

Gender Dysphoria, Body Image and Trauma: Hijra's Rewriting of the Self in Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*

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Abstract

Physical appearance and representation are the two key aspects through which gender identity is expressed. However, these key aspects are subjected to many expectations and standards framed by society. It is highly challenging for transgender people to fulfil heteronormative standards of body image and structure. Thus, the individual who is identified as transgender encounters a variety of physical and psychological illnesses in a wide range of social contexts. Due to the mismatch between their biological and psychological sexes, transgender people tend to experience gender identity disorder which is often addressed through the term gender dysphoria. As a result, transgender people undergo psychological trauma that creates an impact on their daily routine and makes them feel utterly uncomfortable with their bodies. Thus, this research article explores the gender dysphoria and body image of transgender people with special reference to Living Smile Vidya's autobiography, *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* (2007). In addition, this research article investigates the deplorable situation of Hijra in India, their inner turmoil and their psychological trauma through the memoir of Vidya who had transitioned from a man named Saravanan to a self-realized female named Vidya. By critically analyzing the text through the lens of queer theory, this research article speculates on the impact of trauma on Indian Hijra's psyche and identity in their arduous journey to redefine themselves as new being.

Keywords: Body Image, Gender Dysphoria, Hijra, Identity Disorder, Trauma

1. Introduction

People who are identified as transgender do not conform to gender preconceptions of what men and women are meant to be like as per societal standards and norms. Due to the discrepancy between their recognized identity and their birth identity, transgender persons encounter several psychological, social, political, cultural, legal and economic obstacles in their daily lives. Even finding a proper shelter is challenging for them when they start to deviate from society's established gender norms. As a result, they become victims of gender dysphoria. Thus,

this research article explores the gender dysphoria and body image of transgender people with special reference to Living Smile Vidya's autobiography, *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* (2007).

In many circumstances, transgender people are shunned and ignored by all aspects of society, including educational institutions, family setup, employment offices, healthcare organizations and many more. The shocking level of prejudice against the transgender community prevents them from participating in a wide range of political and cultural events. In addition, the stereotypes associated with their gender identity deny them access to

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opportunities for proper education, civil rights and other kinds of stuff. Hence, these research article inquiries about the inner struggles and the psychological trauma of a transgender person in India by critically analyzing the lived experiences of Hijra named Vidya with the help of her first-hand narrative memoir.

Transgender people experience a miserable situation because of being rejected by their families. Sometimes they are compelled to leave their parents house since they are seen as an embarrassment or burden to the family. Vidya too encountered all types of violations and hardships to reach her desired space. Overall, this research article speculates on the impact of trauma on Indian Hijra's psyche and identity in their arduous journey to redefine themselves as a new being.

2. Autobiography - A Tool to Unveil Inner Struggle of Transgender

Autobiographies are written accounts of a person's life from the first-person point of view. Autobiographies are a suitable genre for writers to reveal themselves more profoundly and effectively. Reading autobiographies afford deeper insights into the person's life experience and provides opportunities to access the writer (Nair). Many repressed groups, notably untouchables and transgender people utilize memoirs as a tool to expose their inner turmoil and feelings to the outer world. In addition, they demand an end to their oppressed state through their autobiographies.

Autobiographies written by transgender people are remarkable because they accurately portray the long-term prejudices and suppression that they face due to societal gender norms. Even though numerous biographies have addressed their issues in the literary world, they are not entirely reliable or factual because they are considered the second-hand narrative of a transgender person (Nair). Thus, the first-person narratives of transgender people in their autobiographies stand as a reliable account of actual trans existence.

Transgender self-writing is well known for its verbal brilliance. The ability and power of the selected instances and words make transgender people's writing more poignant and memorable (Nair). It is because the words they use are nothing more than the writer's genuine painful

experiences. The selected autobiography by Living Smile Vidya is an excellent example of exploring the societal framework and prejudices, inner struggle and violations of transgender people in depth. The autobiography depicts the trauma endured by the transgender person/tirunangai named Vidya. The very suffering of a woman in the wrong body is pretty apparent in Vidya's account of expressing things.

Only a transgender person could comprehend and relate to the inner struggle of a transgender person since there is a tremendous difference between a sufferer and a spectator. The language that Vidya uses in her autobiography expresses the striving spirit of her genuine gender identity. In addition, it exposes the writer's fervent desire to identify as a woman. The moment when she recognized the new body structure made her express her joy and the words she uses to express her happiness are rife with strong feelings.

Vidya through her autobiography urges people to recognize transgender people for who they are rather than trying to evoke sympathy or sorrow. The inadequacy of binary gender distinctions is what Vidya is referring to when she remarks on the problems they face in social settings. The autobiography serves as a model to comprehend that most of the problems that transgender people undergo arises from a public failure to accept gender fluidity as a normal phenomenon. Vidya's appeal for reform in her autobiography is quite persuasive and remarkable.

