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## “Being” to “Becoming” in Vidya’s *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey*

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### **Abstract:**

This article tries to capture the various issues that transgender people face in their lives. Being one sex in the beginning and later becoming another sex in due course of life is the fate of many transgender people. But in the process of transformation, the trans people face mental, emotional, and psychical turmoil. People with Gender Identity Disorder (GID), transsexuals, cross-dressers, and the so called genderqueer, are considered to be transgender. Gender Identity Disorder (GID) or transsexualism is defined by strong, persistent feelings of identification with the opposite gender and discomfort with one’s own assigned sex. The plight of Vidya from ‘being’ to ‘becoming’; from ‘Saravana’ to ‘Vidya’; from ‘emotional marginalization’ to ‘established identity’ portrayed in *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey* is a harrowing tragic war against the oddities of assigned sex identity.

**Keywords:** Gender Identity Disorder, transsexualism, emotional marginalization and harrowing tragic war.

### **Introduction:**

This article tries to capture the various issues that transgender people face in their lives. It also brings out the pathetic plight of a transgender called Vidya. ‘How much Vidya struggles to keep odd ends meet’ is the main focus of her autobiography, *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey*. As a transgender Vidya was born as a boy and named as Saravanan but his inner voice always reminds him that she is a girl. Being one sex in the beginning and later becoming another sex in due course of life is the fate of many transgender people. But in the process of transformation, the trans people face mental, emotional, and psychical turmoil. Hence this article focuses on the life of Saravanan @ Vidya who declares her identity as transgender-woman and

now through her own blog creates awareness about the pathetic life conditions of trans people by writing poems and articles.

**Discussion:**

The prefix ‘trans’ means ‘beyond’, ‘across’, or ‘over’. However, ‘transgender’ does not simply connote a gender that crosses boundaries. It is a broad term, particularly in the lesbian and gay community, to describe individuals whose identity or experience does not fit within the expectations of their birth sex. People with Gender Identity Disorder (GID), transsexuals, cross-dressers, and the so called genderqueer, are considered to be transgender. Performers such as drag queens and drag kings often labeled as such, but most do not want to live as the opposite sex and most do believe that they have been born in the wrong body. In fact, for the same reason, identifying as homosexual and have same-sex attractions is distinct from being transgender. Furthermore, a person who is born with both male and female biological characteristics is considered to be intersex.

Gender Identity Disorder (GID) or transsexualism is defined by strong, persistent feelings of identification with the opposite gender and discomfort with one’s own assigned sex. People with GID desire to live as members of the opposite sex and often dress and use mannerisms associated with the other gender. For instance, a person identified as a boy may feel and act like a girl. This is distinct from homosexuality in that homosexuals nearly always identify with their apparent sex or gender. Identity issues may manifests in a variety of different ways. For example, some people with normal genitals and secondary sex characteristics of one gender privately identify more with the other gender. Some may cross-dress, and some may actually seek sex-change surgery. Some are born with ambiguous genitalia which can raise identity issues. An article in *Psychology Today* elaborates this identity disorder thus:

A person who identifies with the opposite sex and is uncomfortable with his or her assigned sex suffers from gender identity disorder (GID) or transsexualism. Along with the desire to live as a person of the opposite sex, the person may have mannerisms and may dress as the other gender. This is different from homosexuality, in which the person is almost always comfortable with his or her own sex or gender. People with GID are preoccupied with their gender distress and also may suffer from emotional problems. Children may have symptoms of depression or anxiety, adolescent are at risk of depression and suicide and adults may show signs of depression and anxiety. (34)

Vidya is a transgender and she belongs to Tamil Nadu, India. She was born on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1982. The plight of Vidya from ‘being’ to ‘becoming’; from ‘Saravana’ to ‘Vidya’; from ‘emotional marginalization’ to ‘established identity’ is a harrowing tragic war against the oddities of assigned sex identity. The autobiography of Vidya *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey* was published by Rupa Publication, New Delhi in 2013. It is a bildungsroman story which picturizes the life of Saravanan @ Vidya from his/ her childhood to adulthood. She hails from a poor dalit family. Her native place is Puttur next to Trichy in Tamil Nadu. The pathetic plight of Vidya, from her birth identity to her felt identity as transgender, has much relevance in the present social scenario:

Identities are not mere markers we are known by; they define as well as limit us. They can both confine or release a consciousness. *I am Vidya* is the story of one such journey – that of a declaration, of the claiming of an identity. It is an assertion of a consciousness that has suffered the agony of being trapped in a mould it does not belong to, a body it does not identify with. (Book cover)

The life of Vidya gives a glimpse of how GID people suffer from identity crisis. Their birth identity is one and their claimed identity is another gender and this gives a lot of mental, psychological, familial and social pressure to them. Vidya also like other transgender (tirunangai) faces identity crisis. But her strong will power and mental determination help her overcome GID and she establishes herself as an educated employed transgender-woman. To attain this established state she has to go through many ordeals in home and also in the society.

