

Navigating Suffering and Acceptance: The Transgender Experience in Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya*

Mohamed Yaseen O M

Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, India

R. Jinu

Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract—Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya* offers a raw and moving portrayal of the transgender experience, particularly focusing on the themes of suffering and acceptance. The autobiography highlights Vidya's journey of confronting societal stigma, rejection, and personal struggle as she navigates life as a transgender woman in India. From early experiences of confusion and alienation to her eventual decision to undergo gender reassignment surgery, Vidya grapples with deep emotional and physical suffering. However, the narrative also reflects the complexity of self-acceptance—not just of her transgender identity but of the broader implications of living authentically in a world hostile to such expressions. Vidya's story is not merely one of victimhood; it is also about her resilience, her fight for dignity, and her embrace of her true self. The title itself, *I Am Vidya*, serves as an affirmation of her identity and an act of defiance against the forces that seek to deny her existence. The text delves into the challenges faced by transgender individuals in Indian society, from legal hurdles to social alienation, along with portrayal of the inner transformation that comes with self-acceptance. Vidya's journey is one of painful endurance but ultimately culminates in personal liberation and empowerment. By embracing her identity, Vidya finds strength and fulfillment, transforming suffering into a source of empowerment. The autobiography becomes a powerful testament to the transgender community's resilience and the universal search for self-acceptance and dignity.

Index Terms—transgender identity, suffering, self-acceptance, resilience, empowerment

I. INTRODUCTION

Transgender identity has evolved significantly over time, from being stigmatized and misunderstood to becoming a symbol of pride and self-affirmation. For many individuals across the gender spectrum—including transgender men, women, and non-binary individuals—living authentically has often meant confronting deeply ingrained societal norms that attempt to confine them to a binary understanding of gender. In India, this societal rigidity is particularly pronounced, as the cultural and religious framework often upholds strict roles for men and women, leaving little space for those who do not fit neatly within these categories.

Transgender individuals—those who identify as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth—have long existed in Indian society. Historically, they were revered in some contexts, particularly during the Mughal period when hijras were respected as protectors of royal harems. However, with the advent of British colonial rule and the subsequent institutionalization of Western moral values, transgender individuals were criminalized and subjected to systemic exclusion. The legacy of this marginalization continues in modern India, where transgender people are often relegated to the fringes of society, facing discrimination, violence, and poverty.

The Indian Constitution recognizes the rights of all citizens, and in recent years, transgender individuals have gained significant legal victories, such as the recognition of the “third gender” in 2014 and the ability to undergo sex reassignment surgery (SRS) to legally change their gender. However, despite these legal advancements, societal attitudes toward transgender people remain largely negative, and they continue to face widespread stigma and exclusion.

One of the key challenges transgender individuals face is the constant negotiation between self-identity and societal expectations. Indian society's reluctance to embrace transgender individuals manifests in a variety of ways—from everyday acts of discrimination to the systemic barriers that deny them basic human rights. While the legal framework has begun to shift, with the Indian government allowing transgender individuals to identify as “eunuchs” (“E”) on official documents like passports, this change is often more symbolic than practical. For instance, transgender individuals are still required to identify as either male or female to vote, and other legal rights are often withheld based on societal prejudices rather than constitutional principles.

The freedom to self-identity is an essential human right. It is deeply connected to the dignity and autonomy of the individual. Yet, for transgender people, this freedom is not always recognized or protected in practice. While legal reforms

have offered some respite, the reality remains that transgender individuals in India are often denied access to fundamental rights and opportunities, from education and employment to healthcare and housing.

Historically, transgender people have been considered part of the “third gender” in many cultures, including in India. In ancient times, transgender identities were acknowledged in various religious and cultural texts, including the Mahabharata and the Kama Sutra. However, despite this historical acknowledgment, transgender individuals continue to face severe persecution in contemporary Indian society, where they are often viewed as “untouchables” and denied equal participation in social, economic, and political life.

Michelraj (2015) highlights this ongoing struggle for recognition and equality, stating that the society may be consciously aware of the existence of transgender individuals, they are often denied of their basic human rights. This struggle for visibility and justice is at the heart of the transgender experience in India, where the law offers certain protections, but societal acceptance remains limited. This gap between legal recognition and societal acceptance is one of the major issues faced by transgender people in India.

