



## Reclaiming Identities: Queer Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality in *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* by Manobi Bandopadhyay and Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey

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This paper dives into the complex dynamics of gender and sexuality within the dominion of Discard Studies, using Manobi Bandopadhyay and Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey's narrative as a focal point. Positioned at the convergence of ecocriticism and biopolitics, Discard Studies provides a lens to scrutinize the marginalized facets of gender and sexuality. Bandopadhyay's portrayal of transgender experiences amidst societal neglect serves as a poignant illustration, particularly within the context of discarded production and management. By reframing the concept of "waste" as "discarded" or "neglected," this study reveals how these elements signify not only physical remnants but also the societal disposability of certain identities. Through an exploration of both literal and metaphorical neglect, this research seeks to deepen our comprehension of the complex connection between gender, sexuality, and societal indifference. Drawing upon feminist and queer theories, the analysis challenges traditional binary understandings, explores how gender and sexuality are performed and constructed, acknowledges intersections of identity, resists fixed categorizations, and emphasizes agency and resistance.

in reclaiming narratives. This paper accentuates the urgency of acknowledging and addressing the overlooked narratives within discard discourse, advocating for more inclusive and ethically informed approaches to societal justice and waste management. By applying these queer theoretical perspectives to *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, it offers a nuanced exploration of gender and sexuality, ultimately contributing to a broader understanding of waste discourse and social justice.

**Keywords:** Deconstruction of norms, Performativity, Intersectionality, Resisting Binaries, Discard studies, Queer Theory, Gender, Sexuality, Societal Indifference, Waste Discourse, Social Justice.

## **Introduction**

In India, the transgender community's rich historical presence contrasts sharply with their present-day marginalization, marked by trauma and societal neglect. This study embarks on an exploration of transgender narratives through the lens of Discard studies, a dynamic framework that probes into the implications of societal neglect and disposability. By diving into the life experiences of transgender individuals and intertwining the essential insights from trauma psychology, transgender studies, and queer theory; this research aims to extract the complex layers of marginalization and resilience within Indian society.

Transgender individuals in India embody a legacy of resilience and cultural significance; yet they wrestle with systemic trauma and societal discardment. From ancient times to colonial rule, transgenders in India have steered shifting societal attitudes and regulations. Despite being an integral part of India's cultural heritage since olden period, the community of transgenders continues to face pervasive trauma, abuse, and discrimination across all possible realms of their life. The oddness between their mental association with the gender identity and the dispensed sex at birth leads transgender individuals susceptible to 'exploitation' and 'marginalization', worsening their physical, sexual, and mental health challenges. Alarmingly high rates of suicide, estimated at 31% within the transgender community, with half of these attempts occurring during adolescence, emphasize the significant health

risks they endure (Virupaksha et al.2016). These statistics highlight the formidable barriers transgender individuals encounter in accessing education, employment, healthcare, and other fundamental rights within society. Transgender individuals being the victims of societal atrocities, trace its roots in the ‘regulation and subsequent criminalization of the hijra population’ during the British colonial rule of the nineteenth century.

In the text, governing “Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c.1850-1900” (2019), sources term “hijra,” derived from” Urdu” and “Persian” roots, embodies individuals born biologically male yet expressing feminine gender traits, thereby occupying a liminal space within society’s constructed gender binary (Hinchy, p. 19).

In India, hijras, known by various regional terms such as “kinnar,” “tirunangai,” “kothi,” or “aravani,” had existed since the Vedic era. During this era, they were highly revered and respected. The attributions such as “tritiya prakriti: the third nature” and “napumsaka: the impotent” in Hindu epics, mythological books, folklores, and ancient scriptures are the evidences for the high regard given to them those times. Even during the “Mughal era”, “hijras “occupied esteemed status quo, serving as counsellors, confidantes in the royal court. Beyond their honourable roles, hijras performed sacred rituals such as the “badhai” (blessings) during marriage ceremonies and childbirths, setting their identity as fortunate beings of auspiciousness. Before the colonial period, hijras were the integral members, deeply woven into the fabric of society.

