



Triumph over Trauma: Probing into the Traumatic Experiences of Hijras in the Select Trans Narratives

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Abstract

Among the most oppressed minorities, the community of the third gender is far more prone to be marginalised and oppressed than the heterogenous mainstream. A psychological insight into the lives of transgender people and their trauma aids in unfixing the notion of gender, sex and sexual identity by opening up new ethics of sexual difference. It enables the understanding of the complex relationship between body and the psyche, identity construction and also the sexual orientation of the third gender community. Applying trauma theory on the transgender literature explores the various ways in which transgender people confront trauma which leads them into the awareness of their vulnerability and thereby shapes their psyche and identity. This paper explores the traumatic experiences of hijras as represented in the three self-narratives of three transgender personalities in India such as *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* by Living Smile Vidya, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* by Manobi Bandyopadhyay. It deals with how trauma affects the psyche of the hijras and moulds their identity.

Keywords: third gender, trauma, body and psyche, sexual identity, self-narratives

Trauma can be defined as “an event that fragments consciousness . . . traumatic experiences irrevocably damages the psyche” (Balaev 364). Traumatic experiences always affect the human psyche. It has an intense psychological connection. Freud’s works such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) suggest that traumatic experiences can “divide the psyche, influence memory differently than other experiences” (Balaev 363). Trauma usually results from adverse life experiences such as natural disasters, accidents, sexual abuse, and close encounter with violence such as assault, discrimination, poverty, racism, oppression and so on. In short trauma can be defined as “a very severe shock or very upsetting experience which causes psychological damage” (Muhammad 2).

Transgenders become the victim of various forms of violence and prejudices of the society in their day to day life. It is said in an article “Lost in Trans-Lation Interpreting Systems of Trauma for Transgender Clients” that “more than half of transgender populations experience violence at one time in their life” (Richmond et al. 47). Research has found out that gender and sexual minorities are more likely to experience emotional and sexual abuse in childhood and physical and sexual violence in adulthood. The social exclusion, discrimination, sexual abuse, harassment and various other forms of violence felt by the people of the third gender land them in the most severe issue of psychological trauma. The consequences of being so marginalised are very pathetic. It is said that nearly forty percent of transgender people attempted suicide, comparing to 1.6% of the general population (Staggs). There are many reasons that account for this higher number. They always feel guilty over their physical appearance and sexual identity. This leads them to drastic psychological trauma. Society always fails to realise this pain and trauma and always treats them as an oddity.

The autobiographies of transgender people stand as a genuine expression of their thought, experience, and trauma, and it serves as a testimony. Since “autobiography is an art of expression from oneself” (Subapriya 60), the third gender has used this medium to voice out the profound story of their traumatic experiences. Their main subject matters are personal trauma such as feelings of gender dysphoria, social exclusion, discrimination, sexual abuse, harassment, homelessness, absence of physical and emotional care, confusion, and fear, which upset their psychic state. The trans narratives *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey* (2007) by Living Smile Vidya, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) by A. Revathi, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) by Manobi Bandyopadhyay can be considered as the perfect testimony of the intense and universal psychological trauma felt by the whole community. It

provides an account of how transgender people encounter various traumas and how it affects their psyche.

Their journey from a man to woman is filled with challenges and pain. It is an extraordinary and courageous journey to define their identity and set new standards of achievement for the whole community. Along with the bipolar disorder they suffer, they witness how identities define as well as limit a being. Their stories are tales of claiming identity and assertion of the consciousness that has suffered agony of being trapped in a body that does not identify with their psyche. Vidya, Revathi and Manobi have undergone persecution and violence from the society both physically and mentally. The mental and physical harassment from family, school, peer groups, street and among their own transgender community left deep scar in the psyche of these people. From being isolated from family and society, to begging on streets, Vidya has lived through all the indignities forced upon her. Revathi also shares the same experience by running away from the family to join the house of hijras. Similarly, Manobi also encountered various psychic tensions in her transformation from a man to woman.

Right from the beginning of their childhood, the transgender people struggle with the complex psyche of being in between two genders. This distressing feeling of inbetweenness is termed as gender dysphoria. From childhood, a transgender person may have persistent feelings of gender dysphoria which is defined as a “feeling of incongruence between the experienced (psychological) gender and the sex assigned at birth” (Kaltiala-Heino). It continues to the adulthood and becomes the common experience among the transgender people. Born as the sixth and the only male child of the family, Vidya displayed the symptoms of gender dysphoria from childhood. She used to put on clothes of girls, sing and dance. She admired female figures and tried to imitate them as she says, “I masqueraded as the heroines, dressing and walking around like them” (Vidya 19). Masquerading as female figures becomes their only choice to vent out their hidden feelings.

