

A view on Beyond Binary Perspective in the Case of Gender Studies through the Lens of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi in the work Red Lipstick

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Abstract

The concept of “Beyond Binary” invites a rich philosophical exploration for broader understanding of identity, logic, expression that emphasizing the human experience and thought. It challenges the dichotomous thinking and encourages a more nuanced view of various aspects of life, including morality, politics, and culture. In discussion of gender, it acknowledges the existence of non-binary, genderqueer, and gender fluidity which promoting inclusivity and challenging societal norms. The idea of being beyond binary can also apply to sexual orientation, stating that attraction is not solely limited to heterosexual or homosexual but broader than the understanding of this dynamic world. The binary framework of gender has long been critiqued by queer theorists and feminists who argue for a more expansive understanding of gender beyond male and female. With the help of the contemporary novel *Red Lipstick* by Laxmi we can have a wider and up-close view on the experience and understanding of Indians on Hijras (Third Genders). Through this personal note of the author, we can explore the themes of queer studies, mythologies, tradition and cultures and identity and stereotypes that a hijra experience throughout their lifetime. It also paves way for the understanding of hijra within their LGBT community and states the “idea of acceptance”. This research helps one to analyse how transgender narratives deconstruct binary gender system in 21st century.

Key Words: Binary complex, Queer theory, Identity and Stereotype, Hijra, Destruction of framework.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* (2016) provides the author's personal experiences and insights as a member of LGBTQ+ community in India. It highlights the struggles and triumphs of women who have uses their voices and power to challenge societal norms and bring about change. It leads the readers to acknowledge the concept of *Hijra*. Moreover, this work is a complete binding of personal reflection towards the

awareness of oneself with the complexities caused by the dynamics of binary structure, and deals with the acknowledge of laws and empowerment within the community.

Hijra, one of a good example of binary bluff in natural structure. The term “Hijra” has its own meaning depends on the context and in the case of cultural context, Hijra is a term refers the transgender individuals who often identify as a third gender. Hijras have unique cultural and social role and are known for their performances at weddings and childbirth celebrations. This term mostly used in South Asian continents of Indian Subcontinent, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. These intersex individuals can also go with the term *Khawaja* instead of Hijra. According to the author, Hijras are the people who were blessed with a **boon** from Rama, as they waited for Rama’s return at the same spot on the outskirts of Ayodhya for all those years. Overwhelmed by their dedication, they got this power to grant both blessings and curses to men and women. Because of this strong historical and traditional fact, many other Gods like Arjuna, Shikhandi even lord Shiva took the form of feminine self, as it consists of both the strength and knowledge which might be a good proportion of power in the identity of a women. Through this cultural context and religious tradition hijras are not limited by binary views of gender.

These individuals are treated with both fear and respect for thousands of years. But it didn’t last long with colonialism. The British were shocked by the wide population of third genders in South Asian continents. As per their Christian beliefs, they imprisoned the hijras with the label of criminals in 1871. But the culture stays quite a shape, as it holds all the traditions even after 200 years of colonialism. In Hinduism, hijras maintaining their traditional rights and responsibilities at marriages and birth even in this 21st century but still excluded from employment and education outside of their ritual roles. As they got no other way of revenue, they were forced for alms begging and prostitution in a way of surviving the poverty in today’s economical world.

To change certain stereotypical view on transgender, Laxmi started an organization to tutoring hijras and passing laws for the well beings of transgenders by suggesting good education and empowerment for all the transgenders in India. The recognition of their existence got no roadblocks as they stand out in any place and situation. But it has to be in a much-matured way of understanding and accepting them as colleague or same being as them. The way they looking at transgenders must change with their own thoughts and it has nothing to do with the community or the work place they are in. Even though hijra have regained some of the rights and freedom, they still not provided with equal rights with the citizens. Most of them were still being victims of the poverty and some managing to survive with their traditional rights of being invited in weddings and childbirth to shower blessings.

