



Transgressions of Transgender: A Reading of I Am Vidya:

A Transgender's Journey by Living Smile Vidya

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ABSTRACT

Blurring the boundaries of race, gender, nationality, and sexuality has become a common denominator in defining personal identity in the twenty-first century. Exploding previous notions of these categories as fixed and static, artists today are taking an active role in exposing them as mere constructions. The purpose of this study is to explore the resistance strategies that trans-genders utilize when met with adversity and the ways that transgenders see their trans-identity as providing them with a form of strength and resilience. My case of study, Living Smile Vidya, was once transphobic, fearing to reveal her gender identity. Vidya, through this book carves out the entire existence of a person who undergoes physical and mental transformation. Her experiences transformed 'Vidya' to 'Living Smile Vidya' and enables her to resist social discrimination.

Keywords: gender, transgender, identity, resistance.

INTRODUCTION

“There exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed.” - Georges Bataille

Blurring the boundaries of race, gender, nationality, and sexuality has become a common denominator in defining personal identity in the twenty-first century. Exploding previous notions of these categories as fixed and static, artists today are taking an active role in exposing them as mere constructions. Nevertheless, transgressing these boundaries is still a delicate dance, and individuals who succeed in walking the line between identity categories occupy a precarious position. The purpose of this study is to explore the resistance strategies that transgenders utilize when met with adversity and the ways that transgenders see their trans-identity as providing them with a form of strength and resiliency. Transgenders are often analyzed from a pathologizing lens within the sociological and psychological literature. I wish to investigate the ways that transgenders are currently pushing back against the oppressive forces that they encounter every day in hopes of increasing awareness of transgenders' resilience and strength within the sociological and psychological fields.

Terminology

Transgender is often used to refer to people who “do not conform to prevailing expectations about gender” by presenting and living the gender that is not assigned to them at birth or by presenting and living gender in ways that may not be readily intelligible in terms of more traditional conceptions of gender. Transsexual is often used to refer to individuals who use hormonal and/or surgical technologies to alter their bodies to conform to their gendered sense of self in ways that may be construed as at odds with the sex assigned at birth or in ways that may not be readily intelligible in terms of traditional conceptions of sexed bodies.

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The term 'queer' has moved from a pejorative to symbolize a new identity category within the LGBT community and a catch-all word for those who resist traditional ways of identifying their sexual orientation and/or gender identity within popular culture. Queer theory is built upon Derrida's (1965) theory of deconstruction as it is applied to gender - that which society has assumed about sexual orientation, bodies and gender is not, 'Truth' transcendent, but instead is "dependent upon other small 't' truths, and that it is culturally constructed" (Wilchins, 2004, p. 44). Queer theory said that there is an interval between what a subject "does" (role-taking) and what a subject "is" (the self). So despite its title the theory's goal is to destabilise identity categories, which are designed to identify the "sexed subject" and place individuals within a single restrictive sexual orientation.

Transliterature is transgender fiction designated so by the narrative and not the author's identity. These are works that have a transgender protagonist. This is significant because most trans characters that appear in books and film are secondary characters or antagonists. Transliterature is considered predominantly to be connected really explicitly to transgender authorship. I believe that trans people are the most qualified to be writing about their own experiences and that the core of this sub-genre of queer literature should be from their voices and perspectives, as opposed to content featuring trans characters and experiences written from the perspectives of those outside of their community.

Literature on Resilience and Resistance

There is limited literature that addresses the challenges that trans individuals and their families face. Biblarz and Savci (2010) stated that "academic research on trans people and their family relationships is almost nonexistent" (p. 489). Much of the literature that does exist comes from a pathologizing perspective of trying to discover the ontology of trans existence, often blaming parents and other family members, as opposed to a strengths-based perspective of trans individuals and their families (Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996).

Although there is a lack of literature that focuses on the resilience and resistance of the trans community, this perspective is important to understand trans identity and experiences further (Mizock & Lewis, 2008). Much of the current literature on the trans liberation movement and trans identity comes from a pathologizing or negative lens by focusing on the oppressive systems that trans individuals face without highlighting the strength, perseverance and creativity that this community and political movement already possesses. Despite the lack of literature, the trans liberation movement and trans individuals are resisting oppressions which are identified as five commonalities across different systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. The five faces of oppression include exploitation, powerlessness, systemic violence, cultural imperialism and marginalization within the economic, social, educational, medical, mental health and familial spheres in a variety of ways, including utilizing the resiliency of trans individuals and the community.

