

Exploring Intersectionality and Power Dynamics in Tripathi's Me Lakshmi, Me Hijra

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Received:

02/10/2025

Revised:

31/10/2025

Accepted:

08/11/2025

Published:

18/11/2025

ABSTRACT

Transgender community is often exposed to severe discrimination and marginalization in every phase of their life. Intersectionality exacerbates their struggles by intertwining gender identity, social stigma and cultural norms, leading to profound physical and psychological impacts. Transgender narratives are often seen through the lenses of trauma and activism, which expose the stark discrimination faced by them. It is implicit that the perspective of the society relies heavily on the intersectionality and power structures that govern the system. The non-binary community interacts with cultural norms and faces ostracization in the gender conformed society. A deeper analysis of power dynamics and intersectional approach reveals significant physical and mental health-related implications for hijras. This paper integrates an intersectional approach to understanding the lived experiences and resilience of third-gendered individuals in the face of pervasive societal prejudices. With a comprehensive analysis of "Me Lakshmi, Me Hijra" by Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi, the study further examines how these dual aspects affect the health and well-being of the hijra community.

Keywords: Cultural norms, Gender identity, Intersectionality, Power dynamics, Third-gender

INTRODUCTION:

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality in 1989 through her influential essay, which critiques how antidiscrimination laws, feminist theory, and antiracist politics often overlook the compounded experiences of Black women (Crenshaw 140). Her article talks about articulation of the "dynamics of structural intersectionality" (Crenshaw 141), which examines battered women's shelters in Los Angeles minority communities. Crenshaw analyses how the interactions of social identities such as race, gender and class interact to create experiences of discrimination which are unique for Black women. They form the group which was facing "overlapping discrimination" (Crenshaw 142) that gets usually ignored by the legal and social frameworks as race and gender issues are separately dealt with. Crenshaw underscores that conventional antidiscrimination laws fail to account for these intersecting identities, thus inadequately protecting those most affected by compounded social biases.

The origin of the word 'hijra,' from 'hijar,' meaning one who has left their tribe or community. It is evident that one cannot be born a hijra, making it a social rather than a biological construct. While 'hijra', is a socio-cultural construct and is a male by birth, a hermaphrodite has both male and female sexual organs at birth. Nonetheless, it is the X and Y chromosomes that determine the sex, sexual orientation is known at the time of puberty. Coming out as the gender of experience further shapes individual identities, yet societal norms

continue to marginalize and ostracize hijras (Tripathi, 172). Hijras are attributed numerals like 'number six,' 'number nine,' and 'chakka' further alienate them, reflects Lakshmi (171- 172). The term 'hijra,' is synonym to a word of abuse thereby weighing down hijras as the 'other' in society. Despite being human, hijras face marginalization due to their gender identity. It is intensified by the diverse cultural and linguistic representations of hijras in media and narratives. From 'khwaja sara' in Urdu to 'kinnar' in Hindi and 'aravani' in Tamil, highlight the different dimensions of their linguistic marginalization across regions (Tripathi, 172).

Like the few autobiographies by the transwomen, Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi's narrative, Me Lakshmi, Me Hijra, is a journey from self-discovery to empowering peers. It displays a traumatic yet tough journey of a hijra steering through a society filled with prejudice and discrimination. Her story encompasses the multifaceted intersectionality and power dynamics that impact the hijra community. Through personal anecdotes and activism, Lakshmi's narrative highlights the trauma, marginalization and ultimately, the unwavering spirit that defines the hijra identity.

Lakshmi observes that many Indians view hijras as a threat or an annoyance, often avoiding them altogether when encountered in public (Tripathi, 181). She adds that such prejudice is equally prevalent among both men and women. Hijras who seek alms frequently endure public humiliation, with the money they receive given not out of compassion but simply to drive away the "creature" who has approached them (Tripathi, 181).

The dehumanization of Hijras in Indian society is sustained by this cultural contempt, which affirms the relationship between gender identity and social shame.

Crenshaw examines how gender norms intersect with sexuality, class, race and other social identities in society. She explores the violence encountered by such group of individuals and finds “often, marginalized groups face compounded forms of violence that are not just physical but also structural and cultural” (Crenshaw, 124). Feminists have critiqued rape laws as patriarchal and that historically emphasized chastity as property. This lead to less sympathy for victims deemed as “impure” (Crenshaw, 27). There were laws in place that required women to prove utmost resistance to validate rape claims. Consequently, puts the victims on trial to determine their innocence. This created a dichotomy where sexually autonomous women were less likely to be justified. Such legal frameworks perpetuate the marginalization and victimization of TG individuals who face similar violence resulting in societal exclusion.

