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Unveiling Trauma in the Life Narrative of Transgender: A Study of Manobi Bandhopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*

Shivani Rana & Dr. Anupriya Roy Srivastava

Abstract

Trauma is a multifaceted phenomenon which permeates numerous facets of human life and experiences, often leaving behind long lasting and enduring imprints on individual, community, and society. The research paper delves into the intricate landscape of trauma in life narrative of Manobi Bandhopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017). With a qualitative approach, the study intends to investigate the lived experiences of the author as portrayed in this autobiography, also shedding light on the intersectionality of gender identity and traumatic experiences. The study also explores how trauma is deeply interwoven with the process of identity formation, social interactions and personal growth. Since transgender literature has been explored considerably less often, transgender have taken it upon themselves to present their traumatic experiences in the most honest and raw form. It is an initiative to amplify transgender voices in the academic discourse and to heal from the past traumatic experiences shared by a large number of transgenders in India in particular. The study also advocates for more inclusive approach to trauma studies that encompasses diverse gender identities and experiences. This paper in context tends to explore traumatic experiences and retrieval of traumatic memories in Manobi Bandhopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017).

Keywords: Memory, Subconscious, Trauma, Autobiography, Transgender.

Indian culture and mythological history have always been full of non-hetero normative, alternative and queer presence. The transgender community has always been an inherent part of the Indian history and culture. From Arjuna's famous gender variance in form of Brihannala or ambiguous gender identity of Sikhandin in Mahabharata, the historical temples of Khajuraho and the sculptures of Elephanta Caves, the much worshiped deity the Ardhanarishwara which is the confluence of Shiv and Shakti, the gods that might appear in any form- male, female, neutral or even non-human form to the presence of the transgender in Ramayana. As Rohit K. Dasgupta investigates in his study "*Queer Sexuality: A Cultural Narrative of India's Historical Archive*" (2011) that there are plenty of evidences of Queer history in India, that has resulted into emergence of numerous new-found queer literatures and has paved way for new opportunities to contemplate over alternate sexuality in contemporary Indian context. He talks about the historical Indian text *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History* (2008) by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai. While presenting the detailed insight about the presence of queer community throughout the Indian history, Vanita and Kidwai (2008) proposed different ideas to explain the concept of same-sex love. The first idea was that of sex change, where Hindu gods were believed to be One such trope is sex change, where Hindu deities were multifaceted, graceful, fluent and always changing in their shape and form, with their primary characteristic being "multiplicity and variability" (p.56). The gods

may appear in any form; female, male, gender neutral or non-human ways. This helps us in drawing the map of historical presence of transgender community in ancient history of Indian civilisation, going way back to the ancient scriptures like Mahabharata and Ramayana and other Vedas and Puranas. Vanita and Kidwai (2008) used the famed example of SIKHANDIN to elucidate the presence of transgender during Mahabharata. "The story of SIKHANDIN is perhaps the best-known case of sex change in any ancient Indian text. SIKHANDIN later became a term to refer to eunuchs and men of doubtful sexuality" (p.36).

With such rich history and abundance of examples, it can be safely assumed that the idea of varied forms and ways of expressing non-binary gender and sexualities of the transgender community will be acknowledged, recognised and comprehended without any opposition or doubts in a country like India. But regrettably, this isn't what the current scenario indicates. Transgenders still become victims of numerous forms of discrimination, taboos and biases in their day to day lives. Despite India showing extraordinary advancement in various medical, technological, economic, and social aspects the transgender people still remain at the receiving end of several discriminatory practices and resulting oppression. The experiences from the recurrent events of discrimination and oppression leads to trauma in the transgender individuals. Inclusion in everyday activities and space remain a dream of transgender community in India. From being denied access to basic facilities like public toilets and access to common areas like parks, malls, hospitals and schools and basic human rights like education and equal work field to being restricted to limited economic space and work opportunities like begging and sex work, along with public humiliation, violence, sexual harassment and unlawful treatment at the hands of the police; the transgender community in India continue to live and carry on with their daily activities in the most suppressed, marginalised, exploited and oppressed state.

Talking about transgender, Susan Stryker in *Transgender History* (2008) explains all the important terms and concepts. According to her, transgender is a word which "is used to refer to people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans*-)the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain gender" (p.1). Moving ahead, she also talks about how the term can be used either for people who do not relate to the gender assigned at birth or it can also be used for people who are looking for a new dimension for their gender identity. The other frequently used terms are transman or transwoman, genderqueer, transsexual, transvestite, intersex etc. Serena Nanda in her book *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (1999), talks about transgender also known as hijras in the Indian society: "Hijras, as neither men nor women, function as an institutionalised third gender role: Their ambiguous sexual nature, through which they embody the power of generativity of the goddess, accounts for their traditional occupation, that of performing after the birth of a child, at weddings, and at temple festivals" (p.4). India with its affluent inhabitants has lakhs of transgenders residing in the country. Individuals from the transgender community are oppressed at the hands of triple marginalisation; geographic, economic, and social-political. This multi-level and systematic oppression and marginalisation often result in trauma, hurt and anguish. Search for identity, inclusion in mainstream society, recounting all the traumatic experiences, and raising their voices against all form and means of oppression has always been a central theme of Transgender literature.

