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**APPALLING ORDEAL OF ISOLATION IN LIVING SMILE VIDYA'S**

*I AM VIDYA*



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## **ABSTRACT**

The 'Others' is a universal expression that we frequently encounter while drafting forms and entering our corresponding gender on the required columns. Imagine that time period where no similar choice was accessible other than these two gender columns-'male' or 'female'. A commune that has been residing with us for hundred of years, but never enjoyed the tantamount perquisite or even an ambiance to maturate like others in the society. Though in recent years, consciousness has deeply enhanced, what honestly deprives in society is a positive mind set to encompass the third gender with them. Their alienation will not end except wakefulness is followed by reception. There is an extensive choice of identities for transgenders in India: Hijras, Kothis, Aravanis, Shiv shaktis, Jogtas etc. These compound conformity

provides a conviction of those contravene societal gender specific rules. Most of them have to suffer multitudinal modes of brutality. The entity of transgenders is as natal as the identity of male or female, Still they are abhorred with derision, incivility and are secluded in the society. The purpose of this paper is to explore the marginalization of third gender and their struggle for survival through Living Smile Vidya's memoir *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*.

## **KEYWORDS**

Gender, Identity, Third Gender, Transgenders, Struggle for Survival, Marginalization

## RESEARCH PAPER

### Introduction

An individual's sex is the biological orientation that one acquires at the time of birth but gender is the social connotation that is given to an individual after birth. It is right from this point that a fixed set of behaviour, habits and expectations are attached to men and women differently. Simone de Beauvoir in the work *The Second Sex* evidently indicates that "One is not born a woman, one becomes one" ( Beauvoir , 283).Whereas women are viewed as the one with soft, kind and nurturing qualities and on the other hand men are associated with strength, wit and leadership qualities. This is how our social fabric retains its core essence that is based on preconceived notions suggesting that beliefs, customs, and purity in it remains as long as its thought processes run along conventional lines. Not to mention, even if there is the slightest discrepancy, then that outcome is forever condemned. Like, in this case, it is the transgender who has had to face great difficulties in getting accepted by the society. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a Transgender Rights activist once told that he was a normal child but the world that made made her felt different. It is precisely not the way one is born into a community but judged upon what identity that a person is likely to assume in future. In a way the social stigma that gets itself attached to the identity of that person. In the wake of shrinking spaces for the LGBTQ like Laxmi, many more activists from the same community have come to the forefront to battle social exclusion.

Living Smile Vidya also known as smiley is an Indian trans-woman, actress, assistant director and writer from Chennai. She is a transgender activist and blogger. Living Smile Vidya selected her name because she preferred it to seem 'happy'. She is not an ordinary woman. Before her transition to a woman, Vidya was a man named Saravanan with Master's in linguistics. When Saravanan found his true identity, he was forced to live a dual life: People advised him to get a PhD degree and enjoy the life of a transgender in exclusive. However, Saravanan couldn't live a double life...being a man was excruciating and he made a decision to reveal his true identity to the world.

No, I couldn't live any longer as a man. I could not become a woman, I'd rather die. I wasn't confused now. I had come to a clear decision, and it burst out into words. Suicide had been an option in my mind over the last few days. I buried my head in Sri's lap and broke into sobs. My decision was firm, bold. I hated being a man. I was going to try and live as a woman. If I failed, I was ready to die. (Vidya 56)

Such was the mental tumult for Vidya to resolve and actualize her identity. Many of her friends to whom she disclosed, implied her not to get into trouble with her life but urged her to contemplate on her academics and career. Though she understood that the pathway she had opted for was extremely challenging for a learned person like her, she desired to create her identification at any cost. Without cautioning her family, what she was actually on to, she departed from there. With the support of her friends, she enquired many NGOs for SRS surgical process, where she had to face the same counselling sessions.

"Why do you want to stay here permanently? Don't ruin your life by undergoing a sex change. With your education, you can get a job elsewhere and visit this place to enjoy the company of fellow kothis.' This was the constant refrain those days." (Vidya 61)

Though, none of these admonishes and warnings had afflicted Vidya in any way. She was so distraught by her duplex identification. Vidya despised to be a male in public and female in exclusive and felt using gent's outfits disgusting. Her distinctiveness lies in her womanhood and she was prepared to face any hassle for her sustenance. Nobody's forewarn could rattle her fortitude. She had clearly announced to everyone that all she preferred in her life was to end up being a woman and exist as one. "I can't go any longer . . . I don't want this double life. . . I want to be a woman. Please, understand me . . . I want to be a woman, even if it means begging on the streets" (Vidya 65). She noticed that in order to endure and accomplish her womanhood the only option for her was to become a beggar or prostitute. Her degree certificates had no place in her life as a transgender. Such was the predicament of transgenders in India.

"The only way I could live the life of a woman was by begging or becoming a sex worker. Neither my linguistics nor theatre experience could help me here. Vowing never to be a sex worker, begging was my only option." (Vidya 66)

Vidya transposed to Pune where she was adopted by an elder thirunagai and there she stayed with others like her in a tin sheeted house in a slum area. She begged in streets and trains until she gained the money enough for her SRS Surgery. Though being a degree holder, Vidya confronted a hard time to subsist as a woman by begging on the streets, in trains and at traffic signals. During the initial stage, it was so laborious for her to beg. But she had no other option except begging as her desire to become a woman in all the ways is endless.

"I had butterflies in my stomach . . . I had waited for this moment. 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 MA in linguistics, of all things. I stood there, nervous, hesitant" (Vidya 85).