Lakshmi’s statement that a group assaulted her (Tripathi, 11) reveals the intertwined nature of systemic oppression and unequal power dynamics that enable such abuse. Her subsequent decision to match their aggression and challenge them to lay a hand on her (Tripathi, 11) captures the spirit of resistance often shown by marginalized communities in the face of exploitation. The excerpt portrays the multilayered oppression faced by Lakshmi, demonstrating how gender identity intersects with power structures to create heightened vulnerability.

The fear of bringing shame to one’s family because of a hijra identity highlights the intense personal and societal struggles individuals often endure, as Lakshmi admits she worried her parents would feel embarrassed by her (Tripathi, 121). After coming out as transgender, Lakshmi told her father that she did not want to get married. Societal norms often push individuals into roles that clash with their true identities, as seen when Lakshmi recalls her parents’ wish for her to marry and have children to lead what they considered a normal life (Tripathi, 49). She strongly opposed the idea, swearing that she would ruin not only her own life but also that of her spouse. She stated that if things went according to her family’s wishes, she would take her own life. Lakshmi finds her father distressed at her decision. Lakshmi recalls seeing her father cry for the first time in her twenty years of life, a moment that reflected the heavy emotional toll of the situation (Tripathi, 60). The family’s dilemma stemmed from being caught between societal expectations and their love for their child, leaving them unable—or unwilling—to step beyond the confines of social norms. As she notes, they were “torn between the demands of society and the love of their son” but she could not allow herself to be stifled (Tripathi, 49). While her mother offered support, it was subtle and unspoken; she never questioned Lakshmi’s late-night returns home (Tripathi, 60).

Lakshmi displays the distress caused by her being a hijra as her parents insists her to remain ‘he’. “Supermen are okay as long they are born to others. No one wants supermen in their own homes” (49). Despite their status as a hijra, the narrator remains the “eldest son” to their family, inheriting property and fulfilling traditional roles. Lakshmi was expected to shave her head upon her father's death. She resisted, feeling it was contrary to her identity, but others insisted. The cultural belief was that failure to perform such rites would impede the liberation of her father's soul's. Smith looks at the prevailing gender roles as an “imposed framework” that upholds male supremacy and imposes rigid standards that people must adhere to, regardless of who they really are (123).

Intersectionality perpetuates a state of mind among transgender individuals that they are ‘others’. They carry a sense of regret for not conforming to binary gender norms. The intertwining of multiple marginalized identities, such as gender nonconformity, familial roles and societal expectations, creates a complex web of oppression. In traditional and patriarchal societies, family honour and societal reputation often take precedence over individual identity. Transgender individuals internalize these prejudices. Lakshmi's grandfather, Harisharan Tiwari, was an erudite scholar who had acquired deep knowledge in the Vedas and the Upanishads. She and her family are traumatized for “his grandson was a hijra! Now tongues would wag even more than before” (Tripathi, 49), she reflects. The narrator grapples with guilt and a sense of betrayal towards their parents. She feels torn between fulfilling the traditional gender roles as the eldest son and staying true to their authentic self: “I was on a guilt trip” (60). Lakshmi is grateful that she has not been abandoned by her family. She navigates dual identities—being a hijra in her community while fulfilling the role of the eldest son in her family—and reflects that this was her way of repaying her parents for the love and care they had given her (Tripathi, 60).

There had even been occasions when Lakshmi's father was 'cursed' (137) by the grandfather that he will father a hijra. This shows how badly the society looks at the third gender. They are not even considered as human beings. Research by Mondal emphasizes that among many factors, hierarchy and caste play significant role in determining the Transgender identities. Lakshmi, being a hijra, stood out because she was well-mannered and educated. When she eventually met her community, they were spellbound by her differences from them. “To their way of thinking, only the wretched of the earth became hijras” (Tripathi, 45) it becomes evident that there is a deep cultural conditioning within the hijra community that associates their identity with social marginalization and poverty. The intersection of gender nonconformity and class privilege complicates this transformation. The reason is, the hijra identity is often seen as one that is only accessible to those who have been excluded from mainstream society.

