ANATOMIZATION OF THE ‘TRANSMIND’ AND TRANSGENDER SEXUAL IDENTITY IN INDIAN TRANS WOMEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This article examines recent autobiographies by Indian transgender women authors to understand their journey towards success and to analyze the psychological development of the "Trans mind", a term representing the complexities of transgender individuals' minds.

Theoretical Framework: The study integrates Freudian, Lacanian, and cognitive developmental theories of gender identity, particularly Lawrence Kohlberg’s model, to explore the formation of transgender individuals' identities.

Method: The research employs qualitative analysis of autobiographical narratives to delve into the psychological experiences and development of transgender individuals, focusing on the relationship between body and mind, the fluidity of gender binaries, and identity formation.

Results and Discussion: The study uncovers fresh insights into the intricate interplay between body and mind, challenging traditional notions of gender identity. It highlights the complexity of the transgender experience and the need for a deeper understanding of the "Trans mind" to foster empathy and support within the community.

Research Implications: The findings contribute to a deeper comprehension of transgender psychology and identity development, offering potential avenues for therapeutic intervention and social support initiatives tailored to the needs of transgender individuals.

Originality/Value: This research offers a novel perspective on transgender psychology, synthesizing diverse theoretical frameworks to shed light on the unique challenges and experiences faced by transgender individuals in India. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and validating the lived experiences of transgender individuals to promote their well-being and social integration.

Keywords: Gender, Sex, Identity, Transgender, Trans Mind.

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Método: a pesquisa emprega análise qualitativa de narrativas autobiográficas para se aprofundar nas experiências psicológicas e no desenvolvimento de indivíduos transgêneros, concentrando-se na relação entre corpo e mente, na fluidez dos binários de gênero e na formação da identidade.

Resultados e Discussão: O estudo revela novas percepções sobre a intrincada interação entre corpo e mente, desafiando as noções tradicionais de identidade de gênero. Ele destaca a complexidade da experiência transgênero e a necessidade de uma compreensão mais profunda da “mente trans” para promover empatia e apoio dentro da comunidade.

Implicações da Pesquisa: Os resultados contribuem para uma compreensão mais profunda da psicologia e do desenvolvimento da identidade dos transgêneros, oferecendo possíveis caminhos para a intervenção terapêutica e iniciativas de apoio social adaptadas às necessidades dos transgêneros.

Originalidade/Valor: esta pesquisa oferece uma nova perspectiva sobre a psicologia dos transgêneros, sintetizando diversas estruturas teóricas para esclarecer os desafios e as experiências únicas enfrentadas pelos transgêneros na Índia. Ela enfatiza a importância de reconhecer e validar as experiências vividas por pessoas transgênero para promover seu bem-estar e integração social.

Palavras-chave: Gênero, Sexo, Identidade, Transgênero, Mente Transgênero.

ANATOMIZACIÓN DE LA IDENTIDAD SEXUAL ‘TRANSMIND’ Y TRANSGÉNERO EN LAS AUTOBIOGRAFÍAS DE MUJERES TRANS INDIA.

ABSTRACT

Objetivos: Este artículo examina autobiografías recientes de autoras transgénero indias para comprender su viaje hacia el éxito y analizar el desarrollo psicológico de la "mente trans", un término que representa las complejidades de las mentes de las personas transgénero.

Marco Teórico: El estudio integra las teorías freudianas, lacanianas y del desarrollo cognitivo sobre la identidad de género, particularmente el modelo de Lawrence Kohlberg, para explorar la formación de las identidades de los individuos transgénero.

Método: La investigación emplea análisis cualitativo de narrativas autobiográficas para profundizar en las experiencias psicológicas y el desarrollo de personas transgénero, enfocándose en la relación entre cuerpo y mente, la fluidez de los binarios de género y la formación de identidad.

Resultados y Discusión: El estudio revela nuevos conocimientos sobre la intrincada interacción entre cuerpo y mente, desafiando las nociones tradicionales de identidad de género. Destaca la complejidad de la experiencia transgênero y la necesidad de una comprensión más profunda de la "mente trans" para fomentar la empatía y el apoio dentro de la comunidad.

Implicaciones de la Investigación: Los hallazgos contribuyen a una comprensión más profunda de la psicología transgênero y el desarrollo de la identidad, ofreciendo vías potenciales para la intervención terapêutica e iniciativas de apoio social adaptadas a las necesidades de las personas transgénero.

