

# Life Writing, Transgender Identity and Refugee Displacement in Thanuja: A Memoir of Migration and Transition

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## Abstract

This study analyzes *Thanuja: A Memoir of Migration and Transition* by Thanuja Singam, translated by Kiran Keshavamurthy, using frameworks from life writing, transgender studies, and refugee studies. The memoir recounts the author's journey as a Tamil refugee fleeing the civil war in Sri Lanka, traversing India to reach Europe while negotiating gender transition. It highlights the challenges of identity formation under displacement, illustrating how bodily transformation, legal systems, and cultural norms shape experiences of selfhood. A translation-aware reading reveals how the English text conveys the embodied and social realities of the author, emphasizing the intersections of migration, gender, and belonging. By examining narrative structure, family and work life, and encounters with state regulations, the study demonstrates how the memoir presents a nuanced account of resilience, ambiguity, and dignity. The article situates *Thanuja* within discussions of refugee testimony, transgender autobiography, and the ethics of translation, showing its contribution to contemporary South Asian life writing and intersectional studies of identity.

**Keywords:** life writing, transgender identity, refugee displacement, autobiography, Tamil diaspora, translation studies

## INTRODUCTION

The memoir *Thanuja: A Memoir of Migration and Transition* by Thanuja Singam, translated by Kiran Keshavamurthy, presents a compelling convergence of refugee displacement and transgender life writing. The text recounts the life of a Tamil refugee who escapes the civil war in Sri Lanka, traversing India before settling in Europe while negotiating gender transition and social recognition as a transwoman. As *Thanuja* states,

“I have been a refugee since birth. The Indian Army massacred thousands of our people and transformed our land into an open prison by the time they left Sri Lanka in 1990” (Singam 5).

This aligns with **refugee studies theory**, particularly Malkki's argument that forced displacement disrupts identity formation and challenges conventional social and political orders (Malkki 495). Unlike many conventional autobiographies, *Thanuja's* narrative foregrounds the entangled experiences of migration, gender identity, and social precarity, illustrating the ways in which bodily and social identities are constructed under conditions of displacement.

This study situates *Thanuja's* narrative within life writing theory, transgender studies, and refugee studies, emphasizing how the memoir negotiates both ethical and aesthetic challenges in representing marginalized

lives. Life writing allows Thanuja to assert agency over her story, offering an intimate account of experiences often excluded from mainstream literature. She articulates,

“I have the opportunity to be the first thirunangai from Eezham to publish her autobiography. Like salt from the sea that will always be used even if there are thousands of other wonders and fishes in the sea, there will always be something for others to learn from my life, won't there?” (Singam xi-xii).

This reflects Smith's conception of life writing as a site of resistance and self-making, emphasizing how marginalized subjects use autobiography to assert visibility and narrate their lives. Simultaneously, the memoir functions as a socio-political intervention, documenting both the challenges of gender transition and the precarity inherent in refugee existence. By examining narrative strategies, episodic structure, and translation-mediated representation, this study demonstrates how Thanuja contributes to contemporary debates in South Asian life writing and intersectional identity studies.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Life Writing**

Life writing encompasses autobiographies, memoirs, and other personal narratives that document lived experiences, memory, and identity formation. In contexts of marginalization, it functions as both self-expression and social testimony (Smith 23). Thanuja's memoir exemplifies this dual function, representing personal struggles of gender transition while also documenting systemic social, legal, and political challenges faced by refugees. She notes,

“If I had continued to stay in India, I might have joined the transwomen, and my life would have taken a different turn. But my sister and I had to return to Sri Lanka” (Singam 22).

This aligns with life writing theory, which emphasizes how autobiographies operate as forms of resistance, blending personal narrative with socio-political critique.

### **Transgender Studies**

Transgender studies examine the social, cultural, and bodily dimensions of gender non-conformity (Stryker 1). In Thanuja, the narrative foregrounds both internal processes of self-discovery and external challenges of recognition, highlighting how societal norms, legal structures, and familial expectations shape gender transition. For example, she recounts,

“The entire family had taken an oath to turn me into a man. I was often thrashed” (Singam 25).

