

# The Struggle Against Gender-Based Violence: Insights from *I Am Vidya*: A Transgender's Journey

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## Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender or sex. It is rooted in gender inequality, discrimination, and the social norms that perpetuate power imbalances between genders. GBV can occur in various forms, including physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological violence, and can happen in both public and private settings. This research paper investigates the experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) as depicted in Living Smile Vidya's autobiographical account, *I Am Vidya*. The narrative presents a poignant exploration of the systemic violence faced by transgender individuals, particularly in the Indian socio-cultural context. Employing a qualitative thematic analysis, this study identifies key forms of violence, stigma, and resilience portrayed in the text. By applying an intersectional framework, the paper situates Vidya's experiences within broader social structures of power and discrimination. It argues that narratives like Vidya's are crucial for understanding the complexities of GBV and the imperative for advocacy and policy change. The study concludes with recommendations for further research and the necessity for urgent systemic reforms to address the pervasive issue of GBV against marginalized communities.

**Keywords:** Gender-based violence, transgender, stigma, resilience

At its core, *I Am Vidya* is an autobiographical narrative. Autobiographies provide a platform for marginalized voices, offering insights into personal experiences that often reflect broader societal issues. According to Smith and Watson (2010), autobiographical narratives can reveal "the ways in which individuals negotiate their identities in the context of historical and cultural forces." Vidya's memoir intricately navigates the intersection of personal and collective identity, illuminating how her experiences as a disabled woman are intertwined with the socio-political fabric of India.

The book *I Am Vidya* is an autobiography which presents the life-sketch of a trans woman who fought against traditional norms, suffered a lot of pain and disdain, but finally acquired her own-ness i.e. womanhood. Sarvanan (birth-name of Vidya) is a boy who always believed he is a female soul dwelling in a male body. As the time passes, his self renounces him to survive as a male, and finally Sarvanan transitions to Vidya. During the course of her transformation, she is tortured by most people she came across. Although some kind-hearted people love her, express sympathy and boost her courage to do so, the book vividly depicts the big clan of conservative minds who are shocked to learn about her sex change.

The book also describes Vidya's relationship with her father, his whimsical nature and his merciless beating of Vidya. In an interview, Chennai-based Vidya has widely talked about her struggling phase in life, her being at the receiving end of violence and her running fight for the benefit of all *trans* people. While presenting her life in this book, Vidya has raised some significant issues related to *trans* people. Being a citizen of democratic country, *trans* people are chained from enjoying their fundamental rights, laws are not sufficient for their protection, and common people share least empathy with them.

Pages and pages have been published to educate the world about what lies beneath the issues of gender and the violence associated with it. Be it a piece of fiction splashing out of a creative mind or the narrative of a victim of gender-based violence or a blend of both, books serve as an omniscient medium that captures the malice of gender-based violence. Giving voices to the people or spreading the words of a sufferer, books stand strong in the mainstream media to portray the naked truth of gender associated crimes. As a shiny wrapper, I would like to conclude with a quotation by Virginia Woolf:

***"I want to write a novel about Silence," he said, "the things people don't say".***

This paper examines the manifestations and implications of gender-based violence (GBV) as portrayed in Living Smile Vidya's autobiographical work, "I Am Vidya." The narrative recounts Vidya's personal experiences with violence, discrimination, and societal marginalization as a transgender individual in India. Through a qualitative analysis of the text, this study explores the systemic factors contributing to GBV, including cultural norms, economic disparities, and institutional failures. Utilizing a framework grounded in feminist theory and sociocultural analysis, the paper highlights the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and class within the context of violence. By situating Vidya's experiences within the larger discourse on GBV, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how individual narratives can illuminate the pervasive nature of gender-based violence and the urgent need for societal change. Inspired by Vidya's resilience, the paper calls for comprehensive policy reforms and increased awareness to combat GBV and empower marginalized communities.

The introduction of this paper sets the stage for understanding gender-based violence (GBV) within the framework of intersectionality, emphasizing how violence is not merely an act but a complex social phenomenon rooted in power dynamics. The relevance of Vidya's narrative in shedding light on the unique challenges faced by transgender individuals serves as a compelling backdrop for this analysis.

