



# Autobiography and Transgender Worlds: Body and Queer Corporeality

Dr Bulbul Gupta

Associate Professor, Department of English, M.M. College, Modinagar, District Ghaziabad, India

Received: 25 Jan 2024; Received in revised form: 05 Mar 2024; Accepted: 16 Mar 2024; Available online: 23 Mar 2024

©2024 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— *In the context of rapidly changing biomedical interventions and emerging non-surgical practices of gender transformation, the paper explores various issues associated with trans procedures that trans people in the three autobiographies go through namely, Manobi Bandyopadhyay's A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi, A. Revathi's The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story, and Living Smile Vidya's I am Vidya: A Transgender's journey. One of the main events of the three autobiographies is the sex change surgery that the three protagonists, Somnath (later, Manobi after sex change operation) in A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi, Doraisamy (later, Revathi after sex change operation) in The Truth About Me, and Preeti (later, Vidya after sex change operation) in Living Smile Vidya's I am Vidya: A Transgender's journey undergo. The paper problematizes various issues related to trans procedures that Somnath, Doraisamy and Preeti undergo and attempts to find answers to questions such as if Somnath's and Doraisamy's undergoing transgender procedures can be 'simply' equated with other forms of body modification such as tattooing, piercing and cosmetic surgery, and is not to be considered as a 'complete, pathological rearrangement of identity'; can these transgender procedures be called a way of reorganizing the protagonists' body to suit their image of themselves; is it possible to extricate social and political implications of transgender procedures that the three protagonists experience; if 'trans' procedures that the three protagonists experience can be seen in context of pseudo-medical accounts of transsexual autobiographies that tolerate body-modificatory practices so far as they enable a move away from strangeness and towards normalcy; do the protagonists opt for 'trans' procedures to alleviate the pain of being strange and engender a process of becoming 'normal'; and whether or not trans practices constitute some form of self-mutilation.*



**Keywords**— *Autobiography, Body Image, Identity, Sex Reassignment Surgery, Transgender*

Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah in the General Editors' Introduction to the exclusive issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* on surgery of trans people outline the changing contours of relationship between sex and surgical interventions. Stryker and Currah state that in ancient times, a close relationship existed between surgery, sex and social status. Human captives, slaves and labourers were subjected to castration "to move them closer to livestock in the hierarchies of life, and further from hereditary kingship..." (Stryker and Currah 161) According to early medical history of transsexuality, a

person's "sex" was changed not to make one genital morphology resemble another but for purposes of contribution towards procreation. Thus, procedures for sex changes included vasectomy, tubal ligation, penectomy, orchiectomy, oophorectomy, hysterectomy, vaginoplasty and phalloplasty. Historically, surgery has played a dominant role in conferring upon a gender-variant person a real change in social status. There was a time when "surgery was the sine qua non of transsexual discourse". A gender-variant person without surgery could be a cross-dresser, a butch, a fetishist, or a drag

queen but would not be considered a transsexual. Hence, it were only genital-altering transsexuals who were believed to have “really” changed sex. However, with the passage of time, genital surgery ceases to be the prerequisite for changing one’s legal sex. There is an ever increasing number of trans people who, in place of trans procedures pursue non surgical ways such as facial feminization or adoption of verbal, social and bureaucratic performances.

In this context of rapidly changing biomedical interventions and emerging non surgical practices of gender transformation, the paper explores various issues associated with trans procedures that trans people in the three autobiographies go through namely, Manobi Bandyopadhyay’s *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, A. Revathi’s *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, and Living Smile Vidya’s *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s journey*. One of the main events of the three autobiographies is the sex change surgery that the three protagonists, Somnath (later, Manobi after sex change operation) in *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, Doraisamy (later, Revathi after sex change operation) in *The Truth About Me*, and Preeti (later, Vidya after sex change operation) Living Smile Vidya’s *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s journey* undergo. The paper problematizes various issues related to ‘trans’ procedures that Somnath, Doraisamy and Preeti undergo and attempts to find answers to questions such as if Somnath’s and Doraisamy’s undergoing transgender procedures can be ‘simply’ equated with other forms of body modification such as tattooing, piercing and cosmetic surgery, and is not to be considered as a “complete, pathological rearrangement of identity”; can these transgender procedures be called a way of reorganizing the protagonists’ body to suit their image of themselves; is it possible to extricate social and political implications of transgender procedures that the three protagonists experience; if ‘trans’ procedures that the three protagonists experience can be seen in context of pseudo-medical accounts of transsexual autobiographies that tolerate body-modificatory practices so far as they enable a move away from strangeness and towards normalcy; do the protagonists opt for ‘trans’ procedures to alleviate the pain of being strange and engender a process of becoming ‘normal’; and whether or not trans practices constitute some form of self-mutilation. Yet another dimension that the paper aims to explore is related to the concept or notion of ‘justice’ that is the reason given in much of the recent work on transgender bodies behind access to body modificatory practices. Two approaches to the concept of ‘justice’ with reference to transgender procedures have been given viz, one, that justice in the

