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Interview with the Author

Interview with the Author

- Jo Ivester is an American writer, transgender activist, and mother of a transman.

Rhema: Good morning ma'am.

Jo: Good morning.

Rhema: What kindled the thought of writing the book *Once a Girl, Always a Boy: A Family Memoir of a Transgender Journey*?

Jo: When Jeremy came out as a trans man, my initial reaction was pure bewilderment. Neither I nor my husband had any proper idea about trans men. We have heard a lot about male- to- female trans women but not much about trans men. So first we assured him that we will be there for him no matter whatever gender he is in. Only then I came to know about the struggles my child has faced due to his gender incongruity. The journey of Jeremy's transition to a trans man was hard, painful, and challenging. When I accompanied Jeremy for post-surgical treatments and health check- up I saw trans individuals who came alone to the hospital. The sex reassignment surgery is like a second birth and people who go through that need care and support from family. As a mother I could not bear to see those children in pain. I wanted to tell the world that all children are equal irrespective of gender and sex. I decided to record our experience in detail; our thoughts, Jeremy's struggles, transition process, and many other things that happened in between so that the readers can get an awareness

about gender spectrum, how to handle a gender incongruent child, the emotions, and needs.

Rhema: What kind of responses did you receive from your readers?

Jo: I have received various kinds of responses from transgender individuals, their parents, cisgenders, and children who were doubtful about their identity. Many trans children were abandoned by their families for their gender incongruity. They wander helplessly for food, shelter, and other basic amenities. Some trans men came to thank for accepting Jeremy and express their longing to be loved by their parents. I encourage people to be more accepting of their transgender family members. Many mothers have written to me expressing their anguish, fear, and insecurities about their trans children. I assure them and ask them to think about days they carried the child in their womb, the first time they held them after birth and all the beautiful moments they shared together and make them realize that nothing has changed. Cisgenders have commented that after reading the book they have learnt to treat their trans friends with more care and dignity. Hearing these kinds of words are overwhelming and incredibly satisfying.

Rhema: What changes should be made in the society in create an inclusive environment for the trans community?

Jo: The most basic thing is to create awareness about gender spectrum since childhood. Kids at school learn only about binary gender ideologies so in future it is difficult for them to accept anyone beyond that. If we teach them that being a trans man and trans woman is quite

normal and natural like cisgender then the future generation can adapt and accept easily. Counselling centers for gender incongruent students should be formed in every educational institution and also companies should also provide gender inclusive norms. Bullying, molestation, or assault in any other form against trans individuals should be taken seriously. Also government should provide allowances for education, employment, hormonal therapies, and sex reassignment surgeries.

Rhema: What are the challenges trans men in particular are facing these days?

Jo: Trans men do not live as a community like trans women in many countries. And their visibility is also low compare to trans women and not many people are aware of their existence. Many young girls who feel masculine traits inside them were unable to identify their gender identity. They keep on blaming their mind and body. If visible FTM communal gatherings are made in society then those who are confusion can easily identify their gender and join the community to feel included. Another challenge is the lack of public washrooms for third gender. Many trans men choose to wear male clothes and project themselves as men even before surgery so they definitely cannot go into female washrooms neither can they use gents washroom. It is important to have a separate washroom for trans individuals. And many trans men who had not removed their uterus have to go through menstruation every month. The use of testosterone and other medications makes it difficult and unbearably painful on those days but

they are not provided any medical leave. This is highly traumatic for trans men.

Rhema: Thank you for your time and valuable responses ma'am.

Jo: It's my pleasure. Thank you.

Case Study

Case Study

- Riya a trans woman from Coimbatore is a freelance make- up artist and hair stylist.

Rhema: Good morning Riya.

Riya: Good morning Rhema.

Rhema: Trans people are commonly accused and humiliated for doing sex work and on the other hand they are not given employment opportunities like cisgender individuals. What are the challenges you faced in your career after your transition?

