

Surmounting Gender Dysphoria in A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 1

Month: December

Year: 2023

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 17.10.2023

Accepted: 05.12.2023

Published: 14.12.2023

Citation:

Geetha, M.

“Surmounting Gender
Dysphoria in A.
Revathi's *The Truth
About Me.*” *Shanlax
International Journal of
English*, vol. 12, no. S1,
2023, pp. 46–51.

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.34293/
rtldh.v12iS1-Dec.77](https://doi.org/10.34293/rtldh.v12iS1-Dec.77)

Dr. M. Geetha

*Associate Professor, Department of English
KG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, India*

Abstract

The term 'Dysphoria' means a state of unease or generalized dissatisfaction with life. This state of unease, pain and dissatisfaction due to one's gender identity is generally known as 'Gender Dysphoria'. The term was coined by Norman Fisk in 1973. Gender Dysphoria typically waxes and wanes until it drives individuals to take steps to live their lives congruently with how they perceive themselves. Some make permanent physical and social changes to live completely in their preferred gender, whereas others find alternative ways to manage the gender Dysphoria, such as living partially in their preferred gender and partially in their assigned gender. This term is also used in psychiatry. It literally refers to a state of psychological distress or discomfort associated with having an experience of gender that does not match one's gender assigned at birth. The study brings under scrutiny the neglected position of women and transgender in present society through the works of the transgender writer, Revathi's "Truth About Me" and also how hijras are humiliated and suppressed in public domain and how Revathi, was not spared even after leaving her village. This autobiography stands as a cornerstone of transgender literature depicting the fulfilment of Revathi's dreams in her successful transformation to become a woman. There is little research on how GD and/or transgender identity are associated with surmounting.

Keywords: Gender Dysphoria, Transgender, Gender Identity, Discomfort, Hijras

Introduction

Gender studies are a field of study devoted to analysing gender identity and gendered representation. This field includes women's studies, men's studies and LGBTQ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender & Queer) studies. A lesbian is a homosexual woman. The word *lesbian* is also used for women in relation to their sexual identity or sexual behaviour, regardless of sexual orientation, or as an adjective to characterize or associate nouns with female homosexuality or same-sex attraction. Gay is a term that primarily refers to a homosexual person or the trait of being homosexual. The term was originally used to mean 'carefree'. It became the word favoured by homosexual men to describe their sexual orientation. Bisexual is romantic attraction, sexual attraction or sexual behaviour toward both males and females, or to more than one sex or gender. It may also be defined as romantic or sexual attraction to people of any sex or gender identity, which is also known as pansexuality. Queer generally means, 'strange' or 'peculiar'. It is an umbrella term for sexual or gender minorities who are not heterosexual or are not is gender.

Transgender Studies is prominent because of the need to create awareness about the personality traits of transgender in the society that considers transgender as mere errors-in-nature. The term ‘transgender’ denotes a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex. Researcher Golden Kisha. B says, “Transgender is the state of one’s ‘gender identity’ not matching one’s ‘assigned sex’”. Transgender literary works are almost always autobiographies and memoirs. Autobiography is penning down personal life experiences and a memoir is a historical account or biography written from a personal knowledge.

A.Revathi, a writer, actor and transgender rights activist, born on 14th of April 1968, works with Sangama, a sexuality minorities human rights organisation for individuals oppressed due to their sexual preference. *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* in 2010, which was initially written in Tamil titled as *Vellai Mozhi* and later translated into English by feminist historian ,V.Geetha, popular for writing issues related to caste, gender, education and civil rights. *The Truth about Me* has been translated into seven Indian languages and has also appeared in e-book and audio book versions. This work is an unflinchingly courageous and moving autobiography of a hijra who fought ridicule, persecution and violence both within and outside home to find a stable life of dignity. Transgenders, literally known as third genders and colloquially known as *hijras* are often considered as the errors-in-nature and are usually rejected by the society. Though this rejection is the result of poor awareness, things can be changed only through constant persistence. This article aims in highlighting the fact that these ‘rejected’ are united and successful through strictly following the customs of their community.

