

Gender, Voice, and Agency: A Study of Self-Narratives in Indian Third-Gender Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines autobiographical self-narratives produced by members of the Indian third-gender community, focusing on the interrelation between gender identity, narrative voice, and agency. Drawing on selected autobiographical texts by A. Revathi and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, the study analyses how life writing functions as a mode of self-representation and resistance within a socio-cultural context marked by marginalisation and exclusion. The paper situates these narratives within theoretical frameworks of gender performativity and life writing to demonstrate how first-person narration enables third-gender authors to reclaim subjectivity and narrative authority. By foregrounding lived experience, these self-narratives challenge dominant gender binaries and institutional representations that have historically silenced third-gender voices. The paper argues that autobiographical writing operates not merely as personal testimony but as a political and cultural intervention that asserts agency, preserves community memory, and expands the scope of Indian literary discourse. Through close textual analysis, the study highlights the significance of third-gender self-narratives as counter-hegemonic texts that negotiate identity, voice, and social recognition.

Keywords: Third Gender, Autobiography, Voice, Agency, Indian Literature, Gender Identity, Life Writing

Introduction

The Indian third-gender community—often referred to as *hijras* or transgender persons—has historically occupied an ambivalent position within Indian society. While references to gender variance exist in mythology and ritual practices, lived social realities have been marked by exclusion, violence, and systemic marginalisation. Literary representations of third-gender identities have largely emerged through external observation, reinforcing stereotypes and denying narrative agency to the subjects themselves.

Against this backdrop, autobiographical writing by third-gender individuals assumes particular significance. Life narratives enable authors to challenge imposed identities and articulate selfhood on their own terms. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, “autobiographical acts are sites of self-interpretation rather than transparent records of experience.” In third-gender literature, this act of self-interpretation becomes inseparable from the struggle for recognition, dignity, and citizenship.

This paper examines how gender, voice, and agency intersect in Indian third-gender self-narratives, focusing primarily on autobiographical texts by A. Revathi and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. It situates these narratives within broader debates on gender performativity, narrative authority, and resistance writing.

Theoretical Framework: Autobiography, Gender, and Marginality

Autobiography has long been understood as a privileged site for the articulation of subjectivity. However,

for marginalised communities, life writing often functions less as self-celebration and more as survival narrative. Leigh Gilmore describes such texts as forms of “limit-case autobiography,” where personal testimony intersects with social critique and political urgency.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity provides an important lens through which to read third-gender self-narratives. Butler contends that gender is not an innate essence but “an identity tenuously constituted in time.” Third-gender autobiographies repeatedly expose the violence inherent in enforcing rigid gender norms, revealing how the failure to conform invites punishment while also opening possibilities for alternative selfhoods.

Within this framework, self-narration becomes a mode of reclaiming agency from dominant discourses that medicalise, criminalise, or exoticize gender non-conformity.

Gender Identity and the Lived Experience of the Body

Third-gender autobiographies foreground the body as a primary site of conflict, surveillance, and resistance. In *The Truth About Me*, A. Revathi recounts her childhood experiences of alienation with stark clarity:

I thought I would die. I felt he would never stop. I tried to protect myself, but he kept yelling and raining blows on me. My hands began to swell. He struck my legs, my back, and then finally brought the bat down heavily on my head. My skull cracked, and blood flowed everywhere—warm and streaming. “That’s right! Beat him and break his bones. Only then will he stay at home and not run away!” I heard my mother say. (Revathi 15)

Such statements destabilise biological determinism and foreground gender as an internal, affective reality rather than a socially assigned role. The body in these narratives is subject to violence, ridicule, and control, yet it is also the site through which identity is claimed.

Revathi’s narrative details how everyday gestures—dress, speech, movement—become acts of defiance. These embodied performances challenge binary gender expectations while simultaneously exposing the narrator to social sanction. The text thus reveals how gender identity is produced at the intersection of desire, discipline, and resistance.