Originalidad/Valor: Esta investigación ofrece una perspectiva novedosa sobre la psicología transgênero, sintetizando diversos marcos teóricos para arrojar luz sobre los desafíos y experiencias únicos que enfrentan las personas transgênero en la India. Enfatiza la importancia de reconocer y validar las experiencias vividas de personas transgênero para promover su bienestar e integración social.

Palabras clave: Género, Sexo, Identidad, Transgênero, Mente Trans.

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1 INTRODUCTION

What are we in our minds? What do we like to be called by others? How do we see and call others? How can we relate to others? These are some of the key questions in defining our own gender identity and our respective roles in society. “I was very confused. My life seemed like a never-ending maze as 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?” (Manobi, 2017). The traditional gender binary spectacle of the past has given way to the hetero-normative sexual realities, determined by the innate self experience (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2009). Society still possesses remarkable power to decide gender roles and is the inescapable structure in which the individual has to struggle for survival.

The notion of the third gender originated in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Initially categorized as a kind of sexual aberration or a psychological disorder, the third sex gradually began to be understood as a normal condition of the mind and body which differed from that of the majority (Stryker, 2008). This third space refers to a group of people who, though possess similarities to the sexual dichotomy, are different from their expected sexual traits. The name transgender came into being in a work named “Sexual Hygiene and Pathology” written by John F. Oliven in 1965. The word was a substitute for the earlier used word, Transsexual, which was not objective. Soon the term began to be used as an umbrella term including a lot of subsections like transsexuals, transvestite, guy, lesbian, agender, bisexual, cross-dresser, asexual, Asterisk, binary, intersex, MTF (Male To Female), FTM (Female To Male), genderqueer, etc. (Singh, 2015).

In India, transgender people are generally known by the term, ‘Hijra’. The word ‘Hij’ refers to the holy soul, “what is important is the soul and the hijra community that possesses it. God loves the hijra community and has created a special place for it outside the man-woman frame. A hijra is neither a man nor a woman she is feminine, but not a woman. He is masculine, a male by birth, not a man either. A hijra’s male body is a trap—not just to the hijra itself, who suffocates within it, but to the world that wrongly assumes a hijra to be a man.” (Tripathi et al., 2015). This study concentrates on transgender persons and their psychological development through the different stages of life based on the autobiographical narrations of Indian transwomen writers. MTF trans persons assume the common name of trans women after their surgery and live an accorded life.
Autobiography, generally known as the story of one’s self-written by that person, is an important genre of literature that explores the personal experiences that one has undergone. The discursive and constitutive elements of the autobiography are always based on experiences, the memory of past events, and their indelible effect on the individual real existence in space and time (Smith & Watson, 2010). The formation and development of the self-identity of a person can be traced through a well-narrated ‘self-life writing’. The identity of the self is narrated about the self of other individuals or communities, whether positive or negative. Differences and commonalities form part of the integrity of the identical retrospective self-evolution. The influence of socio, political, cultural, religious, gender, anthropological, and psychological aspects play a vital role in shaping the ultimate teleology of human existence. All these factors are intertwined in the narrative formation of the autobiographical truth (Leader, 2015). The three autobiographies analyzed in this research paper are the real-life experiences of the Transwomen who fought until their momentum became successful.

The Indian Transwomen autobiographies under study include Laxminarayan Tripathi’s Me Hijra Me Laxmi (2015), Living Smile Vidya’s I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey (2014), and Manobi Bandyopadhyay’s A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi: A Candid Biography of India’s First Transgender Principal, written with Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey (2017). A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi: A Candid Biography of India’s First Transgender Principal, by Manobi Bandyopadhyay, delineates the author’s search for self-identity through education. She became India’s first transgender principal at Krishnagar Women’s College in West Bengal on 9 June 2015. “Education: If we learn all our problems will be solved” is her message to her community. The book is about a transgender who fights against the traditional view of considering transgender as a strange, detestable creature, perhaps a criminal and subhuman (Bandyopadhyay, 2017).

Me Hijra, Me Laxmi by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is an exceptional account of a son of an orthodox Brahmin family who became Laxmi, a hijra, and made history. From childhood onwards, he had to face many abuses for having effeminate mannerisms and a love for dance. He overcame all those situations and stood not only for his feminine identity but also for a community disgusted by all. The autobiography vivifies her becoming a hijra by a choice of her own and her continuous fight against superstitious attitudes toward the hijras and even the self-disrespect of the hijras themselves (Tripathi, 2015).

