



Transgender Subalterns: Unveiling Marginalized Voices

Muktha Manoj¹, Pranamya Snehajan², Shilpa M. Chandran³,

^{1,2,3} Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri, India

Email: ¹ chakkymanoj@gmail.com, ² pranamya.snehajan@gmail.com,

³ m.shilpa7@gmail.com

Abstract

Trauma regarding the gender identity of a transgender individual since childhood affects one's growth as a person. This study aims to contribute to the existing body of literature in transgender experiences in India by examining the specific traumas faced by this community. It explores the psychological distress arising from societal rejection including depression, anxiety and pervasive sense of isolation. By amplifying their voices and shedding light on their struggles this study seeks to foster a better understanding of the challenges faced by these individuals and promote more compassionate and inclusive society. Through the selected life writings, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi, *Transgender in India: Achievers and Survivors* by Dr. C.K. Gariyali IAS, *We are not the others* by Kalki Subramaniam, this study examines the psychological and socio-cultural ramifications of the 'colonizer colonized' dynamic.

Keywords: Trauma, Isolation, inclusive society, subalternity, Transgender experiences.

1. Introduction

Transgender individuals face unique challenges and experiences that contribute to trauma. They face significant discrimination, prejudice, stigma in most important and basic necessities like education, employment, healthcare and housing. This systematic marginalization can result in traumatic experiences including verbal and physical abuse, harassment, and rejection from family, friends, and society. During their childhood, the transgender individuals struggle with the complex psyche of being stuck with in between two genders which leads to a confusion regarding their identity. This confusion leads to a distressing state which is known as gender dysphoria. Gender cannot be solely determined by genitalia, and parents should prioritize understanding their child's evolving emotions and needs. Safeguarding their mental and physical well-being becomes paramount, shielding them from individuals who exploit their gender identity. Additionally, parents must ensure their child receives equitable opportunities just like any other child.

This paper attempts to study the postcolonial aspect of the trauma experienced by the transgender community of India through selected life writings. The book selected for this study are *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A Revathi, *Transgenders in India: Achievers and Survivors* by Dr. C.K Gariyali IAS and her daughter Priyadarshini Rajkumar *We Are Not the Others* by Kalki Subramaniam. *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A Revathi, an activist, talks about her life since childhood and her fights against odds to become a transwoman and live as one. It was never an easy journey, but a path of pain,

marginalization, mockery and more. Her story also reflects her struggles to reach the denied basic human rights and how she finds joy being a transwoman despite being put to the peripheral by society. The book *Transgenders in India: Achievers and Survivors* by Dr. C.K. Gariyali IAS and her daughter Priyadarshini Rajkumar is a collection of real-life stories and struggles of a few famous transwomen. These accounts convey how deep rooted the discrimination towards the community is and how each trans individual had to fight in order to survive the war of life. The book *We Are Not the Others* by Kalki Subramaniam is reflection against the cisgender narrative of the transgender community and its people. Kalki, a transgender activist says "I speak because we need to be heard, I write because we need to be understood, I dare because we need to survive" (Subramaniam, 17). She talks about their community is "othered" by outsiders and she protests against this through her writings.

Subalternity is a term that originated in postcolonial studies and refers to the social, political, and cultural position of marginalized groups within a hierarchical society. The concept was developed by the Indian scholar and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the 1980s.

According to Spivak, subalternity represents the condition of those who are socially and politically oppressed, typically by dominant groups or structures of power. The term "subaltern" originally referred to individuals who were socially and economically subordinate to the colonial ruling class in India, particularly during the British colonial period. These individuals were often from lower castes, impoverished backgrounds, or marginalized communities, and their voices and experiences were silenced or overshadowed by the dominant colonial discourse.

Spivak expanded the concept of subalternity beyond its original colonial context and argued that it could be applied to various marginalized groups worldwide. She emphasized that the subaltern, due to their marginalized position, often lacks agency and the ability to represent themselves in mainstream discourses. Their perspectives and experiences are often ignored, distorted, or appropriated by dominant groups.

