

WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Writing a Life Between Gender Lines Conversations with A. Revathi about Her Autobiography *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*

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I had intended to, but never got around to asking Revathi for a formal interview. It was an unusual encounter, scattered across three days, and this piece has been culled from conversations that took place in a hotel room, in my office, on stage in front of a live audience, over my dinner table, in crowded corridors, inside auto-rickshaws, and over the phone. This was my first meeting with Revathi and the impact of her personality – as a memoirist on the fringes of convention, as a transgender woman speaking for sexual minorities – was such that it seemed necessary to retain at least something of the spontaneous and splintered nature of our exchanges. The following transcript was written from my recollections (we spoke in the Kannada language, so all the challenges and equivocations of translation persist) and has been approved by Revathi for publication.¹

A. Revathi was born physiologically male but felt and behaved like a girl – this is how she tells her story, as will be clear from the interview below. Nearly her whole childhood, spent in a village in Salem district of Tamil Nadu, was plagued by this deep and nagging unease of being trapped in the wrong body and by ‘a growing sense of irrepressible femaleness’.² But when she behaved like one of her girl-playmates, it only meant repeated humiliation and violence by her family and community. This affected her academic performance, and she had to drop out of school after failing the tenth grade. In a quest to be true to herself, Revathi, still in her teens, ran away from home and travelled to Delhi to join a house of hijras. Hijras are male-to-female

¹ Revathi’s language of choice to speak and write is Tamil, the state language of Tamil Nadu, a state in Southern India. She is also very comfortable communicating in Kannada and Hindi languages. As Tamil is unfamiliar to me, we communicated mostly in Kannada, and since this is not a first language for either of us, our efforts were more focused on comprehension rather than specific nuances of words. I have tried to stay true to that in all my translations for this article. It has also been my effort to capture something of the forthright quality of her speech. Of course, the full semantic range of the wide number of words in Kannada and Tamil to denote varieties of the sexual self is beyond the scope of this paper.

² A. Revathi, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* trans. V. Geetha (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2010) 14.

*transsexuals who undergo a surgical removal of the genitals (often performed surreptitiously and in unsanitary conditions) and comprise a distinct community across India with elaborate customs and regulations of their own.³ Hijras are given ritualistic importance by mainstream Indian society (for instance, their blessings are considered to bring good fortune) but at the same time they are easy targets for sexual crimes, discriminated against in public spaces, and have few options for livelihood apart from performing at social events, begging or prostitution. Revathi, now in her mid-forties, discusses all this with remarkable candour and courage in her autobiography *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, translated into English from Tamil by V. Geetha⁴ and published by Penguin India Books in 2010. This autobiography is among the very first of its kind in India, uninhibited with regard to divisive gender lines, sexual hypocrisy of 'traditional' societies, and the dismal lack of public discourse on the rights of sexual minorities.*

I knew Revathi first through her words on the printed page, months before I met her in her hotel room, fresh from her bath, her hair still tangled in a wet towel, while I mumbled something about how beautiful she is, embarrassed to be behaving like a star-struck reader. But Revathi put me at ease, laughed and took the compliment as her due, accustomed as she is now to public gaze as one of the most important sexual minorities activists in India and as the author of an important insider's account of the Hijra community. She has written of how important it was for her to finally pass as a woman, and I can see how effortlessly she has managed it— today, in front of me stands a tall, statuesque woman with expressive eyes, and a melting smile.

*But it has been a long journey. In *The Truth About Me* she has written about the horrors of being sexually assaulted and tortured by police and rowdies, and of her repeated displacements. Her struggle to speak for her rights finally led her towards public activism – first as a member of an important non-governmental organisation working for the cause of sexual minorities (she became one of its directors) and at present through her writings and public lectures.*

At the time of these conversations, Revathi was visiting Manipal, a university-town in Karnataka, India, to participate in a workshop on Science and Religion organized by the Manipal Center of Philosophy and Humanities on November 9-10, 2013. I am employed at this institute and Revathi's book is on the syllabus of a course I teach on gender and sexuality. In the exchanges below, I refer to myself as 'G' and Revathi as 'R'.

G: Tell me about the first time you decided to write this book. What was your writing process?

R: I first thought about all this when I read Bama's autobiography *Karukku* – have you heard of Bama?⁵ – and I was deeply moved by what it had to say. This kind of writing is possible, I

³ Revathi also uses the term 'Aravani' in lieu of 'Hijra' and often seems to prefer it. The transgender community in Tamil Nadu commonly employ the words 'Aravani' or 'Thirunagai' for male-to female transsexuals.

⁴ V. Geetha is a well-known writer, social historian and activist, closely involved with the women's movement in India.

