

Social Dimensions of 'Coming Out' in Vidya's Autobiography *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*

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Abstract: 'Coming out' in the society for a person who belongs to marginalized section of society has been taken as an individual act by the concerned person. But the act is a complete process of accepting new ways of life and shedding of many accepted norms of a society so the act cannot be an individual act but it has many social dimensions. It gives individual as well as community a new dimension and way to lead life.

Keyword: Come out, transgender, social dimension

It is quite recent in India when people from different trans-communities got some air to their credit when the apex body of India in 2014 NALSA vs. Union of India case issued a landmark judgment in which it was declared that people from different trans-communities should be legally recognized, enjoy all fundamentals rights provided by the Constitution of India and special benefits in education and employment. Not only the NALSA judgment but the judgment on IPC 377, which made any sexual activity other than heterosexual against the order of nature in Navtej Singh Johar & Others. v. Union of India judgment by the Supreme Court of India on August 6, 2018 upheld 377 of IPC as violation of the constitutional rights to equality and dignity and decriminalized all the consensual sex among adults. The recent constitutional remedies and voices from among the people and NGOs from within the community have helped in making a shift in the society. People like Laxminarayan Tripathy, transgender rights activist and *Mahamadleswar*, *Kinnar Akhara*, Joyita Mondal, India's first transgender judge appointed at *Lok Adalat* in North Bengal in October 2017, Prithika Yashini, India's first transgender police officer, Manabi Bandopadhyay, India's first transgender college principal, Shabnam Mausi, India's first transgender who became an MLA, Shabi, India's first transgender soldier are a few names who have achieved higher position in the society and they came out openly in the society in creating

a space in the main stream society. But, the ‘coming out’ as a process is not a monotonous act by any individual or group but it has multi-dimensional act, role and purposes and have a mass level impact.

‘Come out’ as an act has been considered in general as an act to come out openly in the society and disclose the individual identity as something different as it has been considered or assigned at birth. But the important question is that whether the process is solely an individual act? What are the factors that forces the person to disclose the traits of the identity which is not so much accepted in the society? If the act is a disclosure, then in front of whom it is disclosed and what are the reactions one gets? What are the factors responsible to the particular response from the main-stream society? And, if the act is multi-dimensional act, what are its dimensions and its connotative meaning(s)?

Magruder refers coming out as simply to the acknowledgement of a gay identity to others. Magruder’s view on the act restricts its limitations to the gay people of the society. Going one step ahead from Magruder, Merighi and Grimes have given specific meaning to the act as it is disclosure of one’s sexuality to family members. Magruder was particularly focused upon the gay identity but Merighi and Grimes have focused sexuality as a whole but they have talked about the disclosure in a limited way to family members only. In her research on some diverse women sexual identity Oswald finds out that “coming out is a process of significant change for women who accept and disclose bisexual or lesbian identities, and for those to whom they come out” (70). Oswald’s definition is quite much inclusive in its nature as it does talk about the ‘self-acceptance’ and then disclosing it to the others. Further Nicholas A. Guittar typically maintains that “coming out includes 1) disclosure of a sexual identity, 2) the involvement of family, friends, or coworkers, and 3) a transformative nature to the exchange” (8). When the act is transformative in its nature, it is, of course, one of the central parts of a new identity-formation and the new identity must be a person’s true reflection as it reveals one’s true self and ignores social intervention.

The present paper will examine the act and process of coming out in Living Smile Vidya’s Autobiography *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey* in three stages of a person with diverse sexual identity by Victor Turner namely- 1) Pre-liminal, 2) Liminal and 3) Post-liminal stage.

Saravanan was the sixth child to be born of his family and the only one born with a male body that which, later on, does not confirm her later life with the body at birth. Her father Ramaswami was a municipal worker of the lowest rank, a sweeper and her mother Veeramma was a housewife. Vidya did not belong to a well off family as his father was the only one to earn breads for his family and happened to be a male in the

family who earns name and fame as well as earns bread for the family. So, after the birth of girls only, his family, specially her father, wanted a male child to be born. Saravanan received the best schooling and family atmosphere among her siblings as she:

was the male heir of the family, and that was reason enough to exempt me from work any kind!
. . . When he came back from work in the evening, Appa usually brought us sweets and snacks,
and you could bet he slipped in something extra for me every time . . . I was the sole beneficiary
of all the love and affection at home by virtue of being a boy. (Vidya 13)

Later on, in her later life she gets troubles with the attached identity with the body she was born with and, at this time, her “effeminate ways—hitherto an object of ridicule on my street—now became the target of my schoolmates’ taunts . . . It became quite common for the boys to trouble me . . . studies began to suffer” (24). Troubled by the society over non-recognition of her real ‘self’ it started a clash between her father, family and society and Saravanan. In her later life she left her home in search of her ‘self’ as she wanted to be a female by body which she was by her soul. In the course of this phase of her life, she gets troubles by the society and its custom; and finally, after understanding the pain that one has to bear with the clash between body and desires, she goes for sex-reassignment-surgery.

