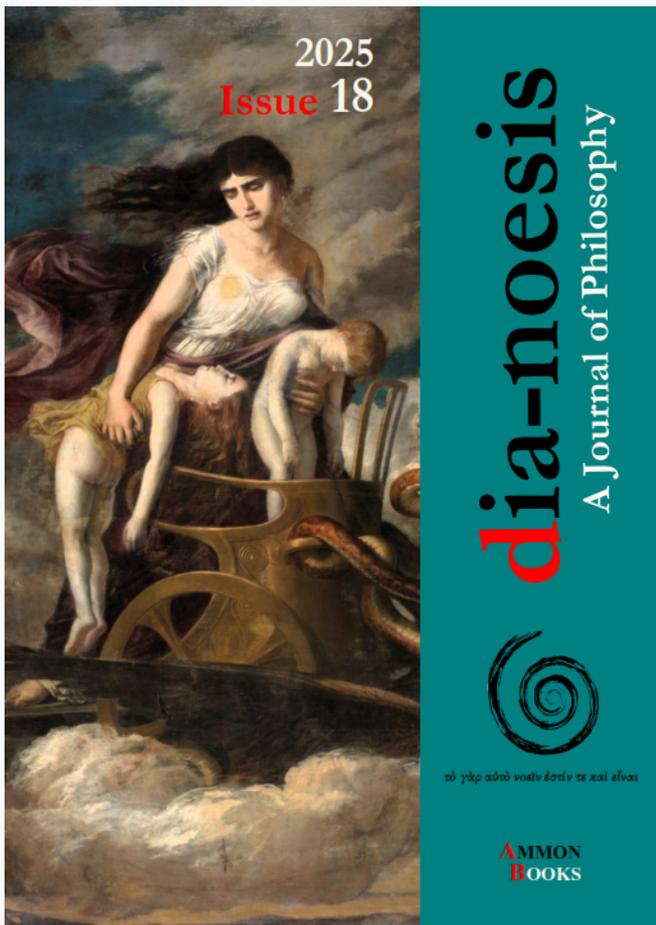


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Trauma, Exile, and Cultural Displacement



### Trauma, Ontological Exile, and the Trans Self:

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## Trauma, Ontological Exile, and the Trans Self: Reading Transgender Autobiographical Narratives from the Global South

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### **Abstract**

Scholarly understanding of exile usually foregrounds the forced displacement of human beings from one geographical location to another due to war, violence, or fear of persecution. However, exile is also a psychological state of being caused by external factors that need not necessarily be limited to the physicality of dislodgement from a sense of home. This paper explores exile as an ontological condition informed by experiences of trauma, selfhood, and marginalisation from the vantage point of transgender lived experiences from India. The philosophical engagement of these ideas is exemplified by the autobiographical work of a transgender woman, A. Revathi, titled *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. The paper facilitates dialogues between narrativising trauma, psychological exile, and the trans self-using interdisciplinary frameworks of Paul Ilie, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edward W. Said, Judith Butler, Cathy Caruth, Sara Ahmed, and Shoshana Felman to examine the interconnection between thoughts

on trauma, testimony, inner exile, lived experiences, queer phenomenology, and gender performativity. The study observes that the reclamation of transgender selfhood emerges through the act of self-narration. It also reimagines exile and trauma as philosophical processes of self-awareness and becoming.

**Keywords:** *ontological exile, transgender trauma, autobiographical narratives, transgender existential displacement, politics of unbelonging*

## Introduction

The experience of exile is generally associated with geographical displacement that is fueled by various reasons, from war and violence to political and personal causes. The notion of being cast out from the space that one calls home forms the basis of exile, which attributes to the word a spatial significance. However, exile can also mean one's expulsion from one's own existence and one's state of being. In this regard, exile becomes an ontological condition that transcends geographical displacement and includes the displacement from one's idea of the self. The exiled self belongs outside the purview of society, transitioning into a self that is aware of its fragility and unbelonging in the social makeup. In this context, trauma that informs exile cannot be limited to physical inflictions of violence and instead, also takes the form of social, cultural, and political stigmatisation of the non-normative self that questions one's existence in the world as a dislodged member of the social fabric. This metaphysical homelessness that serves as the traumatic enforcer of the lived experiences of the exiled will be studied in this paper through transgender lived experiences from India, with reference to A. Revathi's autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. The paper positions itself within a non-Western philosophical standpoint to facilitate dialogues of existence, exile, and trauma from the vantage point of transgender identities. The study leans on seminal and contemporary works of philosophy to contextualise identity politics of being the unrecognised subject to expose the philosophical depth of trauma and exile in trans narratives. Some of the ideas that inform this paper include the notion of exile as posited by Edward W. Said, Paul Ilie's concept of inner exile, Merleau-Ponty's lived body and embodied subject, Cathy Caruth's theorisations of trauma, Shoshana Felman's notions of testimony and witnessing trauma, Sara Ahmed's