The autobiography, *The Truth About Me* begins with the birth of Doraisamy as the last child in the family of five with three brothers and a sister in a small village in Namakkal *taluk*, Salem district. Things went well in the family in spite of the poor turn-over in his father’s milk-delivery business when the family had no suspicions about Doraisamy’s behaviour and gender. This is given in the following lines as, “...he would mix curd with rice and wake me up saying, ‘Little one, my love, won’t you wake up? Open your eyes and eat this ball of rice. I never quite woke up, but managed to swallow the food in a haze of sleep” (TAM 3). His femininity took its baby-steps when Doraisamy pursued his Class 5 in his village school. He always accompanied the girls to school, swept, drew *kolam* and even helped his mother. As days pass on, he underwent the growing sense of irrepressible femaleness and was badly haunted by his inability to live and lead his life as he wished it to be. So, Doraisamy along with his friends boarded the bus to Dindigul with the hope to meet ‘amma’, who wore saris and lived like women.

On reaching, they changed into saris, wore wigs and jewels. Doraisamy felt thrilled and ecstatic when considered a woman or referred with a woman name. This is shown as, “ ‘You look like the actress Revathi.’ And in my heart, I imagined that was my name—Revathi. I looked myself at the mirror and felt a glow of pride. I did look like a woman. It was at that moment that I was convinced I was indeed one” (TAM 22). That day was very special to Revathi as he strongly believed that this wonderful thing of doing women work would never happen again. Revathi enjoyed that night to sleep as a woman. Even after joining the *hijra* community, Revathi wanted to live as human beings with dignity without being whipped about in the whirlpool of emotions. Revathi learnt that for centuries their ancestors were treated as Gods.

In 1986, Revathi had her castration done. After having the operation done, the pain was excruciating. People around glared at her as an oddity and did not allow her to use the ladies toilet in the railway station. Revathi was helped by four other *hijras* in train. When working in *jopdi*, Revathi was forced to have anal sex by a local rowdy. He also accused her of stealing her belongings. Since, they didn’t have proper support from the policemen or the common people, Revathi and her guru decided to pay for his belongings and solve the issue. She expresses her

feelings as, “I had not chosen sex work in order to make money. It was because I could not really repress my sexual feelings that I had opted for this life. I was beginning to discover the horror and violence of this choice”(TAM 110).

Revathi narrates an incident where she was feeling relaxed about her uncommon gender identity. Her family goddess was a virgin goddess. Women don't go into the shrine. They are not supposed to see the goddess or be in the proximity. Only women who have stopped menstruating can go in, but men could go into the shrine. Since there was no question of Revathi menstruating, she was permitted inside the shrine of the goddess. The devotees often did the 'flower choice' to know whether something would work in their favour. Here the priest asked Revathi to choose the flower and added that the goddess and Revathi are same. She was feeling closer to people and felt cool about her gender.

Revathi then met Babu, a Muslim theatre operator and eventually fell in love with him deep down in her heart. She felt a desire to lie with him and hold him tight. Yet, she lied to him about her identity. She said that she hadn't attained puberty and the doctors told her that her womb hasn't developed and also that she isn't fit for the conjugal life. Even after hearing this Babu maintained the relationship smooth and sweet. He habituated meeting in her house and enjoyed food with her often. On knowing this, Revathi's brothers criticised mercilessly

During the time of Ganesh Chaturthi, the *hijras* were asked to dance in village temple. Revathi was also one among the pretty *hijras* chosen for performing in the temple premises. Revathi enjoyed behaving like a typical woman is expected to be in the society. Whenever men spoke to her, said suggestive words, followed her, she wondered why this never happened when she was in male attire yet felt that she was a woman. She always felt that she had the power and urge in her to fight when things went wrong. She didn't know if it's simply because she was born a man and then became a woman. Revathi was humiliated and ignored because of her gender in the driving school when she was applying for the license. The breaking point in Revathi's life was when her father claimed that there was no proof that she had given him the money to build the house they live in. She alone knew all that she had to go through to earn that money. Filled with rage, left the house early in the morning. She knew that she would have to deal with rowdies, police, and with all their kicks and beatings. She was called a prostitute, whore, number nine, *hijra*, *pottai*.

Revathi joined Sangama and realized that people's behaviour towards her has changed. There were less violence, general public was less inclined to harass her and policemen too were not ready to accept bribes or resort to violence against her. While working with Sangama, Revathi initiated in forming an intensive training and legal literacy classes for the four-member crisis intervention team. She also voiced how the policemen on arresting trans women, lodged them in male cells instead of female cells to torment them badly. She explains that it is always common for the policemen to foist false charges on transgender people, accusing them of chain snatching, stripping in public and pick pocketing. She also voiced her wish that on arresting trans women at night, they must be lodged in a remand home and not in the police station. Sangama began to mobilize and collectivize members of the transgender community. It resulted in a community based organisation, Vividha, to handle crisis in the *hijra* community.

