



**Narrativizing a Coherent Story of a ‘Woman in Man’s Body’ and Performing as a Hijra: A Study  
of Two Hijra Self-narratives from India**

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This paper deals with two hijra self-narratives from India- *I am Vidya* by Living Smile Vidya and *Truth about Me* by A. Revathi, both translated from Tamil to English. The paper argues that in these two self-narratives there is an effort to give a coherent narrative of the lives of the writers in terms of 'a woman trapped in a man's body' framework. The paper also shows how other people try to make sense of the lives of these writers through other narratives. It finally argues that there are many performative aspects in the becoming of a hijra that can be seen in these narratives that escape the coherence 'a woman trapped in a man's body' narrative tries to achieve.

The paper uses the word hijra in the title instead of the words transgender or transsexual. There have been many efforts to 'define' and 'distinguish between' the words transgender and transsexual (Tunzi, 2005, p. 9-10, Zimman, G&L 2009 , p. 58, Dey, 2013, p. 54). However, the term hijra as designating certain 'types' of persons is available in India. Both the writers that we discuss accept this identity. In fact *The Truth about Me* has the subtitle 'A Hijra Life Story'. Hence we feel that these two narratives can be called as hijra self-narratives. However, we draw upon many articles from the west that use the category transsexual/transgender. For the purposes of this essay these distinctions between transgender, transsexual and hijra are not significant.

Life is complex. We try to simplify life through various frameworks. Even the so called heterosexual life is complex and we simplify it through the heterosexual framework. The lives of transgenders are a 'problem' to this heterosexual matrix. Hence we make many efforts to simplify the transgender lives and explain it under different frameworks. The efforts of the transgenders to explain themselves may also fall within this process of simplifying and making a coherent narrative out of the complex experience of being a transgender. Writing a self-narrative

is one way of creating a coherent life story. This happens mainly through (at least in these two self-narratives) the reconstruction of the past experience to fit the present condition of the hijra life through the frameworks that are available to the writers. These frameworks can be the frameworks of the heterosexual matrix as well as the framework of the hijra life that is available to these writers in the Indian context. In such a reconstruction often the performative aspect of being a hijra is not explicitly commented upon. This paper tries to reveal such performative aspects in these stories.

Self-narratives themselves can be seen as efforts at achieving coherence of life through narrativizing. This has been recognized as relevant with respect to transgender self-narratives as the following statements suggest: “[transgenders] ... look to their pasts to explain how their new selves came into being” ( Tubbs,2008, p. 27); “In order to smooth over the impression of any possible gender incongruence, trans subjects have to learn to provide coherent stories to narrativize their trans identity and body presentation” (Ho, 2006, p. 229); “In the west, this has emerged as narrative position – to be transsexual is to narrate oneself through a specific series of events”(Prosser, 1998 as cited in Jodi 2007, p.3) and “Autobiography then becomes almost necessary in creating a coherent self...” (Tunzi, 2005, p.35). These two self-narratives also try to narrativize a coherent story of the hijra identity.

But just as the ‘self’ is narrativizing itself, the other people are also trying to narrativize the life of the hijra. They try to explain it through various frameworks available to them. First of all, there is a refusal to accept it and the expression of inability to understand it, particularly from the family members. Vidya’s father refuses to see her in a sari (Vidya, 2007, p. 84). The old woman whose room Revathi had rented says, “Look, just because you decide to change like this in the

middle of your life, you can't expect us to forget what we used to call you!" (Revathi, 2010, p. 174). She refuses to use the feminine name that Revathi prefers and insists on calling her by her masculine name. This refusal to accept the hijraness is because of the inability to understand it as it does not fit in the heterosexual matrix. The sentence "I do not understand you" is used often in these two self-narratives. Some people say, "What is wrong with this fellow? Who denied him anything?" (Revathi, 2010, p.58). Then they proceed to offer an explanation saying this is what comes of having it easy! Vidya's *mama* (uncle) wonders, "Why do you traipse like a girl? Why don't you speak loud and clear like a man?" (Vidya, 2007, p.39). Even one of Vidya's well-wishers says, "I don't understand you at all" (p.70). The fact that other people cannot make sense of the life of a hijra is noticed by Vidya herself: "Other people cannot understand this phenomenon" (p.59). Then the other people proceed to weave together an 'explanation'. One of the explanations is that of forcible 'conversion'. Revathi's parents give a complaint to the police saying that Revathi was forcibly taken away by other hijras and they made her dress like them (Revathi, 2010, p.51). Revathi herself is made to participate in this narrativizing when she is forced to say that she had been lured away by other hijras, made to believe that she had wanted to be like them, and that she had followed them like one with a deceased mind would (p.56), though Revathi implies she tells this story only to escape being beaten by her father and brothers.

