

Narrating the Margins: Transgender Identity, Social Exclusion and Resistance in *I Am Vidya*

Ms. Monika MS

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra,
Haryana, India.
monikadalal06@gmail.com

Dr. Sunita Siroha

Professor.
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Abstract:

This research paper explores how Living Smile Vidya's autobiography, *I Am Vidya* (2007), depicts the complex interplay of identity, exclusion, and agency of a transgender person. While contemporary scholarship often frames transgender experiences through static, marginalising social lenses, this study identifies a distinct Evolution of Resistance as a developmental process. It turns historical silence into speech and invisibility into visibility. By analysing the narrative through the theoretical lenses of Intersectionality and Performativity, the paper traces Vidya's journey from the Internalised Resistance of her childhood and the radical Bodily Resistance of her medical transition (*Nirvana*) to the Institutional Resistance of her post-transition life as a scholar and activist. The study fills a critical research gap by examining the "Mirror" as a spatial threshold of self-reclamation and the rhythmic "Morse code" of community clapping as a sonic act of defiance. Ultimately, Vidya's narrative transforms the transgender subject from a passive object of social scrutiny into an empowered spokesperson of her own reality.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Resistance, Social Exclusion, Bodily Autonomy, Narrative Agency, Intersectionality.

Introduction

The emergence of transgender autobiographies in India marks a radical shift in the country's literary and socio-political landscape. Historically, transgender individuals were systematically ignored, erased and excluded from both canonical literature and mainstream society. Through biographies and personal narratives, contemporary trans authors are actively reclaiming their identity and initiating an era of vocal self-reclamation.

Within this burgeoning corpus, *I Am Vidya* stands as a seminal text. It transforms historical silences into speech and social invisibility into open expression and public recognition. Vidya's narrative represents experiences that society had previously ignored. The paper argues that the autobiography is not merely a record of personal hardship; rather, it is a political statement against structural violence and social ostracism. Vidya's writing becomes a form of resistance against systemic injustice faced by transgender communities.

The existing body of literature on trans narratives frequently emphasises the overt drama of family rejection, exclusion from education, and discrimination in employment. However, this paper proposes a different approach by examining how Vidya's resistance develops and transforms over time. This dynamic developmental trajectory is conceptualised here as the 'Evolution of Resistance'. Rather than viewing resistance as a static reaction, this paper traces how Vidya's agency arises from the silent, internalised cognitive defiance during her youth. Her resistance began internally in childhood, became bodily reclamation during transgender surgery (Nirvana), and finally evolved into a sophisticated form of institutional and digital activism.

This evolution illustrates that transgender identity is not merely a personal whim or temporary desire; rather, it is a lifelong political struggle for existential acceptance in a society whose discourse has traditionally rendered transgender bodies unintelligible. Unpacking this

trajectory, the study incorporates Judith Butler's concept of gender-performativity, which explains how gender is socially constructed through repeated performances, alongside Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which examines how multiple forms of oppression interact simultaneously.

Drawing on Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, the paper examines Vidya's early life as Shravanan through the lens of the 'Constitutive Outside' -the marginalised space occupied by those who are violently excluded from accepted, normative social categories. Vidya becomes socially invisible because her identity does not conform to traditional gender expectations. Thus, her subsequent assertion of her true self serves as a performative affirmation of existence; by choosing her own name, she publicly confirms her existence and humanity. Simultaneously, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is vital for decoding the specificities of Vidya's marginalisation. Vidya does not experience transphobia in a vacuum; she faces multiple, interconnected forms of discrimination as a Dalit transgender woman. Her caste position, gender identity and economic struggle combine to intensify her vulnerability. For instance, her father's masculine, authoritarian behaviour reflects a deep-seated social anxiety to escape caste-based and economic marginalisation. In their social reality, academic success is viewed as a singular vehicle for social mobility and respectability.

Consequently, this paper closely studies three major evolutionary themes: the domestic and pedagogical identity crises of youth, the visceral phenomenology, and institutional bureaucracy. The 'architecture' of this 'resistance' begins within the home, where the mirror serves as the first spatial threshold of self-recognition. Vidya's childhood acts of wearing her sister's clothes secretly reflect her rejection of socially imposed masculinity.

The study then moves to the clinical margins of the medical transition known as Nirvana, where the 'slaughterhouse' metaphor underscores the raw physical trauma endured to obliterate the

deeper pain of social erasure. This transition transforms Vidya from someone studied and controlled by society, i.e. ‘the state of subjugated knowledge’, into someone who speaks and writes her own truth. Finally, it examines her institutional resistance, highlighting the vast chasm between the progressive legal framework and the daily realities of bureaucratic erasure.

