



Performing Gender: A Study of *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*

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Abstract: *The concept of gender has long been seen as an essentialist, biological category. However, Judith Butler's theory of performativity, has challenged this view by demonstrating that gender is a set of repeated acts and performances shaped by social expectations. This paper analyses A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi (2017), the autobiography of Manobi Bandopadhyay, India's first transgender college principal, through the lens of gender performativity. The text recounts Manobi's transformation from Somnath to Manobi, highlighting how gender identity is performed, negotiated, and reconstituted in both private and public spheres. The narrative brings into sharp focus the stigma, violence, and resistance that characterize the transgender experience in India, while simultaneously illustrating resilience, assertion, and triumph. By analyzing key episodes from the autobiography—childhood experiences of gender dysphoria, familial estrangement, institutional struggles, and eventual recognition—the paper argues that A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi exemplifies how transgender autobiography functions not only as personal testimony but also as political intervention. Manobi's narrative destabilizes normative binaries, expands the discourse on gender in India, and becomes a powerful act of performing and reclaiming selfhood.*

Keywords: Gender Performativity, Transgender Studies, Indian Autobiography, Identity Politics, Manobi Bandopadhyay

Introduction

In contemporary gender studies, the idea that gender is “natural” has been replaced by the understanding that it is socially constructed and performed. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), describes gender as performative—a set of repeated acts and gestures that produce the illusion of a stable identity. This framework is particularly significant in reading transgender narratives, which foreground the instability of binary categories of male and female.

In India, transgender communities such as the *Hijras* have a long historical presence, often occupying a paradoxical position of reverence and exclusion. However, the lives of individual transgender persons have remained underrepresented in mainstream discourse. Autobiographical texts such as A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me* (2010), Akkai Padmashali's *A Small Step in a Long Journey* (2019), and Manobi Bandopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) have begun to alter this narrative, offering powerful testimonies of struggle and assertion.

This paper focuses on Manobi Bandopadhyay's autobiography co-authored with Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey, as a site of performing gender. By tracing her journey from Somnath to Manobi, the text illustrates how gender identity is embodied, contested, and redefined in Indian society. The paper examines three broad themes: gender performance in childhood and



adolescence, negotiation with family, institutions, and society and assertion of identity and transformation through autobiography.

Theoretical Framework: Butler's Performativity and Beyond

Judith Butler's performativity theory suggests that gender is not something one *is* but something one *does*. According to Butler, "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (*Gender Trouble* 179). These acts, ranging from bodily gestures to clothing choices, create the illusion of natural gender.

For transgender individuals, this notion of performativity is particularly significant. Their lives expose the performative nature of gender by showing how binary categories fail to encompass lived realities. The act of transitioning—through changes in name, dress, speech, and body—is itself a conscious re-performance of gender identity.

In the Indian context, scholarship by Nivedita Menon (*Seeing Like a Feminist*, 2012) and Gayatri Reddy (*With Respect to Sex*, 2005) reveals how non-normative genders destabilize patriarchal and heteronormative structures. Manobi's autobiography, situated within this framework, demonstrates how performing gender becomes both survival strategy and resistance against exclusionary structures.

Contextualizing *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*

Published in 2017, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* is a milestone in Indian transgender literature. Co-written with journalist Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey, the text narrates the extraordinary journey of Manobi Bandopadhyay—India's first transgender college principal. Born Somnath in 1964 in West Bengal, she underwent immense struggles before her transition to Manobi.

The autobiography details not only the personal and familial dimensions of her transition but also her professional achievements and activism. From experiencing bullying in school to facing ridicule in academia, from enduring social ostracization to eventually achieving recognition as a scholar and leader, Manobi's story is one of resilience and assertion.

The title, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, is deeply symbolic. In Hindu mythology, Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth, prosperity, and auspiciousness. By framing her life as Lakshmi's gift, Manobi reclaims her femininity within a cultural-religious framework that affirms her identity rather than negates it.

