



Reading in between the lines: A comparative study of Laxminarayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* and *Becoming Nicole* by Amy Ellis Nutt

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Literature is always a reflection of the cultural context in which the work is set. A self intended intensive reading can be equated with a journey set with the aim of having a breakthrough through the underlying interwoven intricacies. This includes the reflection of the age in which the work is set, the attitude of people and the cultural diversities as well.

Culture is an inclusive term. As defined by the Illustrated Oxford Dictionary it stands for, “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement collectively; the customs, civilization and achievements of a particular time or people; the improvement by mental or physical training” (202). *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* is set in the Indian cultural context while *Becoming Nicole* is set in the American background. The cultural disparity is much evident from the location itself. America is a free and fast moving society with people having their own busy schedule divided in between personal and public life. Being caught up in a web of themselves they don't have much time to ponder over the lives of others. On the other hand, the Indian society is much more closely knit, the bondings and relations take up new turns in the Indian scenario. The neighbourhood relations too are different in India and America. In India people tend to be more concerned about the lives of others than their own. This concern is visible from the staring and puzzled looks. “It's not as if my folks didn't hear rumours about me –there were enough people around me to gossip “ (Tripathi 33).

The division between binaries like men and women is much deeply inculcated in Indian society. Indians have certain practices, mannerisms and even jobs for men and women separately. Anyone breaking this boundary is labelled outcasts, someone unfit for the society. Many such instances are visible in *Me Hijra Me Laxmi*. “ In patriarchal, misogynistic cultures such as ours, dancing is seen as a womanly pursuit. So I was teased. People began to call me homo and a chakka. They couldn't see the cathartic and therapeutic effect that my art had on me. All they could see was that though I was a man, my body language was that of a woman”(Tripathi 4).



On the other hand, American society seems to be more accepting and accommodative. Though there exists the division between binaries like in India the dividing line is much fainter and at some instances it seems to merge as well. In *Becoming Nicole* Nutt enlists many instances to prove this point. “She’d let Wyatt grow his hair out and occasionally wear a feminine shirt or blouse , which meant that Wayne and Kelly sometimes found themselves getting into awkward conversations with strangers. If they were eating out someone might comment on the twins and ask, “How old are your son and daughter?”(Nutt 32).

Kelly Maines, Nicole’s mother was bothered about Nicole (earlier Wyatt) only. She does everything possible from her part to understand her child properly. She is particular not to leave Wyatt to suffer the trauma of being something like an alien. She does whatever she can do to make her active and charming. Rather than rejecting her son’s effeminate tendencies as an abnormality Kelly set out to observe him carefully and guide properly. “He’s trying to tell us something,”(Nutt 26) Kelly would say.“He's showing us who he is, and we've got to help him figure it out” “ (Nutt26). Kelly was determined not to leave her child astray. She sets out to be his greatest companion. She enquired about his confusions and agonies, to which he responds peacefully. She spends her days and nights searching for Wyatt’s peculiarities. She scrolls through articles, medical sites and online forums which appeared after typing those five words to the search engine, “Boys who like girl's toys” (Nutt 27). She reads a number of articles about homosexuality, transsexualism, transgenderism etc. Perplexed and confused at first she thinks that Wyatt is a gay but sexual orientation seemed crazy to be imagined in a three year old. She proceeds and ponders over the term 'transgender'.

Kelly finds the definition of 'transgender' in the Merriam Webster dictionary as “ of or relating to people who have a sexual identity that is not clearly male or clearly female“(Nutt27). She compares the mannerisms and likings of Wyatt with this definition and concludes that her son was a transgender. The definition of the term gender revealed to Kelly that it is the belief that one is male or female. It is something innate. Kelly does not give up after her conclusion, she moves on to read articles and take notes. Through her study she understood that gender identity has got nothing to do with the physical anatomy, that is having a penis or vagina doesn’t matter; it is all about what a person feels. Born with the physical anatomy of a male does not mean that his gender is that of a male. Kelly continues her reading and she moves on to read the topics like gender identity disorders, gender dysphoria etc. Gender Dysphoria is the state of uneasiness arising out of the mismatching between a person’s sexual anatomy and his / her inner sense of gender. Kelly analyses in detail the feelings of such people. She shudders



when she thinks of the torment that other kids were capable of inflicting upon Wyatt. Wyatt being a young boy was completely unaware about these troublesome terms. All he knows about himself is that he was a “boy-girl” (Nutt29) which is how he referred to himself.

