

Journey of a Transgender in India: Through the lens of '*I am Vidya*'

Mr. Rituraj Anand

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Shaheed Rajguru College of Applied
Sciences for Women

University of Delhi

rituraj127.anand@gmail.com

Ms. Tamanna Priya

MA English Literature

Hindu College, University of

Delhi, india

tamanna0602@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Transgender are those who don't conform to the socially constructed gender and biologically determined sex. A transgender may be transsexual if the person desires or undergoes HRT or SRS surgery and match the genitals with the real gender he/she finds suitable for self. But the journey of a transgender in our society is congested with marginalization, struggle and identity crisis. Trans-phobia is deeply rooted in our society. Negation and neglect of the third gender denies them of their existence. They are treated as outcasts, not only by the society but also by their own parents. At times, they are even prejudiced by the other queer groups as well. The crippled law and deplorable medical facilities fail to rescue them. Further, extreme inequality, discernment, penury, hearsays and violence make their lives Augean. Existence becomes an eroteme with insufficient stut and embrace of the family, society and democracy. Acknowledgement of the transgender in our society is the first and foremost step to relieve them of their insecurities. Acceptance would be liberation. This paper is an attempt to trace the

journey of transgender in India and to study the challenges faced by them with an in-depth analysis of the autobiography of Living Smile Vidya, *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*.

KEYWORDS: transgender, trans-phobia, identity, violence, marginalization, acknowledgement

'I am Vidya' is an autobiography or as the book calls itself—A Transgender's Journey, written by Living Smile Vidya, who is an Indian trans woman actor, assistant director, writer and a Dalit rights activist from Chennai. She has a master's degree holder in linguistics and is keenly interested in contemporary theatre, and cinema. This book is a first person's account of Vidya's journey as a transgender in this society. An autobiography is considered to be as a very authentic source of information, because it speaks of the first-hand experience of a person; it can't be fictionalized at all. Hence, there is also no doubt on the authenticity of the accounts. M.H Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in the book- 'A Glossary of Literary Terms', define autobiography as "a biography written by the subjects about himself/herself." This autobiography is not just an account of Vidya and her journey as a transgender, but a means for us to peep into the life of every transgender in India. It vehemently exposes the plights afflicted on them by their families, friends, society and government, too. It is a full-blown expression by a transgender who becomes the mouthpiece of all the harassments, cruelty and marginalization faced by transgender in India. Along with its universal voice for the visibility of transgender in our society and their acceptance/acknowledgement, it also acts as a galvanizer for the victimized ones like her as her own life is truly inspiring. It acts as a motivating fuel for others to follow her path of self-acceptance and hard work to find a way to success. It is quite explicit that it is only

through sheer struggle with which one can establish oneself in a society like ours. It renders introspection in the readers, so that they bring about a change in the current pathetic state of transgender and that is what this paper intends to do. Emancipation from the prejudices, marginalization and ignorance will be attained with empowerment. For this, the paper will trace the journey of transgender in India through Vidya's journey and further provide an analysis of it, while studying the challenges faced by them.

Gender and sex are different. Sex is a biological distinction which is based on a person's reproductive capabilities, whereas gender is constituted socially. It is a social construction of how a person is supposed to behave in the society. There are different gender roles that define a person's gender as a 'male' or 'female'. Gender tells the ways in which one is expected to perform one's biological sex, by the family, friends, society and state. To support this differentiation, we can recall words of Simon De Beavoir: One is not born but rather becomes a woman. Hence, social structure is the prime source of the gender difference. Human behavior in social milieu gives the gender identity of a person. Unfortunately, this gender identity for a very long time never included the third gender. This human third gender has been devoid of social acceptance for ages. This human third gender is 'Transgender'.

