



Review on Embodied Identities and Narrative Resistance: A Study of the Transgender Autobiographies ‘*From Manjunath to Manjamma*’ and ‘*A Small Step in a Long Journey*’

Padmashree G¹ & Mallya Ambika G²

¹ Research Scholar, College of Social Sciences & Humanities, Srinivas University, Mangaluru, India

ORCID-ID: 0009-0006-9259-6789; E-mail: padmashrigvg@gmail.com

² Research Professor, College of Social Sciences & Humanities, Srinivas University, Mangaluru, India

ORCID-ID: 0009-0007-3570-3389; E-mail: ambikagurumallya@sitmng.ac.in

Abstract

The growing visibility of transgender life writing in contemporary Indian literature has created new opportunities for understanding gender identity, embodiment, and resistance from the perspective of lived experience. Transgender autobiographies challenge dominant social narratives by foregrounding voices that have historically been marginalized and excluded from mainstream literary discourse. This article examines ‘*From Manjunath to Manjamma: The Inspiring Life of a Transgender Folk Artist*’ and ‘*A Small Step in a Long Journey*’ (A Memoir by Akkai Padmashali) as significant autobiographical narratives that document the complex relationship between body, identity, and social recognition. Drawing upon theories of gender performativity, body politics, subalternity, and life writing, the study explores how the transgender body becomes a site of negotiation, regulation, and self-assertion. The article argues that autobiographical narration functions as a form of narrative resistance through which transgender individuals reclaim agency, challenge normative gender structures, and construct empowering identities. By comparatively examining the two autobiographies, the study seeks to demonstrate how embodied experiences are transformed into narratives of resilience, visibility, and social change.

Keywords: Transgender Autobiography, Embodiment, Narrative Resistance, Identity, Body Politics, Life Writing, Visibility.

Introduction

The emergence of transgender autobiographies has contributed significantly to contemporary Indian literary studies by creating spaces for marginalized voices and alternative forms of self-representation. For many decades, transgender individuals were largely represented through stereotypes, social prejudices, and external observations. The rise of autobiographical writing by transgender authors has altered this pattern by enabling individuals to narrate their own experiences and participate directly in the construction of knowledge about gender diversity. (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005; Kaur & Nancy, 2024).

Autobiography is more than a record of personal events. It serves as a powerful medium through which individuals negotiate identity, challenge social structures, and articulate experiences that are frequently ignored within dominant cultural narratives. In the context of transgender literature, autobiographical writing becomes an act of reclaiming agency and resisting marginalization. These narratives provide insight into the emotional, social, and political dimensions of transgender lives while simultaneously challenging assumptions regarding gender, sexuality, and embodiment. (Smith & Watson, 2010).

Among contemporary Indian transgender autobiographies, *'From Manjunath to Manjamma'* and *'A Small Step in a Long Journey'* occupy important positions. Both narratives document journeys marked by exclusion, discrimination, self-discovery, and empowerment. Although the autobiographies emerge from different social and cultural contexts, they share a common concern with identity formation and the struggle for recognition within a society structured by rigid gender norms.

The present study examines the relationship between embodiment and narrative resistance in these texts. It investigates how experiences connected to the body are transformed into narratives that challenge social exclusion and facilitate the reconstruction of identity. Through a comparative analysis, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions within transgender studies, life-writing studies, and contemporary Indian literature.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the representation of the transgender body in the selected autobiographies.
- To analyze the relationship between embodiment and identity formation.
- To investigate the role of autobiographical narration in resisting social marginalization.
- To explore the relationship between visibility, self-representation and empowerment.
- To compare the narrative strategies employed in the selected texts.

Review of Literature

Sl.no	Author	Title	Methodology finding and limitation	Research Gap
1	Jince Joseph & N. Gayathri	<i>Tracing Hijra Ethnicity in Indian Transgender Autobiographies: Revisiting the erased Hijra legacy through trans self-memory (2024)</i>	Qualitative theoretical and textual analysis approach. Here Hijra identity is shown as an ethnic and cultural legacy not just gender identity. It is limited to selected autobiographies.	The research is focused on trauma, marginalization but not on collective memory. There is no attention given to self-memory as a tool of resistance.
2	Poornima R	<i>Visibility and social acceptability of Kerala's transgender population: A comparative study of the periods before and after the transgender policy (2021)</i>	Qualitative approach, comparative study includes personal interview. It focuses only on Kerala	Lack of research on transmasculine and their invisibility.
3	Gayatri Reddy	<i>With Respect to Sex (2005)</i>	Depth ethnographic analysis of Hijras of South India. Focus on cultural and social framework.	Primary focuses on transfeminine identities. Trauma is discussed, but not deeply analyzed through trauma theory.
4	Vidyadeepa Rajendran (2023)	<i>Gender Dysphoria: A study of Marginalized voices in A Revathi's 'The truth about me'</i>	Thematic Analysis- Examines gender Dysphoria & Marginalization	Does not compare different transgender identities
5	Ghanshyam Raidas (2025)	<i>Embodied inequalities: Caste Hierarchies in Transgender Autobiographies of Tripathi and Vidya</i>	Comparative Analysis- Demonstrates intersection of caste and transgender identity	Ignores transmasculine experience

