



MASQUERADE AS PERFORMANCE: THE BUTCH-FEMME GENDER ROLES

Antonia Navarro-Tejero

Resumo: Neste artigo, examinamos os papéis *butch-femme* em dois produtos culturais do pop contemporâneo indiano: *Strange Obsession* (1992), o romance *best-seller* de Shobha Dé, e o filme de Bollywood, *Girlfriend* (2004), de Karan Razdan. A partir dos conceitos de performatividade de gênero, de Judith Butler, e de *masquerade*, argumentamos que ambos os autores retratam o lesbianismo a partir de um sistema de gênero binário. Os termos que indicam masculinidade (*butch*) e feminilidade (*femme*) dependem, no caso, da estabilidade da dicotomia homossexual/heterossexual, apresentando uma compreensão binária e heteronormativa da feminilidade e da masculinidade.

Palavras-chave: Heteronormatividade; *butch-femme*; *Girlfriend*; *Strange Obsession*.

Abstract: In this essay^[1], we examine the *butch-femme* roles in two contemporary Indian pop cultural products: Shobha Dé's bestseller novel *Strange Obsession* (1992) and Karan Razdan's Bollywood film *Girlfriend* (2004). Following Judith Butler's gender performativity and the concept of the *masquerade*, we argue that both authors portray lesbianism in terms of a binary gender system, whose masculine (*butch*) and feminine (*femme*) terms depend on the stability of the dichotomy homosexual/heterosexual, displaying thus a binary and heteronormative understanding of femininity and masculinity.

Keywords: Heteronormativity; *butch-femme*; *Girlfriend*; *Strange Obsession*.

Girlfriend and *Strange Obsession*^[2] portray two single women who are aspiring models and are caught, unwillingly, in a tormented relationship with their same-sex 'best friends' in Bombay. These mannish female characters happen to be paranoid, manifesting a violent obsession towards their innocent villa-mates whenever the latter try to initiate a heterosexual relationship. Both love triangles construct a task-roles continuum: the naïve, feminine and vulnerable *femme* (Sapna in *G*, and Amrita in *SO*), the possessive and sexually dominant *butch* – the only one who is presented as a lesbian and seems to have an obsessive-compulsive disorder – (Tanya in *G*, and Minx in *SO*), and the superhero (Rahul in *G*, and Rakesh in *SO*). In the end, the *butch* is condemned to fail both as a woman and as a lover and, as dueto her 'unhealthy' obsession, violently dies so that the *femme* is liberated and can live a happy and conventional heterosexual marriage.^[3]

Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimation of patriarchy, and which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (1995, p. 77). Femininity is, on the other hand, defined as a lack, an absence of masculinity (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Tanya and Minx are sporty masculine women who harbour an obsessive feeling for Sapna and Amrita, respectively. The one playing the *butch* in the dichotomy is represented as a 'mannish' lesbian. She is later seen as violent abnormal 'other' as against a more acceptably dormant, 'normal' 'feminine' heterosexual woman. Sapna in *G* is, on the other hand, portrayed as the innocent girl who is helplessly dependent on Tanya, as in a 'normal' heterosexual relationship. This binary opposition, as Connell himself admits, does not allow "the usage in which we call some women 'masculine' and some men 'feminine,' or some actions and attitudes 'masculine' or 'feminine,' regardless of who displays them" (p. 69). Here, we find extremes that need to be balanced (hyperfemininity and masculine femininity). According to Connell, lesbian relationships should offer a way for protagonists to deconstruct their own status as those who rely on heteronormative patriarchy. By definition, lesbian relationships have the potential to be a site of critique of resistance to, and a disengagement from the very premises of the category 'woman.' But our protagonists are not portrayed this way, as they fail to shift femininity from its position as the negated Other of hegemonic masculinity and to break through the dualistic relation in order to have a more equal construction. Butler furthers questions that:

if there is a masculinity at work in *butch* desire, that is, if that is the name through which that desire comes to make sense, then why shy away from the fact that there may be ways that masculinity emerges in women, and that feminine and masculine do not belong to differently sexed bodies? Why shouldn't it be that we are at an edge of sexual difference for which the language of sexual difference might not suffice, and that this follows, in a way, from an understanding of the body as constituted by, and constituting, multiple forces? (2004, p. 197-8).