As Wyatt grew up Kelly took special care in his school matters. She informs his teachers about his likings and specialities. This was to make sure that the teacher would accept him for who he was and wasn't. As a mother Kelly is particular to figure out the possibilities of discrimination and mockery that might arise for Wyatt from anywhere around them. “ “ Wyatt is a little different, “ She told the teacher when they met early in the school year. “He really likes girls’ things and we're okay with that – and you're okay with that too right?”She was. Kelly felt relieved. First school hurdle cleared”(Nutt 44).

Kelly always stands up in front of him as a torchbearer, clearing up the hurdles that arise in front of him or might possibly arise. Before the kids visit any friend's home, she will make sure that she has met the parents and made them aware about Wyatt's specialties. She then watched over the kids to make sure that nothing untoward happened. She combs through lists of doctors who treated kids for gender issues. Virginia Holmes , the child psychologist, helps Wyatt to overcome his occasional mood swings and also for his further transformation into Nicole. As Wyatt grows up Kelly notices his growing sense of self esteem when in feminine attire. In order to boost up his confidence she increasingly allows Wyatt to wear more girlish clothes both at home and in public. “ Kelly's ability to accept Wyatt for who he was had helped instill a kind of confidence in him so that anything he said about himself to others seemed in his mind , perfectly normal and ordinary”(Nutt 75).

Kelly's sense of understanding and positivity is commendable. She stands with her kid with utmost care and concern. She is not struck with a destructive sense when she realises that her child is not 'normal'. Rather she proceeds to know him; his feelings, fears, mood swings and everything. Her greatest success as a mother is that she succeeds in creating a close companionship with Wyatt (Nicole). This helps Kelly to avoid the sense of alienation that usually springs up for someone who is different from the majority. It is her perfect sense of understanding that fosters her to persuade everyone including her husband Wayne, the twin Jonas and the school authorities that Wyatt is not an alien or an abnormal, but a special child who needs to be properly cared for and considered. She stands in the forefront against Wyatt's fight to use female toilets, which was initially dismissed and later permitted by the school administration. This overwhelming support and care, especially from the part of the family helps Wyatt to build up his confidence and assert his identity and eventually leads to his transformation from Wyatt



to Nicole. “Kelly had guided Wyatt through so many transitions, always trying to balance his desires with her sense of caution” (Nutt 114).

Unlike Nicole’s childhood Laxmi does not have a pleasant and accepting ambience around her. She doesn’t have the usual sweet memories of childhood which enrapture everyone. “I’m different because I did not have a happy childhood” (Tripathi 1). Being born into a traditional Indian Brahmin family, Laxmi was Laxminarayan Tripathi the elder son . Even after her conversion for her family she is the elder son. Though she feels herself caught up in a male body, her surroundings fail to understand her in betweenness. This doesn’t mean that she is evicted from her family but her family including her father and mother remains dumb and mute to her real problems. Laxmi is not at all cared for during her childhood days. She remains an object to be laughed at and her parents knowingly or unknowingly turn a blind eye against her. As a result, she is subjected to innumerable sexual assaults. Such that childhood turns out as a metaphor of sexual exploitation and illness for Laxmi. “I was first sexually exploited when I was seven” (Tripathi 5). Unending physical and mental torture from the surroundings have a traumatic effect on her. Though a pampered kid within the family, failure from the part of her immediate family members makes her sink further into a cocoon. She opens up only to a very few of her friends and her cousin Vijayprathap, affectionately called Dadibhaiya.

