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## **Gender Identity: Analysis of Marginalized Identity of Transgender in Manobi Bandyopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi***

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### **Abstract:**

Gender identity is an individual's inner sense of their own gender of being male, female, something in between or any other gender. It is their personal experience of their gender which either correlates with their assigned sex at birth or differs from it completely. The third gender i.e., transgender comes into existence after birth and by the time they gain a consciousness of 'self' or at the time of birth when the baby is born with ambiguous genitals. In India, the Third Gender or Transgender or hijras are a visible community and directly or indirectly one might have read and heard mythologies, beliefs and ideas related to the hijras and hijra community. They are also an important group of queer movements which are by and for the people who have been marginalized, oppressed and stigmatized because of their gender or sexual preferences. However, they are looked down with ridicule and disrespect and are marginalized. The present paper is an attempt to study the ways in which cultural representations like literature, and in the present case, the biography in particular, undermine and reinforce the economic, social, political and psychological suppression and oppression of transgenders in society. *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* by Manobi Bandyopadhyay is a candid biography of India's First Transgender Principal written by Journalist Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey.

**Keywords:** Transgenders, Gender Identity, Gender Inequality, Queer theory, marginalization.

### **Introduction:**

Manobi Bandyopadhyay was born on 23 September 1964 as Somnath Bandyopadhyay. Manobi is a transgender. She became India's first third-gender (transgender) principal at Krishnanagar Women's College in Naida district in West Bengal on 9 June 2015. In 1995 she started the first Bengali transgender magazine, *Abomanob* meaning subhuman. There are two books to her credit. The first one *Ontohin Ontorin Prositovortika (Endless Bondage)* which is a best seller. The other one is *Third Gender in Bengali Literature*. The work discussed in this

Paper *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* is biography of Manobi Bandyopadhyay written by Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey who is a Journalist. *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* is called as a candid biography of India's First Transgender Principal by the writers as Manobi tells her story of transformation from a man into a woman with unflinching honesty and deep understanding. It depicts the birth and life of Somanath and his journey to become Manobi and the challenges she faced throughout the journey and how she continued to pursue academics despite many upheavals.

### **Biography:**

Biographies detail the life of a major figure in society, politics, entertainment or various other genres of life. To put simply Biography is a bio that gives an account or detailed description about the life of a person. It is a narrative type of writing where one writes about the life and the personality of a significant figure who actually lived and was not just fiction. According to Encyclopedia Britannica

Biography is a narrative genre and is a form of literature commonly considered nonfictional, the subject of which is the life of an individual. One of the oldest forms of literary expression, it seeks to recreate in words the life of a human-being – as understood from the historical or personal perspective of the author – by drawing upon all available evidence, including that retained in memory as well as written, oral and pictorial material (Kendall 1)

When considered the above definitions the present biography is different as the information in the book is directly given by the person whose life is being discussed, to the writer or biographer. Hence this biography is a kind of its own when compared to the mainstream biographies in general.

### **Gender Identity:**

Gender identity is generally considered as the sense of people as male or female and is related to people's existence as male or female. However, it rarely acknowledges the existence of third gender i.e, transgender. Society in general acknowledges only two polarities or sexes based on the genitalia at the time of birth and they are male and female though the process of sex assignment. But, there are some exemptions in which the infants cannot be easily identified as male or female in live births. In such cases sex chromosomes, external genitalia and internal reproductive system do not confirm to the males and females and they are called as intersexuals. Such intersexuals are considered as third gender where they do not belong to either gender.

Social construction of gender as well as the sexual difference are very much part of the process of Gender Identity. According to Butler, gender identity is simply: "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33)

Thus, when observed, gender identity is just a ‘set of repeated acts’ which appear to be real and natural over a period of time. In all societies, some individuals do not identify with some or all of the aspects of gender that are assigned to their biological sex and such people are called as gender queer or transgender. For such people gender identity is a crisis where their assigned sex categorizes them to one gender and their psychological state categorizes them to the opposite gender and when such clash happens they start behaving oddly when compared with the so called ‘natural behavior’. Such people are called transgenders and are severely criticized and marginalized by the societies.