The Domestic and Pedagogical Margin: Childhood, Caste, and Linguistic Violence

The foundational chapters of *I Am Vidya* reveal a domestic space that is profoundly contradictory – functioning simultaneously as a site of extreme gender privilege and a virtual prison. For Vidya, then identified as Shravana, being the male heir in a Dalit household conferred a special status within the family unit. She was strictly exempted from manual labour by an unwritten law, which was strictly enforced by her father, to protect her academic potential. However, this apparent privilege was not a gesture of liberation, but it isolated Vidya, serving as a mechanism that forcibly alienated her from her own femininity. This privilege becomes another form of oppression. Her identity was rigorously regulated by her father’s absolute authoritarianism, as desperation rooted in the family’s structural status as municipal sweepers. Her father viewed Saravanan’s education as the family’s singular hope for social transformation and escape from an ‘abject caste existence’. Vidya reflects critically on her childhood privilege. She often reminds:

“I was a privileged member of the household. Of the three children, I was the one who didn’t have to do any work at home. That was the unwritten law... ‘The only work we want you to do is study,’ Appa said... I was the male heir of the family, and that was reason enough to exempt me from work of any kind!” (Vidya 16)

The Spatial Threshold of the Mirror and Internalised Defiance

Before her resistance could manifest publicly, it developed through Cognitive Resistance, a vital psychological process in which a marginalised subject preserves an authentic inner

identity that directly contradicts the social role they are forced to perform. These early acts of defiance occurred within the silent, physical margins of her family's home. At the age of six or seven, Vidya began to utilise the 'Princess' archetype as a psychological shield to protect her inner femininity from the aggressive masculinity imposed upon her. This act of spatial reappropriation allowed her to convert an oppressive domestic cage into a site of self-expression. Even without access to feminine clothes, she engaged in creative performances of femininity, exposing the irrationality of constructed gender binaries:

“What’s wrong with my preferences? Why should a boy only wear shirts and trousers? I like skirts and blouses. Why can’t I wear them? Why do people find something odd in what comes to me naturally?” (Vidya 29)

The primary locus for this identity construction is the mirror. The mirror acts as a profound spatial threshold; it is the only site where the gaze is reciprocal and unmediated by societal policing. Vidya established a 'habit of mentalizing' her reflection, actively transforming the physical armour, allowing her to align her visual presence with her inward truth.

This internal negotiation is separable from her Dalit identity. Her father's desperate obsession with her schooling was a direct survival response to systemic caste exclusion. While education was intended as a tool for institutional empowerment, it simultaneously created a painful secondary marginalisation for Vidya. To protect the family's singular ticket out of poverty, she was forced to suppress her femininity and perform hypermasculinity to satisfy her father's dream, even though her inner self underwent a radical transformation.

The Pedagogical Margin: Bullying and Linguistic Violence

When Vidya transitioned into the academic sphere, the site of marginalisation shifted from the home to the school, which quickly became an arena of verbal and physical trauma. Instead of offering empowerment, the educational environment intensified her sufferings through severe

bullying and mockery. The most pervasive tool of this exclusion was linguistic violence—the systemic use of derogatory labelling and abusive language to inflict deep psychological harm. Classmates utilised ‘crude puns’ and emasculating suffixes to isolate her:

“Even though I was extra careful not to reveal myself, my irrepressible femininity exposed me. Once again, I became an object of ridicule, and inevitably, my studies were affected” (Vidya 25).

A particularly agonising manifestation of this violence was her assignment to the “Ninth Position” in the school assembly line. In Tamil culture landscapes, the number nine carries an intensely derogatory meaning, used as a dehumanising slur to jeer at transgender individuals as abnormal or incomplete.

By forcing Vidya into this specific physical position daily, the school transformed a routine administrative lineup into a recurring ritual of public alienation.

This pedagogical discipline was violently reinforced at home. When the trauma of bullying caused Vidya’s academic performance to dip, her father viewed it as a direct threat to the family’s economic salvation. His subsequent physical violence served as a brutal, corporeal reminder of the rigid boundaries governing the “male heir” role. However, despite being beaten “bruised black and blue” for her feminine preferences, Vidya’s cognitive resistance remained unbreakable. This resilience marked a vital evolutionary turning point: her agency shifted from suicidal ideation and despair toward an unshakeable certainty about her identity and her future independence.

The Clinical Margin: Nirvana and the Phenomenology of Bodily Resistance

Sex reassignment surgery, culturally known as Nirvana, represents the definitive turning point in Vidya’s life narrative, marking her evolution from internal emotional defiance to external

physical realisation. Within the clinical margins of an unofficial nursing home in Cuddapah, Vidya shifts her resistance to a radical, corporeal reclamation of the self.

