



Clan Culture, Religion, Rituals, and Emasculation: A Study of Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya*

Dr. R. Srinivasan

Associate Professor & Head

PG & Research Department of English, Government Arts College
Chidambaram-608 102

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse the culture, religion, rituals and emasculation of Transgenders with reference to Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya*. Transgender Persons are called with different names; "Aravani, Ali, Hijaras etc, and have been facing the problem of discrimination that results in homelessness." This sense of homelessness pushes them to form a calm or community with people who are like them to counter the marginalization by the parents, relatives and mainstream public and to protect themselves from continuous abuse in the hands of family and mainstream society. The transgender community is bounded by the defined socio-cultural ethos, and commonly shared social norms. They have their own religious belief system, rituals and celebration to perform. The articles and celebration to perform. This article explores the rituals and myth around them which are full of pains and joy.

Key terms: Clan-culture, emasculation, Nirvana, Jamaath, gharana, Haldi-mehanti.

Introduction

India is one of the most culturally, religiously and traditionally diverse nations in the world. She is known for the concept of unity in diversity and inclusiveness, whether it be religious sects or communities, but suffers from societal stigmas related to caste, religious and gender etc. Though the nation has come long way to breath the glass ceiling of discrimination, still there are certain section of the people have

been living outside the mainstream society of which Transgender are one of such group of people. They are perceived as different because of their non-conformity to the socially constructed gender norms. The notion of gender non-conformity pushes them to the margins and forces them into isolation. Interestingly, despite of they are being excluded from family and society, they have constructed a social organization by taking certain things, such as mythology, rituals, and cultures from

mainstream society counter to the patriarchal joint family.

The excluded Transgender person have created a community that closely matches, mainstream social hierarchal structure for their survival and also to protect themselves from abuses in the hands of family and community. In this article an attempt is made. To explore how the excluded transgender persons create their own community *Jamaath* to save themselves from the exclusionary pressure of their family and the mainstream society,

To study how they identify themselves to gods and goddess.

To study the religious rites and practice of Nirvana, rituals around the a Transgender community.

I am Vdiya (2007) is an autobiography of the author Living Smile Vidya, who is a transperson. This study examines the aspects of Clan Culture - Religion, Rituals and Emasculation of Transpersons as narrated in the autobiography, *I am Vidya*. Writing autobiography is considered as an independent mode of expression. Roy Pascal defines, "Autobiography is historical in method and at the same time the representation of the self and through its relations with the outer world" (18).

In general, literary means of autobiography is written by the mainstream and elite writers and it gives an account of their achievements and experiences. But in the case of Transperson, they are not considered either human or non-human. Because, they do not hold any prominent position in society or even not consider as member of their own family. They write autobiographies with a belief that it would help society understand the hardship that the Transpersons face in everyday life. They are slightly different outworldly but they are also humans, and live just like others in their community, follow their own clan culture, have belief systems.

Living Smile Vidya is born as male and named Saravanan. His father, Ramaswami is known as Chieftain in Puttur, next to Trichy. He lives with his family, Father Ramaswami, Mother Veeramma, and two sisters, Radha and Manju, until he finishes his Masters in Linguistics. He is the only son to his parents. He is dreaming of doing doctoral studies in Dramatics, but femininity in him is growing intense by the time, and that urges him to become a woman by breaking free of maleness i.e. sex identity.

At that crucial moment, there is a man named Sri, whose thought processes also matches with Saravanan. He is a Transperson like him and has done his Masters in Computer Science and works in IT company in Chennai. He is from Madurai, now lives in Chennai. Saravanan meets Sri at Trichy bus stand, whom he says that, he hates himself for being a man and wants to live as woman. If he fails to become a woman, he would die. So Sri tries to console him and says:

Go to Koovagam once in a year and take part in the festivities, there as a woman to your heart's content. Spend time periodically with the NGO, and take part in festivals and celebrations. But never stop studying. Complete your Ph.D. earn a good salary, be a good son to your family. Act in plays if you like. Find expression to your desires in privacy. (62)

Here, Sri suggests Saravanan to take part in Koovagam festival. Koovagam is a village of Villupuram District in Tamilnadu. Where in the main temple of Aravan known as Koothandavar temple is located. The mythical episode of *Mahabhata* is performed in an Eighteen Days festival of Aravan. In Aravan temples the festivals begin with a ceremonial marriage of Aravan, the son of Arjunan, the best archer and warrior of Pandava. Clan to Aravani. In Tamilnadu, Transgender persons are called Aravani, because they are believed as brides of

Aravan the mythical hero. The same of Aravan festival is celebrated in Kothattai, and Thiruvetkulam villages in Cuddalore Districts in Tamil Nadu.