Then there are explanations connected with god and destiny. Revathi's father finally says that it is 'his' destiny (p.116). Her sister says that it is fate's doing or that someone's sin is being visited on Revathi (p.118). Explanations like it is "written in fate" (p.119) and "God's will" (p.166) are offered. Revathi's mother thinks that some female demon has possessed Revathi and god can cure her of this (p.56). All these religious explanations converge when the priest of a village temple calls Revathi a goddess (p.177).

It is also to be noted that to begin with people do not even notice it: as Vidya says, “Though I indulged in my antics in careful secrecy, I got caught in the act sometimes. My family did not take it too seriously in the beginning. They put it down to the innocent pranks of a child. They scolded me occasionally but they saw no cause for alarm at the time” (p.27). Her grandma thinks that Vidya was doing some playful imitation when she dressed like a girl: Vidya says, “Hardly did she know the true story, did she?” (p.26).

But what is ‘the true story’ according to Vidya and Revathi? They have some frameworks to narrativize their experience. One of the frameworks is that of ‘a woman trapped in a man’s body’. Jodi calls this “Sex gender misalignment fabulla” (2007, p.3). According to this framework, these writers have an essential femininity in them and becoming a hijra is a way of fulfilling that femininity. In many ways this is not different from the ‘destiny’ explanation. The argument often is that it is ‘natural’ for these writers to feel like women and they are trapped in a male body. As Ho says, “‘A soul trapped in the wrong body’ is a common description employed by trans subjects to explain their unusual condition. This self-characterization includes two important premises: that the body and the soul (or identity, self-image, etc) are two separate and independent entities whose correct alignment makes up the effect of gender; and that the soul occupies a higher position than the body, to the extent that any mismatch between the two is to be resolved by modifying the body (through cross-dressing, hormonal therapy, SRS, or other procedures) to match the soul (differently known as identity, self-image, etc)”(2006, p. 228). In these two self-narratives, this is often expressed in so many words-“I was a woman trapped in a male body” (Vidya, 2007, p.43): “A woman trapped in a man’s body was how I thought of myself” (Revathi, 2010, p.15). The thought often expressed is that the body does not fit the way these writers feel about themselves. In Vidya we have the following – “my irrepressible

femininity” (p. 32), “I felt like a woman inside” (p.33), “I was a girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy” (p.40), “...I was a woman at heart” (p.51), “... [kothis] were women in spirit and urges” (p.53), “... I may seem to be a man, but I am a woman at heart” (p.56), “... I regarded myself as a girl, woman, though in their eyes I was male” (p.86) and “We [hijras] are women at heart” (p.105). In Revathi we have- “... it felt natural for me to do so [behave like a girl]” (p.7), “I experienced a growing sense of irrepressible femaleness...” (p.14), “... I had given form to my real feelings [when she wore a ‘disguise’ of a woman]” (p.16), “I felt that finally the female in me would be freed from her male body” (p.67), and “I consider myself a woman. But I possessed the form of a man” (p.262). Thus in many instances we have a simple body vs. soul dichotomy, where the body is said to be that of the man and soul is said to be that of the woman. Hence the need to change the body to suit the soul or mind or heart: the underlying assumption often is that this feeling of being a woman is natural, and is by birth. As Vidya says, “My sex. My skin colour. All natural” (2007, p.141) and “If, to be born male and feel female is a sin, it is nature’s creation” (p. 88).

This naturalness of femininity is also proved by retrospectively reconstructing many childhood activities from the point of view of ‘a woman trapped in a man’s body’ framework. These writers revisit their childhood to select the events that show that they were like ‘this’ from the beginning. Vidya’s recollection goes back to when she was six or seven, when she used to enjoy wearing girl’s dresses. She liked dancing wearing her sister’s skirt (p.25). Vidya describes how she liked dressing up as a girl, sometimes using whatever was available as tools: like rubbing coconut oil on lips as an alternative to applying lipstick (p.27). She talks about asking her father to buy midi and gown (p.29), and demanding a “ladies’ bicycle” (p.44). She also mentions her preferring girls’ games to boys’ games (p.30). All these are offered as proofs that

this 'feeling like a woman' was a natural thing in her. In Revathi also we have this revisiting of childhood. Revathi's earliest memories mentioned in the book are of when she was ten year old. She mentions that she used to like playing girls' games (p.3 and p.6): wearing girls' dress (p.4): doing the 'feminine' chores, like sweeping and helping in the kitchen (p.3), etc. She also enjoyed "looking at the tall houses" (p.8), but this activity is not gender marked, like helping in the kitchen. So certain activities are constructed by the society as gender significant, and when reconstructing oneself even as a third gender or hijra or transgender, it is these constructions of the society that play a significant role. As much as these two writers indicate sometimes that their femininity is inborn, it is also clear that they are using the codes that are already available in the society to express their preferred gender. Thus the fact that they enjoyed helping in the kitchen is not seen as just a preference like enjoying looking at tall houses, but as something that indicates an essential femininity.