However, the status and high regard of hijras declined with the start of colonial rule, particularly in the nineteenth century, when British colonial authorities started establishing strict rules and regulations over the “gender expression” and “sexuality” of colonized people. The enactment of laws like *Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1861* and the *Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871* are certain legal measures that particularly targeted “gender non-conforming individuals,” labelling them as criminals based on their body projection, gender fluidity, sexual practices, and employments. The criminalization of the transgender community, as enforced by these laws, not only validated but perpetuated the violence inflicted

upon them within society. Consequently, the collective mindset of the general population underwent a transformation, wherein the transgender community came to be associated with notions of peculiarity, abnormality, and the transmission of sexual diseases.

Once revered and respected, they now face marginalization and discrimination perpetuated by colonial-era laws and entrenched cultural norms. By contextualizing historical trajectories, this study shows the enduring legacy of colonial oppression and its impact on contemporary transgender experiences. In contemporary India, the enduring impact of colonial regulations on hijras, echoes through predominant laws and general attitudes of people towards transgender communities. According to the Supreme Court of India's directive in October 2013, to establish welfare agencies for enhancing medical and healthcare services for the transgender community reflects an attempt at rectifying historical injustices. However, despite all these legalisations, transgenders continue to tolerate exploitation and abuse while seeking healthcare, perpetuated by pervasive societal stigma and a lack of medical expertise in addressing their needs (Jayadeva, p. 7-8). There is a lack of medical studies, focusing on wellness of hijras Existing research predominantly is centred on HIV/AIDS, thus neglecting other crucial aspects of transgender health (Jayadeva, p.7-8).

The trauma endured by the transgender community finds heart rending expression in their memoirs, biographies, and autobiographies. Through Manobi Bandyopadhyay's biography, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* co-authored by Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey, the profound and enduring effects of trauma on transgender individuals' mental health come to the forefront. This study attempts to probe into the multifaceted nature of trauma experienced by transgender individuals, recognizing its dual manifestations as both bodily and mental trauma accentuated by the stress of societal norms. By employing a methodology that combines close textual analysis with the frameworks of trauma psychology, transgender studies, and discard studies, this research seeks to unravel the complex layers of transgender trauma knitted within their discarded identities. Although mental illness and trauma rates have increased among transgender individuals, there is

a lack of ardent studies examining their mental health, safety and security in the society.

The term “trauma,” rooted in Greek, originally denoted “an injury inflicted on a body” (Caruth, p.3). However, its conceptualization evolved with the advent of medical and psychiatric interventions, particularly with Freud’s introduction of the psychological dimension of trauma, emphasizing its impact on the mind rather than solely the body.

Kai Erikson, following the line, claims the diverse manifestations of trauma, emphasizing its potential to arise from a myriad of life experiences, ranging from prolonged exposure to danger to discrete traumatic events.

Roger Luckhurst in “Mixing Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology and Trauma Theory” explains trauma as “Something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes. We have, as it were nowhere to put it, and so it falls out of our conscious memory, yet is still present in our mind like an intruder or ghost” (499). In the contemporary era, trauma is referred to a wound inflicted on a person’s psyche. Freud’s conceptualization of trauma centres on the metaphorical shield safeguarding the mind against external stimuli. When breached, these stimuli inflict direct psychological wounds similar to physical injuries.

Similarly, the *American Psychiatric Association* defines “post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a mental condition that may afflict individuals who have experienced or witnessed traumatic events, such as natural disasters, accidents, acts of terrorism, or sexual violence (Torres,2020)”. Despite the predominant focus of PTSD research on combat veterans, transgender individuals also contend with this mental health condition, stemming from experiences of desertion, exploitation, and aggravation within society. This stark reality is clearly articulated in Manobi Bandyopadhyay’s biography, stressing the profound emotional toll of societal marginalization and trauma on transgender lives treating them to be ‘neglected’ or ‘discarded’ categories of the society. Their struggle and ongoing fight for survival

in society need attention, and their pleas for humanitarian concern must be addressed through the close reading of *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*.

