
**AN INVIGORATING JOURNEY: TRANSFORMING THE TRANSPHOBIA INTO
TRANS RESPECT IN I AM VIDYA**

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Abstract

The binary power structure that continues to place 'men' over 'women' has no place for the third gender – 'The Transgenders'. Adhering to the hierarchies of the society, the transgenders have been marginalized, humiliated and often physically harassed. Trans writing by transgenders has emerged as an endeavor to voice out the struggles of transgenders and to demolish the myth and phobia associated with them. Vidya is a prominent figure among the transgender activists and writers who had continuously given a voice for her community. This paper delineates the transphobia that Vidya endures at various levels throughout her journey and her way out through resilience and transformation from a victim of transphobia into being a reverberator of Trans respect.

Key Words: *transphobia, binary, power politics, hierarchy, Trans respect*

'Man' and 'Woman' are two concretely defined genders of human beings. Nature has assigned corresponding genetic roles and the society has marked its boundaries for both the sexes. Gender roles are assigned so as to ascertain power by one over the other. Michael Foucault in *History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* expounds on the underlying gender politics and three tenants of the power structure within gender roles in the system. And finally, power acts by laying down the rule: power's hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks, and that is the rule" (83).

Over the years, the cultural boundaries have been challenged to redesign the roles and the place of both the genders in the societal norms, yet the hierarchy remains the same placing 'man' over 'woman'. There has been a clear distinction between both the sexes and any form of fluidity have not been encouraged or acknowledged. The patriarchal social order and power were thus enforced through such hegemonic discourse against which the feminist movements rebelled. The power structured binary of placing one sex over the other was broken down by the Postmodernists and the Poststructuralists which in a way paved way for the Queer Theory. Queer

theory is a product of the postmodern line of thought which blurred borders and expanded the boundaries.

The Queer Theory became prominent in the early 1990s, as a reaction to the revolutionary writing by prominent figures associated with the concerned topic such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, Annamarie Jagose among others. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was a quintessential voice in the field of Queer theory whose all three influential publications dealt with the transgender. In the essay "Queer and Now" from *Tendencies*, Sedgwick defines 'Queer' as, "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning. (8).

Queer theory questioned the hegemony of 'heterosexuals' over 'homosexuals' and challenged the rigid definitions of gender and sexuality. It eventually gave space to fluidity which abrogated the defined gender roles and backed the sexuality as an individual choice rather than a fixed order. Individuals, who identify their gender with the gender and sex they were assigned at birth are 'Cisgenders' opposed to whom individuals who identify with the gender that is the opposite of their biological sex are 'transgenders'. Serrano described the binary as "the idea that transsexual genders are distinct from, and less legitimate than, cissexual genders" (162). The queer theory being a reaction against the idea of a structured idea of gender, while investigating the relations between heterosexuality and homosexuality, examines the exclusions otherwise implicit in a heterosexual/homosexual opposition. In this process, transgender identities become a feasible cultural possibility.

Like any minorities, the transgender community has undergone various forms of oppression. Commonly, at the levels of Family, Society, Economy, Education, and Employment. In addition to constant humiliation, and violence against them their entire existence and dignity are debauched by society. In recent times, there have been many success stories of transgenders conquering the struggles put forth against them and have achieved greater heights in different fields in India. There are many transgender social activists, writers, theatre artists, entrepreneurs and recently our country even witnessed its first ever transgender Judge.

Transgender autobiographies play a vital role in communicating their pain, sufferings, longings and identity crisis to a larger audience. Transgender autobiographies written in the Indian context such as Vidya's *I Am Vidya* and A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, have gained greater acclaim in recent times. It has played their part in demolishing the wrong notions and myth that have been adhered to transgender identities. It is a tool that they artistically employ to voice out their long-held silence. Living Smile Vidya or Smiley is one such prominent figure among the transgender community. She is an Indian transwoman actor, assistant director, and writer from Chennai. She was the subject of the award-winning Kannada documentary 'Naanu Avanalla...Avalu', based on her autobiography of the

same name. Vidya is one of the highly qualified transgenders who holds a post-graduate degree in Applied Linguistics from Tanjavur Tamil University.

Her autobiography *I Am Vidya* was written in her mother tongue Tamil and was translated into more than five languages. It is a hard-hitting and painful story of Vidya about her gender fluidity and her process of assertive acquisition towards her being as a woman. It was written in her mother-tongue Tamil and later translated into more than 5 languages due to its widespread acclaim. The book is divided into many chapters which are written as a flash-back narration of Vidhya about her ordeals.

