

Narratives Remaking Identity: Body, Identity and Empowerment in Manobi Bandyopadhyay's *The Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*

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Abstract

This paper is a brief analysis of the concept of Body and Identity as perceived by a transgender in the biography of Manobi Bandyopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*. It makes an attempt to understand how the concept of body and Identity is perceived by 'self' and 'other'. Though victimized, abused and marginalized by the society her courage and determination to break the shackles of bondages help remake her identity.

Keywords: gender, transgender, identity, marginalization

The body has evolved as a pivotal analytical centre with literary writing in the past few decades being increasingly re-contextualized in other social discourses, partly as an effect of the new accession to English that emerged in the 1980s markedly in gender, sexualities, and feminist studies and their profound engagement not only with cultural history, but in connection with anthropology and sociology in which bodily symbolism hold a fundamental place.

One of the most challenging aspects of contemporary autobiographical writing, and theoretical reflection on it, has been the attempt to bring bodies back into the text. It is an attempt that seeks to see the self and the body as historical entities. Having body as the central focus of Transgender Narratives transform the self and develop a dual consciousness-self as socially defined and self as experienced and understood by the individual. For many, the terms "gender" and "sex" are used interchangeable. Biological gender encompasses physical aspects such as external genitalia, sex chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones and internal reproductive structures. At birth, these determine sex, that is, to classify individuals as male or female. Gender is far more convoluted. It is a complex interrelationship between an individual's sex, one's private sense of self as male, female, both or neither as well as one's apparent presentations and behaviours related to that concept, including their gender role. Together, the crossing of these three dimensions produces one's authentic sense of gender, both in how people experience their gender as well as how others identify it.

The term Hijra is used in South Asia, particularly India to refer to transgender individuals who were assigned the male gender at birth. In Indian societies these people are popularly referred as 'Hijras', 'Khusras', 'asexuals', 'aravani', 'aruvani', 'jagappa', 'middle-sexed', 'neutrals', 'eunuchs' etc. Referring to the mythological beings the hijra community

prefer to call themselves ‘kinnar’ or ‘kinner’ who is believed to have excelled at song and dance. Indian epics and myths treat transgender community with much reverence. There are representations of ‘devas’ as transgenders in Mahabharata. They were considered as sign of good luck and prosperity. The ‘Ardhanarishwara’ notion in Hinduism constitute the union of masculine and feminine energies of the universe (Purusha and Prakriti) and depict how Shakti, the female principle of God, is inseparable from Shiva, the male principle of God. The union of these principles is exalted as the root and womb of all creation. India has a tradition of treating transgender as the rebirths of Lord Shiva. Under traditional Hindu culture hijra relished a certain degree of honour hundreds of years ago. Victorian England changed that, when the British colonized India in the mid-19th Century, when they brought a strict sense of prudence to sexual mores, criminalizing “carnal intercourse against the order of nature.” That was the inception, scholars say, of a mainstream displeasure in India with homosexuality, transgender people and hijras.

It is not an unusual sight in the streets of India, a group dressed in saris glittering, makeup coated faces, singing bawdy songs, knocking on car windows. They are told to have the capability to bless and curse. Behind the faces are often depressing stories of exploitation, sex trade, cruel and dangerous castration, and constant humiliation. They are harassed, heckled and assaulted in public. Within India the L.G.B.T community, the hijra’s preserve their own secretive subculture.

This paper is an analysis of the biography of a hijra, born a boy in West Bengal, battling emotional strife from a very young age, become assertive and bold about his sexual identity. This biography is a unique journey of a hijra, from being taunted as a homo to become the first Indian Transgender Principal of a Women’s College.

All transgender narratives centres on body. Gathering memories of assault and insult met with, they try to recreate or reconstruct an Identity by re-presenting them through the aesthetic practice of writing. These narratives underpin a psychoanalytical study as it focuses on self-reflexivity and anxiety endured by the individual mind.

