



Rethinking Normal: Analyzing the Cultural Constructed-ness of Gender in the films *Its a Boy Girl Thing* and *Ma Vie en Rose (My Life in Pink)*

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Abstract

In the proposed research paper entitled Rethinking Normal: Analyzing the Cultural Constructed-ness of Gender in the films *Its a Boy Girl Thing* and *Ma Vie en Rose (My Life in Pink)*, an attempt is made to understand how the American theorist Judith Butler's theories on the fluid nature of gender is exemplified in the movies. In a haste to deem almost everything in terms of binaries like black and white the middling spot of grey is often ignored. *Ma Vie en Rose* tells the story of Ludovic, a child who is biologically identified by everyone as a boy but consistently demands to be recognized as a girl. The film depicts the child's stifled, rudimentary existence and ineffectual attempts to gain the gender identity he/she desires. It also shows the family's struggle to accept this transgressive gender expression. The other movie, *Its a Boy Girl Thing* is a romantic comedy where one fine morning, a teenage boy and a girl, who are neighbors as well as childhood acquaintances, wake up in each other's bodies due to the working of a magic spell. Though humorously, the movie aptly portrays how almost impossible is it to live with a male mind in a female body and vice versa. The culturally constructed gender notions require both of them to acquire the traits pertaining to the gender identified through their 'new' bodies. What both the movies unfold in different ways are the way in which our society prefers to conceive notions of gender only in terms of binaries. Those who are neither this nor that are never given space or acceptance. The very notion of gender requires one to act only in ways that befits either of the two genders- male or female. A child like Ludovic or a girlish Woody or a boyish Nell will have to face reluctance instead of acceptance because of which they are forced to change and somehow fit themselves into the established heterosexual framework. Hence this paper makes a reading of these movies along the lines of Judith Butler's theory of 'performativity of gender'. According to the theorist gender is a cultural construct rather than a biological fact and hence the futility of the various attempts to contain and control the varied 'other' genders.

Keywords: *gender identity, performativity, Judith Butler, constructedness, gender queer*

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Introduction

Today, like many other fields of study, one which invites a lot of serious contemplation, attracts an array of problematic answers and opinions, and at the same time one which absconds an exhaustive cognizance and firm grip over its intricate nuances is gender studies. The relevance and reality of the concept of gender is manifold and multifarious than the two or three blank square boxes left to be filled in application forms. Gender is in fact a harmonious blending of nature and culture. But today we tend to be oblivious of nature and focus only on culture.

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Every culture will have its own social practices, rituals, beliefs, customs, norms, regulations etc. Even delicate concepts like gender is allowed to work only by relenting to these cultural constraints. But, there are innumerable gender variances that are being stifled under this mutually exclusive concepts of binary categorizations- masculine and feminine- dexterously created and crafted out by culture. Trans genders, transsexuals, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, cross-dressers etc. are a few among them and though our society fails to give them proper recognition and space, they are not any more an insignificant minority. Gender is in fact a psychological identification and ratification, and genitals have very little to do with gender though popular notions maintain otherwise. Dating back to the time of Shikhandi, who stood before the great Kurukshetra war and brought the

invincible Bhishma to death, these people are very much part of our cultural history. We and they together form our culture and they are also the inheritors of this earth, just like us.

Saussure taught us that the functioning of language and the process of synthesis of meaning takes place through the workings of binaries or binary oppositions (pairs of related terms whose meanings are mutually exclusive). It must be because of a general human tendency to comprehend anything and everything in terms of binaries that even the notion of gender was brought under the binary classification of male and female. Today however there are widespread discussions and ruminations carried out around the globe to overcome the limitations of this binary categorizations and an attempt to incorporate deviant gender expressions. But at the same time majority of our cultures and societies tend to consciously turn away from addressing these issues which gradually get relegated to the margins and in due course of time gets obliterated. Though concepts like gender, sex, desire etc. escapes a concrete definition by being caught up in a labyrinthine expanse of psychological, emotional and intellectual multitudes, we still refuse to accommodate too many divergences. The only acceptable desire is heterosexual desire and by giving the nickname of heteronormativity, we attempt to define and defend this ideal. And hence for being man or woman, we ourselves frame sets of rules and conventions to be strictly adhered to, in order to qualify ourselves as man or woman. So it is for us to decide whether such kind of a qualification and proof is really necessary for a human being to be whatever gendered he/she is.

