

Politicising Gender through Autobiography: A Reading of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life*

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Abstract

The LGBTQ+ community is experimenting with various forms of expression to come out of the closet, including autobiography, which enables them to voice out their thoughts, real-life experiences, rebuttals, and counter-tactics. The paper attempts to read Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* (2016). The genre of autobiography provides a space for the 'self' to thrive, however, *Red Lipstick* is more than a narrative about 'only' her(self). Laxmi talks about the conflicts and the politics in which a gendered 'other' is trapped. The book is equally concerned with the internal politics of the queer community and the greater society. She focuses largely on India's 'hijra' group, exposing the obstacles and struggles it endures. The paper discusses the instances in *Red Lipstick* where the issues and challenges faced by the queer community are represented by Tripathi.

Keywords: Autobiography; Heterosexuality; Hijra; Identity; Third-gender.

Introduction

Gender is nothing but an unromantic box.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi

The working reference to queer as "forgotten ones" could be traced back to the times when Lord Rama was going on exile for fourteen years in the Chitrakoot forest. He was followed by the "men and women" (Gettleman) of Ayodhya to whom he politely requested "men and women, please wipe your tears and go away" (Gettleman). To follow the instructions of their

loved prince, all “men and women” went back except a few who never identified with the stifling gendered categories of “men” or “women”. This group of people identified itself as the “third gender”. They stayed at the edge of the forest for fourteen years until Rama returned. There is uncertainty surrounding the genesis of this tale because experts believe it does not appear in the earliest iterations of classical Hindu writings (Gettleman). This folktale, however, has evolved over the past century into a significant text illustrating the loyalty and identity of the hijra community. The critical reading of the tale suggests that the LGBTQ+ community has historically evolved in a way that has rendered it invisible, devoid of any agency or sense of self.

The queer community has recently turned to various forms of expression to assert its identity. Self-writings or autobiographies are one of the genres that is providing myriad ways for trans people to “come out of the closet” (Sedgwick). *Dear Queer Self: An Experiment in Memoir* (2022) by Jonathan Alexander; *A Year Without a Name: A Memoir* (2019) by Cyrus Grace Dunham; *We Have Always Been Here* (2019) by Samra Habib; *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) by Manobi Bandopadhyay; *Life in Trans Activism* (2016) by A. Revathi and Nandini Murali; *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi; *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey* (2013) by Living Smile Vidya; *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) by A. Revathi; *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001) by Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed are some of the instances of queer representation through self-narration.

The genre of autobiography is subversive as it gives authority to the “I” of the narrating self which remains neglected in the representation by the dominant hetero perspectives. The representative queer self in the “I” of an autobiography works precisely at multiple levels. Brain Loftus, in “Speaking Silence: The Strategies and Structures of Queer Autobiography” (1997) suggests a need for “double reading” (Loftus 30) of the representational “I” in queer autobiographies. He says, “The literal “I” becomes a literal figure, symbolizing not merely its intended referent, but troping the fields of negativity that structure it. According to this figurative function, the etymological “turning” by which figuration is described by “trope,” disallows a “straight” reading” (30). The “I” of the autobiography is a speaking self but it in itself is also a “resignifying figure” (30) who tries to speak silence that has long been part of its ‘othered’ identity. The paper attempts to read this “I” as a resignifying figure at an individual level and a persona highlighting the silence of the whole community at a broader level. For that, *Red Lipstick: The Men in my Life* (2016) by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is selected as the primary text. It is her second autobiography after *Me Hijra*,

Me Laxmi (2015).

In the book, Laxmi primarily discusses her views and experiences surrounding sexuality. It is a first-person description of the lifelong exploitation she has endured. The book is significant since Laxmi covers the political movements associated with queer activism that influence her personally and the community as a whole. Vineeta Rana (2017), in her review of the book, maintains that this book “revolves around topics that the ordinary mainstream Indian is not entirely familiar, or even comfortable, with. Nevertheless, it resonates with the reader for the simple reason that it is honest and personal” (Rana). It provides a glimpse into the “lived experience” of a transwoman who has started her journey first as a gay, then as a hijra and finally revealing herself as a transgender person whose only ability is to transcend ‘gender’ and its constraints. In this context, the paper aims to examine the issues and challenges linked with queer identity in India. It is divided into two main sections: first deals with the issues revolving around the community and the impact of the suppression on the social, psychological, and, most notably, the ontological self of the LGBTQ+ community. The second part deals with the challenges in coping with these issues.