Riya: Since childhood I wanted to be a make- up artist. I did a diploma degree in Beauty Therapy and started working as a stylist at a unisex salon. I worked tirelessly to earn money for my sex reassignment surgery which cost almost three lakh rupees. I was selected as the outlet's 'Best Employee of the Month' six times and even won the 'Star Performer Award' but after surgery the authorities told me that they cannot keep a trans woman as their employee and asked me to resign my job. I was devastated because this particular firm provides make-up services for trans people and make money out of it but refuse to keep a trans woman as their employee. Such hypocrisy. The surgery was to remove my manhood and it does not have anything to do with my talents. This is not just my experience; many trans people are facing the same situation. Society talks bad about trans people begging

in the shops, trains, and bus stands and indulging in sex work but it the same society that refuse to give employment though we are talented.

Rhema: Riya you mentioned that you spent almost three lakhs for sex reassignment surgery but certain government hospitals provide free surgery for trans people. Then why did you not prefer that?

Riya: I know some government hospitals in India especially Tamil Nadu provide free sex reassignment surgery for trans people but outcome of the surgery is not as expected. It is the dream of every to have perfect feminine physique. We are not born that way so when we undergo surgery the expectation is higher than normal. Not every transgender person is capable enough to undergo plastic surgery, vocal cord surgery, and silicone breast implantation. The basic and foremost importance is given to genital reconstruction. I am sorry to say this but at government hospitals they do not reconstruct rather they just castrate. So most trans women try to save money and approach private hospitals for surgery.

Rhema: Do trans people still practice 'Thayamma' operation?

Riya: Yes, they do but rarely. It is too painful and risky. Earlier not many people were aware of transgender existence and those who did, saw them as possessed, diseased, or an abomination of nature. Medical practitioners had no idea of how to perform the surgery, so thayamma method was the only option for sex change. I have heard my elders speaking about thayamma operation. It was performed on auspicious day before the picture of our deity Mata. Only those who have the will

power can bear that pain. And those trans women get special position and respect in our community. These days most transgenders go for surgical sex change procedure.

Rhema: Could you change your gender to 'transgender' from 'male' in your identity documents and certificates or is it still difficult to get documents for trans people?

Riya: I did change my gender in aadhar, driving license, and identity card. Unlike before, the government is organizing camps especially for trans people who have difficulty in changing their gender in identity cards. If we produce the surgery certificate from hospital the government officials verify it and change the gender from male/female to transgender. Many of our elder hijras fought strenuously for this privilege, so we young hijras are always grateful to them.

Rhema: How difficult was it for transgender people to find a house for rent?

Riya: People belonging to transgender community often face difficulties while renting a house. Most cisgenders try to evade from giving the house to us. They say they are afraid of what people will think and speak about their reputation. House owners think that as trans women do sex work and begging they are connected with goons and this might bring problems for them in the future but that is not true. I agree that people in my community go for begging and sex work but we are not connected with any 'mafia' or illegal drug dealers. Even if a trans woman works in a reputed office or an NGO they hesitate to give the house or else they over charge on the monthly rent. If a cisgender can

get a house for two thousand rupees rent per month, for trans people it would be four thousand. Many of my trans sisters are living near slums and under bridges. Our family has abandoned us and we have nowhere else to go. Like every cisgender, trans people also need proper food, clothing, and shelter. It would be better if the society can understand our sufferings and be a little more considerate about giving house for rent.

Rhema: I have heard that trans people have a secret language for communication in times of trouble. Is that practice still in existence?

Riya: Yes, we do have a secret language used within our community called 'Kowdees' and it is a mixture of Hindi and Urdu. When a hijra joins the parivar, gurus and gurubhais teach them those lexicons and language. It is a strict rule not to share or teach Kowdees to non-trans people. If a hijra is in trouble and needs help all she has to do is shout some particular code words and other hijra sisters will gather for rescue.

Rhema: Do you think the lack of love and affection from family during the initial stages of transition can distort the identity of transgender individuals in the future?

