

Outcast and Life of a Transgender in *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*.

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Abstract

In the current scenario, after the Supreme Court's historical judgement, a new kind of literature i.e., hijra literature is emerging in Indian literary academia. Many hijras are participating in writing and exploring the crucial phases through which they are moving after the declination of the Mughal period. They are actively and skillfully using this platform to revise their lost social recognition. They justify their existence through revising history and myths. The problem of gender and gender identity is perhaps the most discussed issues in the present literary academia. Judith Butler through her oft quoted book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, made perhaps the largest contribution in gender discourse and explored the idea that gender is a social construct and enforced through social practice. To understand gender, its etymology, its nature, its function its characteristics and the causes of its popularity in the present society many seminars, workshops and symposia on national and international circuits are being organized by various scholars, academicians, and professors from time to time. The stereotypical

notion of gender stands to show cultural, political and economic gap between “man” and “woman”. But in recent time it is realized that the term ‘gender’ is not able to represent the whole society except ‘man’ and ‘woman’. There is diversity in society regarding sex and gender. Beyond of this binary (male and female) ‘hijra’, ‘eunuch’ and ‘khawajasira’ also exists in the society. They are entirely different from the point of view of sex and gender. Because of their gender ambiguity they are being treated as social outcast and spending humiliated, abused and painful life society. They feel themselves isolated, alienated, outcast and entirely cut off to the mainstream of life. The aim of this paper is to analyze the social, economic and political status of a particular section that is third gender, (a sexual minority group) in general and Vidya in particular through the autobiography of a transgender. I have used two theories, queer and binary opposition theory (Structuralism), and textual analysis method for my paper.

Key Words- Transgender, Hijra, Mangalamukhi, outcast, social stigma, Patriarchy etc.

Introduction

The term ‘transgender’ refers to those who changes their gender identity by changing his/her sex through medical (Surgical and/ or hormonal) procedures. From the perspective of biology and science transgenders are those people who cannot produce children and known as hermaphrodites. A number of terms across the culturally and linguistically diverse Indian subcontinent represent similar sex or gender categories. In **Odia**, a hijra is referred to as *hinjda*, in **Tamil** as *ali* or *aravani*, in **Punjabi** as *khusra*, in **Kannada** as *mangalamukh*, in **Sindhi** as *khadri*, in **Gujrati** as *pavaiya*, in **Bengali** as *hijra*. This term *hijra* is generally considered derogatory in Urdu and the term *Khwaja Sara* is used instead. While in Indian continent, they are known by various names such as *hijra*, *kothi*, *chakka*, *tirunangai*, eunuch, *number six*, number

nine etc. They are being projected and treated by our society as a curse for the society and social norms in spite of the fact that they may be highly useful. While we all know the fact that they have the senses like us, they can feel, hurt and are as emotional as anyone yet this patriarchal notion always counts them as an obstacle in the progress of society. The society often considers them as abnormal beings while the truth is that they are not abnormal. From psychological, biological, and pathological perspectives they have proved themselves as normal beings as men and women are. But because of their hormonal disorder and physiology they feel themselves different from men and women. They can be identified as physically deformed people but not abnormal beings as the patriarchy often thinks of them.

Far from being invisible, this isolated and miniscule community is emerging day by day and trying to make a strong connection with main stream society by exploring a new kind of literature which talks about hijras' sufferings, subjugations, suppressions and the pattern of their life style. Historically and mythologically they have made their presence everywhere in society. Indian religious epics such as **The Ramayana** and **The Mahabharata** exemplified their existence. Even before these epics (**the Mahabharata** and **the Ramayana**) their presence can be marked in *Manusmiriti*. Transgenders in ancient India seem to have a unique position. Indian texts of around 1500 BC used tritiya prakriti (third nature) for people not belonging to traditionally male or female roles or a mixture of both. While transgender as a category was not promoted they were adjusted in social life without much discrimination. Indian linguist Patanjali claimed around 200BC that three grammatical genders in Sanskrit language are derived from three natural genders. In Indian mythology *Ardhmareeshvara* (a composite *avatar* of *Shiva* 'male' and *Parvati* 'female') has been worshipped since ancient times. Another example is the son of Arjuna , Aravan from the epic *Mahabharata*. According to some legends aravan was