Issues

Michele Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), maintains that each culture chooses its ways to speak about sexuality in different times and spaces. Indian culture is not an exception as, historically, different paradigms have been used to put sexuality in a discourse (Vanita and Kidwai 2001; Vanita 2005). The revered texts of Indian culture like *Manusamriti* ascertain the strict dichotomy between “duty” and “pleasure” in the institution of marriage (Wendy and Smith). In *The Sociology: A Study of Society* (2017), Irshad Ahmad Wani describes the sociology of the Indian marriage system, particularly Hindu marriage, as a strict balance between duty and pleasure (Wani). This dichotomous justification for relationships involving “physical sex” rendered all alternate perspectives obscure. Gayle Rubin, in “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” (1993), argues that “sex” is defined in multiple ways to ensure symbolic exclusion and to uphold “hetero” as the normative form of the “sex” itself. She maintains that the word “sex” has mainly two meanings: first, “the gender and gendered identity, as in ‘the female sex’ and ‘the male sex’” and second, as the “sexual activity, lust, intercourse, and arousal, as in ‘to have sex’” (Rubin 32). This “semantic merging” of sex with the physical act is cultural as it reduces sexuality to sexual intercourse only.

She maintains, “the cultural fusion of gender with sexuality has given rise to the idea that a theory of sexuality may be derived directly out of a theory of gender” (32).

Laxmi represents herself in *Red Lipstick* (2016) as an everyday character. Her autobiography acts as the microcosm of the realities of the LGBT+ community. Her experiences are the exemplar of the third gender issues. Out of many, the issue of marriage is cautiously addressed in the book. Shraddha Chatterjee, in *Queer Politics in India: Towards Sexual Subaltern Subjects* (2018), intensifies the politics of associating the identity of “sexual subaltern” in India with physical sex only. Queer is misunderstood as strange and grotesque ways of having sexual orientation and fantasies. While quoting M. Darwish’s “From now on you’re somebody else,” Chatterjee maintains, “After all, [i]dentity is what we bequeath, not what we inherit, what we invent, not what we remember” (Chatterjee 2). It addresses the non-universalising tendency of queer experiences, desires, fantasies, and orientations as these are more fluid categories than they appear. Laxmi gets trapped in the politics of marriage, just as the majority of LGBT individuals are driven into marriages to help them escape their grotesque, amorous, pleasure-seeking, and weird desires. Her father confronts her when she intends to join the *hijra* group and forces her to marry and start a family. In essence, he wants her to assume the burden of a family to emerge from her amorous, pleasure-seeking fluidity (Tripathi 19).

The other important issue is the unavailability of a representative language. In the “Monologue” section of her autobiography, Laxmi contends that the language of a particular culture is the primary weapon that acts against its people. Scholars and theorists have long been critiquing language as a weapon to create subjects. Laxmi is an authentic and live example of language politics. She feels suffocated in the language of her day-to-day communication. She prefers feminine verbs like “Main abhi aati hoon” (Tripathi 2) instead of masculine verbs, though assigned male gender at birth. The categorisation established through gendered pronouns in a language restricts the actions one will perform, and the self one will claim. While talking to Meena, a social activist from Tata Institute of Social Sciences and the secretary-general of Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha, who works primarily with sex workers, Laxmi questions, “Why is there no acknowledgement of us as human beings then?” (Tripathi 102). The fight between subjective truth and objective reality has been the toughest one for the queer community, as there has been no space for LGBT individuals to speak out their subjective truths making them “subjects of sex/gender/ desire” (Butler 1999, 3). The common and basic ground for their

discrimination is the absence of an inclusive language.

Moreover, the performance of 'self' in the existing language, curtails the thriving of fluidity. Judith Butler outlines the "theory of performativity" in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* (1999). In the Preface to the book, she comments that gender is performed in every aspect of an individual's life and this performance is not a singular act as it is iterated to naturalise the norms and the "gendered stylization of the body" (Butler 1999, xv) acts. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), Butler talks about the construction of sex using the body of a gendered subject. It is used to "demarcate, circulate, differentiate" (Butler 1993, 1) the subjects it always controls. Butler bases her discussion of how sex materialises through "reiteration" (2), which she defines as doing something repeatedly until it becomes the norm, on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interview, "In a word" (1989), with Ellen Rooney, in which Spivak discusses the fluidity of the body and advances her idea by asserting that the body is unthinkable because it has no particular and possible outline as such (27).

