

Queerness - A Quest for Identity, a study on the novel *I am Vidya, A Transgender's Journey* by Living Smile Vidya

JEEVA D¹, DR. R. RANJINI SELVARANI²

¹PhD. Research Scholar, Department of English, Government Arts College, Coimbatore.

²Assistant Professor of English, Government Arts College, Coimbatore.

Abstract - This research delves into the complexities of gender identity, with a particular emphasis on transgender individuals. It critically examines Living Smile Vidya's autobiography, "I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey", as a primary source to understand the personal and societal struggles of the Indian Hijra community. The study highlights the challenges faced by hijras, including marginalization, identity crises, and their ongoing fight for cultural, social, and political recognition. Vidya's journey as a hijra, writer, social worker, and influential figure is explored to shed light on her transformation and the broader movement for acceptance. Additionally, the research investigates how Vidya's personal narrative functions as a call for societal inclusivity, urging recognition of transgender individuals as normative members of society. By weaving together themes of accessibility, marginalization, and identity, this study seeks to contribute to discourse on transgender representation and rights in India. It aims to provide a deeper understanding of the obstacles and triumphs experienced by hijras while advocating for increased social integration and empowerment. Through an analysis of Vidya's life and work, this research underscores the necessity of acknowledging and embracing the diverse identities that constitute the fabric of Indian society.

Key Words: Queer, Identity, Gender Politics, Abuse, Harassment, Trauma.

I.INTRODUCTION

Queer Studies is considered an umbrella term for LGBTQIA+ literature. The origin of queer theory is not easily defined. Although it originated in the educational sphere, cultural studies significantly influence it. Teresa de Lauretis, a critical theorist and academician, has been credited with coining queer theory. In 1991, she utilised the term in her edited special issue of the feminist cultural studies journal 'Differences' entitled "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities". It is the most discussed critical and controversial literary theory of

postcolonial literature and gender studies, exploring the challenging circumstances of the third gender and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

The concept of queerness pertains to an individual's intrinsic sense of gender identity that diverges from established gender norms. While a person's gender expression warrants societal acknowledgement, historical instances have occurred wherein individuals identified as 'Queer' were perceived as deviant, peculiar, immoral, and socially unacceptable. In 16th-century England, homosexual relationships were classified as a criminal offence, punishable by capital punishment.

"A survey of the English laws produced in Latin in 1290, during the reign of Edward I, (9) mentions sodomy, so described because the crime was attributed to the men of Sodom who thereby attracted the wrath of the Lord and the destruction of their city. (10) In another description of the early English criminal laws, written a little later in Norman French, the punishment of burning alive was recorded for 'sorcerers, sorceresses, renegades, sodomists and heretics publicly convicted'. (11) Sodomy was perceived as an offence against God's will, which thereby attracted society's sternest punishments." (Michael Kirby, 2013, 61-82)

Queer theory challenges heteronormative ideology and upholds mismatches between sex, gender, and desire. Simultaneously, it questions common notions about sex and gender. The critical concept of queer theory focuses against heteronormativity that institutionalised heterosexuality as normative while labelling other orientations as abnormal. Queer studies seek intersectional, social-constructionist, and transnational understandings of sexual and sexualised embodiments, desires, identities, communities, and cultures. Queer theory is a term that emerged in the late 1980s for a body

of criticism on issues of gender, sexuality, and subjectivity that came out of gay and lesbian scholarship in such fields as literary criticism, politics, sociology, and history. The queer theory rejects essentialism in favour of social construction; it breaks down binary oppositions such as 'gay' or 'straight'; while it follows those postmodernists who declared the death of the self, it simultaneously attempts to rehabilitate a subjectivity that allows for sexual and political agency.

The most influential work in the field of queer studies was Michel Foucault's '*The History of Sexuality*,' published in the year 1978. In this work he states that, "As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology" (Michel Foucault, 1985, 42). Some of the most significant authors associated with queer theory include Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Michael Warner, and Wayne Koestenbaum.

