

## **Struggle for Existence and Marginalization of the Third Gender in *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Gender and sexuality are socially constructed and not natural. Sex is the polarity of anatomy whereas gender is the polarity of appearance and behaviour. Whenever a discussion of gender is presented it mainly takes place about two genders i.e., male and female. The word 'gender identity' too might lead one towards feminism. However, there is another gender which is often neglected. It is the third gender i.e., transgenders who are a complex and internally varied group mostly male born and a few biologically intersex persons, who cross-dress and may or may not undergo voluntary castration. The existence of the third gender is as natural as the existence of male or female. But transgenders are looked down with ridicule, disrespect and are marginalized in the society. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the struggle for existence and marginalization of transgenders in the autobiography of Living Smile Vidya, *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*.

### **KEYWORDS**

Gender; Identity; Third Gender; Transgenders; Struggle for Existence; Marginalization

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. She holds a post-graduate degree from Thanjavur University in Applied Linguistics. She started her career as an electronic data processing assistant and thereby became the first trans-woman in India who worked in a mainstream job rather than working for NGOs. Later she moved to the theatre is the recipient of the prestigious British Council – Charles Wallace India Trust Fellowship to study theatre in the UK. She acted in several short films including *Kandal Pookkal* and *500&5*. She has also acted

in documentaries "Aghrinaigal" and "Butterfly". She was the subject of the award-winning Kannada documentary "Naanu Avanalla . . . Avalu", which is based on her autobiography.

Her autobiography *I Am Vidya: A Transgenders Journey* was written in Tamil and was later translated into seven different languages including English. It is regarded as one of the most brilliant transgender memoirs. It was first published in 2007. It is the first transgender autobiography in India. It showcases the struggle of Saravanan to become Vidya. The struggle includes a lot of physical and mental draining. In addition to

her life, the autobiography also presents the plight of contemporary transgenders like Vidya in India.

### **Struggle for Existence**

Struggle for existence is defined by Dictionary.com as “the competition in nature among organisms of a population to maintain themselves in a given environment and to survive to reproduce others of their kind.” The theory of ‘struggle for existence’ was first formulated in 1798 in science by English demographer and political economist Thomas Malthus. In 1859 the concept of ‘struggle for existence’ was incorporated by English naturalist Charles Darwin in his “Origin of Species”. In his “Origin of Species,” Darwin proposed theory of evolution based on ‘struggle for existence’ and this theory of evolution is strongly relevant and relatable to existentialist thought.

Existentialism proposes that a person’s actions and free will determine their development and meaning to exist. Existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre claim that a set of individual actions determine existence. “They claim that people are born with no purpose or definition and must act through choice and free will to bring meaning to an intrinsically purposeless life” (Morrison 1). Darwin’s belief that there existed a “struggle for existence” goes along the same vein as the existentialist thought that there is a struggle for finding meaning. According to Darwin existence is dependent upon the struggle for life and competition among species for the availability of resources and ultimately survival.

In our society transgenders struggle a lot to exist. Though transgenders have a lot of history in India they are constantly suppressed and marginalized. Historically they were a revered group thought of not equal status with other two genders. But nowadays the situation is different. “The current status of

Transgender in India is pathetic. Due to the denial of education and basic amenities like food, shelter and water, they were forced to take up either begging or sex work.” (Subapriya 60) In such hostile conditions, a few transgenders managed to climb the ladder of success after much hardship and struggle. Vidya is one such transgender who struggled for her existence and establishment of her identity in a hostile society like India.

### **Vidya’s Struggle for Existence**

When observed the above definition of “Struggle for Existence” it is clear that it includes a struggle to exist. Mere existence in this world itself includes a lot of struggle. And for transgenders like Vidya, whose existence is hated by many and supported neither by family nor friends, the struggle is intense. As said above according to existentialists and Darwin there is a struggle for finding meaning and a purpose to exist. In Vidya’s, *I am Vidya* one can see a lot of struggle that Vidya goes through in order to find who she actually is and find a meaning to her life. The excruciating struggle was both psychological and physical. Vidya was born as a boy on 25 March 1982. She was named as Saravanan by her parents in fulfilment of her father’s vow to name his first son after Muruganan’s name. Vidya was born after two girls and her father was extremely happy. But gradually Vidya started to feel different. Most transgender people face great challenges and a lot of struggle 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. Vidya too struggled a lot to hide her gender and exist in the gender of her biological birth. In Vidya’s words,

