

Voicing the inner Conflict in Kalki Subramaniam's *Kali, Maha Kali*

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Abstract - The transgender communities in India are subjected to discrimination and violence throughout their lives due to their gender identity. This paper focuses on the physical and mental trauma trans people face in society as portrayed in the poem *Kali, Maha Kali* taken from *We Are Not The Others: Reflections Of a Transgender Activist* (2021) by Kalki Subramaniam. The poem is an outrageous cry of suffering she underwent during her transition. The study is validated through *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, narrative, and History* by Cathy Caruth. Sex is a biological trait whereas gender is a cultural facet. In Indian society, the consonance of gender is confined to male and female. And this scenario makes the third gender ignored and alienated. Kalki in her poem talks about the pain of subjugation she faced from her family, friends, and society.

Index Terms - Discrimination, gender, identity, transgender, trauma.

INTRODUCTION

Transgenders are people whose self-identified gender does not correspond to the sex assigned at birth. Their gender identity cannot be confined under the conventional binary ideas of male and female. So, they are forced to confront several psychological, social, economic, and legal challenges throughout their lifetime. As society places the transgender community outside the prescribed binary gender spectrum fulfilling everyday needs is a challenge. They are ostracized from all spheres - family, education, employment, and proper medical care. It is pathetic that trans people are shunned and seen as a disgrace by the family for their sexual orientation. Even in this 21st century the discrimination and negligence towards the transgender community remains unaltered. And due to this abandonment from family, friends, and society

many transgenders are victims of mental and physical trauma.

The traumatic experiences that occur in an individual's life may leave a long-lasting impact. The reasons behind such experiences might either be natural adversity or the betrayal of loved ones but it can create a high- stress level in the person's mind. It is not easy to express such inner turmoil through words. This paper highlights one such traumatic experience caused by society towards the 'third gender' otherwise called 'transgender'. Kalki Subramaniam ferociously pens down her emotions of solitude and subjugation in her poem *Kali, Maha Kali* an extract from her anthology *We are not the Others: Reflections of a Transgender Activist*.

Kalki Subramaniam is an Indian transwoman activist, poet, artist, actor, and writer. She initiated the *Sahodari Foundation* (which means 'sister'), an organization that thrives for the economic, political, and social empowerment of transgender community in India. *Sahodari Foundation* trains the transgender people to uphold their rights and enable them to earn a livelihood through various creative projects. Kalki was born in Pollachi, a town in Tamil Nadu. She was a topper in academics and Kalki is one of the few transwomen in India who holds two master's Degrees, one in Journalism Mass Communication and another in International Relations. It was during her post-graduate studies Kalki felt that the experiences and needs of the transgender community are completely unnoticed by society, so she decided to publish a monthly magazine named *Sahodari* exclusively for transgender people, the first of its kind in India. Kalki was at the forefront of the campaign at the Supreme Court of India's judgment for legalizing transgender identity. Her first anthology *We are not the Others*:

Reflections of a Transgender Activist is a wonderfully sculpted work that reflects her versatile emotions, experiences, and expectations. The title voices out the major problem faced by the trans community 'othering'. For centuries, they were labeled and defined as misfits by mainstream society. Though a little turn around can be seen in certain sectors, they are still the victims of propaganda that pushes them towards marginalization and inequality.

The poem *Kali, Maha Kali* is a trans woman's fervent call to Kali, the Hindu goddess of death and time, the destroyer of evil. She was exhausted by all the subjugations and recklessness the society forced upon her because she was a trans woman. She wanted to lead a simple and peaceful life but the words and actions of others wounded her and left her traumatized. No one accepted her identity: rather they ridiculed, harassed, and called her obscenities. Unable to bear the humiliations she asked Kali for four boons. First, she asked the boon to go back in time, then for a terrifying face, large fiery eyes, and long canine teeth to scare her enemies away. Then she asked for twenty hands to crush her enemies and finally for a sensitive yet strong heart to emancipate love and embrace those who are needy. She wept about her fate for a long time and by going back in time she hoped to change it.

When you grant me these our boons

Kali, Oh kali!

the wheel will roll back in time

to rewrite our fate afresh.

I will sever the hands

that intend to ransack our life

prior to my time and even before that

Kali, Oh, Kali! (Subramaniam 59)

Kalki then talks about the trans women who tried to commit suicide unable to bear the taunts and struggles of others. Suicide is a result of complicated functions of physical, psychological, environmental, and cognitive factors. It is reported that suicidal tendencies among the transgender community are rather high compared to the general population. The major reason being gender based discrimination and harassment. As they were not provided with proper education and employment, most of the people in the trans community were forced to live in slums and depend on begging and sex work for livelihood. This deplorable condition lead to further breakdown and ended up in suicide. The rate of transgender people who suffer from depression, trauma and suicidal tendencies are

alarming. The lack of parental support, social stigma, risks of affecting HIV, and violence from fellow human beings are issues that cause them to lose their hope in life. Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, narrative, and History* point out that at a certain point when the mind becomes numb to confront and resist the pain caused by the people or environment, the struggle for survival will be an endless testimony to the impossibility of living. The modern trauma theory concludes that the ardent tendency of mental trauma governs the individual's life thereafter. Over the course of time, depression deepens into the subconscious mind and cannot be healed like a physical wound. The memories of assault, neglect, betrayal, and abandonment haunt the victim throughout his/her life. With proper medication and counseling, some people learn to create survival strategies and overcome the trauma. In the case of transgender people, even this is difficult due to the lack of proper medical care and psychological support centers.

Kalki pens down with a heavy heart the stigma faced by the trans sex workers. The society blames them for being different and treats them as outcasts so many trans women are forced to do sex work for their survival but they have to endure the physical harassment of goons most of the time. Many trans women are arrested and assaulted mercilessly by the police. They live in constant fear and agony. With the boon from Kali, she wanted to rescue those trans women who were forced to sell their bodies for food and left to die with no one to care for them. Then, she longed for the love of her parents but they chased her away. The wound of abandonment was left unhealed in her heart. Every child born in this world deserves to be loved, cared and accepted by the family and society. When love is denied it creates a void in that individual which later turns out to be a trauma. Caruth explains this as a recurrent image of tragedy that continues to rely on the person's conscious and sub-conscious mind even after the incidents. She further explains that trauma cannot be located entirely on the violent or original incident that occurred in the past but rather may develop in an unassimilated nature. The victim sometimes develops anxiety disorders, panic attacks, and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). In *Kali, Maha Kali* Kalki's words express her struggle to overcome the trauma she experienced throughout her childhood and transition. The poem reflects not only

Kalki's strenuous journey but many other trans women too.

*If you tell me
"I gave you boons,
now give yourself to me",
the very moment
I will return to you
and surrender my life at your feet. (Subramaniam 61)*

The poem *Kali, Maha Kali* concludes with a plea of the wounded soul surrendering at the feet of Kali. After using all the four boons she promises to give herself to the goddess if that was the price to be paid to go back in time and create a change in her destitute life. The poem helps the readers comprehend the sufferings and pain transgenders undergo in every facet of their life and is a clarion cry for their betterment.

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