



Existential Trauma: A Study of Transgender Character through SasindranKallinkeel's Novel *Raasathi: The Other Side of a Transgender*

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Abstract

According to Soren Kierkegaard, “Life is not a problem to be solved. But a reality to be experienced”. To him, human existence is a subjective as well as an authentic one by making some choices in life. Human beings can make choices and live their life as they aspire irrespective of religion, class, caste, sex and gender. Transgender is an umbrella term that stands for those who experience gender identity different from their birth sex. Soren Kierkegaard states that human beings need to pass three stages of life namely aesthetic, ethical and religious for an authentic life. Aesthetic stage deals with immediate pleasure-seeking attitude without making conscious choices, the ethical stage stands for the conscious living in the society with responsibility and finally religious stage is the utmost realization of oneself as surrendering oneself completely to the destiny or the ultimate God. Obviously, transgender people’s existence becomes valid in terms of Kierkegaard’s existentialism. Thus, the researchers have tried to trace the struggle as well as existential crisis of the transgender people in modern society by applying the stages of life to the transgender character in the novel *Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender* by SasindranKallinkeel.

Key words: Authenticity, Existence, Transgender existence, Stages on life’s way, Subjective truth.

Introduction

Existentialism originally a philosophical movement turned into literary movement that deals with individual responsibility in leading oneself to an authentic existence through free-will and freedom. In general, existentialism can be divided into theistic and atheistic existentialism. Theistic existentialism states the ultimate power is God to whom human beings have to surrender. Soren Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism, is a theistic existentialist who considers God as the supreme power to realize the authentic life. On the other side, atheistic existentialists like Jean Paul Sartre, Frederick Nietzsche give emphasis to individual human beings who are responsible for their life not any other ultimate thing. So, existentialism validates that human beings are the only living beings who can make choices in their life for a better life irrespective of their religion, caste, class, sex and gender identity.

Indian Writing in English has a pivotal role in exploring and mirroring many socio-cultural problems of mankind. Ever since it started from three great pioneers of Indian writing in English namely Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan till the present time, it tirelessly throws light upon the social issues in the modern society. In the 21st century, transgender studies have become familiar in India through psychology, sociology, literature, health and legal studies. Our nation has a decent representation of transgender people ever since the ancient times. Specifically, the great epics of our nation Mahabharata and Ramayana have powerfully portrayed them. In Mahabharata, Shikhandi a transgender warrior played a prominent role in paving way to the victory of Pandavas by causing the death of Bhishma. Ramayana had emphasized how transgender people got the boon of blessing people on many good occasions. Then, in Mughal period, they had administrative powers; unfortunately, the British colonization made their life worse than ever before by criminalizing transgender people under IPC Section 377. The last decade has contributed positively to the upliftment and empowerment of transgender people; especially in 2014, they got recognition as the 'Third Gender' in NALSA Vs UOI judgement and in 2019, the government of India amended a bill 'Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill'. Although they have legal supports better than ever, the social stigma and discrimination have not gone yet. Many transgender people have struggled and got greatness in various disciplines like A.R. Revathi, Vidya, KalkiSubramaniam, Sathyasri Sharmila, India's first transgender lawyer, Joyita Mondal, India's first transgender judge and ManabiBandopadhyay, India's first transgender college principal. The first ever transgender library is started in Madurai as 'Transgender Resource Center' by the transgender activist Priya Babu who is also known as the first Transgender film director for the film 'Arikhandi'. Thus, the predicament of transgender people has improved over a period of time not easily but with some hardships as in the life of these achievers. Transgender people are still facing stigma and discrimination in education, employment, health sector and legal sector which leads them to experience severe trauma of their existence in the stereotypical society. Thus, this research article would be an eye opener in highlighting their strife to get success as well as to live an authentic life.

SasindranKallinkeel is a basically Center Reserve Police turned as a writer in the recent times. At present, he is doing some business along with actively writing novels in English. His debut novel is *Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender* in 2019 and his second novel is *Shiva and the Aghoris* (2020)

Review of Literature

In *The Evolution of Inner Self from the Aesthetic to the Religious Stage in Tennyson's 'Ulysses'* (2021) Sabindra R. Bhandari explores the ideals of the existential quest of Kierkegaard's philosophy in Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "Ulysses" and his efforts in making choices to enjoy aesthetic, ethical and religious stage of life of Soren Kierkegaard.

Onwunali Kevin Ugochukwu, in *The Notion of Spheres in Soren Kierkegaard: A Philosophical Insight*(2012) delineates the essence of three spheres of life by Soren Kierkegaard and also highlights the importance of Soren Kierkegaard's writings on human existence.

