

FICTIONALISING THE GENDERED SELF: A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICS OF GENDER IN TRANSGENDER AUTOFICTIONS

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Abstract:

Gender and gender-sex binary is one major decisive factor of every social structure. This dichotomy has given birth to umpteen numbers of arguments and dictates regarding individual and his/her sense of the self. Every major institutions and discourses that influence a society are basically constructed as the by products of this gender sex dichotomy. This has also contributed towards declaring some people as lesser human beings only because they challenged these gender norms through their behaviour and the way they presented themselves. Such people, popularly referred to as transgender, were considered as abnormal and marginalised. Life narratives were widely used by these sexual subcultures to express themselves and to historicize their stories. But often they were reluctant to come out in their true identities and fictionalized their stories in their writings. Thus autofiction became a major mode of self expression for tans communities. But even such narratives were not being true to themselves since they desperately attempted to normalise their gender performance thus resorting to gender stereotyping. This paper examines how far such narratives could successfully reverse the dominant narratives generated by heteronormative discourses through a reading of Leslie Feinberg's autofiction Stone Butch Blues.

Key Words: *Autofiction, Transgender, Heteronormative, Discourse.*

The categorisation of sex and gender is a long familiar one. The wide accepted theory establishes sex as a biological condition and gender as a social construction of roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that build a male masculine and a feminine female. Gender studies focuses on the conception of gender, a socially made reality, as one that presupposes bound norms concerning self and identity formation and the way it results in gender discontentment and oppression. Gender is the result as well as the tool of heteronormativity, the idea that an individual's biological sex can commonly relate to the identity prescribed by the society for that sex. Heteronormativism therefore becomes the dominant discourse on gender and thus the powerful. All the other forms of gender identity and gender expressions are either repressed or excluded from the domain of dominant discourse. This hegemonic position enjoyed by heteronormativism leads to the emergence of non-normative sexuality or sexual subcultures. The queer movement of the nineties addressed these sexual subcultures that embrace lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, cross-dressers, intersexual and many more allied people. Queer movement refers to their sense of collective identification and a resistance against the dominant discourses of sexuality.

Transgender study, a school of critical discourse that branched out from queer/LGBT studies, focuses on the transgender people. *Transgender* is often used to refer to people who do not adapt to the prevailing expectations concerning gender. They identify themselves with and live the genders that were not assigned to them at birth. They live and present themselves in those gender behaviours that may not be readily intelligible in terms of more traditional conceptions of gender. Like all the other subcultural sexual minorities, transgender also experience oppression and marginalisation in multiple modalities. The dominant discourse on sexuality forced such people to live as sexual subalterns relegated to a space outside

the dominant discourse labelled as the third space by the dominant power structures represented by heteronormativism. Competing conceptions regarding the self and its relation to the sexed body and gender has always posed serious political and philosophical challenges to the cultures of all time. The dominant of all these assumptions was always that of gender essentialism. Gender essentialism states that every individual has inherent, unique and natural attributes that will define and qualify them as their separate genders. This categorization based on gender has always been binary- one is either a man or a woman- nothing in between.

Like any other marginalised and oppressed people, gender queer and trans people too offered their resistance in various ways. Apart from collective movements, protests for legal rights and equality they also promoted self narratives and visual depictions as a means of coming out. It resulted in the publication of an increased number of transgender autobiographies and autofictions which were used as inspirational self narratives encouraging those living in gender trauma to come out. But how far such narratives challenged the dominant structure or attempted to reverse or to counter the frame work of the social structure based on heteronormativism is still a debatable issue. They always confront the potential threat of becoming monolithic accounts of individuals, instead of stating the experiential pluralities of transgender people as a community. According to Sandy Stone, the transgender writer and activist, “transgender autobiographies often reinforce the binary oppositional mode of gender identification. They go from being unambiguous men/ women to unambiguous women/men. There is no territory in between. They thus still remain as gender outlaws” (Stone 1992). Hence whether their accounts provide instances of transgender trying to assert and normalise their gender identity and sexual orientation or were they making a compromise and negotiating with the dominant discourse by recounting their urge for sexual change and their sense of relief once they realign their bodies to match their gender is a serious question. “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” (1991) by Sandy Stone is considered as the starting point of contemporary transgender studies. She saw transsexuals as a kind of oppressed minority who “occupy a position which is nowhere....a space which is outside the binary oppositions of gendered discourse” (Stryker and Whittle, 2006:295). She argues for a post transsexual move where a transsexual will ignore their urge to “pass” as a non-transsexual so that trans-sexuality will emerge as a genre of discourse. This paper attempts to analyse whether such discourses happening outside the main cultural frame, the third space, discarded or reiterated the politics of gender binary through a reading of Leslie Feinberg's fictional autobiography *Stone Butch Blues*.

