NEW LITERARIA-
An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities
Volume 7, No. 2, January-February, 2026, PP. 82-95
ISSN: 2582-7375
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2026.v07i2.011
www.newliteraria.com

From Silence to Voice: Social Marginalisation and Quest for Recognition in Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*

Pooja Kalia
Khalsa College, Amritsar

Abstract
Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya: A Transgenders Journey* is an important life-writing that translates silence into speech and invisibility into visibility. Situated at the intersection of gender, caste, and class, Vidya's life-writing not only records her struggles in terms of identity formation and transition but also serves as a collective testimony of a community that has been historically silenced from having a voice, dignity, and citizenship. Vidya rejects the social discourses of shamefulness and invisibility that have long been placed on transgender individuals and proactively reclaims control of her own identity. Doing so, the autobiography subverts mainstream heteronormative narratives that efface trans lives and disrupt the strict boundaries of gender. Moreover, the text records the actual experiences of marginalization- such as rejection by family, exclusion at school, and discrimination at work- while also claiming a political space for recognition that insists on social recognition and inherent human dignity. This paper aims to closely study this memoir with a focus on three main themes: identity crisis, the pains of life, and the many problems that transgender people experience in modern India.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Resistance, Marginalisation, Discrimination, Social Recognition.

Transgender voices in India have remained silenced under the weight of cultural proscriptions, systemic effacement, and entrenched social exclusion. Living Smile *Vidya's I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* is an important life-writing that translates silences into speech and invisibility into visibility. Situated at the intersection of gender, caste, and class, Vidya's life-writing not only records her struggles with identity formation and transition but also serves as a collective testimony from a community historically silenced from having a voice, dignity, and citizenship. The title "From Silence to Voice" captures the aim of this act of resistance. Vidya refuses the social discourses of shamefulness and invisibility that have long been placed

Article History: Received: 30 Nov 2025. Revised: 17 January 2026. Accepted: 20 January 2026. First published: 01st February, 2026.

Published by: Adrija Press, India.

Citation: Kalia,Puja. (2026). Politics, From Silence to Voice: Social Marginalisation and Quest for Recognition in Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*. *Newliteraria Journal* 7:2, 82-95. https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2026.v07i2.011

on transgender individuals and proactively seeks to reappropriate the agency over her own identity. While doing this, the autobiography subverts mainstream heteronormative accounts that efface trans lives and rupture the rigid boundaries of gender. Moreover, the text documents the actual experiences of marginalisation in the form of rejection by family, exclusion at school, and discrimination at work, among other forms, while claiming a political space for recognition that insists on social recognition and human dignity.

Smile Vidya's autobiography, *I Am Vidya*, occupies a central position in the corpus of Indian queer and transgender life-writing, offering an unflinching yet self-aware representation of the transgender subject. The text foregrounds the coexistent themes of pain and self-acceptance, framing Vidya's personal narrative against the wider socio-political discourses that regulate sexuality and gender in post-liberalisation India. In the tradition of transition narrative, *I Am Vidya* explains the multiple facets of marginality- cultural, social, legal, and familial- that transgender people encounter, and simultaneously functions as a counter-text that problematizes dominant assumptions about gender and identity. Vidya's life writing thus shows that the struggle for recognition is never a personal whim but a political appeal for visibility, membership, and shared citizen rights. To that extent, *I Am Vidya* transcends the personal to locate itself within a larger discourse of queer rights and social justice in contemporary India. This is not merely a book about Vidya and her transgender experience; it is, as well, a window to the lives of all transgender people in India. It is not merely a self-narrative but a political performance act of vocal resistance against systemic silence, a cry for visibility against erasure, and a performance of resilience against exclusion. Through the psychological distress due to lack of recognition and the structural violence implicated in social ostracism, Vidya's narrative embodies what Judith Butler, in Bodies That Matter, calls the "constitutive outside" of heteronormative society-those existents rendered unintelligible by their failure to conform to the normative structures of binary gender (Butler, 1993, p. 3).

Even the very title, I Am Vidya, plays a performative role along lines suggested by Butler's formulation, as an affirmation of self-identification and as an act of asserting existence in a society that is ever and again attempting to render it inconspicuous. In presenting the telling of her narrative in her own voice, Vidya illustrates what Susan Stryker, in the essay "(De)Subjugated Knowledges," identifies as one crucial shift in transgender studies: the shift from constituting trans beings as objects of knowledge alone and recognising trans beings as subjects and producers of knowledge (Stryker, 2006, p. 1). The process of self-acceptance described by Vidya is multifaceted and comprises several layers. It moves beyond physical affirmation attained through medical transition and includes the philosophical and existential aspects of actually existing in a society that is often unwelcoming to gender difference.

