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From Stigma to Selfhood: Gender Assertion in Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life

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Abstract: Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* is a compelling autobiographical narrative that traces the author's transformation from a stigmatized individual to an empowered voice of selfhood and social assertion. As a transgender woman, Tripathi occupies a contested space in Indian society—one marked by invisibility, ridicule, and moral policing. Through this text, she reconstructs her identity not as a passive victim of exclusion but as an active agent of change. The autobiography engages with issues of gender, body politics, emotional resilience, and the desire for social belonging, offering a powerful commentary on the nature of identity formation. This paper explores how Tripathi negotiates stigma through acts of self-representation, narrative agency, and performative resistance. It interprets *Red Lipstick* as a work that moves beyond confession to become an instrument of advocacy, dismantling stereotypes surrounding transgender lives in India. By analysing her narrative techniques, linguistic choices, and portrayal of relationships, this study reveals how Tripathi transforms personal pain into literary power and selfhood into a statement of courage.

Keywords: Gender Assertion, Selfhood, Autobiography, Stigma, Identity, Empowerment, Transgender Narrative

Introduction

The autobiographical form has historically served as a domain through which individuals explore the evolution of the self within personal and cultural constraints. For marginalized individuals, particularly those excluded from dominant social narratives, autobiography functions as a political tool—an act of reclaiming agency through self-articulation. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* exemplifies such an act of resistance. It tells the story of a transgender woman who redefines herself against the background of deep-rooted patriarchy, religious orthodoxy, and social stigma.

Tripathi's text situates her personal life within broader socio-cultural and political realities. Her life journey—from a confused child in a conservative Brahmin household to a celebrated dancer, activist, and author—embodies a narrative of resistance and resilience. The work challenges normative gender boundaries and invites readers to engage with the complexities of identity beyond binary categories. In doing so, *Red Lipstick* becomes not only an individual's autobiography but also a collective history of those who live and struggle at the intersections of gender and social exclusion.

This paper argues that Tripathi's narrative is a process of gender assertion—a deliberate act of reclaiming identity through narrative construction. Her self-presentation reveals how literature can convert experiences of marginalization into spaces of empowerment. The study employs a general feminist-autobiographical lens to examine the interplay between stigma, narration, and selfhood in the text.

Autobiography and the Politics of Self-Representation

Autobiography traditionally revolves around the idea of the self as both subject and object of narration. However, for marginalized communities, life writing transcends individual introspection; it becomes a collective voice for the silenced. Tripathi's *Red Lipstick* participates in this redefinition of autobiography by turning the private into the political. Her life, filled with humiliation, exclusion, and triumph, becomes a commentary on the systemic violence faced by those who deviate from heteronormative gender structures.

The act of self-writing is itself revolutionary for someone historically denied social recognition. Through her narrative, Tripathi constructs a textual identity that defies invisibility. She narrates her story unapologetically, using her voice to challenge and dismantle social myths about gender and morality. Her autobiography becomes a counter-discourse that rewrites the social script of shame into one of strength. In the Indian literary tradition, autobiographical writing has often been associated with reformist or nationalist themes. However, *Red Lipstick* expands this tradition by foregrounding the transgender experience—a theme seldom explored in mainstream Indian literature. By positioning herself as both narrator and protagonist, Tripathi assumes control over the narrative of her life, refusing to be represented through the lens of others.

From Stigma to Selfhood: The Transformative Arc

The movement from stigma to selfhood is the central axis around which Tripathi's narrative unfolds. Her early life reflects the suffocating experiences of a gender-nonconforming child in a society governed by rigid gender norms. Growing up as a boy named Ramesh, she experiences both internal confusion and external hostility. Her effeminate mannerisms attract ridicule from peers and concern from family members, marking the beginning of a life-long confrontation with stigma.

The autobiography reveals that stigma functions as a social mechanism of control. By labelling her as “abnormal,” society attempts to define her limits. However, Tripathi's narrative dismantles these imposed definitions by presenting stigma not as an endpoint but as a starting point for transformation. Her decision to join the hijra community, a marginalized yet supportive space, enables her to rediscover belonging. Within this community, she finds validation and sisterhood, though not without challenges. The hijra space, while offering refuge, also exposes her to new hierarchies and power struggles.

Tripathi's transition from isolation to empowerment mirrors the journey of many transgender individuals who seek authenticity in the face of societal hostility. Through education, performance, and activism, she gradually constructs an identity that transcends societal definitions. The text thus becomes a chronicle of liberation—an account of a woman who refuses to be confined by the categories imposed upon her.

Gender Assertion as Literary and Personal Resistance

Tripathi's gender assertion is both thematic and structural. The act of writing her autobiography is itself an act of defiance. By choosing to narrate her story in English—a language associated with authority and legitimacy—she situates herself within a global discourse on identity and human rights. Her choice of language is not merely communicative but symbolic; it signifies the reclamation of a voice that has been historically silenced.

