

Living Smile Vidya's Traumatic Experiences – an Overview

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Abstract : *This paper will deal with the traumatic effect caused by the society towards gender. Gender role is vital in the successful progress of a society. Male and female are the two genders which instantly come to our mind when we talk of gender. The word 'gender identity' too might lead us towards Feminism. Of course, this gender identity is not in terms of feminism but it is about the identity or recognition sought after by the third sex – the transgender. The memory of a traumatic experience, which is either caused by natural disaster, social apathy or betrayal by caregivers or trusted partners, has become a kind of obsession. There are no words to highlight the inner turmoil caused by such traumatic experiences. The inclusion of transgenders into society is an issue which is still unsolved. The role of transgenders in any genre of literature is a big question and it is definitely not at par with other genders. These three - literature, trauma narrative and transgender - have to be intertwined and this is right now possible only by transgender writers like Vidya, Priya Babu, Revathy, Paula Greig and so on. This paper will deal with the insights shared by Vidya regarding the struggle of the transgenders' recognition and inclusion.*

Keywords: *Gender, Identity, Inclusion, Literature, Transgender, Trauma*

Our universe has in store lot of traumatic events which affects or impacts our lives. The memory of a traumatic experience, which is either caused by natural disaster, social apathy or betrayal by caregivers or trusted partners, has become a kind of obsession. There are no words to highlight or showcase the inner turmoil caused by such traumatic experiences. Trauma has a terrific effect on the physical and mental well being of an individual. This paper will deal with one such traumatic effect caused by the society towards the third gender. Gender role is vital in the successful progress of a society. Male and female are the two genders which instantly come to our mind when we talk of gender. Gender – a socially constituted word is not the same as sex. The words of Simon De Beavouir should be recollected here. “One is not born a woman one is made so”, in the similar way it is the cultural and social set up which distinguishes the characteristics to be either a man or woman. The biological sex which determines the identity is different from the gender role. The gender role is the external manifestation of being masculine or feminine through “gender comportment”. The main force behind the gender difference is the social structure. The social role theory proposes that it is division of labour which leads to a gendered society. In fact gender role “stereotypes” the human behavior. The word ‘gender identity’ too might lead us towards Feminism. Gender studies and Feminism has a unique social status in the present society. Of course, the gender identity which is taken here for discussion is not in terms of feminism but it is about the identity or recognition sought by the third sex/third gender – the transgender. The term androgyny is familiar to us through various Greek mythologies and even through the birds and animals which have similar features. In the present society what happens when it comes to the social acceptance of the human third gender??? Most transgender people, especially youth, face great challenges in coming to terms with one's own gender identity and/or gender expression which are opposite to that imposed on them on the basis of their biological sex. The inclusion of transgenders into society is an issue which is still unsolved.

The advent of Westernisation and Globalisation has changed the lifestyle of the people all over the world. Culture and tradition have taken on a new dimension. We see the youngsters amidst us colour their hair and diet to size zero. We see people who change their own selves in order to imitate their favourite stars. We even have people who change their names, jobs, religions, political parties . . . and even nationalities. We not only see them but we also accept them.

On the other hand we are not ready to accept the third gender - ‘the transgenders’ who are nature’s creation. They undergo intense traumatic experiences (both internal and external) in the various stages of their lives especially during “coming out” and “passing” (internal) and in their struggle for space and inclusion (external). Though Queer studies and LGBT literature has become an household name, none of us are willing to acclaim those who fall under this category with an open heart. This paper would highlight the various instances where they put in their courage to stand up for themselves in the face of stiff opposition and go forward in their quest for self-completion apart from focussing on the dark and bleak lives of the transgenders. I would like to focus on the traumatic experiences as revealed by Living Smile Vidya, in her autobiography *I am Vidya*.

Transgenderism

As long as a person's perceived physiological sex is consistent with that person's gender identity, the gender role of a person is rarely even thought of. Only in cases where there is a deviation, if an individual has a gender role that is inconsistent with his or her sex this might draw attention. Transgender is often used as an umbrella term to signify individuals who defy rigid, binary gender constructions and who express a breaking of culturally prevalent stereotypical gender roles. Transgender people may live full- or part-time in the gender role 'opposite' to their biological sex. Transgenders are of two categories MtoF, male to female and FtoM, female to male. A male-to-female transgender person is referred to as 'transgender woman' and a female-to-male transgender person, as 'transgender man'. This digression is a natural process which they identify on their own. From our study on "transgenders" we come to know that they develop a desire for cross dressing at an early age and also have an urge to change their sex through Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS).

