



Gender Identity And Essentialism : A Psychological Analysis Of A. Revathi's Autobiography

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Abstract

This article presents a psychological analysis of transgender experiences in the Indian socio-cultural context, focusing on identity formation, mental health, and resilience. Drawing on the autobiography of A. Revathi, it examines how personal narratives shape the understanding of gender identity. The study highlights themes of gender incongruence, social marginalization, and identity affirmation, with a focus on essentialism and the idea of innate femininity as a form of self-validation. Using frameworks such as the minority stress model, gender dysphoria, and resilience, it argues that essentialist narratives, while appearing binary, help build identity and psychological stability. By combining literary and psychological analysis, the article emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive and affirming approaches to transgender mental health in India.

Keywords: Transgender identity, transgender autobiography, gender incongruence, essentialism, innate femininity, gender dysphoria.

Introduction

Psychology has played an important role in understanding transgender identity. Earlier, transgender individuals were viewed as having a disorder, but with advances in research, they are now supported and affirmed. Contemporary approaches recognize transgender identities as legitimate and diverse expressions of human experience (American Psychiatric Association), and they are no longer treated as gender identity disorder. In India, transgender autobiographies have gained importance as both literary and psychological texts, focusing on identity formation, trauma, resilience, and self-affirmation. This article examines these narratives from a psychological perspective, exploring how identity is negotiated within oppressive structures and how individuals construct meaning through storytelling.

Transgender individuals challenge traditional gender norms, as their gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth. They seek to live in alignment with their internal sense of self. Their



autobiographies form a distinct literary category focused on self-discovery, transition, and identity reconstruction. These narratives highlight gender dysphoria, and the effort to align the body with inner identity, along with the emotional, social, and legal challenges involved. They also emphasize intersectionality, showing how gender interacts with caste, class, and social status, while addressing exclusion and the need for recognition.

From a psychological perspective, these autobiographies are significant as they reveal processes of identity formation, coping with stigma, and building resilience. They bridge theory and lived experience, offering insights into gender dysphoria, minority stress, and self-affirmation, while promoting empathy and more inclusive approaches to mental health. Gender identity is a deeply internal experience that may not align with biological sex. While earlier psychological frameworks enforced rigid binaries, contemporary theories such as 'Gender Performativity' by Judith Butler highlight fluidity and diversity. The shift from "gender identity disorder" to "gender dysphoria" marks a key change, focusing on distress rather than identity itself (American Psychiatric Association). This shift supports removing the idea of pathology while still addressing psychological challenges. Gender dysphoria describes the distress caused by gender incongruence, often expressed in autobiographies through metaphors like being "trapped in the wrong body." Transgender identity formation is non-linear, involving stages of awareness, exploration, acceptance, and integration, processes that autobiographies powerfully document. The study looks at the autobiography of the transgender A. Reavathi 'The Truth About Me' (2010), a male-to-female (MTF) transgender person is someone who was assigned male at birth but identifies and lives as a woman.

Essentialism: Innate Femininity

Essentialism, as a philosophical and sociological perspective, claims that certain traits, such as gender, are inherent, universal, and unchanging. In transgender autobiographies, essentialist narratives frequently emerge as a central strategy of identity construction. Many Trans women describe their femininity as something deeply ingrained within them from early childhood. These accounts usually include memories of engaging in traditionally feminine behaviours, preferences for feminine clothing, and emotional identification with women. A recurring theme is the feeling of being "trapped in the wrong body," which serves as a powerful metaphor for gender incongruence. Authors express how their internal sense of femininity persisted despite external pressures to conform to male gender roles. These narratives also draw on medical and psychological frameworks to validate their experiences. References to biological or neurological explanations of gender identity are often used to reinforce the claim that their femininity is natural and inherent. Additionally, themes such as attraction to men, femininity since childhood and the desire for motherhood are presented as extensions of this essential femininity. From a psychological perspective, essentialist narratives serve important functions. They provide individuals with a sense of coherence and self-understanding, helping to resolve internal conflicts. However, essentialism is not without its limitations. While it supports certain experiences, it may also reinforce binary notions of gender, eventually marginalizing non-binary identities. Scholars such as Butler critique essentialism for overlooking the role of social construction in shaping gender.



