



**‘PERFORMANCE DOES NOT CHANGE THE SEX’: A STUDY OF JUDITH HALBERSTAM’S NOTION OF FEMALE MASCULINITY IN THE LIGHT OF SCIENCE, SOCIETY AND LITERATURE**

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**Abstract**

Gender and sexuality are two dominant aspects in queer and feminist studies. The idea of feminine masculinity has been extensively discussed in Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* (1998)<sup>1</sup> to bring attention to masculine manifestations by female actors in butch-femme interplay and drag king performances. Halberstam’s arguments are based on the prevalent socio-political and cultural monopolization of gender identity that endorses patriarchy as the dominating force of economic and state manipulations. In a bid to challenge the status quo, Halberstam has propagated the notion of an alternative masculinity evident in childhood tomboyism that may lead to gender fluidity, frequently reflected and enacted in lesbian films and the American nightclub theatricals within an emergent drag king culture. The present article contends that Halberstam’s arguments for a feminine masculinity in his non-fictional prose work *Female Masculinity* (1998) are flawed in view of biological science, fictional representations of sexual orientations in dramatic performances, and real-life experiences. The results of the study indicate that outstanding human performances do not erase gender identities evident in biological anthropology.

**Keywords:** Gender and sexuality, drag king performance, biological anthropology

**Introduction**

The history of gender and sexuality has been diverse and multi-faceted over the last two centuries and a half. Mary Wollstonecraft’s (1792/2014) groundbreaking work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is considered the first monumental treatise on gender equality, women’s dignity, and preservation of universal woman rights. Her *Vindication* was a part of and a counter discourse to many of the socio-political issues of her time, particularly the issues of women’s freedom and rights. As this work derived inspirations from the days of the French Revolution, it also challenged Edmund Burke’s (1757/1999) aesthetics of the female body as a conception that relates female beauty to female frailty. Thus the early stages of gender discourse were attempts at demystifying the differences between gender identities, calling for greater freedom and equal opportunities for all irrespective of gender or sexuality.

<sup>1</sup> All subsequent references will be used from *Female Masculinity* by Judith Halberstam (1998). Duke University Press. Copyright © 1998 by Duke University Press

The turn of the century was marked by the appearance of Jane Austen, Emma Willard, Lydia Maria Child, Sarah Margaret Fuller, Harriet Jacobs, John Stuart Mill and many more who raised their voice for gender equality and diversity. Since twentieth century and onward, gender discourse has been gathering momentum, climaxing in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Gender theorists like Virginia Woolf, Simon de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, Sylvia Plath, Julia Kristeva, Monique Wittig and Judith Butler, among others, were gaining ground. Feminists from political and academic platforms produced theoretical, fictional and philosophical discourses, commending the causes of the LGBTQ+ people plus their self-determined gender orientations. In addition to traditional feminist movements, new gender diversity represented by Butch-Femmes theatricals appears significant in the background of a normative heterosexual tradition in line with the usual biological process of the human species. Michel Foucault's (1976/1978, 23) observation in this context is noteworthy:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it is transposed from the practice of sodomy to a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.

This benign view of Foucault must have fanned the imagination of the contemporary gender theorists.

Judith Halberstam professed himself as one of the pioneers of queer studies and a proponent of the theory of female masculinity. Focusing on the topic of tomboyism and drag king performances in his work *Female Masculinity* (1998), Halberstam has tried to neutralize the identity of masculinity among males as a monopoly and through a series of lesbian films and fictional illustrations has emphasized the presence of masculinity in the female performances of the butch-femmes and drag kings. While the views and concerns of Halberstam and other feminists and gender theorists sound valid and justified in view of human rights and individual freedom, their propositions are fictional rather than factual. The present article offers a biological explanation of gender and sexuality to show that Halberstam's notion of a female masculinity is scientifically unfounded and ethically unacceptable.

## **Discussion**

### ***Sex***

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010) defines sex in entry (1) as "the state of being male or female" and in entry (2), as "either of the two groups that people, animals and plants are divided into according to their function of producing young" (p.1401). According to online Merriam-Webster dictionary, sex is "either of the two major forms of individuals that occur in many species and that are distinguished respectively as female or male especially on the basis of their reproductive organs and structures".

### ***Gender***

Gender, according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010), is a "fact of being male or female, especially when considered with social or cultural differences, not differences in biology" (p. 644). Thus sex and gender are scientifically synonymous, but etymologically different. While sex is exclusively related to biological or genetic conditions that produce the effect of maleness or femaleness among humans, gender is a social construct that labels humans as male or female. This dichotomy, which is debatable, marks diversity in sex and gender studies.

