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# Marking Gender Continuums: Life of Transmen

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**ABSTRACT**
Gender is never a choice, rather a natural selection. Man can be homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, heterosexual, and asexual. This varied facet of gender entails different approaches and common propositions, predominantly paving ways to unjust or prejudicial treatment.
Gender disparity affects almost every aspect of a woman's life. She and her voice are often tailed off by norms and taboos of the patriarchal society. This patriarchal oppression intensifies when it comes to transmen's identity formation. This paper centres on the stigmatization and discrimination faced by transmen- the highly marginalized gender minority and also examines the cluster of findings related to the difficulties faced by transmen in the process of their identity development. The paper also focuses on the significant roles Psychiatrists perform in the upbringing of transgender.
The objective of the study is to emphasize the concept of gender performativity and gender identity in the light of the struggles and challenges experienced by transmen. Further support to the study has been drawn from the visual narratives *Sam* (short film) and a documentary, *That's my boy*, which mirrors the issues of Gender identity
in close proximity.
**Keywords:** Gender Identity; Gender performativity; Transgender; Transmen

## Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir claims, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman".Gender is nonconforming and mind is a conscious self that oscillates as one evolve. Wavering of mind can induce psychological shifts which can affect a person's mentality and sexuality. Sometimes this leads to a situation where certain people cannot adapt to the societal stand on the gender they are assigned at birth, that is, the roles performed by each gender. Among the LGBTQ community, transman is a category of people that is most affected mainly because of the patriarchal supremacy.

Judith Butler, an American philosopher and gender theorist, through her work 'Gender trouble: Feminism and Subversion of identity', emphasized on 'gender performativity' and 'gender identity'. Butler's observation was that "gender is an idea which is not stable but an identity that is established through a 'stylized repetition of acts'". This particular work of Butler is considered as the founding text of queer theory, subsequently turning into a key text in the history of feminism and lesbian, gay and bisexual rights, as well in philosophy and literary criticism. According to her, the terms 'sex' and 'gender' connotes two different meanings. Sex is determined biologically at the time of birth which is solely a method operated scientifically. That doesn't mean to fit into a sex one is not fond of. Whereas gender is a gradual transformation that comes to effect as one performs his roles, and gets completely defined as one starts to realize one's own self. Forceful acceptance of gender and the identity crisis that follows, is an action against the free will of an individual. One must be free to choose his/her gender according to one's wish.

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**Background History of Transman**

Delving into the history lands us to the fact that it was Psychiatrist John F. Oliven who first coined the term 'transgender' in his work *Sexual Hygiene and Pathology* (1965). Later, during 1970's this term was made popular by the American transgender activist, Virginia Charles Prince. In 1974, the first ever 'Transvestite and Transexual Conference' was organised by the medical professionals, medical workers and activists, at the University of Leeds. This marked a clear division between transvestite, transexual and transgender. Civil rights law for the protection of transgender people was formulated in the year 1975. During 1980's artist Bruce Laker coined the term 'Gender Transient'. This term which was distinct from transexual was used as an alternative for the term transgender. The line between transgender and transexual began to dissolve as a result of LGBTQ community, holding on to 'trans' as an umbrella term that would cover a wide range of identities like, gender fluid, non-binary, transgender, agender, transexual, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, drag queen, androgenous, and intersex.

**Representation of Transmen in Visual Narratives**

*Sam,* a 2013 short film, written and directed by Sal Bardo, focuses on the struggles faced by a trans boy in the journey of recognising his real self. Sam assigned as a female by birth walks to his home with bruises all over his face, symbolizing a sort of harassment or bullying. The portrayal of his true self is perceived as he changes to a girlish outfit. But as he takes off his frock in front of the mirror, the joy of seeing his true self is evident in his eyes. The reflection he sees of himself in the mirror is what he desires to become. Being a child, its not the physical development that made him realise his true identity, rather the mental changes he underwent. The helplessness he experienced whilst lost in the woods echoes the inner conflicts he is combating with. As he falls into the dream, he is confronted by his other self, wearing a feminine attire. Triggering his subconscious mind was the surreptitious truth he has been trying to hid in his conscious self all this while. He was forced to choose between who he is and who the society expects him to be. And ultimately, he choses to be a trans boy.

