

Education as Liberation: The Transformative Journey of India's First Transgender Principal

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between education and liberation has long been a central concern in critical pedagogy and social justice discourse. For marginalized communities, particularly transgender individuals in India, education represents not only access to knowledge but also a means of resisting systemic oppression and reclaiming agency. This paper examines the transformative role of education in the life of Manobi Bandyopadhyay as narrated in her autobiography *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*. Drawing on queer theory, Foucauldian notions of power/knowledge, and intersectionality, the study explores how educational spaces simultaneously function as sites of exclusion and empowerment. Through a qualitative textual analysis, the paper argues that education becomes a critical tool for self-realization, identity negotiation, and social mobility. Manobi's journey from a marginalized gender-nonconforming child to India's first transgender college principal demonstrates how education can disrupt normative structures and enable transformative change. The study contributes to transgender studies and educational discourse by foregrounding education as a central axis of liberation in transgender life writing.

Keywords: Transgender Studies, Queer Theory, Empowerment, Autobiography, Intersectionality.

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Introduction

Education has historically been positioned as a pathway to empowerment, social mobility, and individual transformation. However, access to education and the experience of educational institutions are deeply shaped by structures of power, privilege, and exclusion. For transgender individuals in India, educational spaces are often fraught with hostility, marginalization, and systemic discrimination. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, social stigma and institutional bias continue to restrict access to meaningful education for gender-nonconforming individuals.

The autobiography of Manobi Bandyopadhyay, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, provides a powerful narrative that foregrounds the role of education as

a transformative force. Her life story exemplifies the struggles and triumphs of negotiating identity within oppressive structures while using education as a tool for resistance and empowerment.

Manobi reflects, "Education was the only realm where I could prove my worth beyond the body that society refused to accept" (Bandyopadhyay 51). This articulation underscores the central argument of this paper: that education operates as a site of both discipline and liberation, offering marginalized individuals the means to redefine their identities and challenge systemic inequalities.

This paper seeks to examine how education functions as a liberatory force in Manobi's life. It explores the ways in which educational

experiences shape identity formation, facilitate resistance, and enable social mobility. By situating her narrative within broader theoretical frameworks, the study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on transgender inclusion, educational reform, and social justice.

Literature Review

The emergence of transgender autobiographies in Indian literature has significantly contributed to the visibility and representation of marginalized gender identities. Texts such as *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and *The Truth About Me* by A Revathi have foregrounded issues of identity, marginalization, and resilience. These narratives challenge dominant discourses and offer alternative perspectives on gender and embodiment.

However, much of the existing scholarship has focused on themes of trauma, social exclusion, and identity formation, often overlooking the role of education as a transformative force. While some studies acknowledge the importance of education, they do not sufficiently explore its potential as a tool for liberation and structural change.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity provides a critical framework for understanding how gender identities are constructed and contested within social institutions. Butler's argument that gender is performative rather than innate is particularly relevant in analyzing how Manobi navigates educational spaces that enforce rigid gender norms.

Michel Foucault's notion of power/knowledge further illuminates the role of educational institutions in regulating bodies and identities. Schools and colleges function as disciplinary spaces that enforce conformity, yet they also offer opportunities for resistance and transformation.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality highlights the interconnected nature of social identities and the ways in which multiple forms of oppression intersect. This framework is essential for understanding how Manobi's experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by class, culture, and societal expectations.

This paper builds on these theoretical perspectives to argue that education is not merely a backdrop in transgender narratives but a central axis of empowerment and transformation.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates queer theory, Foucauldian analysis, and intersectionality.

Queer theory, particularly Butler's work, challenges the binary understanding of gender and emphasizes the fluidity and performativity of identity. In Manobi's narrative, gender is not a fixed category but a dynamic process shaped by social interactions and personal agency. Educational spaces, however, often enforce rigid gender norms, creating tension between individual identity and institutional expectations.

