
Body and Embodiment in *Me Laxmi Me Hijra*

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Abstract: *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra*, the autobiographical account of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, presents a compelling exploration of body and embodiment within the context of hijra identity in contemporary India. This narrative challenges normative conceptions of gender, sexuality, and corporeality by situating the hijra body as a site of both resistance and reclamation. Through Laxmi's journey—from her upbringing in a conventional Brahmin household to her emergence as a prominent hijra activist—the body emerges as a contested terrain where cultural, social, and political tensions converge. The autobiography foregrounds the ways in which bodily expression and performance become central to the assertion of identity, as Laxmi navigates stigma, marginalization, and systemic erasure. Her detailed recounting of bodily experiences—ranging from gender dysphoria and medical interventions to public performances and rituals—offers a nuanced understanding of embodiment that is deeply intersectional, interweaving gender with class, caste, and religion. Laxmi's narrative resists victimhood, instead embracing agency through the re-signification of the hijra body as powerful and sacred. Drawing on both spiritual and activist frameworks, the text positions the body not merely as a biological entity, but as a lived, political, and symbolic space. In doing so, *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra* contributes to broader discourses on queer and trans embodiments in South Asia, offering a voice that is at once intimate and defiant. The autobiography thus serves as both a personal testimony and a cultural intervention, reconfiguring dominant narratives of gender and embodiment from a uniquely hijra perspective.

Introduction: Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's autobiography *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra* is a deeply personal and politically charged narrative that centres the experiences of a transgender woman navigating gender, sexuality, caste, religion, and class in Indian society. At the heart of the text lies a profound exploration of the body—not just as a biological entity but as a contested site of identity, politics, and empowerment. The body in *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra* becomes the primary medium through which Laxmi both experiences oppression and asserts

agency. Embodiment, therefore, is not a fixed state but a continual negotiation with cultural scripts, societal expectations, and internal truths.

From an early age, Laxmi experiences a form of embodied dissonance—her gender identity does not align with the rigid binary norms enforced by family, school, and society. Her body is read and regulated by those around her according to a heteronormative and patriarchal framework that seeks to discipline non-conformity. However, the narrative does not merely present the body as a site of pain or alienation; it is also where Laxmi finds joy, strength, and community. The body becomes a text through which identity is inscribed, challenged, and ultimately reclaimed.

Central to the theme of embodiment in *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra* is the question of performativity. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Laxmi's experiences illustrate how gender is not an inherent truth but a repeated performance that acquires legitimacy through iteration. Laxmi disrupts these performances not just through her gender expression but by actively embodying her femininity in defiance of what is expected of someone assigned male at birth. Her embrace of hijra identity is a radical reclamation of gender outside the Western male-female binary. She doesn't transition into womanhood in a Euro-American sense but moves into a culturally specific identity that challenges the very notion of stable gender categories.

The hijra body, historically marginalized and often fetishized, occupies a liminal space in South Asian culture. It is simultaneously visible and invisible—paraded during rituals but excluded from mainstream society. Laxmi's narrative exposes how the body of a hijra is subjected to surveillance, ridicule, and violence, but also holds power in its ritual and social function. This ambivalence is key to understanding embodiment in the text. Laxmi's body is not just gendered but racialized, caste-marked, and spiritualized. As she transitions and publicly asserts her identity, she resists the notion that the transgender body must conform to cisnormative aesthetics or Western medicalized narratives of transition. Her body becomes a site of activism—her visibility itself a political statement.

Throughout the text, Laxmi describes moments of bodily transformation, not just physical but symbolic. Her decision to undergo hormone therapy and surgery is framed not as an attempt to "correct" her body but as an act of alignment with her truth. It is a gesture of agency against a society that seeks to control transgender bodies through shame and exclusion. These bodily decisions are not taken lightly—they are shaped by social stigma, economic limitation, and the deeply personal desire for recognition. The text resists voyeuristic or sensationalized depictions of her transition. Instead, Laxmi foregrounds the emotional and psychological labor of becoming, showing that embodiment is a holistic experience encompassing mind, spirit, and body.

Pain and violence are recurring motifs in Laxmi's bodily narrative. She recounts episodes of sexual abuse, public humiliation, and familial rejection, all of which are inscribed

onto her body. The transgender body here becomes a palimpsest—layered with trauma, survival, and resistance. Yet, Laxmi refuses to be reduced to victimhood. Her bodily resilience emerges through dance, performance, and later activism. These acts become extensions of her body in public space, reclaiming visibility and authority. In dance especially, her body becomes an instrument of beauty, grace, and cultural capital—a stark contrast to the dehumanization she often faces in daily life.

The politicization of the transgender body is central to the later chapters of the memoir. Laxmi's entry into activism marks a shift in how embodiment functions in her life. No longer solely a personal journey, her body becomes emblematic of collective struggle. As she takes the stage at international forums or challenges the Indian state's treatment of transgender people, her body is positioned as both a symbol and a speaker. This duality is powerful—the same body that was once shamed and marginalized now commands respect and attention. Laxmi's narrative underscores how embodiment can be re-signified through collective action and legal recognition, without erasing the ongoing struggles that trans people face even after public acknowledgment.

