

TRANSGENDER LITERATURE IN INDIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *I AM VIDYA* AND *A GIFT OF GODDESS LAKSHMI*

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Received: 16 May 2018

Accepted: 19 May 2018

Published: 31 May 2018

ABSTRACT

India is a multicultural country which hosts different cultures and ideologies. In India, transgenders have a very ancient history. They used to enjoy a good position and adorned different official posts in pre-colonial India. Colonization in India brought a lot of change in the lives of transgenders. They were named and treated as criminals and different laws were brought against them. This resulted in the marginalization of transgenders in society. However, the recent developments in India are a ray of hope for transgenders. The 2014 verdict of the Supreme Court recognizing transgenders as third-gender and providing reservations to them seems promising. The present paper compares the first transgender autobiography of India by Living Smile Vidya "I am Vidya" and biography of India's First Transgender Principal Manobi Bandyopadhyay "A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi".

KEYWORDS: Transgenders, Hijra, Gender, Colonization, Marginalization

INTRODUCTION

Gender and sex are generally used as interchangeable terms. However, these terms differ from each other. Gender and sexuality are socially constructed, whereas sex of a person is biological. The society decides the roles for each gender and expects them to act accordingly and those who act differently to their gender are considered as queer. Gender identity differs for each person. Gender identity is generally considered as the sense of people as male or female and is related to people's existence as male or female. Transgenders are those whose gender identity does not match with their biological sex. "Transgender is the state of one's "gender identity" not matching one's "assigned sex". (Golden Kisha 2013)

Our society in general, acknowledges only two polarities or sexes based on the genitalia at the time of birth and they are male and female through the process of sex assignment. Sex assignment takes place even before birth in the mother's womb basing on the external genitalia. But, there are some exemptions in which the infants cannot be easily identified as male or female in live births. In such cases sex chromosomes, external genitalia and internal reproductive system do not confirm to the males and females and they are called as intersexual. Such intersexual are considered as third gender or transgenders where they do not belong to either gender.

Nevertheless, the existence of third gender and its identity is greatly neglected in our societies. Especially, in Indian society either male or female is considered as normal and anything or anyone that is other than male or female is considered abnormal or subhuman, which means they are not complete humans but are on an inferior level.

Social construction of gender as well as the sexual difference is very much part of the process of Gender Identity. Ironically, social construction of gender, especially in Indian society is confined to either male or female and the third gender is always neglected and more over marginalized and insulted. It really takes a lot of audacity and courage in our society to merely acknowledge the third gender. It is a very common sight at railway stations and at traffic signals where the transgender are insulated and are avoided. Their touch pollutes and their curses come true - is the belief.

However, the existence of third gender or transgender people in India is not a new phenomenon. Transgender have a long history in India.

Hijras' were once a revered and accepted group in Indian culture. The Vedas, ancient, Hindu texts, include eunuchs and characters with both male and female characteristics. They were believed to bring luck and provide special fertility power . . . For centuries; they have performed badhai, or blessings at weddings and births. (DelliSwararaos 2016)

In India, transgender are called with different names in different parts of the country. They are known as Hijras, eunuchs, tirunangais, khoja, aravanis etc and they had been part of Indian society for centuries. Their existence can be seen in the mythological texts of the land 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata'.

There were historical evidence of recognition of "third-sex" or persons not confirm to male or female gender in near the beginning writings of ancient India. The concept of "tritiyakriti" or "napumsaka" had been an integral part of the Hindu mythology, folklore, epic and early Vedic and Puranic literature. (Michelraj 2015)

Transgenders were well treated in the courts of Mughals. "Hijras were considered clever, trustworthy and fiercely loyal and had free access to all spaces and sections of the population, there by playing a crucial role in the politics of empire building in the Mughal era" (Michelraj 2015). The advent of British changed the fate of transgenders in India. They are one of the victims of colonization. They were looted from all the beneficiaries they had enjoyed till then by the British.

The British couldn't stand the hijras and the importance given to them by the Indian kings and they started vigorously criminalize the hijra community and denied them the civil rights.

