

## Childhood Memory and Third Gender Identity – An Empirical Study of Transgender Life Narratives of India

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### **Abstract:**

Memory studies as a multidisciplinary study area combine intellectual strands from many domains. It examines the forms and functions of representing the past. Life narratives contribute to the study of autobiographical memory studies. Transgenders of India fought for decades with the society and governments to establish their status as the Third Gender. They were the detested lot of the county, deprived of basic human rights and provisions and removed from mainstream society in all possible ways. They have secured their current societal position through rigorous efforts and relentless protests. A few transgenders such as Vidya, Revathi, Laxmi, and Manobi authored autobiographies that trace their journey to success. Transgender autobiographies - narratives of individual memory when put together, act as a collective memory of the transgenders that establish their identity as a community. The present study deals with the research question, “How do Childhood memories influence the development of gender identity in transgenders?” This paper is empirical research that analyses two transgender autobiographies Vidhya’s *I am Vidya* and Revathi’s *The Truth About Me* to study how the respective authors used memory to establish their transgender identity. These autobiographies can be considered as a strategy followed by these transgenders to record and preserve their memory and individual identity and thereby preserve the identity of the transgender community. These life writings serve as a cultural representation of the transgender community. The present paper is an attempt to examine the issues related to memory, identity, and representation in the transgender autobiographies of India.

**Keywords:** Childhood Memory, Transgenders, Gender Identity, Collective Identity.

### **1. Introduction**

Autobiographical narratives are a powerful tool for exploring memory and personal history. Autobiographical writings such as memoirs, autobiographies, etc. record personal and

collective memories. Autobiography as a genre is a repository of personal memories and they preserve individual and collective memories. Autobiographical Memory represents a sophisticated amalgamation of recollections encompassing individual, repetitive, and prolonged experiences, fused into a cohesive self-narrative that is both shaped and appraised within the context of sociocultural customs.

Autobiographical Narratives deal with the memories of an individual's life and of all the memories, childhood memories play a significant role in the construction and development of gender identity. Memory is "the process by which information is encoded, stored, and retrieved. It is the retention of information over time for the purpose of influencing future action." (Schacter et al., 2007). In this regard, childhood memories play a pivotal role in shaping the future and personality of an individual. According to research published by the American Psychological Association, happy childhood memories are linked to better health later in life.

Studying the autobiographical narratives of transgenders helps us to trace and identify the process of gender identity in transgender individuals during their childhood. Transgender individuals' memories of their childhood contrast with those of cisgender individuals and are loaded with the ordeals and turmoil of gender dysphoria. Gender Dysphoria is the sense of unease a person experiences due to the mismatch between their assigned sex and gender identity. Gender Identity is a complex and multifaceted concept of a person's self. Gender Identity is influenced by different factors such as biology, genetics, culture, personal experiences, and upbringing. Gender identity is "a deeply felt sense of being male, female, or something else, and is understood to include a combination of identity elements, including personal identification, bodily reality, and social and cultural roles." (Bauer et al., 2017). Gender identity refers to the masculine and feminine self-definitions.

Transgenders face a crisis in identifying their gender as they cannot map their sense of gender with their biological sex. Cisgenders hardly experience such hardships, as their gender identification aligns with their assigned sex. Sex being biological and gender being social, gender identity is one of the crucial social identities, here each identity signifies an individual's psychological connection to a specific social category to which they belong. As gender identity is the construction of self in relation to others, transgender children face extreme identification with the opposite gender rather than their assigned sex. This results in troubled childhood for transgenders and thus affects their future. Adding to their troubles in identifying their true self,

transgender kids are also burdened with the role of fitting into the apparatus of assigned sex roles as per the norms of society.

## **2. Design/Methods/Modelling**

The present paper is an empirical study that uses autobiographies as a valuable source to explore the personal experiences and perspectives of transgenders. These autobiographies provide first-hand information about the childhood memories of the transgender authors and when these are studied carefully, they provide a powerful insight into the formulation of third gender identity. These autobiographies also provide a resourceful perception of the cultural and social aspects of the transgender community.

However, it is believed that the information provided in the autobiographies may be biased and selective. To overcome the fallacy of being misguided by the selected autobiographies, the research included the validation of the information provided in the autobiographies with other transgender autobiographies, evaluated the consistency within the autobiographies, and the interviews of transgenders other than the authors.

The paper addresses the transgenders under analysis with the pronoun ‘She’, as they preferred to be addressed as ‘She’, and that the writers have used the same pronouns in their autobiographies. The pronoun ‘she’ is used while discussing them even before their ‘coming out’ as transgenders.