“Yes it is true that I was like a woman. My mannerisms, my walking style were all feminine. But why was it so? I did not know. I wasn’t of the age to answer this question. Loner than I already was, I drifted even further into my cocoon” (Tripathi 4). These lines reveal the helplessness of a kid caught up in between the binaries of femininity and masculinity. She is completely ignorant of what was happening to her; this includes the physical and mental assaults. These inbetweenness creates a sense of identity crisis for Laxmi. She is unable to locate herself anywhere within the terms of masculinity or femininity. This lack of identity and mockery encountered by the child makes her sink deeply into her own cocoon. She stops speaking to others thus the act of revealing herself is paused. Her mind is piled up with a sense of in betweenness and crisis. Laxmi was already tormented and tortured by the society with words and these sexual exploitation adds more to the injury. “The physical and mental torture I went through is indescribable. But I didn’t say a word to anyone, either then or later. I kept my feelings bottled”(Tripathi6).

For Nicole, her mother is her best companion, a comfortable place to open up everything. But Laxmi lacks such a companionship. Kelly’s perfect understanding and the concern and care which she takes to protect her kid from the exploitative situations helps to boost up Nicole’s confidence. In the case



of Laxmi conditions are not so favourable. It seems that everything and anything was against her. Ignorance from the part of her family paves way for the sexual assaults against her because as a seven year old kid she was incapable of defending herself. For Laxmi's family their child was a boy and they completely ignored all her effeminate tendencies by dismissing it as mere child play. Along with the sexual exploitations, lack of proper communication and understanding adds gravely to Laxmi's mental trauma. Nicole had her mother as a perfect shelter but Laxmi lacked such a shelter figure. Thus Laxmi's childhood turns out to be days of physical and mental torture. "These sexual assaults transformed me. I became secretive and uncommunicative, hiding my feelings from my family and friends. Suddenly it felt as if my childhood was over and I had grown up before my time"(Tripathi 7).

Despite the initial aversion of Wayne to the effeminate tendencies of Nicole, her family offers her great support. He later understands his kid's desperate situation and vows not to do anything against her wishes. "He had handed everything over to Kelly in terms of decision making, and even when he objected to letting Wyatt dress more like a girl, he ultimately let Kelly be the arbiter" (Nutt 67). Initially Wayne mourns over the loss of one of his sons, but the acceptance and understanding of Kelly and Jonas for Nicole surprises him. Later on he realises himself - he was the sum of many elements, many categories- a man, a husband, a hunter, a fisherman and above all, a father. His identity as a father makes him realise that the problem was not with Nicole or anyone else. He himself was the problem, his thoughts about society and how society treated his "boy-girl". At first out of the fear of society he stands against his kid's identity. But, as soon as he realises her , he embraces her as Nicole and not as Wyatt. "Wayne had been on a longer journey than anyone else in the family. He knew it had been Kelly, not he who had been there for Nicole since day one. Even Jonas had always accepted Nicole as his sister, never mourning the loss of a brother the way Wayne mourned the loss of a son"(Nutt 142).

Soon after his realisation Wayne turns out to be Nicole's companion. He takes pride in going along with his transgender daughter. This pride comes out of his realisation that he must stand with his kid and not according to the tunes of the society.

When Nicole faces some problems in her school it is her father who stands in the forefront along with her mother. When she loses her privileges at school and when both children and parents target her, her father comes out to rescue her. He is determined not to leave her daughter to be humiliated by venomous tongues. The proud father started respecting his girl for her attitudes. "Dad being transgender is no big deal, my friends and I have it under control"(Nutt 202). These words instill respect for Nicole in Wyatt's mind. He is awestruck at the courageous attitude of her girl, willing to deal with anything and



everything in her way positively. Thus the initial aversion eventually transformed into respect for Nicole and not for Wyatt. “He had spoken openly and honestly about his transgender daughter, about himself and now there was no turning back “(Nutt 203).

Things are not at all favourable for Laxmi from all corners. “My body was a playhouse and a plaything , and any man could do anything with it”(Tripathi 27). She is torn in between herself and her surroundings. No one is there to accept her and her femininity in the right sense. Rather she turns out as an object to quench lust. Her lovers, whom she thought of as guarding and accepting, reveal their real faces at suitable opportunities. As the exploitation continues crossing all limits she is haunted by destructive thoughts. “I wanted to take revenge on the whole world”(Tripathi 15).

