

EXISTENTIAL ANGST, AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN LESLIE FEINBERG'S *STONE BUTCH BLUES*

By

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Abstract

'Transgender' is often used as an aggregate term to insinuate those who thwart austere binary gender structures. It is through the line of socialization and learning that we procure our gender identity as we are not born as men or women. Based on Simon de Beauvoir's proclamation "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" (The Second Sex, 283), Judith Butler affirms that gender is fluid. By deconstructing the binary male or female, she demonstrated that the restriction inside this pair is viewed as 'inalienably flimsy'. The perspectives of the queer community are frequently unheard of in an atmosphere where heterosexual hegemony is active. The hostile surrounding in which they live and the traumatic conditions they undergo fill them with constant fear and anxiety in confronting their real selves and asserting their identities life. 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 utilize when met with adversity and the ways that transgenders see their trans-identity as providing them with a form of strength and resilience. Leslie Feinberg, through the book Stone Butch Blues carves out the entire existence of Jess Goldberg who undergoes physical and mental transformation.

Keywords: *queer, heterosexual, hegemony, mainstream acceptance*

Introduction

The opening lines of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* state that "man is born free and everywhere he is in chains." Man gets himself chained in evil and age-old thoughts of the conventional society. When tries to fasten the strands of thought, he draws a line of boundary into other people's expression and life. The mainstream society believes that 'human beings' comprises only two genders: male and female. One of the post-structural postulations tried to deconstruct binary opposition by showing that, as Barry suggests, "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" (143).

Physicality is not the way to identify one's sexual orientation, but it must be confirmed over the course of contemplation and psyche. Sometimes a man's spirit is entrapped inside a female's body and may happen vice versa. There breathes a gender that is disdained, abandoned, and later fades away from the human identity and is named as transgender. So, the individuals appertained to the trans community strive hard to corroborate their gender even whilst their life is in question. Has one's 'transphobia' came about an antagonistic

vibe towards them in the conventional society or, is that due to the abhorrence for a commune who are “gender deviants?” These contemplations and questions prompted the researcher to take up an investigation and finds that Leslie Feinberg, through the work *Stone Butch Blues*, attempts to scrutinize how literature has facilitated the voice of the voiceless to verbalize their standpoint. Since the lives of transgenders are fragmentarily known to others since then, it is expected that this will rip out reader’s apprehension and refine their feeling of empathy, thereby clearing the track for a more unified society. Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* has depicted as a queer narrative. It looks postmodern due to how it impersonates gender as a signifier. There is a hackneyed conviction prevalent in the mainstream society that being born a woman implies resisting to be “feminine.” The same is the case for the central character in *Stone Butch Blues*, who do not come under the binary gender stereotypes inflicted/executed. Jess Goldberg, a biological woman, therefore, is presumed to perform as indicated by society’s conventional meaning of what reserves to be a woman. Jess identifies neither as a woman nor as a man. But as a “he-she,” the very encapsulation of gender incongruity.

It continues to endure abuse from a society that cannot recognise or acknowledge gender inequality and masculinity in women.

Jess said: 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?” (p.13)

Jess apprehends from her early childhood experience, of the outcomes of not conforming to the ruling social order. “No one ever offered 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 this constant refrain: ‘Is that a boy or a girl?’”(13). The clash between normative versus nonnormative/transgressive influences becomes part of her daily catastrophes, which conditioned her struggle for survival. Because of her manliness, she still doesn’t feel at ease in her community of birth and, so the home search becomes a theme as well.

It seems valid to discuss the title of the novel *Stone Butch Blues*. The term butch refers to the female gender, holding masculine expression who generally pairs up sexually with femmes. They cannot meet the expectations of the ideals of the womanhood of the conventional society. Their transgressive masculinity turns them into daily targets of abuse and attack. At some point, Jess realise herself been a “stone butch”. This persona sheds light on how

much 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.' In the English language, the word 'blues' is often used to refer the song with a sense of lamentation. In highly personal interpretations, such songs reflects a psychological mindset of low spirits and melancholy. In this narrative, the melancholy of the blues quoted several times, highlights the painful, yet beautiful and transforming journey of the protagonist Jess Goldberg. The title stresses the role of emotion in the narrative. The 'stone butch' indicates both the physical state of her indetermined masculinity and the texture of her emotional experience. A stone hardens her mind so that she cannot spew her emotions, her 'blues'.

