



Truth Behind The Curtain: A Study Of The Marginalized Voices Of An Indian Transwoman In 'A Gift Of Goddess Lakshmi'

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Citation: Liza Rosario et al. (2024). Truth Behind The Curtain: A Study Of The Marginalized Voices Of An Indian Transwoman In 'A Gift Of Goddess Lakshmi', *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(11), 2049-2053

DOI: 10.53555/kuey.v30i11.10253

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Gender equality is still a big question in the Indian society. Though the Indian society has shown immense growth while the marginalized communities are still struggling for their identity. Transgender people have a gender identity that differs from their assigned sex at birth, they experience gender dysphoria, a distressing condition caused by the incongruence between one's gender identity and one's anatomy. Transwoman is a woman who is born as male but explore her identity as female. She feels that she is trapped in a wrong body. She goes for medical transition to identify her sex which includes feminizing hormone therapy, transgender voice therapy and gender-affirming surgery. She faces challenges in obtaining essential civic documentation, such as birth certificates, voter IDs, or passports due to rigid adherence of these documents to a binary gender classification system. The lack of proper documentation further exacerbated their marginalization within the broader society and deprived them from basic fundamental rights and vitally important services. Transgender individuals have been an indispensable part of the Indian society. Historically they have been regarded as semi-divine beings who has the ability to bestow blessings or inflict curses. Transwomen in India face numerous challenges in their day-to-day life, starting from their basic education to their employment has become challenging. They undergo traumatic experiences both external and internal throughout the journey of their lives. The molestation they face and the insecure life they live have made their life challenging. The feeling of living and working in safe environment has become a sturdy task. They seek validation of their gender identity and validation of being accepted as a 'normal' woman who can live a normal life just like any other woman who falls in love and live a settled life with a man.

The paper explores the marginalized voices of Indian transwomen, particularly through the lens of the book "A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi." This book, written by Manobi Bandyopadhyay, is an autobiography that delves into the life and struggles of a transwoman in India. The book provides a poignant narrative of Manobi's journey, highlighting the societal challenges, discrimination, and personal triumphs she faced. It serves as a powerful testament to the resilience and courage of transwomen in India, shedding light on their experiences and the systemic issues they encounter. The paper aims to how gender, caste, and class intersect in the lives of Indian transwomen. It also analyzes the societal attitudes towards transwomen and the impact of these attitudes on their lives. It highlights the ways in which transwomen navigate and resist societal norms to assert their identities.

Keywords: Gender equality, Marginalized communities, Gender identity, Gender dysphoria, Traumatic experience

A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi is an autobiography of Manobi Bandyopadhyay, India's first transgender principal at Women's college, Krishnagar district, Calcutta. The autobiography explores the traumatic journey of Manobi from childhood to age of maturity. To define her identity as a transgender she has to bear agony, face plight

situation and molestation. The objective of this paper is to explore the miserable situation of transgender community through the character of Manobi. The paper aims to bring the truth of the marginalized community who is treated as lowest of the low in the society where the binary concept of gender is prioritized. Any person who does not fall in binary frame of gender is treated as alien, strange and abnormal. The story of Manobi is the story of such person. The research paper also highlights the struggle of Manobi as principal to seek cooperation from her colleagues who are part and parcel of the mainstream life.

To understand the marginalized voices of Indian transwoman through the character of Manobi critical analysis of the text *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, psychological method, observation and qualitative methods have been used or applied.

Manobi Bandyopadhyay, India's first transgender principal's love for education throughout the journey of her life remain constant, but her struggle for equality and identity was a roller coaster ride. The feeling of being as a fish out of water created immense traumatic effect on her mental health leading to gender dysphoria. She faced numerous forms of oppression and discrimination throughout her journey as transphobia, violence, stigma and debarment from social institutions. Why Somnath has to adopt the identity of a transwoman is the key point of discussion of this research paper.

