



From Marginalisation to Empowerment: A Study of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life*

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Abstract— This paper studies the journey from marginalisation to empowerment in Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life*. It focuses on red lipstick as a visible sign of gender identity, self-expression, social judgement, and resistance. The paper uses Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to explain how gender is produced through repeated social acts and expectations. Tripathi's autobiography shows how a transgender person is often asked to behave according to the gender assigned at birth and how breaking these expectations can lead to shame, exclusion, violence, and silence. At the same time, the autobiography shows how self-expression can become a source of confidence and resistance. The paper discusses childhood, family, language, the hijra community, relationships with men, religion, work, activism, and legal rights. It also engages with existing critical studies on Tripathi's autobiography. The study argues that red lipstick changes its meaning during Tripathi's life. It can first be associated with judgement and fear, but later becomes a sign of self-acceptance and public visibility. Thus, the lipstick becomes a simple but powerful symbol of the movement from marginalisation to empowerment.

Keywords— Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, *Red Lipstick*, Judith Butler, gender performativity, transgender identity, marginalization, empowerment, hijra, gender expression, autobiography



Introduction

Transgender autobiographies are important because they allow transgender people to tell their own stories instead of allowing society to speak for them. Autobiography gives a person the authority to describe childhood, family, relationships, work, discrimination, identity, and resistance from personal experience. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* is an important Indian transgender autobiography because it connects a personal life story with wider questions of gender, sexuality, family, social acceptance, and activism. It describes the book as a narrative of the men who have been creators, supporters, lovers, benefactors, and abusers in Tripathi's life.

The present paper focuses on the meaning of red lipstick in Tripathi's autobiography. Lipstick may look like

a small and ordinary object, but its meaning changes according to the body on which it appears and the social expectations surrounding that body. For Tripathi, feminine appearance is connected with her struggle to understand and express her gender. The colour red also has strong meanings in Indian culture and can be associated with femininity, beauty, power, celebration, and tradition. Therefore, red lipstick becomes useful for understanding the larger struggle over who has the right to express gender openly.

The paper uses Judith Butler as its only main theorist. Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain why clothes, makeup, gestures, language, and bodily appearance become important in gender identity. Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are

said to be its results" (33). In simple words, this means that gender is not only something that exists inside a person; it is also produced and recognised through repeated actions and social meanings. This idea is useful in reading Tripathi because society repeatedly tells her how a person assigned male at birth should behave, while her own expression repeatedly challenges those expectations.

The main argument of this paper is that Tripathi's red lipstick represents a movement from social judgement to self-acceptance and empowerment. The lipstick does not itself create empowerment. Rather, its meaning changes as Tripathi becomes more confident about her identity and becomes increasingly visible in public life. The study therefore reads lipstick as a symbol of gender expression and as a small but meaningful form of resistance to the demand that transgender people hide themselves.

Judith Butler and Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is the main theoretical basis of this paper. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler challenges the idea that gender is a fixed and natural identity that exists separately from social life. She explains that gender is produced through repeated acts. She describes gender as "the stylized repetition of acts" (179). She also writes, "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (34). These statements are important for this study because Tripathi's identity is repeatedly expressed through clothes, makeup, speech, gestures, and public behaviour.

Butler's argument does not mean that a person simply chooses a gender in the same way that one chooses an outfit. "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler 33). Gender acts take place within social rules. People are rewarded when they fit those rules and can be punished when they do not. Therefore, when Tripathi wears feminine clothes or lipstick, her action becomes meaningful because society has already decided that certain forms of appearance belong to women and not to men. Her appearance makes the gender rules visible.

Butler also writes, "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" ("Imitation and Gender Insubordination" 21). This helps us question the idea that there is only one correct way of being a woman or a man. Tripathi's life shows that femininity can be expressed in a transgender body and that the social meaning of femininity is not limited to one biological category. Her use of red lipstick therefore challenges the belief that feminine appearance has only one legitimate owner.

