



## Exploring Identity and Empowerment in Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi

MR. BHAVESH PATEL

Ph.D. Research Scholar,  
Department of Indian Languages and Literature,  
Sabarmati University, Ahmedabad.

DR. SWETA THAKKAR

Ph.D. Research Guide & Assistant Professor,  
Department of Indian Languages and Literature,  
Sabarmati University, Ahmedabad.

### Abstract:

Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life is a powerful autobiographical work by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi that explores themes of **identity, empowerment, societal challenges, and acceptance**, particularly within the transgender and hijra communities in India. The book traces Tripathi's deeply personal journey of **self-discovery**, detailing her struggles with gender identity, societal rejection, and eventual self-acceptance. Through her narrative, she challenges **binary gender norms**, arguing for the fluidity of identity and highlighting the hijra community's rich cultural history despite their marginalized status. The theme of **acceptance** is intricately linked to identity in the book, as Tripathi must first accept herself before seeking validation from others. While she faces **rejection from her biological family and mainstream society**, she finds belonging within the hijra community, illustrating the importance of social and emotional support. Her activism plays a crucial role in fostering broader acceptance, as she challenges stereotypes and advocates for **legal recognition and equal rights** for transgender individuals. Tripathi's story is also one of **empowerment and resistance**, as she navigates systemic discrimination and reclaims her hijra identity with pride. Her **advocacy work**, including her fight for **legal recognition** of transgender individuals, underscores the importance of representation and resilience. She refuses to conform to societal expectations, instead using her visibility to uplift her community. The book further examines **love, relationships, and power dynamics**, revealing the challenges of seeking genuine human connections in a society that struggles with non-binary identities. Through her writing, Tripathi argues for a world where **love transcends gender norms** and is based on mutual respect and understanding. Ultimately, Red Lipstick is not just a memoir—it is a **political and social manifesto**, calling for **visibility, dignity, and systemic change** for the hijra and transgender communities.

**Keywords:** Identity, Empowerment, Societal challenges, Acceptance

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life (2016) is a poignant and powerful autobiographical work that explores the themes of **identity, empowerment, acceptance, and societal challenges** faced by hijras and transgender individuals in India. As a transgender activist, dancer, and writer, Tripathi uses her narrative to challenge **binary gender norms**, advocate for **equal rights**, and highlight the **marginalization** of the hijra community. Through deeply personal reflections and unapologetic storytelling, she presents an intimate yet politically relevant account of her journey toward **self-acceptance and empowerment**.

The book's exploration of **gender identity** is central to its narrative. Tripathi recounts her struggles with societal expectations, her early experiences of feeling different, and the eventual realization that she was neither fully male nor female but a hijra. Her story is not just a personal account but also a representation of the collective identity of hijras, their traditions, and their ongoing fight for recognition and dignity. She **rejects societal stigma** and demands inclusion, using her visibility as a public figure to **reshape perceptions** about gender and sexuality. She transformed the hijra community's mythology and

stereotypes in her autobiography. She is validated as an activist because of her identity as “Laxmi”. When she states, “I am Laxmi”, she has enacted a new identity that exceeds the usual terms. This can provide affirmative strength to anyone who feels oppressed by society's standards of gender, and it declares an egregious right of self-definition. She describes a famous event in a story (Priya and Pandey 565). “When I came out as Gay, when I finally gathered the courage to abandon the life of lies, I was living, and start my own life, my parents disowned me. Laxmi stood by me in those difficult times... I can never forget how incredibly supportive she was, how her strength and confidence were so beneficial for me while I was coming out” (Red Lipstick 143-144).

Another important theme in Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life is **acceptance**—both self-acceptance and acceptance by society. Tripathi illustrates how internal validation is necessary before seeking acceptance from others. She confronts **rejection from her biological family** and mainstream society, yet finds **belonging within the hijra community**, which becomes a source of emotional and social support. Her activism plays a crucial role in fostering broader acceptance of transgender identities, as she works tirelessly to change laws, challenge stereotypes, and ensure dignity for marginalized communities. With Laxmi's claim, she changes her life story from one of victimization to one of winning. By naming herself a “celebration”, she seizes control of her own life, and refuses to let the prejudices of society define her being. This is a bold gesture for anyone from the hijra community, who have been scorned in India. Laxmi's proclamation of her identity as a celebration is both a political and personal one that encourages others to celebrate their own being with pride and joy, even if society deem it wrong (Gupta and Kumar 154).