Transgender literature has seen a surge recently as it has been not explored enough either as a part of marginal literature or as a part of queer literature. Transgender are taking the initiative to pen down about their lives, experiences, hardships, traumas, and all forms and means of oppression in their own words and also discuss about all the steps initiated and policies drafted to override all the disadvantages and setbacks suffered by transgenders so far. 'Autobiography' or self life writing can be seen as the most accurate and frequently chosen genres opted by transgenders to recount their life stories. It functions as an effective tool to narrate the truth of their lived experiences, the hardships and the upheavels, and the traumas that are result of multi-fold oppression while concentrating on transgender's wishes and dreams of having their struggles understood, being accepted for who they are, and to be included in

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the mainstream society. As Stryker (2008) says, “transgender-related topics have been written about as personal issues - something that an individual experiences inwardly and works to bring into social reality by sharing it with others. There are many autobiographies of people who have “changed sex” and an increasing number of self-help guidebooks for people contemplating such a change” (p.1). Serena Nanda (1999) also points out the importance of giving transgender an opportunity to tell their stories in their own words and therefore has included four different personal narratives in her own book. So, it is the need of the hour that this marginalised community is provided with a safe space and their voices should be heard.

Indian literature has also seen many noteworthy transgender autobiographies, which function as a compelling way to narrate the truth of their lived experiences, the hardships and the upheavals, and the traumas that are result of multi-fold oppression while concentrating on transgender's wishes and dreams of having their struggles understood, being accepted for who they are, and to be included in the mainstream society. Few note-worthy works that are path breaking and beginning of a new journey of transgender in India are Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015), A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010), and Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* (2013) to name a few. All of the mentioned autobiographies function as a brilliant tool to shed some light on the unknown and painful aspects of being a transgender in traditional Indian society. From talking about growing up struggling with body and gender identity, being sexually harassed at an early age, facing bullying at school, being beaten up at the hands of their family members, forced to behave according to society's expectations, not being accepted by families and society at large, forced into begging and sex work, pushed to live at the margins of society in ghettos, denied any legal rights or constitutional recognition, to lack of proper medical facilities for sex rearrangement surgery and unable to have healthy love life or partner, all makes up for a very painful and heart breaking stories. The agony and pain experienced by the transgender community in traditional Indian society has been honestly presented by Manobi Bandhopadhyay in her autobiography *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017).

The historical relationship between trauma and narrative goes all the way back to the origin of trauma itself. Certainly, it is an extensively acknowledged reality that the stories we voice out regarding the hardships and upheavals that affected us – both as an individually and in shared form – can be critical apparatuses for retrieval and healing. It is not a matter of astonishment that when trauma theory emerged into the mainstream during the mid-1990s, some of its major advocates started claiming that literature – and literary narrative in particular – might possess a privileged (if not unique) value for communicating our deepest psychic pains. Trauma, as discussed by Michelle Balaev in *Trauma Studies* (2018), is generally understood as “a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organisation and perception of the external world” (p. 360). He further adds that “trauma is an unassimilated event that shatters identity and remains outside normal memory and narrative representation” (p.363). Balaev also discusses how the traditional trauma model pioneered by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996); views trauma “as an event that fragments consciousness and prevents direct linguistic representation” (p.363). Caruth (1996) argues that trauma's latency and dissociation disrupt the ability to fully understand or represent a traumatic experience (p.11). Trauma ordinarily results from unfavourable and adverse experiences such as sexual abuse, accidents, natural or man-made disasters, violence, poverty, racism, marginalisation, discrimination, racism, oppression etc.

Transgenders encounter numerous such situations and scenarios in their everyday lives which lead to a very traumatic experience. Marginalisation, social exclusion, economic oppression, sexual assault, harassment, lack of facilities and basic amenities lead to a very serious psychological, physical and emotional trauma. Often our society fails to realise the struggle and depth of trauma faced by the transgender people and specially those who are subjected to the realm of gender dysphoria. A transgender individual often becomes a part of a never-ending journey filled with fights and struggles to establish their identity in the outer world while continuing to fight with their own inner-self. The very first challenged faced by the

transgenders is the fear of acceptance. After the realisation of their sexuality, the fear of rejection sets in. Transgender individuals are very hesitant, unsure and unable to find the courage to open up in front of their families and friends. This experience and fear of rejection can prove to be very traumatic. The transgender individuals try very hard to hide their sexuality from the society. It is often seen that transgender individual face extreme rejection, physical abuse, punishments and abandonment at the hands of their families. Parents often refuse to own up to the reality of their children, and therefore trauma and marginalisation of transgender individuals begin at home.

