



VEDA'S

JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (JOELL)

An International Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

Impact Factor (SJIF) 6.018

<http://www.joell.in>

Vol.11

Spl.Issue 1

(February)

2024

ICEPTLELL-2024



STEERING GENDER DYSPHORIA: ACTUALIZATION OF THE CONTOURS OF IDENTITY IN TRANS MEN'S NARRATIVES, WITH A FOCUS ON THOMAS PAGE MCBEE'S WORKS

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ABSTRACT



The dynamic literary society has confronted and churned out many stigmas associated with gender fluidity and dysphoria. Transgender people and their literature are no longer considered taboo topics. Many transgender writers have used language and literature to bring about social change. There isn't a dearth of transgender women writers and their narratives to battle vigorously for their community. While transgender women are beginning to garner visibility, there is a set of people who remain invisible among the marginalised. They are transmen. They remain unassessed and disparaged, even within the transgender community. There are very few research papers on transmen. What are their literary contributions? Are they accepted and celebrated as their brotherhood? (transgender women) This paper serves as an earnest explorative study of Thomas McBee - an American journalist and writer who was the first transgender man to fight (boxing) in Madison Square Garden. The paper will also take a close look at the books written by him: *Man Alive: A True Story of Violence, Forgiveness, and Becoming a Man* (2014), published by City Light Publishers, and *Amateur: A True Story About What Makes a Man* (2018), published by Scribner. The paper will also highlight how Thomas McBee used narrative techniques like self-reflexivity, vulnerability, emotional honesty, and interweaving personal narrative with societal commentary to create an impact on society. The paper intends to contribute an in-depth insight into how people question their gender identity, pass through dysphoria, and redefine societal expectations.

.Keywords: *Transmen, Dysphoria, Gender Contour, Narratives, Thomas Mabee, Transgender*

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Proceeding of Two-Day International Conference on "Emerging Practices in Teaching - Learning of English Language and Literature: A Journey from Theory to Praxis." (ICEPTLELL-2024) on 1st & 2nd February 2024, Govt. City College, Hyderabad.

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**INTRODUCTION**

For a very long time, the contours of male identicalness have been strictly carved, emitting long shadows of anticipation and obstruction. Within these boundaries, crossing the circumstances of being transgender, and especially, being a trans man, becomes a herculean process of both questioning and moulding those boundaries. There is an absolute lack of attention to transmasculine identities. Whenever the word transsexual is discussed, the talk generally leads to male-to-female sexual identities. But FTM (female-to-male) also do exist. They remain mostly unnoticed and invisible. India is neither new to such identities nor it is a Westerners' propaganda. Research confirms the existence of transmasculine identities in bygone India. But the problem is narratives. In her essay, *Trans Masculinity in Indian Mythology: Misinterpreted, Forgotten?*, Rima Ghosh says that very few Indian traditional and mythological stories stand as testimony to the existence of transmasculine identities in ancient India. But they are not as recurrent as transfeminine identities. Devdutt Pattanaik says,

"Shikhandini, who became Shikhandi, is what modern queer vocabulary would call a female-to-male transsexual, as her body goes through a very specific genetic change. But retellers avoid details and tend to portray him/ her either as an eunuch (castrated male), a male-to-female transgender (a man who wears women's clothes as if he felt like a woman), an intersexed hermaphrodite, or simply a man who was a woman (Amba) in his past life. It reveals a patriarchal bias even in the queer space" (Patranabish).

DISCUSSION

In the words of Bettcher and Heyes, many feminists have regarded transgenders as either gender betrayers or pretenders. Transsexuals who choose to transition from one sex to another are seen as reiterating the sexist model by seeming to move "effortlessly" to the other box. In this sense, FTMs are considered traitors because they have gained male power without earning it and have turned their backs on women's oppression. (Swetha, 16-20)

In her second book, *A Life in Trans Activism*, Revathi - a trans woman, extends her insight into one of the least talked about experiences on the gender trajectory, that of being a trans man. Revathi introduces us to the poignant, intense, and occasionally tragic tales of marginalisation, bravery, resistance, and victory of multiple transgender people, referring to them as her sons. The book leaves the reader questioning the safety and comfort of trans-sexual people that society takes for granted. Revathi cites that it is an unusual feature of the book that it captures the narratives of trans men, who are a 'highly invisibilized and marginalized gender minority'. She further adds that she wanted stories of transmen to form an important part of the book. As a trans woman, she can identify herself as a woman, and similarly, those trans men can identify themselves as men. She proudly acknowledges herself as the mother figure for many trans men. She wants to take these young people with her by leading the way, just like a mother would do to her offspring. Revathi offers the readers an insight into one of the least talked about experiences on the gender trajectory, that of being a trans man. Calling several female-to-male trans persons her 'sons', Revathi



puts before us their moving, passionate, and sometimes tragic stories of marginalization, courage, resistance, and triumph. The book, *A Life in Transactivism* will leave the reader questioning the 'safe' and 'comfortable' binaries of male/female that so many of us take for granted (Swetha)

