

Embodied Trauma and Survival Narratives: Third-Gender Identity in The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story

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Abstract: *The emergence of transgender autobiographies within South Asian literature represents a critical epistemological shift in the articulation of gendered subjectivity, identity formation, and lived marginalisation. A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* stands as a foundational text that foregrounds third-gender trauma not as an inherent psychological condition but as a socially manufactured and structurally embedded experience. This paper argues that Revathi's narrative constructs trauma as embodied, cumulative, and continuous, arising through intersecting mechanisms of familial regulation, public surveillance, sexual vulnerability, economic precarity, and institutional violence. Drawing upon trauma theory, Judith Butler's framework of gender performativity, Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, and Ilan Meyer's Minority Stress Theory, the study demonstrates that Revathi's autobiography reconfigures trauma from episodic catastrophe to chronic social condition. The paper further contends that autobiographical narration functions as both a survival strategy and a political intervention, transforming embodied suffering into testimonial resistance. By situating trauma within socio-cultural and institutional structures, the study challenges pathologising interpretations of transgender distress and instead reveals trauma because of normative gender regimes.*

Keywords: *Transgender Autobiography, Third-Gender Trauma, Embodied Trauma, Hijra Identity, Survival Narrative*

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I. Introduction

The emergence of transgender autobiographies within South Asian literature marks a significant epistemological rupture in the frameworks through which gender nonconformity has historically been interpreted, regulated, and represented. For much of the twentieth century, hijra identities were confined to the peripheries of cultural discourse, appearing primarily through reductive representational regimes characterised by exoticisation, ridicule, moral suspicion, or anthropological curiosity. Dominant narratives, shaped by colonial ethnography, medico-psychiatric classification, and popular cinematic tropes, constructed third-gender existence as spectacle rather than subjectivity, difference rather than lived reality. Within these discursive formations, transgender lives were frequently rendered visible yet unintelligible — observed, categorised, and narrated by external authorities rather than articulated through self-representation.

Against this historical backdrop of silencing and distortion, autobiographical writing assumes a profoundly transformative function. Transgender autobiography is not merely a literary genre but a critical site of epistemic resistance that reclaims narrative authority for identities historically spoken about but rarely permitted to speak. Through self-narration, lived experience is repositioned from object to subject, from spectacle to testimony. The act of autobiographical articulation thus destabilises normative knowledge systems that have long governed the intelligibility of gender variance.

A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* occupies a foundational position within this representational and literary transformation. Unlike fictionalised portrayals that often aestheticise or dramatise transgender suffering, Revathi's narrative operates as testimonial literature grounded in lived experience, offering a deeply situated account of the structural conditions that generate and sustain third-gender trauma. The autobiography foregrounds trauma not as an isolated psychological disturbance but as a continuous, socially embedded condition emerging through intersecting systems of power, including patriarchy, caste hierarchy, economic precarity, sexual vulnerability, and institutional violence. Trauma, within Revathi's narrative, becomes inseparable from embodiment, visibility, identity formation, and survival.

This paper argues that *The Truth About Me* constructs third-gender trauma as both embodied and structural, shaped by chronic social violence rather than singular catastrophic events. Drawing upon trauma theory, Judith Butler's framework of gender performativity, Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power,

and Ilan Meyer's Minority Stress Theory, the study demonstrates that Revathi's narrative reveals trauma as cumulative, repetitive, and materially grounded. Crucially, the autobiography does not merely document suffering; it reconstitutes trauma as a survival narrative in which endurance itself emerges as a form of resistance. By situating trauma within socio-cultural and institutional structures, Revathi's text challenges pathologising interpretations of transgender distress and instead exposes the systemic mechanisms through which suffering is produced.

II. Literature, Trauma, and Third-Gender Narratives

Trauma studies, traditionally rooted in psychoanalytic, psychiatric, and clinical paradigms, have undergone significant theoretical expansion within literary and cultural analysis. Early formulations of trauma theory frequently privileged extraordinary or catastrophic events — war, genocide, natural disaster, singular acts of violence — as primary sites of traumatic experience. Cathy Caruth's influential reconceptualisation of trauma as an "unclaimed experience" marked a pivotal shift by emphasising belatedness, repetition, and the limits of representation (4). Trauma, in Caruth's formulation, resists immediate assimilation into consciousness and returns through intrusive memory, temporal disruption, and narrative fragmentation. This framework foregrounded the paradoxical nature of trauma: its overwhelming immediacy coupled with deferred comprehension.