unmarried at the time of great battle and promised to sacrifice himself for the victory of Pandva's in war on the condition of experiencing marriage at least once. Consequently Shree Krishna metamorphosed himself as a woman, Mohini and married him. Amara Das Wilhelm in his book, *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex: Understanding Homosexuality, Transgender Identity and Intersex Conditions Through Hinduism*, claimed that early Vedic teachings stressed responsible family life and asceticism but also tolerated different types of sexualities and transgenders within general society. There are a lot of myths regarding transgender community prevalent in Hindu religion. The legend of sage Bhringi in the *Shiva Puran* also explores the existence of third nature in human beings as it remarks flesh and blood as symbolic feminine aspect of men. The existence and the social status of *hijra* community can be traced in another epic called, *the Ramayana*. The epic marks their existence and status in society. It is generally seen that they have their mythology, tools of operating social structure, and other systems of organization. In spite of the differences in life style and way of its representation their society is much like us. They follow the ancient ethnic concept of teacher and disciple and formulate a family in which we see guru, chela, guru bhai, guru bahan, etc. The community, though most of the time dressed as women, had also been associated with valour and power for example- the figure of Shikhandi as well as Brihanala in Mahabharata and the presence of *hijra* as harem guard in Mughal time. Although the presence of hijras in the harem emphasize them as trusty of chastity yet their valor, position and honour cannot be ignored. One such example is Nizam of Hyderabad who employed and honoured hijras. From historical point of views they were employed as harem guard till Mughal period. Thus there was a unique place of transgender in Indian myth and histories.

It was Western ideology that creates a huge gap among human beings. The English were living with their binary ideology (i.e. male and female), so they did not accept the multiplicity of nature and therefore denied nature. They came and embedded article 377 and criminalized those who were beyond of binary system. As human beings, we seek and talk of social justice in every field of life but for hijra's justice was proved only mere term that had nothing to do with their rights and life standard till 15 April 2014, when the honourable Supreme Court of India pulverized the gender binary, accepted the gender variance and asked the government to furnish transgenders legitimate space in India. Despite the court's decision and legal identity with some prevailing rights they are the victims of discrimination, shame, humiliation, and harassment in everyday life.

In present scenario we find that the transgenders are feeling isolated and outcast at every level in society. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the word 'outcast' refers to those who are not accepted by the society. Such people experience social exclusion in which individuals or groups are relegated to the fringes of a society, being denied economic, political, and/or symbolic power and pushed towards being outsiders. Now it is clear that to manifest someone as outcast means making him/her powerless from the political, economical and social points of view. Although these people use to live with us but the treatment in society for them is very different from us. These people are facing humiliation, subjugation, suppression, for a long time. It is generally seen that such people become the victim of identity crisis very easily as their identity is ignored by powerful social agencies

The term transgender has been used by the Western academy as an umbrella term to describe the diversity of gender identity and expression for all people whose gender identity does not fully

match to their assigned birth sex. In Indian social structure there are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transvestite, intersex who are identified as outcast. Gender bias depicts the discrimination among the people. The social pattern of identification of human beings are so deep rooted in gender binary that it treats them outsider who do not fall in binary structure. Men are in positions of authority due to social structure and culture, while women are restricted to domestic duties. Beyond of this binary there is a group of transgender, exist in this society who do not have any influence over policymaking or domestic issues. Now it is time to look beyond of binaries and welcome gender variance as it is natural and scientific.

