

**Voice of a Trans Woman in Manobi Bandyopadhyay's
A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi**

Suba Lakshmi P
M.Phil. Research Scholar (English)
S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil
subalakshmipazhani@gmail.com

**Dr. S. Mangaiyarkarasi, M.A.,
M.Phil., Ph.D.**
Assistant Professor of English
S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil
tejasmangai@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

Apart from basic gender categories such as male and female, there is a third gender which refers to the community of transgender. These people are rejected and discriminated in the society in which they live. They are not accepted as common people. Their life is filled with struggle, tears and barriers and they are excluded and marginalized. Their life is different from that of ordinary people as they do not have a good repute in the society. In order to fulfill their basic needs, they beg and even sometimes are forced to work as sex workers. In 2014 the Supreme Court of India declared the transgendered persons as the third gender. This groundbreaking judgment paved a way for the transgender persons to gain recognition and have the privilege to enjoy their rights now days. Education shapes one's life and gives upliftment. Many transgender persons try to come out of their restricted cage to spread out their wings in flight. Only few transgender people like Manobi Bandyopadhyay have come out successfully breaking the shackles of the society. Education and family support alone have helped her to assert her identity and she has become a representative and voice of her community. This paper is an attempt to show how Manobi faces the struggles and comes out of the crisis to achieve greatness in the society.

Keywords: Manobi Bandyopadhyay, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, Transgender, Identity, Discrimination, Education.

Gender commonly refers to the differences between men and women. In literature it is referred as how individuals define themselves. The individuals are evaluated by others based on the gender. It is important to know how the gender works. It is difficult to face people when they look down on the sexuality. The lives of the transgender persons are terrible and are filled with barriers. They are left as orphans and tend to live an excluded life. Because of unemployment and lack of education, they are unable to lead a peaceful life. They are given the name hijras and are forced to work as sex workers. They even beg to balance their economic and daily needs. The society marginalizes them because of their different sexual orientation. They discriminate them because they consider homosexuality as shameful. Most of them struggle throughout their life. They have to move in the path of thorns.

Only people like Manobi remove away the thorns and moves in a clear way in the life. Ghoshal in “The Brave But Heartbreaking Journey of India’s First Transgender College Principal” points out, “Hijras as transgender people are called in India, are mocked for their mannerisms, feared for their dark powers and labelled as only suitable to begging for alms by singing and dancing. To dream beyond these stereotypes and aspire to a life of respect is a rare feat in a society that is unfair and prejudices out and out” (N. Pag). The term LGBTQ is used to refer sexuality and gender identity. Many organizations work for LGBTQ rights and they function nationwide like Human Rights India, some in informal way and legally funded. From 2014 transgenders in India are allowed to change their gender without surgery. They can have constitutional rights by registering under third gender. Some states protect them by offering housing programmes, welfare benefits, pension schemes and free surgery in the government hospitals. They are guaranteed voting rights as third sex. Educational institutions begin to accept transgender students. They have entered into the corporate fields, police force and are being acknowledged. There are many transgenders who have achieved in various ways. They have got good recognition in the society despite all struggles.

Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi also known as Laxmi is the first transgender person to represent Asia Pacific in the UN in 2008. She is the transgender rights activist, film actor in Hindi and a Bharathanatyam dancer. She represents her community and India internationally. She is the author of *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. Her auto biography is the tale of her struggle she has faced to become who she is now. Her family supports for her education and not for her sexual choice. Revathi, a trans woman, is the writer from Tamil Nadu. She is also an activist who works for the rights of the sexual minorities. She is the author of *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*. She is one of the first members of the hijra community to write a book in English.

The book *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* is the biography of Manobi Bandyopadhyay written by Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey. It is written in a way as Manobi narrates her life to Jhimli. Manobi was born under the name Somnath Bandyopadhyay, the youngest son in the middle class family on September 23, 1964. Believing that the birth of the boy will bring all wealth and prosperity, their relations and neighbours consider him as goddess Lakshmi born as a boy. It reveals the sexual change in her life. Somnath was a kind of a boy who is very industrious and topper at school. Right from childhood she has to struggle to have the body she wanted to have. Manobi had her education in Naihati’s Rishi Bankim Chandra College. She pursued her graduation in Jadavpur University. Manobi describes her journey towards self- identification, transformation from man to woman and the struggles she faces every day. As a teen ager she faces verbal insults and physical assaults from others. Her cousins and neighbours sexually exploit her. She has relation with many men and gets rejected. Though she is denied she has hope for future and moves towards her future endeavors. Right in the childhood Somnath identifies the girl in him. Being Somanth she wears her sister’s printed frocks, uses kohl and lip stick. She excels in her academics. It silences the comments that are passed on her at the sexuality. As a transgender she

faces the problem of sexual identity. While filling the application form in the college, Somnath marks male in the gender column as there was no option for transgender.