However, contemporary trauma scholarship has increasingly recognised the limitations of event-based models, particularly in analysing marginalised subjectivities whose suffering is embedded within everyday social structures rather than singular crises. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* provides a crucial reconceptualisation by framing trauma as inseparable from power relations and sustained conditions of domination (33). Herman argues that trauma may arise not solely from catastrophic events but from prolonged exposure to environments characterised by fear, coercion, instability, and systemic inequality. Trauma, within this framework, becomes a chronic condition rooted in structural vulnerability rather than episodic disruption.

This theoretical shift is particularly significant for understanding third-gender experiences. Transgender trauma rarely conforms neatly to episodic or event-centred paradigms. Instead, it frequently emerges through persistent social invalidation, structural exclusion, everyday humiliation, bodily vulnerability, and chronic exposure to stigma. Ilan Meyer's Minority Stress Theory offers a critical psychological framework for interpreting this condition. Meyer posits that marginalised identities experience sustained psychological strain resulting from social prejudice, discrimination, and anticipatory fear (45). Trauma, within this context, becomes not exceptional but routine — produced through repetition, expectation, and chronic exposure to hostile environments.

Revathi's autobiography participates in and significantly enriches this expanded trauma discourse by foregrounding what may be termed chronic social trauma. Rather than organising suffering around singular traumatic incidents, the narrative reveals trauma as cumulative, repetitive, and structurally sustained. The text challenges pathologising frameworks that attribute distress to gender identity itself, instead exposing trauma's socio-cultural and institutional origins. Trauma emerges not as an inherent attribute of gender variance but as a consequence of regulatory systems that discipline, exclude, and delegitimise non-normative embodiment.

III. Childhood, Family, and the Genesis of Trauma

One of the most striking structural patterns in *The Truth About Me* is the positioning of childhood as the earliest site of trauma production. Revathi's narrative repeatedly returns to scenes of familial surveillance, correction, ridicule, and emotional tension, revealing how gender nonconformity is first constructed as deviance within intimate domestic spaces. The family, conventionally idealised as a site of protection and emotional security, emerges instead as a disciplinary institution invested in preserving normative gender order.

Judith Herman's assertion that trauma is fundamentally an "affliction of the powerless" offers a critical interpretive framework for these early experiences (33). As a child, Revathi lacks both agency and the conceptual vocabulary necessary to articulate gender identity, rendering her profoundly vulnerable to mechanisms of familial control. Verbal reprimands, ridicule, emotional withdrawal, and corrective interventions function not merely as behavioural regulation but as epistemic violence — denying the legitimacy of embodied self-perception and enforcing normative gender intelligibility.

Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power further illuminates this process. Disciplinary regimes operate through surveillance, normalisation, and correction rather than overt brutality (*Discipline and Punish* 135). Gendered behaviour becomes subject to constant scrutiny, and deviation from normative expectations invites regulatory response. Trauma thus originates not through exceptional cruelty but through routine practices of regulation that generate shame, fear, and identity destabilisation.

Crucially, Revathi's narrative reveals that trauma often precedes self-recognition. The child experiences regulation, ridicule, and punishment before acquiring the language necessary to conceptualise identity. This temporal asymmetry intensifies trauma's destabilising effects, as identity formation itself becomes entangled

with fear, anxiety, and internalised shame. Trauma, therefore, is not merely remembered; it is formative — structuring the subject's earliest understanding of selfhood and social belonging.

The repetition of familial correction produces cumulative trauma. Revathi's experiences illustrate Herman's insight that prolonged exposure to fear-based environments generates persistent traumatic stress (56). Trauma emerges not as a singular wound but as a chronic condition produced through repetition, anticipation, and structural vulnerability.

IV. Public Spaces and the Violence of Visibility

As Revathi's narrative extends beyond childhood, trauma expands spatially into schools, streets, workplaces, and public institutions. Public spaces function as arenas of surveillance, ridicule, and symbolic violence in which gender nonconformity becomes hypervisible. Visibility, rather than enabling recognition, frequently produces vulnerability. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a crucial analytical lens. Butler conceptualises gender as socially constituted through repeated performances regulated by normative frameworks (*Gender Trouble* 191). Third-gender bodies disrupt binary expectations, exposing the instability of these norms. Revathi's experiences reveal how deviation from recognisable gender scripts provokes disciplinary responses rooted in social anxiety, discomfort, and hostility.

Trauma here emerges through what may be termed the violence of the public gaze. The gaze functions not merely as observation but as regulation — constantly interrogating legitimacy, reinforcing difference, and producing marginalisation. Social scrutiny transforms everyday spaces into sites of psychological vulnerability. Meyer's *Minority Stress Theory* provides a critical framework for understanding the psychological consequences of this environment. The anticipation of ridicule, rejection, or violence produces sustained hypervigilance, anxiety, and fear (45). Trauma thus operates even in the absence of overt aggression. The expectation of hostility becomes itself traumatic.