⁵ Bama is a contemporary Dalit woman writer who has been at the forefront of Dalit literary activism. Dalits have been traditionally the most oppressed cluster of castes in the Hindu social hierarchy. Bama has written several

said to myself, this should be done. I had some experience with writing -- my first book, *Unarvum Uruvamum (Feelings of the Entire Body)*, a collection of interviews with hijras had been published in 2005.⁶ Now I wanted to tell my life experiences. I started writing and each time I put pen to paper, different episodes of my life came to mind. I revised the manuscript four-five times, and each revision brought to mind other events from the past that I would then weave into the telling. The whole process took about four years and I insisted to Penguin that V. Geetha be the translator. V. Geetha had been known to me for many years and she retained my colloquial, informal style, my own voice, while translating. I am happy with how the book turned out.

G: *The Truth about Me* was written in Tamil but first published in English. Why?

R: Everybody has their own memory, their own version of what happened. I might talk about the beatings from my family as unfair but they might have different recollections and reasons for the same events. I decided to publish in English because nobody in my family reads English and I did not want to get into trouble.⁷ But then the book became famous, many journalists interviewed me and when the articles started appearing in the media, people found out all the details divulged in the book. People in my family and acquaintances kept asking – why did you have to say all that? It was hard initially but now it is okay. I did not write this book to cause anyone pain but to make society understand the plight of my community. Nobody should have to go through what I went through. The book was published in Tamil in 2011 as *Vellai Mozhi*.⁸

G: [This question was asked later in my office after I had reflected on what she had said about her family. I feel the need to tell Revathi about my writing quandaries]. I admire you as a writer because I don't have the courage to write a memoir – it will upset my family and I don't feel ready to do that. But I have written and published two novels. [I show Revathi my novels.]

R: What is a novel?

books on the abusive quality of the caste system, starting with her landmark 1992 autobiography, *Karukku* (trans. Lakshmi Holstrom. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶ A. Revathi, *Unarvum Uruvamum: Aravanigalin Valkkai Kataigal*. (Bangalore: Adaiyalam & Sangama Publishers, 2005).

⁷ In her book, Revathi writes about the conflicting nature of her relationship with her family. Even though she runs away from home to become a hijra against their wishes, she keeps returning to the family every few years, always yearning for acceptance. For a long time her family did not know that she had been earning her living as a commercial sex-worker, nor does she tell them of many traumatic events in her life, such as being stripped and sexually molested by policemen in a police station. Revathi writes about many years of financial (property) disagreements with her parents and siblings. There seems to be some resolution on that front now. She is currently living with her 95-year-old father in the same village that she was born, and feels that there is some sort of acceptance from the family if only because she is taking care of him, just as she had earlier taken care of her hospitalised mother till she died a few years ago.

⁸ Revathi A., *Vellai Mozhi*. Tiruchi: Adaiyaalam, 2011.

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G: A work of fiction ... all made up ... I mean, some of it is not made up ... [*I am fumbling.*]

R: So all this [*she interrupts, taps my books*] did not happen to you? How did you research it?

G: ...based on observation...based on life experience...my imagination [I am still fumbling, never having been asked before to explain why and how fiction exists in book form]

R: Can you write like that? I had no idea! Can I write about things that did not happen to me? Like, I have been observing this family of manual labourers next to my house, how hard they work and how they struggle to raise their children in that environment. Can I write about their story? It so stirs my conscience, and I have been wondering if it is possible to write about them.

[Our conversation is interrupted as a student enters the room to say that everything has been arranged for Revathi's talk. We leave, but she is clearly still thinking about this question, and later in the talk, a student's question about how she delineates her identity as a writer from her identity as an activist, triggers the following response.]

R: I hesitate to call myself an activist and I am not into activism any more. This is now my activism – [*she spread her hands to indicate her audience*] – I do what I can in my personal capacity. I have given more than 300 talks at various universities and public forums. It is important to educate people, especially young people. And I write. Writing is activism. I see no difference between the two.

G: You write repeatedly in the book about the hijra community as a space where differences of caste and religion get erased. However, you also write of it as a strictly hierarchical culture with its own systems of control. As someone who has travelled between gender lines, and as a writer, how do you reconcile different kinds of oppressions?

R: I am against all kinds of oppressions. People should be treated with dignity. It is true that religions meet on an equal footing in the hijra community.⁹ My guru was a Christian and her guru was a Muslim. But then every system has its own rules and that should be respected. If I have to serve my guru, do menial jobs for her, what is wrong with that? Don't children do the same for their parents?

⁹ Anthropologist Serena Nanda writes, 'Hijras are an organized social community with local, regional and national structures. Basic elements of India society such as the extended joint family, the caste system, the hierarchical relationship in Hinduism between gurus (spiritual mentors) and *chelas* (disciples), and local caste and neighborhood councils, are all part of hijra social structure.' (Nanda, Serena, 'Life on the Margins: A Hijra's Life Story,' *Everyday Life in South Asia* ed. Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010] 124-131)

G: It struck our class as we were reading your autobiography that your desire to be a woman is often articulated around very traditional notions about women – wanting to cook and clean, wanting to serve a husband, and so on.

