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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Transgressive Discourse Representing New Forms of Femininity in Contemporary Indian Female Fiction

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Abstract:

The research paper deals with the problem of new forms of femininity in contemporary Indian female fiction outlining the theme of Transgression as an independent discourse with special outlook and gender meaningful concepts. It reveals the meaning of the “discourse of the transgression” described as complicated sociocultural phenomenon reflecting the crossing of the gender bar revealed in the writings of Manju Kapur and Tanuja Desai Hider. These writings represent a radical departure from the conventional depictions of the feminine roles, expectations and morals of middle-class urban twenty-first century Indian women. All mentioned features are very pertinent and actual nowadays because this new form of femininity is rapidly becoming the part of the global occurrence. These sampled fiction texts have been probed deeply to highlight the gender-associated consciousness, constructions, resistances and their crossings. This transgressive act of writing in turn, is also instrumental in engineering the rupturing of the centers.

Keywords: Binary, Discourse, Gender, Lesbian, Patriarchy, Transgression.

Women’s Studies have become important in modern context by obtaining the status of independent gender studies in every nook and corner of the world. Any research conducted in this branch has a far reaching impact on the community of womanhood irrespective of their geographical, religious and cultural locations. Today the most interesting questions are connected with the investigations of social factors that influence a person’s behavior according to her/his gender. Language, literature and art help to open new aspects of gender development and get the deeper understanding of existing social and cultural practices. As the modern age is generating the new and bold compositions in women’s literature encapsulating the myriad manifestations of present day generation, the emergence of the new discourses on woman is also a common phenomenon. These new discourses break the myth of the accepted modes of gender featuring by probing the gender constructions. Catering to the need of the upcoming times, this

paper offers a different critical perspective for Indian women's literature. This fresh critical insight will create many debatable issues as the upcoming models of women's behaviour in fiction can't be judged by the obsolete critical norms.

There is a tide running contrary to the accepted norm of femininity, a new breed of women protagonists women who are single and working; transgressive and the deviant ; no longer prepared to be 'good girls'. The behaviour of these female characters may have been seen as inexplicable by reviewers and readers at the time, but the characters themselves are certainly not incomprehensible. Their deviancy and vileness can also be seen as instances of modernity, in the sense that their femininity was ahead of their time. These women knowingly, thoughtfully and successfully defy societal conventions and tread on the path of extramarital affairs, divorces and even custody battles for children, without shame, guilt, dire consequences or even societal condemnation. Among these variety of projective frameworks, this research paper deals with the canon of women's literature in India and across nation by selecting two significant authors of Indian origin. Women's literature includes not only the study about women's issues, identity crisis, social and political recognition through novels but also reveals present day gender confusion and challenges through critical writings. In a way these new discourses break the myth of the accepted modes of critical analysis and endeavour to probe the reality to the ground level.

In this direction a humble effort is attempted to juxtapose Women's writings with a new concept of literary discourse that is transgression: a derogatory mode of behaviour but when applied in women's life, comes forth with new avenues, multiple opportunities, significant growth and not to exaggerate a chance to develop. As a whole, this study is about the discourse of Transgression in Indian literature from the women's perspective. According to a social thinker:

A theory of transgression . . . draws attention to popular culture's role in struggles over meaning. It argues that the popular text is successful because it operates at the borders of what is socially acceptable; and, in order to provoke a widespread interest, the text must, at some level, breach the bounds of that acceptability. It must, in other words, challenge social standards and norms. (McCracken 158)

Transgression is not a clarion call for rebellion or revolt. It does not seek to break down boundaries or tear away limits always. In fact, the limits are assumed as necessary and reciprocal element. Transgression and limits cannot exist without one another rather complement each other. These limitation and restrictions are constructed within the ambit of culture, politics, language, economy and society. These cultural locations and social surroundings construct an area of limitations for women. As Chris Jenks defines transgressive behaviour: does not deny limits or boundaries, rather it exceeds them and thus completes them. Every rule, limit, boundary or edge carries with it its own fracture, penetration or impulse to disobey. The transgression is a component of the rule. (Jenks 7)

