

TRANSGENDER WORLDS AND CENTRALITY OF HUMAN AGENCY

Bulbul Gupta

Abstract

The paper explores the centrality of human agency in the lives of transgender individuals in context of the two trans protagonists, Captain Macho and Teddy of transgender narratives, namely, *Masks of a Superhero* and *Dean and Teddy* respectively from the anthology entitled *The Collection: Short Fiction from the Transgender Vanguard* edited by trans-activists and playwrights, Tom Léger and Riley MacLeod. The *Collection* that bagged the Lambda Literary Award 2013 in the Transgender Fiction Award category consists of stories by twenty-eight authors from North America that shed light on the vicissitudes and complexities of the transgender spectrum.

The paper explores a trans-person's agential capacity in context of the story, *Dean and Teddy* whose trans-protagonist Teddy opens up newer possibilities of sexual and gender identity as well as of transsituated discourses. It analyses the movement in Teddy's perceptions and experiences and trans-subjectivity through the lens of feminist theory, queer theory and trans-identity/transgender theory. In the process, the paper tries to find answers to questions such as: Is Teddy able to navigate his/her unique identity while being a part of a gender-variant group that has its own fixed, conventional and often stifling rules and norms? If and how Teddy is able to find a way to personal empowerment and selfhood through the intersections of his/her multiple oppressed social identity not only in terms of his/her socially defined and enforced roles but also in terms of his/her self-constructed and embodied aspects of identity?

The paper attempts to investigate the aspect of agency that is, the characteristics and capabilities of the trans-protagonist,

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, M.M. College, Modinagar, Ghaziabad.

Captain Macho (known as Annie post-transition) of the story, *Masks of a Superhero*, in perceiving, interpreting and affecting the world around him. It analyses Captain Macho's emotional and psychological complexity, and the dilemmas and contradictions that s/he faces in her/his dual and seemingly contradictory identities as an individualist and a collectivist.

Keywords: Transgender, queer, theory, agency, individualism, collectivism

“Traditionally, both the homogeneous portrait and the aetiological constructs were a moral discourse that proscribed and, too frequently still proscribes, how trans-people were and are to identify (including their personal histories) and how they are supposed to feel (past and present) and behave (past, present and future)” (Cromwell 2006: 510).

It has been observed that specific characteristics, behaviours, identities, and sexualities have been attributed to transgendered people. It is almost imperative for all trans-people to appropriate themselves within these attributions that have been so distinctly and rigidly earmarked by the gatekeepers, be it the medical practitioners or the society in general, as such transsubjectivities have come to be defined and controlled by social, medical and moral discourses. According to Judith Butler, the American gender theorist, the moral discourses do not just constitute but they also erase, deploy and paralyze trans-situated identities, bodies, and sexualities (Cromwell 2006: 511). For instance, those identities that have been framed within a medicalised border-negated individual identity and erased those whose histories, identities, bodies, and sexualities did not fit within the criterial boundaries of “true transsexual.” Butler's contention that “[W]hat the clinicians fail to realize is that identifications are multiple and contestory” (Cromwell 2006: 512) holds true not just for the medical practitioners but for the society at large too.

Cromwell in *Queering the Binaries* gives examples of how, despite the moral discourses perpetuated by medico-psychological practitioners to prevent the articulation of trans identities outside their prescribed borders, transpeople have persisted and begun to develop other discourses with respect to their identity that are termed as trans-situated discourses (Cromwell, 2006: 512). Grace says that s/he calls “myself” a “hermaphrodyke” for now, which s/he likes to think of as her/his own custom gender-blend and that s/he sees “myself” as “BOTH” male and female; “either/or” rather than “neither/