Her autobiography transforms the narrative of pain into one of empowerment, demonstrating how self-awareness can serve as the foundation for autonomy, self-expression, and political action. In this sense, the life narrative of Vidya both documents the personal lives of the author and exemplifies the collective strength of the transgender community and the wider movement for representation and understanding across India. Ultimately, I Am Vidya moves beyond the depiction of one person's difficult search for identity. It offers a rich narrative that investigates the cultural understanding of gender, challenges established practices of marginalisation, and foregrounds the possibilities of transformation via self-acknowledgement. In doing so, it reveals how transgender autobiography may serve as a site of personal liberation, collective empowerment, and political action. It highlights the universal human desire for recognition, integration, and deference.

This paper aims to closely study the work with a focus on three main themes: identity crisis, the pains of life, and the many problems that transgender people experience in modern India. This paper demonstrates how Vidya contributes to the growing body of transgender literature and enriches the academic discourse in English literary studies and gender studies by integrating textual analysis with theoretical frameworks. In doing so, it shows how important it is to put transgender voices at the centre of stories about identity and resistance. The current

.

autobiography goes back over a decade now. Still, problems such as identity and identity crisis, pain and trauma, acceptance in society and other such concerns remain in society for transsexual individuals.

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, is indeed a landmark legislative measure to recognise the right to self-identity by transgender persons and ensure statutory protection through the said Act. However, the living realities of scores of transgender persons point out the yawning gap that exists between laws and implementation. Although recent Indian law has enacted provisions under which sex of transgender individuals may self-identify on formal documents such as passports as "eunuchs" ("E") without having a supporting document, these reforms remain symbolic rather than transformative in impact. In practice, systematic exclusions persist: e.g., transgender individuals continue to be required to register male or female to vote, and enjoyment of other rights of law is often constrained by entrenched social bias rather than enshrined through constitutional rights.

Public officials tend to disregard legislative mandates, thus evading institutional responsibility towards the actual empowerment of transgender population groups. Despite these legal provisions, transgender persons remain consistently vulnerable to structural violence, social stigma, and structural obstacles in healthcare and job opportunities. Many transgender people still face social stigma despite these legal victories. For example, Manobi Bandyopadhyay was the first transgender person to serve as a university principal in India, Padmini Prakash was the first transgender person to be granted Indian citizenship, and Kalki Subramanian was the first transgender woman to play a major role in a movie.

A recent report from The CSR Journal underlines the continuing social and psychological trauma faced by transgender persons in India. The document indicates that twenty-four transgender people in Indore attempted mass suicide as a result of continuous harassment and intra-community conflict. In another similar incident, ten transgender individuals in Mumbai reportedly attempted to take their lives following abuse at the hands of a former NGO employee. Such tragic instances point out the immediate need for institutional protections, mental health support, and socio-economic inclusion strategies for transgender persons who continue to face discrimination and violence despite advances in legal reform. These incidents reflect systematic marginalisation of gender minorities and point toward the need for more stringent policy interventions to protect dignity and well-being. (The CSR Journal, 2025).

In India, transgender individuals are a marginalised and underprivileged group. They are referred to as "Hijra," which is a combination of the terms "male" and "female." In English, "Hijra" is typically translated as "transgender," "transgendered population," or "transgender women" or "transwomen" (Khan, 2016, p. 1). They also include hermaphrodites, or those who are born with ambiguous genitalia. "Hijras were called 'eunuchs' and were also said to be intersexed at birth..." (Nanda,1999, p xvii). They are still not accepted in society, even though people have known about them for a long time and have seen them over time. Transsexuality is a term used to talk about a situation where a person's gender identity does not match their physical body (Bettcher,2014, p. 383). He also says that transsexuality is seen as a problem with the bodies of transsexuals, and in psychological studies, transsexuality is viewed as a problem of the mind, so it can be fixed with sex-reassignment surgery (SRS). Bettcher further argued that a person's body can feel like it is 'trapped in a wrong body' (Bettcher, 2014, p.383).

This is the bitter truth that we have to swallow, even today, most people pray for the birth of sons. "The birth of a son is the most significant event for an Indian family and a cause for great celebration" (Nanda, 1999, p. 1). A similar incident can be observed in Vidya's life. Vidya's father was an atheist who never believed in God. But after having two daughters and losing his firstborn son and two more girls, Vidya's father made an about-face and visited temple after temple, praying for a son. Upon her birth on March 25, 1982, Vidya was named Sarvanan by her father, a name derived from one of the many titles of the deity Murugan. Her

parents initially gave Vidya the name Saravanan. Being a son in itself confers a special status within the family and household. Vidya also enjoyed the same dispensation as Sarvanan, the only male child in her family.

