

The Trauma of Transmisia in Transwomen Community: A Study on the Gender Identity Disorder in Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*

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Abstract

Gender diversity is challenging the very male and female binary framework in various ways in the Indian society. On this note, the transgender community, also addressed as the *Hijras*, are digressive from the heteronormativity schema usually practised over gender performativity. The society considers them as deviants because of their Gender Identity Disorder (GID) or Gender Dysphoria (GD), since they find discomfort over the mismatch with their body and mind. They, also, undergo psychological distress over transmisia caused by the aversion, ridicule, discrimination, harassment, abuse, and social exclusion shown towards them by their family and peers. Particularly, in this context, 'transwomen' again perform gender in differential ways because of which they become traumatised and silenced in their homes and society. The mitigation of such isolation can be achieved through the increased narrativisation of experienced actualities of the transwomen community and deeper engagement with the narratives. This paper deals with one such autobiographical narrative *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* (2007) by Living Smile Vidya, which brings visibility and recognition to the transwomen community, makes the broader public who engage with their miseries aware of the sharp truth of their plight, and serves as a credible voice for their betterment. This paper also discusses recommendations for a considerable change and normalisation to happen over this vulnerable community.

Keywords: Heteronormativity Schema, Transgender Community, Hijras, Gender Identity Disorder, Transmisia, Transwomen, Autobiographical Narrativisation

The Othered Reality of the *Hijras*

In the Indian society that is deeply structured by sex and gender, the segregation of individuals as 'males' or 'females' prevails as a binary system, on every level of life. Yet, gender diversity is winning in the Indian society and challenging the very binary framework in various ways. On this note, the transgender community, also addressed as the *Hijras*, are deviant from the heteronormativity schema usually practised over gender performativity. As a result of this digression over the socially expected gender performativity, all members of the *Hijras* face ridicule, discrimination, harassment, and abuse in educational institutions, workplaces, health care settings, and public places like bus stands, railway stations, theatres, malls, restrooms, etc. The society does not realise or care about the inner trauma, torment, and anguish of the

transgender community caused by their intrinsic struggle over a differential sexual orientation but simply treats them as ‘othered untouchables’ over their anomie.

Gender Dysphoria and Transmisia

Unlike cisgender community, ‘transgender’ people are more prone to social stigmatisation - a form of disgrace in terms of their looks, behaviour, appearance and identity. Amidst their deviance that the society underscores, they too are normal human beings. The society considers them as deviants because of their Gender Identity Disorder (GID) or Gender Dysphoria (GD), a disorder listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM). According to the DSM-5-TR manual, GID or GD is defined as “marked incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and the gender assigned at birth, accompanied by significant distress or impairment in functioning” (451). The manual also adds that people with GID or GD require no treatment, unless it unsettles their normal functioning. In this context, GID or GD is a common condition among all transgender individuals, where they find discomfort over the mismatch with their body and mind. Moreover, some Transgender or Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC) individuals, often, have psychological distress, which is caused by the hatred shown towards them by their family and peers due to non-inclusivity. This aversion and social exclusion experienced by TGNC individuals is called “transmisia,” according to Nichole Owens in his work, “Transphobia and Transmisia: What to Know.” Mostly, transmisia is internalised by the transgender individuals as a result of familial turbulences and social rejections.

Struggles of Transwomen Community

Specific to this context, ‘transwomen’ have their gender identity or gender expression completely different from their biologically assigned sex. They perform gender in ways that deviate from the gendered social expectations marked as normative. In turn, the society oppresses them and denies most of the basic human rights, which shatters their confidence to survive and interferes with their personal growth. In addition, lack of educational and employment opportunities push them to take up undesirable and less privileged jobs. Subsequently, they become traumatised and silenced in their homes and society, all along their lives, as per the view of Deborah de Muijnck in her article, “Narrative, Memory and PTSD: A Case Study of Autobiographical Narration After Trauma” (82). This happens to be the reason why half the population of young transwomen attempted suicide during their adolescence, in the past decade, as per the recent PubMed Central Reports. Yet, despite an increased positive visibility to the transwomen community and various legal advancements that facilitate their upliftment from their shells, the present society continues to stigmatise them by creating unimaginable troubles. In order to mitigate this ostracisation to whatever extent possible, a greater awareness, acceptance, and normalisation towards the community is required. This can be alternatively achieved through the avenue of the increased narrativisation of experienced actualities of the transwomen community and deeper engagement with the narratives.

