

Transcending Binary Boundaries: The Alchemy of Survival and Education in *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the “alchemy of survival” portrayed in *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, the memoir of Dr. Manobi Bandyopadhyay who is India’s first transgender college principal. Using a critical framework, the study interrogates the convergence of gender non-conformity, institutional marginalisation, and the liberating capacity of education. Bandyopadhyay’s narrative illustrates a lived tension between trauma and resilience as she endures societal violence, psychological wounds, and the entrenched hierarchies of a binary-driven culture. The memoir documents the dehumanising labels imposed on transgender people, cast as “lowest of the low,” monstrous, or supernatural, while simultaneously affirming how knowledge and visibility can subvert oppression. By positioning her experience within broader queer and feminist scholarship, the analysis underscores education as both a tool of resistance and a conduit to dignity. Ultimately, Bandyopadhyay’s story exemplifies the Indian transgender community’s ongoing struggle to secure space, recognition, and humanity within exclusionary structures.

Key Words: Binary Society, Queer, Struggles, Survival, Transgender.

A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi (2017) is the powerful autobiography of Manobi Bandyopadhyay, co-authored with journalist Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey, which chronicles her transition from her birth identity as Somnath Bandopadhyay to becoming India’s first transgender college principal. Autobiography, “. . . is a self-written account of one’s own life, providing a personal narrative that reflects on the author’s experiences, memories, and insights”. The narrative unflinchingly details a life marked by severe trauma, including childhood sexual assault and persistent social humiliation; however, it is primarily a story of indomitable resilience. By confronting systemic prejudice and personal adversity with immense courage, Manobi emerged as a trailblazing figure, effectively shattering societal barriers and reclaiming her true identity to achieve historic professional success in 2015. This

autobiography serves as a poignant window into the systemic marginalization of the transgender community, using the personal narrative of Manobi to illuminate a collective struggle. While the author's own journey was tempered by familial support, the text underscores the grim reality for most rejection, harassment, and forced displacement into isolated enclaves. By retreating from a society that views them as alien or defective, a profound disconnect is born, allowing mainstream culture to substitute truth with harmful myths. Ultimately, the book acts as a powerful corrective, pulling back the metaphorical curtain to reveal the authentic humanity often obscured by societal prejudice.

The social and cultural constructs of gender and sexuality, as well as the identities and experiences of those who do not fit the prevailing standards and expectations of these categories, are examined by the interdisciplinary fields of queer theory and gender studies. The literary work *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, a candid biography of Manobi Bandyopadhyay, India's first transgender person, can be interpreted under the following headings using queer theory and gender studies. The book examines the difficulties faced by transgender people in India, where they encounter legal obstacles, violence, prejudice, and social shame. The book also emphasizes the contributions and accomplishments of transgender persons in a variety of sectors and promotes their acceptance and respect as equal citizens and human beings.

Manobi shares the poignant tale of her transition from a man to a woman with unwavering honesty and profound empathy. She describes how she persevered in her academic pursuits in spite of the significant upheavals and eventually became the first transgender principal of a girl's college. By doing this, she inspired her entire community in addition to defining her own identity. In an interview after being appointed head of a postgraduate college, she said that she was disliked by most of the staff. Teachers and students staged protests and went on strike. They made it difficult for her to carry out her responsibilities. They destroyed her goals and aspirations.

A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi is a tale of a boy who changed from man to woman. Because of this, she was insulted and ill-treated. In an interview, Manobi revealed, "I am only the first transgender principal of a PG college, but I feel too lonely and alone because my present condition is the Tshangu of Mahabharata. Still now, the mainstream has not agreed to accept me, and my community is not ready to give me space so that I have no community, no life, no family excitement, no friends, no children, daughter, and sons. I feel loneliness and isolation. Every day, we see on the street, stretching our palms to earn our livelihood.

Mainstream people do not respect this class, rather they look down upon them with contempt. I am different from others because I have a sound education that gave me high steam but my community people did not give me space to receive education in school or college or university. I feel education is the first and foremost weapon to fight against all odds and buffets, but my community is deprived of this right.”

If some people from Transgender community get a chance to get admission in colleges or schools, sometimes students and teachers mock them, irritate them. Consequently, they are forced to leave the institution and opt for the choice to beg for livelihood. As a principal, she raises their standard of living by making concerted efforts in the field of education, employment, health, she says ‘Transgender’ and ‘hijras’ both are ambiguous words but it has two different meanings – The word hijras’ is considered as an occupation. The term transgender refers to “effeminate boys who have gender fluidity. She maintains that in her childhood if a boy become hijra her whole family had bad name in society and the person is considered black sheep or disgrace in her whole family for this reason they become unwanted in the family when people heard that there was a hijra in a family people would break the matrimonial not even sometimes society would outcast the entire family. That is why they were considered cursed and ostracised from their family. They would become vagabonds and wander here and there in search of money for shelter. Those are the ostracised people who together started living and formed the original community. Thus, the hijra community came into existence. The lifestyle of hijras is a curse to society. To raise their standard of living, the honourable Apex court has given a historical decision on 15th April, 2014, but the decision was not effective in the central or state level government properly. Much consciousness is required not for the people who are supposed to get the benefits but for the people who are in the majority. Their considerations become the law of the country. On the other hand, being a minority, our class is much neglected. Even does not get proper respect. They are treated worse than a beast. This is the reason they are bound to leave the mainstream of a civilized society. To keep a group of people discriminating on the ground of sex and gender is not fortifiable rather it is a disgrace to a civilized society. It was too late to understand by the civilized people in our society, but it is true that today hijras and transgenders are shown as different communities. Some hijras accept challenges to define their identity. She says that she accepted challenges by determining her heart and soul. She became principal but did not bake before anyone. This is how she made her story in this country. She evokes people by imparting proper education in sharing their health, job and other social acceptance and equal

