

WHEN GENDER TRANSCENDS BINARIES: MODERN PRINTING AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE FLUIDITY OF GENDER

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of modern printing in representing the gender binary conscience of society and how it acts as an agent of change. The paper puts forward the argument that the term 'transgender' in itself manifests the trend of society's gradual conscience shifts from the binary notion of gender. The researcher attempts to discuss how gender fluidity is being discussed in the arena of gender/queer studies. The core of the paper is based on two prominent books in the current field of queer studies; Judith Butler's 'Gender Trouble (1990)' and Richard Ekins and Dave King's 'The Transgender Phenomenon (2006)'. Literature and discussions on gender fluidity paved the path to the enlightenment and this triggered some questions on the credibility of the binary gender concept. Such questions might have caused certain changes in society's conscience on gender performance. Prohibitions and forbidden are being subjected to more interrogations and voices for deconstruction are getting more profound.

KEYWORDS: *Gender, Print, Binary, Transgender, Deconstruction, Transgendering*

INTRODUCTION

In order to get into the heart of the matter, few questions ought to be considered in the first hand. Who is a man and what is he meant to do? Who is a woman and what is she meant to do? Is being a man or a woman simply a matter of difference with regard to biological sex? The criterion of genital determining based on morphological differences which classify a newborn to be a 'he' or a 'she' looks upon any differences from the expected morphology as a deviation. A world which has got accustomed to this 'expectation criteria' tries to rectify any possible deviations, to achieve a state of normalcy. Thus we arrive at the answers to the set of questions raised above. Being a man or a woman is simply not a matter of biology! Every man and woman is under the compulsion to act in accordance with the society's expectations to live in peace and ultimately rest in peace. A deviant 'HE' or a deviant 'SHE', if spotted is subjected to several institutional practices for rectification. If all such practices to overcome a deviant resistance fail, out casting becomes the last resort. This is what we have learned from society and what is being practiced in the society since time immemorial. This knowledge and practices date back to ancient times of human history.

Society and the Assignment of Gender

"Gender: Sex is a fact of human biology; gender is not. The experience of being male or female differs dramatically from culture to culture. The concept of gender is used by sociologists to describe all the socially given attributes, roles, activities, and responsibilities connected to being a male or a female in a given society. Our gender identity determines how we are perceived, and how we are expected to think and act as women and men, because of the

way society is organized". March, Smith, & Mukopadya (1999)

Gender functions as an organizing principle for the society because of the cultural meanings it assigns to being male and female; the division of labor for instance, wherein women are meant to carry out household chores while men are expected to carry out jobs outside their domestic spheres. This division is the resultant of a social consensus attained by the dominant patriarchal society which is visible in all institutions of our society. Any deviation from this consensus by any of its members is regarded as a questioning of the morale of the society and society is bound to resist such violations. Minorities who raise their voices for societal change are regarded, anarchists.

But the fact is that the consensus of a society is not always fixed or static. In a heterogeneous society, each living entity is likely to be influenced by different ideologies and is continuously subjected to renewal and reshaping processes. The researcher proposes to classify the entire society into three segments. First, the segment of the resisters, the majority group which upholds all the features of current social consensus and devoted to resisting changes. Second, the segment of the anarchists, the minority restless group who are unable to cope up with the existing models of life insisted upon them and who raise their voices for changes in their favor. Third, the segment of diffusers; neither resistor nor anarchist in nature, they are critical thinkers analyzing current social consensus as well as the need for change. A scholar's fraternity in society, for instance, is heterogeneous in nature accommodating the ideologies of both the resisters and anarchists. They are equipped with the critical faculty to analyze social consensus. This group will disseminate the idea of change to the wider society even though they are not in the group of stake-holders.

This dissemination of ideas through prints and literature will gradually lead to the "enlightenment" of the masses. "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another"(Kant,1992). A gradual conscience shift may challenge society's patriarchal constructions. There is a stream of modern prints and litterateurs carrying the spirit of change in the context of gender performances. Advocating gender fluidity is getting more visibility in modern prints. Judith Butler conducted some serious critical attempts to represent the present gender constructions. At the same time, Richard Eric and Dave King brought a new dimension to the transgender phenomenon. This article intends to look at such works of literature, which represent and discuss the questions of gender beyond the binary construction.

Society and the Negation of Gender Fluidity

Gender is a performance. Normative ideal performances within the frame of binary gender concept construct male and female identities. Judith Butler suggests that "coherence" to the cultural norms and "continuity" is essential for the existence of these identities in a patriarchal society (Butler, 1990). Any performance beyond this expectation will give rise to identity questions. A person with an incoherent and discontinuous performance is always a matter of concern for the patriarchal society. Compromising heterosexuality is forbidden in a patriarchal society, where only masculine-feminine reciprocal sex relationships are legitimate. Homosexual, bisexual, pan-sexual and other orientations are considering as a deviation from the cultural coherence of the society. A person who does not follow the rules pertaining to their assigned genders with respect to their biological sex is vulnerable to be regarded as an outcast and eventually excluded from the public spheres of the society.