The tone of *Red Lipstick* is confident and self-assured. Tripathi writes not from the margins of self-pity but from the centre of agency. She is aware of her readers' curiosity, perhaps even voyeurism, but she reclaims that gaze by speaking directly and assertively. The red lipstick of the title becomes a metaphor for visibility and defiance. It is not a mask but a marker of self-celebration—a symbol of her decision to live boldly and visibly.

By embedding gender assertion into narrative form, Tripathi transforms autobiography into a performative space. Each chapter reenacts her journey toward self-recognition, enabling her to exist on her own terms. In doing so, she challenges the literary and social conventions that have historically defined women and gender-nonconforming people as passive subjects.

Table 1: Conceptual Framework of Gender Assertion in *Red Lipstick*

Stage	Experience	Psychological Impact	Assertion of Self
Childhood	Gender confusion and ridicule	Internalized shame	Awakening of self-awareness
Adolescence	Family rejection and emotional isolation	Identity crisis	Search for belonging
Association with Hijra Community	Partial acceptance and social alienation	Ambivalence	Cultural and spiritual identification
Public Career and Activism	Recognition through performance, dance, and media	Empowerment and visibility	Public affirmation of identity
Authorship and Self-Narration	Writing as healing and advocacy	Reflection and reconstruction	Intellectual selfhood

Table 1: The progressive stages of gender assertion as depicted in Tripathi's narrative.

The Men in Her Life: Conflict, Care, and Consciousness

The subtitle, *The Men in My Life*, indicates that Tripathi's identity has been shaped in dialogue with the men she encountered—her father, teachers, lovers, friends, and abusers. Each relationship contributes to her evolving sense of self. Her father, though initially strict and uncomprehending, becomes a symbol of the patriarchal authority she must both resist and reconcile with. The men who exploit her vulnerability also teach her the importance of self-preservation. In contrast, the few who support her validate her humanity beyond gender categories.

Through this honest portrayal, Tripathi humanizes both herself and those who affected her life. She refuses to present men as monolithic oppressors; instead, she portrays them as complex agents of her emotional development. Her narrative thus challenges the victim–perpetrator binary often found in autobiographical writing. By recognizing the shades of tenderness within patriarchy, she constructs a multidimensional representation of gender relations.

These male figures also function as mirrors reflecting society's attitude toward difference. The violence she faces from some men reveals the fear that nonconformity provokes within patriarchal culture. Yet her ability to forgive, or at least to understand, reveals a mature awareness that identity is constructed not in isolation but in interaction with others.

Body, Beauty, and the Politics of Presentation

The body occupies a central position in *Red Lipstick*. Tripathi's narrative demonstrates that the transgender body is not merely biological but cultural—a text inscribed with social meanings. The gaze directed toward her body is both objectifying and disciplinary, yet she transforms that same body into an instrument of power through dance, dress, and adornment. Her embrace of beauty practices such as makeup and costume is not superficial vanity; it is a declaration of ownership over her physical being.

The red lipstick, an emblem of femininity, is repeatedly invoked throughout the text. It becomes a metaphor for visibility and pride. In societies where gender variance is stigmatized, such markers of femininity are considered transgressive. By wearing them publicly and titling her book after one, Tripathi symbolically reclaims her right to aesthetic and bodily autonomy. The politics of presentation in her life mirrors her broader fight for social recognition.

Moreover, her portrayal of dance as a liberating art form underscores the connection between movement, emotion, and freedom. The body that was once ridiculed becomes the medium through which she communicates grace and self-assurance. Thus, beauty and performance are redefined as tools of self-expression rather than as instruments of objectification.

Negotiating Public and Private Selves

Tripathi's identity oscillates between the public persona of a celebrity activist and the private self-grappling with loneliness and rejection. This duality forms a recurring tension throughout the autobiography. She is celebrated on stage and on television, yet offstage she battles the same prejudices that once haunted her childhood. The juxtaposition of glamour and grief exposes the uneven nature of social acceptance. Her public visibility does not erase her private vulnerabilities. Instead, it highlights how social validation often comes at the cost of emotional exhaustion. The narrative oscillates between moments of triumph—such as representing India at international forums—and moments of despair, when betrayal and misunderstanding threaten her stability. By including both, Tripathi resists idealization and presents authenticity as the foundation of selfhood.

This merging of the personal and the political reaffirms that identity is not a fixed possession but a continuous negotiation. Tripathi's selfhood exists in flux—formed through dialogue between inner conviction and social resistance. The autobiography, therefore, captures the dynamic process of becoming rather than the static state of being.

