

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 5. Issue.4. 2018 (Oct-Dec)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK? – STRUGGLE AT PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL
LEVELS IN LESLIE FEINBERG'S *DRAG KING DREAMS*

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ABSTRACT

Transgender issues found in Literatures in English of West are not yet fully explored. The transgender literature of the West is quite creative and interesting like any other general creative writings. This article neatly captures the issues faced by transgender people. Like any other social issues such as untouchability, corruptions, exploitations and male domination, transgender issues also have a high voltage of social relevance in the postmodern context. As human being, one must think that the fellow human being is a 'being' and should not be troubled or discriminated for any indifference. But transgender face rejection and discrimination in the public and private life. Many writers have portrayed the issues that the trans people face in their lives in the name of social, political, religious, familial, gender or psychological differences. In fact, from the *Mahabharatha* to the postmodern literatures, the issues of transgender are discussed in literatures. The transgender was treated with respect in olden days, but the modern society looks at them with different connotation.

Key Terms: Transgender, trans people, transgender literature, rejection, discrimination, GID, gender queer, FTM and MTF

Man is a laughing animal in the animal kingdom. The special intelligent makes man differ from other animals. Man with this special power does many constructive as well as destructive works. As the worldly knowledge and his comfort in life increase day by day, man forgets to show his love towards his fellowmen. He becomes pervert paying his love on his pets by denying to show his love for fellowmen who suffer from some sort of discriminations. This paved way from many sociological problems and related human rights movements for liberating men from discriminations. One such issue that has been addressing in the last three decades is 'transgender issue'. Man must understand that transgender also human beings, born in this earth as anyone else. It is necessary to analyze the origin and development of transgender movements to have a clear understanding of their mental turmoil and their position in the world scenario.

Transgender issues found in Literatures in English of West are not yet fully explored. Like any other social issues such as untouchability, corruptions, exploitations and male domination, transgender issues also has a high voltage of social relevance in the postmodern context. This research study on **Can the Subaltern Speak? – Struggle at Physical and Psychological Levels in Leslie Feinberg's *Drag King Dreams*** has a main focus on issues of transgender people from social, political, religious, and psychological levels. This paper has also

faithfully studied the struggle of transgender people at physical and psychological levels in order to create awareness among the academic personnel about the position of transgender people in this world.

Many writers have portrayed the social issues of transgender in their writings. Right from *Mahabharatha* to the postmodern literatures, the issues of transgender are discussed. The transgender was treated with respect in olden days, but the modern society looks at them with a different connotation. The modern society thinks that they are embodiment of woes and pains and no human concern is needed for them to uplift their life-conditions. This attitude of the society will bring doom not only to the transgender people but also to the entire society. Though the issue needs alarming action to be taken, the society is highly reluctant in this matter to pay a heed in order to solve the various issues that the transgender people are facing. However in the recent decades the governments of various nations look into this matter with a human concern and take action to improve the life conditions of transgender people. However, it is felt that research project in this area is meager. So this study has a scope of opening a new arena in the study of literatures. The study of social realism in literature can include the study of transgender issues too. This will create an appropriate awareness among the students and the people which is the need of the hour.

The transgender literature of the West is quite creative and interesting like any other general creative writings. This article neatly captures the issues faced by transgender people which include the study of the legal matters of various countries related to transgender people of their nations, their social, religious, cultural beliefs and the recent development in acknowledgement of the transgender people as part of human community. The countries namely, Brazil, Canada, United States of America and India have recognized the transgender people and have brought them under the legal system in order to provide them equal opportunity in education and employment etc. However, the legal system of these countries, few decades back did not readily give the transgender people the rights for decent living. The struggle of the transgender people of these countries has brought them the rights that they have demanded for. Still in many countries the transgender people are struggling to get their rights. It is the responsibility of every individual to realize that transgender people are also people who must be treated like other human beings.

Man's existence in this competitive world is highly a challenging one. This phenomenon is termed "the survival of the fittest". Even though one can accept this phenomenon, he should realize that man is on the highest pedestal in the hierarchy of animal kingdom. He should realize that he alone can think, laugh, speak and feel. So this natural phenomenon cannot be applicable to man for his survival as he possess the sixth sense. But man continues to be dominated by animalistic instincts which are evident in his attitude of suppressing of his fellow beings in the name of caste, class, race, and gender order. In the kingdom of God or in the domain of universe no one is cursed to experience their state of oppression.