*That's my boy,* a bio-documentary, shows the female to male (F2M/FTM) transition of Sonia Niranjan to Sonu Niranjan. Based in Trivandrum, Sonu belong to a poor family, raised by a single mother. He always questioned his identity as a girl. During childhood days he resented wearing the frocks his mother bought him, rather he insisted on wearing the kind of cloths boys wore. He was a part of national women's cricket team, studied in a Girl's High School and also completed his graduation from Government College for women, Trivandrum. All this time he hated his body so much that he decided to change himself to the body he loves to fit into. For gender transformation he had to undergo three different stages, including counselling, hormone therapy and surgery. Like every conventional family it was really hard for his immediate family members to accept this transformation. The only two choices that was left with him was either to live in the way he is now or to undergo a sex change. If he is to choose the former, it may lead him to depression, which could even result in him killing himself and if he is to choose the latter, it will bring him self-satisfaction, but the society will find it hard to accept. He decided to keep his happiness first.

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He was so excited seeing his gradual transformation. Staying in Kerala was not an option as he had to be the victim of some of the ill mouthed people. So, he decided to shift to Bangalore and that's where he chose to transform. It was around his 30's he witnessed the first traces of moustache on his face. Some very crucial support he received was from his psychiatrist, a social activist Guru Kiran, State Transgender Habba and social forum programme 'Sangama'. 'Sangama' which worked for the betterment of sexual minorities also offered him a job as an office assistant.

Sonu says his major achievement in life is 'to live as oneself.' He asks everyone to stop fearing trans people instead to have a talk with them and understand them before assuming things. He also asks every trans people to be true to oneself.

**Discussion**

Transphobic violence has been instilled in the minds of people from a younger age, resulting in the discrimination against transgenders. This in turn has led to a hike in the cases reported every other year on the heinous activities against these individuals. The epitome of all this lies in the gender identity crisis, which remain closely connected to the theory of Gender Performativity and Gender Identity, proposed by the gender theorist Judith Butler. This paper intended to give significance to transmen as they are a community we rarely hear. This is because of the restriction imposed upon the females who are under the strong control of their family members.

The bio-documentary *That's my boy* presents a kind of encouragement for the transmen community. Gender performativity, a term first used by Judith Butler, conveys to the world that every individual has the freedom to choose their gender and this gender emerges from their behavior or the way in which they respond to the societal activities. Here Sonu always hated to wear the girl's dresses or to grow his hair. It was really hard for him to succumb to the roles a female has to perform in the society. He wanted to wear pants and shirts. He wanted to have short hair. He wanted to be a man. That's what he understood in the course of time as he performed the roles of Sonia.

A major point that Sonu asserts is about transphobia. Sonu recollects a memory during his 8$^{th}$ standard while he was travelling in a train with his team members and coach. That day his Coach presented transgenders as trouble makers who could kidnap or kill them. So as transgenders approached them, they acted as if they were sleeping. Such preconceived notion is the main problem that people still see them with an innate fear in mind. This the same reason for their exclusion from the society which also result in people not willing to come out as who they are. Societal approach to trans people as a different form of people has to be changed. They have to be accepted as normal human beings for which transphobic violence must end by putting an end to the spread of misinformation about them. This can be done through awareness programs about transgender people and telling younger generation to see them as one of their kind.

Psychiatrists performs a significant role in the upbringing of transgenders. In Sonu's case his psychiatrist thought outside the social stigma because of which Sonu could gather himself and his emotions together. Sonu had the right support from his doctor who was full of encouragement from the start. But there had been various other instances where the demeanor of a psychiatrist makes things even more complicated for transmen.

