
Challenging Oppression through Education: A Freirean Analysis of *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*

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Abstract:

Access to education remains a distant promise for many transgender individuals, where learning is overshadowed by the constant need to defend one's identity. Classrooms, ideally spaces of growth and inclusion, often become sites of exclusion, discrimination, and silence for transgender students. This article examines *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, the autobiography of Living Smile Vidya, through the theoretical framework of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. The autobiography offers an intimate account of the author's life as a transgender woman in India and exposes the deeply embedded social and institutional barriers she encountered. By applying Freire's principles, the paper analyses how traditional education systems marginalize gender-nonconforming individuals while exploring how education can become a liberating force. Vidya's narrative powerfully demonstrates how the oppression impacts education, employment, and personal identity. The article argues for inclusive and transformative educational practices that reflect the lived realities of marginalized groups and provide meaningful empowerment.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Education, Employment, Empowerment, Transgender individuals

Introduction

Education has the potential to empower, liberate, and transform lives, but for marginalized individuals, it often becomes a space of exclusion and struggle. Living Smile Vidya provides a powerful account of a transgender woman's experiences with systemic discrimination in Indian society, especially within educational and professional spaces. Her narrative exposes the structural inequalities that transgender individuals face, even when academically qualified, and reveals how societal norms continue to devalue their identities and aspirations. This article uses Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy to analyse Vidya's life story, focusing on how education can both perpetuate and challenge oppression. Freire emphasized that true education

should awaken critical consciousness and empower learners to question and transform their realities (1970). Vidya's journey, though marked by rejection, isolation, and economic marginalization, also reflects resilience and the transformative potential of learning. By applying a Freirean lens to Living Smile Vidya's autobiography, this analysis highlights how inclusive and critical education can create space for marginalized voices to be heard and respected. An urgent need for educational reforms that support transgender students not only in access and representation but also in affirming their identities and aspirations within society is also discussed.

Educational Spaces as Zones of Exclusion

"Even kids from the lower classes teased me at school: 'Look at this lady,' they shouted after me. It became quite common for the boys to trouble me. I was still a bright student, but I was lonely throughout high school. My studies began to suffer" (Vidya 24). Vidya narrates how much she had to endure during her high school days, undergoing constant bullying and teasing not only from the elder boys in her school but also from the boys from lower classes. These lines draw attention to the prejudice and harassment transgender students experience in classroom environments. Critical pedagogy offers an outline for examining and resolving the problems faced by Vidya, because it highlights the role that education plays in challenging oppression, marginalization that exist within educational systems and advancing social justice. Critical pedagogy is an effective strategy to enhance the critical thinking capability of students and to generate positive behavioral change in students' lives. This is a strategy that enhances student consciousness, understanding, and judgment. It gives students a voice to speak in the classroom (Uddin, Muhammad Sharif 111).

Vidya's experience of being teased and bullied for her gender identity is a clear example of how oppressive behaviours are present in schools. Acknowledging this is the first step towards creating change. It also advocates for educational spaces that are inclusive and safe for all students. Vidya's loneliness and declining academic performance illustrate the lack of such an environment. Schools must implement policies and practices that actively promote respect and support for transgender students, ensuring they feel safe and included. Education should be a tool for empowerment, allowing students to see themselves reflected in their learning and feel valued. For transgender students like Vidya, this means incorporating LGBTQ+ perspectives into the curriculum and creating opportunities for self-expression and validation within the school community.

Legal recognition, healthcare access, and anti-discrimination protections are essential components of a supportive environment. However, many countries lack comprehensive policies that protect transgender rights. The absence of such protections can lead to systemic inequalities and barriers to accessing essential services. (Namaste 53)

Sociological research examines how different legal frameworks either support or hinder the rights of transgender individuals. Legal recognition is crucial for accessing various social and economic rights, and a lack of recognition can lead to marginalization and discrimination. Effective anti-discrimination policies are vital for protecting the rights of transgender individuals.

The Disconnect Between Education and Livelihood

According to Vidya, “As long as I did not want to be a sex worker, begging was my only option. All tirunangai had to face this cold truth. I prepared myself, and put my MA in linguistics into cold storage” (82). Vidya's decision to refrain from sex work was made possible by her education, which gave her the freedom to make her own decisions. These lines reflect the harsh realities faced by many transgender individuals like Vidya, despite their educational achievements. However, these lines also provide a starting point to discuss how effective educational pathways can empower individuals like Vidya to overcome systemic barriers and utilize their education meaningfully. Critical pedagogy can be employed to analyse and understand these lines, emphasizing the role of education and social awareness in challenging and transforming oppressive structures. The theory seeks to uncover and address the systemic inequalities and power dynamics that perpetuate oppression. The excerpt reveals how transgender individuals (tirunangais) are systematically marginalized, with their education and skills being devalued. Vidya's MA in Linguistics symbolizes her academic achievements and capabilities. However, the inability to translate this degree into meaningful employment underscores a critical gap between education and the job market for transgender individuals. Despite having an MA in linguistics, the narrator is forced into begging due to societal discrimination and a lack of opportunities. In contrast to Vidya, a large number of transgender individuals are uneducated, which makes it impossible for them to obtain employment. As a result, their only sources of sustenance are prostitution.

