

Testimony, Kinship, and the Politics of Visibility in A. Revathi's *Our Lives, Our Words*

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Abstract:

This paper examines A. Revathi's *Our Lives, Our Words* (2011), a collection of first-person hijra and aravani testimonies compiled by a hijra activist and translated from Tamil by A. Mangai, as a decolonial and feminist counter-archive that reclaims narrative authority from a society that has historically rendered hijras, in Gautam Bhan's phrase, “hypervisible and invisible”. Reading the collection through frameworks drawn from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality, the paper traces four interlocking concerns across the narratives: the paradox of public hypervisibility alongside legal and familial invisibility; the systematic violence hijras encounter within the biological family and the alternative kinship structures—the Guru-chela system and the jamaat—that replace it; the body as a site of both violence and self-fashioning, particularly through the ritual of nirvanam; and the shift from narratives of victimhood toward organised collective activism in the volume's closing chapters. The paper argues that the text's formal insistence on multiple, individually attributed testimonies rather than a single composite narrative allows it to hold these tensions in productive, unresolved coexistence, thereby refusing both purely tragic and purely redemptive readings of hijra life.

Keywords: hijra narratives, testimonio, gender performativity, intersectionality, kinship, nirvana, queer postcolonial studies.

Introduction

A. Revathi's *Our Lives, Our Words* occupies a singular place in the archive of South Asian queer and transgender writing. First published in Tamil in 2005 and translated into English by A. Mangai in 2011, the book gathers the oral testimonies of hijra and aravani individuals across Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, compiled and edited by Revathi herself, a hijra activist associated with the Bengaluru-based organisation Sangama. In his "Series Editor's Foreword," Gautam Bhan describes the conventional cultural position of hijras in India as one of paradoxical exposure and erasure: they are, he writes, "hypervisible and invisible" (vii), simultaneously the subject of ridicule, myth, and curiosity, and yet denied "voices, names, families, or histories" of their own (viii). *Our Lives, Our Words* directly answers this condition of enforced silence. Because the narratives are "written and compiled by a hijra activist herself," Bhan notes, the collection escapes the trap of being "simply testimonies to tales of violence, exclusion and eternal victimhood" and becomes an assertion of "rights and citizenship" (viii-ix).

This paper argues that *Our Lives, Our Words* functions simultaneously as a collective testimonio, an ethnographic record, and a decolonial and feminist counter-archive that unsettles the heteronormative and biologically deterministic categories through which Indian society has historically read gender. The discussion proceeds in five stages: a review of the existing scholarly and literary context into which the collection intervenes; an outline of the theoretical framework, drawn primarily from Judith Butler and Kimberlé Crenshaw, that structures the reading offered here; and three analytical movements tracing, in turn, the paradox of hypervisibility and invisibility, the tension between biological and chosen kinship, and the shift from documented victimhood to organised activism across the collection's chapters.

Literature Review

Our Lives, Our Words does not emerge in a scholarly or literary vacuum; both its foreword and translator's note situate it carefully within a prior body of writing on hijra life, but any rigorous academic reading of the collection must also locate it heavily within broader theoretical discourses on postcolonial transgender subjectivity, the mechanics of subaltern life-writing, and transnational feminist critiques of the archive.

Gautam Bhan's foreword explicitly positions the volume against earlier academic treatments of hijra identity, citing Gayatri Reddy's seminal ethnographic study *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* as the most influential prior account. Bhan summarises Reddy's central, paradigm-shifting claim that hijras “were most commonly described using the trope of sexual and gender difference, but that hijras themselves did not understand their own sexuality or their community through this trope” (ix). Reddy argues instead that hijra communities organise themselves around “complex codes of izzat (which she translates as respect, rather than honour), determined by a range of factors that extend far beyond the body and sexual or gender difference” (ix). While Reddy's intervention successfully dismantled the Western anthropological obsession with anatomical difference, her work remains structurally bound by the limitations of the ethnographic observer. Revathi's collection can thus be read as fundamentally extending, de-centring, and vernacularising Reddy's central insight. By relying on first-person autobiographical testimony rather than external ethnographic analysis, the text reclaims epistemic authority, proving that marginalised subjects do not require an academic mediator to theorise their own social and ontological standing.