. . . The colonization brought a different attitude towards the transgenders. They were begun to be treated indifferently and the constant ridiculing of their physique and habits led to a psychological trauma. Casually the society passes various abusive remarks and even the family criticizes them. The current status of transgender in India is pathetic. (Subapriya 2016)

At present it is a very common sight in Indian railways and at many traffic signals of metropolitan cities or towns – that a group of transgenders, or hijras, clad in traditional sarees or chudidars, aggressively begging from the people clapping their hands and blessing those who offer them money and cursing those who deny. It is believed that their touch pollutes and their curses come true. Ironically, their blessings are considered to have a high value and in many places it is a custom to bring hijras home to bless the newly wedded couple or a new born. But they are kept at a safe distance and are not allowed to mingle with others. In a way, they are treated as untouchables. On the other hand, many hijras or transgenders are either forced or volunteered into prostitution as they don't have any other livelihood other than prostitution or begging. Rural transgender or hijra sections are not just marginalized because of flouting gender norms, but are also oppressed by caste and class hierarchies, which intersect with gendered oppression to compound their

disempowerment within social structures. Most people see transgenders from this viewpoint of aggressive beggars and prostitutes, but very little attention is paid to their dismal lives.

VIDYA AND MANOBI

In such hostile conditions, a few transgenders managed to climb the ladder of success in India. They stood hard and firm every time they faced humiliation and rejection. Living Smile Vidya and Manobi Bandyopadhyay are two transgenders among those who proved themselves to the intimidating society.

Living Smile Vidya is also known as smiley is an Indian trans-woman, actress, assistant director and writer from Chennai. She is a transgender activist and blogger. She holds a post-graduate degree from the Tanjavuru University in Applied Linguistics. She started her career as an electronic data processing assistant and thereby became the first trans-woman in India who worked in a mainstream job rather than working for NGOs. Later she moved to a theatre is the recipient of the prestigious British Council – Charles Wallace India Trust Fellowship to study theatre in the UK. She acted in several short films, including *Kandal Pookkal* and *500&5*. She also acted in documentary films “*Aghrinaigal*” and “*Butterfly*”. She was the subject of the award-winning Kannada documentary “*Naanu Avanalla . . . Avalu*”, based on her autobiography.

The book discussed in this paper is her autobiography. Her autobiography “*I Am Vidya: A Transgenders Jourjey*” was written in Tamil and was later translated into seven different languages including English. It is regarded as one of the most brilliant transgender memoirs. It was first published in 2007. It is the first transgender autobiography in India. It showcases the struggle of Sarvanan to become Vidya. The struggle includes a lot of physical and mental training. In addition to her life the autobiography also presents the plight of contemporary transgenders like Vidya in India.

Manobi Bandyopadhyay is the first transgender principal in India. She was born on 23 September 1964 as Somnath Bandyopadhyay. She became India’s first third-gender (transgender) principal at Krishnanagar Women’s College in Naida district in West Bengal on 9 June 2015. She was selected for this post purely on merit. She holds a Ph.D in Bengali Literature and was previously an associate professor of Bengali at the Vivekananda Satavarshiki Mahavidyalaya in Jhargram. In 1995 she started the first Bengali transgender magazine, *Abomanob* meaning subhuman. There are two books to her credit. The first one *Ontohin Ontorin Prositovortika (Endless Bondage)* which is a best seller. The other one is *Third Gender in Bengali Literature*.

The work discussed in this Paper *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* is a candid biography of Manobi Bandyopadhyay written by Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey who is a Journalist. It is called as a candid biography of India’s First Transgender Principal by the writers as Manobi tells her story of transformation from a man into a woman with unflinching honesty and deep understanding. It depicts the birth and life of Somanath and his journey to become Manobi and the challenges she faced throughout the journey and how she continued to pursue academics despite many upheavals. The journey is an extraordinary and courageous one by a transgender person to define her identity and set new standards of achievement. The book mirrors our society and its treatment and reaction to the transgenders in our society.

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *I AM VIDYA* AND *A GIFT OF GODDESS LAKSHMI*

Both *I am Vidya* and *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* show two different paths to success of two transgenders. Vidya an MA linguist graduate had to leave everything and went to Pune to beg and earn as a hijra for her sex

reassignment surgery due to lack of support from the family. But Manobi was blessed to have her parents who never disowned her and hence she never left her education and got a job to earn for her sex reassignment surgery. Both these works give a lot of information about the internal and external turmoil and struggle of transgenders. They help us to understand the life of transgenders and their suffering.

A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi starts with the birth of Manobi as Somanath but Vidya starts her autobiography with her second birth – birth as a woman, birth as Vidya through ‘Nirvana’ (Sex Reassignment Surgery). Studying these two texts gives us many details of transgenders and their lives. There are a lot of similarities in the lives of Vidya and Manobi. Both Manobi and Vidya are the only sons to their parents after daughters. Both were pampered with pride as the valuable possession. The books also depict the typical Indian mentality of having a boy child as an achievement. In her autobiography Vidya says

My father was hoping the next baby would be a boy, to make up for two girls and the loss of his firstborn son . . . Landing finally at the Vayalur Murugan Temple in Tiruchi, he vowed to name his next child after Murugan (the presiding diety) if it was a boy. He would also shave his head in a pious offering of his locks to the lord. (Vidya 2007)

Vidya shares how she used to be treated specially in the house as he was a boy. Her father never allowed him to do any work and always say that he should just study as he was the male heir of their family.