The thought "to be identified" among the mainstream is the constant urge of the transgenders. They are a "double bind" (i.e.) by their own self and by their surroundings. The livelihood for this category is marginal. They resort in taking alms or a sizeable portion is forced to engage in prostitution. The transsexuals also take part in auspicious functions like marriage and birth. Many of them are also good cooks. Many of them are talented in arts and take part in many cultural activities, recitation of folklore and staging of street plays. Some of them spend part of their income on SRS.

Literature, which has different genre, has given a unique place to Feminism. Trauma narrative is a new entrant in the field of literature. Trauma narrative apart from highlighting the traumatic experience it directs the readers to be aware of the social set up against issues related to people who live with it. The role of transgenders in any genre of literature is a big question and it is definitely not on par with other genders. These three - literature, trauma narrative and transgender - have to be intertwined and this is right now possible only by transgender writers like Vidya, Priya Babu, Revathy, Paula Greig and so on.

A normal person, who comes under the gender role category, has various aids and sources to relieve him or her from the stress or mental disorder caused by a trauma. Imagine the case of a transgender, who is born so, undergoes lot of physical and mental conflict during the period of transformation and is eventually traumatised because of our societal setup. Transgenders are cornered by their inner self, their family and also the society, which curtails them from coming out of their shell. Society rather than supporting has alienated them creating a transphobia among the rest of the genders. They face several issues such as: shame, fear, and internalized transphobia; disclosure and coming out; adjusting, adapting, or not adapting to social pressure to conform; fear of relationships or loss of relationships; and self-imposed limitations on expression or aspirations.

The existence of the third gender gender-variant males - who in present times would have been labelled as 'transgender woman' has its roots since ages for which evidences are found in all religious scriptures. Their survival during the kings' reign is also evident through our historical texts. Kama Sutra provides vivid description of sexual life of people with 'third nature' (Tritiya Prakriti).

In India, people with a wide range of transgender-related identities, cultures, or experiences exist – including Hijras, Aravanis, Kothis, Jogtas/Jogappas, and Shiv-Shakthis. Often these people have been part of the broader culture and treated with great respect, at least in the past, although some are still accorded particular respect even in the present

In north India transgenders were identified as a blessed group or messengers of God because they believed that it was God's wish to manifest both masculine and feminine qualities in such people. Transgenders were invited to bless the newly born and the newlywed as their blessings were very powerful.

They are also known for their curse. "It was a firm belief among tirunangais that if you did what I did, cursing your antagonist, he would surely experience financial troubles. Many among the general public, too, believed in this superstition." (Vidya 96).

In India, where these minorities are not even deemed to exist—at least legally—their harrowing plight remains unknown to the heterosexual majority—who, in any case, remain, by and large, not just indifferent but even relentlessly hostile to them. Few members of India's sexual minority communities—gays, lesbians, bisexuals and hijras or the 'third gender'—dare, for fear of being scorned and much worse, to stand up and be publicly identified, leave alone struggle for their rights and the injustice and prejudices that they are haunted with throughout their lives. Gender-rights activists and some human rights groups have only recently begun turning their attention to these communities.

This situation of the transgenders is slowly deteriorating where a kind of transphobia is prevailing in our present world.

Even kids didn't spare me. Once they followed me when
I was on field duty and sang raucous film songs at me.
Who taught them to do this? Where did they learn such
domineering behavior? if you see a tirunangai, attack her,
insult her, make her cry; chase her away whimpering,

screaming – that seemed to be the rule, regardless of race,
religion or creed (Vidya 135)

Transgender youth are exposed to trauma in many ways. Many experience physical and emotional assaults for “coming out,” or fear being found out on a daily basis. Others may engage in at-risk behaviors as a way to cope with confusion about their sexual identity. So many of these children and teens want to share but finding a safe and trusted relationship is a great challenge because the very acknowledgment of same sex attractions and desires may put them at further risk.

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 33)

The trauma of this "double bind" underscores the need for confidentiality and safety from a trusted helper that is the society.

Social exclusion is the major trauma faced by the transgenders. They are restricted from their citizenship, from proper access to education, from employment and excluded from family and society. They are not given proper protection against violence which is incurred to them.

