

Celebrity Culture and Transgenders; A Study of Autobiography by Laxmi Narayan Thripati

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Abstract:

Binary opposition is seen as a fundamental organizer of human philosophy, culture and language. Derrida rejects this binary opposition on grounds that such oppositions always privilege one term over the other.

Our society has binary opposition system of central and peripheral social groups. But there are other different social elements in between belonging to different social groups. In case of transgenders, they belong to the peripheral or the subaltern group having inferior social status. The dominant upper-class celebrity culture occupies the central place enjoying the higher status. In between these central and peripheral elements there exist many other elements consisting people from other social groups or status.

Laxmi Narayan Thripati is a transgender rights activist. She moves into celebrity circle. On one hand she is a subaltern, on the other hand she is a celebrity. This paper tries to explore how some elements of higher celebrity social culture accommodate and support the marginalized transgenders provided the subaltern also is in higher social group. The paper also tries to find out the reactions of the celebrity circle to other transgenders and the reactions of different social groups towards the transgenders.

Keywords: Celebrity Culture, Transgenders, Autobiography

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Celebrities are found across a spectrum of activities and communities including acting, politics, fashion, sports and music. The "culture" is created when people are interested in celebrities and are willing to alter their own lives to take part in celebrities' lives. The "culture" is first defined by factors outside of celebrities themselves, and then augmented by celebrities' involvement within that publicly constructed culture. Celebrity culture has become a part of everyday society and social lives on a global scale. Celebrity culture is now reflected in social norms and values because of the extreme citizen involvement. Hence common people always try to copy celebrities.

The oxford English dictionary defines the term subaltern as inferior status or rank. Transgenders are those whose identity is beyond the notion of conventional gender structures. Mostly they possess male physique and female behavioral traits which make their life complex with conflicts and ridicules. Their life revolves around their neglected and unacknowledged sexual identity. The supreme court of India has acknowledged transgenders as a third gender and has provided them all equal rights and privileges.

Though now the transgenders are given legal identity in our law, the society still has not accepted them whole heartedly. The issue of transgender is still indebate and uncertain. But some of the transgenders in spite of being excluded out of the society have managed to find a place within the society.

Laxmi Narayan triapati is a Transgender rights activist, Hindi Film actor, Bharatanatyamdancer, has participated in Big Boss –Season 5 and a first transgender to represent Asia Pacific in the UN in 2008. She is a Hijra Guru and also spokesperson for the Kinnarcommunity. She originally hails from UP, India. In addition, she served as a member of several NGOs, which conduct LGBTactivist work. In 2002, she became president of the NGODAI Welfare Society, the first registered and workingorganization for eunuchs in South Asia.

Laxmi Narayan thripati has written an autobiography “me Hijra me Laxmi” in which she narrates her struggles, her ambitions, her success, her dreams. We can also notice from Laxmi’s autobiography that the transgenders are not accepted by the common people of Indian society. But the high culture of our society accepts them. The cultures of Indian celebrities have absorbed Laxmi into it. Our celebrity culture includes the area of Indian film stars of Hollywood, fashion world, sports stars, politicians, intellectuals, writers, rich businessmen, social workers etc. These people have acknowledged the talent and ability of educated transgenders and have involved such transgenders into their affairs. Through her autobiography we can find many instances where Laxmi has participated in high celebrity culture.

The famous writer Salman Rushdie says “ I went to Thane to meet an exceptional hijra named Laxmi, a hijra of extreme articulacy and force of character.Laxmi, a local star of sorts,” [Laxmi Narayan ,2015, p.208].

The famous Bollywood actor Salman Khan calls her to participate in his TV show Dus a Dum [121]. She was also called by Salman Khan for the famous TV show Big Boss. Laxmi says in her biography “ ...Salman and Sanjay, always referred to me as Laxmiji. The suffix ‘ji’ is reserved for people worthy of respect. It has never been used for hijras, and here I was a hijra, being addressed as Laxmiji by two distinguished film stars. What more could I ask for?” [126].

Amsterdam India festival used to invite famous artists and celebrities like Hari Prasad Chaurasia, Pundit Shiv Kumar Sharma, Zakir Hussain. They also had fashion show by famous designer Manish Malhotra. Now they wanted to do something new. The directors said “ for us India means Laxmi” [100]. Laxmi was invited. There was standing ovation for Laxmi in Amsterdam [104]. Laxmi says in Amsterdam “ everyone was so non-judgmental; unlike us...there was a tolerance towards all. And not just tolerance but acceptance” [95].