I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey is an autobiography that presents a life sketch of a transgender who fought against the traditional norms of society to acquire her own identity as a woman. As a boy, Sarvanan (birth name of Vidya) always believed that he was not a male but a
person having a female soul imprisoned in a male body. Finally, deciding to survive as a female, Sarvanan transforms himself into Vidya. Originally written in Tamil, the mother tongue of Vidya, the book has been translated into many languages, like English and Marathi (Vidya, 2014).

Mind in psychological terms is the essential facet of the intellect and the consciousness, necessarily exhibited as coalescence of thought, perception, memory, emotion, will, and imagination (Kind, 2015). The term ‘transmit’ involves the specified characteristics of the peculiar nature of the mind of transgender persons, enveloping all the conscious and unconscious cognitive processes. Transgender persons are studied separately because they are thought to be different from ‘normal’ human existence. Likewise, the ‘transmit’ also should be studied in detail, considering the complexities of the mental processes peculiar to its nature.

Kohlberg’s Cognitive-Developmental Theory states the proportionality between the development of understanding of gender and the development of age. The child’s consciousness of gender develops with age. There are three stages in the process of gender development: gender labeling, gender stability, and gender constancy (Staines et al., 2012). But, we cannot limit the stages of gender development to this watertight compartmentalization in the case of transsexual persons. The various stages of mental conflicts in deciding the real sex can be traced by applying the psychoanalytical approach to the transmission.

2 THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS OF THE TRANSMIND

According to Kohlberg’s theory, the first stage of gender identity is known as gender labeling. To understand this stage, it is essential to understand the concept of ‘schema’ about cognitive development. A schema is a conceptual mental pattern according to which children subjectively shape their gender reality. This labeling occurs around the ages of two to three years (Fagot & Leinbach, 1979). It is closely associated with the speaking ability they begin to possess at the time. Speaking ability also depends on the capacity to form vocabulary, inspired by family members and society. During this stage, children start to label/name the things and persons around them to identify and separate those external realities from one thing to another and from themselves. The external influences in the form of ideas and experiences help children to internalize the labels, which are fixed to the mental realm until the next stage, and some labels tend to show permanence even if one tries to overcome them.

The exact distinction of the relationship between the signifier and the signified is still unknown to children. They often use consistent labels though they don’t know the complete sense of the signified. Children form beliefs based on certain criteria that are common to the
labels. For example, the length of the hair, types of dress, and kinds of ornaments may create gender conceptions in the minds of children. But these are not static, since both males and females can have long hair and wear ornaments. This stage is akin to Lacan’s mirror stage, where the child identifies their image in the mirror and understands the self as something different from others (Homer, 1998).

For Lacan, this is the moment when the ego emerges with alienation and fascination with one’s image. Lacan enunciates the two ‘gateways’ that the child never escapes to access the ‘Other’: the mirror stage and castration (Bailly, 2009). Castration is a symbolic process in which the child accepts its limitations in the world of law and understands that self-desires are not paramount. The failure to pass through the mirror stage causes severe autism and other abnormalities. Transgender children at this stage exhibit nothing unusual compared to other children, as the process of self-preconception is not dependent upon the sexual traits of the body. Children develop an equal fascination for all objects other than the self out of curiosity. Autobiographies often omit narrations of this stage because they are irretrievable for any self to reproduce. The ‘abnormality’ or ‘social gender psychosis’ has no influence on the subject at this stage.

In the second stage of development, children begin to construct the notion that the labeled gender typically is static. This development occurs around the ages of four to five and is known as gender stability. They understand that their sexual identity cannot be changed over time and that they will become fathers or mothers in the future. Gender roles and expectations are imposed upon children to be accepted knowingly or unknowingly by the society around them. Feminine and masculine roles are assimilated into the human psyche at this stage. Loving, submissive, caring natures may be understood as core feminine features, and harsh, authoritative, aggressive natures as core to the masculine figure, depending on the circumstances (Fagot & Leibanch, 1978). This stage also aligns with the psychic development of the transmit, where social institutions play a key role in determining the gender aspects of trans children. In Lacanian terms, it may be understood as the representation of representations, within which the subject is constituted and belongs to the imaginary stage. As the RSI knot, it is intrinsically related to the mirror stage’s self-apprehension. Signifiers play a prominent role in this stage to imprint subjective reality in the transmission.

