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GENDER AND IDENTITY IN LITERATURE FROM INDIA'S NORTHEAST

Mridul Bordoloi

Abstract

The aim of this article is to focus on issues of gender as reflected in contemporary short stories from Northeast India. I have included stories of Temsula Ao, Uddipana Goswami, Aruni Kashyap, Sibananda Kakoti, and Janice Pariat to explore different dimensions of gender dynamic and problematic, emphasizing on intersections with militarisation, precarity, class, identity, sexuality, and so forth. It is hoped that stories from three states of Northeast India - Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Meghalaya - will be able to uncover roiling gender issues confronting Northeast India in both general and specific senses.

Keywords: *gender, militarisation, precarity, identity, queer.*

Introduction

Gender Studies in the contemporary context is understood to be explorations of fields which includes women's studies, men's studies, as well as LGBTQ studies. Its foregrounding as a prominent discourse is attributed to post-structuralist theory with its philosophy of interrogating reductionist assumptions. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* considers "gender" to be a fluid category. According to her, the categorization into "masculinity" and "femininity" are basically social and cultural constructions. Here, there tends to be the constitution of binary between "inner"

and "outer", and the attendant claims of the inner being saddled with an "essence" that gets manifested in the outer through different "stylizations" in terms of gestures, postures, dressing, through what Judith Butler phrased as "so many styles of flesh" (Butler 1985, 11). Compulsory heterosexuality is assumed to be the norm, while homosexuality becomes a manifestation of deviant or aberrant sexual behaviour. The patriarchal society assigns certain rules as well asroles for designated gender identities, and it is expected that everyone would adhere to the norms stipulated by them, without taking into cognizance their will or desire. Therefore, in exploring the idea of Gender and Identity in the context of Literature from India's Northeast, one needs to be mindful of representing gender by problematizing it in whatever ways it presents with an opportunity. This paper would attempt to explore gender by contextualizing it in terms of certain dimensions, and reading literary texts (particularly, short stories) from India's Northeast from these dimensions.

Gender and Militarized Society

Preeti Gill, in her "Introduction" to *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's North East* (2010) stated,

> "To say that women have faced violence in situations of conflict is to state the obvious, but what it means in terms of the short-term and long-term impacts is something that is still being studied and analysed. While the most obvious impact is physical or sexual violence, the psychological scarring s a result of prolonged exposure to brutality and the restrictions placed for women in a patriarchal society have even greater consequences for their well-being. (Gill, Introduction, para 13)

Gill's above statement sums up clearly the impact on women's psyche in militarized societies where they become victims of both patriarchal restrictions and sexual violence.

Militarization has defined to a significant extent the cartographical imaginary of India's Northeast since the post-independence period. Easterine Kire, in the "Author's Introduction" to the novel *Bitter Wormwood* has clearly documented the Naga struggle for independence from the neo-imperial Indian state in this manner:

> The stories of torture documented seem to surpass each other in the army's inhuman treatment of the Nagas: men were tied to poles and burned; they were buried alive; their genitals were given electric currents. Each instance of torture was more gruesome and horrible than the next. The report lists the tortures and repression of the Nagas by the Indian army as i. execution in public, ii. mass raping, iii. deforming sexual organs, iv. mutilating limbs and body, v. electric shocks, vi. puncturing eyes, vii. hanging people upside down, viii. putting people in smoke-filled rooms, ix. burning down of villages, x. concentration camps, xi. forced starvation and labour. One of the stories of rape had as its intention the desecration of the village church of Yankeli where four minor girls were raped. The church building was abandoned by the villagers after that incident. (Kire, "Author's Introduction", para 5)

Such an incident (desecration of the church) finds resonance in Temsula Ao's short story "The Last Song" from her short-story anthology *These Hills Called Home*. This story is about a girl named Apenyo, who the narrator says was born to sing. She would break into a song at the slightest opportunity – at home, at community singing events, and also on Sundays at church. She had probably inherited her love for singing from her father, who was presently deceased. One particular year, the villagers were in an especially expectant mood because there was a big event coming up in the village church in about six months' time. This would be the dedication of the new church building. The villagers began the preparations with immense enthusiasm.

However, these were troubled times for the Naga people. The independence movement against the Indian state was gaining momentum, and the villages contributed to this movement by paying "taxes" to the "underground government." This village was no an exception, as they genuinely sympathized with the sub-nationalist cause of the underground insurgents. But the government swung into action. The narrator notes:

> A recent raid of an underground hideout yielded records of all such collections of the area and the government forces were determined to "teach" all those villagers the consequences of supporting the rebels' cause by paying taxes. (Ao, "The Last Song", para 7)

Unknown to them, a sinister plan was being hatched by the forces to demonstrate to the entire Naga community what "happens" when they "betrayed" their own government. It was decided that the forces would go to this particular village on the very day that the village folks would dedicate the new church building and arrest all leaders for their support to the underground insurgent outfit.

