

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES

[ISSN 2581-5369]

Volume 6 | Issue 6

2023

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Book Review of 'Me Hijra, Me Laxmi' by Laxminarayan Tripathi

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ABSTRACT

"Me Hijra, Me Laxmi" written by Laxminarayan Tripathi and translated from Marathi to English by R. Raj Rao and P.G. Joshi narrates the remarkable life story of Laxminarayan Tripathi, tracing her evolution from a young boy to a hijra, offering an intimate account of her struggles and triumphs. A survivor of early sexual abuse, she grappled with secrecy and pain, but ultimately found solace and strength within the LGBTQ+ community. Despite adversity, Laxmi carved her path as a dancer and model, navigating the complexities of her identity. The autobiography exposes the societal biases against hijras and queerness, shedding light on their struggles, while Laxmi's unwavering resilience raises questions about privilege and the broader challenges faced by the hijra community.

Keywords: *queer, hijras, feminine, LGBTQ+, sexuality.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Individuals identifying as transgender have a gender identity that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. Being a transgender is not related to one's sexual orientation, it is all about their gender identity. The word 'trans' is often used as a shorthand for transgender. In order to treat a transgender person with respect, one must treat them in accordance to the norms of the gender they identify with, and not their sex at birth. For instance, a transgender man who lives like a man should be referred to as 'him' and 'he'. When an individual lives as per their gender identity and not as per the gender they had been assigned at birth, this period of time is known as the period of 'gender transition'.

Like most traditional societies, Indian society too looks down upon transgender people although they have been a visible part of the Indian society for centuries. They have been mentioned in ancient texts, mythologies and epics. For instance, in the epic Ramayana, when Lord Rama was leaving his kingdom for fourteen years, he instructed all the 'men and women' who were following him to return to the city. Among these followers, only the *hijras* did not feel bound by his orders and decided to stay with him. Impressed by their loyalty, Lord Rama sanctioned them the power to bless people on auspicious occasions, like marriage and child birth.

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Unfortunately, in today's modern India, this has become the only occasion when *hijras* are openly invited to mix with the mainstream community.

'Me Hijra, Me Laxmi' is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding queer identity. This book is relevant for not only students and scholars of sociology and political science but also for the general public as it helps us understand the life of a third-gender individual. It is a narration of the life journey of Laxminarayan Tripathi. The book depicts her life experiences – her journey from a young boy to becoming a hijra. Born in a high-caste Brahmin family, Laxmi had learned the value of endurance since childhood due to her queer identity. Her childhood was rattled with diseases. She knew she was different from other boys her age. Her ill-health did not weaken her love for dancing. She was naturally flamboyant on stage, and this did not sit well with the patriarchal society she lived in. Dancing was a womanly pursuit, and since that young age, her love for dancing led to mockery. She was called 'homo' and 'chakka' – all they saw was a woman in a man's body. These instances from the very first pages show us how from an early age, individuals are 'othered' for expressing their sexuality. Instead of openness and acceptance, people are 'othered' and isolated, thereby burying such sensitive issues that should be discussed out in the open.

In the book, Laxmi recounts how her life drastically changed when she was sexually molested at the age of seven. Already weak from severe doses of medicines, she was penetrated at the age of seven by her own distant family member. Scared and threatened, she could not tell anyone. The abuse continued as not only her cousin but also her companions took turns to violate her. These instances transfer the minds of readers into a world of pain and suffering, as if the readers are living Laxmi's experiences. We are compelled to wonder if due to her previous experiences that made her feel like the 'other', she was not in a space to open up to anyone about her experiences and was forced to live with her pain, alone.

The sexual assaults ended her childhood. She became secretive and stopped communicating with her family, thereby isolating her from the ones she loved. Various instances in the book elaborate on how sexual assaults on her continued. But soon enough, for the first time in her scarred life, she learnt to fight back. This shows the readers the inherent nature in every human to fight back against what seems like injustice, like Hobbes's interpretation of how it is our nature to avoid avarices. She learnt that in the world that she was born in and the way she was, passivity had no place. At that young age, she discarded her passivity and was ready to be vilified for her aggression.

This book also sheds light on the role of good Samaritans in her life, and this teaches us readers

how positive influences can impact one's life. One such individual in Laxmi's life was Sangita Sethi, her neighbour. Laxmi was able to open up about her sexuality for the first time and was not made to feel like an 'other'. Through Sangita, Laxmi was able to meet people like her – a gay community led by Ashok Row Kavi. This miraculous moment in her life occurred when she was in standard four. She realized that she was not alone, and that her feelings were not alien. She was welcomed into the gay community, and for the first time in her life, she felt like she was normal. This highlights to the readers our inherent nature to be a part of a community, a part of something bigger than just us.

