



**Epitome : International Journal
of Multidisciplinary Research**

ISSN : 2395-6968

**Gaze, Power and Patriarchy:
The Politics of Visibility in Transgender Life Writing**



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ABSTRACT

Everyday life is a performative political activity. Readings of life and the bygone as lived experience of the ordinary has attained a prominent theoretical position as a critique of the enlightenment claims of linearity of history and modernity. Readings of everyday life is a platform upon which new modes of little resistances are invented. Life Writing is a tool of everyday resistance challenging the normative standards of any given society. As a way of self-expression it has brought in all the nuances and possibilities of everyday resistance. Everyday life theory and Life Writing thus shares the basic premises of alter visions of plurality against all modes of power dominance or binaries. This paper attempts to bring together these two theoretical realizations in its reading of gender formation and the politics of invisibility of the many genders/sexualities that come outside the binary of the masculine

and feminine as expressed through the autobiographical texts, *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* and *The Truth About Me* by Living Smile Vidya and Revathy respectively.

KEYWORDS

Everyday Life Theory, Life Writing, Sexuality, Gender, Transgender Narratives

RESEARCH PAPER

The Truth about Me is about my everyday experience of discrimination, ridicule and pain; it is also about my endurance and my joys- Revathy

Everyday life is a performative political activity. Resistance to multiple kinds of power plays and dominance is performed consciously/unconsciously or actively/passively through our everyday activities. Readings of life and the bygone as lived experience of the ordinary has attained a prominent theoretical position as a critique of the enlightenment claims of linearity of history and modernity. Meta narratives were dismantled and history got scattered from the tales of the victorious and the dominant to the little alleys of everyday stories of the ordinary people. Ben Highmore in his book, *Everyday Life and Culture Theory* notes that,

It might be precisely the unnoticed, the inconspicuous, the unobtrusive[...] in modernity the everyday becomes the setting for a dynamic process: for making the unfamiliar familiar; for getting accustomed to the disruption of custom; for struggling to incorporate the new; for adjusting to different ways of living [...] it witnesses the absorption of the most revolutionary of invention in to the landscape of the mundane (1-2)

Everyday life theory when unearthing different ways of reading the past and the present laid down accurate political positions. Readings of everyday life was a platform upon which new modes of little resistances were invented. These little resistances which also contribute to the stories from the past became a narrative space with ever becoming views of life and living. Everyday resistance is all about different ways in which people undermine the dominant power plays. It is not similar to riots or rebellions where resistance takes a physical shape. But, rather everyday resistance is subtle, quiet, scattered, disguised or passive in its day to day performance. Michel de Certeau in his work *The Practice of Everyday Life* defines ‘Tactic’ as the mode of action of the weak; how the weak make use of little gaps within the majoritarian systems to design alternate, resistive ways of operating. de Certeau gathers his notion of the terms in *The Practice of Everyday Life* thus, “tactic is a calculation determined by the absence of a power locus [...] no delimitation of an exteriority, then provides it with condition necessary for autonomy. The space of the tactic is the space of the other”(36-37) Tactics is not an aloud pathway of revolution, but “the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong,” (37) It unearths the loopholes and possibilities that remain opened within majoritarian frameworks of discourse and representation.

Life Writing while writing the impressions of/from life in juxtaposition to the claims of a dominant social order becomes a new historicist text scribbled upon one's own body and its socio political experiences. This challenged the metanarrative claims of objectivity and omniscience bringing in multiple, colorful, resistive and happening stories from everyday. Thus Life Writing became a tool of everyday resistance challenging the normative standards of any given society. As a way of self-expression it has brought in all the nuances and possibilities of everyday resistance. It makes the act of recording life a political act with a different take on the socio cultural formations of history. The little spaces that the new narratives invent and thrives upon form clusters of rhizomatic readings of the past as well as the present. In this act the socio-cultural hegemonic essentialism is eroded with multiple alternate readings. Everyday life theory and Life Writing thus shares the basic premises of alter visions of plurality against all mode of power dominance or binaries. This paper attempts to bring together these two theoretical realizations in its reading of gender formation and the politics of invisibility of the many genders/sexualities that come outside the binary of the masculine and feminine.