The most surprising aspect is the ignorance from the part of her family. Her family ignores all her feminine behaviour. For them it is dancing that feminizes her. It seems that Laxmi's family is an absolute failure in understanding her properly. For her family she was Laxminarayan, the elder son. Thus ignorance can also be read as their unwillingness to accept any feminine trait in their son. “ My parents knew none of this, and are sure to have thrown me out of the house if they got wind of what I was up to “(Tripathi 29). She is quite sure about the possible objections from her family for becoming a hijra. She tactfully hides her hijra identity from her family. Thus Laxmi embraces duality. In college she occasionally tries out female attire and starts exhibiting her identity as a hijra. But, in her home, she always resorts to male dresses, thus trying to fit herself within the body and mannerisms of an ideal son.

I also started to wear my sexuality on my sleeve. I usually went to college in men's clothes, for I was still a man, but sometimes I picked up courage and landed on campus in female attire. At such times, I made it a point to wear my favourite dark – coloured lipstick, Personification 113. I grew my fingernails long and wore small rings on various parts of my body. I was having a good time, and, surprisingly, no one sniggered at me. Perhaps, it had to do with the devil- may – care ethos of Mithibai College –anyone could do anything here. There were pubs all around the college where song and dance parties went on all the time. I would be seen more at these parties than in the classroom. (Tripathi 30 – 31)

While leading a carefree feminine life in her campus, Laxmi, an acclaimed dance teacher and a model coordinator who sent girls to play bit- parts in Bollywood films, is a dutiful elder son in the family. She is daring and courageous enough to proclaim and assert her identity in the campus as well as



in her social life but when it comes to her family she is not willing to assert her female identity. This hide n seek play is not because of fear but out of her love for them. She loves them so much and is aware about their attitudes and ideologies such that she does not want to hurt them at any cost. Moreover she is also conscious about the abuse that the society might shower upon her parents if she exhibits her identity as a hijra. “My family didn’t have an inkling of any of this. To them I was Laxminarayan, the eldest son of the family, who went to college and had a job. They looked at me with hope. I was not just a son, but a dutiful son in their eyes, for I gave all my earnings to my mother to run the house” (Tripathi 33).

She continues her life of duality even after her conversion to a hijra. Though she feels herself having an identity of her own, her inhibition to assert herself in front of her family. She expresses her desperate situation to Lataguru, to whom Laxmi is her Chela and she advises her to continue her life of duality and not to disclose her hijrahood. I said to Lataguru, 'I live in a family with parents, a brother and a sister. I wear shirts and trousers at home. I cannot afford to wear a sari'. To this, she replied, 'For now, live with your family and carry on as usual. Continue to wear trousers and shirts. It’s no fun wearing a sari’, and nor is it compulsory to do so(Tripathi 44)

“I didn’t give a clue to my family about the transformation that had come about in my life. I behaved normally, and wore my usual clothes. I wasn’t ready to tell them anything yet. Nor did they suspect” (Tripathi 45). Laxmi hides her real self from her family out of fear about the disgrace that would be showered upon her family as a result of her transformation. She reveals her transformation to some of her few friends. Even her intimate friends are shocked beyond belief. And after their recovery many of them react indifferently. “Some said, ' why have you brought this he’ll upon yourself?’ (Tripathi 45). The only solace that remained was her boyhood buddy – Pravin. “He said, 'you were, you are, and you will always remain Laxmi for me'(Tripathi45).

Laxmi is welcomed with loud wailings and verbal harassment when the news about her transformation reaches her home. Till then she has managed to hide herself, even her wearing of saree was guised in the name of a performance or rehearsal. She uses it as an excuse and when she makes it her usual costume she smells like a rat. First reaction came out from her brother, he was perplexed. “Why did you do this?. Have you gone mad? “(Tripathi 47). He is not willing to accept her transformation even after explaining the whole course of action. “As we entered the house, mother began to beat her breasts and wail loudly, as if there was a death in the family. Perhaps it was the most spontaneous way to react when confronted by the news that the scion of the family has become a hijra” (Tripathi 47).