Public humiliation functions as chronic trauma. The repetition of ridicule produces identity destabilisation, reinforcing Herman's argument that prolonged exposure to fear-based environments generates persistent traumatic stress (56). Trauma emerges not through isolated incidents but through cumulative encounters that inscribe vulnerability onto everyday existence. Visibility, within Revathi's narrative, thus emerges as profoundly ambivalent. While visibility exposes the regulatory mechanisms governing gender intelligibility, it simultaneously intensifies vulnerability. The third-gender subject becomes hypervisible yet socially precarious — seen but not recognised, observed but not affirmed.

V. Sexual Violence and Bodily Vulnerability

Sexual violence constitutes one of the most profoundly destabilising and embodied dimensions of trauma in *The Truth About Me*. Unlike narratives structured around singular episodes of assault, Revathi's experiences reveal a condition of chronic exposure to sexual exploitation embedded within survival economies. Economic precarity functions not merely as background context but as a structural determinant that compels entry into sex work, where vulnerability to violence becomes routine rather than exceptional. Trauma, in this framework, emerges not from isolated acts but from the persistent normalisation of bodily risk.

Judith Herman's framework of complex trauma offers a crucial interpretive lens for understanding this condition. Herman argues that prolonged and repeated exposure to violence produces enduring psychological consequences, including dissociation, identity fragmentation, and alterations in self-perception (56). Revathi's narrative repeatedly registers these effects through descriptions of fear, shame, emotional numbing, and bodily disconnection. Trauma becomes inscribed onto the body through repetition, transforming embodiment into a site of both survival and injury. The body, rather than functioning as a stable locus of identity, becomes a terrain marked by vulnerability, negotiation, and defence.

The transgender body within Revathi's narrative occupies a paradoxical position characterised by simultaneous hypervisibility and dehumanisation. Judith Butler's concept of recognisability clarifies this tension. Butler posits that bodies existing outside normative gender frameworks are frequently rendered unintelligible within dominant social structures, denied legitimacy, protection, and ethical recognition (*Undoing Gender* 28). Revathi's experiences illustrate how bodily difference becomes a site of intensified vulnerability rather than social safeguarding. Visibility, instead of enabling recognition, exposes the body to surveillance, fetishisation, and violence.

Importantly, however, Revathi's autobiography resists reducing the body to a passive site of victimhood. Embodiment simultaneously emerges as a locus of agency and self-determination. Decisions regarding bodily transformation — whether through gender-affirming practices or identity assertion — represent attempts to reclaim control over selfhood within an environment structured by coercion and marginalisation. Trauma, while inscribed upon embodiment, also becomes a catalyst for acts of self-fashioning. This duality underscores a central insight: the body functions as both the site upon which trauma is enacted and the medium through which resistance is articulated. Thus, sexual violence in Revathi's narrative cannot be understood solely

as interpersonal brutality. It must be situated within broader structures of economic inequality, social stigma, and normative gender regulation. Trauma emerges not merely through violence itself but through the systemic conditions that render violence predictable, recurrent, and socially tolerated.

VI. Policing, Institutional Violence, and Structural Trauma

Trauma in *The Truth About Me* extends decisively beyond interpersonal encounters to encompass systemic and institutional mechanisms of violence. Police harassment recurs throughout Revathi's narrative, revealing trauma's structural and administrative dimension. Encounters with law enforcement are characterised by intimidation, extortion, humiliation, and abuse, exposing how institutions ostensibly responsible for protection instead operate as agents of regulation and punishment.

Dean Spade's concept of administrative violence provides a critical theoretical framework for interpreting these experiences. Spade argues that marginalised populations frequently encounter violence not solely through direct physical harm but through bureaucratic systems, institutional practices, and regulatory mechanisms that systematically produce precarity (Normal Life 5). Revathi's interactions with policing institutions exemplify this structural dynamic. Trauma here is not reducible to individual acts of misconduct but reflects broader systemic hostility embedded within institutional frameworks.

Judith Herman's notion of institutional betrayal further illuminates the destabilising effects of such encounters. Herman contends that trauma inflicted by systems responsible for protection produces particularly profound psychological consequences, as it represents a collapse of fundamental expectations of safety, legitimacy, and justice (76). Revathi's experiences reveal how institutional authority becomes a source of fear rather than security. The unpredictability of police encounters generates chronic anxiety, reinforcing trauma's persistent and cumulative nature.

Structural trauma operates through repetition, anticipation, and normalisation. Police violence, rather than appearing as exceptional disruption, becomes routinised within Revathi's lived reality. Trauma is thus sustained not through isolated brutality but through systemic patterns of intimidation and regulatory hostility. The state, rather than functioning as guarantor of citizenship, emerges as a disciplinary apparatus that polices gender variance.

