

# Queer Metamorphosis: Examining Manobi's Endeavour to Become a Heterosexual Woman after Transgender surgery in *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi: A Candid Biography of India's First Transgender Principal*

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## **Abstract**

Transgender people may undergo sex reassignment surgery (SRS), as observed both in ethnographic studies of transgendered people and transgender literature, in order to be a 'normal' person in society, and to build sustainable ways of living according to the privileges of heterosexuality, since heterosexuality is unquestionably the normative and naturalised human identity. The physical transformation after SRS provides a crucial ground to rethink human sexualities and to interrogate heterosexuality and its various social, historical and political parameters by which other non-conforming sexual and gender identities are shaped and produced in our society. In this research, an effort has been made to examine the different heterosexual roles played to become a heterosexual woman by a self-identified transwoman, Manobi, after undergoing SRS in *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi* (2017). Following Sara Ahmed's concept of *orientations*, the study explores post-operative Manobi's desire for men and the adoption of various heterosexual behaviours that lead to a socio-political tension between gender and sexual identities. The research also adopts Judith Butler's approach to undoing gender to investigate the nexus between post-operative gender, sex and sexuality, and her theory of performativity to examine gender and sexual roles with a theoretical framework of intersectionality that highlights other social factors informing a transsexual's sexual marginalisation. We explore transsexuality's critique of the naturalness of heterosexuality by deconstructing the dimorphic vision of human sexuality and gender identity.

**Keywords:** sex reassignment surgery, heterosexuality, transgender, desire, performativity, orientation

## **Introduction**

We can now see that heterosexuality, now, as a sexual identity and sexual expression, is ubiquitously a norm in every society around the world due to the effects of globalisation and also to the "spatio-intellectual hegemony"<sup>1</sup> of the West. It has become a key site of patriarchal domination over women and people with 'feminine qualities', such as some same-sex men and transgender people. Though it "signifies one particular historical arrangement of the sexes and

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<sup>1</sup> Adnan Hossain, "De-Indianizing Hijra: Intra-regional Effacements and Inequalities in South Asian Queer Space," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2018), pp. 321-331.

their pleasures,”<sup>2</sup> heterosexuality has become a defining norm in producing non-normative sexualities as unnatural. The practice of treating heterosexuality as a norm established it as “the standard for legitimate and prescriptive socio-sexual behaviour, as though it were fixed in time and space and universally occurring.”<sup>3</sup> As an institution, heterosexuality orders not only sexual life but also “domestic and extra-domestic divisions of labour and resources.”<sup>4</sup>

The hegemonic force of the heterosexual set-up of society drives many transgender people to undergo sex reassignment surgery (SRS) to be relocated in a normative gender and sexual role. However, the relocation of trans people to a normative gender and sexual role does not remove the social stigmas attached to them. Though SRS aims “to resolve a patient’s gender dysphoria,”<sup>5</sup> socio-political aspects of the treatment have certain negative implications for transgender people in society, resulting in unemployment, houselessness, and so on. This is due to the assumption of an unnatural, ambiguous, and misleading nature of the new subjectivity. These assumptions are produced by “the hegemonic power of heteronormativity”<sup>6</sup> that dominates the discourse of gender and sex. Thus, SRS often fails to fulfil the expectations of trans people that it will bring a change in the attitudes of society in seeing post-operative trans people who are endeavouring to fit themselves into dominant social categories of gender and sex. Trans people experience unfavourable social attitudes in almost every culture across the globe. Tony, a participant in an empirical study who had undergone SRS from male to female, said that “she did not really want her SRS but felt ‘forced by society’.”<sup>7</sup> This statement does not adequately clarify what kind of force of society led Tony to have the surgery. Is it the force of existing notions of gender and sex that biological sex and gender identity should be matched, and the person should feel attracted to the opposite sex?