Riya: Most trans individuals would have gone through confusions and unsecured emotions about their gender during childhood. The society teaches only the binary gender ideologies and not the gender spectrum so that will provoke us to question the basis of our existence. During childhood I thought I am the only person in the whole world who

cannot fit into the expected gender categories until I met other trans women from neighbouring village. So in such confusions we expect our parents, teachers, and friends to understand us. Gender incongruent children long for the love and affection from their families but what they get in return is humiliation, beatings, reprimands, and sometimes physical abuse. The pain of rejection formed in our hearts lingers and creates an aversion and hatred towards others. If only parents can love their children irrespective of gender and sex then many individuals from my community live without guilt, shame, and trauma.

Rhema: Thank you Riya.

Riya: You are welcome.

➤ Sonesh is a trans man working as an Assistant Professor in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

Rhema: Good Morning Sonesh

Sonesh: Good Morning

Rhema: How did you express the masculinity inside you during the childhood days and when did you come out as a trans man?

Sonesh: When I was a child I loved wearing boy's clothes and accessories than dresses. I have two brothers and a sister and I always played with my brother's friends. I was a 'tomboy' and my parents never scolded me or compelled me to wear girl's dress unless on festive occasions. On those particular days when I wore chudidars or skirt I felt really uncomfortable as if I was wearing a mask to hide. When my neighbours and relatives asked me to 'behave like a girl' I could not because I am a boy, and how can a boy behave like a girl? I was confused about my physical construct and psychological orientation. I was unaware of the trans community those days and thought I had some disease. With great effort and struggle I did my Undergraduate Degree, Master's Degree, and M.Phil and after that I told my parents the truth about my gender identity. They were confused at first and thought that was just a phase and I will move on. As days passed, when I started my transition they realized that there is no going back or pretentions. Finally they accepted me as their son.

Rhema: Can you brief about your transition journey from female- to- male?

Sonesh: When I was doing my UG degree, I read about trans men and realized that is who I am. I went to a hospital and checked my hormone levels and it showed an imbalance between estrogen and testosterone. My body had low estrogen and progesterone. I started taking testosterone shots and did the top and bottom surgery. It cost me lakhs to complete all the medications. I changed my name and gender in all legal documents.

Rhema: Was your surgery done in India? If yes, were you provided with proper treatments and post-operative care?

Sonesh: I did my surgery in a private hospital in Coimbatore. Medical professionals at that time did not have any experience in doing top and bottom surgery for trans men. We a group of seven trans men were the 'first batch subjects'. They removed the breasts like they would treat a breast cancer patient. They warned about the scars but I cared less about getting scars and stiches. I wanted my physique to align with my mind but these days surgeries are done using advanced medical equipment and methods. Government Rajaji Hospital in Madurai is offering free SRS for trans people.

Rhema: You have a good educational background. Did you find it difficult to get an employment after transition?

Sonesh: Binary gender ideologies are deep-rooted in our society. I applied for job in many companies but they all rejected me for my gender identity. People saw me as an abomination of nature while some tried to abuse me physically. I worked as a security, Rapido driver, food delivery

boy, petrol bunk employee and what not. Some employers offered me a job with one fourth of wages they give to other workers. I was devastated. This is not just my condition but the status of many trans men in our country. I got a job in an IT firm through a friend from there I was offered a job as an Assistant Professor in Kongunadu College, Coimbatore. They accepted me and created an inclusive environment for me to work there.

Rhema: What are the major challenges and problems faced by trans men in society?

Sonesh: The major issue is the lack of awareness about trans men. People confuse trans men with 'tomboy' and 'lesbian'. It is important to learn 'what is what' and 'who is who'. And family should be ready to accept their child and love them without any bias. If you analyse the statistics, the suicidal rate of trans men is higher than that of trans women because parents and other family members threaten them emotionally and physically to get married. A trans man can never live with another man, as his wife so they commit suicide to end the misery. Another challenge is getting a proper employment. I have three degrees but was rejected by nearly three hundred companies. The government should take necessary actions to provide employment opportunities for our community. Many trans men want to start a family; marry a girl, adopt a child, have a home, and settle down like everyone else but people are not open- minded to accept us into the mainstream society. They think

letting the trans community live in this world itself is a generosity and that we should not expect more. These kinds of attitudes hurt a lot.