UNGASS-United Nations General Special Session invited Laxmi to New York for a high level meeting of the civil society task force [106]. She got G4 visa. It was a diplomatic visa that gives one a diplomatic status. Laxmi feels “ a hijra from India had been accorded diplomatic status in the world’s richest country. It only happened in fairy tales”. [108]

Sangeetha Sethi was Laxmi’s friend who belonged to celebrity culture. “She was sophisticated, modern and spoke fluent English” [09]. Speaking good English is the major criteria in celebrity culture. Laxmi speaks excellent English.

Laxmi was featured in TLC programme on television. [72]. TV channels invited her for talk shows. A conference was held in Mumbai on the status of HIV and AIDS in India. It was a high level conference, where none other than Mr. Kofi Anan, the then UN Secretary- General was present. Laxmi says “ my morale got a terrific boost” [76]. The celebrity culture boosted Laxmi’s morale by accepting

her. The AIDS conference in Toronto invited Laxmi as a chief speaker. The famous movie star Sharmila Tagore was also present [87].

She was the chairperson of an NGO called DWS. She was invited for a speech by Avert society in Vashi. She made the presentation in chaste, fluent English and got many claps for it. Everyone was amazed. Their stereotypes about hijras were dismantled. [63]

Laxmi says "I made my next presentation at Mumbai district AIDS control society (MDACS). and once again I left my audience speechless. [64]. She acted a major role in movie "Between the Lines" directed by Dorothy, a German. It was premiered at Locarno film festival in Switzerland in 2005. [70]

Laxmi studied in Mithibai College which followed celebrity culture. She says "no one sniggered at me. Perhaps it had to do with the devil-may-care ethos of Mithibai college – anyone could do anything here". [31]. She further says "I noticed that in the world of glamour, no one looked at me with a curious eye, as they did in the world outside. Artistic people are actually supposed to possess angularities that mark them out from the run-of-the-mill. ... I was also in need of social acceptance." [33]. Laxmi was accepted by the world of glamour.

Even Laxmi wanted to be a part of celebrity culture. She says "even I wanted to be a celebrity. that's why I decided to appear on TV" [46]. She had all qualities for that or rather we can say that she acquired all the qualities required to join the celebrity culture. She had good education. Her major asset was her very good fluent English. Speaking good English is the major criteria in celebrity culture. Laxmi speaks excellent English. But Laxmi wanted to move ahead in order to help the hijra community. She says "I wanted to use the show as a platform to make viewers aware that hijras are normal people, just like them, I entered the big boss ... house as a spokesperson for the hijra community". [125]

Laxmi is fashionable and well dressed. The other criteria for celebrity culture is to be fashionable and beautiful. Laxmi is extremely fashionable with good taste of clothes and make up which we come across through her autobiography. Raj Rao in his afterword to Laxmi's autobiography says "Hijras are considered ugly. But when I see Laxmi- tall, sturdy, beautiful and confident- my stereotypes are automatically destroyed" (Rao, 2015, p.225). She was bold and had good acquaintances of well-known people. On top of this she was ambitious and worked hard to fulfill her dreams. She was not the one to assume herself as a victim and suffer. She has learnt to say no and to fight. She did not feel depressed when the world ill-treated her but instead she rose to such a position to make the upper-class culture to accept her. She says to other hijras "why segregate yourselves from mainstream society to such an extent?". [67].

Through Laxmi's autobiography we can also explore that the celebrity culture has accepted only those transgenders who fulfil the criteria of becoming a part of celebrity culture. Laxmi feels that the celebrity culture itself is "full of queer and unconventional people" [39]. But the same culture does not accept the uneducated, sex working, begging transgenders. The reason for this might be because of the behavior of transgenders with the society. Public are scared of such transgenders. But people like Laxmi are well educated. For some time Laxmi danced as a bar dancer. But later after becoming famous she feels that dancing in the bar will make the upper-class culture to repel her. As Laxmi herself says "I decided to leave my disreputable past behind and assume a respectable persona" [63]

In order to provide equality to Hijras, efforts have been made by several NGOs and some state governments within the country so as to empower and give equal rights to them. Due to this, schemes like welfare schemes, transgender policy etc. have been introduced to protect them from exploitations, deprivations and social exclusions within the country. With this effort, few development

and changes can be seen in sectors like film industry, corporate, private and some government jobs. There are happy signs of change for transgenders in public spaces, various fields etc. Emergence of transgenders can be seen in various fields in modern times.

Celebrity culture has accepted transgenders who are also celebrities. But the common people of society don't come across people like Laxmi often. Common people see transgenders as beggars in railway stations and traffic signals, sex workers etc. in their day to day life. Even today transgenders are seen begging on streets or dancing in bars or in private festivals. The common society still needs to accept the transgenders unlike celebrity culture or the upper class society. The emergence of transgenders in advanced fields create a social awareness about how to treat transgenders and it creates an impression to accept them as a part of the society.

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