



# Unarticulated Trauma And The Recurrence Of Self: Implementing Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory In Living Smile Vidya I M Vidyaa Transgender Journey

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**Abstract:** This research article examines the notion of unarticulated trauma and its influence on the recurrence of self within the framework of *Living Smile Vidya: I m Vidya A Transgender Journey*, analyzed through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. Caruth's trauma framework highlights the inability to comprehend and recurring of traumatic experiences, especially those that remain unarticulated or unprocessed. The paper examines how Vidya's story of gender transition serves as a locus of both individual and communal trauma, emphasizing the impact of unexpressed trauma—experiences that defy straightforward articulation—on her identity and self-concept. This study analyzes Vidya's journey through the lens of Caruth's theory to investigate how trauma interrupts the self-narrative and how, throughout the iterative process of recounting, re-experiencing, and reconciling her history, Vidya reasserts her agency and forges a renewed identity. The paper contends that Vidya's transgender experience illustrates the significant relevance of Caruth's trauma theory in comprehending how unarticulated trauma can persistently affect the individual while also facilitating the transformation and reconstruction of identity. Ultimately, it establishes Vidya as a pivotal story that encapsulates the convergence of trauma, belonging, and the recovery of self in transgender experiences.

**Index Terms:** Trauma, Harassment, Cathy Caruth theory.

## 1. Introduction

Cathy Caruth's key contributions to trauma theory have offered scholars significant understanding of trauma's essence, its deferred impacts, and its narrative role. Her insights have been essential in elucidating the ways trauma disturbs the human psyche, especially in its narrative manifestations. Caruth posits that trauma is not instantaneously absorbed or comprehended but resurfaces, frequently unpredictably, in waves that perpetually affect the individual's existence. This research intends to examine the autobiography *Living Smile Vidya: I'm Vidya, A Transgender Journey* via the perspective of Caruth's trauma theory. Vidya, a transgender woman, reflects on her experiences of suffering, bereavement, and self-realization while traversing a society that persistently rejects and misidentifies her. Her narrative, replete with trauma, illustrates a significant convergence of individual anguish and societal ostracism, rendering it an exemplary book for the application of trauma theory.

## 2. Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory posits that trauma constitutes a disruption that surpasses conventional human comprehension. Her idea emphasizes the "delayed" aspect of trauma, which is not instantly assimilated into the individual's experience but manifests as a shock, subsequently acknowledged as painful. Caruth posits that trauma is hardly comprehensively understood in its initial occurrence and instead begins to be comprehended through its recurrent manifestation.

"The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them. Or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess and thus which possesses them." (Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*)

Caruth speculates that trauma impairs the individual's capacity to comprehend experiences in real-time, leading to a disjointed narrative. This fragmentation is a defining trait of trauma; the individual's effort to comprehend their experience is characterized by gaps, silences, and recurrent returns of the horrific event. Caruth's research emphasizes the narrative as a medium for both the communication and, importantly, the processing of trauma. The trauma narrative serves as a domain for the individual to endeavor to process the ineffable, notwithstanding its status as an ongoing endeavor.

## 3. Overview of *Living Smile Vidya: I'm Vidya, A Transgender Journey*

In *Living Smile Vidya: I'm Vidya, A Transgender Journey*, Vidya narrates her experiences as a transgender woman in India, providing a candid depiction of her challenges with gender identification, familial ostracism, societal prejudice, and personal metamorphosis. Her journey is characterized by profound anguish, yet also instances of joy, humility, and empowerment. Vidya's narrative serves as a significant reflection on the convergence of gender identity and the violence perpetrated against transgender individuals in India. Comprehending the struggles of those who are excluded in society will promote the emergence and rejuvenation of the oppressed. Vidya's autobiography commences with her upbringing, during which she experienced a disconnection from her gendered body, although lacked the vocabulary and assistance to articulate her experience. Her anguish manifests in layers: familial rejection, cultural disdain, and the daily assault she endures. Nonetheless, her narrative exemplifies resilience, as Vidya traverses her gender identity and asserts her voice in a culture that has sought to silence her.

