

## Demystifying Trans Narratives: Gender in Post Modern India

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### Abstract:

*Demystifying Trans Narratives: Gender in Post Modern India* attempts to demystify the term 'Trans Narrative' and introduce transgender autobiographies to both the gender marginalized as well as the mainstream heteronormative society. It is a study of the autobiographies of three transgender writers across India and attempts to focus on a renewed narratology in relation to self and body in these narratives. The omission of trans narratives from mainstream society have functioned as an act of silencing nonconforming genders since these unconventional literatures threaten to destabilize the neat binaries of male/female and masculine/feminine. The study analyses three autobiographies by three transgender writers, namely, Laxminarayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* (2015), A. Revathi's *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) and Living Smile Vidya's *I am Vidya* (2007) and focuses on the so-called unnarratable in these narratives. By unnarratable it refers to those narratives which should not be told or mentioned because of the prevailing social conventions. During the Victorian Era, sex and private self was always the unnarratable whereas in the contemporary era, it's same-sex desire and sex change. Hence by euphemism, illusion, metaphor, and metonymy, such tabooed subjects which cannot be narrated are signified.

**Keywords:** Emergent literature; Narrative; Transgender Narrative; Self; Body; Autobiography; Gender; Queer; Space.

Transgender writers across the world are writing their autobiographies as an act of reclaiming their lost spaces where the narratives or self-inscriptions allow for an emergent and varied gender identity to be performed. The narrative of their journey, from gender dysphoria to self-consciousness, and finally to social acceptance, presents the body as a metaphor symbolizing their inner conflicted self. By shaping, narrating and thereby justifying their transformation, amid the gender politics and dual consciousness involved, these trans narratives act as a symbolic text through the body of the narrative, where the physical transformation of sex-change is presented predominantly as a means for self-acceptance, social acceptance, and dignity.

At a very elementary level, transgender, because of the obvious prefix 'trans', suggests a difference from the genre or phenomenon understood as gender. Though the term 'transgender' was first used in the field of psychology by psychiatrist John F. Oliven of Columbia University, the lexical compound of 'trans+gender' was put to work and popularized by pioneering activist Virginia Prince in the 1960s. Prince coined the term 'transgenderist' to distinguish 'heterosexual' male-cross dressers from the 'transsexuals' and the 'homosexuals' in the 1970s. Later in the 1990s transgender took a new life as a broad term including gender non-binaries and non-conforming people. Hence due to its prefix 'trans', it invites comparisons with the term 'gender' through a medium of difference, where 'gender' signifies the state or condition of being male or

female, used with reference to social and cultural differences instead of biological. Though the term 'transgender' was initially used as a conjoined word 'trans+gender' where 'trans' was used as a prefix to gender and not as a verb, it indicated gender transverse or traversing gender, in other words, it involves going beyond what constitutes gender. Following the same praxis, transgender narratives indicate transversing narratives. Not following the conventional narratological rules, these narratives are more about neonarratives or new narratives. Thus autobiographies by transgender writers embody the essence of trans narratives, mainly in two rudimentary ways, narratives by the individuals along the transgendered spectrum as well as narratives which transverse, deconstruct and are emergent.

Transgender writers in India such as Laxminarayan Tripathi, Living Smile Vidya, and A. Revathi, among others, using the genre of autobiography, are penning down their life experiences as a 'Hijra' in Postmodern India. Through the medium and power of the narratives, they are trying to bring forward their journey to a hetero-patriarchal society in order to 'normalize' the 'antinormative', thereby raising issues of sexual identity within current state structures. The three autobiographies, namely, Laxminarayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* (2015), A. Revathi's *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) and Living Smile Vidya's *I am Vidya* (2007), are trying to create a sense of assertion of their author's individuality along with subverting how society perceives them. In this identity politics situates their empowerment where the heterosexual norm of social life, as the only mode of expression, is also being critiqued and questioned. These autobiographies also bring to light the implications of adhering to the supposed rules of normalcy since in the form of dictates of the societal norms, many faced severe socio-psychological problems due to the suppression of their gender reality. Thus through their life examples and by penning down their experiences, these writers are laying a path for future generations to come out of this schema and accept their alternate sexualities as so-called 'normal'.

