

Different Journeys, Shared Truths of Transgender Identity Formation in Vidya's and Jazz Jennings' Life Narratives

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Abstract—This comparative study examines the autobiographies of two transgender women, Vidhya's *I Am Vidya* (2007) and Jazz Jennings' *Being Jazz* (2016), set against the sociocultural backdrops of India and the United States. Through the lenses of Trans Studies, Queer Theory, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Feminism, and Narrative Identity Theory, the research explores how these narratives illuminate the intersections of gender identity, culture, class, religion, stigma, and activism. Vidhya's journey, marked by secrecy, shame, and eventual belonging within the hijra tradition, contrasts with Jazz's experience of early transition, familial acceptance, and media visibility. The analysis reveals that transgender experiences are deeply embedded in geography, privilege, law, and media, resisting universalization. Through autobiography, both authors reclaim agency, disrupt normative gender narratives, and assert selfhood. This study highlights the importance of contextualizing transgender experiences and the role of storytelling in shaping identity and resistance.

Index Terms—Transgender, Autobiography, Intersectionality, Identity, Resistance

I. INTRODUCTION

Transgender autobiographies offer rare windows into lives shaped by complex negotiations of identity, stigma, and cultural belonging. In global literature, the autobiographical mode has become an important political and personal space for transgender people to narrate their experiences in their own words, challenging dominant narratives that misrepresent or erase them. Vidhya's *I Am Vidya* and Jazz Jennings' *Being Jazz* emerge as powerful texts that capture two

unique trajectories of trans womanhood—one shaped by South Asian social hierarchies and another shaped by twenty-first-century American discourses on gender, childhood, and media visibility.

Although both texts narrate journeys toward alignment between inner identity and outer embodiment, their socio-historical contexts create radically different realities. Vidya's narrative navigates the rigid social norms of Indian society, where transgender communities, particularly hijras, occupy both cultural presence and social marginalization. Jazz's narrative is grounded in American debates around trans rights, health access, and youth identity.

Despite these differences, both autobiographies emphasize themes of resilience, self-discovery, family, community, and the struggle for acceptance. As such, a comparative study of these texts yields valuable insights into how culture, geography, and power shape transgender lives.

VIDHYA

Vidhya is an Indian transgender woman whose autobiography *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* (originally in Tamil) recounts her early childhood discomfort with her assigned male gender, her struggles with dysphoria, rejection by family, humiliation by peers, and eventual departure from home to join the hijra community. She describes her transition as a spiritual and emotional rebirth, writing, "When I looked into the mirror after surgery, I finally saw the person who lived inside me all these years." Her story is among the first widely circulated

transgender autobiographies in India, offering a groundbreaking narrative of self-definition and survival.

JAZZ JENNINGS

Jazz Jennings is an American transgender activist, YouTuber, and TV personality who became one of the youngest publicly known transgender girls in the world. Her autobiography, *Being Jazz* (2016), documents her early childhood transition, legal battles for restroom rights, bullying, gender-confirmation medical procedures, and her role as a public advocate. Jazz writes, “*My life has always been about proving that kids like me exist,*” underscoring her role in shaping contemporary conversations about transgender youth.

II. CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING TRANSGENDER AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS LIFE WRITING

Transgender autobiography is more than an account of personal experience; it is a political act. Susan Stryker argues that trans storytelling is “*a refusal to be silenced, a reclamation of one’s own narrative space.*” In societies where trans identities are marginalized or sensationalized, autobiography becomes a counter-discursive space.

Vidya’s text participates in this tradition by reclaiming hijra identity from stereotypes. She writes, “*People saw us as caricatures, never as humans. Through this book, I want them to see my tears, my fears, my heart.*” Her writing produces emotional intimacy, forcing the reader to confront the human behind the hegemonic image. Jazz’s autobiography, meanwhile, challenges a different kind of erasure—the erasure of transgender children. She asserts, “*My identity did not begin at puberty. I knew who I was as a child, even if others couldn’t accept it.*” Both writers use life writing to articulate the legitimacy of transgender identity across ages, classes, and cultures.