According to Jagose, queer theory suggests we understand identities as arbitrary fictional constructs which are ideologically motivated (p. 130). Butler states that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990, p. 43-44). If gender is constituted performatively through repeated acts, we can understand Tanya's and Minx's masculinity as a repetition of the constituent practices of masculine femininity, and not as the masculine mind in the female body found in sexual inversion.

Using the concept of the masquerade, and Butler's gender performativity, Jagger argues that the butch-femme roles may demonstrate that "the very idea of an original heterosexuality is a myth (...) [and that] the route to change in this area is through repetitions that subvert dominant gender norms in the hope of destabilizing and displacing these regimes" (p. 32-34). Jagger explains that in Butler's later work, that she has given a more thorough explanation of citationality, as when analyzing Lacan's theorization of heterosexuality:

On the one hand, if the 'being,' the ontological specification of the Phallus, is masquerade, then it would appear to reduce all being to a form of appearing, the appearance of being, with the consequence that all gender ontology is reducible to the play of appearances. On the other hand, masquerade suggests that there is a 'being' or ontological specification of femininity *prior* to the masquerade, a feminine desire or demand that is masked and capable of disclosure, that, indeed, might promise an eventual disruption and displacement of the phallogocentric signifying economy (1990, p. 60).

However, the butch-femme roles portrayed in *G* and *SO* do not displace and do not expose the myth that heterosexuality is the 'original' form. Rather the opposite is true as both authors reinforce the heteronormative system. In *G* and *SO*, the butch-femme roles enacted by the lesbians are, following Sullivan, simply a "harmless exotic spectacle for the (...) liberal-minded viewer" (p. 96). In *SO* and *G*, we find this binary played out by two women. Supermodels Sapna and Amrita enact a hyperfemininity, as exemplified by Butler's drag queens – a form of dramaturgical, glamorized femininity that bears little relation to those activities conventionally given over to women, and reflected in the popular media (2004, p. 213), and the other enacts the hegemonic masculinity, played out by the hypermasculinized females Tanya and Minx, conforming to the stereotypical butch-femme model.

In both works, Razdan and Dé focus repeatedly on outward appearance, treating gender as fundamentally about how one is perceived and recognized by others. In *G*, Tanya has been depicted as a man hater, with an urge, though, to be 'like men.' This is revealed by her style of dressing, walking, riding a motorcycle, urinating anywhere (considered in Indian culture as masculine behavior). She cuts off her hair to shed the last vestiges of femininity, as if mimicking a male. The same thing occurs in *SO* with Minx, who smokes Cartier, wears Armani cologne, jeans and jacket, drives a black jeep, and hangs out with "local dadas," who look like drug dealers, loyal to her (p. 9). And in this case, she has her breasts removed by a plastic surgeon, leaving in her body jagged scars which began under her breasts and went under her armpits, because as she tells Amrita:

I got the feeling that you didn't like them (...) When I was a teenager, I used to try my best to tie them down. But ... my father ... yes...that pervert...he used to fondle them constantly and tell me how beautiful they were...I began to really hate my breasts after that. Maybe I blamed them for whatever was happening between me and my father. I used to curse myself and think that had they been smaller this horrible thing would never have happened. (...) I thought I saw revulsion in your eyes when you looked at me, especially when I thought I saw you staring at my ugly enormous breasts. (...) And then I knew I had to do it. And I knew you'd like that I'd done. Like me, also" (134-135). (...) And then I met you...fell in love (p. 134-135).

It seems that characters Tanya and Minx have been inspired and informed by the works of Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), who popularized the term 'sexual inversion' with a book of the same title (1897). He defined a lesbian as a sexually inverted woman with a degree of masculinity, that is, sudden and energetic movements, different attitude, walk and voice inflections, direct gaze, and, above all, her unintimidated way of sexually being with a man. This stereotypical portrayal of the lesbian as an 'invert' (a man trapped in a woman's body) harks back to the theories of Western late-nineteenth-century sexologists. It still lies in the sexual discourse of Indian society, and is attributable to the influence of the Victorian era in the country. Thus, both works examine the sexological model of the female 'invert,' which demonstrates how theories of inversion fail to distinguish between cross-gender identification and same-sex desire. Razdan and Dé share the stereotypes of the popular imagination about lesbians, as they consider binary role plays as an unavoidable part of lesbian relationships. Nineteenth-century British sexology differentiated between two types of women homosexuals: the 'inverted congenital' male-oriented, and the 'pseudolesbian' who could have been heterosexual had she not succumbed to the wiles of the true reversed and who has the appearance and behavior of the feminine heterosexual woman of her time.¹⁴ Lesbian sexuality is constructed along the lines of a heterosexual male's sexuality (even confused with transgenderedness). The implication here then is that lesbians are women who want to act as men, and in the male-dominated world of mainstream films and popular fiction, lesbian relationships can only be introduced if they are constructed along this rhetoric, and these lesbian relationships are then condemned later on.