The American philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler's famous book *Gender Trouble: Feminisms and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) came out as a reaction to the problematic treatment of concepts like sexuality and gender. She formulated many important arguments in this book that later became one of the most fulfilling works in the field. She maintained in the book that gender is not to be equated with sex and that, like sex, gender need not necessarily remain as two. Gender being a psychological counterpart of the biological sex can have multiple varieties of expressions and that it does not necessarily mirror sex. Hence sex and gender does not share a mimetic relationship. She also refutes the popular belief that a person ought to have an innate or intrinsic gender identity in accordance with one's assigned sex. For her gender is not innate, but constructed culturally by the repeated performance of a set of conventional norms pertaining to each of the two socially accepted gender roles. With this conception she elaborates the theory of performativity of gender. She also adds that gender is not a stable or fixed entity and that is why terms like 'man' and 'manliness' can signify a female body as much as a male body and terms like 'woman' and 'feminine' can signify a male body as much as a female body.

It's a Boy Girl Thing

It's a Boy Girl Thing is a 2006 romantic comedy film directed by Nick Hurran and written by Geoff Deane,

starring Kevin Zegers and Samaire Armstrong and set in the United States. The plot revolves around the life of two teenagers Woody Deane and Nell Bedworth who are neighbors as well as former childhood friends. But when the story opens, they are high school classmates with contrasting character traits and temperaments who despise each other. Nell, who happens to be a pedagogue and nerd seems to have taken after her mother's strict, serious and classy ways. But Woody, like his uneducated parents is reckless and imprudent in his manners. While Nell's ultimate desire is to get into The University of Yale, all what Woody wishes is to get an admission to some university so that he will not have to work in his father's spatula store. But life reserved for them a very terrible turn when one day while arguing and saying how much they both hated each other they happened to be in front of the statue of some ancient Aztec god of sorcery and shape shifting-Tezcatlipoca. It turns out that the statue had real magical powers and that it has cast a spell upon Nell and Woody as a result of which their bodies get swapped and they wake up in each other's body the next morning.

The real confusion and chaos of the story is let loose only after this swapping of their bodies. Both are befuddled by this bizarre situation and blame each other for this mishap. However, they decide to pretend like normal and hope that may be things will change back after twenty-four hours. However, things don't, and both of them are doomed to live the life of the other. But matters get worse for them because they just not have to live somebody else's life but somebody else's gender too! The story then unfolds the strenuous ways through which the two protagonists go when they try to behave like the other person/gender. Though portrayed in a humorous way the story aptly exemplifies how almost impossible is it to behave like a man while having a woman's mind inside, and vice versa. This is where the real question of gender identity and socially conceived gender traits and stereotypes are summoned into the forefront.

It is obvious that Nell's and Woody's mothers are the first ones to notice and suspect the strange behavioral changes in them. But the greatest dilemma confronted by Nell and Woody was not just to fit into each other's family and lifestyle but to fit into each other's gender roles. Incidents like Nell's (in Woody's body) hesitation and confusion to use gent's urinal, Woody's (in Nell's body) efforts to put on a bra are humorous portrayals of their predicament. But there are also incidents that call for serious contemplation and analysis like the scene in which Woody (in Nell's body) swears upon the school bus driver and passengers. An old man walking on the road over hears this and scolds him: "That's no way for a young lady to talk!" (Hurran, 00:19:49). Implied in his comment is the society's expected behavior pertaining to the feminine gender. Similarly, Mr. Zabornak's embarrassment on watching Nell (in Woody's body) weeping on the corridor shows how even a deviant gender behavior is unwelcome in our social surroundings. Also when Nell (in Woody's body) dresses up like a gentleman and combs hair tidily, Woody

(in Nell's body) as well as most others think that he became 'dorky' looking and Woody even complains that "I look like a male version of you!" (00:31:50). Here again the implication is clear that though anatomically a man, deep inside lies a feminine gender identity which cannot be contained and camouflaged fully and for long. Likewise Woody's coach's angry reprehension: "You play like a damn woman!" (00:28:58) on Nell's (in Woody's body) poor performance in the football practice and Professor Zabornak's bewilderment on seeing Nell (in Woody's body) crying uncontrollably are instances that show that when a man is seen crying or found weak and sensitive, he is readily tagged as effeminate and unmanly. Again, these are examples of how our culture and society have constructed certain gender pertaining roles to both the male and female genders and how any deviance from these expected, pre-determined gender traits are unwelcome and crucified.

In fact, in the case of Nell and Woody, after the swapping of their bodies they actually live like transgenders. Nell has the anatomical features of a man but inwardly she identifies herself as a woman. The very next day after the body swapping, she cries and says: "I don't want to be a boy, Ok?" (00:21:08). This is the central issue faced by all gender deviant people around the world. Like how Nell and Woody desire to get back to their own bodies every gender variant person on this planet want to possess a body that matches with his/her internal gender identity.