QUEER THEORY AND JUDITH BUTLER’S CONCEPT OF GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

Judith Butler’s formulation of gender as *performative* is one of the most influential theoretical contributions in contemporary gender studies, and it offers a powerful lens for reading both Vidya’s *I Am Vidya*

and Jazz Jennings’ *Being Jazz*. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler famously argues that “*gender is not something one is, but something one does*”—a continuous act, sustained through repeated behaviors, gestures, and social performances (Butler 33). According to her, the categories “man” and “woman” are not fixed biological truths but constructed identities, produced and reproduced through social norms, cultural expectations, and daily rituals. This means that gender is not an internal essence but an enacted identity, shaped by power and regulated by society.

In the context of *I Am Vidya*, Butler’s theory becomes especially significant because Vidya’s autobiography exposes the intense social pressures that enforce rigid gender norms in India. Vidya repeatedly emphasizes the tension between who she is internally and the gender she was forced to perform in childhood. Her reflection—“*I knew deep inside who I was, but I had to live the life others gave me*”—mirrors Butler’s idea that normative gender roles are externally imposed performances rather than authentic expressions. Vidya’s struggle is a struggle against compulsory performance. The boyhood role society forced on her was not self-chosen; rather, it was a script enforced by patriarchy, family expectations, and religious-cultural norms. When Vidya writes, “*I could not breathe inside the mask of manhood,*” her metaphor of the “mask” aligns with Butler’s view that gender is a regulatory fiction sustained by performance.

Butler’s theory also helps illuminate Vidya’s transition as an act of reclaiming self-defined performance. Transition becomes more than a medical or physical act—it becomes a radical reformulation of how she appears, speaks, moves, dresses, and lives. By asserting her identity openly, Vidya destabilizes the very system that once confined her. This reflects Butler’s argument that gender performativity always contains the possibility of subversion: “*Acts, gestures, and desire produce the illusion of an interior gender core, but that core is itself produced, not prior to the performance*” (Butler 185). Vidya’s transformation exposes the instability of gender norms by showing that gender identities can be reconstituted.

In *Being Jazz*, Butler’s theory manifests differently, because Jazz’s autobiography reflects a Western

context where transgender identity is increasingly visible and publicly articulated. Unlike Vidya, Jazz begins performing femininity from early childhood and does so with parental support. Jazz writes: “*I always knew I was a girl, even when everyone told me I was a boy,*” echoing Butler’s critique of gender essentialism. The social world attempts to impose one performance ‘boy’, while Jazz insists on performing another ‘girl’. This insistence itself is a performative act that asserts gender identity against normative expectation.

Butler’s theory also helps interpret Jazz’s public life as a form of performativity that challenges traditional gender norms. Her media appearances, speeches, documentaries, and activism constitute repeated acts that materialize her identity. Jazz acknowledges this when she says, “*Telling my story is part of who I am,*” suggesting that narrative and public visibility are forms of gender performance that influence cultural understandings of trans identity. In alignment with Butler’s claim that gender is socially recognized through public acts, jazz’s visibility becomes a political act that unsettles the “naturalness” of gender categories.

Moreover, Butler’s emphasis on power and regulation clarifies the social hostility both Vidya and Jazz face. Gender, as Butler notes, is regulated through punishment: “*Those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished*” (Butler 203). Vidya experiences this punishment in the form of family rejection, social ostracisation, and institutional barriers. Jazz faces it through bullying, online harassment, and public scrutiny. In both cases, the violence directed toward them reveals how compulsory gender norms are policed.

While Vidya’s context is shaped by Indian cultural expectations—where hijra identity is both traditional and marginalized—Jazz’s context is shaped by American medical discourse, legal debates, and media representation. Yet Butler’s theory bridges these worlds by showing that both Vidya and Jazz challenge gender norms through the performative assertion of identity. Their autobiographies reveal that gender is not innate but negotiated, embodied, and enacted.

