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"Shattering the Culture of Silence: The Struggle for Queer Visibility in India through Living Smile Vidya's Memoir - *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*"

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Abstract

This research study critically examines the complexities of gender identity, focusing on the lived experiences of transgender individuals, with particular emphasis on Living Smile Vidya's autobiography, *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*. Through an exploration of the Indian Hijra community, the study highlights the persistent marginalization faced by its members and their ongoing struggle for social, cultural, and political recognition.

In addition to addressing the systemic barriers that hinder their integration into society, this analysis delves into Vidya's advocacy for societal acceptance beyond conventional gender norms. By treating her memoir as a primary source, the research documents Vidya's transformative journey, not only as a hijra but also as a writer, social worker, and influential voice within her community. The research study posits Vidya's narrative within broader discourses on identity crisis, marginalization, and social accessibility, illustrating how the culture of silence perpetuates exclusion while emphasizing the urgent need for visibility and recognition of transgender individuals in India.

Key Words: Queer, Identity, Gender Politics, Culture, Abuse, Harassment, Silence, Trauma.

Introduction

Queer Studies serves as a broad framework encompassing LGBTQIA+ literature and critical discourse. The origins of Queer Theory are complex and not easily pinpointed; while it emerged within academic circles, it has been profoundly shaped by cultural studies. Teresa de Lauretis, a renowned critical theorist and scholar, is credited with introducing the term. In 1991, she first utilized *queer theory* in an edited special issue of the feminist cultural studies journal *Differences*, titled *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*. Since then, queer theory has become one of the most discussed and debated literary

theories, particularly in postcolonial literature and gender studies, as it interrogates the struggles of the third gender and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

The concept of queerness refers to an individual's intrinsic gender identity that challenges established societal norms. While gender expression demands recognition, history reveals that individuals identifying as *queer* have often been subjected to stigma, alienation, and moral condemnation.

In Louis Crompton's 'Homosexuals and the Death Penalty in Colonial America' suggests that "The first American "code", if it can be called that, was a simple list of "Capital offences liable to death" drawn up in Plymouth Colony in 1636. These included treason, murder, witchcraft, arson, sodomy, rape, buggery (here denoting bestiality), and adultery. (Louis Crompton, 278) and Whitemore states that "The Bay Colony, in making sodomy a capital crime, did not follow the English statute but instead adopted the language of Leviticus 20: 13. Section 8 of the 1641 laws was thus a word-for-word translation of a Hebrew law more than 2,000 years old: "If any man lyeth with mankinde as he lyeth with a woman, both of them have committed abomination, they both shall surely be put to death" (Whitmore, 55). Later in 16th-century England, for instance, homosexuality was legally classified as a criminal offense, punishable by capital punishment and death punishments were gradually abolished. These historical injustices highlight the enduring fight for queer visibility, acceptance, and rights.

One of the most influential works in queer studies is Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978). In this seminal text, Foucault explores the transformation of societal perceptions of homosexuality, noting that:

> "As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology" (Foucault, 42).

Beyond Foucault, queer theory has been shaped by scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Michael Warner, and Wayne Koestenbaum, whose works continue to challenge dominant narratives surrounding gender and sexuality. Eve Kosofsky, a prominent figure who explored the transformation of queer, expresses in the "Introduction" chapter of the *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* that the society characterised the homosexuality as homo-ophobia and hatred for homosexuality.

> "Male homosocial desire": the phrase in the title of this study is intended to mark both discriminations and paradoxes. "Homosocial desire," to begin with, is a kind of oxymoron. "Homosocial" is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes

> social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism,... and just as obviously meant to be distin-guished from "homosexual". It is applied to such activities as "male bonding", which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homo-ophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality" (Eve Kosofsky, 1).

Queer theory challenges heteronormative ideology by questioning conventional notions of sex, gender, and desire. It critically examines societal norms that institutionalized heterosexuality as the default while marginalizing other identities and orientations as abnormal. Through an intersectional, social-constructionist, and transnational lens, queer studies seek to understand sexual embodiment, identities, desires, communities, and cultural expressions beyond rigid classifications.