### **Childhood Memories – Gender Identity**

Childhood memories are very important in every individual’s life. They pave the way for a better life ahead. Childhood memories can play a significant role in the lives of transgenders as they are crucial in the development of their gender identity like cisgender children. As discussed already, Gender Identity is very crucial in every single person's life as it makes sense of their self-identity. Gender Identity is a person’s inner sense and understanding of who they are i.e., whether they are male, female, or anything in between. “Gender identity is the private experience of gender role, that sameness, unity, and persistence of one's individuality as male, female, or androgynous, especially as experienced in self-awareness and behavior” (Nanda 114). Gender Identity of an individual may or may not associate with the individual’s assigned sex at birth. Sex is also not seen as an external category that can be assigned to a baby based on its external genitalia. As Stephen Whittle states in the foreword of *The Transgender Studies Reader*

Sex and Gender themselves no longer appear as stable external categories but rather appear embedded in the individuals who experience them. This concern has derived from the postmodern process of deconstruction, in which modernity and its values, including gender, have been stripped away (xii).

Childhood memories are pivotal in forming the Gender Identity of transgenders, and the present study explores how childhood memories can impact the development of gender identity in transgender individuals. This study investigates Early Gender Socialization, Social Interactions, and Recognition of Gender Incongruence among transgender children concerning the two texts Vidya's *I Am Vidya* and Revathi's *The Truth About Me*.

### Early Gender Socialization

Childhood memories are often intertwined with early gender socialization. Transgender individuals have memories of childhood where they have experienced a feeling of disconnection between their gender identity and the gender assigned to them at the time of birth. Some transgender individuals may recall feeling discomfort or a sense of difference from a young age regarding the gender assigned to them at birth. They might express their gender identity in ways that don't align with societal expectations for their assigned gender, such as preferring certain clothes, toys, or activities typically associated with another gender.

Vidya was born as the sixth child, the third surviving one – a boy, born after several years of prayers for a boy and was named Saravanan. She was very much loved by her family, just for being a boy. As Vidya shares in her autobiography, “Instead, I was the sole beneficiary of all the love and affection at home by virtue of being a boy.” (13) But by the age of “six or seven” (18) she used to wear her sister Manju's skirt and dance for the film songs on radio imagining herself as the heroine. She used to always look for a chance when everybody in the home would go out so that she could “put on girl's clothes and sang and danced. I loved it.” (18) Whenever she saw movies, she used to yearn to be like the heroines. She always associated herself with the female lead in the film and after returning home would imitate them by wearing her sister's “skirts and midis, her eyeshadow, bangles, bindis, costume jewels.” (19) She would apply oil on her lips replacing lipstick and a cotton towel on head twirling the long rear portion as a braid. She would then dance her heart out to the songs on the radio.

Revathi was born last in a family of five kids, with three brothers and a sister. Her parents named her Doraisamy as she was assigned male at birth. Like Vidya, Revathi also enjoyed the

privilege of being the last boy of the family. “Since I was the youngest son, I got a lot of attention and affection from both my parents.” (2). But by the time Revathi was six to seven years old, her early gender socialization was with girls, but not boys, and she started performing all the tasks that are usually assigned to girls like drawing kolam (rangoli), sweeping the yard, and helping her mom in all the household activities and enjoyed the companionship of girls.

I would go to the village school along with the girls from the neighbourhood and return with them. I played only girls' games. I loved to sweep the frontyard clean and draw the kolam every morning. I even helped my mother in the kitchen, sweeping and swabbing, washing vessels. (3)

Revathi also loved wearing girls' clothes and imitating women after returning from school. “As soon as I got home from school, I would wear my sister’s long skirt and blouse, twist a long towel around my head and let it trail down my back like a braid.” (4) Revathi always loved to be a girl and considered herself a girl, “I walked and sang and danced to my heart’s content, imagining myself to be a girl.” Revathi always yearned to be a girl and felt sad for not being able to be one. She hated herself for being born as a boy. “In class, I would sit staring at the girls, . . . I longed to be like them and suffered that I could not dress so.” (6) Revathi also loves watching movies and would always imitate the heroines in the movies like Vidya. “. . . I was in the cinema hall, I forgot my troubles. . . sometimes sing the songs I had heard Saroja Devi sing earlier in the day. I even thought I was her, as I echoed her songs.” (10)

### Memories of Social Interactions

Memories of social interactions during childhood, such as feeling misunderstood, bullied, or pressured to conform to gender norms, can significantly impact the development of gender identity. Negative experiences might reinforce an individual's sense of being different or not fitting in with their assigned gender.