Transgender refers to an individual who has a different gender identity from their biological sex. As an identity, it called as the third sex (tritiya prakriti) in Sanskrit. This group of people has an internal desire to exercise an opposite external manifestation of social behavior, to what is expected from them. Transgenderism is a state or condition in which a person's identity does not conform unambiguously to conventional ideas of male or female gender. In medical terms, it refers to the broad spectrum of people who transiently or persistently identify with a gender different from their natal sex. There are two categories of transgenders: MTF (male to

female) and FTM (female to male). MTF is also called ‘transgendered woman’ and FTM is also called ‘transgendered male’. The term “transsexual” is typically used for those who seek medical assistance to change their biological or birth sex. Many of these people develop an understanding of their gender orientation during their childhood itself, thereafter they start cross-dressing and the other urges of behaving like someone of an opposite gender is what makes them take aid of medical assistance. To assert the sexual behavior of their choice and rid of their gender performativity, they change their sex through Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS). These people who go under SRS and get their sex changed are known as transsexuals.

Nirvana- title of the very first chapter, speaks of the importance of one's liberation from one's biological sex and the gender identity along with it. The word refers to the SRS operation. It is the most important part of a transgendered individual's life. Since the time they realize their actual sexuality this is the day that they await. They do all sorts of jobs, no matter what it costs them; they compromise everything to undergo nirvana. They spend all their savings for it.

“Nirvana! How long I had waited for it! What humiliation I had suffered! Obsessed with it, I had mortgaged my pride, my anger, my honour—I had even begged on the streets to achieve that end (Vidya 3).” Vidya worked very hard and begged for a long time on the streets, in the trains and other places. She had to undergo a lot of pain and toiling to save enough for this operation. For her ‘nirvana’ was the ultimate peace!

“Inside, I was at peace. It was a huge relief. I was now a woman: mine was a woman's body. Its shape would be what my heart wanted, had yearned for. This pain would obliterate all earlier pains (Vidya 8).” This may sound pretty soothing but is not as easy in deed as said. The ‘all earlier pains’ are what it takes to achieve this. Many don't even reach up to this. They give up to

the drudgery of life, poverty, marginalization, social discrimination, ostracization and physical abuse. Moreover, the process of SRS is quite traumatic in itself, not just physically but psychologically, too. There are no proper medical facilities in many government hospitals for this operation. As far as Vidya's nirvana is concerned, it is quite evident of how the bare minimum facilities are not available to them in hospitals. She talks about the negligent behavior of the nurse and attendants. She calls their approach as unsafe and unhygienic from the way they treated her and others. The operation theatre seems to her more like a slaughterhouse. The place lacked basic hygiene. There were no tests performed, no questions asked and no counseling done. There was no guarantee given. The most gruesome and painful thing that she felt was when the surgeon made the first incision on her abdomen, she hadn't lost the sensation completely. The anesthesia couldn't work. She was again given a spinal injection, which too failed to completely subside the pain. Lack of medical attention proves to be fatal in the cases of many. There is no proper medication which is prescribed or provided to them, due to which they have to anyhow take help of homely medicines. Here also, Vidya was discharged just after a day of her operation. She explicitly compares and contrasts the countries where sex change operations are legalized and India. She vividly tells about how there are many tests that are to be performed on the person undergoing the procedure and how all of it takes about six months, after which a psychiatrist and gynaecologist have to recommend SRS. She claims, how in India, it's just a simple castration done under local anesthesia, without even a proper approval from government, at times. Then, they face social disapprovals and finally, all of the further discriminations lead to them being involved in begging or prostitution.

Amma, Amma, I have become a woman. I am not Saravanan any more, I am Vidya—a complete Vidya—a whole woman.[...]please Radha, I am no longer your brother, Radha. I am your sister now, your sister.

...Look at me as a woman. Accept me as a girl, Appa. (Vidya 9)

Acceptance from one's family first and the society, next becomes a next major challenge after a transgender becomes a transsexual. The yearning to be recognized and acknowledged for one's actual identity is a matter of dignity to a transgender. This becomes a real problem once a transgender undergoes SRS. Vidya was named Saravanan by her father as his wish for a boy was fulfilled. But hardly, he knew that inside Saravanan was not his boy.