Femininity is supposed to get attracted to masculinity: that is, women are supposed to get attracted to men and men to women. When revisiting their earlier memories both these writers talk about their desire for men to support their 'woman trapped in a male body' framework. The fact that they are attracted to men is in keeping with the view that they are women born in male body. This is what Vidya says about her attraction to a man and the effect it had on her-

"Ilango was the man who kindled in me the kind of changes that occur from time to time in a woman's different stages of development.

Ilango was the man who made me feel whole as a woman" (p.35).

Revathi also talks about her being attracted to the opposite sex:

“...I imagined I was in love with them. This confused me – I was a boy and yet I felt I could love other boys. Was this right or wrong?” (p.9).

Later on also Revathi expresses her ‘desire’ for men after becoming a hijra. Thus, feeling feminine, doing feminine chores, dressing like girls and having desire for the male sex all seem to converge. Thus we have a coherent ‘a woman trapped in a male body’ narrative. According to this narrative, these writers are women at heart: they like doing women’s work; they like playing women’s or girls’ games; they are attracted to men. The only incoherent thing is the male body and hence the desire to bring the body in line. Other than the body all other things are supposed to be natural.

However, there are many things in these two self-narratives that sit uncomfortably with this ‘naturally female except in the male body’ principle. First of all, though the feeling of being ‘feminine’ is said to be natural, both the writers make use of many ‘models’ of femininity available to them and try to construct their femininity on these models. That is, their femininity is as much a thing that is worked on by imitating the available models of femininity as it is (if at all) inborn or natural. The fact that “Hijra’s in Bangalore wear only saris. In the north, they wear salwar-kurtas” (Revathi, p.237) reveals that their femininity is expressed through the available models of femininity. And as the widely available models of the feminine are the leading female actors, both these writers acknowledge being influenced by them. Revathi thinks of herself as Saroja Devi (p.10). Vidya has a host of ‘heroines’ that she imitates:

“What attracted me and caused me painful yearning was the beauty of the leading ladies. I adored their sweet Tamil, and their gait. I floated in an imaginary world



in which I blushed as they did, danced and wooed their heroes as they did, expressed anger as they did” (p.26).

“I delighted in watching film stars like Mena, Roja, Nagma and Rambha prattle away sweetly at TV interviews, and mentally rehearsing play acting at these stars” (34)

“Those were days I wanted to be like the ‘new woman’ portrayed in films like ‘Bhuvana Oru Kelvikuri’ and ‘Aval Oru Todarkathal’” (42).

What is important here are the aspects of ‘imitating’ and ‘play acting’. Though these writers often claim that to be feminine is natural to them, they themselves invest a lot of time and effort to be feminine. As Ho says, “Yet the binary also tends to simplify trans subjectivity by slighting persistent/insistent trans investment in the transformation of the physical body and its image...”(2006, p. 228). This ‘persistent/insistent trans investment’ in becoming a woman continues after they join the hijra community too. There are a lot of things that they have to learn in order to be ‘like’ a woman. The point we are trying to make is that there are many performative aspects in trying to become a ‘woman’ and these performative aspects do not cohere with ‘a woman trapped in a male body’ narrative. To begin with, there is the intense physical discomfort in the sex reassignment surgery that these writers ‘learn’ to face. The pain is so intense that Vidya says, “I wanted to run away. I wanted to kill the doctor and his helper” (p.15). Revathi, before her sex reassignment surgery, witnesses the pain of her friend who has undergone it: “Amma, it’s burning. I fear I’ll die from it” (p.71). According to these writers they tolerate the pain because they want to become complete women: “Tomorrow would dawn the fruition of my desires, the fulfillment of my dreams” (Vidya, p.11) and “I had to put up with all

these painful procedures, if I wanted to become a woman” (Revathi, p.76). But the option of sex reassignment surgery is something that is available in the culture of hijra’s in India and both these writers come to know of it a bit later in their lives. Vidya comes to know of this possibility when she visits an NGO for transgenders where she encounters women who had sex change operation (p.53). Revathi learns of the operation from the hijras she meets in a hill (p.18). She is also told it was not “... all that easy to become a woman. Only if I went to Mumbai and Delhi and stayed for years with those who wore saris and had undergone ‘operations’, could I hope to become one” (p.19). One of the elder hijras praises Revathi saying, “If this one were to undergo *nirvaanam*, [sex reassignment surgery] she would look like a real woman” (p.22). Thus undergoing sex reassignment surgery is something that needs a lot of encouragement and building up.

