



A THEMATIC STUDY OF *I AM VIDYA A TRANSGENDER'S JOURNEY BY LIVING SMILE VIDYA.*

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Abstract

This article a thematic study of *I am Vidya a Transgender's Journey* by Living smile Vidya focuses on the discrimination that facing by the transgender community in the field of education. It tries to bring out the problems and traumas that affects the transgender community as well as analyses the reason behind their struggles in the field of education. Nowadays government passed many laws in favors of the third genders, but it is not effective or active. This article uses interview method to analyze the research problem.

Key Words: Discrimination, Trauma, Transgenders,

1. INTRODUCTION

This work focuses on the problems and sufferings of a transgender during her childhood as well as young age. *I am Vidya A Transgender's journey* is an autobiography of living smile Vidya. It is a successful story of a woman, who has a man's sexuality. *I am Vidya* showcases the identity crisis Vidya faced in the transition period and the attitude of her family and the society before and after. *I am Vidya* is an inspiration to the people from transgender community to fight back to the problems and come out from the traumas.

Living Smile Vidya, or Smiley, is an Indian trans-woman, actor, assistant director, writer, and trans and dalit rights activist, born in 1982, march 22 in Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu. She described her family belongs to the Arunthaiyar caste in Andhra Pradesh, migrating to Chennai several generations ago. Her mother, a Dalit woman, worked as a street cleaner, in addition to domestic work. In 2013 interview, Smiley traces the roots of her public art and activism to her realization that "since all women get oppressed under patriarchy, and trans women and dalit women through the combined might of patriarchy with casteism and transphobia, I

might as well have a loud mouth and be assertive than take everything silently – to be a strong but silent woman was not enough."(Article, Kaveri)

After she moved away from Thanjavur, she begged for a living after gender reassignment surgery, she settled in Tamil Nadu, where she began her career in Bank for two years at a rural bank in Madurai, and got involved with theatre. Smiley has been described as the first full-time trans-theater actress in India, participating in over twenty performances with at least nine directors.

Vidya has acted in several short films, including *Kandal Pookkal* (2001) and *500 & 5*,(2012) and in documentary films *Aghrinaigal* and *Butterfly*(2005). She acted in Leena Manimekalai's 2017 film *Is it Too Much to Ask?*, where she plays a trans-woman seeking housing in Chennai, but facing discrimination; the film, a mix of fiction and documentary, was based in part on her own extensive experiences with housing discrimination. In addition to theater, Smiley has worked as a clown, and described her experience as a dancer as being an important part of her journey as a trans- woman. She has also worked as an Assistant Director in Tamil and Malayalam movies.

In 2013, Smiley was awarded a scholarship by the Charles Wallace India Trust to pursue theatre in the UK. She spent six months of theater training at the London International School of Performing Arts.

In 2014, Smiley co-founded the Panmai theatre troupe in Tamil Nadu, along with fellow trans activists Angel Glady and Gee Imaan Semmalar, inspired in part by cultural groups she saw in London. Panmai's productions included *Colour of Trans 2.0*, which has been performed in India and the United States.

In 2019, she performed her piece, *Scars*, in Switzerland. The piece touches on the mental and physical scars that associated with having her male body blend into her feminine identity.

The Dalit History Month project describes Living Smile Vidya as the first trans-person [in India] to have her chosen gender identity reflected in her passport.

Smiley's autobiography *I Am Vidya* was written in Tamil, and translated into seven languages, including English, Malayalam, Marathi, and Kannada. She was the subject of the award-winning Kannada documentary *Naanu Avanalla...Avalu*, based on her autobiography of the same name.

1.1 Transgender

According to Alina Bradford a science writer "Transgender" is an umbrella term that describes people whose gender identity or expression does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a transgender person may identify as a woman despite having been born with male genitalia.

Sometimes, a person's gender identity doesn't fit neatly into two choices. People who see themselves as being both male and female, neither male nor female or as falling completely outside these categories may

identify as genderqueer, according to the Human Rights Campaign, (HRC) an LGBTQ advocacy organization. (LGBTQ refers to the community of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer or Questioning Individuals) how a person communicates their gender identity through dress, behavior, voice or body characteristics is their gender expression. But in recent studies LGBTQIA is replaced to SOGIESC, Sexual Orientation Gender Identity, Expression and Sex(Universal Periodic Review). A person's gender expression may or may not line up with society's expectations of masculinity or femininity, according to the HRC. The term "gender non-conforming" refers to people whose gender expression is different from conventional expectations of masculinity or femininity. However, not all gender-non-conforming people identify as transgender, and not all transgender people identify as gender non-conforming.