Rhema: Trans men do not have a visible community like that of trans women then how do you know about other trans men in your locality who needs help or how do you communicate with them?

Sonesh: Yes, trans men do not have a jamaat system or parivar so we have initiated an organization called 'Tamil Nadu Transmen Association' and we are providing awareness campaigns, seminars about gender incongruity, guidance to young trans men about transition, how to intake medications, which hospital to approach for surgery etc. With the help of some NGOs and other central government organizations trans men are getting employment and shelter homes. We recommend separate wash rooms for 'third gender' people so that it will be convenient and stress free. Even before surgery I could not use ladies restrooms; it is more of a psychological barrier than a physical one. I feel like an intruder in there.

Rhema: Thank you for the time and sharing your thoughts with me.

Sonesh: Thank you.

Publications



THE CONUNDRUM OF GENDER SPECTRUM: A STUDY ON OBJECTIFICATION OF TRANSGENDER BODIES IN LAXMINARAYAN TRIPATHI'S MEMOIR *ME HIJRA, ME LAXMI*

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the identity crisis faced by the third gender for their incongruent body conditions. The appearance of the body plays a major role in expressing one's gender to the world. Gender expressions are divergent from the sexual identity in transgenders. They generally have a disagreeable or negative relationship with their bodies as compared to cisgenders. So, most transgender individuals try to alter their bodies to create a different bodily contour. Though the presence of the hijra community can be traced to ancient Indian society and culture, they are often socially excluded and disrespected. A transgender body is often subjected to doubts, shame, and ridicule. This research paper aims to bring out the predicaments in Laxminarayan Tripathi's autobiography *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. Being a hijra she took every effort to have a perfect feminine body so that she would be accepted by society. Little did she realize then that the eyes of the society always find flaws and not the fine point. The study is validated through Dennis Prager's *Happiness Is A Serious Problem: A Human Nature Repair Manual*. 'The Missing Tile Syndrome' is a term coined by Prager, which denotes the human tendency to focus on slight imperfections and anomalies. The society's predisposition, to emphasize the negative qualities, and all the imperfect feminine/masculine features, of the transgender people, instead of what they have achieved as a person, create dissatisfaction in life. Such conditions make transgender individuals question their physical construct, identity and, existence.

Index Terms: body incongruity, discrimination, identity, gender, transgender

Transgenders are people who do not fit under the binary gender notions of male and female. When a child is born, the doctors or parents identify the sex of the baby on the basis of the construction of external genitals. But sex and gender are entirely different conceptions. Sex is natural and biological, whereas gender is socially constructed. For centuries transgenders are deliberately marginalized, persecuted and stigmatized for their gender incongruity. In India, the hijra community suffers discrimination, humiliation and violence throughout their life. They are despised by the mainstream society and are forced to undergo physical and psychological abuses in their day to day life. They are excluded from the society and are treated as outsiders though they have every right to live the way they want to.

Many trans people are disowned by their parents, when they get to know about their gender identity. The denial of acceptance and love from parents and family adds much trauma and mental suffocation in the life of trans people. Despite all adversities, transgender community strives hard to prove themselves as competent, talented and valuable. They create opportunities and try to achieve their dreams and destinations. But most of their achievements are not recognized in the main stream arena. The recognitions for their achievements are clouded by their gender incongruity. Dennis Prager in his book *Happiness is a Serious Problem* talks about the human tendency to find one small negative thing amidst all the positive aspects as 'the missing tile syndrome'. This paper focuses on the discriminations and defeats faced by trans people in spite of their accomplishments.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is a trans woman, activist, bharatanatyam dancer, choreographer, actress, and motivational speaker in Mumbai. She is the first transgender person to represent Asia Pacific in the United Nations in the year 2008. She bravely delivered her speech about the hardships faced by trans people and other sexual minority groups in India. As a spokesperson for the trans community she requested everyone to treat her people with respect, dignity and human like. Tripathi has served on the boards of several NGOs that worked for the upliftment of LGBT community. She became the president of the NGO, DAI Welfare society, the first registered organization for transgender people in South Asia. She started her own organization named *Astiva*, to promote the welfare of sexual minorities and support them to be independent. Tripathi is the first trans woman in India to secure a passport which mentioned her sexual identity as 'female, transgender and eunuch'.

