



## TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES OF TRANSGENDERS IN MANOBI'S *A GIFT OF GODDESS LAKSHMI – A STUDY*

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### ABSTRACT



Gender equality is vital in the successful progress of a society. Terms like gender equality, gender inequality, gender roles, and gender issues immediately bring male and female genders to our minds. However, there exists a third gender other than the two genders of male and female and it is known as transgender. Transgenders are a complex and internally varied group mostly male born and a few biologically intersex persons. The existence of third gender is as natural as the existence of male or female.

Gender and sexuality are not natural but social constructed. In society gender is always seen as binary i.e., male and female. Society gives certain roles for each gender to perform and starts marginalizing those who fail to perform according to their gender. Hence, transgenders are always seen as an outcaste in our society. This marginalization and alienation leads to trauma in transgenders. Transgenders undergo intense traumatic experiences both internal and external at various stages of their lives. The present paper deals with the traumatic experiences of Manobi as expressed in her biography *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*.

**Keywords:** *Gender issues, Gender identity, Transgenders, Trauma*

**INTRODUCTION**

Manobi Bandyopadhyay was born on 23 September 1964 as Somnath Bandyopadhyay. She is a male born and later changed her gender through Sex Reassignment Surgery and became a woman. She became India's first third-gender (transgender) principal at Krishnanagar Women's College in Nadia district in West Bengal on 9 June 2015. 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 biography of Manobi Bandyopadhyay written by Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey who is a Journalist. *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* 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 Somnath and his journey to become Manobi and the challenges she faced throughout the journey and how she continued to pursue academics despite many upheavals.

In her process of becoming Manobi, Somnath had to undergo a lot of trauma both internal and external. The internal is the psychological trauma and is a result of the confusion of her gender identity and the external is her struggle for space and inclusion in the society. The Present paper is an attempt to study the trauma Manobi had undergone in her transformation into a woman.

**TRAUMA STUDIES**

Trauma Studies as a field of literary Criticism gained significant attention in 1990s. According to Michelle Balaev, the attention is a result of the publication of "Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*" (1) "The field of Trauma Studies emerged in the early 1990s as an attempt to construct an ethical response to forms of human suffering and their cultural and artistic representation." (Andermahr 1) Earlier trauma theory was based primarily on the concepts of psychoanalytical critics like Freud and Lacan. These

concepts state trauma as unspeakable as it affects psyche irreversibly. "Early scholarship shaped the initial course of literary trauma theory by popularizing the idea of trauma as an unrepresentable event" (Balaev 1). For them trauma makes an irreversible damage to the psyche. However, in later stages the trauma theory evolved. In literary Criticism it evolved in terms of changing definitions of trauma as well as "the semiotic, rhetorical and social concerns that are part of the study of trauma in literature and society" (Balaev 2). The concept of trauma underwent a lot of changes which included contradictory as well as contentious debates and theories. Many scholars challenged the traditional concept of trauma i.e., trauma is unspeakable or trauma is unrepresentable. They challenged it from the perspective that concedes trauma's variability in literature and society and suggests that an extreme experience like trauma actually cultivates multiple responses and values. For instance in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* editor Michelle Balaev in his article "Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered" says the following lines when he discusses about the articles of the scholars that contributed to that particular work.

Authors here consider multiple meanings of trauma that may be found within and between the spheres of personal and public worlds, thus provides views of both the individual and society, rather than consolidating the experience of trauma into a singular silent ghost. (5)

Thus, the shift in the viewpoint of scholars towards literary trauma theory resulted in a set of critical practices that place stress on particular social components and cultural contexts of traumatic experiences. The present paper works on understanding the traumatic experiences of Manobi that are a result of social and cultural stigma on her gender which is third-gender or transgender.

**TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES OF MANOBI**

The meaning of Trauma has been taken from a "stress or blow that may produce disordered feelings or behavior" to a "state or condition



produced by such a stress or blow” (Heidarizadeh 789). It means the term trauma refers to the state of mind which results from an injury. Trauma or traumatize involves a traumatic event which is either single or multiple. It involves the feelings and emotions which are the result of such traumatic event or events. This traumatic event can be anything ranging from natural disasters like cyclones, floods, tsunami to manmade like war, accidents, treachery etc. “Trauma is caused by catastrophic events, war, treachery, betray and sexual abused.” (Heidarizadeh 789) The memory of the traumatic event has become a kind of obsession. Trauma has a tremendous effect on the physical as well as the mental being of an individual. This paper looks at such traumatic effect caused by the society towards the third gender or transgender.

