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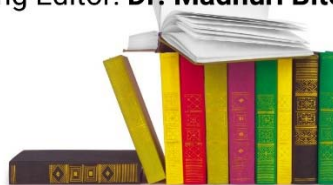
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Narratives of Transformation: The Role of Transgender Stories in Shaping Identity and Social Change

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Abstract:

In recent decades, there has been a significant rise in queer voices advocating for legal and social rights, with transgender individuals playing a leading role in amplifying this movement and enriching its diversity. The study examines *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* by Living Smile Vidya. It demonstrates how the transgender community is advocating for their rights by sharing their life stories in their own words rather than being portrayed by others. The paper also focuses on how the narratives are not just about body transformation, but also about shaping identities and advocating for social change. The literature on this topic often centres around identity and its intersections, influenced by factors such as race, gender, and caste. In this study, identities are shaped by the intersections of gender, sexual orientation, and caste, which remains a significant factor in Vidya's life journey.

Keywords: Transgender, transgender community, gender, sexual orientation, transgender narratives.

Transgender individuals often face significant challenges and intolerance, making them one of the most marginalized groups in South Asian society. They face discrimination in employment,

healthcare, housing, education, marriage, etc. Due to high levels of inequality, they often experience mental health issues. Despite these challenges, positive steps have been taken by the community toward acceptance in society and legal recognition. Transgender is an umbrella term for “persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behaviour does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth” (“Understanding Transgender People, Gender Identity and Gender Expression” Web 8 July 2024). For instance, someone assigned female at birth might identify as male, and someone assigned male might identify as female. It includes people who are non-binary, genderqueer, or have other gender identities that do not fit within the traditional male and female binary paradigm. Transgender in India include various genderqueer groups like *Aravanis*, “one of the transgender communities (male to female) in the state of Tamil Nadu who considers themselves as females trapped in male bodies...They worship Aravana or Iravan” (Choudhary 30), *Joggapas*, “male temple servants of the goddess Yellamma” (Nanda 160), *Shivashaktis*, a transgender community in Andhra Pradesh who are symbolically married to Lord Shiva, embodying the union of masculine and feminine energies, “Shivashaktis who have undergone castration and emasculation, openly cross-dress and take feminine names and are very public about their femininity” (Kumar 34) and hijras, the most well-known transgender community in the country. The term hijra refers to “a person whose gender identity is neither male nor female, typically a person who was assigned male at birth but whose gender expression is female” (Web 11 Aug. 2024). Hijras have a long tradition and are often considered one of the oldest queer communities in the world. *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* is a memoir written by Living Smile Vidya and is one of the first autobiographical writings by a transgender individual in India.

Life writing, encompassing “biography or autobiography...diaries, blogs, testimonials and private letters” (Cuddon 395), serves as a powerful medium for individuals to reflect on their

personal experiences, emotions, and memories. This process of reflection often fosters greater self-awareness and understanding. For marginalized groups, life writing fulfils multiple purposes. However, not all life experiences seamlessly translate into compelling narratives. To attain significance within the genre, everyday occurrences are frequently shaped and reshaped to enhance their appeal. Writers skillfully select and emphasize specific details, weaving them into a coherent and engaging story. It helps in exploring and expressing one's identity. It allows individuals to present their stories in their own words, enabling these groups to advocate for their rights through their first-hand experiences. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall asserted that identities are formed within discourses and remain in a constant state of evolution. He emphasized that representation is the means through which meaning is assigned to depicted subjects, and it is through this process that identities are constructed. Identity is not something one possesses but performs and negotiates through various forms of representation. This continuous process is shaped by cultural, social, and historical contexts. Hall says, "Identity is formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways in which we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us" (598).

