

Representation of Transgender Identity in Yu Sakurazawa's Born in The Third Gender

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Abstract: Trans literary texts are often considered to be gender narratives that revolve around the question of gender identity of the trans subject. Trans literature not only subverts the essentialist notions of gender but also serve as a means of carving a niche for the gender-atypical identities. However, the trans subjects before constructing a distinct identity of their own undergo trials and tribulations thrown upon them by the heteronormative society. The present paper examines the representation of trans identity in the trans fiction written by Japanese writer, Yu Sakurazawa. The selected text is an autobiography styled fiction which tells a story of an intersexed transwoman Roopini who is born to a prostitute. As a consequence of being born with intersexed genitals, she lives under constant humiliation and hardship, but finally finds happiness as a successful classical dancer, wife of a foreigner and mother of an adopted baby. The paper discusses the lived experiences of the protagonist who faces numerous challenges in order to assimilate with her real sense of identity.

Keywords: Trans Fiction, Transgender, Intersex, Gender identity

'Trans', a post-90s term, is a short appellation used for 'transgender and gender non-conforming people' (Erickson-Schroth 3). It is used as an all-inclusive term under the 'trans umbrella' which encompasses a variety of gender identities that exist outside of the dominant gender binary. These include but are not restricted to, transgender, bigender, agender, transsexual, intersex, genderqueer, trans masculine, trans feminine, and non-binary identities (Namaste, 2000; Stryker and Whittle, 2006). Transgender or Trans literature is a collective

term used to designate the literary creation that focuses, has been written by or represents people of diverse gender identities. Jacob Anderson-Minshall, an American author defines “trans literature as written cultural production by, about, for, or resonating with gender nonconforming or non-cisgender people.” Transgender literature is often considered to be a gender narrative that revolves around the question of gender identity of the trans subject. This literature not only subverts the essentialist notions of gender but also serve as a means of carving a niche for the gender-atypical identities. Gender identity thus forms the core of trans literature, a literary landscape that centres around the dominant aspect of the lives of trans individuals: the transition narrative, or the sentence: I am a male/female trapped inside a female’s/male’s body.

Gender identity forms an essential part of any individual’s sense of self. The moment a baby is delivered, “It’s a girl/boy!” exclamation is made. This is the one of the primary aspects identified by society. The life of the child is built around this primary truth. Social relationships, socialisation patterns, societal expectations, appearance, positions and perceptions are facilitated by gender; the social expression of sexual differences. But what happens when one is neither a male nor female? This gender anxiety which revolves around the bodies tends to create a norm to categorise them and all the bodies which do not fit into either of the boxes of gender are either modified to fit into the gender moulds created by the society or deemed as abnormal. Susan Stryker defines gender identity in *Transgender History* as:

Each person has a subjective sense of fit with a particular gender category; this is one’s gender identity. For most people, there is a sense of congruence between the category one has been assigned to and trained in, and what one considers oneself to be. Transgender people demonstrate that this is not always the case—that is possible to form a sense of oneself as not like other members of the gender one has been assigned

to, or to think of one as properly belonging to another gender category. Thus, gender identity is only one of many possible social identities, with each identity representing one's psychological relationship to a particular social category in which one has membership (27).

Anne Fausto-Sterling in “Two Sexes Are Not Enough” notes:

European and American culture is deeply devoted to the idea that there are only two sexes. Even our language refuses other possibilities [...]. But if the state and legal system has an interest in maintaining only two sexes, our collective biological bodies do not. While male and female stand on the extreme ends of a biological continuum, there are many other bodies [...] that evidently mix together anatomical components conventionally attributed to both males and females. [...] If nature really offers us more than two sexes, then it follows that our current notions of masculinity and femininity are cultural conceits.

Thus, gender, as we understand it, is a conceit, a social construct or a cultural trope which refers to the meanings attributed to female and male social categories in various societies.

The present paper examines the representation of transgender identity in the trans fiction written by Japanese writer Yu Sakurazawa. The novel under discussion *Born in the Third Gender: A Truth About Roopini* (2015) (Alternative title: *Born Intersexed*) is an autobiography styled fictional novel which revolves around the story of an intersexed transwoman Roopini. The novel traces the life journey of Roopini from being raised as a boy named Raja with intersex genitals to the creation of the real identity of Roopini, a woman both in body and soul. The present text taken under study is a part of a fictional series called *Hijra, The Third Gender* which is written by Japanese writer, Yulia Yu Sakurazawa. She is a full-time writer who has been publishing novels since the year 1998. She basically belongs to

Fukushima, lived in New Jersey for 8 years, and is currently living in Chiba, Japan. She has written 85 novels in Japanese and more than 90 novellas in English. Her chief interest lies in writing fiction that has a transgender subject at the centre of the story.

