

Gender Incongruity and Trans-identity: A Reading of Leslie Fienberg's *Stone Butch Blues*

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Abstract: The word Transgender is often used as an aggregate term for those who transgress conventional binary gender boundaries. Based on Simon de Beauvoir's pronouncement in *The Second Sex*, "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" (283), Judith Butler affirms that gender is fluid. Butler, by deconstructing the binary of male-female, demonstrates that the boundary implied inside this pair is 'inalienably flimsy.' The perspectives of the queer community are often unheard in an atmosphere where heterosexual hegemony is active. The hostile surroundings in which the trans-people live and the traumatic experiences they undergo fill them with constant fear and anxiety in confronting their real selves and asserting their identities. People who are marginalised because of their sexuality have always had to seek mainstream acceptance to get the rights and freedoms they need for a dignified life. The purpose of this study is to explore the resistance strategies that trans-genders adopt when met with adversity and the ways in which they see their trans-identity as providing them with a form of strength and resilience. Leslie Feinberg, an American author, in *Stone Butch Blues*, carves out the entire existence of Jess Goldberg, a butch lesbian who undergoes physical and mental transformation.

Key words: Queer, heterosexual, hegemony, mainstream acceptance

A conventional society has always believed that humankind comprises only two genders - male and female. Post-structural postulations try to deconstruct this binary opposition by showing that, "the distinction between paired opposites is not absolute since each term in the pairing can only be understood and defined in terms of the other" (Barry 143). Physicality is not the only way to identify one's sexual orientation. Sometimes a man's spirit is entrapped inside a female body and vice-versa. Thus, there is a third gender, which is often disdained, rejected, and marginalised, named the transgender. The antagonistic

vibe towards the gender deviants in a conventional society comes out as ‘transphobia.’ This paper attempts to scrutinize gender incongruity and the formation of trans-identity through a study of Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*.

Stone Butch Blues is a queer narrative, which portrays the life of Jess Goldberg, a butch lesbian in the 1970s America. As a biological woman, Goldberg is expected to perform the roles assigned by society’s conventional notion of what it means to be a woman. Challenging the binary gender stereotypes, she identifies herself neither as a woman nor as a man, but as a “he-she,” the very encapsulation of gender incongruity. She is forced to endure abuse from the society which cannot accept gender nonconformity. As Jess avers: I didn’t want to be different. I longed to be everything grownups wanted, so they would love me. I followed all their rules, tried my best to please. But there was something else about me that made them knit their eyebrows and frown. No one ever offered me a name for what was wrong with me. That’s what made me afraid it was really bad. I only came to recognize its melody through its constant refrain: “Is that a boy or a girl?” (13)

Jess experiences from her early childhood the repercussions of not conforming to the ruling social order. The manliness in the female body excludes her from the gender community of her birth. The clash between normative and non-normative/transgressive influences becomes part of her daily catastrophes, which conditions her struggle for survival.

The very title *Stone Butch Blues* offers deep insights. The term butch refers to females with masculine expressions, who generally pair up sexually with femmes. They cannot live up to the expectations of conventional society’s ‘ideals of womanhood.’ Their transgressive masculinity turns them into daily targets of abuse and attack. At one point in her life, Jess realises that she is a ‘stone butch’ and what it is to be one. This persona sheds light on how sexual assault can affect one’s sexual subjectivity. Jess’s disorder emerges after her first sexual experience with Angie, who assures Jess that she is ‘stone already.’ The word ‘blues’ refers to songs with a note of lamentation. Such songs reflect a psychological mindset of low spirits and melancholy in highly personalised interpretations. The melancholy of the blues quoted several times in this narrative highlights the painful yet transforming journey of the protagonist Jess Goldberg. The ‘stone butch’ indicates both the physical state of her indeterminate masculinity and the texture of her emotional experience. A stone hardens her mind so that she cannot spew her emotions, her ‘blues’.

