



Physical and Mental Liminal Space of Transgenders: A Reading of Living Smile Vidya's *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*

Dr. R.S. Suji

Assistant Professor

Department of English

MS University, PG Extension,
Nagercoil

Abstract

In her book *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, Living Smile Vidya voices boldly for the rights of the third gender. She is an Indian trans woman actress, assistant director, writer and trans and Dalit rights activist from Chennai. This paper scrutinizes the liminal space of transgenders and their struggle and desire to live as normal human beings. It highlights the importance of transgender literature, its emergence, the means through which the transgenders try to express their thoughts and it also gives a detailed picture of the transgenders' psychological struggle to expose their inner soul. It also exposes the traumatic condition of the transgenders and highlights how these transgender people are discriminated. It also insists the measures needed to be taken for the welfare of transgenders to develop their life and also to promote their level to excel in the path of success.

Key Words

Transgender, discrimination, liminal, trauma, stereotype,

The question of sex and gender arises at an early age as soon as a child is born, whether it is a boy or a girl. This is the first question confronted by each and every parents in our society. After discovering the gender these people begin to allot certain characteristic traits based on their gender. If the child is a boy, he needs to wear shirts, trousers; he needs to play with the cars, vehicles and so on. If the child is a girl she needs to wear dresses that are meant particularly for the girls, she needs to play with the dolls that are for the girls.

After a certain age the girls are not allowed to play with the boys and same is the case with boys. If any of the child contradicts this rule, the society treats them in a different manner. When the characteristic features of a particular gender slightly varies from the other gender, there arises the question of identity. If the child grows up and finds some cravings for the things that are to be used by the opposite genders, the particular child is restricted to desire only for those items. This makes the child to question the reason for the restrictions; why I am not allowed to use those items? Am I different from that of others? Finding answers to these questions, leads the child to develop a curiosity to know about the 'self'.

Gender and sex are typically thought of as being interchangeable terms. For the most part, those who are biologically male should possess masculine traits and female should possess feminine traits respectively. However, for some, their biological sex does not match with what society would deem as the appropriate gender quality; the way in which they view themselves is different from the natural way. These people often fall under the umbrella term of transgender, which classifies a number of different people who have various gender identifications.

Gender stereotypes are the major defining factor in Indian society and it is strongly a bipolar society, where only male and female are considered as 'normal' or 'natural'. Anything beyond these genders is a taboo. Transgenders are those who belong to neither of their genders i.e. male or female. They are considered as the marginalized and deprived section of people in Indian society and addressed as 'hijra' who is neither female nor male but an amalgamation of both. The word 'hijra' is usually translated into English as "transgender", "transgendered population" or "transgender women" or "trans women" (Khan 1). They also include people born with ambiguous genitals, known as hermaphrodites. Further, "Hijras were referred to as eunuchs and simultaneously said to be born intersexed..." (Nanda xvii). Though their existence has been acknowledged since ages, their presence is seen through times.

Living Smile Vidya voices boldly for the rights of the third gender people. She is an Indian trans woman actor, assistant director, writer and trans and Dalit rights activist from Chennai. Vidya was born on March 25, 1982. Her family belongs to the arunthatiyar caste in Andhra Pradesh, migrating to Chennai several generations ago. Her mother is a dalit woman who worked as a street cleaner, in addition to domestic work. As a child she describes herself as being "a woman in my heart.... Even I was mistaken to be male and couldn't yet articulate that I as a girl and so I was educated much more than my sisters". In a 2013 interview, Smile traces the roots of her art and activism to her realization that "Since all women get oppressed under patriarchy with casteism and transphobia, I might as well have a loud mouth and be assertive that take everything silently-to be strong but silent woman was not enough".

Vidya holds a master's degree from Tanjavur Tamil University in Applied Linguistics. In a 2014 interview she says, while doing my post-graduation at University, I spent most of the time in the theatre department rather than my Linguistics Department.... So I was able to do a couple of plays.' She has been described as the first full time trans theatre actress in India, participating in more than twenty performances. She has acted in several short films including 'Kadal Pookal' and in the documentary films 'Agrinaigal' and 'Butterfly'. She has also done a role in Leena Manimegalai's 2017 short film 'Is it too much to ask?' where she plays a trans woman seeking housing in Chennai but facing discriminations. The film a mix of fiction and documentary, was based in part on her own extensive experiences with housing discriminations.

In her book *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, she reflects the life of transgenders and their struggle to live in the society. In this story the parents are craving for a boy child after giving birth too many girls. Indian society is a male dominated society in which the people consider the male child as a prestigious gift. In the book *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, Vidya being born as a boy, her parents name her as Saravanan. Their happiness bounds to no limits. They consider the child to be a gift from god. The whole family celebrates the arrival of the boy child; if it is a girl child, the family will react differently.