In 2003, Vividha single handedly conducted the Hijra Habba on a grand scale to affirm the principle that transgender persons are lawful citizens of our country and our fundamental rights (including civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights) need to be protected and guaranteed through the law and by meaningful engagement by the government and general public. A turning point for Vividha was its role in crisis intervention in the lives of one of its members. A trans woman and her husband were accosted and beaten up by the police while standing on the road. Our society finds it hard to accept that a trans woman can have a husband. Society thinks that vaginal or penetrative sex is the only kind of sex that is 'natural'.

Another momentous crisis intervention undertaken by Vividha was what came to be known in activist circles in Bengaluru as the 'Kokila crisis'. Kokila, a 21-year-old trans woman from Tamil Nadu, lived in Bengaluru as a sex worker. On June, 22, 2004, she was standing near the NGEF Layout, when ten men forcibly took her to a plot adjoining the road, where she was gang raped. At some point a couple of policemen arrived on the scene and nabbed two of the culprits, while the rest escaped. The worst was yet to come for Kokila. This is shown in the following lines as, "Kokila was taken into a room in the Bypanahalli Police Station, stripped naked and bound to a window with handcuffs. The six policemen hit her with batons, abused and tortured her sexually. She was burnt with cigarette butts and burning coir" (LTA 60). Later the policemen took her to the public bathroom and forced her to dress in male clothes threatening to tonsure her head if she didn't comply. Vividha, strongly condemned the behaviour of the police and lodged a complaint against their atrocities. These incidents aren't stray occurrences but were part of the on-going police violence against *hijras*.

The sensational arrest on false charges, subsequent custodial torture and the complicity of the medical establishment in violating a 20-year-old trans woman, Shilpa, is a glaring example of this attitude. Sadly, there are many such instances. The arrest of Shilpa was just the opportunity the police were waiting for. Continuing its vicious campaign against *hijras*, the Bengaluru police arrested Shilpa, in November 2008 using an old missing complaint from her family. Born as a physiological male, Shilpa, like most *hijras* felt that she was a female trapped in male body. Because of attempts by her parents to control her feminine expression, she left home and befriended two other *hijras*, Baby and Mangala, who empathized with her. Shilpa expressed her desire to undergo castration and was successful in having the operation done at Cuddapah.

In 2003, Revathi got an unexpected opportunity, an invitation to attend the South Asian Court of women on Violence and trafficking in HIV/AIDS to be held in Dhaka. The invitation came through Vimochana, a popular NGO in Bengaluru, which works on gender issues. Revathi was both confused and excited. She was excited at the prospect of taking a flight and travelling to a foreign country. She was confused and worried about getting the passport. Her fears were certainly valid, as until then, no transgender person had a passport. The reason, it was nearly impossible for people like her to get a valid passport was that as a transgender, people don't have any ID proofs like address proof, bank accounts, voter ID and ration card. The only valid document was the school certificate, but here again was another hurdle, the original name in her school certificate didn't match with her current status as a trans woman with a female name. This glaring discrepancy persisted as a major stumbling block.

With determination, Revathi decided that she would not let any of this stop her from getting a passport. She had with her, a letter from Sangama, an affidavit provided by feminist activist Ashwini Sukthankar and her school leaving certificate. On reaching the passport office in Bengaluru, the first thing the authorities pointed out was the discrepancy in the name in her school leaving certificate (Doraisamy) and her current name (Revathi). Although after the sex change operation, she had legally changed her name to Revathi, it didn't automatically mean that her gender was now female as there was no legal provision to do that. She told the authorities that she was a trans woman who had undergone a sex change surgery. The officers insisted that she must go to the doctors to get a medical certificate about her gender. At the government hospital, she had to face a lot of ridicule and humiliation while she was being medically examined by an obstetrician and a gynaecologist to prove that she was indeed a woman. She put up with all the hardships because she yearned to attend the conference and represent the whole of her *hijra* community. At one point she said to the doctors in sheer desperation, 'I don't care if you give me a certificate as a male or female. But give me one, please. I need to get a passport to represent my country at an international conference. Am I a terrorist trying to fake a passport? As a doctor, it is your duty to examine me and give me a

certificate' (LTA 70). Finally, she won and managed to get a medical certificate that she was indeed a female and the passport authorities issued a passport that enabled her to attend the international conference. She was the first transwoman in the country to have been issued a passport.