With an understanding of the literature surrounding the oppressions that trans individuals face in multiple areas of society, including within the economic, social, educational, medical, and familial spheres, I wish to continue to look at the ways that trans people have resisted these oppressions.

Literature Review

The book I will focus on to make a case for this is I am Vidya, an autobiography by Living Smile Vidya. I think it can be useful to look at it as transgender literature as it is a compelling narrative about a woman trapped within a man's body. The writer, Vidya, belonged to the Arunthathiyar caste in Andhra Pradesh though they were settled in Chennai. Her mother would have a job everyday doing street cleaning as a government worker, and then do domestic work on the side, in several houses for a couple days of the week. Her father was an alcoholic and his income contribution to the family was only 40%. She was a

woman in her heart as a child, even as she was being given male privilege. She hated it because she dearly loved her sisters and mothers [her biological mother as well as stepmother]. She identified with them and was so angry that her sisters didn't get the same things as her. She was mistaken to be male and couldn't yet articulate that she was a girl and so she was educated much more than her sisters. She pursued her masters in linguistics and was very eager to pursue her PhD. She was more inclined towards literature and theatre than professional studies. Before her nirvana [sex change operation] she was definitely anxious to prove her femininity. She had a lot of these thoughts about the injustice of the oppression against women and transgender but she was struggling from day to day to just get enough food to eat, to eat as little as possible so she could save anything extra she made from begging. She couldn't be active in fighting for anything but survival. After her nirvana, she felt physically like a woman and then, it became easier for her to survive and to start to question her own model of femininity. With age also, her understanding of these things improved and she began to question femininity and masculinity and fixed gendered roles and behaviors more strongly.

Oppressions and Resistance

This section will describe both the oppression trans individuals face and their modes of resistance in each of these spheres: Economic, Social, Educational, Medical, Mental health and Family

Economic Sphere

Many trans individuals experience discrimination within the economic sphere. Many trans individuals experience housing discrimination, which may lead to increased rates of homelessness among trans individuals. Additionally, trans individuals often face employment discrimination. To state Vidya "I regarded myself as a girl- a woman- though in their eyes I was a male. That was wrong. When I demand that they henceforth treat me as a woman, address me as one, interact with me as with a woman, conflict arises; they refuse to accept me as I am. When people cannot accept my gender as I feel it, how can I continue to live with them, even if they are my own people?" This is an example of how the trans individuals lose their home and get isolated. About employment, trans individuals called tirunangais in India are mistreated at work which often leads to difficulty in finding or keeping a job. Vidya reflected in her work "I knew clearly what I was going to do- beg, plain and simple. As long as I did not want to be a sex worker, begging was my only option."

Resistance

Despite the economic discriminations, trans individuals prepare themselves to face these oppressions. Through the literature of their experiences society has started changing their attitudes towards trans individuals. In I am Vidya, Vidya gets employed in the banking sector which shows that she withstood all the discriminations and survived.

Social Sphere

Trans individuals are also subject to an increased risk of being the victims of violent crimes. People find it difficult to accept the trans individuals naturally. Nobody is to be blamed as they are representatives of a world of men and women. Vidya points out her experience of the physical harassment she had during her train-begging. She says "one of them held my arms and intertwined them between the stairs of the ladder to the upper berth; another pulled my hair; a third thug whipped me with the buckled end of his belt, hitting my face. His wild swing found my cheekbone and I started bleeding. It hurt like hell, but I didn't weep. I shouted angrily at them." The loud talk and shouting are the tools they used for self-defense.

Resistance

In India, amidst our achievements and failures, democracy has been strong and intact. There are rights and rules for Dalits, women, tribals and so on. Transgenders are mostly oppressed and no legal rules exist. But these days activists like Living Smile Vidya through their literature have started fighting for their rights which will help them to be legally approved and recognized and will enable them to walk freely in public.