### **Literature Review:**

This section reviews existing literature on gender-based violence, focusing on definitions, prevalent forms of GBV, and its impact on marginalized communities. Autobiographical narratives like Vidya's offer valuable insights into the personal experiences of individuals facing these societal issues. Previous studies on transgender populations underscore significant gaps in research that this paper aims to address, particularly around the intersection of gender identity and violence.

### **Methodology:**

The methodology outlines the qualitative content analysis employed in this study, detailing how specific passages from *I Am Vidya* were selected and analyzed to identify themes related to GBV. The study also discusses the ethical considerations in researching sensitive topics related to feminism, gender-based violence, and resistance.

**Findings:**

The findings section synthesizes key themes identified in Vidya's narrative, including: Violence, social stigmatization, gender and sexuality, cultural norms and patriarchy, resistance and empowerment.

**Physical and Emotional Violence:** In *I Am Vidya*, the impact of physical violence is depicted through Vidya's own experiences as a survivor of abuse. This violence manifests in various forms, including domestic abuse and systemic oppression. The memoir highlights the brutal realities faced by many women in similar circumstances, showcasing how physical violence can strip away autonomy and agency. The major agencies discussed are: 1) survival and liberation 2) the body as a site of conflict.

**Survival and Liberation:** Vidya's journey illustrates the struggle to reclaim her body and her life after enduring physical violence. Through her determination to escape abusive situations, she becomes a symbol of resilience and strength. Her narrative emphasizes the importance of finding safety and support in the aftermath of such trauma. **The Body as a Site of Conflict:** Physical violence serves as a metaphorical battleground where the struggle for identity and power unfolds. Vidya's experiences reflect how violence can manifest not only in acts but also through societal expectations and the pressures placed on women. The reclamation of her body becomes an essential aspect of her healing process.

**Emotional violence:** Emotional violence, often insidious and less visible than physical violence, plays a significant role in Vidya's story. The psychological impact of emotional abuse can be just as debilitating, and the memoir delves into the complexities of these experiences. The major impact of emotional violence can be discussed under the categories of psychological trauma and manipulation and control.

**Psychological Trauma:** Vidya addresses the long-term effects of emotional violence, revealing how it can lead to feelings of worthlessness, fear, and isolation. Her narrative illustrates the journey of overcoming these internal battles, showcasing her efforts to rebuild her self-esteem and sense of identity.

**Manipulation and Control:** The memoir reveals how emotional abuse often accompanies physical violence, creating a cycle of control and manipulation. Vidya's reflections on these dynamics highlight the challenges victims face in recognizing and escaping such toxic relationships. Her story underscores the need for awareness and education around emotional abuse.

**Intersection of Physical and Emotional Violence:** Throughout *I Am Vidya*, the interplay between physical and emotional violence is evident. The author portrays how the two forms of violence can compound each other, exacerbating the trauma experienced by the victim. Understanding this relationship is crucial for comprehending the full scope of abuse and its impacts. **Empowerment**

**Through Articulation:** Vidya's act of sharing her story represents a powerful reclaiming of her narrative. By articulating the pain of both physical and emotional violence, she not only empowers herself but also speaks for countless others who have suffered in silence. **Resilience and Recovery:** Ultimately, the memoir is a testament to the resilience of those who face violence. Vidya's journey towards healing and empowerment serves as a source of inspiration, emphasizing the importance of community, solidarity, and advocacy in overcoming such profound adversities.

**2. Social Stigmatization:**

The theme of social stigmatization is a powerful and pervasive element in Living Smile Vidya's memoir, *I Am Vidya*. This memoir offers a deeply personal account of the author's life as a woman who faces various forms of social stigma, particularly in relation to her identity as a survivor of violence, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and an individual living with HIV/AIDS. Through her narrative, Vidya confronts the complexities of stigmatization and its effects on individuals and communities.