I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey is an autobiography, written by Living Smile Vidya. An autobiography is a nonfiction story of a person's life, written from his/her point of views. It is such an autobiographical text that sheds light on the humiliation, oppression, and exclusion of the third sex in general and Vidya particular. The text demands some basic needs and rights as well as political and social recognition which seems like a dream to a transgender. It is a matter of consideration why and how a specific community is subjected to humiliation and is being treated as outcasts despite the fact that they are also human beings. In a democratic country where everyone has the right to live with pride and dignity, this community constantly feels insecure, abused, subjugated, and socially disconnected, and their voices are trampled on and ignored by society due to gender violence. Vidya wants her audience to realize the intersectionality of oppressions that trans-women face after and before the nirvana. In the beginning chapter of the text, Vidya explores the various complications entangled in the act of nirvana. The word nirvana is very significant in the glossary of hijra literature. In the world of hijra it is believed that without passes through the act of nirvana one cannot be identified oneself as true hijra. She writes:

“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 streets to achieve that end.” (Vidya, I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey 3)

Later in a chapter called “Chatla” she explains the very word “nirvana”. She writes:

“Nirvana is an operation- the operation that would slash and remove the sin of my birth as a male.” (Vidya, I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey 98). In fact search for an identity that is perfect for her becomes the ultimate journey of Vidya which she gets through a complicated process of emasculation and nirvana.

Vidya from the beginning of the text tries to compel her readers to ponder over the fundamental necessities as medical facilities given to those who are considered as social outcast like Vidya. She points out some major corruptions, occurred during the emasculation. The text explores how this community is being treated on the name of Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS). The text addresses such plights of transgender’s community. She writes:

“Do you see Janki in the next room? She has AIDS, they say. The collected an extra two thousand rupees from her to do the operation.” (Vidya, I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey 5)

In India to change sex is a very complicated process. Because of much complication before emasculation, most of the transgenders chooses illegal procedure to make it done. In a democratic country like India where its constitution gives everyone right to live with dignity, freedom and pride, such people are suffering and feeling themselves no better than that of colonized. She writes:

“The story is different in India. What happens here is no SRS. What we undergo here is merely 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.” (Vidya, I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey 99)

Begging is very common occupation in the world of transgender because they have not much access to earn money. It is often seen that transgenders are those whose gender identity are ignored by their own family and they are compelled to live as outcast on the fringes of society. For her nirvana Vidya had to beg from street to street because of economic problem.

Vidya throughout the autobiography seems to attract the reader’s attention towards the basic amenities such as food, shelter, water and medical services given to those who are being treated as an outcast like her. Vidya’s remarks about the prevalent corruption and ill treatment and brutality amid emasculation cannot be ignored. She calls for some important tests for the person undergoing the procedure. She writes:

“In countries where sex change operations are legal, many tests are performed on the person undergoing the procedure- medical, investigative, environmental and RLT(real life testing).The tests are done over a period of six to eighteen months, and ultimately a psychiatrist and gynaecologist have to recommend sex reassignment surgery(SRS).” (Vidya, I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey 99)

For a transgender sex change operation is very essential and significant. Vidya memorizes the incidents and puts a very clear picture of the place where her operation took place. The building of hospital was no better than that of a butcher house and the attendant was looking as they were

belonging to another profession. In India the sex change operation is primitive, unsafe, even an unhygienic. The treatment that is given to them is no better than that of an animal. They cut the genital so rudely that they do not care of the patient's sufferings and pains. They have been left unsecure and unhygienic without any notice on behalf of their fate and chance. Vidya discloses such bitter experiences in her book. She writes:

“In barely twenty minutes, a man and a woman wheeled Satya out- it was all over. Neither attendant looked like a nurse or a hospital worker. You'd think they belong to some completely unrelated profession. They lifted Satya from the wheelchair and, spreading a couple of newspapers on a steel cot, dropped her unceremoniously on it. Their unsafe, unhygienic approach made me nervous.... it was no operation theatre, I realized as soon as I entered the tiny room- it was a slaughterhouse.” (Vidya, I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey 6-7)