The challenge to claim fluidity away from the water-tight compartments of the sexual categories is highlighted by Laxmi several times. She claims that the rigid notion of he/she has led her to the final acceptance of 'hijra' as a sexual identity. She comments on the necessity of a particular identity. In "Monologue" she reveals, "The world kept suggesting I was a girl, but my private parts indicated that I was a boy. And then there was the whole question of sexuality" (Tripathi 3). The interpellated identity of Laxmi as a boy and the subjective identity of a girl made her "wondered about all this [throughout her] life, checking the boxes [she] was tagged under as a gay man, as a drag queen" (4). Though she asserted several times different sexual identities for herself, still the answer remained unquestioned to her. She claims, "But the question of my identity, that dialogue with myself, remained unanswered, unaddressed" (4).

Interestingly, she shares the grand moment when she gains her momentary identity, that is, 'gay', after meeting Ashok, but its certainty, she claims, "did not last long" (Tripathi 4). She has found it insane that a gay is a person who dresses like a man, works like a man, and talks like a man, but he has to "look and act 'pansy'" (4), and if he breaks the conventions of the dressing then the society tags him as "doing drag" (4). She has dealt with this ambiguity with a sassy attitude by ultimately accepting the identity of a "hijra" because it gives her freedom to dress and act as she pleases. She transcends the boundaries (Tripathi 1) of gender and its

performativity by accepting this identity.

In Hindu mythology, *kinnars* and *hijra* share a unique significance. These two words reconnect third-gender individuals with their long-denied roots. Moreover, these phrases are revered in India. Nevertheless, throughout Indian history, hijras are revered primarily because many Indians believe they have the power to bless or curse (Gettleman). They are considered demigods whose blessings during marriages and childbirth can invite a boon. Though considered demigods, the violence against hijras is growing as Siddharth Narrain in "In a Twilight World" (2013) maintains, "Hijras in India have virtually no safe spaces, not even in their families, where they are protected from prejudice and abuse" (Narrain). He cites the PUCL(K) report on Human rights violations against the transgender community, which reveals that hijras are frequently subjected to "violence, often of a brutal nature, in public spaces, police stations, prisons, and even in their homes" (Narrain). In addition to their gender, their socioeconomic status also contributes to their plight. Most hijras have a lower middle-class background, which leaves them vulnerable to harassment in both public and private spheres.

The other important issue LGBTIQQAAPK+ people face is a shattered ontological self. The ontological being of a third gender remains wounded. Laxmi poses the question, "Who am I when it's just me, alone in my room? Who am I for the world? Are these two selves different, do they have to be?" (Tripathi 4) several times to herself. The tussle between the individual for herself and the individual for the world leads to traumatic identity crises in queer people. She shares the humiliating experience of being mocked by her fellows and how she adapted to that ambience. While reminiscing about her childhood she remembers how she "was vilified very often because [she] was different" (50). She maintains, "Almost every day of my life I was made fun of by someone or the other and when you're a child, it can really get under your skin" (50). Laxmi has been formed and shaped as an individual with self-confidence and awareness but she feels a need for encouragement and support in childhood instead of "abuse and mockery all the time" (50).

She adds, "As soon as the children saw me, they all started crying, I don't know why, maybe they were frightened. So I called them close and said, 'What happened, dear children? *Main toh aap se achchi lag rahi hoon, achchi dikhti hoon* (I look better than you). Is that why you're crying?" (Tripathi 51). Laxmi strongly believes that it is important to consider the fact that the other is different, and "there is a need to characterise one as other

[different]" (Tripathi 108). In the difference lies a "personal" self; and she believes, "[one] can never separate the personal and the political. It's your personal truth that you're fighting for" (111).

Laxmi discusses the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the concept of heterosexuality. Based on her interactions with heterosexual men, she openly questions the concept of heterosexuality. She asserts, "This 'manliness', then, is just a show, nothing but a convenient construct, a pretence to keep patriarchy alive, to keep women tamed" (Tripathi 165). She contests the fundamental premise of patriarchy, mainly, that it is the ideology men impose on women. Laxmi believes that patriarchy is not only associated with men; instead, it is an ideology that governs power. It constructs the ways for each individual who does not assert the normative behaviour prescribed by a patriarchal set-up. She asserts, "Patriarchy doesn't leave you even when you're gay, does it? It only becomes about power. Like some of those transmen – women who transition into men- and how they then go over the top with their power play and patriarchal politics" (Tripathi 165-66). The primary reason these individuals are exploited is the patriarchs' mentality, which determines that a manly capacity and demeanour are natural in any individual. The patriarch, therefore, could be any individual devoid of sex. The remainder should be considered his 'other'.

