

Me Hijra, Me Laxmi and Njan Marykutty: Phenomenal Pathfinding of Two Torch–Bearer Trans-genders

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Abstract

The article “Me Hijra, Me Laxmi, and Njan Marykutty: Phenomenal Pathfinding of Two Torchbearer Trans-genders” explores the theme of third-gender inequality and identity crisis. It sets a ground for the study of the life of trans-genders in general and gives a brief analysis of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a transgender rights activist, and her works, along with Ranjith Sankar and his films. This article gives a brief summary of Laxmi’s autobiography Me Hijra, Me Laxmi, and shortly explains the story of Ranjith’s film Njan Marykutty.

This dissertation is also concerned with the valuable or significant contributions of both characters to the whole Indian Queer Community. The protagonist Marykutty is transformed from Mathukutty and stands up as an exceptional and eloquent transsexual woman to the entire third-gender community. The dissertation also examines how marginalized individuals can step forward to mainstream society through indestructible determination, continuous hard work, and strong self-assurance. The article looks into the resemblances and variances of both Marykutty and Laxmi share. It gives a detailed explanation of the character analysis of the two trans-individuals and the way they can be considered as unleashing knots of the Indian Queer community. It presents the problems that transgenders face and the laws in favour of them for their protection and to prevent violence against them. In a nutshell, the article throws light on the successful transgender personalities who came out from the dark and isolated part of society to mark their signatures in mainstream society and encapsulates the whole dissertation based on the theme of third gender inequality and identity crisis.

Keywords: Transgender; Queer; Survival; third gender; Identity Crisis; Inequality.

“We are in a place now where more and more trans-people want to come forward and say, ‘This is who I am’.” - Laverne Cox

Society as a whole benefit immeasurably from a climate in which all persons, regardless of gender, may have the opportunity to earn respect, responsibility, and reward based on ability. All humans should have equal rights to live, express, flourish, and love, irrespective of their gender, caste, class, social status, disabilities, religion, or faith. Achieving gender equality requires the engagement of women and men. It is everyone's responsibility. All human beings deserve equal treatment, no matter their gender identity or sexuality.

Gender is a socially constructed one that society imposes on a person at the time of birth itself. The terms 'gender' and 'sex' vary each other. Sex refers to biological and physical features that are linked with being labelled male or female. By birth, sex is determined and this process is followed by gender determination. As a result, society decides how a human should 'be', while he is a part of the society in which he lives in. Gender refers to the mixing up of expectations, behaviour, characteristics, lifestyle, mannerism, appearance, and social roles usually associated with biological sex. All these are categorised into two sections and are placed on a spectrum between masculine and feminine. Any gender that comes apart from these two is not accepted among the stereotypes. When a child is born and if its sex is determined as a boy, then he is supposed to go through certain socially constructed norms. He is forced to behave like what the society wants him to be. How he looks, his talks, his dressing style, his social relationships, and even the profession he must choose are all decided beforehand by society. And if it is a girl, she too has certain predetermined rules and codes that she must follow throughout her life. Everything is structured, and the society itself disseminates them.

In a society where 'males' and 'females' are only considered, it is difficult for a third gender to identify themselves. Even if they identify, it is challenging for them to survive. The pre-determined norms that society exclusively prepared for males and females do not apply to a third gender. Society refuses to accept and include them and as a result of this, the third gender is marginalised or they are put aside in a corner of society. Often, people assume that gender identity is congruent with biological sex; they believe that a female will identify as feminine or a male will identify as masculine. However, this is not true for everyone since some people with male biology feel strongly feminine, and some with female biology feel themselves to be masculine. Others do not consider their gender to be either feminine or masculine but a blend of both; still others feel that they are neither masculine nor feminine, but some other gender. It is important to remember that gender is a malleable and variable category.

Now, in the contemporary world, the term 'gender' gradually became widened, for many individuals, now have the opportunity to identify new terms more suitable to their body and preferences. Therefore, another community was further added to the dominant masculine and feminine communities as a relief to the third genders. Third genders include Gay, Lesbian, Pansexual, Genderqueer, Queer, Intersexed, Agender, Asexual, and Trans-genders as well, of which trans-genders are the ones who are commonly found. If specifying that someone is trans is necessary, the following terminology should be used: someone who was assigned female at birth and who later identifies as a man could be known as a transman or transgender man. Likewise, someone who was assigned male at birth and later identifies as a woman might be labelled transwoman or a transgender woman. It is extremely necessary to keep in mind that transwomen are women just as transmen are men. Non-binary, genderqueer, and agender people should be referred to by the terms they use to describe themselves.