My Life in Pink

Ma Vie en Rose (My Life in Pink) is a 1997 Belgian drama film directed by Alain Berliner. It tells the story of Ludovic Fabre, a seven years old boy\girl who struggles to find his self-identity. Though he\she possess the physical attributes of a boy he constantly demands to be identified as a girl. The story revolves around his/her family's erratic responses and struggles to confront and deal with his/her transgendered identity and the social alienation and estrangement that they must endure because of Ludovic's transgressive gender identity.

Without any delay the central concern that the film intends to address is unfolded in the very beginning itself. The Fabre family arranges a house warming party soon after they occupy their new home and Ludovic shows up dressed in a pink princess dress and adorning himself\herself with lipstick and earrings. The embarrassed parents Hanna and Pierre try to humorize the situation and ask Ludovic to immediately change his\her clothes. Hanna, while helping Ludo to wipe off his lipstick says "You're seven Ludo! Too old to dress up as a girl...even if you think it's funny" (Berliner, 00:07:45). Ludo says that he\she did so because- "I wanted to be pretty" (00:07:52) and he\she is warned never again to repeat it. But Ludovic's granny Elizabeth immediately finds something unusual in his\her behavior and asks if he\she does that frequently. But then again Hanna polishes up the awkwardness by saying that "Only now and then. It's natural. Until the age of seven we search for our

identity. I read it in Marie-Claire." (00:08:12). Soon Granny also corrects Ludovic saying that he\she must be looking "handsome" not pretty. Later in the school when the teacher asks the kids to bring their favourite toys Ludovic takes along the dolls of a popular cartoon couple Pam and Ben. Other kids tease Ludovic saying that "He plays with dollies" (00:11:43). Another crucial comment that Ludovic makes is when Granny ask him\her about Jerome. Ludo says without hesitation that "We are going to get married when I am not a boy" (00:13:54). It is quite evident that every now and then Ludovic, with all the innocence of his\her age, is trying to convey to others that he is a girl. There is another conversation between Granny and Ludovic which further reveals what is deep inside the child's inner self. Granny says "But we all have to face reality. When I want to do things that would make me look ridiculous, I have a trick. Shall I tell you? Watch. I shut my eyes...You shut your eyes. And the world is how I want it." (00:17:14). And then Ludovic imagines himself\herself being dressed in a white frock, in his\her favourite Pam's imaginary world. This scene further asserts Ludovic's transgender identity; though he\she physically appears like a boy, he identifies himself as a girl. That is the reason why he\she wants to keep long hair and doesn't want to look like his\her brothers and father. Hanna questions Ludo about wanting to marry Jerome and says that "Boys don't marry other boys" (00:19:20). When Ludo replies that he\she knows that boys don't marry other boys, Hanna is relieved and thinks that he\she said so only because of childish innocence. But in fact, Ludo thinks that eventually he\she is going to become a girl and then he\she can marry Jerome. But all these are not taken seriously by Ludovic's family who thinks that all what Ludo does are either because he\she is trying to be funny or else, he\she is still searching for an identity.

However, matters get worse when Ludovic wears Jerome's dead sister's dress and playfully enacts his\her marriage with Jerome. Hanna scolds him\her for doing so but Ludo stubbornly says that he\she is going to marry Jerome when he\she becomes a girl. Hanna tries to correct him\her again and asserts "You are a boy and you'll be a boy all your life" (00:24:27). But Jerome is Pierre's boss Albert's son and hence their relation is badly affected because of this incident. Even so Hanna and Pierre realize that there is something more than just an identity crisis with Ludo and they decide to take him\her to a psychologist. From here on begins Ludo's public humiliation and estrangement which has its start with Jerome asking teacher's permission to change seat away from Ludovic's on the grounds that otherwise he will go to hell. Though until now Ludo's family was making desperate attempts to avoid the inevitable, to accept the fact that Ludo is transgendered, after this incident both Ludo's family and the neighborhood clearly realizes the truth behind Ludo's transgressive gender identity. When everybody else is either perplexed or confused to deal with the reality, Granny alone thinks that "...we should let him live out his fantasy" (00:36:33). But Hanna and Pierre frantically kept on trying to change Ludo by training

him\her to be like other boys. Still Ludo also persistently tried to find proofs for being a girl. He showed Jerome that he urinates like a girl and claims that he is a “girl boy” (00:43:56). Ludo overhears Hanna telling Zoe that she has now become a real little lady, referring to her menarche and soon after Ludo fantasizes about having his\her periods.