Postmodern literature is equated with the growth and development of these transgressive writings. The site of tension is when a literary character violates the ‘Gender Rules’ of a ‘Gender Contract’, she is seen as monstrous and evil. “The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who *has* a story to tell—in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her.” (Moi 58)

By applying this contemporary focus, I propose a close study of two post millennial Breakthrough novels Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman* (2004) and Tanuja Desai Hider’s *Born Confused* (2002). These narratives explore the traits of “transgressive women”—those women who actively revolt against cultural expectations of what women should be. The novel *A Married Woman* is here analyzed as ‘speaking back’ against male decadence style, which is generally misogyny instead. Through the protagonist Astha, Manju Kapur subverts and contests the negative and misogynist decadence representation of the feminine in India, and instead radically represents women as natural beings with strong erotic desire, as more ‘original’ human beings than men, natural but oppressed by patriarchal society. Tanuja Desai Hider is an author, not so popular in fiction, and *Born Confused* was a bestseller upon its publication. Desai works as a journalist and has a quite high profile. Today the novel and its author are largely unknown. The novel can be termed as queer novel dealing with non-heteronormative issues and using non-heteronormative characters. The main characters in *Born Confused* expose the performative side of gender by playing with their gender masks. By changing in and out of gender identities these characters become a fine specimen of study to expose the extent to which gender is constructed and unconnected to the biological body, the idea will be discussed in greater detail in due course. In this paper the radical representation of feminine erotic desire and deviant sexuality will be analyzed.

The Creation of New Spaces in Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman*

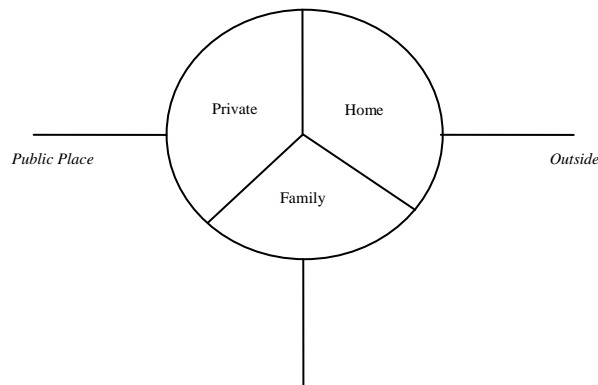
Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman* (2004), contains a neutral and positive view of feminine sexual desire and personal space ‘speaking back’ against male decadence style, which is generally misogyny instead. Through the protagonist Astha, Manju Kapur subverts and contests the negative and misogynist decadence representation of the feminine in India, and reveals the idea of love, both platonic and prohibited, reaching even to the extent of lesbianism through the story of ‘Astha’, the leading character of the novel, who dares to challenge the constraints of middle class family and in search of emotional satisfaction and self-identity.

The novel under examination begins with the opening line “Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear” speaking about the different phases in the life of a woman in pre and post marriage. (Kapur 1) From the cradle to pyre a woman oscillates with a load of fear, the fear of appropriate performance, the fear of shame, the fear of moral uprightness, the fear of a dutiful daughter to the fear of a successful married woman. With

deep insight, Manju Kapur has captured the heroine, Astha's growing up fears, pressures and turmoil's which a cultural existence of a wife can be subjected to. When you marry, you can do anything your husband permits. This invisible hegemonic control of the husband has been brought under the scrutiny. Astha seems to counter the title *A Married Woman* as she would like to be anything and nothing but not 'A Married Woman.'

The novel was badly received by critics in spite of its commercial success, and the main character Astha judged as too simple, unconvincing and irresponsible by reviewers because of her engagement in shallow politics as opposed to her dedication in her family. She becomes ungovernable by the patriarchal politics and encroaches in to the forbidden sphere of public politics. "Ungovernability" is a term I use to introduce transgression; that is, a cultural behavior that does not conform or submit to the norms. Ungovernability constitutes an area that escapes the control of dominant hermeneutics... " (Rodriquez 362-363) Kapur established herself as a mighty pen for transgressive voices. It was quite bold of Kapur in the Indian homophobic socio-cultural context, where Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* depicting a lesbian romance, ignited fire among masses and Karan Razdan's film *Girlfriend*, which also deals with lesbian bonding was condemned as pornography.

