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Universal Womanhood: A Myth and a Monster

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ABSTRACT

The concept of a universal womanhood has long occupied a central position within feminist discourse, often functioning as a unifying framework to articulate collective struggles against patriarchy. However, this paper argues that such a universalized notion of womanhood is not only theoretically flawed but also materially exclusionary, particularly for trans women whose lived experiences fail to align with essentialist and homogenized definitions of femininity. Drawing upon Jennifer Finney Boylan's memoir *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (2013), this study critically examines how the myth of universal womanhood operates as a regulatory construct that polices gendered embodiment, expression, and legitimacy. Rather than fostering solidarity, this construct often reproduces hierarchies within feminism, marginalizing those who do not conform to culturally sanctioned norms of womanhood.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Mythology, Gender Roles, Social Construction of Identity, Monstrosity, Patriarchy, Female Agency

INTRODUCTION

What constitutes a 'woman'? While a simple definition of womanhood is— the state or condition of being a woman, it remains impossible to define what constitutes the word itself. Feminist philosopher Alison Stone calls out the "fictitious commonalities" (89) attributed to the category 'woman' in her paper titled "On the Genealogy of Women: A Defence of Anti Essentialism". The attempt to create the idea of a universal womanhood is harmful as it limits who a woman can be and codifies who a woman is supposed to be. Rather than creating a community, it creates boundaries and perpetuates sexism and systemic oppression.

This is especially true for trans women, whose experiences struggle to find acceptance and visibility in the mainstream understanding of womanhood. Jennifer Finney Boylan's memoir *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders*, is a compelling case study for understanding the complexities that arise due to a socially and culturally normalised idea of what it means to be a woman. This research paper aims to understand how trans women struggle for inclusion in the homogenised category of 'woman'. Using a feminist lens, this paper will accentuate Jennifer's unique experience as a trans woman in a socio-cultural matrix that fails to make space for her experience of womanhood.

In her memoir, Jennifer recalls the first time she was incorrectly gendered. While her mother ironed her father's clothes, she told Jennifer that she would grow up to wear shirts just as her father did. Analysing her mother's comment, Jennifer introspects, "I didn't understand what she was getting at. She never wore shirts like that. Why would I ever be wearing shirts like

my father's?" (27). This memory highlights how clothes become a symbol of manhood and womanhood. While her mother perceives her as a boy and visualises her 'son' dressing as 'his father', Jennifer associates her own dressing with the choices her mother made. As a result, the element of choice is eliminated as clothes are reduced to a symbol of gender; for Jennifer, the message was clear — shirts are for men and not for women. This memory created a fissure in Jennifer's perception of her gender identity, and as she observes, "Since then, the awareness that I was in the wrong body, living the wrong life, was never out of my conscious mind…" (27). This fissure in Jennifer's gender's identity is a direct result of the limited scope of what it means to be a woman within a universal womanhood. Clothing acts as a defining factor, even though it is extremely mutable based on culture and geography. Anti cross-dressing laws gained prominence in the United States by the second half of the nineteenth century and persisted into the twentieth century, as is evident in these lines:

Laws banning cross-dressing were ubiquitous in urban America by the middle of the twentieth century. Most were more explicit than New York's Section 887(7), like the law in Columbus, Ohio, which criminalized any person who "shall appear upon any public street or other public place. . .in a dress not belonging to his or her sex". (Redburn K. 681)

The criminalisation of people dressed in clothes associated with a gender different from what they were assigned at birth captures the extent to which clothing played a role in defining men and women.

Jennifer's early experience of having her self-expression confined by preexisting notions about what constitutes as appropriate dressing for men and women shapes her experience as a trans woman. Trans activist Alok-Vaid Menon wonderfully articulates the harm that is perpetuated through upholding such rigid ideas about how men and women are supposed to be dressed. They write:

People like me live in constant fear because society — including the fashion + beauty industries — holds up toxic + monolithic images of what a "man" + a "woman" are supposed to look like. It's not that we are failing to be real, it's that we are failing to be what these industries have helped design. ("Degendering Fashion is an Anti-Violence Imperative")

These powerful lines capture the way a unidimensional view on defining manhood and womanhood can erase independent experiences and perpetuate violence and harm toward those whose existence defies conventional ideas of being a man or a woman. Menon's observation about the fear a limiting ideology about women's bodies and how they should be dressed is reflected in Jennifer's introspective views:

I thought about the clear, inescapable fact that I was female in spirit and how, in order to be whole, I would have to give up on every dream I'd had, save one. I stayed in a motel one night…I opened my suitcase and put on my bra and some jeans and a blue knit top. I combed out my hair and looked in the mirror and saw a perfectly normal-looking young woman. This is so wrong? I asked myself in the mirror. This is the cause of all the trouble? (Boylan 73)

These lines express a deep-seated fear in Jennifer's thoughts regarding the expected social rejection she would have to face as a trans woman. As she tries on clothes of her choice, she

wonders what was so wrong about them; she fails to see why something as simple as wearing a particular piece of clothing could lead to such outrage. This one-dimensional view of womanhood heavily relies on universalising a homogenised image of women based on physical features, appearance, clothing, mannerisms, etcetera. Yet, the lived experience of many women does not comply with such a restricted view of womanhood. Feminist philosopher Alison Stone rightly comments:

The (false) universalisation of claims about women in effect casts particular forms of feminine experience as the norm and, typically, it is historically and culturally privileged forms of femininity that become normalised in this way. Essentialist theoretical moves thereby end up replicating between women the very patterns of oppression and exclusion that feminism should contest. (87)

These lines highlight the cyclical repetition of oppression, which is perpetuated by these pre-defined notions about what it means to be a woman. When Jennifer started Hormone Replacement Therapy, or HRT, her doctor explained to her, "even within one family, women are all shapes and sizes. So in the end, we don't really have any idea what kinds of results you're going to get" (Boylan 114). The doctor's comment brings the inherent differences within the category of 'women' to the forefront. As Jennifer tries hard to blend in with cis-women, she notices how she begins to conform to social perceptions of how women are expected to be.

Her experience of socially living as a woman required her to adopt certain gender norms and maintain certain gender stereotypes to be taken seriously as a woman. While her experience of being a woman was not dependent on any of these external factors, societal pressure to maintain a certain image that allows entry into a universal womanhood led her to alter her behaviour. She despised removing body hair, but she was now expected to do so; she found herself obsessing over her weight and felt the need to watch her diet and give in to diet culture; she took coaching lessons to sound more feminine. She noticed that while she used to always criticize women for speaking with a tone of doubt, her own social transition led to, "… that same inflection [sneaking into her] own voice, a fact that both amazed and infuriated [her]" (Boylan 17). On the one hand, these things highlight how femininity is produced culturally and enforced on women through gender norms; breaking away from which could be perceived as performing gender incorrectly and lead to alienation. On the other hand, it showcases the increased pressure on trans women to comply with these norms to be believable as 'women'.

Feminist philosopher- Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity wonderfully encapsulates the existing situation where repetition of certain body movements, clothes, etcetera create gender as we understand it in a cisheteronormative culture. Butler explains gender as:

…an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (179)

These lines highlight how identity is intermingled with the socially accepted ideas about what it is to be a man or a woman. These lines can be associated with the way Jennifer alters her existence to fit into the pre-defined conditions that govern what it is to be a woman.

A universal womanhood does not make space for diverse experiences, and Jennifer recognizes this conundrum as she observes how the need for social acceptance led her to adopt certain characteristics associated with women that she did not want for herself. She writes, "Partially, I think what I wanted was to belong. If being female—to others, at any rate—seemed to include self-doubt, insecurity, and anorexia, then some part of me felt, Okay, well, let's do all that, then" (Boylan 130). These lines from the selected text showcase the way a need for social acceptance alters individual experiences of womanhood to fit a pre-defined narrative created through a 'universal womanhood'.

Addressing the issues with such a universal womanhood which is based on unrealistic standards, feminist philosopher Alison Stone writes:

There is no unitary meaning of femininity on which all women agree: although all women may identify with femininity, their femininity invariably differs in content… instead of forming a unitary group, women are connected together in complex and variable ways, through historical chains of partially and multiply overlapping interpretations of femininity. (92-93)

Jennifer's increased fear from the moment she socially existed as a woman showcase the unavoidable consequences of the social dimension which shapes women's experiences. When she stepped out for the first time dressed as a woman, the reaction she got from people gave her much to think about how gendered embodiment impacts the way one is received in society. She noted, "It was unbelievably frightening. The first time I ever went outside wearing a skirt and a knit top, I thought I was going to perish from fear. The world felt raw and intimidating; the cold wind howled on my bare legs" (Boylan 65). The feeling of fear that is evident in these lines point to the excessive objectification and sexualization of women's bodies. However, even this objectification is not felt universally by all women, neither are all women objectified in the same way.

For Jennifer, her trans identity increased the chances of facing gender-based violence. A Human Rights Campaign Foundation report from 2023 analyzed the increasing hate crime targeting trans and queer people in the United States. The report declared that people of color, trans women, and trans women of color, made for the majority of victims targeted by fatal violence, with 62% of the victims being Black transgender women, 85% of the victims being people of color, and 83% of the victims being transgender women. These glaring statistics highlight the intersecting factors that decide who is at more risk of facing violence even within the category 'women'. Jennifer's experience of being a trans woman entailed extensive scrutiny from onlookers. Speaking of this increased surveillance, Jennifer writes:

Had I been born female, no one would remark upon these things—but since I was not, any masculine affect is considered a vestigial link to a previous life; conversely, any feminine affect that seems excessive can be hauled out as evidence that I…have arrived at middle age just in time to be fourteen years old. (Boylan 192)

These lines highlight the dark truth about the heightened policing that trans women face as society tries to align their unique experiences into the fictional category of a universal womanhood; despite the differences that exist across female bodies, it is trans women who experience the most threats of violence if they do not manage to pass as cis-women.

