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Reading *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* through Queer and Postcolonial Theories

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Abstract: *Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's Me Hijra, Me Laxmi (2015) is both a life narrative and a political testimony that negotiates identity at the intersections of gender, caste, class, religion and nation. This paper offers a combined queer and postcolonial reading of Tripathi's autobiography, arguing that the text functions as a site of decolonial gender re-signification and as an intervention in nationalist and heteronormative discourses. Drawing on queer theory's attention to performativity and non-normative embodiments (Judith Butler) together with postcolonial critiques of subject formation, mimicry and subalternity (Homi K. Bhabha; Gayatri C. Spivak), the analysis shows how Tripathi mobilizes narrative strategies—testimony, performance, and counter-memory—to unsettle colonial-modern binaries and to claim public and legal visibility. Close reading of selected episodes (childhood gender dissonance, initiation into hijra communities, negotiations with family, and public activism) reveals an embodied politics in which hijra subjectivity refuses both assimilation into normative gender and simple romanticization as "subaltern." The paper concludes that Me Hijra, Me Laxmi should be read as queer-postcolonial autobiography: a genre that complicates received categories of identity and agency while demanding structural recognition and social justice.*

Keywords: *Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, Me Hijra, Me Laxmi, queer theory,postcolonial theory, hijra, autobiography,performativity, subaltern*

Introduction

Autobiography has long been a fertile medium for marginalized subjects to narrate selfhood and claim public voice. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* adds a crucial voice to South Asian life-writing: a first-person account from a hijra who navigates familial conservatism, casteed social structures, religious practice, sex-work economies, and later—national and transnational activism. To read Tripathi's text only through the lens of identity recognition or as a mere testimonial of suffering is to miss how it strategically deploys performance, narrative form, and political rhetoric. This paper applies a hybrid theoretical frame—queer theory's analysis of gender performativity and postcolonial theory's interrogation of colonial modernity—to show how Tripathi's autobiography both resists and reworks categories imposed by colonial and nationalist epistemologies.

Queer theory is useful because hijra lives expose the instability and cultural specificity of "man/woman" binaries; postcolonial theory is necessary because the hijra figure occupies a historically contingent site shaped by precolonial ritual roles, colonial legal-moral categorization, and postcolonial nation-building. Bringing the two approaches together allows

a reading attentive to how gendered embodiment and political subjectivity are co-constituted by cultural histories and by contemporary legal-political struggles.

Queer Performativity and Embodied Speech

Judith Butler's theorization of gender as performative—repeated acts that produce the appearance of a stable gender—reorients analysis away from an essentialist sex/gender divide. For queer readings of transgender and hijra lives, performativity highlights how cultural practices, sartorial choices, ritual acts, and public performances constitute gendered subjectivities rather than merely expressing a pre-existing identity. Tripathi's narrative repeatedly stages performance: dance and public speaking become modalities through which Laxmi asserts gendered personhood and gains political traction. Read queerly, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* shows performance not as mimicry of normative femininity but as a distinct repertoire of gendered labor and world-making.

Postcolonial Subjectivities: Mimicry, Subalternity, and Cultural Translation

Postcolonial theory, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's notions of mimicry and hybridity, is helpful for locating the hijra within histories of colonial governance that reconfigured gendered categories. Colonial laws and Victorian morality reclassified diverse indigenous sexual/gender practices and often pathologized or criminalized them. Gayatri Spivak's interrogation of the subaltern's voice cautions against simplistic claims that publication or representation automatically empowers marginalized subjects—representation can reinscribe power relations if mediated through elite discourses. Combining these insights keeps analytic attention on how Tripathi's text negotiates power: it speaks *from* a marginal location but also enters institutional spaces (courts, UN forums, mainstream publishing) where representation may be co-opted. The interaction between performance (a queer mechanism) and translation into public discourse (a postcolonial problem) is therefore central to understanding Tripathi's political intervention.

Life-Writing as Queer-Postcolonial Intervention

Testimony as Counter-History

Tripathi's memoir is organized as a sequence of episodes that counters dominant narratives about hijras as either mythical ritual figures or social pariahs. Personal recollections of family, schooling, and the first experiences of gender difference read as counter-histories: they destabilize monolithic national stereotypes about "tradition." These scenes illustrate how gender variance is neither modern nor imported; rather, it is embedded in local cultural matrices that colonial regimes reframed. By narrating pre- and post-initiation life, the autobiography provides archival material that contests both colonial erasures and postcolonial amnesia.

Performance, Dance, and the Public Sphere

Tripathi's recounting of dance and bar performances performs a dual function. On one level, it illustrates the economic realities and embodied artistry of hijra lives; on another, it reframes public performance as political speech-acts. Butler's performativity helps us see these performances as productive, carrying social force that re-signifies gender categories. Tripathi's movement from performance spaces to courtroom and UN podiums indicates an expanded repertoire of performative acts: the stage, the street, and the legal forum all become sites where gender is announced and contested.

