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## A Study of Transphobia in Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya*

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### Abstract

This paper aims to explore the issue of transphobia as depicted in Living Smile Vidya's autobiography, *I Am Vidya*. The term transphobia refers to trans- prejudice or the negative attitude towards transgender persons and how it becomes the cause of discrimination in different forms. Transgender persons are considered akin to the untouchables, unacceptable, and disgraceful to family according to the socially constructed gender norms. Here, the author faces violence and other forms of the ill treatment at the hands of relatives and publics. So, the author insists the Government to take up welfare measures, which are sensitive to transgender persons, non-stigmatizing and ensure protection of their rights, and rehabilitation. Further, the author suggests the Government to teach the lives of Transgender persons for school children.

**Keywords:** Transphobia, Bashing, SRS, ze, hir.

### Introduction

We, humans, are social beings, and constitute society. As we depend on the presence of another human. So, we live in family, work in team, it is because we are by nature driven to form a relationship with the fellow human. The formation of social bond is considered as a foundation for our harmonious living in this planet. Society, in turn, shapes human beings and classifies them as male and female based on external genitalia but there is a group of people who do not fall under the category of male and female. They are called Transgender persons. The society treats them as unwanted aliens. They are considered as: "the Dalits of Dalit's the most oppressed women among women. They enjoy no equality, no freedom, no fraternity. They continue to lead a wretched life devoid of pride and dignity" (I am Vidya, 142).

Now a days there are transgender persons who started to use pen as a potent tool to reach out to the people by writing their autobiographies, which detail their life and struggles and also give an account of the non - alignment that exists between the biological identity and gender roles presumed

for the transgender persons. Their biographies offer an insight into the discrimination meted out to them by their family members, friends and society at large.

So, in this paper an attempt is made to explore the form and nature of gender bashing and social exclusion caused by transphobia as narrated in Living Smile Vidya's autobiography. *I am Vidya*

The focus of this study is on the aspects of discrimination and gender bashing meted out to the author and other transgender persons and the strategies suggested by the author to empower and to ensure participation in economic, social, and public spheres of life.

The term 'Transphobia' is a combination of two words. The prefix 'trans' stands for Transgender and suffix 'phobia' means fear. But the author's portrayal of phobia does not mean an anxiety disorder.

The term 'Transphobia' has been defined in Wikipedia as "as a negative attitude, feelings or action against Transgender persons. It can be in the forms of fear, aversion, hatred, violence or anger towards people who do not conform to gender roles. Veerandera Mishra, in his book, *Transgenders in India* says that "Prejudice or phobia towards transgender community results in transtigma. This transtigma becomes cause of all discriminations as they are branded into a category, which is kept away from access to opportunities and justice" (47), and the negative attitude towards transgender individual is most commonly referred to as transphobia" (qtd. *Transgenders in India*. 47)

The prejudice against the transgender persons are closely seen within the family. The parents identify the child born with the external genital as male or female and when the child's sex does not align with the gender is considered to be inferior to a child as that does not conform to the socially accepted gender norms. This prejudice is the reason for discrimination towards transgender persons. So, they face gender bashings and social exclusion, finally they end up on the street with a cap in hand for their existence.

*I am Vidya* is an autobiography of a transgender person. The author's original name is Saravanan. He is an M.A. Linguistics graduate. The author recalls the pathetic situations that he encountered at home, at school, and other public places as a boy with the gender incongruence. Here he shares in his narrative. When studying at Fathima school, Saravanan's effeminacy becomes an object of ridicule. He is taunted by his schoolmates. Even students of lower classes tease him as "look at this lady" (31). The yelling of the fellow students starts affecting his studies. So he remains alone till the completion of his schooling. Then, he shares his experiences at Bishop Heber school. He is admitted at class Eleventh. It is a boys's school. There too he experiences the same taunts and jibes from his fellow students. Even though he is careful not to reveal himself, his irrepressible femininity discloses him in his new class. Once again, he becomes an object of ridicule. For instance, at the prayer assembly, students stand in an order. Once, he happens to be in ninth place, immediately a classmate, calls him, "Saravana, you are nine, is n't that why you are standing ninth?" (32). Here, the student correlates the place of order to the nine, an offensive epithet in Tamil for Transgender persons. Afterwards, he avoids standing in the ninth position at the prayer assembly. Thereafter, he makes sure that he is in a different place to avoid such humiliation. Then, there is another classmate who scribbles Savanna's name adding the suffix 'ali' to describe him. For instance, the words Padippali, and Uhaippali, meaning Saravanan is a learned person and he is an industrious person. "Saravanan the Padippali or Saravanan Uzhaippali" (32). When he wipes the board clean with duster, the class shouts at him, "nalla ali" punning on "nallazhi which meant wipe the board well" (32). This is a regular occurrence in his class. In addition to this, one day he flings the duster in anger, but that duster hits the science teacher. The teacher, in his turn, tweaked his ear and makes him scrape his knee on the floor. His life at school is intolerable and he simply accepts all these insults and taunts and jibes as his fate.