Autobiography as Social Text

Red Lipstick extends beyond the personal to function as a social document. It illuminates the structural inequalities embedded in Indian society—inequalities that marginalize individuals based on gender, caste, and sexuality. Tripathi's narrative exposes how traditional moral codes perpetuate exclusion while disguising themselves as protectors of culture. By revealing these contradictions, the text becomes an instrument of critique and reform.

Through her visibility and advocacy, Tripathi bridges the gap between art and activism. Her narrative voice resonates with the collective struggles of transgender people in India, transforming the personal into the political. By writing her own life, she also rewrites the cultural narrative of the hijra—one that has long been confined to the peripheries of folklore and myth. She replaces caricature with complexity, silence with speech.

The autobiography also redefines the parameters of Indian English literature. Traditionally dominated by upper-class, cisgender experiences, the inclusion of transgender voices like Tripathi's broadens the canon and enriches its diversity. Red Lipstick thus contributes not only to gender discourse but also to the democratization of literary space.

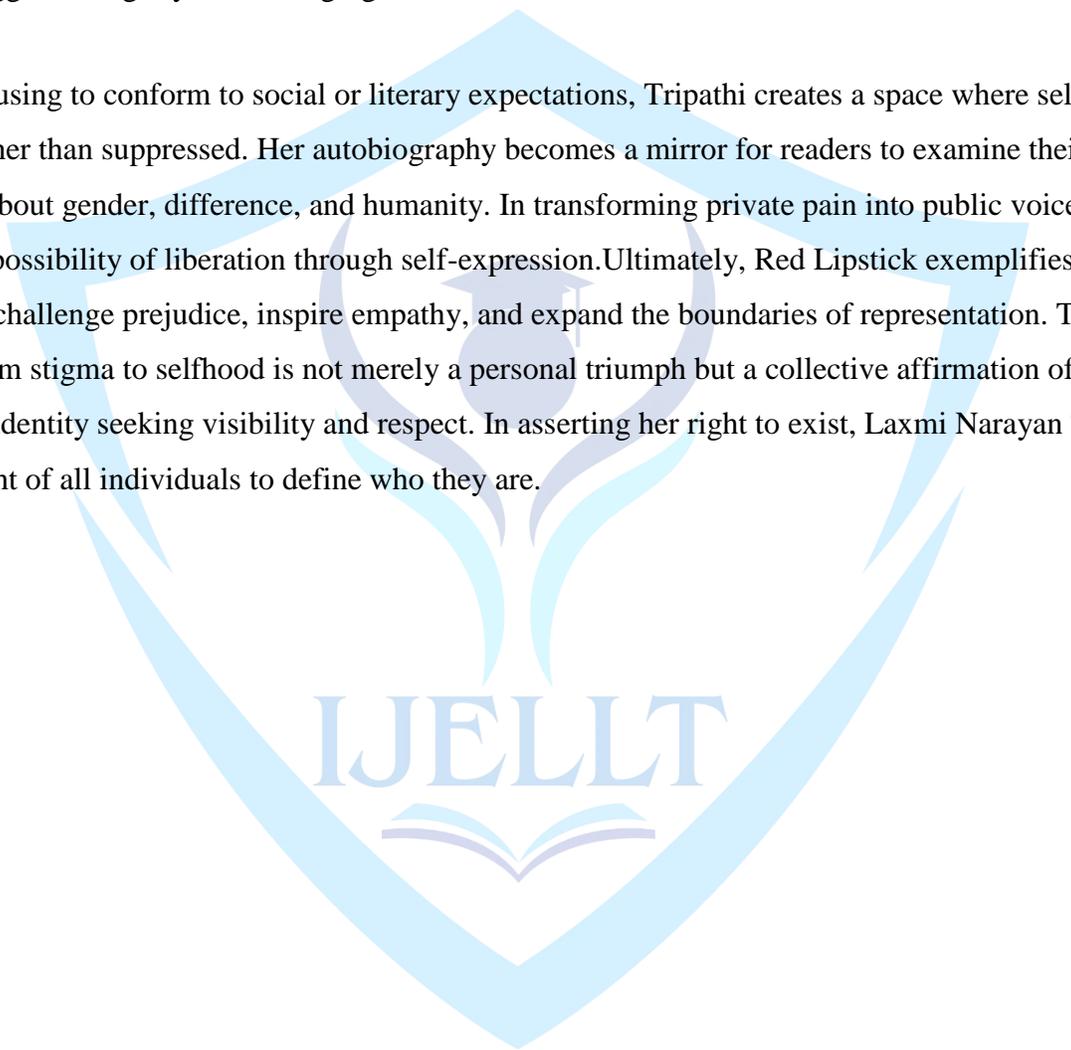
Language and Narrative Tone

Tripathi's linguistic style is accessible yet powerful. Her choice of English allows her to reach an international audience while preserving an Indian ethos through occasional vernacular phrases and idioms. The conversational tone creates intimacy, while her assertive diction conveys authority. She blends humor, irony, and raw honesty, refusing to adhere to conventional decorum. The narrative's rhythm mirrors the emotional highs and lows of her life, making the text both engaging and poignant. Her language becomes a means of identity construction. Each sentence affirms her right to narrate her life on her own terms. The candor with which she discusses sexuality, relationships, and discrimination challenges the silence surrounding these topics in Indian culture. Through words, she reclaims both her story and her dignity.