A minimalist definition of a narrative suffices that it consists of only one event or a situation, followed by change. This definition, however, does not explain why, not every text constitutes a narrative. American academic and literary theoretician, Gerald Prince, in his essay "Revisiting Narrativity", examines the many definitions of narrative that have been put forward in literary criticism, while introducing some fundamental criteria of his own – an examination he feels is particularly necessary given that, by the end of the 1960s, the term 'narrative' had begun to cross over into a multitude of discursive terrains, suggesting that while "'everything' may be part of a narrative, that there is a possible narrative behind 'everything', perhaps it is also true that 'everything' is not equally narrative." (13). He contends that the minimal definition "does not (try to) distinguish between what could be called narrativeness - what makes a text narrative, what all and only narratives have in common - and what I have been calling narrativity: what in a text underlines its possibly narrative nature, what emphasizes the presence and semiotic role of narrative structures in a textual economy, what makes a given narrative more or less narrative." (12)

Recalling the critical distinction made by literary critic and historian, Hayden White between "narrating (reporting a series of events in chronological order) and narrativizing (imposing 'story form' on events or making the world speak itself as a story)," Prince offers that "the narrativity of a text depends on the extent to which that text constitutes a doubly oriented autonomous whole (with a well-defined and interacting beginning, middle, and end) which involves some kind of conflict" (13). This notion of conflict is especially pertinent in the case of transnarratives, particularly for trans autobiographies, as the underlying reason for the creation of a trans narrative is to find a unique identity, a self that is unshackled by societal conventions. Here, trans narrative is the collective representative term for narratives by and about transgender people; and transgenderism is the umbrella term encompassing a wide array of identities,

including drag queen, cross-dresser, transsexual and other nomenclatures (Gagne and Tewksbury 64).

This notion of conflict being central to the construction and the very being of narrativity is further acknowledged by Prince in his seminal essay, “The Disnarrated”, wherein he begins with “We know that, in certain genres and/or in certain periods, the representation of certain experiences, the recounting of certain actions (pertaining to, say, money, eating, excretion, sexuality) is simply taboo...” (297). The omittance of transnarratives has functioned as an act of silencing the nonconforming transgender, who threaten to destabilize the neat categories of male/female and masculine/feminine. Unlike Prince’s “unnarratable” which consisted of that which was not in the text, whether because it was too obvious, too extraordinary, or too taboo, in the case of transnarratives, their entire existence constituted the unnarratable.

Set apart from the other forms of ‘unnarratable’, Prince defines the ‘disnarrated’ as “all the events that do not happen but, nonetheless, are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text,” in other words, “‘this could've happened but didn't'; ‘this didn't happen but could've’” (299). Examining the function of the disnarrated, Prince writes:

The disnarrated can, moreover, contribute to the development of a theme (illusion and reality, appearance and being, determinism and freedom, imagination and perception, or, of course, the theme of narrative itself)...the disnarrated or choices not made, roads not taken, possibilities not actualized, goals not reached. (301)

Further, he writes that the disnarrated provides to the author an important medium of “emphasizing tellability: this narrative is worth narrating because *it* could have been otherwise, because *it* usually is otherwise, because *it* was not otherwise;” here, tellability being what makes a story worth telling. (302) It serves as a way of validating the importance of the story being told. In the case of transnarratives, the alternative gender reality being presented embodies the ‘disnarrated’ as a whole, i.e. in the literary canon, transnarratives have constituted the disnarrated – their stories are worth telling because they represent what is silenced and absent from the mainstream, despite being a presence in communities everywhere .

Radical feminist Audre Lorde in her autobiography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* creates a new style of writing with the term “biomythography,” – a style of narrative building in which she weaves together autobiography, cultural history, and myth; in the process, she recreates the way we experience ourselves and our lived experiences, thereby elevating the story through imagination. In her novel, she creates an image of her childhood self, dressed in a way that society deemed appropriate for young girls in 1930s and 1940s Harlem, New York.:

My lifelong dream of a doll-baby come to life had in fact come true. Here she stood before me now, smiling and pretty in an unbelievable wine-red velvet coat with a wide, wide skirt that flared out over dainty little lisle-stockings legs. Her feet were clad in a pair of totally impractical, black patent—leather mary-jane shoes, whose silver buckles glistened merrily in the drab noon light. (37)

This image of a possible self that she projects is an example of the effective use of the ‘disnarrated’ in narratives, and specifically a trans narrative. The image is a reality that could have been, and in a heteronormative society, usually is, but is not the case for Lorde’s authentic lesbian self.

In the autobiography *Me, Hijra, Me, Laxmi*, the lived experience of the hijra community is described as a “parallel social structure”(174), except that Laxmi, despite being a recognized member of the hijra community, also has to maintain a male persona for her family – which

serves to offset the tellability of her hijra experience, because *it* could have been and usually is otherwise (Laxmi having been born biologically male), but *it* actually isn't. In recounting her failure to save the lives of Kiran, Rupa, and Payal, who are other members of her hijra community, Laxmi says, "The female psyche, trapped in a male body, stifles them. There's no one in the world they can call their own," thus, making liquor their last resort (164). Their fate could have been hers too, but Laxmi describes her hijra experience as empowering: "Being a hijra made me glamorous and militant at first, I seemed a stranger to myself. But over time, the timid, shy Laxmimarayan of old, faded out of existence, and the Laxmi you see before you, aggressive, ready to fight the world, stood in his place" (169).