queer phenomenology, and Judith Butler's ideas of gender performativity and recognition. The unbecoming of the trans self-dictates that the transgender person must fight to be seen, known, and named to release themselves from the condition of ontological exile and make sense of their existence. This paper draws associations between trauma experienced by transgender people and ontological exile, and their negotiations with the experiences of social ostracisation and marginalisation. It also addresses questions about locating the trans self at the nexus of rebuilding selfhood through narrative practices and embracing the othered self. This paper is also motivated by progressivism, which is 'both a belief that social conditions can improve for those now oppressed and a commitment to that improvement'<sup>1</sup>. Aimed at provoking philosophical discussions on transgender subjectivities, ontological exile, and trauma, this paper seeks to contribute to the paradigm of phenomenological philosophical thought, intersectional studies, and transgender scholarship. It also reorients the global academic attention towards Asian queer contexts that have been underrepresented within the school of philosophy.

### **Conceptualising Exile, Trauma, Queer Phenomenology and Transgender Identity**

What does it mean to be driven away from the place that one considers their home? What happens to the sense of belonging when one is untethered from their roots? How does one negotiate between their geographical rootedness and their integrity towards their intersectional identities? These questions fuel the dialogues of exile, trauma, and selfhood with which this study seeks to engage. As opposed to the academic majority that discusses exile as a geographical estrangement due to political reasons, this paper argues for the need to study internal or psychological exile as an essential branch of philosophical thought to encourage alternative visualisations of exile as an ontological state of existence. Within the conventional system of understanding exile as physical displacement, the philosophical reading undertaken in this paper is an attempt to establish that it is also an ontological condition that

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<sup>1</sup> Zack N., 2024: 1

displaces transgender people's notions of selfhood in a socio-cultural climate that forces them to distance themselves from what they believe constitutes their identity. For this purpose, this section begins by contextualising exile as primarily a physical displacement as understood by dominant thoughts. It then derives dialogues on exile as an internal conflict of one's state of being against the backdrop of transgender identities, also building on ideas of trauma, intersectionality, and marginalisation.

Edward W. Said defines exile as 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home'<sup>2</sup> and conceives of the affective evocations of exile as an 'essential sadness' that cannot be removed<sup>3</sup>. Often, those who are exiled are forced to flee from their homeland due to fear of persecution, acts of violence, war, human rights issues, and other such reasons informed by 'mass violence and horror'<sup>4</sup>. The dominant philosophical enquiries into exile make connections between political displacement and nationalism<sup>5</sup>, foregrounding the lived experiences of the exiled with nationalist thought and discourses on the nation, belongingness, and homeland. These debates on exile exist in conjunction with layered intersectional politics concerning race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, caste, religion, nationality, and other identity markers<sup>6</sup>. Intersectional approaches have been adopted by various disciplines, from literary studies, law, social sciences, and cultural studies. However, philosophical investigations into intersectionality primarily cover Western contexts and non-Western identities within Western spaces. In the context of exile, this includes intersectional experiences of the people displaced from countries like India, China, North Korea, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Pakistan, Nepal, South Africa, and who have settled in Western geographies like the United States of America, Canada, and England. Here, the intersectionalities of race, gender, class, and ethnicity inform the trauma faced by the exiled in their home countries and the newly inhabited locales. Therefore, in the broadest sense, thoughts on exile revolve around those who have experienced estrangement from the geographical spaces that they call

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<sup>2</sup> Said E.W., 2002: 173.

<sup>3</sup> Said E.W., 2002: 173.

<sup>4</sup> Rojas M.S., Nuñez J. A. & Erices G. N., 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Said, E. W., 2002: 176.

