

Celebrating homosexuality and Female Masculinity in Kimberly Peirce's movie *Boys Don't Cry*

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Abstract

This research argues that Kimberly Peirce's movie "*Boys Don't Cry*" can be read as emancipative gender narrative that strongly resists Heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity by putting forward female masculinity and celebrating homosexual identity. Our paper focus on some ways narrative has deliberately challenged gender discourse; firstly by resisting Heteronormative social complex and secondly by dismantling male-centric masculinity. This paper further claims that the expression of each rebellious dialogue and contexts within the narrative of *Boys Don't Cry* have contributed to give alternative justice for all socially victimized transgender. It also explains the way movie questions the long sustained subjectivities of heterosexual gender discourse and tries to normalize the existence of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) population in American society. Our paper develops to the conclusion that the 1999 crime drama *Boys Don't Cry* not only advocates gender freedom but also exposes homosexual realities and the brutal consequence of society's failure to accept this fact.

Keywords : Masculinity, Homosexuality, Queer, Identity, Gender, Sexuality

1 Introduction

that Kimberly Peirce's movie "*Boys Don't Cry*" can be read as emancipative gender narrative that strongly resists Heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity by putting forward female masculinity and celebrating homosexual identity. This paper focus on some ways narrative has deliberately challenged gender discourse; firstly by resisting Heteronormative social complex, secondly by dismantling male-centric masculinity and thirdly by normalizing homosexuality. This paper further claims that the expression of each rebellious dialogue and contexts within the narrative of '*Boys Don't Cry*' have contributed to give alternative justice for all socially victimized transgender. It also explains the way movie questions the long sustained subjectivities of heterosexual gender discourse and tries to normalize the existence of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) population in American society. This paper progress to the conclusion that the 1999 crime drama "*Boys Don't Cry*" not only advocates gender freedom but also exposes homosexual realities and the brutal consequence of society's failure to accept this fact.

The 1993 homicide of three young people in Falls City, Nebraska began as just one more crime statistic when the victims identified as Lisa Lambert, Philip DeVine, and Brandon Teena was found shot to death in Lambert's farmhouse. Many national news media picked up the story when Brandon Teena was identified as Teena Brandon, a female-to-male transsexual from

Lincoln, Nebraska, who had been “passing” in Falls City and dating a local teenager, Lana Tisdell (Fairington 2013)

As more detail unveils, the public learned that two local ex-convicts, John Lotter and Tom Nissen who were a friend to Brandon, went mad when they learn that Brandon was a biological female; they repeatedly raped and beat him mercilessly. When Brandon went far to file sexual assault and rape charges against them, they hunted and shot him as he tried to hide under a blanket, then stabbed him to death. After allowing Lisa Lambert to place her infant son in his crib, Lotter and Nissen gunned her down and shot the other witness, Philip DeVine. Lotter and Nissen were convicted of first-degree murder (Holden 1998). The story was not in media highlight till filmmaker Kimberly Peirce brought it back in 1999 biographical crime drama “Boys Don’t Cry,” based on the life of Brandon Teena.

The study explores the movie’s potential to “destabilize binary gender systems” (Halberstam, p. 295). It argues that Peirce’s film function to justify Brandon’s life story, offering film audience a new narrative that opposes biased social restrictions related to mainstream sexuality discourse and transgender issues. The most basic statement in Heteronormativity is that people are perceived under two distinct and complementary genders; either male or female with their own unique natural roles in life. It believes that heterosexuality is the standard or default sexual orientation anyone can have and any kind of sexual relationships is only appropriate between opposite sexes. Heterosexuality is thus considered a vital aspect of human nature, and homosexuality counts as the perverse denial of one’s real self. In short, Heteronormativity is culturally accepted principle of social order that determine all forms of gender difference into its female-male binary gender system.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical insight of the study depends on ‘Queer Theory’ to analyze the issue of Heteronormative resistance in Boys Don’t Cry. It stands on supporting feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and also focus on LGBT studies. On the one hand, the feminist claim emphasizes on the inspection of socially constructed sexual identities and traits, on the other hand, LGBT studies focused its inquiries into natural and unnatural phenomena regarding homosexual behavior.

