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Embodied Inequalities: Caste Hierarchies in Transgender Autobiographies of Tripathi and Vidya

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Abstract

This research paper entitled Embodied Inequalities: Caste Hierarchies in Transgender Autobiographies of Tripathi and Vidya critically explores the intersection of caste and transgender identity through a comparative analysis of two Indian autobiographies—Me Hijra, Me Laxmi by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and I Am Vidya by Living Smile Vidya. While both works document the struggles and resilience of transgender individuals, they also reveal the hidden experiences shaped by caste hierarchies. The research article underlines how caste, an enduring structure of social stratification in India, intersects with gender non-conformity to produce complex forms of marginalization and privilege. Tripathi's account, emerging from an upper-caste background, contrasts sharply with Vidya's Dalit experience, highlighting differential access to social mobility, visibility, and empowerment. By employing an intersectional and subaltern theoretical framework, this paper examines how the embodied experiences of caste influence self-representation, social inclusion, and political agency. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing discourse on Dalit queer politics, challenging normative narratives and advocating for a more inclusive and caste-conscious approach to gender and sexuality studies in South Asia.

Keywords: Transgender Autobiographies, Caste Hierarchies, Intersectionality, Dalit Politics, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, Vidya, Gender and Caste, Identity Politics.

Introduction

In recent years, transgender autobiographies in India have emerged as powerful forms of life writing that challenge dominant narratives around gender, sexuality, and identity. These autobiographies offer rare, intimate insights into the everyday experiences of transgender individuals navigating a society that continues to uphold rigid gender norms and systemic hierarchies. As a form of counter-narrative, transgender autobiographies not only assert personal agency but also act as socio-political documents that interrogate structures of power, including patriarchy, heteronormativity, and caste. Within this growing body of literature, Me Hijra, Me Laxmi by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and I Am Vidya by Living Smile Vidya stand out as groundbreaking texts that provide contrasting yet complementary accounts of transgender lives in India. While both texts foreground the challenges of negotiating gender identity, their narratives are deeply inflected by the authors' caste locations—Tripathi from a privileged Brahmin background and Vidya from a Dalit, working-class context. This difference in caste shapes their struggle, empowerment, identity and visibility.

Caste, though foundational to Indian society, remains a marginal concern within mainstream queer discourses, which have predominantly been shaped by Savarna voices and middle-class urban activism. As scholars like Anupama Rao and Aniruddha Dutta argue, the invisibilization of caste within queer spaces often results in a flattening of queer identity, where the focus on sexuality and gender identity overshadows the lived realities of caste-based oppression (Rao 67; Dutta 301). Dalit queer individuals, thus, face "double marginalization"—ostracized not only for their gender non-conformity but also for their caste location, which affects access to resources, community support, and political representation (Kumar 58). In this light, autobiographies such as Vidya's I Am Vidya serve as crucial interventions that reclaim voice, visibility, and dignity for Dalit transgender persons.

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of Me Hijra, Me Laxmi and I Am Vidya to examine how caste functions as an embodied and structural reality in the lives of transgender individuals. While both autobiographies share thematic concerns related to gender dysphoria, familial rejection, social stigma, and the search for belonging, they diverge sharply in their treatment of caste and the forms of resistance available to them. Tripathi's narrative, for instance, is marked by a strong sense of self-celebration, cosmopolitanism, and spiritual leadership—enabled in part by her caste privilege, which grants her social capital and institutional access (Tripathi 109). In contrast, Vidya's narrative is rooted in the grim realities of poverty, caste discrimination, and survival labor, foregrounding a more grounded and collective mode of activism (Vidya 93).

The present study employs an intersectional framework, drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of overlapping oppressions, to analyze how gender and caste intersect to produce unique modes of subjugation and resistance (Crenshaw 1244). It also engages with Subaltern Studies and Dalit Queer Theory to situate these autobiographies within broader socio-political structures that historically exclude and silence certain voices (Spivak 285; Raj 40). By doing so, the paper highlights the limitations of a monolithic queer politics in India and argues for a more nuanced, caste-conscious understanding of transgender experiences. The aim is not merely to compare two individual stories but to interrogate the ways in which identity, power, and resistance are configured at the intersection of caste and gender.

Me Hijra, Me Laxmi was first published in Marathi in 2009 as Laxmi and was later translated into English by R. Raj Rao and P. G. Joshi in 2015. The text chronicles Tripathi's journey from a Brahmin male child in Thane to an internationally recognized transgender activist and performer. Her narrative is marked by a tone of self-assurance, charisma, and assertiveness, portraying her ascent into public life and her navigation of traditional hijra communities, academia, spiritualism, and global platforms such as the United Nations. As an upper-caste and English-speaking individual with access to elite educational institutions and global forums, Tripathi represents a form of transgender visibility that is both celebrated and critiqued for its detachment from grassroots Dalit and working-class realities (Rao 84; Dutta 311).