Passing as a man is too fortunate to the point that Jess 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 struggled to fulfill her inner self as an all-male figure, she quits taking testosterone infusions. Her enthusiasm and disarray for assimilating her identity can see while Jess recounts 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. (P. 221-222)

This moment poses critical concerns regarding Jess's identity. Passing might make her feel like she is at home with her body. Still, acclimatizing as a man couldn't provide a mind that Jess feels not foreign. This incarnation can hardly grant her a paradise. Here we see that Jess doesn't recognise any femininity in her, nor she feels like a man. But she can see herself mirrored in the memory of a masculine woman she sees in the bars and factories, which makes it clear that Jess is not transsexual. They are someone who thinks that his/her biological gender is at odds with his/her psychological gender.

Jess moves to New York, where she met Ruth. Her open, confident nature, as well as her apparent ease of living in an ambiguous body, fascinates Jess, who urges Ruth to help

herself accommodate her uniqueness. Jess 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.” (p.254)

Jess’s mind is swirling between two dimensions, still bewildered at the depiction of her uniqueness. Ruth’s assumptions on Jess’s identity unveils her struggle to be free from heteronormativity. Ruth tells Jess that the solution to their questionable identity 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. (p.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 held her choices to a minimum and also her fundamental civil rights and biological needs are in jeopardy. Even public washrooms are constructed to the gender binary.

Fienberg in *Stone Butch Blues* marks Jess’s three conspicuous transitional phases of reticence, pauperism, and emotional turmoil to utterance, buoyancy, and distinctiveness. Her first phase is an epoch of laconism. She roves in a world where silence only embraces her. No one is there to endorse her or at least envisage as a mortal being. Once a group of youngsters brutally assaulted her in the subway, which caused her hospitalization for days. Her mangled jaw thwarts her from talking for several days. This metaphorical representation can dexterously construe as an embodiment of her aphonic life. Likewise, readers can re-interpret this image as to how this society comprises men and women compelled her to be hush and may foreshadow her inutility to break her coerced silence. The second phase is an epoch of acerbity. Jess and Ruth click a journey together. Ruth is going to see the family she abandoned and demands Jess to visits the place Buffalo where her life as a butch starts. They switch on their time machine to their history to recall the animosity all around. Perhaps, they need this ride to cast out all those black memories and dream about new ratification.

The third phase is an epoch of accomplishment. Jess’s attention had stolen by a group of people from the queer

community who were enduring on the public stage near the subway. They were chatting to potential crowds and encouraged others to join. Unlike Jess, their thoughts and desires are not been muted. Their loud and brave testimonials are solid enough to shake off the creeps of fear in her, and a bud of trust sprouts on her face. Finally, 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". (p.296)

This electrifying episode brings about robust optimism in her. Unlike the queer feminism of the 1970s, this queer community obliges to implement civic space for trans people. For Jess, for the first time, life bears a lustrous future that commences distinct trails and promises. 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" (p. 296)

Finally, 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 abjected 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?" (p.297)

Conclusion

The closing note of *Stone Butch Blues* encompasses Jess's reversion to the native that is to her community, where she can perceive her true entity. By enshrining her experience, the tale of Jess probe into the potentiality of pertaining on a community where one's true self resides. Jess ends up passing neither as man nor woman and being read as both. She makes the fantastic transformation, the intermediate space of crossing, her lived reality. *Stone Butch Blues* advances the reader into the realm of gender and sexual borderlands and its inhabitants who "queer" the gendered heterosexual norm and expose not only its constructed nature but also the system's means of disciplining and restraining its subjects into gender and sexual conformity.

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