The study of subalternity aims to bring attention to the voices, histories, and struggles of marginalized groups, challenging dominant narratives and power structures. Scholars examine how subaltern groups are socially and politically excluded, how their resistance and agency can be expressed, and how their subordination is maintained through systems of power and control.

It is important to note that the concept of subalternity has been subject to critique and debate within academia. Some scholars argue that it risks essentializing diverse experiences and overlooking the agency and complexities within marginalized communities. Nevertheless, the notion of subalternity continues to be influential in postcolonial studies and remains a valuable framework for understanding power relations and social hierarchies.

The subaltern is identified as the colonial population who are socially, politically, and geographically excluded from the hierarchy of power. The term has been coined by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist linguist, philosopher and politician in one of his prison notebooks. This chapter of the project discusses the transgender community who are marginalized by the society and how they are considered as subalterns. In reference to this aspect, the essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' by Gayathri Chakravarthy Spivak is taken to discuss the perspectives of the subaltern. It is an influential essay written by Spivak, a

postcolonial theorist and scholar and is considered a seminal work in postcolonial studies, specifically addressing the issues of representation, power, and agency for marginalized groups, particularly women in the context of colonial and postcolonial societies. Spivak focuses on the subaltern as a category of people who are socially and politically oppressed, silenced, and excluded from mainstream discourse and power structures. She argues that the subaltern's voice is often muted or ignored, making it difficult for them to articulate their experiences and concerns. Spivak's essay critiques the limitations of Western academic discourse and the tendency for intellectuals to speak on behalf of marginalized groups without genuinely understanding their experiences. She questions whether it is possible for the subaltern to articulate their own reality within the framework of the dominant discourse. Spivak argues that due to structural inequalities and power dynamics, the subaltern's voice is often coopted or distorted, preventing them from speaking authentically and gaining agency. Furthermore, Spivak examines the intersections of gender, class, and race within the subaltern context. She highlights how women in colonized societies face multiple layers of oppression and are often rendered voiceless. Spivak emphasizes the need to critically engage with the complexities of subaltern experiences and challenge the dominant power structures that perpetuate their marginalization. The essay highlights the challenges and limitations faced by the subaltern in expressing their own narratives and argues for a more inclusive and nuanced approach to understanding their experiences.

Subalternity often relates to the experiences of individuals or groups who are excluded from positions of power and authority and are denied the ability to take part fully in shaping their own lives and societies. It can encompass various dimensions of marginalization, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or caste. The subaltern is typically situated at the periphery of the dominant social order and lacks the agency and visibility enjoyed by those in positions of privilege. The concept of subalternity highlights the power dynamics and inequalities that exist within societies and emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing these disparities. It challenges dominant narratives and encourages the amplification of marginalized voices and experiences. Subaltern studies scholars, influenced by postcolonial theory, seek to understand the complex dynamics of power, resistance, and agency within these marginalized groups.

Transgender individuals are subjected to subalternity due to their non-conformity to traditional gender norms. Transgender individuals are excluded from mainstream society and are forced to navigate a world that is not designed to accommodate their needs. This can lead to feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety. Transgenders are seen subaltern by the patriarchal world especially in India their struggles and achievements are not marked either in mainstream. They are not allowed to express their feelings, their existence is not even marked. There are many instances mentioned in the life writings, where the transgender individuals narrated how much they struggled to assert individual identity, right to work and survive even the basic rights were denied to their community. They were only treated as sex workers; basically, they have no power to react to these atrocities because of lack financial capacity and lack of support from their family. The family, friends, relatives and the society, turn out to be the center of power while the trans community is pushed to the periphery.