The role of binary in the life of Laxmi resulted in many changes that happens in the upliftment of the hijra community and, it also provides way for many activisms in feminism in India. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a transgender rights activist, Hindi film actor and Bharatanatyam dancer, is a celebrity and an LGBT icon. Founder of the NGO Astitva which works towards the support and development of sexual minorities. She is the first transgender

who went to the United Nations representing Asia Pacific Sex Workers. Laxmi played a pivotal role in the recognition of hijras as the third gender in India.

She started her work with stating “*it is that people like me, who fall nowhere in this binary, or somewhere in between, or even leap beyond*”- (1). She started with clear description of understanding of their existence but not in a way of grief. She goes on and stating that the term transgender in her dictionary meant “*transcending gender*”, where their soul and body belong to cosmos as they the products of lord Rama and they never meant to stay put with the normal beings and their fixed binaries. The author herself suffered much with complexities of this binary structure right from her childhood. As a child she only knew about two genders and because of the complex relationship between the structure and nature she been through many inner grapples.

“*Everyone’s reactions around me seemed to indicate that I was acting like a girl, so I felt like girl too.*” - (2). As people around her had been the reason for her to assume her identity but the same people were been responsible to questioning their identity later. They might mock them with single sight of their appearance and actions but **they can’t accept what they assume**, as if it going to cost theme a hand and a leg. She even made us think about how straight men being driven for the attraction they found in transgenders. Because these sexual attractions play a major role in identity claims and how could it do nothing with the lives of people who get laid with transgender. This leads to questioning the notion of heterosexual and being so called normal. Why these people of normal can’t stick with their fixed binary structure? As the author have mentioned, it is the people who assume and made others assume the identity through the action of an individual but can’t accept their own assumption. As they have this structure of living and one changes or modifieds these for their own will, will be outcasted and never being a part in binary system. They neither be taken as women nor men, even though they been pushed to act like one, they will never belong to either of these two binary structures.

Laxmi also been a victim of this non-binary complex. She gone through many sleepless nights with the thought of “*who am I when it’s just me, alone in my room?*” - (4) she even goes on and ask, is the one in my room and the one outside the room are two different personas? Do they have to be? The inner grapples haunted her pretty much to search for one constant answer. Even though its quite difficult for such a complex matter, she did her best to come up an understanding to prove herself what she really is. **To her, she is ‘LAXMI’** – the women with supreme confidence, who wears gorgeous saree with expensive makeup and perfume. The bold lipstick gives off the image of absolute self-assurance. Even after all these times, she been eventually fall into the grapples now and then. But against all the odd, whenever she doubts her identity, she makes herself cleared that she is Laxmi, the undoubted self of power and intelligent, and this Laxmi got things to do and there’s people who rely upon her and there is motif that she entrusted with. “**I am Laxmi. That’s my persona; there is no for doubt.**”- (6). And why she claims herself Laxmi, cause to her, the mythological figure Laxmi is someone who was with her in all her downs. She even claims that both the Laxmi (she and Goddess Laxmi) are one in form and both are same. Both were the only option of her to vent her sins and struggles with. Whenever she hit the downs, she makes herself remember that she is the Laxmi, the one and mighty with supreme power of strength

and knowledge. The narrator stated, she might be a woman of all cultural norms but she doesn't want to wait for any Arjuna or Bheem to help her. She got herself, the one who blessed with transcending of strength, beauty and knowledge. *"In my strongest moments, I feel what a man feels, the power games that they like to play."* *"I feel more like a woman than even the most womanly of women one could imagine"* - (9). She stated this with the influence of Cleopatra and Umrao Jaan, who ultimately possess the power and beauty, that even the greatest kings of history were seems a little toy in their story.

