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Conflict between Self, Body and Society in Kim Fu's *For Today I am a Boy*

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Abstract:

Denied of social acceptance and recognition, transgenders remain a differentiated social class. They struggle very much to reconcile their physical visibility within the invisibility of their community as a whole. Seldom do our society realize or care to realize the trauma, agony and pain which these people undergo; nor do they appreciate the innate feelings of the members of the Transgender community, especially of those whose mind and body disown their biological sex. Society makes no provision for the existence of people whose anatomical characteristics do not really fit into the male/ female binary and they are manipulated into living their assigned sex. They are denied the right to express their gender without fear of discrimination or violence. Kim Fu in her debut novel *For Today I am a Boy* successfully portrays the trans experience in all its vitality through the life of Peter who is also a victim of the gender binary system. He is forced to live with a hidden self and a body that does not belong to him. The paper intends to explore how the body that he is trapped in forces him to act in ways his real self never want to becoming a cause of suffering and self-denial. The research identifies how society, through its different institutions, tries to enforce upon him the various norms a person born with a particular sex organ has to follow. It also endeavors to bring out the ways in which family, school, workplace and religion become sites of gendering him in the “right way”. Thus the paper tries to throw light on the dilemma of transgenders and give voice to the long silenced trans experience.

Keywords: Sex, Gender, Self, Identity, Transgenders, Cisgenders, Society.

We are all assigned a gender at birth. Sometimes the assignment doesn't match our inner truth, and there needs to be a new place – a place of self identification. I was not born a boy, I was assigned boy at birth. Understanding the difference between the two is crucial to our culture and society moving forward in the way

we treat – and talk about – transgender individuals. In today's globally connected and ever-diversifying world, culture is now more fluid and more flexible than ever – and so too should be our understanding and perception of gender.

Greena Rocero.

For many people, the terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ are used interchangeable, and thus incorrect. This idea has become so common, particularly in western societies, that it is rarely questioned. We are born, assigned a sex, and sent out into the world. For many people, this is cause for little, if any dissonance. Yet biological sex and gender are different; gender is not inherently nor solely connected to one’s physical anatomy. Virginia Prince, one of the pioneering activists, was the first to put the lexical compound of transgender to work. Prince coined the term ‘transgenderist’ during the early 1970s. The transgender studies took on a new and expansive life during the 1990s. Much of the earlier works of transgender studies were focused on transgender identity pondering on its embodiments, working to leverage its political utility and debating on its various distinctions. Transgender is an umbrella term that covers all people whose gender identity does not get along with their physiological sex. This is a natural thing and no one can be blamed for. “Sex is what you are born with, gender is what you recognize and sexuality is what you discover”, a comment made by a ‘hijra’ when asked to sum up her views on transgender identity (Bhargava).

Judith Butler proposes the idea of “a desire for recognition” wherein humans are constantly seeking recognition because it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings. To be recognized, then, others must be able to understand you. Often, to be understood, one must fit the social norms, which provide us with an identity and a community; “the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms” (Butler 2). Butler suggests that we see the ‘norm’ as that which binds us, but we also see that the ‘norm’ creates unity on through the strategy of exclusion. Transgender individuals do not follow the norm and are thus excluded. Since transgender people defy the norms, “it is unclear whether they are still living, or ought to be, whether their lives are valuable, or can be made to be...” (206). Butler’s idea of gendered violence is born out of the defiance of social norms. Gendered violence occurs when people live outside the accepted cultural norms for what it means to be a man or a woman. Transgender people frequently

experience gendered violence, especially through pathologization and criminalization. Butler questions why gender violence against transgender subjects is not recognized as violence and argues that it is because transgender people are not recognized as real or intelligible. *For Today I am a Boy* traces the protagonist's transition from male to female. It contemplates on how to define and defend one's identity against the clamoring voices of expectation, from both family and society.

The child of Chinese immigrants in a small Canadian town, Peter is the only boy in a family of four children, the answer to his father's prayers. Peter's father is in some ways desperate to assimilate—he refuses to speak Cantonese and forbids his wife from cooking their native cuisine—but he has deeply traditional ideas about gender and the duties of children. He gives Peter the Chinese name Juan Chaun, “powerful king,” and expects him to act accordingly.