This study analyses the autobiography of Living Smile Vidya's "*I am Vidya, A Transgender's Journey*". This study examines the lived experiences and challenges faced by Indian transgender individuals, particularly hijras, as portrayed in autobiographical accounts. The text delves into the Hiras family dynamics, social exclusion, and economic problems that frequently lead to engagement in defamed means of earning. The study delves into the identity struggles and marginalisation experienced by the protagonist in the select autobiography, utilising the transgender identity model. The study also exposes how society imposes restrictive gender roles and identities to maintain its core. Due to societal behavioural norms and rigid gender roles transgenders undergo psychological difficulties. This paper also talks about what measures that the transgenders do as in order to express their innate urges like going for surgical interventions, hormonal therapy, or body modifications. Additionally, the study explores the factors that contribute to the marginalisation of hijras and how these contribute to psychological trauma.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has investigated the representation of queer identities in literary works. Research Scholars have examined the emotional behaviors associated with various aspects of identity within the context of queer culture. Researchers have also explored the transgender theories. Scholarly research papers have delved into the examination of identities of queers and especially transgenders through the lens of queer theory. These papers have also analysed the various aspects of queer and transgenders cultures, communities. This study aims to examine the select autobiography of Living Smile Vidya shedding light in the realm of queer theory.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the study is to deal with the following questions with reference to the taken autobiography:

- What factors influence the identity and identity formation of Hijras?
- What are the important factors that make a difference in Hijra's life and their relation to society?
- How Hijras are physically, mentally traumatised and abused in society?

IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is to -

- Attempt to analyse the issues regarding the quest for identity of transgenders in society.
- To study the Hijra's issues of sexual abuse and trauma.
- To analyse the proposed position of Hijras as accepted individuals and as a community.

V. METHODOLOGY

In this research, the researcher attempts to understand various subjects related to the investigation by transgender people. It also focuses on the actions that affect the protagonists and the world's reaction towards them, as the qualitative research method focuses on the meaning, inductive logic of the inquiry, and generalisation. All the experiences experienced by the authors of the taken autobiography is analysed by using qualitative research methods.

VI. VIDYA'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

In Indian culture, it is widely perceived that masculinity is superior and more socially acceptable, whereas femininity is often regarded as inferior and associated with weakness. The most marginalised and stigmatised gender identities are those of queer individuals, with transgender people being a prominent example. The social rejection experienced by these individuals, often from both society at large and their own families, can have significant psychological impacts. The experiences and hardships endured by the protagonist has been comprehensively explored in the autobiography "*I am Vidya, A Transgender's Journey*". The author, Living Smile Vidya, recounts her personal journey and quest for identity in the face of socio-psychological oppression commonly experienced by transgender and other queer individuals.

Vidya's birth name was Saravanan, and he was the sixth child in the family. Having been born into a lower caste, they experienced caste-based discrimination. His father believed that education was the sole means of escaping this oppression and the primary avenue for their economic and social advancement. He firmly held the conviction that obtaining education and government employment were essential for their societal progress. During his childhood, Vidya enjoyed the privileged status of being the favoured male child in the family, exempting him from household responsibilities. His sisters were tasked with caring for him and providing special attention. As he states, "I was a privileged member of the household. Of the three children, I was the one person who didn't have to do any work at home. That was an unwritten law. I enjoyed every kind of concession" (Vidya, 2013, 12). Although he was a diligent student who achieved commendable academic results, his father never permitted him to participate in extracurricular activities. His father's high expectations meant that even minor transgressions resulted in corporal punishment. This treatment engendered a profound resentment towards his father.

Saravanan was subjected to constant mental and physical mistreatment by his father. As he recounts, "Why didn't I have a loving father like other children? The questions come back to haunt me even today..." (Vidya, 2013, 17). Vidya had a strong interest in drama and knew from a young age. Her

dream was to pursue a doctorate in dramatics after earning her MA, but she was unable to follow her desires because her feminine characters were becoming more evident and she was constantly being forced to keep herself hidden from the outside world. She needed to shed her maleness and become a full-fledged lady. Because of the lack of social acceptability, discrimination, and violence from the family and society, almost every transgenders could write a story on them.