Manobi faces struggles in the process of transformation from Somnath to Manobi. She longs to change her sex as she does not want to be identified as a homosexual. Because of hormonal treatment and scalpel therapy, she has side effects and black acnes. Looking at the sexuality people consider that Manobi does not deserve identity in the society. But she breaks their thoughts by completing her Ph.D. in 2005. She gets the Principal post of Krishnagar Women's College in 2015. People tease, cheat, make fun of Manobi and discourage her growth. She differs from other transgendered people by her academic achievement. An article in *Hindustan Times* states, "India's first transgender Principal, Manobi's tale asserts that merit is the only equalizing factor in an unequal fight. Now well known for her achievements, she often wonders at how education has created a marked difference between the trajectory of her own life and that of other transgender" (no page). She moves right in her path and reaches great heights. Longing for the sexual change, Manobi shares her feelings with the medical student, Indra Da who gets an appointment for her to meet the psychiatrist. The thirst of Somnath to change into a woman does not slow down. She meets Mainak Mukhopadhyay who encourages her. She has many helping and comforting hands with her in all odd situations.

Because of education and the timely help from kind hearted people, Manobi identifies herself in the society. Being Somanth she longs to be a woman and wants to have the womanly life. She feels like a woman trapped in a male body. Yearning to menstruate, she wants to know the strips of clothes which are washed and dried privately. In her privacy she makes a similar sanitary napkins and tie around her genitals to have fake periods. As Somnath, she has to fight between the body she has and the body she wanted to have. Manobi is psychologically affected. Behavior of the people hurts her. They throw the paperweight on her chest and check her body parts by looking down at her dress. She becomes a sex toy for the people around her. Among all the struggles she moves forward to pursue her graduation. She faces insults and gets funny comments when she moves to Naihati's Rishi Bankim Chandra College. Bandyopadhyay shares:

Some started clapping their hands in glee when they saw me, some just whistled and catcalled and soon taunts filled the air. I hadn't expected this scene. In school, I had faced ridicule once in a while but my friends in general liked me. I was shocked at such a reaction but something inside told me to brace myself to face this and not display any sign of weakness. (40)

Towards the journey of self-identification, Manobi independently publishes India's first transgender magazine *Abomanob* meaning subhuman, the status given to the transgendered persons by the society. It contains interviews of transgenders. It throws light on health and hygiene issues of the transgender people. It explores their living environment, the language they speak, love, sex and

castration. In order to prove herself, she starts writing articles for publication in *Malini*, the first Bengali women's magazine. She explores her desire to become a journalist with the help of Arunoday Bhattacharya, her Bengali teacher. She changes her dressing style from unisex clothes to accessories like scarves and sunglasses. When she writes in *Aajkaal*, people treat her with respect and it thrills her. She feels academics bring everything to her. The psychology and the struggle of the transgender are understood through the life of Manobi. She wants to laugh loudly, eat and go out with friends. But all these are denied because of her sexual identity. She yearns for a partner on whom she could rest her head to feel light. She pursues her Post Graduation in Jhadavpur University. She enjoys freedom there because the atmosphere is filled with open minded social people. One of the greatest modernist poets Shankha Ghosh supports her to do sex change operation. He advises her to aim for the highest intellectual exchange and to come out of her mental depression. Enrolling in M.Phil., she starts working as a researcher at Pratibha Agarwal's Natya Shodh Sansthan. She works as a part time lecturer in Sri Krishna College for the salary of Rs. 125. Then she gets the teaching post at Patulia Boys School.

Manobi faces discrimination when she becomes a teacher. The people nearby her school come around to look at her in different attire and her feminine nature. As dancing and make up are quite natural for the transgendered persons, Manobi joins Manjushri Chaki Sarkar's group. She appoints her transgender friend Jagadish to teach dance. She starts Ardhanarishwar Natya Sanstha, a dance troupe to bring out the creativity among students. Education helps her to shatter the barriers that society had built around her. Bandyopahyay states, "In many ways I consider myself far more fortunate than transgendered people like Jagadish. If my family had not supported me despite my 'oddity' and forced me to excel in studies, God knows where I would have ended up" (75). Education shapes Manobi as what she is today. It helps her to represent her community.