<sup>6</sup> Crenshaw K., 1989; Crenshaw K., 1991.

home. However, the focus of this study is on psychological exile that is enforced upon members of society who do not adhere to the rules of normativity established by oppressive dominant ideologies and institutions.

Drawing on Paul Ilie's work, *Literature and Inner Exile: Authoritarian Spain, 1939-1975*, exile can be seen as a mental state of being. It is 'a state of mind whose emotions and values respond to separation and severance as conditions in themselves'<sup>7</sup>. The estrangement caused by exile emerges from the adherence to values that stand in contrast with accepted values of society, according to Ilie. This can be extended to include the purview of trans identities being in a state of exile due to their innate refusal to adhere to what society conceives of as male and female. For A. Revathi, a transgender woman in India, her identity as a woman is an internal reality that the conservative society finds difficult to accept. In addition to the loss of place and the loss of the homeland, exile also means the loss of the self. In the state of exile, the trans subjects occupy a liminal or an in-between space<sup>8</sup> in which they are neither completely recognised nor completely excluded, trapping them in a state of constant negotiation of their identities with the conditions of the society. For Revathi, the subject position of the exiled is inscribed within liminality, the depth of existence wavering between being and non-being, not knowing where she belongs when shrouded by an unsettling state of dislodgement. This creates a sense of alienation, which Ilie observes as an element of inner exile that indicates the severance of a trans person from their sense of self. Building on the phenomenological understanding of selfhood that perceives subjectivity as a relational and disjointed lens, alienation can be understood as a phenomenon that is causative of and emergent from psychological exile. Considering insights from Merleau-Ponty's notion of the embodied subject, the self understands itself and the world through the lived body, which acts in association with the mind<sup>9</sup> and the stimuli from the surroundings. Critiquing the philosophers who 'had become so caught up in the abstractions and theorisations about the world that they'd moved far away from the texture of what real life, as

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<sup>7</sup> Ilie P., 1980: 2.

<sup>8</sup> Gennep A.V., 1960; Turner V., 1966; Bhabha H.K., 2004

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., 2002.

an experience and phenomenon, was actually like'<sup>10</sup>, Merleau-Ponty employed phenomenology to implement his argument that 'true philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world'<sup>11</sup>. By adopting the cathartic expression of her feminine selfhood and her identity as a woman in the form of writing an autobiographical narrative of her lived experiences, understood through her body and mind, Revathi's narrative incites dialogues that further scholarly discussions framed within the larger ontological context of transgender phenomenology. Therefore, transgender literary narratives serve as a space that fuels discussions on the exiled body as a site of experiencing, negotiating, and challenging alienation. By positioning these thinkers in dialogue with each other, the phenomenological lens offered by this study reveals that the exile of the transgender body is a lived condition that is intimate, public, and political simultaneously.

Additionally, the experience of exile is inevitably linked to trauma. While the traumatic influences on spatial exile in the geographical and nationalist sense include macro events of war, violence, religious and ethnic persecution, human rights violations, and economic exploitation, the overlap of trauma with the non-normative exiled body includes both macro and micro levels at which trauma is generated. Cathy Caruth theorises trauma to be evasive from complete integration within consciousness. In her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth explains that during the events that engender trauma, one is unable to grasp it in its entirety and encounters it in later stages when it resurfaces in various ways.<sup>12</sup> Signifying the belated understanding of the repercussions of specific experiences and events on one's psyche, trauma strikes its presence in knowable and unknowable ways that often transcend comprehension. The trauma associated with the experiences of internal exile by transgender people in Indian society has socio-cultural, historical, and political dimensions that add to the lived experiences of trans exile. The philosophical implications of Caruth's claim that trauma is a 'repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site'<sup>13</sup> are many. The very idea that trauma cannot be

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<sup>10</sup> Nixon D., 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., 2002: xxiii.