Vidya’s father is Ramaswami and works as a municipal worker of the lowest rung; a sweeper. Her mother, Veeramma is a typical Indian house wife who submitted to her husband’s tyrannical ways. She has two elder sisters namely Radha and Manju. She has a step sister, Prabha also. Being the only male member of the family, Saravanan @ Vidya receives a very special treatment in the family. His father never allows him to do any household work. Instead he asks Saravanan to study well. The father dreams for Saravanan to become an IAS officer. Saravanan’s father gets satisfied when Saravanan stands first in the class. His father never bothers about Saravanan’s sister’s education since they are girls. Saravanan loses his mother in an accident when he was eleven. By the time, the growing desire of becoming a girl flames up in Saravanan’s mind. He does not like his boy’s attire and his genital part. So without the knowledge other family members, Saravanan puts on Radha’s dresses and imagines himself as

the heroine of Tamil movies and dances like them to the tune of cinema music. This gives a strange satisfaction in him. However he does not like his male genital part and always feels that he is in another body which does not suit to his femininity. Moreover he wants others to address him as ‘dee’ (hey girl) and not as ‘da’ (hey boy).

Even though the birth gender states that Saravanan is a ‘male’ yet his attitude, mannerism and behavior indirectly indicate that he behaves like a girl. Still he has not held enough courage to inform the family especially his father about his condition. So he continues his education and befriends one such transgender, Senthil and through him he comes to know about many such transgender people who live under the hub or “parivar” such as “Bhendi Bazaar, Punekar and Lalkar” (*Vidya*75). Knowing about NGOs, Saravanan now is very stubborn to leave his family in order to have “nirvana”, to get into the felt gender. But Senthil advises him saying,

‘Don’t ever give up your studies,’ he advised me. ‘Go to Koovangam once a year and take part in the festivities there as a woman to your heart’s content. Spend time periodically with the NGO.... Find expression for you desires in privacy. That will be good for you and your family. But if you are adamant about undergoing sex change, you will end up a beggar at these very same bus stands. Can you do it? You are well educated. You’ll never be able to do it. (*Vidya* 56).

However, the growing interest of undergoing sex reassignment surgery pressurizes Saravanan to leave his family and to give up his dream of pursuing Ph.D. He informs Mu. Ra., his professor and also the director of theatre art about his GID and then he goes to Chennai with the help of Senthil and other friends from the theatre group. There he meets an NGO and through that NGO he comes in contact with the NGO called THAA. The director of the THAA NGO, Ashabharati also like Senthil advises Saravanan to live a double life. But Saravanan wants to be true to his ‘self’ so he is very adamant in his decision of undertaking sex reassignment surgery. Then things happen very fast in his life. First he is given a new identity by changing his name as “Vidya”. The very girl name sounds good and sweet to him. Thereafter he is addressed as ‘dee’ and she feels that as if ‘the karma of her birth’ has attained its fulfillment.

Vidya registers herself in “Bhendi Bazaar” NGO. Now openly she wears women’s costumes and make-over. She feels much elated and happy for she is leading a life that she has been aching for since her childhood. Vidya needs to beg on the streets in order to raise money for the sex reassignment surgery. In the beginning she hesitates to do begging but the purpose, sex

reassignment surgery, induces her to do the job of begging. Then she is sent to Pune and there also she involves herself in begging. The crude operation of sex reassignment surgery of Vidya takes place in a cheap hospital. Most of the transgender people who undergo sex reassignment surgery involve themselves in prostitution. But Vidya is determined not to involve herself in prostitution. So she once again starts begging in the trains.