Another major incident was Ludovic appearing on stage as Snow White instead of his classmate Sophie. That incident was a disastrous public mortification for the Fabres and it even trembled the peace and happiness of the family as well. Again, in a conversation with Granny Ludo reveals that his parents want him\her to change and otherwise he\she will only bring them trouble. Yet Ludo does not want to change but he\she still wants them to love him\her. Granny asks him\her to obey his\her parents and assures that they know what is best for him\her. Soon after Ludovic is expelled from school on the grounds that “his tastes and behavior are too eccentric for this school” (00:52:51). In his\her new school he\she is beaten up by other boys for acting like girls. The torture and torment that he\she faces both from the society and his\her family must have shattered Ludovic so much that he\she hides inside the freezer to commit suicide. Hanna finds Ludovic at the right time and the family reconciles. Ludovic asks permission to wear a skirt for Sophie’s party and under Granny’s compulsion Hanna and Pierre agree. They all hope that if Ludovic is left to live out his\her fantasy, maybe he/she will change for the good. Meanwhile Pierre loses his job and Hanna angrily replies to Ludovic that it is all because of him\her. Ludovic thereafter ceases to talk with the therapist and she advises Ludovic that he\she will have to wait until he\she grows up to tell others what they fail to understand about him\her. The society completely alienates them by writing in front of their house “BENT BOYS OUT” upon seeing which Pierre breaks into tears. That very moment Ludovic rushes to them saying that his\her tummy aches because he\she is having periods. Hanna loses all control and cuts off Ludovic’s hair and tells him\her that “bent” means somebody like him\her, a boy who desires to marry other boys. The relation between Hanna and Ludovic turns very bitter after this and Ludovic decides to stay with Granny.

Later Pierre finds a job in a faraway place and the family decides to move. The night before they shift Ludovic dreams of his\her marriage, he\she is the bride, and everyone is happy with what he\she is. However, in their new place Ludovic tries his\her best to change until one day he\she swaps dress with the girl Christine during her birthday party. Hanna becomes terribly upset and beats Ludovic frantically. But it turns out that Christine is a transgender boy and it was he\she who forced Ludovic to swap costumes. In the end Hanna sees a billboard of Pam, the popular cartoon character and realizes that she has been too much hard on Ludovic for a while and decides to change herself instead of trying to change him\her.

Conclusion

Reading both these stories in the light of

Butler’s theories exemplifies the triviality of the line that demarcates the male and female genders. As per Butler’s views gender is not a biological fact but a psychological truth. One does not become a man or a woman, but the society makes them so. She says that gender is only a cultural construction which demands its subjects to act as per certain rules to belong to either of the two genders—male and female. But she adds that this very constructedness of gender is maintained through our repeated performing of these rules. Hence the performativity of gender. Like the professor and couch in *It’s a Boy Girl Thing*, the society just cannot accept any slight deviance in gender performances. While this movie addresses the issue in a humorous way, *Ma vie en Rose* portrays a different picture. It shows the torments faced by most of the gender deviant people around the world. They are not even accepted and understood by their own parents, let alone the society. *It’s a Boy Girl Thing* effectively caricatures the fluidic nature of gender showing how craftily the two gender roles are carried out and acted out by the protagonists. *Ma Vie en Rose* however picturizes the haphazard that every gender variant person faces in our society and how like Hanna in the end, we all must be willing to change our own mindset rather than changing them. Gender is not an essence, nor does it constitute a stable identity. Rather, gendered identities are tenuous and provisional, and can never be demonstrated once and for all; they exist, as Judith Butler emphasizes in her *Gender Trouble*, only so far as they are performed and re-performed.

The established binary grouping of gender has become an inherent part of our culture as well as our psyche. The fact of the two genders are presented before us in such a way that it seems ridiculous to question it. However philosophers and theorists like Butler choose to challenge the preexisting cultural convictions and faulty deliberations regarding the notion of gender. As per her theory of performativity of gender, the idea of gender is real only to the extent to which it is repeatedly performed. The age old expectations of women doing chores at home and taking care of children and men being the bread winner of the family are being torn apart through these subversive discourses. Sex being the biological foundation stone upon which gender acquires culturally conditioned meaning is also a conception that has undergone multiple levels of deconstructive exercises. So any attempt to contain the actuality of the concept of gender within the twin category of male and female is explicitly lacking and defective. The multitudinous varieties of gender identities and gender expressions has been present in our society from time immemorial and the most appropriate and fitting thing for us to do is to cultivate an open mind to assimilate the myriad varieties of gender identities and provide room for every human being in every spheres of life.

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