In 2019, the Indian Constitution granted transgender individuals the right to register as a third gender, marking a significant step forward in their legal recognition. This legal shift allows transgender individuals to officially change their gender and register for sex reassignment surgery (SRS), providing them with a framework to alter their legal identities. However, this legal right does not automatically translate into social acceptance. The barriers transgender individuals face are not limited to the legal realm; they extend into the fabric of everyday life, where discrimination, violence, and exclusion are still common.

The issue of transgender rights in India is, therefore, not just a matter of legal recognition, but of cultural and societal transformation. For transgender individuals, to achieve true equality, Indian society must move beyond token gestures of recognition and address the deep-seated prejudices that continue to marginalize them. The right to self-identity, the ability to live authentically, and the freedom to pursue one’s aspirations without fear of violence or discrimination—these are fundamental human rights that should be extended to all, regardless of gender identity.

In this context, autobiographies like *I Am Vidya* by Living Smile Vidya becomes essential texts for understanding the lived experiences of transgender individuals in India. These narratives offer not only a personal account of one individual’s journey but also a broader commentary on the societal structures that continue to oppress transgender people. Vidya’s story is a powerful testament to the resilience of the transgender community and their ongoing fight for dignity, acceptance, and self-empowerment.

Vidya’s journey, from childhood confusion to the decision to undergo sex reassignment surgery, is emblematic of the struggles faced by transgender individuals worldwide. Her story of emotional and physical suffering, coupled with her eventual triumph over societal rejection, highlights the complexities of self-acceptance in a world that is often hostile to transgender identities. Her autobiography does more than recount her personal experience; providing a critical lens through which we can examine the broader social, legal, and cultural challenges faced by transgender individuals in India.

Vidya’s fight for her identity, dignity, and recognition is not just her own. It is a fight shared by millions of transgender people who continue to live on the margins of society, bereft of their rights and privileges that others take for granted. *I Am Vidya* is not just the story of a woman’s struggle for acceptance; it is a clarion call for society to recognize and respect the humanity of all individuals, regardless of their gender identity.

II. THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY IN INDIA

“Trans” as a stand-alone term did not come into formal usage until it was coined by a parliamentary discussion group in London in 1998, with the deliberate intention of being as inclusive as possible when negotiating equality legislation. We see new languages being developed constantly; for example, the pronoun “per” was created by UK community members with non-binary gender identities, and similarly, the US term “hir” was introduced for those identifying as both. (Stryker & Whittle, 2006).

In India, transgender persons should have the same rights as other protected groups, such as the SC/ST, and the government should do more to help them enroll in schools and programs that provide awareness on sexual harassment and assault prevention. Despite such legislation being put forth, public officials often ignore it, showing little interest in supporting the trans community as it grows. Additionally, when the Indian census was conducted, transgender individuals were either overlooked or grouped into “other” categories, such as in the 2011 census.

The Indian Supreme Court delivered a landmark ruling in April 2014 that recognized transgender people as having a distinct gender identity, emphasizing that sexual orientation is a fundamental aspect of an individual’s worth, autonomy, and dignity. This decision marked a bright future for the transgender community, with government intervention leading to social policies and programmes. However, resistance still exists, with some remaining unprepared or even opposed to the inclusion of a gender outside the binary. Nonetheless, changes are happening, albeit in limited areas, and transgender people are beginning to gain recognition.

The Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Kama Sutra are among ancient Indian writings that detail the transgender community’s 4000-year history. Ruth Vanitha and Saleem Kidwai refer to transgender themes in mythology, noting the Bhagavata Purana, where Narada tells King Pracinarbarhis a cautionary tale about Puranjana, whose excessive love for women led to his rebirth as a woman (Vanitha & Kidwai, 2008). The ancient Kama Sutra also references the third sex

engaging in female fellatio, though interpretations vary regarding whether these references pertain to eunuchs or specific biological men.

During the Mughal era, hijras were revered as protectors of the harem, but the British Raj criminalized them, denying them citizenship and subjecting them to harsh rules and inspections under the Crime Tribes Act of 1871. Although independence in 1952 brought changes, the old stigma persisted. Transgender individuals are still marginalized in contemporary India, and many rely on begging, prostitution, and sacred obligations, such as blessing special events, to survive. Over fifty years after independence, the Indian government granted transgender individuals basic citizenship rights, though these were not fully realized until the Supreme Court's 2014 ruling, which recognized transgender people as a socially and economically disadvantaged class.

