

**Writing Lives, Writing Resistance:**

**Re-reading A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me***

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**Abstract**

Transgender Life Writing aims at not merely the documentation or detailing of one's personal life. Rather, it ensures that their voice is loudly and clearly heard. Transgender narratives have a definite purpose – to make transgender community visible to the people and to know more about their plights and problems. The present paper attempts to analyse how Transgender Life Writings turns to Resistance Writing in A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me*. In this work, she shares her everyday experience of being a transgender. Although her work is primarily interpreted as a personal narrative, it shares the predicaments of the transgender community in general. The work is also an indicator of the various turmoil the community faces in personal as well as public spaces and varied closures manifested through family and society. Revathi, a representative of the Transgender community, creates resistance in different spheres of life and how the transgender life writing becomes resistance writing. This paper also tries to explain more about the resistance and identity created by transgender

people in social structures like family and society, and in ideological institutions of power such as education, through means of their body and exile.

Keywords: Life Writing, Transgender, A. Revathi, Resistance Writing, Identity

Transgender Life Writings are both personal and social. Often done on individual purpose, they tend to make a self-assertion of the transgender community in general. They are mostly personal narratives although they reveal to the outside world the social reality pervading their community. These life narratives capture the relation between the individual and society, the past and present, and the public and private experiences. Transgender identity in society is largely limited to *hijras* (eunuchs), often ridiculed for their appearance, their profession reduced to certain ones and their rights routinely suppressed. Their status can only improve when the gender variant itself raises its voice and demands their rights. A transgender is recognized only when an individual raises her voice and comes to the limelight. When doing so, she can be a model for other transgenders to open themselves to the society. These people have existed in every culture, race and class since the evolution of human life.

Everyday can be interpreted as a performative political activity. Through everyday activities, the resistance to multiple kinds of power play's dominance is performed consciously/unconsciously or active/passively. Readings of life and bygone as lived experience of the ordinary has attained prominent theoretical position as a critique of the enlightenment claims linearity and modernity. Metanarratives were dismantled and history scattered from the tales of the victorious and the dominant to the little alley – everyday stories of the ordinary people. Ben Highmore in *Everyday Life and Culture Theory* notes that

It might be precisely the unnoticed, the inconspicuous, the [...] modernity the everyday becomes the setting for a dynamic process: making the unfamiliar familiar, for getting accustomed to disruption of custom, for struggling to incorporate the new; adjusting to different ways of living [...] it witnesses the absorption the most revolutionary of invention into the landscape of the mundane. (1-2)

While unearthing the different ways of reading the past and the pre-everyday life theory, laid down accurate political positions, reading everybody life was a platform where new modes of little resistances were invented. These little resistances which also contributes to the stories from past became a narrative space with ever becoming views of life living. Everyday resistance is all about different ways in which people undermine the dominant power plays. It is not similar to riots or rebellions where resistances take a physical shape. But in its day to day performance everyday resistance is subtle, quite scattered, disguised or passive.

*The Truth About Me* is the first of its kind in English from a member of the hijra community. It describes vividly her everyday experience of discrimination, ridicule and pain, and also about endurance and her joys, unravelling the horrors of being a transgender. It depicts the physical and emotional anguish that Doraisamy undergoes in the journey to become Revathi. Revathi, now a prominent hijra rights activist with a sexual minority NGO based in Bangalore, recounts the horrors of her tumultuous, terror-filled life. Born a male in a peasant family of modest means in a village in Tamil Nadu, Doraisami (as named by his parents) discovered in early childhood itself that he was very different from the other boys of his village. At school, he shunned boys' games, preferring to play with girls and dressing up like a woman in his mother's clothes. As years passed by, instead of his feminine ways falling aside as his parents had hoped, Doraisami increasingly began to feel that he was a girl, although trapped within a male body. The more feminine he dressed and behaved, the more

he was taunted by his peers at school and his parents and siblings at home. He had no one to share his pains with, till at last, he met a group of young gay men in a town near his village. For the first time, he discovered he was not alone in this world, that he was not the only boy who felt and behaved like a girl. From these men, he discovered that it was indeed possible for a boy to become a girl, or, more precisely, a *hijra*.

In his late teens Doraisamy flees from his home to Delhi, where he met a group of *hijras*, who took him under their wing. The head or guru of the *hijra* household agrees to initiate him into the community and christens him to Revathi, a full-fledged member of the community, no longer just a *kothi* (those who adopt a feminine role in same sex relationships) but also an effeminate male. Revathi soon discovers that life as a hijra was tough, even cruel. She describes in painful detail the sordid life in her guru's home, the constant quarrels with her *gurubais* (fellow hijra disciples of her guru) who are sexually and economically exploited, the threats and violence from men in the streets, the abuses she had to constantly suffer from strangers for being a *hijra*, a veritable outcast, the desperate poverty that most of them have to face because no one is willing to employ them. She also discovers her sexual desires as a woman but soon realises that although she pined for a normal life as a married woman, no man would ever take her as his wife. Finally, she is forced to take to sex-work for survival and also hopes of finding the love of a man. Shifted to Mumbai, Revathi describes in painful detail her life as a *hijra* sex- worker where she speaks of the horrific degradation that she had to suffer at the hands of fellow *hijras* and their gurus as well as drunken men and the police.