Manobi's career as a College Professor was difficult. She finds hard to cope with the people who point out her sexuality and assault her physically. They press her nipples hard and pull her hair to check whether it is real or a wig. When she screams out of pain, they shut her mouth. Despite all difficulties she pursues her teaching profession. Unlike other transgendered persons, Manobi gets education through her family support. Bandyopadhyay tells, "Once again, I realized that despite the reservations I had expressed about my parents and sisters opposing my sexuality, I could not deny their contributions to my life. Had they not kept a strict eye on me and pushed me to complete my education and focus on my career, who knows where I would have ended up?" (114). In the first attempt to have sex change operation, Manobi came out of the operation theatre. In 2003 Manobi collects enough money and steps to do the operation with positivity. By the treatment of Dr. Khanna, she gets transformed from Somnath to Manobi, a trans woman. When she finds curves in her body, she feels her soul has found the body that has been denied to her for long years. Manobi gets cheated by Samarjit. She files case against him. By nature she is religious and optimistic. She prays to Lord Shiva. She faces lot of sittings and hearings in the court. Bandyopadhyay points out, "I asked God why he had created me like this? What have I done to deserve this karma! Eventually I felt at peace" (122). After long struggle she leaves it in the hands of

God. Her faith in Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Sarada Devi heal her pains and pulls her out of all struggles. Tagore's songs give her a constant inspiration and encouragement.

The transgender persons suffer to get identity and reservations till they are declared as socially back ward. Bandyopadhyay states, "The April 2014 judgement of the Supreme Court, recognizing transgendered people as a third gender and safeguarding their equal rights under the Constitution, was, to use an understatement, a landmark decision" (115,116). It safeguards their rights and equality under the constitution. It gives them recognition in the documents as Other, Transgender and Third gender. They have fundamental rights to change their gender. Manobi suffers in the name change. All her academic certificates bear the name Somanth Bandyopadhyay except her doctoral degree which bears the name Manobi Bandyopadhyay. By losing many years of seniority she convinces the state's higher education department that both Somanth and Manobi are same. Pritam Pal Singh in an article titled "Transgender moves Delhi High court for name change in Certificates" states "The NALSA judgment had declared transgenders as a 'third gender' and a back ward class entitled to reservations" (no page). There is a long way for such people to be accepted by the society.

The thirst to get identity made Manobi to apply for the post of Principal. With sixteen years of experience, a doctoral degree and the designation of Associate Professor she applies for the post in response to the state advertisement. Her publications of two books and hundreds of newspaper articles add points to API score. On March 2015 she becomes the Principal of Krishnagar Women's College. She faces triumph in her life when she becomes India's First Transgender Principal. People from clubs and institutions felicitate her. Manobi has been appointed as the Vice Chairperson of the transgender development board established by West Bengal government. She supports for the LGBTQ community and the human rights struggle. All her hard work and struggles lead her to taste the fruit of success. Out of all restrictions with family support and education, she enters into the world of reputation and fame. Only few people like her are able to come out and shine in the world. The society must give them support and good recognition. Manobi stands as a role model for many people especially the transgender persons. Her life inspires them to come out of restrictions. The discrimination towards the transgenders should come to an end. They must be respected and identified in the society.

Works Cited

Bandyopadhyay, Manobi and Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey. *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi: A Candid Biography of India's First Transgender Principal*. India: Penguin Books, 2017. Print.

Ghoshal, Somak. "The Brave But Heartbreaking Journey of India's First Transgender College Principal." *Huffpost*. 30 Feb. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2018.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:3 March 2019

Suba Lakshmi P. and Dr. S. Mangaiyarkarasi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Voice of a Trans Woman in Manobi Bandyopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*

Gupta, Aishwarya. "Making Her-Story: Review of A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi, Manobi Bandyopadhyay's memoir." *Hindustan Times*. 29 Apr. 2017. Web. 08 Nov. 2018.

Singh, Pritam Pal. "Transgender moves Delhi High Court for name change in certificates." *Indian Express*. 17 May. 2018. Web. 03 Nov. 2018.

=====