“I am the princess,

A fresh new one.

Will my dream come true?” (Vidya 18)

This is first unconscious realization of her sexuality and an assertion of the same by the playful dance in the Manju's Indian skirt that she does. She would usually lock herself inside once all the family members at her grandmother's place left the house. Once, her grandmother saw her dancing in a girl's attire. She still continued doing the same after that incident, too. She had an attraction for the charismatic heroes and an unfulfilled longing to acquire the beauty of leading ladies. She talks about how the pity habits of hers which everyone used to ignore as child's play was now being seen as something disfavoured. She was even scolded and thrashed by her family members for the same. She questions that something that's natural to her, why should it be a problem to people around her. In the Indian society, if you do not conform to your

existing gender identity and behaved otherwise, people eye you. They question your sexuality. They start calling you with names as derogatory remarks, like meetha or chhaka. Once, a classmate called her nine (an offensive epithet in Tamil for eunuchs and transgenders) just because she stood ninth position in the class. They would add the suffix 'ali' to his name, which is yet another term for eunuchs in Tamil. All of these remarks create a mental pressure on the person who is being sidelined by the mainstream people due to his/her behavior. The family members also rebel to it and they see it as some kind of aberration. The social behavior of such a person is condemned. Vidya used to be troubled by the boys around her and they would shout on her, "Look at this lady."

There's a mental agony that gets developed inside a person who realizes the internal sexual self and still, has to hide it and keep up to societal expectations. Despite this struggle, when people even get a slight clue about it, they tend to ridicule and bully that person. Once Vidya had to share a room with her mates in Madurai and she was overpowered with fear because all the mates were boys. One of them poked fun at her for her effeminate behaviors.

Due to the fear of such rebukes and abuses that the transgenders receive from the people, they move to NGOs where they can easily and freely adhere to their inner real self. The desire to be recognized as a woman and acquaint with people of her kind leads Vidya to an NGO. She meets Senthil who she met randomly in a bus. At those NGOs, they addressed her as 'dee'—a friendly way in which girls address each other in Tamil. In that NGO, there were many like her, who used to be in garb outside but returned to their real inner self at the NGO. Some of them already went through SRS and were known as tirunangais. Most of these kothis and tirunangais roam around looking for sex work as they have no other source of livelihood. These transgenders are followed and are often exploited. At times, the repressed desire in a transgender makes

him/her take revenge on the society. At times, Vidya also lead some men who followed her and then used to vanish suddenly.

Unfortunately, many times transgenders are discouraged and subverted by their own kind, too. Sri was a kothi just like Vidya. But he advised her to never give up on the studies and be a good son to the family. She suggested her to find an expression of personal desires in privacy and then warned her that she would have to face dire consequences if she would continue to dream of undergoing sex change operation. Similarly, another Anglo-Indian kothi and even the director of the NGO gave her the same advice to carry on with the education. These failures in getting positive vibes, even from the similar kinds of people, disheartens a transgender and further sickens more. She got puzzled with this irony as she remarks:

Wasn't she a woman like me? Why then was he advising me to continue to be a man? This was no casual interest like my foray into theatre. This was my need: my existence; my very survival. I was a woman, not a man. Why couldn't they understand it? What foolishness! How annoying! (63)

This clearly shows the impact such suggestions make on a person like Vidya. When a transgender faces such discriminations and dejections, the final call they make is to be self-independent so as to live the life the way he/she wants. That self-dependence only lies in begging or becoming a sex worker. Now, no matter how qualified a transgender is or how much struggle one has done to reach up to there, such is the fate that every transgender has to surrender in India. Finally, Vidya also decides to go to Pune and start a new life as a beggar. And her reason for this, despite being so qualified, talented and able, is quite reflected in the following lines:

...but I hated to be a man in public and a woman in private. I found wearing man's clothes disgusting. Nobody's advice could shake my resolve. I was a woman and I was nothing without my passion to be a woman. It was more than a passion even: it was an obsession. My womanhood was raging to destroy my manhood, incinerating all the advice I was receiving. (Vidya 68)

A transgender has to enroll oneself formally in the community of tirunangais by doing reet. Once reet is done, the concerned registered person is appointed a family—parivar. There are multiple rules and regulations that further govern the life of a tirunangai. Hence, it is very much clear that the self-dependence that one seeks by getting on with the community, has its own costs.