> I was a privileged member of the household. Of the three children, I was the one who didn't have to do any work at home. That was the unwritten law. I enjoyed every kind of concession. 'The only work we want you to do is study. Appa said. 'Remember it's your job to study.' . . . I was the male heir of the family, and that was reason enough to exempt me from work of any kind! . . I was the sole beneficiary of all the love and affection at home by virtue of being a boy. (16)

During her formative years, Vidya encountered a greater struggle in maintaining her sense of femininity compared to her later life experiences. Vidya's father is an absolute authoritarian. His behaviour has obstructed her ability to engage in the essential joys and liberties that are generally linked to childhood. When Vidya was only six years old, she started to become conscious of the intrinsic feminine identity that she possessed. She used to take great pleasure in hiding herself in her sister's clothes when she was younger, and when she was alone, she would dance to the music. Her lack of interest in being recognised as a male and her wish to be accorded the perks that are often associated with boys were both factors that she did not want to do. As she began to examine herself, she posed the question, "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?" (29) As soon as she reaches the age of twelve, she believes that she will be able to put on a feminine dress, which is driven by her intrinsic desire.

When compared to homosexual, lesbian, and bisexual students, children like Vidya are more likely to experience prejudice, aggressiveness, and both verbal and physical mistreatment within educational institutions. Vidya is one of the children who has experienced harassment and assault. There is a clear correlation between the presence of insecurity in the school environment and the students' academic performance, as well as their attendance. In the end, they leave the facility in an effort to find a place where they can be secure. There is a correlation between the significant increase in drug intake among transgender children and their painful experience with harassment and assault. In addition, those who are subjected to dread in educational environments are more likely to have feelings of hopelessness and to try suicide. To reduce the impact of this phenomenon of bullying among peers, the author suggests the following:

At schools, in the Arivoli Iyakkam, in other non-formal schools, tirunangais can be introduced to students as part of their lessons, so that they learn to treat difference with compassion and dignity. Children should be told about the suffering of transgender people. Film censor boards must firmly root out scenes depicting them in a vulgar manner. (141)

Moreover, there are more insults from the neighbourhood and from school, which affect her studies. "Even though I was extra careful not to reveal myself, my irrepressible femininity exposed me. Once again, I became an object of ridicule, and inevitably, my studies were affected. (25)

First and foremost, educated transgenders and transsexuals demonstrate a tremendous desire to break free from the norms that society has established for them and to live their lives with the same level of independence as everyone else. Children's capacity to participate as engaged students is hindered by the frequent bullying they endure when they are in school and when they are attending college. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to make sure that education is available to people of all genders in order to improve their understanding of the

.

fundamental scientific principles that govern the natural world. Even people who come from wealthy families who identify as transgender could be hesitant to enrol in schools or pursue further education because they are afraid of being discriminated against by society. Because the school curriculum only teaches about the two basic genders, those who live outside these bounds may be perceived as lacking the necessary information. One of the factors that can make it difficult to gain insight into their genuine preferences is the lack of amenities and restroom facilities that are available in the hostel. When faced with such circumstances, even if one has obtained an education, it is not nearly worth the effort to consider the possibility of locating a financially satisfying business opportunity. Even if it were possible, there is an extremely high probability that they would be the target of bullying and stalking.

Since they do not have access to education, the majority of transgender people in India tend to exhibit their femininity or masculinity in an overt manifestation. The culture regards transgender people as social misfits among all other people, rather than offering complete education to everyone to empower them to freely express the traits that are natural to them. They are subjected to chronic pain, harassment, disparaging comments that are comparable to slavery, and they frequently meet various forms of violence. This is primarily because they deviate from the rules that society has established based on their behaviour. Our dominant culture is characterised by chauvinistic views, which makes it a disgrace to have a male who lacks masculinity or a woman who possesses masculinity. This is because chauvinistic beliefs dominate our culture. The majority of their lives are spent on the margins of civilisation, which places them at a significant distance from other human populations. The worry that they feel as a result of being closely scrutinised causes them to experience great emotional discomfort, embarrassment, and even the sense that they are obligated to conceal their identity.

Unlike women in hetero-normative society, transgender women, on the other hand, are denied fundamental rights because of their gender identity. "Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible." (Butler, 1990, p. 141) This is one of the possible explanations for this phenomenon. Judith Butler's idea that gender is performative helps us comprehend Vidya's perspective even further. Butler argues that gender identity is built by means of a set of repeated performances that are socially acknowledged, and that by repeated performance, these acts become regarded as essential expressions of gender. (Butler, 1990, p.45) This aligns with Butler's gender performativity theory- gender is not an inherent quality, but rather established through repeated actions and behaviours.

Children and adolescents who identify as transgender face a wide variety of challenges. A significant number of people are subjected to both physical and emotional assaults whenever they venture outside of their homes, or they suffer from a persistent fear of being detected. Certain individuals may engage in highly risky activities to resolve a misconception about their gender identity. There is significant resistance on the part of family members to recognise or accept the great change that has taken place in the individual at the level of the soul. In Vidya's case, the need to act like a man makes her feel disconnected from her body and from her true self. Putting on men's clothes every day becomes a ritual that takes away her genuine identity. Her body is a battleground where the fight between outside pressure and inward truth never ends. This feeling of being disconnected from your body shows up as times of deep self-hatred and mental suffering. Vidya says that when she looked in the mirror, she couldn't connect what she saw with how she felt inside:

I could not lead a double life any longer. No, I couldn't live any longer like a man. If 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 in 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. (56)