SPATIAL LEVEL TRANSGRESSION



(The Crossing over the Allotted Territory by Patriarchy) figure 1

As shown in the figure 1, there are many manifestations of spatial level transgression for women such as from the closet metaphor to the outside world ; from family ambience to the workplace ; from private arena to publish place. I begin the scrutiny of spatial transgression on the part of protagonist with a passage from *A Married Woman* that articulates Astha's dreaming of a utopian space of homoerotic desire: a space simultaneously separate from and connected with the domestic space.

"Astha: I have a fantasy, ...I have a room, small but private, where my family pass before my eyes. It is very light, before me is a wall which divides the house, but I can see my children, that satisfies me, though to them I am invisible, that satisfies me too. This room will be our

room, you with me, living in harmony. Our lives are separate, different things call to us, different demands are made on us, but always that solid base beneath as, like two flies caught in a sticky pool they cannot leave.”(241)

In these lines the visualization of a personal and ideal space resounds in the famous essay of Virginia Woolf's 'A Room of One's Own' (1929). She writes, "Food, house and clothing are mine forever...I need not hate any man. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me.....Anything may happen when womanhood ceased to be a protected occupation.”(65) This ideal space embodies a juxtaposition of the personal and the familial. It is an imagined utopia that contains desires of erotic and maternal both, an omniscient place from where she may watch others but others might not perceive her presence. The space simultaneously functions as a trap, a "sticky pool" of desire to which the desiring subject submits willingly, and it can provide "solid base" of a stable erotic relationship. This paradoxical spatial metaphor where visibility and invisibility gets mixed together sums up the subject position of transgressive Indian woman.

Through this spatial transgression, an effort has been made to demonstrate how same-sex desire is represented by imagining spaces of resistance within patriarchal spatial systems i.e. home. This spatial metaphor of the closet domestic space becomes a space of queer desire, where female same sex desire has been erased by a simultaneous use of silence and violence. Astha sets out on her quest for a more meaningful life in her lesbian relationship, a safety valve provided by post feminist mindset. It is the deep ambiguity in Kapur's works that make them so interesting from a feminist point of view. The marriages in them are generally unhappy, the female characters often transgressive, resisting the patriarchal values endorsed by the author herself.

The visibility in societal roles as a wife, other, daughter, sister, friend is contrasted against the invisibility as lesbian lover, which can be taken as a transgressive stance upon the part of a domestic home maker. Women who take part in this game of femininity are more valued and validated in patriarchal society. Indeed, the Myth of femininity ensures them natural and commonsensical. On the contrary, women who transgress the accepted social script inevitably encounter an entirely different cultural response.

Here the cloister of home reveals a disturbing truth that a home can both destroy and preserve our maturity, individuality and mental progress. The traditional family home becomes the site that unknowingly conceals inadmissible desire of homoeroticism. At home Astha does not feel comfortable with the way her husband and her family treats her. The entire home is hers but she feels homeless. In her home she has to ask her husband for space. When the 'room of her own' is denied by her husband it raises question in her mind about her status as she is not more than an unpaid servant. This may be taken as the recourse for the spatial transgression as it is justified on the part of Astha to find her 'Home' her own space outside the territories of her own privileged home. That is because transgressive females are "incomprehensible," as normally

women 'only become intelligible through becoming gendered'. (Butler 22)Kapur's heroines seem to pose a great challenge to this patriarchal structure of the society by inverting their roles from domestic to transgressive one. The more Astha resists the conventional feminine role, the more hysterical the narrative voice gets. Her husband Hemant, totally on his guards, tries to repudiate the changing gender order through the expression of dogmatic and derogatory axioms, "Please. Keep to what you know best, the home, children, teaching. All this doesn't suit you." (Kapur 116)

The final solution of this lesbian encoding comes to nothing as Astha is confused and faces the universal dilemma: to transgress her sexual role or not. By the end after a long internal trauma of conflicting thoughts she is about to take a very ghastly decision when Pipee being fed up after a long wait, informs Astha about her planned departure for foreign which shocks and confuses Astha. In an abrupt manner, Pipee leaves India and Astha returns to her conventional married life. Pipee is able to foresee the cultural weakness of Astha as she muses at the time of her final departure, 'I don't think, she could take it, and I couldn't take her not taking it.' (303) Though it seems very unconvincing on her part but it seems that the author willed it so. One character is so much delayed about this and the other is in such a hurry that both of them are not able to get boarded in the plane of lesbianism.