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code of 1860 still criminalized homosexuality, which is quite ironic considering the strides made in recognizing transgender rights. Despite these legal victories, many transgender individuals, such as Kalki Subramanian (the first transgender woman to play a prominent role in a film), Padmini Prakash (the first transgender person granted citizenship in India), and Manobi Bandyopadhyay (the first transgender person to serve as a university principal in India), continue to battle societal stigma. Many members of India's transgender population identify with the hijra culture. After coming out as transgender, those who are abandoned by their natal families are often embraced by a hijra community, which acts as a new family.

Hijras are also known as "Kinnar" or "Kinner", a whimsical term derived from a mythical creature that appears in their dance and music. The hijra community is characterized by tight-knit familial relationships, offering support to individuals who, despite facing significant discrimination, find joy in being their authentic selves—whether as trans men or trans women, "interpersonal relationships define the essence of Indian culture" (Anu & Deepa, 2024, pp. 1537-1544). However, most hijras must still rely on begging, sex work, or blessings at events for survival.

Transgenders in India are known by several regional names, including "Ali, Aravani, Chhakka, Hijra, Jogappa, Khusara, Khusvaa, Kinnar, Kojja, Maada, Mukhannathun, Napusak, Nau Number, Pavaiyaa, and Thirunangai" (Saxena, 2011). Becoming a transgender person in India often involves a series of phases, culminating in the nirvana (sex reassignment surgery) process. Individuals seeking to join the hijra community must first find a guru willing to accept them as a chela (disciple). The guru-chela dynamic is central to hijra tradition, serving as a protective bond within the community.

Leaving the hijra community is only possible with the guru's consent, and any new chela must be accepted by both the guru and the wider community after an evaluation process. Regardless of their profession, every chela is required to give a portion of their earnings to the guru. The options available to hijras are limited to blessing, begging, or sex work, reflecting the challenges they face in finding legitimate employment opportunities.

Indian society has historically paid little attention to the transgender population, and people often struggle to accept their existence. Although ancient scriptures acknowledge the existence of transgender people, modern society has failed to view them as equals. Compared to transgender individuals in other countries, those in India endure greater hardships, largely due to a combination of discrimination, economic disadvantage, and social exclusion.

III. OVERVIEW OF THE NOVEL

I Am Vidya is an autobiography that details the journey of Vidya, a transgender woman who was born as Saravanan. She completed her master's degree in Linguistics during her studies at Tamil University, Thanjavur, and was deeply interested in contemporary theatre. The autobiography offers first-hand insights into Vidya's experiences and serves as a testament to the existential turmoil that transgender people in India face. It not only provides a personal account of a transgender individual but also acts as a source of motivation for others in the transgender community. While some may classify *I Am Vidya* as "propagandist literature," it is far more than that; it conveys the eternal suffering and rejection that many transgender individuals experience.

In *I Am Vidya*, transgender identities do more than just define individuals; they shape who they are and what they can achieve. Consciousness can either be contained or liberated by these identities. The journey that Vidya recounts is one of declaring and claiming her true identity. She describes the pain of being confined to a body she does not identify with, and how she eventually finds her real self through a series of painful experiences. These included rejection by her family, treatment as a social outcast, and enduring of physical and emotional abuse. Despite these challenges, Vidya's story is one of bravery and tenacity as she ultimately embraces her true identity.

Dasari and Reddy (2018) have compared Vidya's *I Am Vidya* to Manobi Bandyopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, highlighting the historical significance of transgender literature in India. Subapriya (2016) also notes that *I Am Vidya* serves as a record of the struggles of transgender people in India and sheds light on how they are often treated as untouchables by society.

IV. LIFE AND STRUGGLE OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Transgender people in India are often targets of sexual harassment, police brutality, and exploitation. The Hijras, Joghtas, Jogappas, Sakhis, and Aradhis represent some of the cultural and social groups within the transgender community in India. These groups have existed for over 4,000 years, with references to them found in Vedic literature, where they were described as "Napusaka", a term meaning "psychological sex". The discrimination against transgender individuals

worsened after the British enacted the Criminal Tribal Act of 1871, which categorized them as criminals. Although this law was abolished in 1949, the prejudice against transgender individuals continues to this day.