According to Lata Hemchand, “Human sexuality is a complex phenomenon which is influenced in different ways by biological, social, economic, cultural and even political factors.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, heterosexuality cannot be defined by its norms of attraction to the opposite sex alone. It is an “elastic category”<sup>9</sup> because some heterosexual men who have sex with other men still identify themselves as heterosexual, on the rationale that they are primarily attracted to women. Sarah E. Ainsworth and Roy F. Baumeister state that “changes in sexuality occur throughout time, during the course of relationships, and depending on the larger sociocultural

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan N. Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Chrys Ingraham, “Introduction: Thinking Straight,” in *Thinking Straight: The Power, Promise and Paradox of Heterosexuality*, ed. Chrys Ingraham (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1-11.

<sup>4</sup> Stevi Jackson, “Gender, Sexuality and Heterosexuality: The Complexity (and limits) of Heteronormativity,” *Feminist Theory*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2006), pp. 105-121.

<sup>5</sup> Stig-Eric Olsson and Anders Möller, “Regret after Sex Reassignment Surgery in a Male-to-Female Transsexual: A Long-Term Follow-Up,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2006), pp. 501-506.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality,” in *Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 183-193.

<sup>7</sup> Olsson and Möller, *Regret after Sex Reassignment Surgery in a Male-to-Female Transsexual: A Long-Term Follow-Up*, p. 504.

<sup>8</sup> Lata Hemchand, “A Psychologist’s Journey to Understanding Sexual Orientation,” in *Nothing to Fix: Medicalisation of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*, eds. Arvind Narrain and Vinay Chandran (New Delhi: Sage, 2016), pp. 223-230.

<sup>9</sup> Héctor Carrillo and Amanda Hoffman, “‘Straight With a Pinch of Bi’: The Construction of Heterosexuality as an Elastic Category among Adult US Men,” *Sexualities*, vol. 21, no. 1-2 (2018), pp. 90-108.

context.”<sup>10</sup> In their research, they have shown that erotic plasticity in women counts more than in men. “To manage this reality,” Ingraham writes, “we have created a set of identity categories and corresponding belief systems to produce the illusion that sexuality is fixed and unchanging and not highly organized and regulated-institutionalized.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, heterosexuality as a sexual expression and social identity is no less perplexing, hence more or less unintelligible, than homosexuality or transsexuality. This article examines different heterosexual roles played in becoming a heterosexual woman by a self-identified transwoman. In this article, it is argued that Manobi’s (being a transsexual herself) adoption of heterosexuality as sexual expression and social identity, even by undergoing SRS, cannot be a liberatory tool for her because the discourse of heteronormativity promotes heterosexuality as an authentic, natural, normal, and stable sexual category while rendering the other sexual categories inauthentic, unnatural, and abnormal through the binary system of gender and sexuality.

In *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi* (2017), Manobi recounts the experiences of stereotypical social attitudes towards transgender people for their ambiguous gender and sexual expressions. She<sup>12</sup> narrates the violence from colleagues encountered when still presenting as male, due to her gender and sexual anomaly while working as an assistant professor in a college. However, the hegemonic norms of heterosexuality and the conservative social structures, like patriarchy, are responsible for generating these gender and sex ambiguities. Manobi undergoes SRS, as some transgender people do, as noted in ethnographic studies of transgender and transgender literature, in an attempt to be considered a normative person in society because the normativity of social-cultural identities determines a person’s social position. Moreover, one of the critical factors behind Manobi’s attempt to be a member of the normative group of society is that “being part of an established and recognised group in society is an important aspect of developing self-esteem and an identity.”<sup>13</sup> In this account, she states that “I was actually a (*heterosexual*) woman trapped inside a man’s body and I wanted liberation from my situation.”<sup>14</sup> She seeks this liberation by undergoing SRS from male to female to match the physique of women, and by adopting female gender roles.

The newly transformed subjectivity of Manobi after SRS provides a crucial ground to rethink human sexualities and to interrogate heterosexuality and its various social, historical and political parameters by which other non-conforming sexual and gender identities are shaped and produced in our society.<sup>15</sup> In this article, we interrogate heteronormativity to challenge the techniques and mechanisms of heterosexuality by questioning how the transsexual condition challenges heterosexuality as an authentic, normal and stable category. This question elaborates on the perspectives of medicine and psychology, which diagnosed non-binary gender and sex as psychological disorders in the nineteenth century. The second

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah E. Ainsworth and Roy F. Baumeister, “Changes in Sexuality: How Sexuality Changes across Time, across Relationships, and across Sociocultural Contexts,” *Clinical Neuropsychiatry*, vol. 9, no.1 (2012), pp. 32-38.