Jess’s physical transformation can only cover up her gender identity at the surface level. She no longer sees “me looking back at me” in the mirror. What Jess perceives is the image

of a man, who scarcely represents the nuances of her transgendered identity. When she struggles to relate her inner self as a ‘man’, she quits taking testosterone infusions. Jess recounts in another mirror scene:

I drew one cc of hormones into a syringe, lifted it above my naked thigh and then paused. My arm felt restrained by an unseen hand. No matter how I tried I could not sink that needle into my quadriceps as I’d done hundreds of times before. I stood up and looked in the bathroom mirror. The depth of sadness in my eyes frightened me. I lathered my morning beard stubble, scraped it clean with a razor, and splashed cold water on my face. The stubble still felt rough. As much as I loved my beard as part of my body, I felt trapped behind it. What I saw reflected in the mirror was not a man, but I couldn’t recognize the he-she. My face no longer revealed the contrasts of my gender. [...] But who was I now-woman or man? [...] 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. (221-222)

This is a critical moment for Jess’s identity. She feels that a ‘transformation’ might make her feel at home with her body. Still, this incarnation, which is, acclimatizing as a man, does not grant her paradise. One can see that Jess doesn’t see any femininity in herself, nor does she feel like a man. She successfully correlates her identity to the memory of a masculine woman she has seen in the bars and factories, which makes it clear that Jess is not transsexual. She is someone in whom his/her biological gender is at odds with his/her psychological gender.

Jess moves to New York, where she meets Ruth whose open, confident nature, as well as her apparent ease of living in an ambiguous body, fascinates her. She asks Ruth:

“Do you know if I’m man or a woman?” “No”, Ruth said. That’s why I know so much about you. “I sighed. “Did you think I was a man when you first met me? “She nodded. “Yes, I first thought you were a straight man. Then I thought you were gay. It’s been a shock for me to realize that even I make assumptions about sex and gender that aren’t true. I thought I was liberated from all of that. I smiled. “I didn’t want you to think I was a man. I wanted you to see how much more complicated I am. I wanted you to like what you saw.” (254)

Ruth tells Jess that the solution to their questionable gender identity and the ensuing crisis lies outside the so-called binary norms. Later Jess concedes to Ruth:

I sighed. When I was growing up, I believed I was gonna do something really important with my life, like explore the universe or cure diseases. I never thought I’d spend so much time of my life fighting over which bathroom I could use. (254-255)

These words are powerful enough to expose the cruelty of the mechanism of dehumanisation and abjection that has taken place. Her transgressive gender identity has limited her choices; also, her fundamental civil rights and biological needs are in jeopardy.

Fienberg in *Stone Butch Blues* marks Jess's conspicuous transitional phases of reticence, pauperism, and emotional turmoil to utterance, buoyancy and distinctiveness. Her first phase is an epoch of laconism. She moves in a world where only silence embraces her. No one is there to envisage her as a mortal being. Once a group of youngsters brutally assault her in the subway and she is hospitalized for a couple of days. Her mangled jaw prevents her from talking for several days. This metaphorical representation is an embodiment of her aphonic life. The second phase is an epoch of acerbity where Jess and Ruth start a journey together. Ruth goes to see the family she abandoned and demands that Jess visit her place Buffalo where she started her life as a butch. They switch on their time machine to their history to recall the animosity all around. One can assume that they need this ride to cast out all those dark memories to dream about new ratifications. The third phase is an epoch of accomplishment. Jess's attention is caught by a group of people from the queer community on the public stage near the subway. They are chatting to potential crowds. Unlike Jess', their thoughts and desires are not muted. Their loud and brave testimonials shake off the fear in her. At this juncture she has the confidence to articulate her traumatic path as well as to name her identity:

And suddenly I felt so sick to death of my own silence that I needed to speak too [...] my legs could hardly get me up on stage. I looked at the hundreds of faces staring at me. "I'm not a gay man." My own amplified voice startled me. "I'm a butch, a he-she. I don't know if the people who hate our guts call us that anymore. But that single epithet shaped my teenage years." (296)

This electrifying episode brings robust optimism in her. Unlike the queer feminism of the 1970s, this queer community strives to implement civic space for trans-people. For Jess, for the first time, life promises a bright future. Jess acknowledges: "I know about getting hurt," I said. "But I don't have much experience talking about it. And I know about fighting back, but I mostly know how to do it alone. That's a tough way to fight, because I'm usually outnumbered and I usually lose" (296). Jess realizes that she is not alone, or at least she does not have to continue her struggle alone. She understands that a strong, organized community can be an alternative to abject identities like her own, "I don't know what it would take to really change the world. But couldn't we get together and try to figure that out? Couldn't we be bigger? Isn't there a way we could help fight each other's battles so

that we are not always alone?” (297).

The closing notes of *Stone Butch Blues* indicate that Jess ends up passing as neither man nor woman, and being read as both. She makes the fantastic transformation to the intermediate space of crossing, her lived reality. The novel envisages gender and sexual borderlands with inhabitants who “queer” the gendered heterosexual norms. It exposes not only its constructed nature of heterosexual structures but also the system’s means of disciplining and restraining its subjects into gender and sexual conformity.

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