



UNVEILING THE CRISIS OF TRANSGENDER IN INDIA: A STUDY OF LIVING SMILE VIDYA'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT



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The autobiography of Transgender Vidya is the voice of the voiceless of every transgender in India who constantly faces harassment and atrocities in current scenario despite the awareness and good will spread about them. The very existence in this earth becomes a question mark without the strong support of the family, society and government. The study of autobiography *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* raises key issues about the status of transgenders in India, their identity and the struggle for the survival. The reading of this autobiography expands the role of autobiography. It is not a mere record of the memories and the experience but it is a record of the common plight of several transgenders and plea of them as they are treated like a marginalised section of the society. The future of autobiographies lies in this sort of text that has a cause and effect. This article focuses on the pathetic state of transgenders in India through the autobiography of an individual Vidya who had a transition from being a man to woman.

Keywords: *Transgender's Autobiography, Role of Autobiography*

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Autobiography is an art of expression from oneself. At times it becomes universal when it addresses a common issue and any reader may identify himself/herself with the writer. Autobiography in the past few decades has gained momentum and it has spread its wings widely under the different types of Religious Autobiography, New Spiritual Autobiography, Conceptual Autobiography and other various types of work hailing from different parts of the world. In general, Autobiography is said to be written for a few purposes like to leave a message to future generations, to pass on heritage, to put closure to a period or episode, to process experiences, to preserve family history and to share about oneself. Autobiography written by a famous person gets easy attention from the audience whereas autobiography written by unknown gains significance when it really addresses certain cause and issues.

Autobiography may help an individual to pour out the thoughts and experience and on the other hand in case of subordinate group it serves as a testimony. The status of Autobiography gets elevated when it addresses the issue of marginalised providing solution for the upliftment. This kind of suffering records also purges one heart and kindles humanitarian sense. *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* is one such autobiographical text that calls for the attention of transgender status in India. It addresses the basic needs and struggle of transgenders. The voice of the voiceless (transgender) is made explicit through this text. The study of such text in the class room turns out to be vital. It also demands a pedagogical strategy as the text deals with sensitive issue. The knowledge about the struggle of a marginalised in the society will pave way for the ultimate source and resurrection of the suppressed.

It is indispensable to examine the status of transgender in ancient India before dealing with their contemporary status. The transgender characters are common in Indian myths and later they also enjoyed a special status in the king's court. They excelled in espionage and considered as auspicious during festive occasions. Their blessings and curses are expected to turn true so people treated them with great respect. However, the colonisation 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. Due to the denial of education and basic amenities like food, shelter and water, they were forced to take up either begging or sex work. Only a few transgender in India find their way to success after much hardship and struggle. There are some public interest litigations filed in High Courts and Supreme Court demanding their welfare but pragmatically they have achieved less and still they need to strive in mass to attain their basic rights and livelihood.

The pathetic state of transgender is brought out in the text *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* through the life of Vidya who was originally named as Saravanan by her parents in Tamilnadu a state that is located in southern tip of India. Despite being a M.A linguistic graduate, the life of Vidya proves to be a state of turmoil. The life of Vidya from her birth to the present and her demand for the basic rights of transgender portrays the plight of thousands of unknown transgender in India. Even in the beginning chapter of the text, she raises crucial complications involved in the act of Nirvana. In fact searching a body that is perfect for her becomes the ultimate search of Vidya and she achieves it through this Nirvana. In this context, Nirvana refers to the act of transformation into womanhood by the removal of male biological organs. Vidya ultimately turns into a beggar only to save money for this Nirvana operation. Once again it reiterates the complication involved in sex transformation in India.

The society in India does not favour any transgender for the sex reassignment operation. Both the law and the people never treat them equally. Vidya points out to the government order No.377 that treats the transgender as mere disease affiliated sex workers. She also demands the sex reassignment surgery for the medically and psychologically tested and certified transgender. She throws light on the brutal way of excising the penis and testicles during sex reassigning operation. The operation is conducted in an unnamed hospital and the patients



are subjected only to the HIV test. Vidya makes a clear remark that even this HIV test is conducted only to collect an extra fee of two thousand rupees if the person is found to be HIV positive.

The operation is the great excitement and awaited day for transgender like Vidya but it is a normal butchering act for the hospital. They perform the operation with great speed. After the operation, in a systematic way they throw the patients over the news paper covered steel cot one after the other. The attendant neither looks like a nurse nor a hospital worker. Even after this painful process Vidya ultimately attains a peace. She derives ultimate happy through the transformation. It is an irony to note Vidya's happiness in becoming a woman as some section of the society in India still laments over the birth of a girl child. Vidya becomes an exemplary when she feels proud for becoming a woman. Her expectation to be accepted as a woman is expressed in the following lines,

Amma, Amma, I have become a woman. I am not Saravanan any more, I am Vidya-a complete Vidya-a whole woman...Radha, please Radha, I am no longer your brother Radha. I am your sister now, your sister...Look at me, Appa. Look at me as a woman. Accept me as a girl, Appa. (Vidya, 9)

Born on 25 March 1982, Vidya was named as Saravanan by her father as she was born after the prayers offered to deity Murugan. Her father Ramaswami craved for a boy baby and as a sixth child Saravanan was supposed to fulfil their desire and of course the birth of Saravanan brought them great joy and the mother Veeramma too would have least expected the future that would change Saravanan into Vidya. Being born as a boy, Vidya received great attention from the parents. The sisters Radha and Manju poured their love on Vidya. Saravanan (Vidya) was supposed to study devoid of any domestic work however; often the trouble broke between Ramaswami and Vidya during the exam results.

