
**Gender Dysphoria and Transitioning: A Study in Selected Works of A. Revathi's
The Truth About Me and Akkai Padmashali's *A Small Step in a Long Journey***

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Abstract

The term 'Gender Dysphoria' denotes discomfort with one's assigned gender. Individuals with gender dysphoria often grapple with the profound challenge of navigating societal expectations and norms. This article seeks to identify the distress associated with this incongruence that can lead some to pursue gender-affirming measures, such as hormone therapy or gender reassignment surgery, as a means of aligning their physical appearance with their gender identity. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* serves as a poignant exploration of her personal journey, providing insights into the challenges, triumphs, and complexities of transgender existence. Meanwhile, *A Small Step in a Long Journey: A Memoir* by Akkai Padmashali offers a strong evoking sensation about the life of this prominent transgender activist. These autobiographies stand as a cornerstone of transgender literature, depicting the fulfillment of their dreams in their successful transformation into becoming women. The study employs qualitative methods, drawing on close textual analysis and literary criticism to examine how Revathi and Padmashali navigate themes such as identity, discrimination, and empowerment within their narratives. Focusing on their autobiographical works, the study scrutinizes how these transgender authors articulate and navigate the complexities of gender dysphoria within their life stories. By examining their experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms, the research aims to emphasize the importance of literary narratives in shaping perceptions, advocating for a more inclusive society, and offering broader discussions surrounding their identities.

Keywords: Gender dysphoria, Marginalization, Transgender, Identity.

Introduction

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." - Simone de Beauvoir.

Gender Dysphoria is a psychological condition characterized by a persistent and distressing misalignment between an individual's assigned gender at birth and their deeply felt sense of gender identity. Gender dysphoria is a phenomenon that has been increasingly recognized and discussed in academic, medical, and social spheres. It goes beyond the natural fluctuations in gender identity that many people experience, causing significant emotional and psychological distress. This condition can manifest in various ways, including discomfort with one's physical characteristics, social roles, or a desire for gender-affirming interventions. Transitioning refers to the process through which individuals align their gender expression with their gender identity. Transgender is an umbrella term encompassing a diverse range of gender identities that do not conform to traditional binary notions of male and female.

This includes identities such as non-binary, genderqueer, and genderfluid. Transgender studies is an interdisciplinary field that focuses on the study of gender identity and expression beyond the binary framework. It examines the social, cultural, political, and medical aspects of transgender experiences, aiming to understand the complexities of gender diversity and challenge normative understandings of gender. Transgender autobiographies are literary works authored by transgender individuals that recount their personal experiences, challenges, and triumphs related to gender identity and transition. They provide a platform for transgender individuals to share their stories, perspectives, and insights with a broader audience. They offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of transgender individuals, contributing to a deeper understanding of gender diversity and the social, psychological, and emotional impacts of gender dysphoria and transitioning.

Individuals experiencing gender dysphoria often struggle with societal expectations, prejudices, and discrimination as they navigate their gender identities and transition to align with their true selves. Autobiographical works provide a platform for individuals to share their personal journeys, struggles, victories, and insights into the transgender experience. A. Revathi and Akkai Padmashali, both prominent transgender activists and authors, have documented their experiences in *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* and *A Small Step in a Long Journey: A Memoir* respectively. Through a systematic analysis of these texts, this paper aims to shed light on the unique yet universal experiences of gender dysphoria and transitioning and give way to the inclusivity of transgender persons in future social setups.

A Journey of Self-Discovery

A. Revathi's autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, offers a poignant portrayal of her journey of self-discovery as a transgender woman in India. Revathi's narrative delves into the turmoil of gender dysphoria as she navigates the dissonance between her assigned gender and her true identity. Revathi was raised in the small town of Namakkal by her parents under the name Doraiswamy. From childhood, Revathi found solace in feminine expressions, yet societal pressures forced her to suppress these inclinations, leading to internal strife and emotional turmoil. As the youngest son in the family, he held a deep affection for his parents. During his early school years, Doraiswamy demonstrated a keen interest in activities typically associated with girls, surprising his family one day by donning his sister's skirt upon returning from school. At the age of ten, Doraiswamy began to grapple with issues surrounding gender identity. A woman trapped in the body of a man was how I thought of myself.

