

The Concomitant Subversion of the Gender Binary through the
Assertion of Transgender Identity: A Study of Manobi
Bandyopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*

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Abstract

In their attempt at gender identity assertion, the transgendered simultaneously subvert the gender binary norm. The reclamation of one's gender identity aids the transgender individual to correct the biological mishap that results in a female psyche trapped in a male body and vice versa. The intense psychological conflict and the horrific transphobic violence from family and society, often drives the transgendered to suicide. Lisa R Miller and Eric Anthony Grollman in "The Social Costs of Gender Non-Conformity for Transgender Adults: Implications for Discrimination and Health" claim that the 2008 NTDS (the National Transgender Discrimination Survey) proves that frequent stigmatization and assault often drives the identity minorities towards substance abuse, alcoholism and/or suicide (*Sociological*, 826). However, the accomplishment of gender identity transforms the hitherto diffident individual to express oneself fully and articulate his/her personality in its entirety. Manobi Bandyopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* charts her struggle to become the *woman* in her mind in the face of ridicule and harassment from the academic circle. Her determination and persistence to assert herself paved her way to become the first transgender

principal in India. Therefore it may be assumed that the subversion of normative dichotomy of gender results in the establishment of the transgendered's *true* gender, which assists in the expression of one's personality.

Keywords- Gender Identity, Psyche, Subversion, Assertion

The transgender persons, belonging to the sexual and gender minority group, are exposed to stigmatization, discrimination and assault: society, comprising mostly of the normative gender binary, refuses to accept the various members of the umbrella term *transgender*. Sexual and gender minorities refer to the *gays* (men in relations with other men), *lesbians* (women who are physically attracted to other women), *bisexuals* (those who like relationships with members of both the male and the female gender), the *intersex* (formerly referred as hermaphrodites, are born with both male and female genitals) and the *large transgender* group. The transgender clan consists of the following categories-the transgender, the transvestite and the transsexual. While both the transgender and the transsexual persons are born with mismatched genitals, the former may or may not surgically transition to the opposite gender; the latter, on the other hand, undergo surgical interventions and/or hormone treatment to become trans men or trans woman, as the case may be. In India, the fine distinctions within the various sub categories of transgender family are usually ignored and even transsexual individuals may be addressed and/or refer to themselves as transgender. The transvestite alludes to one who cross dresses as a person of the other gender at drag performances and other events, mostly for sexual gratification.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2012) Judith Butler writes "gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes" and adds "gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (34). Butler also talks of the "heterosexualization of desire" that presupposes

“feminine” and “masculine” to be the “expressive attributes of the “male” and “female” (24). She refutes the claim of the “cultural matrix” that denies the identities in which “gender does not follow from sex and those in which, the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender” (24). Consequently, it may be assumed that the presence of male genitals in a male body cannot, or rather, must not declare or pronounce the person to be a *male*.

Manobi Bandyopadhyay, the first transgender College Principal in India was born as a male child into a family after two daughters. In the biography *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, written by Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey, Manobi is presented as the narrator who unfolds the whole life history, from being born as a male and his final transitioning into a female. The father, Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay was highly pleased as he had sired a *son* after such a long wait. Since the father believed the son was a gift from God Shiva, the baby was named Somnath. At the age of five or six, young Somnath found himself interested in wearing the feminine dresses of his elder sisters. At first this was done in the privacy of the room; gradually Somnath boldly walked all over the house in this outfit. Initially, it was dismissed as childish play but when it continued in spite of reprimands from his mother and relatives, it began to trouble his parents. Manobi recollects that when her mother tried to reason *him* out of this habit, he would say “But Ma, I am a woman... don’t you believe that? Can I not dress up better than any of you? *Let me be a girl!* Ma” (*Gift*, 10, emphasis added).

Somnath was ragged on his first day at school due to his feminine looks and delicate ways. His “extremely delicate and physically weak” structure prompted the boys to abuse him (8). They taunted him, called him names and “got me into trouble and have fun at the cost of harassing me” as Manobi reminisces (8). It is ironical that after some years, the same boys felt physically attracted to *him*; Somnath believed that it was *his feminineself* which motivated this behaviour from boys (emphasis added). Meanwhile he wondered why he felt attracted to boys instead of girls even while he felt he was a girl.