Foucault's theory of power/knowledge provides insight into how educational institutions function as sites of discipline and control. Through mechanisms such as surveillance, evaluation, and normalization, these institutions regulate behavior and enforce conformity. Yet, as Foucault suggests, power is not absolute; it is productive and can be resisted. Manobi's educational journey exemplifies this resistance.

Intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw, allows for a nuanced understanding of how multiple forms of marginalization intersect in Manobi's life. Her experiences are shaped by the interplay of gender, socio-economic status, and cultural norms. This framework highlights the

structural barriers that limit access to education and opportunities for marginalized individuals.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology based on textual analysis of *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*. The study utilizes:

- Autobiographical analysis to examine the construction of self
- Thematic analysis focusing on education, identity, and resistance
- Critical interpretation using theoretical frameworks

The objective is to explore how education is represented as a transformative force within the narrative.

Early Life and Educational Struggles

Manobi's early life is characterized by a profound sense of alienation and conflict. Assigned male at birth, she struggled to conform to societal expectations of masculinity. Her gender nonconformity made her a target of ridicule and exclusion, particularly within school environments.

She recalls, "The classroom was not a place of learning for me; it was a battleground where I had to defend my very existence" (Bandyopadhyay 34). This statement reflects the hostile environment that transgender individuals often face in educational institutions.

Bullying by peers and lack of support from teachers exacerbated her sense of isolation. Educational spaces, which are ideally meant to nurture and empower, instead became sites of trauma and marginalization.

Despite these challenges, Manobi demonstrated remarkable resilience. Her determination to pursue education can be seen as an act of defiance against the forces that sought to exclude her.

Education as a Tool of Self-Realization

For Manobi, education becomes a means of self-discovery and empowerment. It provides a space where she can transcend societal labels and assert her identity.

She writes, "In books, I found a language to articulate my pain and a vision to imagine a different future" (Bandyopadhyay 62). Education thus enables her to develop a sense of self that is not constrained by societal expectations.

Higher education plays a crucial role in this process. It allows her to engage with new ideas, develop critical thinking skills, and gain confidence in her intellectual abilities. Through education, she acquires the tools necessary to challenge dominant narratives and assert her individuality.

Institutional Barriers and Resistance

Despite her academic achievements, Manobi continues to face discrimination within institutional spaces. Her gender identity often overshadows her qualifications, leading to bias and exclusion.

She notes, "My degrees were often overlooked; what people saw was not my merit but my difference" (Bandyopadhyay 91). This highlights the persistent stigma associated with transgender identities.

However, Manobi's response to these challenges is characterized by resilience and determination. She refuses to be defined by societal prejudices and continues to pursue her goals. Her persistence exemplifies the transformative potential of education as a tool of resistance.

Becoming India's First Transgender Principal

Manobi's appointment as a college principal represents a significant milestone in her journey and in the broader struggle for transgender rights

in India. It challenges deeply entrenched stereotypes and redefines the possibilities for transgender individuals in professional spaces.

Her achievement symbolizes the breaking of institutional barriers and the potential for inclusion within traditionally exclusionary systems. It also highlights the role of education in enabling social mobility and leadership.

Education as Social Transformation

Manobi's journey has far-reaching implications for society. Her success challenges dominant narratives about transgender individuals and demonstrates the transformative power of education.

Education, in this context, becomes a catalyst for social change. It enables marginalized individuals to claim their rights, assert their dignity, and contribute meaningfully to society.

Intersectional Analysis

An intersectional analysis reveals the complex interplay of gender, class, and cultural norms in shaping Manobi's experiences. Her struggle for education is not solely about gender identity but also about navigating structural inequalities.

This perspective underscores the need for inclusive policies that address multiple forms of marginalization.

Comparative Perspective

Comparative Perspective: Education, Identity, and Agency in Transgender Autobiographies

A comparative reading of *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* by Manobi Bandyopadhyay alongside *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and *The Truth About Me* by A Revathi reveals significant convergences and divergences in the articulation of transgender identity, resilience, and empowerment. While all three narratives

foreground marginalization, trauma, and the struggle for dignity, they differ markedly in the role assigned to education as a transformative force.

