

# Transgender Women Identity Acceptance And Attitudes Of The Society: A Trans Feminist Reading Of I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey

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## Abstract

Identity is something that defines a person and gender is one aspect of it. Nature has bestowed all the living beings with gender binaries, be it an animal, bird or human beings. Later the concept of gender is redefined with the advent of third gender; The ones who are trapped in the body of the opposite gender. This study throws light on such a third gender woman and her traumatic experiences in the journey as a transwoman, her identity rooting and the problems from the public, acceptance issues and crises; Living Smile Vidya. Through her autobiographical narrative, her problems and identity issues are read in a trans feminist perspective. Thus, this study will be an awareness and appeal to the society on accepting the third gender, trans women, on par with women. They too have their rights to be a part and parcel of the society as they are just "trapped in the male's body."

**Keywords** Identity Trans feminism

## Introduction

Transwomen are transformed women as one is not born transgender. According to nature's law there is gender binary. The third gender-transwomen are often treated depraved by the society. One of the key reasons is the patriarchal attitude of the society. A man is transformed to a woman, which is quite an undesirable factor in the society. Even parents and family members neglect them as the repute of the family is affected by the very behaviour of the male. Thus, the transwomen find their own ways of existence. They attain 'nirvana' through the castration surgery and thus become transsexuals. As employment is a distant dream, they earn their bread through beggary and flesh trade. These are the sufficient reasons for the society to harass them, bully them and physically and mentally harm them. Vidya, the transwoman, is a phoenix bird who soars high from her ashes. She is a Post Graduate in Linguistics and works for a voluntary organization for destitute people in Chennai.

Transfeminism aims for the liberation of transwomen or rather the equality of women in the society, as per the notion of Emi Koyama, a transactivist from Seattle, Washington, when she rightly pointed out “Transfeminism is primarily a movement by and for transwomen who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond. It is also open to other queers, intersex people, transmen, non-trans women, non-trans men and others who are sympathetic toward needs of transwomen and consider their alliance with transwomen to be essential for their own liberation.” (Koyama). When Teresa de Lauretis put forth the queer theory, it was “to recast and reinvent the terms of our sexualities, to construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual.” (de lauretis p-iv). This is exactly this study is focused on. The transwomen should be given the title “she” not “it.” They are not the ones to be stared at. They are human beings. Accept them as a sojourner in the society. It is quite nasty to illtreat them.

### **Materials and Methods**

The study is a textual analysis of the autobiographical text I am Vidya: A Transgender’s journey by Living Smile Vidya. The common problems faced by transwomen are chalked out through the experiences of Vidya and the equality of transwomen just like the equality of women movement in the society. The idea of educating transwomen and employing them is of a high priority as the society is even now has a negative attitude towards the transwomen. If a transwoman is attacked or trying to be molested publicly, the public has to react and show concerns on them as a human being. These points will be highlighted in the study.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

All transgenders need not be transsexuals, but all transsexuals are transgenders. Just like every other transexuals, Vidya too underwent Sex Reassignment Surgery or SRS. “SRS can incorporate facial feminization, speech therapy, breast augmentation and the insertion of a plastic vagina.” (Vidya Chatla 99). Earlier these surgeries were not done in a proper way, but through crude methods in an unhygienic manner without appropriate tests and all. Vidya’s SRS was performed at an unhygienic hospital.

“The hospital where my operation took place was low on hygiene. I was not given a proper bed- just a steel cot with a newspaper spread on it. The surgeon gave me no guarantees, no counselling. The only pre operation preparation was anaesthesia -that too a local injection. They castrate you while you are watching, suture in the next few minutes, clean you off with cotton and pack you off to recover. ‘Next!’ they call out after.” (Vidya 100)

Thus, she became a transwoman or ‘Tirunangai’ and has faced all the problems while traveling in a train. The degree certificates and all identity documents are changed to the new one. Finally, when Vidya attained her true self, society was a bit indifferent towards her. Vidya was born as ‘Saravanan’, sixth child of the family after five girls in Tiruchi, Tamilnadu. Saravanan was academically excellent and his father was too proud. The “boy” is a Civil Services Brand, according to family and society. But things took a different direction when

Saravanan had fancies for the feminine stuffs as he loved to wear Manju Akka,s (his elder sister) skirt and top and make up. Once he wore all these and was dancing, his feminine ardour was found out by Manju's friend. He was slapped by father and the society was unsympathetic towards his being feminine. He was teased by classmates with a nick name 'Ali' means eunuch. Saravanan has never given up studies amidst all the flagellations from his father.