In *Fundamentals of Human Sexuality*, 2003, Richard Mc Anulty and M Michele Burnette mention that the concept of an individual's gender being one with his/her genital sex is an aberration. Research on people showing sex-differentiation incongruity has shown that along with biological characteristics, some environmental factors also play powerful influences in the formation of one's gender identity (242). The authors also report the gender-specific behaviour being moulded by "reinforcement, punishment and role-modelling" (247). It means the child who exhibits a gender-specific behaviour will be rewarded; consequently, the chances of such behaviour being repeated will increase. On the other hand, gender incongruent actions may be punished, which will discourage the child from repeating those actions in future. When a child imitates the behaviour of one's same-sex members and finds approval from family and acquaintances, the former considers that to be desirable (247-248). Whether or not the birth of a sex/gender incongruent baby is a biological accident or an environmental conditioning, remains to be well-researched and cannot be discussed in this paper.

On his first day at school, Somnath was ridiculed and laughed at due to his feminine ways and appearance. Manobi asserts it may have been because of Somnath's womanly gait and carriage. As a child Somnath enjoyed participating in family weddings where the sight of the bride with her "red Banarasi sari, veil and the jewellery" appealed to him (*Gift*, 11). In fact Somnath yearned for such a "height of femininity and beauty" (11). Even after many days of the wedding, Somnath would rewind the rituals he had witnessed in his mind and wish to become like the bride.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* claims that "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed...there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that gender is performatively constituted by the very 'expression' that are said to be its results" (34). It can be safely surmised that Somnath was

living the life of a girl he thought he was. Somnath loved watching Bengali films and was captivated by the beauty of the actresses, their mannerisms, hairdos and make up. Applying his mother's make up was another of his hobbies. Manobi recollects that when his sisters went for dance class, he accompanied them and just by watching them, he also learnt to dance. At times, Somnath would dance so well that the teacher would declare that he was a better learner than the girls in the class. Consequently, Somnath often got dance performances in which he dressed in feminine costume and he thoroughly enjoyed these events which helped him to fulfil his fantasies of a girl's life.

Even though Somnath continued his feminine behaviour, his parents overlooked it due to his academic excellence. Meanwhile Somnath was trying to figure out if surgery could help him to become a girl. At his senior school friend's tuition class, he articulated his gender crisis. When Somnath met the psychiatrist as directed, the latter advised him to forget the idea of surgery and live a boy's life. This incident throws light on the fact that even in the psychiatric field, transgenderism was recognised much late and the persons exhibiting gender dysphoria would not be understood, let alone empathised with. It was only in 2013 that *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5* (the manual for the assessment and diagnosis of mental disorders) renamed *Gender Identity Disorders* as *Gender Dysphoria*. The term Gender Dysphoria alludes to the condition when one's notion of oneself as male or female is contradictory to genitals at birth and one experiences misgivings about one's gender identity. Later Somnath was guided by a medical post graduate student, whose assurance that sex surgery could be done, assured him and he decided to start working to earn money in order to fulfil his dream.

In the secondary examination Somnath scored high marks which could easily help him to take science for his degree course. His parents expected him to take science as his sisters had also done so. Somnath, however, wanted to take Bengali literature; after a lot of

persuasion, his father relented. The first day at college, Somnath was received with taunts and catcalls as he went dressed in salwar and kurta. While boys looked at him strangely and looked uninterested in him, he went and sat next to girls who treated him considerately. Some boys asked him if he were a cross dresser. Manobi recollects, “I vehemently denied it and said that I was a woman *trapped* inside a man’s body, not knowing the term transgender” (41, emphasis added). The idea of being *trapped* in a body of the sex opposed to one’s true gender is often articulated by transgender individuals. Societal transphobia is apparent from the ragging by his college mates: transphobia points to the emotional feelings of anger, distrust, fear and revulsion against sexual and gender minorities who contest traditional concepts of sex and gender. Varieties of phobia related to the sexual and gender minorities, apart from transphobia are: homophobia; unfounded phobic reaction towards homosexual persons and biphobia or unreasonable fear and hatred of the bisexual category.

