

Language, Silence, and Voice: Narratives of Resistance in Indian Trans Life Writing through the Works of A. Revathi, Kalki Subramaniam, and Living Smile Vidya

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersections of language, silence, and voice as they shape transgender identity in Indian autobiographical narratives. Focusing on A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me*, Kalki Subramaniam's *We Are Not the Others*, and Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya*, the study examines how trans individuals articulate resistance and reclaim agency through life writing. Drawing on queer theory, postcolonial critique, and subaltern studies, the paper investigates how language is employed not only to narrate but also to transform trauma into testimony. It argues that these narratives challenge normative binaries by foregrounding linguistic hybridity, testimonial power, and performative resistance. Silence, often mistaken as absence, is repositioned as strategic defiance. The authors' bilingual expression, primarily in Tamil and English, becomes a critical medium of navigating identity, community, and belonging. By examining the narrative structures, rhetorical strategies, and linguistic negotiations present in these texts, the paper aims to show how Indian trans autobiographies function as discursive sites of political resistance, identity reclamation, and cultural transformation.

Keywords: Trans Autobiography, Queer Resistance, Linguistic Agency, Silence and Voice, Tamil-English Bilingualism

1. Silence as Suppression and Strategy in Trans Narratives

In the autobiographies of A. Revathi, Kalki Subramaniam, and Living Smile Vidya, silence is not merely the absence of voice but a layered site of trauma, erasure, and strategic resistance. From early childhood, each author narrates experiences of being silenced by family, educational institutions, religious norms, and societal expectations. These enforced silences reflect a broader social unwillingness to recognize or accommodate non-conforming gender identities within dominant cultural frameworks.

In *The Truth About Me*, Revathi recounts episodes of punishment and ridicule faced at school for not conforming to male behavior. These moments are marked by an overwhelming silence, her inability to explain herself, her family's refusal to listen, and the institution's failure to protect. Similarly, Vidya, in *I Am Vidya*, recalls her silent suffering through her school years, when her self-awareness as a girl clashed

with the male identity imposed on her. The silence of those around her, teachers, peers, even family members, mirrors the social complicity in reinforcing gender conformity through omission.

Yet, silence in these texts is not monolithic. It also becomes a form of resistance. Choosing not to speak or explain oneself in the face of mockery or violence can be a powerful act of defiance. Kalki, in *We Are Not the Others*, describes moments where silence allowed her to reclaim mental space, reflect, and prepare herself for activism. Here, silence is reclaimed as a contemplative and protective strategy, a pause before assertion.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theorization in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" becomes crucial in this context. She questions whether the marginalized can truly speak within hegemonic discourse, or whether their speech is always already co-opted. The autobiographies of these Indian trans women demonstrate that while society often renders trans voices inaudible, silence itself becomes a counter-discursive strategy. These moments of refusal, of not speaking, of not conforming, subvert expectations and lay the groundwork for future articulation.

Therefore, silence in Indian trans autobiographies functions dually: as an imposed state reflecting social marginalization, and as a deliberate tactic of self-preservation and resistance. By documenting and theorizing these silences, these narratives challenge the dominant logic that equates voice with power and silence with powerlessness.

2. Voice and Testimony: Reclaiming Agency Through Writing

In Indian trans autobiographical writing, voice is more than self-expression, it is an active reclamation of identity in the face of systemic erasure. The act of writing a life story is deeply political for individuals whose existence is often denied or distorted by dominant cultural narratives. A. Revathi, Kalki Subramaniam, and Living Smile Vidya reclaim their subjecthood through testimony, refusing silence and articulating their truths in languages that had long excluded them.

In *The Truth About Me*, Revathi's voice emerges with strength and clarity as she recounts her journey from living in a village as a boy to becoming a hijra and later a public activist. Her voice challenges cultural misconceptions surrounding the hijra community and exposes the layers of discrimination and violence she endured. Through autobiographical narration, she shifts from being an object of social pity to a self-defined subject with agency. Writing enables her to frame her life in her own terms, bypassing misrepresentation in mainstream discourse.

