

article "The "Sincere" Rhetoric of Evidence: Rethinking Egodocuments" revisits and redefines terms like "egodocument" and "egohistorical text" while analysing Dr. James E. Esdaile's surgical/medical document. Deepthy Mohan's article attempts to elucidate the concept of postmemory in the context of the Holocaust in Art Spiegelman's graphic memoirs, *The Complete Maus*. Alicia Jacob's paper looks at the concept called minimalism practised by Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus by examining the various forms of life narratives employed by them to popularise minimalism. Rajesh V. Nair through his paper "Memory, Identity and Life Writing: Scope and Debates" studies how life narratives within the paradigm of cultural memory studies breaks fresh grounds in understanding different cultures and the nuances of identity formation. Anu Kuriakose analyses how Vijayarajamallika marks her transgender identity in her autobiography *Mallikavasantham*, and how Mallika sees herself as a trans woman poet in a cisheteronormative society. Anomitra Biswa and Tonisha Guin interpret Anita R. Ratnam's dance performance titled *Ma3ka* as an act of self- representation on stage. The final article by Achu John analyses the recently discovered memoirs of a 19th century French intersex person called Herculine Barbin to explore the questions of choice, identity, belongingness and trauma.

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## "I AM WHAT I AM": TRANS IDENTITY, BODY AND EXPERIENCE IN JAREENA'S AUTO/BIOGRAPHY

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"I went to say good-bye to myself in the mirror. We would never meet again, and I wanted to give that other self a long last look in the eye, and a wink for luck" (Jan Morris qtd in Jay Prosser 222). For a transgender, the mirror image is a distorted one and transition integrates the projected self and the reflected self, the body image and the image of the body, says Jay Prosser. Akin to the act of looking into the mirror, the textual "I" in trans autobiography is self-reflexive, and entwines transsexuality and autobiography, the narrative and the body. Here, the narrative acts as a transition between the past and the present, thereby imparting a coherence to the gendered split of a trans person. Memory is crucial to any trans life narrative and instead of relegating one's confused and ambiguous gender identity to the darker corners of psyche, it is dug out to declare hir/her/his identity as a (trans)wo/man. The self-writing of a transgender is also a self- righting process, to correct what has been wrong so far and let the world know their true selves. According to the trans activist and writer A. Revathi, writing is a space for a transgender like her to ascertain her identity where she becomes both the narrator and subject. "Writing my own story has also helped me examine my life afresh and that has been both challenging and enjoyable" ("Voice for Visibility").

Among the various genres of life writing, Coming-out narratives emerged as a literary genre after the stone wall rebellion and gay liberation movement giving space for the LGBTIQ community to embrace their sexual and gender identity. Though the term was used earlier to refer to the self-reflexive writing of gay and lesbian communities, it later came to include trans coming-out too. "Like many ethnic autobiographies, coming-out narratives map the individual onto the collective: they tell individual and occasionally idiosyncratic stories that often turn on the realization that the narrator's experience is shared by a broad community of other individuals" (Berovitch 561). With these new genres, the canonicity of autobiography has begun to be challenged giving space to the non-dominant communities to narrate their lives. Coming-out is significant to LGBTIQ experience and the autobiographical mode of writing gives them a voice to express themselves. Bridgewater views the coming-out of gays and lesbians as an important process in combating the prejudice and unhealthy attitude towards the sexual minorities. Rasmussen calls it as 'coming out imperative', an imperative which is challenging yet beneficial to the individual and their community.

Coming-out as a gay or lesbian is different from coming out as a transgender since this is related to one's gender identity and is more personal than the other which has to do with sexuality. Lal Zimman talks about two kinds of coming-out: declaration and disclosure. In LGB coming-out, the sexual orientation of the individual is being declared while a trans coming-out is the disclosure of one's gender identity. In the life of a transsexual, the gender identity is declared before transition and disclosed after the process. Unless a transgendered person comes out of the closet, their chosen gender identity will not be accepted. Judith Butler states that gender reality is real only to the extent that it is performed. The expression of a gender core or identity depends upon our acts, gestures and enactments, which may either conform to or contest an expected gender identity. "We never experience or know ourselves as a body pure

and simple, i.e. as our "sex", because we never know our sex outside of its expression of gender" (qtd in Stewart 60). According to her, the fixed framework of gender is subverted only through parody. The identity of an LGB can be concealed but trans identity can never remain hidden since gender is always and has to be performed.

