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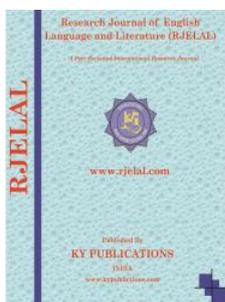
(De) SUBJUGATING KNOWLEDGES: MANOBI BANDYOPADHYAY'S BIOGRAPHY  
*THE GIFT OF GODDESS LAKSHMI*

Dr. TEENA RACHEL THOMAS

Department of English, St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry, Kerala – 689641

Email: [tinathomasrachel@gmail.com](mailto:tinathomasrachel@gmail.com)

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**ABSTRACT**

As women's life writings made it possible to gain acceptance in the larger domain, transgender life writings started to move up the ladder of recognition in the last few years. Women enjoy a fluid self but a transgender enjoys 'double fluidity' by transgressing the heteronormative body which is reflected in their narrative. Trans narratives develop a dual consciousness, they are not a mirror of the cultural norms thus they have a dual consciousness – self as culturally defined and self as different from the cultural definitions. Since they have sex transformation the self-writing is more concerned about the body and their narratives intertwines between body and mind. Thus in a trans narrative, be it a biography or an autobiography, body narratives become the core point and the narrative travels in and out of the body as the mind has achieved or found a new freedom through the body.

**Keywords:** transnarrative, autobiography, biography, double fluidity, body

Far longer than the blacks or rather any other subaltern community, the LGBT voice has been consciously and strategically suppressed for over a millennium. This paper will be dealing with the subfield of transgender studies which is part of the LGBT community (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/ Transsexual). The term 'Transgender' is an umbrella term that is defined as

A diverse community of people whose gender identity differs from that which they were designated at birth; 2) Expressions and identities that challenge the binary male/female gender system in a given culture; (3) Anyone who transcends the conventional definitions of man and woman and whose self-identification or expression challenges traditional notions of male and female. ("Trans, Genderqueer,

and Queer Terms Glossary," def. Transgender)

Over the last seventy-five years transgender's have used the medium of literature, especially life writings as a genre not only to speak about their deeper self but also to clarify and educate others about their lives. This is a great effort taken on their behalf to gain greater acceptance in the society. In the year of 1952, Christine Jorgensen's fame created awareness among many about Trans issues. After many years of protest for equality and several riots, in 1969 Transwomen, including Sylvia Rivera and Marcia P Johnson with other gender non-conforming people clashed with police at Stone Wall, New York, USA which came to be acknowledged as the birth of LGBT movement. Sweden, Europe in 1972 became the first nation in the world to allow their citizens to

legally change their sex. By the twenty first century Transgender Law Center was founded and they took the initiative to change law and policy so that this community could be safely, authentically and free from all kinds of torture and discrimination without taking their gender identity and expression into consideration. Many NGO groups have been established to develop the deplorable condition of the transgender community. These are some of the new, late feathers that are added on to the cap of transgender history.

As women's life writings made it possible to gain acceptance in the larger domain, transgender life writings started to move up the ladder of recognition in the last few years. With the coming of gender fluid identities and identities that are tailored by sex assignment surgeries we could find how it reflected in the transgender life writings. Their narrative technique became greatly fluid and it was not chronological in form and content. In transgender life writings, body is the central point and with that different experiences and life events are narrated. Hence their life narratives transpire into body narratives. They abhor fixity and adore fluidity; the undefined, the unheard. This is the identity of a transgender.

Women enjoy a fluid self but a transgender enjoys 'double fluidity' by transgressing the heteronormative body which is reflected in their narrative. Trans narratives develop a dual consciousness, they are not a mirror of the cultural norms thus they have a dual consciousness – self as culturally defined and self as different from the cultural definitions. Since they have sex transformation the self-writing is more concerned about the body and their narratives intertwines between body and mind. Thus in a trans narrative, be it a biography or an autobiography, body narratives become the core point and the narrative travels in and out of the body as the mind has achieved or found a new freedom through the body. Jay Prosser, known for his work on Transgender studies states that transsexuals are clearly apt, well versed, and absorbing authors of their trans-narratives because the sex transition itself is a plot. They write and express their own body with a desire that they will be heard and accepted, thus they are

creating a voice to communicate with the traditional heteronormative society, and there by it becomes a concept of body politics.