Me Hijra, Me Laxmi is an honest and inspiring narrative of how Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, the eldest son of a traditional Brahmin family transformed to Laxmi, a hijra, creating a benchmark in the history of Indian trans community. In the memoir Laxmi narrates the struggles she underwent during the early days of transition. Since childhood she knew the dominance of femininity in her male body. But she was afraid to disclose her emotions to her parents or anyone in her family. She was brutally molested by an older cousin and his friends. They threatened her not to disclose what they did failing which they would harm her little brother. Devastated Laxmi endured all the pain and agony in silence.

Sickly as I was, I had learnt to endure. I did not tell anyone about the ugly incident. Perhaps the guy's threats scared me. But a few days later, he molested me again, and then again. He was accompanied by his friends and all of them took turns to violate me. The physical and mental torture I went through is indescribable. But I didn't say a word to anyone, either then or later. I kept my feelings bottled. (Tripathi 6)

Laxmi was traumatized by these incidents and started to defend herself. The boys black mailed and raped her when they found her resisting, yet she fought back. Many children with gender incongruity were physically assaulted by their neighbours, classmates and even family members. Later they were threatened to be exposed for their feminine behavior.

Laxmi's love for dancing was deep and divine. While dancing she forgot her troubles and pain. She could express the whole of her femininity through dancing. The way her foot moved and hips swayed to the rhythm of music she felt she was a goddess, liberating every tint of masculinity and captivating the feminine inside her. Her dance teacher Baby Jhonny was more than a guru to her, she was an inspiration. Laxmi took every word of her teacher to heart and expressed it in life. Baby Jhonny insisted her students to maintain the grace and poise of a dancer both on and off stage. She believed that a dancer's movement should always be elegant even while walking on the streets. The words of Baby Jhonny had a profound impact on her. Even after coming out as a hijra in public she draped her saree, walked and talked like her teacher. "Today, everyone compliments me on my attire and on my personality in general. But the credit for it must go to Baby Jhonny" (Tripathi 25). Through her dancing skills Laxmi grew to greater heights. She started a dance school called *Vidya Nritya Niketan* which was later renamed to *Lucky Chap Dance Academy*.

The heteronormative society always tends to find faults with whoever deviates from its ideologies and norms. No matter how talented, brave or well-behaved, they are always branded as an outcast. Laxmi felt betrayed, every time she was identified as a man in the society. She wanted to be a woman and live as a woman. She secretly went to Byculla, a place in Mumbai where hijras lived. She became a chela meaning disciple or daughter to Shabina, another fellow hijra. She was overwhelmed with joy after the initiation ceremony. But she hid this from her family, fearing their wrath. Laxmi was a successful dancer and choreographer but achievements were not acknowledged by the society instead she was discriminated for being a trans person. Dennis Prager in his book *Happiness Is A Serious Problem: A Human Nature Repair Manual* elucidates this kind of human behavior as the 'missing tile syndrome'. It is the human tendency to overlook goodness presented and find fault in what is absent.

One of human nature's most effective ways of sabotaging happiness is to look at a beautiful scene and fixate on whatever is flawed or missing, no matter how small.