Butler says it’s impossible to understand “gender” as a cultural construct which is forced upon the surface matter, perceived either as “the body” or its considered sex. However, once “sex” itself is comprehended in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm. Hence “Sex” is not just what one owns, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the usual standards by which the “one” becomes applicable to all, that which enable a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility. Manobhi begins thus,

How many times have you stopped at a traffic signal and turned your face away from the hijra who stood outside your car window asking for money? Wasn’t it pure loathing that you felt? Wasn’t it worse than what you normally feel when a beggar woman with a child does the same? Why? I’ll tell you why. You abhorred the eunuch

because you couldn't identify with her sex. You thought of her as a strange detestable creature, perhaps a criminal and definitely subhuman. I am one of them. (vii)

The novel portrays her panic struggle for identity at each stage of life. Theorists who have devoted to the understanding of Identity like Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Said, Hall, Gilroy, Althusser and Butler considers it as a process of becoming rather than as a state of being. They have challenged identity as a constant and fixed category and authorized it as a flux or an unstable category. One of the interesting concepts Butler has talked about is the 'Wardrobe analogy' where she argues that one's performance of gender is constituted in the same way of one's choice of clothes.

Manobhi says, "It perhaps started with the love for my sisters' printed frocks. I would take every opportunity to take off my pants and slip into them and stand for hours in front of the mirror admiring my looks. First, I would do this in the privacy of my room. Then gradually, I started wearing their frocks and roaming about in the whole house" (7). She always wished to be like them. She enjoyed extreme happiness and satisfaction whenever she dressed like her sisters. During her school days also, she sat with girls and later they avoided her. She clearly says "I was developing a distaste for my genitals. I just couldn't accept my balls and penis, I wanted to have my sisters' genitals" (8).

During later phase of the narrative Manobhi says that she used to enjoy the weddings that occurred in the family that acquired a new meaning for her.

I would observe how the bride would get ready on the wedding night. I realized there was something different about the way they carried themselves and behaved. I longed for the red Banarasi sari, the veil and the jewelry that the bride would wear on the special occasion. "To me that was the height of femininity and beauty and I yearned for that look" (12).

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender and sexuality are not inherent in a person as his capacity but are acquired through performance. Performance can converge as an individualized act in the domain of power. "The performative is the one domain in which power acts as discourse" ("Critically Queer" 17). Butler postulates that sexuality as acts, expressions, behaviours and practices, and their repetition like speech are constructed identities. She keeps up that sex, sexual orientation and desire are necessary requests stuffed with presumption which create their implications. She sees sexuality and sex as "central" as they are personal attributes devoid of identity. As indicated by her, sex builds the social importance of the sexed body. Manobi says, "When I started putting kohl and lipstick from my mother's make up kit, my mother and sisters realized that it was definitely an aberration; something was not ok here. They would try to council me out of this but I would pout and argue that I could use make-up better than girls" (7).

Manobi's body has not been hers. She was brutally raped by her distant cousin at the age of nine. She was sexually assaulted by the boys in school who considered her as an

instrument of pleasure. “I was alone, he took me to an abandoned room on the secluded ground floor of the huge house and had sex with me.....and kept thrusting till 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” (9).

In the *History of sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault argues, these are historically specific social behaviors that do not pre-exist biological gender. In terms of control and prohibition, he questions the traditional definition of sexuality and offers a new approach to sexuality as a tool of influence. He sees sexuality as a “dense transfer point for power relationships” not as a drive (103). Manobi says “I was already emerging as a beauty and, while the rest of the world detested my sexuality the boys of my class treated me like a girl who had attained puberty. I found deep comfort in this and the fact that the boys flirted with me, competing for my attention, and were always there to protect me...I enjoyed having so many to choose from and I would use my charm at will, like any girl of that age” (18).