Transgender self-narrative thus is based on the body and admires the self, indirectly seeking for acceptance as they were the unaccepted, unwelcomed and questioned lot throughout history. Transgender life narratives are trying to create an individual identity and is in a need to state that transsexuals are different from the gays and lesbians. Through their work they are trying to indicate the fact that their self is lost amongst gender politics. Pallabi Baruah opines,

The trans narratives celebrates the sexual difference without trying to define or categorising any, thereby exploring the undefined, the multiple; and they being non-conformist to the dominant social practice allows them to explore their true selves which is but 'anti-normative' thereby this stance of their social abjection allows them to be in the ambit of the 'unrestricted'. ("Trans Autobiographies" 456)

The first transsexual autobiographies were published by Europeans. Lili Elbe, a male-born Danish painter underwent a series of gender affirming surgeries in the 1920s. She had requested her friend Ernst Ludwig Harnoth Jacobson to publish a book based on her diary entries, letters and dictated material. Shortly after Lili Elbe's death in 1931 Jacobson published the text, *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex* (1933) under the pseudonym Niels Hoyer. During the 1950s in United States, Christine Jorgensen created awareness about Trans, while in Britain Robert Allen's through his autobiography *But for the Grace: The True Story of a Dual Existence* described how he was Designated Female at Birth (DFAB) but requested the British government to modify his birth certificate in 1944 and later on he legally married a woman. Allen states that he did not undergo bottom surgery or take any hormones. So Robert Allen became the country's officially accepted Transman.

By the mid twentieth century there was a fillip in the narratives by Transgender. Some of the well-publicized autobiographies were by, Roberta Cowell's *Story by Herself* (1951), Mario Martino's

*Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography* (1977), Nancy Hunt's *Mirror Image* (1978), Renee Richards' *Second Serve* (1983), Mark Rees' *Dear Sir or Madam* (1996), Jamison Green's *Becoming a Visible Man* (2004) etc.. To add to the list of life writings, by the year 2013, a Transwoman from India named Manobi Bandyopadhyay for the first time became the Principal of a college in Kolkatta. Her biography is written by a female journalist Jhimli Pandey. This paper tends to examine whether the biography *Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* has succeeded in performing the body as a product of a non-conformist identity of a transgender in a heterosexual society. This paper also analyzes the concept of 'narrative as a performance' in this text.

Butler, in one of the closing chapters of her "Giving an Account of Oneself", makes a striking statement that "telling the truth about oneself comes at a price, and the price of that telling is the suspension of a critical relation to the truth regime in which one lives" (56). She believes that, a person gives an account of oneself only in response to an "interpellation" undertaken by the Other. Thus, she states that any 'self' becomes a reflexive being before the Other. The 'I' here can only narrate the story of its own emergence and the conditions of its own possibility only in a society in which the 'I' is questioned. Here, when the 'I' or the self is questioned, Foucault says that the 'I' has a body (soma) to it and it also has numerous techniques (techné) in and through which these bodies are marked/transformed and positioned in a patriarchal, heterosexual society (56)

Later, this very body is again divided in terms of sex and gender. Feminists like Kate Millett and Judith Butler have lately suggested that 'sex' is a mash up – a story that is finely blended into what a body is and which parts of the body really matter. Thus, sex is represented socially through a gender role and subjectively as a gender identity. Once this is understood, it becomes nonetheless clear that the relationship between sex, gender and body appears mechanical, mimetic and constructed. Therefore, the "wholeness" of the body and the "sameness" of the sex is understood to be socially constructed (*Sexual Politics* 47).

Transgender studies play a pivotal role in destabilizing the concept of sex and gender. Once destabilized and deconstructed, the body ceases to have any deterministic relationship to performativity. Gender thus becomes a performative art that no longer needs the body. Gender becomes 'doing' something rather than 'being' something. But this stance of viewing 'gender' as mere performance is being openly criticised by the Transgender or Queer Theory. It puts to stake the transgenders' consideration of their sense of gendered self, which cannot be subjected to instrumental will/form of play.