Queer Theory

Queer theory was developed in the early 1990s in the fields of queer studies and women's studies. The term “queer theory” was first coined by Italian feminist and film theorist Teresa de Lauretis during the conference at University of California, Santa Cruz in 1990. It comprises both queer readings of texts and conceptualizing 'queerness' itself. It’s heavily influenced by the work of Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam and many others (Malinowitz 168-184). The queer theory further develops to include any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls under normative or deviant types. Queerness has been associated most prominently with LGBT subjects, but its theoretical frame also includes such topics as cross-dressing androgynous physiques and personalities, gender uncertainty and genital-surgery. While doing the critical study, we can find many of such contexts in ‘Boys don’t cry,’ ranging from the issue of a whim to act like a man to other transgender plights.

Review of Literature

Judith Halberstam explains in her book 'In A Queer Time and Place' how she first came to know about Brandon Teena's tragedy:

In December 1993, I remembered reading a short story in the newspaper about an execution-style killing in rural Nebraska. The story seemed unremarkable except for one small detail buried in the heart of the report: one of the murder victims was a young female-bodied person who had been passing as a man. The murder of this young transgender person sent shock waves through queer communities in the United States. (22)

This quotation illustrates how a hate crime like Brandon's murder touches the whole transsexual community. After witnessing a crime like that, every member of the community feels like they are the next. However, not only the transsexual group was affected but gay and lesbian people as well, infuriating whole LGBT community.

After the tragic incident of Brandon's murder, Falls City became a news hub for many journalist and photographer wanting to know the whole story. The reports they made, however, highlights a much darker side of Brandon. Referring to the same context, Suzanne Woodward writes:

His masculine appearance and behavior are. . . depicted as a lie perpetrated in order to exploit naïve teenage girls sexually and financially. Newspapers foregrounded Brandon's 'criminality' (credit card theft, cheque forgery, gender 'fraud') in an effort to relegate him to a criminal underclass safely distant from 'normal' law-abiding citizens, and at times to produce implicit revenge logic for his murder. (186)

As this quotation suggests, newspapers ignored gender issues and fabricated the information to prove Brandon as a criminal and a liar, thus providing an excuse, for his murderers. However, its movie adaptation emphasis and pose blame for the murder on the gender issues that Brandon represents. In the movie, we can see how Brandon's friendship is celebrated by his buddies Tom and John in Falls City when he looks like a man and behaves like one. But the story takes a pathetic twist when his friends find out about his feminine physical traits and female genital.

Resisting Heteronormative Social Complex

'Boys Don't Cry' revisits American queerness towards homosexuality and it also poses significant questions regarding the concept of 'just two genders.' The movie further problematizes outdated definitions of heterosexual masculinity and its privileges in American society. As stated by Judith Butler, the scholar of queer theory "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, identity is performativity constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results". The movie is also based on the same ground, questioning gender identity and queerness at the same time.

In the scene when Tom and John doubt about the sexuality of Bardon, we can see the graphic representations of Heteronormative complex as the sickness of society. When two heterosexuals males brutally assault a homo Bardon, splitting apart his clothes in order to

“prove” him a female and later they repeatedly rape him as the exposition of their masculinity. Both Tom and John went mad after knowing that they were hanging out with a ‘homo’. Especially John was further outraged with the fact that Bardon was making love with Lana, whom he secretly loves. So just to prove Bardon’s queerness to Lana, he forcefully drags her to look at his genitals “Look at your boyfriend “. Their anger towards Bardon and his homosexual self was so much intense that they again trap Bardon outside Lana’s home, take him in isolation and repeatedly take turn raping him.

The act of violence towards ‘homosexual’ is usually considered as normal in heteronormative society. In the movie, after Bardon is brutally raped, John tells him ‘you know you brought this on yourself’ and Bardon reply ‘I know it’s my fault’. Thought the character submit his self towards normative discourse by accepting his queerness, the narrative of movie challenge Heteronormativity in many ways. As the movie progress, the implicit message is circulated to the audience that Bardon is not ‘queer’ rather the perception of society towards homosexual need reformation. The movie uses graphic violence scene to represent Tom and John’s sense of heterosexuality as sick. Many media representation of queerness has long sustained the perspective that individuals with a different gender are not counted under normal gender standard and their queer gender behavior is usually depicted as unnatural. However, the narrative of *Boys Don’t Cry* problematizes not the homosexual character but the cultural construction of Heteronormative social structure and its inherent biased gender view. Moreover, the ending of the movie also satirizes that sexual intolerance which often results in violence against those who try to challenge Heteronormative discourse in society.

Thus, the narratives of biographic movie ‘*Boys Don’t Cry*’ successfully depict prejudice social behavior and perception that foster Heteronormative. During the progression of the story, the movie resists the mainstream discourse of Heteronormativity —instead of homosexuality. Through the characterization of lead characters and depiction of events, *Boys Don’t Cry* advocates normalizing homosexuality in the social domain.