### **Manobi’s struggle for identity**

*A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* is an extraordinary and courageous journey of a transgendered person to define her identity and set new standards of achievement. The theme of the entire biography is Manobi’s struggle for her gender identity. It is her struggle and fight with the society, with her family and with herself to establish her own identity. In a bipolar society like India where only two genders i.e., male and female are considered as normal genders and anything other than these two are seen as abnormal or queer it is extremely difficult and hard for a third gender person to achieve such an academic excellence and Manobi proves it possible with a bright smile on her lips. The biography depicts all the events of her life without any prejudice and tells the reader how difficult it is to be a third gender.

According to psychoanalyst Lacan a child acquires identity as a being in “the mirror stage” (Barry 109) which is between six and eighteen months of a child. Every human being goes through this stage in which a child begins to conceive itself as a unified being. It is said that the child starts to acquire knowledge of gender identity around three or four years of age and may not exactly correlate with the birth sex. When a child’s gender identity does not match with their birth sex they turn out to be transgenders. Manobi calls this phase as ‘metamorphosis’ (Bandyopadhyay 6) – metamorphosis from boy to girl. She says her metamorphosis started when she was around six or seven years old and it perhaps started with her love for her sister’s frocks. She used to take every opportunity to wear them and this was first considered by her family as a childish act but when she started putting kohl and lipstick from her mother’s make up kit they started to realize that there was an aberration. They tried hard to counsel her but were futile. Manobi describes her state of mind as follows: “. . . the fact that I was developing a distaste for my genitals. I just couldn’t accept my balls and my penis. I wanted to have my sister’s genitals. It was not that I did not like the male organ. I actually loved it, but in others.” (Bandyopadhyay 8)

However, there were many times in her life where Manobi struggled to understand her gender identity. She underwent great stress at times unable to understand what was happening to her. She used to question her inner feelings and thoughts.

I was very confused; my life seemed like a never-ending maze – each time I arrived at the same bend. Who was I? Why was my body different from my soul or was I mistaking my Identity? Why was I born this way? Was it some past karma for which I was being made to pay so dearly? What could I do to escape this trap? (Bandyopadhyay 31)

There were times in my life when I doubted myself and the path I took. In such instances, my mind would go into a state of flux and the turmoil would sear me within. Am I really a woman trapped in a male body or are these just delirious thoughts? Why is it that the whole world thinks of me as a man who is nothing more than a sissy? . . . My soul and sexuality did not match the image I saw in the mirror. . . I felt like tearing away and escaping from the man's body in which I was born. (Bandyopadhyay 109)

The above lines depicts Manobi's struggle to establish her gender identity. This shows the turmoil that a transgender goes through in her life. The psychological stress and pain they go through at times in their lives is excruciating. In addition to these psychological pressures they experience, transgenders are physically and mentally traumatized by the society.

### **Marginalization:**

Marginalization is a post-colonial concept. Dominant features of Post-colonialism include the first stages of "Confrontation", "Transgression" and "Opposition", "Resistance" and "Revival" (Kothawale 1). Hence, post colonial literature may be called as the literature of the marginalized people at various levels and fields. Therefore, it can also be said that post-colonial literature is one way or the other literature of marginalized.

Marginalize is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "To treat someone or something as if they are not important". Marginalization is to place something or someone in a position of marginal importance, influence or power. It is the process that flows through marginalized groups. Societal marginalization and spatial marginalization are the two important conceptual frame works of marginalization. Societal marginalization is associated with social conditions that are classified under various labels such as stigmatized and oppressed under the name of race, class, caste, culture, power, and gender etc. Spatial marginalization is related to the geographical infrastructure of a group. The present paper looks at the societal marginalization based on Gender and its effect on establishing individual identity.

### **Marginalization of Manobi's identity:**

Marginalization is a theory of social stratification. Inequality and discrimination are the ways in which a race or a caste or a gender is marginalized. Society plays an important role in every individual's life in a process of understanding their identity and their relation with other individuals. As said by Mennel in "The Formation of We-Images: A Process Theory"

. . . the whole symbolic interactionist tradition have stressed the way in which each person's self is formed by a reflexive process, in which our perception of how others see us plays a paramount part . . . individual self-images and group we-images are not separate things (179)

Manobi expresses the same view in her biography."I have always had very strong instincts about who I am and what I am. However, a large part of how we feel about ourselves is also linked to what people say or feel about us." (51)