Nevertheless, the persistence of essentialist narratives in transgender autobiographies suggests that they are not merely theoretical constructs but lived realities. These narratives highlight the need for psychological frameworks that can accommodate both innate and socially constructed aspects of identity.

Trapped in a Wrong Body

From a psychological perspective, the recurring expression of being “trapped in the wrong body” in transgender autobiographies reflects a profound experience of gender dysphoria, an internal conflict between one’s assigned biological sex and one’s deeply felt gender identity. For many transgender individuals, this dissonance is not merely a social discomfort but an enduring psychological reality that shapes their self-perception, emotional life, and behaviour. Autobiographical narratives of transgenders consistently reveal a persistent sense of non-belonging to the assigned body. In developmental psychology, identity formation is a crucial process, and when gender identity, which is one of its core components, does not align with the physical body, it creates a state of internal conflict. This leads to feelings of alienation, anxiety, distress, and a longing for congruence between the inner self and the outer form. Within an essentialist psychological framework, transgender individuals perceive their femininity as innate, natural, and deeply embedded in their psyche. This sense of “essential femininity” functions as a stabilizing inner truth, allowing them to make sense of their experiences despite external contradictions.

We find the same expressions Revathi's autobiography. Revathi mentions “... it felt natural for me to do so [behave like a girl]” (7), “I experienced a growing sense of irrepressible femaleness...” (14). “I felt that finally the female in me would be freed from her male body” (67), and “I consider myself a woman. But I possessed the form of a man” (262).

The desire to undergo Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) or Nirvana can also be understood psychologically as a pursuit of body-self congruence. This process is not merely physical but profoundly therapeutic, as it reduces long-standing psychological distress. The relief, peace, and sense of completeness felt after surgery show that inner conflict is resolved and psychological balance is restored. For instance, the sense of fulfillment expressed by them after surgery reflects what psychology would describe as identity integration, where the self is experienced as whole and authentic.

The metaphor of the “wrong body” thus represents more than a literal mismatch; it expresses a complex psychological experience involving identity conflict, emotional distress, and the search for authenticity. It reflects a body–mind dualism, where the body is experienced as alien or restrictive, while the mind or soul is perceived as the true center of identity. The desire to “correct” the body is therefore not a rejection of the self but an affirmation of it. Thus, in many instances, we have a simple body vs. soul dichotomy, where the body is said to be that of the man and the soul is said to be that of the woman. Hence, there arises a need to change the body to suit the soul, mind, or heart. The underlying assumption often is that this feeling of being a woman is natural and inborn.

Femininity since Childhood

From a psychological point of view, revisiting childhood in transgender autobiographies is not



just a storytelling method, but a way to rebuild identity, make sense of memories, and heal emotionally. Unlike traditional autobiographies that often idealize childhood, transgender narratives focus on experiences of confusion, anxiety, exclusion, and trauma. These early memories are important because they show the first moments of feeling different, which later shape a person's identity. In developmental psychology, childhood is a crucial period for the emergence of gender identity, especially between the ages of three and seven. For transgender individuals, this stage involves an early and persistent awareness that their internal sense of gender does not align with societal expectations imposed on their assigned sex. The recollection of childhood femininity in transgender autobiographies can thus be understood as evidence of early gender nonconformity and the formation of a stable inner identity that precedes social recognition.

The repeated return to childhood memories serves an important psychological function. It allows individuals to validate their present identity by tracing its continuity across time. By reconstructing moments when they felt naturally aligned with femininity, through clothing, play, behaviour, and emotional expression, transgender writers establish that their gender identity is not a sudden or artificial transformation but an enduring and intrinsic aspect of the self. This process aligns with the psychological concept of narrative identity, where individuals create a coherent life story to make sense of who they are.