In recent years, there have been some positive changes for the transgender population in India. The ruling of the Supreme Court in 2014 recognized transgender individuals as the third gender and called for their inclusion in legal and social frameworks. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019 further provided legal rights and allowed transgender individuals to self-identity. Despite these legislative changes, many transgender individuals continue to face violence and prejudice, with limited access to healthcare and employment opportunities. Many are forced into begging or sex work to survive, while societal stigma continues to burden them.

Transgender individuals have recently shown a growing willingness to write about their experiences. As defined by Abrams (1971), an autobiography is “a biography written by the subject about himself or herself.” Vidya, whose birth name was Saravanan, pursued an MA in Linguistics and noted that while there are books about men transitioning into women, few discuss the reverse. Vidya’s writing in *I Am Vidya* explores her gender transition, emphasizing that gender identity is shaped by both biology and society. Vidya discusses the struggles she faced growing up, including how she secretly wished to be female while the world perceived her as a boy.

Vidya recalls her early childhood, when she would secretly wear her sister’s clothing and sing and dance when no one was around. This was a manifestation of her inner femininity, which she was forced to conceal from others. “When I was six years old, I began to come into my own as a feminine being. I enjoyed dancing to music alone and would play dress-up in my sister’s clothing. I had no desire to be treated differently because of my gender identity” (Vidya, 2013, p. 19). Despite these early experiences, her family initially regarded her behavior as innocent pranks, not realizing that Vidya was expressing her true identity. “Appa thrashed me regularly... my irrepressible femininity exposed me despite all my attempts to hide it. It was a battle between the self I wanted to be and the expectations placed upon me by my family.” (Vidya, 2013, pp. 22-24). Over time, however, the family’s attitudes shifted, and Vidya began facing increasing disapproval from her relatives, especially her father, who punished her for her actions. This period of her life filled with intense internal conflict as she tried to hide her femininity from others.

Her experiences in school were similarly painful. Vidya was regularly mocked for her speech and mannerisms, and although she tried to conceal her true identity, her femininity was often apparent to others. As she grew older, her desire to express her true self intensified, and her connection to the female heroines she admired in films became even stronger. By the age of seventeen, she began to fully understand that she wanted to be a woman, and this realization marked the beginning of her struggle to claim her true identity.

For existentialists, the search for meaning and purpose is a central aspect of life. For Vidya, finding meaning in her life was an ongoing challenge. “Why should a boy only wear shirts and trousers? I like skirts and blouses—why can’t I wear them? Why do people find something odd about me choosing feminine clothes that come to me naturally?” (Vidya, 2013, p. 19). Although she was aware from a young age that she was different, it was not until her university years that she fully understood her uniqueness and embraced her purpose. “University years were a time of introspection. I thought a great deal about myself and the troubles of my existence. I was in constant fear that people were watching me, judging me” (Vidya, 2013, p. 44). During her time at university, she found some respite from the bullying she had endured in school and began to explore her identity. Her involvement in theatre, where she played feminine roles, provided her with a sense of comfort and relief, allowing her to express her femininity in a socially acceptable way.

Vidya’s journey toward self-realization was accelerated when she met Senthil, a transgender man, who introduced her to an NGO where she met others who could relate to her struggles. It was here that she began to connect with the tirunangais (a term for transgender people in Tamil Nadu). Although Vidya found solace in the NGO community, she knew that the only way for her to fully become herself was to undergo Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS). This desire to transition into a woman became the driving force in her life.

V. TRANSITION AND ACCEPTANCE

Vidya’s transition and journey toward self-acceptance is the core theme in *I Am Vidya*. It involves not only physical changes but also emotional and societal. Like many transgender individuals, Vidya faces a difficult decision: remain confined within the societal role dictated by her biological sex or undergo the process of transition to live as her authentic self. The decision to transition is not merely a medical procedure; it represents a deeply personal, emotional, and often dangerous journey toward self-realization and acceptance, particularly in a society as conservative as India’s is.

For Vidya, the yearning to become a woman was present from her younger age, but the realization of this desire became more pronounced in her teenage years and early adulthood. The disconnect between her internal identity and the body she was born with led to intense emotional turmoil. While she outwardly presented herself as male, internally she knew she was a woman. This dissonance caused her to experience profound psychological distress, which intensified over time. Vidya’s desire for physical transformation stemmed from this internal conflict, and it was something she could no longer suppress as she grew older.