Narrativisation to Confront Ostracisation

The narrativisation of their lived realities serves as a platform for the transgender community to voice out the unheard. It brings visibility and recognition to them and makes the broader public who engage with their miseries aware of the sharp truth of their plight.

Highlighting the frequent prejudices faced by the *Hijras*, the ‘trans narratives’ underscore the need for social reform to ensure dignity and equality among the non-binary community. According to Dhanya S. in her article, “Autobiography as a Form of Resistance: A Search into *I Am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey*,” transgender autobiographies play a vital role in narrating the pain, sufferings, and tribulations of the transgender community with their first hand experiences (1580). Autobiographies like *I Am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey* (2007) by Living Smile Vidya have gained a greater audience in recent times. Vidya is a very prominent figure among the transgender community. She is a transwoman, movie actor, assistant director, and basically a writer from Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. Her autobiographical narrative has been a voice to bring out her community’s long-held silence. In her narrative, she talks about the repudiation she faced from her family and the indignities she encountered from the society. She lays bare the profound challenges, the distressing life experiences, the excruciating physical and mental agony, and the pressing transmissia she undergoes, when she decides that she can no longer live as a man but can only live as a woman. Yet, she being an epitome of strength and courage, stands as a testimony to the rough survival of the numerous obstacles all along her life, while trying to reconcile with her own gender dysphoria and settle with a clear gender identity, as stressed by Jeeva D. and Ranjini Selvarani R. in their article, “Queerness - A Quest for Identity: A Study on the Novel *I Am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey* by Living Smile Vidya” (316). In this way, Vidya, through her narrative, has tried her best to address the wrong notions that people have towards the transwomen community and express the traumatising transmissia that they undergo, which affects them on multiple aspects.

Reconciling over Gender Dysphoria

Towards the beginning of her narrative, Vidya details about the urge she had after a particular age to live as a woman, though biologically being born as a man. Despite initially being perplexed over the transition she wants to make, she gradually reconciles with her gender dysphoria to have a convincing gender identity. She explains, “No, I couldn’t live any longer as a man. 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 into words....I hated being a man. I was going to try and live as a woman. If I failed, I was ready to die” (56). But she faces familial rejection and social alienation upon her decision to live as a woman. Being thrown out of her house and having no other option to stabilise her livelihood, she begs on the streets to earn money and also for the sex reassignment surgery that she wishes to undergo. Deriving from the perspectives of Mohamed Yaseen and Jinu R. in their article, “Navigating Suffering and Acceptance: The Transgender Experience in Living Smile Vidya’s *I Am Vidya*,” usually, the sex reassignment surgery that is undertaken by the transgender individuals to undergo a complete transition from the biological sex born with to the sex they desire to live with, is brutal (342). But sadly after the transition, as a result of the ostracisation they face, they are left to indulge in prostitution having no other means of survival. However, Vidya, after going through her excruciatingly agonising sex reassignment surgery with the money she earned, is determined not to get into prostitution at any cost. She continues to beg on the streets and trains, apart from trying to do some small businesses and odd jobs. She goes on to search for some good-paying jobs for her self-sufficiency, with the help of her friends, but nothing favours her, with she being a socially deviant individual on the aspect of gender performativity. She endures all the biological, psychological, and social trauma

she faces, as a result of being incompatible with her biological sex and wanting to relieve herself off the confinement. The book cover of her narrative says,

Vidya has lived through all the indignities forced upon a tirunangai, a transgender, by a society that divides and defines itself as men and women in terms of biology alone, from being spurned by her family, to begging on the streets as a social outcast; from donning a woman's clothes, to undergoing excruciating surgery to lose her 'manhood' from suffering emotional and physical harassment. . . .