Revathi's childhood is marked by both affirmation and stigma. While she experienced joy in engaging in feminine activities and identifying with girls, she was also subjected to teasing, bullying, and punishment. Such experiences can lead to minority stress, a form of chronic stress faced by marginalized individuals due to social stigma and discrimination. Interestingly, Revathi's response to teasing, feeling both hurt and faintly gratified, reveals a complex emotional dynamic. Revathi's earliest memories mentioned in the book are of when she was ten years old. She mentions that she used to like playing girls' games, wearing girls' dresses, doing the 'feminine' chores, like sweeping, drawing kolam every morning in the front yard, and helping in the kitchen. She says "As soon as I got home from school, I would wear my sister's long skirt and blouse, twist a long towel around my head, and let it trail down my back like a braid. I would then walk as if I were a shy bride, my eyes to the ground..." [4].

She describes

"I played with the girls. We played five stones, hopscotch, and hide and seek..... On some days, one of the girls would ask me, 'Why do you play with us? Boys like you are playing there, go join them. 'I don't wish to play with them', I'd reply. I was teased often at school, for behaving like a girl, for doing women's work, and on the streets too, was bullied often.....My heart would sink at these words, but I also felt faintly gratified and even happy that these boys actually conceded that I was somehow a woman.... In class, I would sit staring at the girls, taking note of the way their braids fell, the intricate knot of their colorful ribbons, the jasmine and kanakambaram they wore in their hair, and their skirts and blouses. I longed to be like them and suffered that I could not dress so." (6).

In school, she was punished for not only being unmindful but also because she often spoke like



a girl. Often, she was caned by the PT teacher for not showing bravery as a boy and for not playing with the boys. (7). She explains that being a girl felt as natural to her as eating. Just as she wouldn't stop eating simply because someone told her to, she couldn't stop embracing her identity despite others insisting she shouldn't. (7). In seventh grade, Revathi portrayed the role of Chandramathi in the play Harishchandra for the school's annual day celebration. She was praised for both her appearance and performance, with many saying she looked and acted like a real woman. [9]

Thus childhood femininity is consistently portrayed as instinctive, spontaneous, and emotionally fulfilling, rather than learned or imposed. From a psychological standpoint, this supports the view that gender identity is deeply rooted in the individual's psyche and emerges early in life. The consistent preference for feminine roles, activities, and expressions reflects a stable internal identity that resists social conditioning. Moreover, revisiting childhood also functions as a form of therapeutic narration. By articulating past experiences of pain, confusion, and marginalization, transgender individuals engage in a process of emotional release and self-understanding. This aligns with psychological approaches such as narrative therapy, where storytelling becomes a means of reclaiming agency and reconstructing identity in empowering ways.

Attraction toward the Opposite Sex

From a psychological perspective, the attraction toward men expressed in transgender women's autobiographies reflects the complex interplay between gender identity, sexual orientation, and emotional validation. Rather than being a simple matter of desire, this attraction is deeply connected to the formation and affirmation of their feminine self-concept. It often serves as a crucial dimension through which transgender individuals understand, experience, and affirm their identity as women.

In many of these narratives, attraction to men begins during adolescence, a time when romantic and sexual feelings develop. For transgender individuals, this can be confusing because their assigned sex does not match their inner gender identity. This creates difficulty in understanding the difference between sexual orientation (who they are attracted to) and gender identity (who they are). Without proper social understanding or guidance, this confusion can lead to self-doubt and questioning.

Revathi also talks about her being attracted to the opposite sex:

"...I imagined I was in love with them. This confused me, I was a boy and yet I felt I could love other boys. Was this right or wrong?" (9).

Revathi lived in uncertainty and heavily sought somebody who would indeed understand what she felt. She questioned herself, "Why did I love men? Was I mad? Was I the only one who felt this way? Or were there others like me, elsewhere in the world? Would I find them, if indeed they were there?" (Revathi 14) Revathi fell in love with a man called Babu, who used to work in a cinema hall, and she accepted him as her husband, but he left her later. Revathi deeply loved her colleague in Sangama. They also got married. She says "I was his mother, companion, office assistant, lover, and good wife" [274].