The task of becoming a woman does not stop with sex reassignment surgery nor does it begin there. Throughout these two narratives, we find direct statements to the effect that feminine behavior is something that is natural to these two writers, but we also find that even they find it not easy to be ‘women-like’. They need to keep on performing like women and keep on learning what it is to be like women, what it is to move like women, to behave like women, to have sex like women, etc. Situation is more complicated for them than for ‘other’ women because they have to learn also to be like hijras or tirunangais or kothis. Levitt says “Transgender individuals often lack models of nontraditional gender to aid them in their identity development...” (2014, p. 1728). But in India, “ people with a wide range of transgender-related identities, cultures, or experiences exist – including Hijras, Aravanis, Kothis, Jogtas/Jogappas, and Shiv-Shakthis” (Ramya, 2014, p. 33). Vidya is admonished by another kothi, “What kind of kothi are you? Can’t even clap hands” (p. 91). Revathi also talks about the rules one has to follow if born a

pottai and if one lives among the pottais. And it is also "... important to learn the ways of the hijra's..." (p.47). And later on, "If you are a pottai, you have to know all that is there to know about a pottai's life" (p.233). This is said to criticize the younger educated transgenders who are more independent in their decisions. Just as the writers have to say that they feel like women, they also have to accept other categories. Vidya says, "Nature decreed us a neutral existence" (p. 97), "I would henceforth be a tirunangai. A complete tirunangai. This was my identity. This alone" (p.108) and "My being a tirunangai was natural, just as men are men, women are women and cats are cats" (p.135). In Revathi we find, "I was hijra" (p.94), "Though I thought of myself as a woman, I felt that I was a man who had become a woman" (p.121), and "Why was I born a pottai" (p.195). Thus even before the sex reassignment surgery there are many identities or labels available to these writers and they have to learn to model their behavior to suit these identities. And seldom is the desired behavior natural or inborn. Dey says about a Kothi that his "narration also depicts that the identity of a Kothi appears to be performatively acquired" (2013, p. 56). In these two narratives also we see many performatively acquired traits.

Though there are many labels or identities, both Vidya and Revathi express the desire to be recognized as a woman. But "it [is] not all that easy to become a woman" (Revathi, 2010, p.19): it is something that has to be learnt and performed constantly. Vidya once says-

"On such occasions, I walked swaying my hips like a woman, sat with my legs crossed stylishly, or rearranged my hair in a feminine way when the wind blew it across my forehead" (p.43-44)

One wonders whether this is natural or a performance. Later on she mentions a kothi who would talk to women in a NGO in a feminine manner, "gesticulating like a woman,...The

moment he went out he was back to being Suresh” (p.53). Performance is of course not like taking off one dress and putting on another dress. But these examples do indicate that even the so called natural feminine behavior is something that needs to be worked at. As Vidya decides to become a hijra, her “ear and nose were pierced” (p.73). Revathi is asked to learn to apply make up like a girl (p.29). As she says, “I learnt too that while we felt like women, it was equally important to look like them, and that long hair was an important marker of being feminine” (p.28). She adapts other markers of femininity like fetching water like a woman (p.23) and riding a ‘feminine’ two-wheeler like the scooter (p.23). Shakunthala’s guru reminds her about how much she (the guru) has taught her including how to wear sari (p.96). This process of learning to be a woman does not stop once you have sex reassignment surgery. Revathi is still learning ways to be an attractive woman: “I learnt to dress like a film actress by watching how others did it. I learnt to wear make-up and choose my clothes. I came to know only then that there are such things as beauty parlours that help to make one beautiful. I started going to a parlour- to get a haircut that suited my face, to tweeze my eyebrows just so and to get a facial and bleach to remove blackheads” (p.134). So becoming a woman is not something that you do once for all: it is something that you have to keep on doing: “You are a woman now and so must learn to act like one” (Revathi, p.89). Revathi says, “Back then I thought that in order to turn feminine, all I needed to do was get rid of this male object and I would become free to be a woman, like other women” (66).

But removing the male organ and taking hormones is not enough. The body changes but the voice does not. As Revathi says, “I tried to hide it [low pitched voice], and when on bus, spoke softly to ask for a ticket” (p.118). She laments “Could not God have given me a woman’s voice at least?” (p.173). Thus, like for most women, for these two writers also, being a woman is

something that has to be acted out on a daily basis. Again as Ho says "... trans embodiment is still a continuous process of becoming, the process of a highly reflexive self-fashioning that is constantly testing the limits of the body" (2006, p. 234).

To conclude, the two writers are trying to weave together a coherent narrative of their lives just as other people are also trying to account for the 'nature' of these two writers through their own narratives. The writers' narrative often focuses on the fact that their femininity is natural and innate. This can be said to be within the "a woman trapped in a man's body" framework. However there are many aspects of their life that escape this narrative. The femininity even in them has to be constructed according to the models and options that are available in the society. To that extent, the hijra femininity as seen in these two works is also performative.

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