This tendency is easily demonstrated. Imagine looking up at a tiled ceiling from which one tile is missing—you will most likely concentrate on that missing tile. In fact, the more beautiful the ceiling, the more you are likely to concentrate on the missing tile and permit it to affect your enjoyment of the rest of the ceiling. (Prager 50)

Trans people in India were often despised for begging and doing sex work. They are considered as a nuisance for disturbing the public with their loud voice and claps. But Laxmi was nothing like that, she was educated and well behaved, yet the society did not accept her as a fellow being. When Laxmi's parents came to know of her hijra identity, they became perplexed and angry. Her mother shouted at her for betraying their family honor and community. She even tried to bribe Laxmi to start a new business if she could live as a man. Laxmi felt empathetic for her parents, for breaking their trust and expectations. She tried to convince them by explaining her achievements and her ability to survive on her own. But her parents were not ready to listen and cursed her for being a hijra. This reflects the deep rooted heteronormative ideologies among people. Laxmi longed for the love and acceptance of her family. She went to school, worked hard and earned a job for the reason that she never wanted to end up like many other trans people who did sex work in her community. She thought that society might respect a trans woman if she is capable of living on her own with dignity. On the contrary she was verbally and physically abused for her sex change. "My father did not speak to me. As for my mother, she cried non-stop for three whole days. Things came to a head when, in a fit of anger, she sheared off some of my hair. I could take it no longer. I drowned my sorrow by starting to work for the hijra community" (Tripathi 49-50).

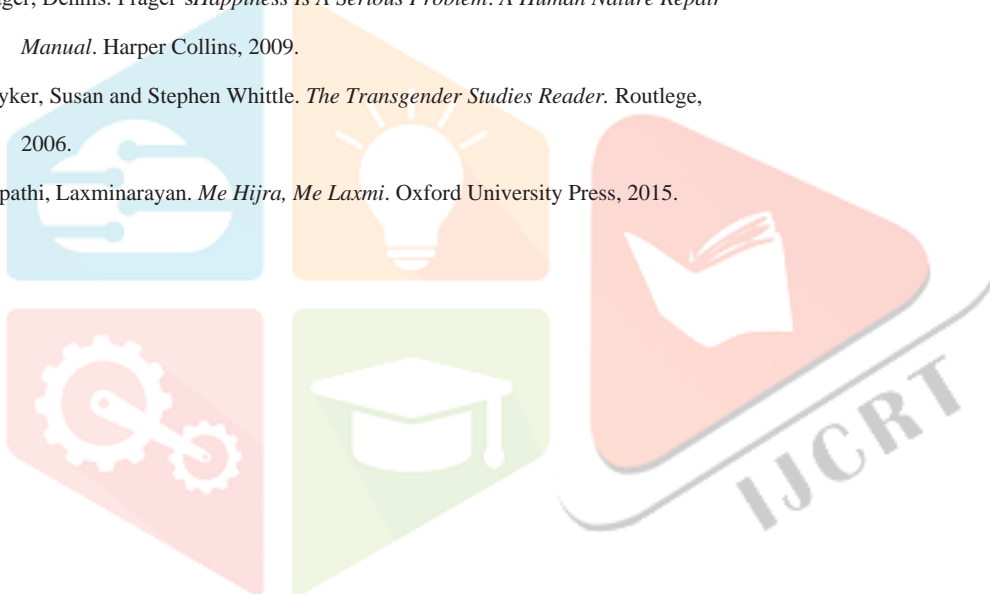
Prager points out that the missing tile syndrome is universal. One way or the other humans tend to look for the void rather than being satisfied with what they already have. He further states that whatever people proclaim to be the most important trait in others would be the only thing absent in their life. A trans woman is a person, born with male sexual parts but later identifies the femininity in them and change their sex to female. Every trans woman before transition would be blamed for not being manly, for having a feminine body, and behaving like a girl. They point out the missing manliness and taunt them for the uncontrollable feminine nature. At the same time after transition, they are singled out for not having a uterus, naturally formed

breasts, and vagina. Prager calls this human behaviour as 'miserable'. He reprimands the human nature that concentrates on what is missing and opines that unless people teach themselves to concentrate on what is present and be contented with it, they will end up obsessing over the missing tiles creating anxiety, hostility and humiliation for them as well as others.