At some point of time, he realizes and begins to comfort himself that the detractors are making fun at his effeminate ways, and no amount of their teasing has any effect on his behavior. Because he

feels like a woman inside him, and wants to be a woman forever. So, he decides to wear unisex cloths like Kurtas or the neutral tops and Jeans.

After completing his schooling, he opts for computer science in college. There, when he is in the third year, he registers his name in the dance competition, which is to be held at Madurai Kamarajar University. The other participants are all boys. Though they are all from his department, there is a fear and worry that dominated him. So, he stays with his friends in a room. But he is filled with the fear of detection and ridicule by the students who have come for the competition

There is a boy named, Immanuel who enjoys by giving pinpricks to Saravanan. So Saravanan, decides to spend that fear filled night by covering himself with blanket. But Immanuel does not stop his teasing and brands his foot with lighted cigarette. When Saravanan sits up, he is laughed at by the other boys.

In later days he goes to Chennai and becomes a member of Transgender community 'Jamath' and under goes sex change surgery, and becomes a woman and he changes his name as Vidya. As ze has been away from hir family, ze wants to meet them. So ze goes to Trichy and ze meets hir sister Radha at the railway station. Then ze goes to meet hir father. As he is a transphobic, he refuses to meet Saravanan transwoman and starts wailing at hir which makes Radha to cry. Hir relatives try to convince him but their attempt becomes vain. Finally, ze takes a shirt from a bundle of donation to the Tsunami victims and wears it. Only then, his father agrees to speak to hir. Further with the folded arms, he pleads with Arunnma, adapted mother of Vidya, to release hir from the Jamath. At last Ze explains him that if Saravanan were physically maimed, won't he accept hir. So, he tells him to treat this problem similar to the physical disability.

Here, Vidya gives reason for why ze (Saravanan) was not able to live with hir own family members as a transgender person. Ze lived with them not revealing the gender incongruence until the completion of hir post graduations. Now ze has become a Transwoman and wants them to treat hir as a woman. They are not able to accept hir as woman. This is the reason for the rise of conflict in hir family. Even though ze is one among his family, ze is not able to continue to live with them as transgender person. They do not understand what ze feels in hir mind. Particularly hir father does not accept hir as what ze feels. He sheds tears whenever he meets hir. Saravanan explains as: "In the world of men and women. The place of Tirunangai is always going to be a problem. When no one has the maturity to accept us naturally. I don't wish to blame my family. They are but representatives of a world of men and women. Now I must pursue my path, my life, my desires, my dreams, my future – if I have one. I started my trail back to Pune" (87).

Not only Saravaran but also most of the transgender persons leave their home and relatives at one point of time, when they feel that they can no longer live with masculine identity. So they move to the northern states like; Mumbai, Kolkata, and Delhi. The people of Northern states regard them as an incarnation of Krishna and believe "It is good to receive the blessings or fear that their curses could come true" (87). So, that the belief system of the people of the northern states gives comforts and shelter to the transgender persons in those cities. Whereas the people of southern states like; Tamilnadu, Karnataka, and Andhra are god fearing, religious, "But no myth, no epic seems to have a positive impact on them. Where tirunangais are concerned" (88). They do not treat them as a fellow beings and "look down on them...with disgust as if their very proximity can pollute" (88).

The people of southern states are transphobic and that the negative attitude is the reason for the migration of transgender persons to cities like Mumbai. Here, there are transgender persons who move to Pune and other cities because there is no scope for their living in their home town. Saravanan aka Vidya shares hir bitter and painful experiences that Ze gained in public places as a Transgender person. It is hir first outing as shop beggar. On the arrival of Swar Gate, Satya, another transgender person,

who accompanies Vidya (Saravanan), chooses the first shop where Ze begins his routine. Because Ze can get "at least a rupee without any haggling by the shop keeper" (90).

Sathya begins his shop begging from the shop that Ze already had chosen by clapping his hands and asking 'Baiya, dena' ((Give brother). Ze asks Vidya (Saravanan) to start his shop begging from the next shop. Vidya (Saravanan) says, "I was expected to do something. I must do now. Still even as my brain told my hand to reach out that hand refused to obey!... I stood there, nervous, hesitant" (91). As he is hesitating, Sathya chides him "your M.A. doesn't mean anything here. Come on, hurry up and beg" (93).

It is the only source of income to the transgender persons. They are not considered as members of the society. Vidya is an M.A. graduate but with which he cannot get employment in Government or private sectors. They are not recognized as human. They are not given a voter ID and Ration card by the government too. So he prepares his mind to shop begging.