Educational Sphere

Violence directed at trans individuals also occur within the educational system. Trans adolescents experience discrimination and violence in school at higher level than lesbian, gay, or bisexual students. Unsafe and discriminatory school environments impact students' performance and attendance, with more than half of trans students that experience high levels of verbal and physical harassment reporting, that they missed school for safety reasons. Past experiences of harassment and violence in schools are also related to an increased rate of substance use, with some trans participants who had experienced school violence or harassment because of their gender identity reporting that they used alcohol or drugs to cope with the effects of discrimination, compared to those who had not experienced harassment. Students who experience harassment and bullying at school have higher rates of both depression and suicide attempts, with more than half of trans students who had been harassed or assaulted while in school reporting having attempted suicide. An increased risk for suicide ideation and attempts extends into adulthood for trans individuals.

Resistance

Trans youth have resisted bullying and harassment by finding and forming a community within their schools. Trans youth have also resisted harassment and bullying by seeking out alternative school options that they feel offer a safer and more accepting environment.

Medical system

Trans individuals often experience discrimination when attempting to access medical services. Even when overt harassment is not present, quality and educated medical care about trans issues may be difficult to locate. Also in countries where sex change operations are legal, many tests are performed on the person undergoing the procedure- medical, investigative, environmental and real life testing. But in India, there is no SRS but a mere castration without government approval. Vidya through her work shares her experience of the surgical procedure she went through. She says "the hospital where my operation took place was low on hygiene. I was not even given a proper bed, just a steel cot with a newspaper spread on it. The surgeon gave me no guarantees, no counseling. The only pre-operation process was anesthesia- that through a local injection. They castrate you while you are watching and suture in the next few minutes, clean you with cotton and pack you off to recover. 'Next', they call out after."

Resistance

There are legal movements favoring trans individuals these days. Vidya demands that the existing government order (Order No.377) that treats transgenders as disease-afflicted sex workers alone should be removed and SRS must be allowed for those medically and psychologically tested and certified transgenders.

Mental Health

In addition to the discrimination that trans individuals face within the health care system, the mental health field has had a historically marginalizing relationship with the trans community. It is often difficult to find mental health professionals that are knowledgeable about trans-specific issues. It is

found that many trans clients felt that there were not enough informed and experienced mental health professionals in the area of gender identity and expression. Additionally, many mental health professionals do not feel that they have received adequate training on issues of gender identity.

Resistance

Gender Identity Disorder is no longer a diagnosis, instead being replaced by Gender Incongruence, which will no longer imply that trans identity itself is disordered (World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2010).

Family System

Parents of gender-variant children may experience guilt, grief, and a lack of understanding when they become aware of a child's atypical gender identity due to the stigmatization and lack of education and representation surrounding trans individuals. The distress that many parents of trans individuals experience about their child's gender identity often translates to an unsupportive environment, leading to trans children and youth not receiving adequate support and often being subject to family rejection, abuse, and isolation. Parents often seek out treatment for a child who is displaying "cross-gendered" gender identity development in order to "prevent" same sex attraction, as sexual orientation and gender identity are often conflated in society. In my book of focus when Vidya declared herself as a trans woman emotionally and crying,

"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"

Her parents reacted, "Why are you crying? Aren't we the people who must weep? What did you lack? Why have you done this to us?"

Resistance

In current times there are trans literatures which increase awareness among people where both characters and authors are transgender. Vidya asks "we grow up in families amidst parents, siblings and relatives. The day we realize our difference and try to explain it, we are driven out mercilessly. Does anyone have the minimum awareness about us?" Vidya chose her blog and her books to resist and to increase awareness.

CONCLUSION

My case of study, Living Smile Vidya, was once transphobic, fearing to reveal her gender identity. She believed that being a transgender she would do nothing but begging and kept her M.A. in Linguistics in the freezer. Vidya, through this book carves out the entire existence of a person who undergoes physical and mental transformation. Once she was 'Saravanan' who later on became 'Vidya'. Her experiences transformed 'Vidya' to 'Living Smile Vidya'. My study focuses on Vidya vs. Living Smile Vidya. She fought against the social discriminations and now survives beautifully. This study brings the importance of life and its existence in the universe. "Every life in 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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