

LONGING FOR BELONGING: TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN LIVING SMILE VIDYA'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Gender studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that combines various disciplines to analyse gender as a social construct and not as a biological factor. It explores gender identity, gender expression and gender representation. The objective of this field is to create an equitable society by challenging the stereotypical gender norms. Gender identity refers to the way how one internally identifies his or her gender that may differ from his or her assigned sex at birth. When one changes his or her biological sex due to his or her gender identity, he or she is known as transgender person. Living Smile Vidya, also known as Smiley, is an Indian actress, assistant director, writer, and an activist for transgender and Dalit rights. The present study aims at an analysis of Living Smile Vidya's autobiography *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* so as to bring out the transgender person's yearning for acceptance in both family and society. In this work, Vidya recounts her struggles and experiences of being a trans-woman. She was biologically male at birth but later she was transformed into a woman due to her gender identity. The society is unaware of the fact that gender identity is personal trait which challenges the stereotypical gender norms. One of the reasons for the transformation is the change that occurs in the chromosome formation. It makes the mind of a person to act against the body. The conflict between the mind and body makes the transgender person to get the duality and it causes lifelong misery. The gender identity is influenced by a combination of genetic, hormonal, environmental, and social factors. Hence, it is hard for the common people to understand and accept transgender persons. Often people consider mistakenly the trans-persons wantonly misbehaving and they fail to understand the nature of them. As a result, the transgender persons struggle to establish their own identity and long for social acceptance.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Gender Identity, Gender Stereotypes, Transgender, Identity, and Social Acceptance.

Gender studies has originated from the field of Women's Studies which has initially focused on women, feminism, and gender. Over the time, it has incorporated Queer Studies, Men's Studies, and Transgender Studies. It gained prominence after 1990. It does not examine gender in isolation but analyses its intersection with other aspects of identity such as race, class, caste, and ethnicity. It challenges the binary division of male and female identities. In this field, gender is seen as a social construct rather than a biological aspect. It questions the traditional

gender norms and aims to create an equitable society by fostering a better understanding of the gender diversity. Gender identity is an individual's internal sense of identifying his or her gender which may vary from his or her biological sex. Those who change their assigned sex due to their gender identity are known as transgender people. Living Smile Vidya, popularly known as Smiley, is an Indian actress, assistant director, and writer who fights for the rights of transgender and Dalit people. The present study aims at an analysis of Living Smile Vidya's autobiography *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* so as to bring out the transgender person's yearning for acceptance in both family and society. Through this work, Smiley gives voice to the entire transgender community.

The writer was named as Saravanan by her parents and later she has changed her name as Living Smile Vidya. Her family comprises of her father, stepmother, and her two elder sisters. She has scored good marks in her schooling. As she grows up, she has started to feel like a woman and her femininity has developed further. She realises that her behaviour is discouraged in the society. When she has moved to a different school for her higher education, she is ridiculed and humiliated by others which affects her studies. After completing her schooling, she has earned a B.Sc. degree in Computer Science. Further, she has obtained M.A. degree in Linguistics from Tamil University in Thanjavur. During her post-graduation, she has spent a lot of her time in the library and in the department of Dramatics as she is an avid reader and a passionate lover of theatre. She also has made several friends notably the well-known artists and writers. After her post-graduation, she has decided to go for a job but her inner urge to become a woman has prevented her to lead a normal life. She feels that she is trapped in a male body. Despite knowing that there are many challenges involved in it, she has made up her mind to undergo the Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS). With the help of NGOs, she has gone to Mumbai for the surgery. Many of the transgender persons save money for the surgery through begging. Hence, in order to earn money, she loses her pride and begs on the streets. With the earnings she has saved, she undergoes the surgery and finally becomes a woman. Later, she goes in search of job but her attempts for getting job end in vain. After much struggles, she gets a job in a private bank where she is treated as a fellow human being regardless of her gender identity. Later, she has become a writer and an activist supporting the transgender persons.

In her autobiography, she narrates her struggle for identity and her yearning for social inclusion. For instance, when she has reached her teenage, her femininity has evolved further in her male body. She has noticed the way how people have started reacting indifferently against her behaviour. Hence she tries not to expose her femininity and maintains it secretly. She questions the stereotypical gender norms by asking, "What's wrong with my preferences? Why should a boy 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) The traditional gender norms are based only on the binary identities of male and female. As a result, the society is not ready to accept any non-binary identities which leads to the rejection of transgender people. She has been denied the right to express herself due to the social stigma. Hence, she dresses up as a woman with the help of her sister's clothes and enjoys being a woman in secrecy.

After learning about her condition, her family members visit her. Her stepmother, sisters, and other relatives have approached her and they have spoken with her except her father. Since she has been the only male child in her family, her father has had great faith on her. He finds hard

to accept “him” as “her.” She tries to convince her father and asks, “Wouldn’t you have accepted me if I had been physically maimed? Why don’t you treat my predicament similarly, Appa?” (79) She breaks down and she cannot bear the fact that her own family is unable to accept her transformation. Though the family members love the transgender persons, they fail to accept them due to the fear of society’s indifference and insult.

When she and her friend Satya go for begging in the shops, Vidya struggles to beg. She loses her self-respect gradually and begs on the streets. She reveals her plight by saying: “For the first fifteen days of my begging career, my extreme diffidence made it difficult for me to put my hand out in supplication-especially for alms. Shame, fear, ego, my education, memories of awards and rewards and God knows what else made me pull back every time I tried” (92). Though she is educated, the society is not prepared to provide her the job opportunities and it rejects her. As a result, she has been pushed to this sad situation in which she has lost her dignity by begging for her survival.

Her sex reassignment surgery is performed under unhygienic conditions. She reprimands the legal and medical systems when she writes:

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. . . . The hospital where my operation took place was low on hygiene. I was not even given a proper bed-just a steel cot with a newspaper spread on it. The surgeon gave me no guarantees, no counselling. The only pre-operation preparation was anaesthesia-that too a local injection. They castrate you while you are watching suture in the next few minutes, clean you with cotton and pack you off to recover. (100)

In the early decade of 21st century, when Vidya underwent the surgery, there was no legal recognition of sex reassignment surgery in India. Hence, those gender-affirming surgeries are performed illegally under unhygienic conditions. It not only reflects her personal experience but also implies the Government’s negligence of the health of transgender people. They have been denied the right to get the proper healthcare and legal recognition.

She has taken up several petty jobs like selling articles on train, which have not succeeded. She has remained jobless for a longer period and she has been dependent on her friends. She struggles to find a job and a place to stay. Since many hostels hesitate to accommodate her due to her gender identity, she moves from one friend’s house to another without a permanent shelter. She questions, “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?” (106) It reveals how she is discriminated in every aspect of her life. The society fails to recognise the transgender persons as fellow human beings and rejects them. She is deprived of the basic amenities like shelter, healthcare, food, dress and so on. The stereotypical gender binaries have made the society to exclude transgender people from providing basic necessities to them.

She longs for acceptance from both family and society. She says: “We need to belong, just as the rest of humanity needs to belong” (131). The fundamental expectation of the transgender

people is to live a peaceful and respectful life but even this basic right is denied to them. They should be given equal opportunities in every sphere of their lives. From the analysis, the readers could understand that social ignorance and rigid gender norms have forced the transgender community to suffer and struggle to establish their identity. The conflict arises when the society fails to understand the fact that a person's gender identity is innate. Living Smile Vidya has adeptly presented the predicaments faced by the transgender community. Through her autobiography, she creates awareness among the readers about their sad plight and the need for their social acceptance.

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