The process of transition in Vidya’s life was not only about changing her body but also about gaining societal acceptance—a goal that, for most transgender individuals, is fraught with obstacles. “Many female names were scrawled on the wall, some in ink, others in charcoal. Our predecessors in the room have scribbled their names on the wall, presumably because they feared they could die on the operating table” (Vidya, 2013, p. 12). In Vidya’s case, this journey

began with small steps, such as dressing in unisex clothing to express her femininity without drawing too much attention. However, as her identity became more defined, she sought to fully embrace her true self through gender confirmation surgery.

Undergoing sex reassignment surgery (SRS) was one of the most crucial steps in Vidya's journey. However, the context in which she pursued the surgery was marked by difficulty, given the lack of legal and safe medical options available in India at the time. Vidya's surgery was performed illegally, a situation that reflects the larger societal and governmental neglect of transgender healthcare needs. The illegal nature of her procedure brought many risks, including a lack of proper anesthesia, a risk of infection, and the possibility of death, as evidenced by the names of patients who had died during surgery, written on the walls of the operating room. Despite the physical pain and fear involved, the surgery represented a turning point in her life, giving her the ability to align her external appearance with her internal identity.

The transition, however, did not end with surgery. Vidya's post-surgery life brought new challenges. Although the surgery allowed her to physically embody the woman, she knew she was, societal acceptance remained elusive. Returning to her family after surgery, she was met with mixed reactions. Although she was permitted to stay at home for a short time, the discomfort of living in a society that did not fully accept her as a woman led Vidya to seek refuge with her friends, many of whom were also transgender. Employment opportunities were scarce, and she struggled to find work that would allow her to live independently.

One of the most significant aspects of Vidya's post-transition experience was the legal battle she had to fight to be recognized as her true self. After undergoing SRS, she applied to change her name from Saravanan to Living Smile Vidya, but her application was initially denied because of her gender change. This rejection underscored the societal and bureaucratic hurdles that transgender individuals face, even after completing their physical transition. Vidya's determination to assert her identity led her to fight a public interest lawsuit, which ultimately resulted in the legal recognition of her name change and her status as a transgender woman. This legal victory was not just a personal triumph for Vidya; it also represented a broader struggle for the rights of transgender individuals in India.

Vidya's journey toward acceptance was not only about seeking acceptance from society but also about self-acceptance. Throughout her life, she faced constant rejection, harassment, and violence, both for being transgender and for defying societal norms. "I was in search of myself, going beyond my confusion over my gender. I realized that becoming a woman was not just a desire—it was my only truth" (Vidya, 2013, p. 44). However, her autobiography emphasizes that true acceptance begins with oneself. Vidya's ability to accept her identity as a woman, despite the challenges she faced, empowered her to fight for her rights and live her life on her own terms. Her story reflects the internal strength required to overcome both personal and external obstacles in the journey toward self-realization.

Vidya's experience illustrates the complex intersection of physical, emotional, and societal aspects of transition. While the surgery marked a pivotal moment in her life, it was only one part of a larger process of accepting herself and seeking acceptance from others. The journey of transition is ongoing, involving continuous negotiation with a society that often fails to understand or accept transgender individuals. Despite these challenges, Vidya's story is one of resilience and empowerment, showing that, although societal acceptance may be slow, self-acceptance is the key to living authentically.

VI. OVERCOMING STRUGGLES AND EMPOWERMENT

Vidya's life journey, as depicted in *I Am Vidya*, is not just a narrative of personal transition but also one of overcoming tremendous societal, emotional, and institutional struggles. "I sobbed on Sri's lap and buried my head in her lap. I took a strong and courageous stand. It was a burden I despised. Attempting to lead a woman's life was my intention. I was prepared to die if I was unsuccessful" (Vidya, 2013, p. 56). Vidya's story represents the fight for dignity and self-worth that many transgender individuals face in a world that is often hostile to their very existence. Throughout her autobiography, Vidya paints a vivid picture of the pain and suffering that accompanied her journey toward self-empowerment, but ultimately, her story is one of resilience, where she transforms adversity into a source of personal strength and empowerment.

A. Overcoming Struggles

(a). Rejection

One of the most pervasive challenges Vidya faced was the constant rejection and hostility from society. In India, where traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained, Vidya's desire to live as her authentic self is met with extreme resistance. From a young age, she was mocked for her feminine behavior, and her family did not understand her need to express her true identity. As she grew older, this rejection became even more pronounced, with her family and society perceiving her desire to transition as something unnatural or shameful.