The narrative also highlights the strength that comes with being transgender. Even though she is always being told to fit in, Vidya makes room for her true self. Vidya has a master's degree from Tanjavur Tamil University in Applied Linguistics. In a 2014 interview, she says, while doing my post-graduation at University, I spent most of the time in the theatre department rather than my Linguistics Department…. So I was able to do a couple of plays. However, she could no longer bear the ordeal of managing her suppressed femininity at this period. She could see that her ultimate aim in life lay in breaking free from the constraint of masculinity and becoming the woman, she innately was. A profound level of redemption that occurs in the life of a transgender person who accepts their full identification as either male or female is referred to as nirvana. Those who engage in the practice of cross-dressing gain a great deal of enjoyment from the occasion of dressed in the garb of a different gender.

With this belief, she went to undergo sex reassignment surgery (SRS), despite the poor medical facilities and the risks involved, evoking scenes akin to those in a slaughterhouse. "Many female names were scrawled on the wall, some in ink, others in charcoal… our predecessors in the room have scribbled their names on the wall, presumably because they feared they could die on the operating table" (12). After the surgery, she publicly claimed to be Vidya and began living as the woman she had always known herself to be. Vidya, who is educated, goes through with the operation illegally with the express purpose of enjoying her life as a woman, even though it was hard for her financially, socially, and medically. In these fraught medical situations, the surgical process evokes scenes akin to those in a slaughterhouse-marked by a mechanical indifference to the body and little regard for safety, dignity, and integral care. This metaphor attracts attention to the dehumanising elements surrounding having to undergo major surgery in an environment without proper procedures, ethical control, and medical finesse.

There is a substantial number of transgender people who are knowledgeable about the procedure of post-reassignment surgery but are not aware of it. However, the attainment of Nirvana is associated with a great danger for transgender individuals due to the trauma that is frequently associated with the surgery. As a result of the fact that a sizeable percentage of transgender people in India are experiencing financial difficulties, they opt for hospitals that provide 'Nirvana' therapies at more affordable prices. Consequently, the health status of the patients is connected to the mortality risk that is associated with the surgery having been performed. Transgender people, on the other hand, have access to high-quality medical facilities in Western countries, which allows them to undergo surgeries of this kind.

In her memoirs, Vidya draws a comparison between the Nirvana procedure, which was carried out in India without the appropriate official clearance or safety protocols, and sex reassignment surgeries carried out in other countries at a time when they were legally recognised. The physicians are not completely knowledgeable in a variety of topics, including speech therapy, breast augmentation, feminising the face, and inserting a prosthetic vagina. Only an HIV test is carried out before the procedure, and there is no specific protocol that is followed. Through the use of general anaesthesia, it is feasible to castrate an organ during the surgical procedure. After the SRS has been completed, the patient would not be allowed to remain in the hospital until their wounds have completely healed. Vidya's happiness will reach

.

its zenith once she has achieved the status of a woman. Her wish to be acknowledged for her gender is communicated through these remarks:

Amma, Amma, I have blossomed into womanhood. I have shed my old identity. My name is Vidya. Where could you possibly be, Amma? Is it too much to ask for you to be with me, even if it's just for a fleeting moment? Could you please hold my hand, Amma? My heart feels like it's shattering into a million tiny pieces. Radha, I must insist that you address me differently. Our relationship has changed, and I no longer consider myself your brother. I am now your sister, your sister. Radha, please come to me. Chithi, Manju, Prabha, Appa.... (17)

Transgender people frequently see it as the solution to many of their problems in everyday life because it allows recognition as a man (or a woman in the case of mtf transsexual people). However, at the time of transition, many transsexual people experience the loss of family, friends and other relationships." (Whittle, 2012, p. 272) "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 pains." (137) was the statement that Vidya made. This underscores the profound struggles and personal suffering she has endured throughout her life. She demonstrates the feelings that are experienced by other individuals who identify as transgender.

Following the transformation that she underwent in Pune, she gradually makes her way back to her domestic sphere. The family has collectively agreed to allow her to reside within their home. Nevertheless, her discontent with her existing living arrangements has motivated her to relocate and live with friends. Although her friends are capable of fulfilling her basic requirements, she faces considerable difficulties in obtaining employment. The Hijra community gives Vidya comfort and strength because they accept and appreciate who she is. After undergoing gender reassignment surgery, Vidya, like a great number of other transgender people, eventually finds herself in a position where she is forced to resort to begging. They have only two choices available to them in India, just like they have in other countries: they can either engage in begging or get involved in prostitution. The idea that she should spend her entire life engaged in prostitution is something that she is adamant about.