Religious and spiritual dimensions also shape Laxmi's understanding of her body. She draws upon Hindu mythology and the cultural role of hijras in religious ritual to situate her identity within a sacred continuum. The idea that her body is divinely ordained counters the pathologization often imposed by biomedical discourses. By invoking the spiritual history of hijras, Laxmi reframes her embodiment as a source of power, legitimacy, and even holiness. This reclamation complicates Western transgender narratives, which often separate gender identity from spiritual or cultural lineage.

Caste also intersects with Laxmi's bodily experience. While she belongs to an upper-caste background, her association with hijra identity—traditionally associated with lower-caste and marginalized groups—alienates her from both caste and gender privilege. Her embodied identity challenges Brahmanical patriarchy not just in terms of gender but in its refusal to conform to caste-bound respectability. Her body is both marked and free—excluded from social norms but liberated from their expectations. This tension is central to the narrative's political charge.

Language itself plays a role in shaping embodiment. Laxmi's multilingual narrative—shifting between English, Hindi, and other registers—mirrors the fluidity of her gendered experience. The way she speaks about her body changes depending on context, audience, and emotion. This linguistic embodiment shows how language can both reflect and shape one's relationship to the body. In moments of trauma, her language is raw and direct; in moments of joy, it becomes poetic. The voice of the text is itself a bodily extension—a way to inscribe her presence in a world that often seeks to erase it.

What makes *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra* so compelling is that it refuses to offer a singular or sanitized version of trans embodiment. Laxmi is neither a tragic figure nor a sanitized

activist heroine. She is complex, contradictory, and real. Her narrative honors the messiness of bodily life—the scars, the surgeries, the dances, the desires. She challenges readers to rethink what it means to inhabit a body that defies easy categorization.

In the novel, the narrative of body and embodiment is not merely a personal chronicle, but a profound reimagining of how bodies can speak, resist, and transform within oppressive socio-cultural structures. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's autobiography pushes beyond conventional frameworks of identity to articulate a form of embodiment that is fluid, political, spiritual, and deeply rooted in lived experience. Through her candid exploration of her life as a hijra, Laxmi reclaims the body from the margins of invisibility and articulates it as a dynamic site of self-definition and social resistance.

Laxmi acknowledges that mainstream culture exhibits curiosity regarding transgender individuals; however, many within this community are reluctant to disclose the intricacies of their lives. Contemporary society perceives hijras as engaged in begging or sex work; but, at the courts of historical Muslim monarchs, hijras were esteemed and seen as essential participants. Historically, hijras engaged in singing, dancing, and performing badhai at weddings and childbirth; however, these activities are inadequate for sustaining a livelihood in contemporary society. Due to discrimination in educational institutions, the majority of hijras are deprived of education and professional opportunities, forcing them into sex work or bar dancing. Laxmi notes that in the modern era, several transgender individuals are obtaining education and securing respectable employment; she too has successfully pursued education and reclaimed her identity. Despite her audacious decision to identify as transgender, Laxmi declined to adhere to the regulations established by the hijra group. She frequently violated community regulations, although she rationalises her behaviour by asserting that her international travel and media engagements contributed to her personal development and autonomy. Laxmi effectively illuminated the challenges faced by the transgender community; she established the Maharashtra Trutiya Panthi Sanghatana and, through relentless advocacy, succeeded in persuading the government to incorporate transgender individuals within their specialised policy for women.

Throughout the text, Laxmi's body becomes a battleground for negotiating the contradictions between societal norms and internal truths. From an early age, her experiences of gender nonconformity are filtered through a lens of shame and rejection, yet she never allows these experiences to define her solely in terms of victimhood. Instead, her narrative becomes one of self-assertion—of reclaiming the right to live, express, and define her body on her own terms. Her embodiment challenges binary gender categories and the reductive medical and legal frameworks that often seek to regulate trans and hijra identities. By narrating experiences of medical transition, ritual participation, and public performance, Laxmi reveals how embodiment is a multifaceted process, shaped by emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions.

Importantly, the text reveals how embodiment for Laxmi is not limited to physical transformation. Her body is also a symbol of collective resistance and sacred power, grounded in the historical and spiritual traditions of the hijra community. In invoking divine figures like Bahuchara Mata, Laxmi ties her body to a lineage of sacred femininity, repositioning the hijra identity not as a deviation, but as a continuation of ancient cultural and spiritual roles. This spiritual anchoring allows her to reclaim a space that has often been pathologized or excluded by modern discourses on gender and sexuality. Her embodiment becomes not only a personal assertion of identity but also a form of cultural remembrance and political empowerment.

Moreover, Laxmi's activism and public visibility underscore the transformative potential of embodied experience. Her work in legal reform, HIV/AIDS awareness, and LGBTQIA+ rights highlights how the body becomes a vehicle for broader social change. She embodies the intersection of personal narrative and political action, using her life story to challenge systemic injustices and demand recognition and dignity for hijra and trans communities. Her narrative forces readers to reconsider the boundaries of normativity, respectability, and legitimacy, insisting that bodies like hers are not merely to be tolerated but celebrated and listened to.

In conclusion, *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra* redefines embodiment as a deeply political, spiritual, and liberatory process. It portrays the body not as a static object of categorization, but as a living, expressive, and resistant force. Laxmi's narrative reminds us that embodiment is central to the construction of self and community, particularly for those whose identities defy hegemonic norms. Her story challenges silence with speech, shame with pride, and marginalization with presence—ultimately offering a transformative vision of what it means to inhabit and own one's body fully and apologetically.

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