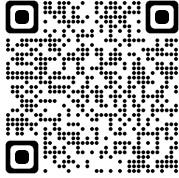




Transgender Narratives in Postcolonial India: Intersections and Divergences- A Study of Select Autobiographies



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Introduction:

India has more than 200 years of colonial past. Colonization shattered the psyche of Indians in particular; the transgenders were occluded from Mughal courts. They were also dangerously insulted, marginalized and criminalized by the British. The Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 was the final nail in the coffin. This Act spread complete myths about the transgender community. Even to this day, the existing transgender have been eking out a living dependent either on begging or prostitution. Living in the peripheral, the transgenders took up writing to articulate their ordeal of fire and inner angst against the Indian society. The 'Body Politics' plays a major role in the transgender narratives. They are not just trapped biological beings with a thrust gender on them. Transgender is also a sociological being, a cultural representative, political participant, a spiritual element, an emotional soul and a patriotic Indian. *I am Vidhya*, an autobiography by Living Smile Vidhya, who is not just a transgender but a Dalit-transgender from Tamil Nadu, suffered the dual discrimination based on caste and gender identity. In contrast, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's autobiography, *Me Hijda, Me Laxmi*, is a narrative of a trans person born into a Maharashtrian Brahmin family. *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi*, yet another autobiography of Manabi Bandyopadhyay, a Bengali trans person who went ahead to become the first transgender Indian to get a PhD degree.

The lived experiences of all these three transgenders are similar, yet different. Their autobiographies intersect at many common points, yet, diverges at certain junctures. A prominent question emerges out of these autobiographies. Do every transperson has to write an autobiography to seek respect and acceptance by the society? What if they are illiterates belong to a voiceless marginalised community? This research paper intends to deal with understanding the divergences in the lives of transgenders living in a diverse India. The aim is to accommodate the transgenders into the main stream of the so-called society.

Trans identities and practices are one of the crisis points in Postcolonial India. To be a 'transgender', is to feel the need to move across the boundaries placed on the unchosen starting place from which we are thrown into the world. Nobody gets to pick his/her body. It is something that we do not have agency over. If we think of gender as the system a society has for organizing and categorizing the bodies of its members, gender is universal, like language-the system for organizing and expressing our thoughts. There is not just a single language, but many. If we think of all cultures as having a way of organizing, categorizing, and ranking bodies by



sorting them into social categories, then there always seems to be some individuals who do it differently than most, whatever the cultural dominant is. Most people are right-handed and the world is organized spatially to reflect that. But there are left-handed people as well. Gender can be like that too. Trans identities and practices are one of the crisis points in Postcolonial India. Transgenders in India, have a long history, and these histories are connected to the broader aspects of Colonialism, Racism, Urban revolt, Capitalism, etc.

The medicalization and psychiatrization of transgender issues and of transgender ways of being in the world, gained force during the era of colonization. In India, transgenders became the targets of the medical, psychiatric, forensic, judicial, criminal, socio-scientific and political complexes, with the advent of British. Until nineteenth century, the transgenders were revered and led a respectable life. The policy of cultural imperialism by the British, seized the psyche of Indians and sabotaged the self-esteem of the transgender community. According to Devdatt Patnaik, queerness and gender diversity have been a part of cultural narratives of India. The aravan story depicts the descent of the term 'Aravani', the most revered term used to address a transgender in Tamil Nadu. Bahucharamaatha narratives of Odisha demonstrate the respectable position they held in the precolonial India. In second half of the 19th century, the British colonial administration vigorously sought to criminalize the community of the transgenders and denied them the civil rights. The Criminal Tribes Act was introduced in 1871, which adorned the status of being a criminal, for transgenders. The fabric of the trans community was brutally destroyed by the British, relegating the trans community to the domains of begging and prostitution even in the postcolonial India. (Michelraj, 18). Transgender writings have become a genre of postcolonial literature, articulating the stories of survival of the transgenders in their own language. Since India has been a diverse country, the transperson belonging to different regions represent the respective cultures and these divergences make them unique. Like any other heteronormative person, every transgender is a unique individual with specific traits of culture, tradition, language and of course the DNA!

The narratives of the transpersons contain some common elements of social mockery, familial abandonment, unemployed and begging, sex work, social insecurity, harassment, psychological trauma. On the other hand, despite these intersections, there are divergences as well in the social and cultural milieu of these transperson. Transgenders spread across the sub-continent of India, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, the divergences are evident in their rituals, languages, customs, and traditions. For instance, a transperson from Rajasthan is different from one in Kerala. The nuances must be identified and studied for a deeper understanding of the trans community. The main intention is to integrate the trans community into the main stream of society.

It is interesting to study the divergences in the context of the autobiographies of the transperson. "I Am Vidya," is the story of one such journey of a transperson, named as "Living Smile Vidya." She has lived through all the indignities forced upon a tirunangai, the transgender. The society defines and divides itself as men and women in biological terms.



From being spurned by her family, to begging on the streets as a social out-cast, from donning sarees, to undergoing excruciating surgery to lose her “manhood”, from suffering emotional and physical harassment, to arriving at her true identity. Hers is a story of extraordinary courage and perseverance. Today, she is a successful filmmaker, an actress, a social activist, and a crusader of trans rights. Living in Chennai, Vidya represents the rich culture of Tamilnadu. She had to fight the double oppression of gender and caste. Having born into a Dalit family, Vidya had to fight tooth and nail to survive in a society, insensitive to the needs of trans community. The Dalit History Month project describes Vidya as, the first transperson in India to have chosen gender identity reflected in her passport. Every citizen anticipates to have equal rights in a democratic country like India. There has been a dearth of voice for trans peoples' fundamental rights. They continue to lead a wretched life devoid of pride and dignity. (Vidya, 137)

For Laxminarayan Tripathi, yet another transperson from North India, being born into a brahmin family, the battle fought was different. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, is her autobiographies of failures and triumphs. Imbibing the culture of a brahmin community, her life's journey is more introspective. She has rose to the position of “Mahamandaleshwar”, by sheer grit and determination. The social and cultural dynamics are different in her case. Her autobiography leaves few existential questions to be answered. The very word, “Hij”, refers to the soul, a holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides is called “Hijra”.

Dr. Manabi Bandhyopadhyay, born as Somnath Banerjee, in West Bengal had to face a lot of ridicule from not only the society but also her father who was extremely conservative. Goddess Durga, whom Dr. Manabi considers as her spiritual strength and inspiration to fight against all the injustices she has been facing. Though education has created a marked difference between the trajectory of her own life and that of other trans people, her journey was tumultuous and full of ordeals. She rose to become the first transgender principal of an Indian University. Her story asserts that merit is the only equalizing factor in an unequal fight. The culture of West Bengal has created a strong impact on Dr. Manabi, having carved an identity of her own. The cultural study of the transperson across India gives a better understanding of the trans community and perhaps, place them on a better platform.

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