Victor Turner is of the view that in the pre-liminal stage in a transgender’s life, one isolates oneself to give one’s life to his ‘real-self’. In this stage the person understands, feels and tries to act in the field of life where one finds satisfaction but sensing something strange, the person does not share those feelings openly to each and every one. Vidya has recorded many incidents and events in her life where her actions challenge the set gender notions of a society but she was not able to understand why does she love to do and behave like other female in the society and home? In this stage, Vidya feels something different in her as expected by the family and society but it was very difficult for her to share those feelings and emotions to almost anyone. She often locks herself inside once all of the family members had gone out and put on girl’s dress and she loves the wearing of the dress. When the family members see her wearing girl’s dress at an early age they consider it as childish and her “family did not take it too seriously in the beginning. They put it down as innocent pranks of a child and scolded me occasionally, but they saw no cause for alarm at the time” (Vidya 20). From Saravanan’s cross dressing incidents one can understand the methods adopted by her in fulfilling her inner longings. She cherishes to listen to music and dances to its melody. Her favourite song is one which is often aired in the radio, “I am the princess/ A fresh new one/ Will my dream come true.” (Vidya 18). The word

'princess' suggests that she considers herself to be a girl, which was not at that time. Saravanan imagines herself to be the heroine:

I floated in an imaginary world in which I blushed as they did, danced and wooed their heroes as they did, expressed anger as they did. Once I emerged from the dream and re-entered the real world, I masqueraded as the heroine, dressing and walking around like them. (Vidya 19)

She dreams to be a woman and the dream was so much rooted in her mind, soul and body that she often wants to copy her sister in all regards:

Manju's skirts and midis, her eyeshadow, bangles, bindis and costume jewels. Lipstick was easily replicated by applying coconut oil to my lips and rubbing it in repeatedly. Long, plaited hair was an altogether different issue, but I knew how to overcome that problem too: just spread a thin cotton towel - a large kerchief, really . . . on your head like a veil, not covering the forehead, and twirl the long rear portion as if it were covering a pigtail. Worn this way you, could easily pass as a girl drying her hair after a shower. (Vidya 20)

Later on, the act of cross-dressing has been taken by the family members differently and something ill-omen. Saravanan was beaten by her father for the same acts in which, earlier, it was considered as childish act. Later on, Saravanan starts questioning the society over the fixed categories of gender and sexuality and she questions as "What's wrong with my preferences? Why should a boy only wear shirts and trousers? I like skirts and blouses. Why can't I wear them? Why do people find something odd in what comes naturally?" (Vidya 22).

In the pre-liminal stage, Vidya tries to know her real self and questions social attributes related to gender sexual identity as the attributes do not comply with her real self. Vidya recalls one incident where she becomes quite aggressive over denial of the space that she wants from the society. Vidya recalls:

Once while removing the insult or another, I flung the duster in sheer frustration and disgust, hitting the teacher. He tweaked my ear and made me scrape my knees on the floor. I had to grin and bear it. What else could I do, if this was my destiny? (Vidya 26)

Liminal stage, according to Turner, states the 'marginalised' state where transgender person clearly knows his social space in the society and it is the beginning of the life that individual, basically transgender, person advises them about the impact of how terrible the marginalised life would be. But the person does not prefer to go back to the life from where he has come out and already accepted a new life for his own. The person is also confident that he is not doing anything abnormal as the changes he has experience is quite

natural. “Nobody’s advice could shake my resolution. I was a woman and I was nothing without my passion to be a woman. It was more than a passion even: it was on obsession” (Vidya 68). Saravanan was advised by Ashabharathi, director of an NGO, “you are a man, remain a man” (Vidya 63). During this stage transgender people admit and put their ‘real self’ in public domain. At first, they disclose their self to someone very close to them who can maintain the dignity of their personal and social life. They do not wrap their life in secrecy:

Yes Sir, it is true. I want to be a woman. I can’t be a man anymore. My whole life is a lie. I don’t know why, but I wanted to tell you . . . no Sir, I can’t wait. I want to live as a woman. Nothing else seems important now. (Vidya 64)

At present Indian society, this coming out act openly in the society brings a state of marginalization for the community. Although, the state of marginalization is a social act performed by the main stream of society through various modes such as dehumanize the person or group, criminalize certain acts, almost no social space or work to perform for them etc. Knowing all the trauma regarding her life and future perspective, Vidya chooses to live a life of transgender community, one of the most fringe communities in Indian society, whose life and life-style is something that Vidya has never expected and she recall the moment:

I had butterflies in my stomach . . . I had waited for this moment . . . something I now had to do. And yet, 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 85)