Is *A Married Woman* a lesbian text? The answer is vague and ambivalent. According to the critical principles outlined above, in the text, Astha's physical relationship with Pipee is the concrete proof of lesbian bonding between two women, though the narrator does not use the word 'lesbian' directly for either of them. This taboo project has been dealt judiciously. The author has depicted this sexual matrix convincingly, where reader's empathy gets settled upon Astha, who is like a sex doll but bereft of the boon of true love other than physical with her husband. She being love lorn seeks this fulfillment in Pipee, a vibrant young girl. On the other hand, Pipee after getting widowed is in search of a partner who can satisfy her on physical planes.

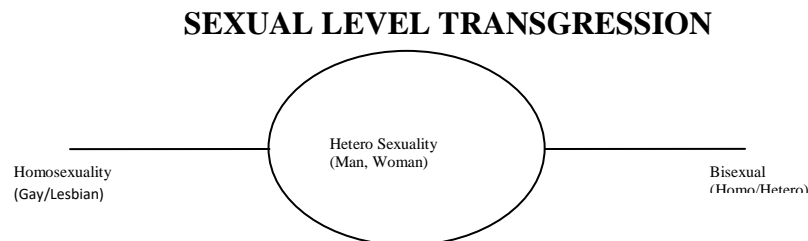
Both ladies find a safety valve in lesbianism for their repressed desires. They enjoy being together; they desire each other; revel in each other's bodies and celebrates this notion privately. There exists a passionate sexual compatibility between the two. The narrator overtly describes this, 'they had been skin on skin, mind on mind with nothing in between.' (303) A mere touch is enough to give orgasmic delight: '[Pipee] closed her hands over me, and I could scarcely breathe with the pleasure,' effuses Astha. (256) For the maintenance of this marginal relationship she gets the marginal time and space as she is being pushed by Pipee into snatching time and space for being exclusively available to her on the pretext of going to an Ekta Yatra which becomes symbolic as unity march for both of them, lasting a few days. Thus Astha can be taken as the end journey of a married woman's choice to be homosexual though it may be destructive for both the family and society. She represents the idea that a woman can be seducing, devouring

and devastating like young men of the day. Through this Kapur demonstrates how a transgressive female character is created to explain and illustrate the decay of traditional masculinity and the weakness of a new generation of men at a time of social turbulence and changing gender roles.

The text that has been analyzed is not labeled as lesbian text, but the absence of the acknowledgement of this label has significant impact on how this silent space is imagined or represented in private. The lesbian affair goes silently and secretly between the two. Though this mode of adopted silence does not intervene with the political and dominant heterosexual discourse yet this closet culture needs to be brought into the limelight.

The Breakdown of Compulsory Heterosexuality in Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused*

Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused* (2002) is an ambiguous example of New Woman literature depicting the interplay of various 'female bondings' as a weapon to contest the skewed power relations in the society. While one of the bondings explicates itself as 'close 'girl and girl' friendship, other is out and out sexual or lesbian relation between girl and girl. This willful shifting of sexual paradigm is an attempt to resist the collective essentialism of sexuality. *Born Confused* is a coming of age story of Dimple lala, an Indian American teenager, who is confused about her identity and wants to deconstruct the socio-cultural, constrains and constructs. She refuses to be an object and transgresses the set gender identity by creating a new pluralistic image for the young generation to emulate.



Transgression in the matter of sexual orientation is a subversion of rigid cultural gender identities and it also inverts the mandates of gendered behavior. As shown in the figure 2 Transgression can take place in the matter of sexuality where it is not mandatory for woman to follow the beaten track of compulsive hetero sexuality and woman can follow the homo and bisexual modes of sexuality. For Foucault is a movement of violence, not because it destroys, but because it reveals. Transgression is its own limit, denies its own limit, and reveals its own limit. Transgression does not want to surpass the limit, but "forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, [. . .] to experience its positive truth in its downward fall" ("A Preface

to Transgression” 73). Due to homophobic violence in India, there is the silent erasure of Lesbianism and gay system which are manifestations of varied sexuality. The dominant discourse in gender seems to control the expression of lesbian sexuality which can be a great threat to the apparently traditional setup of India.