At the most fundamental level, all three autobiographies depict childhood as a site of intense conflict, where gender nonconformity is met with ridicule, punishment, and social alienation. However, the trajectories that follow diverge based on access to education, socio-cultural context, and personal circumstances. These differences illuminate the central argument of this paper: that education is not merely an incidental factor but a decisive axis of empowerment and social mobility.

In the case of Manobi Bandyopadhyay, education occupies a central and sustained role throughout her life narrative. From early schooling to higher education and eventually institutional leadership, her journey is deeply embedded in academic spaces. Despite experiencing hostility and exclusion, she persists in her educational pursuits, using academic achievement as a means of asserting her identity and gaining social recognition. As she notes "Education gave me a language to exist beyond the body that society marked as deviant" (Bandyopadhyay 60). This articulation underscores the epistemic dimension of education it enables not only social mobility but also self-articulation and intellectual agency.

In contrast, the narrative of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi presents a more complex and ambivalent relationship with formal education. While Laxmi's early life includes schooling, her trajectory is shaped more significantly by her association with the hijra community and her emergence as a cultural and political activist. Education, in her narrative, is not the primary vehicle of empowerment; rather, performance, activism, and community engagement become the dominant modes of self-realization.

Laxmi writes, "I learned more from life and from my community than any classroom could teach me" (Tripathi 112). This statement reflects a broader critique of formal education as an exclusionary institution that fails to accommodate transgender identities. Unlike Manobi, who navigates and ultimately transforms academic institutions, Laxmi redefines knowledge production outside formal structures. Her empowerment is rooted in cultural visibility, public speaking, and activism, particularly in advocating for transgender rights on national and international platforms.

Similarly, A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me* presents yet another distinct trajectory. Revathi's narrative is marked by early alienation, family rejection, and eventual migration into the hijra community. Unlike Manobi, Revathi does not have sustained access to formal education, and her life is shaped by economic precarity and social marginalization. Her experiences highlight the structural barriers that prevent many transgender individuals from accessing education.

Revathi reflects, "School was never a place where I felt I belonged; survival became more important than studies" (Revathi 45). This statement underscores the harsh realities faced by transgender individuals who are forced to abandon education due to discrimination and economic necessity. In Revathi's narrative, empowerment emerges not through formal education but through community belonging and later through writing, which becomes a form of self-expression and resistance.

A comparative analysis of these three narratives reveals that education functions differently depending on the socio-economic and cultural context of the individual. For Manobi, education serves as a pathway to institutional inclusion and leadership. For Laxmi, empowerment is achieved

through cultural and political activism, while for Revathi, survival and community solidarity take precedence over formal education.

From a theoretical perspective, these differences can be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Manobi's access to education enables her to acquire cultural capital, which she leverages to gain legitimacy and authority within institutional spaces. In contrast, Laxmi and Revathi operate within alternative forms of capital cultural, social, and experiential that exist outside formal academic structures.

Furthermore, Judith Butler's notion of performativity can be applied to understand how each of these individuals negotiates gender identity within different contexts. While Manobi performs her identity within the constraints of academic institutions, Laxmi's performance is public and political, and Revathi's is rooted in community practices.

The role of intersectionality is also crucial in understanding these divergent trajectories. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, experiences of marginalization are shaped by the intersection of multiple social categories. Manobi's relative access to education and institutional spaces can be partly attributed to her socio-economic positioning, which differs from that of Revathi. This highlights the uneven distribution of opportunities within the transgender community.

Another significant point of comparison lies in the concept of visibility. Manobi's visibility is institutional she becomes a principal, a figure of authority within the education system. Laxmi's visibility is performative and activist, rooted in media representation and public discourse. Revathi's visibility emerges through literary expression, as her autobiography brings marginalized experiences into the public sphere.