<sup>12</sup> Caruth C., 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Caruth C., 1995: 10

limited to a particular event alone, and that its manifestations come in temporal waves, argues for channels through which such trauma can be processed, negotiated, experienced, and tackled. The traumatic experiences of being a transwoman in India are built on the foundation of the historical marginalisation of gender non-conforming people and the political invisibilisation of such members of society who are consequently forced into the peripheries. Contemporary philosophical thoughts on transgender experiences in a conservative, developing nation call for an understanding of the political perception of transgender people in India. While the social stigma towards trans people extends to all strata of the Indian society, the legal recognition of transgender people, especially the ruling of the Supreme Court of India regarding transgender people's constitutional rights and the 'right to self-determined identity',<sup>14</sup> *theoretically* legitimised their existence in India. The legitimacy is theoretical instead of actual integration with society because the lived experiences of transgender people continue to be entrenched within subjugation, alienation, and oppression despite their legal rights. It is in this context that this study locates trauma within the transgender exiled body.

The exiled and traumatised self of the gendered and sexualised body is also informed by the manner in which it is oriented. Sara Ahmed expounds on the theory of queer phenomenology in her work *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), arguing that the orientation of a body in society inhabits spaces that are bound by norms of gender and sexuality<sup>15</sup>. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty's relationality of spatial forms, Ahmed locates what she calls migrant orientation, describing it as 'the lived experience of facing at least two directions: toward a home that has been lost, and to a place that is not yet home'<sup>16</sup>. The migrant orientation in the context of those facing internal displacement can be understood in terms of the duality of existence proposed by Ahmed. When ostracised by their own family and communities, the trans person loses the home that they were born into, signifying the first level of orientation. This emerges from being out of place in a setting that rationalises non-queer existence and marginalises queer ones. The second level of orientation of the exiled trans body is towards

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<sup>14</sup> Kumar G. & Chadha A., 2025: 84

<sup>15</sup> Ahmed S., 2006. Cf., Mitrou Y., & Kolyri C., 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Ahmed S., 2006.

a community of fellow trans people who form the new home. Drawing from Revathi's lived experiences, this second home is formed by the *hijra* community, which provides her with a space closest to home despite its shortcomings. The members of the community trained Revathi in the performative ways of being a hijra, teaching her to embody her femininity in a manner that was, in fact, socially prescribed yet fulfilling to her. The phenomenological orientation of the trans self also needs to be discussed against the backdrop of the historical reorientation of the perception of transgender women in India. For instance, the mythological association of the hijra community in India spoke of reverence and respect.

The ontological applications of exile, trauma, and transgender identities, as conceptualised in this section, lead to the following question: What is the relevance of Revathi's autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, in the philosophical ideation of psychological exile and trauma? The rationale behind the adoption of a literary foundation to address this larger philosophical question is rooted in Shoshana Felman's conceptualisation of testimony in her thoughts on trauma studies. People who witness events that cause trauma have the power to use the articulation of their experiences in the form of a testimony to process traumatic occurrences, sharing these experiences with the world, and finding comfort through the cathartic release of repressed stories. In this context, literature serves as an outlet for expressing traumatic experiences. Therefore, autobiographical narratives are important critical tools that can be used to understand how trauma impacts a person's consciousness and self-perception. In Revathi's autobiography, she offers vignettes of her lived experiences as a transgender woman in the Indian context, recounting instances that are embedded within structural inequality and transmissia. These accounts serve as a fertile ground for philosophical discussions on the ontology of inner exile and trauma, exploring displacements of the inner self from rightful existence and well-being that also manifest as physical displacement and the trauma of gendered violence. Through Revathi's narrative, notions of spatiality, temporality, and ethical consciousness are debated from the context of transgender experiences from the Global South.

## The Trans Self, Gendered Trauma and Ontological Exile

Edward W. Said's position that 'exile is a solitude experienced outside the group'<sup>17</sup> reflects Revathi's exiled transgender subjectivity that renders her in a perpetual state of disconnect from society. The trans self in exile is therefore 'fundamentally a discontinuous state of being'<sup>18</sup> which experiences ostracisation owing to its non-normative ontologies that occupy the peripheries of a heteropatriarchal transmissive society. While Said's approach to exile draws from nationalist and geographical notions of exile, the philosophical reading of exile through the lenses of trans narratives and traumatic experiences undertaken in this study aligns with Caruth's understanding of trauma as a persistent and stubborn wound<sup>19</sup>. In a world that believes in the binaristic view of gender and sexuality, the transgender person is perceived as an anomaly owing to the contradiction between their gender assigned at birth and the gender they embody. Reflecting on Moore's Paradox within the context of trans selfhood<sup>20</sup>, the tense relationship between unbiased reality and subjective belief emerges as opposing forces in which the physiological gendered label stands in contrast with the epistemic understanding of the gendered self. Here, exile is experienced by the transgender person when they are forced to move away from the knowledge about themselves. Grounding this thought on *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, Revathi's understanding of herself as a woman is refuted by her socio-cultural contexts and communities, who perceived her as a man, forcing a rift between who she is and who they want her to be.

