

Distortion of “Tritiya Prakriti” (Third Nature) By Colonial Ideology in India

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Abstract

Because of the upheaval in the country regarding the Supreme Court Judgment on banning gay marriages in India in 2013, it is useful to show that how this act is simply reiterating British Colonialism in India. While the British banned homosexuality because it was period specific (the upcoming of bourgeoisie class against the aristocrats), the resurfacing of 19th century ban in 2013 India is deepening the effects of Colonialism. This paper attempts to show the inclusive culture of India, in terms of sexuality and gender, before the colonial authorities barged into the country. Indian classical texts as well religious myths are full of examples of androgynous sexualities which is celebrated rather than shunned. With the advent of colonialism and its methods to contain sexuality under heterosexuality, gender also got contained as either male or female. What followed was an identity crisis whose poignancy is shown through the character of Doraismy (Aka revathi) in A. Revathi's *The Truth About ME*. This paper successfully manages to explore the lives of Hijras in India before colonialism and how drastically it has changed so that they are no more radicals but rather strengthen the two dominant categories of sex : Male and female.

Keywords

Homosexuality; India; Hijras; Colonialism; A.Revathi

Introduction

Hijras are generally known as the “third gender” of India. They are described as “Neither man nor woman”. Serena Nanda, Professor of Anthropology in New York, based her ethnography on the context and lives of Hijras in India and in her work establishes them as the ‘third gender’. My research is based on the critique of this view. I wish to demonstrate how instead of demolishing the two normative gender categories, Hijras, in post colonial India, instead strengthen it. In order to elucidate it with discretion, I have referred to A. Revathi's “The Truth About me” which is the first autobiography written by an Indian Hijra. “The Truth About Me” is a compelling book on the life of Revathi and her struggles. Along with the struggles of an individual Hijra, the book highlights the core customs

and traditions of the Hijra community which will be useful in my critique. The main aim of this research is to show how the understanding of ‘Tritiya Prakriti’ (Third Nature)¹ went wrong in the post colonial India despite of the celebration of an ambivalent sexuality in the Hindu texts.

Hindu Mythology is full of examples of how the Hijras were inclusive in the society. There are many Hindu myths which give power and strength to the Hijras even today.² The most prominent is the story when Lord Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu in Hindu mythology, takes the avatar of a female in order to destroy a demon called ‘Araka’. The power behind Araka's strength was his chasteness. Hence, Krishna in a beautiful woman *avatar*, marries Araka and then destroys him in a battle. When Krishna finally reveals himself in front of other Gods he says “there will be many like me, neither man nor woman, and whatever words will come from the mouths of these people, whether good (blessings) or bad(curses), will come

¹ Tritiya Prakriti, prakriti meaning nature, in Sanskrit means the third gender which would encompass any gender outside the dominant male and the female. But does this understanding of tritinya Prakriti exists today in pre colonial India as it is in our mythologies and ancient texts? This research aims at finding the changes in gendered identity of a Hijra brought by colonialism in India. This research mainly focuses on the changes in the identities of a Hijra with respect to its gender. There are many other aspects regarding the name Hijra and their changes in occupation which this research touches upon slightly but not completely. The main focal point remains the change in identity regarding gender. In the 17th and 18th century, Hijras wore both male and female clothing but after the 19th century, this portrayal changed to Hijras only in women clothes. And not only clothes but also attributes, customs and behavior. How then is the concept of “tritinya prakriti” still valid?

² Also the popular Hindu Deity among Hijras is Lord Shiva in his Ardhanarisvara form, i.e., half man/half woman. It represents the male form of Shiva united with his female/Shakti form. Hijras have a great affinity for Lord Shiva and are respected in Shiva temples

true “. (Nanda 28). The other story which is cemented in the memories of Hijras is when Lord Ram, the seventh avatar of Lord Vishnu in Hindu Mythology, was leaving for his exile of 14 years, he turns back and asks all the men, women and children to go back. When he returns, he sees a group of people standing on the brink of river. Unable to comprehend the reason, he asks the people standing there. One of them says that Lord Ram asked only men, women and children to go back but they are neither of them. Hence they decided to stay back and wait to be instructed on where to go. Lord Ram, being moved by this, grants them a boon that whatever they will say will come true. This is the reason why the Hijras even today are seen blessing the child at the time of childbirth and people fear their curses and look out for their blessings. Not only in the Hindu mythology but also in core Sanskrit texts such as *Natyasastra* and *Kamasutra* there are instructions regarding the ‘third gender’. Many relevant words can be found in Sanskrit texts such as “tritiya prakriti” (third nature) *stlripini/stripuman* “woman-man,” and *napumsaka*, “not male”. *Kamasutra*, the sex manual in Sanskrit Literature, has instructions for men regarding sexual practices with the “third gender”. Also in *Natyasatstra*, the drama manual in classical India, the third gender is placed under the umbrella term ‘prakriti’ along with male and female gender (Roscoe 212). These are evidential examples of the celebrated presence of the people with ambivalent sexuality or the “third’ gender.