Life Writings, today rise up as 'body narratives' wherein the transgender subjects present themselves not as a fixed entity but as a fluid, reflexive entity. They celebrate the fluidity they enjoyed through blurring the boundaries of the male and female bodies. When blurred, the transgender subject projects how being trapped in the fixities of one particular body traumatised them to such an extent that they come out of their comfortable cocoons and lets the heterosexual society know that their sex and gender identity do not fall into the binary of the male/female. This journey of a transgender triggers off with this realization of the entrapment in a body that does not correspond to the biological sex that one has acquired. From this realization the trans-subject acquires energy and interpellates to the act of sex-assignment operations.

This paper plans to reread how the biography of the first transgender Principal Manobi Bandyopadhyay's, written by the journalist Jhimli Pandey, openly acknowledges how she through her transnarrative de-subjugates the knowledge that the heterosexual patriarchal society has about the transgender community. It is a journey of how a man transforms into a woman with undaunted honesty and unregretful mind. The biography brings to light how Manobi gradually transformed into a woman.

Born as Somnath, in a middle-class family at Naihati in Kolkatta, Manobi narrates her life experiences through the pen of a woman journalist-Jhimli Pandey. This decision of choosing a woman

journalist to narrate her own story might have been a conscious one as she must have felt that only a woman could rightly relate to and bring out the emotional upheavals of a transwoman. Manobi's traces the journey she had taken right from the time she was a child till she adopted her own son; stumbling each time to bring her sex in terms with her prescribed gender identity.

At the age of 7 or 8, Manobi begins to show traits openly in her family. She calls this age as "metamorphosis" (Pandey 6) – a transition from a boy into a girl. Her intense desire to wear her sister's frock; later quietly applying the kohl and lipstick from her mother's make-up kit. Initially, her family ignored this aberration as yet another silly act by the child. But as Manobi slowly grew up, her feminine traits began to disturb her family. Her family members tried all ways to counsel her and bring her back to her 'proper gender'- the male gender.

Society, often drives in as an important factor in every individual's life in developing their identity and their relation with other individuals. According to Mennel, in "The Formation of the We Images: A Process Theory",

... the whole symbolic interactionist tradition has stressed the way in which each person's self is formed by a reflexive process, in which our perception of how others see us plays a paramount part...individual self images and group we-images are not separate things (179).

Manobi highlights the same view in her biography "I have always had a strong instinct about who I am and what I am. However, a large part of how we feel about oneself is linked to what people say or feel about us" (Pandey 51).

Julia Kristeva's theory of the 'abject' from the "Powers of Horror" indicates the human reaction horror, vomit etc.) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and the other. Thus, according to Kristeva, "abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which the body becomes separated from another body in order to be"

(Powers 10). In a heterosexual society, a transgender's body is always already made separated from a perfect female or a perfect male body. The very term 'Third gender' itself shows the position where the people grouped under this category is placed in hierarchy to the 'First gender' and the 'Second' gender. This binary in gender is threatened "to breakdown" in meaning as it gets destabilized with the coming of the third gender. The way Manobi was counselled and forced to return back to the 'male' body by her parents and the society was due to the 'fear' of the abject (Powers 10).

Extreme disgust and hatred towards a transgender body that cannot be positioned in neither of the gender compartment leads to distancing of this 'body' from the society, and hence side-lining it as 'dangerous' or 'abnormal'. All transgenders including Manobi had to face this challenge of overcoming and sometimes neutralising the 'disgust' and 'hatred' at every step of their lives. Right from the age of 'metamorphosis' till she became a Principal of a college in Kolkata; Manobi tries to dissolve this hatred towards her from all levels of the society.

There were also times when Manobi felt completely alienated from her assigned gender identity.

I was confused; my life seemed like a never-ending maze – each time I arrived at the same bend. Who was I? Why was my body different from my soul or was I mistaking my Identity? Why was I born this way? Was it some past karma for which I was being made to pay so dearly? What could I do to escape this trap? (Pandey 31).