"A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought of myself. But how could that be? Would the world accept me thus? I longed to be known as a woman and felt shamed by this feeling. I wondered why God has chosen to inflict this peculiar torture on me and why he could not have created me wholly male or wholly female." (Revathi, 15).

A transgender person grapples with intricate emotions, hesitant to embrace a sexual identity divergent from the one assigned at birth, and experiences ongoing self-interrogation in the early stages of understanding their sexuality.

"This further confused me- I was a boy, yet I felt I could love other boys. Was this right or wrong?" (Revathi 14).

As Revathi matured, she embarked on a journey of self-discovery, gradually embracing her transgender identity. Despite facing societal stigma and discrimination, Revathi found solace and affirmation within the hijra community, where she discovered a sense of belonging and acceptance. Her recognition of being feminine within prompted her to join the hijra community in Dindigul, where she learned about the requirement of undergoing 'nirvana' (castration) to transition to womanhood. Motivated by his femininity, he underwent the surgery, during which the doctor posed the question,

"Do you want me to arrange things so that you can pee as women do from below, or as men do from above? I want to live as a woman, which is why I wanted this operation" (ALITA 20).

After undergoing sex reassignment surgery, she faced confusion during her journey back when she needed to use the restroom, unsure which one to choose. Additionally, she encountered security personnel who insulted her, asserting that she couldn't use either

restroom because someone who transitioned from male to female isn't considered a woman. This incident vividly illustrates the conservative and traditional attitudes prevailing in a society that prides itself on its modernity and advancements in technology, economy, and social spheres. The situation for transgender individuals is increasingly dire. This comparison holds merit, considering the lack of familial support many transgender people face, leading to homelessness and a sense of aimlessness. While Revathi could adopt feminine attire, she remained a hijra—a figure embodying the liminal space of the third gender—thus, she was confined to specific locations and livelihoods dictated by societal norms. The narrative traces Revathi's journey as she transitioned from one city to another, from one Hijra House to the next. Throughout, Revathi longed for the freedom to live authentically, to love openly, and to embrace her identity as a woman [12]. "The 'I' is not a fixed essence, but a becoming, and this becoming is a scene of address." (Butler).

Studies indicate that those who receive support from their families tend to have higher self-esteem, while those without such support are more likely to end up homeless and despondent, severely impacting their mental well-being. Despite their reluctance to leave home, the pressure and mistreatment from their parents often force them to do so. Revathi's experience echoes this pattern; subjected to insults and harsh treatment by her brothers, she eventually left home and found refuge within the transgender community. Upon returning home as Revathi, she faced further exploitation, including the grabbing of family assets and the loss of her bike to her brothers, who demanded payment for its use and refueling.

In addition to the challenges she faces outside and within the hijra community—such as oppressive gurus, internal conflicts among hijras, and rivalries with other Houses—Revathi grapples with a delicate relationship with her family. Their acceptance of her transition is begrudging at best. Furthermore, tensions surrounding her gender identity coincide with a longstanding familial dispute over parental property. Dividing the inheritance among three sons and one "daughter" presents a serious dilemma, particularly when the daughter has limited sources of income and is vulnerable to feelings of rejection. [12]. The problems Hijra faces after transforming and embracing womanhood in the patriarchal society are expressed through Revathi's life. "The myth of femininity is the creation of men in order to justify their power" (Beauvoir)

The suppression doesn't just originate from within the household; it permeates society as well. Experiencing rejection from one's own community and feeling isolated at such a young age is profoundly unsettling, as Revathi did. The fear instilled by familial and societal discrimination and persecution prolonged Revathi's journey to self-understanding and acceptance of her true identity. Initially confused, the joy of embracing her female identity eventually outweighed all doubts. Breaking free from the shackles of terror, trauma,

and

prejudice, she emerged as a resilient individual who went on to inspire countless others like her. "The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project." (Beauvoir)