<sup>11</sup> Ingraham, “Introduction: Thinking Straight,” pp. 1-11.

<sup>12</sup> The authors refer to Manobi as she and her, respecting her self-identification as a woman.

<sup>13</sup> Angie Fee, “Who Put the ‘Hetero’ in Sexuality?” in *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*, eds. Sally Hines and Tam Sanger (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 217.

<sup>14</sup> Manobi Bandyopadhyay and Jhimli M. Pandey, *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi: A Candid Biography of India’s First Transgender Principal* (India: Penguin Books, 2017), p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

question concerns how sexual marginalisation pushes other social identities to the periphery. The intersectional linking of this question highlights the erasure of transsexuals as a citizen of a nation and other social entitlements that can help, we argue, destigmatise the people of non-conforming sex and gender. We use Judith Butler's performativity and Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology as theoretical tools which provide a transgressive approach to deconstructing the hegemonic patterns of heterosexuality.

### **Medico-Psychological Construction of Heterosexuality and Its Influence on SRS**

Sexology, then a part of medical and psychological disciplines in nineteenth century Europe, provided some knowledge on gendered and sexual diversity and laid the foundation of the modern binary system of gender and sex. The hegemonic medico-psychological discourse, "the major 'cultural lens' through which sexuality is now understood,"<sup>16</sup> rendered people of deviant sexualities psychologically sick or biologically ill. The invention of "contrary inverted sexual feeling" came to academic discipline with the works of sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing. Later, sexologists such as Havelock Ellis expressed some positive attitudes towards homosexuals, calling them "congenital inverts"<sup>17</sup> instead of 'criminal'. These historical and cultural interventions have left a long-lasting impact on the evolution of heterosexuality as a dominant discourse of human sexual and gendered identities.

During this historical period, the binary system of gender and sex and the dominant position of heterosexuality swept the history of the world, mobilising it as normal, natural and stable. The way of thinking straight founded the belief that heterosexuality is universal, occurring the same in all societies and the animal kingdom when the contrary result is abundant. But before this event, there was no evidence of naming sexuality as normal or abnormal. Instead, there were procreative sex (which was valorised) and non-procreative sex, which was considered a sin (for wasting vital energy in vain), and it is legitimate to ask, echoing Foucault, "why sex was associated with sin for such a long time."<sup>18</sup> Jonathan N. Katz notes of the sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895) "Heterosexuality and normal sexuality he defined as the innate form of sexual satisfaction of the majority of the population. That emphasis on numbers as the foundation of the normal marks a historic break with the old qualitative, procreative standard."<sup>19</sup> In his landmark book *The History of Sexuality* Foucault points out two great systems "the law of marriage and the order of desires"<sup>20</sup> invented by the West for governing sex.

Travelling from the earliest sexologists' formulation of heterosexuality to Freud's psychoanalytic theories of sexuality, we are presented with a complex but influential theory of sex. Freud remained biased while analysing the developmental phases of sexual drives, relying on male sexuality as the principle of sexual development. His psychoanalytic conceptions and theories still significantly impact the notions of sex and sexuality. His conceptualisation of the 'pleasure principle' historically sidelines the procreation ethic. Freud's emphasis on pleasure

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<sup>16</sup> Myra J. Hird, "For a Sociology of Transsexualism," *Sociology*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2002), pp. 577-595.

<sup>17</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (London: Random House, 1936), p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (India: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 39.

as the main purpose of ‘our mental apparatus’ transmutes “sex from productive duty to act of pleasurable consumption.”<sup>21</sup> For him, unnecessary repression of libido causes deep psychic pain. The insightful intervention of Jonathan Katz on Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex shows how it creates and relies on the institution of heterosexuality. He writes:

In the first years of the twentieth century, with Freud’s and medical men’s help, the nineteenth century’s tentative, ambiguous heterosexual concept was stabilized, fixed and widely distributed as the ruling sexual orthodoxy—The Heterosexual Mystique—the idea of an essential, eternal, normal heterosexuality. As the term *heterosexual* moved out of the small world of medical discourse into the big world of American mass media, the heterosexual idea moved from abnormal to normal, and from normal to normative.<sup>22</sup>