The concept of gender has always been an essentialist metanarrative. While sex is a biological categorization primarily based on reproductive capabilities gender is socially constructed by defining specific gender roles to the male and the female, i.e., the ways in which a male or a female is supposed to perform her biological sex. Gender gets constructed and established through everyday interaction between people. Each sex performs, taking for granted, the gender that is expected from him/her by the family or larger social structures and ideological institutions of power like family, state, education, media and so on.

Discussions on social exclusion and gender sensitivity still linger around the claims of justice for the female. The presence of transgender and their basic rights as human beings are still ignored or invisible to a large extent. Though Supreme Court issued a verdict in April 2014 recognizing transgender as 'third gender' with constitutional rights much remain to be attained in connection with the everyday performance of these rights. This paper while problematizing issues of gender by focusing on the life writing of two transwoman, Living Smile Vidya and Revathy, envisages writing as a mode of resistance and the becoming spaces of everyday resistance and alternate histories such narratives create.

The two texts selected for the present study, *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* and *The Truth About Me* by Living Smile Vidya and Revathy respectively challenge the politics of visibility by asserting its presence within a larger framework of generic narratives. The

gendered gaze of patriarchy that sets standards of role plays and hetero normative behavior has left the wider space of alternate sexualities invisible. The majoritarian socio cultural schemata doesn't include them in their narrative formations. While the theoretical formulations centered around the concept of gaze speak about the objectification of varied kind, the gendered gaze of transgender exclusion marks them as 'others' invariably invisible. Vistas of exclusion begins within the personal realm of family and moves out to a broader canvas of society and social rights such as education, health, law, work and survival. The transgender narratives under study share the everyday traumas, insults and indifference the members of the community face on a day to day basis. The sharing/writing of these stories of alternate realities brings out the politics of resistance of transgender life writings. By voicing the invisibilities, by scribbling the non-existent the writers are in fact inventing a space of assertive social inclusion and visibility.

Within the narrative space Vidya as well as Revathy performs resistance through little acts of everyday. The first and major hurdle both of them, like many from the community, had to face was the family. The gender binary gets performed and established through the ideological construct of the Family. It is from within this majoritarian space that the narrators begin their resistance. Initially they hide their confusions and let free the urges during solitary rendezvous wherein we see them wearing saree and other dress materials of their sisters or mothers and dancing to the tune of film songs. Gradually as their gender expectations overflow the idealized piousness of homesteads, they run away or detach physically from their family. They join the community of transgenders with whom they could easily relate. Yet, the transgender narratives under study don't whine over the loss of their personal spaces within the family. The narrative unfolds to assert how both Revathy and Vidya continuously return to the everyday spaces of family and society, thereby strongly marking their presence and finally making peace with their everyday immediate surroundings. Revathy observes her occasional visits to her parents after years of confusions and apprehensions thus, "I bought clothes for everyone, toys for the children [...] I was received with love and warmth [...] they advised me not to fight with my people, but to behave well and make a proper living" (210) The occasional return of Vidya and Revathy to their personal and intimate domestic spaces gradually changes the attitude of the immediate family, relatives and neighbours and they learn to accept their choice of sexuality. This naturally takes the pride beyond the four walls of personal life to a wider domain of public space. As they move out and gradually come in to being on the streets, markets and social gatherings one suddenly comes across a multitude of

people/sexualities beyond binaries. The spectrum of sexualities on the street directly negate the patriarchal gender binary. The gaze into invisibility and social exclusion gets revoked to form layers of inclusions.

The little spaces the narratives create also proclaim the right to body. “My body my right, my sexuality my choice” is the maxim of the contemporary that the transgender life texts put across vigorously. The sex change operation that some transgenders undergo is an act of performing resistance. Body becomes the text on which they scribble their sexuality and free will. They cancel out the body into which they were born. The narratives take us to the limits of frustration and self-assertion through sex change surgeries (*Nirvana*) which are not yet legalized and done in a very unhygienic situation. Vidya talks about her experiences of *Nirvana* and the creation of her female body/alternate history as she narrates her joy even while she had unbearable post surgery pain. She says, “I have become a woman. I am not Saravan anymore, I am Vidya- a complete Vidya-a whole woman [...] look at my dissected body” (9)