In *Kierkegaard's Existentialism on The Main Character in Paulo Coelho's The Zahir* (2021) AsharuddinAsy'ari, Ambar Andayani analyze despair in aesthetic life, anxiety in ethical life and subjective truth in religious stage through the main character in Paulo Coelho's *The Zahir*.

In *Existential Crisis: A Transgender's Journey* (2021) Reva Ramesh and Dr. Sreelakshmi N discuss the existential challenges of Transgender people in living their life in the patriarchal society and their efforts in tackling those obstacles to seal their success.

V. Vidya and K. Sathya Sai in *Role of 'Choice' as Existential Predicament in Salman Rushdie's The Moor's Last Sigh and Shalimar the Clown: An Analysis* (2015) trace the significance of existential choices in life by exploring the aesthetic and ethical choices taken by the characters in the novel.

In *Role of 'Choice' as Existential Predicament in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children and The Enchantress of Florence: An Analysis* (2015) V. Vidya and K. Sathya Sai justify significance of aesthetic and ethical choice in leading a meaningful life through the main characters' aesthetic choices and their impact to ethical choices.

In *Identity Crisis for Transgender in India: A Case-study from Madhya Pradesh* (2018) Akhand Sharma brings out the emotions and feelings of transgender people through the case study of Kamla Bua in Madhya Pradesh.

Sujita Sethi in *Transgender Health and Their Rights in India* (2018) deals with the lives of transgender people and the need for their inclusion in the mainstream to attain gender equality, since every human has the right to live their life as they wish without interfering other's freedom.

Sakshi Parashar in *Inclusion of Transgender Community within Socially and Educationally Backward Classes: Examining the Deeper Concerns* (2017) explores the legal recognition of transgender people and its pros and cons in living their life among the heteronormative people.

In *Resilience among Transgender Persons: Indian Perspective* HasiruvalliGangappa (2018) talks about the variations in resilience among Transgender persons in living their life among the mainstream society through a quantitative analysis.

KonduruDelliswararao and ChongneikimHangsing in *Socio-cultural Exclusion and Inclusion of Transgenders in India* (2018) throw light upon the socio-cultural problems of both inclusion and exclusion of transgender people in the modern heteronormative society.

In *Changing Trends in Socio-Economic Conditions of Transgender in Chennai City* S. Gnana Sanga Mithra and V. Vijayalakshmi (2019) analyse various ways to enhance the social acceptance of Transgender. They talk about their basic problems like lack of family support, ignorance, and lack of recognition in the society. These things can be overcome by creating awareness about their rights both to them as well as the society which would obviously lead to the understanding of their gender identity as a disorder not a crime.

In *Indian Third Gender – Literary Representation and Place in the Social Structure* Adriana Simoncelli (2018) reminisces the tradition of transgender people in India where once they used to bless people on the occasion of wedding and child birth, and how they were given recognition in the great epics of India. But at present they are struggling and facing lots of challenges to survive in the society.

The researches on transgender studies are trending only in the 21st century in terms of psychology, sociology, legal studies, medical studies and literary studies. Mostly, transgender people's struggles and challenges have been highlighted in the background of psychology, sociology, political science, legal studies and health studies but when it comes to literary genre,

the amount of literary works especially fictions are less in Indian English literature. Thus, the researchers try to explore the existential struggles of transgender people through the novel *Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender* by SasindranKallinkeel.

Methodology

The real meaning of life lies in how human beings live their life actively as they are liable for their choices. The researchers have come up with Soren Kierkegaard's 'Stages on Life's Way' (1845) where Kierkegaard states as if human beings want to experience authentic life, they need to pass three stages of life namely, aesthetic, ethical and religious. Aesthetic stage talks about the initial spark of senses, immediate need of pleasure and acting aimlessly. Ethical stage indicates the self-conscious living where an individual takes active participation in life with some choices. Finally, religious stage is the ultimate realization of authentic life with faith over God. Therefore, the researchers would like to explore the transgender people's existential challenges as well as importance of choices in realizing their existence through the application of 'Stages on Life's Way' to the transgender character in the novel *Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender* by SasindranKallinkeel.

