

Gender Dysphoria: A Study of Living Smile Vidya's Autobiography I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey

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Abstract

Gender Dysphoria, earlier named as gender identity disorder, is a discomfort and incongruence marked between an individual's experienced and assigned gender. The rigid and traditional binary roles of being a male or a female causes a cultural stigmatization, stopping individuals experiencing a turmoil with their gender identity to correlate to it. Familial rejection, stigmatization, social exclusion, prejudice causes poor self-esteem, risk of self-harm and suicide, poor economic and living conditions among people experiencing gender dysphoria. Transgender are associated with gender dysphoria and are often a victim of discrimination and prejudice. Various treatments are available for the treatment of gender dysphoria such as hormonal therapy, behavioural therapy, and sex reassignment surgery (SRS). Existential crisis is often a result of the rejection and stigma faced by them and the constant struggle to attain basic rights and not limiting themselves to the boundaries of gender, thereby fighting transphobia.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Gender Dysphoria, gender identity, transphobia, treatment.*

Introduction

The term 'gender' originated from old French 'genre' (genre- modern French) around 1300c which meant 'species, kind, character'. The word 'gender' has different etymological origins. In Proto-Indo-European the term 'gene' (give birth) was used which meant to procreate tribal and familial groups. In Latin, Aristotle used the term 'genos' which denoted species, kin, race. According to him, Protagoras, a Greek philosopher, defined gender in a grammatical manner using the terms 'masculine, feminine or neutral.' Afterward 14th century, the term also indicated male and female qualities. Thomas Browne in his work 'Hydriotaphia' classified gender to be masculine "The Psyche, or soul, of Tiresias is of the masculine gender" (55). Similarly, Charles Dickens in A Tale of two Cities attributed gender as feminine "Black divinities of the feminine gender." (19). Around 1900 some people regarded the usage of the term as jocular similar to the phrase 'of the female persuasion' used today. In 1926, Henry Watson Fowler suggested that "gender...is a grammatical term only. To talk of persons...of the masculine or feminine g[ender], meaning of the male or female sex, is either a jocularly (permissible or not according to context) or a blunder." (211). A shift began in 1950's around the usage of the term and got established well around 1980's referring to the social usage of the term 'gender' and focusing less on the biological category under which it had been categorized. The term 'gender role' was

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first coined by sexologist John Money which he described in a seminal 1955 paper as "all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman". The social roles of men and women were popularized in 1970's following the feminist movement which focused on the arbitrary construction of the term 'sex' and the social distinctions based on that. Sex and gender were used to illustrate the difference between the two terms by The American Heritage Dictionary as "The effectiveness of the medication appears to depend on the sex (not gender) of the patient" (3044) also "In peasant societies, gender (not sex) roles are likely to be more clearly defined." (3044). 20th century marks the usage of the term 'gender' outnumbering the word 'sex' used in arts, humanities, and social sciences.

Gender and sex are two distinct ideas, with the former having to do with one's image of oneself and the latter having to do with biology. "Sex is a biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex." (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 10). Gender identity is not always determined by the sex assigned at birth. The defining characteristics of one's gender expression have been developed by society and culture to correspond with their sex.

Labeling someone a man or a woman is a social decision. We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs -- not science -- can define our sex. Furthermore, our beliefs about gender affect what kinds of knowledge scientists produce about sex in the first place. (Fausto-Sterling 3)

The struggle between expressing one's true personality traits and the binary societal expectations of male and female roles frequently leads to cultural prejudice.

Gender Dysphoria is defined by the DSM-5-TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental disorders) as "a marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and their assigned gender." (512). It is sense of uneasiness that a person may suffer from if their gender identity does not match with their biological sex. Gender dysphoria lays its roots deep in one's gender identity. The two binary gender identities are 'male' and 'female'. The sense and notion of who a person is and who they identify as refers to their gender identity. For example, a person with male genitals does not identify as male, a person with female genitals does not identify as female or a person with either of the two does not identify as male or female, otherwise called non-binary. The cause of gender dysphoria can be categorized by the marked incongruity between a person's experienced gender and their primary gender. Having a desire to eliminate one's primary gender to possess the characteristics/gender of the opposite gender marks a significant role in gender dysphoria. Cross gender roles, strong and intense preferences for the things stereotypically associated with other gender and/or the desire to change attributes related physical characteristics of one's sex and many more causes distress upon a person's experiences. Until 2013, the term 'gender-identity disorder' was used to define gender dysphoria among people. However, the term was discontinued to be used in order to remove the stigmatization linked to the term 'disorder'. Gender dysphoria is commonly associated with transgender identity. Scientifically speaking, gender incongruence may be reflected by various factors such as biological, socio-cultural, educational etc. while the causes of it remain unknown. It differs from sexual orientation as defined by British National Health Service as "gender dysphoria is not related to sexual orientation" ("Gender Dysphoria") although historically the two have been linked.

