



Research Paper

Literary Potential and Reformatory Power of Transgender Self Writings From India

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ABSTRACT

Transgender, an umbrella term used for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behaviour does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they are assigned at birth are marginalized in different countries in the name of gender. India also places transgender in the margins of different human realms. Literature also confers them a subordinate position though our epics, Vedas, Puranas, different ancient literary texts, religious writings, and Indian mythology provided them a place equal or close to god. They are given large amount of money and great gifts by people as well as their blessings on auspicious occasions like child birth or marriage is regarded highly once by the Indians. Shikandi in "Mahabharata", Ardhanarishivara figure of Lord Shiva, Mohini avatar of Lord Vishnu, disguised figure of Arjuna as Brihannala, story of King Ila, shows the extent to which Indian mythology respected and recognised gender fluidity. But today we could see transgender writing about their subaltern agonies through their works. They are denied prominent positions in our elite literature. Even if they are provided a space it is one of a minor relevance. Thus transgender started to voice their feelings through their own self writings. They seek for a reformation in the gender norms and are highly noted for their literary relevance. Thus the research article entitled "Literary Potential and Reformatory Power of Transgender Self Writing" earnestly tries to appreciate Indian transgender autobiographies and their importance. The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life story and A Life in Trans Activism by A Revathi, Me Hijra, Me Laxmi and Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life by Laxminarayan Tripathi, A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi by Manobi Bandyopadhyay and I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey by Living Smile Vidya are the selected autobiographies for the study.

KEYWORDS: Transgender, gender fluidity, Indian literature, subaltern, transgender autobiographies.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Autobiographies are first person account of a person's life written by that person itself. Writers use autobiography as a suitable form to express themselves more clearly and deeply. Autobiographies provide a platform for the readers to understand and evaluate the writers more intensely. Many suppressed classes like women, untouchables, and transgender make use of autobiographies to reveal their trauma to the public and thereby calling for a change in their discriminated status. Among this transgender self writings are specially noted as they truly picture the long term suppression and discrimination experienced by them from the gender constructs of society. Though many biographies tried to address their issues, it is not completely reliable or accurate as they are not written by transgender themselves. Autobiographies thus stand out as trustworthy records of real trans life.

II. OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The research basically aims at a study of selected transgender autobiographies from India using subaltern theory. The chief objectives of research are to:

- i. Analyze the position of transgender and their autobiographies in Indian literature.
- ii. Appreciate the literary potential and reformatory power of transgender self writings from India.
- iii. Create awareness among public about the problems faced by transgender and call for a fair and equal treatment of such a community.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research takes the support of qualitative methods for study. It will be a qualitative analysis including textual analysis, in depth study, close reading as well as interpreting, comparing and contrasting the primary sources chosen for the study. Data for the research will be collected with the help of library resources and online sources. Different articles and books relating to transgender autobiographies from India are carefully read and analysed for the research.

IV. LITERARY GENIUS OF TRANSGENDER AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Transgender self-writings are noted for their power of language. The potential of chosen words marks them most memorable and touching among different self-writings as the words are nothing but actual bitter experiences in the life of writer. Literary figures, puns, comparisons, irony, choice of words, sarcasm, and monologue indicate an outflow of strong impressions from a swollen and wounded heart. At times language even fails to truly draw the picture of intense feelings from the life of a transgender. Among many works, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life story* and *A Life in Trans Activism* by A Revathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* and *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* by Laxminarayan Tripathi, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* by Manobi Bandyopadhyay and *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* by Living Smile Vidya are fine pieces to unearth the literary and reformatory potentials of transgender autobiographies.

I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey by Living Smile Vidya pictures the trauma faced by a tirunangai, a transgender in the society which defines the rights and limits of men and women in terms of biology alone. Vidya's narrative clearly suggests the agonies undergone by a woman trapped within a man's body. We could see the linguistic mastery of her words through the following lines where she can through a few sentences draw herself very vividly in front of the readers.