Emerging in the late 1980s, queer theory developed as a critical framework rooted in gay and lesbian scholarship, drawing from diverse fields such as literary criticism, sociology, history, and political discourse. Rejecting essentialist perspectives, it embraces social constructionism, dismantling binary oppositions such as trans versus straight . While it aligns with postmodernist critiques that challenge fixed identities, queer theory simultaneously seeks to restore subjectivity that enables sexual and political agency.

Transgender theory is an interdisciplinary framework that examines gender identity, gender expression, and the lived experiences of transgender individuals. It emerged in the early 1990s, closely linked to queer theory, and challenges traditional notions of gender as a fixed, binary concept. This theory integrates perspectives from various disciplines, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, and feminist studies, to explore how gender is socially constructed and embodied. It critiques essentialist views that define gender solely based on biological sex and instead emphasizes the fluidity and diversity of gender identities. Transgender theory also addresses issues of discrimination, marginalization, and systemic oppression faced by transgender individuals. It advocates for greater recognition of transgender rights and inclusion in social, legal, and medical frameworks.

The recent studies like, Vakoch Douglas's book on *Transgender India: Understanding Third Gender Identities and Experience,* under-lines an essential conversation surrounding transpeople in India. study talks about the 'spectacular, the spectacle, the erotic, and the exotic are all that remain in the eye of the public, and the lived realities of being transgender are often ignored'. This text helps to understand the "dialogue across academic fields, as authors cross-reference each other's chapters, comparing and contrasting their understanding of transgender experience and identity in India. This multidisciplinary approach helps readers understand the complex interplay of factors that have led to discrimination against third gender individuals, as well as paths forward to a more equitable and just future, in ways not possible from the view of a single academic field" (Vakoch Douglas, 1).

The proposed research study analyses the autobiography of Living Smile Vidya's "*I am Vidya, A Transgender's Journey*". This study examines the lived experiences and challenges faced by Indian transgender individuals, particularly hijras, as portrayed in autobiographical accounts. The text delves into the Hiras family dynamics, social exclusion, and economic problems that frequently lead to engagement in defamed means of earning. The study delves into the identity struggles and marginalisation experienced by the protagonist in the select autobiography, utilising the transgender identity model. The study also exposes how society imposes restrictive gender roles and identities to maintain its core. Due to societal behavioural, norms and rigid gender roles transgenders undergo psychological difficulties. This paper also talks about what measures that the transgenders take in order to express their innate urges like going for surgical interventions, hormonal therapy, or body modifications. Additionally, the study explores the factors that contribute to the marginalisation of hijras and how these contribute to psychological trauma.

Literature Review:

Academic research has extensively explored the representation of queer identities in literary works, shedding light on the complexities of gender and sexuality. Scholars have examined the emotional dimensions of identity within queer culture, analyzing the ways in which individuals navigate societal norms and personal experiences. Additionally, researchers have investigated transgender theories, contributing to a broader understanding of gender fluidity and self-identification. Through the lens of queer theory, numerous scholarly papers have examined the identities of queer and transgender individuals, analyzing their cultural, communal, and societal aspects. These studies provide critical insights into the experiences of marginalized identities, challenging traditional narratives and advocating for inclusivity.

This research study specifically focuses on the autobiography of Living Smile Vidya, offering an in-depth exploration of her journey as a transgender individual and shattering the culture of silence. By engaging with queer theory, the research aims to highlight the struggles, resilience, and evolving discourse surrounding queer identities in contemporary literature and social contexts.

Research Questions

The aim of the study is to deal with the following questions with reference to the taken autobiography:

- What factors influence the identity and identity formation of Hijras?
- How are Hijras physically, mentally traumatised and abused in society?

- How does societal silence influence the Hijra identity, their struggles, and their quest for social acceptance?

Research Objectives:

The objective of this study is to -

- Attempt to analyse the issues regarding the quest for identity of transgenders in society.
- To study the Hijra's issues of sexual abuse and trauma.
- To examine the proposed position of Hijras as accepted individuals and as a community within the framework of societal silence and exclusion.

Methodology:

This research study seeks to explore the theme of quest for identity, related to transgender identity and experiences. It examines the actions and events that shape the protagonists' lives, as well as the societal reactions they encounter. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study emphasizes meaning, inductive reasoning, and broader generalizations drawn from personal narratives. The lived experiences of the authors, as documented in the autobiography, are carefully analyzed using qualitative research techniques to provide deeper insights into their journey and societal perceptions.