Misconceptions about trans men often centre around their perceived lesbian identity, which may be a reflection of society's reluctance to acknowledge someone who was biologically assigned as female as male. (Patranabish) Gender fluidity is the core theme of Devdutt Pattanaik's historic books. In his book, *Shikandi and Other Queer Tales they Don't Tell You*, he celebrates queerness. He says, "The hijra, perhaps, the most vocal manifestation of queerness in India, refuses to stay invisible. Ignored by the mainstream, often rejected by her own family, and reduced to a joke in popular entertainment, she claps in the crowded streets, demanding to be seen." He further adds that in the karmic worldview, one can be queer because of a bane or boon. In the 'one-life worldview,' they are queer because they choose to be and it is an expression of individuality and an earnest effort to defy authority.

Nandini Krishnan's *Invisible Men: Inside India's Transmasculine Networks* delves into the experiences of transgender men living in India. The book deals with the difficulties associated with hormonal shifts and sex reassignment surgery, the prejudices transmen encounter, and the problems of social and familial alienation. To debunk myths and educate readers about the realities of being transgender in a prejudiced society, Krishnan speaks with several transgender men and publishes the

transcripts of their interviews. In the Preface, she writes,

"When I hear the word 'transman', I think of the dimpled smile of the student who calls me 'Akka'; I think of a bodybuilder who spends four hours a day at the gym and has broader shoulders than any cisman I know; I think of a cinematographer and the heart emoticons with which he ends our WhatsApp chats; I think of the thoughtful eyes of an activist who does not subscribe to any pronoun, not even gender-neutral ones... These are the images I hope will unfold in the next few hundred pages."

Though we have very few transmasculine narratives in India, there are a considerable number of literary pieces available worldwide. Maxim Februari (*The Making of a Man; Notes on Transsexuality*), Max Wolf Valerio (*The Testosterone Files: My Hormonal and Social Transformation from Female to Male*), and Thomas Page McBee are some of the prominent names lingering around the transmasculine literature.

Thomas Page McBee is an American transgender journalist, television writer, and amateur boxer. He was the first transgender man to box in Madison Square Garden, which he discusses in *Amateur*. His first book, *Man Alive*, won a Lambda Literary Award for Transgender Nonfiction ("Thomas Page McBee"). McBee's plaintive explorations, particularly in "*Man Alive*" and "*Amateur: A True Story About Amateur Men*," offer a sporadic glance into the emotional nuances and lived narratives of trans men. He trades a tapestry of vulnerability and strength through his forthright prose and ruminative storytelling, showcasing the triumphs and tribulations of reconciling personal truths with societal



expectations. The narratives of McBee challenge the rigid notions of masculinity and, at the same time, feast on the magnanimity of self-discovery. He intends to convey that one's gender identity is not an end but a means to self-definition, navigated by internal and societal conflicts.

Henry Giardina observes the works of McBee in the following lines. "The act of writing could amount to a kind of revenge. But empathy, instead, is McBee's objective, the most important part of becoming real in one's own eyes. 'Being human,' he concludes, 'means being at the mercy of others.' That's a part of aspiration, too. We are born human; with hard work, we achieve humanity."

NPR Books, BuzzFeed, Kirkus, and Publisher's Weekly all voted Thomas Page McBee's Lambda-winning debut memoir, *Man Alive*, the best book of the year. His follow-up, *Amateur*, described as "refreshing [and] radical" (The Guardian), was translated into multiple languages, named the best book of 2018 by numerous publications, and shortlisted for both the Wellcome Book Prize and the UK's Baillie-Gifford nonfiction book prize. ("Thomas Page McBee").

"The stories we tell ourselves can feel like a weapon to someone else" says McBee and he adds that despite the historical realities of our existence, ongoing attempts to "erase" trans identities continue to have real, material consequences. About the iconic Pride Parades, he claims that pride is the antithesis of shame. "We are here; we are queer, and, even if you can't see us, we can't be erased. We don't need a parade to make ourselves known" (Page). His books illuminate the contours of gender dysphoria, not as a

static state of dissonance but as a dynamic force that propels individual journeys.