In her book, Vidya chronicles her life journey, offering glimpses into her transition into womanhood, the obstacles she faced, societal disapproval, and her eventual emergence as an activist. Vidya was born as Saravanan in a family where both parents worked hard to make two ends meet. As a male child born after years of prayers, Saravanan brought immense joy to his parents, as his birth carried the hope that "he would change the course of their abject existence" (11). Her father worked as a sweeper in municipal, a job of the lowest rung, and she lost her mother at the age of eleven. All these hopes and the family situation pressured on Saravanan, "The only work we want you to do is study... it's your job to study" (12). The early years of Vidya's life ensured that she studied hard and positioned herself respectfully in society. Unlike

most of the transgender people in India who fail to get a decent education, Vidya was able to procure a master's degree in linguistics before she joined the hijra community.

Another factor that would determine Vidya's future was the gender identity that had always been present, even before she became aware of it. "Gender Identity refers to an internal sense people have of who they are that comes from an intersection of biological traits, developmental influences and environmental conditions. This may be male, female, somewhere in between, a combination of both or neither" (Rafferty Web 5 July 2024). Being raised by three women - two sisters and a mother - she gained valuable insight into femininity. As a child, Vidya as Saravanan often wore her sister's clothes and danced to the tune of radio on film songs, "I usually locked myself inside once all of them had gone out, put on girls' clothes, and sang and danced. I loved it" (18). She was always fascinated by the heroines in movies and often tried to imitate their good looks with "Manju's skirts and midis, her eyeshadows, bangles, bindis and costume jewels" (20). Vidya used this method to pass as a girl during childhood.

The changes in behaviours and mannerisms in transgender individuals occur much earlier than physical transformations. Gender identity crisis is a significant part of many transgender stories, and it becomes important when shared by those who have undergone these experiences. These narratives serve as a source of validation for individuals living their lives similarly. Vidya's father slaps her when he catches her dancing to the song, "I am the king's daughter, A fresh new rose. Will my dreams come true" (21). These lines also symbolize the life Vidya is meant to lead and foreshadow the transformative changes that will soon alter her life entirely.

While Vidya was unaware of the impact of her changing behaviour, the habits "which had been dismissed lightly as childish pranks, were now viewed with disfavour" (22). Vidya often wondered why she was not allowed to wear skirts and blouses or why those around her seemed to view her "natural" (22) behaviours as odd. Unfamiliar with the constraints of binary norms,

she would face her father's wrath whenever she asked him to buy her the same clothes as her sisters. Her unusual behaviour soon caught attention at home and outside, "My habits of wearing drag, bathing with the towel wrapped around my chest, tying a towel around my head to dry my imaginary long hair... My voice was still effeminate, and I tended to blush, gesture, and walk like a woman, too" (23). All these things further problematized her life. Vidya's effeminate behaviour had led to teasing from her schoolmates, increasing her loneliness. They used derogatory terms like "Ali" and the number "nine," referring to eunuchs in Tamil (25).

When Vidya met a man named Ilango on the banks of a river she often visited, she experienced an unusual feeling—a kind of change that every woman undergoes at different stages of development, "Ilango was the man who made me feel whole as a woman" (28). With age, Vidya's gender identity as a woman developed further, "I was a girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy. Inwardly, I wanted to be a girl" (33).

Vidya's self-reflection deepened over time. Although male in body, Vidya felt a feminine identity inside. A pivotal moment in her life occurred when she met Senthil, a man who shared her gender identity. Vidya found their "desires, needs, humiliations, pains, and loneliness were identical" (39). After graduating in computer sciences, she pursued a humanities course, bringing her closer to drama, art, and poetry. Working in a theatre opened up new avenues for her. Change is a fundamental element of transgender narratives, often represented through the motif of mirror images. She became captivated by her reflection in the mirror when a makeup artist applied lipstick on her before the play's performance. Here, the narrator states, "The mirror may reflect your outer appearance to you and other like you, but in the case of tirunangais it portrays their innermost feelings and turbulence, their essential femininity, displaying all" (138). As a theatre artist, Vidya enjoyed expressing her inner feelings, whereas the other group members often took these expressions as acting.