Laxmi after coming out as a transgender, started working for the upliftment of sexual minorities. Her visit to United Nations for United Nations General Assembly Special Session on G4 visa made her to realize that trans people were meant to achieve great things and not to be confined in begging and sex work. She admired the transgender community in America leading a dignified life when compared to India. She dreamt and worked for the betterment of trans people in India. Like Prager, Laxmi found happiness in the uniqueness of her body, mind and soul. She never bothered to go behind the missing tile in her life. "I felt empowered, and empowerment is not a word that normally exists in the vocabulary of a hijra. It is true that as a person, I, Laxminarayan Tripathi, liked taking on new challenges, but as a hijra I was never allowed to (Tripathi 62-63). The memoir *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* presents Laxminarayan Tripathi as a multi- faceted personality; the child, the dancer, the lover, the woman, the friend, the dutiful son, and the hijra.

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Voicing the inner Conflict in Kalki Subramaniam's *Kali, Maha Kali*

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Abstract - The transgender communities in India are subjected to discrimination and violence throughout their lives due to their gender identity. This paper focuses on the physical and mental trauma trans people face in society as portrayed in the poem *Kali, Maha Kali* taken from *We Are Not The Others: Reflections Of a Transgender Activist* (2021) by Kalki Subramaniam. The poem is an outrageous cry of suffering she underwent during her transition. The study is validated through *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, narrative, and History* by Cathy Caruth. Sex is a biological trait whereas gender is a cultural facet. In Indian society, the consonance of gender is confined to male and female. And this scenario makes the third gender ignored and alienated. Kalki in her poem talks about the pain of subjugation she faced from her family, friends, and society.

Index Terms - Discrimination, gender, identity, transgender, trauma.

INTRODUCTION

Transgenders are people whose self-identified gender does not correspond to the sex assigned at birth. Their gender identity cannot be confined under the conventional binary ideas of male and female. So, they are forced to confront several psychological, social, economic, and legal challenges throughout their lifetime. As society places the transgender community outside the prescribed binary gender spectrum fulfilling everyday needs is a challenge. They are ostracized from all spheres - family, education, employment, and proper medical care. It is pathetic that trans people are shunned and seen as a disgrace by the family for their sexual orientation. Even in this 21st century the discrimination and negligence towards the transgender community remains unaltered. And due to this abandonment from family, friends, and society

many transgenders are victims of mental and physical trauma.

The traumatic experiences that occur in an individual's life may leave a long-lasting impact. The reasons behind such experiences might either be natural adversity or the betrayal of loved ones but it can create a high- stress level in the person's mind. It is not easy to express such inner turmoil through words. This paper highlights one such traumatic experience caused by society towards the 'third gender' otherwise called 'transgender'. Kalki Subramaniam ferociously pens down her emotions of solitude and subjugation in her poem *Kali, Maha Kali* an extract from her anthology *We are not the Others: Reflections of a Transgender Activist*.

Kalki Subramaniam is an Indian transwoman activist, poet, artist, actor, and writer. She initiated the *Sahodari Foundation* (which means 'sister'), an organization that thrives for the economic, political, and social empowerment of transgender community in India. *Sahodari Foundation* trains the transgender people to uphold their rights and enable them to earn a livelihood through various creative projects. Kalki was born in Pollachi, a town in Tamil Nadu. She was a topper in academics and Kalki is one of the few transwomen in India who holds two master's Degrees, one in Journalism Mass Communication and another in International Relations. It was during her post-graduate studies Kalki felt that the experiences and needs of the transgender community are completely unnoticed by society, so she decided to publish a monthly magazine named *Sahodari* exclusively for transgender people, the first of its kind in India. Kalki was at the forefront of the campaign at the Supreme Court of India's judgment for legalizing transgender identity. Her first anthology *We are not the Others*:

Reflections of a Transgender Activist is a wonderfully sculpted work that reflects her versatile emotions, experiences, and expectations. The title voices out the major problem faced by the trans community 'othering'. For centuries, they were labeled and defined as misfits by mainstream society. Though a little turn around can be seen in certain sectors, they are still the victims of propaganda that pushes them towards marginalization and inequality.