Trauma of Transmisia

Over the course of her narrative, Vidya talks about the many forms of discrimination, harassment, abuse, and exclusion she and her transwomen community encountered due to their differential sexual orientation. She points out to transmisia that the society holds towards them, to be the reason for their alienation. She delineates that such a prejudice shown towards them by the society is cruel, and it pushes them into significant levels of mental distress to the extent of self-harm requiring interventions. She adds how living in hateful environments that endorse negative attitudes towards non-heterosexual behaviour, identity, and relationships can lead to internalised transmisia. This, in turn, forms the root cause of the psychological trauma they undergo adversely all throughout their life, as they are not able to suppress or get along with the repudiation and ostracisation they face, in accordance with the perception of Polina Pak in her work, "Trauma Narratives in Mental Health Counseling." Already dealing with transmissic milieus, Vidya explains how she and her community, when exposed to verbal and physical assaults, sometimes exhibit violent behaviour on an uncontrollable note, impacted by the existent dissatisfaction, loneliness, and ostracism. She relatively underscores,

My situation was no different from that of thousands of other tirunangais. Just like them, I could not live in my own home, with my own family, as I wanted to. How would society view such an arrangement? What is society? Isn't my society my father, sisters, chithi, and Mama? Even then, I regarded myself as a girl - a woman - though in their eyes I was male. . . . When people cannot accept my gender as I feel it, how can I continue to live with them, even if they are my people? (80)

Breaking Socially Constructed Binary Structures

Over the conclusion of her narrative, Vidya reveals how she tirelessly searched for opportunities to deal with transmissic environments, pacify her turbulent mental trauma, and lead a dignified life. Being a fighter, her unceasing efforts pave ways for her to be a movie actor, assistant director, and a writer. In a society where she wanted to lead a dignified life, she is currently looked upon as a remarkable personality with her own collection of accomplishments. Ultimately, as underscored by Kavita Pant and Bhawana Mauni in their article, "Not a Disorder: A Deep Insight into Vidya's Narrative *I Am Vidya*," Vidya proves that though her sexual orientation might be different, she has all the light in her to be an achiever like any other normative heterosexual individual, having broken all the socially constructed binary structures through her relativist perspectives (65). With this, she highlights that like her, her entire community has the potential to live successful lives, if they are not transmissically ostracised by the society. Therefore, through her autobiographical narrativisation, she not only reflects her own gender dysphoric journey towards displaying a stable gender identity but projects the unheard as

well as unrepresented anguish of every single individual from her transwomen community and serves as a credible voice for their betterment.

From Transphobia to Triumph

In contemporary times, due to technological advancements, the society has gained both positive and negative attitudes towards the transgender community, as a whole. Yet, a greater part of the society still lacks knowledge about what the transgender individuals really encounter in their day to day life, and this is the reason why transphobia exists towards the vulnerable section, even today. Since they are isolated by society in all aspects, they are deprived of their basic education and employment, which forces them to take menial jobs for their livelihood. They are biopsychosocially traumatised. So, for a considerable change to happen over this painful scenario in the future, in the first place, proper awareness and information regarding transgenderism need to be imparted to parents of transgender children via counselling, which would facilitate them to accept and support their transgender children. When the parents and extended family become protective over their transgender children against the physical, psychological, social, and verbal abuses they encounter, it may bring about a transition from transphobia to triumph for them. Gradually, the transgender children would learn to cope with transphobia from their adolescence with parental and peer support. Secondly, social awareness about gender diversity and fluidity need to be promoted by the governmental and non-governmental organisations to safeguard the transgender community from all sorts of abuses faced in public forums. Thirdly, since education is from where every individual develops multitudinous perceptions, the education system needs to incorporate a short syllabi on diverse gender structures and transgenderism, so that the particular community does not face suppression in any environment. The recommendations mentioned above have to transcend this paper to practical understanding, acceptance, and normalisation, for radical changes to happen. Therefore, human beings, being diverse in nature, can opt to live with any sexual orientation they wish to and the society should normalise this by giving them the space to be their own selves.

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