3. Gender Dysphoria

Gender incongruence or gender dysphoria is a form of gender identity issue a person may experience in his or her early childhood. This problem arises from conflict between a person's anatomy and his/her gender identification. Dysphoria sufferers seldom have any outward symptoms in their earlier state, but they experience a change in lifestyle patterns (Kavitha) that eventually make them feel the impact on their mental health. On the ground, they experience a tussle between their body and mind, which leads to frustration, trauma and social isolation. In some instances, they feel desperate enough to put on clothing intended for other sexes. As they are identified as new beings, these teenagers feel compelled to express themselves to the world. In fact, they wish to rid themselves of their birth anatomical structure.

They experience psychological trauma when their emotions and thoughts are repressed. There is evidence that people who have gender dysphoria frequently suffer from depression (Kavitha). Through the life narratives of Vidya, this research article explores the concept of gender dysphoria and its effect on the Indian Hijra in detail.

4. Gender Misalignment Fabula

Few academicians believe that the categorization of transgender people is societal rather than natural or biological (Sowmya). According to Chris Beasley “Transgender refers to people adopting sex identification different from their assignment at birth” (152). Zimman Lal claims “Transgender has a gender identity that clashes with how they perceived by others” (54). In general, transgender people may identify themselves as a woman while others identify them as man or the other way around. Edward David admits, “Without boundaries, there are problems of self-definition. Problems in terms of discrimination are based on this unacknowledged social location” (114).

Transgender people have faced the issue of social stigmatization since time immemorial. Many transgender people prefer to enter a permanent gender habitation rather than acknowledge the possibility of living in transcending gender (Sowmya). Thus, the desire to establish themselves with a lasting gender identity occupies their hearts meticulously.

The autobiography produced by Living Smile Vidya is narrated within the framework of a female whose body has been stuck inside a male. Judith Butler named this “woman trapped in male body” concept as “sex gender misalignment fabula” (3). The selected non-fiction portrays that the writer possesses a fundamental femininity within her that can be satisfied only by becoming a hijra.

Many transgender people frequently use the phrase ‘a soul stuck in the wrong body’ to explain their peculiar position (Ho). Vidya in her autobiography too frequently mentions her state by using phrases like “my irrepressible femininity” (Vidya 32), “I was a girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy” (40), “I felt like a woman inside” (33) and “I regarded myself as a girl, woman, though in their eyes I was a male” (86). Among all these phrases, the most notable one that she penned in her autobiography is

“I was a woman trapped in the male body” (43). All these phrases contribute to the clear dichotomy between the body and the soul of transgender people, whose bodies belong to men and whose soul belongs to women. As a result, Hijras like Vidya demand that the body be modified to accommodate the soul throughout her childhood. In the chosen non-fiction Vidya challenges the underlying assumption that the sense of being a woman is not only inherent and comes from birth but transgender people, like her, realize and acquire femininity naturally as their lives progress. In one instance, Vidya claims, “My sex, my skin color. All natural” (141). The quote reflects the truth that Vidya’s femininity is a part of nature’s creation.

5. Naturalness of Femininity

Vidya clearly demonstrates her naturalness of femininity just by articulating a variety of childhood activities that she involves herself in as a transgender persona. She recalls how she used to adore wearing girls’ clothing when she was around six or seven years old. She says that her sister’s outfit is her favorite costume to dance in on the stage or at other functions. In addition, she cherishes her memories by recollecting how she enjoyed applying makeup like a girl. For instance, she relishes applying coconut oil to her lips just by imagining it as lipstick. At times, she requests her dad to get a midi and other female costumes for her to wear like those of her sisters. Besides, she pleads with her dad to gift her “ladies’ bicycle” for her transport facility (Vidya 44). Throughout her early childhood, she preferred playing female games over boy’s games both in her school and on the streets. All these incidents and activities addressed by the writer served as evidence that the sense of femininity is more natural to her than that of a normal female.

It is believed that people should be drawn to each other as per the saying ‘opposite sexes attract each other.’ It is also applicable to a transgender person. One who identifies themselves as female is attracted to a male personality and vice versa. Vidya identifies herself as a female and she needs a male to support her actions and to stand behind her deeds and passion. Transgender writers like Vidya, Lakshmi, Revathy and many more discuss their need for men to reinforce their perceived gender. To illustrate, Vidya expresses the influence of a man’s attraction on her as follows: “Illango was the man who kindled in me the kind of changes that occur from time to time in a woman’s

various stages of development. Illango was the man who made me feel whole as a woman” (Vidya 35). Therefore, having a desire for the male sex but possessing feminine features is all perceived to be relatable to the life of Hijra.

6. Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS)

Many transgender people become aware of their gender orientation in their early childhood after which they begin to cross-dress and experience various inclinations to behave in a gender-opposing way. The urge within themselves to alter their sexuality prompts them to seek medical assistance. They undergo Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) to change their sex to affirm the sexual conduct of their preferences and to get free from their gender performativity.