Vidya's childhood efforts to preserve her femininity were even more pronounced. Her father, an imposing ruler, allowed no room for trivial joys or youthful autonomy. The home functioned as a metaphorical prison because of the severe discipline enforced by his father. He pressed his ambitions on Vidya, intending to convert him into an IAS officer. Only God comprehends the worries and fears that troubled him; nonetheless, he never permitted me to have a conventional upbringing (Vidya 16). At the age of six, Vidya starting acknowledging her womanhood. She previously took pleasure in wearing her sister's clothing and would dance alone to music. She was indifferent to being acknowledged as a boy and did not seek the privileges granted to her. The anguish of being unable to transcend her male identity was tormenting her. She proceeded to scrutinize her inclination, interrogating its legitimacy. What is the justification for a boy to exclusively wear shirts and trousers? I value skirts and blouses; why am I unable to don them? Why do individuals find unusual what is instinctive to me? (Vidya 22).

The trauma imposed by familial relationships profoundly impacts the psychological well-being of transgender individuals. In the face of societal challenges, family serves as their only sanctuary. When everything else becomes ambiguous, they are left destitute.

“One can endure the majority of life's adversities, yet the sensation of being orphaned signifies an immense loss—self-pity is a potent narcotic, a poison” (Vidya 97).

Now discuss about the nirvana or sex reassignment surgery experience of Vidya. Vidya, following her experience of "nirvana," exclaims

“Amma, Amma, I have become a woman. I am not Saravanan anymore, I am Vidya – a complete Vidya-a whole woman. Where are you, Amma? Can't you come to me by some miracle. At least for a moment? Please hold my hand, Amma. My heart seems to be breaking into smithereens. Radha please Radha, I am no longer your brother, Radha I am your sister now, your sister. Come to me Radha, Chithi, Maju, Prabha, Appa... Look at me Appa – Look at my dissected body. This is a mere body. Can you see that I can bear all this pain? I can take any amount of pain, Appa. Look at me, Appa Look at me as a woman. accept me as a girl, App. Only I could hear my screams.”(Vidya9).

Her screams, arising from her misery and fear, reflect her longing to be connected to the family. Transgender individuals want familial connection. Disband and separate are arduous concepts, especially when individuals are alienated from those they care about. The trauma she faced by family specially her father's violence. Vidya, born on 25 March 1982, was named Saravanan by her father following prayers to the deity Murugan. Her progenitor Ramaswami desired a male child, and being their sixth offspring, Saravanan was anticipated to satisfy this longing. The arrival of Saravanan indeed gave immense delight to the family, and his mother, Veeramma, could hardly have foreseen the future transformation of Saravanan into Vidya. Upon his birth as a male, Vidya garnered significant attention from his parents. The sisters Radha and Manju expressed their affection for Vidya. Saravanan (Vidya) was expected to study without engaging in any household chores; yet, conflicts frequently arose between Ramaswami and Vidya during the examination results period.

The father's treatment varied according to the results. The loss of a single point will result in severe corporal punishment. The father invested all his aspirations in his purported son Saravanan to secure a distinguished position through a robust education, leading to distress if Vidya's academic performance faltered. She was expressly forbidden from playing. In her book, she conveys the decline of her childhood joy due to her father's demands.

Vidya's sisters were assigned the responsibility of continuous surveillance. The introduction of a new stepmother shortly following the mother's death did not alter Vidya's standing. She was regarded as the sole male child and simultaneously experienced both immense affection and the pressure to consistently achieve top academic performance. Vidya completed her school education, obtained a degree in computer technology, and pursued a master's in M.A. Linguistics (Tamil). In recounting her childhood, she articulately reveals her concealed and latent aspiration to become a lady. She adorns herself in women's garments and performs by emulating the heroes from films. When she was apprehended for similar actions at a young age, she was not regarded seriously; nevertheless, the perception of observers shifts as she matures. In educational institutions and public settings, Saravanan's conduct is consistently observed and ridiculed for exhibiting traits traditionally associated with femininity. Vidya admits, “Even children from lower classes mocked me at school: ‘Look at this lady,’ they shouted after me” (Vidya, 24). Notwithstanding the abuse and harassment, Saravanan harbors a profound passion for converting into Vidya. A limited number of friends assisted her upon learning of the predicament.