The agony of being outcasted by her own family was something that caused deep anguish to her. A transgender was believed to be the one who causes emotional and social damage to the people around and even treated as a criminal by her family. The families of the transgenders really do not understand the turmoil and identity struggles and most families do not accept them as a woman or even a human, when they consider the validations of the society. "When I demanded that they henceforth treat me as a woman, address me as one, interact with me as, with a woman, conflict arises; they refuse to accept me as I am" (Vidya, 2013, 80). She states that the struggles that every transgender has to go through because of validation from society.

This constant conflict leads to the recourse of exhaling from the family in search of a supportive and acceptable community. This conflict of inner self made her search for her identity. She wrote, "I was in search of myself, going beyond my confusion over my gender" (Vidya, 2013, 49). These social norms forced on her made her rebellious and she stubbornly forced her identity on them. She states that "When people cannot accept my gender as I feel it, how can I continue to live with them, even if they are my own people" (Vidya, 2013, 80). Even a grownups who lived with their families and relatives, have also been driven away from their families at the moment they express their desire to become a woman and express their identity. She has brought up the significant issue of Nirvana, the sex change operation. Her ultimate goal was to become a woman by removing the biological components of men. To save money for this operation to attain Nirvana, Vidya eventually becomes a beggar.

Name calling was one another way of marginalisation of the society. Even a child's play like wearing a girl's dress attracts criticism. From family members to people around her, everyone

mocked, called her 'girly' or 'sissy.' She states that her schoolmates would call her, like 'Saravanan the uzhaiappali,' intended to mean that she works as a sex worker. They used to call her from behind, calling her 'Ali', meaning eunuch. Her preference to be with girls for playing games was always ridiculed by people around her. Her schoolmates insulted her for having feminine qualities; they mocked her imitating her voice and body language. She used to get public mockery from everyone around her, sometimes, it became physical. Once she was physically intimidated by one of her schoolmate that he burned her foot with a lighted cigarette, which led to not socialising. She avoided going to weddings or any similar communal occasions.

"In 2008, The National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force formed a ground-breaking research partnership to address this problem, launching the first comprehensive national transgender discrimination study. The data collected brings into clear focus the pervasiveness and overwhelming collective weight of discrimination that transgender and gender non-conforming people endure." (Grant, Jaime M, 2011, 11)

Vidya has earned an M.A. in linguistics, even though she has master's degree under her name she faced continues struggles. She deeply pained by the discrimination forced on her. Even an educated a Hijras like her need to face the same social discrimination, mockery, and harassment from society: "Don't walk around with a swollen head because you went to college, Ok? Whether educated or illiterate, a 'kothi' is a 'kothi', do you understand?" (Vidya, 2013, 72). Due to these circumstances transgenders come out of the comforts and desires of home. That was a hard decision to take but they were not the sole purpose to take that as a decision rather they were made to take one. They constantly face hardship in everything they do and desire, such as finding jobs, homes, and security. They become an easy target of the vultures and forced into sex work.

Vidya talks about how the society pursued her not to take the sex change operation. Her inner urges to establish her sexuality was always troubled by the social norms. She also talks about the psychological trauma that she went through when she wanted to go through sex reassignment surgery. She tells how she

was advised by people not to go for any sex change surgery and remain a male and focus on her education. The society could not understand her inner desires and her inmates keep advising her to remain a male since the society does not acknowledge transgenders as normal. Ashabharti a close friend of her gave her the same advice everyone had given. She stressed the importance of education and warned me about the social disapproval. You are a man remain a man, repeating what everyone had told me so far. (Vidya, 2013, 62-63)

Vidya had to face this Hijra life challenge when she moved to Pune. Being transgender is considered a kind of flaw, disability and even a crime. Comparing to India, in foreign countries transgenders go through facial feminization, and breast transplantation and they can become a complete woman by changing all their degree certificates and legal documents. They even can go back to their previous jobs with a new identity. But in here Nirvana, the sex change operations are carried out without proper government approval. HIV test alone is conducted before the operation without any suitable procedure. Health and Hygiene for transgenders are cared to the least. Discriminations also prevail in the more essential part of human, the medical health. Despite all this mental pressure and pain, Vidya undergoes nirvana only in the hope of changing herself. Even though the physical pain she suffered was horrible, she was peaceful because she was a woman both by heart and body.