To push beyond the primary text's paratext, however, requires reading Revathi's compilation alongside the broader field of *testimonio* and postcolonial subaltern studies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational question of whether the subaltern can speak—and whether

the hegemonic archive can ever faithfully record that speech without epistemic violence—haunts any project of marginalised life-writing. *Our Lives, Our Words* answers this by adopting the modality of the *testimonio*. For Beverley, the *testimonio* constitutes a radical "truth-claim" wherein the individual narrator explicitly speaks on behalf of a fractured or suppressed collective, demanding that marginalised voices be recognised as vital agents of history rather than passive victims of circumstance.

Furthermore, as literary theorists like Doris Sommer have noted in their work on minority autobiographies, such texts intentionally cultivate "reader complicity." They refuse the voyeuristic consumption of trauma and instead interpellate the reader as a witness compelled to acknowledge their own positionality within the matrix of systemic oppression. Revathi's work operates precisely within this urgent, mobilising modality, transforming the autobiographical memoir into a potent juridical and political mechanism that actively builds a counter-archive.

Furthermore, scholarship by queer postcolonial critics such as Aniruddha Dutta emphasises that South Asian transgender and *kothi* identities fiercely resist smooth assimilation into transnational, Euro-American LGBT rights frameworks. Dutta argues that metropolitan queer theory frequently relies on the premise of a liberal, rights-bearing, and highly individualised subject (Dutta 1205). This aligns with the critiques levelled by transnational feminist scholars like Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, who warn against the imposition of universalising, Western identity categories onto Global South realities. In stark contrast to a teleological narrative of Western "coming out," hijra and *kothi* communities navigate their realities through localised, class-inflected idioms of survival, relying on complex networks of spatial negotiation, regional patronage, and kinship that globalised rights frameworks routinely render invisible.

Regional feminist criticism must also inform our reading of the regulation of the gendered and the spatial. Scholars such as C.S. Lakshmi (writing under the pseudonym Ambai) have extensively documented how gender in Tamil literature and society is rigorously policed through the control of space and the physical body. Lakshmi's critiques of the normative, caste-bound Tamil domestic sphere illuminate exactly what the hijra narrators in Revathi's text are violently exiled from. When the hijra body is forced into public hypervisibility, it directly violates the gendered spatial boundaries of traditional Tamil domesticity that Lakshmi critiques. Revathi's collection, therefore, is not merely a transgender text; it is an intervention into Tamil feminist geography, redefining who is permitted to occupy public and private spaces.

A. Mangai's "Translator's Note" traces the localised emergence of this distinct body of Tamil-language hijra writing that *Our Lives, Our Words* helped to consolidate and validate. Mangai meticulously notes that Revathi's project was preceded by formative workshops organised through the Dalit literary magazine *Pudiyā Kodangi*, which generated "short poems, prose articles and oral narratives" (x). This institutional affiliation with a Dalit publication is theoretically profound. It maps an essential intersectional solidarity between anti-caste literary movements and transgender self-representation. Dalit life-writing, as articulated by scholars like Sharmila Rege, has long weaponised the autobiographical form to expose the structural violence of Brahminical patriarchy. By emerging alongside these Dalit literary spaces, hijra life-writing utilises a similar strategy of structural critique, demonstrating how marginalised literatures build collective, anti-caste counter-publics.

Mangai subsequently places Revathi's work alongside related structural interventions, such as Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya*, Priya Babu's folklore documentation for the National Folklore Support Centre, Thilagavathy IPS's compilations, and the televised advocacy of *Ippadikku Rose* (x-xi). Recognising this multifaceted context—the global, militant theory of subaltern *testimonio*, the spatial critiques of Tamil feminism, and the highly localised

vernacular traditions catalogued by Mangai and Dutta—demonstrates that Revathi's collection is already in complex, sophisticated critical dialogue with established scholarship. It lays a formidable foundation for an indigenous, intersectional gender theory that decisively transcends mere ethnographic description and functions instead as a dynamic, collective autobiography of resistance.