Consequently, the body becomes the primary site of exile as it is psychologically forced to leave what it considers to be its home. To elaborate, the psyche of the transgender woman is exiled as she is forced to disassociate herself with her female identity and occupy the liminal space of social outcasts. The temporal displacement experienced by Revathi occurs only when her feminine identity is revealed to others, indicating how one's sense of self is constituted not only by one's awareness of oneself but also by the validation

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<sup>17</sup> Said E.W., 2002: 177.

<sup>18</sup> Said E.W., 2002: 177

<sup>19</sup> Caruth C., 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Brakel L.A.W.

of other people. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty's notions of embodiment, the transgender body becomes a lived body<sup>21</sup> that experiences trauma and exile from the impact of social negligence that strips the non-normative person of recognition and discards them at the fringes of society. Using the lived experiences of Revathi as an example, the lived body as the bearer of transformation, trauma, and exile can be seen in her following statement:

'I experienced changes in my body and in my being. I experienced a growing sense of irrepressible femaleness, which haunted me, day in and day out. A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought of myself. But how could that be? Would the world accept me thus? I longed to be known as a woman and felt pain at being considered a man.'<sup>22</sup>

This internal conflict of not being able to actualise her innate womanhood becomes the premise for her ontological exile, where her state of being itself is questioned and negated. The psychological impact of cultural ostracisation and becoming the victim of social ridicule leads to her internal dislocation from being able to express herself, constituting the first stage of exile. An instance from the autobiographical narrative can be taken in order to spatialise this psychological exile. During the *Mariamman*<sup>23</sup> festival in Revathi's village, she dressed up as a *kurathi*<sup>24</sup> at the behest of other boys who also dressed up for the festival as 'bears and tigers, policemen, gods, and *kurathis*'<sup>25</sup>. While the others perceived her as a boy disguised as a girl, she was self-aware, existing as a woman who knew she looked beautiful.<sup>26</sup> In the same festival in the subsequent year, too, she dressed up to dance. Herein lies the significance of drawing phenomenological understandings from autobiographical narratives. Revathi's ontological awareness that she 'had not worn a disguise' rather, she had 'given form to [her] real feelings'<sup>27</sup> advances the idea of selfhood trapped within social

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<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Revathi A., 2010: 14-15.

<sup>23</sup> A Hindu Goddess

<sup>24</sup> A female gypsy

<sup>25</sup> Revathi A., 2010: 11-12

<sup>26</sup> Revathi A., 2010: 12

<sup>27</sup> Revathi A., 2010: 16

perceptions of normative existence. Though the teenage transgender girl asserted the reality about her identity to herself, the manifestation of this awareness also attracted anger, judgment, and ridicule from those who perceived her reality as a fallacy.

Additionally, the displaced transgender person asserts their gendered existence in known performatives of masculinity and femininity. Butler's contention that gender is a state of doing refers to the performative nature of the construct. She argues that 'gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being'<sup>28</sup>. Posing Butler's thoughts on gender performativity in conversation with phenomenological ideas on the psychological exile of trans subjects reveals that Revathi's manifestation of her female identity as a child deemed a male included performative actions of femininity. This is exemplified by the following extract from her autobiography:

'I played only girls' games. I loved to sweep the front yard clean and draw the kolam every morning. I even helped my mother in the kitchen, sweeping and swabbing, washing vessels. My work was certainly not tidy, not like that of grown-up women. But all the same, I would do it with confidence. On days when the kolam outside the yard opposite ours was more beautiful, I would smudge the marks with my feet and flee before I was discovered. As soon as I got home from school, I would wear my sister's long skirt and blouse, twist a long towel around my head, and let it trail down my back like a braid. I would then walk as if I were a shy bride, my eyes to the ground, and everyone would laugh.'<sup>29</sup>

Here, Revathi expressed herself 'with confidence'<sup>30</sup> as a child, before social stigma stifled her and banished her into a state of exile. Being ridiculed by her family, friends, and other villagers marks the onset of her awareness that her expression of her selfhood stands against the 'prevailing values', in the words of Ilie<sup>31</sup>,

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<sup>28</sup> Butler J., 1990: 33; Kakoliris, 2025.