In addition to societal rejection, transgender people in India are often treated as outcasts, facing daily humiliation, discrimination, and violence. This marginalization pushed Vidya to a point where she had to leave her family home and live with friends from the transgender community, who could relate to her struggles. Even after her transition, Vidya found that society continued to stigmatize her, particularly in the job market. Employment opportunities were severely limited for transgender individuals, leaving many like Vidya with little choice but to rely on precarious means of survival, such as begging or sex work.

Despite these societal barriers, Vidya's determination to live as her authentic self drove her to fight against these oppressive norms. Her resilience in the face of such overwhelming social rejection is one of the most significant aspects of her empowerment journey.

(b). Institutional and Legal Obstacles

Vidya's struggles extended beyond societal rejection to institutional discrimination. While she managed to undergo sex reassignment surgery, the legal recognition of her new identity was a battle in itself. In India, legal processes for transgender individuals were (and often still are) fraught with difficulties. After her surgery, Vidya faced bureaucratic hurdles in her attempts to officially change her name and gender. Her application to change her name from Saravanan to Living Smile Vidya was initially denied, not because of procedural issues, but because of her gender transition.

This denial highlighted the deep-rooted institutional discrimination that transgender individuals face, even after undergoing physical transitions. Vidya had to take legal action, filing a public interest lawsuit, to secure her right to change her name and be recognized as a transgender woman. Her victory in this case was not just a personal achievement; it was a significant legal milestone for the transgender community in India. This legal battle symbolizes how Vidya had to navigate a system designed to exclude her and others like her, but she did so with courage and perseverance, turning the fight into a source of empowerment.

(c). Internal Struggles and Emotional Resilience

The external struggles Vidya faced were compounded by deep internal conflicts. "In my past life I was a female. The world, however, mistook me for a boy. I suppressed my femininity from everyone around me, even though I secretly wished I could be a female" (Vidya, 2013, p. 40). From a young age, she had to reconcile the incongruity between her assigned gender and her internal identity. The pain of living in a body that did not reflect her true self created an intense psychological struggle that lasted for years. She experienced feelings of shame, isolation, and confusion, particularly during her adolescence when she became more acutely aware of her gender identity. This internal battle was not just about confronting her own feelings but also about coming to terms with the fear of societal repercussions.

One of the most emotionally powerful aspects of Vidya's narrative is how she transformed her internal struggle into emotional resilience. Instead of allowing the shame and confusion to defeat her, Vidya found ways to embrace her identity, despite the harsh realities she faced. Her decision to undergo SRS, despite the risks and the lack of legal medical options, was an act of reclaiming her body and her life. This act of courage marked a turning point in her emotional journey, allowing her to move from self-doubt to self-empowerment.

B. Empowerment Through Identity and Activism

(a). Self-Acceptance and Authenticity

Vidya's story is a testament to the power of self-acceptance. "Wounds and barbs life has aimed at me? Yet my journey has crossed these hurdles. It has a meaning. I have found a body that's perfect for me" (Vidya, 2013, p. 150). Though the process of transitioning allowed her to align her physical appearance with her internal sense of self, the journey of self-acceptance went far beyond the surgery. Vidya's ability to embrace her identity as a transgender woman, despite all the societal, familial, and personal challenges, became the cornerstone of her empowerment. Self-acceptance allowed her to live authentically, rejecting societal expectations that dictated how she should behave or present herself.

This authenticity also extended to her relationships with others, particularly those in the transgender community. "My name is Amma, and I am now a lady. My name is no longer Saravanan. This is Vidya" (Vidya, 2013, p. 17). Vidya found strength in the solidarity she shared with other transgender individuals who had faced similar struggles. This sense of community and shared experience reinforced her belief that transgender people deserve dignity, respect, and the freedom to live as their true selves.

(b). Empowerment Through Legal Victories

Vidya's legal fight for her change of name represented a broader struggle for the recognition of transgender rights in India. Her victory not only allowed her to be recognized as Vidya, but it also set a legal precedent that others could follow. This fight for legal recognition empowered Vidya to continue advocating for transgender rights, using her personal experience as a platform for change. She became a voice for the transgender community, demanding that they be treated with respect and given the same opportunities as other citizens. "All I want is the legal approval and recognition that will enable us to walk free in public... without stooping to begging or being forced into sex work just to survive" (Vidya, 2013, p. 142).