Theoretical Framework: Vernacular Epistemologies

This paper draws on Judith Butler's account of gender as performative and Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality to interpret these testimonies, while supplementing them with Homi Bhabha's decolonial vocabulary of hybridity. However, the paper seeks to push these theoretical apparatuses further, arguing that the narrators in Revathi's text do not simply illustrate Western theory, but actively generate their own parallel, indigenous theoretical frameworks.

Butler's argument, most fully elaborated in *Gender Trouble*, holds that gender is not an innate, pre-social essence but a repeated, stylised set of acts that produce the appearance of a natural, binary sex. This framework is initially useful for reading Santhi Amma's insistence in the "Cultural Practices" chapter that identity precedes and exceeds bodily modification: "You do not become a hijra only after changing into a saree or performing nirvanam... The Mind is the major arbitrator... I live in the shape given to me. Whether you castrate or not, if you are a hijra, you are one!" (60). Read strictly through Butler, this statement understands hijra identity as constituted through embodied practice and communal recognition. However, to conclude the analysis there is to shortchange the primary text. Santhi Amma's declaration that "the mind is the major arbitrator" constitutes a profound piece of vernacular gender theory arising independently from within the community's own conceptual vocabulary. It posits an internal, spiritual, or psychological ontology that resists the totalising post-structuralist dissolution of

the self often found in Western queer theory. It suggests a theorisation of gender rooted in South Asian cosmological traditions where the "Mind" acts as an anchor of truth independent of anatomical determinism. Thus, the text talks back to Western performativity by insisting on a deeply localised, subjective core.

Crenshaw's intersectionality offers a necessary, materialist tool for reading how caste, class, and gender non-conformity compound one another across the narratives. Sudha Senthilkumar's account of being poisoned by her father and brother is framed explicitly in terms of caste honour: her family accuses her of having been "born to spoil our family honour and heritage by becoming a hijra" (18). Devi's and Aruna's accounts of violent disinheritance similarly reveal how gender non-conformity intersects with the patrilineal transmission of caste-marked property (21, 24). Finally, Bhabha's concept of hybridity provides a decolonial supplement, particularly for reading the collection's account of chosen kinship. The community's "in-between" space—the very space A. Mangai identifies as lost between the classical Tamil categories of *uyar tinai* and *ahrinai* (xi)—resonates with Bhabha's notion of an interstitial "third space" that unsettles binary categories from within.

Collective Testimonio and the Reclamation of Voice

The formal structure of *Our Lives, Our Words* is crucial to its political intervention. Rather than presenting a single continuous autobiography, the book assembles dozens of first-person narratives—Roja, Santhi Amma, Ranjitha, Aruna, Sundari, Sudha Senthilkumar, Devi, Kokila, Vanitha, Rajini, Rajam, Gopal Amma, Radha, and others—under thematic headings such as "Childhood and Schooling," "Parents and Society," "Work," "Love and Family Life," and "Activism". Revathi explains her motivation in the Preface: "In other countries, there are many books about people who have undergone sex change surgery, but all in English. In Tamil, we

hardly have any” (4). She writes that she “did not want to present it as an academic research work” but rather “in the form of sharing among ourselves” (4).

This framing matters because it repositions the hijra narrator not as an object of ethnographic study—the position Bhan identifies as historically dominant (viii)—but as the subject and author of her own history. Several interviewees noted that “a hijra alone can understand hijras better” and that the study would “lead to changes within the community” (5). Furthermore, as A. Mangai notes, this self-articulation responds to a long history of grammatical erasure, reversing the shift from the ancient Tamil *Tolkappiyam*, which granted transgender persons the status of *uyar tinai* (living beings with a gender marker), to the later *Nannul*, which reclassified them as *ahrinai* (non-living objects) (xi). Revathi's project restores hijras to the position of speaking, living subjects rather than ungended objects.