While a significant portion of early transgender scholarship on Vidya emphasises the dehumanising elements and the unsafe, unhygienic conditions of the medical environment she endures, a closer textual reading reveals that Vidya utilises this trauma as a transformative tool. Often, she discusses that the nursing home is her collective memory of survival and also gives her fear and trauma; the walls of the recovery room are scrawled with the names of predecessors who “feared they would die on the operating table” (Vidya 12). Far from being mere graffiti, this act of scribbling represents a historical, collective resistance against institutional erasure – a way for trans individuals to leave an indelible mark of their existence.

The “Slaughterhouse” Metaphor and the Economics of Pain

Vidya explicitly describes the operating room as a “slaughterhouse” rather than a sterile medical theatre. This deliberate metaphor serves as a severe indictment of the Indian healthcare system, which routinely forces transgender individuals into clandestine, unregulated spaces due to a total lack of institutional medical support. In this space, the medical staff treats the trans body with a clinical, mechanical indifference, completely stripping away the patient’s individuality. Vidya illustrates this cold dehumanisation during the agony of her spinal injection.

However, the medical system treated them as if they were no individual. This was the process that she rejected during her childhood, but she wants to remove the virtual poison of her male-assigned life. Consequently, Vidya highlights that this pain is an investment in the future identity. As she notes

“Inside, I was at peace. It was a huge relief. I was now a woman: mine was a woman’s body. Its shape would be what my heart wanted, had yearned for. This pain would obliterate all earlier pains” (Vidya 137).

By embracing this suffering as a pathway to sovereignty, Vidya’s narrative challenges traditional theoretical frameworks that view trans bodies as inherently “trapped” or broken. Instead, the surgery becomes a radical, highly conscious political alignment of the physical body with the soul.

Sovereignty through Suffering: The Post-Operative Peace

This post-operative peace constitutes an act of absolute bodily resistance. By finding spiritual fulfilment in her transition, Vidya completely rejects the state’s bio-political definition of her surgery as an “illegal” or “improper” procedure. She immediately asserts her entry into womanhood through a series of phone calls to her family, a performative reclamation of her rightful place in the social world:

“Amma, Amma, I have blossomed into womanhood. I have shed my old identity. My name is Vidya..... I am now your sister, your sister Radha. Please come to me. Chitti, Manju, Prabha, Appa...” (Vidya 17).

This public declaration proves that her transition is never a mere “personal whim” but an explicit “political appeal for visibility”.

This bodily sovereignty is permanently cemented through the ritual of Chatla, a foundational tradition within the Tirunangai community of South India used to affirm and celebrate a transgender identity. For Vidya, Chatla functions as an alternative, indigenous form of legal recognition. Instead of waiting for a cold, transphobic government office to authorise her gender, Vidya announces her identity directly to the natural elements and the expanse of the world. By bypassing the massive gap between progressive laws and their discriminatory

implementation, this ritualistic performance allows Vidya to exist autonomously outside of heteronormative societal binaries, reclaiming her inherent human dignity through communal tradition.

4. The Socio-Legal and Institutional Margin: Economic Resistance and Professional Triumphs

The final phase of Vidya's evolutionary trajectory involves her navigation of the social-legal and institutional margins, spaces where transgender individuals have traditionally been relegated to the status of permanent outsiders. Here, Vidya's narrative directly confronts the state's regulatory frameworks. Her gruelling bureaucratic battle within the corridors of the Tamil Nadu Stationery and Printing Departments to legally change her name from Saravanan to Living Smile Vidya exposes a deeply flawed legal apparatus. The state enforces a hypocritical catch-22; it demands formal medical certificates to process a name change, yet simultaneously refuses to recognise or authorise the very medical certificates trans individuals provide. While the landmark *NALSA v. Union of India* (2014) judgment formally recognised the right to self-identification, Vidya's narrative documents the agonising practical chasm that persists between federal legislative mandates and localised social realities.

Economic Resistance as a Claim of Compensation

This institutional exclusion directly impacted Vidya's financial survival, resulting in the denial of formal employment. Despite holding a master's degree in applied linguistics and possessing exemplary academic credentials, her job applications were repeatedly rejected solely due to her gender identity.

Faced with starvation, Vidya turned to begging, an act that this paper argues must be radically reframed. Rather than viewing her begging as a sign of passive helplessness or tragic defeat, the text demonstrates that Vidya transforms it into a deliberate claim of financial restitution

from a society that flagrantly violated its own social contract by denying her access to formal labour. To survive this trade, Vidya had to overcome an intense internal battle against her own conditioning. She notes the immense psychological barrier she faced during her first two weeks on the street:

“During the first fifteen days of my career as a beggar, I encountered several obstacles. That made it difficult for me to extend my handling application. These obstacles include humiliation, fear, ego, education, memories of accolades and rewards. On the other hand, within our reasonable amount of time, I was able to triumph and successfully let go of my overpowering sense of guilt for asking (Vidya 92)

By actively confronting and overcoming this internalised shame, Vidya reappropriated begging as a site of collective survival. Crucial to this economic resistance is the community’s rhythmic, Synchronized clapping. While mainstream society reductionistically stereotypes trans clapping as an annoying gesture of harassment or begging. Vidya reveals it to be a sophisticated, sonic “Morse code”. This clapping operates as a secret, shared language of moral support, an assertion of space, and a tool for collective visibility. It is a powerful sonic performance that transforms localised vulnerability into a mobilising tool for group empowerment.