Ultimately, applying Butler’s queer theoretical framework to both texts demonstrates how each woman reclaims performativity to assert authenticity.

Their stories illuminate the radical potential of gender performativity to disrupt oppressive norms and to open pathways toward self-expression and social recognition. They show, as Butler argues, that gender is always “a doing”—and that through doing differently, individuals can challenge the structures that once constrained them.

III. CHAPTER 2: CHILDHOOD, EARLY REALIZATIONS, AND THE FIRST CONSCIOUSNESS OF GENDER

VIDYA’S CHILDHOOD

Vidya’s early years are shaped by an overwhelming sense of displacement within her own home and body. Her remembrance—“*Every time I was called by my boy’s name, I felt as though I was being torn away from myself*” (Vidya, *I Am Vidya*)—encapsulates the emotional violence of misrecognition. In a society where masculinity is rigidly structured and enforced, Vidya’s intuitive gender identity becomes a site of conflict between her inner truth and the external expectations imposed on her.

Her childhood is marked by secrecy, silence, and shame. She finds herself instinctively gravitating towards objects and activities coded as feminine, yet these are constantly denied to her. Toys, clothing choices, and school discipline operate as instruments of gender regulation. Vidya recounts how the insistence on “boyishness” made her daily life suffocating, as she struggled to perform a gender that felt artificial. The normative environment not only policed her behavior but also erased her emerging sense of self. Her childhood becomes a prolonged initiation into the harsh reality that gender nonconformity in a traditional Indian household is met with punishment rather than compassion. Thus, Vidya’s earliest consciousness of gender is born not out of self-exploration but out of the pain of suppression.

JAZZ’S CHILDHOOD

Jazz Jennings’ childhood stands in profound contrast. Her declaration—“*At two years old, I told my mom: ‘I’m not a boy. I’m a girl!’*” (Jennings, *Being Jazz*)—reveals a sense of clarity that emerges before the imposition of external shame. Jazz’s early self-knowledge is met not with denial but with a

willingness to listen. Her mother's words, "*We just listened to the child in front of us*", radically transform the trajectory of her life.

Unlike Vidya, who must navigate secrecy, Jazz grows within an atmosphere where authenticity is nurtured. Her family validates her earliest expressions of identity, allowing her to wear dresses, play with dolls, and articulate her feelings without fear. This early affirmation becomes foundational in shaping her confidence and later activism. The cultural distinction is striking: while Vidya's early life is defined by concealment and internal fragmentation, jazz experiences visibility, reinforcement, and love. Thus, the two childhoods demonstrate how cultural and familial acceptance fundamentally shapes the first consciousness of gender, determining whether gender identity becomes a source of shame or liberation.

IV. CHAPTER 3: FAMILY, ACCEPTANCE, AND REJECTION

VIDYA'S FAMILY

Vidya's family embodies the social anxieties of a South Asian context where gender roles are deeply entrenched in notions of honor lineage, and public reputation. Her mother's warning, "Don't bring dishonor to this family" (Vidya), reflects the cultural belief that gender variance threatens familial respectability. Vidya's statement, "The greatest pain was not that I was rejected by society, but that I was invisible in my own home", exposes the emotional abandonment that follows.

Her family's fear of social judgment supersedes their concern for her well-being. Vidya is forced to internalize guilt, believing her identity is a burden. This rejection is not merely emotional but existential; it denies her recognition, legitimacy, and a sense of belonging. Invisibility within the home becomes a form of symbolic violence, shaping her later decision to leave and seek community elsewhere. Her family's reaction is not individual but cultural: it represents a larger system where non-normative gender identities are equated with shame, impurity, and failure.

JAZZ'S FAMILY

In contrast, Jazz Jennings grew up surrounded by unconditional affirmation. Her father's statement, "Our daughter is not a mistake. Society's ignorance

is" (Jennings), articulates a radically different approach. Jazz's family not only accepts her but also actively defends and advocates for her. Their dedication becomes a buffer against societal prejudice and medical gatekeeping. Family support allows Jazz to develop resilience rather than trauma. Their home becomes a sanctuary where gender is validated rather than questioned. This acceptance enables Jazz to enter schools, participate in sports, and engage with peers with a sense of confidence rarely afforded to transgender youth. The Jennings family reframes gender identity from something dangerous to something inherently human.