There were times in my life when I doubted myself and the path I took. In such instances, my mind would go into a state of flux and the turmoil would sear me within. Am I really a woman trapped in a male body or are these just delirious thoughts? Why is it that the whole world thinks of me as a man who is nothing more than a sissy? ... My soul and sexuality did not match the image I saw in the mirror... I felt like tearing away and escaping from the man's body in which I was born? (Pandey 109).

The above quoted lines, thus, suggests what the transgender subject has to experience on a day to day basis.

Education was the only tool that Manobi had with her to get empowered and gradually release herself from her predicament in a heterosexual society. Here too, she was traumatised and victimised right from the first day she joined school. Her first day at school left an impression that lasted a lifetime in her mind. Being delicate and slim, bigger boys taunted and ridiculed her to such an extent that she slowly released that she "wasn't accepted by most in this world" (8). Sexually, her body was exploited by either a family member or a classmate at school just because her male body exhibited feminine traits. When finally, she decides that she would no longer be entrapped in a wrong body and would openly come out displaying more profoundly her feminine traits; hell broke loose as more problems came her way.

The ridicule that I was facing at home and in the neighbourhood continued unabated, as I started taking bolder steps of wearing my sister's petticoats as skirts and their nighties as dresses .... This behaviour – actively seeking to be who I was – only invited more insults. The hypocrisy around hurt me. People took every opportunity to call me a hijra, to ridicule my sexual identity and yet when they found me alone, they never missed an opportunity to take me to a dark corner and have a go at me (Pandey 35).

As Manobi entered her college education, she was even more attacked by her friends and fellow beings. Once again, she became the butt of ridicule. Her identity and sexuality were constantly mocked and often exploited by many.

... I realized that I was again the centre of attention and ridicule despite being a good student. I could not be called a man or woman and that was far more important than the fact that I had read more Bengali literature than anyone else .... Clearly, my reputation had preceded me. (Pandey 40).

As she walks down the corridor of her college, students stared at her in awe. "Word had got out that a Hijra had entered the college in the garb of a student! Many had gathered to see me. Some started clapping their hands in glee when they saw me, some just whistled and catcalled and soon taunts filled the air. I hadn't expected this scene." (Pandey 40)

In spite of all these assaults and insults inflicted on Manobi and her body, she still continued to bravely cling onto the decision to complete her collegiate education. She very well knew that education was the only way through which she could bring a change in her life. And thus she gained her Ph.D in Bengali literature.

But her situation declined much further when she was finally appointed as a lecturer in a remote government college in a rural village, Jhargram. As a person who was born and brought up in a city, the rural setting was completely new to her. In polarised society, the body is always already placed in hierarchized (false) dichotomies, like the male-female, rural-urban, homosexual-heterosexual and many more. Furthermore, these dichotomies illustrate that the private and the public borders are rather unstable. On her way to college from bus stop she and her father had to face many insults. She suddenly felt like running away. However, her determination to stand up on her own as well as earn enough money for her sex change operation held her not to care for them. But more threat waited in the college for Manobi.

Two lecturers in particular at her college were very much upset with her presence in college and threatened to ruin her career "since no hijra had the right to become a professor!" (Pandey 92) They convinced other teachers that she is an aberration and they need to collectively force her out of the college. "No one as lowly as a hijra should be allowed to teach in a college, share the same staffroom, toilet and facilities." (Pandey 93) But when they realized that Manobi wouldn't give in so easily they started assaulting her every now and then.

They would lurk in every nook and corner and pull my hair and clothes, saying they

wanted to see if my hair was real or if I was wearing a wig. Once, two of them pinned me to the wall and groped me, trying to find out what was beneath my clothes. . . 'Keep shut, you hijra, don't act smart. . . One day they caught hold of me and started hitting me in the chest with a paper weight till I was so badly bruised that I fell unconscious from the pain. (Pandey 94)

Such was the piteous condition of Manobi in her career as a lecturer. It was just the tip of the iceberg and she had into worse situations than the above-mentioned instance. Transgenders in general face these situations on a regular basis throughout their lives. Such is the violence against transgenders in society. However, Manobi faced all these with a brave heart and emerged victorious.