6	Gowri Shankari & Manali Karmakar (2023)	<i>Gender Dysphoria, Body Image and Trauma: Hijra's Rewriting of the self in Living Smile Vidya's 'I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey'</i>	Trauma and Body Politics Analysis- Connects body images, trauma	Focuses solely on Living Smile Vidya
7	Indu Swami & Priyanka Raya (2023)	<i>Subversive Performances and Gender Identity in A Revathi's 'The truth about me'</i>	Butlarian Gender performativity framework- Shows how gender identity is socially performed and negotiated	Focuses only on transfeminine narratives
8	Manjeet Rathee (2022)	<i>Exploring Transgender Sexuality and Agency in A Revathi's 'The Truth About Me'</i>	Queer Literary Analysis- Examines sexuality, resistance in Revathi's narratives	Ignores transmasculine experience
9	Rafraf Shakil Ansari (2024)	<i>From Manjunath to Manjamma : Navigating Gender and Identity Through Folk Art</i>	The study explores embodiment and bodily experiences in transgender narratives, focusing on dysphoria and identity struggles.	Does not connect bodily experience. Does not explore embodied identity
10	Mohamed Yaseen & R. David Raja Bose (2025)	<i>From Margins to Movements: An Autobiographical voice of Akkai Padmashali's 'A Small Step in a Long Journey'</i>	Textual Analysis- Highlights visibility, resilience, and activism	Does not explore embodiment, body politics

Research on transgender autobiographies has increasingly emphasized themes of identity formation, marginalization, body politics, and social resistance. Scholars working within gender studies and literary studies have recognized autobiographical narratives as valuable sources for understanding the lived realities of transgender individuals. (Joseph & Gayathri, 2024; Kaur & Nancy, 2024).

Studies informed by gender performativity have demonstrated how transgender narratives challenge conventional understandings of gender as a fixed biological category. Researchers have argued that autobiographical writing reveals the ways in which individuals negotiate socially imposed identities and construct alternative forms of selfhood. (Butler, 1990; Smith & Watson, 2010).

Recent discussions concerning transgender life-writing have increasingly focused on visibility and empowerment. Researchers argue that autobiographical narratives function as counter-discourses that challenge stereotypes and create opportunities for social recognition. Such studies emphasize the political significance of self-representation within marginalized communities. (Poornima, 2021; Joseph & Gayathri, 2024).

Although scholarship on transgender autobiographies has expanded considerably, limited attention has been paid to the interconnected relationship between embodiment and narrative resistance in *'From Manjunath to Manjamma'* and *'A Small Step in a Long Journey.'* Existing studies often focus on identity, activism, or social exclusion separately. Consequently, a comparative examination of these autobiographies through the framework of embodied identity and narrative resistance remains necessary.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is informed by four major theoretical perspectives:

- Gender Performativity Theory examines gender as a socially constructed and repeatedly performed identity. (Butler, 1990).
- Body Politics explores the ways in which social institutions regulate, discipline, and control bodies. (Foucault, 1978).
- Subaltern Theory enables an understanding of how marginalized communities reclaim voice and agency through self-representation. (Spivak, 1988).
- Life-Writing Theory provides insights into the relationship between narrative, memory, and identity construction. (Smith & Watson, 2010).

Together, these frameworks facilitate an understanding of embodiment, identity, and resistance within transgender autobiographies.

Materials and Methods

The present research adopts a qualitative and comparative methodology. The study relies primarily on textual interpretation and thematic analysis to examine the selected autobiographies.

Embodied Identity in the Selected Narratives

Embodied identity constitutes a central theme in both autobiographies. The narratives reveal that the experience of being transgender is closely linked to the ways individuals perceive and negotiate their bodies within society. The authors describe persistent conflicts between their inner sense of self and the gender roles imposed upon them by family, community, and social institutions. (Butler, 1990).