Just like any other parent, Saravanan's father too had high expectations on his "son" who was no more one. Thus, he was keen on his son's higher education. "He became preoccupied with my next course of action in higher education, quite ready to fall at the feet of influential people to find me a seat in MSc or MCA, even though I had told him of my resolve of not doing any such course. I wanted to pursue MA in Linguistics, shattering his expectations again." (Vidya 40). Education is a blessing for Vidya to fight for herself. It helped her to defend her in front of her father's flagellations.

"Stop it Appa! (...) So far, everything that happened had been expected, according to the script Appa had perfected—but something no one had expected, something unforgivable also occurred. For years I had suffered Appa's violence without a word of protest—only my screams of pain shattering the surrounding silence. But for the first time I fought back". (...) (Vidya 30)

The life of Vidya is a journey of a successful transwoman, as she did not give up her studies mid- way and amidst all the negativities from family and society. The attitudes of people which is still strange towards transwomen. Though the transwomen try to ignore it, it leaves an indelible scar in the heart. Thus, if they get emotional, it will be an outburst of a dam that was ready to break. When her friends embraced her and offer a job and they said, "You are an artist, an angel. You should be our energy. The dam burst and tears flowed down my cheeks at this demonstration of love and affection by my friends, which came as a balm to the emotional wounds I had accrued from Pune" (121).

Vidya, being a transwoman, has a firm determination to stop tirunangais (transgenders) from begging and sex work. She wants to rehabilitate them. Most of the NGOs do not do a pertinent recuperation. "No Indian NGOs 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'?" (123). Then she started a new job as EDP Assistant in a bank, which was a micro-credit institution to fund NGOs. Thus, she emerged out to be a completely self-reliant transwoman who intended to work for the deserted people and transgenders as she could perfectly make out the problems faced by them.

One of the major constraints in the life of transwomen is the lack of acceptance by the family. Once they identify the change, their identity can be formed. It looks like all the successful transwomen are emerged out of their own will power and ambitions. As they know the problems faced by them better than anyone, they can help others who are the sojourners.

Society too shows the attitude that the transgenders are existing for money. Thus, Vidya had to think painfully, "Wasn't I going through this trauma for money?" (Vidya 95). The society was too cruel in their approach. Of course, they too require money for their existence and Vidya and her friend decided not to do begging for that. They started a small business by selling petty

things in train. But they haven't got a welcome by the society. They were shooed off by the common man and even an army officer too. They have suffered merciless spits and thrashes. "Now four or five people surrounded me (...) whipped me with the buckled end of the belt, hitting my face (...) I was screaming at the top of the voice. My nose was bleeding, my face was swollen, my whole body ached; I looked—to myself—like some kind of monster. (Vidya 96).

The transgender community does not believe in caste system. All are welcome to their community. They even accept and embrace the desolate, marginalized and even penury stricken human beings, as they know the value of humanity more than anyone. The gender minorities of India Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgenders and Queer are treated as non-existent in terms of humans. They can be teased, taunted and attacked mercilessly as they are different from the gender binaries; this is the attitude. Vidya pecks an incident from her life.

"Not just men, even women, too, laughed at me. 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 or creed." (Vidya 135)."

The transgender youth are prone to attacks more and are facing the trauma of double identity. The curiosity of the public to know their original self, lands up in molesting and physical assault. The trauma of identity and the fine line between the characteristic features of male and female has triggered the society to behave inhuman to them. This is the perception of the beholders. At teenage Vidya (Saravanan) too faced such challenges. The acknowledgement of her true self was a distant dream in those days. "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 lead a false life of strenuous attempts to swagger like a man and speak like one." (Vidya 33).

## **Conclusion**

Thus, through Vidya's experiences certain problems faced by transwomen can be generalised and read it along with transfeminism. First one is the patriarchal society defenestrates the upliftment of transwomen. Secondly, the very identity of transwomen is denied as their gender by birth is male, which is superior. Thirdly, the lack of acceptance as a human by the family and society is always conveniently forgotten. They are to be thrashed black and blue and no voice should be raised against them. The legal aspect of their rights are in black and white and their lives are still miserable.

Safety and security are the keywords that everyone says when it comes to the concept of feminism. Being aware of the same, men are ready to transform their identity to that of women. Thus, empowerment is required to the mindset of the society that is male privileged which paves no room to a different gender that has the attributes of a female. Even though the term transfeminism looks slightly different from feminism, it has ultimately claimed to be the gender equality and rights to enroot the identity of them as one among the other genders. This study has been undertaken to throw light to the lives of transwomen who are not in well-heeled jobs.

Government has accepted the transgenders as third gender, but according to transgenders the law is only in black and white, the life in the society is too boisterous. When the negative side of them is portrayed every time in the form of articles and documentaries, this should be an eye opener to the society that there have been positive success stories of transwomen, that can be a great motivation to the suffering transwomen.

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