As explained above, it has been interpreted by several academics and reviewers that Amrita's sexual encounters with other characters in the novel are a clear instance of the New Woman¹⁵ who refuses just to be a toy in the hands of tradition in which man has total control. Dé tries to depict Amrita as self-reliant. Her brother Ashish admires her ability to be apparently independent: "Amrita is capable of looking after herself. We all know that. When she decided to go to Bombay, nobody tried to stop her because we had full faith in her" (p. 147). Except for the protagonists' mothers, none seems to play the role of the stereotypical feminine. Distancing oneself from this prototypical femininity may be interpreted as a claiming of power, hence the reviews relating Amrita as the New Woman. For example, Gupta states that in doing so, Amrita disrupts the myth that a woman should maintain her virginity and indirectly be the 'slave' of man who would marry her, because she never wants to be a victim or commodity to be sold or bought (p. 27). However, the message the reader gets from Amrita's behavior is a totally different one, as she feels powerless with every lover. All her homosexual encounters are described by Dé as a sexual urge that cannot be controlled and whose consequences are regretful.

We can argue that Amrita and Sapna are victims of other women bought with the expensive gifts and lifestyle that Minx and Tanya offer, and in need of being rescued. Instead of being the New Women, they continue to embody the weaker sex, the innocent and hyperfeminized supermodel femme. Thus, these relationships replicate the same gender stereotypes that are considered oppressive in the heterosexual system, butch and femme, as mutually exclusive. In that line, Lee argues that butch, like masculinity in males, requires the feminine as its Other. Without femininity, masculinity makes no sense; and the butch needs to reject femininity, so women who

identify as butch emphasize their difference from other women. De Lauretis explains that in some films “whatever women may feel toward other women cannot be sexual desire, unless it be a ‘masculinization,’ a usurpation or an imitation of man’s desire” (p. 112). She has linked the notion of a ‘perverse desire’ for (masculine) fetishism with butch/femme role-playing in lesbian relationships. Elizabeth Grosz criticized her, demanding the need for lesbian analysis to move beyond concepts of Freudian phallic desire. Grosz rejects the notion that one must necessarily conceive of desire as a ‘lack’ or ‘absence’ or even ‘hole’ that seeks to be filled, whereby this ‘ontology of lack’ is then dangerously refigured in feminine-masculine terms (1997, p. 296). According to Sue-Ellen Case, “the butch is the lesbian woman who roundly displays the possession of the penis, while the femme takes on the compensatory masquerade of womanliness” (p. 300). In *SO*, we find a direct allusion to this stereotype in the dialogue between Minx and Amrita, as the first one announces: “OK, I’ll become a man, just to satisfy you. Is that what you want? I’ve been thinking about it myself. I’ve met a couple of surgeons too... the ones who reshaped my breasts. (...) I’m planning to undergo a sex-change operation. Yes, darling. I’ll do it for you. You want a prick to enter you — I’ll go out and get one” (p. 160), to which Amrita replies: “You may be able to get some quack to stitch on a plastic dick. But will that make me pregnant? Will you be able to fill my womb with a child?” (p. 160).

