



CHALLENGING THE NORM: GENDER TROUBLE AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION ACROSS SELECT TEXTS AND SCREEN

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Abstract

*This study seeks to underscore the intersections of gender trouble, the subsequent dysphoria, social stigma, and transitioning within the personal flights of transgender individuals. Through an analytic study of Jeo Baby's poem-video *Fading Shades*, A. Revathi's life narrative *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*, and a curated selection of transgender poetry, this paper looks into how marginalised individuals confront oppressive societal stigma to affirm their authentic subjectivities. Specifically, the analysis decodes a self-identified transvestite's journey in the poem-video, highlighting the nuances of self-discovery and resistance against systemic stigma. This is counterbalanced by an exploration of Revathi's autobiography, which offers vital insights into the institutional challenges, personal triumphs, and transitional journey of a transsexual individual. Supplementing these texts, the selected poems further illuminate themes of resilience, self-assertion, and the enduring pursuit of dignity.*

Keywords

Gender Trouble, Dysphoria, Self-Actualization, Transitioning, Societal Stigma, etc.

Full Article

Contemporary discourses on gender and sartorial choice demand a deeper interrogation of how individual distinctiveness and human dignity are maintained in the face of systemic social stigma. Identity is never static and monolithic; rather, it manifests as a complex matrix of diverse positionalities determined by factors such as gender expression, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. Having said that, not all identities are accepted or understood in the same way within the society. The term social stigma describes the negative attitudes, convictions, and stereotypes that society set down on individuals or groups based on their particular characteristics and identities. Individuals with stigmatized identities are more likely to experience marginalization, discrimination and prejudice as they often flout societal norms and expectations. The people who experience such stigma can have severe psychological, emotional, and social hitches which restrict their opportunities and self-expression, creating a negative impact on their overall well-being.

The academic expressions 'gender dysphoria' and 'transitioning' are closely connected to the wider theme of gender identity. If a person's intensely-held feeling of being male, female or anything else, does not go with the sex they were assigned at birth, it can cause them severe distress or trauma leading them to a state of gender dysphoria. In other words, gender dysphoria is manifested as the incongruity between one's physique and their internal sense of gender. The inability to cope with the societal presuppositions mixed with the so-called weird social interactions and physical absurdities can cause gender trouble and the subsequent dysphoria in transgender persons. The usual mixture of distress and discomfort are evinced through a deep dissatisfaction with one's own body and its social perception. Martin Mitchell and Charlie Howarth observes, "a diagnosis of gender dysphoria is required before gender reassignment



treatment and gender recognition under the Gender Recognition Act” (Great Britain.). The magnitude and severity of gender dysphoria differ from person to person. In order to alleviate the symptoms of suffering, some may resort to medical transitioning and sex reassignment interventions; and some others seek a deeply personal journey of psychological transition to reaffirm their mental health. In that way the expression ‘transitioning’ is steadily roped up with gender dysphoria. And for transgender individuals, both medical and psychological transitioning is of therapeutic effect to their overall well-being. As far as a gender dysphoric person is concerned, transitioning can be a decisive move towards a normal life. Nevertheless, medical as well as legal transitioning does not often prove to be a cake walk for a great number of gender dysphoric souls. Moreover, transitioning is an intense personal flight, and the time and the approach might vary depending on the individuals. For those who are on the transitioning mode, access to benevolent mental health-care providers and a never-failing systemic support, are of paramount importance.

Conceived by Jeo Baby, the poem video ‘Fading Shades,’ depicts the psychological transitioning of a transvestite, a person who slips into the clothing of the opposite sex. The protagonist, Charles is very stressful and disappointed at the outset because he is compelled to wear the clothes customarily connected to men. Being a transvestite, Charles does not want to alter his male body, nor does he feel comfortable with the conventional masculine attire. He earnestly proclaims, ‘I am a man, not a woman, not a trans,’ somewhere in the middle of the poem video. The expression ‘weeps of despair’ characterises his emotional turmoil. The failure to conform to the societal prescriptions of masculinity makes him feel confined and anomalous with his gender identity. His wife’s mocking query as to why he needs so much time to get ready for the party ‘as though a woman,’ is yet another blow on him. The impelling pressures and straight jacket gender dictates of the society get reflected through this seemingly harmless sarcastic comment. This further magnifies the intensity of his trauma and he feels stifled by the rigid gender benchmarks! However, towards the end of the poem Charles undergoes a psychological transitioning by boldly asserting his true self ignoring all the raised eyebrows around him. With an acquired defiance he makes a fearless proclamation, “Up my head/ Up my heel/ kneel never again.... Barricades I don’t care.” This never-before-seen determination coupled with self-discovery makes him espouse his true self and live a life accordingly.

Jeo Baby succeeds in capturing the dilemma of a person who oscillates between his innate gender identity and societal parameters. The poem video foregrounds the ways of self-recognition, revelation, realisation, uncovering, resilience and defiance in the face of hardships in a world that is bound to fail in accepting dignity of difference.

