

Queer Reading of *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*

Anisha

Assistant Professor, Maharaja Surajmal Institute of Technology, C-4, Janakpuri, New Delhi-110058

ABSTRACT

Queer Theory is a field of critical theory which emerged from the alliance between gay and lesbian theories. It aims to disrupt the presumed relations between and among sexuality, gender and desire. A deconstruction of the hetero/ homo hierarchy is one of the major components of queer theory. Michael Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* is one of the important and influential critical works which informs the Queer theoretical movement. Queer Theory includes both queer reading of text and the theorisation of queerness itself. Queer Reading of texts explore characters who in some manner defy predisposed notions of explicit heteronormativity and binary gender norms. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* is a seminal autobiography of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi in which there are strong undertones of queerness. The aim of this paper is to explore a queer reading of this third gender narrative. This paper intends to explore the fluid nature of sexuality through the character of Laxmi who fails to fall in narrow frame of heterosexuality. It illustrates the struggle of Laxmi in coming to terms with her ambiguous identity through key episodes. Particular emphasis is also given upon portrayal of plight of hijras who being transgressive, inconsistent and defiant have always been viewed with an eye of huge contempt. The paper also explores Laxmi as a queer character whose success journey completely defy predisposed notions of explicit heteronormativity and binary gender norms.

Keywords: Queer Theory, Normative vs Non-Normative Categories, Heteronormativity, Heterosexuality, Homosexuality, Michael Foucault, Third Gender, Hijras, Sexual fluidity

INTRODUCTION

“When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is ‘male or female’? and you are accustomed to make the distinction with unhesitant certainty.” (Freud; qtd. in Robbins 209)

It is a kind of common-sense position: we all know that woman is, what a man is, and we are ‘accustomed’ says Freud, to be able to tell the distinction with ‘unhesitant uncertainty’. When we talk about identity and self or subject, we tend to focus on our gendered self in terms of sexuality- male and female, and also try to locate self or subject in terms of gendered identity- masculine and feminine. In other words, one view sexuality only from these two established terms validated by the dominant society. However, this notion contradicts the very nature of sexuality which is too complex, ambiguous, and dynamic to be understood by this single biological distinction. The influential theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick considers sexuality as a modality of the body that resists essential reduction because it represents: “the full spectrum of positions between the most intimate and the most social, the most pre- determined and the most aleatory, the most physically rooted and the most symbolically infused, the most innate and the most learned, the most autonomous and the most relational traits of being. (102)

Queer Theory debunks this one-dimensional orientation of sexuality. There are women and men who choose to fall in love with others of the same gender; there are women and men who choose to transition from their assigned sex at birth to the other sex; and there are those whose sexual behaviour do not fit traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity and reject the binaries of two sexes. To appreciate this fluidity of nature of sexuality is to appreciate queerness. ‘Queer’ refers to a kind of doing, a way of living, that does not take for granted the presumptions that are often made about the naturalness of identity, of sex, of gender, or of desire. It questions the whole set of normative categories and the working ideology behind them. It challenges the cognitive paradigms generated by such normative i.e. what is ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’, ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ and so on. As Teresa de Lauretis puts it:

“Queer unsettles and questions the genderness of sexuality.” (100)

In other words, ‘queer’ becomes an act by which established compartments of sexual identity are transgressed, reversed, mimicked, or otherwise critiqued. It gives voice to all those non- normative sexualities as well as identities that are denounced as alien, strange, unnatural, transgressive and odd. Michael Foucault's work on sexuality has had a considerable influence on queer theory. *The History of Sexuality* is a seminal work of Foucault which exposes the politics of ideology behind the fixed sexual categories as well as identities. He explores how in

his time heterosexuality was legitimized at the expense of homosexuality.

From the moment we are born, our gender identity is no secret. We are either a boy or a girl. As Chris Ingraham delineated:

“Gender is always heterogender.” (qtd. in Nayar 247)

Gender organises our world into pink or blue. As we grow, most of naturally fit into our gender and sexual roles. But for some people, what is inside them does not match with what’s outside them in their world. They insist to be born into the wrong body. They are basically “Transgenders”. Transgenders are the living example of sexual fluidity whose complex mesh of overlaps of biological sex, the gendered identity and sexual orientation have turned the binary distinction of gendered identity into a topsy turvy. Transgender individuals destabilize gender categories through their assertions of not fitting either gender as well as claims to actually being a bit of both. Hijras are the most prevalent expression of transgenders in India who identify with a different sex at birth and typically undergo some form of social gender transitioning and may also undergo some form of medical gender transition in the form of gender affirmative medical treatments. Transgressive, inconsistent, defiant, difficult to confine, they inhabit both a gendered and a literary third space because of their inability to fit inside the narrow frame of what constitutes ‘sexual legitimacy’.

Hijras have been time and again viewed with an eye of contempt, and have been often stigmatized in the society. In other words, they have always got the stepmotherly treatment from the society not being marginalized by nature and God but by the system which does not ensure an equitable distribution of human identity and dignity. Most of them still live in shadows, hiding from world and pining for parental acceptance. Rejected by their families, many grow up hating their bodies, and fall victim to high rates of depression, drug abuse and even suicide. Unfortunately, the system denied their very human existence by complicating their fundamental rights. The most egregious instance of their identity crisis has been spotlighted in Mahesh Dattani’s play *Seven Steps around the fire* in which Anarkali is kept in male prison denounced as “worthless pig” and “castrated degenerate men”. Moreover Munswamy, the constable, almost crushes her dignity through his remark: “She of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn’t.” (100)

Queer reading of the text *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* portrays the mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Laxmi, the protagonist, voices the notion that sexuality is fluid. She manages to violate the boundaries of binary gender categories. Being exploited throughout her journey, she refuses to bend in front of heteronormative hierarchy.

