



### Issues and challenges faced by a Transgender in *I Am Vidya* and remedies to lead an ordinary life.

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#### Abstract

*The individual identity of humans is universally determined by their, nationality, race, and gender in the modern society in the twenty first century. The formation of identity is one of the major concerns in literature. This paper proposes to study the discrimination of 'Hijras' in the society. Gender plays a crucial role in the successful growth of a society. Male and female are the two genders which straight away draw closer to human mind when someone talks of gender. The word 'gender identity' too might guide us towards Feminism. Of course, this gender identity is not in terms of feminism but it is about the identity or recognition sought after by the third sex –the transgender. The inclusion of transgender into society is an issue which is still unsolved. Through the book she brings out the whole existence of an individual who experienced physical and mental conversion. Her experiences transformed 'Vidya' to 'Living Smile Vidya' and permit her to oppose social discrimination. This paper deals with the insights shared by Vidya concerning the struggle of the transgender's inclusion and appreciation.*

**Key Words:** trans -identity, transphobic, social discrimination, inclusion.

Literature plays a vital role in the lives of every human. "Literature has been commonly used since the eighteenth century, equivalently with the French belles letter (fine letter) to designate fictional and imaginative writing – poetry, prose fiction and drama".<sup>1</sup> It focuses on every aspect of human life. Through literature one can discover his own identity in the earth. It not only brings out positive and negative changes made by human from the ancient time but also gives remedy for the problems of the people in their daily life. Twenty –first century literature has the command and ability to raise and defend the cultural space of various communities. Transgender's identity is one of the main issues in the current

<sup>1</sup>. Abrams, M H, and Geoffrey G. Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 11<sup>th</sup> ed. Delhi: Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 2015. Print. at p. 200

scenario. The term ‘Transgender’ coined by Virginia Prince, is a pioneer in the cross dresser movement in the United States in 1970. “The term transgender refers to those who reject their socially assigned gender and refuse to place themselves in the men and women gender binary”.<sup>2</sup> They do have the legal rights in our society. How do they stifle in the society? They have concealed in various perceptions like education, health, shelter, hygienic food, travel, humiliation in public places, production, justice, freedom, employment and identity. In simpler terms, “transgender is an umbrella term used to group several different kinds of people who do not conform to their expected gender, and are living the gender that was not assigned to them at birth, and also those who live genders which does not suit the traditional conception of gender”.<sup>3</sup>

Around the world each country gives different names to transgender. But South Asian people used to call in terms of ‘Hijras’:

The word ‘hijra’ is a term of abuse. Its variants in colloquial language include expression like number six, number nine, and chakka. The word ‘hijra’ derives from the Urdu word ‘hijra’. A hijra is a person who has walked out of his tribe or community. Thus, a hijra is one who has left main stream society, comprising men and women, and joined a community of hijras. But the hijra community isn’t a monolith. Its history and culture varies from state to state. <sup>4</sup>

The autobiography begins with turmoil and achievement of Vidya (transgender) in her field, and it motives her community to come forward:

Vidya has suffered all the indignities a transgender or tirunangai can suffer in a world inhabited by men and women. Still, strong in self-belief, she has held on to her convictions. She has a master’s degree in linguistics, has a keen interest in contemporary theatre and cinema. She is a student of Professor Mu Ramaswami, a well-known name in theatre. After years of struggle in Madurai and Pune, she now works as a voluntary organisation engaged in serving destitutes in Chennai. <sup>5</sup>

Vidya was named as Saravanan by her parents and later she becomes a hijra, changed her name as Vidya. He was born a boy but from his early childhood he felt and behaved like a girl. *I Am Vidya* is her autobiography originally written by her in Tamil as Naan Vidya and translated into English as *I Am Vidya*

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<sup>2</sup> Beasley, Chris. *Gender and Sexuality—Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers*. New York: Sage Publications Ltd, 2005. Print. at p. 4

<sup>3</sup> Bettcher, Talia. ‘Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues’. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 25, Feb 2013, web. 25, Feb 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Tripathi, L. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. Trans. R RajaRao & P G Joshi. New Delhi: OUP. 2015. Print. at p.172

<sup>5</sup> Vidya, Living Smile. *I am Vidya*. Chennai: Oxygen Books, 2007. Print. at p. I

by V. Ramnarayan which she shares her experiences of having a masculine body with the feminine attributes.