Education significantly benefited Vidya, as her father was highly committed to the education of his son, Saravanan. Vidya shown an interest in furthering her education; nevertheless, her enthusiasm was short-lived. She was experiencing an internal transition, during which her interest in her studies gradually began to diminish. My deepest thoughts and disposition, laden with dread and concerns, made it progressively challenging to concentrate on my academics. (Vidya, 29). Unable to withstand the strain imposed by her father, she revolted. At that time, she summoned her bravery and shouted.

“So far, everything that happened had been as expected, according to the script Appa had perfected – but something no one had expected.... for years I had suffered Appa's violence without a word of protest- only my screams of pain shattering the surrounding silence. But on that occasion, for the first time, I fought back: I shouted at him and pushed him hard. Stop it Appa! I yelled right in the midst of his crazed bout of flagellation.” (Vidya 30)

Exclusion from familial bonds represents a profound distress encountered by transgender individuals. The family is the force that drives them to the streets. It resembles a chain link. The family members, motivated by fear and guilt, are reluctant to challenge the prevailing society in which they live. The sheer concept that aravani or transgender individuals are part of their family undermines their perceived social status.

Next the trauma experienced following sex reassignment surgery (SRS), which is legalized in some nations but remains largely unacknowledged in our own, is multifaceted. There are a handful of facilities which executes this castration surgery without approval for a significant sum but without skilled doctors. It is crucial for a tirunangai to undergo this surgery, as they perceive their male status as a mere accident. They aspire to transition into women as they identify as such. If SRS is administered appropriately with government endorsement and support, the challenges faced by transgender individuals will diminish significantly. Records will explicitly reflect their new gender and name, so facilitating their comfort in securing suitable employment. Vidya recounts her experience of undergoing this procedure. It was a critical jiffy for her. No safety measures or preventative steps exist to assist persons in distress. The trauma resulting from the surgery was immense. The castration is accomplished by infusing local anesthetic where no follow-up occurs. She was compelled to recline on a steel cot covered with a newspaper. Following the surgery, the blood was cleaned, and the subsequent patient was summoned. I was provided only with a steel cot and a newspaper laid upon it, rather than a decent bed. The surgeon provided no guarantees and no counseling. They do the castration as you observe. Suture in the ensuing minutes, cleanse you with cotton, and prepare you for recovery —Next! they announce the operation is indistinguishable from a procedure conducted at the butcher's shop (Vidya 100). Her desire to transform her physique was her sole purpose, compelling her to endure the discomfort. We desire the surgical intervention that will provide us with a physical resemblance to that female identity (Vidya 100). The senior hijras are the sole nurses responsible for caring for individuals undergoing this castration. The devastating effect of this procedure is seen in Vidya's hesitation to endure her appendix operation. — I was exceedingly apprehensive about the surgery (Vidya 117). She found contentment in the experience of SRS surgery, as the discharge certificate included the phrase —Male to Female operation done in Pune (Vidya 118), the sole documentation acknowledging her gender transition.

In the Indian setting, many transgender individuals, fearing societal repercussions, opt to remain with their assigned sex rather than pursue sex reassignment, masculine attire while experiencing an inward sense of femininity. Vidya's transsexual friends urge her to suppress her femininity. It results in significant psychological trauma for Vidya. Transgender adolescents encounter trauma through various means. Numerous individuals endure physical and emotional attacks for "coming out" or live in constant fear of being discovered. Individuals may partake in high-risk behaviors as a means to navigate uncertainty around their sexual identity. A multitude of these children and adolescents desire to share, yet Establishing a secure and reliable relationship poses a significant barrier, as the mere recognition of same-sex affections and desires may exacerbate their vulnerability. Social exclusion constitutes the primary trauma experienced by transsexual individuals. They are deprived of their citizenship, denied adequate access to school, barred from employment, and prevented from familial and societal integration. They are not afforded adequate protection against the brutality inflicted upon them. Transgender individuals fear the hostile language they encounter following the acknowledgment of their gender identity. Both the educated and the illiterate experience identical trauma. They utilize the NGO as a venue to authentically express their inner selves, employing terms such as 'di' (a colloquial form of addressing a lady in Tamil context). It is burdensome to consistently feign masculinity, and Vidya has done so for an extended period. Due to the intense repression of her emotions, she ultimately resolves to embrace a transsexual identity. She chooses to beg instead of engaging in sex work to finance her operation. She symbolizes the existence of thousands of transgender individuals in India who are compelled to beg due to starvation. For many years, society and the government have denied them employment, so indirectly depriving them of a decent standard of living. They are the victims who are punished for the sin not done.