V. CHAPTER 4: THE BODY AS A SITE OF POWER (FOUCAULT)

Using Foucault's theory of the body as an object of institutional discipline, both narratives reveal how transgender bodies become sites of societal power battles.

VIDYA'S BODY

Vidya writes, "My body was a prison built by others and guarded by fear". Her body becomes subjected to constant policing by family, teachers, neighbors, and society. Her gender expression is scrutinized, corrected and punished. The body becomes a battlefield where cultural norms enforce compliance. Even medical interventions, which she seeks for liberation, are structured within systems that stigmatize trans identities. For Vidya, bodily freedom requires escaping social and familial control and reclaiming agency through surgery and community support.

JAZZ'S BODY

Jazz also experiences bodily control, though in different institutional forms. She recalls being denied puberty blockers because she was 'too young' Her response "They wanted me to suffer puberty, I did not want. They wanted my body to betray me", shows how medical systems regulate body development. In Jazz's case, control is less moralistic and more bureaucratic, yet equally painful. Her body becomes a site where doctors, lawmakers, and school authorities negotiate their anxieties around youth transitioning. Foucault's theory helps us understand how the body becomes the first terrain on which

power asserts itself, whether in traditional Indian society or the medicalized structures of the U.S.

VI. CONCLUSION

The life narratives of Vidya and Jazz Jennings, though emerging from vastly different cultural, political, and socio-economic landscapes, converge in their profound testimony to the universal human search for authenticity, dignity, and self-recognition. Their stories illuminate the multiple pathways through which transgender identities are formed, asserted, and lived, revealing that gender is never a fixed essence but a dynamic process negotiated through the body, family, community, and society at large. Whether understood through Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, Foucault's theorization of the disciplined body, or Goffman's framework of stigma, the experiences of both Vidya and Jazz reaffirm that gender identity is shaped as much by internal self-awareness as by external structures of power and acceptance.

Vidya's journey is rooted in the sociocultural terrain of India, where notions of gender are heavily policed through familial honor, societal norms, and religious morality. Her struggle is marked by silence, fear, and a persistent invisibility imposed by a world that denies legitimacy to those who do not conform. Yet her narrative is also one of resilience—a reclamation of self-achieved through community belonging, bodily transition, and the courageous articulation of her truth. Jazz's journey, while seemingly smoother due to early family support and the visibility afforded by American media platforms, carries its own challenges: medical gatekeeping, public scrutiny, and the burden of representing an entire community at a very young age. Her story reminds us that acceptance does not eliminate struggle, and affirmation does not negate the emotional weight of living a life that constantly defies societal expectations.

Together, these narratives demonstrate that transgender identity is not a singular experience but a constellation of lived realities shaped by culture, class, geography, age, and access to resources. Vidya and Jazz ultimately arrive at different destinations—one finding solace in community recognition within a marginalized space, the other using her voice to transform public discourse and advocate for future

generations. Yet, beneath these differences lies a shared truth: the insistence on being seen and heard on their own terms. Both narratives challenge normative constructions of gender, affirm the legitimacy of transfeminine lives, and assert that identity formation is an ongoing, evolving act of self-making.

In bringing these two autobiographies into dialogue, the article underscores the necessity of understanding transgender experiences through an intersectional and culturally sensitive lens. It also highlights the transformative power of life writing as a form of resistance—a means by which marginalized voices claim narrative authority and disrupt hegemonic definitions of gender. Ultimately, Vidya and Jazz remind us that while the contours of their journeys differ, the essence of their struggle is united by a common aspiration: to live truthfully, freely, and without fear. Their stories not only challenge existing frameworks of gender and identity but also compel us to imagine a world where every individual, regardless of gender, can inhabit their truth without apology.

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