

Rejecting Happiness Myth as Resistance in *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*

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Abstract

Happiness is the promised state of mind that everyone wants to reach. Asserting self-identity is the path to attain happiness. To proclaim identity is difficult for those who face identity crisis. Transgender people face such a situation in their lives even though they endure a Sex Reaffirmation/ Reassignment Surgery (SRS). An Indian actor, activist and author from Tamil Nadu, Living Smile Vidya's autobiographical account entitled *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* shares her experience before and after her surgery. This article focuses on the struggles undergone by Vidya to attain the right she wants to have in her life. The role of society in deciding the freedom of its subjects and the approval given by the society to live one's life as per their wish varies from non-queer and queer personalities. This study paves light on how the society's happiness myth turns out to bring unexpected bumps and crossroads on the route of Vidya's journey from Saravanan to Vidya. It also focuses on the denial of self-actualization goals of queer identities by the mainstream society that marginalizes their attempts to face their struggles. The queer killjoys of the society experience constant struggles and thus they exert resistance to overcome the thorns on their paths to self-actualization.

Keywords: Queer identity, self-actualization, Happiness myth. Killjoys, Resistance

Queer is an idea that absorbs pluralism. It deconstructs the age-old fixities of the terms such as sex and gender. By placing them as social constructs, queer theory challenges the concept of being 'normal'. In practice, queer theory gives voice to the marginalized groups in terms of gender. It also analyzes the power dynamics inherent in our society.

The autobiographical work *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* (2013) introduces the challenges faced by Living Smile Vidya, an actor, activist and author. It was written in Tamil by Vidya and later it was translated into other languages. The story of Vidya is narrated by using stream of consciousness technique. The book is divided into fifteen chapters. The first chapter titled 'Nirvana' is the depiction of the turning point in Vidya's life. It marked the metamorphosis of Vidya from the body of Saravanan to the body of Vidya. The title Nirvana denotes the moksha in Indian mythology happened in the life of Vidya- a declaration of her rights to live in her desired identity.

The blurb of the book rightly marks, “It is an assertion of a consciousness that has suffered the agony of being trapped in a mould it does not belong to, a body it does not identify with”. This attainment of liberation or salvation is of course a landmark event in her journey. However, it is not the culminated event, which brings in happiness in a transgender’s life. Here comes the importance of social acceptance that which earns the final ‘moksha’, that is, salvation, in everyone’s lives. This article is focusing on the yearning of an individual to get social acceptance even if she bravely fought her struggles.

Happiness Myth

Everyone wants happiness. According to Sara Ahmed, “...happiness is a feeling- state or state-of-being that we aspire toward” (200). Happiness, a “hopeful performative”, makes people “motivated and energetic” (Ahmed 200). Ahmed defines happiness as the “object of human desire, as being what we aim for, as being what gives purpose, meaning, and order to human life” (Ahmed 1). Renowned feminist thinker Betty Friedan’s magnum opus *The Feminine Mystique* identifies the image of a happy wife as a fantasy figure that aimed to control women. As per the patriarchal myth, abiding rules is the prime quality for being happy. This idea of happiness makes woman a sad person throughout her life.

Considering the pursuit of happiness in Vidya’s life, there are certain landmarks in her life, which marks the struggles she faced. In the first chapter Nirvana, after undergoing the sex reaffirmation surgery, she thinks: “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). This assertion makes us to believe that Vidya is happy at that point of time. She is at the zenith of happiness when she feels: “My happiness knew no bounds. It was as if I had been a captive for ages and had finally been released” (Vidya 126). She justifies her feeling of happiness;

My expectations were simple: I wanted to live a normal life like all men and women. My being a tirunangai [transwoman in Tamil] was natural, just as men are men, women are women, and cats are cats. Trouble arises when people do not understand this simple truth. (Vidya 130)

Her belief was that people would treat her as ‘normal’ and she can lead a ‘normal life’ after the surgery. Her dream of becoming a happy transwoman gets shattered when the people around her do not accept her new identity of Vidya.

Happiness myth is a false idea which bases on the belief that happiness comes from external successes. It indicates the thoughts of people who believe that they can pursue happiness by achieving certain things in their lives. Happiness is not external. It is not based on any

conditions that we possess. Material success is not a standard to attain happiness. Her desire to attain self-actualization is adamant. She says;

With all your qualifications, after all your struggles, do you want to end up a beggar?