The readers get staggered when they read about the molestation in her childhood. From being physically to mentally abused and fighting for her basic rights, the journey of Manobi was devastating. *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* is about the transformation of Somnath into Manobi, the transformation of a boy into a girl. When Manobi was born as Somnath the universe also gave a sign as Somnath's father found a job in prestigious engineering company and people congratulated him by saying: 'Chitta, this is a boy Lakshmi' (Manobi,4).

In Indian society the birth of a girl child is considered as Goddess Lakshmi's arrival who brings wealth. Being slim and delicate Somnath had a girlish look and he was teased by most of the boys in the school when he was small. They would pinch him, punch him and would have fun by harassing him which made Somnath traumatized. She writes, "No one took pity on me. This left a deep scar on my mind" (Manobi,8).

Manobi calls her process of transitioning as 'Metamorphosis'. 'When did so-called metamorphosis happen? It perhaps started with my love for my sister's printed frocks' (Manobi,6,7).

In the beginning people thought it was just a childish act but later people started talking about Somnath's appearance. People started staring at him as if he was an alien which made him feel very uncomfortable which clearly shows when he says – "I started realizing that I wasn't accepted by most in this world" (Manobi,8). Somnath was not only fighting with the society but also with his family for his identity which clearly shows when his father directly overlooked his appearance and his behaviour in the house. His mother and sister were constantly blamed for his acts as the people around him thought he was under the influence of his mother and sister: "My mother, who was my greatest confidante, would try in vain to make me understand that my behaviour was bringing shame to the family" (Manobi,10). His mother never wanted to accept what was happening in front of her eyes. She tried her best to counsel her son as it was not only Somnath but her mother was also taunted by the society: "Poor woman, they didn't know how she battled with herself all the time and blamed herself for giving birth to a hijra! Yes, that is what the world had started calling me" (Manobi,10).

Being physically weak Somnath looked quite girlish which grabbed many scavengers' eyes. There was an older cousin who had been secretly lusting about him and one day he molested him. He was in a great agony which clearly shows when he said – 'I screamed in excruciating pain; he put his hand on my mouth to suppress my cries. I could not take it anymore and started weeping' (Manobi,9). As Somnath was getting sexually active he was getting clearer about his sexuality. By this time, he knew he was a GIRL bottled in a MAN'S body: "I yearned to tell them that I was not trying to be a girl, I was actually one!" (Manobi,14).

Somnath was actually born thrice in his journey of life. First, when he was actually born. Second, when he realized about his sexuality and third, when he got his sex operation done. Now the second phase starts in Somnath's life, the awakening of actual Lakshmi within him: "I longed for that red Banarasi sari, the veil and the jewellery that the bride would wear on this special occasion" (Manobi,11).

Just like a normal girl she craved for validation from the outside world as she wanted to be accepted and live a normal girl's life from dressing up like them to getting married to a man whom she loves. 'I craved to dress up as a girl and be taken as a girl' (Manobi, 13). Manobi was in the era when the technological gadgets were developing and people were not that digital native like today when people can search about anything in just one click. Her sexuality and the way she was transitioning was quite natural and was not influenced by any social media influencer. This gives a very clear glass image that Somnath was trapped in the wrong body from the birth which had led to 'Gender dysphoria'. Manobi was very clear about her sexuality but the transgender word was still unknown to her that time. She was naturally attracted towards dancing and she turned out to be a good dancer: "It was then I realized that dancing comes naturally to transgender person" (Manobi,14). She joined Manjushri Chaki Sarkar's dance troupe where she met many wonderful dancers who were men physically but had feminine souls. This is exactly where she found her comfort and a place where she can be what she was within but her struggle for equality and identity was like a never-ending maze. People never saw her talent and love for dance, they only taunted her and even they taunted the other men who were like her: "We were called Kotis, a slang that is often used to denote transgendered people. There are some other slang words for such as meetha chawal (sweet rice) and mama" (Manobi,15).

