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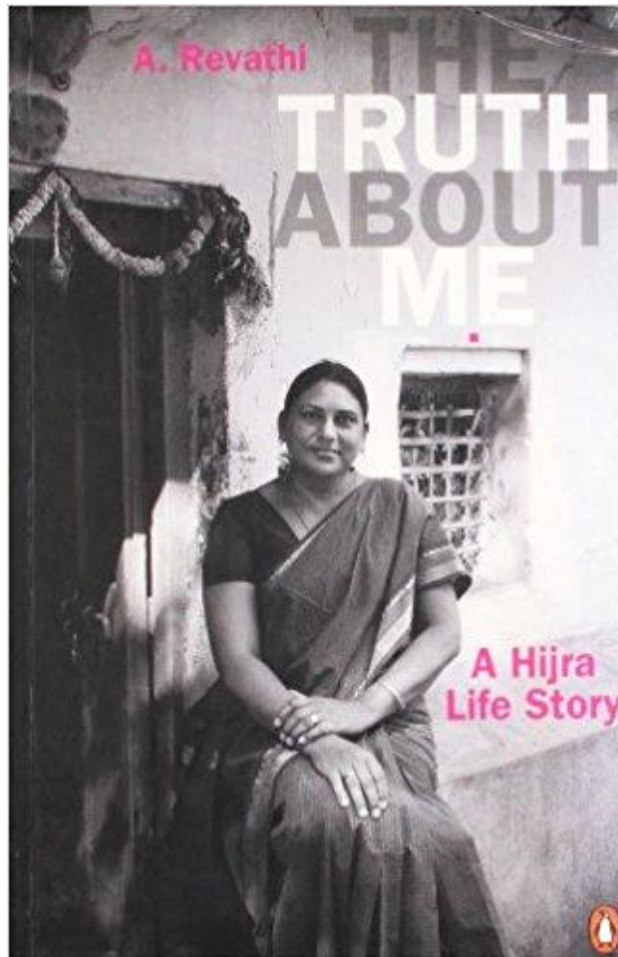
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**The Representation of Trans-men by A. Revathi:  
Arguments and Counter Arguments**

**S. A. Annie Swetha, M.A., M.Phil. Research Scholar**

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## **Authority and Authenticity - *A Life in Trans Activism***

In recent times, the notions of authority and authenticity have become dominant to the concerns of trans narratives. The question of whether an ‘outsider’ is in a position to make meaningful comments about the community he/she does not belong to is often raised. Addressing this concern regarding to the representation of Trans men in the text *A Life in Trans Activism*, by Revathi, a hijra, forms the major focus of this study. The study intends to show how Revathi’s representations of trans men community, with the aid of interviews conducted on four trans men, should not be misinterpreted as the representation of the entire community. As Spivak rightly points out, subaltern consciousness can only be achieved when we intend to understand the silent voices of ‘the other’ than the privilege one’s who has the power and agency to voice out their struggle. Thus, the study, in general, is critical of representational politics especially with regard to the trans men community. It seeks to examine or rather encourage the trans men to salvage their own agency and speak for their cause without depending on a representative to voice their cause.

**Keywords:** Revathi, Representation transmen, Agency, Critical Outsider, hijra,

## **Introduction**

In recent times, the notions of authority and authenticity have become dominant to the concerns of trans narratives. The question of whether an ‘outsider’ is in a position to make meaningful comments about the community she/he does not belong to is often raised. Addressing this concern regarding the representation of Trans men by Revathi in her work *A Life in Trans Activism* forms the major focus of this study.

The above- mentioned text intends to examine the struggles faced by the Trans men in India who unlike many other sexual minorities do not have the privilege to enjoy alternate support systems including the hijra *jammatt*, the guru chela bonding, NGO’s. It states “Very few organizations support us and gives us work. NGO’s also mostly focus on HIV work.” (5) The text contains a collection of four interviews given by Trans men, which is recorded by Revathi, the narrator. These textual evidences throw light on the invisible struggles and subjugation faced by the transman within the trans family and the society at large. It states, “Trans women are more visible. But this does not mean that we can erase or deny the existence of trans men... Even in the transgender community, trans man are not accepted” (129,130).

## **Discussion**

However, a close examination of choice of this text from a critical perspective, it was selected because it is the only available written text on trans man in Indian context. From this, one can get a hint of what the research is hinting at- representational politics.