Unfortunately, despite her education, intelligence, and perseverance, she is unable to secure a promising job for herself. The existing attitudes that society has against transgender people make it difficult for transgender people to participate in activities that would allow them to live a respectable life. In the entrepreneurial venture, begging is seen as a daunting task by members of the Transgender community. Most members are willing to risk their lives, honour, and even academic futures in the quest to lead a lifestyle different from their assigned biological gender at birth. Vidya's experiences provide a touching example of the extreme inner conflict that she suffered by engaging in the activity of begging within stores and public transport terminals. Vidya herself describes the initial feelings that she experienced when she was given the responsibility of engaging in begging:

During the first fifteen days of my career as a beggar, I encountered several obstacles that made it difficult for me to extend my hand in supplication. These obstacles included humiliation, fear, ego, education, memories of accolades and rewards, and possibly other factors that compelled me to withdraw each attempt. In particular, I hesitated to ask for alms because of my significant disparity. On the other hand, within a reasonable amount of time, I was able to triumph and successfully let go of my overpowering sense of guilt for asking. A tirunangai is characterised by passionate applause and a strong request for charity, and I started doing both enthusiastically. (92)

Individuals who identify as transgender frequently face a variety of forms of violence, including physical assault, teasing, intimidation, and even sexual assault. "Whatever the reason, the oppression is real – transsexuals have a perplexing legal and medical status, and continue to lose their jobs, their homes and their families merely for being what they are." (Whittle, 2012, p.33). There was a time when Vidya was insulted by a woman who asked, "Are you not ashamed to beg?" Vidya felt embarrassed by this woman's comments. On a physical level, you are capable. When Vidya heard the lady's comments, she became infuriated and reacted with a strong question, "Do you want me to die?" (94). Each of these Vidya words carries with it the sense of density.

Where should people seek refuge when they are denied the chance to pursue work and educational prospects, and what actions should they take to make sure they can continue to support themselves? It is known that the social stigma associated with non-conventional gender behaviour or cross-gender identity still leads to social isolation for many trans people. The social stigma takes many forms, from experiencing personal violence in the home and in public arenas to job or home loss, financial difficulties, loss of contact with families and communities, and having great difficulties in personal relationships. (Whittle, 2002, p. 218) But instead of permitting people to engage in prostitution and begging, the government should prioritise providing resources for education and jobs.

When it comes to educating and motivating members of the transgender community, Vidya utilises her own personal life as a model. As a good example of her writing prowess, Vidya, an accomplished Indian author, uses her own life as an example. If the government were to encourage transgender people, it would catalyse them to achieve a multitude of incredible accomplishments throughout their lives and make significant contributions to our nation. "The government can do it. If it will- if the government takes one step- society will follow suit. Once we gain social approval, our families will also accept us. Politicians take out flag marches for a million causes. Can they surely take some interest in this issue?" (143)

In her autobiography, Vidya places a notable emphasis on this particular subject. The emotional pain, family rejection, public humiliation, and mental health problems shown in the memoir are a powerful condemnation of the systemic brutality that transgender people in India experience. Vidya's story reflects the pain of exclusion from society and the economy, in addition to emotional trauma, public humiliation, and mental health disorders. Through Vidya's writing, readers are presented with a detailed account of the challenges Tirunangais face in society to achieve a basic standard of living. Individuals who identify as transgender face significant hostility when they attempt to gain access to mainstream health services as a result of the combined effects of inequality and prejudice. Transgender persons experience mental health challenges disproportionately compared to the general population. Research in India has shown alarming trends. For example, "A study by The George Institute for Global Health revealed 42.7% of trans women reported having moderate to severe depression while nearly 48% were diagnosed with psychiatric disorders" (The George Institute for Global Health, 2021). Likewise, studies across countries consistently demonstrate high risks: "a systematic review of 65 studies that indicated approximately 50% of transgender individuals have lifetime suicidal ideation, while about 29% reported a history of suicide attempts" (Marshall et al., 2023).

Transgender persons are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and psychological distress two to three times than cisgender people" (Zhang et al., 2020). Indian studies confirm these findings, too: the lifetime suicide attempt rates among transgender women range between 25% and 50%, depending on the sample. (ETV Bharat, 2024) "Gender-based victimisation, discrimination, bullying, violence, being rejected by family, friends, and

.

community; harassment by intimate partners, family members, police and the public; discrimination and ill-treatment in the healthcare system are major risk factors that influence suicidal behaviour among transgender persons" (Virupaksha, Muralidhar, & Ramakrishna, 2016, p. 506). These statistics point to the disproportionate mental health burden placed on the transgender community due to stigma, discrimination, and lack of access to appropriate healthcare services.

This study documents, in a single case of Vidya, the systemic suppressions faced by transgender individuals within Indian society. Based on Vidya's life circumstances, this book provides an important example of widespread abuse, acts of violence, and rejection experienced by transgender people by positioning Vidya as a symbol of collective suffering. Along with the documented story showing individual resilience, the text itself functions as a global advocate for transgender populations in relation to visibility, acceptance, and recognition. Further, it operates as a mobilising tool for empowerment that would foster self-acceptance among individuals who have experienced such abuse and who are actively striving toward their objectives.