works on transgender bodies is a “matter of tolerating difference, of being liberal minded, of allowing the other to claim and to exercise his/her rights, in particular, if s/he is suffering” (Stryker and Whittle 563), and two, justice, in Sullivan’s own opinion “generates an opening onto alterity, to difference, to a future, or futures, yet to come”(563). In the paper, the two above stated opinions about the notion of „justice“ are applied to the two protagonists to probe if justice is meted out to them, and which of the two opinions is true to their condition.

Judith Halberstam in *Lesbians Talk Transgender* claims that if transsexual surgery is considered simply as cosmetic surgery and stigma attached to transsexual surgery is taken away, then the simple answer to a question like ‘Why do you want to become a man? What’s wrong with you?’ would be ‘Because I prefer the way a penis looks on my body to the way a vagina looks on my body’.(Quoted in Stryker and Whittle 553) However, neither Manobi nor Vidya nor Revathi undergo transsexual surgery for as simple a reason that they prefer how a vagina looks on their bodies to how a penis looks. In the case of Manobi, an intense desire to opt for sex reassignment surgery has its roots in her girlhood days. As a young girl, she would “dream of a happy family with a loving and protective husband”. (Bandyopadhyay 25). The desire to undergo surgery becomes overwhelming when Manobi enters college and at that point of her life comes across an article in a popular Bengali magazine about a man in Kolkata who experiences sex change surgery to become a woman. In another article, Manobi also comes to know about a man who was the son of a famous Hindustani classical vocalist and goes through transsexual surgery. These articles reinforce Manobi’s strong wish to go under the scalpel one day because to her, the sex change surgery seemed to be “the only way to get the kind of love I (she) was looking for” (45).

Lisa Walker, in the paper entitled, *Embodying Desire: Piercing and the Fashioning of ‘Neo- butch/femme’ Identities* examines the relation between non-mainstream forms of body modification that include transsexual practices and procedures besides tattooing, piercing, etc. and cosmetic surgery as one in which the former is a “radical political practice” (Stryker and Whittle 2006: 554) while the latter is „a form of compliance to normative gendered standards of beauty“ (Stryker and Whittle 554). Andrea Juno, the editor of *Modern Primitives* too has described non-mainstream forms of body modification as “creative and liberatory form of self- reclamation” (554) whereas cosmetic surgery as one that implies “surrendering...one’s creativity, one’s individuality, one’s body to the

mandates of a male-defined system” (554). When seen in the context of these contentions of Walker and Juno, Manobi’s case of undergoing the trans procedure is similar to cosmetic surgery since it is basically prompted by her overwhelming desire to give pleasure to her husband of vaginal sex and not anal sex. Manobi’s desire for sex reassignment surgery is governed strongly by the internalization of hetero-patriarchal norms and values.

Vidya’s obsession with sex reassignment surgery lies, in her own words, in her belief that “a person of my (her) kind never feels male,” (Vidya 99) and “We (they) are – we (they) want to be

– women” (99). Vidya continuously carries a strong feeling that she was a woman trapped in male body. She felt that she may have biological status of a man but “my (her) thought processes when considering my (her) future, my (her) professional career were those of a woman”. When in college, it hurts Vidya immensely that though she was a girl, the world around her saw her as a boy. She had intense longing to be a girl and thus made every possible effort to hide her femininity from the outside world. Hence Vidya undergoes sex reassignment surgery to put an end to her “search of my (her) self” (49) and to go “beyond my (her) confusion over my (her) gender” (49) and bring harmony between her outer and inner being. Thus, Vidya’s act of going through sex reassignment surgery is contrary to Halberstam’s contention that if transsexual surgery is considered similar to cosmetic surgery, it would then be seen as ‘a way of organizing your body to suit your image of yourself’ (Quoted in Stryker and Whittle 553).