Similarly, in *I Am Vidya*, Living Smile Vidya transforms her traumatic experiences into testimony, using language to affirm the validity of her identity and experiences. Her narrative structure alternates between pain and empowerment, demonstrating the transformative power of storytelling. Vidya emphasizes that she is not just telling her story for herself, but for others who remain unheard. In doing so, her voice becomes a collective one, a bridge for other marginalized trans persons seeking visibility.

Kalki Subramaniam's *We Are Not the Others* offers a multifaceted testimony composed of personal reflections, poems, and speeches. Her voice is at once lyrical and confrontational, blending vulnerability with assertiveness. Her use of poetic expression and direct address not only amplifies her individuality but also embodies the struggle of an entire community against historical invisibility. The layering of genres, memoir, poetry, manifesto, enriches the testimonial mode, positioning Kalki's voice within both personal and public spheres.

Drawing upon Leigh Gilmore's theory of "testimonial life writing," these narratives can be read as strategic assertions of identity that intervene in historical silences. Testimony, here, is not a passive

recounting of events but a performative act of truth-telling that insists on recognition. The power of these trans narratives lies not only in the content of what is said but in the fact that they are being said at all, by those who were never expected to speak.

By reclaiming their voices through writing, these authors resist the historical silencing of trans identities. Their testimonies do more than narrate personal histories; they assert epistemic authority, demand social justice, and inspire solidarity. In doing so, voice becomes an act of resistance and a foundation for collective liberation.

3. Language as Resistance: Tamil-English Code-Switching and Identity Performance

Language in Indian trans autobiographies is not merely a medium of storytelling but a tool of resistance, shaped by the politics of region, class, and gender. In the works of A. Revathi, Kalki Subramaniam, and Living Smile Vidya, the strategic use of bilingualism, particularly Tamil and English, serves to navigate multiple audiences, reclaim cultural identity, and challenge linguistic hierarchies that often marginalize non-English voices.

A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me* was originally written in Tamil and later translated into English, a transition that highlights a crucial aspect of trans discourse in India: the need to reach both local and global readers. Tamil, as her native tongue, allows her to articulate nuances of identity, emotion, and community that English cannot fully capture. Her use of Tamil expressions, kinship terms, and regional idioms imbues the text with cultural authenticity. At the same time, the English translation opens a path for broader visibility, including international academia and activist circles. This dual existence of the text mirrors the in-between space that trans individuals often occupy, negotiating between cultural specificity and universal recognition.

Kalki Subramaniam, in *We Are Not the Others*, masterfully blends English prose with references to Tamil identity, mythology, and experience. As a performer, filmmaker, and poet, she understands the performativity of language itself. Her prose is interspersed with Tamil expressions and cultural symbols, resisting a homogenized queer discourse that often favors Western frameworks. By choosing English as a primary narrative language while maintaining deep cultural rootedness, she resists both the erasure of regional identity and the exoticization of trans bodies in global discourse.

Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya* similarly demonstrates the tension and synergy between Tamil and English. Writing originally in Tamil, Vidya crafts her narrative with cultural intimacy, foregrounding the lived experiences of South Indian trans women. The subsequent translation into English preserves this intimacy while enabling her story to circulate beyond Tamil-speaking audiences. This dual-language existence emphasizes that the act of writing in a native language and then allowing it to be translated is itself a political act, asserting control over narrative dissemination.

Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "linguistic terrorism" becomes relevant here, where speaking in a non-dominant language is often policed or punished. These Indian trans authors reclaim their right to speak in both tongues, using Tamil to assert cultural specificity and English to enter global platforms without erasing their roots. Code-switching in their narratives does not dilute meaning but enriches it, creating layered identities that are fluid, plural, and resistant to singular definition.

Thus, bilingualism in Indian trans life writing becomes a performative act, one that defies linguistic binaries, colonial residue, and normative expectations. The use of Tamil-English code-switching reflects the hybrid, evolving identities of the authors and their refusal to be confined within rigid linguistic or

cultural boundaries. In their hands, language becomes both shield and sword: a means to protect their stories and a tool to dismantle the structures that once silenced them.