While Manobi was metamorphosing she got stuck by cupid's arrow at an early age as love has always been most elusive thing in her life. Throughout her journey she craved for a 'normal' life. Yes, 'NORMAL' just like an

ordinary girl who wishes for a secured life in the form of a loving and caring husband or a loyal lover. She was not a hypocrite as she openly admitted that she enjoying the pleasure of physical intimacy with her partners throughout her journey but that was not all what she wanted, throughout her relationships she was in an illusion. An illusion of true love and a secured future which she was craving for. Every relationship broke her mentally but awakened her also to be comprehensible for what she wants in her life.

Manobi(Somnath) was in class ninth when she fell in love with a boy name Shwet and later she fell in love with his cousin brother Shyam. Shyam awakened the feeling of love and how he betrayed her just because she was a woman bottled up in a man's body. His love changed as he changed his school. He used her and left her all alone with a lot of questions in her mind. He even harassed her along with his friends: "I would cry and beg but he would just laugh at me and encourage his friends to tease me about my sexuality" (Manobi,27). This left a great impact on her mental health while the war of the past betrayal was still going on in her mind, she met another boy whose name was Deb. Her love story again took a flight but landed on the same terminal. Every heart that she goes through made her clear that love is only an illusion in her life. It was by then the world started questioning her sexuality. Some called her 'homosexual' and some called her 'girlish boy' but Manobi as Somnath was very clear from the beginning about her sexuality and a desire to live a settled life like any ordinary 'normal' girl: "I was attracted to men and wanted them as my partners" (Manobi, 32). People would make fun of her and pass remarks when she was around. This created a great impact on her mental health and she was getting into depression: "They were not sure of my genital status and would crack crass jokes trying to guess whether there was a 'hole' or a 'pipe' underneath my pyjamas" (Manobi,31,32). By this time the word transgender was unknown to her. Life seems to be never ending maze, when depression hit her badly. She even went to see psychiatrist and took pills in order to come out of such a chaotic war of gender dysphoria in her mind. Amidst of all the chaos her younger cousin who molested her earlier didn't leave a single stone unturned. He would come home drunk and abuses her parents and taunted her father for siring a hijra as an offspring. In her college days she was exploited by many boys who would take her to concealed spot just to have sex with her. They exploited her just because she belonged to the third category. There were a lot of questions in her mind which made her self-esteem low. It was exactly then when she questioned herself with the prostitutes: "I sometimes asked myself if, like them, society was exploiting me too" (Manobi,44).

Manobi met few transgenders like her in life and their life story showed the exact status of transwomen in our society. One was Jolly who was Chandan's partner, he betrayed Jolly after using her though Jolly was quite serious about him. Jolly cut her penis as a last attempt to win Chandan back. She belonged to a poor family so she was earning her bread through prostitution but she fell in love with Chandan. When Manobi was working she met another transgender name Jagadish whom she calls Juhi. She was a little different from Manobi as she never went for surgery or was interested in it. As she earned her living by being sexually active as she belonged to a poor family. In order to earn for her family, she started dancing on street and became a part of prostitution. Soon she died by committing suicide because of life threatening disease like AIDS: "While most transgendered people are trapped there for life and eventually become sex workers, never returning to their families or their homes" (Manobi,81). This shows the real status of transgender people in our Indian society. As they deprived from education so to earn their daily bread, they indulge in these sorts of activities risking their life: "In our conservative society where hijras are considered beggars, sex workers and irritants, who come home to dance and extort money when babies are born" (Manobi,81).

The most humiliating and petrifying episode happened in Manobi's life when she joined a college as a lecturer in Jhargram. Right from the bus stop to the college she was accompanied by her father heard a lot of brickbats. Just because of her appearance though she didn't wear any women's clothes but the femininity was pronounced in her mannerism. She was so much traumatized but she carried out her so well as it was a part of her career growth.