I was a 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 the particular

trouble to remain inconspicuous . . . I lead a false life of strenuous attempts to swagger like a man and speak like one. (Vidya 33)

Vidya used to reveal her true self in isolation. The change started when she was six or seven years old. She started wearing her elder sister's clothes and sang and dance locking herself inside, once everyone in the house had gone out. When she was caught, elders used to think that she was doing some mischievous imitation of her sisters. "Grandma probably thought that I was doing some playful imitation. Hardly did she know the true story, did she?" (Vidya 18)

Movies had a profound influence on Vidya. She loves watching the heroines gracefully dance to the beautiful songs. She used to imagine herself to be a heroin and imitate them at home. To dress like a heroine she used to take help of her sister's skirts and midis, her eyeshadows, bangles, bindis and costume jewels. As there was no availability of lipstick she used to rub coconut oil to lips as a gloss. She used to wear a towel around her head and twirl the long rear portion as a braid to replace the long plaited hair of the heroines. Getting all ready, she used to dance in secrecy. But sometimes she got caught dancing in girls clothes and her family used to think that as a childish act. "Though I indulged in my antics in careful secrecy, I got caught in the act sometimes. My family did not take it too much seriously in the beginning. They put it down as innocent pranks of a child and scolded me occasionally, but they saw no cause for alarm at the time." (Vidya 20)

The strain Vidya took to hide her identity is too much that all the time she used to look for a lonely space and time where no one would take notice of her. She was so much troubled with her inner self that sometimes all she looked for was an opportunity to sneak out and be her true self. Her mother passed away in an accident when Vidya was a small

girl and Vidya was very young to fully comprehend the extent of her loss. Even in such a situation with her mother's body lying in the home all Vidya did was to slip into a room feeling that no one will observe her and then put on her sister's clothes and dance to the tunes on the radio. But to her shock, she was discovered and her secret was out for everyone. Her father thrashed her for dancing like a girl at such an unhappy moment. After two years to this, Vidya says that her habits remained same but the way people looked at her differed. "My old ways – the same habits which had been dismissed lightly as childish pranks – were now viewed with disfavour. Chitti and Radha scolded me for my acts, and Appa thrashed me regularly." (Vidya 22)

The internal struggle Vidya faced at that young age to understand her existence was too much to handle for her. She often questioned herself. "What's wrong with my preferences? 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 more she tried to come to terms with her inner self she faced trouble both at home and at school. People started teasing her the way she walks and talks. Though she tried to hide her true self she had to face a lot of humiliation and embarrassment at school on a daily basis. "Even though I was extra careful not to reveal myself, my irrepressible femininity exposed me" (Vidya 24). As she turned seventeen her obsession for heroines and cross-dressing increased rather than reducing. But she began to comfort herself saying that, all that was because she felt like a woman inside and because she wanted to be a woman. So the dawn of the fact that she wanted to be a woman started by that time and from that point the struggle she took to exist in her true self-was increased. She started picking up unisex clothes and was sure to do her antics in

complete secrecy more careful than ever before.

Existentialists believe that in life there is a struggle for finding meaning and a purpose to exist. Similarly, in Vidya's life, there is a lot of struggle to find meaning and a purpose to exist. She struggled a lot to understand and establish her identity. Once she understood what her identity was, she struggled a lot to attain her nirvana – the ultimate peace. Though she has been realizing and understanding the difference in her since childhood it was during her post-graduation in university that she found that her meaning and purpose, to exist, was to become a complete woman. "University years were a time of introspection. I thought a great deal about myself and the troubles and woes of my existence. With this warning bell going off inside all the time, I was plagued by the constant fear that people were watching me." (Vidya 44) University days were the happy days for her free from teasing and harassment and where she completely realized what she was. "I was in search of myself, going beyond my confusion over my gender." (Vidya 49) It happened when she met Senthil a transgender like her but who prefer to stay male but lead a secret life of a female. They are called Kothis and he introduced her to an NGO where Vidya met a lot of people like her and shared their experiences. However, she never revealed her true self to them but understood what she was completely and the ways to become a whole woman that is through Nirvana – castration of male genitals. During her university days, she joined the theatre and played female roles to perfection. She says that ". . . it was a consolation, giving me the comfort and peace of mind to perform without fear or self – consciousness." (Vidya 44)