First there is the relationship between Dimple and Gywn which forms the mainstay of the novel. Such a unique woman and woman bond between them has palpable reasons. Dimple is enamored of and enchanted with Gywn due to her own doubly marginalized status of being a woman and an ethnic group member of an exotic culture. Lesbians tic behavior or fixation with another woman stems basically from a feeling of being a subaltern in the male dominated discourse of the patriarchy. The union of two women in relationship so close, is an escape from the culture nurtured notions and codes of morality and piety. Staying close and confiding closely guarded secrets of womanhood in the other woman in the ‘relationship’ is an important aspect of this behavior. There are no narrated overt sexual encounters between Dimple and Gwyn in the novel but there intimate girl-girl talks concerning their sexual fantasies and the way they long for each other’s companionship after having been snubbed and unheard by the parental authority , hints at the ‘woman identified woman’ factor as suggested by Adrienne Rich.

Her escapades with Bobby and the kissing and amorous performances seem to make her synonym of the American world as she states that she too is one of them. Her best friend Gywn epitomizes the American teen world with her frequent dates with boys, night outs, multiple-dating, kissing, sex, drugs, provocative dressing, etc. which Dimple is aware and quite sure that her parents will not permit her but the internal sexual urge and adolescent immaturity stimulate her to cross the bars. She rebels against her parents and her roots. Her sexual adventures can be attributed to the sexually liberated environs of America which she has been bred in. She cannot accept her parents’ age old traditions and draconian norms of Indian ethnicity yet the impact of which she can hardly escape.

These modes of sexual and behavioural transgression to escape the Indian mould are her ways to posit the defence of her confused identity and paranoia over her oriental existence . Through her Tanuja Desai vitally highlights the difference in attitude towards sex in Indian and American society and how this difference confounds the second generation of diaspora and awes the first generation. The sexual disciplining, typical trait of Indian tradition, is juxtaposed to the sexual freedom that characterizes the American society.

This relationship of mutual necessity cement their bond of friendship and in times to come is converted into close girl and girl relationship. This idea echoes in Rich’s idea of ‘lesbian continuum’ where she foresees that female bondings are gaining ground since childhood in the form of sisters, daughter-mother relationships, friends where the sameness is more needed as

personal preference rather than difference. This sharing of idea and experiences cement a bond of intimacy and love between them and lesbianism is a culmination of this gradual process though bereft of sexual connotations. Dimple's close relationship with Gywn gives the novel its unique character of transgression and a playing field for woman-woman relationships minus sex in the American cultural setting. Though this relationship goes through many ups and downs to finally get reconciled being unable to stay separated from each other. Their intimate friendly bond becomes a tool to counter their own subdued subjectivities in the face of many checks and prohibitions imposed by the cultural milieu around them.

Also there is the sub-plot of Kavita, Dimple's cousin, and her girl-friend Sabina who live together in a pure lesbian set up and then split in the most 'American' fashion of peaceful separation informed by mutual depletion of interests. Kavita comes to America from India for higher studies on Dimple's family's representation out of a pretty orthodox background as is apparent in her conservative outlook and ghettoisation despite being in America. Such restrictive antecedents are bound to give way to hedonism and self-assertion once the lid is taken off. The homophobic Indian setting suppressed her sexual preferences and she is able to disclose it with authority only in America.

According to the heteronormative norm, a person's gender can be identified by their erotic desire for a person of the opposite gender. That makes a fine a balancing of positive and negative, the subject and the other, the possessor and the possessed. With Kavita's sexuality being androgynous, her gender cannot be defined this way. She becomes a confusion for the heteronormative demarcations. In this way she undermines the main discourse of heteronormativity. In this context Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*:

The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. (31)

Thus Kavita is bold enough to ignore the rules of heteronormativity and disrupts the notion of binary construction of gender. She refuses to take her place on the binary gender scale, refuses to stick to erotic desire only for men as her body is biologically female and choosing also sexual partner who is a woman. In India, the only gender identity available for a person with a female body is the heterosexual feminine. As she doesn't conform to this norm she may have been seen as a decadent, wicked and threatening character, as illustrated by the novel's reception among critics especially in India.

