

Harrowing Experiences to Triumph in Living Smile Vidya's *I am Vidya: A Transformative Journey*

P. Mary Joshy,
M. Phil Scholar,
Department of English,
Holy Cross College (Autonomous),
Nagercoil.
Dr. H. Jimsy Asha,
Assistant Professor of English,

Holy Cross College (Autonomous),
Nagercoil.

Abstract

Living Smile Vidya is a famous transgender writer. Through her autobiography, she portrays gender issues, social exclusion and how she overcomes the difficulties through education. She is a transgender activist and motivates others to achieve greatness through intelligence, determination and confidence. Transgender community faces marginalization, social isolation, unemployment, discrimination, depression, *nirvana* etc. They should have the equal rights to lead a peaceful life. Through proper education only, transgender community will overcome all the difficulties and achieve higher level.

Key Words: Transgender, social exclusion, marginalization, discrimination, social isolation, *nirvana*.

Transgender community is fronting many trials and tribulations in the society. Most of them are thrown out from their family and have no economic sources. They are ill-treated by the brutal society and are not considered as normal human beings. For the fulfillment of their life, they beg, go for bar dances and do sex work. People ignore their rights and restrict them from accessing education, health services, and public spaces. They live in isolated areas and they are silenced by the majority. Many transgender communities do not get the chance to study and they find it difficult to get jobs.

Transgender people are often prone to many problems. These transgender people not only face problems after their metamorphosis, but also during their early childhood. Some people lose the childhood pleasures and have no freedom to play with other children. Transgenders have darker childhood memories.

It prickles their happiness. In Vidya's life, she lost her happy childhood because of her father's brutal behaviour. He expects Vidya to become an I.A.S Officer. He makes her to do the third grade exercises when she is still in the first grade. She explains her father's behaviour

I began to resent Appa's constant harassment---both mental and physical. I knew he was only doing what was good for me, but losing the simple joys and freedom other children enjoyed irritated me. Was a childhood without games worth living? Home was a virtual prison---even the love of my mother and sisters could not bend its bars. (Vidya 14-15)

Vidya compares her home to a prison. She does not have a peaceful childhood. Vidya's birth brings happiness to her family. Her initial name is Saravanan and she is born with male genital organs biologically.

From Vidya's birth itself, she carries the burden of responsibilities and dreams of the family. Too much expectation makes her stressful. She suppresses her desires of wearing girls' dress and ornaments. Suppressing the desires is like a volcano, which is ready to erupt inside the psyche. People store the ignored thoughts in the sub-conscious mind. They want to dump it in the corner of their mind, but it influences the behaviour of themselves from a darker side. They do not express their feelings but they suffer with anger, stress and disappointments within themselves. All the stress and anger evolve from the dark corner of suppressed thoughts. It is dangerous and it drives them to insanity. If they express the suppressed thoughts, they will feel free in their mind. When Vidya's mother's dead body laid out in a cot, Vidya feels that no one notices her. She goes into the middle house and puts on her sister Manju's skirts and starts to dance in a closed room. Her suppressed thoughts erupt like a volcano and she dances in the female attire during her mother's funeral. No one knows her inner trauma of longing to behave as a woman. After finishing her studies, she boldly takes the decision to leave her home and to transform into a new gender.

Death is inevitable in human life. People who lose their dear and near ones suffer due to the eternal rest which cause the everlasting pain, but the pain decreases day by day. But in the case of transgender people, the idea of death is quite different. The impact of their death becomes deeply imprinted in their hearts. Vidya loses her mother at the age of eleven, because of an accident. Her mother Veeramma is a brave and hard working woman as her name meant 'brave woman'. Her mother's loss brings her immense pain. She has the hope that her mother may understand her gender conflicts. Then, her sister Radha plays the mother role in her life.

Teenage is the prominent stage in molding the behaviour of humans. Before the gender transformation, transgender people have to face several traumas to achieve gender transformation. Vidya also feels feminine from the age of six. She has the confusion of her gender identity. Because of the confusion and fear, she does not concentrate on studies. She says “In the new class, I was no longer the keen student of earlier years. Where it was a question of lack of interest or one aptitude deficiency, I was hardly able to concentrate on my studies...My innermost thoughts and nature filled with anxiety and fears, I was finding it increasingly difficult to focus on my studies”(Vidya 29). Her depression on her gender identity makes her to prepare to hang herself from the ceiling fan. Almost all the transgender people try to commit suicide in some occasions, because of confusion and loneliness.