Vidya even tries to do a small errand business, selling cheap household articles, in the train. But it does not give her any fruitful result. So Vidya's psyche is much wounded. She then escapes from the NGO in Pune and goes to Chennai. There with the help of his college friends and theatre group, she searches for a decent job. But everywhere for her transgender position she is denied the chance of getting job. Finally she gets a job in a voluntary organization engaged in serving destitute people:

Vidya has lived through all the indignities forced upon a tirunangai, a transgender, by a society which divides and defines itself as men and women in terms of biology alone – from being spurned by her family, to begging on the streets as a social outcast; from donning a woman's clothes, to undergoing excruciating surgery to lose her 'manhood'; from suffering emotional and physical harassment, to arriving at her true identity. (Book cover)

There are many important aspects of transgender life that have come alive in Vidya's *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*. Family is the first space where transgender has to face the contempt of family members if the transgender announces that he/she is suffering from gender identity disorder. The family members especially father and mother do not understand the GID in transgender because the society is a strict gender based society where only two genders namely male and female alone are natural. Often the family members are afraid of the society. In fact, if the society comes to know about the GID person in the family, the other members of the family will be ostracized from the community. Secondly the family members may think that like any other psychological problem, GID can also be cured. But in reality 'becoming a transgender' is not curable. In Vidya's case also the family members especially her father does not accept her changed gender identity. Therefore, Vidya faced a great deal of hardship in life like other trans people. Though Vidya is educated yet she is like other transgender people involves herself in begging due to the family's indifference shown on her for she is strongly influenced by GID:

My situation was no different from that of thousands of other tirunangais. Just like them, I could not live in my own home, with my own family, as I wanted to. How would society view such an arrangement? Good question. What is society? Isn’t my society my father, sisters, Chithi and Mama? After all, didn’t I live with all of them until I completed my post graduate studies? Even then, I regarded myself as a girl – a woman – though in their eyes I was male.... 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 80)

Begging is not an easy business for the trans people. They bait their life, dignity, and even education in order to lead a life as other gender. Vidya’s life picturesquely brings out the pathos that she has faced while she was begging in shops and trains. Vidya herself explains how she felt for the first time when she was assigned to do begging:

For the first fifteen days of my begging career, my extreme difference 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. But soon enough I got over all that and managed to shed my feelings of guilt about begging. I started clapping and demanding alms like the average tirunangai. (Vidya 92)

Transgender people not only face humiliation in the hands of passers-by and shop owners but also experience harassment such as beating, teasing, threatening and even sexual assaults. Once Vidya was insulted by a woman who said, “Aren’t you ashamed to beg? Aren’t you able bodied” (94). The words of the lady infuriate Vidya and so in anger Vidya retaliated, “Do you want me to die?” (94), these words of Vidya have density of meaning in them. Like other gender, a transgender is also a human being. If educational and employment opportunities are denied to them where do they go and what do they do for their livelihood. Vidya being an educated is fit to get good employment opportunity. Even if the job is offered to her, will she be spared from sexual harassment or assaults? There is no proper legal procedure for ensuring trans people’s safe living. Suffering from gender identity disorder and being a poor dalit, how can Vidya lead a decent life. Committing suicide is a sin ethically and an offence legally. Hence Vidya’s words carry high voltage of meaning in them. Certainly it is the society, it is the authority, it is the family of trans people and it is the job providers have to be blamed. Vidya like transgenders are

sinned due to the social code based on gender disparity. Hence the family, government and the society should come forward to change the poor predicament of Vidya like trans people.

Vidya's life also picturizes the ordeal faced by the transgender people who make public appearance. Yet they follow strict rules and regulation in their society or NGO. The younger transgenders should give due respect to the elder transgenders. They relate themselves as kith and kin even though they have come from different social background, different families and so on. This kind of bond among them is created since they have snatched their roots from their families. Even they learn the art of clapping in a different way or style which always helps them earn money and sometimes rescues them from any dangerous situations such as assault or rape:

Tirunangai have this highly effective language among themselves. Clapping their hands together is their Morse code. The sharp sound we make clapping our hands can instantly draw the attention of our fellow tirunangai, wherever we are, however, crowded the street. Especially in times of need – as in a dispute or quarrel – this mode of communication leads us great moral support. (*Vidya 85*)

Nirvana is a great atonement in the life of a transgender who identifies himself/ herself fully as man/ woman but in a male/ female body. But cross-dressers simply relishes the moment if they are in other gender's costume. Vidya who is a cross-dresser and at the same time who feels that she has been trapped in a man's body wants to attain the state of Nirvana or sex reassignment surgery. Many transgender people do not know what to do after the reassignment surgery and in India like country they have only two choices before them – they can either choose begging or prostitution. However, Nirvana is a very dangerous process in the life of trans people due to the pain of surgery associated with it. Yet Vidya who strongly feels that she is in a foreign body and wants to risk her life.