Transgender is nature's creation just like male and female. However, transgenders are never treated that way but are treated as an aberration to the society. “Transgender is often used as an umbrella term to signify individuals who defy rigid, binary gender constructions and who express a breaking of culturally prevalent stereotypical gender roles.” (Ramya, Cauveri 33) In our society gender is treated as bi polar – male and female. Feminists argue that gender is a product of society where the patriarchal society lays rules for each gender as to what to wear, what to do and how to do. Hence, gender is socially constructed and not natural like sex. When Transgenders challenge these set gender roles and start behaving as the opposite gender they are considered as not natural or abnormal. They are also called as sub-humans as they are not like “normal humans”.

Gender identity too might lead us towards feminism. Gender identity is an individual's inner sense of their own gender of being male, female, something in between or any other gender. It is their personal experience of their gender which either correlates with their assigned sex at birth or differs from it completely. Gender identity is the process where an individual realizes their sex and self. When an individual identifies their gender in opposite to their biological sex they prefer to behave and be like the sex they identify themselves with. They are called transgenders.

Manobi who was born as Somanath has also undergone a lot of psychological trauma when she started realizing her gender. She calls her change as “metamorphosis” (Bandyopadhyay 6). She says that it started with her love for her sisters printed frocks and petticoates. She was around six or seven when she started wearing her sisters' clothes and kohl and lipstick from her mother's make up as she longed to be like them. At first the family who laughed at it as childish acts started confronting her when she started using make up as boy using make up is an aberration. But Manobi enjoyed it a lot and always felt happy if any one mistook her for a girl because of her lean physic. In school she felt so happy on the first day when boys make her sit next to girls as they thought her to be a girl in boys' clothes. But once they knew that he was a boy and not a girl they started teasing her appearance and behavior. That was the first time when Manobi started realizing that she was not accepted by most in this world. She says that by the age of eight she started developing distaste for her sex. “I was developing distaste for my genitals. I just couldn't accept my balls and my penis. I wanted to have my sister's genitals.” (Bandyopadhyay 8) When she was in class VIII she started wearing her sister's clothes at home which shocked everyone. When her mother tried to explain her that she is bringing shame to the family she would say “But Ma, I am a woman . . . don't you believe that? Can I not dress up better than any of you? Let me be a girl, Ma . . .” (10). When people complimented her for beautifully dancing like a girl in school function she “yearned to tell them that I was not trying to be a girl, I was actually one!” (14) That was how she always wanted to scream out her identity and the trauma she has to go every time people address her as a boy but not a girl was very excruciating.

However, because of her excellence in studies she was never punished, as her parents put her scholarship before her different behavior. Her father would proudly show off her marks saying that a boy with such an excellence and genius was bound to be a little different. This was when Manobi realized that studying and topping “was the only way by which I could win this unequal fight” (11). She never let her awakening sexuality and her inner



trauma to affect her intellect. She always worked hard to top in every exam. It is this hard work that has put her in the present prestigious position as India's first Transgender Principal. She got there purely on merit.

Manobi throughout her life had to always undergo an inner struggle to understand her sexuality.

I was very confused; my life seemed like a never-ending maze – each time I arrived at the same bend. Who was I? Why was my body different from my soul or was I mistaking my identity? Why was I born this way? Was it some past karma for which I was being made to pay so dearly? What could I do to escape this trap? (Bandyopadhyay 31)

There were times in my life when I doubted myself and the path I took. In such instances, my mind would go into a state of flux and the turmoil would sear me from within. Am I really a woman trapped in a male body or are these just delirious thoughts? Why is it that the whole world thinks of me as man who is nothing more than a sissy . . . I felt like tearing away and escaping from the man's body in which I was born. (Bandyopadhyay 109)

That was the trauma Manobi had to undergo in order to realize her sexuality and come in terms with it. But the goal of her life was - "the biggest aim of my life was to establish my sexual identity" (Bandyopadhyay 56) Every transgender goes through such phase in their lives where they experience intense internal trauma.