Aesthetic Stage of Existence

According to Soren Kierkegaard, the aesthetic stage of existence mainly deals with immediacy and reflection without having commitment towards one's action. The protagonist of the novel is Appu (later named as Raasathi) a transgender, who happened to undergo struggle for her transgender identity from aesthetic to religious stage. Having taken birth as a boy, he became the star of his family and everybody invariably poured love on him. However, at some point of his life, he happened to feel his thirst for woman identity and started using girls' dresses and ornaments out of immediate desire and gained some pleasure. An 'aesthetic choice', according to Kierkegaard, is 'no choice' and is either 'entirely immediate' or it loses itself in the multifarious. (Vidya, Sathya Sai, 114)

"If I am correct, by the time I was 4 or 5, I was very much attracted to girls of my age and always stayed in their company. More than that, I always had this desire to wear girls' dresses and ornaments, use mascara and put a bindi on my forehead." (*Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender*, 4)

The society around Appu including his parents were conscious of the social norms on gender identity and brought him as a boy child by giving a lot of toys meant for boys without ever attempting to know their child's wish. The stereotypical nature on gender played an important role in Appu's life to explore his gender identity as well as individuality. On the other hand, his parents remained the voice of the societal norms which Kierkegaard pointed out as 'crowd men' who are known for inauthentic life by simply accepting the common ideas.

"I was reluctant to play with boys or with toys meant for them. Papa used to buy me a lot of toy cars, buses, pistols and balls but I rarely touched them. My brother wanted all of it and I was happy to spare them to him. I liked dolls very much though." (*Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender*, 4-5)

Appu felt incomplete as a boy and was waiting for the time to become a girl which showed his immediate need only for pleasure without knowing its impact. Somehow, he got opportunity to use his sister's mascara, bindi and bangles and he felt satisfied as well as complete only in girls'

attire. The desire and thirst to be a girl is an evident to the characteristics of aesthetic stage wherein he explored his transgender identity.

“One day when my mom was busy in the kitchen and nobody was at home, I took my sister’s mascara, bindi, bangles and other items and dressed up. When I wore a frock, I got an overwhelming joy that cannot be described in words. At the moment I felt complete. It felt as if till the moment I was in a fancy-dress competition as a boy.” (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 5)

Although he knew that his parents would not let him wear girls’ dress whenever he wanted, this awareness made him cautious and enjoy wearing the girls’ dress when nobody was there. Once when he was in girls’ attire first time ever, his father got angry with him and warned not to indulge in such kinds of activities again. Appu could not understand the reason behind his father’s anger and felt despair because of the situation. He was helpless as none was ready to understand his feelings and hear his words but oppressed him. “Since the life of the aesthete realizes no complete satisfaction, it ends up in despair.” (UGOCHUKWU, 124) Here, Appu too experienced the despair out of his aesthetic choice of living for the moment.

“One day when papa came, I was dressed like a girl. For the first time in my life, he got angry and scolded me. He warned me that I won’t be spared if I did this again. I didn’t understand what had happened to him. I thought and thought but couldn’t understand the reason behind his anger.” (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 5)

The reaction of his father made him to feel despair and worry about his pathetic state in boy’s dress which seemed uncomfortable to him since he aspired to be a girl. He became restless and anxious to wear girls’ dress again for his complete satisfaction. On one side, he got kindled and driven by his immediate desire to be a girl without knowing its impact outside, on the other side, his parents were quite disappointed and started pulling down him without taking any efforts to understand his feelings.

“I was totally shattered. I felt breathless and uncomfortable in a boy’s dress and hated it like anything. I was like a fish out of water, unable to sleep properly and always thinking when I would be able to wear the girls’ dresses and put on makeup again.” (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 6)

The crowd-man has not come to a clear consciousness of himself as distinguished from his surroundings. Therefore, his self has not become individuated, but remains in a state of undifferentiation. ((Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship, 147)

As long as Appu remained true to the expectations of the society, he got unconditional love and care from the society including his parents. But the moment he tried to express his inner self to the outside, the society including his parents oppressed him with the social norms. This proves that people in the society act as ‘crowd men by blindly following the objective thoughts, without giving space to individual choice. Unfortunately, he became prey to this kind of society and struggled a lot to know the meaning of life.