### **Discarding Divinity: Examining *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi***

The biography *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi: A Candid Biography of India's First Transgender Principal* by Manobi Bandopadhyay with Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey offers an evocative illustration of the trauma endured by transgender individuals. Bandopadhyay's life story manifests the psychological, physical and sociological challenges faced by transgender people, highlighting the issues of abandonment, exploitation, and harassment. Her experiences underline the necessity of recognizing and addressing the mental health conditions, such as PTSD, societal neglect prevalent within the transgender community.

“Born in 1964 in Chandernagore, Hooghly, Manobi was assigned male at birth and named “Somnath” by her parents, who desired a male child after having two daughters” (Bandopadhyay and Pandey, p.1). Her father considered, Manobi as a “trophy to show off to his family that had ridiculed him all this while for not being able to father a son” Bandopadhyay and Pandey, p. 2). Her father’s attitude mirrors the patriarchal mentality of the society that values sons as caretakers, soul and solace to uphold the heritage and affluence of the family, and thereby the one who shall continue the family lineage.

In the biography, Manobi Bandopadhyay examines the themes of neglect and disposability, reflecting her own experiences of being discarded and marginalized by both her family and society. This attitude reflects a broader pattern of “neglect” emblematic of the marginalization faced by transgender people. Her father’s refusal to acknowledge her “non-conforming behaviour” exemplifies the societal inclination to nullify the presence of alternate identities. “When I was gradually metamorphosing into someone else right in front of his eyes, the whole world noticed, but my father chose to look the other way for as long as he could” (Bandopadhyay and Pandey, p. 6).

Through the lens of queer theory, the narrative of *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* can be seen as a powerful illustration of gender

performativity. Manobi's journey toward self-acceptance involves the conscious and continuous performance of her gender identity, challenging traditional binary constructs and societal norms. Her gender projection and sexuality, challenges the traditional societal definitions of sex, gender, and sexuality. From a young age, Manobi envisioned herself as a woman and realized this inner desire through "cross-dressing". In the book, she describes her moment of self-realisation as, "So, when did I change? When did the so-called metamorphosis happen? It perhaps started with my love for my sister's printed frocks. I would take every opportunity to take off my pants and slip into them...and stand for hours in front of the mirror admiring my looks" (Bandopadhyay and Pandey, p. 9).

The narrative also explores the intersections of identity, particularly how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape Manobi's experiences. As a transgender woman from a lower-middle-class background, Manobi faces heightened forms of discrimination that reflect the complex interplay of various forms of oppression." Being transgender was just one part of my struggle. I also had to fight the prejudice of being "a low-caste, poor woman in a deeply hierarchical society" (Bandopadhyay and Pandey 53).

Her biography details numerous traumatic experiences that highlight the abuse and discrimination faced by transgender individuals. The home, often considered as a place of safety, became a site of trauma for Manobi, who faced gender policing and sexual abuse from a cousin: "He was like a tiger who had tasted human blood, and lurked here and there, trying to corner me every now and then. Gradually it became a routine, both for him and me" (Bandopadhyay and Pandey, p. 9).

Numerous sexual encounters with the same cousin after the first act of child sexual abuse, involving violence and brutality could be interpreted as her vain attempt to get acceptance from the society.

The inability to reconcile Manobi's body with her gender identity is emotionally depicted through her interactions with mirrors, which reflect a distorted self-image due to the misalignment between her form, gender distinctiveness, and body image: "... I was developing

a distaste for my genitals. I just could not accept my balls and my penis. I wanted to have my sister's genitals" (Bandopadhyay and Pandey, p.8).

I would spend hours standing naked in front of the mirror trying to inspect the image that stared back at me. I hated him. I could not relate one bit to this body that was absolutely linear with no curves in sight. Each time I arrived at the same conclusion- this is not me. (Bandopadhyay and Pandey, p. 28).