I understood every word, knowing my friends only had my welfare at heart, but I hated to be a man in public and a woman in private. I found wearing men'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)

The life journey of a cisgender and a transgender is different. Transgender people struggle hard to assert their identity whereas a cisgender finds it comparatively easy. Vidya's life is a demonstration of how transgenders feel to undergo a dangerous and unhygienic method to establish their identity evident. Sex affirmation surgery is illegal in India. Knowing all these, Vidya risks her life to certify her identity.

Resistance against Society

Society has an important role in making its individual's life a bed of roses or a bed of thorns. A transgender's life is a combination of humiliation, isolation, and discrimination. Accepting such a life with the prior knowledge of the scenario is itself an act of resistance.

Insults heaped on me and all my shattered hopes repeatedly reinforced the fact that I was not considered a member of this society. The object of everyone's ridicule for so long, I came to regard all of society as something ridiculous- I came to believe that the world was full of mad men, within which I had to live with my body, my pain, my sorrows. (Vidya 93)

This autobiography also reveals the sad plight of transgenders to make a living. There are two options before them to lead their lives, one is begging and the other one is sex work. Vidya says:

...I was overcome by emotion, no doubt, but what I said was the truth. The only way I could live the life of a woman was by begging or becoming a sex worker. Neither my linguistics nor theatre experience could help me here. Vowing never to be a sex worker, begging was my only option." (Vidya 66)

Her intense desire to lead a 'normal' life forces her to go for begging which was a troublesome phase in her life. "I want to be a woman, even if it means begging on the streets". I said weeping

uncontrollably” (Vidya 65). This decision was purely based on her strong desire to lead a life that proclaims her identity. She accounts it as;

...I could not lead a double life any longer. 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)

Her life has to experience many hardships from the society. At first, she finds it difficult to lead a double life. Acting as a man outside and being a woman inside made her to go through the surgery. However, she was not received well by the society after the surgery. She resonates; “Inside, I simmered with rage against a formless, nameless society” (Vidya 93). It was difficult for her to find a job or a house to rent due to the double standards of the society. She retorts;

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)

She complains on how people in different places treat transgenders. It is a sincere confession of a person who has a first-hand experience of this discrimination. She says; “A transgender could not rent a house anywhere else in Pune for love or money” (Vidya 83). The basic life conditions of transgenders become troublesome. People will not give jobs to transgenders as they think that it will bring them shame. Lack of employment, even though Vidya is an educated person, is a threatening situation that forces transgenders to do the jobs which is decided by the society.

There was never any shortage of perils and humiliations. Nonetheless, I was obsessively collecting and saving money throughout. I desperately needed money- not to buy fancy stuff but to redeem my identity, to fulfil my dream, to achieve what I set out for in Pune: nirvana.

Nirvana was an operation- the operation that would slash and remove the sin of my birth as a male. (Vidya 98)

Countries that do not support transgenders frame no laws to protect their rights. Some countries do not even consider them as humans. Hence, they are forced to choose either sex work or begging to lead their lives. Vidya explains the system of sex reaffirmation surgery in India:

The story is different in India. What happens here is no SRS. What we undergo here is mere castration under local anaesthesia- and that too without government approval. An illegal procedure, its fruits include a lack of social approval, such as denial of jobs and

opportunities for higher education. Transgenders in India have no option but to resort to begging or prostitution. (Vidya 99)

This strong retort shows Vidya's resistance to the system, which considers transgenders as people who are not liable to receive any rights from their motherland. Society's discriminations and humiliations forced her to conduct the surgery at any cost. She finds it as an assertion of her identity to the world. This declaration of identity is an act of resistance to the regime of power that exerts its superiority to ignore the existence of transgenders.

Vidya claims; "We are women at heart desperately seeking to delete or erase our male identity. That is why we crave the surgical procedure that will give us the bodily likeness of that female identity" (Vidya 100). Her desire to become a whole woman faces many trials and tribulations. She notes down the common problems faced by those who possess her same desire.

Unfortunately, these operations are carried out in primitive, unsafe, unhygienic conditions in India. A kothi [transgender] undergoing castration is not administered any tests. No questions are asked either. The kothi only learns the fee payable- ranging from three to ten thousand rupees, depending on the place where it is done.

The only test done is to determine if the kothi is HIV positive, which test is performed with a view to collecting extra fees from the kothi, not for any medical purpose. (Vidya 100)

The hospital where Vidya was admitted to undergo her nirvana had given her steel cot to lie down with a newspaper spread on it. After her operation, she wants to stop begging. However, it was difficult for her to find another job. Her plans of survival were destroyed just because of her identity as a transwoman. However, being a postgraduate and a person with connections in the theatre field like her Professor Mu Ramaswami and blessed with many friends during her college life, she finds out a job for her to lead a decent and peaceful life. She says; "Social acceptance of tirunangais did not end with my rehabilitation" (Vidya 132). She works for the welfare of transpeople and even fights legal battles and social protests to give social acceptance and respect to such groups of people.