Identity Crisis faced by Vidya

The term "outcast" is used to describe those who are purposefully removed from society and who are purposefully kept separate from the human community or the social group to which they belong. People who identify as transgender or transsexual are frequently considered to be social outcasts because they are thought to be incompatible with the societal norms that define "normality" for unknown reasons. Therefore, a great number of societies reject the idea that transgender and transsexual people should be considered members of their own social group. If a person were to think back to a time in the past when they were stopped at a traffic signal for defending themselves against a Hijra or any transgender individual who was begging, and they were immediately overtaken with hostility or scorn, it would be more upsetting than seeing a beggar holding a child.

People who identify as LGBTQ in India are disproportionately undereducated in official environments. Vidya's story extends beyond recounting her own experiences and becomes a form of political resistance. She tells a very compelling story of the identity crisis and pain that Hijra people go through in a cis-heteronormative culture by vividly remembering the bewilderment, body dysphoria, rejection from family, and systematic prejudice she faced as a youngster. One of the most moving things she wrote was, "Every time I looked in the mirror, I saw someone else. I didn't belong to this body" (42). This one sentence encapsulates the profound disparity between her body and her identity, which lies at the heart of her problems.

Vidya's narrative reveals a great deal of body dysphoria, a dysfunction that emanates from the dissonance between gender identity and biological sex. Whereas sex is determined biologically, gender is a social construct, culturally conceived and conventionally nurtured. As posits Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex*, "One is not born a woman, but becomes one" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 283), suggesting that it is culture and socialisation, biology, that creates gender identity. Family, peer groups, and the state enforce binary categories of male and female and discriminate against anyone outside this mould. The consequence, therefore, is that transgender people like Vidya suffer from psychological trauma, as their self-identity clashes with the societal definition of gender, as poignantly brought out in her narrative. At the point of confusion about gender identity, Sarvanan, the youngster in *I Am Vidya*, feels like a girl inside his mind. She says: "Even when I wore my brother's clothes, I

felt suffocated. I yearned for the softness of a saree, the sound of bangles" (49). "The most obvious expression of hijras as women is in their dress." (Nanda, 1999, p. 17) This desire goes beyond just wanting to wear feminine clothes; it's a deeper statement of her true gender identity, which is constantly rejected by the expectations placed on her. Sarvanan experiences an identity crisis, which makes him deal with the issue of gender nonconformity. There is a significant amount of resistance among family members to accept the deep transformation that the soul goes through. This shows how hijras, or transgender feel psychologically and how they struggle to express themselves. It is such determination and hatred towards their male bodies that makes them leave every comfort of their life and go away from their families.

The dual existence is a characteristic of the lifestyle that is prevalent among transgender and transsexual individuals. Some people could think that ending their own lives is a reasonable option, while others might decide to endure in the face of the difficulties that life presents. As a result, because they are persons who belong to the third gender, they have a great deal of difficulty in terms of education, employment, and other issues that are associated with them. The concealment of their identities, the continuation of their education, and the attainment of greater economic independence are of more relevance to transgender individuals in contemporary society. Having a Master of Arts degree does not necessarily guarantee work prospects with the government. Even those who sympathise with transgender people who work in the private sector will be hesitant to hire someone who identifies as transgender. It is unlikely that they will be able to find any official financial institution or corporate organisation that can give them business opportunities if they have the goal of becoming an experienced entrepreneur. Vidya, who has completed her education and has made the decision to take on the responsibility of selling appealing home things on trains as a means of overcoming feelings of shame, bullying, or sexual harassment they may have experienced. However, the economic outcome of her commercial endeavour is not favourable. The same people who had shown compassion for her when she was begging on the trains are now mocking her and saying hurtful things about her business venture. Even the beneficent station master is unable to convince her otherwise. In light of this, the attainment of social security continues to be an unattainable goal for trans people. Accordingly, accepting a transgender identity in a society such as ours invariably involves putting our mental health and our ability to survive in jeopardy.

The passage of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2016, which commemorates the life of the first transgender person in India, brought to light several success stories that had previously been obscured. The legislation, which was proposed by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and adopted by the Indian parliament, protects the rights of transgender individuals as well as their well-being and other considerations that are pertinent to the situation. For transgender people like Vidya, who exhibit distinct behaviours that clearly identify their boundaries, education ought to be a highly protected entitlement. Vidya is an example of this. Theatre, dance, and writing are just a few of the hobbies that have served as a means of creative expression for her amid the ongoing intense emotional turmoil she is experiencing.