I was a privileged member of the household. Of the three children, I was the one person who didn’t have to do any work at home. That was the unwritten law. . . I was the male heir of the family and that was reason enough to exempt me from work of any kind! . . . I was the sole beneficiary of all the love and affection at home by virtue of a boy (Vidya 2007)

Likewise, Manobi was also the only son of her parents and her arrival was much celebrated by her father. In her words

My father, Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay, was a proud man that day. Finally, after two daughters, he had been able to sire a boy! . . . He had a trophy to show off to his family that had ridiculed him all this while for not being able to father a son. He thought I was Shiva’s gift to him, and named me Somnath. (Vidya 2007)

Even Manobi’s sisters were so scared of their father just like Vidya’s sisters. Manobi was never scared of her father as he was never strict with her. She says “was it because I was a boy? You know how they indulge boys in Indian families.” (Vidya 2007). These instances show how in Indian society boys are given importance and are treated superior to their girl siblings. They depict the typical mindset of our Indian’s in treating boys’ superior to girls’ right from the birth.

Both Vidya and Manobi share that their change started at a very early age of six or seven years old and that their change started with their love for their sisters printed frocks and skirts. Both had a deep yearning to be a complete woman and hated their genitals. They used to wear their sisters’ clothes in secrecy and dance to the tunes of film songs. Both of them love cinema and the influence of the heroines was too much on them. They used to imitate the heroines at school and get a good, applaud for their imitating skills. But both of them knew that they were not imitating but being their self in doing so. They wanted to shout out that they were women deep inside and hate to be called as boys. Both of them had a

very deep interest in arts and literature. Vidya used to work with drama groups and Manobi with dance groups. Even today Vidya is a famous theatre artist. When they used to act or dance, they preferably chose female characters so that they can show of their femininity without any fear of being recognized and to satisfy the urge of exhibiting their true self to all. “Actually, I was pretending to imitate a girl for fun, and they liked my ‘acting’ – but deep inside I was not really acting: I was expressing my inner urges.” (Vidya 2007) Similarly, “She said, ‘Being a boy, if Somnath can pick up a girl’s steps so well, can’t you all do that?’ I just smiled shyly and enjoyed the adulation. I yearned to tell them that I was not trying to be a girl, I was actually one!” (Bandyopadhyay 2017)

There are a lot of similarities in Vidya and Manobi lives. Both had a lot of passion for dance. Manobi even opines that “dancing comes naturally to a transgender person.” (Bandyopadhyay 2017) “I think dancing and make-up are the two fields in which transgendered people excel.” (Bandyopadhyay 2017) They always felt happy being recognized as female but could never take the teasing or harsh comments on their femininity. They both were very bright in studies and had very bitter experiences in their schools. At stages in their lives they pick up unisex clothes as they both hated the male clothing and also “realized that wearing obviously feminine clothes was a problem.” (Vidya 2007) For both of them their university days were the happiest and best as know one minded their sexuality and never taunted them for their femininity. Both of them worked for press. They always tried to suppresses their femininity before others and express themselves in solitude. They were both advised by many, to whom they shared their situation, not to go for Sex Reassignment Surgery.

Ashabharathi gave me the same advice everyone had given so far. She stressed the importance of education and warned me about the social disapproval. ‘You are a man, remain a man.’ repeating what everyone had told me so far (Vidya 2007)

The doctor told me that I was completely out of my senses and that I should not even remotely try to go for such a surgery because it would ultimately harm me. He asked me to take such destructive thoughts out of my mind and remain a boy. (Bandyopadhyay 2017)

But, the urge for Vidya and Manobi to establish their sexuality is more important than anything. “the biggest aim of my life was to establish my sexual identity.” (Bandyopadhyay 2017) The inner psychological turmoil they underwent was dreadful. Fearing the society of discrimination and disapproval, and the fear of families’ discontent puts a lot of stress on them and lead to severe internal trauma. Until they underwent the Sex Reassignment surgery their life was a double ride. Physically, they were male but deep inside they were female. At points they were confused and troubled with their idea of their sexuality, but the femininity in them broke all the doubts and chains and craved to come out. They were even ready to face death in their quest to establish their sexuality.