The patriarchal norms not only form the basis of hetero society but are rooted deeply in the internal politics of the hijra *gharanas*. Hijras work through a *gharana*, where all the members of the hijra community live. They are mainly divided into three sections: *badhaai* (comprises the ones who go to homes to bless newlywed couples or a newborn baby), *mang-ti* (comprises the ones who beg and threaten with curses), and *dhandha* (comprises sex workers) (Tripathi 25); and all the three sects work under the strict guidelines of their *gharanas* to which they belong. Ostracised from their homes, these people live like a family with certain restrictions and taboos long followed by particular *gharanas*. Laxmi claims, "I [she] was lonely and feeling absolutely claustrophobic in the hijra culture" (Tripathi 26). This sounds controversial and contradictory as she chose a hijra identity and a *gharana* to live in by herself. Joseph T. Bockrath, in his research paper "Bhartia Hijro Ka Dharma: The Code of India's Hijra" (2019), maintains, "The hijras of India have been likened to refugees, rejected by the country's most important social unit, the family" (Bockrath). In that case, the members of the hijra *gharanas* "recreate[s] Indian society's organisational framework with a communal focus on combined resources, economic adaption and submission to hierarchal structure" (Bockrath). The most important alliance that provides the foundation to

the new members in these *gharanas* is the “relationship . . . of guru and chella” (Bockrath). The guru or teacher usually facilitates the initiation and socialisation of the chella, or follower, into the hijra communal life and serves alternatively as father, mother, husband, teacher, mother, and mother-in-law. The “guru-chella relationship is asymmetrical” (Bockrath) as gurus become the authoritative and patriarchal figures and the chelas must remain obedient to them. The “obedience to the guru is unquestioned and the authority of the guru in the teaching process is supreme and unchallengeable” (Bockrath).

The politics of obedience plays a crucial role in *gharanas*, and a hijra with out-of-the-box thinking is not welcomed. If someone breaks the rules, the person should have to leave the *gharana*. In this case, the person has to face poverty, hunger, homelessness, and alienation without any personal space. Laxmi maintains, “the politics around queer activism sickened us and we wanted to build a new space for it” (Tripathi 27), and this is the basic cause for which she is working today. She suggests that women and the third gender also play the role of a patriarch to mandate a powerful position in the community. *Gharanas* are the ‘ghettos’ of the marginalised, but the guru in the *gharana* works on the principles of patriarchy with a strict moral and social code of conduct. The internal politics of *gharana* is ideological as the fight to gain power among the oppressed deviates this community from the path of upliftment as a whole. That way, hetero-patriarchy is not a concept limited to men only rather it has become a thinking process or an everyday reality which is hard to surpass.

Challenges

The first and foremost challenge for the community is to deal with the mindset of the populace. The ingrained binaries in the everyday aspect of heteronormative society make it difficult for gender-neutral or unbiased thinking to thrive. Laxmi considers this as the main challenge to the upliftment of the LGBTQ+ community. She says, “I firmly believe that even if you have the best, laws unless you change the mindset of people, nothing will change” (Tripathi 5). She, as an activist, only wants to change the popular mindset of society regarding queerness, which she feels “is what true activism means” (5).

The other hinted challenge is the lack of opportunity for trans people. Atharv Nair, an individual researcher, who has collaborated with Laxmi for a project on the LGBTQ+ community, delineates through his research project on transgender people that they have talent that never comes to

the front due to the lack of opportunities. He observes that gay men are likely to find a workspace because they “can conveniently switch over when required” (Tripathi 24), but it is difficult for transgender people because they “are visibly trans” (24). This ideological issue of office culture and dress code acts in favour of the hetero norms to ‘otherise’ those who do not follow the ethical code of conduct of the workspace. Crucially, this mandates the invisibility of the queer from the public sphere.

The wounded ontological being of a queer person usually leads to a lack of self-confidence. Laxmi maintains that people choose to become ‘hijra’ out of poverty; and due to the lack of jobs and education. However, she chooses to be a ‘hijra’ because she wants to become one. She asserts, “I am going through a difficult time personally, I act even stronger when I don the persona” (Tripathi 34). Her struggle as an individual and as an activist never refrained her from fighting her shortcomings. She has consistently worked for the upliftment of her community. The question arises here, what would have been the scenario if this had been a member of an orthodox family? Her queer identity was accepted by her parents, then friends, and then the community. But the ones coming from the lower strata of society never get such support from family and friends. They mostly face ostracism, trauma, and humiliation from society. Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil of Rajpipla, Gujarat, the first gay, who came out openly, is a typical case in point. In practical terms, the pupils of the royal families do not have any freedom as they have to follow strict royal rules. For them, “freedom of expression is not a birthright” (Tripathi 69). Manvendra always felt “closeted from the outside world – with no awareness of homosexuality or what being gay meant. He spent years wondering if he would ever become ‘normal’- that is, not be attracted to members of his own sex-again” (70). After coming out as gay, he faced ostracism, leading him on his path alone. However, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey in a 2007 appearance, he claimed his identity and affirmed, “I knew they would never accept me for who I truly am, but I also knew that I could no longer live a lie” (Tripathi 71). Universally, the opportunity to get accepted in society is limited only to a few.