Being transgender is not a mental disorder. It cannot be "cured" with treatment. Transgender people do experience a persistent disconnect between their assigned sex and their internal sense of who they are, according to the HRC. Medical professionals refer to this disconnect as gender dysphoria because it can cause pain and distress in the lives of transgender people.

The American Psychiatric Association in 2012 announced that a new version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) would replace the term "gender identity disorder" with the more neutral term "gender dysphoria."

The 2014 National Transgender Discrimination Survey found that 60 percent of health care providers refuse treatment to transgender people. Additionally, the research found that 64 to 65 percent of the transgender people surveyed suffered physical or sexual violence at work, and 63 to 78 percent suffered physical or sexual violence at school.

Transgender people often face discrimination even when using the bathroom. In a 2016 poll of Americans by CBS and The New York Times, 46 percent of respondents said those who are transgender should use the bathrooms assigned to their birth genders, while 41 percent said such individuals should be able use the bathroom that matches their identities. In May 2016, the U.S. Education and Justice departments stepped in to advise school districts to permit transgender students to use bathrooms and locker rooms that matched the students' gender identities. In response, several states joined in a lawsuit, stating that the federal government had overreached its authority. Because of discrimination and other factors, the suicide rate among transgender people is high. The Suicide Prevention Resource Center reports that more than 83 percent of transgender people had thought about suicide and 54 percent had attempted it. (The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255.)

2. Literature Review

To write this dissertation I seek many articles, journals and interviews published in online. I find out many articles related to this topic and I selected few which is based on the novel I am Vidya and it gave me a better understanding of the book.

The paper “Transgender Literature in India: a Comparative study of *I am Vidya* and *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*” by Twinkle Dasari & G. Chenna Reddy is a comparative study between the first transgender autobiography of india by Living Smile Vidya “I am Vidy” and biography of India’s First Transgender Principal Manobi Bandyopadhyay “A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi”. In this paper the author starts with the history of the transgender.

“Reframing Transgender: The Marginalized Voice Echoed in I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey” by Anila Chandran tries to explain about the third gender identity crisis. In this Anila Chandran says that “The existence of the third gender is as natural as the existence of the binary groups of gender. But in a bipolar society like India only two genders, male and female are considered as normal genders and anything other than these two are seen as abnormal or subhuman.” (Anila,782) This paper about The autobiographical work *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey* by Living Smiling Vidya . It focuses on the trauma that a transgender undergoes.

“Unveiling Crisis of Transgender in India: A Study of a Living Smile Vidya’s Autobiography” by Dr.K.Subapriya focuses on the pathetic state of transgenders in India through the autobiography of an individual Vidya who had a transition from being a man to woman.The study of autobiography I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey raises key issues about the status of transgenders in India, their identity and the struggle for the survival. The reading of this autobiography expands the role of autobiography. It is not a mere record of the memories and the experience but it is a record of the common plight of several transgenders and plea of them as they are treated like a marginalised section of the society.

“Living Smile Vidya’s Traumatic Experiences – an Overview” by S.Ramya, & Dr.B.Cauveri deals with the traumatic effect caused by the society towards gender. It focuses on the struggle and challenges in a transgender life. This paper will deal with the insights shared by Vidya regarding the struggle of the transgenders’ recognition and inclusion.

The case study “Transgressions of Transgender: A Reading of *I Am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey*” by Living Smile Vidya by Sajna Hameed is about transphobic, fearing to reveal her gender identity. Vidya, through this book carves out the entire existence of a person who undergoes physical and mental transformation. Her experience transformed ‘Vidya’ to ‘Living Smile Vidya’ and enables her to resist social discrimination.

3. FAMILY

This chapter explains the problems Vidya has undergone in her family. This is discussing three major problems suffered by Vidya during her childhood as well as young age. This chapter divided into two - Saravana's family and Vidya's family at Pune. In first section Saravana's family, discuss the problems she undergone like education, identity crisis, struggles to overcome the crisis and acceptance crisis; and in next section Vidya's family at Pune, discuss the problems like begging, and harassment by people.