In contrast, I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey, published in Tamil in 2007 and later translated into English by Gita Subramanian, offers a poignant and grounded account of Living Smile Vidya's life. Vidya, a Dalit from a lower-middle-class background in Tamil Nadu, recounts her struggles with poverty, caste-based discrimination, and gender dysphoria. Her narrative is devoid of glamour and fame; instead, it is shaped by survival, marginality, and political awakening. Vidya's reflections on the everyday violence she endures—from educational institutions, public spaces, and even within the hijra community—foreground the lived experiences of those at the lowest rungs of both the caste and gender hierarchies. Unlike Tripathi's global activism, Vidya's engagement is more rooted in street theatre, Dalit movements, and localized activism, signaling a politics of resistance that emerges from the margins (Vidya 102).

The publishing contexts of these texts also reveal important disparities. Tripathi's autobiography was published by Oxford University Press, one of the most prestigious academic publishers in India, ensuring wide visibility and access to a global readership. This institutional backing reinforces her already privileged location within the queer movement. Conversely, Vidya's autobiography was published by a regional

press and translated by a small-scale translator, receiving limited circulation in mainstream literary and academic circuits. Despite this, I Am Vidya has gradually gained attention in gender studies and Dalit literature curricula, especially as scholars seek to diversify and de-Brahminize queer studies in India (Kumar 59; Satyanarayana and Tharu 17).

The reception of these autobiographies also mirrors the asymmetries of power in the queer movement. Tripathi has been featured widely in national media, documentaries, and international forums, while Vidya's recognition has largely come from academic circles and grassroots networks. This contrast invites critical reflection on whose stories are heard, published, and legitimized, and whose are confined to the margins of the literary and activist landscapes. The two texts, while equally important, illustrate how caste continues to mediate access to platforms, narratives, and influence—even within the discourse of sexual and gender rights.

Gender Identity and the Performance of Self

In both Me Hijra, Me Laxmi and I Am Vidya, the construction of transgender identity unfolds through a complex interplay of body, self-perception, social rejection, and political consciousness. However, the ways in which each author performs and narrates her gendered self-differ significantly due to divergent caste positions, cultural capital, and modes of resistance. These texts not only assert a transgender identity but also foreground the performative nature of gender itself, echoing Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender as "a stylized repetition of acts" shaped by historical and social conventions (Butler 191).

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's autobiography presents gender identity as a form of empowered self-creation. Her narrative frames femininity as something she claims boldly and strategically, often with aesthetic, spiritual, and performative dimensions. Tripathi discusses her involvement with Bharatanatyam, her flair for beauty and fashion, and her commanding presence in hijra communities and on global platforms. Her identity is constructed through self-celebration, charisma, and spiritual authority, describing herself as "more than a woman," combining power, sensuality, and shakti (Tripathi 89). The visibility she cultivates—on television, in activism, and within hijra communities—becomes both a personal triumph and a political strategy. Yet, her access to these spaces is made possible, at least in part, by her caste privilege, education, and fluency in elite discourse.

By contrast, Living Smile Vidya's narrative builds gender identity through struggle, self-negotiation, and daily survival. Her story is punctuated by episodes of humiliation, rejection, and erasure—not just from mainstream society but also within queer and hijra communities. Vidya's performance of gender is not theatrical or flamboyant; it is grounded in the labor of asserting dignity in public spaces where she is constantly questioned, stared at, or harassed. Her femininity is shaped by silence, pain, and protest, not by access to makeup, art, or public accolades. In one poignant moment, she writes, "I just wanted to walk down the road like any other person, without being looked at like a freak" (Vidya 73). Unlike Tripathi, who finds agency in visibility, Vidya often articulates her resistance through the right to be invisible—to exist without spectacle, stigma, or objectification.

Tripathi's activism heavily relies on the interplay between gender and caste. One social hierarchy structure that has both advantages and downsides is the caste system. Due to her family's upper caste brahmin origins in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, she enjoys significant privileges in her schooling, social status, and transgender advocacy. Even so, she was made "acharya mahamandaleshwar of kinner akhada." However, because of her gender non-binary hijra status, she also experienced marginalization and discrimination. She lived as a man during her home stays with her family because she came from a patriarchal Brahmin household and saw herself as Laxmi Narayan (Raju), the eldest son. However, she used to roam in female attire whenever she goes outside.