Despite these differences, all three narratives converge in their emphasis on resilience and resistance. Each author challenges dominant narratives that portray transgender individuals as passive victims. Instead, they assert agency and redefine the terms of their existence.

However, what distinguishes Manobi's narrative is the centrality of education as a sustained and transformative force. While Laxmi and Revathi achieve empowerment through alternative pathways, Manobi's journey demonstrates the potential of education to facilitate not only personal transformation but also structural change. Her position as a principal disrupts entrenched hierarchies and challenges the exclusionary nature of academic institutions.

This comparative analysis thus reinforces the argument that education can serve as a powerful tool of liberation, but its accessibility and impact are unevenly distributed. It also underscores the need for more inclusive educational policies that address the specific challenges faced by transgender individuals.

The comparative perspective highlights both the diversity and commonality of transgender experiences. While the pathways to empowerment may differ, the underlying struggle for dignity, recognition, and self-realization remains constant. By foregrounding education as a central axis of transformation in Manobi's narrative, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of education in shaping transgender lives.

Findings and Discussion: Education as a Multidimensional Site of Liberation

The analysis of *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* by Manobi Bandyopadhyay reveals that education functions not merely as a background element in the narrative but as a central, multidimensional force of transformation. The findings of this study

demonstrate that education operates simultaneously as a site of oppression, a tool of resistance, a medium of identity formation, and a pathway to social mobility and institutional transformation. This layered role complicates simplistic understandings of education as inherently liberatory and instead positions it within a dynamic framework of power, negotiation, and agency.

1. Education as a Site of Discipline and Exclusion

The first major finding underscores that educational institutions initially function as spaces of surveillance, discipline, and exclusion. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault, it becomes evident that schools and colleges operate as regulatory systems that enforce normative gender identities through implicit and explicit mechanisms.

Manobi's early experiences reflect this disciplinary structure. The classroom, rather than being an inclusive environment, becomes a space where deviation from gender norms is punished through ridicule, isolation, and symbolic violence. She observes, "I was constantly reminded that I did not belong, that my existence disrupted the order of things" (Bandyopadhyay 36). This illustrates how educational institutions participate in the production and reinforcement of gender binaries.

Foucault's concept of normalization is particularly relevant here. The institutional insistence on conformity renders gender nonconforming bodies as "abnormal," thereby justifying exclusionary practices. This finding aligns with broader scholarship on how schools perpetuate heteronormativity and marginalize non-binary identities.

However, it is crucial to note that this exclusion is not merely interpersonal but structural, embedded in curricula, institutional policies, and everyday

practices. The absence of transgender-inclusive frameworks further exacerbates this marginalization.

2. Education as a Tool of Resistance and Agency

Despite functioning as a site of exclusion, education simultaneously emerges as a powerful tool of resistance. This paradox reflects Foucault's assertion that power is not monolithic but productive and relational; where there is power, there is also resistance.

Manobi's persistence in pursuing education despite systemic barriers exemplifies this resistance. Academic excellence becomes a strategic means of challenging societal prejudices and asserting legitimacy. As she states, "My success in studies became my answer to those who denied my worth"(Bandyopadhyay 64).

This finding suggests that education enables marginalized individuals to negotiate power structures rather than merely succumb to them. By excelling within the very system that marginalizes her, Manobi disrupts dominant narratives that associate transgender identity with incapacity or deviance.

From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with Judith Butler's notion of performativity. Manobi's academic achievements can be read as performative acts that subvert normative expectations. By occupying spaces traditionally denied to transgender individuals, she redefines the parameters of legitimacy and competence.

3. Education and the Formation of Selfhood

Another significant finding is the role of education in facilitating identity formation and self-realization. Beyond its instrumental value, education provides an epistemic framework through which Manobi interprets and articulates her experiences.