Lastly, the state’s intervention in constructing the discourse around sexuality is the suggested major challenge in the book. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault maintains that the state plays a significant role in repressing sexuality through institutional machinery which works hegemonically, pushing specific populations to the margins. Louis Althusser, in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus” (1969-70), describes the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and the Repressive State Apparatus

(RSA) running to lure the masses by consent and coercion, respectively. ISA worked when Article 377 barred the third gender from fundamental rights. The roots of this discriminating act were sowed in 1871 with the inculcation of Section 377 in the Indian Penal Code by the Britishers. Joseph T. Bockrath, in "Bhartia Hijro Ka Dharma: The Code of India's Hijra" (2019), highlights that the British intervention has shaped the discourse of sexuality in India. Initially, the Criminal Tribes Act, of 1871, was an act for the Registration of Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs. Gradually, it turned its attention specifically to hijra practice. The British imposed "laws built on top of an indigenous code of behavior of great antiquity" (Bockrath).

Konduru Delliswararao and Chongneikim Hangsing from the Department of Anthropology, Pondicherry University, in "Socio-Cultural Exclusion and Inclusion of Trans-genders in India" (2018), have cited Indian Penal Code to ground transgender exclusion and their limited political participation. The British enacted the "systematic commission of non-bailable offences" (Delliswararao and Hangsing) to control the legal, civil, and fundamental rights of certain tribes and communities. These communities were perceived to be criminals, by birth. In 1897, the act was amended and under the new statute "a eunuch [was] deemed to include all members of the male sex who admit themselves or on medical inspection clearly appear, to be impotent" (Delliswararao and Hangsing). In addition, "any eunuch so registered who appear dressed or ornamented like a woman in a public street. Or who dances or plays music or takes part in any public exhibition, in a public street [could] be arrested without warrant" (Delliswararao and Hangsing). The act systematically erased the third gender from the public sphere and police allegedly harassed *hijras* by threatening to file criminal charges under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.

However, recent political movements like the Supreme Court's verdict on "decriminalising homosexuality" by revoking Section 377; the Transgender Person (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019; the inclusion of transgender welfare policy by Tamil Nadu and Kerala providing access to free sex re-assignment surgery (SRS) in government hospitals are serving hopes to the long-suppressed community. The community has battled for a long time to claim an identity in the public domain, but tackling the issue of violence in the private sphere still requires attention. Access to formal education, entry into sports, unisex toilets, medical help, economic independence and most importantly, radical activism are other important challenges (Arushi) in the way of queer politics and activism.

Conclusion

The paper has outlined the issues and challenges of the queer movement in India by taking stances from the autobiography of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. It has addressed the issue of a lost history, the lack of inclusive language, underrepresentation, and the internal politics of the *gharanas* as major issues in the upliftment of the community. The major challenges to curb these issues are highlighted through the notion of hetero-patriarchy, lack of self-confidence and opportunities and the intrusion of the state through its repressive policies in the past. The major challenge is whether or not LGBT individuals may fully express themselves through autobiography while simultaneously supporting their own identities through first-person narratives. Queer autobiography expresses “both the problem of the homosexual’s entry into representation and the (im)possibilities of the claim to an “I” that autobiography demands” (Loftus 1). Though the first-person narration gives authenticity to the experiences of Laxmi (Saxena); the claim to an autobiographical “I” is still a bit ambiguous field. Laxmi’s desire to remain fluid has prevented her from associating with a logocentric “I”; instead, she claims multiple “I”s: first as a gay, then as a hijra, and ultimately as a transgender. She never makes the reader fall in love with her character. Vinneta Rana maintains, “never at any point are we [reader] compelled to ‘like’ Laxmi” (Rana). She has expressed herself as aggressive, arrogant, and impulsive. However, the very “humane nature of these acts, and the simplicity and candour with which she states them, is remarkable” (Rana).

Notes:

- i. SANGRAM is an HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and support organisation and is working with socially marginalised people in Sangli, Maharashtra.
- ii. The acronym stands for Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, ally, pansexual, kink. The plus sign at the end indicates the room for addition to more orientations.

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