Vidya's Search for her place in the Society

In Indian society, masculinity is often perceived as dominant and socially preferable, while femininity is frequently regarded as subordinate and linked to vulnerability. This deeply ingrained gender hierarchy contributes to the marginalization of queer identities, with transgender individuals facing some of the most severe societal stigma and exclusion. The rejection experienced by transgender people both from broader society and their own families can result in profound psychological distress, reinforcing their struggle for identity and acceptance. These hardships and lived experiences are vividly explored in Living Smile Vidya's autobiography, *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*. Through her memoir, Vidya documents her personal fight against socio-psychological oppression, shedding light on the broader challenges faced by transgender and queer individuals in India.

Vidya, originally named Saravanan, was the sixth child in his family. Born into a lower caste, he faced the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination. His father firmly believed that education was the key to breaking free from this oppression and viewed it as the cornerstone of their economic and social advancement. He placed great emphasis on the idea that academic achievement and securing government employment were vital for the family's progress in society. During his early years, Saravanan benefited

from a privileged position within the family as the favored male child, sparing him from household chores. His sisters bore the responsibility of caring for him and ensuring he received special attention. Reflecting on this, he remarked, “I was a privileged member of the household. Of the three children, I was the one person who didn't have to do any work at home. That was an unwritten law. I enjoyed every kind of concession” (Vidya, 12). Saravanan was a conscientious student who consistently delivered strong academic performances. However, his father imposed strict limits, forbidding participation in extracurricular activities. Driven by high expectations, his father reacted to even minor infractions with corporal punishment, a practice that left Saravanan harboring deep resentment toward him.

Saravanan was subjected to constant mental and physical mistreatment by his father. As he recounts, “Why didn’t I have a loving father like other children? The questions come back to haunt me even today…” (Vidya, 17). From an early age, he exhibited a profound interest in drama and aspired to pursue a doctorate in the field following the completion of his MA. However, as his feminine identity became increasingly visible, he encountered persistent societal pressures that compelled him to suppress his emotions and conceal his true self. The internal conflict between his authentic identity and external expectations led to prolonged emotional distress, exacerbated by systemic discrimination, social marginalization, and familial opposition. Despite these challenges, he ultimately resolved to undergo gender-affirming surgery to achieve congruence between his physical embodiment and his intrinsic identity. This decision, while affirming his selfhood, resulted in estrangement from his family, underscoring the pervasive societal obstacles faced by individuals undergoing gender transitions. After the affirmation surgery, ‘Saravanan’ becomes ‘Vidya’, ‘He’ becomes ‘She’.

The profound distress of being ostracized by her own family inflicted significant emotional suffering upon her. Within societal constructs, transgender individuals have often been erroneously perceived as sources of emotional and social disruption, leading to their unjust criminalization within familial contexts. Many families fail to comprehend the psychological turmoil and identity struggles experienced by transgender individuals, frequently refusing to acknowledge them as women or even as autonomous human beings. This rejection is often influenced by prevailing societal norms and external validations that reinforce exclusionary attitudes and systemic discrimination. “When I demanded that they henceforth treat me as a woman, address me as one, interact with me as, with a woman, conflict arises; they refuse to accept me as I am” (Vidya, 80). She underscores the significant challenges encountered by transgender individuals as they navigate a society characterized by entrenched norms, rigid social validations, and deeply ingrained prejudices. Their struggle for acceptance is shaped by systemic barriers that reinforce exclusion and marginalization, often obstructing their ability to assert their identity and access equal opportunities.

This persistent internal conflict often compels individuals to distance themselves from their

families in pursuit of a supportive and accepting community. The struggle between societal expectations and personal identity necessitates a journey of self-exploration, as she seeks to affirm and establish her sense of self within a more inclusive environment. She wrote, 'I was in search of myself, going beyond my confusion over my gender' (Vidya, 49). These social norms forced on her made her rebellious and she stubbornly forced her identity on them. She states that '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). Even adults who have lived with their families and relatives for years often face expulsion upon expressing their desire to transition and assert their gender identity. She has highlighted the critical issue of Nirvana, the gender-affirming surgery, which represents a profound milestone in the journey of self-actualization for transgender individuals. Her ultimate aspiration was to fully embody her identity as a woman by undergoing medical procedures to remove male biological characteristics. In pursuit of this goal, Vidya was compelled to resort to begging as a means of securing the financial resources necessary for the surgery, illustrating the systemic socio-economic barriers that transgender individuals frequently encounter in their efforts to access gender-affirming healthcare.

