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Revising Hijras' Culture Through History, Myths And Literature In India.

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Abstract:

In the current scenario, after the Supreme Court's historical judgement, a new kind of literature i.e., hijra literature is emerging in Indian literary academia. Many hijras are participating in writing and exploring the crucial phases through which they are moving after the declination of the Mughal period. They are actively and skilfully using this platform to revise their lost social recognition. They justify their existence through revising history and myths. Although there is no much description of hijras in history. It is generally seen that history always represents powerful and main stream society. It fails in representation of marginalised section as women and third genders. The problem of gender and gender identity is perhaps the most discussed issues in the present literary academia. Judith Butler through her oft quoted book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, made perhaps the largest contribution in gender discourse and explored the idea that gender is a social construct and enforced through social practices. To understand gender, its etymology, its nature, its function its characteristics and the causes of its popularity in the present society many seminars, workshops and symposia on national and international circuits are being organized by various scholars, academicians, and professors from time to time. But these seminars and discussions somehow move around either in male culture identity or female culture identity and thus leave no room for thirdgenders and become bias. In this paper I shall use textual analysis method and queer theory to explore my ideas.

Key Words: *Hijra*, Eunuchs, Culture, Myth, History, Subculture, Periphery etc.

Introduction:

Every society has its own traditions, customs and culture. "Culture" is a shared customs, beliefs, interests and activities among a group of people in society. It is passed from generation to generation and are thus highly influenced by the religion, ethnicity, and the location of the society. It determines, in a large amount, what is legal or illegal and what is morally acceptable and the codes of conducts etc. It is generally seen that most of the cultures encompasses many subcultures in itself. These subcultures are being practiced by smaller group of individuals who practice a different code of behaviour, interests and activities. In India there is a community of transgenders, living on the periphery of society, is practicing a culture that is regarded as subculture by its main stream society. This community, however, seems to be formed and united on the basis of gender identity as well as shared biological and psychological similarities. The transgenders or third genders or eunuchs are mostly considered as *hijra* or *kinner* in India. Although there is difference in the meaning of *hijra* and eunuchs. Historically these two terms were used in different senses. The word 'Eunuch' has been derived from the Greek word which connotes "the keeper of the bed". While on the other hand the word *hijra* is derived from an Urdu word '*hijar*' which means "someone who has come out from his or her own tribe or clan". Till the Mughal period both *hijras* and eunuchs coexisted distinctively. But following on from the Mughal Empire, the British administration in India amalgamated *hijras* and eunuchs into one understanding under later title and criminalised both under the same laws. Thus, these two terms, in present scenario, are being used as synonymous and are interchangeable terms in its interpretation. Today, not only castrated men are called eunuchs, but also those with genital disorders, such as those born with male and female genitalia.

Despite being as legal as any other community, India's transgender community continues to strive for social recognition. When a community does not find social security and recognition in main stream society, it moves towards history to affirm its existence. It is history that explores the cultural, social and ethnic acceptance of any community in past. Many transgender people are currently rewriting history and attempting to understand the social and cultural acceptance of *hijras* in India. These marginalized writers (transgender writers) are seeking historical and mythical evidences and interpreting it their own way. History plays an essential role in depicting the cultures, traditions, and ethnicity of a particular community at a particular time. It is linked to the systematic study and documentation of human activity. Here is one point that should be noted here is that history is not complete and still has debatable mysteries. History always revolves around the tales of kings, queens, and warriors and thus limits itself to the main stream of society. There are no or very few examples of females/women in history. For example there are few stories about women freedom fighters are available in history. It always centred on male oriented society. Thus it can be said that history is biased and gendered in its interpretation. It is not for women and transgenders. Although there are some description and depiction of *hijras* in history. The word eunuch has been in existence since the 9th century BC. It is believed that the practice of *hijra* as harem guards originated in China, where, at the end of the Ming dynasty, the Ming Palace housed approximately 70000 eunuchs. But our attention in this paper is limited to Indian history, myth and literature. Despite the homophobic nature of Indian culture and society, transgender people are mentioned in both older religious and nonreligious books. Hence, it may be said that gender nonconformity has existed in India since the beginning of time. The Vedic civilization of the past witnessed three genders. According to one's nature, or "Prakrit," the Vedas (about 1500–500 BC) classify people into one of three distinct groups. This is also evident in other texts, such as the Kama Sutra from the 4th century AD, as *pumsprakrtistri* (male-nature), *prakrti* (female-nature), and *tritiya-prakrti* (third nature). According to some books, third-sex people—who could be intersexual or have a male or female body—were common in pre-modern India and were frequently identifiable as early as childhood. In Kamasutra's third chapter, "Auparishtaka," Vatsyayana talked about a section that is different from the male and female sections. This section is called "tritiya," which means "third gender." The transgender people Vatsyayana refers to as "tritiya" are referred to as "third gender" in contemporary society. Vatsyayana's perspectives and explanations on 'tritiya' nature is obviously apparent in the transsexuals. According to the aforementioned "tritiya" nature, males dress in female attire and wear female costumes, and females dress in male attire. In ancient Hindu law, medicine, linguistics, and astrology, a third sex is also discussed.