The treatment of the father varied according to the results. The loss of a single mark will also result in the severe corporal punishment. As the father completely pinned the hopes on his so called son

Saravanan to hold a higher post after good education, a storm brewed up whenever the academic performance of Vidya slackened. She was strictly forbidden to play. In this autobiography, she expresses the loss of her childhood joy due to her father's expectation. Vidya's sisters were given the charge of constant vigilance. The arrival of a new stepmother immediately after the mother's demise also did not bring any change in Vidya's status. She was considered as an only boy child and she enjoyed the utmost affection simultaneously with the pressure of always securing the first place in education. Vidya after her school education graduated with computer science degree and did her masters in M.A linguistics (Tamil).

During the description of her childhood, she vividly presents her buried and stealthy desire to be a woman. She dresses herself in woman's attire and dances by imitating the heroines in movie. When she was caught at such acts during young age she is not taken seriously but the attitude of the spectator changes as she grows. In school and public places, the behaviour of Saravanan is noted and teased repeatedly for behaving like a woman. Vidya confesses that "Even kids from lower classes teased me at school: 'Look at this lady', they shouted after me" (Vidya, 24). Despite all the bullying and ragging, the passion of transforming into Vidya is deeply nurtured in the heart of Saravanan. Only a few friends helped her after knowing about the trouble. Vidya passionately acknowledges them in this autobiography.

Her acquaintance with a bank employee who is similar to her changes the stream of life. He introduces Vidya to NGO's and that ultimately leads to the shift from Trichy (her birth place-a district in Tamilnadu) to Chennai-a metropolitan city and the capital of Tamilnadu. Vidya's constant knock on the NGO for the ideas about sex reassignment is turned down by many NGO's and friends. Identity crisis is one of the major issues in contemporary literature. It has been dealt from postcolonial context, diaspora, feminism and various other aspects. In this autobiography one can identify the identity conflict between the male and female gender within oneself. In Indian context rather than sex reassignment, many transgender fearing the society tries to remain with



male outfits but feels feminine inwardly. Vidya's transgender friends insist her to conceal the femininity. It becomes a great psychological trauma for Vidya. The text presents the identity crisis of every transgender in India who could not openly behave and dress in the way they wish. When Senthil, friend of Vidya introduces her to the NGO for Tirunangais (Tamil word for transgender who has transformed from male to female), he passes a caution note stating, "it's all very well for you to go there regularly," he said, "but make sure people don't find out you are a female. Don't go there too often" (Vidya, 46).

The Transgender are scared about the abusive words that they had to receive after the recognition of their gender. Both the educated and the uneducated undergo the same trauma. They use NGO as a place where they can freely be their inner self using the expressions like 'di' (friendly way of addressing a woman in Tamil context). It is a stress to always pretend like a man and Vidya does that for a long time. As the suppressed feeling has a strong vent out, ultimately she decides to lead the life of transgender. She opts for begging rather than sex work in order to save money for her operation. She represents the lives of thousands of transgender in India who are forced to beg for hunger. The society and the government for many years have denied them job thereby indirectly denied them descent living. They are the victims who are penalised for the uncommitted sin.

Vidya's friend suggestion to conceal her femaleness turns futile. She can understand the reality but the voice of her inner mind states, "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" (Vidya, 56). This decision for revealing the inner self and original identity leads Vidya to a hard life. She moves to North India and joins the group with other transgender community. When compared to South India, transgender enjoys some privilege in North. Since their blessings and curses are expected to turn true they were able to make their livelihood through begging. Vidya in detail describes about the shop begging and train begging. She also records the various bitter experiences that she has to encounter

during the life in Pune (a city in Maharashtra). The community of these transgender have their own customs, ritual and tradition. They have the senior, junior difference and the elderly transgender has complete rights to dictate over the younger. She gets introduced to the world of tirunangais and it is good to note the hospitality extended to visiting tirunangais.

They have the name enrolment by paying a nominal fee. After the registration each tirunangai will be labelled under one parivar (Hindi word for family). Each parivar will have amma (mother) and nani (grandmother). If a transgender had to leave one parivar due to the misunderstanding with nani or amma, she has to pay a fine, a kind of transfer fee compensating the loss. Every individual in particular parivar is considered to be the kith and kin. Chennai, the capital of Tamilnadu state has seven and Vidya was included in Bhendi Bazaar parivar. Immediately after the enrolment a sari is gifted to Vidya and she points out the gift to be a part of their custom. Vidya states, "The life of a tirunangai is bound by thousands of such rules and regulations, all unwritten" (Vidya, 75).