Being transgender is 'natural' like other birth order and not a voluntary one. In fact, it is not a curse. When scientifically studied, one can understand that it is due to the different order of chromosomes that takes place in the formation of a zygote for which the transgender should not be blamed. However the transgender people experience a lot of mental agonies in their day to day survival. They are treated like animals and are not included in the world of man. They are put under neither in male category nor in female category. They are denied of their basic rights such as formal education and employment. They are forced to lead an abominable life. Moreover, they are treated differently even by their parents and family members, forgetting the fact that the transgender people also possess feelings like any other man or woman. The bitterest and the worst form of ill-treatment on transgender is evident when they are termed as "IT". Now, the government has realized the density of this issue and has come out with many relief packages which include reservation of seats for transgender people in educational and employment domains. There are many organizations and NGOs raising the question, are they animal to be called "IT"? Awareness such this makes man to think and rethink.

The process of thinking and rethinking makes man to be very much creative in bringing out this bitter social realism into literature. As literatures in English deal with the social realistic themes such as untouchability, male-domination, and want of freedom, never fails to deal with the social realistic theme such as transgender issues. The pains and pangs experienced by the transgender people are common all over the

world. Their trauma has been contextualized through literatures. There are number of novels, poetry, dramas, and short stories that project the theme of oppression experienced by the transgender. In this milieu, it is necessary to study the pathetic conditions of the transgender people in the West and the East. The core result would be the one which says that the treatment meted on them causes a lot of mental agony in them. This kind of *angst* can best be studied through the works of writers like Leslie Feinberg, Jeffrey Eugenidas, Charlie Anders, Daphne Scholinski, Hanif Kureishi, Gi, Hyeong-do, Leslie Forbes, William Dalrymple and etc. The study of transgender literature has a great social relevance in the postmodern context. The postmodern literatures enhance the people to understand the social issues such as untouchability, feminism and other social issues. Now, it is right time to include the study of transgender people found in literature in the curriculum of Indian universities. This new area has to be studied and explored. This new vista of literature has a new frontier and future through which social realism can be created. Hence this research study gets justified as it proposes to create timely social awareness on the much denied and hitherto forgotten area namely the transgender issues.

The prefix 'trans' means 'beyond', 'across' or 'over'. However, 'transgender does not simply connote a gender that crosses boundaries. It is a broad term, particularly in the lesbian and gay community, to describe individuals whose identity or experience does not fit within the expectations of their birth sex. People with gender identity disorder (GID), transsexuals, cross-dressers, and the so-called genderqueer, are considered to be transgender. Performers such as drag queens and drag kings often are labeled as such, but most do not want to live as the opposite sex and most do not believe they've been 'born in the wrong body.' In fact, for the same reason, identifying as homosexual and have same-sex attractions is distinct from being transgender. Furthermore, a person who is born with both male and female biological characteristics is considered to be intersex.

Leslie Feinberg born on September 1, 1949, in Kansas City, Missouri is a transgender activist and author known for authoring *Stone Butch Blues* in 1993. Feinberg's 1993 first novel *Stone Butch Blues*, won the Lambda Literary Award and the 1994 American Library Association Gay & Lesbian Book Award. The work is not an autobiography. Feinberg has also authored two non-fiction books, *Transliberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* and *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Rupaul*. His second novel, *Drag King Dreams* (2006) and his *Rainbow Solidarity in Defense of Cuba*, a compilation of 25 journalistic articles are also worth mentioning. Feinberg is a member of the Workers World Party and a managing editor of *Workers World* newspaper. Feinberg's writings on LGBT history, "Lavender & Red," frequently appear in the *Workers World* newspaper. Feinberg has also been involved in Camp Trans and has been awarded an honorary doctorate by Starr King School for the Ministry for transgender and social justice work.

It is important to understand the role of U.S. government in giving recognition to the transgender people in order ensure their rights for living. However, even in United States the transgender people are struggling for their basic rights for living and that becomes the theme of the novel, *Drag King Dreams* by Leslie Feinberg. In the Unites States, the history and structures of antiblack racism stand as an intellectual touchstone for understanding how and why recognition is refused. This necessarily leads to the question, what is the connective tissue between transphobia and racism? A sufficient answer to the question is more subtle than simply saying that both are forms of unjust discrimination. In her groundbreaking work, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Patricia Williams writes of meeting S, a white transsexual woman and law student. Intending to transition, S, "wanted to talk to me before anyone else at the school because I was black and might be more understanding. I had never thought about transsexuality at all and found myself lost for words" (123). William's ambivalent silence should not be read as a signal of unconscious transphobia but as the sign of an important experimental difference between the racism experienced by nontrans persons of color and the transphobia faced by white transgender persons.