The western idea that a physical sex is fixed because of his/her gentiles is also debunked in the Hindu belief. As observed by Wendy Donigner O’Flaherty in her essay “Women Androgens and other Mythical Beasts” validate the theory of hydraulic construction of body in Hindu belief. This view of hydraulic construction of the body is parallel to the recent studies on medical texts in Greek and Roman world. In this view, masculinity and femininity definitely depend on the physiology but this dependence is itself unstable. These genders, according to the Greco-Roman view which is evident in Hindu texts as well, are dependent on the levels of cold and heat in a body. These levels are subject to changes even after birth. (Roscoe 220)

The word ‘transgender’ is generally used to describe people who transgress social gender norms. This is generally used as an umbrella term to signify individuals who defy rigid, binary gender roles. But, does this really happen? Sarah Kaye Lewis in her thesis on “Gendering the Body: Exploring the Construction of the Sexually Dimorphic Body” says “

Trans sexuality is seen as a transitional period either from woman to man or from man to woman.³ Aren’t Hijras then trying to perform only one gender perfectly without any mistake or insufficiency?” In A. Revathi’s “The Truth About Me”, the narrator describes about his friend who also possessed an ambivalent personality. He expresses that he is the only son and hence has to hide his feelings. But when he goes to the Hijra cult, he goes clad in a *sari*. What strikes me is that the narrator describes his friend tying a handkerchief around his face to hide his moustache while he is still clad in a *sari* (36). Keeping a moustache is also considered a sign of man’s dignity and masculinity. Shaving off his moustache will make him feminine enough to be reprimanded at home because it is a gendered society but isn’t keeping a moustache while wearing a *sari* serving him indignation too? This hints at Lewis’s observation that they try and perform only one gender correctly. Elements of both man and woman cannot co-exist. It is either a man or a woman.

Judith Butler, an American philosopher and a gender theorist says that doing gender also creates gender and in creating the gender it creates the body of the gender (Butler). When Doraismy, the narrator of “The Truth About Me”, is instructed on to keep his hair long, he is doing gender. And by that he is creating gender which is not radical but conformist. Without long hair it will be seen as a man wearing a *sari* and that is considered as a “dishonor” in Hijra community. The narrator says “It was equally important to look like a woman and that keeping long hair was an important marker of being feminine” (28). Butler gives a very crucial point in gender studies by saying that gender is performative, that is, “nobody really is a gender from the start”. Butler definitely says that gender is “culturally formed” but at the same time stresses the fact that there is freedom of individual agency and people who are gender different should be non-conformist to gender presentations. A.Revathi in her autobiography says “If you happen to see a man crossing your path, you’re expected to make way for him, bend your head bashfully and make sure that your chest is covered...This is what is expected of those who want to be a part of the Hijra community” (47). Also when Revathi, who hadn’t got her

³ Revathi in her autobiography describes her new family after her ‘nirvanam’. Her new family now has a mother, grandmother, sisters-in-law et al. There are only female pronouns and not a single mention of a male relation. Devoid any mention of male, doesn’t it make male and female as two different categories which cannot merge

'*nirvanaam*'⁴ yet, goes to the hill top in her village clad in sari to meet other people like her. Revathi exclaims fear on seeing the rowdies in bike and says "We could not get off the rowdies" (18). Rowdies were only two and Revathi and her members were more in number. What was displayed was the fear, weakness, anxiety which is stereotypical of a woman. Doraismy not just turns into Revathi biologically but also socially and culturally. He acquires not just the sex of a woman but also the gender. As suggested by Sigmund Freud that "gender is framed as being created by, and limited to the biological capacity of sex". (Lewis 21). By limiting her capacity of fighting against the rowdies, Revathi recreates her gender as a female.

Will Roscoe in his paper "The Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion" studies the goddess centered priesthoods regarding the Hijra of contemporary India. His paper is circumscribed around three goddess priesthoods namely the Greco-roman galli, Inanna in Sumeria and Ishtar in Akkad and lastly Hijras in India. The center goddess for the Hijra in India is Bahuchara Mata. Roscoe opines that these goddesses possess a radical behavior and did not align themselves with the patriarchal patterns of the society. He writes:

Cybele, Bahuchara Mata, Ishtar are credited with the power to inspire divine madness which can include the transformation of gender. Their mythologies clearly places them outside the patriarchal domestic sphere...Cybele roams the mountains with her wild devotees, Innan/Ishtar is the patron of battlefield and Bahuchara Mata becomes deified while on a journey between cities...All three transgress patriarchal roles and structures. Cybele begets a child out of wedlock,

Ishtar the goddess of sexuality, is notoriously promiscuous, never marries and Bahuchara Mata cuts her breasts in an act of asceticism to avoid unwanted heterosexual contact.