Nikki Sullivan, a critical theorist of body modification practices says in the article, *Transmogrification: (Un)Becoming Other(s)* that Halberstam has identified two opposed dichotomies that inform a large part of the work produced on transgender bodies as well as on body modification. The first of these dichotomies is framed in terms of *becoming strange* versus *being normal* in which ‘transgender embodiment constitutes a *becoming strange* that is inevitably non-normative, while non-transgender embodiment is equated with simply *being normal*’. (Stryker and Whittle 562) This type of dichotomy is found in accounts which lay down non-mainstream body modification as radical. The other dichotomy is posited between *becoming normal* and *being strange*. This position is found most commonly in pseudo-medical accounts of transsexualism and in a number of transsexual autobiographies where body modification practices are tolerated only in so far as they enable a move away from strangeness and towards

normalcy. (562). The question arises if Revathi’s undergoing sex reassignment surgery be considered as an instance wherein the trans procedure is undertaken to alleviate the pain of being

‘strange’ and to become ‘normal’. Revathi’s case is seen in the context of Sullivan’s definition of the word ‘strange’ as a ‘sense of something ‘other’, something unknown and unaccountable, something that incites wonder’ (561). Revathi felt like a girl right from her school days. As such, she would wear her sister’s long skirt and blouse and twist a towel around her and walk as if she was a shy bride; she would sweep the frontyard of her house and draw a kolam like other girls did; during the season of planting of sweet potatoes by people of her village, she, like other women would plant the saplings; at school, she would play with the girls five stones, hopscotch and hide and seek. All such activities that were usual for a girl or woman came so naturally to Revathi that “I (she) did not know that I (she) behaved like a girl” (Revathi 07) while she incited wonder in others especially the members of her family to behave as a girl does despite being a boy. As Revathi grows up, she is drawn towards boys in the school that leaves her confused. It felt “strange” to her that “I (she) was a boy and yet I (she) could love other boys” (09). Around the time when she was in class X in school, she began to feel strange that though she was a woman in spirit but had a man’s body. She, in utter desperation says that “I (she) longed to be known as a woman and felt the pain at being considered a man” (15).

Another set of the feelings of being ‘strange’ versus ‘normal’ confronts Revathi when she comes to know about the men at the fort of Namakkal that appries her of the fact that the only way to become a woman was to have an ‘operation’. It appeared ‘strange’ to Revathi that the transgender people at Namakkal fort had anal sex. To her, heterosexuality and vaginal sex was

‘normal’. Thus, she “desired to become a woman, marry an educated man and only then have sex”(19).

Nikki Sullivan talks about an important dimension to the transgender practices and non-mainstream body modification namely, self-mutilation. She says that there are some writers who argue that transgender practices constitute a form of self-mutilation (Stryker and Whittle 559). She further says that most often, people who participate in non-mainstream forms of body modification, cosmetic surgery or those who go under the scalpel to ‘feminize’ their bodies profess that they are enacting new forms of embodiment, defining themselves, enjoying transgressive pleasures, reclaiming their bodies or making counter-cultural

statements with their bodies but actually, such people suffer from a sort of sickness and thus their statements to legitimize their actions are attempts to rationalize their self-harming desires. Jolly's case in *The Truth About Me* can be examined in this contention of Sullivan. Jolly, a transgender person falls in love with a man named Chandan who makes her think that 'he would finally accept her as a partner and they would live like a family'. However, Chandan had developed the relationship merely for fun sake and to satisfy his lust and thus, once he grows out of the relationship, he forsakes Jolly. No matter how much Jolly pleads with Chandan, nothing revives Chandan's interest in her. Out of sheer frustration and in the last attempt to win Chandan back, Jolly cuts off her penis that proves nearly fatal. She is saved by the doctors as her mother takes her to medical care well on time. Yet after this incident, Jolly attempts castration but doctors are unable to create a vagina for her. Ultimately, she resorts to becoming a transgender sex worker. Here, Jolly's act of cutting off her penis is an extreme instance of self-mutilation. Further, what is noteworthy is the reason that lies behind Jolly's gory act is way different from those cited above. Jolly harms herself not to feminize her body but to make it appropriate for to make her lover marry her and enable him to enjoy vaginal sex.

Though Jolly's example is a stark instance of self-mutilation but the manner and conditions in which the likes of Vidya undergo sex reassignment surgery is nothing short of an attempt towards self-mutilation. Vidya calls sex reassignment surgery an 'illegal procedure' that is carried out in primitive, unsafe and unhygienic conditions in India. She says that there are neither medical tests or counseling of the 'kothi' preceding the operation nor adequate medical care during or after it. "They (doctors) castrate you (the kothi) while you are watching, suture in the next few minutes, clean you with cotton and pack you off to recover". (Vidya 100) Highlighting the barbaric, callous and insensitive treatment of people who undergo trans surgery, Vidya says that the "post-operative pain is indescribable. You want to die – and people often do". Thus, Vidya is compelled to confess that she was aware that "my (her) survival after the surgery was a question mark: I (she) was told I (she) had a fifty-fifty chance" (98).