Transgender community craves for true love but their attempts in achieving true love ends in vain. Transgender people are mostly cheated by their mate, because of lack of bearing child and being afraid of the society. Vidya loves Ilango during twelfth standard. She has the confusion whether her feelings is love or lust. He is the man who makes her feel whole as a woman. She voices out for legal marriage of transgender community, but she does not want to marry and to behave like a typical wife. She wants a baby from her womb, but she knows it is not practical. She longs for being a mother. In an interview she tells “Personally I want to have a relationship but I don’t want to end up as a wife to someone. I want to have a baby of my own like 9 months in womb. The process of a baby delivering from my own body and stuff...I am just dying for it” (Monika).

Transgender people’s gender transformation is the most important incident in their life. *Nirvana* or castration is one of the most traumatic incidents of transgender community. Vidya longs for *nirvana*. Her dreams are going to be fulfilled through begging on the streets to achieve an end. She knows that fifty percentage of possibilities to live after the operation. There is no proper medical test before *nirvana*, and they test her blood for AIDS. This process is also money minded, because if they have AIDS, they have to pay extra two thousand rupees. There is no proper arrangement in the operation theatre. The room smells strange. In the pre-operative stage, they have more confusion about life and death. This stage is compared with last judgment day, whether to receive the invitation from the heaven or hell. Vidya is sad about the timing of *nirvana*. She expects one to two hours will take for the operation, but it ends within twenty minutes. It shows the careless treatment. The pain is unbearable, so she curses the doctor who has done the

operation and wants to kill the doctor and his helper. It shows her immense painful condition. She mentions it as instant death.

Vidya begins her story by mentioning harrowing incident of sex reassignment surgery in Cuddapah. While reading the experience of Vidya, the readers also experience the immense pain in their psyche. Vidya speaks truthfully about her feeling before the surgery: “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 that end. How could I sleep now, with my dream about to be fulfilled tomorrow?” (Vidya 3). She could not bear the pain, but her inner peace makes her to bear. She painfully expresses her feeling: “My abdomen seemed to be on fire. I couldn’t move my arms and legs. The pain was unbearable, however hard I tried to ease it” (Vidya 8-9). Her physical trauma changes her psyche to be happy. She wants to express her happiness to become woman to her parents and siblings. She can take any amount of pain for transition of woman, because she wants to be a woman.

Vidya is neglected by her family and they reject her new gender identity. Even though, her elder sister loves a lot, she also fails to give residence. Her classmates and neighbours tease her and call her by derogatory names. Educators should learn about transgender students by acknowledging their difficulties and giving suggestions to overcome the confusion and fear. But teachers are showing negative attitude towards the transgender students. They do not have vast knowledge on transgender issues. They fail to give awareness of gender identity. They too criticize the effeminate speech and behaviour of transgender students. Vidya is offended by the classmates, other students, neighbours as well as teachers. She expresses her painful feeling that “My effeminate speech and behaviour, the fact that I preferred the company of girls, drew out the worst in them—they, like my schoolmasters, started using my femininity as an excuse to insult me. It made me wary of the external world and increased my loneliness” (Vidya 24). The teacher should be a role model of the students to behave reliable and trustworthy. Transgender students want safe and caring environments. They do not tolerate or endure the educators’ negative attitude towards them. It affects them severely and this trauma upsets their psyche.

Transgenders’s main job is to move, going from door to door in search of alms. They collect alms from market places, shops, hotels or at traffic signals etc. They form a group to beg in the train for their self-protection. Vidya begs in the train for her *nirvana*. She feels ashamed while begging and she says about begging “for the first fifteen days of my begging career, my extreme diffidence made it difficult for me to

put my hand out in supplication---especially for alms. Shame, fear, ego, my education, memories of awards and rewards and God know what else made me pull back every time I tried” (Vidya 92). There is no economic security for transgender community in this country. Vidya feels ashamed of begging.

Before the gender transformation, transgender people fear about treatment and having frustration of changed legal documents. For example, driving license, passport, titles of property, diplomas, birth certificate etc. have to be changed. Vidya faces many challenges to change her name from Saravanan to Living Smile Vidya. Her application is rejected by the Tamil Nadu Stationery and Printing Department and she mentions her sex change operation. With the help of Madurai’s best advocate and tirunangai Priya Babu, she gets the judgment of choosing male or female names as their gender. But it takes one and a half year to change her name legally. While getting the name change, she undergoes much verbal abuse not from men, but sometimes women also. Some of the tirunangais get voter ID, because of this judgment.