The third and final stage in Kohlberg's theory is the typical affirmation and adherence to the realized gender identity. This gender constancy is acquired by children around the ages of six to seven. This conviction is not based on the peripheral aspects of gender expressions of persons like behavior, attitude, hairstyle, clothing, career, etc. They give importance to the real
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and core aspects of gender designations. The last stage is the culmination of the social constructs imposed upon children, which are part of a social formation. The conclusive idea of gender depends upon the personal experience of the teaching of gender by family, elders, neighbors, peers, religion, community, and the social world around them.

The real divergence in the gender conceptions and sexual determination of transgender persons originates in the last stage of Kohlbergian theory. It is around five to ten years of age that transgender children slowly and unknowingly start to express the underlying sexual traits other than the obtruded gender idiosyncrasies. “Yes, it is true that I was like a woman. My mannerisms, my walking and talking style were all feminine. But why was it so? I don’t know. I wasn’t of the age to answer this question. Loner than I already was, I drifted even further into my cocoon.” (Tripathy, 2008) Though named Raju, the only son of the parents, he had the traits of a girl who in early childhood did not like to keep company with the boys (Tripathy et al., 2008). This can be considered a stage of Gender nonconformity (GNC) since they are not sure whether they are male, female, or transgender persons. Some other names like gender variant, gender formative, gender creative, gender diverse, and even gender fluid can be used because it is an unfixed stage of sexual existence.

It is not easy for anyone to identify a child as gender diverse based on their traits because in a way they are part of every child of this age in one way or another. However, the consistent and continuous references towards the other sex can be viewed as the possibility of being in a Gender nonconformity status. "Why do you call me a boy? Why are you treating me like a boy? Am I supposed to be a boy?” (Tripathy, 2008), (Vidya, 2015), (Jacques, 2003), (Mock, 2017). These types of recurring questions indicate the distortions in accepting the gender of the assigned sex. When the parents correct the children for their cross behaviors, they might show anger or frustration towards others or themselves. Sometimes, they try to adopt the names of pets to refer to themselves to overcome the internal struggle.

In the peer group, they try to be more with the same sex they want to be. At times, they also will let others call them by the names of the opposite sex and will not correct others if they call them by the name of the other sex. The incident from the autobiography of Manobi Bandyopadhyay beautifully describes this attitude from personal experience. At the age of six, he was sent to Mahendra High School in Naihati. On the first day itself, he had to face humiliation in the classroom. His mother had tied a scarf around his head to protect him from the cold. But the big-sized boys in the class called him a girl because he had a veil on his head and they made him sit with the girls. All the girls laughed but Somnath enjoyed it very well and did not mind it at all. Here began his fight for self-acceptance and survival. He never blamed
other children because he always wanted to be called a girl. He just wept but never complained about the harassment he had to face. By this time, he realized that he had a powerful physical attraction towards men (Bandyopadhyay, 2008). So, in this stage, we can see a genuine, gentle, and tender expression of the unauthorized self. These indicators may not always be the signs of gender nonconformity, but a transgender person cannot avoid passing through these traits in the journey of life. When they grow further, they acquire the distinctive features of the sexual traits, innate to both genders. We are expected to love care, respect, and create a safe environment for such children to raise their free and true voices.

The next stage can be named the stage of gender experimentation, where the children try to assert their sex as opposite to the established gender norms. This stage is related to the pubescent period, around eleven to sixteen years of age. The social gender discourses added with the bodily hormonal functions affect the sexual orientation in this stage. The children knowingly start to experiment with the taboos inflicted upon them, first in private and then in public. Since the children are not properly able to articulate their personal sexual experiences, these experiments are the only way to communicate their feelings and so experiments are their sexual language.