nor” (Cromwell 2006: 512). Cromwell draws similarity with Grace and says that both of them have felt that they are different from other men and thus generalizes: “Many transpeople acknowledge that their histories, identities, bodies, and sexualities are different from nontransgendered men and women” (Cromwell 2006: 513). C. Bonnie expresses another discourse as she states that she does not find those FTMs (female to male) attractive who define themselves and their masculinity from the perspective of the presence of a penis. Instead, what according to her is the essence of masculinity is defining oneself from the inside-out, and to integrate into their personalities what fits them and to hell with what others think (Cromwell 2006: 513). H. Amy has laid down yet another transsituated discourse by saying, “I’m attracted to the yin/yangness – polarity is sexy to me. Trans-men (transsexual men) have an otherness, a differentness, that I like” (Cromwell 2006: 513). K. Chris disrupts binary notions of male and female as opposites and frames a transsituated identity of her own. Chris says that he does not adhere to either male or female identity. Rather, he explores both male and female sides for he believes that “what makes me/us so special is that we are aware of both sides of our persona and we can express them” (Cromwell 2006: 513).

Hence in a situation where society, for the most part, dictates the standards of what we conceive gender to be, and lays down a socially constructed web of ideologies that doesn’t connect to or understand the individual human experience; questions that arise and form the framework of the paper are: How do transgendered people articulate their trans-subjectivity and expand the binaries of bodies, sexual desires and genders? How do they reframe the conventional trans-situated discourses and subvert the dominant paradigms of trans-identity as well as expand the very meaning of trans-identity? If and how do they resist and oppose the oppression meted out to them by the stereotypical often negative and degrading notions of the society regarding their identity?

Teddy, the trans-protagonist of the story, *Dean & Teddy*, opens up newer possibilities of sexual and gender identity of a trans-person. Her/his exploration of her identity projects a movement in her/his perceptions and experiences as a trans-individual that can be read in context of feminist theory, queer theory and transgender theory/trans-identity theory. Teddy initially attempts to create her/his sexual/gender identity by adhering to the conventional gender binary system elucidating the essentializing strands of the feminist theory. S/he reads vociferously transgender memoirs, stories about

gay people and message boards on the internet by women who created their own websites, takes estrogen for almost five long years to transform from male body to female body and undergoes “[Y]ears of therapy, invasive questions, electrolysis, voice lessons,[that entail] tons of medical bills...” (289).

However, Teddy’s efforts towards transition go in vain and s/he could never see the woman in the mirror that s/he wanted to see. What Teddy notices is that “[M]y (her/his) eyes look dead, my (her/his) face...unexpressive” (287). S/he is ridiculed and pitied by people for not being able to pass as a woman and for looking like a guy in a wig. At times, s/he is labeled as a fetishist and not a *real* trans-woman (p. 292). Further complexities beset Teddy in her/his position as a member of the gender-variant group, *TransPride*. Eleanor Fromby observes that people meet with other LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) individuals and form LGBT friendships or communities for varied reasons such as to avoid risk and ensure safety, for political activism, potential social change and to enable feelings of comfort and being relaxed (Fromby, 2017: 61). It is quite ironic that for Teddy, her/histrans group is of little solace to her/him. By virtue of the fact that within the ideology of “queer”, “gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (Nagoshi and Nagoshi, 2014: 22), the so-called ‘queer’ group of Teddy that includes non-traditional gender identities and sexual orientations should have extended to Teddy the open mesh of possibilities of sexual/gender identity but actually, it doesn’t. The members of the group set fixed norms of sexual/gender identity describing themselves as either transgender man or transgender woman and the male or female pronouns that they prefer thereby homogenizing the queer experience and erasing the possibility of an individualized queer identity hence proving that one of the problems with the particular use of queer as an umbrella term is that it does little if anything to deconstruct the humanist understanding of the subject. The use of queer as an overarching term veils over the difference between lesbianism and gayness, between ‘women’, between transsexualism and crossdressing, and ignored differences of class, race, age, and so on, once again positing sexuality as a unifies and unifying factor (Nagoshi 2014: 24). Here in the case of Teddy and her trans group, it allows little room for differences of one’s embodied and self-constructed self. Teddy finds her/himself entrenched in the social constructivist ideology of queer

theory wherein the central self is mapped onto the individual by the gender performance and society's acceptance of this performance and the individual is not allowed to question one's personal identity.