Man Alive: A True Story of Violence, Forgiveness and Becoming a Man (2014)

According to Roxane Gay, *Man Alive* is a sweet, tender memoir. He adds that Thomas Page McBee deftly recounts what has shaped him into the man he has become and how—from childhood trauma to a mugging in Oakland where he learned of his body's ability to save itself. He also compliments that it is a memoir about forgiveness and self-discovery, but mostly it's about love—so much love. Further, he clarifies that McBee takes us into his capable hands and shows us what it takes to become a man who is gloriously, gloriously alive. A significant portion of *Man Alive* is concentrated on one time period: McBee's late 20s, a turning point in which his need to comprehend the causes of his father's abuse, his marriage, his acceptance that he will become a man and experience gender transition, and his own struggle with the peculiar mercy of his mugger all come to a head. Instead of watering down a larger "memoir" with background information and superfluous imagery, he capitalises on the momentum that develops when a writer concentrates on one of life's turning points. McBee writes with precision, structuring each sentence to make a strong point. *Man Alive* not only provides the reader with information about trans storytelling but also about the creative nonfiction genre. The focus of *Man Alive*, rather, is held within its first sentence: "What makes a man?" Its uncertainty, its yearning, its deceptive simplicity, its focus on mythical meanings rather than physical ones, its potentially dark undertones, and its potentially liberating ones chart



their course through an early adulthood that is indebted to, yet so much more, than an outward, bodily shift from “female” to male. (Kellaway and Page)

Amateur: A True Story about What Makes a Man (2018)

The author of this ground-breaking book is training for a charity fight at Madison Square Garden while attempting to resolve the complex connection between violence and masculinity. Through his boxing experiences—learning how to be hit and how to respond to blows; battling the gym's camaraderie; facing betrayals and facing his own physical strength—McBee explores the gravity of male aggression, the ubiquity of gender stereotypes, and the constraints of traditional masculinity. As McBee traces a new path, a new kind of masculinity, both inside and outside the ring, *Amateur*—a comprehensive examination of gender in our society—is ultimately a story of hope. In this scintillating exploration of living, fighting and healing, the stereotypes are questioned and the realities of masculinity are shifted. The Guardian compliments the book, saying,

"In an age when identity feels so splintered and fractional, McBee's empathy with men feels refreshing, but it is his determination to be accountable that is radical. He resolves his own masculinity crisis by doing the things men often think they're doing, but so often are not: listening, asking questions, seeking help, being vulnerable." ("Thomas Page McBee")

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN THOMAS PAGE MCBEE'S WORKS

Amateur and *Man Alive* both make effective use of a potent blend of narrative techniques to amplify McBee's story. McBee constantly reflects on his experiences, analyzing his thoughts and feelings. This creates a sense of intimacy and vulnerability, drawing readers into his journey of self-discovery. He doesn't shy away from sharing his vulnerabilities and emotional struggles. This rawness allows readers to connect with him on a deeper level and empathise with his experiences. He skillfully blends his personal experiences with broader societal issues related to gender, masculinity, and violence. This adds depth and significance to his narrative, prompting readers to think critically about these issues. McBee often uses flashbacks to contrast moments in his past with his present experiences. This juxtaposition highlights how his understanding of himself and the world has evolved. He also paints a vivid picture of his experiences through his use of sensory details and evocative language. This helps readers feel immersed in the story and connect with him on a deeper emotional level. He effectively uses dialogue to reveal character motivations and build relationships. This adds depth and complexity to the people he encounters, making them feel real and relatable. McBee occasionally employs humour and irony to lighten the mood and provide comic relief. This helps to balance the heavier aspects of his story and makes it more engaging for readers. The adeptness of McBee is found in the words of Roxane Gay, "He takes us in his capable hands and shows us what it takes to become a man who is gloriously, gloriously alive." ("Thomas Page McBee")



CONCLUSION

Transmen remain invisible; they are considered marginalized among the marginalized. The mythological evidence will secure their place in society, ignite their inner passion and help them search for their self-identity. The limited number of narratives, especially autobiographical tales in Indian scenarios may highlight the grim situation of trans men. On the other hand, the works of Thomas McBee serve as a powerful example of how transmen are pushing boundaries and asserting their rightful place within the literary landscape. While further research is necessary to fully understand the diverse experiences of trans men, McBee's work undoubtedly paves the way for critical discourse and broader societal acceptance.

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