Revathi also narrates about the happiest moment of her life and the most important day for her. The day, her dream that she nurtured since she was sixteen-years-old was fulfilled in her thirty-third year when she became closer to her superior in Sangama and eventually got his acceptance for marriage. Her *gurubais* felt happy for her and said that she is really lucky to have both good job and good husband. On the day of marriage, he held her hand tight and walked out hand in hand. She felt teary-eyed with happiness when he did that. She was convinced that a man who held her thus would never abandon her. They registered their marriage and even applied for a ration card. Hence, their life together began in a happy note.

All the joys of love and life came to an end even before their first anniversary. He became less romantic and quit speaking affectionately to Revathi as before. She had to extract love and romance from her husband, which made her life miserable and bad. Though Revathi resigned her work in Sangama, as per his suggestions, he constantly criticised Revathi saying, 'I can be romantic only when I feel like it. If you ask me to feel romantic, it is as if I have no freedom of choice here'... 'I've lost my freedom because of you, Because of you I've lost my peace of mind'... 'I made a mistake by marrying you. In fact, it is one of the biggest mistakes of my life...' (TAM 287 and 289). He suggested her to meet a counsellor and also accused her to be an uneducated village *hijra*. Though she loved him, was fond of him and desired him beyond measure, he seemed to have lost all desire for her, which made her home a hell on earth. A year after they got married, their love and relationship ended. Her distress and his words-don't-match-action deed is expressed clearly when she says,

Sangama didn't abandon Revathi, her colleagues and friends stood by her as the pillars of strength and support, they suggested that she need not come to office and share a work space with him (Revathi's husband), but could go and meet *hijra* people, interview them and write a book. They assigned a year's project to her. Revathi readily agreed and chose Tamil Nadu as the site for her project, as writing is a tool to deal with oppression. In 2003, she took a one-year break from work to write her first book, *Unarvum Uruamum* (The Feelings and the Body). Written originally in Tamil, the book captured the experiences of 25 *hijras* who she personally interviewed and traced their journeys from childhood to adulthood. This work was followed by her memoir, *The Truth About Me* in 2010.

Later Revathi received a one-year fellowship to research the lives of female to male trans persons from Samvada, a Bengaluru based organisation that works with youth. This was a ray of hope for Revathi, as she received a monthly stipend of Rs.10,000, which was of great help to her at that point of life. Even among the transgender community, female to male trans persons are not accepted because the community feels that they aren't 'real men'. She was certain that female to male trans persons also go through a similar trauma over their masculine feelings trapped in a female body. This mismatch and the resulting feelings of confusion, loneliness, anxiety, guilt and shame are termed Gender Dysphoria.

Every year, 15th of April is celebrated as the Transgender Day. It is an important step towards a truly inclusive world. The prime concern of this celebration is that the next generation of transgender people should not go through the traumas and pains that this generation are undergoing. One must first completely welcome and accept the lasting social change. Humans must work for creating a healthy world where there are no barriers of gender, caste, race, colour and language. Legal change without social freedom is meaningless. Even the best legislation in the world is of no use if people's mind-sets and attitudes remain closed. True equality images only when women are treated with

respect; as equals in the true sense of the term. France people must be truly respected as humans. The *hijra* community strictly follow their customs and lead a well-organised life. Though they are identified only by their scars of humiliation, they overcome their agony and sufferings with the strength and support provided by their community. This community is customised because they sincerely practise their traditions. In this modern age, when people forget to follow the customs and traditions, owing to the busy money-minded nature, the hijras of hijra community stay strong as they stand united bound by their customs.

Review of Literature

“A Woman Trapped in a Man’s Body... Am I a Flawed Being (?)”: A Study of Revathi’s *The Truth about Me* by Dr. Anupriya Roy Srivastav. This paper examines how hijras are humiliated and suppressed in public domain.

Flagitiousness in a Transgender Life: A. Revathi’s *Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* by R. Murugesu. This paper depicts the life of Revathi as a hijra representing hijra community in India.

References

1. Revathi, A. *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. Translated by V. Geetha. Penguin, 2010.
2. Bisexuality. *Wikipedia*, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bisexuality>
3. Cultural Identity. *Wikipedia*, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_identity