“All the days thereafter were similar or more painful. Nobody talked to me and even my mom avoided me. All I could do was cry and pray. Nothing changed, neither my genitals nor my family’s behaviour towards me.” (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 12)

Appu's parents decided to leave him to the transgender community of Erode since they thought that he couldn't be brought up by them. Being the voice of the stereotypical society, they acted socially beyond their authentic individuality and responsibility. It's a chain process as they were driven by the social norms as a crowd man and their child was not allowed to entertain freedom in his life. Thus, neither they were ready to be subjective nor let their child express himself beyond the societal norms. "Where are we going, mom? I asked. Appu, I am not coming but papa will take you to Erode (a district in Tamil Nadu) where you will be happy, as there are a lot of people and kids like you." (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 13)

His parents' reaction to his transgender identity and their abandonment somehow impacted him internally a lot as only if a child could meet the demands of the society, the child would be given enough love and care. In case, if the child fails, the society would ostracize the child by oppressing in the name of social norms. But the moment he met some transgender people who loved him as he was, this recognition made him feel happy. Because after he got identified as a transgender including his parents everybody alienated him for being expressive, but a transgender person accepted him with open arms which is evidence to the scope of existentialism as human beings are subjective in nature. "Even though he was a stranger, I knew it was purely out of love. Then I noticed though almost all of them appeared to be men, they were wearing saree and blouse, not shirts and trousers." (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 17)

His liberty and individuality were restricted by his parents. So, he couldn't express his state of mind to them at all and felt helpless at home after he got identified as a transgender. Here, his father sold him to the transgender group without even letting him know the reason behind everything. The main objective of the aesthetic stage is the absence of decision and free will as Appu didn't have freedom even to express his feelings to his parents and was forced to accept their reaction to his gender identity. Being a child, he couldn't understand the situation clearly but became anxious about life.

"Papa in a husky voice, said to me, "From here onwards, this is your home and these people are your family. They will take care of you. Forget about us." I started crying, pleading him to take me along. But he went away. I realized that was the end of my life with my true family. Several questions were raised in my mind as I looked back to see if papa was coming for me. But it was dark and I saw nothing." (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 17-18)

Appu didn't have the liberty to live his life as he wanted and got abandoned for his expression of transgender identity. The drastic change in the behavior of his parents to him and his life for expressing his transgender identity immensely affected him to worry about his future life. Despite being a child, even his parent was not ready to consider him as a child but abandoned him as a transgender. On one side, he felt despair of his immediacy in expressing his gender identity beyond the fixed norms of the society. On the other side, his parents didn't act as his parents in understanding his feelings and gender expression but abruptly abandoned him. "The anxiety, despair, new people and a new place, all made me exhausted. I kept my head on the shoulder of the aunty and fell asleep thinking where papa had gone leaving me behind." (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 19)

Ethical Stage of Existence

The person must first become aware of, and accept, the actuality of his particular self. Upon the basis of his concreteness, he must imagine possibilities that he might try to enact. (Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship,197)

In the ethical stage, Rasaathi started realizing her pathetic condition as a transgender in the stereotypical society through various problems faced by the transgender community in general. Specifically, she understood the discrimination and social stigma of transgender people in getting education in the society like everyone. The restriction and discriminationshe had in getting education provoked her to look for other options to get education from home. The act of choice becomes vital in Soren Kierkegaard's existentialism as he argues that choices lead to responsible as well as authentic existence. In her ethical choice, she had a different experience from her aesthetic choice, as she understood transgender identity and its culture clearly than before.

“Further, we knew Hijras are not allowed in school. If at all I was admitted, then the students and teachers would have teased me and never left me in peace. It was finally decided that I was to be homeschooled, with the task assigned to Amma as well as a few Akkas.” (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 28)

Her aesthetic stage paved way to ethical stage where she experienced the basic needs of transgender people and their practical difficulties in accessing those in the stereotypical society. Although she aspired to go to school and get education, she couldn't enjoy those times in her life for being a transgender. So, she realized the plight of transgender community in the stereotypical society and explored various possibilities how she could change the living condition of transgender community. In the below instances, her despair and anxiety for not getting into school as cisgender people is clear.

“It was a dream for me to go to school like other children, with a school bag, water bottle and lunch box. The chatting, teasing, jokes and fighting made for a unique experience, something I was deprived of.” (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 29)

The primary goal of ethical stage is self-realization as people try to understand the role of society and surroundings in realizing one's existence. Here, Rasaathi somehow could understand the history and plight of transgender people (hijras) in India. Those Indian myths about transgender people helped her to feel proud of herself and live as a transgender with some hope.