Upon relocating to Bangalore, Revathi discovered a sense of kinship with three individuals whom she regarded as her own "daughters." Unlike others in the hijra community, these three young people hailed from educated, affluent backgrounds and sought greater autonomy and space, eschewing conservative attire outside of sex work. Sympathizing with their aspirations, Revathi granted them the freedom they craved. One of these individuals, Famila, stands out as a notable figure—a dynamic hijra-feminist-queer activist. Tragically, Famila passed away in 2004, leaving behind a legacy observed primarily through the perspectives of those who knew and collaborated with her. Despite nominally being under Revathi's care, it was Familia who led her into the realm of social activism by introducing her to Sangama. Revathi challenged hijra customs by securing a paid position at Sangama, where she learned about her rights and discovered avenues for advocating on behalf of her community. Sangama equipped Revathi with the vocabulary to articulate her grievances, desires, and the importance of solidarity among hijra sisters while also acknowledging her discomfort within the confines of their homes.[12].

The Truth About Me chronicles Revathi's remarkable personal transformation and empowerment as she embraces her authentic self. Through her resilience and courage, Revathi defies societal expectations and charts her own path toward fulfillment and happiness. A significant portion of the novel chronicles her involvement in sex work. It's challenging to comprehend and recall the constrained options available to her within the hijra community. However, at the age of twenty, Revathi made the decision to engage in sex work to fulfill her sexual needs. At that time, it seemed to be the sole avenue through which she could attain any semblance of sexual satisfaction. Yet, being a sex worker and a member of a sexual minority brings about unwelcome attention.[12]

Advocating Inclusivity

"Gender is not a fact; it is a performance." - Judith Butler.

Transgender inclusivity in India has gained momentum in recent years, albeit with ongoing challenges. The country has witnessed significant legal advancements aimed at recognizing and protecting the rights of transgender individuals. In 2014, the Supreme Court of India recognized transgender people as a third gender, affirming their fundamental rights and entitlements. Subsequently, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act was enacted in 2019, aiming to prohibit discrimination and promote inclusivity in various spheres of life, including education, employment, healthcare, and housing. Residing in Bangalore, Karnataka, Akkai's influence extends far beyond her local community, with her contributions recognized nationally. She was awarded the Rajyotsava Prashasti, the second-highest civilian

honor bestowed by the state of Karnataka, in recognition of her significant achievements. Dr. Akkai Padmashali, a transgender woman and social activist, embodies courage and determination in her journey. Having previously resorted to begging on the streets and engaging in sex work to sustain herself, she has since transformed into an inspiring activist who has touched the lives of many [20]. Akkai Padmashali embarked on her esteemed career in activism by joining Sangama, an LGBT rights group headquartered in Bangalore [21].

Akkai encountered significant challenges in her journey to assert her identity from childhood. She vividly recounts the traumas she endured in her autobiographical book *A Small Step In A Long Journey* [18]. She decided to abandon her childhood name, Jagadish; Akkai opted for the full name Ashta Aishwarya Ghana Sampanne Doddamane Akkayamma. Despite the legal strides, transgender individuals in India continue to face pervasive social stigma, discrimination, and marginalization. Akkai was also a victim of these. Butler argues that “Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (p. 522). Following a violent assault in the school restroom, she recounts the principal's response upon seeing her with torn clothing.

"If you had behaved like a man, this would not have happened...Don't show your face. Please go out of this office, get clean, and go back home." [18]

This punishment includes the oppression of women and the stigmatization and marginalization of those who violate the gender binary, either by disrupting the presumed link between sex and gender (e.g., transgender individuals) (Butler 522). In the biographies of transgender persons that Padmashali has read so far, there is a pervasive sense of victimhood, but she did not want to narrate her life story in that manner. Through her story, she aims to convey to the reader that they should not perceive her as a victim. Engaged in sex work and begging, she experienced significant violence and social stigma. Her life lacked social acceptance and dignity [19]. She had to voice out for inclusivity, she asserts in an interview -

"I've had to struggle at every point for even basic needs because of being 'different.' You are stripped of the inclusion in your own home, society, schools, offices, and communities because it perturbs their idea of a normal patriarchal system." [20].