The first chapter of Vidya's autobiography, titled “Nirvana” highlights the shift from body dissatisfaction to body satisfaction in the transgender persona. The chapter emphasizes how crucial it is for a transgender person to get rid of their birth sex and its associated identity. SRS in the selected memoir is referred to with the term “Nirvana.” For a transgender person like Vidya, the surgery represents the focal point of their existence.

All transgender people in general have been anticipating the day of SRS ever since they discovered their true sexuality (Anand and Priya). They are ready to sacrifice everything and anything to undergo SRS. Regardless of the time, money and place, they are ready to perform any sort of job to save money for their operation. Without any doubt, they will spend all their savings on performing SRS to attain their desired sex.

Vidya in her autobiography claims, “Nirvana! How long I had waited for it! What humiliation I had suffered! Obsessed with it, I mortgaged my pride, my anger, my honor – I even begged on the streets to achieve that end” (3). She is not bothered to beg in the street to undergo nirvana. She put in a lot of effort while persistently begging on the streets, in trains and everywhere. She worked extremely hard and endured great agony to save money for her surgery. Undergoing Nirvana is the goal and guiding factor for her to attain the pinnacle of tranquility.

The act of surgery is not aseasy as it seems. Though trans people are excited to undergo SRS, they will have to deal with the consequences of the surgery. Vidya in her

memoir shared her happiness by stating, “Inside, I was at peace. It was a huge relief. I am now a woman: mine was a woman's body. Its shape would be what my heart wanted, had yearned for. This pain will obliterate all earlier pain” (8). Although Vidya's words sound energetic, easy and pleasurable, the operation that they undergo is not simple in practice.

To accomplish one's desired sex through SRS, transgender people should have enough courage and determination to overcome their earlier hardships and discrimination. Few transgender people abandon their SRS plan at this point, because they surrender themselves to the daily drudgery, starvation, alienation, physical violation and ostracization. Unlike them, Vidya with her firm determination underwent SRS.

Not only are the physical and psychological issues associated with SRS extremely difficult for transgender people, but the condition and treatment procedures for SRS in hospitals are also extremely distressing for them. Many government hospitals lack the necessary medical equipment for SRS surgery. In terms of Vidya's Nirvana, it is clearly shown that even the most basic amenities for performing SRS are not offered to her in the hospital.

Vidya criticizes the attendants' and nurses' careless actions toward the patients in the hospital. She describes their procedure as risky and unhygienic based on how they treat their fellow patients admitted to the hospital with Vidya. She compares the operating room to a slaughterhouse. None of them is provided with assessment, inquiries or counselling before and after the surgery. In fact, hospital management does not assure the safety of the patients who undergo SRS. Though there are tremendous issues associated with the surgery, Vidya feels extremely happy once she is done with it. Despite all the struggles, Vidya feels a sense of satisfaction with her body image after SRS. She expresses her joy by stating, “I am not a Saravanan any more, I am Vidya – a complete Vidya - a whole woman” (Vidya 9). In one way or another, the trauma, body dissatisfaction and her urge to attain the desired identity push her to redefine herself as a new being.

7. Conclusion

A transgender person's life incorporates psychological trauma and its resulting mental and bodily issues. In general, Hijra experiences a great deal of anguish and hurt.

The majority of hijra shed their fear and has the courage to face the reality like that of renowned transgender Vidya. She was once Saravanan before becoming Vidya. Later with her vibrant confidence she becomes a Living Smile Vidya. All the pain and discrimination that she encounters make her break the shell that has been wrapped around her. She successfully proved her real identity to the world outside. This research article highlights the significance of SRS for transgender people to overcome the stereotypes of body image and their psychological trauma. Furthermore, it reveals how the pain and struggle of gender dysphoria push the transgender people to undergo SRS to prove their gender identity to the rest of the world. Vidya in the selected non-fiction serves as a living example to all the other transgender people that rebuilding their identity is possible despite all the existential crises that they face in their daily lives.

Living Smile Vidya succeeds in both her passion and profession. She never gives up on societal pressures and climbs the success ladder with her unwavering faith and energetic soul. Unlike Vidya, many transgender people give up in the course of time because of assorted reasons prevailing in society. The most common among them is the failure of the society to accept them as a normal being. So, it is crucial for the public to comprehend transgender people by fostering a friendly environment and accepting them as normal beings. It will undoubtedly reduce and prevent transgender person's physical and psychological trauma on a large scale.

Thus, the affirmation of each and every transgender person's unique identity is necessary for their physical and mental wellbeing. The most pressing need of the hour is to

assist transgender people in understanding themselves as well as to help other understand transgender people's lives and body issues. That will help the transgender people to cope with their lot and to have a smooth sail in their life and their chosen careers.

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