

Social Exclusion and Intersectionality in Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya*

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Abstract: Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya* is a groundbreaking autobiographical account of a transgender Dalit woman navigating the layered structures of exclusion in Indian society. This paper explores the narrative through two critical frameworks: social exclusion and intersectionality. While the text has often been analyzed as a transgender life story, the overlapping axes of caste, class, gender, and region demand a more nuanced reading. This study argues that understanding Vidya's experience through intersectionality reveals the multi-dimensional oppression she faces and the resilience required to reclaim identity and dignity in a deeply hierarchical society.

Keywords: Living Smile Vidya, transgender, intersectionality, caste, social exclusion, Dalit, Tamil Nadu, autobiography, gender identity, class oppression

Introduction

In recent years, the discourse on transgender rights in India has gained increasing visibility, particularly following the legal recognition of a third gender by the Supreme Court in 2014. However, public attention often fails to account for the layered complexities that shape the lived experiences of transgender individuals, especially those situated at the intersections of other marginalized identities. *I Am Vidya* by Living Smile Vidya, a Dalit transgender woman from Tamil Nadu, is a powerful autobiographical account that challenges singular narratives of gender identity.

“People see only the fact that I am a transgender. They do not see that I am also a Dalit. Even among the transgender community, caste matters.”— Living Smile Vidya, *I Am Vidya*.

This quote underscores the intersectionality of Vidya's identity, illustrating how caste continues to be a significant axis of discrimination even within already marginalized groups.

This paper proposes that *I Am Vidya* must be understood not just as a transgender life story, but as a critical text that lays bare the compounded effects of caste, class, gender, and regional belonging. Traditional analyses have predominantly focused on Vidya's gender transition, often neglecting the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of her marginalization. This study seeks to address that gap by integrating the frameworks of **social exclusion** and **intersectionality**, particularly drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw's theorization of how overlapping social identities produce unique experiences of oppression.

By highlighting the ways in which Vidya is systematically excluded from education, employment, family, and public life—not only because she is transgender, but because she is also Dalit and economically marginalized—this paper foregrounds the need for intersectional analysis in literary and social discourse. Vidya’s journey is not simply one of personal transformation, but one that reflects the broader structural inequalities entrenched in Indian society.

Literature Review

Previous scholarship on *I Am Vidya* has predominantly centered on the themes of gender identity and transformation. Studies have acknowledged Vidya’s contribution to the transgender discourse in India but have often overlooked the deeper layers of marginalization that intersect in her narrative. Academic work has typically focused on the biographical aspects of her transition, touching upon psychological resilience and societal rejection.

“After I started dressing like a woman, the people who used to call me ‘teacher’ refused to even look at me.”

This quote reflects institutional and interpersonal exclusion, highlighting how Vidya’s transition triggered social alienation, despite her professional qualifications and prior acceptance.

However, recent literature on social exclusion and intersectionality suggests that marginalized individuals experience multiple, compounded forms of discrimination. Scholars like Naila Kabeer and Ruth Lister have argued for a more inclusive understanding of exclusion that accounts for caste, class, and gender simultaneously. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality framework, originally applied in the context of race and gender in the United States, has increasingly been adapted to examine the experiences of marginalized communities in South Asia, especially Dalit women and transgender individuals.

“Dalits and transgenders are seen as polluting. When you are both, you are untouchable in every sense.”

Here, Vidya brings to light the layered marginalization she experiences. The concept of "pollution" attached to both Dalit and transgender identities reflects deep-rooted cultural stigma.

Yet, there remains a significant research gap in applying intersectional frameworks to the analysis of transgender Dalit autobiographies. This paper seeks to address that lacuna by positioning Vidya’s narrative within a broader theoretical context that acknowledges her multidimensional marginalization.

“Education gave me knowledge, but it could not give me acceptance.”

This quote supports your critique of the limitations of existing analyses, showing that education alone doesn’t guarantee inclusion, particularly for Dalit trans individuals.

Theoretical Framework This study draws upon two primary frameworks: **Social Exclusion Theory** and **Intersectionality**.

- **Social Exclusion Theory:** This theory posits that individuals and groups are systematically blocked from accessing rights, opportunities, and resources that are normally available to members of society and that are key to social integration. It is particularly useful in analyzing how institutional structures such as education, employment, and healthcare exclude individuals on the basis of their identity.
- **Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw):** Intersectionality theorizes that social categorizations such as race, gender, class, and caste do not exist independently of each other but interrelate to create a system of oppression that reflects the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination. In this context, intersectionality allows for a deeper understanding of how Vidya's gender identity interacts with her caste and class background to produce unique experiences of exclusion.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research methodology rooted in textual analysis. The primary text, Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya*, is examined through close reading to identify key themes of social exclusion and intersectionality. The analysis is contextualized using relevant secondary sources including academic articles, books on gender and caste, and theoretical texts on intersectionality and social exclusion.