Excluding or out-casting the “odds”, the formula of the odd one out is a patriarchal solution to create an even society that leaves the impression that “odd” identities do not even exist. The researcher considers legitimate sexuality, oppression and out-casting/exclusion as the three inevitable essentials to sustain the masculine dominance of the society. The first essential, legitimate sexuality is a kind of manipulation by the society towards the construction of a ‘truth’ that heterosexuality is the only legitimate sexuality and anything not heterosexual is deviance or odd sexuality. All other identities are not in coherence with the culture of our society and therefore disregarded. Any questions on the legitimacy of heterosexuality are invalid. The second essential is oppression; of oppressing feminine identities in a legitimate heterosexual relation by creating a social-consensus that this oppression is an integral part of the natural order. The third essential is out-casting/exclusion; by creating a consensus that anything beyond the binary gender construction of the society is an odd or deviance. Individuals are obliged to follow the assigned gender with respect to the biological sex leaving no possibilities of other deviant identities.

Reading gender without or free from the conscience that heterosexuality is the only legitimate sexuality, enables a different understanding about gender. Such critical understanding can provoke anyone to question the acceptable codes of legitimate gender constructions of the society. In reality, the question of legitimacy holds no value, as there isn’t anything truly legitimate or illegitimate in any societies. Diversity is the very essence of society. Society is heterogeneous. Hence gender and sexuality are unique to every individual. If the order of life is in accordance with the patriarchal constructions, there would not have been a possibility for the so-called transgender phenomenon to even happen. Sexual minorities would not have existed. Excluding such diversities by naming them odds or deviant is a patriarchal defense mechanism which arises from the fear of losing masculine domination. So gender fluidity is definitely a concern for patriarchy.

Gender Fluidity as a Truth that cannot be Negated

“Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is any juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purpose at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergence without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure” (Butler,1990).

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that stable gender identity is an illusion. Heterosexuality is culturally legitimized and it needs homosexuality as an opposition, which is culturally a taboo. What we see is legitimizing an act of a patriarchal interest for keeping gender binary concept out of all questions. Butler criticizes the basic assumptions of feminism because that depends on the patriarchal binary notion of ‘being female/woman’ on the ground that it is artificially created. She puts forward a politics which is destabilizing the binary and creates an invisible concept of gender which is fluid.

Let us look at biological sex, sexuality and gender expressions as three independent parallel lines. Usually, individuals confine to biological sex by birth. It could be male, female or n intersex. For survival in a patriarchal society, an individual should confine oneself to either a male or a female paradigm. Those who cannot confine to particular biological sex which is assigned by birth, tend to transcend to another. Sexuality molds an individual under the influence of several variables like personal experiences, physicality, culture, human hormones, etc. Being masculine or feminine are two proposed gender expressions by the society but a gender expression does not represent an individual’s sexuality. A super masculine or a super feminine body which posses all the qualities prescribed by the society can very well be a homosexual. Here is the importance of revoking the so-called binary concept to an invisible concept of gender that Bulter proposed. The

fluidity of gender is a truth that we cannot negate. Each and every individual in the world possess a unique gender, which cannot be measured by means of any tools. For an argumentative point, would like to take consider male and female concepts as two infinite points in a scale and 'gendering' as a journey from any point in the scale (in between the two infinite ends) in any direction. The patriarchal legitimization is only possible for those journeys which are in the prescribed direction of the biological sex. Biological sex may not always determine the direction of the journey but personal experiences and culture can determine it. Some journeys, which are against the constructions like male to female and vice versa, are always a problem for a patriarchal society. The fluidity of the gender is a big concern of the patriarchy because it is destabilizing the binary concept. If there is no binary, there is no male and female and eventually male hegemony will be outdated.

Let us move on to the discussion of such journeys which are marked as cultural taboo and therefore prohibited. Some journeys transcend all the conventional boundaries, the travelers of which are the transgender individuals. Richard Ekins and Dave Kings' explained the phenomenon of transgender from a scientific perspective in their work, *The Transgender Phenomenon*(2006).