Vidya pens down the struggles she has to overcome after the surgery. When she went for changing her name from Saravanan to Living Smile Vidya, she had to fight to remove the red tapism. She writes;

Everywhere I went, I had to suffer barbs, ignore insults, brush aside hurts. On my way home from work, there was always the jibe or two flung at me- 'Hey, is this a boy or a girl?' While all around laughed at me, I tried to hide my tears.

Not just men, but sometimes women, too, laughed at me. Every time that happened, I swallowed my pride, hid my irritation, and walked on. At supermarkets, fruit shops, bakeries, villains sprang up from nowhere to torment me.

Even kids didn't spare me. Once they followed me when I was on field duty and sang raucous film songs at me. Who taught them to do this? Where did they learn such domineering behavior? If you see a tirunangai, attack her, insult her, make her cry; chase her away whimpering, screaming- that seemed to be the rule, regardless of race, religion or creed. (Vidya 135)

The above citation from the autobiographical account itself suggests that whatever strong steps a transgender might undergo to prove one's identity, the society that you live will not accept a transgender. Vidya, being an educated, employed, and privileged person when compared to a majority of transgenders, is facing such discriminations in the society she lives in. Hence, an SRS cannot alone give a transgender their identity. The goal of self-actualization of Vidya, which is at the top of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, will only happen when the society accepts and approves her.

Vidya concludes her story/ journey;

There is a government order (Order No. 377) that treats transgenders as disease-afflicted sex workers alone. This must be removed, and sex reassignment surgery must be allowed for those medically and psychologically tested and certified transgender. Reservation could be considered too. (Vidya 138)

She adds her suggestions by including lessons on transgenders in schools. This will inculcate a tradition of treating transgenders by accepting their difference with compassion and dignity. "Children should be told about the suffering of transgenders. Film sensor boards must firmly root out scenes depicting them in a vulgar manner" (Vidya 138). The last paragraph of her autobiography is a request to the states quo to change the present system.

The government can do it. If it will- if the government takes one step- society will follow suit. Once we gain social approval, our families will also accept us. Politicians take out flag marches for a million causes. They can surely take some interest in this issue?

I do not ask for heaven- I am begging to be spared from living hell. I plead for myself and fellow tirunangais. Thank you for your understanding. (Vidya 138)

Vidya's clarion call is her need, her goal to achieve self-actualization. Her traumatic experience of surgery was an attempt from her side to assert her identity. It was her act of resistance to become a complete woman. However, her attempts cannot help her attain the social acceptability she dreamt of. Now she is engaged in the battle to reclaim social acceptance. Her

spirit of resistance requests the government to take sufficient steps to provide equality to transgenders. Transpeople are also humans, they need their rights to enjoy their lives. Thus, her autobiographical text raises voice for social approval of the transgender people. This makes the book a narrative of resistance.

Conclusion

Happiness is a primary need. We strive our best to attain the realm of happiness. Society finds some as killjoys. According to Sara Ahmed, Cisgenders, whose gender identity matches with the sex they assigned at birth, find transgenders as killjoys while patriarchal world finds feminists as killjoys. This causes a tendency to treat these killjoys as inferior. All know this truth and so people tend to be on the safest side by not acting as a killjoy.

Vidya can lead a 'normal' life by living a 'double' life, that is, man outside and woman inside. She was advised by many to follow this trick to live a 'happy' life. She personally knows some of her friends who do the same. However, she does not want to live a life as per the happiness myth. She knows pretty well that if she follows the happiness myth of the society, that will never give her happiness. Living a life as per the happiness myth, as per the rules and customs of the society to become happy, is not practical in her life. However, after doing the surgery and living with the transgender community with a new name and new identity does not give her the happiness she wants.

Vidya begins to realize that self-actualization only happens when society approves and accepts the identity of transgenders. This realization prompts her to fight for the rights of transgenders to get social acceptance and credibility. Her autobiographical work is a proclamation of the need to accept transgender communities. It is an act of activism on her part to raise her resistive voice against the injustices in society. Her life is an example that shows the dare to bring difference. By rejecting the happiness myth, undergoing a life-threatening surgery, and standing up for the cause of trans people, she creates a saga of resistance.

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