“I don’t identify as a man or a woman. There are many more aspects of identity, than that. It is not our fault that we don’t fit in the society established boxes.” (Laxmi)

She makes us peep into her abused childhood in the very beginning. Though born as a male in Mumbai in an orthodox Brahmin family, Laxmi never felt like a normal boy inside. She started living the life of isolation from a very early age. There was a clear mismatch between her sex, gender and desire. Dance was a passion of her having a therapeutic effect on her. She loved dancing and often got the chance to perform on stage by her teachers, but in an Indian patriarchal society, the dancing is considered a feminine pursuit. (Bhardwaj 59) The people teased him by calling her names as “homo” and a “chakka”. At the very early age Laxmi recognized the different gender identity which created a kind of identity crisis in her. She wasn’t able to recognise her true self as what she felt inside was opposite to what was outside.

“Yes, it’s true that I was like a woman. My mannerisms, my walking and talking style were all feminine. But why was it so? I didn’t know. I wasn’t of an age to answer this question. Loner that I already was, I drifted further into my cocoon” (4).

Laxmi was sexually harassed at a tender age of eight. Once she had attended the marriage function of a relative, where she was molested by a cousin and even threatened by that cousin. Not only this, she was molested again by him and his other friends. She was a little boy at the time of molestation; so she remained silent and didn’t talk about her assault to anyone. The physical exploitation became a part of her life and her cousin and his friends molested her several times at occasions such as family functions. This made her silent and weak both physically and mentally for a long time.

Laxmi continues to suffer silently until her decision to join the hijra community. Laxmi recognized her gender identity and joined the hijra community. She considered herself as feminine rather than masculine. Laxmi expresses her feelings as:

“When I became a hijra, a great burden was lifted off my head. I felt relaxed. I was now neither a man nor a woman. I

was a hijra. I had my own identity; no longer did I feel like an alien.” (43)

Realising her true self gave her feelings of peace and happiness. Feelings of fear and uncertainty gave place to feelings of peace and happiness. She hid the fact from her family due to fear and anxiety but later it exploded like a bomb. Her family initially refused to accept her new identity but later on conceded out of love. Unlike other families, her family didn't leave her on streets instead supported her.

Laxmi became a chela of Lata guru as a member of hijra community. Her journey from then takes us into the plight of transgender community. Social ostracism comes to the fore as the major cause of the psychic trauma of the third gender. Laxmi narrates the plight of hijras through their lives. She explains how their means of livelihood was either sex work or begging. Most of them died a pathetic death either due to poverty or unsafe sex. The whole society including police wore an attitude of apathy towards them. Instead of helping them, the police also exploited them. Infact Laxmi's encounter with the police inspired her to choose the life of activism. There are various instances in the memoir which portray the abuse of transgenders by police. One such instance of assault is illustrated through the incident of Subhadra. She went for sex work and never returned and reported dead later. Laxmi explains her grief in her words, “Subhadra's death had opened our eyes to the dangers of being a hijra” (55). She had been murdered and the police was unable to find any evidence of her murder. The case of Subhadra's murder was finally closed for the lack of evidence. Throughout Laxmi talks about the horror of being a hijra, Subhadra's death became the mystery for the other hijras. Laxmi relates another incident of the plight of the third gender as:

“A hijra was raped in Virar. Not only did the police refuse to lodge an FIR, they refused to even listen to what the hijra had to say. The hijra was in pain but the doctors were unwilling to treat her till the police did their job. It was a vicious circle... When I reached the police station, the havaldars were in splits. They couldn't fathom how a hijra could be raped (couldn't they)? They were using the incident to lubricate their filthiest fantasies when all they should have done was file the FIR and send the hijra to hospital.” (92)

Towards the end of autobiography Laxmi transforms from a meek, feeble young boy to one of the distinguished personalities of India. She not only joins an organization DWS to make hijras aware about the sexual epidemics like AIDS but also becomes the first chairperson of the organization. Activism works as a central tenet of the life of Laxmi throughout.

CONCLUSION

In the light of above discussion, we can confidently conclude that queerness is a major theme in the third gender narrative: *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. The notion of sexual fluidity works through the entire journey of Laxmi. Laxmi marvelously accomplishes this through the portrayal of her real-life episodes from the very childhood to her final acceptance of real identity. At the heart of the novel lies the rejection of one-dimensional orientation of sexuality which is also one of the central points of queer theory. It is not only a presentation of the pathetic state of sexual minorities but also a picture of the triumph of a hijra who manages to break the narrow social norms.

WORKS CITED

- [1]. Bhardwaj, Vandhana. *The Plight of The Third Gender: Quest for Identity in the Narratives Me Hijra Me Laxmi and The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. 2016-2017. Lovely Professional University. M.Phil. Thesis. http://dspace.lpu.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/2390/1/11614940_5_9_2017%201_48_44%20PM_complete%20thesis.pdf.
- [2]. Dattani, Mahesh. *Seven Steps Around the Fire: A Stage Play*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2013.
- [3]. De Lauretis, Teresa. *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*. Indiana University Press, 1991.
- [4]. Nayar, Pramod K. *Literary Theory Today*. Asia Book Club, 2017. Robbins, Ruth. *Literary Feminisms*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- [5]. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. United Kingdom, University of California Press, 1990.
- [6]. Seervai, Shanoor. “Laxmi Narayan Tripathi: India's Third Gender.” *Guernica*, March 16, 2015, <https://www.guernicamag.com/indias-third-gender/>.
- [7]. Tripathi, Laxminarayan. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. Oxford University Press, 2015.