Though transsexual autobiographies were written way back during the early 90s in Western countries, the coming-out of a transgender through narratives happened much later in India since the community was shrouded in the grey area of unspeakability and intrigue. Trans activists like Kalki Subramaniam, Priya Babu, Living Smile Vidya, A.Revathi etc. have represented the transgender community becoming political agents through their literatures and memoirs. Vidya's *I am Vidya* and Revathi's, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* were the earliest autobiographies written by hijras in Indian society. Later trans life narratives like *The Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* by Manobi Bandhyopadhyay and *Mallikavasantham* by Vijayaraja Mallika were published in 2017 and 2019 respectively. Still, the production of transgender narratives is much lesser when compared to the Western scenario.

The first life narrative about a transgender from Kerala was *Jareena, Oru Malayali Hijadayude Athmakatha*. It is the first autobiography of a trans person in an Indian language. In her autobiography, Jareena narrates her experience of leading the life of a hijra in Bangalore due to the trans repudiation in Kerala, where it is more intense when compared to other states. Though it is an autobiography in genre, it blurs the distinction between an autobiography and biography since it is a life story narrated to B.Hari with an appendix on hijra life and culture by Vijayan Kodanchery. The body of the narrative is auto/ biographical, which necessitates the cautious use of a slash between the two words 'auto' and 'biography'. This split can be correlated with the trans identity of the narrator. Trans visibility was scarce in Kerala due to the gender non-

conformist attitude of the society. The auto/biography was published only because of Hari's genuine interest in understanding the lives of hijras. As a life narrative, the work was the first of its kind in Malayalam literature. It discusses the predicament of a transgender in Kerala before NALSA Judgement and the State Transgender Policy. The work was published in 2006, much before Revathi's, but unlike the latter it was not an intentional act of coming-out through narrative.

The life writings or coming-out stories of transgendered people share similar experiences, and based on that many identity models have been put forward by different social theorists. Anne Bolin and Frank Lewins have developed a four stage and six stage development models respectively for transsexual women. It begins with gender confusion and then moves towards transsexual identity, an identity as a woman and finally a rejection of transsexual identity to be a real woman. Gender theorists like Leslie Feinberg, Kate Bornstein and Jamison Green are against this kind of sweeping generalization. According to them, "many transsexual women and men openly acknowledge their transgender histories today and take pride in this identity, rather than considering it shameful or stigmatizing and seeking to become invisible" (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). Devor's fourteen stage model reifies this fact - the last stage is that of pride which "implies both a personal sense of pride in oneself and a political stance" (Devor 2004). Even Anne Bolin has revised her later studies since many trans people in recent times choose not to undergo sex reassignment surgery. Nevertheless, finding a coherent model is impossible since individuals differ from each other.

This paper seeks to analyse different stages of identity formation in the life of a gender non-normative person as reflected in Jareena's autobiography. The transgender identity formation model developed by the sociologists/gender theorists in the West will be used for the study for two main reasons: (i) there are no specific models developed to study

the identity formation stages in the life of an Indian transgender and (ii) the MtF trans people of India who belong to the hijra community can be blanketed under the term 'transgender'. Though the different positions taken by trans people over the globe reflect the fact that lived experience cannot be reduced to mere theories, these literary and sociological theories can be used as tools to facilitate better understanding and frame a general idea of the identities of trans people. Aaron Devor discusses two important themes in the process of transsexual identity formation: witnessing and mirroring. "Each of us has a deep need to be witnessed by others for whom we are. Each of us wants to see ourselves mirrored in others' eyes as we see ourselves" (46). When the expected people do not respond the way we wish them to perceive us, it results in psychological distress and mental trauma. In the case of trans people, mirroring "is also about seeing oneself in the eyes of others like oneself" (46). Transgender life writings play a vital role in validating these two processes since it breathes a sense of self into the lives of trans people 'witnessed' by others through the process of reading. Mirroring happens when other trans people could see their own lives reflected in the lives of the subject/narrator. They impart a sense of community feeling to the transgendered people and encourage them to come out of their closets.