<sup>29</sup> Revathi A., 2010: 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> Revathi A., 2010: 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ilie P., 1980: 2.

of the culture of her geographical home. This brings into question her rootedness within the realm of her village, located in Salem, in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu. The spatial association of exile is relevant in tracing the transformation of a young human being who was at home in the metaphysical sense to being displaced not only from her hometown but also from her awareness of her identity. The autobiographical narrative of Revathi traces her dislocation from her village to various parts of India in an attempt to find a home and a sense of community. The ontological underpinnings of Revathi's narrative shed light on the experiences of transgender people in India, marked by persecution and punishment for performing their gender that is much removed from their assigned gender at birth. In her work *An Account of Oneself*, Butler posits that the self is never self-constituted as its making is influenced by the norms of society, the pressure to perform the self in accordance with accepted behaviour, and the historical and cultural conditions that dictate molds of selfhood. In the case of transgender people, their gendered existence is often distorted by systemic structures that enforce the pressure of legitimising the social membership of transgender people by politicising their selfhood and gendered identity.

Consequently, philosophical renderings of the notion of recognition<sup>32</sup>, as opined by Butler, are essential in this context to understand the trauma of invisibility and ostracisation of trans subjectivities. When the trans identity is denied recognition, the ontological and epistemic rootedness located within the conscious awareness of transgender people's gendered identity is negated, conferring upon them an unlivable existence<sup>33</sup>. This notion of living an 'unlivable life' is borrowed from Butler, who argues that 'certain humans are recognized as less than human, and that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life'<sup>34</sup>. Here, non-recognition paves the way to the erasure of one's identity and selfhood. Transposing this notion to the context of transgender people's lived experiences in India, the absence of recognition of Revathi as a transgender woman stems from an ideological refusal to accept intersectional identities that defy what constitutes normativity, and this gap between accepted womanhood and transgender

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<sup>32</sup> Butler, J., 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Butler J., 2004: 8

<sup>34</sup> Butler J., 2004 2

womenhood gives unlivable and traumatic characteristics to Revathi's life. Moreover, it is integral to note that an understanding of the influence of societal recognition of the transgender person calls for an awareness of the role of external forces in validating one's identity. Anybody with intersectional non-normative identities is exiled from the normative categories of existence that have been historically formulated and reconstituted with time, bringing in such awareness about the extent to which the stigmatised self is dependent on others for recognition. Locating these thoughts in Revathi's narratives shows how the state of being unrecognised<sup>35</sup> as a woman leads her to an existential crisis, as indicated by her thoughts following the *Mariamman* festival: 'Reluctantly, I changed into my regular clothes. As I re-emerged in my man's garb, I felt that I was in disguise, and that I had left my real self behind<sup>36</sup>. This brings into question Moore's Paradox, drawing from the association of this paradox with the trans self by Linda Brakel in her work, *Investigations into the Trans Self and Moore's Paradox*. Brakel proposes 'a new ontological phenotype' that argues for the categories of 'trans-man' and 'trans-woman' to be inscribed within the mainstream gender binary, bringing in biological and empirical studies to strengthen her philosophical arguments.<sup>3738</sup> While weaving such categorisations into the social framework may ease the experience of internal exile by transgender people, it also contributes to the larger problem of essentialising the gender binary, whether in cisgender or transgender contexts. Consequently, there arises a need to not only broaden the existing vocabulary of identities related to gender and sexuality but also formulate a practical way of disseminating inclusive practices within different strata of society in everyday language, vocabulary, and culture.

While the lived body becomes a site of ontological exile when placed at the juncture of self-awareness and social stigma, physical

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<sup>35</sup> Butler, J., 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Revathi A., 2010: 16

<sup>37</sup> Brakel L.A.W.