The search for her true identity starts when her desires go beyond the nature of the gender. By looking at her body structure and the feminine appearance, the neighbours tease her calling, 'sissy or girly'. In the book, *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, Living Smile Vidya narrates her likings during her childhood. When the other boys preferred the usual games like marbles, kites, Saravanan (Vidya) preferred to join the girls at their games; generally board games like dayakattam and pallanguzhi. She is very fond of girls' games and being a participant in one of them. This makes her an object of ridicule everywhere both, in schools and streets.

Saravanan (Vidya) has profound likings for the dresses of her sisters. When there seems no one at home, she locks the doors and windows, wears the saree of Radha, her sister and stands in front of the mirror and puts all the make ups like kajal, eye-liner and bangles. She thinks that she has a very long hair and wraps a towel over her head. The people nearby her house thought that Saravanan (Vidya) is playing. But later on when the desires urges her more, she starts wearing skirts of her sisters openly. Though the father thrashes her badly, the urge of exposing her feminine qualities, begins increasing as she grows up. Whenever the father beats her, she thinks, "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 to me naturally?" (22).

Societies play a crucial role in worsening the situation in the life of Vidya. When the parents come to know that the behaviour of the child is different, they beat her rudely, and their harsh attitude towards their child is the reflection of their own society. Nowadays people in the society live their lives not for themselves but to fulfill the expectation of the society. They are ready to sacrifice their own happiness, considering others. These people are not ready to face the society boldly instead they think that 'if I do this, what the other people may think of me'. This is the thought of the people in any society. The parents of Vidya are not exceptional. The society blames them for letting their son to turn into hijra. When the whole society alleges the parents, the father could do nothing; they need to beat their own child. They try to correct the behavioural attitude of their own son. They fail to understand the emotional struggle the child faces due to the harsh behaviour of her own parents.

Due to these insecure feelings, the child yearns to befriend with the girls. Because, Vidya considers it as safe to be with the girls than with the boys. The inner soul of Saravanan is entirely different which the whole society fail to see. They all just see the outward behaviour of the victim which is entirely different from the other boys and girls. They reject the innermost feelings of the boy. In *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, Vidya narrates her emotional struggle,

I was a girl unfortunately; the world saw me as a boy. Inwardly I wanted to be a girl, but I made every effort possible to hide my feminity from the outside world. I took particular trouble to remain inconspicuous at college, the unpleasant memories of my bitter experience at school still fresh in my mind. I lead a false life of strenuous attempts to swagger like a man and speak like one. (33)

Not only in the life of Vidya, there are many such people who suffer discriminations, harassments, on the pretext of gender. In Ajay K. Pandey's *An Unexpected Gift*, Sheetal being born as a boy, craves to become a girl. One day when her parents are not at home, she dresses herself in her mother's clothes, applies red lipstick and combs her hair. When she looks her face in the mirror, she feels that she resembles a doll. When her parents return home, they see their son in the women's clothes, without asking even a single word to Sheetal, suddenly her mom slaps her. She realizes something wrong with their son. Thus self-identification arises when the society reacts harshly to their behavioural attitude. They are in dilemma and start questioning among themselves about their gender.

Due to the societal pressure, the parents neglect their own children, when they find something wrong in their child's physiology. In some houses, after recognizing their own child as the transgender, they either lock them within the room or send out of the house.

Though they face rejections from the parents, the boy children's urge to become a girl does not vanish. Instead their thirst grow and they start wearing female dresses openly. They feel as if they have been trapped in a male body, but their inner soul is that of female. When everyone ridicules them as gay, they are confused and accept those harsh words as their fate. But their inner soul continue to say that they are not gay, they are women trapped in a male body. The parents consider them as a sin to the family and they throw them out. In some places the parents lock their transgender children within a room; they are not allowed to come out of the room, not allowed to appear in front of the guests. When these things happens, the education of the child gets spoiled. They consider their own child as a shame to the family. Fearing the society, the parents spoil their own child's life by locking inside the room without considering about the future.

In *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, when Vidhya goes to the school for the first time, the other boys in the class who looks gigantic, tease her and start punching in the chest and abdomen. This occurs due to her effeminate appearance. The affected child is unable to reveal the issue either to the teacher or in the house. There is no one to come forward to speak in favour of her. Thus, she feels alienated almost in all the places.

Another one book *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi: A Candid Biography of India's First Transgender Principal*, several incidents that happened in the life of Manobi when she was studying in the school is portrayed. Manobi has experienced lots of love stories which came as passing cloud. Each time she falls in love with a guy who

promises to be with her till the end of her life. But all the boys left her. Each time after break up she suffers similar to that of a hell. She is actually a woman by heart. But the other boys failed to understand her feelings and treated her as that of a puppet. In the book of Revathi *The truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*, she narrates the voice of her inner soul:

A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought of myself. But how could that be? Would the world accept me thus? I longed to be known as a woman and felt pain at being considered a man. I longed to be with men, but felt ashamed by this feeling. I wondered why god had chosen to inflict this peculiar torture on me, and why he could not have created me wholly male or wholly female. Why am I a flawed being, I wondered often. I might as well die, I thought, I could not study, yet pretended to, and all the time I was obsessed, confused and anxious. (15)

Thus the transgender people at a young age lead a dual life. One life they live for the sake of the society and another life for themselves, which is not known to anyone. They love their private life. When no one is at home, they dress as a woman and admire their beauty. Whenever they see the mirror they do not look at the face which is reflected on the mirror. Instead the mirror exposes the inner soul. Up to certain extent they cope with the society, try to adjust themselves by living a life hiding their inner soul. But most of the times the inner soul gets exposed without the knowledge of themselves and it becomes the object of teasing at public places like schools, streets, etc. The society never sees the educational qualification of the third gender people. They are alienated by looking at their external appearance itself.