In *'A Small Step in a Long Journey,'* Akkai Padmashali recounts the difficulties of growing up in an environment governed by rigid gender expectations. The autobiography highlights the emotional challenges involved in understanding one's gender identity while confronting prejudice, misunderstanding, and social rejection. Akkai's experiences demonstrate that identity formation is shaped not only by personal realization but also by social interactions and cultural expectations.

Similarly, *'From Manjunath to Manjamma'* narrates Manjamma Jogathi's journey toward self-acceptance and public recognition. The narrative portrays the body as a space where experiences of suffering, exclusion, and transformation intersect. Manjamma's life story illustrates how bodily experiences influence identity construction and contribute to the emergence of a resilient sense of self.

Both autobiographies suggest that identity is dynamic rather than fixed. Identity emerges as a continuous process of negotiation through which transgender individuals redefine themselves in response to changing personal and social circumstances. (Butler, 1990).

Narrative Resistance and the Reclamation of Voice

Narrative resistance constitutes another significant dimension of the selected texts. Historically, transgender individuals have often been represented through stereotypical and marginalizing discourses. By narrating their own experiences, Akkai Padmashali and Manjamma Jogathi resist such representations and assert their right to self-definition. (Spivak, 1988).

The act of autobiographical writing itself becomes an important form of resistance. Through self-narration, the authors challenge dominant assumptions about gender and create alternative narratives grounded in lived experience. (Smith & Watson, 2010).

Akkai Padmashali's autobiography foregrounds social activism as a means of resistance. Through education, advocacy, and public engagement, Akkai transforms personal experiences of discrimination into collective struggles for social justice.

In contrast, Manjamma Jogathi's autobiography emphasizes cultural performance and artistic expression as strategies of resistance. By attaining recognition within folk art traditions, Manjamma challenges societal prejudices and establishes a visible presence within mainstream cultural spaces.

Visibility, Recognition, and Empowerment

Both autobiographies portray the movement from social marginalization to public recognition and empowerment. Visibility functions not merely as social acceptance but also as a political act that challenges the historical erasure of transgender identities. (Poornima, 2021).

The narratives suggest that empowerment is achieved through self-acceptance, community support, and sustained public engagement. By sharing their lived experiences, the authors contribute to broader conversations on gender diversity and social inclusion.

Results and Discussion

Embodiment and Identity Formation

The selected autobiographies demonstrate that the body occupies a central position in the formation of transgender identity. Experiences associated with bodily difference frequently become the starting point for self-reflection and identity negotiation. The narratives reveal how personal understandings of gender often conflict with social expectations, creating tensions that shape the authors' experiences of selfhood.

The body is not presented merely as a biological entity but as a social and cultural construct through which identity is interpreted and regulated. Both autobiographies illustrate the complex process through which transgender individuals come to recognize, accept, and affirm their identities despite social opposition. (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978).

The Body as a Site of Regulation

The narratives reveal that gendered bodies are subjected to various forms of social regulation. Family structures, educational institutions, and community expectations frequently reinforce normative gender roles and discourage expressions of gender diversity. Through these experiences, the autobiographies demonstrate how power operates through everyday practices of surveillance and discipline. (Foucault, 1978).

The body becomes a contested space where personal identity encounters social control. Such experiences illustrate the broader mechanisms through which societies maintain gender norms and marginalize those who challenge them.

Trauma and Marginalization

A recurring theme in both autobiographies is the experience of trauma resulting from exclusion, discrimination, and social rejection. The narratives document emotional suffering, isolation, and struggles for acceptance. These experiences highlight the structural barriers faced by transgender individuals within various social institutions. (Caruth, 1996).

At the same time, the autobiographies move beyond narratives of victimhood. Rather than remaining confined within experiences of suffering, the authors transform trauma into a source of strength and resilience. Their narratives demonstrate the possibility of self-affirmation despite adversity.

Narrative Resistance

One of the most significant aspects of the selected autobiographies is their function as acts of resistance. Through life writing, the authors challenge dominant narratives that have historically defined transgender identities through stereotypes and misconceptions. Autobiographical narration enables them to reclaim authority over their own stories and represent themselves on their own terms. (Smith & Watson, 2010; Spivak, 1988).

Narrative resistance is evident in the authors' efforts to articulate experiences that have often remained invisible within mainstream discourse. By documenting their journeys, they create alternative narratives that contest exclusion and demand recognition.

