

## Revathi's 'Estrangement'

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**Abstract:-** *Would a [sic] time come when we would be freed from being humiliated thus? (Revathi, 109)* The environment which plays a crucial role in our physical, mental and social well-being is out of reach for the Transgenders. The transgenders' life is always at stake because of the hostile surroundings in which they live. Invariably they are buffeted by the traumatic conditions; forever they live on the precipice of fear and anxiety in their struggle even to admit to themselves who they are let alone to realize who they are. This 'moment to moment' stress and depression curtail them from insisting on the two 'I's (their eyes) - 'Identity' and 'Inclusion'. *Truth About Me*, an autobiography by Revathi, a *hijra* herself, reveals the hardships faced by her in the process of identifying her 'real self' amidst those males and females who lead a very normal life in this environment. This paper discusses in detail how the heterosexual human beings – who form the majority – view the existence of the 'gender dysphoria' community.

**Key words:** *identity, inclusion, Transgenders, hijra environment, gender dysphoria*

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The term environment has been derived from a French word "Environia" meaning "to surround". It can also be termed as the social and cultural forces that shape the life of a person. It is the atmosphere or background against which someone or something is seen. That environment which plays a crucial role in people's physical, mental and social well-being is out of reach for the Transgenders. The transgenders' life is at stake because of the hostile surroundings in which they live. Invariably they are buffeted by the traumatic conditions; forever they live on the precipice of fear and anxiety in their struggle even to admit to themselves who they are let alone to realize who they are. Family, neighbours, friends, school and the people of the *hijra* community is the environment which is discussed at length in this paper by citing real life instances as penned by Revathi. Transgenders suffer a lot from within because of the fear of being identified by the people as this might cause a lot of problems for their family members. The family members also consider it a curse on their family. Eventually, these 'betwixt' people have to run away from their homes. They are torn between of their love for their family and their incapability to make their family understand what their real nature is. "Why don't you try and understand my feelings? ... I am here only because of the love I bear for all of you!" (Revathi, 56). Revathi's voluntary return to her family from Delhi was only to make her family understand what her family really thought about her. They welcomed her only to change her new appearance. The family which should accommodate her beat her up and forcefully shaved her head. The environment i.e., family, which should have offered her solace let loose its animosity and contempt on her. She was shorn off her feminine thing, 'the long hair', which according to the third-sex people is a mark of being feminine. Though her brothers beat her and called her by names, she loved them a lot. In the entire cosmos it is the family which they long to be with. "Howsoever my family treated me, even if they beat me and scolded me, I could not quite forget them" (Revathi, 49). Even before her SRS she had been longing to be with her family. Family plays a major role in their life. If their own parents abandon them to destitute, how will the society accept them? It is the societal set up which so forces the family.

Neighbours, friends and school too play a major role in their survival. School, which has to counsel them, guide them and teach them the life values, betrays them. This is evident when Revathi talks about the punishment she suffered in school. "I was punished not just for being distracted, but also because I spoke like a girl, holding my body coyly like one. I remember being canned for 'not being brave like a boy'" (Revathi, 7). The school which should inculcate positive values goes to the extent of penalizing the student by inflicting psychological injury. The instance, which Revathi quotes, is a pointer to the state of stress and depression such children undergo due to embarrassment. The teacher yelled, "Are you a girl or what? Pull your trousers down, let me check". He would make as if he was going to strip me and I would start crying. The other boys laughed at this" (Revathi, 7). The humiliation which the child undergoes is beyond explanation. Her friends, on the other hand, started to call her 'No. 9' and 'Ali'. Their actions against her were wounding but deep in her heart she was happy because she was identified as a woman. She felt "gratified" and happy for being recognized so. She also found it comforting when her neighbours remarked that "she looked and acted like a real woman" (Revathi, 9). It was for these neighbours who her family was worried about and for whose sake they estranged

themselves from her. *Hamam* the place where Revathi lived in Bangalore became a tourist spot as young lads who passed by that place sang songs by way of teasing them. Neighbours (the shopkeepers) used to pelt stones and throw tomatoes at them when the *hijras* walked on the road. It was not an easy task to establish her identity as a woman. A lot of introspection took place before 'he' could change into 'her'. She found pleasure in acting and doing the jobs of a woman. Even with nature she felt one in the form of woman. "I walked and sang and danced to my heart's content, imagining myself to be a girl" (Revathi, 5). She often was afraid of being spotted by the villagers. So she had to play a dual role - the natural one and the outward appearance - with all discomfort. "As I re-emerged in my man's garb, I felt that I was in disguise, and that I had left my real self behind" (Revathi, 16). All this per force makes them to lose their self-esteem and hence they try to commit suicide. According to the task force conducted by National Task Force, nearly 40% of the transgenders, who are in the age group of 20, die every year when their survival in this 'dark' society becomes a question mark.