The biggest challenge a transsexual faces in society is the unrecognition and disownment from the family. A person can fight the whole world only if there is a good support from the family. Vidya had to face this challenge soon after few months she settled in Pune. She went to meet her family in a woman's attire and the first time Radha calls her with her former name—'Saravana', she retorts and says, "Don't call me that. I am Vidya now." She is made to feel guilty as she is asked the reason for why she was crying and that her family is supposed to weep instead because of what she had done to them. If a transgender takes a decision for oneself in society, it is not accepted at all. The actual identity which a transgender desires to assert is considered to be as a kind of flaw or disability in a person. She seemed very clear with this realization that the place of tirunangais would always be a problem in a world of men and women where no one had the maturity to accept them naturally.

Some relief for them comes from the myths, which helps them to settle down in certain cities. The fear that a trinungais blessings and curse both are very powerful makes people think it

is good to receive them. Doesn't this make them stand in a position where they are not accepted out of will or welcomed as a natural order, rather they are given a position out of fear, which doubly disables them and make them dependent on myths to survive?

Begging is very difficult in the initial stages for any transgender, so as for any other transgender, too. Still, they do it without giving any thought to their self-respect, qualification etc. Vidya also faced similar problem. She learnt how clapping hands is a highly effective language that they could use to catch the attention of people as well as to connect to their own kind in case of emergencies. Now, the question is what emergencies are they susceptible to? Transgenders in India are anytime prone to physical and sexual abuse. They are thrashed many a times, especially when they are not in their group. Vidya had also been a victim of violence against her, few times. Once when she was begging in Nagercoil train, she was slapped by one of the persons from the group of four to which she just insisted to increase the money given to her. When she retaliated with a cuss, she was beaten by four of them very badly. The condemnable thing is the way common people tend to ignore such public violence as if they have nothing to do with it. The other reason is that they don't feel transgenders as equal to them—as even mere human beings. In fact, people tend to blame transgenders only and behave towards them as if they deserve it. In Vidya's situation, too, people around her in the train were just interested in watching the scene as if it is some kind of fun for them. Another time, when Vidya was begging with Priya and Prateeksha in a train, they were treated badly by two fellow passengers even when neither Vidya nor Priya and Prateeksha said anything to them. When both the men tried to shoo them, Vidya retorted equally shamefully. To that act, the military man raised a hand on Priya. The only way in which one defends oneself in such situations, is by creating fear. Fear is the only factor by which they can fight some of the battles in life. Vidya narrates that once when

Priya was begging in a bazaar alone, she was about to be attacked by a man. To defend herself, she took a brick and hit her own head and when she bled she feigned to be an avatar of goddess Bhadrakali, that moment. Such tricks work for transgenders, but then it also comes at a cost of self-hurt. It gets equally difficult for a transgender to start a business or become self-employed. When Vidya tried it for some time, she failed miserably in that. Even when she did her best, she couldn't get enough returns on the hard work. The only reason for it, according to her, was their gender and not their goods. The social stigma and transphobia has made the so called 'social beings' completely devoid of any social sense or humanity. People's unnecessary prejudice has made them hollow within which doesn't allow them to even have a feeling of pity over transgenders. Due to this, they avoid every kind of direct and indirect association with trans people, so far as to not even buy the goods that are sold by these people. Such situations finally push them back to their pathetic life where they either have to sell their dignity for alms or sell their body for livelihood.