The Failure of the NGO Sector and the Pursuit of Dignity

Vidya’s institutional resistance also features a sharp, necessary critique of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector in India. She exposes how well-meaning organisations frequently pathologise transgender individuals, reducing them exclusively to ‘disease-afflicted sex workers’, and focusing their funding entirely on HIV /AIDS prevention rather than holistic education and career development.

This narrow paternalistic view further marginalises trans individuals by implying they are inherently incapable of occupying professional, intellectual spaces. Consequently, Vidya's resistance at this stage is an intellectual one. She resists tokenism and demands equal professional respect based on her qualifications and abilities. She notes the bitterness of having academic credentials that are ignored by the state. She asserts:

“Having a Master of Arts degree does not necessarily guarantee work prospects... even those who sympathise... will be hesitant to hire someone who identifies as transgender” (Vidya 91).

Furthermore, she denounces the degrading “administrative penance” and suffocating red tape designed by the state to exhaust the marginalised citizens into total submission.

Professional Integration and the Subversion of the Binary

Ultimately, Vidya enacts a monumental subversion of these socio-economic barriers through her successful integration into the formal banking sector and the realm of professional digital activism. Her employment at the Micro Credit Bank serves as a powerful disruption of the narrow economic options (such as forced sex, work or permanent begging) typically available to trans women. In this corporate space, she experienced genuine camaraderie from colleagues who evaluated her output, rather than her anatomy:

“It was a time I felt I was being treated as a human being in a workspace where they did not see my gender as a handicap; they saw my work” (Vidya158).

This professional environment provided a baseline of everyday social security that formal legislation had failed to guarantee.

Building on this success, Vidya transitioned into digital activism by launching a personal blog that enabled her to circumvent localised social stigma and address a broader public beyond the constraints of immediate community prejudice. Through the digital sphere, she connected her

personal experiences directly with global discourses on social justice. By writing and publishing her narrative in her own unmediated voice, Vidya exemplifies a profound epistemological shift. She ceases to be a passive “object of knowledge” analysed by cisgender academics, and instead establishes herself as an active, sovereign “producer of knowledge”.

Conclusion: The Power of Resilience and Cultural Transformation

Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya* offers a vital, multi-layered blueprint of how marginalised individuals can systematically dismantle oppressive socio-legal structures to reclaim their inherent dignity. By mapping her life journey through a three-stage framework of "Evolution of Resistance," this paper has demonstrated that transgender agency is neither static nor purely reactive. Rather, it evolves from the quiet, internal sanctuaries of "Cognitive Resistance" in childhood, matures into the visceral, sovereign domain of "Bodily Resistance" during the trauma of Nirvana, and culminates in a sophisticated form of Institutional and Digital Resistance that simultaneously challenges the state, corporate sectors, and civil society organisations alike. Vidya radically redefines the phenomenology of physical pain, transforming the raw suffering of an unregulated medical transition into a deliberate tool for existential liberation.

Theoretically, this evolutionary trajectory underscores the indispensable value of synthesising Judith Butler's theory of performativity with Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality. Butler's framework illuminates Vidya's struggle against the “constitutive outside,” illustrating how her linguistic renaming and bodily performance force a rigid gender binary to acknowledge her existence. Concurrently, Crenshaw's intersectionality ensures that her experiences are never detached from her reality as a Dalit woman. Her father's authoritarian enforcement of hyper-masculinity and her subsequent exclusion from formal labour are deeply rooted in the intersection of caste vulnerability, poverty, and transphobia. Her eventual

reclamation of begging as a justified claim for social compensation—complemented by the sonic “Morse code” of community clapping—proves that even the most marginalised spaces can be transformed into sites of profound political critique.

Ultimately, *I Am Vidya* contributes a transformative perspective to the wider field of transgender life writing and subaltern scholarship. It firmly rejects the historical literary tendency to view transgender lives through a lens of pure tragedy, pathology, or victimhood. Instead, Vidya positions the trans subject as an intellectual leader and a sovereign producer of knowledge. Her final, triumphant declaration of kinship and self-acceptance functions as an enduring mobilising tool for global trans empowerment. Her narrative stands as unshakeable proof that true resistance lies in the absolute refusal to be silenced, demanding a world where gender diversity is integrated with unconditional dignity.

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