The fictional novel is a story is written in a form of a story within story wherein the protagonist who, in the present, is an established Bharatanatyam dance teacher records her life story in a diary and is narrating her life story from those diary entries. Roopini begins by talking about her mother Selvi, a maidservant, who becomes pregnant when she was eighteen. Upon enquired by her family about who the father is, Selvi refuses to disclose the name. As a result, she is thrown out of the house for bringing ignominy on the family. “Dazed and confused, she aimlessly wandered the streets of Chennai and the next thing she was cognizant of was being grasped by muscular hairy arms and being pulled into a moving car” (), abducted by some ruffians Selvi is then sold to a brothel and is forced to work as a prostitute in a village called Sivakasi. Raja (renamed as Roopini later) is Selvi’s baby born and bred in the brothel of Sivakasi.

The moment Roopini was born everyone around her started exclaiming in disgust. She recalls,

The midwife who attended on her inspected my genitals carefully and was thrown in a state of perplexity. She ushered other women in the brothel to show what was clearly an unusual, aberrant phenomenon—an atypical male organ with some features of the female. I was born a hermaphrodite. (16)

Even, the brothel keeper, Olirpirai coarsely interjected “Ayyo Shiva, the child is a Pottai!” (17) (a derogatory term for hijra or transgender). . . “You have given birth to a bloody hijra” (19). This incident confirms that the body of this intersexed child disrupts the normalised

image of what human body is thought to typically look like and calls into question the society's strongly held beliefs around heteronormativity. Her intersexed body is seen as an abnormality rather than difference. She even became a source of shame and dishonour to her mother Selvi as “giving birth to an intersexed child was more than she could handle—that way I had clearly failed her and I still blame myself sometimes for causing her unhappiness.” (20)

Since Roopini the protagonist was anatomically closer to a boy, so she was brought up as one. Hence totally disregarding the difference that existed. This reflects how heteronormative society is so driven by the gender anxiety that it tries to categorize the bodies according to the available boxes of gender categorisation. As Katrina Karkazis in *Fixing Sex: Intersex, Medical Authority, and Lived Experience* (2008) notes that “bodies are not only biological phenomena but also complex social creations onto which meanings have been variously composed and imposed according to time and space”. Hence, this meaning-making drives the people around Roopini to categorize her into one of the gender categories available.

An understanding of identity development is significant in distinguishing individual's behaviour and how a person functions on an individual level and as a part of a larger social group. Social construction works in fashioning a sense of self and identity, but in doing so, produces something opposite, the 'other'. The exploration of identity and othering are particularly relevant to the case of trans individuals who have dual selves- a culturally assigned self and the inner self. However, gender is something that is an inner phenomenological “felt” experience in the lives of trans individuals and incongruent with the external identity that society or culture has imposed upon them. In the novel, Roopini as a boy always felt different from the rest of the boys. She found it hard to identify with them.

Instead, she insisted on playing with dolls and wearing frocks like any girl of her age and also had a natural inclination for dancing. However, this was seen as a deviation and the protagonist was often chided for her wayward behaviour: “You are a boy, they would emphasize, you ought to dress and behave like one” (22). Besides that, her childhood male playmates “would heckle and taunt” her and call her names like “Pottai, khoja, hijra, aravani, etc” (22). Torn between the imposed gender of a male and her inner sense of identity of a female, Roopini would often get disturbing thoughts. “I wasn’t a boy. Nor a girl like I felt on the inside. I was different –abnormal—a nature’s freak.” (23) exposing how our culture creates the pressure of being “culturally intelligible” (a term employed by Judith Butler) and those who don’t find themselves subscribing to that often feel traumatised and dejected. This conflict between Roopini’s inner sense of self and the culturally assigned self calls into question the seemingly intelligible binary categories of gender. In the same connection, Eleanor MacDonald in the paper titled “Critical Identities: Rethinking Feminism Through Transgender Politics” avers “Transgender identity is about identity experienced as problematic; the experience of being transgender problematizes the relationship of the self to the body and the self to others. In doing so, it also problematizes issues of identity boundaries, stability and coherence” (3).