While the taken for granted societal norms like gender binary is negated through many different everyday performances, a much more original mode of little resistance/everyday resistance is played out in the alternate societal/familial patterns that the transgender community has designed for itself. Parallel to the relational chart of heteronormativity the transgender community has a self-designed pattern of personal relations which grows out to form a community/society of its own. Chela (daughter), Nani (mother), Guru (grandmother), Gurubais (sisters) and so on exemplify a resistive mode of parallel personal/social pattern which exist simultaneously and gets formed from within the majoritarian schemata of family and society. They make use of the majoritarian language to form their own vocabulary and meaning. Thirunangais(Transgenders), Nirvana (sex change operation) Jamaat, “a gathering of sari clad elders” (decision making bodies)and the like show varied expressions different from the normative use of language. The act of writing, and thereby resisting, is an ever incomplete act, that continuously ‘becomes’ to be a major tool of deterritorialization. Only by using language in tactical subversive ways can one create another possible narrative/history it attempts to express.

The transgender community has its own ways of functioning, laws, rituals and ways of everyday life. Revathy shares the episode of her entrance to the transgender community during a Jamaat,

That night, after we returned home and had our dinner, the jamaat gathered. In front of all the elders it was decided such and such would be the chela-daughter of such-and-such elder (who was referred to as so and so's daughter). All of us sat around a place, on which was spread a white cloth. Betel leaves and 1.25 rupees were placed on it. My guru announced that she would like to adopt me as her chela and for this, she was willing to give 5 Rupees and also 1.25 rupees to the jamaat. This latter was referred to as Thandu (fee) money. The others received the thandu money in my guru's name and placed it on the plate. They took the 5-rupee note and noted that this was 'for Revathi' and muttered, Five rupees for Revathy *deen deen*'. At this the others showed their appreciation by shouting and clapping. I was to address my guru as I would my mother- I would have to call her Amma. My guru in turn announced that I was her daughter, and my name was Revathy (25)

The narratives while sharing these alternate stories of living in fact create a cartographic sketch of resistive living wherein the alternate sexualities invent a space of their own with varied hues of their own invented everyday.

Though Supreme Court issued a verdict in April 2014 recognizing transgender as 'third gender' with constitutional rights and Rajya Sabha's Bill on Transgender Rights 2015, much remain to be attained in connection with the everyday performance of these rights. No inventiveness has been done officially in many states as a follow up of the Supreme Court judgment with regard to their special right to higher education like those initiated by the Mumbai University. All discussions about gender justice should be naturally made inclusive of LGBT concerns as well, which is yet to gain a prominent presence in the social and psychic mindset of the general public or even academicians. Living Smile Vidya in her autobiography, *I am Vidya A Transgender's Journey* shares her disapproval of NGO for Tirunangais (Transgender) when she says, "No Indian NGO had fought to liberate tirunangais from begging and sex work. What kind of rehabilitation was it to tell them, 'Go on being sex workers, but do it safely?'" (123). Vidya shares the trials she had to face to get a job as a means of living even though she had a MA degree in Linguistics. On many instances within her text she shares her woes of finding an equal ground with others at home, educational institution and in her job hunt. She observes,

There is a government order (Order No: 377) that treats transgenders as disease-afflicted sex workers alone. This must be removed, and sex reassignment surgery must be allowed for those medically and psychologically tested and certified

transgender. Reservation could be considered too [...] at schools [...] tirunangais can be introduced to students as part of their lessons, so that they learn to treat difference with compassion and dignity (138)

Vidya's text shares the woes and confusions she had to undergo during her early years in school and college where she had to hide her urge for the female identity. She tells how she had to compromise on her choice of instruction, "I decided that I wanted to join Pondicherry University for my M.A, but the problem was that I would then have to stay in a hostel" (78), and she decides to choose a college with a different subject other than her passion just because she needn't stay in a hostel and could commute daily. And Revathy, in her text, *The Truth About Me* says, "I was teased often at school, for behaving like a girl, for doing women's work and on the streets too, was bullied often" (18) Yet, like the narratives which continuously creates becoming spaces of alter realities/histories prove to be a space on which the transgender sensitive approaches to pedagogy has been initiated.