Performing Gender in Childhood and Adolescence

Manobi's autobiography begins by narrating Somnath's early experiences of gender nonconformity. She recalls feeling drawn to feminine clothes, gestures, and activities, in contrast to expectations placed on her as a boy. These moments exemplify Butler's assertion that gender is not innate but produced through performance.

The ridicule faced in school illustrates how gender variance is policed. Teachers and peers sought to discipline Somnath into masculinity, but her inner identification with femininity persisted. The autobiography foregrounds how gender dysphoria is experienced as a constant dissonance between inner sense of self and societal expectations.

In this phase, Manobi's performances of femininity were tentative, often secretive, yet they highlight the performative instability of gender. Even as she was compelled to "act" masculine in public, her inner self sought expression through alternative performances.

Negotiating Family and Society

Family is a crucial site where gender performance is regulated. In Manobi's case, her parents struggled to accept her non-normative gender identity. Their attempts at correction—through reprimand, shame, and moral policing—illustrate how heteronormativity is reproduced within familial structures.



The autobiography also details her struggles in higher education and professional life. As Somnath, she achieved academic excellence, earning a Ph.D. in Bengali literature. Yet, even in academia, she faced ostracization and ridicule, demonstrating how institutions perpetuate gender conformity.

Public spaces were equally hostile. Like many transgender individuals, Manobi encountered harassment, abuse, and invisibility. Yet, she refused to retreat. Her insistence on pursuing education and asserting herself in academia exemplifies resistance through performance.

Transition and Assertion of Identity

One of the most significant aspects of the autobiography is Manobi's transition from Somnath to Manobi. This transition was not merely medical or physical but profoundly performative. Through changes in clothing, name, voice, and body, she began to embody her true identity.

The act of renaming herself Manobi was symbolic—an assertion of selfhood and rejection of the identity imposed on her. As Butler argues, gender identity emerges through repetition and citation of cultural codes. Manobi's adoption of feminine dress, speech, and comportment not only aligned her external identity with her internal sense of self but also disrupted binary frameworks.

The autobiography emphasizes the psychological liberation accompanying her transition. Even amidst hostility, she describes the joy of living authentically as a woman. This embodiment of femininity becomes both a personal triumph and a political act.

Professional Struggles and Triumphs

Perhaps the most remarkable dimension of Manobi's story is her role as India's first transgender college principal. Her appointment at Krishnagar Women's College in 2015 made headlines across the nation. While the position brought recognition, it also intensified public scrutiny.

The autobiography candidly narrates the challenges she faced as principal—resistance from colleagues, media sensationalism, and societal prejudice. Yet, her resilience in navigating these struggles exemplifies the transformative potential of transgender visibility.

Her position as principal was not just personal success but symbolic of a broader cultural shift. It marked the entry of transgender individuals into mainstream professional spaces, challenging stereotypes that confined them to marginal livelihoods.

Autobiography as Resistance

Autobiographical writing has historically been a powerful tool for marginalized communities. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe, life writing allows marginalized subjects to "intervene in dominant discourses and refigure cultural narratives" (*Reading Autobiography* 142).

For Manobi, narrating her life in *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* is itself an act of resistance. By documenting her struggles and achievements, she not only validates her own existence but also speaks for countless transgender individuals denied a voice.

The narrative challenges the dominant scripts of gender and sexuality, exposing the violence of binary systems while celebrating transgender resilience. The autobiography thus becomes both personal testimony and political manifesto.

Conclusion

A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi is more than an autobiography; it is a cultural document that reshapes Indian discourse on gender and identity. Through the lens of Butler's performativity, Manobi's life exemplifies how gender is performed, resisted, and reconstituted within hostile environments.



Her journey from Somnath to Manobi illustrates the instability of gender binaries and the transformative power of self-assertion. By becoming India's first transgender principal and narrating her story, she not only redefined her own life but also paved the way for broader acceptance and recognition of transgender identities.

In foregrounding her struggles and triumphs, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* asserts that autobiography can serve as activism—destabilizing oppressive structures and affirming marginalized lives. Ultimately, Manobi's narrative reminds us that performing gender is not a passive act of conformity but a dynamic process of resistance, creativity, and transformation.

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