The book also explores **love and relationships**, highlighting the complexities of human connections within the framework of gender identity. Tripathi shares her experiences with men—those who shaped her, supported her, and, at times, exploited her—revealing the power dynamics often faced by transgender individuals in intimate relationships. She challenges **conventional notions of love**, arguing that **true acceptance comes from self-worth rather than societal approval**. Finally, Red Lipstick presents an unfiltered critique of **societal challenges and discrimination**. Tripathi sheds light on **legal battles, policy changes, and persistent social prejudices** that hijras continue to face. Her resistance against these oppressive structures is not just personal but political, as she actively fights for **legal recognition, equal opportunities, and the dignity of her community**. - On Embracing Her Dual Identity: “Raju must live. Always. I cherish him and nurture him, and keep him alive for Papa, for Mummy, for my sisters, for my brother, for my family” (Red Lipstick 155). Through her memoir, Tripathi transforms her personal struggles into a **manifesto for change**, using literature as a **tool for activism and representation**. Her story is a call to action for **visibility, dignity, and systemic reform**, making Red Lipstick a crucial text in gender studies and LGBTQ+ advocacy.

The theme of **identity** in Red Lipstick by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is deeply personal and transformative. The book explores Tripathi's journey of self-discovery as a hijra, a term used in South Asia for transgender and non-binary individuals. Tripathi's narrative delves into the complexities of gender identity, particularly the struggle between societal expectations and personal truth. She recounts her early experiences of feeling different, the confusion surrounding her gender, and the eventual realization that she was neither fully male nor female but a hijra. This journey of self-acceptance is central to the book, as she embraces her identity despite societal stigma. The book sheds light on the hijra community in India, which has a long history but remains marginalized. Tripathi's story is not just about her personal identity but also about the collective identity of hijras, their traditions, and their fight for recognition. She challenges stereotypes and misconceptions, advocating for dignity and equal rights. Tripathi's interactions with family, friends, and romantic partners shape her understanding of herself. She discusses the rejection she faced from her biological family and the acceptance she found within the hijra community. On Identity and Family Ties: “Raju lives and breathes inside me and no matter what I think or do or say, or how much I fight as an activist for transgenders' rights. Despite the breast implants that

make me feel like a woman and my saris and my precious lipsticks, Raju will always live and breathe inside me” (Red Lipstick 147).

Her relationships with men also play a crucial role in her identity, as she navigates love, desire, and societal judgment. As an activist, Tripathi’s identity extends beyond her personal experiences. She becomes a voice for the transgender community, using her platform to demand legal rights and social acceptance. Her identity evolves from being an individual struggling with self-acceptance to a leader advocating for change. One of the most powerful aspects of Red Lipstick is its exploration of identity as fluid rather than fixed. Tripathi challenges binary notions of gender and sexuality, emphasizing that identity is a spectrum rather than a rigid category. Identity and acceptance are deeply intertwined in Red Lipstick by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. The book explores how self-identity—particularly gender identity—shapes an individual’s journey toward acceptance, both from within and from society.

Tripathi’s personal journey highlights the importance of self-acceptance. Before seeking validation from others, she had to embrace her identity as a hijra. This internal acceptance empowered her to navigate societal challenges with confidence. The book portrays the struggle for acceptance in a society that often marginalizes transgender individuals. Tripathi faces rejection from her biological family and mainstream society but finds acceptance within the hijra community. This contrast underscores the significance of belonging and support. Laxmi's Red Lipstick clearly illustrates how they struggle to manage these two conflicting ways of being and soul searching between their biological sex and their discomfort in the mind. “My relationship with my father was complicated. He loved me, but he also wanted me to be someone I wasn't - a 'normal' boy” (Red Lipstick 15). Laxmi is signifying that their relationship with their father was complicated because their father, who had expectations of them they could never fulfil, was one of their complications. It is implied that the Laxmi did not follow gender norms or expectations because of her father's insistence that he wanted a “normal” guy (Priya and Pandey 657).

Tripathi’s activism plays a crucial role in fostering broader acceptance of transgender identities. By sharing her story, she challenges stereotypes and misconceptions, advocating for dignity and equal rights. As a public figure, her visibility helps the shift societal attitudes. The theme of acceptance extends to personal relationships. Tripathi’s interactions with friends, romantic partners, and mentors shape her understanding of identity. Some relationships offer unconditional acceptance, while others reflect societal prejudices. By writing Red Lipstick, Tripathi contributes to the growing discourse on transgender rights and representation. Literature serves as a powerful medium to foster empathy and understanding, encouraging readers to accept diverse identities. “Saris and make-up who am I to question that? Who am I to decide how he sees me?” (Red Lipstick 153). This quote highlights Laxmi's journey of self-discovery, acceptance, and the complexities of her relationships with her family.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s journey is a testament to **empowerment and resistance**, as she navigates societal prejudices and reclaims her identity as a hijra. Empowerment in the book is deeply tied to self-acceptance, education, and activism. Tripathi’s defiance against rigid gender norms and societal expectations is a form of resistance that challenges the traditional binary understanding of gender. “I have always believed that gender is a fluid thing, a spectrum, rather than a binary. But most people don't see it that way. They want everything to fit neatly into boxes - male or female, gay or straight, black or white” (Red Lipstick 45). Tripathy suggests the notion that gender is not binary or fixed but is on a continuum with numerous identities and expressions. This notion espoused by the author is in opposition to generally accepted cultural norms and expectations, which have the tendency to put people into either one of two categories (male or female) by virtue of their biological sex. The author learns that, rather than accepting the complexities and fluidity that are included in one's own identity; most people have the tendency to reduce others into binary oppositions such as "gay or straight" and "black or white". It could be attributed to cultural norms and expectations that shove people into fixed gender roles and binary oppositions. She refuses to conform to the roles imposed upon her and instead embraces her hijra identity with pride.