The act of name-calling serves as a significant mechanism of social marginalization, reinforcing exclusion and stigmatization. Even seemingly innocuous childhood activities, such as wearing a dress traditionally associated with girls, can elicit severe criticism and ridicule. From immediate family members to the broader social environment, she was subjected to relentless mockery, often labeled with derogatory terms such as "girly" or "sissy". Her schoolmates further exacerbated this mistreatment by assigning pejorative names, including "Saravanan the uzhaippali," implying sex work, and "Ali," a term used to denote eunuchs.

Her preference for socializing and engaging in activities with girls was persistently met with ridicule, perpetuating rigid gender norms and societal expectations. She was subjected to continuous verbal and physical harassment, with peers mocking her voice and mimicking her body language in efforts to demean her. In more severe instances, this harassment escalated to physical violence, including a particularly traumatic event where a schoolmate burned her foot with a lit cigarette. Such experiences profoundly impacted her, leading to social withdrawal and avoidance of communal events, such as weddings, further deepening her isolation from both familial and societal networks. Her narrative highlights the systemic discrimination and exclusion faced by transgender individuals, shedding light on the profound psychological and social consequences of gender-based prejudice.

Despite holding an M.A. in linguistics, Vidya continued to experience persistent societal challenges. The systemic discrimination imposed upon her caused profound emotional distress, underscoring the reality that educational attainment does not necessarily shield transgender individuals from prejudice. Even among educated Hijras, pervasive social marginalization, mockery, and harassment

remain significant obstacles, reflecting entrenched societal biases that hinder their full acceptance and inclusion. ‘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?’ (Vidya, 72). Owing to these challenging circumstances, transgender individuals are often compelled to leave the comfort and aspirations associated with their homes. This decision, though difficult, is not entirely voluntary but rather a consequence of external pressures. They frequently encounter significant obstacles in various aspects of life, including securing employment, housing, and personal safety. Consequently, they become vulnerable to exploitation and are often coerced into sex work.

Vidya discusses the societal pressures that discouraged her from undergoing sex reassignment surgery. Her intrinsic need to affirm her gender identity was consistently challenged by prevailing social norms. She also reflects on the psychological distress she experienced while considering the procedure. Additionally, she recounts how individuals around her advised against pursuing gender-affirming surgery, urging her instead to remain male and prioritize her education. The broader society failed to recognize her internal struggles, and those around her continually encouraged her to conform to a male identity, as transgender individuals are not widely acknowledged as part of the societal norm. Ashabharti, a close friend of hers, gave her the same advice everyone had given. She stressed the importance of education and warned me about the social disapproval. ‘You are a man, remain a man, repeating what everyone had told me so far’ (Vidya, 62-63).

Vidya encountered significant challenges associated with the Hijra community when she relocated to Pune. In many societal contexts, being transgender is perceived as a deviation, a disability, or even a criminal act. Comparatively, in several foreign countries, transgender individuals have access to advanced gender-affirming medical procedures, including facial feminization and breast augmentation, enabling them to fully transition. Furthermore, they can amend their educational qualifications and legal documents to reflect their gender identity, allowing them to return to their previous professional roles under their new identity. However, within the practice of Nirvana, sex reassignment procedures are conducted without proper governmental authorization, with only an HIV test administered prior to surgery, rather than a comprehensive medical evaluation. The healthcare and hygienic needs of transgender individuals are often neglected, with systemic discrimination permeating even critical areas such as medical care. Despite enduring immense psychological distress and societal barriers, Vidya proceeded with Nirvana, motivated by the aspiration to affirm her identity. While the physical pain she experienced was severe, she ultimately found peace, as her transition allowed her to embody her true self both internally and externally.

Following sex reassignment procedures, transgender individuals often face limited opportunities, with begging and sex work being among the few options available for survival. Securing stable

employment and leading a conventional lifestyle, such as returning home after work, remains an unattainable aspiration for many. To sustain themselves, they resort to begging in various public spaces, including shops, trains, and traffic intersections. Additionally, to avoid conflict within their community, they are compelled to adhere strictly to the established rules and regulations.