Fee’s critical observation of Freud’s views on child sexuality offers vital insight into how the diverse possibilities of sexual orientation are channelled into a single direction. She observes,

If Freud’s theory that all children are polymorphously perverse is to be believed, it is difficult to understand how these multitudinous, undifferentiated desires get so narrowly channeled into adult procreative heterosexuality. His theory of identity does not allow for diverse identifications, and the free play of polymorphous perversities are constrained within the dominant cultural heterosexual matrix.<sup>23</sup>

Through regulating sexuality, which began during the late Victorian era, as rightly pointed out by Foucault, the ideas of the binary opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality formulated by the practitioners of psychology, medicine, and psychiatry came to be normalised by repetitive cultural practices and techniques.<sup>24</sup> These cultural practices and methods “continue infiltrate minds and bodies and which, in turn, cultivate beliefs and behaviours as seemingly natural qualities embedded in the individual psyche.”<sup>25</sup>

The nineteenth century medico-psychological gaze on transsexualism still has power in our society. Before undergoing an SRS, transsexual individuals undergo a long process of medical counselling involving a team of medical and psychological practitioners to check their mental fitness. The notion of authenticity still is a scale of measuring a transsexual’s gender and sexuality. The post-operative condition of transsexual individuals often brings depression and dissatisfaction, and this mental condition begets suicidal tendencies in them if the surgery fails to attain perfection measured by the existing notion of authenticity. Though Manobi earnestly yearns for a sex change operation, she cannot stop negative thoughts from suffocating her. Even after the reassignment surgery, her mental condition remains the same when no sign of womanhood appears in her body for a long time. She goes through this utterly depressing condition alone because she knows no one would support her decision. She says, “My family was dead against it and I decided that, instead of being bogged down by negative comments

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<sup>21</sup> Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, p. 82.

<sup>23</sup> Fee, “Who Put the ‘Hetero’ in Sexuality?,” p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

<sup>25</sup> Fee, “Who Put the ‘Hetero’ in Sexuality?,” p. 211.

from my parents and sisters, I would rather keep things to myself and reveal all only when it was done.”<sup>26</sup> During the follow-up, several studies reported regret, dissatisfaction and disappointment of trans people after the gender reassignment surgery for various reasons, such as poor medical treatment, underdeveloped physical appearance, lack of family support, negative attitude from the neighbourhood, and so on. As one study reports, “SRS did not resolve Tony’s gender dysphoria; instead, it reduced her sexual outlet and pleasure, something she deplored. In her case, SRS could be considered a mistake.”<sup>27</sup> Hird also opines in a sociological study of transsexualism, “Those supporting somatic arguments cite long-term evidence suggesting that transsexual women and men are not mentally ill, and that, in tandem with homosexuality, much of the distress, anger and depression evidenced in transsexual people is a result of societal discrimination and not the transsexual condition itself.”<sup>28</sup>

Gender, sex and sexual orientation play a central role in describing a person’s identity. Every society has a peculiar pattern in constructing gender and sexual identities, and these identities evolve from a complex amalgamation of that society’s historical and cultural traditions. Those expressions of social identities that break these historical and cultural traditions have negative and violent repercussions in that society. Manobi, who was born and brought up in a lower-middle-class family in India in the mid-1960s, encounters social discrimination, stigma and violence based on her sexuality in every socio-cultural space of Indian culture, right from her home where she lives with a joined family, her school, college and university where she graduates, the residence where she lives as a renter, to the college where she teaches. At home, her “behaviour was bringing shame to the family”<sup>29</sup> when she started wearing her sisters’ clothes and “the whole locality started shunning” them for this wayward behaviour. When the boys at school realised that “I (Manobi) was not a girl, but an extremely delicate and physically weak boy, they would pinch me, pull my hair, box my ears and punch my face at the slightest provocation.”<sup>30</sup> Still, as a student, she initially perceived college as a place to “find freedom after fourteen years of regimented school life” and found it “to be yet another place where I would have to fight for my identity and respect... Many had gathered to see me. Some started clapping their hands in glee when they saw me, some just whistled and catcalled and soon taunts filled the air.”<sup>31</sup> Even the college where she taught as an assistant professor was a contested site because, as she says, “My colleagues still treated me like a subhuman, like I had no right to sit with them in the same staff room and enjoy the same facilities as they did as college professors. They would not include me in their teachers’ union meetings or even in their social dos.”<sup>32</sup>