“We are born as hijra to fulfill some purpose of God. Never feel bad about why you were born a hijra. Instead, be proud because God created you to fulfill a mission. Don't worry about anything, do your duty and never listen to what the other people are saying about you.” (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 36)

The concretely given self must first be understood, and then be chosen. To choose oneself in this sense is to accept responsibility for oneself. It means acknowledging that the actuality of oneself has resulted from forces beyond the control of the self. (Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship,190)

Rasaathi's self-realization came out of the struggles she underwent during her aesthetic stage as exploring her transgender identity. Upon which she was abandoned by her parents and then started living with transgender group, wherein she gradually understood the existential struggles of transgender community in this stereotypical society. Specifically, she came to know that transgender people would not be given job anywhere even household works which was her

realization of herself and her community. "Nobody will ever give us any job or work, even household chores through there are much demand for that. So, we have to find a way to earn our livelihood." (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 38)

Rasaathi despaired over the ill treatment of transgender people in the society even if they tried to live a normal life as here, she along with some transgender people went to a shop for shopping. However, the society failed to understand the reason for their sufferings and looked them always as either beggars or sex workers. So, this stereotypical nature affected her intrinsically and she worried about the inauthentic society. "Listen mister, we beg for a living because people like you don't give us any work. But that doesn't mean that we always come to beg only. Right now, we are here for shopping and don't spoil it." (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 123)

Rasaathi's free will to stand on her own motivated her to understand the practical difficulties in the society and to act on her own by her choice. Only as an ethical person, she had the liberty to actualize the predicament of transgender people and possibilities for their better life. "For the first time in my life, I was purchasing things as per my need and choice, that too paying from my hard-earned money. It was a special moment for me." (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 123)

Self-realization of transgender community's state in the society guided her to contemplate over the stereotypical and fixed mentality of the society as transgender people are always known for begging and sex work and are forbidden to live any life beyond that. She became anxious about the mentality of the society that always suppresses the transgender community with the stereotypical power. "I realized that even if hijras have money to buy, they are not treated like other customers. I was annoyed but I understood nobody cared." (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 123)

Being a human, Rasaathi could actualize the predicament of transgender people in the society as unwanted creatures. The fixed mentality of the society somehow restricted them not to express themselves freely as they feel. This stereotypical as well as oppressive attitude of the society on transgender people made some impact on her and she started contemplating the reasons behind those. Thus, her ethical stage let her explore the problems and possible solutions for those in the future.

"Everywhere we were treated as unwanted as well as untouchables. Even if we were ready to pay for anything we needed, we were not welcome. I couldn't understand the reason but understood it would always remain like this." (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 126)

Kierkegaard argues that the process of actualizing possibilities in which the self-gains a history is the self's revelation of itself: "So his [the ethical man's] ethical task is to develop out of his concealment and to reveal himself in the universal. (Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship, 202)

In fact, as a transgender, Rasaathi learnt both positives and negatives only in her ethical stage wherein she happened to live amid the socio-cultural norms of the majority. She could also witness the society's inauthenticity in leading the people in the name of norms without giving voice to their individual free will. In particular, transgender people have been forbidden to live independently on their own beyond the social norms. Therefore, all those oppressions and

humiliations over transgender people somehow disturbed her internally and she determined to find out the solutions for these problems.

“This week was really an eye-opener for me, and I learnt what we are, and what the society feels about us. I have no objection to flesh trade, and I know we have no other way for a living. Anyhow, I must do it, earlier the better.” (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 132)

Ethical stage of existence makes people committed and responsible of their life through their own choices. In this context, Rasaathi had a lot of responsibility to take care of the transgender people and make their life better in the future. She was so keen on improving the standard of transgender lives in the society as she experienced many challenges as a transgender in the society.

Religious stage of Existence

Kierkegaard stated that religious stage is the ultimate realization of oneself and submission to God. An individual tries to validate the authenticity of life and accepts the good and bad as nature of human beings likewise Rasaathi realized that though she was a transgender, she got all the love and care that nobody could imagine. However, she wanted to do many things for the upliftment of her community and surrendered herself to the destiny with hope.

“Even though I was born a transgender, I got all the care and love I could imagine and I have enjoyed the beauty of falling in love with a great human being. I could do something for my community, though I am not fully satisfied with my achievements. What else can I say at this stage of my life? I have surrendered myself to my destiny now.” (Rasaathi: The Other Side of a Transgender, 314)

Conclusion

Transgender people are forbidden from living a normal life in the stereotypical society as it strongly believes in binary gender. However, they are also human beings who have full rights to live and lead their life as they want through their self-made choices. The researchers have explored their struggles, making of choices and striving attitude not only in establishing their gender identity in the society but also tried their level best to look for the opportunities for their empowerment from aesthetic to religious stages of Soren Kierkegaard. Even among cisgender people, not all reach the religious stage where one can understand the ultimate meaning of life. In that case, though transgender people are not given equality and freedom, they try their level best to fight against all the problems they have in the society. This act of existential thirst is highlighted by the researchers as a ray of hope for transgender community through the protagonist Rasaathi in the selected novel.

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