Laxmi asserts that her traditional Brahmin family, which was fundamentally patriarchal, welcomed her as a male kid at birth. In the Brahmanical environment of Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, she was born and raised in an affluent, upright household of significant social standing; she regards herself as a privileged child. She frequently brings up her caste

in her biography Red Lipstic: Men in My Life. Being a brahmin is something she is proud of.

Laxmi takes great pride in her caste, which is a very important fact. In contrast to the other transgender people, like Living Smile Vidya and A. Revthi, who were on the intersection of caste and gender, scarcely mention caste at all in their autobiographies. They did not conform to the heteronormative society's gender binary and were both born into what were considered lower castes. A. Revathi and Living Smile Vidya primarily discuss their experiences coming out as transgender, the challenges they encountered, the reactions of their families and society to their gender identity, the mental trauma and gender dysphoria they went through prior to coming out, the challenges, struggles, and discrimination they encountered both during their transgender activism. Pradeep Patkar, in the afterword of laxmi's autobiography 'Me Hijra, Me Laxmi' also acknowledges this fact and I quote 'but Laxmi is an exception. Her education, her talent, and the backing she received from her family have given her a good life. Other hijras are not so fortunate. Most of them are thrown out of their homes and are forced to beg on the streets and do sex work. Death alone liberates them from the wretched lives they are compelled to lead.'

Her decision to forgo castration, or "Nirvana" in the parlance of Indian transgender people, is equally daring from a gender standpoint. Her decision to remain with her male genitalia and avoid hormone therapy is in contrast to that of most transgender people, such as A. Revathi and Living Smile Vidya, who underwent "Nirvana," or castration. One could argue that she profited from this choice because, while residing with her family, she takes on the role of Raju, their eldest son, dressing in male clothes and carrying out the duties that go along with it. Outside the house, she is free to embrace her true femininity and engages in transgender activism while dressed in female clothing.

Laxmi had the good fortune to have her family not reject her upon learning of her gender non-confirming identification. They backed her decision and helped her along the way. She also gave her all to the family, fulfilling her responsibilities with the utmost dedication. When it comes to family support, Living Smile Vidya, A. Revathi, and the majority of transgender people are not as fortunate as Laxmi. Their respective families attempted to force them to live according to the gender they were assigned at birth as soon as they came out as Hijras, but when they were unable in doing so, they did not hesitate to use violence. Their only option in this condition is to flee from their family and home, join any hijra gharana, and survive through prostitution, begging, and requesting ceremonial favors. As a result, they were constrained by the "occupational fixity" that heteronormative society had prescribed. The reason for this is educational backwardness; even though they have to leave their home and family, their marksheet and documents stay behind. Society bears some responsibility as well; yet, it is hesitant to offer transgender people respectable professions. With Laxmi, however, this was not the case. Her proficiency in English and her college degree greatly aided her in her trans-activism.

Despite the fact that her advocacy for hijra rights may have been aided by her family's social standing and her higher caste status, from a gender standpoint, she was exposed to sexual offenses at a very young age. She lists the sexual offenses she had experienced in both of her memoirs. She remembers being sexually harassed by fourteen boys in one instance. Thus, this is the most typical problem that the majority of transgender individuals encountered. Sexual molestation and rape are serious risks that transgender people face. The accused is typically a relative or a member of the family. Transgender individuals are susceptible to crimes of this nature from an early age due to factors such as gender dysphoria, confusion, and a disconnection between their spirit and body.

The narrative voices in both texts reflect these contrasting experiences. Tripathi's voice is bold, theatrical, and unapologetically flamboyant. She writes with a sense of entitlement to space, often invoking divine metaphors and historical figures to amplify her legitimacy. Her story is not only about survival but about conquering spaces—from family and hijra gharanas to the United Nations. Vidya, on the other hand, writes with restraint, reflection, and political urgency. Her voice is intimate, often raw, and directed toward marginalized readers who may not see themselves in dominant queer narratives.

While Tripathi's self-representation leans toward exceptionalism, Vidya's emphasizes collectivity and solidarity with other Dalit queer individuals.

Caste as an Embodied Reality

Caste, though often peripheral in mainstream queer discourse in India, emerges in both Me Hijra, Me Laxmi and I Am Vidya as a deeply embodied and structuring force—either through its explicit visibility or strategic invisibility. These autobiographies do not merely mention caste as a social category; rather, they reflect how caste operates through the body, access, labor, and belonging. While Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's narrative tends to obscure or neutralize caste privilege, Living Smile Vidya's narrative insists on naming and confronting caste as a lived trauma and political truth.