Visibility and Empowerment

The autobiographies illustrate the importance of visibility in the process of empowerment. Recognition within public, cultural, and social spaces contributes to the authors' journeys toward self-affirmation and agency. Visibility functions not merely as public acknowledgment but also as a form of resistance against erasure.

The narratives suggest that empowerment emerges through a combination of self-acceptance, community support, and public engagement. Consequently, visibility becomes an important dimension of identity formation and social transformation.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative reading of the two autobiographies reveals both shared experiences and distinctive approaches to resistance. Both authors confront social exclusion, negotiate identity, and challenge dominant gender norms. However, the specific strategies through which they achieve recognition and empowerment differ according to their personal histories and social contexts.

Despite these differences, the autobiographies collectively demonstrate the transformative potential of life writing. Through narrative, the authors reconstruct identities that transcend social marginalization and create new possibilities for belonging and recognition.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that *'From Manjunath to Manjamma'* and *'A Small Step in a Long Journey'* are significant contributions to contemporary Indian transgender literature. Both autobiographies reveal the body as a crucial site where questions of identity, power, and social regulation converge. Through autobiographical narration, experiences of exclusion and discrimination are transformed into narratives of resilience, visibility, and empowerment.

The analysis further highlights the role of narrative resistance in challenging dominant gender ideologies and reclaiming marginalized voices. By documenting their lived experiences, the authors not only construct personal identities but also contribute to broader social conversations regarding gender diversity and human dignity.

The study concludes that transgender autobiographies function simultaneously as personal testimonies, cultural interventions, and political acts of self-representation. Future research may extend this discussion by incorporating detailed textual evidence, reader-response studies, interviews, and comparative analyses involving additional transgender autobiographies from contemporary India.

REFERENCE

Primary sources

- Padmashali. Akkai.(2022), *A Small Step In A Long Journey*, Zubaan Publication
- Jogati Manjamma (2023), *From Manjunath to Manjamma: The Inspiring Life of a Transgender*, Harper Collins India

Secondary sources:

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Volume 1*. Pantheon Books.
- Ghanshyam Raidas (2025) *Embodied inequalities: Caste Hierarchies in Transgender Autobiographies of Tripathi and Vidya*, Bodhi International Journal of Research in Humanities Arts and Science 10(1):72-79
- Gowri Shankari & Manali Karmakar (2022), *Gender Dysphoria, Body Image and Trauma: Hijra's Rewriting of the Self in Living Smile Vidya's I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol 9(2), 43-47, July-December 2022
- Indu Swami & Priyanka Raya(2023)*Subversive performances and gender identity in a.Revathi's the truth about me: a hijra life story*, Shodhkosh: Journal of visual and performing art
- Joseph, J., & Gayathri, N. (2024). *Tracing hijra ethnicity in Indian transgender autobiographies: Revisiting the erased hijra legacy through trans-self-memory*. World Journal of English Language, 14.
- Kaur, M., & Nancy. (2024). *Narrowing the gender divide: A study of selected trans-autobiographies*. International Journal of Novel Research and Development, 9(1).
- Mohamed Yaseen & R. David Raja Bose (2025) *From Margins to Movements: An Autobiographical Voice of 1 Akkai Padmashali's A Small Step in a Long Journey*, Bodhi International Journal of Research in Humanities Arts and Science 10(S1-Oct):117-119
- Nanda, S. (1999). *Neither man nor woman: The hijras of India*. Wadsworth.
- Poornima, R. (2021). *Visibility and social acceptability of Kerala's transgender population*. Journal of Polity and Society.
- Reddy, G. (2005). *With respect to sex: Negotiating hijra identity in South India*. University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, S., & Watson, J. (2010). *Reading autobiography: A guide for interpreting life narratives (2nd ed.)*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Rafraf Shakil Ansari (2024), *From Manjunath to Manjamma: Navigating Gender and Identity Through Folk Art*. *Space Identity and Literature* (pp.94-101) Publisher: Authorspress
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). *Can the subaltern speak?* In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Vijayadeepa Rajendran (2023), *Gender Dysphoria: A Study Of Marginalized Voices In Revathi's The Truth About Me -A Hijra Life Story*,
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393711282_GENDER_DYSPHORIA_A_STUDY_OF_MARGINALIZED_VOICES_IN_REVATHI'S_THE_TRUTH_ABOUT_ME_-_A_HIJRA_LIFE_STORY