Revathi's instance of sex reassignment surgery too is no less than submitting oneself to extreme pain and agony. She undergoes the surgery in abysmal medical conditions where she is taken least care of before, during and after the operation by the doctors. During the operation, she screams and howls with excruciating pain

and vomits due to acute sense of pain. An hour after the surgery, as the effect of anesthesia wears off, she experiences intolerable pain so much so it appears to her that she would die but no medical assistance is provided to her.

Manobi however presents a different case as regards the undergoing trans procedure. She is administered the treatment in a more organized and professionally sound manner. She is given hormone treatment before the surgery along with supportive medication and psychological counseling to prepare her for the trans procedure. Nevertheless, just minutes before the surgery is to be carried out, Manobi feels lack of confidence that serves to illustrate the extreme sense of fear, trauma and insecurity that a trans often experiences in the process of going through the surgery. Though ultimately, Manobi does go through the sex reassignment surgery yet it remains a bothersome part of her life for, as she says, "sex change is a lifelong clinical process and you (the trans person who undergo the surgery) have to be constantly under medication and clinical observation" (Bandyopadhyay 135) which surely has a fair share of stressful impact on the trans person throughout her life.

Another vital issue related to trans practices is if it is possible to extricate social and political implications of 'trans' surgery. Nikki Sullivan states in *Transmogrification: (Un)Becoming Other(s)* that she can perceive in the work of Nataf, Califia and Halberstam a sense that association of transgender procedures with other forms of body modifications like tattooing, piercing, cosmetic surgery would "enable a move away from essentialized, essentializing and/or pathologizing theories of trans embodiment and the social and political implications of such" (Stryker and Whittle 554). It is seen that even after 'nirvaanam' or sex reassignment procedure, Revathi knows no respite from exploitation by her own hijra community. Revathi finds herself held even more tightly in the clutches of the hijra community than she was prior to undergoing sex reassignment surgery. The 'guru' of the 'parivar' to which she belonged takes advantage of the fact that post sex reassignment surgery, Revathi has become "a woman (now) and so must learn to act like one" (Revathi 89). By instructing Revathi not to cut her hair, not to run away to her home and not to spoil herself by taking on a husband, Revathi's 'guru' ensures that she deprives her of enjoying any feeling that makes her feel like a woman and thus defeats for her the very purpose for which she has undergone the painful 'trans' procedure. It is ensured that Revathi's status in the hijra 'parivar' remains as subservient and inconsequential as it was before she had through sex reassignment surgery.

If Revathi's 'guru' instructs her to continue to respect and abide by the codes that the hijras live by and to listen to and obey her guru then the older women of the 'parivar' called the likes of Revathi (who go through 'trans' procedure) as "pinjus" implying that they were "still tender and young" (89).

Similarly, though Vidya undergoes sex reassignment surgery to coordinate her physical body with the image of a woman in which she always perceived herself yet her act does not ensure for her a moving away or an escape from social and political repercussions of the surgery. In fact, there follows a gamut of social consequences that run contrary to the claim of Halberstam, Nataf and Califia that if transgender practices are associated with other forms of body modification such as tattooing, piercing, cosmetic surgery, etc, and is undertaken to suit one's image of oneself then it might wean away the social and political implications of trans surgery.

The status of Vidya not only in the society in general but also in transgender community remains unchanged in all respects even after she goes through the trans procedure or "nirvana". The Nani (the head of a 'parivar', the transgender community) remains politically motivated and reminds Vidya that getting "nirvana" does not in any way improve her economic conditions. She covertly attempts to preserve the hegemony of the 'parivar' through her insistence that Vidya continues to, "do the sensible thing and concentrate on begging" to ensure a financially secure and dignified future for herself. After Vidya undergoes 'nirvana', Nani addresses her as "new girl" (Vidya 106)

which carries sarcastic undertones. What Nani attempts to emphasize is that though Vidya might consider herself 'new' in body after undergoing 'nirvana' but her social as well as economic position in the hierarchy of transgender community remains unchanged.