### Issues and Challenges Faced by Vidya

In the recent times though, transgenders are prepared to write about their world themselves. The study of an autobiography *I am Vidya* by Living Smile Vidya from India has offered a historical session on transgender's lives. "Autobiography is a biography written by the subject about himself or herself".<sup>6</sup> "Hence apart from being collective as well as personal narratives, autobiographies also offer its creator a chance to have made sense of their lives and experiences as they have answered the question, who am I?, as observed by Diane Bjorklund, who researched on the genre of autobiography in America".<sup>7</sup> *I am Vidya* is an undeniable plot about a woman trapped within a man's body. This, an autobiography deals with traumatic effect caused by the society towards the third gender. Gender plays a vital role in the successful growth of a society. Male and female are the two genders which straight away draw closer to human mind when someone talks of gender. Gender, a socially constituted word is not the same as sex. "The words of Simon De Beavouir should be recollected here. One is not born a woman one is made so, in the similar way it is the cultural and social set up which distinguishes the characteristics to be either a man or woman".<sup>8</sup> The biological sex which decides the individuality is different from the gender role. The gender role is the external manifestation of being masculine or feminine through gender comportment:

People call me a second type woman, a transgender woman, a hijra or whatever. I don't care about criticism, about being labelled and about people telling me that I am not a complete woman. To me, there exists no complete woman or a complete man. In every man, there is a woman and in every woman a man.<sup>9</sup>

Defining what it means to be a boy or a girl is not simple as biology. It is often dictated by culture and society. For centuries, this nursery rhyme "What are little boys made of ?" has reflected how most people think of the different genders:

What are little boys made of?  
Frogs and snails and puppy  
Dog's tails,  
That's what little boys are made of.  
What are the little girls are made of  
Sugar and spice and all things

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<sup>6</sup> Abrams, M H, and Geoffrey G. Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 11<sup>th</sup> ed. Delhi: Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 2015. Print. at p. 200

<sup>7</sup> Bjorklund, Diane. *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> S. Ramya & Dr. B. Cauvery. 'Living Smile Vidya's Traumatic Experiences'. Oct 2014, iosrjournals.org, 04 Dec 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Subramanian, Kalki. Woman by Choice. *The Week*. 07, Mar 2016, web.07, Mar 2016.

Nice,

That's what little girls are made of<sup>10</sup>

Vidya was originally named as Saravanan by her parents and she is an M.A linguistic graduate. The life of Vidya from her birth to the present and her demand for the basic rights of transgender portrays the plight of thousands of unknown transgenders in India. Vidya was once timid to explore her femininity to the world. Her bold drive pushed her to undergo SRS (Sex Reassignment Surgery) unable to live in a male body. Vidya writes in her autobiography that in India, the SRS is carried out in an unhygienic environment with no appropriate authorization from the government. No Patient is made to take up any compulsory test required for operation. The one single test that a transgender is made to undergo is the HIV test. As soon as the SRS is over, the patient is not allowed to stay in the hospital till the wounds are healed. Vidya's happiness reached its zenith when she becomes a woman. Her expectation to be accepted as a woman is expressed in the following lines:

Amma, Amma, I have become a woman. I am not Saravanan anymore. I am Vidya. A complete Vidya. A whole woman. Where are you, Amma? Can't you come to me by some miracle, at least for a moment? Please hold my hand, Amma. My heart seems to be breaking into smithereens. Radha, please Radha, I am no longer your brother, Radha. I am your sister now, your sister. Come to me, Radha. Chithi, Manju, Prabha, Appa....<sup>11</sup>