Teddy is in a predicament as she is termed abnormal by the members of her/his discussion group, *Trans Pride* that consists of gender-variant youth from the age of 14 years to 22 years and who identify themselves as either transgender man or transgender woman. S/he honestly confesses that despite taking hormones and going through voice lessons and electrolysis, s/he neither looks like a woman in appearance nor feels like one. S/he might have only changed her/his body into that of a woman but s/he is unable to see in the mirror the woman s/he wanted to see or to finally see 'myself' (289). S/he does not share an embodied identity of a woman that s/he thinks s/he should have post transition (the question of embodied identity has been largely overlooked by feminists and queer theorists as source of sexual and gender identity).

Teddy's inability to understand her/his embodied self can be contextualized in the failures of various movements, even the postmodernist movement to clarify the concept of embodiment. Various researchers have given differing interpretations of the concept of embodiment. While some researchers contend that trans "embodied subjectivity" should be looked at as an ongoing process of *becoming* male or female, others argue that there is this deep need to move toward the feeling of embodiment versus before, where there was an initial absence and subsequent striving for the feeling of embodiment and a need to feel whole. Yet some researchers opine that for some trans people, actual change in physical body followed by embodiment may help them to understand their true self while others state that greater emphasis must be placed not on central self but on experience.

Moreover, "...the very notion of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) community is problematic because every member of the groups represented by those letters has had experiences that might not be shared or experienced similarly by the others based on their complex and multiple identities" (Alexander et al. 2018:190). This aspect of intersectionality is seen in the case of Teddy and the gender-variant group that s/he belongs to. Where all the members of this group profess their definite sexual and gender identity, viz. whether they identify as a transgender man or transgender woman and the male/female pronoun that they prefer, Teddy finds it difficult to categorize her/himself as a transwoman despite having taken hormones and all other therapies required for

the transition. Teddy says that even if s/he prefers female pronouns, it is only for the sake of providing convenience to others when they need to address her/him and not because s/he truly considers her/himself as a trans-woman.

A lack of surety regarding her/his own identity as a trans-woman not just confuses Teddy but also results in self-admonition wherein s/he constructs her/his identity as one who is “sick” and doesn’t know what s/he wants. Teddy has a tough time interacting with her/his gender-variant friends who just cannot relate to her/his inner conflicts that ensue between what s/he ought to feel and become as a gender-variant person and what s/he actually feels s/he is. A sort of intersectionality confronts Teddy wherein s/he is pulled in different directions by her/his self-constructed identity and by her/his socially defined sexual and gender identity. Feminist scholars Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa Rey have defined intersectionality as “an integrative perspective that emphasizes the intersection of several attributes, for example, gender, race, class, and nation” (Alexander 2018: 189). But in case of Teddy, it is about the intersection of various types of one’s identities that have been recognized by transgender/trans-identity theories. The framework of transgender/trans-identity theories “explicitly considers the intersections of multiple oppressed social identities not only in terms of socially defined, enforced, and performed roles, but also in terms of intersections of embodied, self-constructed, and narrative aspects of identity” (Nagoshi 2014: 178).

As Teddy goes through this inner conflict, s/he narrates her/his own conception of her/his “self”, body and gender to Dean, one of the members of her/his gender-variant group wherein s/he recognizes and invokes her/his embodied identity as one who was never meant to blend in the socially-defined gender categories and who least cared about societal opinions of her/his sexual and gender identity. Though Teddy is seen as abnormal or an aberration by all her/his gender-variant friends for not being able to truly feel like a trans-woman even after taking hormones, not only that s/he does not see in the mirror a woman of her/his conception but also as if s/he is a freak, wearing a mask that hides her/his true self who is not behaving or experiencing according to the usual standards of transhood. S/he explains that right from the very beginning, s/he has never tried to *be* anything. Even in the past, s/he had never ever cared to blend in the society’s constructed notions of identity. But though other members of her/his group, Trans-Pride, are not able to relate to her/his lived experience, Teddy continues to emphasize her/his own individuality seizing the moment not as of oppression but as an

opportunity. Michael Mascuch has rightly observed that to feel, to think, and to speak as an individual is possible only at a certain time in a certain place where the norms and practices governing discursive interaction are structured to privilege individualistic speakers with a firm grasp of their particular “I” (Mascuch 1997: 16). No matter how much Teddy’s sense of self-determination is hedged in by the members of her/his group, Teddy does not succumb and firmly resists homogenizing the individual queer-experience. “Identity is not just about one’s own self-identification, but is also relative to the larger social structure and the power differentials associated with belonging to a certain group. These intersections generate both oppression and opportunity” (Nagoshi 2014: 183).