“Shame, fear, ego, my education, memories of awards and rewards and God knows what else made me pull back every time I tried”(Vidya 92). Thus after earning sufficient money to undertake her SRS surgery, Vidya left behind to Cuddapah along with two other thirunangais and an older ayiah. Vidya calls this surgery as Nirvana – the ultimate peace. But that surgery itself was a big tussle as it was nothing more than an absolute butchering of the male gonads in a filthy atmosphere and there was no assurance of life after the surgery. But for Vidya, Nirvana is the result of her perseverance and her purpose to exist. In Vidya’s words “Nirvana! How long I had waited for it! What humiliation I had suffered! Obsessed with it, I had mortgaged my pride, my anger, my honour – I had even begged on the streets to achieve the end.” (3) Nirvana, the hazardous operation guaranteed no life after, was conducted in a room which Vidya calls a ‘slaughterhouse’ (7) and with poor anaesthesia, Vidya saw death in that instant. “What happens here is no SRS. What we undergo is merely castration under local anesthesia”. “I was screaming and shouting all the time. I begged the nurse to give me an injection to kill the pain while she was negotiating a higher tip”(107). In spite of the mortification and torment she confronted, the rapture that she sensed at the execution of SRS was priceless. Finally, her psychological struggle ended.

Inside, I was at peace. It was a huge relief. I was now a woman: mine was a woman’s body. Its shape would be what my heart wanted, had yearned for. This pain would obliterate all earlier pain . . . I thanked them silently: ‘Thank you for removing my maleness from my body; thank you for making my body a female body. My life is fulfilled. If I die now, I’ll lose nothing. I can sleep in peace.’ (Vidya 8)

Finally Saravanan became Vidya. But this young lady with a master’s degree had to beg because transgenders are not acknowledged in the Indian society and the only way to meet their livelihood are begging and sex work. But Vidya desired to find an acceptance in the main stream society and she finally accomplished in procuring it. She initiated her career as an electronic data processing assistant and then became the first trans-woman in India who owned a job in mainstream society rather than working for NGOs. Later she moved to the theatre side and even bagged the prestigious British Council – Charles Wallace India Trust Fellowship to study theatre in the UK. She acted in several short films and documentaries and the award-winning Kannada documentary “Naanu Avanalla . . . Avalu” is based on her autobiography *I Am Vidya: A Transgenders Journey*, written in Tamil that has been translated into several languages including English. It is regarded as one of the most brilliant transgender memoirs. It was first published in 2007.

As the initial transgender autobiography in India, *I Am Vidya* endeavors the striving of Saravanan to become Vidya. The effort encircles a lot of physical and emotional sapping. More than an autobiography, it portrays the perplexity of transgenders like her in India. She features how the refusal of admittance to certain resources including proper schooling, health and employment persists to broaden the chasm between the transgenders and the rest of the society. The words of Revathi clearly formalize their right for identity :

“God has made us this way, I thought, and we have no work of our own, our parents do not understand us and this world looks upon us with distaste. Yet we too go hungry. Above all, we wanted to live as human beings do, with dignity” (Revathi 30).

The social preconception to a great extent has marginalized the transgender in the society. Firstly, no one employs them in their houses, work places, factories or anywhere. So, in order to survive, they are forced to look up for an employment on their own. All they could find is begging and prostitution.

“Hunger: but for that, no tirunagai would beg on the streets, trains, at marketplaces. They submerge pride and dignity and put their hands out in supplication, seeking alms, only because all windows of opportunity are closed to them. It is our tragedy that the world does not understand this simple truth.” (Vidya 137)

Such unfavourable circumstances in a way drive all of them to the periphery of the society and leading them to take their career as a prostitute or at times purlieu to begging for their sustenance. In our world, there is no social aegis to transgenders. The only thing they sense is marginalization and abhorrence from the society. In their life as a thirunagai, while begging, they endured a lot of bigotry and ignominy. Vidya had to face such an incident in one of her begging routine and another transgender Priya saved her by shouted at him:

“Who cares if you are a soldier? Come with us to the Pune Police Station. We'll hold a parade for you there. All the transgenders will be waiting there for you. We won't let you cross Pune. Just wait and see”(104).

Vidya endured a lot of derangement all through her life. Not just Vidya, every transgender in this India goes through this on a daily basis. They are considered as fugitives. In vidya's words:

“But Transgenders are Dalits of Dalits, the most women among women – they enjoy no equality, no freedom, no fraternity. They continued to lead a wretched life, devoid of pride and dignity. . . Society marginalizes us constantly. Tirunangais have no family, no jobs, no security, nothing”. (137)

They are virtually abused physically, psychologically, sentimentally, sexually and scorned from society. It is painless to spout them regarding their professional career, however there are barely minimal establishments that are unsealed to employing the service of transgenders. Vidya is certain that the only way to alter the situation is by reserving certain seats for government jobs for transgenders. “Once people know that being a transgender, you can work and live with dignity, things will change rapidly for our community,” she expresses, this is true of any forlorn segment, be it women, Dalits or tribal people. When inquired if she perceives her parents would certainly have been more approving of her now that there is more recognition, she pauses. “I am not sure. But if they knew that their child can earn a living and aspire to be a respected member of society, their attitude would change.” When inquired what she wanted in the near future for people like her to be, she returns with something that is deeply profound and incisive. She pertains to a similar question asked by a press reporter to B.R. Ambedkar in the 50s. When inquired what he dreamt of for the Dalits, says Vidya, “he told the reporter that he did not wish to fly on the streets that everyone walks on. He said we merely want to walk the same streets”.

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