3.1 Saravanan's family

Vidya starts to describe her family in the second chapter called "Appa". When she was born the first time, her parents named her as Saravana. She was the sixth child, born after years of prayers for a boy. They first had a boy, unfortunately baby was stillborn. So her parents had many expectations about her career. In the house they were four girls and one boy. The girls were allotted house hold works and studies were the only duty for Saravana.

Education was one of the major problems she undergone her childhood. Because she was the only one boy child in her house and her Appa was an uneducated, he wanted Vidya to reach a good position. His ambition was to make her a collector in future.

Vidya was not understood her father nature. When she was a child she experienced his double shade. She was the victim of his happy face as well as cruel. Vidya marked two incidents related to this. The incidents are; she was ranked first in her first grade, her father carried her on his shoulder and broadcasted the news to the world; "My son got the first rank" again and again (Vidya, 13). After this incident her father made Vidya's to do third grade exercises. He believe that study hard in the light of a hurricane lamp would one day make her in the district collector. Her childhood was without joys, freedom and games. The only duty was to study. But her bad luck she came second in the six grade exam. This time her father picked her up and thrashed wildly. Her father couldn't understand that second rank is equal to first.

Identity crisis was the second problem she faced. It changed her normal life and introduced a new world to her. When she was eleven or twelve she noticed some changes in herself. She would like to dance to the radio song, wearing Manjus (second eldest sister) Indian skirt. Vidya loved to dance with her sister's costumes. Time passes, her ambition changed Doctor to an actress. She found time to enjoy herself. She had chosen her grandmother's house to enjoy her inner feelings. But one day she came to hear the news that her mother was no more. At the age of eleven she could not understand the pain or separation, but the same day she felt like to dance her mother's favorite song. She put on Manju's skirt, shut the door and started to dance;

"I am the king's daughter,

A fresh new rose.

Will my dreams come true"

But she caught by Fathima Akka, Manju's friend. Fortunately her family did not give more attention to the act she did. But Vidya continued secretly.

Vidya was confused in the beginning and couldn't understand what was happening to her. She would like to behave like a boy but an unknown force was not allowing to doing her. She was became a joker to her friends and relative. During childhood she undergone through many traumatic experience.

At college she realized the reason why she like this. After graduation she joined M.A linguistic. During her masters she started to search NEO's for kothis to explore her identity. But she finds that's the people in those NGO's are cheating their self. When she asked information regarding "sex change" (vidya 60) the NGO's replied "why do you want to stay here permanently? Don't ruin your life by undergoing sex change. With your education you can get a job elsewhere and visit the place to enjoy the company of fellow Kothis."(Vidya 60-61) But she was not ready to cheat herself. She moved to Chennai and from there to Pune to escape from her family and society and to do justice to herself.

Acceptance crisis was the another thing bothered vidya. Her family was not ready to accept vidya as a woman. They were very orthodox and live in a society of hyper reality. But her sister Radha understood Vidya's feelings and accepted as a woman. After Vidya's nirvana she came to meet her family. But the only consolation was that her family knew the truth. Vidya beautifully explained the first meeting with her family after Nirvana

"I wore a beautiful black sari with a broad, silver border. Everytime I wore it, I told my self it would suite my sister better. When I saw Radha at the entrance to the station, my heart nearly stopped and tears filled my eyes. Radha I called softly." (Vidya; 77")

Through the pictures of family we will get a clear picture about her acceptance and identity crisis and how she fought against them.

3.2 Vidya's Family at Pune

Vidya explored her identity after went to Pune. She started a new life and spent her woman hood in Pune. After her post graduation she realized that she cannot stay at home anymore. First she moves to Chennai and from there to Pune with the help of Arunamma. Vidya starts to explain about her life in Pune in the chapter called "My World My People".

The reason behind to move to Pune was the cities like Pune Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi the people see Transgender as avatars of Krishna. It is the treatment in south India that drive transgender to the northern states. In Pune she acquired new knowledge about transgender; firstly to be a transgender she has to register herself in a 'parivar – literary 'family'- is a group'(Vidya-75) secondly ; begging or sex work is the only job they can do.