Vidya, born as Saravana on 25 March 1982 to Ramaswami and Veeramma was the only son after 5 sisters after several years of longing and prayers by the parents for a son. Vidya's father was a strict man yet showered his love entirely upon Saravanan/Vidya and placed high hopes and aspirations for his only son. Ramaswami expected his son to excel in his studies and fulfill his dad's dreams being the only son. Saravanan/Vidya was not allowed to play unlike the sisters and was asked only to focus on the studies and academic activities. The excessive love and high expectations were taxing for Saravanan/Vidya as a kid.

Over the years Saravan(Vidya) discovered his innate desire to be a woman, he began with dressing in woman's attire and danced by imitating the heroines in the movies. Once when caught at such activity the incident was not taken seriously by others but the desire only grew stronger and fiercer within Saravanan/Vidya. Eventually, people around him noted the obvious change in the attitude and behavior of Saravanan/Vidya and eventually, the family condemned it and others started teasing him for behaving like a girl. Vidya states in her autobiography *I am Vidya* that "Even kids from lower classes teased me at school: 'Look at this lady', they shouted after me"(24). Despite all the bullying, humiliation and condemn the desire to transform into a woman was rooted strongly in the mind of Saravanan/Vidya.

When she stayed at her uncle's place he condemns her: "Mama castigates me out of sheer frustration...why do you act like a woman here? Aren't we human, too? Aren't their people around us? How many questions I have to answer you! What insults, what humiliation" (119). The constant social pressure to answer the questions posed on them is a major reason the own family members fail to accept the transgenders and their identity. One of the titles of the chapter 'Appa, A time for farewell, Accept me!Chatla, I want to live with pride' shows Vidya's constant cry for acceptance within her own family and her trauma of being disowned from the family. The trauma of being destitute in spite of having a family is worse than all pains and struggles for a transgender. She laments: ". . . you can bear most of the troubles of life, but to feel orphaned is to feel a huge loss – self-pity is a strong drug, a venom"(Vidya 97).

The marginalization and humiliation begin from the family and is present in all areas throughout the lives of the transgenders. After the complete understanding and acceptance of being a woman, she pleads and longs for the acceptance as her true self of being a woman among

her family members. “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). She questions the inability of people around her to understand her innate femininity and choices “what’s wrong with my preference? 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?!”(Vidya 22).

Being dejected by the family Vidya moves out of the house and undergoes several struggles for her survival. Employment opportunities are hard to find because transgenders are not given job opportunities on both the private and the government sectors. Apparently, they end up begging or forced into being a sex worker. Vidya is determined not to be a sex- worker what life may bring and the only option left for her is to beg for her survival. Vidya reflects “I knew clearly what I was going to do- beg, plain and simple. As long as I did not want to be a sex worker, begging was my only option”(54).

At the social level, the transgenders undergo humiliation, discrimination and even violence. Vidya describes the physical harassment that took place against her while begging in a train: “one of them held my arms and intertwined them between the stairs of the ladder to the upper berth; another pulled my hair; a third thug whipped me with the buckled end of his belt, hitting my face. His wild swing found my cheekbone and I started bleeding. It hurt like hell, but I didn’t weep. I shouted angrily at them.”(55).The loud talk that the transgenders are associated with is actually a defense mechanism that they use to protect themselves from the harsh treatment of the society towards them. She understands the reality of transgenders like her and vents her anger within herself and says: “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 madmen, within which I had to live with my body, my pain, my sorrows”(Vidya 93)

Vidya’s friend suggests her to conceal her identity and continue to pretend to be a man so as to avoid the humiliation and oppression. But she asserts that “No, I couldn’t live any longer as a man. I wasn’t confused now. I had come to a clear decision, and it burst out in words” (Vidya, 56). She decides to undergo sex reassignment surgery but the financial requirements are high and she undergoes a lot of struggles to finally undergo the procedure which she calls as ‘Nirvana’.

She eventually realizes her role to contribute to the change and improvement in the lives of transgenders. Vidya with a help of a lawyer filed public interest litigation demanding franchise for transgenders. Upon which the government announced that “Tirunangais could choose male or female as their gender. . . some of them had voter ID cards as a result” (133). She realized that pen is mightier than a sword and started to pen down her experiences of being born as a boy and eventually transforming into a girl and the struggles throughout the journey as a transgender in the society that is bound within the binaries of gender.

Vidya has not stopped from just conquering the struggles that came her way but had broadened the scope for the better lives of other transgenders by her writings and voicing against the discriminations against transgenders in our society. Through her autobiography and constant voicing out against the boundaries that the society has constructed upon the binary power structures, Vidya had challenged the various levels of transphobia that she was undergoing throughout and has transformed it into trans respect towards her and also paved way for trans respect for transgenders in general.

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