Stigmatization of Survivors of Violence: Vidya reflects on her experiences with physical and emotional violence, highlighting how societal attitudes often blame victims rather than holding perpetrators accountable. This stigma manifests in various ways:

**Victim Blaming:** Vidya's story reveals how survivors of violence are frequently subjected to scrutiny and judgment. Society often questions their choices and behaviors, creating an environment where victims feel ashamed or responsible for their circumstances. This aspect of stigmatization exacerbates feelings of isolation and prevents many from seeking help.

**Silencing of Voices:** The stigma surrounding violence often leads to the silencing of victims. Vidya's courage to share her story serves as a counter-narrative to this silence, challenging the societal tendency to overlook or minimize the experiences of survivors. By breaking the silence, she not only asserts her voice but also encourages others to do the same. Vidya endures different forms of stigmatizations such as stigmatization of HIV/AIDS, LGBTQ+ stigma, and internal stigma.

**Stigmatization of HIV/AIDS:** Living with HIV/AIDS is a central aspect of Vidya's identity, and the social stigma associated with the disease is a recurring theme in her memoir. This stigmatization is deeply rooted in misinformation, fear, and prejudice.

**Fear and Misunderstanding:** The stigma attached to HIV/AIDS is often fueled by misconceptions about the disease and its transmission. Vidya highlights how people living with HIV are frequently marginalized and ostracized, leading to discrimination in various aspects of life, including employment, healthcare, and personal relationships.

**Internalized Stigma:** Vidya discusses how the stigma of being HIV-positive impacted her self-image and mental health. Internalizing negative societal perceptions can lead to shame and self-loathing, complicating the process of acceptance and healing. This aspect emphasizes the need for education and awareness to change perceptions around living with HIV/AIDS.

Michael P. O'Leary's "Stigma and HIV: The Black-White Gap" (2009). This study explores the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, particularly in marginalized communities. It helps frame the societal perceptions surrounding HIV that Vidya encounters. Peter Aggleton and Richard Parker's "HIV/AIDS-related Stigma and Discrimination: A Conceptual Framework" (2002). This framework outlines the mechanisms through which stigma operates and its impact on individuals living with HIV/AIDS. It provides a critical lens for analyzing the stigma Vidya faces and challenges in her narrative.

**LGBTQ+ Stigmatization:** Vidya's identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community also subjects her to societal stigma. The fear of rejection and discrimination can lead many individuals to conceal their identities, leading to further isolation. By embracing her identity and sharing her story, Vidya resists the societal pressures that enforce conformity.

The memoir also addresses the stigmatization that comes from both gender norms and LGBTQ+ identities. Vidya's experiences as a woman and her sexual orientation intersect with societal expectations, resulting in additional layers of stigmatization:

**Gender Norms:** Women who defy traditional gender roles or who have experienced violence may face harsh judgment and ostracization. Vidya's narrative illustrates how patriarchal norms can perpetuate stigma, often placing the burden of shame on women while excusing male behavior.

**The Impact of Stigmatization**

The memoir poignantly depicts the emotional and psychological toll that stigma can take on individuals:

**Isolation and Alienation:** Social stigmatization can lead to profound loneliness, as those who are stigmatized may feel unable to connect with others who do not share or understand their experiences. Vidya discusses her feelings of isolation throughout her journey, illustrating the deep human need for acceptance and community.

Advocacy and Empowerment: In confronting stigmatization, Vidya becomes an advocate for change, using her story to raise awareness and challenge societal norms. Her journey toward empowerment illustrates how individuals can reclaim their narratives and inspire others to fight against stigma. The theme of social stigmatization in *I Am Vidya* serves as a powerful commentary on the intersectionality of identity, violence, and health. Through her courageous storytelling, Living Smile Vidya sheds light on the pervasive effects of stigma and advocates for understanding, empathy, and acceptance. Her memoir not only addresses personal struggles but also calls for a societal shift towards a more compassionate approach to those who are marginalized. Ultimately, Vidya's narrative champions the idea that sharing one's story can be a powerful tool for dismantling stigma and fostering community, healing, and resilience.