Vidya shares in her autobiography *I Am Vidya* that she was often the victim of bullying at school because of her femininity and was constantly punished at home for not behaving according to the gender assigned at her birth. Vidya always wondered growing up, why her choice of being a girl which was never taken seriously in the early days, started troubling her family later. “My old ways---the same habits which had been dismissed lightly as childish pranks---were now viewed with disfavour. Chithi and Radha scolded me for my acts, and Appa thrashed me regularly.” (22) Vidya also shares her childhood memories of how she became the

victim of constant bullying in the neighbourhood and school. “When I walked down the street, youngsters started teasing me: Look at the nattamai’s son. He walks like a female!” (23)

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. (24)

After completing her tenth class Vidya joined a new school and it was even more unfriendly than the old. “I had no friends; no one to share my likes and dislikes: no one to understand me. On the contrary, there was no shortage of taunts and jibes. . . .Crude puns were invented by my classmates to scribble with my name on the blackboard.” (25) Vidhya shares in her autobiography recollecting her traumatic childhood that, “The constant ridicule made school intolerable, and soon it became impossible to walk on the street as well. I was now completely alone.” (26)

Revathi in her autobiography *The Truth About Me*, recollects her harrowing childhood memories when she was constantly ridiculed both by other students in school and by neighbours. “...boys at school, as well as men and women who saw me outside the house, would call out “Hey, Number 9!’, ‘female thing,’ and ‘female boy’.” (4) Revathi always loved to spend time with girls and showed interest in playing with girls rather than with boys. She was mocked for choosing girls' games like hopscotch and hide and seek over boys' games like robber-police, cricket and, football. “I was teased often at school, for behaving like a girl, for doing women’s work, and on the streets too, was bullied often.” (6) In addition to all this ill-treatment from her peers at school, Revathi was also punished by teachers for not fitting into her assigned gender role. In her words, “I remember being canned for ‘not being brave like a boy’. And since I did not play boys’ games, I got punished by the PT teacher too.” (7)

### **Recognition of Gender Incongruence**

Some transgender individuals recall early memories or feelings of discomfort, confusion, or a sense of incongruence between their physical body and their internal sense of gender identity. These memories might become more pronounced or understood as they grow older and learn more about gender diversity.

Vidhya recollects her childhood memories in her autobiography where she felt a sense of incongruence between her physical body and her internal sense of gender identity. Vidya shares that by the time of a sense of self was formulated in her she felt she was a girl. When Vidya

continued to explore her feminine self by continuing her habits, she soon realized the difference in people's attitudes towards her deeds. Her father regularly thrashed her whenever he caught her in her antics. She used to suffer why her gender socialization with the feminine sex was considered wrong; she wondered why her choices were considered erroneous. "What's wrong with my preferences? 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?" (22)

Revathi shares her experiences of Incongruence, "I did know that I behaved like a girl, if felt natural for me to do so. I did not know how to be like a boy. . . I felt I could not stop being a girl because others told me I ought not to be so." (7) Revathi shares her memories of childhood where she was confused regarding her feelings and emotions. She always hated when people addressed her as a boy and always longed for people to recognize her as a female. Her growing sense of irrepressible femaleness haunted her day in and day out. As she says, "A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought of myself." (15)

Both Vidya and Revathi shared their memories of playing female roles on stage and being appreciated for their acting skills. They felt very happy for their feminine self getting appreciation and acceptance for the first time. They share that they never acted in the roles but expressed their true self in freedom which they usually suppress. These memories made more sense to them once they grew up and met people of their kind and shared their experiences with them.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The above empirical study of transgender autobiographies investigated the question of how childhood memories influence the development of gender identity in transgenders. The study proved that trans kids have a fascination with opposite-gender clothes and their gender socialization is always with the opposite gender other than the one assigned to them at their birth. They love dancing and would always imitate the heroines from the movies by dressing up like girls and dancing to the tunes. The same is expressed by the trans model Kushi Shaik in an interview with BBC News India titled *The Trans Model Dancing Her Way to Stardom*, which is available on YouTube. In her words "I have loved dancing since I was a child. I used

to look into the mirror and dance. I would imitate Madhuri Dixit and dance like her.” (3:02 – 3:10)

We have also learned that by the time a sense of self is formulated in the trans kids they identify themselves with the opposite gender. The same is expressed by Janet Mock in her autobiography *Redefining Realness*, “When I look back at my childhood, I often say I always knew I was a girl since the age of three or four, a time when I began cataloging memories.” (28)

#### 4. Conclusions

The present study asserts that childhood memories do influence the development of gender identity in transgenders. Their memories of early gender socialization, Social Interactions, and Recognition of Gender Incongruence paved the way for the formulation and realization of their third gender. Their memories help them analyze and understand their gender divergence constructively. In conclusion, childhood memories can have a profound impact on the lives of transgender individuals. They can serve as a lens through which one understands and embraces their gender identity, influencing their emotional well-being, resilience, and advocacy efforts. Acknowledging and understanding the complexities of these memories is crucial in providing support and creating inclusive environments for transgender individuals to live authentically and thrive.

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