4. Public Voice and Activist Rhetoric Beyond the Text

Beyond the pages of their autobiographical texts, A. Revathi, Kalki Subramaniam, and Living Smile Vidya extend their voices into the public sphere through activism, performance, and media engagement. Their narratives do not end with the written word; they continue in speeches, interviews, art installations, and public protests. In doing so, these authors transform personal testimony into public pedagogy, challenging both institutionalized transphobia and broader systems of oppression.

A. Revathi's activism is deeply embedded in her work with NGOs and grassroots organizations advocating for transgender rights in Tamil Nadu. Her public speaking engagements, often held in educational and governmental spaces, serve as acts of vocal defiance. These moments represent the literal amplification of a voice once silenced. Revathi often re-narrates segments of her autobiography in these settings, reinforcing the link between lived experience and political demand. Her oratory style, grounded, emotive, and assertive, compels institutions to recognize trans lives as sites of knowledge and legitimacy.

Kalki Subramaniam seamlessly blends activism with art and digital media. Her TEDx talks, YouTube content, and poetry readings use multimedia platforms to reach diverse audiences. By engaging in visual storytelling and spoken word performance, she destabilizes traditional notions of gender and self-representation. Her "Red Wall Project," which documents transphobic violence through art, exemplifies how public voice can be transformed into collective activism. These initiatives extend her autobiographical voice into a civic realm, inspiring others to narrate their truths and resist oppression.

Living Smile Vidya's work in theatre, particularly her solo performances, translates her autobiography into a performative space where the body itself becomes a medium of protest. Her enactments of scenes from *I Am Vidya* challenge spectators to confront the discomforts of transphobia, casteism, and gender-based violence. These performances are not mere retellings; they are embodied protests that demand engagement. In interviews and panel discussions, Vidya continues to advocate for inclusive policy changes and representation in the arts, using her life story as a foundation for systemic critique.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity gains new dimensions in these contexts, where language, body, and space coalesce in activist performance. By speaking, acting, and performing in public, these trans authors dismantle the privatization of pain and assert their political personhood. Their public voice extends the function of the autobiographical into the realm of collective resistance, blurring the line between personal narrative and political speech.

Thus, the autobiographical voice of these writers transcends the textual and becomes a mode of continuous activism. Their presence in public discourse reclaims the right not only to speak but to be heard, to be visible, and to shape the very terms of their recognition. This activist rhetoric exemplifies how trans life writing can move beyond the page to enact real-world transformation.

Conclusion: Language as Liberation and Legacy

The autobiographical works of A. Revathi, Kalki Subramaniam, and Living Smile Vidya illuminate the potent intersections of language, silence, and voice in Indian trans life writing. These texts do not merely narrate personal journeys; they enact resistance, carve out discursive space, and demand recognition. Language here is not passive, it is performative, strategic, and revolutionary.

Throughout their narratives, silence emerges as both a condition imposed by societal marginalization and a deliberate tactic of resistance. These moments of non-speech speak volumes about the violence of

invisibility and the power of withheld voice. The subsequent emergence of voice, through writing, performance, and public speech, reclaims agency and asserts trans subjectivity on the authors' own terms. Their testimonies not only chronicle trauma but also rewrite dominant narratives, offering new epistemologies grounded in lived experience.

The use of bilingualism, particularly Tamil and English, adds another dimension to this resistance. By embracing linguistic hybridity, these authors bridge local and global audiences, asserting the complexity of their identities while challenging dominant linguistic hierarchies. Tamil grounds their narratives in regional specificity and cultural familiarity; English extends their reach and forces global conversations to reckon with local realities. This code-switching is not merely stylistic, it is political, a mode of survival and defiance.

Moreover, these voices do not remain confined to the page. Through activism, art, and public performance, Revathi, Kalki, and Vidya transform autobiography into a living, evolving form of resistance. Their bodies, voices, and stories enter public spaces, confronting systems of oppression and creating pathways for others to speak. In doing so, they redefine the boundaries of literary activism, merging the personal with the political in powerful ways.

In conclusion, Indian trans life writing, as exemplified by these authors, reveals how language can serve as a tool of liberation. These narratives are not just stories, they are interventions, declarations, and blueprints for resistance. By centering their voices, these writers disrupt silences, claim visibility, and leave behind a literary legacy of courage, complexity, and transformation.

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