Existential crisis in transgender

Transgender people in India suffer from high levels of stigmatization, victimization and discrimination leading to their poor and negative self-esteem and self-image and an increased risk and higher prevalence of other mental health conditions. The hate crimes against them are higher as compared to the general population leading to the higher suicidal rates among them. This socially stigmatized group are often a victim of bullying and harassment starting at a very young age. From being rejected at their own house to falling

a prey to bullying at school, they are often traumatized. Children and teenagers who identify as transgender often experience prejudice and non-acceptance at school, home and in society which leads to their adverse mental health conditions. Not getting the right treatment, socially or economically leads to their poor living conditions. Studies show that transgender in western culture face less stigmatization than Indian culture. The means of livelihood in India for transgender people are extremely poor. According to studies conducted, the literacy rate of transgender is 56.07% because of the bullying and abuse faced by them and this demographic has a relatively higher percentage of school and college dropouts. Their career opportunities in the employment sector are significantly reduced by their lower educational and literacy status and because of the pervasive and widespread transphobia. This leads to them relying on sex work, begging, and going to houses, singing and dancing and blessing other people for money. Due to the lack of social acceptance and often a victim of harassment and abuse at home, most of the transgender people leave their homes at a very young age undergoing sex change operation which may or may not be supervised properly. Drug abuse, indulgence in unsafe sex leads them to live a poor life style compromising their mental and physical wellbeing.

A similar experience is encountered by Vidya in her autobiography *I am Vidya, A Transgenders Journey*. Her autobiographical account paints a picture of the condition of transgender in India. Their war with their gender identity leads them to being a subject of ridicule, thus facing extreme trauma. Vidya had always been a subject of harassment and abuse from a very young age. This motherless child experienced physical and mental abuse at the hands of her father. Being born a male, she never related to her male form and was more inclined towards the opposite gender. She sought pleasure and comfort in female company rather than male company. Everyone dismissed this situation which they thought of as an issue for the mere excuse of Vidya being focused on her studies. As she grew older, people became more vigilant and started traumatizing her for enjoying the pleasure of female company over the male company. She could not understand the taunts as she felt like a woman at heart. It was then when she realized that she wanted to be an actress and would usually dress up in her sister's clothes and dance. This was ignored as an act of child's innocence and later became a problem for her.

There was as yet no major change in my habits, but I started noticing a difference in the way people approached me—the way they looked at me. My old ways—the same habits which had been dismissed lightly as childish pranks—were now viewed with disfavor. Chithi and Radha scolded me for my acts, and Appa thrashed me regularly. (Vidya 22).

Her existential crisis started when she could not understand the difference of dress code. The stereotypical ideas associated with clothes, like pant and shirt for men and skirts for women, led to her developing mental trauma. “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?” (Vidya 22). Her father added more to it by physically abusing her. The rejection from her own family traumatized her even more. This a plight of an average transgender in India. The stigma associated with transgender people causes their primary caregivers to mistreat them and it shapes their adult lives. Keeping her real identity under the drapes, Vidya completed her schooling and joined a college later. “I was a girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy. Inwardly I wanted to be a girl, but I made every effort possible to hide my femininity from the outside world” (Vidya 33). Having no friends at all, she spent most of her college days in isolation. Being a part of the theatre was the only thing that made her feel alive. She could express who she was through the characters she played. It was then when Vidya met a friend, Saravanan who was just like her. He was a transgender man and made her acquainted with an NGO where Vidya saw a whole world with people experiencing the same thing as her. It was around the time when her desire to become a woman was getting intense and at one point, she felt like dying rather being trapped in a male form. “I was a woman trapped in a male body” (Vidya 37). Every person with the crisis about their own body and form feel trapped inside themselves. This desire to express their true nature

impacts a major portion of their lives. With the society and family being less supportive to them, many leave their homes at a very young age. Vidya did the same and went to Chennai to look for a job and what was more important for her was to be her true self which she could not do at her own home. Even after landing a job, her heart was more focused on being a woman, despite everyone else warning her against it. The desire to express her true nature grew and she left her job and went to Pune to her Amma. In India transgender have their own family comprising of Amma (mother), Nani (grandmother), Chitti (sister) and so on. As she had no job, she had to earn money for her sex change operation. Despite having a degree in linguistics, it was difficult for her to get a job being her true self. Many transgender people often find it difficult to be accepted as they are in the workplace which leaves them with limited number of ways to earn money. Some beg while some indulge in sex work. Vidya knew that sex work was not an option for her so she started to beg. This was a small price she had to pay for being herself, as she thought. "I want to be a woman. I can't be a man any more. My whole life is a lie" (Vidya 64). As if she had not endured enough at the hands of her family and people in her hometown, she experienced much more trauma when she begged. Although she made a few friends and talking to them brought her a sense of relief yet she always became a subject of bullying.