Teddy not just understands but utilizes too the dynamic interactions among her/his embodied self as well as her/his lived experience and among the members of her/his trans-group as a source of empowerment that, in turn, enables her/him to construct her/his own unique identity that is not defined by people. All of the people’s conceptions about her/him of being a fetishist and not a real trans woman and to be one who masturbates in high heels have nothing to do with who essentially “I am” (she is). Teddy’s pure essence remains untouched by externalities of any kind and instead she chooses to exercise her/his agential power and assert her/his true self of having never tried too hard to be anything (292). One is reminded here of Judith Butler’s conviction that human beings are dependent on the social norms for determining their own sense of gender. However, the self can take possession of itself only when it dispossesses sociality (Nagoshi 2014: 84). During the course of this personal narrative of her/his lived experiences as Teddy frees her/himself of the clutches of societal norms, s/he finds her/his own transgendered voice and subjectivity. The intersectional perspective that is characterized by a conflict inside Teddy between her/his embodied self, the self-constructed self and the socially constructed self leads her/him to recognize, affirm and arrive at her/his own unique “transgender” identity that s/he puts thus: “I just am” (292). Teddy exemplifies “transgender theory (that) suggests that the lived experiences of individuals, including their negotiations of multiple intersectional identities may empower without confining us (them) to any particular identity category.”

Where such stigmatizing assumptions about transgenderism prevail that transgender people were deeply disordered, sexual offenders or social outcasts, Captain Macho, originally Charles Waughner of the story, *Masks of a Superhero* comes across as a socially

sensitive and active trans-person who was not just satisfied with a mundane newspaper job in Salt City. Though Charles is constantly tormented within by an overwhelming desire to be a woman, s/he was equally concerned about the crime and discrimination in the city and harboured a sincere desire to stand up for those who were too weak to protect themselves. Right from the beginning of her/his youthful days, Charles exhibits traits of a collectivist who sees himself not in isolation but as a part of the society and city s/he lives in. Charles' social behaviour is marked by a deep sense of duty and commitment that s/he feels towards the people of her/his city. As a highly active and creative member of the society, Captain Macho — the name chosen by Charles Waughner in her/his role as the savior of the city — attempts to shape and reshape the social structure by effectively combining power and responsibility. In the capacity of a strong and confident man donning the costume of a superhero, Captain Macho would run in if a building was on fire, or fly through the eye of a storm to break a tornado up. "The more dangerous the event, the more likely he would risk his life" (205).

As far as Captain Macho is concerned, the import of being a *trans* is not limited to gender alone which is usually the case with various understandings of the term *trans*. In *Transgendering: Blurring the boundaries of Gender*, Wendy and Suzanne have explored diverse meanings of the prefix *trans* in the word *transgender* where each meaning relates the prefix *trans* to the concept and issues of gender in some way or the other. In the first meaning, *trans* is said to connote 'change' that implies transformation of one's body from male to female or *vice versa*. Thus, transgendered people are those who "change their bodies from those they were born with to those matching the genders they feel they are". Apart from this essentialist perspective of gender, Wendy and Suzanne give the second meaning of *trans* as "across" that is, a transgendered person is one who moves across genders (not leaving the realm of gender completely) without undergoing any surgical procedures. This meaning of 'across' "names some deviation from dichotomous gender expectations, in dress, behavior, bodily changes (other than genital), and choice of sex partner..." (McKenna and Kissler 2006: 5). Third meaning of *trans* thus: "a transgendering person is one who has gotten through gender – is beyond it, although probably never really over it, gender is refused. It ceases to exist as a cross-situational essential attribute for the person and for those with whom they interact" (McKenna 2006: 6).