The excerpts from the biography exemplify the impact of heteronormative societal views on the gender and sexuality of non-normative people. The hostile attitude towards non-heteronormative people characterises their effacement from social spaces in India. The procedure of this effacement began at the hands of British officials in colonial India under the Criminal Tribes Act (1871), which criminalised hijras as representatives of “a threat of moral,

<sup>26</sup> Bandyopadhyay and Pandey, *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi*, p. 121.

<sup>27</sup> Olsson and Möller, “Regret after Sex Reassignment Surgery in a Male-to-Female Transsexual,” p. 505.

<sup>28</sup> Hird, “For a Sociology of Transsexualism,” p. 580.

<sup>29</sup> Bandyopadhyay and Pandey, *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi*, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Bandyopadhyay and Pandey, *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi*, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Bandyopadhyay and Pandey, *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi*, p. 40.

<sup>32</sup> Bandyopadhyay and Pandey, *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi*, p. 163.

sexual and physical contagion to both Indian men and public space... Colonial public space was specifically conceptualised as a masculine space, clearly demarcated in its public nature from the feminised private domain. The visibility of femininely-dressed ‘habitual sodomites’ in public undermined the masculine status of that space, as well as the social and spatial boundaries between the masculine and the feminine.”<sup>33</sup> The ethnographic studies of Serena Nanda and Gayatri Reddy on transgender point to the gradual erasure of hijras from once living in a social environment and occupying social positions before the British rule in India. The terrible effects of the Criminal Tribes Act implemented by the British still haunt the people of the sexual sub-culture in India.

### **Queer Theory and Social Construction of Human Sexuality**

Much of the political and philosophical critiques of heteronormative gender and sexual identity are derived from queer theory. Though queer theory developed from feminist and deconstructionist theories, it has posed challenges to feminist theory in many ways, for “if feminism was framed as a theory of gender oppression, in which sexuality was assumed to be tied to gender identity, then one should question whether such a theory of gender oppression could also offer a valid theory of sexual oppression.”<sup>34</sup> The nonheteronormative understanding of sexuality, advanced by queer theory, rebels against the essentialist view of sexuality. The social constructivist approach to sexuality, beginning with the ground-breaking work of Michel Foucault, revolutionises the early notion of sexuality based on essentialism. Apart from sexual essentialism, the American cultural anthropologist and theorist of the politics of gender and sexuality Gayle Rubin, in her widely regarded founding text of sexuality studies and queer theory *Thinking Sex*, presents five other ideological models such as sex negativity, the fallacy of misplaced scale, the hierarchical valuation of sex acts, the domino theory of sexual peril, and the lack of a concept of benign sexual variation, whose “grip on sexual thought is so strong that to fail to discuss them is to remain enmeshed within them.”<sup>35</sup> She suggests that sexuality is constructed by a system of “sexual stratification” where forms of sexuality are valued differently.

In a seminal work of queer studies, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's deconstructivist approach argues that the standard binary analysis of human sexuality is simplistic. The oversimplification has deteriorating effects on the Western culture. In this book, she furnishes a history which contends the binary hetero/homosexual model as a foundation of modern civilisation. Sedgwick contributes to the contemporary debate on the relationship between the regulating structure of power and desire and the intricate relationship between gender and sexuality, using her deconstructivist approach to show that the social binary is not a symmetrical relation between subjects. Instead, social binaries are constituted by asymmetrical relations where one subjugates the other. She deconstructs such binaries

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<sup>33</sup> Jessica Hinchy, “Obscenity, Moral Contagion and Masculinity: Hijras in Public Space in Colonial North India,” *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2014), pp. 274-294.