People who defy gender norms have existed in every culture throughout time. Often the word 'transitioning' is used to describe the period of moving away from one's assigned sex to a different one. Transgender is an umbrella term that describes people whose gender identity and expression do not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Those who did not desire a full surgical change of sex was alone considered 'trans-genders' at earlier times. These persons often live full-time in their desired gender role and may or may not take cross gender hormones. The term transgender has taken a broader interpretation in recent years. It is used to cover the spectrum of gender diversity, including crossdressers and transsexual persons. The transgender community is then a very diverse group with areas of similarity and areas of difference which may result in conflict.

About 1.4 million adults in the United States identify as transgender, according to 2016 research by the Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles. Broken down on a state level, that research found 0.8% of adults in California, Georgia, Hawaii, and New Mexico identify as transgender, compared with 0.3% of adults in Iowa,

Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming are identified as such. However, being transgender means different things to different people, according to the National Centre for Transgender Equality (NCTE)

(livescience.com)

Several recent studies have shown that transgender individuals face discrimination within their family units and schools, in employment and housing, within government settings,

through crimes, and under the justice and legal systems. From a young age, when a child recognises himself as a transgender, he is often brought up in heteronormative settings within his own home and school by the elders. Parents oftentimes respond quite negatively when their children cross gender barriers. They treat them accordingly, that is, they accuse them of not being 'normal'. This way of treatment affects their mental health and they are pulled down both physically and inwardly. It results in prompting transgender youth to run away from their homes and beloved ones. Hence, homeless transgender youth are more likely to turn to drug dealing, theft, and sexual exploitation.

Trans-genders are given no choice to choose the profession they want to do as society allots gender roles for males and females only. Even though they wish to live a normal life like other genders do, with good jobs and social dignity, they are neglected and mocked by the public. This tends to the whole transgender community to move towards the underrated profession 'sex work' and take it as their main occupation. Transgender sex workers in many settings report extreme levels of violence and harassment in connection with their work, including their clients, managers, and police. Criminalisation makes it difficult for transgender sex workers to report rights violations, especially by the police. In this way, the transgender group is also stamped as criminals in society.

India holds a prominent place in one of the most religiously and traditionally diverse nations in the entire world. She has a very long, unique, and authentic history of her own, which mirrors the customs and cultures and their usages that existed during that time. And also, the fascinating part is that those customs, cultures, and traditions are still prevalent in this modern era. Even though the country has travelled many more centuries, some traditions have still a role in Indian soil. Kinnar or Hijra people, whom the government refers to as the 'third gender', have historically been regarded as close to the gods in Indian mythology. In India, there has been a long-standing tradition of Kinnars or trans-genders coming to weddings or child's birth to offer blessings. They are given hefty amounts of money and a lot of ceremonial gifts because their stature is similar to God itself, and hence, their blessings are believed to be quite pure and effective. It is forbidden in the Hindu religion to abuse a Kinnar, let alone hurt them physically, for fear of incurring the wrath of the only one that matters to every Indian: God. If we go further back and look at our epics, like 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata', we come across numerous instances of the third gender holding a significant part of the story. It proves how they have not only been considered a normal part of ancient and medieval society but have also held an

essential place in the epics, which are considered to be holy by a large portion of the Indian population.

Nevertheless, the existence of the third gender and its identity is greatly neglected in our societies. Trans-genders were at a time considered equal to Gods as well as filthy creatures by the same society. According to Indian society, they are not complete humans but are at an inferior level. It takes a lot of audacity and courage in our society to merely acknowledge the third gender. It is a very common sight in railway stations and at traffic signals where the trans-genders are mocked and avoided. Their touch pollutes and their curses come true – is the belief. In such hostile conditions, a few trans-genders managed to climb the ladder of success all over the world. They stood hard and firm every time and faced humiliation and rejection. Such people's lives are depicted in transgender literature. Trans literature may have trans characters to double cisgender ideas about gender, sex, and sexuality. It includes stories, poems, plays, comics, and so on, that centre and supports trans audiences. That doesn't mean these works cannot be accessible and important for cisgender audiences, but the trans audience comes first. It is also the body of writing that is very new so it is growing and changing rapidly. To be noted more importantly, among the various genres, autobiographies of transgender people are a rich source of literature as their lives and struggles are narrated in the first person. It is they who are in charge of telling their own story and shaping the narrative of their lives. The narratives also offer an insight into the discrimination that they have faced from their biological family and society at large. If one wants to understand the discrimination and challenges that transgender commonly face in India, there is no better way to do that than reading an autobiography of a trans person.