She reflects, "Education gave me the courage to understand myself, to name my reality, and to refuse imposed identities"(Bandyopadhyay 70). This highlights the transformative potential of education as a space for critical self-reflection and intellectual empowerment.

From a queer theoretical perspective, identity is not fixed but constructed through discourse and experience. Education introduces Manobi to new ideas, languages, and frameworks that enable her to conceptualize her gender identity beyond societal constraints. It allows her to move from a position of confusion and alienation to one of clarity and self-acceptance.

This process also underscores the importance of representation and knowledge production. The absence of transgender narratives in mainstream education contributes to feelings of isolation, while access to diverse perspectives fosters a sense of belonging and validation.

4. Education as Cultural Capital and Social Mobility

A crucial finding of this study is that education functions as a form of cultural capital, enabling social mobility and institutional recognition. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, education can be understood as a resource that confers legitimacy, authority, and access to opportunities.

Manobi's academic qualifications allow her to navigate institutional spaces and eventually attain a position of leadership. Her appointment as a principal represents not only personal achievement but also a significant disruption of entrenched hierarchies.

She notes, "For the first time, people saw me not just as a transgender person but as an academic, an administrator, a leader"(Bandyopadhyay 102).

This shift in perception illustrates how education enables the reconfiguration of identity within social and professional contexts.

However, this finding must be situated within an intersectional framework. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, access to resources such as education is unevenly distributed. Manobi's trajectory, while inspiring, is not representative of all transgender experiences. Structural barriers continue to limit educational opportunities for many individuals within the community.

5. Institutional Transformation and Symbolic Representation

The study further reveals that Manobi's educational achievements contribute to institutional transformation and symbolic representation. Her position as India's first transgender principal challenges deeply ingrained assumptions about gender and authority.

This achievement has a dual impact: it transforms institutional spaces from within and provides representation for marginalized communities. Her presence in a leadership role disrupts the invisibility of transgender individuals in academia and creates new possibilities for inclusion.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this can be interpreted as a reconfiguration of power relations. By occupying a position of authority, Manobi not only resists exclusion but also participates in shaping institutional norms.

6. The Limits of Education as Liberation

While the findings highlight the transformative potential of education, they also reveal its limitations. Education alone cannot dismantle deeply entrenched social prejudices and structural inequalities.

Despite her achievements, Manobi continues to

face discrimination and scrutiny. She observes, "Even at the height of my success, I was reminded that acceptance was conditional" (Bandyopadhyay 110). This underscores the persistence of stigma and the limits of individual success in addressing systemic issues.

This finding complicates the notion of education as a panacea for marginalization. It suggests that while education can facilitate empowerment, it must be accompanied by broader social and institutional reforms.

7. Comparative Insights and Broader Implications

When viewed in comparison with the narratives of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and A Revathi, the findings underscore the uneven accessibility and impact of education. While Manobi's trajectory highlights the transformative potential of formal education, the experiences of Laxmi and Revathi reveal alternative pathways to empowerment.

This comparative perspective reinforces the need for inclusive educational policies that address the specific challenges faced by transgender individuals. It also highlights the importance of recognizing diverse forms of knowledge and agency beyond formal education.

8. Reaffirming the Central Argument

The discussion ultimately reaffirms the central argument of this paper: that education, while embedded within structures of power, possesses the potential to function as a transformative force in the lives of marginalized individuals. In the case of Manobi Bandyopadhyay, education becomes a means of negotiating identity, challenging institutional barriers, and achieving social mobility.

However, this transformation is neither automatic nor universal. It requires resilience, access to resources, and supportive institutional

frameworks. The study thus calls for a reimagining of education as an inclusive and emancipatory space that recognizes and accommodates diverse identities.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the role of education as a transformative and liberatory force in the life of Manobi Bandyopadhyay, as articulated in *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*. Through a detailed textual and theoretical analysis, the paper has demonstrated that education occupies a paradoxical yet powerful position within transgender life narratives: it is simultaneously a site of exclusion and a medium of empowerment. By navigating this tension, Manobi's journey reveals the complex ways in which marginalized individuals engage with institutional structures to negotiate identity, assert agency, and achieve social mobility.