Clearly his studies trace the personality of Bahuchara Mata⁵ to be transgressive and non-conformist. But is her lineage in the contemporary India as radical and transgressive as the myths portray them to be? There

are many rituals in the contemporary Hijra community which are parallel to the rituals performed by a woman. When the process of *nirvanaam* is completed, the blood is allowed to flow out completely because it is considered "male". Also after the process, the rituals of the recovery are similar to that of a woman after her childbirth. The Hijra after nirvan is clothed as a bride and the rituals such as applying *mehndi* are performed. The other prominent custom in the Hijra community which parallels the role of woman in Indian society is at the death of a Guru; the chelas are dressed as widows (in white sari) and perform mourning. They also break their bangles and cry out loudly beating their chests. This is similar to how a woman behaves when her husband dies in Indian culture (Loh 10). "When a guru dies", writes Revathi, "the chelas become widowed, and are meant to observe widowhood. This is our custom and practice" (297). When Revathi expressed her desire to own a bike she didn't want that of her father because it was loud. She wanted a scooter because "that's the kind of vehicle women drive".

There is a great gap between Hindu texts/mythologies and the state of contemporary socio-cultural society. Hijras in India, before the colonial rule, enjoyed secure lives working in wealthy homes. The present lives of Hijras are struck with constant fear and shame. The colonial rule created two contingent boxes of genders, male and female, and people were supposed to fall in these boxes. Anybody who was between the boxes, or hung out at the edges or chose to be outside the boxes completely was considered as an outcast. The most evident example is the Indian Penal Code of 1860 which criminalized "carnal intercourse against the order of nature". The ambiguity in the Sanskrit texts regarding the sexualities and gender were seen as grounds for representing Indians as 'lesser breeds without the law' (Macaulay). The myths and traditions were seen as "less valuable as what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England". India with its ambiguities was seen as in a complex state which needed civilization.⁶ Serena Nanda states that "In

⁴ This term is used by Hijras to refer to the process of emasculation. It defines rebirth stating that they have left the male body and taken a new birth as a woman.

⁵ Bahuchara Mata is a Hindu Goddess. According to Mythology, Bahuchara Mata cut off her breasts when she was threatened in the wild forest as an act of asceticism. For Hijras, she represents transvestism and transgenderism. Every Hijra household has a shrine of Bahuchara Mata.

⁶ A similar process is stated by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" when she states that 'Sati', the practice of wife being burned after the death of husband, was not a norm in India but an exception. By the projection of sati as a norm, the Europeans projected India as a barbaric nation which needed civilization. The banning of Sati by the Europeans was not done by a moral alignment

Western culture gender identity is ideally dichotomous. One is supposed to experience oneself as either a man or a woman." (Nanda 115)

19th century was the time when bourgeoisie middle class in Europe were emerging with their discourse on sexuality and in turn how sexuality forms the social order. This was the time of construction of bourgeoisie morality as against the aristocrats and the 19th century bourgeoisie chose sexuality as their base for forming their morality and social order. The foundation of a bourgeoisie family was threatened by anyone of a different sexuality because it would be non-reproductive. As observed by Sigmund Freud, Civilization can only occur when natural sexual instincts are repressed. This socio political structure which was forming in Britain penetrated to its colonies as well. Shane Patrick Gannon in his thesis describes the pre colonial representations of Hijras in India. In his work he includes the account of a French traveler, Jean De Thevenot, who talks about his encounter with the 'hermaphrodites' in Surat. He describes the hermaphrodites as wearing "turban on their heads like men, though they go in the habit of a woman" (Gannon 133). Gannon uses this point to illustrate how in pre colonial India the hermaphrodites or Hijra used to wear non-gendered clothes. The post colonial representations of Hijras included words like "disgusting" incorporating moral aesthetics (Gannon 135).⁷ Also the inability of Hijras to reproduce questioned whether they are "perfect" species or not. Gannon uses the account of Francois Balthazar Solvyns "The Costume of Indostan" (1807) and says that the post colonial representations "categories them as physiologically abnormal" (Gannon 138). These accounts were formed as valid forms of knowledge and hence helped in building the state of British

with the country but merely for representing India as barbaric and Europeans as their benefactors.