Therefore, the biography, *The Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* exposes the true insight into the ordeals that a transgendered self has to encounter on a day to day basis. Life writings normally focus on a particular accomplishment or experience of a single person. But this life writing under scrutiny is not a mere record of a single transgender but instead had the fire to voice for an entire community of transgenders. Life narratives thus get transformed to become an art of expression and it stayed true to express and address the common issues of a transgendered self. Manobi has written in the blurb that,

Identities are not mere markers we are known by; they define as well as limit us. They can both confine or release a consciousness. *The Gift of Goddess* is the story of one such journey – that of a declaration, of the claiming of an 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. (Pandey 65)

So, her fight was to find a body which identifies her individual self. This project examined whether the life narrative succeeded in performing the body as an identity of a transgender in a heteronormative society. As Butler states, Manobi understood the reality that gender could neither be

true or false, neither natural nor superficial. Yet we are forced to live in a culturally constructed perspective of gender. She was able to break the stereotypical binaries of gender and could transgress both mind and body from a male-born Somnath to a female- Maobi. Her body performed in becoming a transgender in a heterosexual society where the stereotypical binaries exist to remain as male or female only. Manobi was a victim of harassment and abuses by the society because she did not perform the correct gender which was assigned at her birth. She was a female trapped in a male body. So it can be said that gender is an act which should be performed because gender is a social construct. But Manobi, who in the beginning suppressed her mixed emotions of body and mind as Somnath, later rebelled back to discover her true 'self'. By transgressing the heteronormative body Manobi enjoyed 'double fluidity'. The concept of gender was contradicting with her 'self' so it restricted her from enjoying performative fluidity. Therefore, while being Somnath, she had to recognize her mind, whether she truly felt in the wrong body. Then she had to transform her body to her 'self' identity, giving her the ability to enjoy 'double fluidity'. Manobi mentions that "I have found a body that is perfect for me" (Pandey 45).

Butler states about the stark reality about our society, "the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence" ("Performative Acts" 527). In the theatre it is an act, but the same performance of play in society creates violence. This is because by performing against the social norms of gender breaks down the demarcation set between the concepts of gender as binaries. Manobi faced the oppression with steadfast bravery because her aim was to attain a body which expressed her 'I' and in the biography we can find Manobi celebrating her body.

The current paper also analysed the concept of transnarrative as a performance. The patriarchal notions have played a vital role in the making of a transgender. Manobi was able to use a fluid transnarrative self against the patriarchal stereotypes and she was successful in creating a

body of her own. The society considered her as yet another transgender who was a disgrace to the society. She was a transwoman but in reality she wanted to be recognized as an individual with an identity. Manobi's transnarrative is a performance depicting the success of her identity. Transgenders do not have a linear narration, they give importance to body. So attaining "Nirvana" (1) is mentioned first in the plot and from there the journey continues like a flashback bringing us back into the present. Manobi's trans narrative is a play about the self.

Transnarratives develop a dual consciousness and it is centred on the body. The narrative is intertwined between the mind and 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" (Baruah, "Trans Autobiographies" 455). Thus, the thesis analysed how Manobi through her trans-biography achieved to create a transnarrative that best suits the story of 'their' body. "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" (Pandey 8). Manobi, as a result arrives at her true identity. This is because for a transgender their identity, their true self lies first in their body which is connected to their mind.

Performativity is based on variety of socially constructed matters like gender and race. Amongst all this socially and culturally existing norms Manobi's transnarrative and body fought and performed in such a manner that she created a fluid identity for her 'self'. According to Nagoshi and Brzuzy, "transgenders are those who express gender identities outside traditional heteronormative definitions" (qtd. in Saveri 91). Manobi was also successful through her text. Butler opines that,

...if gender is the cultural significance that the sexed body assumes, and if that significance is codetermined through various acts and their cultural perception, then it would appear that from within the terms of culture it is not possible to know

sex as distinct from gender... But the more mundane reproduction of gendered identity takes place through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence. ("Performative Acts" 524)

This was the area where Manobi proved her 'self' to be different from the gendered existence. She knew that she was trapped in a wrong sex but never attached it with her gender. Manobi Bandyopadhyay found a body which suited her individuality by performing through her body and transnarrative, which is clearly portrayed in the first Indian trans-biography of a Principal, Dr. Manobi Bandyopadhyay.

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