Living Smile Vidya (~~Saravanan~~) in her autobiography *I am Vidya* represents all the traumatic incidents which a transgender faces in “his/her” life. It is a narrative about a woman trapped within a man’s body, this is a story of extraordinary courage and perseverance. Through this book she carves the entire existence of a person who undergoes physical and mental transformation. This story describes the long traumatic journey “ of declaration, of claiming of an identity”. It identifies the agony faced by the soul which is trapped in a body to which it does not identify or belong to. This paper will deal with the insights shared by Vidya regarding the struggle of the transgenders’ recognition and inclusion.

Vidya’s work clearly explains about the struggles a trirunagai faces in “her” life. She starts to narrate the incidents of her life from the phase of her transition “nirvana” that is becoming a proper transgender. This start with “nirvana” makes it clear that she was longing to get rid of her male body. “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). The beginning of her narration makes it clear that she has undergone a terrific trauma in order to make people understand that she is a woman.

The title of all the 15 chapters (*Appa, A time for farewell, Accecept me!, Chatla, I want to live with pride*) by itself explains the trauma she underwent throughout her life. Exclusion from the family and from the family members is another major trauma faced by the transgenders. The perils which they face in life would be reduced to half if they are recognized and bonded by their loved ones. Family is the place which pushes them on the streets. It is like a chain link. The family members, because of fear and shame, are not ready to face the society in which they live. The very thought that aravani or transgender belongs to their family makes them to feel below their social status. The words which Vidya uses to explain her mama’s plight because of her stay in his house is a sample of what the family members of a transgender feel. “Mama castigates me out of sheer frustration...why do you act like a woman here? Aren’t we human, too? Aren’t there people around us? How many questions I have to answer about you! What insults, what humiliation!” (119).

Family members are not ready to accept the transformation which the soul undergoes. Vidya’s childhood struggles to maintain her femininity was even more worse. Her father who was a strong dictator gave no room for simple joys and freedom of childhood. “ home was a virtual prison “ because of the rigid order his father laid. He thrust his dreams on Vidya and wanted to make him an IAS officer. “God knows what fears and anxieties troubled him, but he never allowed me a normal childhood.” (Vidya 16). Vidya at the age of 6 started to realize the femininity within her. She used to enjoy masquerading herself with her sisters dress and in solitude used to dance to music. She was not interested to be identified as a boy and did not wish to have the privilege given to her. The trauma of not able to come out from her shell “her male body” was haunting her. She started to question “what’s wrong with my preference? Why should a boy only wear shirts and trousers? I like skirts and blouses why can’t I wear them? Why do people find something odd in what comes to me naturally?”(Vidya 22).

The trauma which the family has created has a great impact in the minds of the transgender. When they are cornered by the society, family becomes their only resort. When that too becomes a question mark they are left as destitute. “ you can bear most of the troubles of life, but to feel orphaned is to feel a huge loss – self-pity is a strong drug, a venom” (Vidya 97). They always long for the mental support from their family members. Vidya after she underwent her “nirvana” exclaims

Amma, Amma, I have become a woman. I am not Saravanan any more, 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, Maju, Prabha, Appa... Look at me Appa – Look at my dissected body. This is a mere body. Can you see that I can bear all this pain? I can take any amount of pain, Appa. Look at me, Appa Look at me as a woman. accept me as a girl, Appa (9).

The longing to be a part of the family is evident through her screams which comes out of her mind because of her pain and anxiety. Family bonding is what the transgender long for. "Break apart, separate ... these are hard words" especially when they are isolated from their dear ones.

The trauma which they undergo during SRS(sex reassignment surgery), which is legalized in many countries but out of sight in our country, is many folded. There are a very few hospitals which conduct this castration surgery without approval for a huge amount but without expert doctors. For a tirunagai to undergo this surgery is very important because they feel that their male identity is just an accident. They want to become woman as they feel like woman.

If SRS is properly conducted with government approval and support, the burden of the transgenders would subside by all means. Records will have a clear entry of their new gender and name which in turn will enable them to relax in good jobs.

Vidya shares the way she underwent this surgery. It was a life and death moment for her. There are no safety measures or precautionary steps to help those who are suffering. The trauma which the impact of the surgery gave her was boundless. The castration is conducted by injecting local anesthesia where no follow up occurs. She was made to lie on a steel cot on which a newspaper was spread. After the surgery the blood was wiped off and the next patient was called. "I was not even given a proper bed – just a steel cot with a newspaper spread on it. The surgeon gave no guaranteed, no counselling... They castrate you while you are watching. Suture in the next few minutes, clean you with cotton and pack you off to recover "Next!" they call out.... the operation is no different from a procedure performed at the butcher's shop" (Vidya 100). Her spirit to change her body was her only motivation which made her to bear the pain." We crave the surgical procedure that will give us bodily likeness of that female identity" (Vidya 100). The senior hijra's are the only nurse who would take care of the people who undergo this castration.