Now he has no feeling of guilty about begging at shop rather he regards receiving alms is a compensation for insult, pain inflicted on their body and mind from each and every member of this society. He does begging with happiness. He approaches people in different ways and address them as brother, uncle, sister and so on. Here he says that begging on the train, at shops is not easy one. Every day they have to walk miles and bear the poisonous words from the people from whom they beg money. Further he remembers a few incidents that they faced while begging on a train. Once, there is a woman who asks him. "aren't you ashamed to beg? Aren't you able bodied? His reply to her is "can't you see I am begging shamelessly? ... instead of giving me advice why don't you get me a job in your husband's company?" (100).

Then he recounts another incident that he faced on the train. There are four men on the compartment of which one of them seems to be a kind person. So, Vidya asks him for money. He also gives him two rupees. Vidya asks more as "Can't you make it five, Tamil sir? Immediately, Ze receives a hard slap on his cheek. It is given by a person sitting in the opposite seat. When Ze begins to react, Soon all the four begin to attack him fiercely. When Ze somehow moves away from them after much struggle. He considers the money that he received from the men as a burden, for which he has gone through trauma. Now Ze is full of self-pity and wants to throw away the coin out of the door. Later, Ze goes back to the same compartment. He stands amidst the same men and bites the coin and circles his head with muttering some curses against them and throws the coin out of the train.

There is a belief among transgender persons and the public. If any one does what as Vidya did, the antagonist would surely experience financial troubles. So, the four men surround him start beating him again. One of them beats him up with his belt and the buckle bruises the bone below his eyelid and starts bleeding. He is screaming at the top of his voice, but no one of the commuters comes forward to rescue him or push the antagonist back. They are much interested in watching the drama. Finally, they push Vidya out of the compartment at the next station. So, he gets into the next compartment. There is a kind woman in her fifties, who comforts him. This incident makes him realize the pain, disgrace and helplessness, and he is deeply hurt. The feeling of being orphaned makes him miserable. Finally, he realizes that all these incidents take place when he is all alone. So he teams up with other transgender persons.

Then Vidya recalls an incident that happened to Priya. He is also a transgender person. Once, there was a man, who was about to attack Priya, When he was begging at shops. He immediately responds to him, taking a brick in his hand and stood there defying him "come on I'm ready for you. I am ready to risk my life" (103), He said.

There is a similar incident that takes place on the Pune train. There is an army man travelling with a boy. Both of them are well built. Usually, Vidya and other transgender persons do not approach

such a kind of men. Though they did not ask them for money, the army man tries to drive the transgender persons away from the compartment. Priya asks him to mind his business. Vidya also joins Priya and tells him not to show off. They immediately leave the compartment without making any further complications. He tries to beat them. Finally, he hits Priya. So, all of them mustering courage and claimed for just as: "How dare you strike female? And Priya asks Vidya to inform their nani to inform all the community gathers at the Pune station. Actually, the army man is scared. Some onlookers advise them to settle the issues by giving them some money. Then, they move to the next compartment and get down from the train even before the train reaches the station.

Despite of all these physical and psychological assaults and humiliations, Vidya and other transgender do their begging at shops, as this is the only source of income. With that money they fulfill their dream of becoming a woman by shedding their male identity through Nirvana.

Society does not recognize transgender persons as a fellow human. They do not get any support from their family and even from relatives. So ultimately they are destined to beg at public places for their living and to save for their future. It is evident in the portrayal of Vasanthi Ayaha. Ze is another transgender person, begs on train in hir old age. Because ze failed to save money in hir young age. Vidya and Preteeksha are begging on same train route in which Vasanthi Aayaha begs. Ze suggests that there is less competition from other transgender in Surat. If they go to Surat they can earn more.

Vidya also thinks that the different place and different culture would do them good. So, the three of them leave for Surat by train with the hope of better future. There they realize that there is no scope for much earning as they anticipated. They decide to return. When they are about to leave Surat, Prateeksa comes up with an idea of doing saree business on the train. Surat is famous for quality textile, where they can purchase sarees at competitive price and sell them to the train passengers, rather than begging on the train.

Finally, they realize that they do not have enough money to purchase. So, they choose selling some simple articles on the train. There is a man named Kumar, a friend of Prateeksha, who sells a variety of small articles: key chain, and pouches of mobile phone. He teaches them where to buy goods at wholesale prices and to sell them on the train. He encourages them and wishes their life would be better.

Vidya and Pratheeksha, both dividing their products, set out in different compartments in the same train. They go from one compartment to another compartment. But their venture results in hardly any sales except aching feet and sore throat. The passengers are not interested in buying things from them. Even the people who advised them to work hard instead of asking alms for their living are not found anywhere to buy things from the transgender persons.