But Peter can't be the son his father wants, and he lives for stolen moments when he can imagine himself into a different life. Alone in the afternoons after school, he puts on his mother's apron and cleans the house, then cooks a meal his sister will take credit for. When his father discovers that his son has been doing “women's work,” his response is immediate and cruel (Towloroad).

Peter does find allies in his small town, people he can begin to share his secrets with, but it isn't until he moves to Montreal as a young man that he has his first glimpses of queer life. And even here he can't let himself make use of his new freedom. Years after his leaving home, even after his father's death, Peter is still ruled by his parents' expectations. He feels not just shame at being trans, but absolute certainty that anything like a full life is impossible. It's not surprising, then, that Peter's first sexual experiences are bound up with violence. In one of the book's most powerful sequences, he enters into an abusive relationship with a much older woman, who stages scenes of sexual sadism and racist humiliation. In a devastating scene, this woman dresses Peter as a woman and then chokes him in front of a mirror, so that “I could watch my own blissful face white out slowly, glowing like an angel's, until I passed out” (128).

The novel also brings out trans experiences in various spaces like family, school, and society as a whole. Structured in short, intense fragments and poetic scenes, Kim Fu's novel follows Peter's life over three decades making it a powerful coming of age novel.

A baby is born into a world of set criteria he/she has to follow to fall into the binary gender division despite what one truly feels inside. This social cultivation begins from the minute one is born. If one is born with a penis, he is a boy and is expected to live and die as a man. Peter is born into a Chinese family with three daughters. He is crowned a "king" right at his birth whereas he would have loved to be crowned "a queen". This marks the very beginning of a life of despair, a life to be lived as someone else despite what one feels to be inside. This marks the beginning of a lifetime of hiding one's true self and striving to be a "man".

Right at the time of birth a child is recognized based on what is in between its legs and is categorized into the he/she binary. There is no question of having an identity outside this binary. "During these early, blissful days, all my father knows about me is the nub of penis that extends from my torso" (xiii). Thus the body turns out to be the origin of gendered violence one has to encounter all throughout one's life. As the child is exposed to the outside world of his peers the construction of gender identity takes a higher level. A trans child is forced to assert a gender identity contrast to his/ he true self. Peter is expected to act in a certain way on the playground, among his peers.

Educational institution tries to internalize certain set norms of one's gender identity right from the primary school. "One of our assignments was what I wanted to be when I grow up. Our teacher had written several suggestions on the board: Doctor, Astronaut, Policeman, Scientist, Businessman, and Mommy"(3). He draws himself as a Mommy bending her waist over the apron and serving pancakes, wrapping presents, patting the head of puppies, vacuuming sparkling clean floors. He wanted to be a Mommy. But being a mommy is something that is expected to be of his sisters, not him. He is to wear manly clothes, sit on the armchair watching the "mommy" of the family doing the chores. But he finds the page ripped out by one of his family members. This turns out to be the ripping off of his identity to replace it with someone else's. Thus Peter is made aware of the performativity of gender, of what he should be in spite of what he truly is. He is made familiar with the answers he is supposed to give to agree to his gender. Later on when asked the same question, he answers with a fireman. He draws a masculine fireman with an axe in one hand and a woman on the other. Here, gender turns out to be an impersonation of an ideal that nobody actually inhabits. But he could imagine only being a woman.

Peter experiences great identity crisis while amidst his peers. As it is right for a boy to hang out with other boys of his age, Peter, however, feels it to be quite wrong. He is haunted by constantly feeling out of place among his friends. The games they play, the way they talk and the way they act are all alien to him. “Hi, Peter, Lester said. I gave him the same knowing nod and crossed my arms over my chest the way they did” (4). Here we see an imitation or miming of the dominant conventions of gender. As Judith Butler argues “the act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that’s been going on before one arrived on the scene. His body becomes an object that causes suffering. There is always this feeling of not feeling one with the body. My real body was somewhere else, waiting for me. It looked like my sisters’ bodies” (8).

All through his childhood, he found boys to be ugly and foreign, like another species. He always felt he was not one of them. But the evidence to his boyhood was right there, tucked into his tight underwear. As much as he thought boys were ugly, he had to believe that he was one of them just because of what was hanging between his legs.