> "The trans-person in India even till recent times was a very paradoxical citizen. They were not sexual, social, political, or legal citizens. Yet they existed, rented homes, met and talked to people, went about their everyday activities, and were very visible. No one could account for the millions of identity cards of supposed males and females being rendered useless through the changed appearance or the identity dysphoria of the and holder. No one could account either for the millions of people who appended over a period of time, who had the certificate of birth to prove their name of choice or their gender choice or a valid address or antecedents." (S J Nair, 1)

Transgender individuals have historically been marginalized, excluded from societal recognition, and subjected to stigmatization for their identity. They often face social alienation, resulting in profound psychological distress and a diminished sense of self-worth. Many are compelled to navigate public spaces with lowered gazes, embodying the weight of societal rejection. Economic barriers further restrict their opportunities, rendering homeownership an unattainable goal. In a moment of desperation, she resorted to begging as a means of survival. Vidya says, "Of course, 'I had waited for this moment. It was something I was expected to do; something I now had to do. And yet, even as my brain told my hand to reach out, the hand refused to obey! Tears were welling up in my eyes. At that very instant I remembered my M. A in linguistics, of all things, I stood there, nervous, hesitant" (Vidya, 85). Soon she realized that her M.A. meant nothing in the real world.

As a consequence, she endured various forms of harassment, including a particularly violent incident in which she was brutally assaulted by four or five men while traveling by train to Nagercoil. The most distressing aspect of this experience was the absence of intervention or assistance from bystanders. To mitigate such risks, transgender individuals often travel in groups, as they are frequently perceived as vulnerable and are subjected to physical abuse and attacks when alone. This systematic marginalization underscores the persistent threats to their safety and well-being.

During times of hardship, she found refuge and support within transgender communities. Aruna, a fellow transgender individual, guided her through the process of accessing counseling and medical assistance. Additionally, Aruna assisted her in securing employment, though the pervasive social stigma surrounding transgender individuals made finding a stable job exceptionally difficult. Many transgender individuals are often compelled into begging or sex work due to the lack of societal acceptance, and remaining in her native place presented significant challenges. Ultimately, the humiliation she endured due to societal norms prompted her decision to relocate to the northern region. Upon her return from

Pune, her family eventually accepted her, marking a pivotal moment in her journey. She traveled extensively, staying with various friends, until she secured a job. She expressed deep appreciation for her employer, recognizing him as a compassionate and fair individual. Having long aspired to lead a peaceful life, she finally found stability. As a committed social worker, she became increasingly aware of the pressing need for rehabilitation programs to support thousands of other transgender individuals facing similar struggles. Motivated by her experiences, she sought to become an advocate for the transgender community, aiming to raise awareness about their rights and opportunities.

Vidya was a dedicated advocate within the Hijra community, actively working toward its welfare and advancement. In April 2015, a landmark private bill addressing the rights and well-being of transgender individuals was passed in the Rajya Sabha. The bill proposed the establishment of a welfare board and introduced reservation quotas in education and employment to promote inclusivity and equal opportunities. Vidya hoped that these progressive measures would instill faith and optimism among transgender individuals, fostering greater societal acceptance. She aspired for transgender individuals to be recognized and treated with dignity, equal to other members of society. She firmly believed that even a small step toward inclusivity could lead to transformative changes in the lives of transgender people, enabling them to pursue their aspirations without fear of discrimination.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Living Smile Vidya's autobiography offers an intimate and firsthand narrative of the author's lived experiences. Vidya critically examines the complex challenges and adversities faced by transgender individuals in India, providing a nuanced analysis of their exclusion, forced migration, and traumatic encounters. The text extensively explores the systemic violence, social inequality, and pervasive verbal and physical harassment endured by members of the transgender community. Furthermore, Vidya highlights the influential roles of both family and society in the continued marginalization of the Hijra community, reinforcing their status as outsiders within the social framework. She underscores the necessity of recognizing the unheard and unseen voices of transgender individuals, advocating for greater social acceptance as a means to uplift and empower them. Vidya argues that fostering inclusivity and acknowledging transgender rights could pave the way for economic stability, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and just society.

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