During the portrayal of her early days, she clearly presents her obscured and sneaky desire to be a woman. She dresses herself in woman's attire and dances by imitating the heroines in movie. When she was caught at such acts during her young age, she is not taken seriously but the attitude of the spectator changes as she grows. In school and public places, the behaviour of Saravanan is noted and mocked frequently for behaving like a woman. Vidya confesses that "Even kids from lower classes teased me at school. 'Look at this lady', they shouted after me".<sup>12</sup>

Vidya explained major issues which transgenders are facing in their day to day life. Transgender adolescences are exposed to suffering in many ways. Many experience physical and emotional assaults for coming out, or fear being found out on a daily basis. Others may take on at-risk behaviours as a way to cope with confusion about their sexual identity. So many of these children and teens want to share but finding a safe and trusted relationship is a great challenge because the very acknowledgment of same sex attractions and desires may put them at further risk:

I was girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy. Inwardly I wanted to be a girl, but I made every effort possible to hide my femininity from the outside world. I took particular trouble to remain inconspicuous at college, the unpleasant memories of my bitter

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<sup>10</sup> Opie, P Opie. *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.

<sup>11</sup> Vidya, at p. 17

<sup>12</sup> Vidya, at p. 31

experience at school still fresh in my mind. I lead a false life of strenuous attempts to swagger like a man and speak like one;<sup>13</sup>

Family members are not ready to accept the transformation which the soul undergoes. Vidya's childhood effort to sustain her feminine was even worse. Her father who was a sturdy dictator gave no room for simple joys and freedom of childhood. Vidya at the age of six started to realise the feminine within her. She used to take pleasure in disguising herself with her sister's clothes and in solitude used to dance to music. She was not interested to be recognised as a boy and did not wish to have the privilege given to her. She started to question "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?".<sup>14</sup>

During the death of her mother, she locked up herself in a room, wore her sister's clothes and started to dance to the song of

I am the king's daughter,

A fresh new rose.

Will my dreams come true?<sup>15</sup>

The death of her mother did not create a great impact on her rather she took that solitude too to enjoy her personal self. Vidya is very much indebted to one of her friends Ilango, with whom she used to enjoy talking about girls. She attributes her liking for him and even dreams that one day she might win his love. "Ilango was the man who kindled in me the kind of changes that occur in a woman at different stages of her development. Ilango was the man who made me feel whole as a woman".<sup>16</sup>

The suffering which the protagonist Vidya undergoes when she hears people calling her as Ennada, the word 'da' irritates her. The da 'in ennada' is a familiar form of address meant for a male, and I reacted immediately. I once again showed irritation at her calling me 'da'.<sup>17</sup> The last chapter – "I want to live with Pride" highlights the one and half year mission to change her name in the government records. Through her traumatic narration one can find her struggle to find a legally enforceable social status for all the tirunangai's.

The society subjects transgender to an increased violence because it finds it difficult to accept them in a natural way. Vidya was once begging in train. She was physically harassed "One of them held my arms and intertwined them between the stairs of the ladder to the upper berth. Another one pulled my

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<sup>13</sup> Vidya, at p.40

<sup>14</sup> Vidya, at p. 29

<sup>15</sup> Vidya, at p. 28

<sup>16</sup> Vidya, at p. 35

<sup>17</sup> Vidya, at p. 123

hair. A third thug whipped me with the buckled end of his belt, hitting my face”<sup>18</sup> but she never lost her courage, “It hurt like hell, but I didn’t weep. I shouted angrily at them”.<sup>19</sup> This technique of shouting or loud clapping is generally to send signal to the nearby transgender to come help and such behaviours are used as self-defense to scare the abusers. “only by doing disgusting acts, can we keep at bay men who are stronger than we. We can’t even go to the police... don’t take care of our compliments seriously”.<sup>20</sup> The duty of policeman is safeguarding public but they sometimes (most of the times) forgot to treat transgender equally.