By reframing the concept of waste as a metaphor for societal neglect, her life experience highlights how the marginalization of transgender individuals mirrors the treatment of discarded physical remnants. The narrative structure serves as a distressing illustration of this metaphor, revealing the parallels between physical and social disposability. The concept of "waste" becomes a powerful symbol for understanding how certain lives and identities are deemed expendable by society: "I felt like waste, something to be thrown away and forgotten. But I refused to be discarded "(Bandopadhyay and Pandey, p. 89).

Despite the pervasive neglect and disposability, they face, the characters in *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* exemplify agency and resistance in reclaiming their narratives. Manobi's journey is marked by resilience and determination as she challenges societal norms and asserts her identity. Her story projects the importance of agency in resisting marginalization and reclaiming one's narrative: "I decided to rewrite my destiny, to tell my story in my own words. I refused to be silent "(Bandopadhyay and Pandey, p. 177).

Manobi's projected sense of self was profoundly disrupted by the incongruence between her gender identity and her physical appearance as male. Jay Prosser states that "the mirror enables in the transsexual only disidentification, not a jubilant integration of body but an anguishing shattering of the felt already formed imaginary body- that sensory body of the body image" (Prosser, p. 100).

Somnath's identity transition into a transwoman named "Manoby" plays a significant part in her life. She attained a sense of unity and contentment with her identity only after she had successfully

undergone the sex reassignment surgery. Only after that she could match her external identity with her internal gender identity. This experience is demonstrated in the text through her interaction with the mirror, where she affirms, “Finally, my soul had found its body, and I had a sense of completeness that had been denied to me at birth” (Bandyopadhyay and Pandey, p. 136).

The text persistently portrays her experiences of humiliation and distress as transcending the confines of personal life and reflecting the broader societal realities. During her time at school, Manobi faced ridicule and abuse for drifting away from gender-specific customs linked with clothing and cosmetics. She recalls, “They would pinch me, pull my hair, box my ears and punch my face at the slightest provocation...No one took pity on me. This left a deep scar on my mind” (Bandyopadhyay and Pandey, p. 8).

As Manobi matured, instances of harassment and discrimination against her increased. Even in college, she encountered ridicule because of her identity. Manobi reflects on her situation, stating, “. . . I could not be called a man or woman and that was far more important than the fact that I had read more Bengali literature than anyone else...Clearly, my reputation had preceded me” (Bandyopadhyay and Pandey, p. 40).

As the first transgender principal of a college, Manobi Bandyopadhyay faced significant societal and institutional challenges. Her achievements were often overshadowed by her gender identity, with many people dismissing her success due to their perceptions of her as “sexless.” This viewpoint underlines the pervasive stigma and discrimination faced by transgender individuals in India. “People viewed me as sexless, which they thought was my only identity. They didn’t care about my success; they couldn’t see beyond my gender identity” (Bandyopadhyay and Pandey 152).

Additionally, the text emphasizes that transgender individuals continue to endure exploitation and harassment even after transitioning. Despite undergoing sex reassignment surgery, Manobi remained susceptible to discrimination and mistreatment. This is exemplified in another distressing incident recounted in Manobi’s narrative involving

her encounter with Arindam, which led to a legal dispute. The entire ordeal was orchestrated by Arindam's brother after Manobi rebuffed his advances. Later, both brothers falsely accused Manobi of being homosexual and sought to extort money from her to drop the case. Reflecting on the incident, Manobi recalls, "Arindam started his argument by claiming that I was a homosexual man. He argued that I had lied about the sex change and that he could not marry another man because he was straight and I was gay! "(Bandyopadhyay and Pandey, p. 149-150).