Red Lipstick as a Sign of Gender Identity

Red lipstick is especially important because it makes gender expression visible. Makeup is commonly associated with femininity, and lipstick can therefore become a strong sign of feminine appearance. For Tripathi, such signs are connected with the process of becoming comfortable with her identity. Her later public use of feminine appearance shows a movement from hiding to visibility. "My story is not about becoming a woman. It's about being Laxmi" (Tripathi 195).

Tripathi's red lipstick can therefore be read through Butler's idea that gender is produced through repeated acts. Wearing lipstick repeatedly makes feminine identity visible. When society says that a person assigned male at birth should not wear lipstick, it is enforcing a gender rule. When Tripathi continues to wear it, the same act becomes a refusal to accept that rule as absolute.

The colour red also has a strong place in Indian cultural life. It can suggest beauty, power, celebration, marriage, and feminine presence. Therefore, red lipstick can be read not simply as a foreign symbol but as a cultural sign that Tripathi uses to express herself. The significance lies in who is allowed to use that sign and how society reacts when a transgender woman uses it openly. She embraces contradictions: "I've been a bar dancer, a sex worker, a UN speaker, a hijra guru. I am all of these and none of these" (Tripathi 190).

The Men in Tripathi's Life

The subtitle *The Men in My Life* draws attention to the different roles played by men. Tripathi presents men as family members, lovers, friends, supporters, strangers, and people who can also cause harm. The memoir does not describe all men in the same way. Instead, it shows how relationships can contain care, desire, control, rejection, and support at the same time.

The book's own description calls these men "creators, preservers, lovers, benefactors, and abusers." This range is important because the problem is not simply individual men. The deeper problem is the social expectation that masculinity must remain within a narrow form and that transgender femininity is something to be hidden or mocked.

Tripathi's discussion of patriarchy is especially direct. She writes, "This 'manliness', then, is just a show, nothing but a convenient construct, a pretence to keep patriarchy alive, to keep women tamed" (165). She continues, "Patriarchy doesn't leave you even when you're gay, does it? It only becomes about power" (165–66). These statements connect well with Butler's understanding of gender as a social system rather than a simple natural fact.

Tripathi shows that gender expectations are also connected with power.

Hijra Community and Belonging

The hijra community provides Tripathi with an alternative space of belonging. "The Indian hijra community encompasses persons with a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations, forming a culturally unique gender group" (Kalra and Shah 171). When mainstream family and society do not fully accept a transgender person, community can provide relationships, cultural practices, and a sense of identity. However, Tripathi does not present the hijra community as perfect. She also shows its internal rules and problems.

Tripathi writes, "I was lonely and feeling absolutely claustrophobic in the hijra culture" (26). This quotation is important because it prevents a simple victim-versus-hero reading. A community can provide belonging and still contain restrictions. Tripathi later states, "the politics around queer activism sickened us and we wanted to build a new space for it" (27). This quotation shows that empowerment also means creating new spaces rather than simply asking old institutions for acceptance. The movement from marginalisation to empowerment therefore involves both resistance and institution-building.

Religion, Culture, and Gender

Tripathi's engagement with religion is also important. Indian religious and cultural traditions contain stories and figures that allow gender to be imagined in more than one form. This creates a contradiction when gender-diverse people are respected in mythology but rejected in everyday life. Tripathi's discussion encourages readers to question this contradiction rather than simply rejecting religion. "The Hijra identity in India is closely linked with the traditional livelihood of the community" (Nayak and Panda 68).

The meaning of red also becomes important here. Red can be connected with feminine power, celebration, ritual, and religious practice. When Tripathi wears red lipstick, the colour can therefore be read as part of a wider cultural vocabulary of femininity. Her use of the colour becomes a way of claiming visibility within, rather than outside, Indian cultural meanings.

Economic Marginalisation

Economic marginalisation is another important part of Tripathi's story. Transgender people can face barriers in education and employment because of discrimination. Tripathi's experiences of dance and other forms of work need to be understood within this limited choice of opportunities. "Transgender individuals in India face entrenched economic marginalization, often being

pushed into informal 'survival' activities such as sex work and begging" (Raja and Khan). Social exclusion can reduce the number of jobs available to a person and then society may blame that person for the work she is forced to do.