Right from school days there was a chain of men in her life. Each time she begins with new hope and expectation and ended in hatred and disappointment. She longed for true love, the promise of a family, but all of them used her for satisfying their carnal desires. Beyond the innumerable superficial relationships Manobi had for pleasure and fun, there was a deep longing in her to lead a quiet happy family life. While in a relationship with Shyam her classmate, Manobi says, “Yes, our bodies met, but that was not the goal. It was just a manifestation of the deep love that we felt for each other. It was not looking for physical gratification at all, but for a relationship that would eventually lead to a future, a family. Like any other girl who is about to step into her youth, I would dream of a happy family with a loving and protective husband” (25).

When her father chose to overlook her love for lipstick, kohl skirts and other female traits shifting all the blame to her mother’s softness for her ‘boy’ as the reason behind her erratic behavior, she feels it was only her mother who felt that something was terribly, even irreparably wrong with Manobi.

Identity requires ways to understand the environment, others, and human existence issues. James Clifford also upholds the belief that identity is not something independent of other people that is stable and real. According to him identity is not “a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject” (344).

In terms of an inter-subjective experience, Jean Paul Sartre understands human identity. According to him, what generates one’s future identity is the “gaze” of others. Thus, binary oppositions are the most common form of identity creation. But the “self” is regarded as a norm in a collection of binaries and the “other” is considered deviant especially in the context of culture and gender. It becomes the root for social exclusion and marginalization. The sudden change in Shyam was questioned by Manobi, he not only replies that his status did not match her background but also encouraged his friends to tease her on her sexuality. He gangs up hurling abuses at Manobi. Individual or personal identity is the reflection of

one's self into the universe, regardless of whether society validates it or not. John Locke, who first developed a theory of personal identity, considers identity or self, rather than substance or soul, depending on consciousness. Locke's identity is based on the repetitive actions of consciousness, which is repeated self-identification. In the work *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, Though Deb could easily get connected to Manobi he never realized that she was a female soul trapped in a male body. "I yearned for breasts and a vagina. I yearned to be a woman physically. He would never understand this" (Bandyopadhyay 31). Nevertheless, without a social context where an individual is recognized by others, the personal identity does not have its original acceptability. So the various modalities of one's life in different categories of relationships with society make a society and the presence of the individual within the group give rise to social identity. In the biography *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, when Manobi herself become depressed and confused of her identity, society tries to fix it for her.

I was very 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? Most of the people I knew concluded that I was a homosexual. They classified me as a 'girlish boy' who was preparing to become a hijra. 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. (31)

When Manobi shifted from home town to pursue her degree her perspectives widened and she started developing an individual's life pattern. In her college days she continuously involved in theatre, dance and writing which provided a relaxation to her disturbed mind and confused body. The introduction of India's first transgender magazine 'Abomanob' (sub-human) was under her initiative. It strongly presented the topics like transgender health, hygiene, living conditions, language, sex etc. which were directly linked with the third gender community. This promoted a space for this community to present their issues and experiences. Education delivered the success in her life. She pursued her MA in Bengali literature. And then achieved her PhD in the same field. She applied to the post of principal and was selected as the first Indian transgender to be the principal of a women's college at Krishnagar.

Though Manobi finally decided to quit her dream of having a family this never affected her decision of becoming a woman. She consulted many doctors and counsellors for more options and possibilities. During a seminar conducted in another college, she came to meet a boy named Debashish. He was from a very poor family and was not good in studies. She adopted him as her son and helped in his studies. The presence of Debashish bought a change in her life. She considered being a mother as the best part of her life.

Manobi refers to her transformation as 'metamorphosis' (6). Manobi has faced both internal and external trauma. The former is psychological and the latter is her conflict for a

space in social sphere. Still strong intention and will power made her to reach heights without any recommendation and political backup. Although the Gay and Lesbian movements gained momentum in the last decade of the twentieth century, the transgender's status remained unchanged. Neglected and ill-treated, the 'third-sex' is still continuing their fights for rights and justice. During their fights a few like Manobi deconstructs the so-called gender construct. Manobi was able to dismantle the stereotypical views about hijras.

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