The trauma she endured on the train while begging made her question her reality. From being beaten up to being thrown out of the train, she suffered and endured it all. The desire to become a woman physically was the only thing keeping her alive. Embarking this harsh journey of being at par with one's true self and resorting to either prostitution or begging and leaving one's regular job behind is what an average person with gender dysphoria, particularly trans people face in India. Although some people give into the social norms, others find it rather difficult to live a life in secrecy. The comfort of being what people want you to be, the luxurious life one could live, is never an option for people who cannot bear the trauma and discomfort it brings for not living their lives at their own conditions. But many do not get the luxury to do so. Being born a different gender or not complying with the societal norms of binary genders, transgender often and regularly go through a path of suffering and trauma. Vidya experienced all these things and much more. After achieving nirvana (sex change operation), she left relief for being what she felt like. Her inner nature was not at par with her physical self anymore. She had not to live her life in secrecy yet she missed the primary care she wanted throughout her life. Even after revealing her true and changed self to her family, they never accepted her for who she was. After a few years, she was successful at getting a job at a bank and found a few people who did not treat her any differently yet she faced a lot of issues. She had already started writing her own blog by the time but was still facing issues for being a transgender like not getting a place at a woman's hostel etc. She also got called to write for a woman's magazine and she was happy for being considered a woman by a few people.

However, the thoughts of being a tirunangai (transgender) kept bothering her. She could not help but think of the plight of trans women in India. In a world of men and women, where no one has the maturity to accept us naturally, the place of tirunangais was always going to be a problem. Vidya in her autobiography says that transgender people are not violent or do not indulge in violence but it is only an act of self-defence that makes them do so. Although many laws have been attributed to them but the issue of social acceptance remains the same.

True, I was a graduate—an MA in linguistics, in fact—but did that mean there were government jobs waiting for me, a transgender person? And while there might be sympathizers in the private sector, how many would actively support tirunangais? If I wanted to strike the path of a self-employed entrepreneur, how many people would be ready to give me business, or even finance my venture? There is absolutely no social security for transgenders in this country. Who will step forward to help us, when the government itself is unprepared to extend any kind of basic recognition—it does not issue us a voter ID or even a ration card! (Vidya 92)

Treatment for Gender Dysphoria

With the aid of treatment, people facing gender dysphoria explore their gender identity and find the gender role they feel comfortable with, lessening their discomfort. Every individual should be treated differently. Behavioural therapy, surgery and hormone therapy are a few of many options used for treatment. Transsexualism often occurs in adults whose psychological gender differs from their biological sex. Surgical advances have made it possible for an individual to undergo a sex change operation to treat gender dysphoria. Recent estimates suggest that about 1 in 12,000 men in Western countries has undergone the surgery (Lawrence, 2007). A pursuit of sex reassignment surgery (SRS) helps people transition to their self-identified gender. Vidya also underwent a sex change operation without the proper procedure being followed. Although the stigma is still prevalent in India, yet many measures have been taken for an individual to undergo a proper sex change operation. Many change their mind due to the surgical cost being high between 5000-10000 USD. Ayushman Transgender Health Insurance was launched in India in 2018 by the Indian government which entitles transgender in India to Rs 5 lakh as insurance money for SRS and treatment. General awareness is a missing factor when it comes to proper treatment and care given to the transgender. While undergoing a sex change operation, Vidya faced issues such as stigma, insanitation, and lack of proper care. April 26th, as described by Vidya was the most important day of her life as she could finally undergo nirvana (sex change operation) and become liberated from her male biological sex. "Nirvana! How long I had waited for it! What humiliation I had suffered! Obsessed with it, I had mortgaged my pride, my anger, my honour—I had even begged on the streets to achieve that end." (Vidya 3). After reaching the hospital, Vidya was taken upstairs along with the others accompanying her. A separate room was assigned for transgender which terrified her. On the walls of the room were written the names of the transgender who had undergone the surgery and had not thought of making it out alive. The only blood test done on her was to check for AIDS. Upon taking Vidya to the operation theatre, she could not help but think of it as a slaughter house. No proper measures were followed while operating on her. Despite being given the anaesthetic spinal injection, she could feel enormous pain while the doctor made an incision at her abdomen. After being given another anaesthetic injection, she still could feel a bit of pain. The pain reached its peak towards the end of her operation and she could feel like someone removing her intestines with a rod. After removing her penis and testicles, she attained nirvana. Not proper after surgical was given to her. She was laid on a cot laid with newspaper, no nurse attended on her, she was told to keep her voice low and bear her pain for the fear of people coming to know about her operation. Her operation and treatment were unhygienic and improper.

Conclusion

Gender Dysphoria has always been in existence since the time unknown. Transgender who experiences gender dysphoria should be given proper means of treatment and care and the problems should be solved targeting the social, physical and psychological aspects of an individual. In order for the favourable outcome, awareness and validation of such issues should be brought into account. Gender should not be reduced to binary forms only. On every level, the stigmatization transgender face should be reduced. Every individual must be given individual treatment and maximization of care should be provided to improve outcomes. Transgender rights protection Bill has opened various employment opportunities thereby reducing the stigma associated with transgender. Human Rights Commission of India conducted a study according to which 93% of the transgender are denied the rights to employment and other economic activity in India. The bill banned any unjust treatment towards the employment opportunities and towards the denial of occupation. Even after the Bill of 2016, discrimination is still prevalent in the country. Education and employment, social acceptance, familial acceptance, and lack of proper medical care are still a few among various injustices and stigmas faced by the transgender in India.

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