The vast majority of hijras in India are born biogenetically male, while there are very few instances of biogenetically female individuals who never started menstruating becoming hijras. Transgender people face a lot of challenges and struggles in coming to terms with one's own identity. In Vidya's case it is not different as she was born with male genital or male body but she had female soul or feelings. Vidya from her childhood felt like a girl and wanted to be a woman so she had to go through a complicated process of castration in order to search for an identity that was perfect to her. It is often seen that in India where men are primary and women are secondary, transgenders are living with double identity. In the eye of the society they play the role of either male or female as the society think of them but in private places and in dark time they play the role which they feel from their bottom of the heart. But Vidya rejects her friend's

suggestion of bearing an identity of a man in public and an identity of woman in private and stays on her determination of remaining a woman throughout her life. She writes:

“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....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, I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey 68)

There are very few opportunities are being provided to transgenders for their livelihood. They have very limited sources regarding their income and livelihood. Traditionally hijras are engaged in the professions such as dancing, blessing (*badhai*), begging and sex work for their economic growth. These professions are now seen as trivial and outdated and even the people do not willing to give them anything except abuse and harassment. In Indian subcontinent they are still performing their traditional roles at rituals as childbirth, especially a male child, and marriages. Ironically, the society that welcomes these people at rituals like birth and marriage does not favour them whenever they setup any other source (except traditional professional) for their income. Although they bless the newly married couple and new born baby but the baby who is blessed by them will see them as irrelevant creature, garbage and an object of mockery. It is felt that the people welcome them at rituals not because of their respect but the belief of their (transgender people) religious-cultural background. Vidya raises some questions regarding the livelihood and source of income. She asks:

“True, 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 tirunangais? If I strike the path of a self- employed entrepreneur, how many people would be ready to give me business, or even finance my venture?" (Vidya, I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey 92) She again mentions: "She was absolutely right. How could I find employment in a country which did not recognize people like us, where there was no social concern for us, no legal status, where even family support was non-existent?" (Vidya, I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey 106) Such questions as Vidya has raised, are either denied or ignored by our society.

Migration is a key factor in hijra literature which is discussed in ample amount by writers especially hijra writers. Most of the transgenders move from one town to another town or metropolis in search of livelihood and identity. It is often seen that the family does not support a child when a child does not fit in the category of gender, categorized by society. They are forced to leave the house because this society requires such actions Vidya's life is not untouched with this fact. Her suffering about gender and its determination begins from her childhood. She was born with male genital and gets ultimately special attention, love and freedom in comparison to her sisters in family. But this love begins to decrease when her family gets informed about her gender ambiguity. She faces a lot of challenges from her father and ultimately leaves her home for an identity. The journey of Vidya from one city to another metropolis is full of pain and stigma. Vidya does not find any social, financial and political support from her family as well as society when she desires to live a life of woman. She finds herself as helpless as an orphan when she faces humiliations and plights in trains during her begging. She reveals her mental and physical plights when she was beaten by four men black and blue. She Writes:

“He gave me two rupees. ‘Can’t you make it five, Tamil sir?’ I said. Hardly had I spoken when a hard slap landed on my cheek....Now four or five people surrounded me again. One of them held my arms and intertwined them between the stairs of the ladder to the upper birth; another pulled my hair; a third thug whipped me with the buckled end of his belt, hitting my face. His wild swig found my cheekbone and I started bleeding. It hurt, like hell but I didn’t weep. I shouted angrily at them.... (Vidya, I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey 96) Such brutal incidents, however, are not only limited to Vidya but many others who are spending their life like Vidya. Vidya had to face such humiliation because she belongs to a community which does not get attention of the society. Being a sexual minority she was unable to get any social security from passengers, sitting in that compartment.