Conclusion

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* stands as a testament to human resilience and the power of narrative self-assertion. Through the art of autobiography, Tripathi transforms her life from a site of stigma into a narrative of empowerment. The text articulates how identity is not a given condition but a continual act of self-definition. Her journey—from marginalization to recognition—reflects a universal struggle for dignity and belonging.

By refusing to conform to social or literary expectations, Tripathi creates a space where selfhood is celebrated rather than suppressed. Her autobiography becomes a mirror for readers to examine their own assumptions about gender, difference, and humanity. In transforming private pain into public voice, she reaffirms the possibility of liberation through self-expression. Ultimately, *Red Lipstick* exemplifies how literature can challenge prejudice, inspire empathy, and expand the boundaries of representation. The movement from stigma to selfhood is not merely a personal triumph but a collective affirmation of every marginalized identity seeking visibility and respect. In asserting her right to exist, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi asserts the right of all individuals to define who they are.

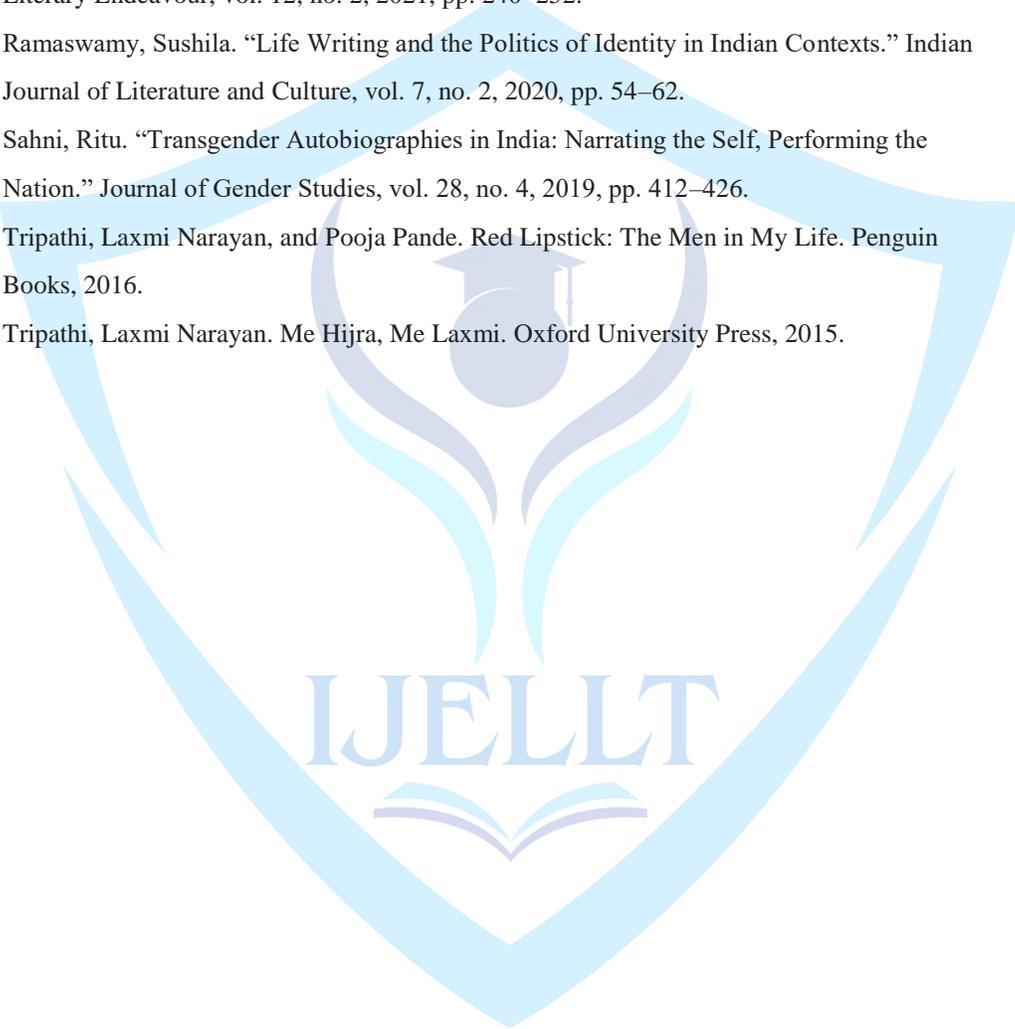


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