The challenges faced by transgender individuals in India extend beyond securing employment. Social exclusion constitutes the primary trauma experienced by transsexual individuals. They are deprived of their citizenship, denied adequate access to school, barred from employment, and prevented from familial and societal integration. They are not afforded adequate protection against the brutality inflicted upon them.

#### 4. Application of Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory to Vidya's Narrative

Vidya's autobiography serves as a compelling case study for the application of Caruth's trauma theory. Vidya's recounting of her upbringing and youth clearly reflects the postponed acknowledgment of her pain. From an early age, she encountered doubt and estrangement regarding her gender identity. Nevertheless, the anguish of recognizing she was born in the "incorrect" physique was not promptly assimilated. At some point in her life, after a succession of violent and validating experiences of societal rejection, did she come to comprehend the profundity of her pain. Caruth's concept of the "return of the repressed" is also significant in Vidya's tale. Her traumatic experiences are cyclical rather than linear, resembling the unpredictable resurgence of traumatic events as described in Caruth's paradigm. For example, Vidya's recollections of familial rejection and her challenges with self-acceptance persistently resurface as she matures and endeavors to establish her own life. These experiences, instead of being cured or resolved, manifest in various forms during her journey. The disjointed essence of pain is also apparent in Vidya's writing. Her trauma is depicted not as a coherent, linear narrative but in fragmented, nonlinear segments, where previous experiences intermingle with present moments, engendering a sense of disjunction. This disjunction reflects Caruth's concept of trauma as an incident that cannot be immediately assimilated into the self, a trauma that the mind finds difficult to completely understand.

#### 5. The Role of Memory and the Unspoken in Vidya's Experience

According to Caruth's thesis, trauma frequently remains unarticulated or inexpressible, as language inadequately conveys the profundity of the experience. Vidya's story provides a compelling exemplification of this concept. Throughout the book, Vidya's trauma is ineffable—not alone due to society's linguistic inadequacy in conveying the complexities of transgender experiences, but also because the anguish of exclusion and self-doubt eludes verbal expression. The silence in her narration conveys significant insights into the essence of her trauma. Vidya's difficulty in expressing her experiences is apparent when she recounts instances of doubts about oneself or emotional crises that transpire without explicit verbalization. This silence is not a rejection of communication but a recognition of the inexpressible aspect of her trauma. Caruth posits that the traumatic incident cannot be articulated directly; rather, it necessitates an exploration through repetition and indirect storytelling.

#### 6. Repetition of Trauma in the Autobiography

A fundamental aspect of Caruth's trauma theory is the continual occurrence of trauma. This is apparent throughout Vidya's narrative, as the painful traumas she encounters are not isolated events. Instead, they manifest in cycles, exemplified by the persistent assault and prejudice she encounters in society. These traumas, rather than dissipating, resurface intermittently in her life, each instance adopting a distinct manifestation yet preserving the underlying anguish. Caruth posits that trauma is a cyclical process, as it remains perpetually unintegrated within the individual's consciousness. Vidya's trauma is not simply a sequence of occurrences; it is a persistent phenomena that reemerges at various phases of her life. This recurrence is evident in her battles with identity, the brutality of rejection from society, and the episodes of self-doubt she revisits through the autobiography.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory offers a valuable foundation for comprehending the intricate and diverse pain depicted in *Living Smile Vidya: I'm Vidya, A Transgender Journey*. Vidya's encounters with rejection, aggression, and self-doubt correspond with Caruth's conception of trauma as an experience that is not instantly assimilated but recurs cyclically, undermining the individual's self-perception. Vidya's autobiography exemplifies the tenacity of the human spirit amidst unprocessed trauma and serves as a compelling narrative of survival. Vidya's tale significantly contributes to the discourse on transgender identity as well as the therapeutic power of storytelling, facilitating the reclamation of one's physicality and psyche from the trauma imposed by an antagonistic culture.

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