When analysed in the context of the different meanings of *trans* by

Wendy and Suzanne, Captain Macho exemplifies the first meaning where transgender is equivalent to transsexual. Captain Macho who is tormented continually with the fact that “I (he) am (is) a woman... stuck in this body” (208) seeks the help of a therapist. On being assured by the therapist of the possibility of sexual transition from male to female by means of medical intervention, Captain Macho visits various doctors. The doctors discuss with Charles the risks and side effects of hormone treatment to feminize her/his body and begin the treatment. The hormones bring about a flurry of changes both in the body and psyche of Captain Macho. The new hormones cause her/him to worry more, a probable side-effect, and at the same time, lead to the growth of new breasts in her/him.

However, for Captain Macho who transitions to Annie gradually, changing her/his biological self is not the ultimate answer to finding a purpose to life or her/his “true” self. To the gradually shaping up Annie, transgending is a part of her identity, not the complete self. For Annie, the experience of being transgender problematizes not only the relationship of the self to the body but also the self to others. “It problematizes issues of identity boundaries, stability and coherence” (McKenna, 2006: 8). During the period of transition, Annie experiences psychological and emotional turmoil owing to hormonal changes. Simultaneously, she is traumatized with the memories when s/he as Captain Macho had acted as the savior of the city protecting the people from crime and discrimination. S/he is asked by her/his foster son, Donovan to give up the role of Captain Macho and to stop risking the life for the city and instead to put taking care of her/himself on the forefront. The interaction with Donovan further spurs uncertainty and confusion in Annie but in place of getting discouraged or throwing herself into inertia, s/he motivates herself to restructure the situation on her/his own.

As such, Captain Macho (now Annie) acts as an agent of her/his sexual/gender identity and in the process, s/he experiences the dual, contradictory and inherently split character which is a striking feature of the human condition (Sztompka 1994: 28). Annie finds her/himself torn between puzzling and opposite emotions and questions regarding her/his personal identity and her/his social roles and responsibilities that can be put across in terms of two basic oppositions, viz. autonomy and constraint, and persistence and change (Sztompka, 1994: 28–29). On the one hand, if Annie feels free and capable of changing her/his own future by transforming into a woman, then on the other hand, s/he also feels enchained by the society’s expectations to protect it. If Annie experiences joy

and satisfaction at the gradual transformation into a woman's body then s/he is also beset with guilt and shame to let her/his desire to become a woman and then to take care of her/himself during the course of transition take precedence over her/his duty and responsibility as the savior of the city. Sztompka, in the essay *Evolving Focus on Human Agency in Contemporary Social Theory*, has aptly pointed out, "Corporeality imposes strict limitations upon the capabilities of movement and perception of the human agent" (Sztompka, 1994: 39). As such, after six months of transition, Annie witnesses alternating and ambivalent notions of personal identity as the maker as well as the prisoner of her/his new life: "Now, after six months, s/he loved the woman in the mirror. S/he loved to look at her/himself and see a woman looking back. Some days, s/he would see Captain Macho in the mirror, blaming her/him for all of society's problems" (203).

There is the question of essential identity of her/himself that is at stake for Annie which causes her/him to vacillate between the opposition of persistence and change, stability and movement, repetition and change that is grounded in ontological dualities of the human world (Sztompka 1994: 29): "Would she live out the rest of her life as a saleswoman (the job taken up by Annie)? ... Didn't the city *need* its hero – more importantly, did that hero *have* to be her? Why had she even *started* saving people in the first place?" (203). In such moments of personal crisis, Annie is haunted with the choice of prioritizing her/his identity as a woman over that of a saviour or hero or *vice versa* or in other words, s/he experiences the opposition of continuity and transformation. Should s/he continue her/his earlier role as the superhero or protector of the city or should s/he change by way of her/his transition to a woman not just in body but in spirit too by loving, admiring and embracing and almost getting lost in that new self as a woman?