In India transgenders face rejection and sarcasam from the society. As Tanupriya stated in her article they are "a visible community and directly or indirectly we have read and heard the mythologies, beliefs and ideas related to them" (1) Society ill treats transgenders in many ways and marginalizes and victimizes them. In Manobi's biography one can see a number of instances where Manobi and her identity is marginalized and victimized. Manobi first experienced it at the age of six when she started attending school. The first day of her school left an impression on her mind for lifetime. As she used to be slim and delicate, she was often mistaken for a girl. Some bigger boys in her class used to make fun of her appearance and behavior. It was the first time Manobi started realizing that she "wasn't accepted by most in this world" (8). Right from an early age Manobi became a victim of sexual assault. She was sexually exploited either by a family member or someone from school. As she grew up the ridicule she faced from the society also increased. When she decided that she is not a boy and at any cost would change into a girl at one or the other time in her life she started expressing her sexuality boldly and this ignited more trouble.

The ridicule that I was facing at home and in the neighborhood continued unabated, as I started taking bolder steps of wearing my sister's petticoats as skirts and their nighties as dresses. . . . This behavior – actively seeking to be who I was – only invited more insults. The hypocrisy around hurt me. People took every opportunity to call me a hijra, to ridicule my sexual identity and yet when they found me alone, they never missed an opportunity to take me to a dark corner and have a go at me. (Bandyopadhyay 35)

Joining college was another traumatic experience for Manobi. She once again became butt of many jokes in college. Her identity and sexuality are always scoffed. "I found college to be yet another place where I would have to fight for my identity and respect" (Bandyopadhyay 40) This show how educational institutions like colleges and schools are not exceptional in ill treating transgenders.

. . . I realized that I was again become the center of attention and ridicule despite being a good student. I could not be called a man or woman and that was far more important than the fact that I had read more Bengali literature than anyone else . . . . Clearly, my reputation had preceded me. (Bandyopadhyay 40)

Students simply stood and gaped at her going to the Bengali Department. "Word had got out that a hijra had entered the college in the garb of a student! Many had gathered to see me. Some started clapping their hands in glee when they saw me, some just whistled and catcalled and soon taunts filled the air. I hadn't expected this scene." (Bandyopadhyay 40)

Her situation worsened when she got a job as a lecturer in a remote government college in a rural village Jhargram. Until then she was used to city and the rural setting was completely new to her. In that village she was a complete novelty and there was shock and awe writ large on the community's face. When she entered the college few people catcalled her saying whether she was a man or woman. On her way to college from bus stop she and her father had to face many insults. She suddenly felt like running away. However, her determination to stand up on her own as well as earn enough money for her sex change operation held her not to care for them. But more threat waited in the college for Manobi. Two lecturers in particular were very much upset with her presence in college and threatened to ruin her career "since no hijra had the right to become a professor!" (Bandyopadhyay 92) They convinced other teachers that she is an aberration and they need to collectively force her out of the college. "No one as lowly as a hijra should be allowed to teach in a college, share the same staffroom, toilet and facilities." (Bandyopadhyay 93) But when they realized that Manobi wouldn't give in so easily they started assaulting her every now and then.

They would lurk in every nook and corner and pull my hair and clothes, saying they wanted to see if my hair was real or if I was wearing a wig. Once, two of them pinned me to the wall and groped me, trying to find out what was beneath my clothes. . . 'Keep shut, you hijra, don't act smart. . . One day they caught hold of me and started hitting me in the chest with a paper weight till I was so badly bruised that I fell unconscious from the pain. (Bandyopadhyay 94)

Such was the piteous condition of Manobi in her career as a lecturer. It was just the tip of the iceberg and she had into worse situations than the above mentioned instance. Transgenders in general face these situations on a regular basis throughout their lives. Such is the violence against transgenders in society. However, Manobi faced all these with a brave heart and emerged victorious.

## **Conclusion**

Manobi's "A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi" is the courageous journey set by a transgender to win over the bipolar society of India. It is dedicated to all those people who called her subhuman and mocked her throughout her life. It depicts at best how a person's third gender identity is created and how society treats transgenders. Throughout the biography Manobi thanks her parents for being with her in times of need and says that her success lies in having understanding parents.



The marginalization towards transgenders needs to be ended and their identity needs to be respected.

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