Lack of Institutional Support and Social Security

“No Indian NGO had fought to liberate tirunangai from begging and sex work. What kind of rehabilitation was it to tell them, ‘Go on being sex workers, but do it safely?’” (Vidya 123). People who identify as transgender are not covered by any type of social security and are shut out of the ordinary economy. Through her writing, Vidya calls for a shift in the way the government and the general public view the transgender community to give them access to healthcare, work opportunities, and education. These lines point out the inadequacies of existing support systems for transgender individuals (tirunangai) in India. This passage underscores the need for comprehensive educational pathways that can empower transgender individuals like Vidya, providing them with opportunities to escape the cycle of marginalization and unemployment. “An act on transgender protection marks a legal acknowledgment of transgender rights. Its impact on their advocacy efforts and the broader transgender community's access to education and employment is significant (“Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act” 2019).” Vidya's transgender identity prevented her from getting a decent career. Because they are not allowed to

participate in the mainstream workforce, the hijra community's economic situation is still unstable even after the declaration of Transgender Persons Act in 2019, and they are forced to rely on their earnings from sex work, extortion, and begging. Thus, the aggression against their community is exacerbated.

Vidya's pursuit of higher education, exemplified by her MA in linguistics, demonstrates her commitment to self-improvement and her potential to contribute meaningfully to society. Despite her academic qualifications, societal prejudices and lack of support forced her into begging and sex work, highlighting the gap between educational attainment and employment opportunities for transgender individuals. There is a crucial need to bridge the gap between education and employment for transgender individuals. Effective educational pathways should include career counselling, vocational training, and job placement services specifically geared towards transgender students. These services can help them navigate the job market and find employment that aligns with their skills and interests.

Education as Resistance and Transformation

“When are you joining?” he asked next. I can never forget that moment, ‘I’ll join tomorrow, sir,’ I told him happily. My job hunting had been a penance. It was finally bearing fruit” (Vidya 126). The excerpt reflects the culmination of a difficult and persistent search for employment, highlighting the critical role of educational pathways in achieving this success. Vidya's educational journey, culminating in securing a job, reflects her persistence and determination. Despite the systemic barriers and discrimination she had faced, her education provided her with the knowledge and qualifications necessary to persist in her job search until she found success. The satisfaction and relief Vidya expresses upon finding a job emphasize the empowerment that education can provide. Having the right qualifications can open doors and offer chances for personal and professional progress, which is particularly essential for marginalized individuals like Vidya. The difficulty Vidya is having finding employment can be interpreted as a challenge to the discriminatory systems that frequently exclude transgender people. In order to foster fairness and inclusivity, critical pedagogy emphasizes the necessity of challenging and dismantling these systems in both professional and educational contexts. “The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption” (Freire 54). The achievement of Vidya is viewed as a step toward confronting and changing repressive societal institutions as well as a personal accomplishment. Her journey serves as an excellent example of critical pedagogy, underlining the role that education plays in promoting social change, empowerment, and critical awareness. Educational paths can become effective instruments for attaining equity and inclusion by addressing the unique demands and difficulties of marginalized communities.

Conclusion

In *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, Living Smile Vidya narrates her life with striking honesty, revealing how education can be both a source of strength

and a site of struggle for transgender individuals. When read through the lens of Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy, her story becomes not just personal, but profoundly political. Freire believed that education should be a liberating experience, one that awakens awareness and encourages individuals to question the structures that oppress them. For Vidya, early education was far from liberating. Teased and isolated at school, her academic performance suffered under the weight of daily humiliation. Yet, she persisted, eventually earning a postgraduate degree in Linguistics. This achievement did more than boost her qualifications; it gave her a language to articulate her identity and experiences, and a weapon to resist a society that tried to silence her. Living Smile Vidya's life narrative is a powerful testament that challenges social norms and advocates for the acceptance and rights of transgender individuals in India. Her active participation in advocacy to advance social change, challenge deeply ingrained stereotypes, and expose the challenges faced by the transgender community through her accounts. Vidya's pursuit of an MA in Linguistics and her subsequent academic success challenge the notion that transgender individuals are unfit for higher education and professional success. Her achievements serve as a powerful counter-narrative to societal expectations of failure and discrimination. Freire emphasized that education itself may not directly change the world, but it empowers individuals with the critical consciousness to enact transformation (Freire 1970). Vidya's journey is a demonstration of this idea. Even when her degree couldn't immediately secure stable employment, it empowered her to reject sex work, speak out for the community, and eventually find meaningful work. Her story challenges us to ask: Are our education systems liberating or limiting? As an answer to this question, when viewed through Vidya's lived experience, is complex but revealing. Her life demonstrates that education can become a practice of freedom, transforming both lives and societies.

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