Hypervisibility and Invisibility: The Paradox of Public Perception

Bhan's foreword frames the collection through the paradox of hijra visibility. Hijras are hyper-visible in the sense that their bodies are mocked and made into a collective spectacle, yet invisible in the sense that their interiority goes unacknowledged. Bhan recalls a childhood memory where “that hijra became just another joke between us boys” (vii). This is echoed throughout: Ranjitha recounts being teased as “girlie” and “number nine” (10), while Rajam recalls her father complaining, “He is behaving like an ompathu!” (16). The epithet “number nine” demonstrates how ordinary language becomes a vehicle for hypervisible marking.

At the same time, an unnamed narrator poses rhetorical questions that crystallise the double bind of legal invisibility: “Aren't we citizens of this country? Don't we deserve to get voting rights, a passport, a driving license, a ration card, property rights?” (2). Kokila directly names this historical erasure: “We were not born women. We were males by birth... When we became hijras, we gave ourselves a new name” (74). Roja's narrative extends this into public space,

describing the shift from people throwing “tomatoes, eggs and vegetables” at the market to addressing them as “Auntie, what do you want?” (78). This shift from projectile violence to a term of familial address marks the movement toward a more livable social visibility achieved through the community's sustained public presence.

Familial Rejection and the Fracture of Biological Kinship

If the wider society enacts a hypervisible mockery, the biological family frequently enacts intimate violence. Sudha Senthilkumar recounts her father and brother giving her poison to “spoil our family honour” (18). Devi describes being beaten when claiming her share of family property after castration: “I was born a male before you. Today I am not a male; I have become a female. But the first share has to be mine” (24). Aruna was beaten “black and blue” and had her hair cut by relatives demanding, “Why are you putting us to shame wearing a saree? You are a studious boy” (21).

These episodes reveal violence directed at the perceived dishonouring of caste and lineage. Several narrators also describe a quieter form of violence: parents refusing to acknowledge a child's gender identity. Sudha Senthilkumar reflects, “Even now, my father accepts only my brother as his son” (21). Roja's mother is comforted by fellow hijras: “Your son is also born like this. Don't feel bad. He will live with you and us” (10), capturing a suspended state of partial recognition.

Alternative Kinship: The Third Space of the Jamaat

Against this violence, the text documents a self-organised system of chosen kinship. Rather than merely describing the Guru-chela relationship, it is vital to analyse it as a decolonial restructuring of society. Santhi Amma notes she was told, “You can touch the feet of someone whom you like and choose her as your mother... Even though you have a mother who gave you birth, you will also have a mother in the hijra community. You can visit both” (9-10). This ritual

of adoption, *madikattuthal*, does not require the repudiation of the birth family. Instead, it operates flawlessly as Bhabha's "third space"—it is a structure of supplementation rather than substitution, utilising the normative vocabulary of kinship (mother, daughter) to establish a radical, non-biological network of mutual obligation and survival.

Similarly, the *jamaat* (regional council) and the hierarchical “seven houses” governed by Nayaks (59-61) function as parallel civic institutions. When Rajam secretly adopts her brother's newborn daughter and raises her within her hijra household, explicitly warning her husband that they must share the labour of night-feeding (56-58), she performs a subversive mimicry of conventional domesticity. These acts of chosen kinship and hijra motherhood dismantle the biological determinism of the normative Indian family, replacing it with a resilient, hybridised social contract.

The Body as Battleground: Reconciling Performativity and Matter

If kinship is reimagined, gender is figured as a tension between internal conviction and physical trauma. The analytical yield here lies not in describing the physical ordeal of *nirvanam*, but in recognising the dialectic it creates with performativity. While Santhi Amma provides the theoretical framework that identity precedes bodily modification (60), the chapter “Nirvanam” forces a confrontation with the material stakes of embodiment.