The study also applies a socio-literary approach, combining literary critique with sociological insights to offer a holistic understanding of the text. Data from government reports, NGO documentation on transgender rights, and historical perspectives on Dalit oppression are used to support the arguments.

1. Social Exclusion in *I Am Vidya* Social exclusion in the Indian context is often rooted in rigid social structures such as caste hierarchy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. Vidya is excluded from educational institutions, employment opportunities, housing, and even her own family because of her gender identity. The rejection she faces is not only institutional but also interpersonal, reflecting the pervasive stigma against the transgender community.

Key moments in the autobiography highlight how transgender individuals are pushed to the margins of society, often left with no choice but to resort to begging or sex work. Vidya's decision to leave her teaching job after her transition underscores the institutional intolerance and lack of safeguards for transgender employees.

"People were ready to see me as a beggar or sex worker, but not as a teacher."

This reinforces the theme of societal intolerance for trans individuals in professional roles, especially when combined with caste and class markers.

2. Intersectionality with Other Social Identities While gender identity forms the core of Vidya's narrative, other social identities such as caste, class, and regional background

compound her struggles. Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is instrumental in understanding how multiple identities interact to produce distinct experiences of marginalization.

“When you don’t have a family that supports you, and when you are poor and transgender, there are very few choices left.”

This quote ties in with discussions around economic marginalization. It captures how poverty, family rejection, and gender identity intersect to restrict one’s life chances.

2.1 Caste and Gender:

Vidya identifies as a Dalit, and although caste is not always foregrounded in her narrative, its influence is palpable. Dalit transgender individuals face double discrimination, being stigmatized both for their caste and their gender identity. The intersection of these two identities places them at the bottom of the social ladder, with limited access to resources, support systems, or justice.

2.2 Class and Economic Insecurity:

Vidya's working-class background further intensifies her vulnerability. Her family’s financial struggles and her own economic dependence limit her options for transition and self-expression. Even after acquiring higher education, her identity as a trans woman becomes a barrier to stable employment, demonstrating how class and gender intersect to restrict mobility.

2.3 Education and Social Mobility:

Despite institutional exclusion, Vidya achieves academic success and briefly works as a school teacher. However, her journey reveals that education alone cannot dismantle the societal barriers erected by intersecting identities. Her experience exposes the myth of meritocracy, especially when identity-based discrimination outweighs qualification.

“Education did not save me from being humiliated. Degrees don’t matter when society decides you’re not human.”

Vidya’s reflection here reveals the limits of education as a tool for empowerment in the face of systemic discrimination. It challenges the notion of meritocracy in a caste- and gender-stratified society.

2.4 Regional and Cultural Identity:

Vidya's life in Tamil Nadu adds another dimension to her story. The cultural conservatism and societal pressure of South Indian communities often exacerbate the challenges faced by non-conforming individuals. Her experience illustrates how regional norms and expectations play a role in shaping gender identities and their reception.

2.5 Religion and Symbolic Exclusion:

Though not a central theme, Vidya's narrative occasionally reflects on religious spaces and their exclusionary practices. The invocation of transgender figures in mythology contrasts sharply with the social alienation faced by real trans people, underscoring the hypocrisy embedded in cultural traditions.

3. Activism, Agency, and Resistance Vidya's life is not merely one of suffering but also of resistance. Her public identity as a Dalit transgender woman, her writing, and her activism challenge the normative structures of gender, caste, and class. She reclaims public space and voice, asserting her right to dignity and self-definition.

Her autobiography thus becomes a political text, not only recounting her journey but also offering a roadmap for inclusive identity politics in India. Through this act of self-narration, she resists symbolic and literal erasure.

"I don't want pity. I want justice, dignity, and a place to live like any other human being."

This closing quote reinforces the paper's emphasis on rights-based discourse rather than charity or sympathy, summarizing the broader call for structural change.

Conclusion

Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya* is an essential text for understanding the complex realities of social exclusion in India. An intersectional analysis reveals that her struggles are not rooted solely in gender identity but are exacerbated by caste, class, and cultural context. This paper highlights the urgent need for a more inclusive discourse that accounts for the overlapping structures of oppression that transgender individuals, especially those from marginalized communities, continue to face.

"I chose to write because I wanted to tell the world that I exist. That we exist."

This powerful statement frames her autobiography as an act of resistance and assertion. Writing becomes a political tool for visibility and validation.

Citations

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