A. Revathi’s life narrative *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*, is a moving account of social prejudice and derision. A. Revathi is one among the pioneer members of the transgender clique to author a book. Her works have been disseminated over eight languages and has been serving as a primary reference on Gender Studies across Asia. Marking a significant escalation in the ongoing discussions over the social status of the hijra community, A. Revathi’s life narrative expounds on why this particular community signals out as stigmatized group and why they are bereft of the so-called expected gender roles of a man and a woman. Being at the receiving end of Othering and always manipulated through a mediated lens, hijras are not received as part of the mainstream and destined to lead a life of their own. Holding a mirror to the lives of sexual minorities, Revathi’s life narrative talks about how the refusal, spurn and disapproval in a hyper-prescriptive patriarchal society make the life of a hijra intolerable. Revathi begins with a Preface, where the intention behind writing such a book is clearly mentioned:



My aim is to introduce to the readers the lives of hijras, their distinct culture, and their dreams and desires. I hope now that by publishing my life story, larger changes can be achieved. I hope this book of mine will make people see that Hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work. I do not seek sympathy from society or the government. I seek to show that we hijras do have the rights to live in this society (Revathi, vi).

As a life narrative *The Truth About Me* does not restrict its span and range to a mere bewailing tale of a despicable life, rather it calls for a transfiguration in the mindscape of the cultural assaulters who are abominably insensitive and ignorant of transgenders' physique and sexuality:

How many of us are even conscious that there is a social group called hijra? Since people are not even aware of our existence, they think ill of us. It is our duty to dispel such ignorance. Just as how dalits have come to oppose the violence inflicted upon them, why cannot we hijras get together and fight for our rights? Do we not have the right to change our sex? Aren't we human too We have rights, just like the others (Revathi, 247).

The vehemence and fervour of emotions conveyed through the poem *It's a New Day* by L. J. Mark extend a vivid picture on the experience of gender fluidity. An inner world of the most intimate dreams and an outside reality of societal presuppositions have been skilfully juxtaposed. The poem tracks down the metaphorical transitioning of an individual who wakes up only to feel an uncomfortably confining body but seeks solace, comfort and freedom in the dream world. Embracing femininity, the protagonist fantasises about himself being a princess treading the magical forests and a mermaid dancing in a waterfall. The poem unfurls:

She wakes from the nights sleepy darkness
Knowing the body under the covers doesn't fit her
But as she drifts in and out of the mornings gentle hold
Her dreams and mind forget the body under the covers
And she finds herself dancing in a waterfall
Swimming like a mermaid she reaches the edge of the pool
Shaking her beautiful long curls, and dressing
In her silks and flowing lace (Mark, 1-8).

The tone of the poem swiftly changes as there is an abrupt end to the dream. The protagonist feels the constraints and pressures outside 'her' dream world. With a shudder, the protagonist comes out of that joyous little world of bubble:

But the dreams end suddenly, as the scent of coffee /Fills the room, and
the sounds of cars passing outside /Bring her back, back into the here and
now /The covers pull off and the trousers come on, the shirt and boots
that the / day requires (Mark, 14-18).

The poem rounds up the disconnectedness felt by many transgender persons who are dismally torn between the two incongruous world of their physique and an innate self. The dissonance between the visible body and their true inner self are apparently dealt in the poem as



the protagonist yearns for a gender at variance. The poem brings to the fore, the importance of resilience, self-reflection and fulfilment. The disparity between the world of bubble and the world of real is also steadily depicted in the poem. The world of bubble serves an emotional anchorage so that the reality is conveniently disregarded and the constraints are deftly overcome. This reflects the mindscape of numerous trans people who find an empowered self through this kind of psychological transitioning. The quest for genuineness and integration is highlighted through the imagery of the embodied self in dream. Ultimately, the protagonist exhibits the suppleness and sensitivity required to lead a comfortable social life confronting the necessary evils!

Justice Ameer, the American trans poet and political educator raises the issues of gender identity and perplexity in the poem 'body without the "d"'. The deeply perplexed identity of a gender dysphoric person is convincingly expressed. The poem laments the lack of fecundity and productivity of the transgender body. The body is a 'hollow façade' with mere embellishments. Caught between the masculine and the feminine, the body remains just a body. The utter dissatisfaction with a non-menstruating and non-productive body is vehemently expressed throughout the poem:

The bo'y wakes up / the bo'y looks at itself / the bo'y notices something
missing / there is both too much and not enough flesh on the bo'y//
the bo'y talks to a girl about bleeding / she explains how this bo'y works
/ this bo'y is different from hers / bo'y has too much and not enough
flesh to be her / the biology of a bo'y is just / bo'y will only ever be a
bo'y //the bo'y feels empty / the bo'y feels like it will only ever be empty
/ the bo'y feels that it will never hold the weight of another bo'y inside of
it (Ameer, 1-27)

The poem truly mirrors the life of gender dysphoric persons who are appallingly going through emotional turmoil as well as a deep existential anguish owing to their physical absurdities and stigmatised identities. However, unlike some other gender dysphoric cases, the scope for a medical or psychological or even a metaphorical transitioning gets undermined here as the poem is largely autobiographical and the dejection is intensely felt. Fundamentally, each artistic medium under this analysis serves to evolve as a compendium for validating diverse gender subjectivities and their articulation. Transgressing rigid gender binaries and heteronormative societal mandates subjects these individuals to severe socio-cultural friction; this external adversity intersects intimately with their inner emotional upheavals and negotiated senses of self-actualization.

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