The first stage in the life of any Male-to-Female transgender is abiding anxiety over one's gender and the desire to be a female. The individual may not recognize the transgenderism that is latent in her/him but may merely experience confusion in their gender identity. Most of the trans life narratives on Male-to-Female transgender people discuss similar stages of anxiety and confusion in the life of a trans person at a very young age. The very narration of the auto/biography begins with the revelation of Jareena's infatuation for her ninth standard classmate, Prabhakar and her headmaster. The identity confusion could also be witnessed in her desire to do the tasks 'culturally' meant for girls, prefer female playmates over male and wear female clothing of her siblings

when alone. Cross-dressing seems to be an important form of gender expression when the anecdotes of trans people are analysed. Cavallaro and Warwick in their work, *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress and Body* discuss clothing "as a figurative supplement of identity" (Elahi 195). According to them, clothing is an important element in determining ethnic identity and this reading can be extended to the study of gender identity as well. It is an expression of the self, one's core gender identity too. Jareena was admonished and even bullied by her brothers for her cross-gendered behaviour. Wearing her siblings' dress, Jareena would often stand in front of the mirror for hours to admire the femininity in her. In Richard Ekins' theory of Male Femaling, there is a stage called fantasizing femaling where the femaler tries to maintain a boundary between the male and female self. Cross-dressing is not rampant in this stage, but it is one of the earliest indications of transgenderism among many transsexuals. Though Jareena did not cross-dress in public at this stage, her ontological identity as a woman was explicit in her performative aspects.

The feeling of a wo/man trapped inside the wrong body is the feeling that many trans people claim to have experienced. In the identity formation theories, the realization that one belongs to the opposite gender happens in the life of a transgender after the stages of abiding anxiety, gender confusion and comparison. The constant physical and verbal abuses from both the family and the villagers exalted the feeling of a woman trapped inside the body of a man and Jareena was compelled to leave her home in search of her real identity. Educated trans people of contemporary times have enough exposure to the existence of a trans community through television, social media, popular culture, social networking sites, web pages, chat rooms and even through the text books prescribed in the syllabus of various courses. Unlike these transgendered people, Jareena did not know that there were people similar to her in existence, people who embraced a gender identity beyond the definitions

of the binary. Growing up in a society like Kerala, she had little chances of coming across people similar to her. The realization that such a community exists is a mile stone in the life of any transgender. Jareena lands in Madras to work in a hotel and from there through the short term friendship developed with a man named Muthu, comes to know of the hijra community, "people who were born in a male body with a female self" (Trans. Mine 34).

Referring to trans lives, many gender theorists discuss the need to belong to a group with similar gender identity. In Jareena's life, this sense of 'belonging' found its actualization upon her landing in Alsoor, where hijras lived as a community. Here, she was embraced by the community without any veiled barbs of sarcasm. As a hijra, Jareena could lead a feminine way of life in her group rejecting stereotypical masculinity and get transformed into a woman in both sartorial and performative aspects. In the Indian cultural scenario, the visibility of trans people as a community was found only among the hijras who formed a subcultural group. Transgender, as a community, in its broader sense remained almost invisible and unknown to many. So the only choice for people like Jareena was to join the hijra community. It was in 1976 that Jareena, upon arriving at Hamam (household where the hijras live as a family) in Alsoor, realized for the first time that there were many who lived with a mind and body similar to her. Though there were many from Tamilnadu and Karnataka, hijras from Kerala were considerably less, denoting the fact that transgender identity in Kerala had remained closeted for a long time.

As a result of the transgender movement of the 1990s, many transwo/men have begun to acknowledge their transgender status and take pride in their identity. Though some people seek invisibility post transition, many "recognize that being transsexual does not make them any less of a woman or man" (Beemyn and Rankin 111). The very

existence, identity and life writings of the hijras published later reinforce this fact where they began switching roles from referents to speaking subjects. The need to resist social stigmatization and to empower the community come into the bargain. However, this political stance taken by Revathi, Vidhya, Vijayaraja Mallika or Manobi Bandhyopadhyay seems to be absent in Jareena's auto/biography. Antithetical to the stance taken by these trans people, Jareena hesitated to disclose her identity as is evident from her request to B.Hari, "You can ask anything about me, write anything but do not include my photos. That will destroy my peace of mind" (Trans. Mine 19). Arlene Istar Lev includes disclosure as an important stage in the identity formation of transsexuals since it is a major obstacle that many trans people face, the anxiety over when and how to disclose their true gender identity. The transphobia and stigmatization perpetrated by the mainstream community make many trans people keep their identity closeted.