<sup>38</sup> The sensitive way of using the word transgender is as an adjective and not a noun. For example, do not use 'transwoman'. Instead use 'trans woman'. Further insights into the correct usage of terms associated with the word 'transgender' can be found in the "Glossary of Terms: Transgender" published by GLAAD Media Reference Guide.

displacement adds to the internalisation of the experience of exile of a trans person. Exile, in its literal sense, occurs when the body and self are dislodged from physical spaces that the lived body had perceived as its home. This second stage of exile has physical implications, including violence, spatial displacement, and unbelonging. Finding a community within the mental state of displacement becomes pivotal in the life of Revathi as a teenager. A sense of community is built when she befriends four people like her, who were perceived by society as men. The spatial implications of the perpetual state of exile can be traced to the top of a hill that these women frequented, disguised in their male bodies and preserving their self-awareness as women. Locations such as the hilltop serve as the host land that offers a space for the exiled to rest and be themselves. This geographical movement, in its initial stages, can be understood as the process of rehomeing, in which finding pockets of safety within a hostile environment contributes to inner peace and stability. However, these seemingly safe spaces are inscribed within the heteronormative cis-patriarchal setting, making them susceptible to encroachment by enforcers of dominant cultures. To contextualise this thought within the lived experiences documented in transgender narratives, consider the following scenario recounted by Revathi:

‘Those who come to visit the hill-fort do so in the mornings and are all gone by sunset. We, on the other hand, went up the hill only after 6 o’clock, and since there was no one around then, we felt we could be women and do as we pleased. The odd rowdy did come up the hill, and whenever we saw them come in a group, we fled. One evening, though, two rowdies caught hold of one of my thozhis<sup>39</sup> and marched her off, further up the hill. We could not fight with them, but neither did we want to leave until she was back with us. After about half an hour, and much to our relief, she returned. She looked exhausted. Sweat ran down her face, and she could barely walk.’<sup>40</sup>

Revathi continues to elaborate on the harrowing tale of the sexual assault of her friend, which becomes one of the first instances

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<sup>39</sup> ‘Female comrades’ as noted in Revathi A., 2010: 18

<sup>40</sup> Revathi A., 2010: 18-19

of horrific violence faced by trans women recounted in the autobiography. The fear of persecution by cisgender men who objectify transgender women and inflict physical and sexual violence on them becomes the source of an inexplicable, deep-seated trauma that manifests in different scenarios throughout the lives of these women.<sup>41</sup> The narrative politicises the trauma of sexual violence as the result of an unjust, patriarchal society with failing legal systems that serve only a few dominant groups. Though Felman's theorisation of trauma as the 'radical crisis of witnessing' is in the context of being a witness to the Holocaust, the concept also applies to the context of this study in that it enlists the physically and mentally abused trans self at the crossroads between wanting to speak about their trauma and the overwhelming impossibility of articulating their woundedness.<sup>42</sup> Revathi's testimony, as seen in this excerpt, is a testimony of how her identity is questioned by herself and society, and of how her trauma becomes a collective event that transcends her individuality and becomes an anthem for transgender people.

Additionally, the autobiographical narrativisation of the *hijra* experience cannot be reduced to trauma narratives. They also signify a reorientation from being the persecuted to being at home in a new yet familiar and welcoming community, as experienced by a migrant<sup>43</sup>. Ahmed's philosophical approaches to queer phenomenology prove vital in understanding the integration of the non-normative exiled self within a host community. Revathi's travel to Delhi amounted to fleeing from a land she considered home by birth to a space where she was at home with fellow sisters from her community. The journey itself can be viewed as the process of reorientation from a disoriented self that was excluded by dominant bodies towards embracing new possibilities of existence in spaces that redefined what it meant to be a transgender woman whose existence was welcomed. The physical journey of the exiled self can be seen as leading to a transformed ontological awareness of a self-actualised transgender body, as signified by the following introspection by Revathi on joining her guru at the *hijra* community in Delhi: 'I am not a man now. I am a woman and I have a

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<sup>41</sup> Caruth C., 1996.

<sup>42</sup> Felman S. & Laub D., 1991: xviii.