The novel also serves as an instrument in exposing the hypocrisy of the heteronormative society. The protagonist often faced bullying and sexual harassment at the hands of the so-called men of culture because of her gender atypicality. As Manobi Bandhopadhyay in her trans autobiography *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) has pointed out that how a transgender’s gender difference gives a kind of sanction to the heteropatriarchal males to deem them as sexual preys, and to violate their bodies as if they don’t have any honour. Similarly, Roopini experienced an episode of sexual harassment at the hands of a lecherous autorickshaw driver, Murugan who was one of her mother’s favourite paramours.

She reminisces, “Soon his podgy fingers were caressing my face. Before I could take another breath, they had moved down my neck, the upper body, and fondling forbidden areas. My mind was in a tizzy—what was I supposed to do? I sat there without breathing.” (31-32). Shockingly Roopini’s mother lashes on her on the account of the misunderstanding that Roopini was trying to seduce her mother’s lover instead, she was shaken to the very core as she “was no stranger to receiving a tongue-lashing from my [her] mother, but this was the first time she’d called me [her] a *pottai* or intersexed person... ‘*I know what the likes of you are always up to*’”(33). These words had a traumatic impact on Roopini’s mind as her own mother branded her as filthy and malicious. Instead of being angry at the molester, Selvi blamed her own child.

Dismayed by her mother’s reaction to this episode, Roopini sets out on a new journey that leads her way to join a *hijra jamaat*. Upon joining the *jamaat* she undergoes the ritual of Nirvanum. Every true hijra is needed to undergo a surgical emasculation process called Nirvaan meaning rebirth. This procedure consists of the removal of the male organs; penis and testes. The entire practice happens in a highly ritualistic three-staged process namely the preparation, the operation and the recovery, each of them comprising of a complex set of rituals. Post the ceremony, she attained a new identity as a trans woman. She says “Having gone through the nirvanum successfully, my identity was now that of a bona fide verified hijra’s. I had to have a new name to begin life anew, just like a newly married Indian bride. My friend Prabha chose the name ‘Roopini’ for me. It literally means One bestowed with beauty” (45). Henceforth, this marks the new phase in Roopini’s life. Like other hijras, she was “apparently permeated with supernatural powers—the sanction to bless with fertility or prosperity; conversely curse with infertility or death”. She also “went along with the other hijras to dance at marriages and child-births, and got a *badhai*, a tip for my [her] efforts” (46).

Her quest for identity made her way to be a woman through the operation but it was not the end of her struggle for identity. She felt trapped in the community. She has become a hijra in order to assimilate with her inner women but the hijra norms didn't allow her to be like a true independent woman. Her guru, Porkodi grew utter jealous of her popularity among the *jamaat* so much so that she plotted against the protagonist's murder at the hands of some hired *supari* killers. For this reason, Roopini ran away to Chennai to live life on her own terms so as to fulfil her desires and ambitions. She wanted to be like other women who sought love and companionship instead of being enslaved in sex work. Being a god-gifted dancer, Roopini started dancing at the roadside at Marina beach: "I gained a firm foothold over myself and started dancing on any and every square meter of land I could find. Soon I was all over Chennai; its streets, footpaths, traffic signals et al, shimmying away for all I was worth" (57). She always had a flair for dancing but the thought of making it her means of living never crossed her mind.

It was during one of her gigs, she met her father I. Sadasivan, a renowned Bharatnatyam dancer who took her under his tutelage and the rosy dream of becoming a dancer and living a life of a 'culturally intelligible' woman got materialised. She recounts "Under his inspiring tutelage, I absorbed knowledge like a ready sponge. Before I knew it, I was reading major English Books and dailies fluently and could comprehend complex concepts and issues with ease.... There were no limits to anything including what a human being could achieve" (65). Roopini became a skilled Bharatanatyam dancer at the age of twenty-three. "Finally, the blight's broken, I said to myself. The recognition I'd earned had clearly made people overlook my gender." (68). Thus, Roopini reclaims her identity from being identified as a Pottai to a respectable Bharatanatyam dancer and later, an LGBT activist who deserved to be loved and respected through sheer hard work and zeal. Roopini reflects "I, who heckled, mocked, tyrannized, marginalized and alienated by the rest of the human

species, am the object of reverence today” (8). Later on, she meets her future husband Paolo during one of her visits to rehabilitation centres for transgenders. She undergoes sex reassignment surgery in order to become a woman in body also.

Thus, the present novel tries to unfold a third gender trajectory as the protagonist is born intersexed who seeks her position in the world denying western society's heteronormative hegemony. The novel is therefore inherently political, in that it is defined by the author's identity and experiences of an intersexed individual who calls into question and deconstructs the rigid gender binary imposed by the dominant model in society, since it disregards the needs of alternative identities, and contributes to their ostracism in society.

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