In order to give life to the inner soul, they are ready to transform their male body into female. Though the sex change operation is a life threatening procedure, they are ready to take up just to attain the body which they are yearning to become. They are even ready to face death during the sex change operation. They just need to become a complete woman which they long for years. Though they are aware of the fact that they are unable to bear children even after the operation, they are firm in their decision. Their only desire is to have female genitals not the male organs. They consider that their male identity is an unfortunate accident. Vidya in *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, sobs when she is frustrated with her male body.

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, and it burst out in words. Suicide had been an option in my mind over the last few days. ...I hated being man. I was going to try and live as a woman. If I failed, I was ready to die. (56)

This shows how tirunangais, hijras or transgenders feel psychologically and how they struggle to express themselves. It is such determination and hatred towards their male bodies that make them leave every comfort of their life and go away from their families. In *I am Vidya: A Transgenders Journey*, Vidya being a post graduate student in linguistics, goes to Pune and changes the name to Vidya and starts to beg. Vidya narrates this incident:

Of course I had waited for this moment-it was something I was expected to do, something I now had to. 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. (84-85)

When transgenders feel that they are different and are born in the wrong body, parents react to their abnormal behaviours in a rude manner. They respond so hard that the transgender child feels suffocated within the household. They are affected mentally due to the pressure laid down by the family members. Sigmund Freud in the book *Beginning Theory* by Peter Barry links this concept of psychoanalytic criticism with "the idea of repression, which is the forgetting or ignoring of unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires or traumatic past events, so that they are forced out of conscious awareness and into the realm of unconscious" (92-93). Thus the transgender with the unresolved conflicts, traumatic past events, and unadmitted desires resolve to move out of their houses to seek solution for the mental conflicts which they undergo in their day to day life. The societies in which the normal

people live fail to recognize the educational qualification or the love which they long for. Instead those people reject these transgenders just by seeing their gender. These rejections start from the home.

In the book *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, Vidya gives much importance to the woman beneath her body that is her inner soul. And by giving much importance to the inner soul she gives up her studies. She expresses that no one is ready to give her job by seeing her qualification. Everyone sees her gender. In contrast to the opinion of Vidya, Manobi Bandyopadhyay in the book *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi: A Candid Biography of India's First Transgender Principal*, considers education as the chief requirement and the strong tool which could safe guard her from numerous harassments. Her life journey is not like that of a bed of roses. She too faces enormous struggles which prick her like thorns. Amidst such pains she grasped her education as a ladder to climb up higher to reach her destinations.

Like Vidya, Manobi too gives much importance to the inner soul but at the same time, she does not give up her studies. Though the gender transformation troubles her parents, wounds them at every twist and turns, out somewhere in a corner of their heart, they gain hope by seeing their child excelling in the field by frequently contributing to articles and so on. The only drawback in Vidya's life was giving up her education. If she too has been excelled in education, then Living Smile Vidya too would have become a principal like Manobi Bandyopadhyay.

In the book *I am Vidya: A Transgenders Journey*, Vidya suggests another idea. She asks the government to introduce the syllabus about transgender people in the educational curriculum. This lays another strand which enables the children to learn about the third gender people, their life, their birth, their struggle for existence and so on. If all the future gems of the society come to know about the pitiable life of the third gender people they will also behave in a well-mannered way, especially in public places. By instigating new thoughts, new opinions about these transgender people the children may slowly move away from the rules that are framed by the earlier society and develop an optimistic approach which leads to a better society with well-behaving people, which remains a dream for many third genders.

Transgenders are no more inferior to normal people. They must be treated as equal as that of human beings. Secondly the parents must not reject their transgender children. Since education is the significant tool to uplift their life in a better way, the child must be given access to education. The rights and laws implemented in the court are sleeping silently in the papers. It must be brought to reality i.e. all the rights must be easily accessible to them. The government must come forward with various scholarships, welfare schemes in the educational field as well as in many other professions. So the parents will never reject their trans child instead they will accept them. Acceptance is required in almost all the places. But what the transgender expect from the society is not to ridicule them by using rubbish words and throbbing nick names which hurt them to the most. They are human beings like us. It is very bad to tease them in the name of gender. Thus each and every one should learn to respect them and treat them in a better manner. They are not third gender they are one among the creations of God.

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