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Body Narratives: The Case of Transgender

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Abstract

Body Narratives: The Case of Transgender aims to study the autobiography of a transgender writer from India and will attempt to analyse how trans narratives tend to be body narratives, wherein the somatic transitions which hold great significance in trans lives also becomes the central focus in their autobiographies and also how it involves a will to compose a self, literally, a self which they intend to express in the autobiography, out of the many selves and eventually how it becomes political, the will to be heard and accepted, rather than merely being treated as site markers of non-binary gender systems. The paper will also attempt to study how the transgendered identity has been significant to queer theory since the figure of the transgender made possible the merging between the gay and the lesbian, giving rise to a different type of homosexuality and thereby broadening its horizon.

Key Words: *Transgender Autobiography, Queer, Gender Studies, Body Narratives, Body Politics*

Body Narratives: The Case of Transgender aims to study the autobiography of a transgender¹ writer from India and will attempt to analyse how trans narratives tend to be body narratives, wherein the somatic transitions which hold great significance in trans lives also becomes the central focus in their autobiographies and also how it involves a will to compose a self, literally, a self which they intend to express in the autobiography, out of the many selves and eventually how it becomes political, the will to be heard and accepted, rather than merely being treated as site markers of non-binary gender systems.

Queer by questioning the hegemony of heterosexuals and rigid definitions of gender and sexuality, debunked hierarchies and offered space to varied gender choices, without privileging any. Technically thus, trying to define what 'queer' means would constitute a

¹ Following Susan Stryker and Cressida J. Heyes, *trans* will be used as a broad umbrella term to capture the multiple forms of sex and gender crossings. And here transgender implies a person who lives a gender they are not prenatally assigned as well as a person who undergoes (or hopes to undergo) any surgery to lessen the difference between her sexed body and gender identity.

violation of its very character, for queer abhors fixity and celebrates fluidity, the undefined, the unheard. And this is also what the transgender is – fluid, multiple, undefined².

But before delving critically into trans autobiographies, the term ‘autobiography’ needs to be understood first. Autobiographies are self-narratives in which authors try to present themselves to readers in a way they want to be seen. Hence apart from being collective as well as personal narratives, autobiographies also offer its creator a chance to have made sense of their lives and experiences as they have answered the question, ‘who am I?’, as observed by Diane Bjorklund, who researched on the genre of autobiography in America (Bjorklund 89) . Autobiographers, being aware that their work is going to be read by a future audience, accordingly organise the events of their lives into narrative structure that contains a central point around which it revolves. Transgender autobiographies, as noticed in many autobiographies including the ones written in the Indian context such as Vidya’s *I Am Vidya* and A. Revathi’s *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*, centres around the body. Having the body as the central point the different experiences and the life events are told out. Hence their autobiographies transpire into body narratives.

Autobiography begins on the presumption of self-knowledge and ends in the creation of a narrative that conceals the promises of its construction, revealing the impossibility of its own dream. It has been said that for a woman the autobiography is often a means to survive traumas of childbirth, illness, deaths of spouses and children, loss of cultural identity and personal regard, fear of loss of beauty and they struggle to find a voice to express. She cannot experience herself as an entirely separate identity as she is aware of the fact that she is being defined as a woman whose identity as been pre-determined by the dominant male culture. While on the other hand, male autobiographies enforces a unity and identity across time by reconstructing the ego as a safeguard against disintegration and they seldom admit their internal fears and insecurities, hesitations and ruptures to glide smoothly over gaps in memory and blind spots. The basic masculine self is separate and not connected to the world.

Trans Autobiographies on the other hand develop a dual consciousness. They don’t recognise themselves in the reflections of cultural representation and hence a dual consciousness is developed - Self as culturally defined and Self as different from the cultural definition. From this division, came the experience of one part being strange and alien, cut-off from the other which continuously tries to find a voice. They are never together in one place, always in transit, travelling into alien territory. Sex transformations being an important part of the plot, the focus is on the body and the narrative intertwines in and out of the mind and the body. There autobiographies act as a means to survive the trauma of self-realisation and social realisation, sex change and loss of identity, acclimatizing with the new found identity and empowerment.

² According to many theorists such as Donald E. Hall it implies embracing the impossibility of comprehensiveness, partiality and diversity.

I thanked them silently. ‘Thank you for removing my maleness from my body, thank you for making my body a female body. My life is fulfilled. If I die, I’ll lose nothing.’ (Vidya 16)

Living Smile Vidya’s autobiography *I Am Vidya* exemplifies this continuous conflict apparent in the Indian Trans autobiographies, the Indian experience being no different from the West. Vidya, a transgender or Tirunangai³ from Chennai, details the struggle undergone while transforming herself⁴ from a male (Saravanan) to a female (Vidya).