Such experiences illustrate Stryker's framework on embodiment and social marginalization, showing how trans individuals navigate both internal identity and societal expectations.

### **Refugee Studies**

Refugee studies provides a lens for understanding displacement, precarity, and statelessness. Thanuja's narrative demonstrates how forced migration interacts with identity formation, with legal uncertainty and social marginalization intersecting with gender transition to create unique vulnerabilities. As she recalls, “Like thousands of other Tamil families, my family had to escape to India as refugees when the war intensified in December 1991” (Singam 4).

Malkki's theoretical lens frames this as an example of refugees negotiating social, political, and emotional precarity, emphasizing the intersectionality of gender and displacement (Malkki 497).

### **Translation Studies**

Translation mediates the memoir from Tamil to English, facilitating accessibility while preserving cultural specificity. Thanuja notes,

“When you read this book you may realise that my heart is rooted in Tamil land. Although I can speak and

write in three languages, I wrote my autobiography in my mother tongue. Even this wasn't my choice; I believe it came naturally to me" (Singam xi).

This reflects Spivak's argument that translation is an ethical and cultural practice, highlighting how linguistic shifts impact representation of marginalized experiences (Spivak 182).

### **Methodology**

This study employs qualitative textual analysis, focusing on narrative structure, episodic organization, and thematic development. Translation-aware reading examines how English mediates cultural and emotional nuance. Intersectional analysis explores the convergence of gender identity, displacement, and social precarity, demonstrating how personal narrative functions as both testimony and literary intervention.

### **Life Narrative and Refugee Displacement**

The memoir opens with Thanuja's early life in Sri Lanka during the civil war:

"Our small village, Mankumbam, was besieged by the army when I was still in my mother's womb. The army looted and set fire to homes and raped women...deeds we charred" (Singam 3).

This embodies the refugee studies lens, illustrating how early exposure to conflict shapes social and personal identity (Malkki 497). Migration through India and eventual settlement in Europe adds layers of legal precarity and cultural adaptation:

"Like thousands of other Tamil families, my family had to escape to India as refugees when the war intensified in December 1991" (Singam 4).

### **Gender Transition and Embodiment**

Gender transition constitutes a central theme, encompassing identity formation and struggles for social validation. Thanuja recounts:

"But my irrepressible femininity did not let me sustain the pretence. A pregnancy can be concealed for a few months, but I could not conceal my femininity even for a day" (Singam 40).

Such passages illustrate Stryker's theory of embodiment, showing how physical and social realities intersect with gender identity.

"I could not find answers to questions that concerned my gender identity. My deep loneliness and the thought that no one understood me made me feel terribly depressed" (Singam 44).

### **Life Writing as Testimony**

Thanuja's narrative demonstrates life writing as testimonial practice, blending personal experience with socio-political critique:

"I wished to live like a woman. It was destined by nature. My body did not cooperate with my heart as it was subject to nature's law" (Singam 48).

Life writing here illuminates structural inequities while preserving intimate reflection (Smith 25).

"Talking to Rose made me feel ecstatic. It was as if I was talking to God. Rose patiently listened to what I had to say and, like a specialist in the field, spelt out the contradictions that constitute different genders" (Singam 50).

### **Translation and Cultural Mediation**

Translation from Tamil to English mediates cultural, linguistic, and emotional nuance. The memoir negotiates authenticity and readability, reflecting Spivak's argument that translation is an ethical and cultural practice (Spivak 182).

"Translating my Tamil thoughts into English was not mere words; it was carrying my soul across borders" (Singam xiii).

## Conclusion

Thanuja: A Memoir of Migration and Transition presents a richly detailed account of displacement, gender transition, and self-representation. The memoir illustrates the ways in which refugee experience and transgender identity intersect, emphasizing the role of life writing in asserting dignity, narrating embodied experience, and engaging with social, legal, and cultural frameworks.

“To survive, to become, to be seen—that is the journey I continue” (Singam 230).

The text contributes to scholarship on intersectional identity in South Asian literature, highlighting the politics of visibility and social recognition for marginalized populations. Future research may examine comparative transgender refugee memoirs, ethics of translation, and autobiographical practices among displaced and gender-diverse populations.

## Works Cited

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