Dismantling Male-Centric Masculinity

In the movie, the homosexual character Brandon Teena performs stereotypical macho masculinity in such a way that it challenges the masculine sense of other heterosexual boys namely Tom and John. The plot of the movie successfully executes Brandon’s masculinity through various dramatic contexts. Firstly when Brandon attempt to develop a male identity around his friends, he abandons his self and adopt a kind of Alfa-male behavioral traits that Tom and John exhibits. The way Brandon’s character effectively express masculinity vibes in the movie, it ridicules heteronormative ideology and challenges the biologically loaded assumption of what it takes to be a male or female.

In his work *Transsexualism: Reflections on the Persistence of Gender and the Mutability of Sex*, Judith Shapiro mention that “transsexuals must work hard at passing in their new gender status” in order to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a ‘natural’ member of that gender” (Shapiro, 2008, p.257) and it’s what Brandon does in the movie. The homosexual character encounters his dreamed masculine version during a bar fight when he makes friendship with Tom and John. Brandon’s journey of imitating masculinity continued when he went to Falls City party with John and Tom. During the party Brandon finds himself among drunken rowdies, trying nasty actions— a game where one needs to hold the rope and stand on the bumper of the truck as it moves around a dirt track.

Brandon was asked to try it: “Come on, stud. Let’s go cowboy. Be a man.” After hearing the call of John and to prove his masculinity, Brandon climbs the truck and tries that nasty act. Later when Lana later asks Brandon why he let John tie him in the truck and drags like a dog? He replied, “I thought that’s what guys do around here.” After spending some time with then, Brandon developed a kind of intense desire to win Lana and began to try his own ways of impressing her, which was very different from Tom and John. When Brandon used to talk in a shy and tender manner, it debunks a very different side of being male. While trying to befriend Lana, he shows a new version of masculinity- soft maleness that young girls usually prefer. His sensitive nature, tender love, the act of buying gifts and mostly his emphasis on women’s sexual value rather than rewarding his own masculinity. Once when John inquires Lana regarding her interest in Brandon, she replied: “He’s no big he-man like you, but there is something about him that I like”. Soon both Tom and John feel outcast by the newcomer in the group.

Normalizing Homosexuality

Looking from the perspective of Lana, Brandon’s version of masculinity was more ‘normal’ than the aggressive maleness shown by Tom and John. *Boys Don’t Cry* did more than just dismantling traditional male-centered masculinity, it implicitly advocate the audience to accept the new form of maleness portrayed by Brandon.

Throughout the movie, only in very few scenes, feminine pronouns are used to refer Brandon and those referring to him as a female are the male characters whose masculinity has been challenged by Brandon’s personality. Since the beginning of the movie, he was shown in men’s fashion, stylish haircut, meeting dates – which implies that Brandon actually regards himself as a man; therefore living like a man is not shown as an abnormal act in the movie. According to Shapiro “Transsexuals commonly believe that it is when they are trying to play the role of their anatomical sex, as opposed to their subjectively experienced gender, that they are trying to pass as someone they are not” (p. 258). Going with this claim, there exist very few accounts of Brandon Teena life as a girl, the portrayal of his real life in the movie begins as a young man. In the movie *Boys Don’t cry*, the story celebrates his self-made identity more than his biological reality- in most of the scene, he is featured as the man.

Going back to the main point of argument, *Boys Don’t Cry* tries to establish an alternative perception of masculinity- as femanine masculinity, through the unique characterization of Brandon. By ignoring the conservative restrictions of sexual identity, it appeals for a new domain of gender experience as performative rather than biologically ascribed. Brandon’s masculine characteristic throughout the movie adds more authenticity to the constructive nature of gender and dismantle Heteronormativity viewpoint.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, this research finds that *Boys Don’t Cry* tries to problematize heteronormativity and justify the way transsexuals establish their own version of gender in the social domain. This movie also challenges the basic (that is, anatomical possession) on which gender are allotted to anyone and imply that such biological allocation can never create the reality of gender in social life. Evidently, the character of Brandon is portrayed as fictional proof. In this way, the narratives of *Boys Don’t Cry* give more space to Brandon’s own social experiences of sexual identity and try to prove what he believes as true. The plot and storyline of the movie is very uniquely framed as the narrative never shows any scene where Brandon has to

prove his masculinity to himself- just some other male characters demand that proof. Brandon's self-actualization and belief in his masculinity is the best resistance to Heteronormativity.

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