Tripathi explains that transgender people are "visibly trans" (24). This short phrase is important because visibility can become both a problem and a source of strength. "The term transgender broadly describes individuals who self-identify with a gender other than that assigned to them at birth" (McDermott et al. 2). A person who cannot easily hide a transgender identity may face discrimination in workplaces, but public visibility can also challenge the idea that transgender people should remain invisible. "Individuals whose gender identity and/or expression differs from the sex assigned to them at birth" (Wandrekar et al. 196).

"Feminist movements have fought for women's suffrage, equal pay, reproductive rights, and an end to gender-based violence. LGBTQ+ rights movements have advocated for the decriminalization of same-sex relationships, marriage equality, and protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity" (Panday 1325). Feminist movements and LGBTQ+ rights movements both fight for equality and freedom. Feminist movements have worked so that women get the right to vote, receive equal pay for the same work, have control over their own bodies, and live free from violence. LGBTQ+ rights movements have fought so that people can love who they want without being treated as criminals, can marry the person they love, and are protected from discrimination because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In society today, transgender people are also part of this fight. We are seeing more awareness about transgender rights — like legal recognition of a third gender, access to education and jobs, and protections against harassment. But at the same time, many trans people still face judgment in homes, schools, and workplaces, and are told how they should look or behave. So just like women and LGBTQ+ people, transgender people are also asking for respect, safety, and the freedom to live as their true selves.

"Understanding how gender and sexuality interact with other social identities including race, class, and disability is crucial. Because of this intersectionality, distinct experiences of marginalization and discrimination are produced (Panday 1326).

Tripathi also writes, "I am going through a difficult time personally, I act even stronger when I don the persona" (34). The quotation shows how public strength can sometimes be consciously created even when private life is difficult. Her public identity becomes part of her activism and her ability to speak for others.

Activism, Law, and Empowerment

Tripathi's movement into activism changes the position from which she speaks. She is no longer only the person being judged; she becomes someone who questions the people and institutions doing the judging. Her autobiography therefore becomes a form of public speech.

Tripathi states, "I firmly believe that even if you have the best laws, unless you change the mindset of people, nothing will change" (5). She describes changing the popular mindset as "true activism" (5). This is a useful statement for understanding the paper's central argument. Legal recognition is necessary, but social attitudes must also change.

The 2014 NALSA judgment is an important background to this movement because the Supreme Court recognised transgender identity and important rights connected with self-determination and equality. However, the autobiography reminds us that legal recognition does not automatically remove everyday prejudice. The movement toward empowerment must therefore happen both through law and through ordinary social behaviour.

From Marginalisation to Empowerment

The movement in Tripathi's autobiography is gradual. She begins with confusion, social pressure, and ridicule. "Queer identities in India are not simply about sexuality or gender; they are about resistance to oppression, about challenging power structures that marginalise" (Narain 88).

She then finds language and community through which she can express herself. Later, she becomes publicly visible as an activist. The meaning of red lipstick changes along this journey. It is connected first with gender difference and judgement and later with confidence and self-expression.

Butler's theory helps explain why this change is important. Gender rules are repeated through everyday acts, but repeated acts can also expose the limits of those rules. Tripathi's continued use of feminine appearance challenges the belief that only one kind of body can legitimately express femininity. The act of appearing as herself becomes a way of questioning the social rule that asks her to hide.

Empowerment in this autobiography is therefore not simply becoming famous or successful. It means gaining the ability to speak, work, form relationships, participate in public life, and express gender without constantly being punished for it. Red lipstick becomes a simple symbol of this larger right to visibility.

CONCLUSION

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life presents both her personal struggle and the wider social challenges faced by transgender people. Her journey shows how gender expectations begin in childhood and continue through family, society, relationships, and institutions. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain how Tripathi challenges these expectations through her clothes, language, makeup, and public identity.

Her red lipstick becomes more than a cosmetic choice; it becomes a symbol of identity, visibility, and resistance. Her statement that "gender is nothing but an unromantic box" reflects the limitations created by fixed gender categories, while her belief in fighting for one's "personal truth" shows her movement towards empowerment. Thus, the red lipstick represents Tripathi's journey from marginalisation to self-acceptance, freedom, and empowerment.

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