"The teasing sounded like the lashes of a whip to my ears" (Manobi,91). She was going through a very tough phase of her life and it had a great impact on her mental health. The agony and humiliation that she was going through impacted her very badly as her father accompanied her and he also had to hear all the derogatory comments. Even the students left no stone unturned: "I saw teachers and students peeping from all corners and heard their gleeful laughter" (Manobi,91). The people around her in college had threatened her as they believed that no hijra has a right to become a professor. They did their best to ruin her career and bullied her so that she resigns from the college. The most challenging task was using the staff room and the toilet: "No one as lowly as a hijra should be allowed to teach in college, share the same staffroom, toilet and facilities" (Manobi,93). There were two men in the college who molested her and even hit her with the paper weight on her chest. She was badly bruised and fell unconscious on the floor: "I dreaded the day when they would strip me naked to prove their point" (Manobi,94). They would even open her pants to see her private part and pull her hair to see whether she was wearing a wig or not? No one can imagine the trauma that Manobi was going through. She felt so insecure that time and even she was horrified to walk alone in the passage: "I would avoid going up the staircase or walking down the passages alone for fear that they would catch me. The way Chandresh and Surya treated me – was nothing short of a hate crime" (Manobi,94).

Manobi was staying in her aunt's house in Kharagpur, just because of her sexuality and visiting of her other transgender friend her aunt started misbehaving with her. Even the neighbours taunted her aunt for giving shelter to a hijra. Life of Manobi was very challenging from teaching in a college to finding a proper and safe shelter to live. As there is a proverb which says – "Every cloud has a silver lining", the only silver lining in

Manobi's life was her students and her love for teaching Tagore's poem. So much was going around in her life during the college days when she was teaching, she was even blamed for drinking in the campus and sexually abusing a girl. But the girl stood for Manobi so no charges were filed against her. She wanted to give her resignation but the face of her helpless parents made her continue to work in the college. "My soul and sexuality did not match the image I saw in the mirror" (Manobi,109). She stood hours and hours naked in front of the mirror. She hated her body as she desperately craves for curves and female genital. In order to protect herself from the scavengers around, she started puffing cigarettes in open as in that area it was known as a manly act. No one can imagine the trauma and depression of Manobi as she was constantly fighting a battle within her mind and a battle around her with the world: "I felt like a helpless lamb being stalked by a man – eater" (Manobi,125)

Manobi started her first India's transgender magazine 'Abomanob' where she wrote about transgender, health and hygiene, love, sex and castration. There was a transgender community at Ranaghat which was run by a very powerful leader named Shyamoli. Manobi stayed acquainted with Shyamoli di as she was not satisfied of her nonfiction article so she started writing a novel with Shyamoli di as protagonist. While her magazines and articles grabbed a lot of attention, as Manobi said "If you want something desperately, the universe conspires to make it happen" (Manobi,117). A famous endocrinologist Anirban Majumdar read one of her interviews in the newspaper and got in touch with her. He offered to take her case without charging a single penny! She went through hormone therapy for next three years. She started looking more feminine and glamorous, but she got worried about her future and a lot of questions came across her mind at midnight which made her insomniac. She cross – examine her mind that will she be able to change herself emotionally and spiritually after the surgery. These thoughts had made a fear in Manobi's mind she become quite vulnerable which was seen on the day of surgery. Finally, the day of surgery arrived after a long hormone therapy. The fear conquered her mind and she ran away inconsolably from the operation theatre. She was so embarrassed after that so she apologized to Dr.Khanna who was the surgeon and promised him to come back again. Sex change operation became a fear in Manobi's mind.