Transgender community undergoes the social isolation from the society. Social isolation is a state of complete or near complete lack of contact between an individual and society. It is different from loneliness. It includes lack of communication with family, avoidance of others and friends. It leads to an individual into negative self-esteem. It changes the human mind and takes the decision of suicide. A lack of social relationships impacts the development of brain’s structure. Social isolation is caused by physical disabilities. The society isolates the transgender people from the society. Vidya does not have friends in the new higher secondary school. She feels alienated in the school atmosphere. She has no friends and no one to understand her. She is stressful to hide her feminine identity and she knows that it will affect the education. Classmates humiliate her in several occasions. She wants to live in a happy and secure place, but the social isolation hurts her much.

Transphobia is a range of negative attitudes feelings or actions towards the transgender people. People who do not conform to society’s gender expectation; they will suffer by emotional disgust, fear, violence, anger or discrimination similar to racism and sexism. It creates stress and suicide. Narrow-minded people do not accept the transsexual of feminine or masculine. Vidya faces abusive words while begging in the train. One of the commuters treats her in a disgusting language to question about her begging. When four or five men severely attack in the train, none of the onlookers make any attempt to rescue her. They feel happy to watch the fun. They do not have humanity to stop the violence. These incidents make the transgender persons to be afraid of their gender identity. They feel unsecured and threatened. Transphobia

happens because there is no proper education and understanding of gender identity. Therefore, the community shows hatred and violence towards transgender people.

Lack of financial condition is the greatest problem among the transgender community. Lack of education, inability to access proper employment is the causes for poverty of transgender community. It leads to begging and sex work. They are not able to afford basic living necessities and force into doing drug sales and sex work. It causes violence and arrest. Most of the transgender people are school dropouts. During childhood, they are insulted not only by fellow students but also by teachers and they are unable to complete their education. Even educated transgender people face the unemployment because of their gender identity. Vidya says painfully

India freed herself sixty-six years ago. Amidst our achievements and failures, democracy has remained strong and intact. Dalits have a voice, feminists are heard---they can hold rallies, demand their rights. But transgenders are the Dalits of Dalits, the most oppressed women among women--- they enjoy no equality, no freedom, no fraternity. They continue to lead a wretched life, devoid of pride and dignity. (Vidya 136-137)

Vidya hunts a job for her livelihood. After returning from Pune, she stays in her sister's house. Her *mama* (uncle) believes that Vidya could not get a job. He questions that "who will employ a person like you in a sari?" (Vidya 119). Discouragement sucks the energy of a person. According to J.R.Miller, discouragement makes the hard path-much harder; and the heavy load- much heavier. Vidya wants a job according to her education and her talent. Her wish is that transgender people obtain safe job and economic freedom. She opposes the ways of NGO in India and says: "No India NGO had fought to liberate tirunangais from begging and sex work. What kind of rehabilitation was it to tell them, 'Go on being sex workers, but do it safely'?" (Vidya 123). Her searching job is a long time process and she gets a job in a private bank. To overcome the trauma of unemployment, transgender should be educated and courageously seek job. The society must change their understanding of gender differences.

Exclusion from the family is the problem faced by the transgender community. Family bond is a solution for many trials in life. It is a strong foundation to strengthen the relationships. Healthy family members should be selfless in their behavior so that they can form a lovable and peaceful life. If the family members have a problem, others should help the member to come out from the problem and give solution for that. People are fearful of having a transgender in their family as they are worried about their social

status. The most terrible trauma of transgender community is seclusion of the family. When the society refuses their rights and the family has the responsible to soothe them and providing special efforts to come out of the difficulties. Transgender people do not bear the troubles of life without their family and they feel orphaned. It is a challenging task to face all the gender issues as a loner.

God creates human beings to live in peace and with love. People have differences in colour, language and gender but are in heart. They should consider everyone as equal because in front of God there is no gender and class. Understanding the difficulties and accepting the reality makes life beautiful. People should not underestimate others, especially transgender community. They should avoid the discrimination, sexual abuse, physical assault, verbal abuse and social isolation. They should understand the psychological issues and challenges faced by the transgender community. Acceptance is the key note for a change in the transgender community.

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