In the course of their butch/femme lesbian relationships, the tropes are consistently heterosexual.^[1] This has important implications especially in the butch-femme scenario been played out. The bodies of these ‘lesbian’ women are co-opted into the heteronormative gaze because both the butches as well as the femmes are governed by commodity aesthetics. Furthermore, when considering the lesbian body in relation to patriarchal heterosexual discourses, certain stereotypes become prevalent, for example that of the tomboy and the stereotype that the lesbian is really a man trapped in a woman’s body (Faderman, 1985, p. 317). In both works, after Tanya’s and Minx’s ultimate proclamation that they are lesbians, they go on to say that they hate men (because of child abuse) and that they are men trapped in the body of a woman. As Barbara Creed analyzes in her “Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys and Tarts,” the proper lesbian had short hair, wore sandals, jeans or boiler suit, flannel shirt and rejected all forms of make-up. In appearance, she hovered somewhere between the look of the butch lesbian, who wore men’s clothes and parodied men’s behavior and gestures, and the tomboy (p. 123),^[2] but for Butler, the butch community cannot really be seen as antifeminine, as many butches “are deeply, if not fatally, attracted to the feminine, and, in this sense, love the feminine” (2004, p. 197). Rahul in *G*, calls Tanya ‘*shaitansahela*’ which might be translated into ‘devilish butch,’ as Rahul made up that word out of the feminine *saheli*,^[3] which means she-friend. Thadani points out that the term *saheli* (along with *sakhi*) have historically described women who love women but have been purged of their eroticism over time and reshaped into simply female friendship.

Dé and Razdan deploy the urban setting of Bombay, not as a tolerant place where individual liberties can be performed, but as Sukthankar puts it, a cityscape decadent enough for women to love other women (xxiv).^[4] Lesbianism is, thus, associated with the modeling world of Bombay, where luxury, wealth and access to the West can corrupt an innocent’s mind and body. Against the backdrop of this exotic locale, representations of the lesbian bodies circulate in both works as commodities available for commercial exploitation for its exoticism and eroticism, but with a huge load of morality in that the voyeurism and sensationalism of lesbian erotica is predominantly exercised by and for a heterosexual male gaze. They fall into the stereotype that heterosexual authors use lesbian sexual encounters for commercial pornography. Ashwini Sukthankar states about lesbian representation in the media that they “were fetishized, made the symbol of Western debauchery, of feminist independence. (...) Again and again, our lives were boiled down to pornography or caricature” (xxii).^[5] *G* and *SO* warn young women against lesbians in particular, and against evil in general, as the first ‘evil condition’ is simply a consequence of wandering around a big metropolitan city like Bombay, and mingling with Anglos without the protection of the traditional extended family. The implicit message underlying both works is a warning against the insanity of a non-familiar relationship produced by a westernized, urban and modern setting, showing that the consequences of deviating from the heterosexuality are harsh. The gender binary is maintained because it has been challenged with no success. Razdan and Dé have portrayed lesbianism in terms of a binary gender system, whose masculine (butch) and feminine (femme) terms depend on the stability of the dichotomy homosexual/heterosexual, displaying thus a binary and heteronormative understanding of femininity and masculinity.

* **Antonia Navajo-Tejero** teaches Cultural Studies and South Asian Literature at [Universidad de Córdoba](#) (Spain), where she chairs the [Permanent Seminar on India Studies](#). She is Founder-President of the [Spanish Association for Interdisciplinary India Studies](#) (www.aeeii.org), and currently leads workpackage 3 “Docile bodies, metamorphoses and (re)generation” of the nationally funded research project “[Bodies in transit: from conflict to healing](#)”.

Works cited

BUTLER, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

BUTLER. *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

BUTLER. Imitation and Gender Insubordination. In: ABELOVE, Henry; BARALE, Michele Aina; HALPERIN, David M. (eds.). *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge. 1993. p. 307-320.

CASE, Sue-Ellen. Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic. In: ABELOVE, Henry; BARALE, Michele Aina; HALPERIN, David M. (eds.). *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1993. p. 294-306.

CONNELL, Raewyn. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.