In the beginning Vidya called herself Preeti. But Satya one of her companion in Pune changed her name. She said

'My name is Sathya... Let's call you Vidya. We were sisters and our name will rhyme. There she chose begging. But she faced several problems in begging. In the first time she accompanied with Satya. She explained the way to beg. But Vidya couldn't go forward "I had butterflies in my stomach. Me, beg at the next shop. I don't know how to handle the situation. Of course I had waited for this moment – it was something I was expected to do. I now had to. And yet even as my brain told my hand to reach out, the hand refused to obey."(Vidya, 84-85)

Vidya finds begging in train is a difficult task. Most of the injustice towards transgender happens in train. Vidya had a bad experience in train. They brutally attacked her and took her money. She was in a trauma that why they are not considered them as human beings. In this book *I am Vidya* she describes an incident she underwent. She says

"Now four or five people surrounded me again; one of them held my arms and interviewed them between the stairs of the ladder to the upper birth; another pulled my hair; a third thug whipped me with the buckled end of his belt, hitting my face. His wild swing found my cheekbone and I started bleeding. It hurt like hell, but I didn't weep. I shouted angrily at them. Get lost you sissies. You impotent dogs, can't you do better than show your bravado to a woman like me. Why don't you take on men your size and display your heroism? Otherwise wear a sari and come and strut before me. " (Vidya, 96)

This chapter explains the problems faced by Vidya during her life journey. She underwent many problems in order to escape from her family and society. This chapter focuses on the problems she faced at Tamil Nadu and Pune.

4. FRIENDSHIP AND SOCIETY

This chapter focuses on how Vidya's identity has been treated by her friends in Tamil Nadu and Pune.

4.1 Friends in Tamil Nadu

'My first friend' is the chapter where Vidya talks about her friends in Tamil Nadu. In this chapter she explains the changes she had from school to college. During her school life she noticed some changes in her. But at young age she realized her real identity. But she hides her identity to escape from her Family, Friends and Society. In the chapter 'My first friend' she says that, "I was a girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy. Inwardly I wanted to be a girl, but I made every possible way to hide my femininity from the outside world. I took particular trouble to remain inconspicuous at college, the unpleasant memories of my bitter experience at school still fresh in my mind." (Vidya, 33)

Vidya's college life was better than school in all ways. Library was the place she used to spend time and she considered that books are the best friends to spend time. To establish her friendship with books Vidya moved one author to another and enlarge her friends' circle. She doesn't like to make friendship with boys. For example, she had shared her room with a boy during a competition, rather friendship, fear and worries dominated in her mind.

To escape from her worries, she joined a drama club and participated in several competitions. One day she went to Dindigul, far from Madurai. At night her friends were round Vidya and starts discussing about women. During the conversation she heard a boy commented on her. He says that "Why do you bring specimens like this guy?" (Vidya, 35), this comment was intolerable to Vidya. It showcases the attitude of her friends towards her. They criticize her gender identity.

After this incident she hesitates to go with her friend and shrink to herself. But fortunately she met a boy called Senthil and she realized her affection towards him. Within a short span of time they become thick friends. This friendship was the turning point in her life. Senthil shared the information about the NGO's where people like them were acceptable and can explore their identity.

4.2 Friends at Pune

"Accept Me" is the chapter where Vidya talks about her friends in Pune. In this chapter Vidya gives a picture of transgender's life in Pune. Firstly she met Nani, head of the community, and sought her blessings. Nani finds some worries on her face, to clear her questions and worries. Nani says :

You can be yourself here, sing and dance to your heart's content, but always be respectful to elders. At the same time you must get on well with the younger people. Go out with your akka, Satya everyday and shop. You must bring back

less than three hundred rupees every day. You do that and well in perform your nirvana in precisely six months. (Vidya,72)

These words give confidence to her. She believes that this is the right place she can explore her identity.

Satya was her first friend and sister in Pune. Before coming to Pune Vidya calls herself Preeti. But Satya replaced Preeti to Vidya and she comments that “ Vidya. I liked it. Short and sweet: a beautiful, meaningful name.” (Vidya, 73)

Vidya started to enjoy her identity. She finds comfort and security in the community and her friends were taking her to wherever they go and she was happy in their circle. She had many friends in Pune.

After she came back from Pune with a fixed identity, some of her friends helps her to finds a job. Nehru, Mu Ra, Murugabhupati, Selven, and Viji were the well-wishers who hunt a job for her. They respect her identity and gave importance to her friendship.