Autofiction as a genre of discourse plays a pivotal role in identity formation. Until the early 1990 s', the only mode of discourse through which trans people externalised their thoughts and feelings was autobiographies. The earliest attempts at such modes of self expression were made by Europeans. The first known book length account is the narrative of Lili Elbe, a male-born Danish painter who began to identify and live as a woman in the 1920s. The major transsexual women autobiographies of the 1970s were written by Jan Morris (*Conundrum* 1974), Renée Richards (*Second Serve* 1983) and Nancy Hunt (*Mirror Image* 1978) and Mario Martino (*Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography* (1977) which raised greater awareness of transsexual experience.

But all such discourses were in tune with the conventional norms of sexuality where one has to be either a male or female. All the earlier accounts of transgender experiences presented individuals, who were in conflict with their bodies and coming to terms with their preferred gender identities once they undergo sex reassignment surgery. Majority of transsexuals consciously attempted to blend in the heterosexual society as heterosexual individuals with its expected gender behaviour and expressions. They believed that they will be able to lead a “normal life” by safeguarding the secret of gender identity conflict they experienced in the past and thus tries to pass by. They wanted to live as man or woman, not as a transsexual. In the 1990s, the publication of Leslie Feinberg's semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch*

Blues (1993) and Kate Bornstein's collection of personal essays and performance works *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (1994) paved the way for the emergence of new field of critical discourse dealing with the trans identities. These publications provided great insights into trans lives and experience aiding the younger generation of trans people to develop better perspectives on their lives. Leslie Feinberg's autofiction posed serious challenges to the transgender politics of reaffirming gender binary which was in conflict with the Queer politics of upholding the notion of gender fluidity. Leslie Feinberg is an American writer and activist. She identified herself as a Butch-lesbian (biologically a woman but presented outwardly as male) and transgender activist. According to Minnie Bruce Pratt, Feinberg's spouse, Feinberg was "an anti-racist white, working class, secular Jewish, transgender, lesbian, female, revolutionary communist". (The Guardian, 2014). Her writing, especially *Stone Butch Blues* and her path breaking non-fiction book, 1996's *Transgender Warriors*, contributed much of the critical terms and concepts that enhanced the world's understanding of trans experience and contributed a lot towards trans academic studies. The word transgender was first used by Virginia Prince to refer to a person who lives in the gender opposite of the one assigned to them at birth but who is not a transsexual (one who had resorted to medical methods for gender change) (Stryker 123). It was Leslie Feinberg who, for the first time, used the term "transgender" as an umbrella term with a political stance against medical pathologisation (Bettcher, 2009:2). According to Sandy Stone, moving away from subjects named for their deviant physicality or expression, transgender thus became an identifier an individual, group, or community could take up to name themselves or their politics (Stryker 4). In her essay "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come" she had introduced non-gender specific pronouns like "ze" and "hir" to counter the oppression through language. In one of her interviews given to "CAMP-Kansas City's Voice for the LGBT and Allied Communities she said,

For me, pronouns are always placed within context. I am female-bodied, I am a butch lesbian, a transgender lesbian - referring to me as "she/her" is appropriate, particularly in a non-trans setting in which referring to me as "he" would appear to resolve the social contradiction between my birth sex and gender expression and render my transgender expression invisible. I like the gender neutral pronoun "ze/hir" because it makes it impossible to hold on to gender/sex/sexuality assumptions about a person you're about to meet or you've just met. And in an all trans setting, referring to me as "he/him"? honors my gender expression in the same way that referring to my sister drag queens as "she/her"? does. (nytimes 2014)

This statement clearly presents Feinberg's politics of gender, one that had boldly challenged and refuted all the gendered notions of the heterosexual society as well the transgenders' urge to hide their transgender identities once they restructure their bodies to their preferred gender identities.

Leslie Feinberg's 1993 novel *Stone Butch Blues* is one of the first American literary texts to address the question of transgender identities. The famous gender theorist Kate Bornstein described the novel as "groundbreaking" (149). The novel can be described as the first move made towards what Susan Stryker had referred to as (Stryker and Whittle 295). post transsexual, where a transsexual will ignore their urge to "pass" as a non-transsexual so that transsexuality will emerge as a genre of discourse (Stryker and Whittle 295). *Stone Butch Blues* is a coming-of-age novel, drawn from Feinberg's own life, about a young person, born female, who grows into adulthood at odds with her own family and comes to grips with her complicated, unconventional sexual and gender identity in a way quite unconventional even among the trans people. The book is an authentic record of the trauma of lesbian and transgender life in the second half of the 20th century. It won a 1994 Stonewall Book Award and was translated into a number of languages.