This internalized expectation reflects how intersecting factors such as gender, class, and the perception of

“worthiness”. It influences an individual's positioning within the hijra community, revealing how the mind is conditioned to conform to rigid social constructs. The rigid structure links non-conformity with deprivation and exclusion. When Lakshmi's father dies and his ashes are carried for the final rituals, the duty of paying final respects, as the son, was thrust upon Lakshmi's shoulders. The thought of not being a 'son' but a hijra pulls her into deep despair. Eventually, when her cousin Shyambhaiya offered to perform the role traditionally expected of a son, she felt it was more acceptable that her father's ashes were being immersed by a brother's son rather than by a hijra (Tripathi, 149). The deep-rooted, conditioned and internalized stigma surrounding hijra identity is revealed here.

The intersectional bias extends beyond set boundaries. It encompasses aspects of beauty, gender, religion, myth, and even the intersectionality within the hijra community. Tripathi vividly portrays the gender biases expressed by society in her narrative. Following her appearance on the Bigg Boss show, Lakshmi visits the Gymkhana Club. Ajay, the event organizer who had been warned by Bombay Gymkhana's CEO, Brigadier R.K. Bose, asked Lakshmi to leave the gathering, explaining that the club's rules prohibited the entry of people “like me” (Tripathi, 128–129). Many beauty pageants are organized for hijras in Bombay. Tripathi states that the aim was to challenge and reverse the mindset that they are “ugly people” (Tripathi, 131). From these incidents, it is evident that gender and beauty standards intersect to cause discrimination against hijras. According to a study by Audhkhasi and Arora, “the cosmetic industry capitalizes on women's insecurities and contributes to gender socialization and inequality” (Audhkhasi and Arora).

How society thinks and believes are deeply affected by religious and mythical practices. Shakuntala notes that family structures and power hierarchies can be shaped by myths and religious stories. Tripathi walks the readers through the lives of different transgender people. Kartini, who was born a Muslim boy and subsequently became transgender, faced double trouble in Malaysia. The laws of the land criminalize homosexuals. Meanwhile the Muslims are barred from undergoing sexual reassignment surgery. This combination of religious and legal restrictions led Kartini to engage in sex work. The relationship between personal religion and social rejection is complicated and evident in Kartini's story: “religion may be intolerant towards him, but he cannot spurn it” (116).

One common misconception is that hijras are directed by their community to convince others to adopt their gender identity (Tripathi, 157). Another false belief is that their funerals are always held at night and involve the symbolic act of beating with slippers. In reality, as Tripathi explains, “Hijras belong to different religions, and our last rites depend on our religion” (159), showing that both faith and gender identity shape their lived experiences. These myths contribute to harmful stereotypes and misunderstandings. Choosing to

embrace a hijra identity often involves leaving behind one's former life and facing layers of discrimination. Lakshmi openly states, “The decision to become a hijra is traumatic” (158). Within their community, customs and norms are highly structured, with intersectionality evident. The guru–chela relationship exemplifies this hierarchy, with strict cultural protocols in place—for example, a chela must not lie with her feet toward the guru or wear the guru's garments. As Tripathi notes, “The guru's clothes mustn't be worn by the chela, nor should she utter her guru's or gharana's name” (159), reflecting the deep-rooted respect and authority embedded in their traditions.

Power and intersectionality decide policies within the hijra community as well. Before Lakshmi rose to fame, she was welcome by Lata Guru. However, Lataguru restricts her on speaking to the press or publishing photographs. “Lataguru did not want me to talk about my life to the press” (Tripathi, 160) exhibit the control and authority gurus exert over their chelas.

Foucault's theory of power suggests that it operates not as a possession but as a dynamic force embedded within social relationships. Rather than being held or transferred, power circulates through countless interactions, reinforcing unequal and shifting structures across society (Foucault 93). Lakshmi questioned the tradition by breaking preconceived notions of the society and her community. Despite repeated warnings, she went on to give media interviews, appear on television, travel internationally, and even consume alcohol (160). With power dynamics in place, these actions were met with penalty and social ostracism. Tripathi's rebellion against these rules emphasizes the tension between individual autonomy and community expectations.