Saravan's meeting with Sri on the same night, Saravan meets another friend, Nehru, who is an assistant director of the film industry. Saravan asks Nehru to help him get a job immediately in Chennai. Nehru directs him to go with Kumaran a friend of Nehru, who would help Saravan to find a job and also introduce him to a NGO for Transgender. Kumaram at first takes him to SWAM, THAA. These are the NGOs run for Transgenders, and finally he takes him to Aruna. Ze is a transgender person. Ze is affectionately called Arunamma.

Arunamma sends Saravan to Pune, where Arunamma's Nani (mother) lives. The moment it is decided, his ear and nose are pierced. He wears saree and blouse and puts a dot on his forehead, ties his hair in a bun. Now, he considers himself a beautiful woman when he stands before the mirror. Then, he leaves for Pune with Kalaichelvi. Ze is also a Transgender, person. Ze is Saravan's maternal grandmother, according to the tradition of transgender community.

Finally, they reach Pune after a day and half long travel. There he is taken to a Nani. On seeking her, Saravan greets her by saying 'Panv Padti' and seeks her blessing by falling at her feet. After the introductory preliminaries, that Nani delivers a well-rehearsed speech;

You can be yourself here, sing and dance to your heart's content, but always be respected to elders. At the same time, you must get on well with the younger people. Come to me if you need something. Go out with your akka, Satya (she had enlisted just before me) every day and shop the community's slang for seeking alms at shops. You must bring back not less than 300 rupees every day. You do that and we'll

perform your nirvana in precisely six months. (78)

Further ze asks him to go to Mumbai in the evening to do a reet and also asks to change his name. So, he changes his name as Vidya. This name rhymes with Satya. Satya is a transgender person, now ze is considered as Vidya i.e, Saravan's sister.

Through this description the author tells us how he changes his name Saravan to Vidya and how he comes a member of Transgender Community. Vidya is adopted by guru into this transgender community through a reet. It is a ritualistic ceremony. The author explains reet as; "doing the reet was the term for formally enrolling in the community of Tirunangais. It was a registration procedure of sorts. You paid a nominal sum and you were included in a praivar/parampara list" (80-81). He is registered as Saradammal's nathi Chela grand daughter and Arunammal's Chela daughter. Once, Saradammal adopted Arunammal as her daughter, now Arunammal in her turn adopts Vidya as her daughter; So, Vidya becomes nathi chala (grand daughter) of Saradammal.

As a mark of welcome into the parembara (household) a veteran transgender gifts her a sari. This is their regular custom. Vidya has also shared in her autobiography as "when a senior see off a new thirunangai or when she goes to see them, the gift of a sari and some cash is mandatory. The life of a Thirunangai is bound by thousands of such rules and regulations all unwritten" (81).

As transgender person live outside their own family, so they form a close community to similar to traditional family and set up their own family structure, that follows guru chala tradition. Their family structure is based not a biological but a fictional kinship system with which the transperson relates to each other as mother, daughter and granddaughter. It is fully matriarchal relationship.

The parivar/parmpara is called Hijira gharanas. It is constructed on hierarchal structure. It has unique social norms and cultural practices. The transgender person gets introduced to community living through guru-chela relationship. In this community guru- the head provides home, food, guidance and emotional support for the young chalas, and gives advice about castration. Once the chela joins, the gure gives a new female name to the chala. It is the first formal step towards transition. The chela vows in front of witness (Jamaat) to obey the guru and the rules of the particular gharana.

Within the community, hijiras develop their own family. This family is created through the network. It is called Jamaat. The Jamaat has an important role in the process of acceptance of new members in the community. The stamping of the new entrant is vital. The senior members of the Jamaat sit together and enquire in detail about the profile of the new comer.

A senior member of the Jamaat puts it before the members present to elicit their willing to accept the new comer in the family. The Jamaat meetings are conventionally attended by all hijara household in the locality, hence the initiation of a hijara in the household is a complete ceremony. There is a provision of changing guru by the chals, but it is not appreciated in the community. Once, a transperson becomes a member of particular parivar, transgender person has to change his name to a female one. The mother (guru) explains the nature of duties and responsibility with the family. The transgender person considered it as an alternative family. The chelas are supposed to bring the earing from their begging to this guru. The guru provides basic amenities to the chelas and spends the money on their nivarana and other ceremonies.

The breaking of relationship of chala with the guru is formalized and the chela has to give the amount as compensation, in the presence of the Jamaat. Veerendra Mishara in

his book *Transgenders in India: Introduction* has stated that the chief of gharana is also called naik. The gharana naik is expected to be a skilful leader who has the capacity to manage affairs within limited resources. They have exceptional Managerial skills. Naik is also responsible for the health of the community and take care of ritualistic final arrangement on the death of the hijar within gharana irrespective of the deceased hijra's religion and as caste. Actually, the final rites are normally performed by the family members, but here the head of the hijra community does it in the place of their relatives.