Radha's stark description of the surgical removal by a *Thayamma*—"It was burning like hell. It was like sitting on a burning fire" (65)—and the subsequent forty-day recovery conceptualised as a ritual rebirth (66), underscores that gender for hijras cannot be reduced to a fluid, frictionless performance. The physical body remains the irrevocable anchor of communal entry. Kokila notes that these operations “are done in secrecy” and carry immense medical risks due to lack of resources (70). Nevertheless, this centrality of trauma is simultaneously resisted. Vanitha gives away her surgery savings, declaring, “I am not worried

about what others will say" (31), and Sudha Senthilkumar remains in male clothing due to a "terrible dilemma" (71). By analytically compressing the procedural summaries of *nirvanam*, what emerges is a sophisticated communal refusal to mandate a single, linear trajectory of physical transition, prioritising a plurality of embodied survivals.

Labour, Economic Marginalisation, and the Intersectional Bind

While the early chapters are highly theoretical regarding performativity and kinship, the chapter "Work" requires an explicitly intersectional framework to illuminate the structural trap laid for transgender bodies. The theoretical vocabulary of Butler and Bhabha drops away here, demanding the application of Crenshaw's intersectionality to understand how economic precarity, caste, and gender are fundamentally interlocked. Santhi Amma observes that despite qualifications, mainstream retailers "can only give us jobs as sweepers in government offices, hospitals and railway stations" (38). When formal employment is obtained, it is frequently accompanied by sexual exploitation. Rajam describes relentless harassment in a scooter-parts factory (42), and Sundari endures two years of sexual blackmail at a computer training centre (41).

The most analytically striking application of intersectionality, however, is found in Rajini's account of housing discrimination. Rajini states: "The rent for the house I stay in at Chennai would normally be Rs 500. But they charge Rs 800 from me as I am a hijra... We are therefore forced to take up sex work to make ends meet" (74). Through an intersectional lens, this Rs 300 penalty is not merely an inconvenience; it is a compounding structural violence. Rajini is simultaneously punished for her spatial segregation, her lack of inherited property (due to familial excommunication), and her hypervisible gender non-conformity. By drawing a direct, causal line from predatory housing economics to sex work, Rajini executes a profound sociological critique: sex work is not an innate destiny or a moral failure, but a mandated

economic outcome manufactured by discriminatory pricing and formal labour exclusion. Intersectionality reveals that without resolving class and caste-based economic terrorism, gender liberation remains materially impossible.

From Victimhood to Agency: Activism and Social Transformation

The final chapters, “Activism” and “Change,” chart a deliberate movement toward organised collective demand. Sudha Senthilkumar describes founding an organisation with thirty-five members, insisting: “There should be legal amendments brought about for the welfare of hijras” (73). Kokila records concrete institutional gains in Vellore: “We got our voting rights... we got our houses and loans too like that” (74), a direct rebuttal to the Preface's earlier questions about citizenship rights (2).

Ranjitha reports that hijras in Vellore now “live like anyone else in society” (79). Santhi Amma strikes a forward-looking optimism: “We participate in government programmes... I should say our community is developing quite well” (76). However, Vanitha's final words combine acknowledgement of struggle with momentum: “This is just the beginning. We have miles to go” (80). This phrase resists the closure of a purely redemptive narrative arc, positioning organised self-representation as an unfinished political project.

Conclusion

Our Lives, Our Words wrests the hijra life story from the hands of outside observers—doctors, journalists, and ethnographers—and places it in the hands of hijra narrators themselves. The collection's formal choice to present distinct testimonies allows it to hold several contradictions in productive tension: the coexistence of hypervisibility and legal invisibility (viii); the fracture of biological kinship alongside the flourishing of chosen kinship; the simultaneous insistence that gender identity precedes bodily modification (60) and the physical ordeal of nirvanam (65-66); and the intersectional reality of economic marginalisation. In refusing to resolve these

tensions, Revathi's collection offers what A. Mangai calls “multiple strands that converge at various points while remaining distinct and disparate” (xii)—an apt description of the book's form and a fitting rebuttal to a society that must finally understand “that it was no fault of ours but the mistake of society” (5).

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