When it comes to the third gender lives, intersectionality and power structures operate double-fold. Lakshmi portrays an incident when Sangeeta, Mardana, and Vardaan, who engage in sex work, face police harassment. The brutality and lopsided approach from the police displays enforcement of power against disregarded groups. Lakshmi's timely intervention at the Sheelfata police station demonstrates resistance within these power dynamics. It was her education and awareness of basic human rights that showed them the way out of the bars. She makes use of the societal perception of hijras as “troublemakers” to her advantage, reflects Tripathi. She observes that being a hijra sometimes proved advantageous, as many people perceived them as troublemakers and, if possible, preferred to avoid any interaction (56). Another incident involves Subhadra, who is a sex worker and was found missing after engaging in sex work. Lakshmi files the complaint only to face suspicion and bias from the officers. This further illustrates the intersectional discrimination faced by hijras. The hijras face questioning and cross-questioning at the station. This reflects the deep-seated prejudice and power imbalance that transgender individuals encounter. Tripathi's appeal, “I urged the police not to think of us as hijras, but as human beings” (56), encapsulates the ongoing

fight for dignity and societal acceptance. Despite the gravity of Subhadra's death, the investigation yielded no suspects, and the case was eventually closed due to lack of evidence. The tragic reality remained: society showed little concern when a hijra was murdered (57).

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault examines how societal norms function as mechanisms of power, shaping and controlling individual behaviour. He argues that power is not centralized but diffused throughout social structures, emerging from countless interactions and practices rather than being imposed from above (Foucault 93). Drawing inspiration from Foucault, it can be argued that societal norms act as mechanisms of power and control. The norms are often made to discipline bodies and behaviours. The discipline is imposed on the marginalized and underprivileged group, including the third gender. Research shows that these binary-centred norms can create barriers to full participation of transgender individuals in societal life. The list includes access to healthcare, athletic opportunities, and workplace equality (Shakunthala, 2014). For example, many transgender individuals report that access to gender-affirming care is hindered by cultural biases against transitioning, reflecting how societal norms can restrict bodily autonomy.

Kamathipura is infamous for the activities it witnesses under the dark sky. There, men approached prostitutes under the cover of anonymity by exploiting the marginalized status of the inmates. Simultaneously, these men adhere to societal expectations of being respectable family men. The intersectionality of patriarchal power dynamics and societal hypocrisy are explicit here. Men often exploited sex workers, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, while still upholding their image as responsible family men. They engaged in such acts in private, yet returned to their roles as husbands, fathers, and sons, seamlessly blending into the fabric of a so-called respectable society.

Societal norms constructed by patriarchal ideologies cause intersectionality to penetrate the lives of marginalized communities. The plight of their existence is often discussed and then forgotten. While analyzing Tripathi's life story, it is evident that hijra individuals are much like the 'untouchables of the past' (Tripathi, 94). The discrimination they encounter is multifaceted. In every phase of life, including healthcare settings, they are subjected to dehumanizing approaches. Goel (2021) examines the denial of health care to disregarded groups, and unfortunately, the transgender community is one of them. Even though, they can access to scarce health services they are often viewed with suspicion since the have had bitter experiences in the past. The approach of the hospital and the staff including doctors and nurses were unwelcoming. This exemplifies the deeper societal biases and stigmas that intersect across gender and caste lines.

Belonging to the third gender in society often exposes individuals to intense discrimination and social

exclusion. When a person's biological, psychological, and sexual identities do not align, they are frequently subjected to derogatory labels and treated as outsiders. The gradual isolation drives them to seek out others like themselves, forming hijra communities. The formation of hijra communities is a response to societal rejection, providing a sense of belonging and support amidst pervasive discrimination. The extreme measures that follow to have acceptance from their peers are sex reassignment surgery and hormone treatment. Despite it not being compulsory to reassign the sex, Hijras have a practice to sever their private parts without anaesthesia.

Lakshmi's narrative is a manifesto of how family support aids to the health care of the third genders. While, Revathi and Manobi Bandhopadhyay, encountered hostility from their beloved people, Lakshmi successfully led a life of the third gender without undergoing any sex reassignment treatment. This decision was primarily influenced by her parents' acceptance and support. She was allowed to navigate her identity with less pressure from her family. Research has shown that "ostracism's initial distress is not mitigated by being in a group," highlighting the importance of familial support in improving mental health (van Beest et al. 246). In addition, supportive environments and need to address health disparities are to be focussed to support such group of people. This would cater to better physical and mental health outcomes among transgender individuals (Teti et al. 598). Through the lens of intersectionality and power dynamics, Lakshmi's narrative highlights that despite the external pressure from the society, if the family supports the TGs, it reduces the need for surgical intervention and mitigating associated health issues.

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