Even though Captain Macho had begun to realize her/his dream to become a woman, s/he is not at ease and his (now Annie) contemplation that "Why had she even *started* saving people in the first place?" indicates that her/his initial or basic idea of her/his identity was not limited solely to having a woman's body. After transitioning to Annie, Captain Macho continues to miss her/his personal identity as the savior of the city and is pricked continuously by the nagging feelings of power and responsibility. Captain Macho's dissatisfaction with her/his own self as well as a deep sense of incompleteness truly elucidates: "Transmen and FTMs (as well as the transwomen and MTFs who also see the surgical imperative as a

problem) realize that reconstructing their bodies is not what makes them a whole person. For them, all things carry equal value: body, identity (spiritual, as well as personal and social), and sexuality. That is the reconstruction – reassociation and reconnection with the body – whereby a transperson becomes a whole person” (Cromwell 2006: 519).

There follows internal conflict within Annie that is relatable to the struggle between the individualist and the collectivist sides of her/his personality. The challenge before Annie is not merely her/his desire to resume her/his work as a hero but also to simultaneously retain her/his newly acquired female persona as “returning to a male persona felt inauthentic” to her/him; to bring about a reconciliation between her individual identity as a woman and group identity as the superhero of the city’; to integrate the personal need of looking after her/his gradually transforming body of a female and the social need of safeguarding the city and its people from every calamity or misfortune. Annie finds a resolution to this conflict by refashioning her/his old costume that s/he (Captain Macho) would wear while performing her/his role of saviour of the city. Her/his act of sewing and tailoring the old costume to fit her/his transformed body of a female is symbolically the creation of her/his true ‘self’ – the self that is not to be conceived as just an object of nature and a product of social relations but more significantly, as one’s own maker, as one’s own telos. By dint of her/his immense creative potential, Annie cuts the new costume low enough to show off the cleavage while the bottoms hugged her/his curves and the short skirt clung to her/his body like a second skin. “The purple and white fabric made her look soft but the tight fit of it highlighted her new form as well as her strength” (210) conveys the creative agency of Annie by which s/he unites individualistic and collectivist traits and inclinations of her personality. The new costume reflects the fact that Captain Macho while undergoing transformation into a woman or after and establishing his individual identity could never forget her/his duty and commitment towards the welfare of the society and separate her/himself from the wider social fabric. S/he does not see an individual (her/himself) and the society as opposed entities. Rather, he reinforces the fact that individuals and social wholes are one unified, mutually integrated, interpenetrated, undividable field that possesses efficacy only in their fusion (Sztompka 1994: 276).

Annie’s final act of wearing her/his new costume and a newly bought pair of thigh-high purple boots with a slight heel once again as s/he ventures out on her/his mission to patrol the city is her/

his final stamp of her/his agential potentiality that is capable of constant renewal, enrichment and even self-transcendence. Annie aptly epitomizes: “We cannot define the boundary of an individual self by throwing a kind of sheath about his skin. A human mind is not like that. It is not limited to the boundaries of the body....The dimensions of his mind are spread along all avenues of his perception and social awareness” (Sztompka 1994: 272).

Hence, it can well be concluded that the two trans-protagonists, Teddy and Captain Macho, exhibit immense capacity to embark on processes of autonomous self-realization while being located in a dialectic relationship with social structures and embedded in social relations (Goddard 2000: 27). Teddy and Captain Macho exemplify that the ultimate motor of change for trans-individuals is their agential power and creativeness that can, to a large extent enable them to modify, transform and construct their sexual and gender identity and their subjective life-worlds. The struggles with the society and their own inner conflict that they undergo in the process of not just navigating their true self but also expanding the scope of trans-identity goes on to prove that “...agency is finally embodied in individual human beings. It is no longer the vague tendency of the system, nor the undefined drive of change-oriented collectivities, classes or movements, but the everyday conduct of common people, often quite far from any reformist intentions that are found to shape and reshape human societies” (Sztompka 1994: 39).

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