The third visible transgression of regulatory regimes of heterosexuality or homosexuality in the novel is that by Zara, a transvestite or drag queen who changes clothes and personality. His/Her persona is symbolic of the immigrant identity embodying two selves. He also

symbolizes the post modernistic fluidity of identity (sexual) and gender as merely a structure of differences without fixed signifiers. Transvestitism is defined as an abnormality in the essentialist dictionary whereby transvestite is a person who derives sexual pleasure in wearing the clothes of the opposite sex and acting it out in a queer way. Such a tendency is bound to infuriate the moral police in the countries like India where any minor deviation from the pre-defined codes leads to excommunication and wrath.

The concept of cross dressing can be taken literally to contaminate one gender with the other as if the traits of other gender can be worn through clothes. Hidier interprets Zara's delight in cross-dressing as a manifestation of her homosexuality and an attempt to demasculinise himself. The idea of cross dressing may be dealt as a continuation of the deconstruction of gender in the novel. Zara's obviously successful dressing-up as an actress demonstrates how fragile gender is, as it is here performed successfully by Zara. Here Butler's theory of gender performance provides more authentic explanation, revealing the interrelated element of dressing and performance. The apparel put on by its 'wearer' many a times creates and determines gender. The ambiguous character of Zara demonstrates how gender is 'appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done.' (Butler 21)

Dwelling on the same 'fluidity of identity' precept pertaining to sexual identity, and specifically gay and lesbian studies, Eve Sedgwick in her *Epistemology of the Closet* considers how coming out of the closet or revealing one's gay traits is not a single absolute act. The confiding of one's homosexuality in others presupposes the need of a discretionary behavior, to be 'in' or 'out' is not a simple dichotomy or a once and for all event. Degrees of concealment and openness co-exist in the same lives (Sedgwick 1985: 23).

The gender performance act again undermines the concept of a stable sexuality Zara's erotic desire follows both as a man and as a woman (dressed up). The cross-dressing in the novel exposes the instability of the characters 'identities, muddling the concept of stability with regard to both subjectivity and gender/sexuality. Not only can Zara switch gender as he pleases, but also he switches between sexual orientations no matter which gender he performs. Thus the novel undermines the notion that sexual orientation is 'naturally' dependent on gender very effectively. Zara becomes the most complete and most powerful symbol of masculine transgression and does not even bother to convince the reader of the ideal of heterosexual identity rather he allows it to fall apart in front of the eyes of readers by refusing to take part in the endless repetition of one correct gender performance. The novel ends with Dimple's self-actualization reached through the experiences and interplay with these characters that motivate her to relish the exploration of possibilities enshrined in this rainbow existence.

These modes of sexual and behavioural transgression to escape the moulds of 'compulsory heterosexuality' are the ways to posit the defense of the confused protagonists. Through the pluralism of sexual orientation, Desai vitally highlights the difference in attitude

towards sex in Indian and American society : the sexual disciplining, typical trait of Indian tradition, is juxtaposed to the sexual freedom that characterizes the American society. These novels are replete with the experiences of those transgressive women who have the potential to stir the constructed fanfare club, reader's groups and conservative and constructed society. These rebellious narratives not only create awareness to alternative models of femininity, but also foster a resistance towards current limiting definitions of "the feminine." It brings about a radical difference in the society by rejecting the centre and creating a pluralistic society. The paper brings out the changing paradigms of gender discourse where binary identities are blurring out, giving birth to a new concept of plural, fluid and neutral identity. This woman does not teeter on the borders of a constructed identity, asserts her existence, transgresses the stereotypical notions of femininity and subverts the normative function of society. Following the global image of women, she is the part of corporate world, confident in behaviour, comfortable in unisex mode of dressing, and rational in language usage. Thus, shedding the feminine mask, she has transgressed her gender role by adapting new 'performative tasks and masks'. Thus breaking the rule actually forms a vital and necessary part of the game of society because the boundary is then acknowledged. The 'boundaries' and 'limits' also connote ideas of rigidity and fixed positions, thus contemporary transgressive novels continue to counter with a tradition of transgression.

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