⁷ There are several written post colonial accounts that Gannon describes in his thesis which are evidential in seeing the "unnatural" representations of Hijras by the Europeans. Hijras were described as the "vilest and most polluted beings" (Gannon 141) and also 'lusus naturae' was the term often used to describe the hermaphrodite which signals the fact that they were opposed to nature. Also because these "unnatural" hermaphrodites were taken as "natural" by the Indian society itself, it called into question the whole morality of Indian populace and their need of immediate treatment by the colonial civilization. What is noted that that Gannon illustrates that how the representations of 19th century were carried forward to the 20th century as well.

Empire. Also, Through the use of institutions such as law, these ideas moved beyond the hegemonic framework to the coercive framework.⁸

There is a constant fear in Revathi about her sexuality. "I was afraid if the world knew I was a Hijra, I would be isolated ". Also there is a continuous ambiguity on to consider herself a Hijra or a woman. In the text she sometimes relishes being called as a woman and sometimes calls herself a Hijra. Whenever the societal factors come into the play she wishes to be inside one of the two gendered boxes of sexuality: a woman. When police catches her during her sex work she says "Samy! Let me go! I'm not a woman. I'm a *pottai*."⁹ Also when Revathi describes their mode of income by sex work she says " Only those Hijras who looked like women were allowed to do sex work." The constant going to back and forth to their parents place and coming back unsatisfied signifies the unacceptance for Hijras filled in contemporary India. Revathi too talks about her frequent visits to her home after her *Nirvanaam* and her changing many gurus in order to search stability but fails to find it.

In my view, Colonization in India has shifted ambivalent sexualities and gender into the realm of Imaginary¹⁰ despite of being very much present in the Symbolic earlier. One way to keep them in the

⁸ Louis Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher, described two kinds of state apparatus namely ISA's (Ideological state Apparatus) and RSA's (repressive State Apparatus). ISA's such as education and reproduction helps in the reproduction of ideology and RSA's takes the ideology into the coercive governance in which whatever is given people accept it as valid and truth. The formation of Hijra identity in post colonial India took place by both.

⁹ Pottai is a Tamil word meaning an effeminate man or a woman. Tamil speaking Hijras refer themselves as a pottai.

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, in psychoanalytical theory, describes three stages of human psyche namely the Imaginary, Real and Symbolic. The Imaginary in his theory is the realm of unfulfilled desire while the Symbolic is the realm of language and narrative. Lacan explains it through what he calls "the mirror stage". He says that when a boy who identifies with his mother and has oedipal relation with his mother, sees himself in a mirror and identifies his phallus, due to the fear of castration he distract himself from the mother and towards the father. Because the realm of the father represents the patriarchal realm of male language and narrative which is powerful. In a similar manner, the colonial formation of true knowledge in India, shifted the non gendered identities of Hijras to the Imaginary (of unfulfilled desire) while it was very much present in the Symbolic order of language and narrative

Imaginary so as not to disturb the Symbolic is Religion. Religion allows the Hijras to perform their rituals along with other genders. As Nanda also observes as there are “several esoteric Hindu ritual practices involve male transvestism as a form of devotion.” (Nanda 21) When Revathi with her effeminate feelings goes back to her home in long hair and is asked to cut it short, she replies to have kept it as a form of devotion to *Tirupati* and successfully escapes the situation (31). Also when she talks about the festival in Koothandavar temple in Tamil Nadu, she mentions that only men and Hijras, not women, are allowed to “make a vow to tie *thali* to Aravan in the temple” (259).

The “*tritiya Prakriti*’ (third nature) which was prevalent and acceptable in the pre-colonial Indian times turned against the ‘order of nature’ and unnatural by the colonial weapons. As Revathi claims, “If I have to live in this world, I’ve got to adjust to its demands” (220). These demands are formed by the colonial ideology that we are carrying in the present times. This ideology works in two ways. At one hand it doesn’t allow the gendered categories to accept the non-gendered people. On the other hand it also doesn’t let the non-gendered people accept themselves as non-gendered completely. “Hijras read themselves as ‘deficiently masculine’ and ‘incompletely feminine’ “(Loh 3). They will always define themselves as the lack of the two genders instead of the union of both. “Why was I born a *pottai*” (195), Revathi exclaims!

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2. ON THE SEXUALISING OF INDIAN ADS AND ITS REPURCUSSIONS

(<http://www.dimensiontoday.com/latest-india-news-online/the-kama-sutra-of-indian-ads-how-sex-is-used-to-sell-everything-in-advertisements-09650.html>)

3. ON SCHOOLING, EDUCATION AND POLITICS

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