Once Vidya realized the meaning and purpose of her existence, she started visiting the NGOs more often and talk to other thirunangais (transgenders in Tamil Nadu are

called as Tirunangais) or transgenders. She then moved to bus stands where thirunangais gathered in groups to beg and learned more about their life. In India, the status of a thirunangai alias transgender is awful that they were allowed only either to beg or sex work. The moment a family realizes that there is a thirunangai in their family they immediately disowns them and the shattered ones are forced either to beg or sex work left with no other option in order to survive or exist. Hence, for a thirunangai to exist they have to struggle for food and shelter as it is not easy for them to find them both. Vidya gives the readers a clear picture of the life of a thirunangai. The struggles they face in the society for a mere living.

Struggle for the existence of her femininity increased by the time Vidya finished her MA linguistics as first in the university. She dreamt of pursuing doctoral studies in dramatics but her femininity which has been subdued so long started to intensify.

. . . now my femininity was growing more intense by the day. I was quite unsettled by the fiery conflict within me; a conflict I was unable to comprehend. There were several choices before me: one, I wanted to be a theater person; two, I was obliged to take up a job of my father's choice; three, and most importantly, my most virulent desire of all, my urge to follow my natural inclination to break free of the maleness I had been born with and be a woman. (Vidya 55)

Thus Vidya felt that the most important thing in her life is to break free of the maleness and become a woman. When she shared her problem with Sri another Kothi he suggested her not to neglect her career but to concentrate on her studied for time being and be a Kothi and satisfy her feminine urge in secrecy the way kothis do. But Vidya never wanted to be a kothi she wanted to be a

thirunagai, a woman. She couldn't tolerate the fact that she was a man anymore.

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 psychological struggle for Vidya to decide and determine her identity. She was then suggested many of her friends to whom she opened up not to get into trouble with her life but concentrate on her career. But she could no longer be what she was. Even though she knew that the path she has chosen was very difficult for an educated person like her she wanted to establish her identity at any cost. Without informing her family what she was actually on to she moved out. With the help of her friends, she enquired many NGOs for sex change operation, where she experienced 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) But Vidya hated to be a man in public and women in private and found wearing men's clothes disgusting.

However, none of these advises and warnings had affected Vidya in any way. She was so troubled by her double identity. Her existence lies in her womanhood and she was ready to take any struggle for her existence. Nobody's advice could shake her resolve. She had clearly declared to everyone that all she wanted in her life was to become 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) Such was the determination of Vidya. She knew in order to survive and achieve her womanhood the only way was by begging or becoming a sex worker. Such was the condition 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) With such determination, Vidya moved to Pune where she was adopted by an elder thirunagai and there she stayed with other thirunagais in a slum in tin sheet houses and begged in the streets and trains until she earned the money that was enough for her sex change operation. Thus, being a degree holder, Vidya struggled to exist as a woman by begging on the streets, at traffic signals and in trains. But she was happy because she was begging to become a woman and is going to beg as a woman.

Thus after earning enough amounts to undergo her sex operation, Vidya left to Cuddapah accompanied with other thirunagais who wanted to undergo sex change operation along with an older ayiah. Vidya calls sex change operation as NIRVANA – the ultimate peace. But that operation itself was a big struggle as it was nothing more than mere butchering of the male genitals in an unhygienic environment. And there was no guarantee of life after the operation. But for Vidya and other thirunagais, it can be said that Nirvana is a struggle for finding meaning and a 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. But that physical pain and struggle had no effect on her mental peace. 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)

Vidya struggled accordingly throughout her life to exist as a woman. Thomas Malthus in 1798 in "Essay on Population" when he formulated the theory "Struggle for Existence" for the first time ever, argued that existence of life is a perpetual struggle for room and food. For Vidya existence of life is a perpetual struggle for her gender identity and acceptance. In order to achieve that she also had to struggle for room and food.

### **Marginalization:**

Marginalization is a post-colonial concept. Dominant features of Post-colonialism include the first stages of "Confrontation", "Transgression" and "Opposition", "Resistance" and "Revival". Hence, postcolonial literature may be called as the literature of the marginalized people at various levels and fields. Therefore, it can also be said that post-colonial literature is one way or the other literature of marginalized.