The life story of Laxminarayan Tripathi forces the readers through waves of emotions. Reading about her sexual exploitation as a child makes us shudder, but at the same time, her journey from childhood to adulthood inspires us. We are forced to wonder why she was not able to open up to her parents even when she had a loving relationship with them. On one hand, it seems like childish foolishness on her part, but on the other hand, it is understandable why she wasn't able to open up. There have been several instances of children being sexually abused by their family members but no action was taken to prevent public shame. In the case of Laxmi, her opening up about her sexual abuse was more complicated because of her queerness.

Laxmi found her footing in life through the art form of dance. She opened her own dance school and she received appreciation for her talent. But as she grew older, she became more conscious of her outward appearances. Dancing feminized her but she did not back down to taunts and mockery. However, her aggression worked against her as she was abducted twice and raped. Being born in a patriarchal society was a curse. For a third time, she was raped by a gang of fourteen men. She was pushed to a point where the mere touch of a man sent chills down her spine. But, her desire for love and comfort did not disappear. What is fascinating here is that even after such abuses, she still kept parts of herself alive, wanting normalcy. Herein we also see a difference between Laxmi and the community of gays that accepted her. They were men, they loved men and they themselves felt like men. But for Laxmi, she felt like a woman whenever she yearned for a man. She states that this maybe her unconscious desire looking for a heterosexual relationship.

Her entry into Mithibai College was a turning point in her life. The college was located in a Mumbai suburb where people had an indifferent attitude. This is where she started wearing her sexuality on her sleeve. Sometimes she came to college in female attire, wore her favorite lipstick and grew her fingernails. It is in college that she became a model-coordinator. Her contacts grew, and she slowly started knocking on the doors of film industry. She got the opportunity to be on the big screen for small roles. She earned well and took up the

responsibility of supporting her family. However, her parents were not aware of her life. On one hand, we see her entering a life of freedom and opportunity, where she was not seen for how she appeared but for what she could do. On the other hand, she still had to hide her true identity to her parents even when the world she lived in had accepted her. Why she was not able to open up to her parents in this moment can have various explanations. It maybe that she did not want to go through the painstaking task of coming out to her parents, having to explain them the ins and outs of her life. Maybe she was afraid of rejection and the fear of being disowned by her family, which is still a real issue in India today wherein queer sexuality is treated as abnormal and a perversion.

Soon, Laxmi was introduced to the world of bar-dancing. She made good money by dancing but she states that she never had sex in exchange for money. She states in the book that she considered herself as “monarch of my own body”. This is a crucial moment for the readers as this is where Laxmi definitively claims her body as her own. Although exploited before and presently living in a questionable world, Laxmi had enough courage to retain her spirit and morality. She was the owner of her own decisions and choices. But her internal battles and battles against the society did not get easier. She was expected to be the man of the hosue, but she could never be that. She came from a society where women had their hands tied. Even if her parents accepted her lifestyle, the society would shun and discard her. Her coming out as her true self would not only affect her but also isolate and humiliate her family in public eyes.

Laxmi was introduced to the world of hijras through her friend Shabina. Through her understanding of hijras, she understood herself. Hijras were trapped in a male body – they felt feminine but they were neither men nor women. Once Laxmi realized her familiarity with hijras, she finally decided to join the hijra community. What’s important to note here that this was back in 1998, when social mindsets were more closed off. She no longer felt like an alien but that didn’t mean that she stopped feeling out of place among her new community. Members of the hijra community felt that a college-educated boy with parents to look after shouldn’t be among them.

Endurance is one term that will come to the mind of anyone who reads this book. While dealing with the disappointment of her family once they got to know about her hijra identity, Laxmi drowned herself into working for the DWS, educating hijras about STDs. Later on, she became the first transgender person in India to hold a passport. She represented India at the UN World Aids Conference in Toronto, illuminating on the problems of hijras. Laxmi’s life has been all about a two-fold effort – to empower the hijra community and to educate the society.

Hijras are a part of Indian history. They even have a place in mythology – in Ramayana, they were blessed by Lord Rama. Still, hijras have a lower-class status in India. Most hijras in India earn by begging or through sex work. ‘Me Hijra, Me Laxmi’ gives us readers a first-hand account of what it is to be a queer; the life experiences, the struggles and the unwavering mentality to endure. But the question that may come to mind is that Laxmi is one example out of hundreds and thousands. Laxmi had the privilege of being born in a well to do family. She received love and education and she was able to navigate her way to higher status in life. But what about the rest? How difficult must it be for hijras who were disowned by their family and have to live a life of perpetual hardship, filled with daily hardships? Although there are NGOs operating to bring their issues to light, can we say that the hijra community in India in general are able to live a life to dignity? This autobiography of Laxminarayan Tripathi humanizes the hijra community for us, helps us see them as they are, and maybe this book will help bring change in how we look at the hijra community in the near future.