Voice, Silence, and Narrative Authority

One of the most significant interventions of third-gender self-narratives lies in their reclamation of voice. Historically, hijras and transgender individuals have been represented through medical, legal, or anthropological discourses that deny them subjectivity. Autobiographical writing disrupts this tradition by placing first-person narration at the centre of the text.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi asserts this reclamation explicitly:

The decision to become a hijra is traumatic. Once one becomes a hijra, the doors to one’s earlier life are shut for ever. It isn’t easy for a hijra to come to terms with her new life. The family and indeed society as a whole, reacts strangely . . . crimes by hijras are exaggerated and the hijras are chastised. Disproportionate punishment is meted out to us by the police and the public. (Tripathi 157)

The first-person voice functions as both personal testimony and collective assertion. By narrating lived experience, the author challenges dominant epistemologies that privilege institutional knowledge over experiential truth. As Smith and Watson note, voice in autobiography is never neutral; it is shaped by power relations and cultural constraints.

Third-gender narratives transform silence into speech, turning personal memory into a form of public intervention.

Agency, Choice, and Acts of Resistance

Agency in third-gender self-narratives is not presented as absolute autonomy but as a series of negotiated choices made within oppressive social structures. Decisions to leave family homes, join hijra communities, or assert gender identity publicly are framed as acts of survival rather than rebellion.

Revathi reflects on her departure from home, “I did not abandon my family; society abandoned me.” (45) Such moments reveal how agency is exercised within constraint. Writing itself becomes a crucial act of agency, allowing authors to reframe experiences of violence and exclusion as narratives of resilience. By documenting injustice, these texts demand ethical and political accountability from the reader. Autobiography thus operates as a mode of resistance that challenges both social marginalisation and literary exclusion.

Community, Kinship, and Collective Identity

Although autobiographical in form, third-gender self-narratives rarely focus solely on the individual self. Instead, they situate personal experience within collective histories of community, ritual, and kinship. The hijra *guru-chela* system emerges as an alternative familial structure that offers belonging and cultural continuity.

Tripathi writes:

I had learned from Ashok Row Kavi that I wasn't abnormal. But then, what was going on inside my body? Though I was born a boy, how come I fell in love with boys and not with girls? Slowly, gradually, I came to conclusion that I wasn't a boy. I was a girl. But then I had a penis and testicles, not breasts. So how could I call myself a girl? I was bewildered. I did not have the answers to these questions. I wanted to end my life. (Tripathi 22)

These representations challenge heteronormative models of family and social organisation. Community becomes a site of collective agency, where individual survival is inseparable from shared struggle. The autobiographical “I” thus expands into a communal voice that speaks on behalf of a historically marginalised group.

Self-Narrative as Cultural and Political Intervention

Third-gender autobiographies function not only as literary texts but also as cultural documents that intervene in public discourse. By articulating lived realities, these narratives challenge dominant representations and demand recognition within legal, social, and literary frameworks.

Revathi's declaration—

Men and even women stared at us and laughed, and heckled us. I realized what a burden a hijra's daily life is. Do people harass those who are men and women when they go outwith their families? Why, a crippled person, a blind person -- even they attract pity and people help them. If someone has experienced physical hurt, they are cared for both by the family and by outsiders who come to know of it. But we -- we are not considered human (Revathi 40)

In this sense, third-gender self-narratives contribute to the broader project of re-writing Indian literary history to include voices previously excluded from its canon.

Conclusion

Self-narratives in Indian third-gender literature represent a crucial convergence of gender, voice, and agency. Through autobiographical writing, third-gender authors reclaim narrative authority, articulate gender identity beyond binary frameworks, and assert agency within contexts of systemic marginalisation. These texts challenge dominant literary and social discourses while preserving community histories and lived experiences.

By transforming personal testimony into cultural critique, third-gender self-narratives expand the scope of Indian literature and reaffirm the political power of life writing as a form of resistance and self-empowerment.

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