Hence, if at all the sex reassignment surgery leaves a positive impact on somebody then it is on Vidya herself. The surgical intervention, to a large extent alleviates Vidya's inner suffering. When considered from the perspective of the feminist theorist, Davis, following feelings of Vidya after sex reassignment surgery echoes Davis' belief that 'sex reassignment surgery...will...enable the displaced person to finally feel at home in his/her body to become whole': "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" (08), and once the rituals that are carried out by transgender community for Vidya, Vidya with a big sigh of relief says:

"Henceforth I would be a tirunangai – complete. This alone was my identity". (103) Similarly, Manobi, post sex reassignment surgery feels that her "soul had found its body, and I (she) had a sense of completeness that had been denied to me (her) at birth" (Bandyopadhyay 136).

In much of the recent work on transgender practices, according to Nikki Sullivan, the notion of

'justice' is stated as the reason behind access to body modificatory practices. Sullivan says that there are two approaches to the concept of 'justice' with reference to transgender procedures namely, one, that justice in the works on transgender bodies is a 'matter of tolerating difference, of being liberal minded, of allowing the other to claim and to exercise his/her rights, in particular, if h/she is suffering' (Stryker and Whittle 563), and two, justice 'generates an opening onto alterity,...to a future, or futures, yet to come' (Stryker and Whittle 563). The example of Revathi's friend, Shakuntala whom Revathi had met on her visits to the shops at Masjid Bhandar reveals that she is completely deprived of 'justice' for she is neither given the right to undergo trans procedure and having gone through it by herself, all doors to a new and better future are closed on her. Shakuntala earns for her 'guru' by going to the shops regularly yet she is denied by her the permission to go for sex reassignment surgery. She somehow manages to undergo the

'trans' procedure on the strength of her own earnings but unable to extricate herself of her guru's hold on her. She is forced by her guru to continue to give a portion of her earnings to her on the basis of the fact that she owes much to her (guru) who has nurtured and polished her as a hijra. Life becomes even more complex and difficult for Shakuntala after the trans surgery when she falls into the trap of a local rowdy who professes love to her. The rowdy successfully entices her and then takes advantage of her soft feelings towards him. He takes away her money and blows it on drinking and gambling. When Shakuntala expresses her mind to end her relationship with him, the rowdy threatens to throw acid on her that leaves her scared and vulnerable. Thus, 'trans' surgery brings no relief or justice to Shakuntala or to Revathi and does not open up a brighter or happier future for her. Revathi finds herself in an even more precarious situation when she is denied the freedom to marry after the surgery and to satiate her sexual urge through marriage. As a twenty year old, she remains continually troubled by the desire for sex for which she has to leave her guru's house and become a chela in another house. In the new house, she had to do sex work

that she never wanted to. She had always dreamt of experiencing sexual happiness in marriage but unfortunately, “I (she) found myself (herself) having to treat sexual experiences as work” (Revathi 106). “It was because I (she) could not really express my (her) sexual feelings that I (she) had opted for this life” (Revathi 110). As such the life at the new house brings nothing else to Revathi but horror and violence.

Hence, what emerges from the above analysis is that though genital surgery may not anymore be the prerequisite for altering one’s legal sex yet the importance of sex reassignment surgery continues to exist for trans people like the protagonists of the three autobiographies mentioned above. The relevance of trans procedures may vary from that of securing a happy and satisfied sexual relationship in marriage and adherence to heteronormativity to establishing one’s identity as a ‘true’ woman and derive a sense of completeness and ‘normalcy’. But what is noteworthy is that where historically one of the major aims behind opting for trans surgeries was change in one’s social status, in case of trans protagonists of the above given autobiographies, the attitude of trans community towards them post-surgical interventions remains as authoritative and unyielding as before denying them the right to marry (which is the major reason for their undergoing genital surgery) or aspire for jobs for better financial condition. As such, the feeling of satisfaction of attaining congruity between their sex and gender by means of surgery is largely nullified for the trans protagonists as the trans procedures does not herald for them a brighter or happier future.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Bandyopadhyay, Manobi. (2017). *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*. Penguin Random House India.
- [2] Revathi. A. (2010). *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. Penguin Random House India Pvt.Ltd.
- [3] Vidya, Living Smile. (2013). *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s journey*. Rupa Publications India Pvt.Ltd.
- [4] Stryker, Susan, and Stephen Whittle, eds. (2006). *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Routledge.
- [5] Susan, Stryker, and Paisley Currah. (2018). “General Editors’ Introduction” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 2: 161-63. <https://read.dukepress.edu/tsq/issue/5/2>