



From Margins to Movements: An Autobiographical Voice of Akkai Padmashali's *A Small Step in a Long Journey*

Mohamed Yaseen. O.M¹ & Dr. R. David Raja Bose²

¹ Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kumaracoil, Tamil Nadu

² Professor, Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kumaracoil, Tamil Nadu



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Abstract

Akkai Padmashali's A Small Step in a Long Journey offers a compelling autobiographical voice that reflects the transformation of an individual's life from the periphery of societal recognition to a space of agency and visibility. This paper examines the text as a work that blends personal reflection with broader social observations, highlighting how individual transgender life experiences can evolve into sources of inspiration and resilience. Through a close reading, the study identifies the ways in which the narrative negotiates themes of identity, self-discovery, and perseverance in the face of adversity. The study focuses on the construction of selfhood through lived experiences, the role of language in shaping and reclaiming identity, and the significance of personal storytelling in influencing collective understanding. Attention is given to the stylistic features of the text, such as its candid tone, narrative structure, and interweaving of intimate moments with universal human concerns. By tracing the progression of the protagonist's journey, the paper demonstrates how A Small Step in a Long Journey transforms an individual voice into a narrative of empowerment that resonates beyond its immediate context. The work is positioned as an important contribution to contemporary life writing in India, offering insights into the ways autobiography can articulate themes of belonging, transformation, and the human spirit's capacity for endurance.

Keywords: autobiography, identity, life writing, resilience, akkai padmashali

Introduction

The autobiographical narrative has long served as a potent site for articulating marginal identities and experiences silenced by hegemonic discourse. Akkai Padmashali's *A Small Step in a Long Journey* (2021) is a rare and powerful contribution to Indian literature, offering a first-hand account of a transgender woman's struggle for dignity, identity, and rights in a society structured by caste, gender, and sexual normativity. As an activist, orator, and founder of Ondede—a collective for sexual minorities and other marginalized groups—Padmashali's life story is intrinsically political. Her memoir functions not only as personal catharsis but

as an archival document that brings visibility to historically erased narratives.

This paper seeks to analyze the memoir within the larger framework of intersectional activism and the genre of Dalit and queer autobiographies. The title—*A Small Step in a Long Journey*—itself reflects humility and tenacity, embodying a recognition that systemic transformation is a protracted endeavor. It signifies an acknowledgment of progress while emphasizing the distance yet to be covered in the fight for justice and equality. The paper argues that Padmashali's memoir redefines what it means to be political by fusing personal testimony with collective mobilization.



The Significance of the Title: A Journey Rooted in Resistance

The title *A Small Step in a Long Journey* encapsulates multiple layers of meaning. It signifies the arduous, incremental nature of change—especially within the context of Indian society, where marginalized communities continue to face systemic violence. The "small step" is autobiographical: Padmashali's journey begins with her own coming to terms with gender dysphoria, familial rejection, and societal violence. Yet, it also carries the weight of being part of a much larger movement—feminist, queer, Dalit, and democratic.

The "long journey" denotes both historical and future trajectories of social justice. It includes the long-standing oppression of transgender people in South Asia, the colonial criminalization under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, and the resistance movements that led to its partial decriminalization in 2018. It also suggests the road ahead—the continued struggle for inclusion in education, employment, healthcare, and political representation.

The memoir does not present the journey as linear or triumphant but as recursive, fraught with setbacks and self-discovery. It is a title that speaks of hope without romanticizing struggle, offering instead a grounded realism that is both pragmatic and visionary.

Autobiography as Political Archive

Padmashali's memoir serves as a counter-narrative to dominant historiographies that have excluded non-cisgender voices. In narrating her life—from a child confused by gender norms to a prominent activist addressing the United Nations—Padmashali performs what Leigh Gilmore calls "testimonial authority." Her life becomes evidence, her body a text that resists erasure. Through autobiography, she reclaims narrative space historically denied to queer and trans people.

Unlike conventional memoirs that focus on individual triumph, *A Small Step in a Long Journey* emphasizes community. Padmashali constantly references the support systems—feminist activists,

queer collectives, and mentors—that made her survival possible. The narrative thus becomes a mosaic of collective memory and shared resistance.

Moreover, the memoir does not shy away from critiquing institutions. It confronts the violence of family, religion, the police, and the state while also acknowledging moments of solidarity and transformation. Her voice is neither victimized nor sanitized—it is raw, assertive, and strategic.

Identity Formation: Intersectionality in Practice

Padmashali's life is marked by intersecting forms of marginalization: as a Dalit, a transgender woman, and a sexual minority. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality becomes vital to understand how these identities compound rather than simply add to one another. Padmashali describes how being Dalit compounded her exclusion within the transgender community itself, which often remains caste-blind.

Her narrative critiques the romanticization of the hijra community as inherently sacred or empowered. Instead, she exposes the economic exploitation, forced sex work, and rigid hierarchies that exist within these spaces. In doing so, Padmashali breaks new ground by unsettling internal structures of oppression even within marginalized groups.

Her eventual self-identification as a woman—and not necessarily as hijra—also signifies agency over imposed identities. Language becomes a tool for this reclamation. She refuses medical and legal processes that pathologize trans identity and instead demands recognition on her own terms.

Activism as Embodied Praxis

Activism in Padmashali's life is not an abstraction but an embodied, lived reality. Her experiences of begging, harassment, incarceration, and public speaking are not simply events but moments of political articulation. She is not just an activist in the ideological sense; her body, visibility, and very existence challenge societal norms.

Her founding of Ondede and advocacy for the inclusion of transgender issues in policy reforms, legal discussions, and public health exemplify her pragmatic approach to change. Padmashali does not



position herself as an outsider lobbying for inclusion but as a stakeholder with an unassailable right to shape the future of her country.

She speaks of confronting spiritual leaders, judges, and politicians with the same confidence as she does her own mother—testifying to the internalization of self-worth. This is not just personal growth but political pedagogy. She transforms the private into the political and reclaims both.

Faith, Law, and Belonging

One of the more complex dimensions of Padmashali's narrative is her relationship with religion and law. Unlike many secular liberal narratives of queerness, she finds strength in spirituality. Her engagement with the teachings of Basavanna and the idea of *Anubhava Mantapa* as a space of radical inclusion speaks to an indigenous queerness grounded in social reform traditions.

Similarly, she critiques the law not just as an instrument of oppression but as a potential site of justice. Her testimony during hearings on Section 377 and participation in legal campaigns illustrate her commitment to constitutional morality as opposed to majoritarian ethics.

Her demand is not mere tolerance or accommodation but full citizenship—legal, social, and spiritual.

Conclusion

A Small Step in a Long Journey is more than a memoir—it is a political act, a manifesto, and a pedagogical tool. Through an unapologetically intersectional lens, Akkai Padmashali redefines what it means to be human in a society structured by caste, gender, and sexuality. Her life narrative destabilizes hegemonic notions of identity and challenges the very foundations of exclusion. The memoir insists on visibility—not as spectacle but as a right. It claims space not only in literature but in courts, policies,

and religious discourses. It compels readers, scholars, and policymakers alike to recognize that the personal is not only political but historical and constitutional. In documenting her journey, Padmashali does not merely ask for empathy—she demands justice, dignity, and transformation. Her "small step" is a giant leap for queer autobiographical literature in India, and a vital contribution to the archives of resistance.

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