As though, the other vendors, who view them as competitors also encourage them. The regular commuters do not come forward with a heart to spend a paisa to purchase their articles. The ticket examiners also start creating trouble for them. Kumar, finally, buys back all the stocks paying proper price for them and suggests another venture of selling ten-rupee torches and key chain on the local trains. They also manage to do so, but it is not substantially better. Finally, they understand that their gender is the reason for the failures of their venture into selling goods, on the train, but not the goods that they sell. "We could not understand the prejudice? What did it matter who sold the goods so long as the goods were of acceptable quality and price?" (115). The people begin to commiserate with the transgender persons and asking why they are back on the train.

There are some incidents that made Vidya upset and deeply wounded and one of them is hir encounter with Mr. Ramanujam. He is seated in a compartment of train in which Vidya is begging. He is a theatre personality, hugely respected by hir and personally known to vidya. So, Vidya does not

want to stand before him as a beggar and Ze disappears from him, for the whole day ze did not beg and felt miserable about how hir life has sunk low.

Thereafter, ze determines not to beg anymore and wants to give begging up forever and to seek employment. So, he makes phone call to hir friends: Vijay and Murugabhupati and informs them about hir encounter with Mr. Ramanujam and asks them to find hir a job and leaves Pune forever. Then Vidya shares hir painful experience that ze had with her relatives. Once, ze is admitted in a hospital to get treatment for appendicitis. After the treatment, Ze stays at hir sister Radha's house. During hir stay, Radha's husband chides hir as: "Castrated... when you can go to your father's home dressed like a man, taking off all your Jewelry, why do you act like a woman horse? Aren't we human too? Aren't these people around us? How many questions I have to answered about you! What insult, what humiliations! Take off that nose stud" (123).

Vidya actually does not want to blame his uncle, because hir uncle has now become an object of ridicule in the society. Vidya also admits that hir uncle is "the butt of a many insults and jokes everyday on account of me" (124). So, ze wants to leave hir sister's house. When ze informs hir uncle that ze is leaving their house. He is also very hurt by hir decision. Further he asks "who will employ a person like you in a sari? (124). In the next day, Ze leaves his house as ze said. Without blaming anyone for the present situation. Ze could neither live with hir parents nor hir sisters.

Ze reaches Madurai and meets hir friends Murguabhupati, Gopi, and Kannan, etc. One of hir friends named, Amudhan, tries to place Vidya with an NGO that is working for transgender persons. But Vidya refuses this kind of job stating, many of the NGO's are focusing on HIV/AIDS awareness, but they do not redress the grievances of Transgenders, like providing jobs with which they can attain economic independence. Further Ze continues as: "No Indian NGO had fought to liberate Tirunangai from begging and sex work what kind of realization was it to tell them. Go on being sex workers but do it safely?" (128).

Then, there is a friend of Amudhan named Ashok takes Vidya to Anandkmar, a manager of a private bank. He enquires about his education and what kind of work ze can do at the bank, and promises to call hir back after a consulting with the corporate office. The next day, Vidya goes to the corporate office to attend personal interview with the managing director, Mr. Udhaya Kumar. There Vidya gets human treatment from the Managing Director. He in his interview asks if ze is given an opportunity, how ze will handle teasing and harassment by people. The day after the interview Vidya joins to hir work in a Micro Credit institution that lends to self-help groups in Madurai. Then ze befriends with people in the literary circles. Hir friends encourage him to write. At first, Ze publishes hir experiences in a magazine called *Mozhi*. After that Vidya is brought to the limelight, by one of hir friends Sivaraj, who invites Vidya to light the lamp for the event at the Kamarajar Hall. There, ze encounters Balabharathi, who encourages hir to write the experiences and issues of Transgender persons in a blog and helps hir to set up blog. Later Vidya becomes a member of literary group called *Tamizhmanam*.

In hir blog, Ze addresses the problems faced by Transgender persons in the society and in family, because of no clear understanding about the positions of transgender persons in our society. Ze shares hir own problems that Ze faced in hir day to day life.

All hir expectations are simple, ze wants to live a normal life like all men and women, equal opportunity to work, and earn a livelihood and wants to be free from physical bashing and sexual abuse and desires for social acceptance and legally enforceable social status. As they are away from their family and parents, they have been denied of the voter identity cards, ration cards, and cannot open a bank account. And also Vidya makes a plea to Government for a legal approval for sex change Surgery like in other nations. The author seeks the Government to introduce the lives of transgender persons to students at school levels. So, they will learn to treat transgender persons with compassion and dignity

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when they grow old. Finally, hir appeal to the Government is that the Government has to take initiative for their social acceptance. The family does not accept transgender as fellow rather it considers as disgrace. Ze concludes her autobiography with a plea for the entire folk of transgender persons, "I do not ask for heaven. I beg to be spared from m living hell" (143).

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