Even the Indian NGO’s are not properly taking care of Tirunangais and uplifting their life. They are indirectly supporting them to be sex workers. “No Indian NGO had fought to liberate tirunangais from begging and sex work. What kind of rehabilitation was it to tell them, ‘Go on being sex workers, but do it safely’”.<sup>21</sup>

### **Remedies to lead a normal life**

In schools, children like Vidya experience inequality, violence, verbal and physical harassment more than the gay, lesbian and bisexual students. Such insecure school atmosphere influences their performance and attendance. They eventually leave the school for protection. This bitter experience of harassment and violence coincides with the increased usage of drugs in trans-adolescents. In addition, those who are frightened at school have higher rates of depression and suicide attempts. To reduce this peer bullying, the author suggests:

At school, in Arivolilyakkam, in other non-formal school, tirunangais can be introduced to students as a part of their lesson, so that they learn to treat difference with compassion and dignity. Children should be told about the sufferings of transgender. Film censor boards must firmly root out scenes depicting them in a vulgar manner.<sup>22</sup>

Realising the right to development for transgender people like, other marginalised groups, is about core developmental issue such as poverty reduction, mitigate negative health and HIV consequences, the production and exercise of human rights and combating gender based violence. It requires transgender people’s inclusion in society on an equal basis with others. It is impossible to be included within a community and society if one’s very existence is denied. Yet, such exclusion is routinely experienced by transgender people when there are two binary sex options and no legal ability to move between the two. Vidya is struggling a lot for the social inclusion of her community with the society. She states that “My being a tirunangai was natural, just as men are men, women are women and cats are cats. Trouble arises

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<sup>18</sup> Vidya, at p. 102

<sup>19</sup> Vidya, at p. 102

<sup>20</sup> Vidya, at p. 122

<sup>21</sup> Vidya, at p. 136

<sup>22</sup> Vidya, at p. 143

when people do not understand this simple truth”.<sup>23</sup> Transgender are very much like other people, made of flesh and bone, have similar blood coursing through their vein and have the same feeling and emotions. So the society should think about their inclusion in all means.

The government should not treat tirunagais as sexual workers. Everyone has the right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Transgender people have the same range of general health needs as the other groups. The cumulative impact of discrimination and relative deprivation is bound to impact negatively on transgender people’s health. Transgenders face systematic discrimination trying to access general health service. This includes being treated with contempt and refused care. Even the “government order (Order No. 377) that treats transgender as disease afflicted sex workers alone”.<sup>24</sup> Though there are many NGO’s to take care of them, though the Tamil Nadu government has given them ration cards, voter id’s, given them seats in elections, accommodated them with proper shelter, the bigger question arises. To what extent are these really fruitful and effective? For the transgender to get out of this suffering the family should act as a great support. Every individual in this society should welcome the third gender. “All I want is the legal approval and recognition that will enable us to walk free in public”.<sup>25</sup> The government should take necessary initiatives to identify them as a human being.

Hunger but for that, no tirunagai would beg on the streets, trains, or market places. They submerge pride and dignity and put their hands out in supplication, seeking alms, only because all windows of opportunity are closed to them. It is our tragedy that the world does not understand this simple truth.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

Transgender women require understanding and support of the government, health care professionals, general public as well as their family members. To conclude, The autobiography of transgender Vidya’s *I am Vidya* is not a mere record of the memories and experience but it is the record of the common plight of several transgender and their plea of not to be treated like a marginalised section of society. This book carves out the entire existence of a person who undergoes physical and mental transformation. The self-understanding of themselves and understanding by others is the major necessitate of the hour. Every life on this universe is created with a purpose just as every drop of rain water come down with the purpose to fall on its blade of grass. The final words of Vidya in this work “I do not ask for heaven. I beg to be spared from living hell. I plead for me and fellow tirunangais”.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Vidya, at p. 135

<sup>24</sup> Vidya, at p. 143

<sup>25</sup> Vidya, at p. 142

<sup>26</sup> Vidya, at p. 137

<sup>27</sup> Vidya, at p. 143