Twinkle Dasari in “*Traumatic Experiences of Transgenders in Manobi’s A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi – A Study*” (2018) elaborates that the purpose of this study is to highlight the importance of gender equality for an egalitarian society. Existence of a third gender, apart from male and female, has also been discussed. This paper brings into forefront the trauma experienced by transgender during their lifetime. Psychological trauma resulting out of gender non-conformity and pain and distress for not being accepted in society are all registered internally. External trauma is experienced when transgenders are marginalised owing to transphobia, criticised, discriminated against, or when they face physical violence in society. The journey of a transgender individual from a man to a woman is extremely hurtful and full of difficulties and challenges. A transgender individual becomes a part of a never-ending journey filled with fights and struggles to establish their identity in the outer world while continuing to fight with their own inner-self. Generally, while talking about gender, only male and female are mentioned. But it goes unnoticed and is ignored as per convenience, that there are numerous people who do not come under either of the two genders. These people are often marginalised and are left stranded to live as the outcasts. The idea that gender is a socially constructed entity has been accepted for a long time now. Judith Butler’s work *Gender Trouble* (1999) proved to be most radical work on gender and her theory on gender introduces the notion of performativity- the idea that gender is involuntarily ‘performed’. According to Butler (1999), what makes gender performative is the repetitiveness of the acts that are being done (p.12). This view of gender performativity explains how gender identity is formed. Butler (1999) also talks about how gender is also seen as mark of identity and this gender identity is formed when gendered acts are used as a form of expression (p.33). So, whenever a transgender individual tries to move past these definite and fixed gender identities and roles which are based on the age-old binaries, they often encounter traumatic experiences and often considered to be not normal.

Manobi Bandhopadhyay is an academician and an activist working diligently for transgenders’ rights and equality. *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) is Manobi’s deep and honest story of her journey of transforming into a woman, about how she chose academics as a way of expression and continued to excel despite many upheavals and went on to become the first transgender principal of a women’s college in 2015. And in doing so, she not only defined her own identity, but also inspired an entire community. Manobi, born as Somnath, recounts how the changes began early on in her childhood. She called this process and experience “metamorphosis” (p.6). She recalls how her older sisters’ frocks were like gowns for her and she would “still wear it and stand for hours in front of the mirror” (p. 7) admiring her look. Even though Manobi’s family tried to counsel her out of it, she continued to wear her sisters’ clothes, apply her mother’s makeup and kept on admiring her looks. But the realisation of being different and experimentation with different set of clothes and makeup was soon followed by traumatic experiences. Boys at school would often bully and harass Manobi for being “extremely delicate and weak boy” (p.8). Manobi recounts how the boys at school would “pinch me, pull my hair, box my ears and punch my face at the slightest provocation... No one took pity on me. This left a deep scar on my mind” (p.8). She soon started realising that she “wasn’t accepted by most in the world” (p.8).

It is observed that transgender individuals often end up becoming victims of sexual abuse very early on in life, which might end up developing trust issues and distaste for sex in

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them. Manobi also encountered one such traumatic incident where her cousin had sex with her. He would continuously look for chances to corner her every now and then. This was a very traumatic memory for Manobi. She recalls how her cousin “kept thrusting till I screamed in excruciating pain; he put his hand on my mouth to suppress my cries. I could not take it anymore and started weeping” (p.9). Maintaining and entering into a normal relationship often proves to be almost impossible for a transgender people. Encountering numerous partners and experiences accompanied with resulting confusion and doubts can be highly traumatic for any individual. Manobi reminiscences about her love life, “each experience left me hurt, even broken at times...” (p.17).

Manobi talks about how she never regretted or questioned her choices but there came times when the ridicule, discrimination and hurt got too much to handle. She recalls how...

There were times in my life when I doubted myself and the path I took. In such instances, my mind would sear me from within. Am I really a woman trapped in a male body or are these just delirious thoughts?... I would spend hours standing naked in front of mirror trying to inspect the image that stared back at me. I hated him. (p.109)

Gender variant people are acclaimed in some societies, while they are despised and denigrated in others. Their identities do not fit into a rigid male/female gender dichotomy nor in a bipolar gender conscious society. When raised within conventional heteronormative societal structures, they stray from fixed gender boundaries and experience instability. These transgender people are historically oppressed community. For long, transgenders have been considered ‘deviant’, ‘abnormal’ and ‘Others’. Resented by cynic transphobic people, these transgenders are pushed to the fringes of the society and from times immemorial, they have suffered from broken relationships, hatred and abandonments from family members, intercommunity struggle, the relative consequences of begging, sex work, beating in public sphere, and other forms of violence. They have been denied social positioning and dignified life both on familial and societal plane. Transgender are taking it upon themselves now to talk about their lives, experiences, hardships, traumas, and initiatives taken to overcome all of them. Initiatives are being taken to further explore this transgender literature and expand the existing academia.