The life of tirunangai was mixed up with a frugal happiness and trouble for Vidya. She fondly recollects the time spent at Lonavala which is neither urban nor rural. Her friendship with Prateeksha, Priya and Titanic is fondly recollected by her. She explains about the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law game which they fondly play to pass the time. Along with sharing the sweet memories, she also recollects the hard times that she encountered during begging. She felt very odd to beg at the initial stages but later for the sake of survival she learned the art of begging. However in Pune her worst experience happened in the hands of Tamils.

She gives a picturesque representation of the harassment. She was severely attacked by four or five men in the Nagercoil train but none came to rescue her. She was thrown out of the train and later when the train started she ran and got into the next compartment. Therefore transgender in India always move in groups rather than going alone. They are easily attacked when they are alone. Vidya faces the humiliation of begging to redeem her identity. Her desire can be achieved only through the operation



Nirvana. She wants to do away with the sin of the male sign through the operation Nirvana. In the context of Hinduism and Buddhism Nirvana refers to achievement of peace after the sacrifice of worldly desires but in case of Vidya flaming desire lies in the removal of male identity. She could achieve bliss and salvation of being a woman only after the operation Nirvana.

Vidya through her autobiography presents the distinction between the sex reassignment operation carried in countries that legally acknowledge them and the Nirvana operation carried out in India without government approval. The readers are enlightened to know the incorporation of facial feminization, speech therapy, breast augmentation and the insertion of a plastic vagina. She talks about the RLT (real life testing) being carried out before sex reassignment surgery. In contrast to the above, in India no Sex reassignment surgery takes place. HIV test alone is conducted prior to the operation without any proper procedures. The operation is carried out in lack of anaesthesia and mere castration of the body organ takes place. Vidya being educated also undertakes the operation illegally only for the desire of leading a life like woman.

There was no medicine or suggestion even after the operation. Just hot water was splashed on the operated part as a home remedy to prevent infection. Again the other transgenders were caring and she describes the rituals in detail after the operation. The ritual is conducted in a grand manner inviting all the other tirunangais. It is really a big day for Vidya acknowledging the transformation from Saravanan to Vidya. As Vidya achieves the desired end she gradually shifts back to her family. She leaves stealthily from transgender circle in Pune as she won't get the approval for the permanent move from them. The family accepts her but staying without a job causes agitation and it becomes a great burden for Vidya. She moves and stays with different friends. The professors and friends help her by all means for basic needs and finally after desperate struggle she settles in a job. She approves her boss and the friends. Life seems to get settled down for Vidya but she is conscious about thousands of other transgender who needs rehabilitation.

The struggle for a transgender in India does not stop with finding a job. In the last chapter "I want to live-with pride" she lists down the various efforts that she has taken to secure the basic rights. As a first step she wanted to change her name for Saravanan to Living Smile Vidya in gazette. She mentions the sex change operation as the reason for the change of name in the application and it gets rejected by the government. Vidya sought the help of the lawyer and filed a public interest litigation demanding franchise for transgenders. She got a positive reply stating "tirunangais could choose male or female as their gender. . . some of them had voter ID cards as a result" (Vidya, 133). Even after the court order Vidya had to run from pillar to the post to change her name. She was shuttled between the court and the various government offices. She had to face insults, hurts from innumerable people including women and kids. She laments over the unfulfilled desire of changing her name.

The court order victory is insufficient for transgenders. In current scenario they can't even open bank accounts. They have to incessantly struggle to change their name and sex in the certificates. India is a democratic country and every citizen is expected to have equal rights. Dalits and the feminist voices are heard but she raises a strong question about the lack of voice for transgenders in India for their basic rights. Transgenders continue "to lead a wretched life, devoid of pride and dignity" (Vidya, 137). She expects to bring more awareness among people especially the children who are future pillars of a country. They are not an object to be gazed. She pleads for herself and the fellow tirunangais. She strongly believes in government who can bring changes through laws. A short step for the government and the society can serve as a giant leap in the life of transgenders. It will help them to stride forward.

To conclude, Living Smile Vidya's autobiography is not a mere record of experience and the past of a single transgender but she eventually presents the plight and horrible state of contemporary transgenders in India. She lays emphasis on the need of emancipation of those unheard and unseen voices of transgenders. Rather than being an autobiography text, her life becomes a



testimony and voices out for a cause. Such kind of autobiographies in classrooms is mandatory. Recently during April, 2015 a historic private bill was passed in Rajya Sabha for the welfare of the Transgender. The Bill promises welfare board and reservation quotas in education and job. It is a ray of hope however the majority of Transgender state is still at lurk. Therefore, the future India i.e the students ought to know about the tough times of Transgender. Through such prescriptions in the classroom, the role of autobiography gets expanded and elevated through the text like *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*.

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