His friends Lester, Roger and Ollie are the absolute definitions of what and how “a boy” should be. They play games hurting each other, shedding blood and bullying girls at school. He is forced to play games in which he finds no happiness. One of the exciting games introduced by Roger Foher, the tall hulking friend of Peter, is to pull down a girl’s underwear. Peter is the “chosen” one for this act of bravery. He looks into the girl’s eyes and his mind is filled with words that he cannot articulate. “I tried to tell her I was sorry; that we were both victims. I wanted her to see who I really was” (17). Lacking an identity of his own, the only choice left was to resort to someone else’s identity and to follow their orders unwillingly. But as the girl lie crying on the floor he is accustomed to the harsh reality that it is better to stay true to the “gender identity” thrust upon him.

Better to be one of us, better to be standing on this side than kneeling and weeping in the gravel while they leer, that was all my father wanted from me, to be one of them, to be a king. But even as the rationale asks him to be one of them, his conscience knows that he truly belonged to her place, with a body holding something so stunning they’d steal for it, they’d stare into its hot center even as it blinded them. (18)

It is ironic however that the vagina he yearns to possess is the very factor that instigated violence against the girl.

Family also becomes a site of gendering. Peter is born with a burden, a heavy weighing burden of expectations of his family. He loves to be with his sisters, to be more precise, be like them. In fact being a child, he could see nothing different between himself and his sisters. He loved combing his sister's hair and playing with them rather than being out on the playground with other boys. As much as he wants to be like his sisters, he is only given two choices: either to be manly like his father or strong and handsome like Bruce Lee. But none of these options seem acceptable to his being.

Throughout his childhood his sisters and his father try to internalize in him the "fact" that he is a boy, but he could never see what split him apart from his sisters. Thus Peter as a child finds it very hard to find his space in a family with four women and a man, him fitting into neither of the category. When left alone at home, however, he dares to be his real self. He engages himself with the chores, cooks dinner for the family wearing his mother's apron with a feeling of fulfillment of finally becoming the Mommy of the family, something he always yearns to be. There occurs a shift in the gender performativity thus causing him to identify who he truly is and what he truly enjoys doing. But he gets to live his true self only on the rare solitude of Thursdays when both his parents go out to work. "I took off my pants, underwear and shirt and pulled my scrunches socks up to my knees. I took out the apron, put one loop around my head and another around my waist, the pinched sateen catching on my sparse body hair. It felt like a second skin- a better one"(49).

Here we see him completely tearing off the layer of skin on his alien body and casting on a new body, a much more familiar one. But as soon as his father gets to know about his Thursday activities, he burns the apron and "it curled in the flames, twisting inward as though alive" (55). His very being is burned to death with a lighter and he could hear a high-pitched cry from somewhere; his soul weeping from within, a wail from his own throat, from the depths of his ersatz body.

His father remains as a staunch Patriarch all through his life and his mere presence remains an accusation. As he enters high school, his sexual orientation starts to grow

incongruous to his gender. He, for the first time, develops feeling for the chef in the restaurant he works at. He is sexually attracted to the chef and his very gaze, words and touch make Peter fantasy a love affair with him. However he felt a strong sense of revulsion every time he pictured having sex with the male body he owned. He does not want to form intimate relationships with the male body he is born with. A male body is not the right tool and he does not want his partners interacting with a male body, but rather a female body. “I realized what I had been picturing. Large breasts sliding sideways on my chest, his hands stopping their momentum”(89).

When it comes to transgenders, the imperative of sex contrasts with that of the cisgenders. We, as a society, have not created a space for men to openly express their desire to be with trans women. Instead, we shame men who have this desire, from the boyfriends, cheaters and “chasers” to the “trade,” clients, and pornography admirers. Men are taught to keep their attraction to transwomen secret, to limit it to the internet, frame it as a passing fetish or transaction. In effect, we’re telling trans women that they are only deserving of secret interactions with men, further demeaning and stigmatizing trans women. When it does come out, it often turns out to be breaking news, a gossip or a scandal. This pervasive ideology says that trans women are shameful, that trans women are not worthy of being seen and that trans women must remain a secret — invisible and disposable. If a man dares to be seen with a transwoman, he will likely lose social capital so he must adamantly deny, vehemently demean, trash and/or exterminate the woman in question. He must do this to maintain his standing in our patriarchal society (Mock).