### ***Halberstam's notion of Sex, Gender and Masculinity***

In his *Female Masculinity* (1998), Halberstam has defined masculinity as a "social and cultural and ... political expression of maleness" (p. 1). He further asserts that "masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects" (p. 1). The normative notion of masculinity, according to the proposition of the author, is a "subordination of alternative masculinities" (p. 1). He laments that "female masculinity has been blatantly ignored both in the culture at large and within academic studies of masculinity"

(p. 2), only to re-ensure that such predisposition has clear "ideological motivations and has sustained the complex social structures that wed masculinity to maleness and to power and domination" (p. 2). Halberstam ultimately relates male-oriented masculinity to the legitimacy of state power, patriarchy and economic advantages. Conversely, he finds feminine masculinity "in the lives of aristocratic European cross-dressing women in the 1920s...[in] butch lesbians and female-to-male transsexuals... in a history of butches in cinema" and asserts that "the shapes and forms of modern masculinity are best showcased within female masculinity" (p. 3). In this connection, he has categorically mentioned the female impersonation of James Bond and Elvis to show that the notion of masculinity is fluid and changeable, that the idea of masculinity may be, and truly, shared by both males and females.

Next, Halberstam has questioned the biological binary gender identities, suggesting innumerable gender orientations and functionalities. He has cast doubt on the taxonomy of sexologists in an attempt to show queer and lesbian culture as a result and consequence of centuries-old tradition of the practice of a "hermaphrodite," a "tribade," or a "female husband". One of the earliest examples of the origin of lesbianism lies in the individual female impulses of Tomboyism. Halberstam explains the functions of androgen with a push to show that female masculinity is independent of socially defined gender fixation:

The androgyny represents some version of gender mixing, but this rarely adds up to total ambiguity; when a woman is mistaken consistently for a man, I think it is safe to say that what marks her gender presentation is not androgyny but masculinity. (p. 57)

While such a view is biologically untenable, Halberstam has nonetheless tried to indicate the existence of masculine women down the ages.

In defense of intersex, the author has turned to "psychic mechanisms of inversion and the romantic relations between inverts and their lovers" (p. 76) with a fictional reference to Radclyffe Hall's novel of inversion, *The Well of Loneliness* (1990). On the basis of this fiction, the author arrives at the conclusion that "The masculine invert was the congenital invert who was born to an essential female masculinity" (p. 76).

One of the major sections of *Female Masculinity* (1998) deals with the Butch-Femme and Drag King theatrical performances — the core area of Halberstam's feminine discourse. In the drag king culture and male impersonation — a female performer acts in the male attire and style. He asserts that a female character playing a male role "has been a theatrical genre for at least two hundred years, but the drag king is a recent phenomenon" (p. 232). This male impersonation, he observes, continued down the ages until 1933 when Hollywood Motion Picture Production Code, "banned all performances of so called sexual perversion", and thereafter all "male impersonation died out as a mainstream theatrical practice" (p. 234). The butch-femme performativity, Halberstam mentions categorically, faced a similar challenge as "the business of survival as a butch woman is often predicated on one's ability to pass as male in certain situations", and as the economic pressure mounted high, the "camp has been a luxury that the passing butch cannot afford" (p. 232).

Halberstam, however, laments that though mainstream masculinity does not usually need a performance test for its supremacy, female masculinity is essentially performative, and sexually dysfunctional males are under threat and become exposed to "the instability of mainstream fictions of fortified male masculinities" (p. 235). Therefore, male masculinity creates a "performance anxiety" in the art of male impersonation that leads to "a neurotic fear of exposing the theatricality of masculinity" by female actors (p. 236).

So much, then, for Halberstam's laborious psychosexual and quasi-fictional representation of the idea of an arbitrary female masculinity, which can be refuted by a scientific study of the function of sex chromosomes that determine biological gender and account for the gender abnormalities among people identified as Hijra, Travesti, Kathoey and American Transgender---the true victims of genetic disorder and social prejudice.

### ***Role of chromosomes in determining biological gender and sexuality***

Once a mystery, biological differences in human species are now nothing more than simple mathematical equations. Genetic science confirms that humans are born with 46 chromosomes in 23 pairs. The presence of

X and Y chromosomes determines a person's biological sex. While males are 46XY, females are 46XX. This is the major demarcation for mainstream gender binary. The exceptions are 46XX males or 46XY females due to some faulty mutations in the Y chromosome which results in the formation of the fetus with x-gender identities evident in hermaphrodite people.