Kalki Subramanian's *We are not the others* reflects the experiences of the transgenders from an insider's perspective. Kalki feels that when outsiders tell the story of the individuals from

the transgender community, their narratives are often from a limited point of view which results in promoting certain stereotypes about the trans community and labelling them as “others” as they do not fit in the hegemonic gender binary narrative. Kalki attempts to challenge the notion of the society on how transgenders are merely reduced to “others”.

Kalki introduces her readers to her transwoman friend named Priya, who craves for a love life. Kalki describes her as “She always desired to have a husband, children and a big band of in-laws. Shunned away by her own biological family because of her coming out as trans, she now lives alone struggling for a livelihood, struggling for a dignified place in society”(Subramaian,39). This highlights how social exclusion based on gender seems normalized, but how they struggle for power.

One of Kalki’s poems named ‘A Mutilated Vagina Called Eezham’ mentioned in the book discusses the pain and injustices caused to the subalterns. She spits out her anger towards the patriarchal society and how brutally they are marginalized and are mere puppets in the hands of power.

“Oh
the stray dogs
who sneer at me
as I am a transgender,
and bear the semblance
of those breasts
who mauled my sister
to death.”

“When injustice
is inflicted upon me,
at once
the snarling tiger
in me wakes up,
fuming with wrath.
My eyes grow
fiercely red
and my veins throb with anger.” (Subramaniam,72)

In another poem named ‘Arise, My Precious’, she fights for the dignity of her community in that subaltern space and their bodies become a medium of marginalization and sexual exploitation to make them inferior to the heterogenous section of the society.

“To earn your prey
alas, the irony,
you let yourself
preyed upon first!
Why should you my dear,
though you fume with anger
to wring off the hands which squeeze your breasts

and pluck and castaway
the penis that pulsates
to penetrate you manically,
you carry the fire embered
in your heart and
live like a walking corpse
selling your naked body
for the paper currency printed with its price
for the Father of the Nation
fixed upon it?" (Subramaniam,49)
"Arise!
Topple him off your body!
He is the agent of the insults
that strip you off your dignity,
stamp your foot on his throat
reveal your Kali-face!" (Subramiam,50)

Kalki voices the violence unleashed upon the members of her community because she sits in a privileged position today. Spivak in her essay, raise a question can the oppressed really speak for themselves and the book *We are not the Others* by Kalki is an answer here, but Kalki, an activist was able to speak for herself only after she became entitled to it. Also, Spivak in her essay explains how the people in the privileged positions tend to universalize and consider the issues of such people as same. Spivak argues that for them, they believe that they have the authority to discuss the issues in a wide platform. For example, Dr. C.K. Gariyali, an ex-IAS officer is an influential person who can discuss the issues of trans people, but it will still be from a third lens or perspective. Though she empathizes with the community and their struggles, sets a tone for the nationwide discussion on the power dynamics of different genders and the prejudice mindset of the society, she unknowingly was stereotypical about transgenders. In the dedication page of the book, she wrote "The book is also dedicated to the Hijra Community of Turkman Gate who blessed and entertained us for every childbirth and every wedding in the neighbourhood and sang folk songs" (Gariyali, v). During her childhood days, she had experienced the existence of a community who made their living by dancing and singing Badhai which means the congratulatory songs. She also compared one of her transwoman neighbours, Aapa Hussan as "She normally dressed like a woman" (Gariyali,6) which shows how the outside world stereotypes a transgender. These are some very minute details found in the text where elements of stereotypes that exists in the notion of the privileged people. As a reader we can cannot fully have an insight into their problems many of us including author are privileged we are actually acting as their voice in actual sense we cannot fully convey their internal conflicts in true sense because we are not experiencing or witnessing their struggles in true sense. The transgenders are not allowed to show up or voice up their experience; we can also find that only after when they have achieved their position through their struggles so at that particular point of time they are celebrated. After that point they are judged on the basis of which gender they have choosen.

The point even if they struggled and achieved what they want they are seen as subaltern this judgement never ends.