The emergence of transgender literature as a distinct branch of LGBT literature took place when the number of fiction works focused on the topic saw a prominent growth. It was accompanied by a general interest in the area and a process of differentiation from the rest of LGBT literature. This gave rise to a trend that saw more books being written by transgender authors whose main intended readers were transgender people. Some autobiographies of transgender people who not only fought the battle for their identity but carved a life of dignity for themselves include, *I Am Vidya* by Living Smile Vidya, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A.Revathi, *A Life in Trans Activism* by Nandini Murali, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* by Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey and Manobi Bandopadhyay, and *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, and *Red Lipstick* by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi.

Cinema is culture-oriented and it depicts the specific culture of a region or community. Filmmakers explore and deploy a wide variety of themes in their works. History, politics, science, and religion are well-depicted but certain areas particularly that of human interest are less brooded upon. Movies based on LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) were scarce; the first such experiment in Hollywood was Richard Oswald's *Different from the Others* in 1919 which is identified as the first-ever gay film. Charles Bryant went overboard and cast gay people in his movie *Salome* in 1922. But there was a lull in making such movies for a long time. While Indian cinema, in general, is notorious for its stereotypical, crude and often diminishing depictions of the LGBTQ community, some filmmakers have broken this mould to explore sexuality in sensitive and informed ways. Deepa Mehta's 1996 film *Fire* is perhaps the most revered of these ground-breaking films, and others include *Darmiyaan: In Between* (1997) by Kalpana Lajmi, *Sancharram* (2004) by Ligy.J.Pullappally, *Meghadhanushya – The Colour of Life* (2013) by K.R. Devmani, *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) by Shonali Bose, *Nanu Avanalla Avalu* (2015) by B.S. Lingadevaru, *Aligarh* (2016) by Dr. Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras and so on. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, transgender rights activist, Hindi film actor, and Bharatanatyam dancer, is a celebrity and an LGBT icon. Founder of the NGO Astitva which works towards the support and development of sexual minorities, she is the first transgender who went to the United Nations representing the Asia-Pacific sex workers. Laxmi played a pivotal role in the recognition of hijras as the third gender in India. Her autobiographical novels include *Me Hijra*, *Me Laxmi* (2015), and *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* (2016). She was awarded 'Indian of the Year 2017'. *Me Hijra*, *Me Laxmi* is an autobiographical account tracing the extraordinary journey of Laxmi, a hijra, and their rights. In this book, Laxmi spoke about every sphere of life, whether it was the matter of sexuality or personal life. Initial chapters are fully dropped in the incidents of sexual harassment. According to her, she was born as a normal male child but was always confused to choose between her sexuality or personality. From her early childhood, she was unable to find her identity as a woman or man. The best of her is that she accepts however she is. She could have opted for an operation to change her sex and to become a transsexual, but she decided to be a hijra and started to work to uplift for transgender community. Her identity of being a hijra is for the people, but being a social worker, her works are more than 'of being hijra'. Ranjith Sankar is an Indian screenwriter, producer, and director who works in Malayalam film industry. He started his film career with the acclaimed 2009 thriller film *Passenger*. He has followed up with movies *Arjunan Sakshi* (2011), *Varsham* (2014), *Pretham* (2016), *Punyalan Private Limited* (2017) and *Njan Marykutty* (2018). Sankar

launched his production house Dreams N Beyond in 2012 and his distribution house Punyalan Cinemas in 2017.

Njan Marykutty is a serious take-off flight against the well-established conventions of the transgender community in the nation. The protagonist is trying to emphasize that she is a woman and trying to establish herself as Marykutty which is the significance of the title '*Njan Marykutty*' meaning '*I am Marykutty*'. The film describes the protagonist Marykutty's situation in its totality and cares for the basic conditions of her existence. In the movie, Marykutty herself highlights that she is not a transgender, but a transsexual person. Here, the film draws out the fact that 'transsexual' is different from that 'transgender'. It was her uncontrollable will and devotion to her feminine nature that made her undergo surgery to become transsexual. Marykutty is fighting all odds stacked against her to lead her life.

Trans literature can subvert our definitions of gender and transgress the boundaries between men and women; these topics affirm the autobiography of the transgender rights activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) and the movie released in 2018, *Njan Marykutty* by Ranjith Sankar. Every audience who has seen the film and every reader who has read the book is guaranteed to look at the trans-persons in a new light and that is the victory of this path-breaking film and thought-provoking book.