In I Am Vidya, caste is not only acknowledged but is central to Vidya's narrative of marginalization and resilience. As a Dalit from a working-class Tamil family, Vidya recounts how caste-based discrimination shaped every sphere of her life—education, employment, and even relationships. Her account of struggling to access gender-affirming healthcare, stable employment, and housing is intimately tied to her caste location. She notes how, even within hijra and queer circles, her Dalit identity renders her invisible or less "worthy," thus exposing the casteism internal to queer communities that are often presumed to be uniformly oppressed (Vidya 88). The burden of caste, she suggests, is not merely institutional but also psychological, affecting self-worth and internalized shame. Her narration becomes a form of counter-memory, reclaiming space for Dalit transgender narratives long excluded from dominant representations (Satyanarayana and Tharu 21).

By contrast, Me Hijra, Me Laxmi makes only passing references to caste, though its silences speak volumes. Tripathi identifies herself as a Brahmin and occasionally invokes her high-caste background with pride, especially when comparing her journey with others in the hijra community. Her sense of moral and spiritual superiority is often couched in religious and cultural idioms that are inaccessible or alienating to those from marginalized castes. While Tripathi describes discrimination based on gender identity, the absence of caste-based vulnerability in her story reveals the protective shield her Brahmin identity affords her (Tripathi 67). Her access to elite education, financial support, and global platforms is not merely a function of personal merit or charisma but also a symptom of caste privilege. As Anupama Rao notes, "caste is most effective when it is least visible, when it masquerades as merit, morality, or culture" (Rao 92).

Moreover, caste shapes how each author interacts with the hijra community. Tripathi narrates her induction into the hijra gharana as a rite of passage, eventually claiming leadership roles within it. Her narrative frequently positions her as someone who improves or refines the hijra tradition—suggesting a top-down reformist gaze. In contrast, Vidya experiences exclusion even within these alternative communities, where dominant caste ideologies are reproduced despite shared gender identity. Her desire for community is consistently met with classist and casteist barriers, prompting her to seek political solidarity through Dalit and feminist movements rather than hijra networks (Dutta 319).

The divergence between the two texts reveals how caste not only influences life opportunities—such as education, media representation, and public visibility—but also mediates how transgender individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others. Tripathi's narrative performs caste privilege through an assertive self-construction that is confident, visible, and spiritually elevated. Vidya's autobiography, in contrast, speaks from the margins, articulating a voice shaped by vulnerability, rage, and resilience. Her caste identity is not merely narrated—it is inhabited, resisted, and politicized. Raina Roy rightly says in this connection,

> *...caste functions as an embodied reality that intersects with gender identity in ways that profoundly shape life outcomes. For Dalit transgender individuals like Vidya, caste intensifies marginalization and constrains access to empowerment structures. For upper-caste individuals like Tripathi, caste facilitates smoother navigation through spaces of power, even within marginal communities. Any analysis of transgender narratives in India, therefore, must foreground caste not as a backdrop, but as a central axis of identity and inequality. (Roy 81)*

Margins Within Margins: Intra-Community Caste Dynamics

While the transgender and hijra communities in India are widely recognized as socially marginalized groups, the assumption of internal homogeneity often erases the layered oppressions within these collectives. Caste, in this context, operates not only as a historical structure imposed from outside but also as a persistent axis of exclusion within queer and transgender spaces themselves. This intra-community stratification—what may be termed "margins within margins"—is critically explored in the autobiographies of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and Living Smile Vidya. Through their divergent experiences, it becomes evident that casteism is not merely an external force but an internalized, actively reproduced reality even among the socially oppressed.

Living Smile Vidya's I Am Vidya offers a pointed critique of caste hierarchies within the hijra and transgender collectives. Vidya exposes the subtle and overt ways in which Dalit transpersons are relegated to the peripheries of queer leadership, resource allocation, and narrative representation. Her experiences within the hijra community are marked by a lack of acceptance, as many senior gurus and peers viewed her Dalit identity with disdain. In her reflections, she writes that the hijra gharana—often imagined as a refuge from mainstream violence—mirrored the casteist attitudes of the dominant society (Vidya 91). Vidya's political engagements beyond the hijra gharana, such as her alignment with anti-caste, feminist, and Ambedkarite movements, reveal her refusal to remain silent within caste-ignorant queer spaces. She questions the erasure of Dalit bodies and voices from the leadership of queer activism, which is largely dominated by savarna (upper-caste) individuals with access to English education, media visibility, and NGO platforms.