At the outset, the paper established that educational institutions in India often function as spaces of discipline and normalization, reinforcing rigid gender binaries and marginalizing those who deviate from them. Drawing on the insights of Michel Foucault, it became evident that these institutions regulate bodies and identities through subtle yet pervasive mechanisms of power. For Manobi, early schooling was marked by alienation, ridicule, and exclusion, highlighting the systemic barriers faced by transgender individuals within formal education.

However, as the analysis progressed, it became clear that education also provides the tools necessary to resist and subvert these structures. In line with Judith Butler's concept of performativity, Manobi's academic success can be understood as a strategic performance that challenges normative assumptions about gender and capability. By excelling within the very system that sought to marginalize her, she

redefines the parameters of legitimacy and disrupts dominant discourses that associate transgender identity with incapacity.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the role of education in facilitating identity formation and self-realization. Education enabled Manobi to develop a language through which she could articulate her experiences and assert her identity. This epistemic dimension of education underscores its significance not merely as a means of acquiring knowledge but as a process of becoming. It allowed her to move from a position of marginalization to one of self-awareness and confidence, thereby transforming both her personal and social identity.

The analysis also emphasized the importance of education as a form of cultural capital, drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Manobi's academic qualifications provided her with the legitimacy and authority required to access institutional spaces and leadership roles. Her appointment as India's first transgender principal represents a significant disruption of entrenched hierarchies and serves as a powerful symbol of inclusion and possibility. This achievement not only marks a personal milestone but also contributes to broader processes of institutional transformation and social change.

At the same time, the study acknowledged the limitations of education as a singular pathway to liberation. Despite her success, Manobi continues to encounter discrimination and conditional acceptance, underscoring the persistence of societal prejudice. This finding aligns with the intersectional framework proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which highlights the complex interplay of gender, class, and cultural norms in shaping individual experiences. It becomes evident that while education can facilitate empowerment, it cannot, in isolation, dismantle deeply entrenched systems of inequality.

The comparative analysis further reinforced this argument by situating Manobi's narrative alongside those of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and A Revathi. While all three narratives foreground resilience and resistance, they differ significantly in their engagement with education. Manobi's trajectory underscores the transformative potential of formal education, whereas Laxmi and Revathi highlight alternative pathways to empowerment through activism, community, and literary expression. This diversity of experiences underscores the uneven accessibility of education and the need for more inclusive frameworks that accommodate varied forms of knowledge and agency.

In synthesizing these insights, this paper argues that education must be reimagined as an inclusive and emancipatory space that recognizes and affirms diverse identities. Such a reimagining requires not only policy reforms but also a fundamental shift in institutional culture. Educational systems must move beyond tokenistic inclusion to actively challenge heteronormative assumptions, incorporate transgender perspectives into curricula, and create safe and supportive environments for all students.

From a policy perspective, this entails the implementation of gender-inclusive practices, anti-discrimination measures, and targeted support systems for transgender students. It also requires a commitment to addressing structural inequalities that limit access to education for marginalized communities. Without such interventions, the transformative potential of education will remain inaccessible to many.

Ultimately, Manobi Bandyopadhyay's journey serves as both an inspiration and a critique. It demonstrates the power of education to transform lives and challenge social norms, while also

exposing the limitations of existing systems. Her story compels us to rethink the role of education in contemporary society and to envision new possibilities for inclusion, equity, and justice.

In conclusion, education emerges in this study not as a neutral or inherently liberatory force, but as a contested and dynamic space where power, identity, and resistance intersect. For transgender individuals, it holds the potential to be a site of profound transformation but only if it is made accessible, inclusive, and responsive to their lived realities. The task, therefore, is not merely to celebrate individual success stories but to work towards systemic change that ensures education becomes a genuine instrument of liberation for all.

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