Laxmi and Marykutty: Trailblazing, Ingenious, and Inspirational Transgender

Individualities

A transgender can be born in any family. If we spurn them and show them the door, we leave them with no alternative but to become beggars. Not everyone could live like a transgender- it took guts.

The word 'hij' refers to the soul, the holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides is called '*hijra*'. The individual is not important here. What is important is the soul and the transgender community that possess it. God loves the hijra community and has created a special place for it outside the man-woman frame. A hijra is neither a man nor a woman. A transgender's male body is a trap-not just to the transgender itself who suffocates within it, but the world in general that wrongly assumes a hijra to be a man. Marykutty in *Njan Marykutty* and Laxmi in *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* suffocated all along throughout their life. They had been victims of the wrongful assumptions of the world.

The plot of *Njan Marykutty* though well executed, is a sanitized depiction of reality. In real life, the abuse must be horrendously worse than depicted in the movie. The character of Marykutty attracts not only the transgender community but also the whole audience and one automatically admires Marykutty, as she is a 'fictional' character. Though some experiences of Marykutty in the film relate to those of real-life transgenders such as Prithika Yashini (the first transgender woman police officer in India), and Surya, who is married to Ishaan (the first transgender couple in Kerala), the character Marykutty in total, and the core plot of the film is undoubtedly unrealistic which was born in the mind of the Director, Ranjith Sankar. On the other hand, in the autobiography of Laxmi, *Me Hijra, and Me Laxmi*, the reader can go deeper into the lives of transgenders, as it narrates the real-life story of a transgender by herself. Laxmi's memoir deals with the wide spectrum of all variables in society. It holds trans-genders at the center and reflects from different angles the conditions of the oppressed people, including female society. The book makes the vision of the reader more powerful enough to see the dark side of society and to feel the dreadful environment around them. One could experience the harassment being faced by sexual minorities as one had witnessed it. The autobiography is that influential and true to life. Marykutty is a fictional or a created example, while Laxmi is a living example and this remains as the most distinguishing factor between the two characters. The transgender community is not a monolith. Its history and culture vary from state to state. Both Laxmi and Marykutty are of Indian Nationality but belong to two different states (North India and South India). These two states are entirely different in their cultures, traditions, and norms. Based on this, the lifestyle, the hurdles faced by the two trans-genders, and the approach towards them by the society varies. Laxmi narrates the story of her life from her early childhood, but Marykutty's life is not understood in the film, even though there are minute scenes that show how her childhood went. Laxmi becomes a victim of sexual exploitation at the age of 7, while Marykutty is never tortured until she begins to lead a life like a transsexual. When considering the adult lives of both the trans-genders, Laxmi goes through hard and harsh exploitations in her life when compared with Marykutty. The environment in which Laxmi lives treats her in a vulgar and dirty way, but Marykutty is not being subjected to such deep harassment except, a scene in which the local police officers insult her sexually. This gives a clear picture of the difference between the approach of two societies towards the same gendered people.

One of the many things that differentiates Marykutty from Laxmi is that Marykutty is a transsexual and Laxmi is a Transgender. Marykutty diligently desired to lead a woman's life.

This uncontrollable aspiration leads her to undergo a castration process and finally turns to be a transsexual, to become a woman. Marykutty continuously made attempts to acquire feminine features like long hair, a soft voice, and so on. Marykutty's struggles show that she never wanted to be accepted as a 'third gender' but as a woman. She suggests that one has to be emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically ready for castration before one undertakes it. Laxmi's character, as brought out by her book, gives us the feeling that she cannot suffer pain. She has grown accustomed to the good life, devoid of hardship. The sadomasochism of a castration operation is not for her. The very thought of mutilating her body seems revolting to Laxmi. But there is another issue that stakes her, and it is about her relationship with her family. If Laxmi's family has accepted her, it is on the exclusive condition that she continues to be their son at home, though she may be transgender also. In such a scenario, the castration would be unacceptable to the family. This is proved by the fact that Laxmi's parents disliked her liking female attire at home and insisted that she wear shirts and trousers like her brother. One way to read this is that Laxmi compromised some of her principles here to enjoy homely comforts and the warmth of family life. Above all these, Laxmi wishes to explore transgender life.