R: This was before I found out about feminism! Then I realised how very oppressive men have been towards women, forcing us to behave in certain ways (be docile, be obedient), making us think that being a good woman is to dress in a certain way (wear sarees, grow our hair long). I then understood how unfair it was! I now dress in any way I want. I have cut my hair short. There are many ways to be a woman.

[Probably sensitive to questions about sexual confusion in the minds of those who claim alternate sexuality, Revathi makes it a point to bring this up when she is addressing students.]

There was never any confusion in my mind about my identity. I was always a woman. I was a woman then and I am a woman now. Once I was in a man's body that I did not want. If you have six fingers instead of five, will you cut all the fingers off or will you just get rid of the one finger you don't want? All I changed was the body that did not match. Yet, over time I realise that being a woman also meant independence and assertion].

[Later, away from the gaze of the audience, we have another conversation about writing about trauma being an important part of the healing process. I share some of my life experiences with her in confidence. Revathi has very specific advice for me.]

R: You should write about what happened. Just change all the names. Set it in some different city.

G: Yes, maybe, someday. I can't imagine how hard it must be for you to share such difficult experiences on a public forum.

R: It is easier now. But for the first two years, I could not talk about all this without breaking down into tears. *[We were five minutes away from her second public appearance in Manipal, this time in front of a larger university audience, and she remained poised, the only indication that she was preparing for the event – she is a passionate and articulate public speaker – was a taut stillness that felt as if her entire body was thinking.]*

*[During the event, responding to questions from students and young scholars, Revathi talks about her past life as a sex-worker, about being raped, about the obsession that hetero-normative society has with penis-vagina penetration as the only kind of appropriate sex. She makes an impassioned plea to the audience to not get caught up in definitions of gender and sexual choices. **These constructs are from the West, written by people sitting in air-conditioned rooms and typing on computers. Your sexual identity is whatever you want it to***

be! If you say you are gay, then you are gay! What is important is that we don't discriminate against people for their sexual preferences and orientation.]

G: [*I wished to ask Revathi more about this. She had come to my home for dinner and seemed unusually quiet.*] Your talk with the students was very inspiring. Isn't it amazing, the power of the written word, and how it can deeply touch the lives of people whose social realities and personal experiences can be so far removed from that of the author?

R: [*Nods, and says something about how much public honor the book has given her, how she has been invited to address different groups in India and abroad. But she now seems to want to talk to me about something else. Earlier in the day she found out that I was married to a colleague who works in the same department as me, and it seems to have worried her.*] **You should be careful. Learn from my experience. I was married for one year – we both worked at the NGO together where he was a senior employee and I was the office assistant. I tried to do everything possible to do everything right both at work and at home. He worked late in the office – work was brought home and disagreements at home went to the office. I was miserable.¹⁰ I am very worried for you, sister. Be very very careful.** [*Revathi cautioned me several times about the pressures on a marriage when couples share professional space, and again when she was leaving Manipal, her concern and anxiety for my life as wife and writer was strangely intense and moving*].

G: Are you writing something now? What do you want to write next?

R: **I want to continue the story I tell in my autobiography, write a second part. So much has happened to me since I told my story to the world, since the publication of this book. It changed so many things for me. All that, I want to share. I have also been working on a book about female-to-male transgenders. The trouble is that I have severe back pain, and I can't sit down for long to write. My neck hurts. I need someone to write it down for me. I want to write.**

This hunger to write again, and to chronicle her life as it proceeded, was something that often came up when Revathi talked about her future. Writing has clearly become central to her identity, her sense of self—the book in some contrast, dwelt little on the writing process itself. And it is writing that has given her life story the kind of public validation that most other sexual minorities in India have to do without. Perhaps that is why her book, in the hands of her reader, comes to stand for more than its contents or its intentions and becomes a complex matrix of sexual politics that implicates the vantaged or marginal perspective of the reader. It disturbs me, therefore, as I am composing this piece, to reduce Revathi's life story and my interactions

¹⁰ Revathi has written about this marriage at some length in her book – the great joy it brought her to have a husband and then the terrible anguish of feeling judged and rejected by him. 'I have no faith in the institution of marriage,' she told the audience at Manipal.

with her to an interview, a series of remembrances. But then suddenly, one afternoon, a few days after her return home to Tamil Nadu, Revathi calls me to say hello. That is when I know for certain that there is more I want to tell her, more I want to learn from her, and that this recent experience is important to share. I thank her with all my heart for encouraging me to tell a fragmentary story for now, my kind of story, about two writers talking to each other as sisters, and I promise to continue to listen, just as I hope she will continue to write.

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