Self-dependence can provide transgenders a chance to prove themselves and become something. But due to lack of opportunities and lack of support from public, they are denied the chances of at least proving their worth even when they are very much capable of doing it. Their recognition is also under question often.

True, I was a graduate—an MA in linguistics, in fact—but did that mean there were government jobs waiting for me, a transgender person? And while there might be sympathizers in the private sector, how many would actively support transgenders? If I wanted to strike the path of a self-employed entrepreneur, how many people would be ready to give me business, or even finance my venture? There is absolutely no social security for transgenders in this country. (Vidya 92)

Even the NGOs which exist for the causes of tirunangais, don't function well. Vidya poses a serious question on the bodies which flaunt themselves wearing the badges of rescuers and end up going astray or not functioning in the ideal way at all. When Vidya is suggested a place at an NGO which worked for tirunangais, by Amudan, she refuses for the offer as she objected to their work which involved excessive focus on HIV/AIDS awareness, when their prime objectives should be to work for the welfare of transgenders, the redressal of their grievances, providing them job opportunities and economic freedom, overall.

According to Vidya, transgenders are 'Dalits of Dalits' because unlike other minorities their problems can't be even described by them. Dalits and feminists can be heard but transgenders, as the oppressed women among women, scarcely hold any rallies or are expected to demand their rights. They are denied equality, freedom and fraternity which our democratic nation bestows to every citizen in the constitution. Till the end of their lives, most of them continue to live a despicable life where their self-respect and dignity remain tattered.

Social conditioning is a very important to bring about any social change. Children need to be taught from their early childhood about equality of human beings. Children mostly acquire the behaviors that they see or experience around them. The society and its ill notions teach the children to attack, insult or make a transgender cry whenever they can. The children see the whole ridiculing and prejudiced behavior around them and with all these experiences, they grow up and do the same. There is utterly a need to put a full stop on such conditioning. People also need to understand that transgenders are also just like humans and they had no role in what kind of biology or inner feelings they have. Neither they are to be abhorred nor to be feared. They must be treated just the way we treat every other man or woman.

Acceptance at the cost of transforming them into either a complete male or a female is a mutilation of their fluid distinct self and this sort of merging into the mainstream of culture after a certain sort of correction in their liminal sexuality is indeed a farce and a sort of mockery of the acceptance of transgender identity. They should be made comfortable as a third sex without having any need to go through horribly hazardous and painful sex-change surgeries. Specially when the law and the medical practitioners both mirror the fact that even after the sex reassignment surgery the transbody cannot be recognized as a complete male or female.(Sharma 71)

Why do many transgenders need to even undergo SRS? Why can't they be respected and be allowed to freely live with the sexuality and the gender behavior that they want to pursue? They must be accepted for what they are.

Government should come up with skill based programs and job opportunities for these people. Private sector firms should also be welcoming enough to employ transgenders who are capable of some work or have the ideal qualification. NGOs must also function well for the welfare of transgenders. There must be strict laws made against any kind of violence against transgenders. Sensitization among people is also important to make them stand in support of transgenders in public place and defend their rights if violated. Proper medical facilities must be provided to these people. They must also be psychologically prepared for SRS with continuous counseling. Money becomes a big hindrance for transgenders in getting their sex changed. That's the reason they indulge into begging and other petty activities. Hence, free and good medical facilities for their operation would relieve them of arranging money for the operation. For the preservation of their identity, they must be easily provided with government scheme cards and the procedure for the name change must be made simpler.

Vidya's life was full of struggle just like other transgenders like her. The only way she could reach here was her efforts and hard work. Her hope never let her go down. Even in the darkest moments, she had enough optimism and courage to think of betterment. Her life's journey is also motivation for others of her kind. It is an example of how one can free oneself from the clutches of society's notions. She claims her identity through the very title of the book- '*I am Vidya*'!

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