In Vidya’s autobiography, one can discern that the beleaguered self and body of Vidya is the central point throughout. Vidya’s emotional and sexual conflicts along with issues of conformity of hir multiple selves becomes prominent right from the beginning. And it can be observed that through the process of writing the autobiography, Vidya is actually creating or constructing a self literally, out of the many selves. Thus one sees how the transgendered body is obsessed upon and also out of many epiphanies, Vidya’s sex change with surgical help was the greatest one. After having gone through the painful process of removing male genitals, Saravanan finally got rid of his male identity and changed into Vidya. To quote from the text –

Yes, what I saw in that moment was death. They had removed that part of me over which I had silent tears of rejection from the time I could remember. I saw that my penis and my testicles had been excised. I was sutured and applied medication after that. I could feel all that very distinctly. Ah! Nirvana. The ultimate peace.

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, yearned for. This pain would obliterate all my earlier pains. (Vidya 16)

But the truth is removing the male genitals won’t make a male Saravanan, a female Vidya. Ze tells all the phases of the changing, feminine mind in a male body, hir obsession to wear hir sister’s sari’s and dance to the radio songs, hir strong feelings for Ilango and how he made hir feel like a whole woman (both mentally and physically), how ze felt hir body as that of a woman’s with hir imaginary breasts wrapped in a sari and towel-wrapped hair, among others. To quote one such incident –

Every time he spoke to me of such things, I thrilled at the thought of the many men who might enjoy looking at me. It made me blush, all right, but I cannot deny those thoughts of mine. As the days progressed, I started wishing Ilango would feast on me the way he enjoyed watching other girls. I became eager to win his love....I thought then that what I felt for Ilango was neither love nor lust. Ilango was the man who kindled in me the kind of changes that occur from time to time in a woman’s

³ As they prefer to be called in Tamil Nadu.

⁴ Leslie Feinberg has introduced the pronouns *hir* (in place of her/his) and *ze* (in place of he/she) to describe *hirself*. Following her and Cressida J. Heyes, I will use them throughout the paper.

different stages of development. Ilango was the man who made me feel whole as a woman. (Vidya 35)

Nick Adams, GLAAD's director of programs, Transgender Media, made a very powerful statement, "For a transgender person to step into the world as his or her authentic self is a moment of tremendous freedom." And for Vidya that was her moment of freedom and liberty which gave her the courage to face the world with her new identity. But that doesn't mean that surgery is a miracle cure for the difficulties of gender dysphoria, which every MTF or FTM transgender undergo. People who make the transition often lose spouses, families, friends and jobs. They may find themselves completely alone if they relocate to start new lives. Johns Hopkins University, which in the 1960s was one of the first medical institutions to perform sex reassignment surgery, questioned the practice when officials concluded that it was not helping the transgender's overall mental and physical state, a question one needs to analyse and inquire discursively.

The process of changing one's sex, under the standards of care adopted by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), usually, is meeting with a mental health professional for a diagnosis and psychotherapy, as the first step. A diagnosis of gender identity disorder or gender dysphoria and a letter of recommendation from the therapist allows a person to begin hormone therapy with a doctor. That is usually followed by a period of living publicly as a member of the opposite sex and, finally, surgery to alter the genitalia and other body parts. The hormonal therapies help FTM transgender develop secondary male sex characteristics such as a beard and body hair, and help MTF transgender to change their musculature, skin and fat distribution, all of which will make them appear more feminine. Body hair also diminishes. But the hormones' most important contribution is to reduce the dysphoria transgender people have been struggling with all their lives. After a month or two, their bodies and brains begin aligning. And apart from the changes in the body, these hormones also make them feel differently. Hence, they start behaving differently.

Vidya, by portraying the queerness according to the heteronormative society, throughout her narrative tried to explore the aspects of a transgendered body, which cannot be defined, is multiple and was almost unheard of and thereby she attempted to give a voice to the unheard and the silent. The world can now see what she has always known, that she is — and always has been — a woman.

On being critically analysed as to why the trans narratives tend to be body narratives, one can account the somatic transitions which hold great significance in their lives and hence become the central focus in the autobiographies. Thus the narratives are written in and out of the body, shifting between the new found liberties the mind attains, through the body. As Jay Prosser claims that sex change is a plot and thus appropriately transsexuals make for adept and absorbing authors. They read and write out their own body, with a will to be heard and accepted, and herein it becomes political. The body narratives, narrated through the transgender's own recounting, centre around the body and valorise the self,

thus having pointed out the ‘difference,’ their ultimate aim is to be accepted, as throughout history transgenders are the unaccepted and the questioned lot. And this need to be accepted by the traditional heteronormative society⁵, transpires their autobiographies into body narratives.

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⁵ The heteronormative society until recently did not understand or recognise that being transgender is a fact and not a choice.

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