Transition is an important stage in the transgender identity formation models. According to Devor, there are "two stages of "identity confusion" and two stages of "delay," before transition, reflecting the struggle that many transgender people have faced in understanding themselves, overcoming denial, and establishing an identity that remains socially stigmatized"(114). Though this was the situation in the past many transgender individuals of the present generation find the synthesis much easier, thanks to the information age. Jareena, during her initial days in hamam had wished to return to her village and family but existence outside the community was even more stigmatizing. Despite the fact that there was nothing to hope for in the life of a hijra and when life as a sex worker became unendurable due to the harassment from the customers who were mostly rogues, Jareena decided to continue her life in the dark rooms of hamam only for her self- actualization of becoming a woman. The stages of confusion and delay are almost absent in the lives of hijras since they do not get enough space and time to chew over it. It was by

chance rather than choice that many trans people joined the hijra community.

In both Bolin and Lewin's models, the last stage of an MTF is sex reassignment surgery and thereafter, the transsexual becomes a 'natural' woman and renounces the transgender identity. Unlike the transsexuals in Lewin's model who try to erase their identity of a transsexual after gender affirmative surgery, an MtF joining the hijra community embraces this identity with the initiation into the hijra clan by becoming a *chela* to a hijra guru. 'Nirvan' can be equated with the surgical alterations of the body that a transsexual undergoes and it is a part of hijra cult when the person becomes a member of the community. The hijra identity becomes an 'imprinted' one with the ritual of emasculation. Traditionally, the hijras believed that the ritual of castration transformed them from an impotent male to a potent hijra, one who will be accorded the power of an ascetic with the ability to bless or curse; but as understood from Jareena's life narrative, it is a part of self-actualization as a woman for many hijras.

Transition involves both hormonal therapy and sex reassignment surgery, a psychological integration of the mind and the body. It also "means the leaving behind a way of life" (Devor 61). Jareena's physical transition was made possible to some extent with hormone therapy though a complete transformation was unattainable through gender affirmative surgery. In hijra culture, it was 'Dai ma' (mid wife) who performed the ritual of emasculation upon the consent from the Guru and their Goddess, Bahucharamata or Yellamma but the complications involved in the crude practice compelled Jareena's Guru to send her to a surgeon for sex reassignment surgery (SRS). Since she suffered from occasional attacks of fits, the doctor refused to conduct the surgery. Jareena would often compare herself to other hijras who were fortunate enough to undergo 'nirvana' and become a 'natural' (as defined in the autobiography) woman.



However, for some transsexuals, as Devor mentions, transition is complete when they are witnessed and mirrored as the gender and sex they identify with. Taken in that sense, Jareena's transformation is complete when she has begun to be witnessed and mirrored as a woman. Her marital relationship with Surendran is a testimony to the fact that she was perceived as the gender she identified herself with.

The cultural context of hijras may be rooted in the mythological past but, in contemporary times, their identity is evolving in a number of different directions. Contrary to the view put forward by Serena Nanda, most of the hijras of the present do not perceive themselves as either man nor woman but as women, and their identity formation resembles the transsexual trajectory of the MTF transsexual. The only difference is in the collective identity of hijras as against the fragmentary nature of the individual which is found among the Western trans people. Here, Jareena seems to challenge the dichotomy between sex and gender without the SRS, though it is not an overtly political act. Nowadays, many trans people, especially, Female-to-Male transgender people refuse to undergo SRS due to the medical complications and depend on mere hormonal therapy for physical transformation. Some people, due to their political stance also refuse surgical alterations of the body. Transition is not mandatory for a transgender to accept oneself in the gender role they identify with. Cromwell draws attention to the reversal of ontological premises in trans-situated discourses. For him, trans-situated discourses, by narrating experiences, body, sexuality and identity, reorder the order of things and bring into focus the alternative experience of a community condemned hitherto.

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