As this work critically analyzed the current discourses in transgender studies, it was chosen to be a vantage point in the development of this research paper. It criticized the absence of discussions on gender fluidity among transgenders in the contemporary gender discourses. When all the trans varieties come under an umbrella term called 'transgender', discourses were limited to the mere interplay between Male to Female and Female to Male transgender or Transsexual stories. But by explaining the modes and process of 'transgendering', authors reveal the existence of a spectrum of uniquely 'transgendered' identities and the possibilities for new angles of studies. By keeping the M to F and F to M transgender classifications silent, authors explain four different modes of transgendering (migrating, oscillating, negating and transcending) and five main sub-processes (erasing, substituting, concealing, implying and redefining). Gendering and Transgendering are two concepts used in *Transgender phenomenon* (2006) to explain the process behind the transgender phenomenon. Gendering is accomplished when a person is allocated to one of the two gender categories on the basis of certain signifiers which are taken to indicate the gender questions. Kessler and McKenna (1978) emphasized that persons are assigned to a gender category at birth, usually on the basis of their genitals, but thereafter, in everyday interaction, gender is attributed on the basis of other signifiers. Transgendering, therefore, is accomplished by alternating the signifiers in some way. Any mode of 'transgendering' is accomplishing by a certain sub-process or in other words mode of transgendering is decided by the dominant sub-process. Each sub-process is associated with a unique way of altering signifier. The first sub-process is 'erasing', which involves the elimination of the features and characteristics of masculinity or femininity. The second sub-process is 'substituting', which involves the process of replacing body parts, roles, activities, and responsibilities with those associated with the other gender. The third sub-process is 'concealing', here individuals are concealing or hiding body parts which are not suitable for their performing gender. Concealing may also involve hiding personal history, destroying or hiding documents which reveal previous gender, etc. 'Implying' is the fourth sub-process. Apart from concealing and displaying, implying attributes and body parts is common among transgender. By implying fake body parts inside the cloth a transgender can create a virtual body, which satisfies their self. This virtual body may influence others for an extent and a desired social interaction is becoming more possible for the transgender. 'Redefining' is the fifth sub-process. It is a subtle and multilayered process. Here the individual is redefining their actual body parts, attributes and social roles with respect to one's self. The MTF transsexual may redefine her beard growth as facial hair. The penis may be redefined as 'a growth between the legs' as in 'I was a woman who had needed some corrective surgery. The growth was

gone and my labia, clitoris, and vagina were free' (Spry, 1997:152).

According to the researcher's personal conviction, this does not mean that each mode is a specific compartment of gender performance, like a male and female dichotomy. Rather than, whatever the dominant sub-process the subsequent sub-processes may vary. In a certain mode of migrating, for instance, substituting is the dominant sub-process. But erasing, concealing, implying, and redefining is followed by the dominant sub-process (substituting). But at the same time, another migrating transgender may have different priorities in adopting sub-processes after substituting (dominant sub-process). The sub-process which is dominant decides the mode of transgenering and facilitates the classification of transgenering possible. But the role of other four co-opted sub-processes in each individual in any four modes can be different. In other words, each transgender is unique even though there are four modes of transgenering. These variations show that how fluid is the concept of gender or how much constant is gender fluidity.

CONCLUSIONS

Butler suggests that the concept of homosexuality is derived from homophobic discourse; the term was a medical-legal one which was first used in 1869 in Germany. After eleven years, in 1880 the term heterosexuality was invented as a binary opposition to homosexuality. She argues that all gender identities are an approximation and a kind of imitation and that there is no ideal performance for reference. Her writings questioned the normative patriarchal construction of binary notion and paved path to the postmodern gender fluidity discourses. The book *Transgender Phenomenon* is a response to such discourses. It is an attempt to deconstruct the concept of transgender beyond the conventional classifications, by revealing different modes and processes and fluidity of transgenering.

These kinds of modern prints have influenced the reading public and spawned many thoughts. Patriarchal gender notions were questioned and queer voices became more profound. For instance, even twenty years before the advent of the lesbian and gay theory (1990), the significance of lesbian gay studies was indicated. "Many publications on lesbian-gay concerns, got represented in the catalogue, books were presented in many mainstream book shops, etc" Barry (2010). Representation of gender fluidity in prints is gradually causing a shift in society's consciences and triggering new streams of thoughts. Gender fluidity discourse became more serious around the 1970s like lesbian-gay discourses, and later scholars like Butler nourished it. These kinds of print representation have a wide range of influence in a society ranging from the social, cultural, political, legal, to institutional. On 6th September 2018, the Indian Supreme Court passed the verdict that inactive section 377 of IPC. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code 1860 makes it an offence by declaring that "whoever as carnal Intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine."ⁱ The section further makes it clear that penetration would be sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offense described in the section. It was in February 2011, that Naz Foundation filed public interest litigation in Delhi High court challenging section 377 and it took a period of over 17 for this historical judgment. What would have been the possible factors that affected SC to arrive at such a judgement? Nothing changes in the blink of an eye. The fluidity of gender has been there in 2001 as it is there today. The change in the conscience of the society that came around as a resultant of time and critical thought was reflected in the Supreme Court verdict. Modern prints represented and advocated the truth of gender and questioned patriarchal constructions while some reading public enlightened and reproduced it. This is a note of positivity with regard to gender sensitivity in a highly patriarchal country like India

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ⁱ 1 Explanation to section 371 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860