. . . I could not lead a double life any longer. No, I couldn’t live any longer as a man. If I could not become a woman, I’d rather die. I wasn’t confused now. I had come to a clear decision . . . My decision was firm, bold. I hated being a man. I was going to try and live as a woman. If I failed, I was ready to die. (Vidya 2007)

I felt like tearing away and escaping from the man’s body in which I was born . . . I came to the conclusion that I was a woman and that I had to come out of my shell at any cost . . . I was firm. If I had to face death in an effort to establish my true sexual identity, so be it. I would do whatever it took to prove to the world that I was a woman. (Bandyopadhyay 2017)

However, the paths they took to establish their identity through sex reassignment surgery are different. Vidya being an MA Linguistics degree holder had no other option other than going and joining the transgender community in Pune and begged in the streets and trains to earn the money for her sex reassignment surgery. Throughout her life as a *tirunagai* (transgenders in Tamil Nadu are called as 'tirunangais') Vidya faced a lot of physical and psychological trauma. The trauma is the result of the discrimination and marginalization from the society. In the beginning she had to pawn her self esteem and education to clap and beg. As she vowed never to be a sex worker, begging was her only option.

I had butterflies in my stomach. Me, beg at next shop? . . . even as my brain told my hand to reach out, the hand refused to obey! Tears were welling up in my eyes. At that very instant I remembered my MA in linguistics, of all things. I stood there, nervous, hesitant. (Vidya 2007)

Even her sex reassignment surgery was not a sanctioned procedure or even hygienic. She calls her sex reassignment surgery as 'nirvana' the ultimate peace – the inner peace that comes from the removing of male genitals and becoming a woman physically. Vidya says that the operation was a mere butchering of the male genitals. "But it was no operation theatre, I realized as soon as I entered the tiny room – it was a slaughterhouse." (Vidya 2007) she says that the walls of the room allotted for transgenders in the hospital was full with the scribbling of their names on the wall and it was because that they feared they would die on the operation table. This shows the most dangerous circumstances transgenders in India go through in an attempt to establish their sexuality. There were no proper legal hospitals to do the sex reassignment surgery and even though there are a few, the majority of the transgenders are unaware of them. Vidya felt so relieved and happy after her operation. Her inner peace won her physical pain.

Inside, I was at peace. It was a huge relief. I was now a woman: mine was a woman's body . . . Thank you for removing my maleness from my body; thank you for making my body a female body. My life is fulfilled. If I die now, I'll loose nothing. I can sleep in peace. (Vidya 2007)

Unlike Vidya Manobi was lucky enough to have an understanding family. Not that the family supported her for her sex reassignment surgery but they have never disowned her and always put her on right education. In her words "In many ways I consider myself far more fortunate than transgendered people . . . If my family had not supported me despite my 'oddity' and forced me to excel in studies, God knows where I would have ended up." (Bandyopadhyay 2017) Her education got her a job as a lecturer in a remote village of Jhargram. But it was not a bed of roses for her as most of her colleagues hated her saying that "No one as lowly as a hijra should be allowed to teach in a college, share the same staffroom, toilet and facilities." (Bandyopadhyay 2017) They used to assault her and insult her every now and then. But Manobi never gave up on them but stood her stance and continued her job. She started publishing India's first transgender magazine – *Abomanob* meaning subhuman. Her sex reassignment surgery was a long process where she got the virtue of counseling from psychoanalysts and psychologists. She was under hormonal treatment for some years before the surgery. Her sex reassignment surgery was not mere taking away the male genitals, but a plastic surgeon successfully sculpted her breasts and was able to create the perfect female genitalia for her. "Somnath had left me forever and Manobi was born, just as Dr Khanna had written in the certificate . . . Finally, my soul had found its body, and I had a sense of completeness that had been denied to me at birth" (Bandyopadhyay 2017)

But life was not better even after their sex reassignment surgery. The society still saw them as an aberration and taunted them with sneers and comments. Even their families are not left with peace, but were harassed by the neighbors.

They both had to fight hard with the governments to change their names and sex in the records. Vidya had to put up a lot of fight to change her name from Sarvanan to Vidya and Manobi to change her name from Somnath to Manobi.

CONCLUSIONS

India is a land of different cultures and traditions. Whether accepted or not Hijras or transgenders are a very integral part of our culture and it's high time we leave the stigma about them and inculcate them in the mainstream society. The present transgender autobiography and biography give us a lot of inside information about transgenders and their mental and physical pain. Including such literature on transgenders in our mainstream education helps the students to understand them better and have compassion towards them. In the wake of the Supreme Court judgment in 2015 asking the government to provide reservation in all educational institutions and employment, it would be advisable to include these bios in the curriculum so that it adds to a better understanding of transgenders.

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