People can go talk nonsense on the achievement on a woman; at the end their recognition is not even a deal to start with. To her, the persona Laxmi, the activist, is a framework of struggles and despairs; not just hers but the people around her also been a part of who she is today, as they entrusted in her choice of hijra. Being a hijra activist she gone through many criticisms, but still it worked with recognition of hijras not in just any local media but with international acknowledgement held by the organisation *"So many doors that were closed to me, that were firmly shut, opened to this Laxmi."* - (5) She eventually felt, that being a Hijra is what she is for, the recognition that she gained from being hijra and the hijra community from her are so much that they been empowered in many aspects even in a stereotypic country like India. She felt much proud about her choice in life and much generous of what she has become from what she has gone through in her childhood. She can turn out to be anyone, as she was lucky enough to be not thrown in the streets. But the choice of turning a hijra activist, is the one that made herself believe in the reality. The emergence of 'ASTITVA' (a trust, defends the rights of sexual minorities groups) set the achievement on whole another level. It's main purpose to help in empowering women or supporting social causes. Through this heavy base motive to her life, Laxmi set the trust to works on creating awareness and providing support to transgenders by focusing on their rights, education, and health awareness in the community. It is the foundation that made Laxmi to stick with who she assumes she is.

As Laxmi is cleared with her gender and nature, now want people to recognise who she is. As she stated before she is neither a male nor a female that comes into the fixed structure of binary. Rather she assumes, the non-binary people who never been a part in this structure will obviously come somewhere in between the structure, the structure flaw. To deconstruct this fixed structure there are certain law and facts been dropping around the town now and then. But still the people of fixed minds would never take this as a deal to talk. *"Unless you change the mindset of people, nothing will change."* -(5) Its pretty much common in human system, that if it doesn't bother you, until or unless you don't have to make move in it. Apart from the societal norms and attributes, it's all among the individual's perspective and choice of what they take as ethics. Acceptance or rejection of something never came from learning or inspiration, it is innate and people have to acknowledge certain things, in order to distinguished between good or bad. So as per the narrator too, it was all self-made hatred that they pass down to generation without proper definition any space to questioning it. As a well-known scholar she didn't force people to know their rights but it just an act of letting people to acknowledge their existence, as they area also a part of human society at the end of the day.

“What nobody talks about is that you have practically no freedom. And freedom of expression is not a birthright”. – (69) Even though there are rights and acts passed for their favours. People still outcaste them without any interest to hear from their part. To them hijras are prostitutes and they never deserve to have a normal life as it is their wish to turn themselves into the community. Even though you got the rights of living the same as the normal fixative narrow-minded people, you were still a hijra, and that simple enough to hate your existence. The freedom that you fight for is actually not in exist to start with. So, what in the use of fighting and receiving orders from ideological system of class. She stated that you can never the separate the personal and the politics, but you have to be honest with what you are fighting for ***“It’s your personal truth that you’re fighting for”*** – (111). It’s no more about making people to turn to notice your existence, it’s time to grow and shine with rights and empowerments that we got from the tough fight and let them see you through your achimenes. She insisted the other hijras to be bold enough to speak for themselves. They should never let people to talk ill of what are just because their choice of turning as hijras.

The fight against the binary structure, make her come up with a proper realization of herself. ***“I could be whoever I wanted to be – even if it meant being a hijra”*** – (152) she got into the phase of whatever you can assume, I know who I am. And if it’s being hijra, that makes me feel like being in my own skin, then am one of hijra. She may get into many inner conflicts regarding her gender but at last, she considers Laxmi as a transcending gender which neither come under male or female structure of living. The self-realisation and self-acceptance would be the foremost reorganisation of their existence, and Laxmi excels in this as she made herself strongly believe that she is Laxmi the activist. Next to self-realisation, it is the rights and laws, which made one believe in certain things that drop down by the state apparatus. The ideological consideration of thing made the impact more visual and clearer. Even though they weren’t able to wholly accepted by the society, it’s the spirit that made such minority communities live as their will and these laws gives them the additional will power to fight for themselves.

Laxmi and her organisation consider it as ‘A Golden Moment’ when the judgement was passed on their rights and this engage with their spirit for fighting against the stereotypic society. ***“For us- is an acceptance of our sexuality in the eyes of law and that is a huge step forward in the right direction.”*** – (74) The law makes sure of the acceptance of transgender as on among the gender types, because of this now there is male, female and there is third gender, which is the transgender. The judgement passed with the statement, that **the recognition of gender identity should not be dependent on medical requirements**. It was stated cleared that no individual from the third gender should discriminate of their sex of male and female that the born with. Gender is something that they adapt to their choice of living, no one should force them to cling on the fixed gender structure just for the sake of social norm, as now there is officially the third gender category which refers to the transgender, made path for the equal rights on living with a recognised gender term. They really don’t have to stick with the natural binary structure.