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud states that "unlike the wound on the body, the wound of the mind, cannot be easily healed, since it appears repeatedly in the form of nightmares, inflicting the same wound on the trauma survivor, as experienced during the original event. Hence, the trauma is not situated in the past event alone, but repeats itself in the life of the survivor "(Caruth, p. 3-4) This side of trauma becomes perceptible in Manobi's narrative as she depicts the continued trauma, she endures later in life due to her past experiences. Manobi articulates, "All my life people have called me hijra, brihannala, napungshak, khoja, launda...Did it pain me? It maimed me...The pain remains but the ache has dulled with time. It visits me in my loneliest hours, when I come face to face with the question of my existential reality "(Bandyopadhyay and Pandey, p. vii).

Manobi's outstanding academic accomplishments and steadfast determination amidst adversity are a testament to her resilience. Despite facing ridicule and marginalization, she consistently excelled in her studies, using education as a tool to challenge societal prejudices. Her journey from enduring mockery and physical assault in school to becoming a respected academic leader vividly showcases the transformative power of perseverance and education. The life journey of *Somnath* (meaning Lord Siva) to *Manobi* (meaning Prakriti) can be interpreted as a transgression of boundaries, a dissolving of duality of male, that is "Siva and female," *Sakthi*". Her transformative journey serves as a symbolic enactment of the convergence of masculine and feminine energies, reflecting the Hindu ideology of *Ardhanareeswara*. The notion of *Ardhanareeswara*, which embodies the divine synthesis of masculine and feminine energies,

becomes an implicit framework in *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*. Traditionally revered as a symbol of cosmic balance and spiritual completeness, *Ardhanareeswara* celebrates the inseparability of Shiva and Shakti—the masculine and feminine principles within a unified existence. However, in the case of Manobi Bandopadhyay, this divine ideal is paradoxically *discarded* by a society that refuses to recognize such harmony within human identity.

The title “*Discarding Divinity*” thus reflects the cultural irony wherein the same society that worships the androgynous deity as sacred simultaneously stigmatizes individuals who embody similar dualities in real life. Manobi’s lived experience, situated between divinity and disposability, exposes the hypocrisy of social constructs that venerate divine dualism while condemning its human manifestation. Through her narrative, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* transforms *Ardhanareeswara* from a static symbol of divinity into a living metaphor for resistance, reclaiming dignity in the face of exclusion and spiritual estrangement.

Through her commitment to learning, Manobi defied societal biases, emerging from a dismissive societal attitude to achieve success and recognition. She proclaims, “Education and being at the top in studies was the only way by which I could win this unequal fight” (Bandopadhyay and Pandey 11).

### Conclusion

This study challenges the nuanced relationship between gender and sexuality within the narrative of *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, utilizing Discard Studies and queer theoretical perspectives to reveal the societal neglect and disposability experienced by transgender identities. By analysing key moments in the narrative, it reveals how transgender individuals are marginalized and treated as expendable by society. Additionally, it delves into themes of gender performativity and intersectionality, uncovering the nuanced interplay of various forms of oppression shaping the characters’ experiences.

The findings of this research underscore the critical need to acknowledge and address the overlooked narratives of marginalized identities. Future studies should continue to explore the intersections

of gender, sexuality, and societal neglect, employing Discard Studies and queer theory to provide deeper insights into these complex dynamics. Moreover, there is a pressing demand for more inclusive and compassion-driven approaches to societal justice, particularly concerning legal recognition and protection for transgender individuals. By advocating for these changes, we can strive towards creating a society that values and embraces all individuals.

The struggles faced by transgender individuals in India, as depicted in the narrative, are deeply rooted in historical injustices and perpetuated by contemporary societal and institutional barriers. Addressing the associated health risks, especially mental health, demands comprehensive and inclusive approaches that acknowledge the unique experiences of trauma faced by transgender people. Integrating trauma psychology with transgender studies can offer a nuanced understanding and pave the way for more effective support systems, fostering the well-being and inclusion of transgender individuals in society.

Ultimately, Manobi Bandopadhyay's journey serves as a powerful narrative of resilience and triumph against societal adversities. Her biography challenges the rigid classifications imposed on sex, gender, and sexuality, advocating for recognition and transformation. Through education and compassion, society can begin to honour and cherish transgender identities, creating a nurturing environment where everyone feels valued and accepted.

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