This critique is particularly sharp when read alongside the narrative of Tripathi in Me Hijra, Me Laxmi, whose location within both the hijra community and the national queer movement is one of authority and prominence. As a Brahmin transgender woman, Tripathi benefits from caste capital, which allows her to frame her leadership in terms of charisma, divinity, and moral guidance. Although her narrative occasionally gestures towards community upliftment, it does not acknowledge the ways in which caste privilege enables her rise and silences others. Her elevation to international platforms and her branding as the face of the Indian transgender movement often comes at the cost of more marginalized voices. As queer scholar Aniruddha Dutta observes, upper-caste transgender activists have frequently been positioned as "acceptable representatives" of a sanitized, NGO-friendly queer politics that avoids addressing structural caste violence (Dutta 320).

In this context, Vidya's political position as a Dalit transwoman challenges both mainstream and intra-community hierarchies. Her critique of savarna queer narratives is not simply personal but structural; she draws attention to how representation in queer politics is monopolized by those who replicate dominant caste ideologies while claiming the mantle of marginality. For example, the visibility of savarna queer figures in literature, film, and policy spaces often obscures the voices of working-class and Dalit transgender persons whose lives remain undocumented or misrepresented. Vidya's insistence on narrating her own story—in Tamil, later translated into English—becomes a form of resistance against this hegemonic storytelling. Her act of writing and naming her caste identity in a queer narrative is itself a radical departure from the caste-neutral language often adopted by dominant queer discourse in India (Satyanarayana and Tharu 24).

This intra-community casteism also reveals how social capital, linguistic privilege, and cultural legitimacy continue to shape whose struggles are legible and whose activism is deemed valid. The autobiography as a genre becomes a site where these tensions are performed and contested. While Tripathi's text embodies the privileges of the visible and articulate transgender elite, Vidya's narrative disrupts the status quo by forcing a confrontation with the inconvenient truths of caste, even within activist spaces. In doing so, she helps reframe queer politics in India as a terrain that must reckon with not just gender, but also with the deep fractures of caste.

The autobiographies of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and Living Smile Vidya not only document personal journeys of gender transformation but also serve as

political texts that reflect divergent models of activism and resistance. These models are inextricably shaped by caste positionality, which governs both access to power and modes of self-articulation. While Tripathi operates within the realm of institutional visibility and media representation, Vidya locates her political agency in grassroots mobilization and anti-caste praxis. Their autobiographical narratives, therefore, do not merely recount lives—they actively produce and negotiate political subjectivities.

In contrast, Living Smile Vidya's political voice emerges from the margins. Her activism is shaped not by institutional endorsement but by lived resistance—against caste oppression, gender marginalization, and economic precarity. Vidya's association with Ambedkarite movements, Dalit literature, and working-class politics informs her rejection of sanitized queer visibility that excludes lower-caste voices. Her narrative critiques the tokenism that pervades mainstream LGBTQIA+ representation, where Dalit transgender persons are often visible only as subjects of pity or spectacle, not as agents of change (Vidya 102). Vidya refuses to perform respectability; instead, she reclaims anger, silence, and bodily discomfort as political tools. Her refusal to align with Brahminical Hindu frameworks, in contrast to Tripathi, is a conscious act of caste dissent.

These contrasting models of empowerment—Tripathi's through visibility and institutional participation, and Vidya's through radical critique and grassroots action—highlight the multiplicity of transgender political agency. One navigates power with the authority of caste-sanctioned legitimacy; the other resists power with the urgency of caste-inscribed exclusion. Together, they underscore that there can be no singular trans narrative or activism without accounting for caste, and that queer politics in India must move beyond representation to redistribution and structural justice.

This comparative exploration of Me Hijra, Me Laxmi and I Am Vidya reveals that transgender autobiographies in India are deeply entangled with the social, cultural, and political realities of caste. While both texts document personal and gendered journeys of marginalization and resilience, they do so from vastly different caste positions—Tripathi from a savarna background and Vidya from a Dalit location. These positionalities are not incidental but central to the shaping of their narratives, political agency, public reception, and access to platforms.

The analysis demonstrates that Tripathi's narrative, steeped in cultural privilege and linguistic capital, frames gender transformation within themes of pride, acceptance, and spiritual legitimacy. In contrast, Vidya's life-writing presents a more fragmented, emotionally restrained, and structurally conscious narrative, rooted in everyday caste discrimination, economic struggle, and the search for dignity. Their distinct experiences foreground the urgent need to address caste not as a peripheral concern but as a constitutive force within queer and transgender discourse in India.

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