In addition to this internal trauma transgenders also go through external trauma when they are marginalized by the society. Society rather than supporting has alienated them creating a transphobia among the rest of the genders. (Ramya, Cauveri 33)

It is said that in India transgenders were used to be treated with respect if not on equal levels before the British arrival. One can find transgender characters in myths. Their blessings and curses are believed to be very powerful and hence are invited to auspicious occasions and are treated with respect. However, it is believed that the advent of colonialism pushed transgenders to the fringes of Indian society.

. . . 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 60)

Manobi also faced a lot of trauma because of the indifferent treatment of society but she was lucky enough to have the support of her parents. It's not that they have encouraged her in her choice but that they never disowned her and took care of her in the hour of need. In this process they also had to face a lot of trauma and pain. When mentioning about her mother's death in March 2011 Manobi shares that she felt sad

. . . every time I remember how my poor mother suffered all her life, pinning for the safety of her youngest child. She loved me when I was her son and continued to love me even when I became her daughter. She didn't have the courage to stand up against the world and take up my cause, but I knew that in her quiet, meek way she was always with me, never questioning my choice and silently suffering it. (179)

The criticism and discrimination not only affected her but her parents also faced a lot of trauma because of it. They were relentlessly criticized and blamed by their neighbors.

The whole world had started blaming her for not being able to



control me. Poor woman, they didn't know how she battled with herself all the time and blamed herself for giving birth to a hijra! Yes, that is what the world had started calling me.

Even my father was no spared. The whole locality started shunning us for my wayward behavior. 'How can you let your son turn into a hijra right in front of your eyes?' was something he had to listen day in and day out (Bandyopadhyay 10)

Not only the neighbors and their family but her parents had to face insults everywhere they go with Manobi. There were times when her father was severely insulted for accompanying a hijra. One such incident was when he accompanied with Manobi when she was going to start working in as a lecturer at the remote Vivekananda Satavarshiki College in Jhargram. He agreed to accompany her on her first day as she was leaving home for the first time to a far off place and as she felt that his presence would feel comforting. But it was an awful experience for both of them in the college. Manobi managed to go about her affairs in the city from which she was from but in the rural setting she was a complete novelty and from the time she stepped out of the bus she heard people giggling and commenting her throughout her way to the college. She says that "the teasing sounded like a lashes of a whip to my ears." (91). College was no different. All the teachers and students started peeping from all corners and started laughing gleefully.

Soon my father became the butt of their jokes. 'Why has this old man come with you? Are you a schoolboy . . . er . . . girl?' a lady teacher sniggered. My father was stunned. He was used to facing insults whenever he was out with me . . . But he had not bargained for this! (Bandyopadhyay 91)

Later when Manobi was renting in 'kalpataru Bhavan' in Jhargram she was harassed by one of the other tenants in the bhavan. When she succeeded in avoiding him he plotted against her with the help of

his brother-in-law. But when that ploy didn't work he got her parents phone number and harassed them calling at late nights.

He asked him whether his youngest child was male or female . . . sometimes my mother picked up and was forced to listen to his abusive language . . . she tried her best to shield my father from these calls, lest he fell ill. I can imagine the torture that my poor parents underwent. (Bandyopadhyay 140)

Manobi had to put a lot of fight when the tenant and his brother-in-law filed a case against her accusing her of sexual harassment. She filed counter cases against them. They tried to portray her as sex maniac and accused her of cheating. There were a lot of stories about her in the news papers. She says that she is always thankful to those reporters who had covered her life at every step, bringing into the public forum her fight for justice, equality and the right to live. But her parents were more affected than her because of all that is happening to her. When they heard that she had her Sex Reassignment Surgery they were aghast. People started making their lives difficult. "My parents were already in a state of shock over what was happening to me. Not only would they get threatening calls and abusive letters, strangers who would often ring the bell at night and then disappear, just to terrify them." (Bandyopadhyay 167) Thus along with Manobi her parents and family also underwent a lot of trauma because of the marginalization and torture from the society.

### CONCLUSION

Manobi's "A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi" is the courageous journey set by a transgender to win over the bipolar society of India. It is dedicated to all those people who called her subhuman and mocked her throughout her life. This gives the reader a complete outlook at the problems and suffering of the transgenders and their family in a callous society. Irrespective of the trauma she and her parents underwent Manobi turned her life into a victory unlike many transgenders. She says that her biography is to help society understand people like her better. We all need to understand that humans



are diverse and need to accept them and not cause any more traumas to transgenders.

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