The Manu Smriti, which was written between 200 BC and 200 AD and served as the foundational work of Hindu law, explains biological sex. It states that a greater quantity of male seeds results in the birth of a male child, a female child due to the prevalence of female seeds, and if both seeds are present, there is a possibility of producing a third-sex child or girl-boy twins; a conception fails if either is inadequate or weak in quantity.

Hijra culture again appears in the Mughal period. They were employed in the Mughal Empire as servant, administrative officers and the owner of royal harems. The eunuchs were the most important source for the knowledge of the harem to the outside world and vice versa. Abul Fazl, the author of *Akbarnama*, which is a major primary source of information on Mughal India, informs us that all the intrigues and gossips travelled through the means of this servile class, transgender community. The authoritative and political role by the hijras has been underplayed or overlooked in the vast majority of the works on Mughal state. For instance, K.S. Lal, Gavin Hambly and others, while recognizing the diverse role played by the eunuchs, only feature their association in the harems. It is a direct result of this limited verifiable characterisation that today the main space related with the picture of a Middle age Indian khwajasara is that of the Mughal collection of mistresses.

There are various myths available in India, glorifying gender diversity. Literature has always followed folk-lore, myth and history and many transgender characters appear in Indian Classical literature as well as Indian writing in English. They are picking up their common folklores derived from Hindu myths of androgynies for retelling as oral story. The presence of hijra can be traced in *The Ramayana*. The epic states that when the hero Rama heads into exile in the forest the whole city followed him because they loved him so. As Rama came to the banks of the river at the edge of the forest, he turned to the people and said, "Men and women, please wipe your tears and go away." Numerous religious interpretations express that among his devotees, the hijras alone felt limited by this direction and choose to remain with him. Impressed with their loyalties, Rama endorsed them the

ability to confer blessings on people on auspicious occasions like child births and marriages, and also at inaugural functions which, it was supposed to set the stage for the custom of 'bathai' in which hijras sing, dance and confer blessings.

Another epic called the *Mahabharata* is also important to trace their roots and cultures. The epic contains the tale of Aravan, Shikhandi, and the transgenderism of Arjuna as Brihnala. The epic states a situation where Aravan (the son of Arjuna and his wife Ulupi, the Naga princess) sacrifices himself to ensure the victory of the Pandvas. The only condition Aravan made there was to spend the last night of his life in marriage. But no woman would attempt to marry a man sentenced to death. Desperate, the Pandavas turned to Krishna, who turned into a beautiful woman called Mohini, married Aravan and spent the whole night with him. It is said that the hijras of Tamil Nadu considered themselves as Aravanis. Every year in Tamil Nadu the hijras stage the tale of aravan and perform the role of Aranvan and Aravanis.

Another story of Shikhandi (a character of mixed nature) received more publicity than the hijras of the *Ramayana* and other stories. Sikandi is the reincarnation of Amba, the daughter of King Kasi. She was living with the intention of killing Bhishma, who had angered Sikandi in her first birth. . During the Kurukshetra War, Shikhandi fought alongside the Pandavas and became one of the factors that paved the way for the Pandavas' success in the war. To kill Bhishma, who was blessed with euthanasia, Arjuna skillfully waged war with Bhishma, putting Sikhandi in the lead. Bhishma, who vowed not to attack women, was finally killed by Arjuna and Shikhandi. It can be seen that Shikhandi was not a common human being but the descendant of king.