<sup>34</sup> Julie L. Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy, “Transgender Theory: Embodying Research and Practice,” *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, vol. 25, no. 4 (2010), pp. 431-443.

<sup>35</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 267-319.

organised to approve of heterosexual individuals in the context of gender and sexuality. Sedgwick exposes that only through the creation of the homosexual category does the heterosexual come into existence, and the privileged heterosexual position depends upon the subordinated homosexual. Implicit in this analysis is a radical challenge to the foundation of contemporary gay and lesbian politics. The theory of compulsory heterosexuality, popularised by the lesbian feminist Adrienne Rich in a 1980 contribution to *Third Wave Feminism*, emerged as a response to the universal category of woman, which has implicitly promoted heterosexuality and failed to incorporate the issues of same-sex sexuality. Her essay highlights the erasure of lesbian existence from scholarly feminist literature and encourages heterosexual feminists to interrogate heterosexuality as a political system which disempowers women.

Ahmed's queer phenomenological approach to sexual orientation provides a new way to think about the construction of sexual orientation. The new way shows the construction of sexual orientation as not entirely a biological or psychological phenomenon. In the case of developing sexual orientation, Ahmed argues, social circumstances in which we live and the objects placed around us shape the orientation in a particular direction with our simultaneous growing up from early childhood. She says:

In the case of sexual orientation, it is not then simply that we have it. To become straight means not only that we have to turn toward the objects given to us by heterosexual culture but also that we must turn away from objects that take us off this line. The queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant. What is present to us in the present is not casual: as I have suggested, we do not just acquire our orientations because we find things here or there. Rather, certain objects are available to us because of lines that we have already taken... Insofar as we inherit that which is near enough to be available at home, we also inherit orientations, that is, we inherit the nearness of certain objects more than others, which means we inherit ways of inhabiting and extending into space. The very requirement that the child follow a parental line puts some objects and not others in reach.<sup>36</sup>

Through this line of thinking, she establishes the notion that due to our society primarily constructed as heteronormative and decked with heterosexual objects and behaviours, "Heterosexuality is not then simply an orientation toward others, it is also something that we are oriented around, even if it disappears from view." Heterosexual sexual orientation is performed as natural and is expected from everyone without questioning the nurturing process. This concept put forward by Ahmed helps to find the answer to an important question—why do some transsexuals identify as heterosexually oriented? This question, consequently, cites heterosexual sexual orientation as hegemonic—an orientation that marginalises other sexual orientations, creating a divide between real and unreal or normal and abnormal.

Transsexual people express their self-identification of sex and gender the same way as Manobi does in *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi*: "I was convinced that I was a girl and definitely not a homosexual. I knew that just like the girls of my age, I was attracted to men and wanted them as my partners. So how was I not a heterosexual? But the heterosexual world denied my

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<sup>36</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2006), pp. 543-574



entry!”<sup>37</sup> For expressing such views of themselves, trans people receive denial from both the world of heterosexual and gender non-conforming people. Thus, they reach an impasse, and to end this difficult situation, a dispute erupts between transsexuals and heterosexuals. Although Manobi, by undergoing an SRS and longing for marriage, a husband and family, aligns herself with the traditional notions of gender and sex to become a heterosexual woman, the heterosexuals deny her as a member of their world on the logic of the unnaturalness of her sexuality. The post-operative sexuality of Manobi is a creation of the surgical knife. On the other hand, critical gender theorists and transgender activists criticise transsexuals by arguing that they construct their social identity in a way that reinforces the conservative, essentialist “Euro-American dimorphic vision of gender,”<sup>38</sup> which perpetuates the oppression of women. Thus, much feminist and queer theory builds a binary opposition that “valorises transgender narratives as subversive, social-constructionist, and challenging gender binaries, while devaluing transsexual narratives as conservative, essentialist, biological-determinist and gender-conformist.”<sup>39</sup> However, transgenderism challenges both feminist and queer theories.