Her mother wails loudly as if their family is struck with a disaster. Her loud wails and words are not about her son's future but about the disgrace brought to the family. She, like every other typical Indian mother, is all the way confused and concerned as to what the society might think about Laxmi as well as her family. She is tossing her head thinking about the disgrace brought to their family by her son's transformation as a hijra. "When she was able to speak, she said, ' No one in fourteen generations has done such a thing in our family. We are a noble, high – caste Brahmin family. Didn't you think of our self-respect? Your sister is married. What will her husband's family think of us?'"(Tripathi 47-48). Throughout her sobbing and loud wailing she is mourning at the great disrepute brought to their family, though hijras are worshipped in many Indian traditions. She seems to be not at all concerned about her kid's trauma and identity but is thinking about what others think . The over importance given by Indians on what society thinks is evident from Vidyawati Tripathi's (Laxmi's mother) utterances.

Irrespective of the respectability bestowed upon hijras in the great Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, hijras meant outcasts who lead a life by tormenting common folks. These negative pictures along with the concern about society forces Laxmi's family to think deeply about their son and the evil cast upon him. For them, they are unable to leave the house out of disgrace and are torn in between the demands of society and their love for their son. "My father did not speak to me. As for my mother, she cried non- stop for three whole days. Things came to a head when, in a fit of anger, she sheared off some of my hair. I could take it no longer. I drowned my sorrow by starting to work for the hijra community" (Tripathi 49-50).

Even to the educated and the well settled 'hijra' or the term 'transgender' is not accepted by her sister as well as her soldier brother- in- law. For him masculinity meant a lot. Laxmi's family is deeply concerned as of what would be her position in her husband's family when they come to know about her brother's hijra identity.

My identity as a hijra was unacceptable to her soldier husband. Army men tend to be macho, and masculinity means a lot to them. As I have said earlier in my account, when I became a hijra, my folks were not concerned about anyone else as they were concerned about my sister. They feared the worst, thinking her husband and his parents would send her back to her maik for the shame she had heaped on them. And their fears were not exaggerated or farfetched –my jijaji did, in fact, stop talking to me for many years afterwards. His father, too a rationalist and masculine to his fingertips, thought of me as an odd ball (Tripathi 139)



Vidyawati Tripathi, Laxmi's mother can be placed in strict contrast with Kelly Maines, Nicole's mother. For Nicole, her mother was everything, her best companion, a perfect shelter and she is able to reveal all her feelings, tensions and confusions to her mother. On the other hand, Laxmi had a family which absolutely fails to understand the trauma of a transgender kid. Kelly, by carefully and properly understanding Nicole, is able to guide her properly. This helps Nicole to gain courage and boost her confidence from her school days onward. Thus Nicole's childhood is that of acceptance. But for Laxmi, childhood is horrible and traumatic, a metaphor for physical and mental torture. Ignorance from the part of her family makes Laxmi suffocate and suffer during her childhood days. While Nicole exposes anything and everything to her family, particularly her mother, Laxmi conceals everything from her mother and her family. This concealment is the result of her perfect understanding of her family members and she is also capable of foreshadowing the upcoming responses.

Neither Western nor Indian society is completely in tune with transgenders and their rights. But while comparing the two societies, with respect to both the works, the American society seems more friendly and concerned about these minorities. This doesn't mean that Indians are completely hostile to them. The Indian society is becoming receptive to changes but only slowly. For Nicole, the entire family joins with her to support her in her transformation. Because they believed that "Gender identity is in the brain, not the anatomy" (Nutt 107). The support offered by the school authorities and her friends are also commendable. The concern and support offered by Nicole's grandparents needs special mention. Though they are very old, they are receptive to changes and are willing to do whatever possible to make their grandchild happy. "Billy and Betty Maines had been supportive all along ; they'd seen how Wyatt behaved, practically from birth , so they knew this wasn't some passing impulse on the child's part or something Wayne and Kelly had encouraged" (Nutt 119). They completely ignore society and its backbiting conversations. " " We want what's best for Nicole, too," said Billy. "If anyone ever lays a hand on her, they'll have to go through us" "(Nutt 121).

In American society, the younger generation also accepts gender fluid behaviour. Nicole's friends stand as the best example for this. Majority of them wholeheartedly supports her and shows no discrimination to her. Friends play an important role in facilitating Nicole's transformation. They also serve their parts to boost up her confidence. They accept her as she is without any objections.