I was girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy. Inwardly I wanted to be a girl, but I made every effort possible to hide my femininity from the outside world. I took particular trouble to remain inconspicuous at college, the unpleasant memories of my bitter experience at school still fresh in my mind. I lead a false life of strenuous attempts to swagger like a man and speak like one; (Vidya 40)

The inner turmoil of a transgender could be understood and related by only a transgender since there is a huge difference between a victim and a witness. Vidya's ardent wish to be admitted as a woman is penned most touchingly through the following lines where we could find her spirit earning for a complete realization of her true gender identity. Here the language is loaded with intense emotions.

Amma, Amma, I have become a woman. I am not Saravanan anymore. I am Vidya. A complete Vidya. A whole woman. Where are you, Amma? Can't you come to me by some miracle, at least for a moment? Please hold my hand, Amma. My heart seems to be breaking into smithereens. Radha, please Radha, I am no longer your brother, Radha. I am your sister now, your sister. Come to me, Radha. Chithi, Manju, Prabha, Appa....(Vidya 17)

Similarly in *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life story* and *A Life in Trans Activism* we could find the cry of a person suffering from gender fluidity or queerness when Revathi says,

Why did I love men? Was I mad? Was I the only one who felt this way? Or were there others like me, elsewhere in the world? Would I find them, if indeed they were there? (Revathi, 14)

Revathi's narration portrays her earnest wish for acceptance in a world of gender norms neglecting and discriminating the trans people as other. When she says the following lines, it is evident that she is deeply affected by the queerness in her gender identity and her words suggest her dilemma and sorrow to the fullest.

A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought of myself. But how could that be? Would the world accept me thus? I longed to be known as a woman and felt shamed by this feeling. I wondered why God has chosen to inflict this peculiar torture on me, and why he could not have created me wholly male or wholly female. (Revathi, 15)

Me Hijra, Me Laxmi and *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* by Laxminarayan Tripathi, also offers before the readers a painful saga of torture and humiliation experienced by a transgender from a very young age. The violence, sexual harassment and humiliation she faced are far beyond explanation. We could get a glimpse of patriarchal society which suppressed gender expressions of Laxmi from these lines. Here the term inadequacy is connoting the inadequacy of our gender divisions itself.

"As the eldest son of my parents, they expected me to be a man. They expected me to be manly, and eventually be the man of the house. I knew I couldn't fulfil these expectations because, inwardly, I did not feel like a man. On top of that, I was gay. Even if my parents overlooked my aberrations, society would not. I felt inadequate."

A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi by Manobi Bandyopadhyay presents itself as a fine specimen offering insights into the mental trauma of transgender. When we go through the following lines by Manobi

Bandyopadhyay, we could see her excellence and mastery in the use of language where she is able to imprint her emotions through a few introspective questions.

I am one of them. All my life people have called me *hijra*, *brihannala*, *napungshak*, *khoja*, *launda* . . . and I have lived these years knowing that I am an outcast. Did it pain me? It maimed me. But time, to use a cliché, is the biggest healer. The adage worked a little differently in my case. The pain remains but the ache has dulled with time. It visits me in my loneliest hours, when I come face to face with the question of my existential reality. Who am I and why was I born a woman trapped in a man's body? What is my destiny?

Thus it can be observed that literary talent of a long oppressed class is adding more colour and flavour to Indian literature. Though they are voice of agonies, we could recover from such autobiographies, splendid levels of fancy and imagination narrating saga of troubles most touchingly.

V. REFORMATORY POTENTIAL OF TRANSGENDER SELF WRITINGS

One of basic drives behind transgender self writing is undoubtedly a call for reformation in the diseased gender norms of our society. They clearly denote through the writings that the stereotypical male-female categories in which we divided our society often show not our understanding of human sexuality but the lack of it. For instance, when Bandyopadhyay asks for freedom and acceptance we could feel in her voice, a true urge for a reformation in the gender norms of the society which always terms a transgender as an outcast.