Revathi shares the same feeling when she is a child. She used to go to school with girls and played girl’s game. On holidays she would dance and sing imagining herself to be a girl. Manobi felt the feeling of “metamorphosing into someone else” (Manobi 6) during her childhood. All these feelings led them to a psychological dilemma which moulded their identity in future. Society views them as the regular source of amusement. Revathi remembers the time when she was being caned for not being

brave like a boy and punished by the PT teacher for not playing boy's games. They are deeply hurt when they realize that they are not accepted by most in this world.

There is an urge for the transgender people to establish their sexuality amidst all the troubles because they are unwilling to lead a double life any longer when they realize their actual identity. Even though they are aware of the consequences of their decision, they take bold steps to break free of the maleness in them. Those periods are the most crucial period in their life. It is analysed that, "At points they were confused and troubled with their idea of sexuality, but the femininity in them broke all the doubts and chains and craved to come out. They were even ready to face death in their quest to establish their sexuality" (Dasari and Reddy 363). Vidya who knows that she has to beg in the bus stand despite her educational qualification says, "I was going to be a beggar, but as a woman!" (Vidya 68). They find out that their "biggest aim of life was to establish sexual identity" (Bandyopadhyay 56).

Even after undergoing a series of physical and mental pains, the insults and jeers from society have become the part of every walking minute of the transgenders' life. They have become the source of amusement for the normal people. They are stared at, called by names and abused sexually and mentally. K Subapriya in her study "Unveiling the Crisis of Transgender in India: A Study of Living Smile Vidya's Autobiography" has analysed that "the transgender are scared about the abusive words that they had to receive after the recognition of their gender. Both educated and the uneducated undergo the same trauma" (Subapriya 62). They have to endure teasing, laughter and staring of the people in public places which leave them heartbroken. When Manobi joined as the assistant professor, she was ostracised labeling her as odd by her colleagues. She recollects in her autobiography: "they were naturally stunned by my presence and openly declared war against me, threatening to ruin my career since no hijra had the right to become a professor!" (Bandyopadhyay 92). She finds exceedingly difficult to cope with the hostility of the teachers around. All these traumas leave them in utter despair.

The psychological trauma leads to self inflicted injuries and provokes the tendencies to kill themselves. There has been a growing rate of suicide among the transgender community which is provoked by the harsh world around them. Their family disregards their feelings and refuses to accept. Vidya becomes confused between her sexual identity and the norms accepted by the society, and she comes to the decision of ending her life at a certain point of time. The cruel realities make them live a nonchalant life. Revathi once goes out of her control. She records as "If society scorns us, then we turn

to our families, if we have family. But if family scorn us, who do we turn to? . . . Could not God have created me as a man or a woman? Why did he make me this way? Why is He savouring this spectacle that He created? In a rage, hitting my head against the wall, I began to cry” (Revathi 186).

Some of them commit suicide after the operation as they are unable to cope with their new image. The loneliness and depression also lands them to take pills and drugs.

The Transgender people have the same feeling of a normal person. They desire to get married to a man they love and to lead a happy and healthy life like other women. Even though they find a man of their choice, most of them prove to sexually exploit them. Revathi narrates the story of many hijras who have suffered the cruelties of their husbands in *The Truth about Me*: “whose faces had been scared by a nasty blade, who had poison forced down their throats and those who had been burnt and were still raw from it” (Revathi 95). Some of them are beaten black and blue by their husbands and left alone to suffer. Manobi also encounters the most painful trauma when she is ditched by a man who pretends to love her to avenge her. After a few days of her happy life she realises the devil in him. When their relationship reached the court, she is ordered to prove her sexual identity. She feels like a “sacrificial goat” (Bandyopadhyay 153).

The psychological trauma and the resultant nervous disorder have become the part of a transgender’s life. Hijras carry a lot of pain and hurt but most of them still move on with courage, strong enough to face reality. They rise up from ashes each day and try to stick on to their gender identity in spite of the aversion from the society. They never give up on their life and manage to climb the ladder of success. But this happens only for a few in their community. Society should be ready to create an amiable atmosphere for them to survive, by accepting them as normal. Traumatization can occur when the society neglects to provide the essential physical and emotional care. The society always fails to understand the physical pain of the transgender people. For the emotional well being of the each and every transgender people, their individual identity must be affirmed. They should be given space for identity awareness and performance with the support from the hetero mainstream.

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