Judith Halberstam has argued that trans men and masculine women are more likely to be imagined as targets than as threats. Halberstam notes that "the code that dominate within the women's bathroom are primarily gender codes; in the men's room, they are sexual codes" (24). In turn, gender policing in bathrooms insects with the asymmetries that structure the cultural ideals of the divide between public and private. Because of these intersections, "The perils for passing FTMs in the men's room are very different from the

perils of passing MTFs in the women's room. "On one hand, the FTM in the men's room is likely to be less scrutinized because men are not quite as vigilant about intruders for obvious reasons. On the other hand, if caught, the FTM may face some version of gender panic from the man who discovers him, and it is quite reasonable to expect and fear violence in the wake of such a discovery. The MTF, by open to punishment if caught" (62). Masculine and androgynous women in the women's room receive intensified scrutiny and face the demand by law enforcement to confirm their sex in ways that feminine men or androgynous persons in the men's room typically do not. These are, of course, interpretively useful generalizations, not absolutes. One can refine the analysis of gender policing further by exploring the ways that persons are scrutinized also for skin color, class, age, body art, and other features. In fact, Leslie Feinberg has touched almost all these issues in his novel, *Drag King Dreams*.

Leslie Feinberg is highly expressive in his novel, *Drag King Dreams* while telling the story of the woe and struggle of the transgender people. He faithfully relates the struggle of the transgender people by keeping the American society as a backdrop which treats them for their gender disparity. Feminism and feminist movements try to get equality of status for women in the society. Like this the transgender movement also fights for their rights. The narrator or the author's persona of *Drag King Dreams* who himself is a transgender explains the woeful experiences of transgender people. Max Robinowitz, the narrator of the novel, *Drag King Dreams* makes a journey from one state namely 'unaffected in his mind about the society's ill treatment of transgender people' to another state namely 'actively involving himself in the struggle for the rights of transgender people'. This finally makes him declare the world that he has just laid a stepping stone for the transgender people to assert their rights for living as human beings. His mental trauma as a transgender man is explained with minute details in this book. Commenting the book E. Lynn Harris states:

After more than a decade the transgender blockbuster novel *Stone Butch Blues* continues to electrify readers everywhere. Now *Drag King Dreams* takes us on unforgettable new gender journey. Max Robinowitz, a bouncer in an East village drag club, has become a loner. Sleepwalking through post-9/11 Manhattan. But as life closes in, a circle of co-workers and friends help awaken Max's old activist spirit. In this wonderful novel Leslie Feinberg shows us where we live today. (Book cover)

The 9/11 incidents has created a lot of social, political, and religious turmoil in the American continent. The Americans being more fervor in keeping their national identity and nationalism are not ready to forget the incident. They have started giving troubles to the Muslim countries. In fact, the 9/11 incident also gave way for Transgender Movement in U.S. and the spirit of the movement spreads into other countries of the world like forest fire. The Transgender Movement ultimately results in demanding gender identity for the transgender people and equality of status for them. Even though the transgender people do not keep the parity raised out of racial, class, or national differences, the government policies tries to impose the 'norms' of racial, class or national differences among the transgender people. This kind of government's tactics is heavily criticized by the author, Leslie Feinberg through the character, Thor in this novel.

The struggle to keep their gender identity, the transgender people are organizing meetings at many places. They stick notices and carry placards to show their agitation towards the government. They shout slogans for their freedom and identity. As a result Thor is arrested by the policemen and is bruised heavily by them. Knowing the arrest of Thor, other transgender people namely Ruby, Jasmine, Deacon and Max from the organization shout slogans at the policemen. They shout, "stop the war and free Thor" (205). Max is little uninterested at first in joining the movement. Still he has been going with his peers and shouting slogans at the government and the police who try to control their spirit of freedom. The police force at last releases Thor from the custody. On seeing the bruised body and face of Thor, Max who is very much attached to Thor, now decides to get into the Transgender Movement very actively. Max with his other transgender peers namely Ruby, Thor, Jasmine and Deacon battle for the rights of their living. One of the articles appeared in Psychology Today which correlates psychology and human behavior states:

A person who identifies with the opposite sex and is uncomfortable with his or her assigned sex suffers from gender identity disorder (GID) or transsexualism. Along with the desire to live as a person of the opposite sex, the person may have mannerisms and may dress as the other gender. This is different from homosexuality, in which the person is almost always comfortable with his or her own sex or gender. People with GID are preoccupied with their gender distress and also may suffer from emotional problems. Children may have symptoms of depression or anxiety, adolescents are at risk of depression and suicide, and adults may show signs of depression and anxiety. (34)

As the author explaining the social struggle of the transgender people, he never misses a chance to bring out the details of sufferings that the transgender people experience in their daily activities. The using of toilet by the transgender people is a great problem for them in the public places as they belong to either male or female. There is no separate toilet for them. The Transgender Movement puts forth the right of getting separate toilet for them in the public places as one of their agendas. In fact, in some western countries, a gender-neutral toilet also called 'unisex toilet' or 'gender-free toilet', is a public toilet that is available for the use of either male or female or transgender.

Sex-separated public toilets are a source of difficulty for some people. For example, people with children of the opposite sex must choose between bringing the child into a toilet not designated for the child's gender, and entering a toilet not designated for one's own. Men caring for babies often find that only women's washroom has been fitted with a change table. People with disabilities who need assistance to use the restroom have an additional problem if their helper is the opposite sex. Some public places provide individual washrooms that are not gender-specified, specifically in order to respond to the concerns of gender-variant people; but this remains very rare and often controversial. Various courts have ruled on whether transgender people have the right to use the washroom of their gender of identification. It is worth to state that the Transgender Movements in U.S. have achieved their rights after a long struggle and have got separate toilets for them:

Transgender advocacy groups in the United States have taken up the cause of unisex toilets as a solution to eliminate harassment and other inconveniences for trans people in using conventional toilets. In 2005 there were 5 American cities including San Francisco and New York, with regulations for public restroom access based on person's perceived gender identity rather than their birth sex. (*Transgender Rights* 5)

Leslie Feinberg brings out the problem of using the public toilets by the transgender people in this novel with satirical touch. When Max is asked to quit the menial job that he is doing at the bar, he explains that he cannot quit the job as the bar has no restriction for using the toilet though he is found with other gender identity. Even though the issue is a serious one, the author tells this with a humorous touch. Max says:

...But where's a bathroom?

Thor frowns. "They're both out in the hall. Other businesses on the floor use them, too. The keys are hanging up over there."

"Which should I use?"

He shrugs, "Either one. The men's is multiple occupancy; the stalls have doors. If you use the women's room, just be ready for an argument from the Democratic Club down the hall. There's no reason it should matter to them – it's single occupancy with a door that locks. It's just gender-phobia." He adds bitterly, "They don't seem to care so much when it's the super or one of the men from the other companies who uses the single occupancy. They only get up in arms if it's the gender queers." (177)

The Transgender Movement has its own momentum when many have joined into the movement. As Max Robinowitz is severe in fighting for the rights of the transgender people, he is threatened by the anti-

transgender association. He is stubborn not to get back his foot and as the result his house is broken and looted. He finds a place temporarily in Heshie's house with the help of Mohammad. The Movement becomes stronger day by day as many transgender people vigorously participate in the demonstrations and strikes. All the transgender people assembled at a common place talk about the murder of Vickie who was very active in the Movement. This time the transgender people take an oath that they may not let anyone of them to be murdered like Vickie. However, many are arrested and put into jail. The appointed lawyer Miriam tries to get all of them out of jail. But Max could not get the bail as he has lost his identity card when his house was looted. Hence it is hard from him to get out of the jail. However, with the help of the lawyer he could manage to get out of the jail. Now, the four friends decide to organize a drag show in order to raise fund for running the movement which is rigorously fighting against the government to get the legal rights for the transgender people. This time they are arrested and are not given bail.

Leslie Feinberg who is a transgender, is a political organizer, editor, and journalist. His novels, *Stone Butch Blues* and *Drag King Dreams* bring out the conditions of transgender people all over the world, especially of America. The minute details of the life of transgender people and their sufferings are penned by the author from his own experiences. While *Stone Butch Blues* deals with the identity crisis of the transgender people, *Drag King Dreams* clearly finds solution for the various problems that the transgender people are encountering. The author through the characters, namely Max Robinowitz, Ruby, Jasmine, Thor, Vickie, and Deacon announces the world that it is only through war against the social, political and religious system which discriminates the transgender people for their third gender identity, the transgender people can get their rights for living a decent life by getting education and employment.

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