Construction and development of identity is a complex and intricate process where an individual forms a distinct perception of viewing self. It has always been a part of continuous exploration and study. Formation of identity can either be cultural, social, political, national, professional, religious, gender based, etc. On account of the prejudice that is frequently aimed at people whose gender identity go against what society expects, trans people and their families are susceptible to a variety of types of oppression. The social, educational, political, medical, economic, and mental health realms are all affected by this tyranny. The difficulties that trans people frequently experience is rarely discussed in literature. Most of the transgender individuals face severe hardships and challenges during the process of developing identity and coming to terms with it. They experience fear, guilt, shame and even fall victim at the hands of sexual harassment, violence, discrimination, and oppression. Identity development for a transgender individual can be a very confusing and exhausting process as the gender expression and gender identity desired, preferred and practiced by them is usually opposite of what is imposed and expected from the society at large. Such individuals find it extremely hard to adjust with the outside world while struggling with their inner turmoil at the same time. These people are often marginalised and are left stranded to live as the outcasts.

Hormonal therapy and sex-change operation can prove to be a very traumatic and tiring process. Finding good medical support and facilities, clinics which believe in ethical operations and treatments for the transgender individuals and the financial burden of the entire process can be a lot more taxing than imagined. Not every transgender individual is able to get access to the best facilities. Manobi vividly recalls her experience after she had opted for hormonal therapy and sex-change operation. She talks how “sex change is a lifelong process and you have to be constantly under medication and clinical observation” (p.135). And even after sex-change operation, societal acceptance and approval does is not always received. When Manobi

told her sister about the sex-change operation, “she was aghast. First came the volley of words, blaming me for being completely irresponsible. She felt that sex change operation would bring shame to all of them since society would definitely treat me as an outcast...” (p.135). Even after undergoing all the stress, pain, hormonal changes in the body and going under a knife to merely fulfill the dream of living like a woman; these changes are not always welcome and accepted by everyone. Manobi talks about how Samarjit, a man who wanted to take revenge on Manobi because she refused his advances wanted to sexually exploit her and expose her in the public. She recalls how “Samarjit openly said that he did not believe I had undergone an operation that had changed me into a woman. He said such operations were not possible and that the procedure must be illegal...” (p.139) and started a vicious campaign against her in the neighbourhood.

Even though India is the largest democracy in the world and the constitution guarantees equal rights for every individual, the reality is still a far cry for the transgender community. Due to the lack of awareness and interest on society’s end and on account of delay in implementation of laws at grass root level, they continue to face multi-level oppression and atrocities. Physical, emotional and mental trauma becomes an integral part of every transgender’s life. Inclusion in everyday activities and spaces remain a dream of transgender community in India. Even the most basic human emotions, feelings and experiences become a matter of luxury, privilege, wonder, and amazement. The lack of representation of transgender community in mainstream society in India is evident and blatantly obvious. If Indian literature is taken into consideration, it is noted that there is very little work done to rightfully represent the transgender people, present their thoughts and feelings, talk about their struggle and hardships, give them acceptance and recognition in society and very little attempt has been made to bring them from periphery to the center. Manobi’s “*A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*” is a heroic attempt and her activism towards equality has helped and motivated other transgenders to fight for their rights. Manobi also emphasises how literature can bring the desired and necessary changes in society. It also examines Manobi’s family life, struggle with self and society seeking equal opportunity for all and her academic journey to become financially independent. Manobi has used the trans-narrative to establish her individual identity and her true self which suits her body the best. Manobi’s life narrative offers an insight into mental suffering endured by the transgenders. Manobi’s struggles began early in her childhood, continued throughout her school and college and well into adult life. Be it at home, public places, educational institutions or workplace, Manobi’s problems and struggle for safety, respect and acceptance continued to take place. *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* has explored the traumatic journey of a transgender trying to establish her identity outside the dominant gender binary by setting new records of academic achievements. While analysing Manobi’s life-narrative, one can trace the humiliation she faced, her journey as first transgender professor and being appointed as first transgender principal in a college of West Bengal, her academic achievements, as well as problems she came across throughout her life. Even years later after Supreme Court recognised transgender in India as ‘third sex’, the ground reality is shattering and painful. There is almost no discussion about the identity development of a transgender, the limited economic space that has been created for them, there is no acceptance from families and society at large. All of these experiences, hardships, rejections, marginalisation, discrimination, lack of facilities, acceptance and understanding can prove to be very traumatic for a transgender individual.

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