### Gender and Sexuality

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) deals with gender and sexuality issues that are faced by women. This foundational text in feminist philosophy examines women's oppression in a patriarchal society. de Beauvoir's concepts of *the Other* can be used to analyze how Vidya's identity and experiences are shaped by societal perceptions of gender and sexuality. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) also sheds light on the gender based troubles that women often suffer. Butler's theory of gender performativity can provide insights into how societal expectations around gender influence identity, including aspects crucial to Vidya's narrative. The exploration of fluidity in gender and the subversion of traditional identities can offer depth to the analysis of Vidya's resistance to cultural norms. bell hooks' *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000). bell hooks emphasizes the importance of an inclusive feminist politics that addresses issues of race, class, and gender. Her arguments can augment the understanding of how intersecting identities influence experiences of violence and stigmatization.

Studies on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Elizabeth A. Meyer's *Gender-Based Violence: The Role of Educational Institutions* (2015). This article examines the prevalence of GBV and highlights the roles educational institutions play in either perpetuating or preventing violence. It can help frame Vidya's experiences within broader societal contexts, including the impact of education on understanding violence and victim support. Laura L. Camacho and Brian T. Chan's "The Intersections of Gender, Race, and Violence: Another Look at Women of Color" (2017). This study explores the intersectionality of various forms of violence against women of color, providing critical context for analyzing Vidya's experiences and the societal structures that uphold such violence. Victoria O. Minkowitz's "Cultural Factors and Domestic Violence in Immigrant Communities" (2012): This work explores how cultural expectations can shape the experiences of domestic violence survivors in immigrant communities, relevant for understanding the cultural dynamics in Vidya's narrative.

### 3. Cultural Norms and Patriarchy

The theme of cultural norms and patriarchy is intricately explored in Living Smile Vidya's memoir, *I Am Vidya*. Through her personal journey, Vidya addresses the constraints imposed by societal expectations on women, particularly within the context of violence, gender identity, and health. Her narrative reveals the ways in which cultural norms and patriarchal structures shape individual lives, often leading to oppression and marginalization.



### **Societal Expectations and Gender Roles**

Vidya examines the rigid gender roles and expectations that dictate behavior for women in her culture. These norms often limit women's freedom and agency:

**Traditional Gender Roles:** The memoir underscores the expectation for women to conform to traditional roles of being submissive, nurturing, and dependent on men. This culture of patriarchy often results in the oppression of women's rights and choices, reinforcing inequality in various aspects of life, from family dynamics to professional settings.

**Consequences of Non-conformity:** Vidya's experiences highlight the repercussions faced by women who challenge these norms. Those who do not adhere to traditional gender expectations may experience social ostracism, violence, or emotional abuse. Her story illustrates the struggle to assert one's identity and autonomy in a society that often punishes deviation from accepted norms.

### **Domestic Violence and Cultural Justifications**

The memoir also delves into the cultural justifications for domestic violence, exposing how patriarchal norms can perpetuate abuse. **Normalization of Violence:** In many cultures, domestic violence is often normalized or excused under the guise of preserving family honor or tradition. Vidya reflects on how societal attitudes can lead to the victim-blaming mentality, where the victim is often held responsible for the violence inflicted upon them. This perpetuates a cycle of abuse and silence, making it difficult for survivors to seek help. **Silencing of Women's Voices:** Patriarchy often silences women's voices in discussions about violence and abuse. Vidya's act of sharing her story is a powerful counter-narrative to this silencing. She uses her memoir to challenge the stigma and shame often associated with victimhood, advocating for the rights of women to speak out and seek justice.

### **Intersection of Cultural Norms and Health**

The memoir addresses how cultural norms and patriarchal values intersect with health issues, particularly surrounding HIV/AIDS. **Stigmatization of HIV/AIDS:** Vidya illustrates how societal perceptions of HIV/AIDS are deeply influenced by cultural beliefs and stereotypes. Women, particularly those who are HIV-positive, may face doubly stigmatizing experiences; they are not only marginalized due to their health status but also judged based on traditional gender expectations. This stigma can lead to social isolation and hinder access to healthcare and support.