Beneath my colourful exterior lies a curled up, bruised individual that yearns for freedom—freedom to live life on her own terms and freedom to come across as the person she is. Acceptance is what I seek. My tough exterior and nonchalance is an armour that I have learnt to wear to protect my vulnerability. Today, through my good fate, I have achieved a rare success that is generally not destined to my lot. But what if my trajectory had been different? I keep telling myself that this is my time under the sun, my time to feel happy, but something deep inside warns me. My inner voice tells me that the fame and celebration that I see all around is *maya* (illusion) and I should accept all this adulation with the detachment of a *sanyasi* (hermit).

Through her autobiography, *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey, Living Smile* Vidya's aim is not to arouse pity or sympathy but she wants to acknowledge transgender as transgender itself.

My expectations were simple: I wanted to live like all men and women. My being a tirunangai was natural, just as men are men, women are women, and cats are cats. Trouble arises when people do not understand this simple truth.

When Vidya point out that trouble arises from people not understanding gender fluidity as normal, she is actually denoting the insufficiency of binary divisions of gender. Her call for a reform is far fetching. Living Smile Vidya's autobiography suggests that though in our country, minorities and backward castes have their rights, rarely one talk for the fair treatment of transgender as a minor category and try for an upliftment in their downtrodden status.

Similarly, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* and *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* by Laxminarayan Tripathi powerfully voices for a change in the gender based demarcations. From family, friends, relatives, colleagues, to ultimate law makers need to educate themselves about the inner turmoil faced by a transgender. Mere acceptance of their being is what a transgender demands and if a country could not provide that it cannot be called just and equal. When a society forces transgender to be man or woman against their whims and fancies, the ultimate result will be a life of suppression or a drive towards suicide for them. When Laxmi utters the following lines we could see how she is struggled with the expectations of a family put on her which is against her actual gender self.

But where was I in all this? How could I fit into such a scenario? True, I didn't have to support a family. But, I too straddled many worlds, without belonging to any. As the eldest son of my parents, they expected me to be a man. They expected me to be manly, and eventually be the man of the house. I couldn't fulfil these expectations because, inwardly, I did not feel like a man. (37)

Coming to A. Revathi's self writings *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life story* and *A Life in Trans Activism* are specially noted for their essence of trans activism. We could see the power of her writing, when she says that her aim is not to seek sympathy but to show the society the ability of a transgender and the fact that they too have rights.

As a hijra I get pushed to the fringes of society. Yet I have dared to share my innermost life with you – about being a hijra and also about doing sex work. My story is not meant to offend, accuse or hurt anyone's sentiments. My aim is to introduce to the readers the lives of hijras, their districts culture, and their dreams and desires. I hope now that by publishing my story, larger changes can be achieved. I hope this book of mine will make people see that hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work. I do not seek sympathy from the society or the government. I seek to show that we hijras do have the right to live in this society. (Revathi, v-vi)

Thus, it can be understood that transgender self writings are powerful in informing people about the intensity of oppression and seeking to bring about reformation in the society which always places a transgender aloof or detached from the mainstream.

VI. CONCLUSION

A voyage through Indian literature reveals the fact that transgender autobiographies are an integral part of it. Though elite literature tried to portray transgender in dim light, with the coming of authentic self writings by transgender themselves, long unheard agonies of a subaltern group are brought to the forefront. Just like the respect and recognition they received from our ancient literature, after reading such autobiographies one will start to acknowledge the rights of transgender. The literary output and reformatory capacity of trans writings are absolutely laudable. Such writings are true record of the discrimination transgender community faces from the gender norms and regulations of Indian society which always placed them apart from the centre of gender classifications. A reformation in the binary divisions of gender as male and female is what voiced and hoped by transgender writers and India can be termed completely democratic when the wishes of such a section are properly recognised.

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