

From Life Story to Political Testimony: Re-narrating *Hijra* Identity in Contemporary Indian Trans Autobiography

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of *hijra* autobiographical writing in contemporary India through a close reading of A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) and *A Life in Trans Activism* (2016). While existing scholarship has largely approached *hijra* autobiographies as narratives of marginalisation, trauma, and survival, this study argues that recent life writing marks a decisive shift from confessional self-narration to politically engaged autobiographical testimony. Revathi's later memoir reconfigures autobiography as a form of activist documentation, where personal memory is mobilised to articulate collective identity, institutional engagement, and political responsibility.

Drawing on life-writing theory by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, alongside Paul John Eakin's conception of socially constituted selfhood, the paper analyses how narrative voice, ethical orientation, and representational strategies evolve across the two texts. It demonstrates that *A Life in Trans Activism* moves beyond individualised suffering to foreground a collective *hijra* consciousness shaped by activism, organisational labour, and negotiations with state power. By reading *hijra* autobiography as an evolving literary genre rather than a static archive of pain, this paper contributes to queer literary studies and South Asian gender scholarship, addressing a critical gap in research that continues to privilege early transgender narratives without attending to newer forms of political self-representation.

Keywords

Hijra Autobiography, Transgender Life Writing, Indian Queer Literature, activism, Political Testimony, Revathi

Introduction

Autobiography has long been understood as a literary form through which individuals not only recount their lives but also position themselves within social and cultural structures. As Paul John Eakin argues, autobiographical writing does not simply mirror a pre-existing self; rather, it actively constructs identity through narrative choices shaped by historical conditions and relational contexts (Eakin 23). This understanding becomes especially significant when reading transgender autobiographies, where self-representation functions as both personal expression and social negotiation. In the Indian context, *hijra* autobiographies have emerged as powerful counter-narratives that challenge normative assumptions about gender, visibility, and belonging. Among these, A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me* (2010) has occupied a central place in academic discourse, offering one of the earliest sustained first-person accounts of *hijra* life in English.

The Truth About Me documents a life shaped by displacement, violence, and continuous social surveillance. Revathi's narration foregrounds the precarity of occupying public space as a *hijra*, revealing how gender non-conformity renders the body perpetually suspect. In a

striking passage, she recalls how *hijras* were subjected to public ridicule and invasive curiosity: “We were asked out loudly... whether we were men or women... ‘Original or duplicate?’ they shouted and hooted” (*The Truth About Me* 45). Such moments expose the everyday operations of power that regulate gendered bodies through humiliation and visibility. These experiences align with Michel Foucault’s insights into disciplinary power, which operates not only through institutions but through routine social practices that normalise surveillance and control (Foucault 176).

Critical responses to Revathi’s early autobiography have understandably emphasised trauma, exclusion, and victimisation. While such readings are necessary, they risk stabilising *hijra* autobiography as a genre defined solely by suffering. This paper argues that such a framework becomes insufficient when confronted with Revathi’s later memoir, *A Life in Trans Activism* (2016), which signals a marked shift in autobiographical intent and narrative structure. Rather than centring the self as an isolated subject enduring social violence, the later text reframes life writing as a collective and politically conscious practice. Revathi explicitly acknowledges this transformation when she states, “My life could no longer be separated from the lives of other transgender people” (*A Life in Trans Activism* 112). The autobiographical “I” thus becomes representative, embedded within community histories and activist struggles.

This shift can be productively understood through Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s theorisation of autobiography as a “situated act,” shaped by cultural, ideological, and institutional forces (Smith and Watson 6). In *A Life in Trans Activism*, self-narration is inseparable from encounters with NGOs, policy makers, and international platforms. Autobiography here functions not merely as memory but as documentation and intervention. The narrative charts Revathi’s movement from personal survival to collective responsibility, reflecting Eakin’s assertion that selfhood is socially constituted and ethically grounded in relationships with others (Eakin 61).

The emergence of this activist autobiographical mode must also be situated within broader socio-legal developments in India, including increased visibility of transgender rights movements and evolving legal recognition. These changes provide the context in which Revathi’s later life writing operates as a political act rather than a purely confessional one. By documenting organisational labour, advocacy, and coalition building, *A Life in Trans Activism* transforms autobiography into an archive of resistance, challenging dominant narratives that confine transgender lives to marginality.

This paper therefore proposes reading *hijra* autobiography as a dynamic and evolving genre, responsive to historical moments and political imperatives. By placing Revathi’s two autobiographical texts in dialogue, it seeks to move beyond trauma-centred interpretations and to foreground the emergence of activist life writing as a significant development in contemporary Indian transgender literature.

From Survival Narrative to Activist Life Writing

In *The Truth About Me*, the autobiographical voice is marked by isolation and vulnerability. The narrative foregrounds rejection by family, economic precarity, and exposure to violence, constructing the *hijra* self as one constantly negotiating survival. Public space

emerges as a site of danger rather than belonging, reinforcing the sense of exclusion that structures the text. While moments of resilience appear, the dominant narrative arc remains anchored in endurance rather than transformation.

A Life in Trans Activism, however, reorients this narrative trajectory. Survival is no longer the endpoint but the ground from which activism emerges. The memoir foregrounds Revathi's involvement in community organisations, her interactions with institutions, and her role in advocating for transgender rights. This shift is also evident in narrative voice: the frequent use of the collective "we" replaces the solitary "I," signalling a move towards communal self-representation. Autobiography thus becomes a space where personal history intersects with movement history, expanding the ethical scope of life writing.

Smith and Watson note that autobiographical narratives often negotiate "dominant discourses that structure subjectivity" (15). Revathi's later memoir actively challenges dominant representations of *hijras* as passive victims by asserting agency and political presence. The text documents not only oppression but also strategies of resistance, demonstrating how life writing can function as a tool of social critique.

Institutional Engagement and the Political Self

One of the most significant features of *A Life in Trans Activism* is its sustained engagement with institutions. Revathi records meetings with NGOs, state officials, and international organisations, converting autobiography into a form of evidence. These encounters reposition the *hijra* subject within structures of power, not as an outsider but as a negotiator demanding recognition and rights. Autobiography here performs what Smith and Watson describe as an "intervention" into public discourse, challenging normative assumptions about citizenship and gender. The narrative thus exemplifies Eakin's notion of the relational self, where identity is forged through ethical responsibility to others. Revathi's selfhood is inseparable from the community she represents, and her life writing articulates a collective demand for dignity rather than individual acceptance alone.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *hijra* autobiographical writing in contemporary India must be understood as an evolving literary form rather than a static archive of marginalisation. Through a comparative reading of *The Truth About Me* and *A Life in Trans Activism*, it has demonstrated a clear shift from survival-centred testimony to activist life writing that foregrounds collective identity, institutional engagement, and political responsibility. While the earlier text powerfully documents exclusion and violence, the later memoir reframes personal memory as public documentation, transforming autobiography into political testimony.

By applying life-writing theory and concepts of socially constituted selfhood, the paper has shown how Revathi's later narrative resists trauma-centred readings that confine transgender writing to victimhood. Instead, it positions *hijra* autobiography as a dynamic genre capable of articulating agency, resistance, and collective imagination. Recognising this transformation allows queer literary scholarship to move beyond documenting suffering and

towards understanding transgender life writing as a site of political intervention and ethical engagement.

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