Vidya's involvement with an NGO supporting people like her brought her closer to the trans community. She began spending extended periods with them, even accompanying them to bus stops where they begged or sought sex work to make a living. These interactions soon decreased her fear of being seen as a female, and a day came when she started roaming around freely as a *Kothi*. What she has tried to hide from society till date was now finding its way to come out. She began to express her femininity, which stemmed from her “age, experience, and maturity” (9). This was a step towards claiming self-identity just before she decided to transition into a woman. Vidya had a bright future ahead after pursuing a masters in linguistics, however, she eventually decides to come out as a woman as she confesses to her friend Sri, “No, I couldn’t live any longer as a man. If I could not become a woman, I’d rather die. I wasn’t confused now” (11). Coming out in transgender narratives marks a significant shift as the term is “a shortened form of “coming out of the closet”, which is a metaphor for revealing one’s sexual orientation and/ or transgender status” (“Coming out” Web 27 Aug. 2024). In Sedgwick’s opinion Coming out is a “speech act” (3) and is performative, much like being closeted. It does not only reflect an already established identity; it creates a new one. Declaring “I’m transgender” not only reveals one’s identity but also transforms how they understand and express themselves.

Vidya soon moves to Chennai to live her life as a woman far from home and the people who knew her. In Chennai, even the people who were engaged in activism for sexual and gender minorities advised her against changing her gender, “you are a man, remain a man” (63). Even after taking up a demanding job in Chennai, she was often haunted by her lingering male identity and “felt a strong urge to discard” this manhood (65). At this stage, she was firm in her resolve, realizing that neither her degree nor her theatre experience could enable her to live as a transwoman. She knew that her decision to live as a woman would likely push her into sex

work or begging. Resolute in her choice, the narrator declares, “In my heart, the decision to become a woman has taken firm root, the transformation in my mind and body complete” (66).

Vidya’s decision was unwavering, and ultimately, Arunamma, a transwoman who ran an NGO for sexual minorities, helped her relocate to Pune, where she could begin her transition into a woman. Her ears and nose were pierced, and her hair had grown long enough for her to be recognized as a woman within the trans community. She declares, “My womanhood was raging to destroy my manhood... I was going to be a beggar but as a woman” (68). Renouncing her male identity, she proclaims, “I was no more Saravanan” (68).

Unlike other transgender groups worldwide, hijras form a distinct subculture in the Indian subcontinent, bound by a strong sense of community. They live together in communal houses, supporting and caring for one another like a family. Most individuals who join hijra houses leave behind their birth identity and families. These houses adhere to strict rules rooted in long-standing hijra traditions. Community regulations require all members to perform their gender as women, mandating the adoption of feminine markers such as sarees, makeup, long hair, and specific body language. These rules are equal for everyone. On becoming a part of the community house in Pune, the narrator was given strict instructions by Nani- her *guru* Arunamma’s *guru*, “Don’t Walk around with a swollen head because you went to college, OK? Whether educated or illiterate, a Kothi is a Kothi. Do you understand?” (72). Saravanan was then named Vidya in the new house. This name was soon to become the narrator’s identity. The new identity was problematic to make everyone understand, especially the family where Vidya had grown up as Saravanan, the only son of his parents, the only brother to his sisters, and the only hope of the house who would bring good days to a family which is stuck in poverty from generations. Vidya’s renouncement will go a long way throughout the narrative, “I am Vidya- not Saravanan- Vidya” (76).

Upon reuniting with her family after the transformation, Vidya struggled to console her father, as the family was in shock and denial. Her only solace was that her family now knew the truth. Vidya chooses to depart from the family, as they have rejected her in her new identity. Vidya says, “I can learn how to live... I am not Saravanan, but I am a human being, not some monster. Not some demon. My brain will protect me” (80). Vidya had always had a home to return to, a sanctuary after being away for studies and work. However, with her new identity came rejection from her own family. Despite this, she chose to stay true to who she is. She says, “How can I continue to live with them, even if they are my people” (80).