The transgender community is still stuck in the subaltern space due to the exclusion from the mainstream society even today. Gariyali mentions an incident while she was working as the Chairperson of the Women's Development Corporation of Tamil Nadu, two transwomen approached her and cried about the pathetic situation they were dealing after their sex reassignment surgeries. These women who previously led a simple life as men, lost their jobs after the sex change. As she the opportunity to appoint office assistants, she decided to provide them with these positions. But soon after Gariyali got transferred to the Urban Development Department, she never knew that both the transgender individuals were ostracized by their colleagues and were forced to resign from the jobs.

Kalki in her poem, 'The Story of Two' quotes a few stanzas from the poem to bring to light how the pathetic transgender's lives are due to marginalization.

"He was born she,
she was born he,
they both fled
from the fangs of
their families
to have a life
of their own.
Free to live
free to love" (Subramaniam,85).

"He ran away
to another town,
in hunger to survive
he sold himself
and let his health down.

Fate never smiled
but only frowned,
AIDS took him down
and in drugs he drowned.

Unable to bear
and sheltered nowhere,
he died on the streets
no one to care" (Subramaniam,89).

This depicts how inhuman the society is to them, being marginalized they are not just deprived of basic necessities but also right to live with dignity is never granted.

Revathi in her autobiography narrates her life experiences where are forced into begging as they are denied jobs, and in this process, they sell and surrender their bodies to men who desired them only to meet their sexual needs and some are so brutal that they snatch their

money that they earned after lot of struggles. She says, "hijras who had been deceived by men who praised their beauty and enslaved them, who stole their hard-earned money and spent it all, leaving the hijras with scarred faces, bruised by knives, who were little better than servants, going to shops, washing vessels"(Revathi,133). Within the subaltern space, there are many internal conflicts inside the community. There are many hussle-tussle within the hijras. Revathi quotes one instance where she had a fight with another hijra due to a miscommunication. "Everyone in the bar turned to look at us, and I felt ashamed. And so in turn, I tried to clutch at her hair. Mouthing a string of obscenities, she kicked at me and tore my blouse. I felt humiliated"(Revathi,144). That hijra abused her all the way back and complained to Revathi's mistress and got her into trouble and her mistress yelled at her for her behavior. Revathi also mentions a drawback of her community which becomes a reason for the conflicts. "Those who earned money for their mistress were condoned, even when they made mistakes. This was because if their wrong doings were pointed out, the wrongdoers could desert the guru and become chelas to another and the guru would lose her income. I did not have the support of the hijras who shared the house with me because I was a pottai from another parivar (family). There is rivalry among hijras about parivars though we do not observe caste or religious differences". (Revathi,145)

Kalki's 'Half a Woman' poem is another example that reflects the internal conflicts and stereotypes that exist with in the community. According to her Gurubhai, a woman is supposed to behave in a certain manner as per their norms.

"Di, do you know to cook?"

"I don't know Gurubhai".

"Di, can you draw kolam?"

"Don't know how".

"Kothi, what do you know then?"

I laugh.

"A sari looks beautiful on you
than a t-shirt and jeans, wear it di."

"I don't know how to wrap a sari, gurubhai"!

"You don't know anything..."

What do you know ha...

you call yourself a woman!"

Laughed my gurubhai fondly.

If this and this

is what strictly

defines me as a woman,

then I am not one.

I shall remain half a woman. (Subramaniam,143).

2. Conclusion

The identity crisis faced by transgender individuals is deeply rooted in the suppression they endure and the subaltern position they occupy within society. By acknowledging and dismantling the oppressive systems that contribute to their marginalization, we can create an environment that fosters self-expression, validation, and inclusivity. Through education, empathy, and supportive policies, we can empower transgender individuals to embrace their authentic selves and alleviate the identity crisis that stems from the burden of suppression and subalternity. It is imperative that we work collectively to build a world that celebrates diversity and a compassionate world.

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