Negotiating Family, Caste, and Religion

A postcolonial lens draws attention to the social structure in which Tripathi's gender journey unfolds. Born into a Brahmin household, Tripathi's narrative highlights the salience of caste and religious ritual in shaping social expectations. The friction between entrenched Brahminical norms and hijra embodiment underscores the hybridity of identity: Laxmi is simultaneously rooted in local ritual worlds and in a body that transgresses casteed gender

expectations. This intersectional dimension complicates simple queer narratives that focus narrowly on sexuality or gender without considering caste and class. Tripathi's rhetorical strategy—addressing family, invoking religious practice, and reclaiming ritual roles—exposes how gendered subjectivity must negotiate multiple normative frameworks born of both precolonial and colonial histories.

Language, Translation, and the Politics of Publication

Publication itself raises postcolonial concerns. When a hijra's narrative is translated and published by a mainstream press, questions arise: whose voice is mediated, and what editorial frameworks shape the public image? Spivak's caution—"Can the Subaltern Speak?"—is relevant: while Tripathi's narrative articulates subaltern experience, translation into recognized literary forms and circulation by respected presses also involves gatekeeping. The memoir's availability in English and its circulation at international fora produce visibility that can empower but also domesticate the hijra figure into familiar tropes for global audiences (victim, brave survivor, exotic cultural other). Yet Tripathi's own rhetorical choices—moments of refusal, insistence on structural critique, and strategic deployment of humor and irony—work against simple domestication. Language becomes a contested terrain where queer performativity and postcolonial translation intersect.

Case Studies from the Text

Childhood and the First Acts of Dissent

Scenes of early gender dissonance—childhood cross-dressing, mockery at school, and secret play—operate as micro-performances that prefigure later public acts. A queer reading attends to how these small acts accumulate into a performative repertoire; a postcolonial reading charts how family honor, caste-coded shame, and communal morality frame those acts as threats to social order. Tripathi's narration refuses the teleology of "becoming" a normative woman; rather, it charts an emergent, culturally specific identity anchored in both self-fashioning and community belonging.

Initiation and Community Life

The initiation into hijra communities is narrated as both ritual rebirth and political apprenticeship. These passages offer particularly rich material for theorizing hybridity: the hijra community sustains ritual knowledge (dance, blessing rites) that predates colonial intervention while also constituting an adaptive social formation in the modern urban economy. The text refuses romantic nostalgia by detailing hardship and exploitation, while simultaneously celebrating the community's ethical economies and care networks—reflecting a queer solidaristic ethic that resists state and familial exclusion.

Activism, Courts, and the UN: Visibility and Legal Subjectivity

Tripathi's later transition into formal activism—litigation, media work, and UN representation—exposes tensions inherent to translating embodied forms of life into legal recognition. Here the postcolonial lens discerns how state power and international norms both constrain and enable claims. The memoir recounts victories and frustrations, making legible the slow, uneven gains of recognition. Queer theory illuminates how performative acts at the level of law (testimony, presence in court, public dress) become site-specific enactments of gendered personhood that challenge legal categories. Yet the state's recognition is partial: legal categories may grant rights without dismantling social stigma. Tripathi's writing thus functions as an insistence that recognition must be structural, not merely symbolic.

Critical Reflections: Agency, Representation, and the Risks of Visibility

While *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* asserts agency, a critical queer-postcolonial stance also interrogates potential pitfalls. Increased visibility can invite surveillance, co-optation, or tokenism. Spivak's

warning about representation is instructive: bringing marginalized voices into dominant forums can reinscribe epistemic hierarchies if those forums shape the terms of discourse. Tripathi's memoir negotiates this by being self-reflexive—acknowledging compromises, naming the politics of publication, and refusing to be reduced to singular narrative lines. The text's rhetorical plurality—combining humor, confession, ritual description, legal argument, and direct address—protects some autonomy of voice while making strategic inroads into institutional arenas.

Conclusion

Reading *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* through queer and postcolonial theories reveals the autobiography as a complex site of resistance and negotiation. Queer performativity clarifies how embodied acts—dance, dress, speech—constitute gendered subjectivity beyond binary models; postcolonial critique situates those acts within histories of colonial categorization, caste hierarchies, and nation-state formation. Tripathi's life-writing, then, is neither a mere personal story nor a straightforward political manifesto: it is a hybrid genre that deploys narrative as activism, performance as testimony, and publication as strategic visibility.

The combined theoretical approach advocated here underscores two claims. First, hijra subjectivity in Tripathi's account is best understood as a culturally situated form of queerness—rooted in indigenous ritual practice and shaped by colonial-modern transformations. Second, the politics of recognition must engage material structures (law, welfare, caste discrimination) as much as symbolic visibility. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* accomplishes both: it insists on the humanity and artistry of hijra lives while demanding systemic change. For scholars in queer studies, South Asian studies, and life-writing, Tripathi's memoir offers a necessary corrective to narratives that isolate gender from social history or reduce postcolonial subjects to passive victims. It invites further work that takes seriously the intersections of gender, caste, class, and law.

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