The traumatic impact which this surgery gave is evident from the incident where Vidya hesitates to undergo her appendicitis operation. "I was so scared of surgery" (Vidya 117). But she was happy in this ordeal of SRS surgery because the discharge certificate carried the following line "Male to Female operation done in Pune" (Vidya 118) the only record which recognized her gender change.

Education was a big boon to Vidya as her father was very keen in educating his son Saravanan. Vidya was also interested in pursuing her studies, but this did not last long. She who was undergoing a kind of transition within herself and it was at this time her interest in studies slowly started to erode. "My innermost thoughts and nature filled with anxiety and fears, I was finding it increasingly difficult to focus on my studies" (Vidya, 29). Unable to bear the pressure given by her father, she rebelled. It was this moment she gained courage and yelled

Stop it, Appa! .. "So far, everything that happened had been as expected, according to the script Appa had perfected for years I had suffered Appa's violence without a word of protest on that occasion, for the first time, I fought back: I shouted at him and pushed him hard" (Vidya 30)

She was more towards literature and theatre than professional studies. Maybe she choose theater so that she can enjoy her drag queen attitude. She pursued her masters in linguistics and was very eager to pursue her PhD. In fact she resorted to studies after her traumatic experience in Pune, because of begging. When arrangements were made for her higher studies by her guru Mu.Ra, she refused to accept it and asked for favour to join the theater. The thought that there would be no one to support her financial needs made her to give up her idea to pursue her higher studies. She was able to forecast the troubles she would face in her ordeal to win her aim.

Many of her friends and her teacher advised her not to change her identity. They highlighted the plight of the transgender in the country. They said after gaining her masters where is the need for her to resort in begging or sex work. They made her understand that even to identify as one of their friends would spoil her

growth. They said that she will be into lot of ridicule , teasing and harassment by the fellow human beings. “ it’s all very well for you to go there regularly.. but make sure people don’t find out you are a female.. don’t go there too often.... But most of them are uneducated. When they go out, they exhibit their femininity quite openly. If you get too close to them people will tease you too.” (Vidya 46)

There are many instances in the book where Vidya brings out the perils behind begging. Vidya who bid farewell and flew to Pune had just these options one is to beg and the other to be sex worker. She was taken care by a senior Nani who often reminded her that linguistics or theater experience would not help to eke out a living and insisted that she goes out to beg. The trauma, which all the tirunangai’s face, when they are asked to beg, cannot be expressed. “Shame, fear, ego, my education, memories of awards and rewards and God knows what else made me pull back every time I tried to put my hand out for alms” (92).

The impact of such horrible life shattered her hopes and thoughts that she belonged to this society. The transgenders have a negative idea about the society they live in, as they are not recognised to lead their life. Their vengeance against the society is obvious from the bitter truth spitted out by Vidya. “the object of everyone’s ridicule for so long, I came to regard all of society as something ridiculous – I came to believe that the world was full of mad men, within which I had to live with my nody, my pain , my sorrows”(Vidya 93)

Transgender’s feel that it is because of the treatment which the society bestows on them, they resort to begging. There is no recognition of their identity and the changes for their employability is also very meager. “When I go out and beg – on the street, in trains, at shops-I consider it my revenge, my claim of compensation from each and every member of the prevailing society. No longer humiliated, I set out on my shop-begging campaign with happiness. (Vidya 93)

The amount of ridicule they face in their venture to beg has in store lot of fatal incidents and accidents which they had to face with a heavy heart. The public who fear them try to shun them. They insult them and at times even hit them. “wasn’t I going through all this trauma for money?” (Vidya 95). Society has traumatized the entire transgender community.

Vidya and her friend Prateeksha were not interested in begging. So they took up a business. They started to sell petty things in the train. They were not welcomed by the “rozwalas”. Their dream to start their own shop came down within days. “ the problem was obviously our gender, not the goods we sold. We couldn’t understand the prejudice. What did it matter who sold the goods, so long as the goods were of acceptable quality and price” (Vidya 110). The society was not ready to help them find their own livelihood. This had a great impact on Vidya and she planned to return to her home town.