Fearful apprehensions like "Why did I love men? Was I mad? Was I the only one who felt this way? Or were there others like me, elsewhere in the world?" (Revathi, 14) clearly reveal her confused state of mind. She is unable to accept her change as she is aware of the dire consequences thereof. But who can stop the bodily changes that happen within? Her mind was teeming with numerous questions as she experienced the bodily changes. All these questions arose because of the social stigma that was associated with those feelings and changes. "A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought myself. But how could that be? Would the world accept me thus? I longed to be known as a woman and felt pain at being considered a man" (Revathi, 16). Before the SRS (sexual re-assignment surgery), the physical and mental agony that she underwent because of the people around her was more hurting than her actual physical pain. "Sometimes, when no one was looking, they would pinch my chest; run their hands over my bum and much else. I was afraid to complain to my brothers. Everyday proved an ordeal and I thought to myself that all this will stop only if I leave home again, return to the *pottais* I know, have the operation and become a woman" (Revathi, 58).

Revathi took up stage acting and Art provided a wonderful 'space' for her to easily identify with her real self. When others praised her for her acting this is how she felt. "I had not worn a disguise I said to myself; I had given form to my real feeling" (Revathi, 16). Art gave her assurance that even off stage she can lead a life as woman. The praise which she received from her neighbours, be it for her acting or for appearance, gave her confidence. "To the world, it appeared that I was dressing up and playing a woman, but inside, I felt I was a woman" (Revathi, 12). Art gave her mental pleasure as she wore the 'real' clothes of a woman and it gave room for her 'real' self to be established. "I could express all those female feelings that I usually have to suppress and so felt happy for days afterwards" (Revathi, 14).

The environment which should succor one's moral, mental and physical courage should by no means suppress or become a mechanism that marginalizes a particular group. 'Transphobia', the term itself makes it obvious as to how the society views the transgenders. Had they been included or treated equally in the mainstream this term would not have come into existence. The transphobia does not merely stop with unleashing our fear against the transgender community. It goes a step further: it curtails and disrupts the routine life of the transgenders. "I could neither talk about my condition, nor entirely hide it. Every day, my feelings die only to be reborn and to die again" (Revathi, 32). These lines testify to their longing to live like any other in this society. But under the duress of social prejudice and bias the transgenders take to begging and sex work, those jobs that are looked down upon by the 'normal' people. It is the society which hard presses them to take up such odd jobs. "Society and law not only think we are doing wrong, but are violent towards us" (Revathi, 221). The transgenders feel at home when they are with people who share their similar traits. Revathi admits that she was able to let out all her suppressed feelings as woman when she was in the company of her *hijra* friends. The unity which is found among the members of this community is unique. They help each other without any expectation. "*Pottais* stand by each other and, believe me, a *pottai* looking for consolation is sure to find it, and often only in another *pottai*" (Revathi, 82). These lines highlight the trust and bonding Revathi had towards her community.

The stress and depression which she suffered within because of the environment (family, friends, neighbours and teachers) compelled her to question the Creator. "Amma! Why must I suffer like this? Why must you put me through this ordeal? ... What wrong have I done? It was you who made me male in form, but with female feelings. And now, for your crime, I am being punished ..." (Revathi, 57). Why he was determined to test me?" (Revathi, 35). The people around her make her feel alienated. They do not even consider these gender deviant people as human beings. "Why did God give me these feelings? Why must we be tortured by people's looks?" (Revathi, 84). The 'estrangement' of Revathi, especially, in the beginning of her transformation from and because her family members and villagers, results in her loss of self-esteem. Yet she had to bear all this pain just for one reason - to be a woman, "to become a woman and that is all mattered for me" (Revathi, 16). Once her SRS was over she was overwhelmed for "she has become a woman" and she has attained a 'veritable rebirth'. The transgenders in their search for 'identity' and in their struggle to become one among the main stream society face innumerable hardships. They feel they are still in the fringes of the

society. "God has made us this way. I thought, and we have no work of our own, our parents do not understand us and this world looks upon us with distaste. Yet we too go hungry. Above all we wanted to live as human beings do, with dignity" (Revathi, 30). A society cannot claim itself to be 'progressive' if it leaves behind a portion (however negligible) of the society to darkness and suffering. It should change this bleak environment to a better and safe place for such people to live in. It is not only imperative for us to take the concepts of 'inclusion' and 'identity' seriously, but it is also imperative on our part to find the means and implement them sincerely. The initial step for that can be by consciously expunging the term 'transphobia' from use and by empowering our fellow beings to lead their life as others do, in this Universe.

**Works Cited**

[1] Revathi, A. *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. Haryana: Penguin Books, 2010. Print.