The feelings and emotions which Manobi locked in her heart was about to overflow again and cupid was again ready to hit her this time. Love at first sight knocked the door of her heart. As she always craved for true love and a settled like just like any other 'normal' girl. Arindam was the name of that boy with whom she fell in love. Little did she know the fairy tale that she saw in front of her eyes, soon going to turn into a nightmare. She was so enamored with Arindam that she decided to go for sex change operation as she did not want to keep Arindam deprived of anything in the relationship. The craving for a secured and a family life which dreamt of was about to turn into reality: "I told him that I did not believe in casual flings. I was looking for a stable relationship that would give me a family and security" (Manobi,131,132). Finally, the time came when biologically 'SOMANTH' left the body and 'MANOBI' took over the throne. The operation was successful but the struggle for equality and her identity has just begun. The typhoon hit Manobi's life and she was devastated when Samarjit plotted a revenge with his brother-in-law who was none other than the love of Manobi's life 'ARINDAM': "They had plotted to sexually exploit me and expose me in public" (Manobi,138,139). Manobi's life has always been a struggle which seems like she was going through a never-ending dark tunnel. Samarjit accused her in public that she has been sexually abusing Arindam in order to satisfy her carnal desires: "He tried to convince my landlord that I had turned his house into a brothel and was sexually abusing another tenant" (Manobi,140). Samarjit even phoned her parents and abused them. Her mother was so much traumatized that she feared he might kill Manobi or lead her to commit suicide. She was facing all this for what? Just because she was a 'TRANSWOMAN!'. They don't have right to live 'NORMAL' life. She started smoking and drinking heavily just to ease her depression. Dr. Khanna got worried after reading about her in a newspaper so he called her just to check that she was alive or not? The struggle for acceptance in the society was indeed a life-threatening battle. Was there anything left for Manobi to face? Yes, the most devastating thing was left which broke her into pieces as she came to know Arindam was also involved in the plan which his brother-in-law made to make her life miserable. So, she decided to file a rape case against Arindam. The humiliation and mental harassment she has gone through while proving that she can be raped was the most traumatizing part of her life. 'Imagine baring your body to a prying medical team as they decide whether your genitalia is male or female. Could there be anything more insulting than this?' (Manobi,153). Though she felt like a 'sacrificial goat' but she stayed brave. A transwoman who is no more a manis actually a woman now was being examined just to prove her identity! The only best thing that happened at that time was her PhD. She managed to cling her job but still had no right to sit with others in the staffroom and enjoy the facilities as the people around her still questioned her identity and treated her like an alien. Even the landlord refused to take rent and planned to throw her out. But somehow, she managed to pay rent through government. Loneliness and depression never left Manobi's life: "I started taking sleeping pills besides drinking and smoking heavily to help me to sleep when I couldn't handle it anymore" (Manobi,164). One part of Manobi needs to be highlighted as it is the most beautiful part i.e. her 'motherly love'. She met a boy named Debashish who Manobi treated like her own son as he called me her 'Ma'. This shows a different side of Manobi and her feminine quality which was trapped in a man's body. People told Manobi that one day Debashish will also leave her and go but she never listened to anyone around. Her motherly love conquered all negative things around. Finally, Manobi becomes the first transgender principal at Krishnagar Women's College in Nadia district in West Bengal on 9th June,2015. The impossible happened as she never left her studies. She proved that anything is possible with education and hard work. Though many

love in the form of men came into her life and went away but only one love remained constant in her life was her love for education.

Life of Manobi has been a roller coaster ride, from the beginning of her struggle at her own house for her identity and then gradually in the society for the equality. In today's world still there is a big gap in the thinking of the people when it comes to third gender. They are still treated as aliens and still in many big companies or institutions transgender people are not appointed. Still the life of a transwoman is not secured and her security has become questionable. Transwomen struggle for their basic rights and they face a lot of bully while walking in the market or malls. They find it very difficult to access the public toilet. Manobi's life puts a light on struggle of a transwoman and how one can win a battle if one's get an opportunity to study and get employment to earn their livelihood. The acceptance by the society plays a great role to win the battle. Manobi's '*A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*' is a gallant journey of an Indian transwoman. She believed that her biography is help the society to understand people like her. The society needs to understand that they are 'normal' just like any other human. They should be accepted and given respect as we give to the other binary gender.

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