<sup>43</sup> Ahmed S., 2006.

family with a mother, a grandmother, and sisters-in-law.’<sup>44</sup> However, the awareness of the trans self is also culturally determined by the physicality of the gendered body. Revathi’s testimony raises the existential question of the crux of transgender identity. The horrors of non-medical interventions in what is now called gender-affirming surgery (GAS), documented in *The Truth About Me*, bring to attention the immense pain undergone by transgender women of Revathi’s time to reunite their mind and their body. While the stigma associated with transgender people, especially in the field of medicine, is actively being tackled in the third decade of the twenty-first century in India by awareness campaigns and protests, it is still extremely difficult for them to gain access to gender reaffirming surgeries in India. This study seeks to pose another question of interest in this scenario: in the grand scheme of linking one’s body with one’s gendered identity, is a transgender woman any less a woman if she chooses not to go through GAS? A critical perspective this study has to offer is that the identity of a transgender person is not validated by whether they go through GAS or not. The trans selfhood stems from the ontological awareness of their identity as a trans person, irrespective of conformity to bodily norms dictated by society. Transgender identity is, therefore, an internal state of existence marked by autonomous selfhood that need not necessarily involve bodily manifestations that correspond to the gendered awareness of the self. Revathi’s narratives demonstrate the painful reality of GAS for transgender women possessing intersectional marginalised identities that place them at a disadvantaged position due to their gender, sexuality, class, education, and power positions. The internal exile is intensified by the lack of access to safe medical options to fully claim their womanhood, creating a sense of disorientation and estrangement from who they are internally and their perceptions of their own bodies<sup>45</sup>. The reclamation of womanhood for Revathi was defined by a layered experience involving pain, wounds, blood, relief, tenacity, and resilience.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, the act of writing is a tool for claiming visibility for her identity as a transgender woman. Falling in line with But-

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<sup>44</sup> Revathi A., 2010: 43

<sup>45</sup> Revathi A., 2010: 80; Ahmed S., 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Revathi A., 2010: 67-88

ler's notion of the implications of recognition, writing an autobiographical book narrativising Revathi's identity as a woman creates a respite from the visibilised invisibility of the non-normative transgender self. The othering experienced by those pushed to the margins of society, therefore, is reclaimed through the act of storytelling in which their lived experiences are shared with the world, which becomes a critical step towards challenging the physical and ontological banishment from society. Therefore, Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* engenders the philosophical thought that autobiographical narratives of the gendered other cannot be seen solely as the manifestation of past pain; rather, it gives rise to critical channels of thought that engage with narrativising experiences of marginalisation as tools against perpetual exile from intelligibility. As explicated by Felman in her research, the narrative emerging from the witness of trauma<sup>47</sup>, who in this case is the transgender person, facilitates related engagements of listening, witnessing, representation, and narrative reconstruction of trauma built within ontological exile, unpacking it for a society that must transform to be at the cusp of positive change. The truth that Revathi attempts to convey stands for the reclamation of her ontological awareness as a transgender woman with the agency to fight for her selfhood. As a result, debates surrounding internal exile and trauma are intrinsically linked to intersectional identities of being and becoming with socio-cultural and political discourses pervading into these dialogues. While a permanent resolution to the ostracisation of transgender people remains unreachable at the moment, scholarly undertakings such as this study ensure that such topics of critical importance continue to be actively discussed and debated, perhaps becoming vital in reaching the foundations of disparity and uprooting them.

## Conclusion

While global understanding of exile in its primary sense is concerned with the geographical displacement of people with multifaceted causatives, this study creates a scholarly space for exploring exile as an ontological state experienced by people who embody

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<sup>47</sup> Felman S. & Laub D., 1991.

intersectional marginalised identities. This is further studied from the perspective of transgender narratives in India, facilitating dialogues between the phenomenological exile, trauma, and trans selfhood. Using insights from scholars from various schools of thought, such as Paul Ilie, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edward W. Said, Judith Butler, Cathy Caruth, Linda Brake, Sara Ahmed, and Shoshana Felman, this study has engaged in a philosophical discussion fueled by interdisciplinary ideas on selfhood, exile, gender performativity, and trauma. Revathi's testimony in the form of her autobiographical account titled *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* provokes discussions on exile as a rhythmic state of being marked by internal and physical crisis and estrangement between the subject and the self, the mind and the body, and the self and society. Ontological exile is embedded with traumatic experiences of ostracisation and upheavals that serve together as transformative processes towards recognition in which the self is realised through narrativising their lived experiences. Though the recognition of the non-normative person by the community that emplaces them cannot be achieved in its fullest sense, such recognition is vital to the perception of the self as an indispensable member of any given society, which in turn redirects the exiled towards a space that actively attempts to heal their fragmented self.

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# *Articles*