Another achievement of being recognise is ***“Being accepted by the elders of the community”*** which will give immense self – confidence and a tremendous sense of entitlement. Being hijra doesn’t make much difference in living, when you belong to a

community of your own kind. And the best of all recognition is to prove and make you believe in yourself, in order to that the community will help you understanding certain attributes. And the recognition that you gained from your own community make the fight a worth one. Laxmi wanted people of all aspect to overcome the stereotypic view of hijra, and it is because of the elderly or primary customs of hijra community that made them outcasted from all kind of factors like education, employment and mainly from recognitions for their equal rights in existing. So, it is a complex matter to made the elderly understand about the seriousness of existence such economical state. And when people from her own community get the ideology of this activism, Laxmi considered it as big win regardless of her efforts and personal struggle.

Acceptance of oneself, is what we been seeing through this article but, Laxmi herself didn't seem to accept as a whole one person. Through all her inner grapples she manages to come up with a new term in gender, but right through the end she doesn't seem very sure of her identity. Because the one that she created through all the struggle and the that made her run constantly was Laxmi- the activist, and she belong to the community of hijra. And Laxmi herself stated about this as she may be Laxmi for the outer world but to her family she still, the first-born son 'Raju'. It's the fixed binary structure and social norms that made her worry about her identity. As she has stated, **Laxmi is beyond binary. She doesn't need a fixed term to identify herself.** According to her, Laxmi itself a term to begin with. A powerful woman of strength and intellectuality. But why the image of hijra is questionable. As Laxmi has had gone through pretty much because of her actions, she was discriminated right from her early childhood. The desperate Laxmi turns herself in, when she found similarities in hijra people. Was too young to deal with people so herself claims as a hijra, so people will stop forcing her to stick with the fixed binary structure. **"Within the hijra community is where I found the greatest self- alignment and self- identification. And till that's how I see myself – as hijra" (89).**

Now she was much clear about who she is, what her identity, and where she belongs to. But everything has happened because of the acceptance that took place in her home. But Laxmi stated that to her home she obviously the kid they raised so far, but still, they didn't force her to stick with her gender of societal expectations. Her father who was a strict brahmin lineage expect nothing much but to serve the same from his children, but when Laxmi turns out to an odd, he didn't resist her decision but request to start being one right from the home itself. He doesn't want to know thinks from others, he rather prefers it to happen from the home itself. He never had thoughts of expelling her, instead he stated in an TV show, **"hijra cab be born to any family"**. The level of acceptance that came out from her dad's thoughts made her what she is today. As her dad cherish his child much, that he doesn't want to shun him out, Laxmi let Raju stay alive for his father. It's not like she playing with her gender, but it's something where the persona of a being cherished. As the people from her home expect nothing but be their child and continue staying with them, Laxmi got no other choice but to be their Raju, as they don't want their Raju to die. **"To them, I must stay and always remain Raju" – (152).** It may sounds contradict, as she who been under the influence of breaking the binary system, is not quite clear about her actual form in the natural elementary structure of her identity. But Laxmi was way sure of her identity and what she is. It just **she considers her personalities rather than its gender**, which gives the best example

for things existing beyond binary. she herself stated, “*At times I am taken aback by my own conservatism*” as life is full of contradictions.

“This Laxmi is beyond gender – a true transgender who transcends gender,” – (216)

Throughout this book, we can see how Laxmi was worked up to find herself in this world of fixed box-structure. As there’s no way to claim herself into one fixed gender, she went through of all the struggles for the recognition as hijra, as she felt her own skin there, alive. She prefers to live with the personalities rather than being fixative and fighting for one particular gender. So, she was much clear about her gender and doesn’t want to be a part of binary structure of nature. At last, all she can say about her gender is Laxmi, the activist, the image of strength and knowledge, a transgender blessed with transcending gender.

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