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," claimed Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949/1956, 273). This declaration, which has become almost proverbial, is inconsistent with biological science and genetic manipulations. What determines male or female entities is the presence and absence of the testes. Eric J. N. Vilain (2008) has explained the event in his "Genetics of Sexual Development and Differentiation":

during all stages of fetal development maleness is a permanent molecular fight. During the past decade, a number of genes responsible for the making of a male have been characterized. When altered or, to use a genetic terminology, mutated, these genes are responsible for "demasculinization" of fetuses carrying a male, XY chromosomal constitution, resulting in individuals born intersex" or females" (p.329).

Such a process produces, in fact, three categories of humans: two binary opposites and the third called hermaphrodite or intersex. Thus hermaphrodite is an accidental outcome of 'y' chromosome mutation that ultimately triggers "Disorder of Sex Development" (p.330). Simon de Beauvoir (1949/1956) does not seem comfortable with such a possible outcome:

With a hermaphrodite we should be no better off, for here the situation is most peculiar; the hermaphrodite is not really the combination of a whole man or a whole woman, but consists of parts of each and thus is neither (p.25).

While Halberstam in his discourse has tried to delete the dichotomy of sex binary and propagated same-sex orientation, Eric J. N. Vilain (2008) concludes that, "despite a theoretically infinite spectrum of sexual and gender variations, the legal definition of sex offers no more than two choices in most societies: male or female" (p.332).

### ***Hermaphrodites versus LGBTQ***

Humans with "Disorder of Sex Development" are Hijra, Travesti, and Kathoey, commonly called hermaphrodites. The Hijras are considered as neither men nor women, but "impotent" men, looking like "female". Their genetic disorder is either a non-developed female reproductive organ leading to the uterus, or the male genitalia invisible. The travesties in Brazil, in the description of Nanda (2008) are "conceptualized as men who take the passive, receptive role in sexual interaction— they are identified as "nonmen" in a system of either men or nonmen, not as an alternative or "in-between" gender (p.460). The Kathoey are considered as hermaphrodites, with a female gender identity disorder, and counted as the third gender in Thailand, the combination being: male/female/kathoey. They are more like the Indian Hijras but less like Brazilian travesties.

Thus a biological enquiry into gender and sexuality, apart from some minor exceptions, generally confirms two legal states of all higher species: binary and intersex. Genetic scientists have quashed any evidence of a single "gay gene" (Nicola Davis (2019) in operation among LGBTQ+ bodies, a latest discovery that challenges the Foucauldian notion of a sodomite "aberration" into "homosexuality", as well as Halberstam's notion of a female masculinity.

### ***Tomboyism versus biological eventualities***

Tomboyism is more a psycho-social than biological condition. Children's dress behavior may depend on social classification, fashion and culture. A female child may develop fantasies for a male child's dress, hair-style or typical habits and vice versa. However, Halberstam's conceptualization of this behavior pattern as a natural

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genetic condition is clearly baseless. Whether male or female, children before puberty hardly realize a biological difference between themselves except the different orientation of genitals. It is the release of sex hormones by human brain cells that triggers the differentiation of the ultimate male- female gender orientation.

However, in rare cases, a female child dressed in a typical boy's attire in early childhood may develop a masculine behavioral tendency. These children are identified with a medical condition called gender identity disorder (GID). But when they reach puberty, due to hormonal change, they gradually revert to their typical feminine identity, behavior and personality.

As a clinical remedy to these psycho-physical symptoms, Zucker and Cohen-Kettenis (2008) have prescribed behavior therapy, psychotherapy, parental guidance and engagement, limit setting, and supportive attitude. If tomboyism, as propagated in Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*, is allowed a free rein, and clinical advice and treatment are ignored, these children may face serious psychosocial and psychosexual complexities in their adulthood.

### ***LGBTQ+ culture: Anti-evolution and anti-Nature***

Nicola Davis (2019) has quoted Qazi Rahman, a leading authority on sexual orientation research from King's College London, saying, "he was not surprised that the genetic variants identified only have small individual effects, pointing out that since same-sex behaviour is linked to having to fewer offspring, evolution is likely to hide such variants in effect". The observation of Qazi Rahman attests the fact that LGBTQ+ behavior is not only genetically insignificant but also against the law of Nature or "anti-evolution". The planet's ever-expanding bio-diversity is a result of a natural evolution carried on by male-female combination of production and reproduction among the species. The OALD (2010) defines species as "a group into which animals, plants, etc. that are able to breed with each other and produce healthy young are divided, smaller than a GENUS and identified by a Latin name" (p. 1481). Conversely, LGBTQ+ culture is anti-biological, genetically abnormal, anti-Nature, non-procreative and anti-civilization.