The character of Brihnala was also seen as a warrior. Arjuna once showed no interest in Urvasi's sexual innuendos. A frustrated Apsara cursed him for being a eunuch. The curse was later changed to 1 year by Indra. Thus, Arjuna used curses during his period of incognito exile and lived like a eunuch. Brihannala fought the Kaurava He was a charioteer of Uttara Kumara. After Kichaka's death, there was no one to protect the Virata Kingdom. Kauravas took this opportunity to take the cattle away from Virata. Uttaran went with Brihanara as a charioteer to fight the Kauravas. But the young prince was horrified at the sight of the great warriors on the edge of Kaurava. He decided to flee the battlefield. Brihanara then took over and fought against the Kauravas. He defeated the Kaurava army and returned triumphant.

Bahuchara mata, a mythical figure is invoked in many hijra communities and is evidently depicted as central figure in the nirvana ceremony. She is regarded as the patron of transgender community. The myths of Bahuchara involve in gender variance which explains her popularity with the hijra community. Many heterosexual, worship in her temple also wear women's clothing to seek her blessings. It is general belief in hijra community that the blessing of the goddess gives them the power to bless and curse people. The hijras also seek alms at the temple of Bahuchara Mata and in return bless the devotees who visit the temple. While today the hijra community is almost exclusively identified with extortion and prostitution, the myth of Bahuchara Mata, the deity revered by the community, in fact emphasizes chastity and not homoerotic desires. Thus it can be seen that this community always secured unique place in society from ancient to the Mughal period. They were always the part of the mainstream society. Previously they were never treated as a community who has their own rituals, beliefs and unique performing art forms but at present they are considered as a community with their exclusive culture.

It is a general belief that literature is the mirror of society. Literature always depicts customs, traditions, culture, of a society in a particular time. Literature covers almost each sections of society. The central perspective for sociologists studying literature has been the use of literature as information about society. The idea that literature can be "read" as information about social behavior and values, is generally referred to as *reflection theory*. It effectively emphasises social and cultural determinism. Following the Supreme Court's judgement on legality of transgender community may scholars, academicians, activists are writing about this community. The Writers are trying to examine the socio-cultural, political and economical condition of this community by comparing the cultural material of present moment and the past one. There are many hijra writers who are receiving their fame through their writings. These writers, however, are exploring their cultures of badhai, dancing, clapping, as well their professions and life style as dress code etc. We know very little about their life style and culture before these writings because it is believed that they were very secretive about their personal life.

Published in 2010, *The Truth about Me- A Hijra Life Story* recounts the terror regarding her identity and cultural life. Revathi was born as a male child in a peasant family in a village in Tamil Nadu. His childhood name was Doraisamy, as given by his parents. Doraisamy discovered that he was very different from the other boys of his village. At school, he shunned boy's games, preferring to play with girls and dressing up like a woman in his mother's clothes. With the passes of time, Doraisamy constantly began to feel that he was actually a girl within a male body. Now the problem begins with Revathi for her identity and social, cultural and traditional practices. Doraisamy fled away from his home and took a train to Delhi, where he found in a world completely different from his village. Here he met a group of *hijras*, who took him under their protection and developed a new culture as how to clap in public, how to perform begging in public and how to behave in public and private. Doraisamy chose to remove his male sexual organs in order to get 'womanhood'.

Revathi had hoped that once she turned into a 'woman' or a hijra, she would at least get peace and tranquility in her life. But she soon discovered, life as a hijra was tough, even cruel. She describes it in painful detail. She recounts the threats and violence from men in the streets, the abuse she had to constantly suffer from strangers for being a *hijra*, the poverty that most *hijras* have to face because no one is willing to employ them. Life as a *hijra*, sex worker which Revathi describes in painful detail, is brutal. She writes:

"We are *pottais*. No one is willing to give us work. My family does not want me so I came here to earn for my stomach...A policeman brought his *lathi* down on my legs and hands. Another kicked me with booted foot....he then asked me to take my clothes off right there, while the prisoners were watching. I plead with him and wept, but he forcibly stripped me. When I was standing naked, he stuck his *lathi* where I'd had my operation and demanded that I stand with my legs apart like a woman would...I bent and showed him my back. He then asked to hold my buttocks apart so that he could see my anal passage. When I did, he thrust his *lathi* in there and asked, 'So you get it there?' (Revathi 205-207)

She describes her suffering in the hands of fellow *hijras* and their *gurus* as well as drunken men and police. She writes:

"When I returned to my first house, I received nothing. It was I who earned for all of them. But today I stand before you, with empty hands and an empty purpose." (Revathi 199)

It is important here to explore that in *hijra* community and its culture the word 'house' refers to *gharana*. Finally, unable to bear her painful existence any longer, she escapes and goes back home to her village but unwelcomed. There, however, she realizes that she is dead as far as they are concerned. Throughout the text the pain of Revathi comes out. Revathi discusses even the most 'private' aspects of her life as a hijra with frankness and fearlessness.

Another text which I have selected for my paper is *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* (2013) written by Living Smile Vidya. The text depicts the life-sketch of young transgender who fights against the traditional social norms and gets her own identity as womanhood. Vidya was born as a boy on 25 March 1982. She was named as Saravanan by her parents. But gradually Vidya started to feel different. Most transgender people face great challenges and a lot of struggle in coming to terms with one's own gender identity. Vidya too struggled a lot in order to hide her gender and exist in the gender of her biological birth. In Vidya's words, "I was a girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy. Inwardly I wanted to be a girl, but I made every effort possible to hide my femininity from outside world....I lead a false life of strenuous attempts to swagger like a man and speak like one." (Vidya 33)

The above mentioned passage reveals her trauma regarding the identity crisis. The book is a daring of Vidya to express herself honestly, without showing any pang for society. The autobiography opens very dramatically and runs with flash-back technique of narration. Appa, father of Sarvanan, was quite whimsical kind of person. He loved Sarvanan heartily, but when the issue of study occurs, he became very strict, and beat him mercilessly. Such experiences are described very pathetically in this book. While presenting her life, Vidya has raised some important issues related to transgenders. Being a citizen of democratic country, transgenders are not able to enjoy their fundamental rights, law is not sufficient to protect them, and common people have no understanding of gender dysphoria.

Me Hijra, Me Laxmi (2015) is an autobiography of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a *hijra*. The narrative is about what motivates Laxmi to make her original identity and how it helps to achieve notoriety, name and fame. As an authentic transgender voice *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* is an important text which reflects the pain, stigma, sorrow, success and struggle for identity of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi who changes into the hijra, Laxmi. Laxmi Narayan has described the pain and crisis of the third genders for their identity through her autobiography. The autobiography explores every sphere of her life whether it is the subject matter of sexuality or personal life. She has explored the bitter truth of her life, how she was sexually abused in her early childhood due to feminine feeling and gesture. Laxmi has explored the pain which is given not only by the outsiders but relatives also. From her early childhood, she was unable to find her identity as woman or man. When she was in fourth standard, she joined a gay group of Ashok Row Kavi.

After living a confused life, she joined a hijra community and became a *chela* of Lataguru, a leader of *hijras*. In chapter six, Laxmi expressed her joy for being called as hijra. She said, "When I became a hijra, a great burden was lifted off my head. I felt relaxed. I was now neither a man nor a woman. I was hijra. I had my own identity. No longer did I feel like an alien." (Tripathi) The autobiography serves as an educational narrative about the lives and paradigms of the hijra community and its culture.

Conclusion:

In conclusion it can be said that this community has made its presence everywhere. We find that this marginalized community is still holding on to their traditional performing art in spite of being mocked, condemned, and disowned by the people. We are witnessing of their progressive set of ideas. Despite of their progress and rationalism influenced by globalization, they do not reject their traditional professions and cultures. It is very interesting to note that Hijras follow one myth whether they came from Hindu religion or any other religions. They are not divided on the basis of religion and cast like this mainstream society. This community is divided into various *ghranas* (clans) and every *gharana* has its own rules and cultures depending on its main *Guru*. The step that may be taken to keep their traditions, cultures and ethnicities alive is government aid and free education.

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