- CREED, Barbara. Lesbian Bodies: tribades, tomboys and tarts. In: PRICE, Janet; SHILDRICK, Margrit (eds.). *Feminist Theory and the Body: a reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999. p. 111-124.
- DÉ, Shobhaa. *Strange Obsession*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1992.
- DE LAURETIS, Teresa. *The Practice of Love: lesbian sexuality and perverse desire*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- ELLIS, Havelock; SYMONDS, J.A. *Sexual Inversion*. 1897.
- FADERMAN, Lillian. *Surpassing the Love of Men: romantic friendship and love between women from the Renaissance to the present*. London: The Women's Press, 1985.
- Fire*. Dir. Deepa Mehta. Canada/India: Pathé, 1996. DVD.
- GROSZ, Elizabeth. The Labors of Love. Analyzing perverse desire: an interrogation of Teresa de Lauretis's *The Practice of Love*. In: WEED, Elizabeth; SCHOR, Naomi (eds). *Feminism meets Queer Theory*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997. p. 292-314.
- Girlfriend*. Dir. Karan Razdan. India: Video Sound, 2004. DVD.
- GUPTA, Jyotsna Agnihotri. "Feminist utopias: strategies for women's empowerment. In: KAUR, Iqbal (ed.). *Gender and Literature*. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1992.
- JAGGER, Gill. *Judith Butler: sexual politics, social change and the power of the performative*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- JAGOSE, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: an introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.
- KESSLER, Suzanne J., and Wendy McKenna. *Gender: an ethnomethodological approach*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978.
- RAY, Sohomjit. "Legibility, Erasure and the Neoliberal Assimilation of Same-Sex Desire in *Dostana*". *South Asian Review* 34.3 (2013): 159-174.
- REAY, Diane. 2001. "'Spice Girls,' 'Nice Girls,' 'Girlies' and 'Tomboys:' gender discourses, girls' cultures and femininities in the primary classroom". *Gender and Education*. 13.2: 153-166.
- SHAHANI, Parmesh. *GayBombay: Globalization, love and (be)longing in contemporary India*. New Delhi: Sage, 2008.
- SUKTHANKAR, Ashwini. *Facing the Mirror: lesbian writing from India*. Delhi: Penguin, 1999.
- SULLIVAN, Nikki. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.
- THADANI, Giti. *Sakhiani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India*. London: Cassell, 1996.

Notes:

[1] The author wishes to acknowledge the funding provided by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Research Project "Bodies in Transit", ref. FFI2013-47789-C2-1-P) and the European Regional Development Fund for the writing of this essay.

[2] From now on, references to *Strange Obsession* and *Girlfriend* are given in abbreviations (SO and G).

[3] In spite of all the similarities, *Girlfriend* is not a filmic adaptation of the novel *Strange Obsession*. The writer/director has claimed in an interview with Jha (2004) that the script is completely original.

[4] This would make a homophobic classification, which has a Western origin, as in Hinduism there is a long tradition of the third sex. An example could be the divinity Ardhanarishvara (androgynous form depicted as half Parvati and half Shiva), whose images are found starting first-century.

[5] The 'New Woman' emerged as an emancipatory ideal female character in the nineteenth century in Europe and North America, as a reaction to the limited role assigned to women during the Victorian era. In the India literary context, it refers to post-independence literature where the 'New Woman' has greater freedom, autonomy and individuality, challenging traditional gender roles.

[6] According to Judith Butler, heterosexuality always fails in its approximation of its ideal. She asks to reconsider "the homophobic charge that queens and butches and femmes are imitations of the Heterosexual real" because "if it were not for the notion of the homosexual as copy, there would be no construct of heterosexuality as origin" (1993, p. 313).

[7] For tomboys (Reay, 2001), rejection of the feminine goes along with identification with boys, with the adoption of a form of hegemonic masculinity and a claiming of a share of male power through acting as an honorary boy. For butch women, or at least for butch lesbians, the situation is possibly more complicated.

[8] There is an important association in India called Saheli (<https://sites.google.com/site/saheliorgsite/gender-sexuality>), which centers its campaigns around issues of control of women's sexuality by the family, community, social structures and the law, and since the *furor*

generated by the screening of the film *Fire* in the 90s, it has also been engaged with the rights of the LGBT community. As part of the Campaign for Lesbian Rights (CALERI) in 1999, Saheli worked to visibilize the issue and generate public debates. It is also a member of the coalition of NGOs "Voices Against 377."

[9] It is well-known the LGBTQI activism in Bombay. The first queer magazine, *Bombay Dost*, was published there in 1991. For more on the city, see Parmesh Shahani's *GayBombay: Globalization, Love and (Be)Longing in Contemporary India* (2008).

[10] Sohomjit Ray explains, when discussing film *Dostana*, that in a neoliberal narrative same-sex desire becomes another aspect of urban life that the neoliberal consumer-subject may encounter while trying to achieve the dream of making it in the big city and living a luxurious life marked by conspicuous consumption (p.160).