### ***Drag King performance and butch-femme culture: Anti existential and anti-biological***

In support of gender fluidity, Halberstam has referred to Simon de Beauvoir (1949/1956). Interestingly, de Beauvoir's own idea of sexuality coincides with the above clarification and contradicts Halberstam's notion of female masculinity when she (de Beauvoir) writes: "Males and females are two kinds of individuals which are differentiated within a species for the functions of reproduction; they can be defined only correlatively" (p.33). She further observes that the egg produced in the ovary floats on water and eagerly waits for fertilization. It is the male chromosome, or the sperm, that seeks it out, tries hard to penetrate the outer covering of the egg and finally takes hold of it. It is noteworthy that only one sperm is let in and then the egg quickly creates a membrane to prevent other sperms from entry. The competition among the millions of sperms is phenomenal and spectacular. While the egg is static and passive, "the sperm --- free, slender, agile---typifies the impatience and restlessness of existence" (p.41).

Clearly, de Beauvoir assigns an active role to the sperm, terms it as an impatient and restless suitor to its covetous beloved (the egg), while the beloved herself is shy, passive, but protective. Even she (the egg) is monogamous, as she maintains her sexual purity by shutting her door permanently to other "numerous suitors". Such passivity and conservative nature of the egg significantly downplays Halberstam's notion of a female masculinity.

### ***Shakespeare's (1606) Macbeth:<sup>2</sup> 'Unsex me here'***

Halberstam's propagation of female masculinity with reference to lesbian films in his book and his own drag king night club experiences may be refuted by Shakespeare's normative fictional representation of the apparently masculine role of Lady Macbeth.

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<sup>2</sup> All references to *Macbeth* are from A R Brawnmueller, 1994/1606, Cambridge University Press

William Shakespeare, almost four centuries back, may have envisaged such a phenomenon among womenfolk, and designed the character of his Lady Macbeth to show the mettle of the “butch” on the dramatic stage. Her initial performance really outplays her warrior husband, and she continues to keep her grip on state affairs up to a certain period of their rule. But eventually the biologically inherent female nature gains ground and Lady Macbeth is hardly able to resist the pressure of a crime unusual for a feminine spirit and thus finally succumbs to her own frailty.

Overall, the world of *Macbeth* is a projection of dominating female power represented by both the witches and Lady Macbeth. Macbeth, the ‘brave’ and ‘valiant’ General of King Duncan, is first netted by the witch sisters whose appearance is androgynous:

you should be women,  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
That you are so. (1.3.43-45)

But they not only try to befool this powerful General, they appear sexually perverse. One of the witches, to take revenge on a sailor’s wife, will change into a “rat without a tail” (1.3.8), an apparent hermaphrodite, who will “do and do and do” (1.3.9). The sexual connotation of “do and do and do” signals a repetition of sexual assaults, which will “drain him dry as hay” (1.3.17), and render him “dwindle, peak, and pine” (1.3.22). The magical image of the castrated rat displayed by a “pilot’s thumb” (1.3.26) is a projection of phallic fetishism of lesbian orientation. Thus, besides being filthy and obnoxious in their misdeeds, the “weird sisters” represent the perverse sexuality of modern-day LGBTQ culture.

The more powerful female figure, however, is Lady Macbeth. Her desire for a transformation into male masculinity is both interesting and alarming. To execute her heinous crime to kill the King, she makes a plea to evil spirits to “unsex” her so that she acquires necessary male “cruelty” for the desired performance. She wants to go against her female femininity by making her blood “thick”, which most probably connotes female periodical menstruation, to stop all “th’access and passage to remorse” so that “compunctious visitings of nature”, i.e. natural female compassion and infirmity, should not fail her in her purpose (1.5.39-45). The stoppage to “menstruation” is a direct reference to the idea of transgender orientation. Macbeth also notices such a transformation in his wife’s biological nature:

Bring forth men-children only,  
For thy undaunted mettle should compose  
Nothing but males. (1.7.73-75)

It is, however, difficult to assume, whether Shakespeare was making a mockery of such a female masculinity. The first symptom occurs when after the murder is revealed, and the ‘iron lady’ faints (debatable whether it was real or fake):

Help me hence, ho.  
MACDUFF: Look to the lady.  
[Exit Lady Macbeth, helped]. (2.3.112-114)

Lady Macbeth is seen onstage only briefly in Act III, Scene IV, and thereafter her assumed masculinity begins to decline until she re-appears in Act V, Scene I— sick, broken, and full of remorse. While Macbeth is preparing to fight his enemies with his last but desperate masculinity, Lady Macbeth has lost the power of her female masculinity. She is now a defeated drag king, a fake butch, who is unable to defend her own mind under the huge pressure of a rough and tough political commotion, and finally commits suicide—signaling death to the notion of Halberstam’s discourse of female masculinity.