The chef talks about having sex with a transwoman once in the most derogatory manner to which the other men pass the most savage comments. The chef tells in detail the story of him “fucking a guy” in Montreal and one of his furious listeners adds: “I would have cut his fucking balls off, wants to be a woman that bad, enough to trick normal, God fearing, pussy-loving men into having sex with him” (95).

Peter’s first time shaving experience lets him enjoy the privilege of having his own body, even if it is in the most superficial manner.

I sprayed more shaving cream into my hands and spread it over my legs. Just running my palms up my legs and smoothing down the foam felt good. The razor

felt even better as it slid up my shinbone. Clumps of hair washed away. Water struck the skin with a new intensity. I went over each leg twice, redoing missed spots, more fastidious than I'd ever been with my face. When I stepped out, I couldn't believe how sensitive my bare legs were; the towel felt too rough but raised goose bumps of pleasure. Our bathroom had a narrow full length mirror hanging on the back of the door that I always had to avoid. I turned my back to the mirror and looked over my shoulder, those legs! Coming out of the bottom of my bathrobe, a little pale, but so slim, so shapely. Legs made for high heels. Legs made for short skirts. Legs made to be seen. (103)

The unending desire to own a female body turns out to be an envy to the ones who possess it. The disjunction between "felt sense" of the body and the body's corporeal contours causes suffering. Also there is a deep desire to be recognized for his true self rather than the material being. He lived two decades in disguise, playing roles not destined for him trapped in a body that is not his and now all he wants is to be perceived as the woman he truly is. He is also tired of operating as a machine in accordance with the gender role assigned to him.

Peter enters into a relationship with an older woman who sexually assaulted him and suffocated him for pleasure. But the desire to feel his "missing body" made him hold on to Margie despite all the torture. It is not the love that he wanted; but he wanted to feel the body he coveted, envied and knew better than his own.

I ran my hands over her body, spending a long time on her breasts, lifting them, tweaking the nipples, pretending they were mine. Then even longer between her legs, both hands tracing the folds, the slick walls. From this angle it was perfect, it was just where it was supposed to be. It was between my legs. I rubbed her and could almost feel it myself. (126)

Here Margie takes up the role of a saviour because this is the only way he could do it and this was the closest he could get to being his self. He keeps on fantasizing about having a female body. "If I looked like her, I would stand with my back straight and my chest thrust out, smiling with my white teeth and puffy lips" (140).

Religion acts as a correction authority in a transgender's life. It is often seen Christianity trying to guide them in the "right direction", the direction not at all right for the person being directed, thus creating a dissonance within their psyches. The result of this dissonance is an often lifelong process of reconciling the contradictions derived from rigid dogma with the lived experience of being. For some, this means a painful process of exile while others find creative ways of integration and wholeness. In Christianity it is believed that the "essential maleness" and "essential femaleness" are not brought together as intended from creation. When extended to transsexuality and cross-gender identification, the theological concerns rest in what Gagnon calls the denial of the integrity of one's own sex and an overt attempt at marring the sacred image of maleness or femaleness formed by God. Others view it to be a disability. This approach to understanding transgenderism too leans heavily upon the essentialist notion of gender which is rooted in inclusion of cisgenderist expressions and exclusion and stigmatizing anything outside of the binary idea. The implications of this thinking also make way for attempting to "cure" or "change" those who do not fit the ideal. This internalizes a shame and guilt of being trans, simultaneously providing room for supportive care to cure the disability they suffer from.

Conclusion:

Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns . . . which give form, order, point, and direction to our lives. . . . We must . . . descend into detail, past the misleading tags, past the metaphysical types, past the empty similarities to grasp firmly the essential character of not only the various cultures but the various sorts of individuals within each culture, if we wish to encounter humanity face to face.

Clifford Geertz

Transgenders are individuals with a different sense of self than the cisgenders; but they too are individuals with equal rights and respectability. They should be given the right of self expression and should not be forced into living someone else's life. They should not be forced into performing the socially constructed gender roles in order to be recognized and accepted as individuals.

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