These splits, dualities, and multiplicities in the narrative are far more than mere devices used by the author in case of trans narratives. They are, in fact, representation of the narrator's dual consciousness. Writing on women's autobiographies, as narratives from the margins, social feminist theorist and historian, Sheila Rowbotham, in *Women's Consciousness, Man's World* wrote that a woman defines herself as belonging to a collective that has been assigned a role by the dominant masculine culture. Her journey is that of a dual consciousness – one of the self that is defined by culture, and the other is of that what she creates for herself apart from cultural prescription. (31)

This dual consciousness also presents itself in trans narratives, particularly trans autobiographies, through the medium of the disnarrated – Laxmi chooses to put forward an empowered image of herself, although still living in conflict of having to maintain her male identity for her family. She chooses to ascribe for herself an identity apart from that which is defined by culture. In doing so, she is creating what was not available to her – a precedent and a history in contemporary culture. Laxmi places her own story in the larger socio-cultural and political presence of the community by drawing on the long history of the hijra community in India in mythology<sup>i</sup>, the epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, in medieval history through the courtly traditions of Muslim kings, and in the current political context by speaking of enabling laws in favour of hijras, as well as hijras who have contested and won elections.

In the final chapter, she begins with the meaning and origin of the word 'hijra,' derived from the Urdu word, 'hijra,' used to refer to someone who has left their tribe or community, in this case, men and women, usually men, who do not fit the heterosexual norms, leaving to join the hijra community. She establishes a written history for the hijra community by documenting their complex social structures and hierarchies of the various hijra gharanas (houses) with a nayak (chief) followed by gurus, who take on chelas (disciple) to mentor. They have their own system of governance and redressal, and most significantly, they have strong rituals and customs surrounding the initiation rites of becoming a hijra. Very often, the unnarratable in transnarratives and other forms of narratives representing marginalized people through their course transform the unnarratable into the narratable, as an attempt to find a voice and bring the marginalized out of the margins.

Following Prince, Robyn R. Warhol, in "Neonarrative; or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film," revisits the notion of the unnarratable to offer taxonomy of the subject, one that re-categorizes based on the conventions governing what can and cannot be represented in narrative. Her primary objective for doing this though, is to examine the phenomena of the use single coma for these words 'disnarrated' and the 'unnarrated' as instances of the larger category of the 'unnarratable', and to identify genre conventions and changes in those conventions that ultimately lead to shifts in genres by way of expanding the boundaries of the narratable.

As mentioned previously, the disnarrated, as identified by Gerald Prince, is the narration of something that might have happened or was imagined to have happened but did not

actually happen. On the other hand, the unnarrated is the lack of narration about something that did happen; it can be found in those passages “that explicitly do not tell what is supposed to have happened, foregrounding the narrator’s refusal to narrate”(Warhol 221). Warhol see both the disnarrated and the unnarrated as strategies for representing the unnarratable, which she divides into four types.

The first possible form of the unnarratable, as classified by Warhol, is “the Subnarratable: what needn’t be told because it’s normal.” By this, she means the common everyday events that “go without saying” since they are too insignificant for the narrative (222). Quoting Prince, Warhol explains, “If I told a friend what I did yesterday, I would most probably not mention that I tied my shoelaces.” (1). The second possible form of the unnarratable is “the Supranarratable: what can’t be told because it’s ineffable,” meaning events that “defy narrative” often due to the inadequacy of language or visual representation.(Warhol 223) Warhol presents an example from Louisa May Alcott's sentimental narrator where moments that are unnarratable conclude with comments such as “The shock she received can better be imagined than described” (359). Laxmi, in her autobiography, cannot find words to describe her childhood rape: “The physical and mental torture I went through is indescribable. But I didn’t say a word to anyone, either then or later. I kept my feelings bottled.” (6) The supranarratable, as seen here, is commonly used in narratives to describe trauma, but she also calls out to the restrictions imposed by social taboos forcing her into the unnarratable: “But who would believe me if I complained?”(7)

The third and fourth variety of the unnarratable are “the Antinarratable: what shouldn’t be told because of social convention” and “the Paranarratable: what wouldn’t be told because of formal convention,” respectively. The third category, i.e., the antinarratable, which deals with matters that transgress “social laws or taboos,” highlights the difficulty faced by transgender autobiography writers and activist. During the Victorian era, sex was the subject that was the antinarratable; in the contemporary era, it happens to be same-sex desire and sex change. (Warhole 224-6)