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### ***Real-life stories that demean the doctrine of female masculinity***

The Harry Potter author JK Rowling's recent comment on gender and sexuality has attracted the attention of gender activists around the globe. The author maintains the view that gender dichotomy is real and self-evident. Alison Flood (2020) has reported "Author 'follows my conscience' after head of Robert F Kennedy Human Rights group says her views are transphobic". She has quoted Ms. Rowling as saying: "If sex isn't real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives." The truth claimed by the Harry Potter author testifies to the lived experience of mainstream heterosexual orientation of human species.

### ***Sexual misconducts in academic and professional arena***

Sex, with the exceptions of genetic disorder, is binary opposite from being to becoming. While sexual assault is a forced performance of the male predators against the females, the opposite is rarely revealed. Even the best of the female categories---the lawyers, the barristers, university students, athletes, and military officers---are not safe and they can hardly defend themselves, however academically, intellectually or professionally strong they are. This is partly biological and the rest is due to psycho-sexual perversion. According to an article published in *The Guardian*, Owen Bowcott (2016) has reported that female barristers are frequently sexually assaulted by their male counterparts but they rarely complain for fear they might be in trouble with their career and dignity.

Sally Weale (2018) reported that the University of Cambridge has admitted it has "a significant problem" with sexual misconduct after it received 173 complaints in nine months after launching a new anonymous reporting system. The majority of complaints (119) alleged student-on-student misconduct, while seven complaints were made by staff against colleagues, and two by students against staff. The rest involved neither staff nor students.

### ***Rape in the military: exposing the shocking truth***

Stacey Samuel's (2012) report was aired by the CNN that Klay was "gang-raped" by a senior officer and his civilian friend at her Washington home, the suit contends. The officer allegedly threatened to kill Klay. She reported the rapes and the officer was eventually convicted in a military court of adultery and indecent language, and given 45 days in military confinement, Klay said.

Alexandra Topping (2012), with reference to the groundbreaking feature-length documentary *The Invisible War* (2012), reported a heartbreaking account of rape of KoriCioca, a veteran US Navy coastguard,

'He hit me across the left side of my face ... and my face hurt so bad. He screamed at me and he grabbed my arm and he raped me.' KoriCioca's heartbreaking account of her rape by a commanding officer while serving in the US Coast Guard is not the most shocking part of her testimony.

She reports that Cioca is just one of the women interviewed in *The Invisible War (2012)* that lifts the lid on the abuse of women in the US military and which got its first UK screening in the Frontline Club in London.

These examples of gendered misconducts at different social and professional settings conform to the facts of binary opposite biological conditions and are triggered by fantasies rather than conscience.

### **Conclusion**

Judith Halberstam, in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, propagated in *his Female Masculinity* (1998) the notion of the "drag king" in American night clubs, the "butch-femme" culture in lesbian films, and tomboyism in middle-class fashionable families to draw attention to the idea of masculine manifestations by female performers. Biological science, as this study finds, indicates the normative gender orientation as a grand design of natural selection, with the exceptions of genetic abnormalities leading to the birth of the hermaphrodites. Whether William Shakespeare foresaw an emergence of gender identity disorder in his time or not, he did try

to produce a new type of gender personae in Lady Macbeth, a modern day “butch” or a “drag king” or a “self-chosen hormone-transferred transgender”, whose on-stage failure in the fictional framework of the play, *Macbeth*, clearly downplays Halberstam’s notion of female masculinity. Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth shows the essential hollowness of the proposition of a hybrid female masculinity that succumbs to its innate natural femininity. Likewise, the lived experiences in the meaningful explanation of life attest to the fact that the XX and XY chromosome combination is a grand demarcation of biological anthropology. Thus while the notion of a female masculinity is fairly fascinating, its grounding is baseless and flawed. Overall, the study nullifies the impact of the painting of a “Raging Bull” on the cover page of Halberstam’s book which inadvertently claims to create “a connection between the spectacle of boxing and the spectacle of the fighting butch”.

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