The poem *Kali, Maha Kali* is a trans woman's fervent call to Kali, the Hindu goddess of death and time, the destroyer of evil. She was exhausted by all the subjugations and recklessness the society forced upon her because she was a trans woman. She wanted to lead a simple and peaceful life but the words and actions of others wounded her and left her traumatized. No one accepted her identity: rather they ridiculed, harassed, and called her obscenities. Unable to bear the humiliations she asked Kali for four boons. First, she asked the boon to go back in time, then for a terrifying face, large fiery eyes, and long canine teeth to scare her enemies away. Then she asked for twenty hands to crush her enemies and finally for a sensitive yet strong heart to emancipate love and embrace those who are needy. She wept about her fate for a long time and by going back in time she hoped to change it.

When you grant me these our boons

*Kali, Oh kali!
the wheel will roll back in time
to rewrite our fate afresh.
I will sever the hands
that intend to ransack our life
prior to my time and even before that
Kali, Oh, Kali! (Subramaniam 59)*

Kalki then talks about the trans women who tried to commit suicide unable to bear the taunts and struggles of others. Suicide is a result of complicated functions of physical, psychological, environmental, and cognitive factors. It is reported that suicidal tendencies among the transgender community are rather high compared to the general population. The major reason being gender based discrimination and harassment. As they were not provided with proper education and employment, most of the people in the trans community were forced to live in slums and depend on begging and sex work for livelihood. This deplorable condition lead to further breakdown and ended up in suicide. The rate of transgender people who suffer from depression, trauma and suicidal tendencies are

alarming. The lack of parental support, social stigma, risks of affecting HIV, and violence from fellow human beings are issues that cause them to lose their hope in life. Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, narrative, and History* point out that at a certain point when the mind becomes numb to confront and resist the pain caused by the people or environment, the struggle for survival will be an endless testimony to the impossibility of living. The modern trauma theory concludes that the ardent tendency of mental trauma governs the individual's life thereafter. Over the course of time, depression deepens into the subconscious mind and cannot be healed like a physical wound. The memories of assault, neglect, betrayal, and abandonment haunt the victim throughout his/her life. With proper medication and counseling, some people learn to create survival strategies and overcome the trauma. In the case of transgender people, even this is difficult due to the lack of proper medical care and psychological support centers.

Kalki pens down with a heavy heart the stigma faced by the trans sex workers. The society blames them for being different and treats them as outcasts so many trans women are forced to do sex work for their survival but they have to endure the physical harassment of goons most of the time. Many trans women are arrested and assaulted mercilessly by the police. They live in constant fear and agony. With the boon from Kali, she wanted to rescue those trans women who were forced to sell their bodies for food and left to die with no one to care for them. Then, she longed for the love of her parents but they chased her away. The wound of abandonment was left unhealed in her heart. Every child born in this world deserves to be loved, cared and accepted by the family and society. When love is denied it creates a void in that individual which later turns out to be a trauma. Caruth explains this as a recurrent image of tragedy that continues to rely on the person's conscious and sub-conscious mind even after the incidents. She further explains that trauma cannot be located entirely on the violent or original incident that occurred in the past but rather may develop in an unassimilated nature. The victim sometimes develops anxiety disorders, panic attacks, and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). In *Kali, Maha Kali* Kalki's words express her struggle to overcome the trauma she experienced throughout her childhood and transition. The poem reflects not only

Kalki's strenuous journey but many other trans women too.

*If you tell me
"I gave you boons,
now give yourself to me",
the very moment
I will return to you
and surrender my life at your feet. (Subramaniam 61)*

The poem *Kali, Maha Kali* concludes with a plea of the wounded soul surrendering at the feet of Kali. After using all the four boons she promises to give herself to the goddess if that was the price to be paid to go back in time and create a change in her destitute life. The poem helps the readers comprehend the sufferings and pain transgenders undergo in every facet of their life and is a clarion cry for their betterment.

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