Knowing that life would be tough, as she confesses, “begging was my only option,” she takes this step boldly. Begging was no joke; from begging in shops to trains, Vidya had to deal with all the harassment and trouble that were the result of her transformed identity, as most people saw trans people as abject beings. Vidya was persistent in her resolve to go and earn as she says “to achieve what I set out for in Pune: nirvana” (98). *Nirvana* is a surgical procedure in which male genitals are removed, allowing a person to live as a trans woman, free from their birth identity as a male. Despite knowing the implications of the operation that was “no different from a procedure performed at the butcher’s shop” (100), Vidya chooses to go for the life-threatening surgery to shed her male identity, “willing to die in the process” (99). Vidya’s description of the sex reassignment surgery is a testimonial of the pain and suffering that most transgender women have to endure to shed their male identities and transform into women. Most members of the community in India lack access to even basic healthcare services, and surgeries like these are often performed in private clinics without proper medical protocols, driven by profit. Upon her return after *nirvana*, she was welcomed with traditional hijra rituals. Announcing this moment with pride, Vidya declares in her narrative, “Henceforth I would be a tirunangai [trans woman]—complete. This alone was my identity” (103).

Vidya, determined to change her life, initially tried selling small goods on trains instead of begging. However, when this did not provide enough income, she resolved to find a more dignified way to earn a living. Leaving Mumbai at midnight without informing anyone, Vidya was steadfast in her decision to avoid sex work and begging. She says, “My expectations were simple: I wanted to live a normal life like men and women. My Being a tirunangai was natural, just as men are men, women are women and cats are cats” (130). Over time, she gained acceptance from her old friends and sister, though some still taunted her for her new identity. After many failed attempts, Vidya’s long journey concluded when she finally secured a bank job as an EDP assistant.

Having secured a job and surrounded by accepting individuals who recognized her gender identity, Vidya emerged from her challenging years. She began activism by writing her blog, drawing from her education and deep understanding of transgender issues. Her impactful writing resonated with many, leading to broader effects. As her social circle expanded, Vidya reflected on the need to shed inhibitions and actively engage in a meaningful social life. Her resilience, education, and writing played pivotal roles in gaining social acceptance and recognition.

Vidya writes, “Social acceptance of tirunangais did not end with my rehabilitation” (132). She highlights the legal system’s lack of inclusivity toward gender and sexual minorities. The process of changing her name on official documents took an exhausting one-and-a-half years, involving not only legal hurdles but also harassment at public institutions. Vidya contrasts this with the ease at which politicians, numerology believers, and religious converts can change their names within a month. Despite nearly two decades passing since the first publication of her book, the marginalization of transgender individuals persists, underscoring the ongoing challenges they face. Vidya posits,

Dalits have a voice, feminists are heard- they can hold rallies, demand their rights. But transgenders are the Dalits of Dalits, the most oppressed women among women- they enjoy no equality, no freedom, no fraternity. They continue to lead a wretched life, devoid of pride and dignity. (136)

Vidya's story is a profoundly personal account that resonates with the experiences of many transwomen across South Asia. The struggles with limited opportunities, denial of legal and medical recognition, public violence, harassment, and living on the fringes of society are common challenges faced by transgender individuals in India. Published in 2007, *I Am Vidya* was groundbreaking as the country's first book of its kind. Following Vidya's pioneering work, authors like A. Revathi, Kalki Subramaniam, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, and Manobi Bandopadhyay have shared their narratives. These stories are celebrated not just for documenting physical transformations, but for reclaiming identities and challenging the mainstream portrayal of trans people as marginalized and abject beings. In her article "Awareness Key to Responsible Conduct," Sohini Bhattacharya asserts that various NGO case studies highlight "the transformative impact of empowered and self-aware youth on communities" (41).

Vidya's life narrative exemplifies the transformative power of personal stories in challenging societal norms and reshaping identities. Her journey—from self-doubt and societal rejection to self-acceptance and community involvement—highlights the resilience and agency of transgender individuals in reclaiming their narratives. Her experiences emphasize the significance of visibility and representation in fostering understanding, empathy, and advocacy for structural change. Through her story, one witnesses how personal struggles intertwine with broader social movements, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Vidya's life not only reveals the complexities of navigating identity within a rigidly binary world but also stands as a beacon of hope for those seeking liberation and belonging.

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