Her resistance is not just personal but also political she fights for the legal recognition of transgender individuals in India, advocating for their rights in courts and public spaces. Through her activism, she empowers not only herself but also the hijra community, demanding dignity and equal opportunities. The book highlights how empowerment is achieved through resilience, self-expression, and the ability to challenge oppressive structures. Tripathi's narrative is unapologetic, raw, and deeply personal, making her resistance a powerful force against discrimination. Her journey underscores the importance of visibility and representation, proving that empowerment is not just about individual success but about uplifting an entire marginalized community. She has fostered relationships with others in the midst of hardship and found confirmation. As a counterpoint to a singular emphasis on trauma, the counterbalance of both suffering and pleasure is an indicator of resilience or resistance to erasure and is a component of her broader emphasis on resilience and empowerment.

Moreover, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi explores the intricate dynamics of **love, relationships, and acceptance**, offering a deeply personal yet socially relevant perspective on these themes. The book delves into her experiences with men—those who shaped her, supported her, and, at times, exploited her revealing the complexities of human connections within the context of gender identity and societal norms. Tripathi's journey is marked by a search for love and validation, both within her personal relationships and in the broader social sphere. "While Laxmi was born a boy, she never identified as one. She described her sexual orientation as 'oozing femininity' and she stated she was 'his firstborn masculine offspring, his eldest son'" (Red Lipstick 18). Transgender people do not fit into the sex they were born with. So even though they may have a biological sex, they do not identify with the gender that is typically attached to that sex. Because the world is binary and takes gender seriously, transgender people are likely to be discriminated against or persecuted. Society needs to be able to see and believe in the diversity of gender identities on offer and to be able to offer a space in which people can be who they are, with nightly regard to discrimination or marginalization (Priya and Pandey 657).

Laxmi recounts moments of tenderness and betrayal, highlighting how acceptance is often conditional in a world that struggles to embrace non-binary identities. Her relationships with men range from affectionate to abusive, reflecting the power dynamics that transgender individuals often navigate. Despite facing rejection from her biological family and mainstream society, she finds solace and acceptance within the hijra community, where bonds are formed through shared struggles and resilience. The book challenges conventional notions of love, arguing that true acceptance comes not from societal approval but from self-acceptance and the ability to define relationships on one's own terms. Through her narrative, Tripathi advocates for a world where love is not dictated by rigid gender norms but is instead based on mutual respect and understanding. Tripathi vividly portrays the **societal challenges and discrimination** faced by hijras and transgender individuals in India. The book highlights how deeply ingrained prejudices and systemic exclusion shape the lived experiences of those who do not conform to traditional gender norms. Tripathi recounts her personal struggles with rejection from her biological family, educational institutions, and mainstream society, illustrating the harsh realities of being a hijra in a world that often refuses to acknowledge their dignity.

Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life sheds light on the **legal and social battles** hijras have had to fight for recognition, including the struggle for basic rights such as employment, healthcare, and legal identity. Tripathi's narrative challenges the **stereotypes** that hijras are confined to begging or sex work, emphasizing their rich cultural history and contributions to society. She also critiques the **media's portrayal** of hijras, which often reinforces negative perceptions rather than fostering understanding. Through her activism, Tripathi has worked to dismantle these barriers, advocating for policy changes and greater inclusivity. Tripathy crystallizes the entire scope of Laxmi's journey from marginalization to self-acceptance or pride which is more fundamentally a message of empowerment and faith for all of those who are or are trying to find out their identity. Her story is a powerful testament to the resilience of the hijra community and a call to action for a more accepting and equitable society.

## References

1. Gupta, K. & Kumar D. Politicising Gender through Autobiography: A Reading of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life. IIS University Journal of Arts, 2023, vol.11, no.4, pp. 150-162.
2. Priya, A. K. & Pandey S. P. Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi's Red Lipstick: A Queer Study. Journal of Survey in Fisheries Sciences, 2023, vol.10, no.2, 2023, pp. 653-659.
3. Tripathi, Laxmi Narayan. Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life. Penguin Publication, 2016.
4. Tripathi, Laxmi Narayan. Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life. Random House Audio, 2018.