Marginalize is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "To treat someone or something as if they are not important". Marginalization is to place something or someone in a position of marginal importance, influence or power. It is the process that flows

through marginalized groups. Our society always puts some sections depending on various reasons in marginalization. Societal marginalization and spatial marginalization are the two important conceptual frameworks of marginalization. Societal marginalization is associated with social conditions that are classified under various labels such as stigmatized and oppressed under the name of race, class, caste, culture, power, and gender etc. Spatial marginalization is related to the geographical infrastructure of a group. The present paper looks at the societal marginalization based on Gender and its effect on establishing an individual identity.

### **Marginalization of Vidya's identity**

In her autobiography *I am Vidya*, Vidya describes how thirunangais or transgenders are treated in India. Despite their long history atrocities on thirunangais are so common in India. In Vidya's words,

They don't seem to realize that tirunangais eat, sleep, work hard and live just like anyone else. People look down on them, approach them in a domineering spirit, with contempt, with disgust, as if very proximity with them could pollute. What sin have tirunangais committed? If to be born male and feel female is a sin, it is nature's creation. What can we do about it? (81)

In our society, there is no social security to transgenders. The only thing they experience is marginalization and hatred from the society. In her life as a thirunagai, while begging in streets, from shops and on trains Vidya faced a lot of discrimination and humiliation. There were times when she was abused physically by passengers for asking alms. In "Living Smile Vidya's Traumatic Experiences – an Overview" it is said that "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.” (Ramya, Cauveri 33)

Transgenders are so marginalized that our society did not let them do anything other than begging or prostitution. Firstly, no one employs them in their houses, offices, factories or anywhere. So they have to look up for an employment on their own in order to survive. And all they could find is begging and are encouraged in prostitution. “Hunger: but for that, no tirunangai 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)

However, this doesn't mean that they are not allowed to do anything on their own but what lacks is acceptance and encouragement from the society. Vidya being a postgraduate never liked begging. It was very difficult for her to beg, in the beginning. But in order to become a woman, she had no other option except begging. “. . . even as my brain told my hand to reach out, the hand refused to obey! Tears were welling up in my eye. 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) After her Sex Reassignment Surgery, Vidya and her friend Prateeksha decided to take up a business as they both were not interested in begging. When they put their idea before their Nani, she was surprised but was impressed at their determination to alter their livelihood. She blessed them, warning against the risks. They started to sell petty things on the train but were not welcomed by the “rozwalas” (daily

commuters). 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.

In our society hatred towards transgenders or in that case towards any marginalized sections is so imbibed that even kids follow it. Vidya has experienced the same in her life. After her sex reassignment surgery i.e., sex change operation Vidya could no longer beg for her living and returned to Chennai to look for a job. When she was working in a bank in Madurai after her Sex Reassignment Surgery she had very terrible experiences whenever she went on a field trip. Not only men but women and kids also laugh at her. One such was

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 behaviour? 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 and creed. (Vidya 135)

Not just this but she had to face many insults in her life. Everywhere she went she had to suffer barbs, ignore insults and brush aside hurts. She had to hide her tears from the teasing public just to show off a strong face and not to look weak. Vidya suffered a lot of trauma from all these experiences. Not just Vidya every transgender in this country goes through this trauma on a daily basis. They are treated as untouchables. 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)

### Conclusion

To conclude Vidya's life is a struggle for existence in the sense that she struggled to establish her gender identity and acceptance from the family and society. In order to establish her gender identity and achieve her goal to become a woman, she struggled for food and shelter. She had to survive in the world where she was always marginalized, mocked at and harassed. ". . . they (transgenders) suffer persistent inequalities in the aspects of life at the hands of society. They are subjected to trans-phobic attacks which result in non-acceptance in the society." (Tanupriya 3) *I am Vidya*, the autobiography of Vidya does not talk just about Vidya alone but it mirrors the life and fate of transgenders in India especially south India. Transgenders are neither bad people nor criminals. All they need and deserve is a normal life. Their expectations are simple as that of Vidya.

I wanted to live a normal life 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. We cannot even describe our problems as those of the minorities. All we need is equal opportunity to work and earn a livelihood. Only when people approach us with evil intent and harass us do we have to take specific steps with negative outcomes. (Vidya 130)

That was and to a large extent is the plight of transgenders in our society. Though the Supreme Court of India in 2014 delivered a landmark judgment directing the government to take appropriate steps to protect the rights of the transgender people, including the option of according reservation in education and employment, a lot has to be put into practice. The marginalization towards transgenders needs to be ended and their identity needs to be respected.

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