The antinarratable transgresses social laws or taboos, and for that reason remains unspoken. This is the unnarratable as “that which does not call for narration”, in the specific sense that it might prompt a response of “that's uncalled for.”...Sex in realist Victorian novels, for instance, is always antinarratable, and can only be known by its results as they play themselves out in the plot (for instance in the presence of new babies, disillusioned hearts, or ruined reputations). As I have written elsewhere Victorian narrative uses euphemism, illusion, metaphor, and especially metonymy to signify sexual connections between characters, but never narration. (Warhol 224)

In Charlotte Bronte’s feminist classic *Jane Eyre* (1847), a prepubescent Jane is locked in a red room (literally, so) by her Aunt for a night. It was in the same room that her uncle Mr. Reed, who had been her last real possibility at finding a guardian-like figure, breathed his last, a frightening prospect in itself. Locked in this room, she hallucinates seeing the ghost of her uncle and various other disturbing visions that haunt her well into womanhood.

Shaking my hair from my eyes, I lifted my head and tried to look boldly round the dark room: at this moment a light gleamed on the wall. Was it, I asked myself, a ray from the moon penetrating some aperture in the blind? No; moonlight was still, and this stirred; while I gazed, it glided up to the ceiling and quivered over my head. I can now conjecture readily that this streak of light was, in all likelihood, a gleam from a lantern, carried by some one across the lawn: but then, prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation, I thought the swift-darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world. My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings: something seemed

near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down—I uttered a wild, involuntary cry—I rushed to the door and shook the lock in a desperate effort. (Bronte 18-19)

Embedded deep within her consciousness, Jane continues to feel the trauma of the red room even as an adult, whenever she finds herself in situations where she is threatened or is defenseless. The sequence serves as a challenge to “the unnarratability of another kind of taboo, the silence that results from trauma...the struggle to tell what supposedly shouldn’t be told, that which has been repressed both from history and from the characters’ own consciousnesses” (Warhol 224).

Another popular interpretation of the ‘antinarratable’ in the red room sequence is that the time she spends inside the room signifies her coming of puberty and first menstruation – a deeply taboo subject for the Victorian era. Elaborating on the connection between the representation or the expression of trauma and the antinarratable, Warhol writes, “Trauma in Victorian realist fiction can also be figured as antinarratable, as belonging beyond the bounds of what should be told, but the boundaries of this kind of narratability are stricter in Victorian than in twentieth-century texts...First-hand or focalized accounts of trauma in Victorian novels are rare, making trauma the kind of antinarratable experience represented mainly by silence or gaps in realist texts” (225).

However, transformative capacity of the ‘unnarratable’ is that the story “eventually does get told in the course of the narrative: what has been repressed or suppressed because it shouldn’t be told, gets expressed before the novel’s end because it must be told for healing to occur and, for that matter, for the novel to get written...what began as the unnarratable trauma...ultimately becomes narratable, in a narrative process moving toward wholeness for the characters and for the text itself” (Warhol 224). What is unnarratable as a result of social conventions can also be a result of silencing and repression of the marginalized sections. In this case, even an allusion to ‘anti-narratable’ subjects can function as an act of defiance, thus over the course of the narrative, make the unnarratable, narratable, and over a longer period of time, make these unnarratable, taboo subjects more culturally acceptable and thereby, narratable. This serves to effect genre shifts over a period of time, creating what Warhol terms as ‘neonarratives’ that transgress the formal or social conventions governing the unnarratable.

Transgender autobiographers, like Laxmi and Vidya, voice a similar challenge since same-sex desire and sex change are considered another kind of taboo. The struggle to voice that which shouldn’t be told, felt and thereby repressed, points to the difficulties of embarking on a transnarrative. As Vidya, in her autobiography says, “My expectations were simple. I wanted to live a normal life like all men and women. But being Tirunangai (Transgender) was natural, just as men are men, women are women, and cats are cats. Trouble arises when people do not understand this simple truth. We cannot even describe our problems...”(21).

Transsexual subjects frequently articulate their bodily alienation as a discomfort with their skin or bodily encasing: being trapped in the wrong body is figured as being in the wrong, or an extra, or a second skin, and transsexuality is expressed as a desire to shed or to step out of this skin. Fantasies of excoriation punctuate transsexual autobiographies. (Prosser 68)

Trans autobiographies, narrating the distressing straddling of gender binary to finally coming out as a gender non-conforming person, reveal the development of a dual consciousness. The trans person is unable to recognize themselves in the cultural representations available to them, and develop a dual consciousness—a self as culturally defined and a self as different from the cultural definition. From this division, comes the experiencing of one half as being strange and alien, cut-off from the other which is in a constant struggle to find a voice. These two selves are never together in one place, always in transit, travelling into alien territory. Sex

transformations being an important part of the plot, the focus is on the body and the narrative intertwines in and out of the mind and the body. Their autobiographies act as a means to survive the trauma of self-realisation and social realisation, sex change and loss of identity, acclimatizing with the newfound identity and empowerment.

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