**Body Autonomy and Sexuality:** Cultural norms often dictate women's behavior regarding sexuality, which can lead to restrictive views on agency and consent. Vidya's journey emphasizes the importance of bodily autonomy and the right for women to make informed choices about their health and sexuality without societal backlash.

**Intersectionality and Marginalization Studies** Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991). Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is crucial in analyzing how overlapping identities (such as gender, race, and class) impact experiences of violence and stigma. This framework can deepen the understanding of Vidya's multifaceted identity. Ruth Wilson Gilmore's "Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Global Capitalism" (2007). While focused on systemic violence against marginalized communities, Gilmore's work addresses broader socio-economic structures that contribute to violence. This perspective can illuminate context around societal responses to HIV/AIDS and marginalized identities in Vidya's story.

#### 4. Resistance and Empowerment:

Despite the oppressive nature of cultural norms and patriarchy, Vidya's narrative also emphasizes themes of resistance and empowerment.

**Reclaiming Identity:** Through her memoir, Vidya asserts her identity and challenges societal expectations. By sharing her experiences of violence, illness, and survival, she empowers herself and inspires others to resist the constraints of cultural norms. Her story becomes a beacon for others facing similar struggles, advocating for self-acceptance and resilience.

**Advocacy for Change:** Vidya becomes an advocate for breaking down the cultural and patriarchal structures that perpetuate violence and discrimination. Her activism highlights the need for societal change and collective efforts to address gender inequality and promote women's rights.

The theme of cultural norms and patriarchy in *I Am Vidya* is a profound exploration of the challenges faced by women in a society deeply influenced by traditional gender roles and expectations. Living Smile Vidya's memoir serves as both a personal testament of survival and a call to action for societal transformation. By confronting these norms, she challenges the status quo and advocates for a more equitable future where women can assert their rights, reclaim their bodies, and live free from violence and stigma. Through her narrative, Vidya not only illuminates her own experiences but also speaks for all those who continue to fight against the oppressive forces of patriarchy and cultural stigma.

#### Discussion:

To develop a scholarly framework for analyzing *I Am Vidya* by Living Smile Vidya through themes of cultural norms, patriarchy, and social stigmatization, one might explore a variety of feminist theories, studies on gender-based violence (GBV), and sociological inquiries into violence against marginalized communities. Messner examines masculinity and violence, providing a framework to discuss how cultural norms around masculinity can perpetuate violence and victimization. This can be tied to understanding the male perpetrators in Vidya's narrative.

Hence, these scholarly works collectively offer a rich foundation for an in-depth analysis of *I Am Vidya*, focusing on cultural norms, patriarchy, and social stigmatization. By engaging with feminist theories, studies on gender-based violence, and sociological inquiries into marginalized communities, one can better understand the complexities of Vidya's experiences and the broader societal forces at play. This multifaceted approach can illuminate how individual narratives reflect and resist systemic injustices. Engaging with works such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, and bell hooks' *Feminism Is for Everybody*, this paper analyzes the societal perceptions that shape Vidya's identity. Additionally, research on GBV, such as "Elizabeth A. Meyer's examination of the role of educational institutions" and "Laura Camacho and Brian Chan's study of violence against women of color", articulates the significance of educational and societal contexts in perpetuating violence.

The discussion contextualizes Vidya's experiences within broader societal issues. It emphasizes the need for intersectional approaches to understanding and addressing GBV, considering how various identities intersect to amplify the effects of violence.

#### Conclusion:

The conclusion reiterates the significance of Vidya's narrative in the discourse on GBV, advocating for greater visibility and support for marginalized voices. *I Am Vidya* serves as both a personal testament of survival and a call to action for societal transformation. It emphasizes the urgent need for policy reforms,

community support, and inclusive societal attitudes to combat GBV. Vidya's story champions the idea that sharing personal narratives can be a powerful tool for dismantling stigma, fostering resilience, and inspiring change. Through a nuanced analysis of the themes of gender-based violence, cultural norms, and the resilience of marginalized identities, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the societal forces at play in the experiences of individuals like Living Smile Vidya.

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