"The only defense against the world is a thorough knowledge of it" (Some Thoughts Concerning Education, John Locke). Education is essential for the development of any democratic country in which there are three genders; male, female, and trans-genders. Education and skills opportunity plays a pivotal role in enhancing jobs and economic opportunities for a transgender individual. Both Marykutty and Laxmi were able to deconstruct the pre-existed status of transgender community because they were educated. Transgenders are in general, considered ugly but Laxmi and Marykutty are sturdy, beautiful, and confident. They are the lights at the end of the tunnel for trans-genders. Their education and talent have given them 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 street and do sex work. Death alone liberates them from the wretched lives they are compelled to lead. Marykutty becomes well-educated and gains a dignified job since she already knows that she is never going to be accepted by her family as she is. And hence she was confident enough to leave her own home without the consent of her parents, and education moulded her in this way. She acquired a greater knowledge of real-world mechanisms which later helped her to stand confident in many adverse conditions. Laxmi is a postgraduate in Bharathanatyam. It is this knowledge that made her a distinguished figure among transgender community. Hence, she was able to share the stage with various reputed officials and travelled to many countries to represent the Indian transgender community.

Education paved the way for Marykutty to chase her dream and become a Police Officer and Laxmi a popular transgender activist.

Marykutty nowhere in the movie chooses an underrated profession or leads an undignified life. She is aware of her value and does not wish to destroy it for any cause. But Laxmi lives through many unfair conditions to reach a successful life. Laxmi during her model coordination days was introduced to the world of bar dancing by another transgender Sweetie. Sweetie encouraged her to dance in the bar for money. But Laxmi considered it as an opportunity to live in her own identity and passion. But it spoiled her and she acquired the habit of drinking and got addicted to it. She has gone for sex work even though she did not have sex in exchange for money. But the professions chosen by Marykutty, like Radio Jockey, her job in Chennai, and even her dream job, were all of high stature. Trans-genders in general are usually drug addicts, like Laxmi, but unlike them, Marykutty is not involved in any malicious practices. Laxmi believes that in India trans-genders cannot ever aspire to be in a noble profession, it is evident in her words, *“Can a hijra in India ever aspire to be a doctor, engineer, journalist, or business manager? The answer is a resounding NO”* (Me Hijra, Me Laxmi, 110). But Marykutty through her life proves that transgender can also strive to do these jobs and through hard work, they can make their dreams come true.

Both Marykutty and Laxmi wished to be a part of mainstream society and interfere in social and political matters. They stood on the frontline to react against the anti-social activities. It shows that trans-genders are also capable of intervening in social issues. At times Marykutty as well as Laxmi can be seen as feminist thinkers. Laxmi follows the stereotypical appearance of transgender, with exaggerated makeup, whereas Marykutty appears in a natural look. She behaves ordinarily. The male supremacist society's attitude of objectifying trans-genders and women as sex objects only is well sketched through the life stories of Marykutty and Laxmi. Marykutty and Laxmi do not fail to show that society views females as inferiors, and this same way of treatment is reflected in transwomen too.

The film and autobiography, show a reference to Buddha, the symbol of peace and love. In an early scene in the film, Marykutty puts a bindi on a Buddha and stares. The camera records not her reactions, but the stillness of the statue and perceived incongruity of the bindi. It is one of the rare moments when the outside noise of the film quiets down and you can hear yourself think about what 'normal' is. The fact that the bindi does not suit the statue shows that there will be a contradiction in its outer looks, but the statue is the same. When one becomes a transgender his sexuality only changes and not the personality. This is how Buddha is being

relevant in the film. In the autobiography of Laxmi, she also gives a hint of Lord Buddha and craves for inner peace. “*I envied Lord Buddha his peace, and wished I has some of it myself.*” (Me Hijra, Me Laxmi, 13).

One of the issues trans-genders raised was that in all government application forms, one has to state one's gender as male or female. But hijras are neither male nor female. Laxmi's suggestion if hijras are neither M/F then they are 'O', or other, and that, henceforth, all application forms should have an option for 'O' is to be put forward in the society. Similarly, Marykutty also is called 'Nine' in a scene in the film, but in the climax of the film the collector calls her 'Shero'. Thus, the film signifies that trans-genders are not 'Nine', they are 'Sheroes'.

Marykutty's and Laxmi's *heroism* engraved them as milestones for queer representation in history. When Marykutty shows how a transgender must be in her life, Laxmi's life illustrates how a transgender should and should not be. In this sense, Marykutty stands as an inspiration and an ideal role model for the whole queer community. It would be a better world if everyone knew that transgender people have the same hopes and dreams as everyone else. The film *Njan Marykutty* and the book *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* reveals that it is not hard to like transgender people because they are like anyone else.

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