They day after, Saravanan registers his name in Jamaatth, as daughter of Arunammal he is sent shop begging with Sathya. It is his first outing as a shop begger Satya, on the arrival of swar gate, chooses the first shop. She regularly begins hir daily routine from that particular shop, because Ze can get "at least a rupee without any haggling by the shopkeeper" (90).

It is a common belief among all the transgender persons. If they are driven away from the shop without offering any rupee at the first shop. There will not any earnings for the whole day. This is common belief among the transgender community. Shop begging is the only source of income to the transgender persons. With this money they fulfil their dream of shedding their male identity through Nirvana.

Nirvana refers to the experience of liberation from male identity. Transgender Persons undergo surgery to attain their desirous sex identity as a Transwoman. Veerandra Mishra says, "it is transitioning from one phase of life to another, the most important phase. It is so important that in the hijra community castration is termed as "nirvana" which means freedom from suffering and rebirth" (78). That the nivarvan is done in two ways, Traditional method of castration is known as Thai Amma Nirvana and the other one is modern surgery that is known as Sex Reassignment Surgery, also known as gender confirmation surgery. Hence,

Thaiamma refer to a traditional mid wife and nirvana to rebirth.

In *I am Vidya*, the author details what necessitates a transgender person to go for nirvana / sex reassignment surgery from the personal experiences. First, a Transgender person though the transgender person seems to be male, in appearance, he feels himself as woman at heart. So they desire to remove their male identity through this nirvana. It gives them the female identity. Thereafter, they will realize themselves as complete woman at heart and in appearance. There will not be a problem for them to wear female dress that suits with the sex identity. Likely, Saravanna also had his SRS at the sometime with other Transgender Person namely Sathya, Nagarani. Soon after, the surgery is over, Saravanan returns to Neelambal's house at Vyasarpadi. When the post operation pain is subsided and got his wound healed. He becomes a woman and had the feeling of "a no longer a man at all" (107).

Then the author vividly presents the rituals Haldi – Mehanti. It is a rite given to the Transgender persons who have successfully undergone Nirvana. It is also a formal announcement to the members of the transgender community about the change from he into she. Saravanan also had haldi – Mehadi function after forty days of his Nirvana. The functions are arranged in marriage hall, at Vysarpadi, in the evening and attended by many of the Transgender person in and round Chennai. Ze narrates the whole event in her autobiography:

I was made to wear a paavadai and sit down, while Thirunangais queued up to apply marudani, the green leaf paste that turns red on drying, to my hands. They also spread turmeric paste on my face, arms and feet. After affixing a huge bindi on my forehead they put some sugar on my tongue. Finally, they waved currency notes around my head to ward off evil influence. (108)

It is a customary among the Transgender Persons. In the afternoon, he is given a ritual bath after that he is given a green sari, green blouse and green bangles other green ornaments and given a jug of milk. He first pours the milk into the sea, and standing towards sea, reveals his private parts to the sea. This is considering as concluding ceremony of Nirvana. It is the moment of announcing his identity to nature. Once again the same procedure is done in front of a black dog and finally to a green tree. Vidya calls it as "ritual known as chetla a time honoured ceremony among Thirunangais" (108).

Saravanan, henceforth, will be treated as complete transgender person with female identity, both physically and mentally a complete transwoman. Vidya as a transwoman shares hir changes into a woman as, "it was like cleaning an old house, removing the cobwebs and dust, swabbing the floors and whitewashing the walls. My woman's body no longer had a male proturbence" (109).

Then, Saravanan desires to meet his family members, and he goes to Trichy with the permission of hir nani. When Ze lands at Trichy, and goes first to hir sister Radha's house. Radha accepts hir with new identity, and hisrfather is happy that Saravanan is back but his is not ready to accept hir as Transwoman. So, ze again sets off on journey from Trichy to Pune. On the other hand, within a month of Saravana's return from Tiruchi. Priya with whom Saravan had hir SRS, goes to Chennai to meet hir family. They are not like the father and sisters of Saravanan. They simply accept Priya with the gender change and treat hir with same love and affection. So, Priya is comfortable with hir new identity. Whereas Saravana akka Vidya is yearning for parental love and affection.

The autobiography, *I am Vidya* of Living Smile Vidya does not simply demonstrates the Clan-Culture of Transgender persons such as; Jamaath, reet, guru-chella relationships, and rituals, belief systems. But, also it mirrors their

exclusion from family and society. They really lack love and moral support from their parents, and relatives. So, they become the members of Transgender communal living system.

All they need is a normal life like Priya. Being Transgender person is normal. It is not their fault. So they deserve a life with dignity, so, the exclusion of Transgender person from family needs to be ended and the parents of Transgender persons must change their attitudes and accept them with the gender expression and let them grow with siblings and relatives and grow with family with their gender identity and expression.

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