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**Cultural normativity leading to the quest for identity: A Comparative study on
A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi and If I was your girl**

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Abstract

Transgender narratives preach about the marginalization of Third Genders who have been viewed as the minorities who cannot fit themselves under the heteronormativity. Queer theory has also been considered as a form of intersectional theory and race theory as it perpetually talks about the oppressed subjugated community's inexplicable dormant miseries and their rights. Sex is identified with physiology and physical anatomic details determine them and Gender has been socially built and are cultural assumptions. But when sexuality does not coincide with its own gender role, it is considered unusual. They are often portrayed as anomalous and disappointments as they do not meet the cultural normativity which heterosexuals have created. This paper compares the Biography of India's first Transgender Principal A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi by Manobi Bandyopadhyay and the American trans fiction If I Was your Girl by Meredith Russo.

Keywords: Identity, Cis gender, body autonomy, marginalization, gender and sexuality.

Meredith Russo is an American author from Tennessee. The different characters of her stories are based on people she met during her life or from her own personal experience. If I Was your Girl is her debut young adult novel about transgender teens. Manobi Bandyopadhyay was born in West Bengal. She is the first PhD professor in India who accepts her identity as a transgender person (Wikipedia). A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi is a bildungsroman, the author's growth from childhood to an educator whereas If I was your girl is a transgender teen novel which traces back to the past in between to let the audience know about the difference after her transformation into a girl. Both the narratives begin with the first person narration. Manobi's biological name is Somnath and was born to an educated and a reputed family. Manobi was considered as a liability and disgrace to her ostensible family and Amanda's real name is Andrew.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Andrew's gender orientation resulted in the split of his parents. In both the stories, we see well supporting mothers despite being disappointed, later accepted her decision for the love they had for their daughters. But in the case of fathers, it took them a great space of time to realize their daughters' decisions. The reason for transitioning into a girl was looked down is because femininity is considered inferiority. Stephen Greenblatt in *Fiction and Friction* says "In part because a passage from male to female was coded ideologically as a descent from superior to inferior and hence as an unnatural act or a social disgrace" (92). In Manobi's story, she was the only son after two daughters and she was treated godly just because she was a son. But in Amanda's story, her parents thought being a girl was unsafe to her and we see her father constantly warning her for her safety. As Amanda's mother says "I was more sad for you for having to deal with being a girl than anything else" (Russo, 233). Gender dysphoria has been a taboo topic even in developed countries and it is far worse in India. The vedic and Puranic literatures mention third genders as hijra which means someone who is effeminate and/or incompetent. We see nuances of gender fluidity in Hindu mythologies as well. One such example is Shikhandi, the daughter of Draupad, who was reborn as Amba to seek revenge on Bheesma. The Eunuchs were treated with great reverence during the Mughal period. They were the attendants of bed chambers due to their effeminate nature. But after the British colonization, they were deprived of their rights and was set as a third group which perpetually continues and haunts (Transgender: Status in India, Neena Sawant).

The patriarchal leverage was at its culmination in Manobi's story than in Amanda's. Manobi's mother had to constantly put up with her husband's tantrums and abuses for giving birth to a trans woman. She was the one to face the society's flare ups and conniptions than her husband.

The whole world had started blaming her for not being able to control me. Poor woman, they didn't know how she battled with herself all the time and blamed herself for giving birth to a hijra....

My father took out his frustration on my mother and two older sisters for not keeping a stern eye on me. (Bandyopadhyay, 10)

But in Amanda's story, we see no influence of patriarchy as we witness her mother had the audacity to part from her husband to support her daughter. It vividly explains the independent and self sustaining nature of a woman without any hindrance of male domination. Grant, the boyfriend of Amanda is a symbol of terminating the cultural assumptions. His Gay friend Tommy despite

RESEARCH ARTICLE

being cornered and bullied by everyone, he still found his solace in Grant. Grant respected everyone equally irrespective of their sexuality. He even accepted Amanda after knowing her true self post introspection. ““I didn’t abandon Tommy,” he said, his expression serious, “and I won’t abandon you” (Russo,291). Grant is seen as an exceptional as it is in antithesis to Manobi’s love life. Her romantic life was really a non-fulfillment, unreciprocated and incomplete as the men in her past had taken the relationships sensually and fleshly disregarding her womanly emotions and sentiments. Thus giving out the glimpse of reality verses fictitious work as the author Meredith Russo herself says that she wanted to write a trans fiction with a happy ending (Wikipedia).

In both the works, we come across sex reassignment surgery as a mode of attaining their rights and power. This low-key brings the prevailing stigma that sexuality is one’s own identity and power exhibiting their contemplation of not fitting into either of the two sides. The urge of belonging was unreasonably soaring and elevating in both of them. As Michael Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* says the regulation of the body that produces docility and make us consider a prison for soul (article by Charles Stewart). The normatively and prescriptive exist in the society limit the third gender from their privileges and rights. These norms and standardizations set by the society are the dormant power regulating the body which the society itself oblivious enough.

The biography of Manobi also gives the upheavals of her fellow trans genders and the existence of toxic masculinity from men whom she had acquainted with throughout her journey. Manobi highlights the stories of Jolly and Jagadish in her work. She gives the contrary of her life with her other fellow trans people. As she says “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.”(Bandyopadhyay, 75). she implicitly says many have lost their way into prostitution and unrequited love and disappeared while trying to fit themselves in either of the categories just because they are not entitled as Manobi. But the teenager fiction has the diverse range of queer such as bisexual and gay also and we witness those teenagers concealing their sexuality and put a false pretense, the aversion of real to align with the society but does not focus on poverty based trans people and trans sex workers in the US like Manobi’s. Trans sex workers are possibly higher than cis gender sex workers in India and the US. The NTDS found the transgender people experience high levels of discrimination, poverty, unemployment, homelessness and as a result, many transgenders participate in the sex trade. This stigmatizing of sex work in the US can worsen the discrimination and marginalization that transgender people already face in the society. (Meaningful Work, transgender experiences in the sex trade December 2015, pg-4).

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Both Manobi and Amanda despite transforming their bodies, are unoblivious of their past. In Amanda's case, she had been conscious and skeptical about others not discerning her real identity. She had that guilty and remorse and often would introspect herself about her closure. As Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity and Diaspora says "The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual past, since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always already 'after the break'" (Rutherford 226). The past is interminable and perpetuating as acceptance is the only way to cease it.

A comparative study learns, analyzes, discovers and compares literary works irrespective of one's cultures, traditions and habits. The Indian transgender Biography A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi and the American trans teenager fiction If I Was a Girl both talk about the transgenders' unsaid forced docility and their rights. But the teenager fiction is a fantasy story with imaginary aspects unlike the biography and fails to produce the overview of poverty-stricken, abandoned transgenders from the remote places by bringing the one phase of life alone which are identical to developing countries like India. Despite race, ethnicities, complexion, countries, certain nuances and habits refuse to change. This proceeds answers to the distinctive features between a developed and developing because both the countries experience the same shunning of adequate privileges and needs to the secluded unprivileged third genders as cosmopolitans or the orthodox perceive certain issues similarly.

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