The narrative follows the life of Jess Goldberg, who grows up in a working class area of upstate, Buffalo in New York, Feinberg's birthplace, in the 1940s-50s. Jess, even at a very young age is increasingly made conscious of her difference by the society through their baffled queries regarding her gender identity. The contempt of her family and the hatred from the society became so oppressive that she left her home

before her sixteenth birthday. She joined a community of working class butches and femmes and started visiting the gay bars of Buffalo. There she got trained on how to dress, behave and talk like a butch lesbian. But this was at odds with the gender identity that she had within. Though she was allowed to dress like a male, the rules about how to be a butch do not always fit. Jess adopts a "stone butch" persona, which does not really protect her from trauma and often distances her from intimacy. Jess started taking testosterone so that she can "pass" as a man. Jess felt that confirming to the expected sex and gender congruence is the only way to escape the surveillance of the society. She started her journey to become a 'complete man' so that she can belong to this heterosexual society. But this challenged her inclusion in the lesbian community where a man was never welcomed. Again she is forced to hide her true self and live a life of alienation and rejection even in the lesbian community where she was at home. To escape this, Jess decides to stop taking hormones. She decides to stop altering herself to fit in the expected gender roles of the society and learns to be at home with her natural self despite the fact that she still had a convoluted relationship to her own gender identity. She expresses feeling that she is between genders. Jess moves to New York expecting to start her life afresh. New York City gifts her the most beautiful friendship of her life with her neighbour, a transgender woman, and this comradeship gives Jess a feeling of belonging she has never experienced before in her life. When the novel ends, we see Jess as an activist who speaks up for the rights and dignity that every human being deserves. At the end of the novel when Jess finds her voice and makes a speech at the rally, she explains, "I'm not a gay man ... I'm a butch, a he-she" (296). Unlike the majority of trans people who confirm to the expected gender roles, Jess accepts the critical position of androgyny which gave her a sense of fulfilment. Jess says, "I felt my whole life coming full circle" (301).

It is this very androgynous stand of Jess that made this autofiction revolutionary in the history of transgender self narratives. This politics of being at the cross roads, neither a male nor a female, but living in the realms of both was a move made towards a Post Transsexual politics. Sandy Stone in her essay "The Empire Strikes back: A Post-transsexual Manifesto" opines that the "transsexuals should take the responsibility for all of their history and begin to rearticulate their lives not as a series of erasures but as a political action by reappropriating differences and reclaiming the power of the refigured and reinforced body" (Stone 8). This is what Leslie Feinberg did through Jess.

Feinberg's autofiction points at the grave theoretical tension between transgender and queer. When queer ideology considers gender as a fluid construct, transgender politics rather reaffirms the gender binary through their "trapped in the wrong body" or "coming home" after sex reassignment surgery notions. Bernice L Hausman in her "Body Technology and Gender in Transsexual Autobiographies" criticises the compromise made by transsexuals in claiming that their physical intersexuality is the cause of their cross-sex identification. She says that transsexual autobiographies regulate transsexual self-representations. "Thus transsexual autobiographies institute a sort of discursive hegemony within a community whose members are looking for an enunciative modality to mimic in matters of sex transformation" (Stryker and Whittle 516). Hence transgender self-narratives as well as autofictions that promote the idea of being a male or a female by reappropriating their gender behaviour, at times assisted by medical intervention, promote the dominant discourse of sexuality. Thus most of such texts reaffirm gender binary instead of generating a reverse discourse capable of disrupting heteronormativism. Leslie Feinberg and her Jess deconstructs this when they chose to be androgynous.

By choosing the very realist mode of autofiction Feinberg has deliberately rendered Jess's experiences as credible. It provides the text with a sense of intimacy and immediacy. According to Jay Prosser,

Transsexual subjects themselves have traditionally figured their transition as a final going home, a trajectory that is only worth its risks, complications, and intense pain (somatic and psychic) because it will allow one to finally arrive at where one should have always been: the destination,. (Prosser 487)

But for Jess there is no such final destination, not coming home but rather “whole life coming full circle” (301). This is in conflict with the usual transgender narratives which redo gender (from male to female or from female to male) instead of undoing gender (from being either male or female to becoming gender fluid). Jess accepts, finally, the gender position of the third. Feinberg's autofiction rejects the conventions of usual transsexual autobiographical master narratives of accepting the gender binary as means to escape oppression. By withholding herself from altering her body to fit the masculine appearance, Jess challenges the norms of gender binary. But at the same time she loved the changes the hormones had already brought to her body like her beard. At the same time she loved her breast reduction surgery which she considered as “a gift to myself, a coming home to my body” (224). This ambiguous phases of her life proves her gender fluidity the complicated self that exists somewhere in the third gender space between male and female. She concludes, “Who was I now man or woman? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices; it could never be answered if it had to be asked” (222). The novel thus breaks down the categories of male and female.

The entire novel revolves around the notion of intersections, a complex web of gendered identity which lacks a fixed centre. Leslie Feinberg thus challenges gender essentialism and heteronormativism. When Jess found her identity between genders, a harmonious blend of Jess's essential and constructed selves, like Feinberg herself, *Stone Butch Blues* becomes a reverse discourse strong enough to rupture the politics of gender binary.

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