Individuals who have been diagnosed with gender identity disorder (GID), transsexuals, crossdressers, and those who identify as gender queer are all considered to be part of the transgender community. Performers, such as drag queens and drag kings, are often stereotyped as such; yet, the majority of them do not genuinely identify as the opposite sex and believe that they were born in an improper physical form. In the setting of gender identity disorder (GID) or transsexuality, individuals have deep and long-lasting feelings of identification with the gender that is opposite to their assigned sex, accompanied by feelings of dissatisfaction with their own assigned sex. Individuals who suffer from gender identity disorder (GID) have a strong propensity to identify with the opposite sex and regularly adopt

.

habits and apparel that are typically associated with the gender that they do not identify with. It is possible, for instance, for a person who identifies as male to experience and exhibit behaviours that are normally associated with females. Certain individuals, for example, who have typical genitals and exhibit secondary sex traits of one gender, could covertly associate themselves more with the opposing gender. This is because they have a larger range of sexual characteristics. Some people choose to engage in cross-dressing, while others opt to have sex-change surgery. Some people are born with genitalia that are difficult to distinguish from one another, which can lead to difficulties in identifying them.

Identities are not mere markers we are known by; they define as well as limit us. They can both confine or release a consciousness. *I am Vidya* is the story of one such journey, that of a declaration, of the claiming of identity. It is an assertion of a consciousness that has suffered the agony of being trapped in a mould it does not belong to, a body it does not identify with. (Book Cover, 2013) The experiences that Vidya has had in her life provide light on the identity crisis that people who suffer from gender identity disorder (GID) go through frequently. A large amount of psychological, physiological, familial, and societal stress is experienced by individuals who are given a different gender at birth. In the same way as other transgender people do, Vidya is also confronted with an identity crisis. Although she struggles with gender identity disorder (GID), she can overcome it and establish herself as a transgender woman who is highly educated and employed, thanks to her unyielding willpower and mental determination. For her to acquire this well-established standing, she will have to go through a great deal of adversity, not only inside her own household but also in society.

Vidya has rendered in various crucial aspects of the existential experiences of transgender people. When transgender people come forward with the information that they have a gender identity issue, the first area in which they may experience the disdain of their family members is the family. Due to the prevalent societal conventions that closely adhere to two traditionally accepted genders- male and female- the members of the family, notably the father and mother, do not have a grasp of the gender identity disorder (GID) that is present in transgender individuals. There is frequently concern directed at society among the members of the family. Additionally, it is likely that the members of Vidya's family, notably Vidya's father, may view her gender identity change as being comparable to other psychological difficulties.

As a result, Vidya experienced considerable challenges throughout her life, much like other people who identify as transgender. She believes that individual transgender people are subjected to discrimination as a result of the discriminatory social standards that are rooted in gender inequality. Thus, it is of the utmost importance for the family, the government, and society as a whole to take action to confront and better the difficult circumstances that Vidya, like Trans persons, are currently experiencing. Even though they come from different social backgrounds and have different family histories, these people consider themselves to be related to one another. They have taken possession of their ancestral roots from their family, which has resulted in the formation of a connection of this kind between them. Someone can develop the art of clapping in a specific manner or genre, which not only consistently promotes their money benefits but also occasionally rescues them from potentially dangerous conditions such as physical assault or sexual assault:

Tirunangai possesses a remarkable quality that sets them apart. Their hands come together in a rhythmic symphony, a secret language only they understand. With a single clap of our hands, we can effortlessly capture the gaze of our fellow Tirunangai, no matter the bustling chaos of the street. Especially during moments of conflict or disagreement, this method of communication provides us with valuable moral support. (85)

The persistent absence of empathy not only makes it more difficult to comprehend the internal anguish that transgender people go through, but it also makes it more difficult for people to be willing to aid transgender people in their educational or professional efforts. In light of this, transgender people call for the establishment of segregated educational institutions, segregated public restrooms, limits on work, rights to possess a driving license and ration card, and even the right to marry within their own sex or with those of the opposite sex. Vidya's autobiography not only explores Vidya herself, but it also represents the experiences and fate of transgender people in India, notably in southern India, specifically in Chennai. Vidya's autobiography is a reflection of the entire transgender community in India. To put it another way, transgender people are neither morally reprehensible nor criminals. They only need and are entitled to a regular life. The expectations that they have are just as simple as Vidya's expectations may be.

In short, the pains of existence shown in *I Am Vidya* are complex and deeply rooted in institutional institutions of violence and discrimination. Vidya's experiences show how hard it is for transgender people in India to deal with things like mental anguish, familial rejection, public humiliation, economic marginalisation, and physical abuse. Living Smile Vidya tells a powerful story about the many problems that transgender people in India have to deal with. These problems are caused by deeply rooted systems of patriarchy, caste hierarchy, heteronormativity, and neglect by institutions. Vidya's book shows how being denied legal recognition, pushed to the edges of the economy, discriminated against in healthcare, and oppressed in multiple ways affected her daily life, creating scars that would never heal but also making her stronger. The problems she faces aren't just personal; they show how the transgender community as a whole is dealing with systemic assault. This shows how badly we need both legal and cultural change.