Vidya's activism extended beyond her own life. Through her autobiography and public appearances, she began to raise awareness about the struggles faced by transgender individuals in India. "I knocked on so many doors, but none opened. I was either too much of a woman to be considered a man or too much of a man to be accepted as a woman" (Vidya, 2013, p. 98). Her story became a source of inspiration for many, showing that it is possible to overcome societal oppression and reclaim one's identity.

(c). Transforming Suffering Into Empowerment

At the heart of Vidya's journey is her ability to transform suffering into empowerment. The pain, rejection, and marginalization she endured were undeniable, but instead of allowing them to break her, Vidya used these experiences as fuel for her empowerment. She came to see her suffering not as a source of weakness, but as a path to resilience. By accepting and confronting her pain, she found the strength to fight for herself and others in the transgender community.

Vidya's empowerment is not just personal; it is collective. She advocates for better healthcare, education, and employment opportunities for transgender people, highlighting the systemic inequalities that keep them marginalized. Her story is a call to action, urging society and governments to recognize the rights and dignity of transgender individuals.

Vidya's journey in *I Am Vidya* encapsulates the struggles and empowerment experienced by many transgender individuals in India and around the world. Her life is a powerful example of how personal resilience, self-acceptance, and advocacy can turn even the harshest adversities into sources of strength. "We don't want pity. We want rights. We want the right to exist without fear, the right to live our lives as we choose, with dignity and respect" (Vidya, 2013, p. 145). By overcoming rejection, legal discrimination, and internal conflicts, Vidya not only empowered herself but also paved the way for greater recognition of transgender rights in India. Her story is a beacon of hope, demonstrating that empowerment lies in embracing one's true self and fighting for the rights to live with dignity and respect.

VII. CONCLUSION

Incorporating transgender-themed literature into standard curricula can help students empathize with and learn about transgender people. Including autobiographies like *I Am Vidya* in the curriculum will enhance understanding of transgender experiences, especially in light of the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that requested the government to implement reservation policies for transgender individuals in educational institutions and workplaces. *I Am Vidya* presents transgender people who achieve success in their own unique ways, demonstrating resilience and determination despite societal rejection.

Vidya, a graduate of an MA program in Linguistics, had to leave everything behind to undergo sex reassignment surgery and embrace her true identity. She began her autobiography with her "second birth", when she became Vidya, a woman, through surgery. Her journey shows that, despite the lack of family support and numerous obstacles, it is possible to live an authentic life.

I Am Vidya is not just a story of personal transformation; it is also a powerful exploration of the suffering and struggle faced by transgender individuals in India. Vidya's experiences highlight the challenges of living as a transgender person in a society that often refuses to recognize their existence, let alone their rights. However, her story also emphasizes that personal liberation and fulfillment are possible when one embraces their true self.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abrams, M. H. (1971). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York.
- [2] Anu, R., & Deepa, P. (2024). Navigating the Labyrinth of Indian Cultural Tapestry and Societal Norms: An In-Depth Analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Literary Canon, *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 14(5), 1537-1544.
- [3] Dasari, T., & Reddy, C. (2018). Transgender Literature in India: A Comparative Study of *I Am Vidya* and *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*. *IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts, and Literature*, 6(5), 359-366.
- [4] Michelraj, M. (2015). Historical Evolution of Transgender Community in India. *Asian Review of Social Sciences*, 4(1), 17-19.
- [5] Saxena, P. (2011). *Life of a Eunuch*. Shanta Publishing, India.
- [6] Stryker, S., & Whittle, S. (2006). *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Routledge, UK.
- [7] Subapriya, K. (2016). Unveiling the Crisis of Transgender in India: A Study of Living Smile Vidya's Autobiography *I Am Vidya*. *Journal of English Language and Literature*, 3(1), 59-64.
- [8] Vanita, R., & Kidwai, S. (2008). *Same-Sex Love: A Literary History*. Penguin Books, UK.
- [9] Vidya. (2013). *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*. Rupa Publication, India.

Mohamed Yaseen O M is a dedicated part-time Ph.D. Research Scholar at Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education in Kanyakumari, India. His area of interest is Transgender Studies and Indian Writing in English. He has published research articles in international peer-reviewed journals and presented research papers at both national and international conferences.

R. Jinu is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kanyakumari, India. His expertise lies in Dalit Literature and Indian Writing in English. He has published research articles in national and international journals.