In India many transgender people are in poor economic condition and so they choose hospitals which do this 'Nirvana' collecting less fee. So the risk of survival after the surgery is associated with the health position of the individuals. But in western countries, the trans people have a good medical facility to have such surgery. Vidya herself explains Nirvana in her autobiography:

Nirvana was an operation – the operation that would slash and remove the sin of my birth as a male.... My survival after the surgery was a question mark: I was told I had a fifty-fifty chance.... Sure enough about wanting to discard my male identity, I was willing to



die in the process.... In countries where sex change operations are legal, many tests are performed on the person undergoing the procedure – medical investigative, environmental and RLT (real life testing). The tests are done over a period of six to eighteen months, and ultimately a psychiatrist and gynaecologist have to recommend sex reassignment surgery (SRS).... SRS can incorporate facial feminization, speech therapy, breast augmentation and the insertion of a plastic vagina. You can acquire sweet voice of a normal woman. Your new name and sex change are duly marked in all the identity documentations you will ever need, including your degree certificates, if you should have any. Thus, one is enabled to seek proper employment or return to an earlier job. (*Vidya* 98-99)

People have no empathy to understand the inner turmoil of trans people and at the same time they are not ready to help them in the pursuit of their education or employment. Men give sexual harassment to tirunangai whereas women are afraid of them and they treat trans people with contempt. Women never allow tirunangai to enter into their woman’s world. Hence trans people demand a separate identity for them. They want themselves to be called ‘Transgenders’. They demand separate schools and colleges, separate public toilets, reservation in employment, rights to hold driving license, ration card, id card and even they asks for their marriage right among them or with the opposite sex:

Groups that campaign for the rights of transgender, transvestite, transsexual, third gender and other gender variant peoples have been in existence since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and have multiplied greatly in number since the 1990s. They may use a civil rights or minority rights political discourse, or may instead aim to change the institution of gender. Their goals are varied, but include legal change, such as recognition in one’s chosen sex on official documents; challenging discrimination and social exclusion in institutions such as prisons, housing, employment, health and education; and combating violence against transgender people. (John 47)

Vidya’s lot is also like other transgender ends in begging after her sex reassignment surgery. She is very particular that she should not end up her life in prostitution. As an educated transgender, she decides to run an errand of selling petty household articles in the trains to overcome humiliations, bullying or sexual harassment. But her business venture does not yield her good harvest. People who took pity at her while she was begging in the trains, now ridicule at

her and make ill comments about her business venture. Even the good-hearted station master discourages her. Her education, her intelligence and will power do not fetch her any bright future. Unless the society changes its attitudes for transgenders, the trans people do not have avenues to live a decent life.

The indomitable spirit, the determination to establish her identity and the desire to lead a decent life make Vidya take a drastic decision in life. She leaves her ‘parivar’ without informing the leader of the group, because escaping is common in “parivar – literally family” (Vidya 75). She goes to Chennai and meets her college friends and the theatre group. Meanwhile, her friend informs her that a professor from Madurai has accepted her to guide her in her Ph.D. pursuit. So she goes to Madurai but instead of meeting the professor, she applies jobs after job. In fact, the unconquered spirit of Vidya shown during the interview has fetched her a decent job. A good hearted manager of a private company offers her employment knowing that she is a transgender but a talented guy.

Now she lives in Madurai. As a creative artist, she could not resist herself from creative writing. As advised by Balabharati, a kind hearted fellow and a social activist, she has created her own blog and writes whatever that helps transpeople to get their due privilege in the society. She also participates in demonstrations organized by NGOs for the betterment of transgenders. Her “Tamil Kavithaigal” which have the theme of the pathetic plight of transgenders, have been translated into other languages such as English and French. Her saga from ‘being’ a man into ‘becoming’ a transgender-woman though contains all painful incidents, yet establishment of her identity as an educated and employed trans-woman is an eye opener to many such transgenders who suffer from double identity. The requests that she has made to the authority or the government in her autobiography deserve due respect, recognition and approval.

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