rights like our mainstream people. This earth can be a better place to live if mainstream people come forward with noble thoughts to make transgenders feel that they are part and parcel of our society. They have been given the right to live dignified lives together. All the institutions are opened for them. They can cherish their lives as the mainstream people enjoy. Many initiatives have been taken to improve the condition of the ostracised hijras but things remain to do to define their identity in true sense (Manobi Bandopadhyay).

Issues and challenges faced by Manobi Bandyopadhyay to carve her identity as a transgender in India include social stigma, discrimination, violence, and legal issues. These issues and challenges that she faced are described in her autobiography 'A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi' by journalist Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey. Some of the issues and challenges faced by her and described in her book are: She was raped by her cousin in class V and was beaten up by boys in school. She wrote, "I was raped by my cousin when I was in class V. He was a year older than me and he would come to our house often. He would take me to the terrace and force himself on me. I was too scared and ashamed to tell anyone. He would threaten me that if I ever told anyone, he would kill me" (23). She was rejected and mocked by her family, particularly her father, who refused to accept her identity and attempted to marry her off. She felt the rejection, "My father hated me. He would beat me up and abuse me verbally. He would call me names like hijra, napunsak, khoja, etc. He would say that I was a curse on the family and that I should die. He would try to arrange marriages for me with girls, but I would refuse. He would say that I was a disgrace to the family name and that I should leave the house" (45).

Manobi was harassed and threatened by her colleagues and superiors at work, who doubted her qualifications and competence. She shares her college experience, "I faced a lot of hostility and discrimination at work. My colleagues would mock me and gossip about me. They would say that I was not fit to be a teacher and that I was corrupting the students. My superiors would try to sabotage my career and make false allegations against me. They would say that I had forged my certificates and that I was mentally unstable. They would try to transfer me to remote places or suspend me from work" (87).

Another issue she faced was regarding the medical care. Manobi was not allowed medical attention and legal rights, including the right to change her name and gender in official documents. She said, "I had to overcome many difficulties and obstacles to get my sex reassignment surgery. I had to go to different doctors and hospitals, and face their

ignorance and prejudice. I had to pay a lot of money and bribe a lot of people. I had to face a lot of pain and complications. I had to fight a lot of legal battlesto get my name and gender changed on my documents. I had to face a lot of harassment and humiliation from the authorities and the society” (112).

She was ostracized and made to feel isolated by the rest of society, as well as by some of her transgender friends, who accused her of being arrogant and selfish. She wrote, “I felt lonely and alienated. I did not belong to any group or community. The mainstream society rejected me and discriminated against me. The transgender community resented me and envied me. They said that I was a traitor and a snob. They said that I had forgotten my roots and that I had betrayed them. They said that I was selfish and greedy. They said that I was not a real transgender” (136).

These are a few of the problems and difficulties Manobi Bandyopadhyay had in forming her identity and described in her autobiography. The book portrays the stigma, suffering, and trauma experienced by transgender people in India, where they encounter violence, prejudice, social stigma, and legal obstacles. Manobi’s struggles and traumas as a transgender person in a patriarchal and traditional society are chronicled in the book.

Manobi’s autobiography describes multiple incidents of marginalization, assault, and discrimination. The portrayal of these encounters is striking, emphasizing the cultural biases and structural obstacles that transgender people face in India. Her story highlights her attempts to raise awareness of the Hijra community and to struggle for respect and equality. Her story centres on the relationship between gender identification and career goals. Her story is thorough and insightful, offering a profound comprehension of her psychological and emotional journey. Her tale serves as a tribute to both the strength of education and resiliency. One can obtain a thorough understanding of the various routes to self-acceptance as well as the continuous struggle for equality and acknowledgment by reading her autobiography. To put it another way, Manobi’s autobiography is a potent instrument for social change as well as a personal story. It dispels myths, promotes rights, and offers a more thorough comprehension of the transgender experience in India. It offers deep insights into the lives of transgender people in India, showcasing their identities, challenges, and paths to self-acceptance. She demonstrates Nelson Mandela’s claim that the most effective tool for changing the world is education. Mandela states, “Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world and Mindset Network is a powerful part of that world changing arsenal”.

Works Cited

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