A major turning point in Revathi's life occurs when, after shifting from her village to Bangalore where she works selling her body, she meets with activists of an NGO working for the justice of sexual minorities. The NGO offers her a modestly-paid job in order to finally escape the brutal life as a sex-worker. She starts off as a peon of sorts, doing odd jobs in the

office, but her grit and intelligence win her greater responsibilities in the organisation, where he begins to realise that an alternate life is indeed possible for people like her. She attends activist meetings and reads literature about *hijras* like herself, where she learns that they, like other marginalized communities, can and must stand up for their rights. Also, they deserve the same rights as everyone else, she now knows how to be recognised by the state as equal citizens – having ration cards, right to vote and stand for elections, to study and be decently employed, to marry and adopt children, and to be free of hate, scorn and prejudice. She begins mobilising her fellow *hijras* on these lines.

Throughout the book, Revathi does not plead for pity. All she asks is for others to recognise and treat *hijras* as fellow humans, with the same hopes and desires as everybody else. The frankness and fearlessness with which she discusses even the most private aspects of her life as a *hijra* – the details of her sex-change operation, her sexual encounters with her customers, the brutal sex assault by the police – is striking and admirable. Her critique of social constructions of gender and dominant notions of masculinity, bereft of theoretical jargon, is a powerful plea for us to radically reconsider what it means to be male and female. At the same time, it urges us to seek the third way of transcending the rigid binary division between male and female and work towards a notion of humanity beyond and above gender. Here, writing becomes a new historical text scribbled upon one's own body and its socio-political experiences, while writing the impressions of/from life in juxtaposition to the claims of a dominant social order. Life Writing became a tool of everyday resistance which challenges the normative standards of any given society. It has brought in all the nuances and possibilities of everyday resistance as a way of self-expression. While sex is a biological categorisation primarily based on reproductive capabilities, gender is socially constructed by defining specific gender roles to the male and the female that is the way in which a male or a

female is supposed to perform her biological sex. Gender gets constructed and established through everyday interaction between people.

*The Truth About Me* challenges the politics of visibility by asserting its presence within a large framework of generic narratives. The gendered gaze of patriarchy that sets standards of role plays and hetero normative behaviour has left the wider space of alternate sexualities invisible. While theoretical formulations centred on the concept of gaze speak about objectification of varied kind, the gendered gaze of transgender exclusion marks them as ‘others’ who are invariably invisible. This transgender narrative shares the everyday traumas, insults and indifference faced by the members of the community on a day-to-day basis. The sharing/writing of these stories of alternate realities brings out the politics of resistance of transgender life writings. By voicing the invisibilities and scribbling the non-existent, the writers are, in fact, inventing a space of assertive social inclusion and visibility. Within the narrative space, Revathi performs resistance through little acts of everyday. The first major hurdle she had to face was the family. Through the ideological construct of the family, the gender binary gets performed and established. It is from this majoritarian space that the narrator began her resistance.

The narrative unfolds to assert how Revathi continuously returns to the everyday spaces of family and society, thereby strongly marking their presence and finally making peace with their everyday immediate surroundings. Revathi observes her occasional visits to her parents after years of confusions and apprehensions: “I brought clothes for everyone, toys for the children [...] I was received with love and warmth [...] they advised me not to fight with my people, but to behave well and make a proper living” (210). The occasional return of Revathi to her personal and intimate domestic space gradually changes the attitude of the immediate family, relatives and neighbours and they learn to accept their choice of sexuality. This naturally takes the pride beyond the four walls of personal life to a wider domain of

public space. As they move out and gradually come into being on the streets, markets and social gatherings, one suddenly comes across a multitude of people/sexualities on the street directly negate the patriarchal gender binary. The gaze into invisibility and social exclusion gets revoked to form layers of inclusions. The sex change operation that some transgenders undergo is an act of performing resistance. Body becomes the text on which they scribble their sexuality and free will. They cancel out the body into which they were born. The narrative takes us to the limits of frustration and self-assertion through sex change surgeries (Nirvana) which are not yet legalized and done in a very unhygienic situation.

Revathi records her change of mindset and how she came out of her own apprehensions of transgender self and sex work after joining Sangama, for work. The idea of subjectivity has been read and re-read down the ages. When subjectivity gets linked to sexuality, it once again crosses all kind of binaries and ideas of essentialist or fragmented reading to a much more fluidic form. The transgender life writings are a self-reflexive political performance which becomes an open area where variant/deviant sexualities crisscross, blend or even reformulate itself. The signs of identity like names of the normative family lineage is deterritorialized to form new spaces of self- realized identities that are becoming and flexible. The many different modes of resistance politics the transgender community performs have a common cause of self-assertion. Sketching one to visibility and creating new socio-cultural spaces within the fabric of the present undoubtedly brings in a bygone of exclusions. The nowhere lands that the trans genders occupied, as shadows at night, speak aloud through their life writings. The negation of the invisibilities of the past is the initial move of the contemporary to narrate stories of being and becoming that would overwrite the concepts of time and space and normativity. Transgender Life Writing not only disrupts the broader concepts of patriarchal world view, but also constantly read the subtle

realms of everyday resistance wherein questions of body, text, absences and performances come into play.

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