After the sex change procedure transgender people have two options, begging or prostitution. Because finding a regular job and returning home every evening was mere a dream. They would be begging from shop to shop, on the train, at traffic lights, and so on to have a livelihood. To avoid causing trouble, they will have to follow all of the rules and regulations established by their community. They would also have to walk through the streets with their heads bowed down. They couldn't afford to buy a house at any cost. On one occasion, she started begging. Vidya says, Of course, I had waited for this moment. It was something I was expected to do; something I now had to do. And yet, even as my brain told my hand to reach out, the hand refused to obey! Tears were welling up in my eyes. At that very instant I remembered my M. A in linguistics, of all things, I stood there, nervous, hesitant (Vidya, 2013,

85). Soon she realized that her M.A. meant nothing in the real world.

As a result she faced all sort of harassments, once she was severely beaten by four or five men on her journey to the Nagercoil on a train. But the painful thing was that no one came to her support or rescues her. Transgender people in always travel in groups to save them from such incidents. Because people see them as a vulnerable and they are physically abused and attacked when they are alone.

In these difficult times she was given shelter and comfort by transgender communities. Aruna, another transgender guided her and helped her find counseling and medical help. She also helped her find a job, but however finding job was not easy due to social unacceptability. They forced into begging and sex work, and having to work in the native place always made it difficult for people like her. So eventually the social norms humiliate her and she takes the decision to move to north. The family accepts her later when she comes back from Pune. She travels around and stays with different friends. Eventually finds a job and she appreciates her boss for providing her the job and being the kind and gentle man. She always dreamt about having a peaceful life, now she has settled down in her life. As a social worker she was aware that there are thousands of other transgender people who require rehabilitation. She wanted to be the advocate to the transgender community. She wanted to increase awareness among the transgender about the rights and opportunities.

Vidya was one of the focused members of the Hijra community who moved and worked towards hijra's welfare. In April 2015, a historic private bill for the welfare of transgender people was passed in Rajya Sabha. The bill promises a welfare board and reservation quotas in education and employment. She wished these welcoming factors and acceptance gives faith and hope to transgenders. She wished transgenders were treated as normal human being like other people in society. She believes that even a small step forward by the society would bring leaping change in the lives of transgenders.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Living Smile Vidya's autobiography presents a firsthand account of the author's

experiences. Vidya elucidates the challenging circumstances and adverse conditions faced by transgender individuals in India. She provides an analysis of exclusion, migration, and the traumatic experiences of the transgender community. The author extensively discusses the violence, inequality, and verbal and physical harassment encountered by transgender individuals. Vidya delineates the significant roles of family and society in the marginalisation of hijra as human beings. She emphasises the importance of acknowledging the unheard and unseen voices of transgender people. The author posits that social acceptance is a crucial factor that can support and elevate the transgender community, potentially providing economic stability which, in turn, may contribute to society.

REFERENCES

- [1] Vidya, Living Smile. *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications India, 2013.
- [2] Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*. Translated by Robert Hurley. London: Penguin Books. 2008.
- [3] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1985.
- [4] Kirby, Michael. "The Sodomy Offence: England's Least Lovely Criminal Law Export?" In *Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in The Commonwealth*, edited by Corinne Lennox and Matthew Waites, 61–82. University of London Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv512st2.6>. 2013.
- [5] Grant, Jaime M., Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman, and Mara Keisling. *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. 2011.