The passage shows that once she has come out with her new identity how much she was determined with her choice of life. Shedding of the identity which was given by the society at her time of birth can also be seen as the clear revolt against the tyrannical social trails which do not confirm to Vidya’s real self. A complete denial of some aspect of main stream society is also a firm stand by any individual and a way to show one’s real self. Vidya narrates her *nirvana* or sex-reassignment-surgery (SRS) which signifies how much she was determined to shed of her body which do not confirm her inner feelings and real self. *Niravana* means rebirth and the act can also be seen as a new birth and it also signifies the risk involved in it. Vidya has rightly claimed that it is the instinct to live as a woman that drives persons like her to undergo such an ordeal:

I cursed and swore: I can’t bear the pain let me go! As the operation reached it’s, the pain rose to unbearable heights—as if someone was digging deep into my innards with a long rod and removing my intestines. Yes, what I saw in that instant was death. They had removed the part

of me over which I had shed silent tears of rejection from as far back as I could remember—
my penis and my testicles had been excised. (Vidya 7)

Transgenders' coming out together or forming an alternate world is something that the post-liminal stage refers to. In Indian society transgender people form an alternate world for themselves as a group or community which has its own rules and regulations. Transgenders feel that they have accomplished victory for they live according to their heart, "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 lose nothing. I can sleep in peace." (Vidya 8). Vidya has no regret in her life as the statement "I'll lose nothing" (8) if she dies in the process of attaining *nirvana*. She comes out openly in her life and in this stage she feels as if her aim of life is already fulfilled by accepting, revealing and by living the life that she wanted to lead. Further, she did not like the begging work and she "was consumed by the desire to lead a dignified life, to put an end to begging on trains or in market places' (110). But, it is quite tough as society is never ready to change their mind-set when it comes to accepting transgenders. Vidya starts selling products in trains but she was unable to fulfill her livelihood through this as there were no buyers for her products. The treatment of the host society and Vidya's predicament is clear from her words that "the problem was obviously our gender, not the goods we sold. We couldn't understand the prejudice." (110). Vidya becomes so depressed by the treatments of main-stream society to the community that she equates their plights and life with a community of utmost negligence:

India freed herself sixty-six years ago. Amidst our achievements and failures, democracy has remained strong and intact. Dalits have a voice, feminists are heard—they can hold rallies or demand for their right. But transgenders are the Dalits of Dalits, the most oppressed women among women—they enjoy no equality, no freedom, no fraternity. They continue to lead a wretched life, deprived of pride and dignity (Vidya 136-7)

Vidya's journey of life starts with a male body and she was named accordingly Saravanan. It is her life of letting one identity blur and disappear in the course of time and the new identity to be come out in the society. But, it is very tough for the society to accept one's new identity mainly based on sexuality.

The coming out act in the pre-liminal stage is quite much restricted to the person only. Magruder, Merighi and Grimes are quite right that the act is a disclosure of sexuality and here in the autobiography, Vidya has discussed her life as a diverse identity based on her sexuality. But, Merighi and Grimes' observation that restricts the act to family members only is quite limited in a sense because it is just a step of coming out among

many which happens generally in liminal stage. In the pre-liminal stage, cross-dressing and other different gender performances which can easily be neglected become the tool for individual to give vent to one's identity. But, through the small differences, one makes one's mind clear enough as where and what to choose in later life. Vidya recalls one incident where the teacher "tweaked my ear and made me scrape my knees on the floor. I had to grin and bear it. What else could I do, if this was my destiny?" (Vidya 26). The use of the word 'destiny' makes it clear that, at this stage, the individual is very confident of separating himself from the gender assigned at birth. In the liminal stage, through coming out act, one's desire to be recognized as a different identity gets affirmed which one hesitates to disclose at first but the desire remains somewhere in the person like magma. It was not easy for Vidya to disclose her real self in the society but it was only in private space or in rehearsals she could vent her emotions, feelings and her 'self' in front of the main-stream society.

She recalls:

On one occasion I acted like a girl for the benefit of Maharasan and a couple of other university students. 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 subtly expressing my inner urges . . . In a short while they realized I was not acting. What they saw, they discovered, was the truth. At first they were shocked, and after a while they began teasing me constantly. It hurts me a lot. (53-4)

In the liminal stage one discloses one's real identity after some hesitation but firmly accepts and starts living the life of that identity. And the post-liminal stage talks about the future perspective of transgender person and one's acceptance to the new identity, culture of the new shared identity and the whole set of new rules and ways of life. It is not the life-story of Vidya alone but many transgenders like her. Laxmi Narayan Tripathy's life starts with a male body named Raju and she belongs to the brahmin community and brahmins are considered as the upper rung in Indian society. Revathi's journey of life is a tale from being a male named Doraisamay to her real self as Revathi. Manobi Bandhopadhya's childhood spent with a male identity and she was named by her parents as Somnath. These are some of the examples among many in Indian society but the plight and struggle faced by these characters are almost similar as we have noticed in the above mentioned life narrations. The gap between their expected life in their pre-liminal and liminal life and the main-stream society creates troubles for them and this leads to many traumatic experiences.

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