### **Transgenderism, Performativity and Manobi’s Transsexuality**

Many transgender people express discontent at queer theory’s purely social constructivist approach to gender identity and sexuality, without considering their lived experiences, though it advances a voice for the political challenge to these identities. A feminist theory of transgenderism that maintains an essentialist perspective of gender is also problematic. Transgender theory develops from Katrina Roen’s ideas of transgenderism as “a political movement seeking to challenge the belief that every person can be categorized simply as one of two sexes. One political strategy instituted by transgenderists has been to promote transsexual visibility and, in particular, to encourage transsexuals to be out as both and neither. This both/neither stance has come to be privileged over passing as women and men.”<sup>40</sup> Unlike “either/or” conceptualisation, transgenderism includes both the fluidity of gender identity and the acceptance of gender binary as Surya Monro in *Theorizing Transgender Diversity* argues for “the need to understand the lived experiences of transgenders and the limitations on the fluidity of gender imposed by the body and biology.”<sup>41</sup> In the founding text of transgender studies, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1987), Sandy Stone expresses the need for “the possibility of analyzing desire and motivational complexity in a manner that adequately describes the multiple contradictions of individual lived experience. We need a deeper analytical language for transsexual theory, one that allows for the sorts of ambiguities and polyvocalities that have already so productively informed and enriched feminist theory.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bandyopadhyay and Pandey, *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi*, p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> Terry S. Kogan, “Transsexuals and Critical Gender Theory: The Possibility of a Restroom Labelled Other,” *Hastings Law Journal*, vol. 48, no. 6 (1997), pp. 1223-1255.

<sup>39</sup> Riki Lane, “Trans as Bodily Becoming: Rethinking the Biological as Diversity, Not Dichotomy,” *Hypatia*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2009), pp. 136-157.

<sup>40</sup> Katrina Roen, “‘Either/Or’ and ‘Both/Neither’: Discursive Tensions in Transgender Politics,” *Signs*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2002), pp. 501-522.

<sup>41</sup> Nagoshi and Brzuzy, *Transgender Theory: Embodying Research and Practice*, p. 435.

<sup>42</sup> Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-transsexual Manifesto,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1992), pp. 150-176.

Both feminist and queer theories cannot address the embodied experiences and gender fluidity of Manobi. The idea of transgender theory as “fluid, embodied, socially and self-constructed social identity” informs an inclusive and intersectional understanding of identity. The narrative of Manobi offers a provocative account of gender identity and sexuality in transgender studies, delineating the socio-cultural, political, and medical journey of a trans person in India.

## **Conclusion**

The present article maps the context of the marginalisation of trans people and the emergence of heterosexuality as a normative sexual identity/orientation based on the notion of authenticity through the binary system. This discourse formulated by psychology and medicine in nineteenth century Europe subsequently created an effect of normalcy, which is still most prevalent in our society. The normalising effect produces such an environment for people of non-normative gender and sex, such as Manobi in this biographical narrative, where he frequently doubts his body and the sexual orientation he feels, for the combination of gender and the sex it entails does not go hand in hand in terms of the traditional notion of the correct combination of gender and sex. Therefore, we have argued that Manobi’s identification of herself as a heterosexual woman cannot remove the social stigmas attached to her. Transgender Studies, which has emerged as a burgeoning field of academic discipline, offers intriguing ideas to challenge the deeply entrenched notions of gender, sex, and sexuality. The dominant discourses of these ideas limit how individuals can make sense of their selves. By questioning heterosexuality and its social, historical and political parameters, the study highlights heterosexuality’s coercive effects that produce the non-conforming gendered persons as sick or biologically ill. Analysed through an intersectional framework, the study showcases how deviant sexuality can foreclose Manobi’s other social identities and jeopardise her profession as a college teacher.

The category of transsexual has the potential to reveal thought-provoking results in the arena of gender, sex and sexuality when these categories are not seen as natural or fixed. The experiences of non-binary people make it easier to think about the constraints of heterosexual ideology. Heteronormative ideologies need to be deconstructed and the discourses reformulated to get the voices of people, not only non-binary people, to be heard. Though we do not encourage the rationale of identifying transsexuals as heterosexual men/women by adopting the hetero-patriarchal norms of society, the act of becoming a heterosexual man/woman emphasises denial of the oppressive nature of heterosexism, heterosexuality as an inelastic sexual identity and its advocacy of non-heterosexuality as unnatural sexual categories.