One of the main problems that Vidya talks about is how the law makes transgender people invisible. For a long time, there were no laws in India that recognised transsexual identities. Because she wasn't recognised, her life was unstable because she couldn't obtain essential rights and benefits. This forced misgendering in official documentation is not a trivial bureaucratic inconvenience; rather, it is a form of institutional erasure that denies transgender individuals the right to self-definition. In documenting these challenges, *I Am Vidya* makes a valuable contribution to the burgeoning corpus of Indian queer literature and activism. The memoir presents an unforgiving mirror to the lived realities of transgender people and serves as a counter-narrative to dominant themes of erasure and marginalisation. As Stephen Whittle illustrates, such narratives are pivotal: Whittle, in her book Respect and Equality, emphasises that personal narratives from trans lives are crucial to shifting public knowledge and creating legal reform. (Whittle 2006, p. 95) Vidya's voice within and beyond her memoir continues to frame and galvanise the growing movement for transgender rights in India.

As she closes her memoir, Vidya remains acutely alive to this incompleteness of the struggle. The challenges faced by Vidya, as documented in *I Am Vidya*, are vast and complex and implicate the social, legal, and cultural fabric of Indian society at almost every level. From legal erasure to economic marginalisation, caste-based exclusion to intra-community hierarchies, the life narrative of Vidya exposes how systemic oppression works on many levels to perpetuate the denial of basic dignity and rights of transgender people. Lived experiences reveal that even when legal recognition is achieved was the case with the judgment of 2014 in NALSA-societal attitudes remain deep-seated and slow to evolve. Vidya's own musings speak volumes about this hiatus between law and lived reality. Here is where Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality becomes crucial to understand. Intersectionality is a prism through which forms of inequality span on multiple axes and can be said to be operating intersectively at one time. Vidya's identity as a Dalit transgender woman positioned her precisely at such an axis,

where caste, gender identity, among other axes of marginalisation feed into one another (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1241). Yet, despite such crushing odds, Vidya's resilience and activism manage to be nothing less than a beacon of hope.

Through her writing, public speaking, and advocacy, she has emerged as a key voice in the fight for transgender rights in India. Vidya's work makes a powerful contribution to this process, offering readers an intimate and humanising portrayal of transgender life in India. The memoir has inspired countless others to share their stories and demand their rights, helping to build a more inclusive literary and activist landscape. In conclusion, while the challenges remain formidable, Vidya's journey exemplifies the power of resilience, community, and storytelling in the fight for justice. Her life and work remind us that true change requires not only legal reform but also a deep cultural transformation.

References

Bettcher, T. M. (2014). Trapped in the wrong theory: Rethinking trans oppression and resistance. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 39(2), 383–406. https://doi.org/10.1086/673088

Butler, J. (1990). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

ETV Bharat. (2024). High suicide rates among transgender community in India: A growing mental health crisis. *ETV Bharat*. [URL]

The George Institute for Global Health. (2021). Mental health and wellbeing of transgender women in India: A community-based study. *The George Institute for Global Health*. [URL]

Khan, S. I., Khan, N. M., Rahman, M., & Gourab, G. (2016). Hijra/Hejira. In N. A. Naples (Ed.), The Wiley Blackwell encyclopedia of gender and sexuality studies (1st ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Marshall, E., et al. (2023). Global prevalence of depression, anxiety, and suicidality among transgender people: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 335, 45–58. [DOI or URL]

NALSA v. Union of India, (2014). Supreme Court of India.

Nanda, S. (1999). *Neither man nor woman: The hijras of India (2nd ed.)*. Wadsworth Publishing.

The CSR Journal. (2025, October 26). Trans persons attempt mass suicide in Indore, Mumbai. Inshorts. https://inshorts.com/en/news/trans-persons-attempt-mass-suicide-in-indore-mumbai-20251026

Virupaksha, H. G., Muralidhar, S., & Ramakrishna, J. (2016). Suicide and suicidal behavior among transgender persons. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 38(6), 505–509. https://doi.org/10.4103/0253-7176.194908

Vidya, Living Smile. (2014). *I am Vidya: A transgender's journey*. Rupa Publications.

Whittle, S. (2012). *Respect and equality: Transsexual and transgender rights*. Routledge-Cavendish.

Zhang, Q., et al. (2020). Mental health of transgender and gender diverse people: A meta-analysis of comparative studies. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 130, 480–489. [DOI or

URL]

Bio-note

Pooja Kalia serves as an Assistant Professor of English at Khalsa College, Amritsar, Punjab, India. She has a total of 19 years of teaching experience to her credit. She obtained her M.Phil. in Fiction and is pursuing her Ph.D. in Transgender Studies. She had cleared the UGC-NET and completed her B.Ed at the Punjab College of Education. She has attended many National and International Seminars, Conferences, and Workshops and presented papers in national and international seminars and conferences in the thrust areas of ELT and literature. Some of her papers are published on Research Gate and Academia. She has contributed numerous research papers and articles to National and International reputed books and refereed journals. Her areas of interest are ELT, Language, Literature, and Gender Studies. She has contributed four papers on Research Gate and Academia. She had been invited as a Resource person from the Centre of Nucleus and Learning Development for the Webinar on Transgender Community. She was also invited as a Resource person for conducting an FDP on Transgender community this year.

Email Id: poojakalia007@gmail.com