‘Back to Struggle’ is the chapter where she talks about her coming back to Tamil Nadu. But in the second time she had a good friend, Gopi, Kannan, Malaichami, Nehru, Mu Ra, Murugabhupati, Selven, and Viji who stand for her success.

When we look Vidya’s friends in Tamil Nadu and Pune, there are many differences. Vidya starts to enjoy her friend circle in Pune. In her hometown she doesn’t have any friends to share her problems and to find solutions for her trouble.

5. Society

This section focuses on the social injustices on transgenders. It gives an idea about the problems Vidya faced in a Government office while applying for election ID card. Vidya explains these problems in the last chapter titled ‘I want to live—with pride’.

As first step to live with pride, she wanted to change her name from Saravanan to Living Smile Vidya. To get her name changed she approached the Tamil Nadu stationery and printing department. And she mentioned “sex change operation”(Vidya, 133) as a reason for changing her name. But they rejected her application without a reason.

To get her name changed she seeks the help of the court. Unfortunately the harassment starts from there. They arranged a meeting with Vidya. When she entered the room one of the officers comments, “Hey, is this a boy or girl?” (Vidya, 135) The harassment continued for few minutes. But at the end of the questions she replied, “If you see a tirunangai, attack her, insult her, make her cay; chase her away whimpering, screaming- that seemed to be the rule, regardless of the race, religion or creed. My sex, my skin, my colour- all were natural. Why did people never understand?”(Vidya, 135)

She closed her book by using powerful dialogues about the society. She says that:

It is not improbable that a male-domination society cannot tolerate a man waiting to become a woman. Women who have accepted male domination tend to agree with that view. The presence of a tirunangai in a Family is considered a disgrace; they are believed to hamper a family's progress and restrict their normal activities. (Vidya, 137)

It showcases Vidya's view on how society treats third gender. Vidya considered Indian society as a male dominated society. In this society a woman leads her life with many rules and regulations. They never allowed a man or woman to change their identity. It considered as a taboo. In this chapter Vidya talks about the taboos with a harsh tone.

6. CONCLUSION

I am Vidya is an example of a novel which deals with the identity crisis of a transgender. It gives the readers a platform to understand the trauma of a transgender and the real life struggle of a transgender.

This paper focused on the problems Vidya faced in Family, Friends, and Society. First chapter 'Family', discussed three major problems suffered by Vidya during her childhood as well as young age. This chapter is divided in to two. In the first section, Saravana's family, analyses the problems she undergone like education, identity crisis, struggles to overcome the crisis and acceptance crisis, and in 'Vidya's family at Pune' the problems like begging, and harassment by people. In second chapter 'Friendship' and 'Society' focused on how her friends' treated her in Tamil Nadu as well as in Pune and social injustice on transgender.

I am Vidya comes under the field of gender studies. It talks about LGBTQ, gender discrimination and identity crisis of both men and women. *I am Vidya* is an autobiography of a third gender. This paper focused on the problems she faced in family, friends and society and we can compare the problems with other autobiographies by third gender for further research.

This paper explained real life difficulties of transgenders and how they fighting back to the struggle. In this world we have more genders than Man and Woman. For example Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender etc... but transgenders facing many problems like education, acceptance, family etc...

In Kerala two gay couple got married, Nikesh and Sonu and Nivedh and Rahim. They are educated and working in IT sector. They are accepted by the society and family. But the condition of transgenders is different from them. Ranju and Surya are very famous transgenders in Kerala .Ranju is a famous makeup artist and Surya is a famous actress. But to get this position they struggled a lot. The time they identified their

gender, they couldn't complete their education and family and relatives ignored them. Surya and Ranju explained their life story in a T.V show called J,B Junction. Surya is the first transgender got married in India and Ranju is the first celebrity and bridal transgender makeup artist in Kerala. It means nothing will happen if a transgender wish to be in a good position, because they already tasted the bitter taste of life and it will gives you the energy and strength to success in your carrier.

This paper wish to lit the torch on the statement by Chaz Bono an American writer, "There's a gender in your brain and a gender in your body. For 99% of people, those things are alignment. For transgender people, they're mismatched. That's all it is. It is not complicated, it's not neurosis. It's a mix-up. Its birth defects, like a cleft palate".

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