These institutional encounters also expose the intersection between gender nonconformity and socio-legal vulnerability. Third-gender bodies frequently exist at the margins of legal intelligibility, rendering them disproportionately susceptible to state violence. Trauma, therefore, must be understood as structurally embedded within institutional arrangements rather than as incidental abuse.

By foregrounding institutional violence, Revathi's narrative destabilises liberal assumptions that legal and policing systems operate neutrally. Instead, the autobiography reveals how normative gender regimes are reproduced through administrative practices that discipline, marginalise, and criminalise gender nonconforming lives.

VII. Community, Kinship, and Ambivalent Survival

Within the pervasive landscape of violence and exclusion, the hijra community emerges in Revathi's narrative as a complex and ambivalent site of belonging, protection, and regulation. Community functions simultaneously as refuge from total social isolation and as a structured social formation characterised by hierarchies, discipline, and internal power dynamics. Serena Nanda's ethnographic analysis of hijra kinship networks provides a crucial interpretive framework. Nanda emphasises that hijra communities operate as chosen familial structures offering emotional solidarity, cultural continuity, and survival support while also functioning through systems of authority and regulation (132). Revathi's autobiography reflects this duality with striking nuance. Community offers recognition, shared identity, and collective resilience, mitigating the destabilising effects of familial rejection and social exclusion.

However, Revathi's narrative resists idealising community life. Belonging within hijra structures introduces new forms of negotiation, discipline, and constraint. Trauma does not disappear upon entry into community; rather, it is reconfigured. Survival becomes collective rather than individual, revealing resilience as relational and socially embedded rather than purely psychological. This ambivalence is theoretically significant. It challenges simplistic binaries that position community exclusively as either emancipatory or oppressive. Instead, Revathi's experiences illustrate that survival within marginalised social formations often involves navigating complex internal dynamics shaped by broader structures of economic precarity and social exclusion.

Community thus functions as a counter-traumatic space without being trauma-free. It provides mechanisms of support and continuity while simultaneously reflecting the structural pressures imposed upon marginalised populations. Resilience, in this framework, emerges not as the absence of suffering but as the capacity to negotiate survival within constrained conditions.

VIII. Narration, Memory, and the Politics of Testimony

Autobiographical narration constitutes a central and transformative dimension of Revathi's survival narrative. The act of writing functions not merely as retrospective recollection but as a critical practice through which fragmented, embodied, and often silenced experiences are rendered intelligible within public discourse.

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" trauma offers a crucial theoretical framework. LaCapra conceptualises acting out as characterised by compulsive repetition and temporal entrapment, whereas working through involves critical engagement and reflective processing (70). Revathi's autobiography participates in this movement toward working through by transforming embodied suffering into testimony. Writing becomes a medium through which trauma is articulated, contextualised, and critically examined.

Yet trauma narratives, as Cathy Caruth emphasises, frequently resist linear closure or narrative coherence (6). Trauma disrupts temporality, memory, and representation, producing fragmentation rather than resolution. Revathi's narrative similarly resists simplistic trajectories of recovery or healing. Memory remains layered, discontinuous, and affectively charged, reflecting trauma's persistence. Narration therefore operates simultaneously as therapeutic and political practice. It reclaims narrative authority from discursive regimes that historically rendered third-gender identities as objects of representation rather than subjects of articulation. Testimony becomes a form of epistemic resistance that challenges dominant knowledge systems governing gender intelligibility. Importantly, Revathi's narrative transforms private suffering into collective discourse. Trauma, once silenced within familial and social structures, becomes publicly legible. This transformation underscores the political significance of autobiographical writing within marginalised communities.

IX. Conclusion

The Truth About Me constructs third-gender trauma as structural, embodied, and continuous. Trauma emerges not as an inherent consequence of gender diversity but as a socially manufactured condition produced through intersecting systems of regulation, exclusion, and institutional hostility. Familial correction, public humiliation, sexual violence, economic precarity, and administrative regulation collectively generate a condition of chronic social trauma. Yet Revathi's narrative profoundly redefines survival. Endurance emerges not as passive persistence but as a form of resistance articulated through embodiment, community, and narration. Trauma does not erase agency; rather, it reshapes its conditions, strategies, and expressions.

The autobiography affirms a central theoretical insight: third-gender trauma originates not in identity itself but in society's persistent refusal to accommodate gender plurality with dignity, recognition, and care. By transforming lived suffering into testimony, Revathi's narrative stands as both a literary intervention and an ethical challenge to normative gender regimes.

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