The transgender community is not caste biased. They always welcome people with an open heart. In the initial stages it would be difficult for the new tirunangai’s to accommodate with the rest of the people. The senior tirunangai’s would always have a upper hand on the new entrants. “. victims turn tormentors overnight. These people who have been marginalized by the society, insulted, humiliated, even cursed find a semblance of release from their torments by occasionally taunting others.”(Vidya 70). The senior tirunangai’s would have overall control of the money and the whereabouts of the newcomer. The new comer would take up all this with a happy mind as it’s a great relief from the trauma which they underwent before transformation. After the castration it is these old nani’s who take great care of these transgenders. They conduct a function called as “Chatla” in which a Haldi mehendi is applied on the new comer as a ritual announcement for the rest of the crowd. It will be conducted and on the same day a jug of milk will be given to the person and people will accompany the new TG till the sea, where the milk will be poured into the sea. This process signifies the completion of nirvana, the moment of announcing ones identity to nature.

The transgenders have a morse code “clapping” which will help all the aravani’s unite during emergency situations or in their venture of shop-begging. Aravani’s resort to shouting or screaming not with the intention of frightening the people but just to protect themselves from the rest of the world, as they are marginalized and often humiliated. Once a aravani joins the group of elderly nani’s it is very difficult for them to come out of it. Vidya who was not happy with the sales experience in the train ended up in stepping out of Pune and planned to return to her hometown. Stepping out was a great deal because the nani’s would not permit. The trauma which she underwent along with fellow transgender was very huge.

When a tirunangai went missing, a search party invariably landed at the railway station. If caught you really had to face the music. The enquiry that followed was quite a harrowing experience. People who were loving all along could turn quite cruel: and if Nani saw my attempt to leave as an act of betrayal it would spell disaster for me”(Vidya 114)

Vidya during the death of her mother locked up herself in a room, wore girls dress and started to dance to the tune of

I am the king’s daughter,

A fresh new rose.

Will my dreams come true? (Vidya 21)

The death of her mother did not create a great impact on her rather she took that solitude too to enjoy her personal self. Vidya is very much indebted to one of her friend Ilango, with whom she used to enjoy talking about girls. She attributes her liking for him and even dreams that one day she might win his love. "... Ilango was the man who kindled in me the kind of changes that occur in a woman at different stages of her development. Ilango was the man who made me feel whole as a woman" (Vidya 28).

Few incidents which are traumatic for the reader are the only places where a kind of self realization and analysis takes place for Vidya. Words like "terror stricken", "scream", "pain", "tears", "complete mess", "no strength", "refuge", "wet my shorts in fear and shock", "irritating", "hand and legs were trembling", "self – pity", "scared of being spotted by old acquaintances", "overcoming fears caused by earlier experience", ... makes the reader clear about the impact of trauma which is prevailing throughout the text. The trauma which the protagonist Vidya undergoes when she hears people calling her as "Ennada", the word "da" irritates her. "the 'da' in 'ennada' is a familiar form of address meant for a male, and I reacted immediately". (Vidya 115). The saga of struggle clothed in trauma is for the sake of inclusion and recognition. The last chapter "I need to live with Pride" highlights the one and half year mission to change her name in the government records. Through her traumatic narration we can find her struggle to find a "legally enforceable social status" for all the tirunangai's.

Though there are many NGO's to take care of them, though the Tamil Nadu government has given them ration cards, voter id's, given them seats in elections, accommodated them with proper shelter the bigger question arises. To what extent are these really fruitful and effective?

For the transgenders to get out of this trauma the family should act as a great support. Every individual in this society should welcome the third gender. The government should take necessary initiatives to identify them as a human being. It should remove the social stigma on the tirunangai GO No. 377. that tirunangai's are disease-afflicted sex workers.

"Hunger: but for that, no tirunangai would beg on the streets, trains, or market places. 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). It's the society's initiative to open the doors of recognition for these transgenders. Though the present government has recognized them as the "third gender" ... the transgenders feel that it's all in papers and not in real life. Vidya, through this book she carves the entire existence of a person who undergoes physical and mental transformation.

Transgender women require understanding and support of the government, health care professionals, general public as well as their family members. We need to understand and accept that humans are diverse. People have the right to be what they are and what they want to be. For transgender people, the same holds true.

The words of Hartley Coleridge from his poem *No Life Vain*, would make one realize the importance of life and its existence in this universe.

Let me not deem that I was made in vain,
Or that my being was an accident,
Which fate, in working its sublime intent,
Not wished to be, to hinder would not deign.
Each drop uncounted in a storm of rain
Hath its own mission, and is duly sent
To its own leaf or blade, not idly spent

Every life on this universe is created with a purpose just as every drop of rain comes down with the purpose - to fall on its blade of grass. Let us understand that all are God's creation.

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