The school authorities also render their support in facilitating Nicole's transformation. When Kelly informs them about her peculiarities, they show no signs of hostility and a version, but provides her with all possible forms of care and support. Nicole, before her transformation is permitted to use the



girls bathroom. And this permission is granted after they realize the child's real identity. The acceptance offered by the school authorities and friends makes Wayne question his attitude to his kid.

To a child such as Wyatt, however, saying he was really a girl was as natural as saying he was right-handed. Wayne was still ceding nearly all the decisions about clothing and pronouns to Kelly, but the degree to which Wyatt's own schoolmates and teachers accepted his feminine nature was slowly making Wayne realise not only that his son's, beliefs and behaviour were not going away, but that most everyone else in Wyatt's orbit accepted him for who he was.(Nutt 77)

As for Laxmi the only consolation is the attitude of the younger generation. She feels a very few positive signs of change in them. Unlike the parental generation, youngsters are much more sensitive and acceptive. She notices upcoming positive changes that are on its way with regard to the treatment of hijras and other minorities. "I discovered that the younger generation, made up of Shashi and my sister and brother-in-law, was more willing to talk, to have a dialogue with me, than my parents. My parents were so ill-informed about the matter that they thought that the cure for my madness was marriage"(Tripathi 59).

Later Laxmi's family accepts her but the tone is not much that of acceptance rather of permitting her to do whatever she chooses in life. But this happens much later, only when she establishes herself as a dancer and an advocate for the rights of minorities. Her father makes his public appearance along with her at the set of Big Boss reality show. " 'Laxminarayan is my elder son and he will continue to be so as long as I am alive' "(Tripathi 122). He also clears his part by stating that " 'Why should I expel Laxmi from the family? I am his father, he is my responsibility. A hijra can be born to any family. If we spurn them and show them the door, we leave them with no alternative but to become beggars. Driving Laxmi out of the house was out of question.' "(Tripathi 123). Nothing more than the care and concern of a loving father is visible in these lines.

'*Me Hijra me Laxmi*' and '*Becoming Nicole*' belong to the genres of autobiography and biography respectively. Apart from being life depictions these two works follow entirely different narrative patterns, as a person narrating one's own account will be different from an author narrating the subject's life. Since both the works belong to different genres, a comparison can be made between the two categories. Both the works have an entirely different narrative pattern since they belong to two different genres. Autobiography is self writing, an attempt from the part of the author to reveal one's own life, with utmost concentration on the minutest detail. On the other hand, biography is the depiction



of the life of a person authored by another person. Both these genres offer different points of view. An autobiography is a subjective account from the author's own point of view whereas in a biographical writing events are narrated from the point of view of another person, who is not the subject. As defined by the Illustrated Oxford Dictionary 'Biography' is the "written account of a person's life" (86) and 'Autobiography' is the "personal account of a person's life" (61).

The greatest difference that can be spotted between these two books is that while one follows an emotional strain the other is highly informative. Laxmi has narrated her life's battle and baffle in an emotional manner in *Me Hijra me Laxmi*. But through *Becoming Nicole*, the author has not only concentrated on the life depiction of Nicole but also many medical and psychological concepts as well. She has introduced the concepts of Gender Identity, the Transgender Brain and detailed accounts about the counselling sessions also. A detached narration is visible in *Becoming Nicole* mainly with the inclusion of many scientific and technical details. On the other hand, Laxmi's autobiography presents a touching and thrilling account. It is touching as it portrays the physical and mental agony encountered by an outcast in Indian society. At the same time, it seems thrilling as it projects the trajectory of Laxmi's life, from torments and torture to the status of a lime light figure arguing for the rights of minorities.

Amy Ellis Nutt presents a book which deals with the concept of change with regard to the attitudes against minorities. *Becoming Nicole* is not just about Nicole, the transgender girl but the transformation of a family to accept a transgender member. By narrating about such a transformation, the author calls for an attitude change for the society against minorities. By detailing the scientific and technical terms, the author attempts to convey the essential idea that transgenderism is not an abnormality. The concept of gender fluidity is emphasized.

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