The experiments primarily aim at the personal gratification of the sexual instincts at play. In-depth, the children also want to get feedback or responses from family, friends, and neighbors, as they were reluctant towards their traits in the earlier stage. The experiments include wearing the dress of the opposite sex, following a new hairstyle, wearing ornaments, name change, aptitude towards certain objects like toys, dresses, and accessories, and even fascination for some art forms, etc. (Tripathy, 2008, Bandyopadhyay, 2008). “The stage had a hypnotic effect on me. Once on it, I would forget who I was. I am danced to frenzy. Nothing, not even my chronic breathlessness and cough, acted as a deterrent. I thus came to regard the stage as an oasis in the desert of ill health.” (Tripathi, 2008) The private experiments give them more confidence and the pleasure of self-realization. It will give them the courage to be more expressive in the close circle of the family. Many parents fear giving positive strokes regarding their changes because they think that it will make them transgender in the future. So naturally, the negative comments and even punishments make the transmit more repressed, and they move from family to peer groups to continue their experimentation.

The peer group normally will not accept the deviation from the ‘discoursed’ order of the ‘sanity’. Humiliation, bullying, tormenting, intimidation, and belittling would be the result of the genuine experimentation with real sex and rejection by both the family and the friends children try to conform to the expected gender expression, hell to the self (Bandyopadhyay,
2008). So inspiration for experiments and the attempt to conform to the ‘wrong’ gender are the key factors of this stage. Some may also exploit these kinds of experimentations, “But a few days later, he molested me again, and then again. He was accompanied by his friends and all of them took turns to violate me. The physical and mental torture I went through is indescribable. But I didn’t say a word to anyone, either then or later. I kept my feelings bottled.” (Tripathi et al., 2008) The repressed feelings may cause dangerous frustration that can lead the children to irretrievable depression. So, proper care should be provided for those children who are undergoing this stage.

The realization of the incongruence between the body and the mind is also evident in this stage. A contempt for the body, that is entirely different from real sexual instincts, leads to further exasperation. The structure and shape of the body may become a hindrance to the real endeavors into which they want to indulge like sports and public speaking. The development and maturation of the sexual organs also may create an inferiority complex in the transmind, since they are not the desired changes in the body. Body shaming by others also adds fuel to the fire. So these children should be given proper awareness to accept the body and its changes together with the public awareness program.

Sexual determination is the next stage in the actualization of the transmission, whereby one yields to the irrepressible sexual orientations, overcoming all the gender discourses of the external agents. This is also the final stage in the actualization of the sexual identity. “Just one more night: tomorrow would dawn the fruition of my desires, the fulfillment of my dreams. The night was long. I tossed and turned. I woke up and looked around the whole train was asleep. Very few people were the engine driver, a few policemen on patrol, and I.” (Vidya, 2015) The children challenged all the restraints including choices of mannerisms, clothing, and gender roles to perform (Bandyopadhyay, 2008). They are free to select male/female/genderqueer aspects based on his/her own choice and this freedom continues to exist even in aligning the body in line with the transmit using medicines and surgeries (Vidya, 2015).

To state Vidya, “I regarded myself as a girl- a woman- though in their eyes, I was a male. That was wrong. When I demand that they henceforth treat me as a woman, address me as one, and interact with me as a woman, conflict arises; they refuse to accept me as I am. When people cannot accept my gender as I feel it, how can I continue to live with them, even if they are my people? (Vidya, 2015) Through this stage, the transmit frees the self from the “rights” and “shoulds” of society, which saves the self from being the facsimile of society to invite respect and status. The self that rested in the cocoon in the earlier stage, now ‘comes out’ as a butterfly to glide in the sky, shattering all shells. So it’s the stage of ‘coming out’ too. But of
course, it will end the support of family, friends, and institutions as in the case of many. This stage of personal cum social transition of determining or realizing the sexual identity is a slow and long process involving many steps. The creation of a positive and friendly social ambiance is a must for the ‘coming out’ of transgender people.

3 CONCLUSION

‘Sex’ is rooted in the physiological characteristics of individuals, including their chromosome combinations and genitalia, while ‘gender’ is a broad gamut by which individuals identify themselves with social constructs of roles, manners, behaviors, and patterns pertinent to man and woman. Identifying and assuming gender roles is a complex process for transgender persons because of the incongruence between the assigned sex and gender roles. They have to undergo multiple identities to reach the real one. The diversity of transgender experiences revealed through the autobiographies under study affirms the social support needed by transgender persons to freely express their gender identity. Identifying the various stages of identity formation apposite to the mental spectrum of the transgender persons in these autobiographical notes gives a clearer picture of gender incongruence and the need to implement a gender perception paradigm. A better understanding of transgender lives helps us to promote gender justice and gender democratization to create trans-affirmative policies for better inclusion into the mainstream of society.

REFERENCES