Hence attraction to men functions as more than a sexual orientation; it becomes a psychological mechanism for affirming gender identity. Being desired by men, loving men, and imagining life with a



male partner all contribute to the construction of a coherent feminine self. At the same time, these experiences reveal the influence of heteronormative frameworks, where femininity is often validated through attraction to masculinity. Importantly, these accounts also highlight the initial confusion between being transgender and being homosexual. Psychologically, this confusion arises from the lack of awareness and representation, leading individuals to interpret their feelings through available but inadequate categories. Over time, through self-reflection and lived experience, they achieve a clearer understanding of their identity, recognizing that their attraction to men aligns with their identity as women.

Motherhood

From a psychological perspective, the desire for motherhood expressed in transgender autobiographies reflects a deep engagement with nurturance, care, attachment, and identity fulfillment, rather than a purely biological instinct. While society often equates womanhood with biological motherhood, these narratives demonstrate that maternal feelings are fundamentally psychological and relational, emerging from emotional factors along with anatomy. For transgender women, the desire for motherhood becomes a powerful means of affirming their feminine identity and achieving a sense of completeness within their self-concept.

Revathi's maternal affection toward her chela demonstrates how kinship structures within transgender communities can fulfill psychological needs for family and belonging. Even in the absence of traditional family systems, these chosen relationships provide opportunities for emotional connection, caregiving, and identity affirmation. Revathi experiences maternal affection towards her chela, Mya, acknowledging that, despite the brief duration of their acquaintance, she genuinely felt in her heart that Mya was her daughter (153). Motherhood emerges as a psychological and emotional reality, independent of biological constraints. The consistent expression of nurturing behaviour, emotional attachment, and the desire to care for others indicates that maternal identity is deeply embedded in their sense of self.

Thus the convergence of various aspects, such as femininity, attraction to men, domestic roles, and the longing for motherhood, contributes to the formation of a coherent psychological narrative often described as "a woman trapped in a male body." From a psychological standpoint, this narrative functions as a framework for identity coherence, allowing individuals to integrate diverse experiences into a unified understanding of themselves. It reinforces the belief that their womanhood is not superficial or performative but deeply felt, consistent, and enduring.

Conclusion

Contemporary research makes it clear that transgender identity cannot be understood through a single perspective. It emerges from a complex interaction of biological, psychological, and socio-cultural factors. Transgender autobiographies, the growing genre of work challenges earlier views that treated transgender identity as a disorder or deviation. Instead, it affirms gender diversity as a natural and valid aspect of human experience. Transgender identity is therefore neither purely innate nor entirely socially constructed; it is a dynamic and multifaceted reality shaped by both internal



dispositions and lived experiences.

The study on essentialism further highlights that, for many transgender individuals, gender is experienced as deeply internal, natural, and enduring. The autobiographical narratives of Indian male-to-female writers such as Living Smile Vidya, A. Revathi, Manobi Bandopadhyay, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, Akkai, and Mabjamma Jogathi reveal that their sense of being female is not a choice or a temporary phase, but a core aspect of their identity. Despite social stigma, rejection, and hardship, this inner sense of self remains persistent and resistant to suppression.

From a psychological perspective, this reflects identity coherence, where one's internal experience of gender remains stable over time, even in the face of external pressures. These narratives show that femininity or masculinity is not something that can be adopted or discarded at will, but an intrinsic part of the self. The distress caused by enforced conformity further emphasizes the depth and authenticity of this internal reality. At the heart of these autobiographies lies a powerful assertion of selfhood. Writing becomes an act of resistance and self-affirmation, enabling transgender individuals to articulate their identities in a society that has often marginalized or misunderstood them. Their stories challenge rigid gender norms and invite a more nuanced understanding of gender as a deeply personal and lived experience.

Ultimately, transgender identity cannot be dismissed as illusion or choice. It is a genuine and deeply rooted human experience shaped by the interplay of inner identity and lived reality. By examining Indian transgender autobiographies, this study demonstrates how individuals construct meaningful identities while navigating adversity. It also shows that essentialist and social constructionist perspectives, rather than being oppositional, coexist within lived experiences. A more inclusive psychological approach must therefore acknowledge this complexity and ensure that transgender individuals are met with affirmation, dignity, and equitable access to mental health care.

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