In the words of Spivak, elite intellectual represents the position of the subaltern, which is a kind of “epistemic violence”. The reason for this resistance is that Spivak knows the opaque nature of writing, which does not permit clear and innocent communication. In connecting this idea to the primary text, one can find how Revathi intends to make her the voice of the trans men community. Not only the voice she also calls her as the mother figure to them. Despite being marginalized for her choice of sexuality, Revathi elevates her position as a mother figure for the

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trans men and gives voice for their choice of sexuality. Here, the central concept to be addressed is the notion of the ‘critical outsider’. It is frequently invoked to explain why a trans man does not represent himself, which gives him a chance to raise his own voice, rather than adhering to the representation projected by the society. This question can be answered in the words of Sundar Sarukkai who in his essay “Experience and Theory” states, how people tend to elevate themselves as the voice of a community, because of them being part of the publishing industry. Spivak too agrees to the statement by pointing out “For me, the question ‘Who should speak?’ is less crucial than ‘Who will listen?’” (Spivak 594). From this one should understand that Revathi becomes the voice of the trans men not because they are incapable to voicing out their opinion, rather they are not popular as her.

Sarukkai also talks about the idea of ‘participant observation’, i.e. what is written about a subject is based on the outsiders’ observations of the subject for a limited period. He gives an interesting example to it by stating how the theories about Indian experience- as experienced by those who live in India- are largely derived from ‘outsiders’ who, at the most, may visit India during breaks in their teaching schedules or during vocations. Similarly, Revathi is also a participant observer whose representation based on the narratives of four trans men should not be misinterpreted as the representation of the entire community.

A major flaw of Revathi’s representation of trans men can be understood by drawing example from Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak talks about how the British abolished Sati in order to project them as saviours. Unfortunately, the colonizers never took into consideration that some Indian women wanted to perish with their dead husbands. This incident emphasizes that the very idea of representation is most often problematic. What is being represented is deemed as the ultimate doomed reality of the victim. For instance, in the text, Revathi largely emphasizes hijras and other sexual minorities to accept the identity of trans men. However, this might not be the only concern of all trans men. Since the four trans men in the novel are in a way related to Sangama or Revathi, they expect the hijras to accept them without discrimination. However, they are multiple other issues faced by the trans men which are unheard.

Another important issue is that though these four trans men are marginalized, Revathi becomes instrumental in voicing their concerns. So, are they the most oppressed? This question can be answered using Pierre Macherey’s concept of measuring silences. According to him the in order to understand subaltern consciousness in a work, “what the work cannot say becomes important.” (221) As we saw that all the four are in a way related to Sangama, which gives them the privilege of expressing their voice. What is more oppressive and significant are the unheard voices of the trans man who lacks agency to voice out their struggle. These are the major drawbacks of Revathi’s representation of trans men in her work *A Life in Trans Activism*.

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge Revathi’s contribution to the upliftment of transman in her text. For instance, the primary text points out how there lie huge difference and diversity among the trans individuals. First is Mookan, a poor uneducated Dalit trans man. His identity is a combination of different categories like class, caste and gender. Then comes Kiran, who copes with the double oppression of suffering from a disability and being a trans man but at

the same time he is married to Radhika a lesbian. Next is Sonu, lover of Familia, Revathi Chela, he falls into depression on hearing the death of Familia. Moreover, Christy, a trans man who is raised by a trans woman who did not accept him as a man till the end of her life.

From this perspective, one can say the narrator has done justice to her representation of these four trans men. Their life experiences are not shown as something which is collective whereas individual issues are taken into consideration. The lived experiences of individuals which the narrator points out along with their multiple intersectional identities seem to empower them without confining them to any particular identity category.

The text can also be viewed as a tool to overcome the stereotypes associated with the trans identity especially among feminist theories. In the words of Bettcher and Heyes, many feminists have regarded transgenders as either gender betrayers or pretenders. Transsexuals who choose to transition from one sex to another are seen as reiterating the sexist model by seeming to move “effortlessly” to the other box. In this, FTMs are considered traitors because they have gained male power without earning it and have turned their backs on women’s oppression. MTFs are also traitors for trying to call themselves real women with embodied experiences, although they have not experienced oppression throughout their lives, as many women have. This attitude tends to exclude transgender struggle from feminist consciousness. This text seems to address these issues by pointing how transgenders seem to face a different set of issues apart from their gender transition. The realization that not all transgenders are affected only as a result of their gender is emphasized in the text. It emphasizes the importance to study, understand and respond to the ways in which transgender identity intersects with other identities and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study emphasizes the fact that the selected text is just a representation of those privileged trans men who has the opportunity of voicing out their struggle with the help of a renowned *hijra* Revathi. As mentioned by Spivak the subaltern consciousness can only be achieved when we intend to understand the silent voices of the trans men. However, Revathi had done justice to her representation of trans men by presenting their experience not as a collective entity but as a part of an individual struggle.

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