Both the narratives thoroughly slash the prejudiced perception of the society regarding the idea of work and livelihood for the transgenders. Sex work or begging were the only choices allowed/expected of them. Vidya fought hard with her postgraduate degree in linguistics to get a job of her choice though initially for a long time she had to do begging on streets and trains.

I was consumed by the desire to lead a dignified life, to put an end to begging on trains or in market places, but was forced by circumstances to go back to alms [...] my job hunting had been a penance. It was finally bearing fruit [...] my happiness knew no bounds. It was as if I had been a captive for ages and had finally been released (118)

Revathy tells she choose sex work to pacify her sexual desires. She abandons her initial clan of transgenders which took her in to join another so that she could do sex work. She says, "I became a chela to my new guru because of my desire for sexual happiness, in order to fulfill my sexual longings" (104) But soon she realizes the horrors of it as she decides to walk out of it. "I had not chosen sex work in order to make money. It was because I could not really repress my sexual feelings that I had opted for this life. I was beginning to discover the horror and violence of this choice. I cried and confessed that I wanted to go home to my parents" (110) The text shares her decision to quit sex work to join an organization for sexual minorities. She tells to her guru who was not happy with her decision,

Amma people like us have done this forever. For generations all we have been able to do is begging or sex work. How much longer should we have to do this? [...] you taught us your way of life, but hijras of my generation want more. We want to acquaint the world with our lives, and we wish to live like others. That's why I am going to work. (242)

Revathy records her change of mindset and how she came out of her own apprehensions of transgender self and sex work after joining Sangama, for work.

The idea of subjectivity has been read and re-read down the ages. When subjectivity gets linked to sexuality it once again crosses all kinds of binaries and ideas of essentialist or fragmented reading to a much more fluidic form. The transgender life writings is a self-reflexive political performance which becomes an open area where variant/deviant sexualities crisscross, blend or even reformulate itself. The signs of identity like names or the normative family lineage is deterritorialized to form new spaces of self-realized identities that are becoming and flexible. Vidya narrates at length about the tribulations she had to face to change her name officially from Saravan to Vidya. She says quiet ironically,

It took me a year and a half to change my name- to exercise my legal, moral right. How hard I had to fight- how many rounds to various hospitals, advocates, taluk office, collectorate and Stationery and Printing Department I had to undertake to accomplish my purpose- when politicians, people who believe in numerology, people who convert from religion to religion, can change their names in a month! (135)

She further adds,

All I want is legal Approval and recognition that will enable us to walk freely in public. Why can't governments think on these lines? Why can't we legalize the sex change operation[...] there is a government order (Order No.377) that treats transgenders as disease-afflicted sex workers alone. This must be removed (138)

The many different modes of resistance politics the transgender community perform have a common cause of self-assertion. Sketching oneself to visibility and creating new socio cultural spaces within the fabric of the present undoubtedly brings in a bygone of exclusions. The nowhere lands that the transgenders occupied, as shadows at night, speaks aloud through their life writings.

Life writing while sharing the subtle nuances of everyday life in effect dismantles the socio cultural meta constructs of power and domination. For a female, the act of writing, esp. life writing, is the most assertive mode of resistance against patriarchy. The text, *Borderlines*:

Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing observes the importance of Life Writing thus,

The reasons for this interest in life-writing are many and varied, but one important factor is that autobiography in its various guises- can capture and address many contemporary concerns, for example the status of the subject, the relations and representations of ethnicity and gender, and perhaps most importantly questions the individual's relationship with the past.(1)

The negation of the invisibilities of the past is the initial move of the contemporary to narrate stories of being and becoming that would overwrite the concepts of time and space and normativity. Transgender life writing not just disrupts the broader concepts of patriarchal world view, but these writings are a constant reading of the subtle realms of everyday resistance where in questions of body, text, absences and performance come in to play.

The presence and visibility of the LGBT community in the everyday socio cultural and political interactions is still a matter debated upon. Though positive interventions from the law makers and policy designers have been initiated much remain to be clarified with regard to the attitude of the general public. A radical shift is possible only if society opens up its conservative closures of binaries and take for granted the pluralities and possibilities of living.

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