Akkai perceives herself not as a casualty of her circumstances; rather, her life narrative epitomizes her bravery and her quest to restore her dignity. The notions of "respectability," which risks their erasure, are built by caste-hetero-patriarchal society,

continuing to exploit trans people, Akkai elaborates in the chapter titled "Love, Marriage, and Patriarchy." [16]. Having served as a transgender activist for nearly two decades, Akkai has steadfastly endeavored to enhance the well-being of her community members [19].

"My fight has been with the ideology of the society that portrays superficial notions of gender. I don't like the labels, so I would say that it is important to be human and to be human is to be inclusive." [20].

Gender dysphoria has long been stigmatized and misunderstood in society, contributing to the marginalization and discrimination faced by transgender individuals. Thus, transgender people expect them to be treated as humans and not be outcasts. Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. (Butler, p. 522). In 2014, she played a pivotal role in co-founding Ondede, an organization comprising feminists, activists, scholars, and intellectuals. Recognizing the imperative to unify the agendas of three pivotal movements in the nation—children's rights, women's rights, and the rights of sexual minorities—Ondede emerged as a beacon of advocacy and empowerment [13]. Additionally, Dr. Padmashali was among the petitioners who advocated for the decriminalization of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, ultimately leading to a historic verdict on September 6, 2018 [14]. Towards the end of her book, she expresses,

"I learn from the dreams of Nelson Mandela, of B R Ambedkar, of Gandhi. Society should not harass us, oppress us, or kill us in the name of patriarchy and power. I dream of a just world, a world without discrimination or social exclusion, where people exist for their own sake and lead their lives with dignity. I dream that tomorrow's world will be one in which we are all born and die simply as human beings." [18].

She concurs with the assertion that the challenges faced by the transgender community persist despite the decriminalization of homosexuality in India. She acknowledges the existence of social discrimination against the transgender community and underscores the imperative to address it. Emphasizing constitutional principles, Padmashali asserts in an interview.

"No one has the right to decide my identity... It's the constitutional right of every Indian. We need to promote inclusivity." [14].

It's crucial to acknowledge the profound distress experienced by transgender individuals when their bodies do not align with their gender identity. Consequently, the transgender community faces elevated rates of mental health issues and a heightened risk of suicide attempts. Various treatments exist to alleviate symptoms of gender dysphoria. However, the reactions of others to an individual's transition, as well as It's crucial to acknowledge the profound distress experienced by transgender individuals when their body does not align with their gender identity. Consequently, the transgender community faces elevated rates of mental health issues and a heightened risk of suicide attempts. Various treatments exist to alleviate symptoms of gender dysphoria. However, the reactions of others to an individual's transition, as well as the social and legal challenges encountered during the transitioning process, can persistently disrupt aspects of work, family, religious, and social life. Building a robust personal support network and seeking out healthcare providers with expertise in transgender health significantly enhance the prospects for individuals grappling with gender dysphoria.

Conclusion

The precise cause of gender dysphoria remains uncertain. Some professionals suggest that factors such as hormonal influences during fetal development, genetic predispositions, and cultural and environmental elements could play a role. The emotional anguish and turmoil stemming from gender dysphoria can disrupt various aspects of life, including education, employment, social interactions, religious activities, and more. Therefore, it is crucial for individuals experiencing gender dysphoria to receive compassionate psychological and social support from healthcare professionals. It's worth noting that not all individuals opt for sex reassignment surgery. Societal and familial pressures, coupled with a lack of acceptance, can exacerbate feelings of anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. Consequently, it's imperative to seek counseling and ongoing support throughout and beyond the transition process. Additionally, having emotional support from peers, whether through support groups or from trusted friends and family members, is invaluable in navigating the journey of gender transition. Identifying and addressing gender dysphoria at an early stage can mitigate the risk of depression, emotional distress, and suicide. Creating a supportive environment where individuals are empowered to express their gender identity freely and comfortably while also understanding the available treatment options can alleviate anxiety and depression. The field of transgender studies has sought to challenge these misconceptions and provide a platform for transgender voices to be. Transgender autobiographies play a crucial role in transgender literature and activism, amplifying marginalized voices, advocating for social change, and fostering empathy and understanding within society. In Judith Butler's words - "To articulate an identity is to

establish kinship with a political tradition, to place oneself in a landscape of struggle, to define one's location within a history of oppression and resistance.”

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