At college, Somnath got the support of the girls in his class. Many boys wanted physical relations with Somnath but the latter yearned for a deep emotional relationship. In spite of several sexual relationships, Somnath failed to find someone who loved him sincerely. Since he lacked good friends at college, Somnath yearned for some creative outlet. In order to escape the monotony of college life, Somnath started writing articles for a magazine. The journalistic experiences gave him a celebrity status at college. Somnath could now wear unisex attire more confidently and started using women’s accessories like scarves and sunglasses. Somnath joined Jadavpur University for his post-graduation: it was an invigorating experience for him. He enjoyed classes by the eminent teachers there and the progressive atmosphere also was conducive to his dressing style. Somnath was gratified that nobody looked upon him with disgust for his “sexual alignment” (*Gift*, 55). He managed to confide in his favourite teacher about his identity crisis. Even though Somnath studied well,

his marks for post- graduation were not as per his expectation. He concluded that his sexual status may have offended some teachers.

At the age of twenty three, Somnath got a part time job; later a permanent job came his way in a boys' school. Somnath was interested in interacting with boys and set up a dance and theatre group at school. Manobi reminisces about many boys who were gender dysphoric but unable to express themselves “for fear of parental and societal backlash” (67).

When Somnath joined the Vivekananda Satavarshiki College at Jhargram as a lecturer in 1995, he experienced transphobic reaction from the academic circle. His colleagues at the college often manhandled him: they pinched him on his nipples, groped him and once even attacked him with a paper weight. In spite of such horrible humiliation and personal misbehaviour from his colleagues, Somnath did not lose courage. He continued teaching and loved interacting with the students, who were hardly affected by his strange feminine ways.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler presents a performative expression of gender. She contests gender identity being a manifestation of one's natural gender and claims that gender identity is exhibited through repetitive practices enacted by the person. This may be explained thus: gender performance is not manipulated since it occurs unconsciously and is controlled through “regulative practises” (34). This explains Somnath's continual attempts to appear feminine; after all, deep within his psyche Somnath realized that he was actually a woman in a man's body.

Through hormone therapy and Sex Reassignment Surgery, the male yet feminine Somnath transitioned into a more womanly Manobi. The hormonal treatment brought about many changes in Somnath's body; his facial hair disappeared, bodily hair began to thin and curves appeared in waist, tummy and chest. The sex surgery removed the much abhorred penis and a perfect vagina was sculpted. Somnath also underwent psychological counselling alongside to become a *complete* woman. This proves that the transgender person's act of

asserting gender identity subverts the dichotomy of gender and simultaneously helps one to express oneself fully. Not only was Manobi able to assert her identity forcefully, but she also endeavoured to be bold in the face of personal humiliation. She went in for doctoral studies and acquired a Ph D in Bengali, the first transgender to do so. Her career achievements and her personal service eligibility enabled her to become the first transgender Principal in India. It is noteworthy that the post was purely on the basis of merit and she did not enjoy any political recommendation. This proves that a transgender person can achieve a lot in life if provided education and allowed to lead life like *normal* cisgender people.

As per Butler, sex dichotomy, looked upon as natural truth, results in heteronormativity being considered the norm. She posits that normalization of heterosexuality leads to the growth and legitimization of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. Butler's explanation of identity as fluid instead of being fixed forms the principle of Queer Theory and validates the transgender entity's efforts and struggles to transition to the gender of his/her choice.

The contestation of the dichotomy of gender binary by the transgender individual, not only questions the traditional ways of gender identity formation but it also enables the person to express and articulate his/her gender fully, thereby leading a meaningful life. The political correctness of heteronormativity is contested by the transgender persons who simultaneously express themselves through their strong gender identity assertion. The fact that sexual and gender minorities are stigmatised and bypassed due to their differences in sexual and gender identity, ought to be corrected and reparative measures to be introduced for their inclusion in mainstream society. An inclusive society which embraces all, irrespective of differences of caste, colour, religion, gender and financial status, will be an ideal society which ensures human rights of all are respected.

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