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Adam Harry, the first Indian transman to get a pilot license, went through a lot of tortures and harassment in the course of his journey to become a transman. As his parents noticed his changes, they took him to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist did not bother to understand the helpless situation he was in. Instead of making his parents aware about the the gender identity crisis their son was going through, the doctor behaved in the way his parents wanted. He was treated falsely by injecting an excess amount of estrogen. All his parents and psychiatrist did was to look for a way to go against his will. They never bothered to care about his mental health. Adam says that there are many psychiatrists out there who are not aware of transgenders. Psychiatrist are doctors who are supposed to understand the feelings of an individuals and motivate them accordingly. But in Adam's case instead of consoling him the psychiatrist injected female hormones, gave out false information to his parents and even talked them into a surgery. Even the psychiatrist did not bother to accept him as who he is.

Individuals reach out to Psychiatrist once they begin to experience mental health problems. They consult them with an utmost trust that, psychiatrists will lend their hand and lead them to peace. So, it's the duty of doctors to understand and get to know about people's mind so that they would not fall into a state of depression. In the case of Adam Harry, the Psychiatrist had the capability to make his parents understand about their child's condition but he did not. A Psychiatrist has the ability to hold a family from tearing apart. And so, a psychiatrist must be well aware of cases like transmen and has to treat their patients accordingly. They must become their pillar of support.

Adam's story put forth the painful path a transmen encounters, more than any other group belonging to the LGBTQ. As he entered the adolescent period, his parents restricted him from wearing pants and shirts. He was even barred from speaking to boys or playing with them. His suffocated self, produced a sense of realization. The physical changes his body was undergoing could not be accepted by his inner self. He endured a lot of bullying from school which made him to continue as a girl till $10^{th}$ standard. The physical changes a girl undergoes is much higher than boys. Compared to boys the level of freedom a girl receives is very less. This makes it even more hard for those who wanted to come out as transmen.

Though the scenario is changing female to male transition is still very rare. Afterall, it's an individual's likings that matters. If Sonu was not ready to go against the conventional society he would have fallen into the gender identity crisis. It was his confidence for his body that changed his life.

In the other short film *Sam*, it's evident from his clandestine acts the fear of getting exposed. There are two instances in this short film which reveals this fear of Sam, one being Sam changing to a girl wear just before entering his house and the second one in the scene where he tries to hide his toys. We can make out the change of emotions as he removes his cloths in front of the mirror. The satisfactory gaze he gives itself says it all. From his behavioral patterns we come to know his inclination towards the other gender. This is where the theoretical approach of Judith Butler, on Gender Performativity, is put into practice. According to Butler, though gender occur with language, much importance is given to bodily actions. But here, since Sam is all alone in this long run, he is confronted by the gender identity crisis. The dream which sets him free initially triggered Sam so much that he fell into a gender dysphoria and that's the point where he resolves to choose his identity, that is to exist as a trans boy.

## Conclusion

All genders are equal. The battles for identity are a prevailing and persistent concept across the world. Many reformations have been seen across the world including the arise of organizations like 'Sangama', transgender pageant competitions like 'Dwaya'. Eventually, Judith Butler's work 'Gender Trouble' began to be a revolutionary proposal where the thought of gender identity is instilled upon the human minds. And men considering the scenario has begun to raise voice on the issue.

Despite this, the lack of awareness still holds back people from expressing their true self. There is no law that demands men to be men or woman to be woman and no one's right to choose the life of their wish is denied. Yet, acceptance of the transmen category is small-scale. To pull through this, they must be offered a higher level of guidance and encouragement.

Man can be homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, heterosexual, and asexual. Gender is not a choice, it's the selection of nature. Lack of acceptance by themselves or the others stands as a hindrance in exploring and awakening their natural gender. It's the peak moment that we bring the idea of most known greeting in the Zulu tribe in to our daily life-'Sawubona': "I see you. you are important and I value you". It's a vision to bring the other person in sight and accepting them just the way they are with all their vices, virtues and differences.

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