There have been a lot of propagandas and prejudices prevalent against this community in Indian subcontinent. There is a propaganda that they steal the boys and effeminate them in order to make them their *chela*. These propagandas are so common in Indian rural society that no one wants to talk them. Such dire experiences are mentioned in Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s autobiography, *Me Hijra Me Laxmi*. Our society is so gendered bias that the common people do not want to talk and buy any articles if it is sold by any transgender. There is one such example comes from Vidya’s autobiography. She explores the gender bias prejudice exist among society. She writes, “We did our best, not minding the severe hard work, but the returns were not good enough. The problem was obviously our gender, not the goods we sold. We couldn’t understand the prejudice.” (Vidya, I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey 110) They face the discriminations and prejudices in their daily life. Although the myths of India are replete with the respected positions and valor of hijras yet in present society the term is used as an opprobrious epithet.

No one can deny the fact that unlettered people become very easily the victims of society in comparison to lettered person. It is education that shapes one's social, political and cultural life. It is often seen that illiterate people very easily are deprived of social and cultural participation in the society. It is education that gives the knowledge of the world around us. By applying education and information one can change the world around one's into something better. The education of transgenders or hijras in India is very poor and a matter of discussion and analysis. Most of the hijras in India is illiterate. The reason behind their illiteracy is the crisis of their gender identity. Most of the hijras leave their schooling from very beginning after the realization of their gender ambiguity and migrate from their house in search of their community. The boys and girls in classroom make harsh comment on them because of their gender ambiguity. Vidya has a great ability to bear the humiliation and derision of the classmates. There are very few who has the ability to bear like Vidya. She writes:

“My effeminate ways— hitherto an object of ridicule on my street— now became the target of my schoolmates' taunts. Even kids from lower classes teased me at school: ‘Look at this lady,’ they shouted after me. It became quite common for the boys to trouble me....Adults were no better. My effeminate speech and behaviour, the fact that I preferred the company of girls, drew out of the worst in them- they, like my schoolmates, started using my femininity as an excuse to insult me.” (Vidya, I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey 24) She suggests every sexual minority to be educated so that they can raise their voice and make their access to every citizen. She writes:

“Most of tirunangais are unlettered. Thus, they cannot find avenues of expression as I have done. Even if they are prepared for hard work, they have few skills.” (Vidya, I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey 131)

The crisis of hijras regarding their political identity is perhaps proved a key factor in their suppression and lost social and cultural identity. Although some hijras have contested and even some of them have been declared as the winner yet their political identity has been neglected by our society. Their victory seems the reaction against previous leaders not society’s concern and consciousness towards gender sensitization. There is no one from their community to represent them in the Parliament. Right to vote cannot empower them unless they have their own voice in politics. Men, Women, and even Dalits have their voices and rights but transgenders who are suppressed and humiliated at every point in society have no voice. In this context Vidya writes:

“Dalits have a voice, feminists are heard—they can hold rallies, demand their rights. But transgenders are the Dalits of Dalits, the most oppressed women among women—they enjoy no equality, no freedom, no fraternity. They continue to lead a wretched life, devoid of pride and dignity. Very rarely do people even talk about us or write about us. Are we so undeserving? I cannot understand.” (Vidya, I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey 136-37) Although the ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has been established for the welfare, social justice and empowerment of disadvantaged and marginalized section of society yet this community feels no betterment in its social, political and economical recognition.

Conclusion:

In conclusion it can be said that the autobiography of Vidya is very important text that explores various aspects and suffering of transgender community. It explores how transgender community can emerge and make its intelligentsia in betterment of society. To understand gender many seminars are being organized but the speakers choose to speak only male and female. There are very speakers who cover transgender in their speech. We shall have to include them in schools' and college's curriculum if we actually want their participation in society's upliftment. Now it is time to recognize their (transgenders) positive potency or strength and include them in mainstream by providing them basic human rights such as-Right to life and liberty with dignity, right to privacy and freedom of expression, right to education and empowerment, and right against violence, discrimination, and exploitation.

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