Riki Wilchins' views on this regressive outlook which limits women's bodies and experiences are expressed in these lines, "Girls must still grow up to be women, and women must still be feminine…Transsexuals must still be understood in terms of "real" men and women…We can have rights, but only by first agreeing to occupy the identities society demands of us" (104). These important lines touch the root cause of the problem with the idea of a universal womanhood. It was Jennifer's identity as a trans woman which isolated her experience of womanhood, even her best friend needed repeated assurance to believe her femininity as he commented, "That Jenny is the real you is something that I have to take on faith, because the evidence of my senses suggests the opposite" (Boylan 146). The normalisation of a universal womanhood is guilty for leaving out Jennifer's experience as a woman; her identity as a woman is not a topic for debate. The fact that her best friend was unable to see the problem in that was because his doubt was sanctioned by this universalised notion of womanhood which is based on exclusion rather than inclusion.

Culturally approved ideas about womanhood can be easily internalized. It is evident in the way Jennifer's best friend needs some external proof and repeated reassurance to believe her identity as a woman, even though there simply isn't any quantifiable way to prove one's gender as it is not something to be proved but to be experienced personally. However, there is a cultural and social dimension to gender, and to how womanhood is viewed and defined. Despite being an English lecturer who by the nature of the job must be well-versed with literary criticism based on theories that study essentialism and social constructivism, Jennifer finds herself internalizing many ideas associated with a universal womanhood. Due to her ability to critically analyze these matters, she makes a clear observation:

…the culture had its hooks in me, like it or not. In no time at all I'd internalized many of the things I'd spent years imploring my students to fight against. I worried that I was too fat. I apologized when someone else stepped on my foot, as if it were my fault. My sentences often ended with a question, as if I were unsure of myself. All of these changes transpired without any conscious thought, and if I became aware of them, I felt ashamed. (130)

These lines capture the way culture plays a major role in enforcing a universalized version of women, which erases diversity and forces people to shrink themselves to fit in the predefined notions regarding womanhood.

Highlighting how masculinity and femininity are products of nurture and not nature, Sally Haslanger, a feminist philosopher describes them as being "causally constructed" (95) through the mechanism of social learning. On a similar train of thought, Kate Millett argues gender differences to have "essentially cultural, rather than biological bases" (28), a view she attributes to differential treatment; Millett describes gender as "the sum total of the parents', the peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression" (31). These

important inputs by feminist philosophers clearly explain the role of culture in producing femininity in a way that creates a false sense of a universal womanhood. Jennifer's experience as a trans woman had to be omitted to fit this preexisting narrative, a reality she only recognized when it caused the erasure of her individual identity. Seeing how her gender identity puzzled her family and friends—who could not reconcile how the very person they knew and loved could remain the same if she was a trans woman—Jennifer introspects, "That I could be both unambiguously female and, at the same time, the person they had always known seemed impossible. Yet it was an impossibility that was largely true" (128). This interrogation of her gender identity and the pressure on her to be believable as a woman showcases the targeted exploitation of trans women as they are expected to earn their place in a genealogical womanhood that is aligned with a cisheteronormative culture. Jennifer's unique experience as a trans woman seldom finds a place in the idea of a universal womanhood that governs much of feminist activism. These lines emphasize the roots of the issue:

Trans was positioned as something antithetical or irrelevant to or at least outside of feminism, and the notion that trans people could be feminists, feminists could be trans allies or that there could even be something called transfeminism has been poorly considered. (Scott-Dixon 23)

However, it is of utmost importance to broaden the understanding of womanhood beyond superficial components of femininity and an essentialist view of gender more broadly.

Jennifer's journey through her memoir traces her path from a place where she, too, could not allow herself the possibility of claiming her identity as a woman, to being unapologetic about it. In the final section of the memoir, she reaches a place where she no longer seeks approval for her gender identity. She lives as her full self without limiting herself to a pre-defined notion of femininity and womanhood. She observes:

At long last, my sense of self seemed firm and fixed. No one else could take my womanhood away from me, and no one thing defined it…I would never call myself an invulnerable person; it was still all too easy to bring me to tears. But my identity was no longer a matter of debate. I had, to my own enduring joy and surprise, become something solid. (Boylan 242)

These lines touch upon the importance of broadening the understanding of womanhood to include the many experiences that deserve to belong.

The critical analysis of the selected memoir points to the fallacy of the idea of a universal womanhood, which causes more harm than providing a sense of community. As discussed through Jennifer's experiences as a trans woman, a universal womanhood is predicated upon forced, essentialist ideas about womanhood. It is a myth because it is not based on fact, and it is a monster because it devours the many individual experiences it erases due to a limited perception popularized by a universal womanhood. The targeted violence faced by women who defy the conventional ideas propagated by this universal womanhood is the very wrath of this monster. The internalized ideas about womanhood and femininity by everyone in a cisheteronormative culture lead to further marginalization of vulnerable populations within the category of women. Rebecca Walker firmly declares:

To be a feminist is to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fiber of my life. It is to search for personal clarity in the midst of systemic destruction, to join in sisterhood with women when often we are divided, to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them. (87)

These lines point to the relevance of a womanhood that feels like a sisterhood, which unites people fighting the same forms of systemic oppression, rather than enforcing boundaries where there need not be any.

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