On the day of dedication, Apenyo, lead singer, was waiting inside the church to begin her solo rendition after the group song. As the choir song began, there was the sound of gunfire. Very soon the approaching soldiers surrounded the crowd, and demanded the leaders of the community to come out. But before they could do anything, Apenyo burst into her solo number, thereby exposing herself to these marauding soldiers. The soldiers were incensed with her as they felt that it was an act of open defiance. The leader of the army contingent grabbed Apenyo by the hair and dragged her away. But, she continued with her song. After that, the situation got out of hand. Villagers who attempted to flee were shot at, kicked and clubbed by the soldiers. Libeni, the mother of Apenyo, tried to search for the daughter, and was horrified to find her being raped by the army officer. As the mother attempted to free her daughter from the soldier's grasp, she was herself knocked down cold and raped multiple times. Both Apenyo and her mother could not survive such brutal onslaughts on their bodies, and succumbed to their injuries. The soldiers, then, opened random fire upon the crowd, killed many, and then set fire to the church. When later, the villagers arrived at theburnt-out site of the old church building, they found the charred remains of both mother and daughter.

Ao's horrifying story, in a way, depicts the fate of women in militarized society. It depicts how insurgency has affected the lives of the people of India's Northeast, and especially how women's bodies become objects of occupation or invasion in such traumatizing terms that it leaves indelible scars upon their collective psyche. The tragic deaths of Apenyo, an innocent teen-aged girl, and the mother

who tried to protect her, amply testifies to the vulnerability of women's bodies in militarized societies.

In another story of Temsula Ao titled "Soaba" about a mentally-disabled boy, we find how psychological scarring of the Naga people in militarized zones, is exacerbated by seemingly-innocuous terms like "convoy," "grouping," "curfew," and "situation" (Ao, "Soaba", para 5) – which have extremely sinister implications. The narrator in the story notes that convoy implies massive deployment of security forces; grouping generated chilling images of people being herded together and dislodged from their ancestral home, which was the worst form of humiliation that could be inflicted upon a proud race; curfew (a word which did not exist in their lexicon) became a dreaded fact of everyday life of the people residing in urban spaces; and the word situation implied all-out conflict among antagonistic forces.

In the story "Soaba," the depiction of a mentally-challenged boy as protagonist, could be quite symbolic. In militarized society, it is most often the innocent, law-abiding, meek citizens that happen to be caught in the crossfire in a "situation" between the underground insurgent outfit and the security forces of the State. Like Apenyo, the innocent girl who becomes a victim of the state's repressive apparatus, Soaba - the village "idiot" - is killed in a fit of rage for no fault of his, by the commander of a dreaded Home Guard squad – another rogue (state-sponsored) militarized faction, which became the "disquieting elements in the power struggle between two warring groups" (Ao, "Soaba", para 6). Through both these stories, Ao perhaps attempted to highlight the horrifying consequences to lives of common people cutting across rigid gender lines amid insurgency. The killing of innocents (both Apenyo and Soaba) is a "normal" phenomenon in violence-torn militarised society, and writings from India's Northeast, provide ample illustration of this fact.

Assamese writer, Uddipana Goswami, in the afterword to her short story anthology *No Ghosts in the City* attempted to understand the psyche of the people inhabiting the Northeast plagued by "violence and protracted conflicts" (Goswami, "Aftweword", para 1). She feels that "there is a lot of darkness in people's souls" ("Afterword, para 1), but there is also light. She feels that what makes us ultimately

human is the capacity to dispel the darkness. In her short story "Colours," gender in militarized society is intersected with identity-politics. In a way, identity-politics figured also in Temsula Ao's stories. However, her stories were more concerned in foregrounding the repressive functionalities of the state.

In Uddipana Goswami's "Colours," identity-politics is underscored by situating her story in a mofussil town of lower Assam – Kalguri, Borbari – which happens to be a Bodo community stronghold. This town became a hotbed of insurrectionist activity due to inter-community clashes between three minority factions – the indigenous Bodo community, the tea garden tribes or adivasis, and the East Bengali Muslim immigrants. Due to such inter-community dynamics, Kalguri transforms into a militarized zone. This is exacerbated by the intervention of the government's security forces who too have their own covert strategies in place.

In this story, the star-crossed love affair between an Adivasi boy named Dambaru and a Bodo girl named Deepti (who happens to be the daughter of the village headmaster), becomes the flashpoint of inter-ethnic clashes resulting in the murder of Dambaru on one side, and the devastation of the Bodo village as collateral damage, on the other.

In the wake of this violent conflict, Deepti goes missing, and it is later learnt that she was forcibly carried away by Adivasi attackers and dumped in a mustard field after perhaps being raped, from where she was picked up by "another group," perhaps alluding to the government security forces, which again subjects her to multiple rape, and eventually dumps her outside the army camp. She survives somehow, and eventually enlists in an underground Bodo militant organisation, and get indoctrinated into the sub-nationalist militant Bodo ideology. She, by dint of her education, swiftly rises in rank in this organisation's hierarchy. However, she ends up surrendering and getting "co-opted" into the mainstream society, with the government promising all sorts of assistance to "rehabilitate" her into the mainstream society. The fact that her lover Dambaru was killed by the Bodo insurgent group did not now figure much in her scheme of things after she joined the underground militant outfit. The question of survival becomes paramount.

Thus, Goswami's story uncovers the plight of women caught in militarized society, where they require the intervention of powerful forces to remain alive. Assertion of identity could, in a way, ensure protection, entitlements, and patronage, thereby ensuring their survival in spaces where the language of the gun wields enormous clout. Therefore, identity politics and insurrectionist ideologies appear to be the only pragmatic solution in militarized societies.

In another story titled "This is How we Lived," Uddipana Goswami recounts the horrors of women being used as docile bodies in militarized zones. The narrator in the story reveals that the fear of attracting attention of soldiers "made every woman, every girl, for miles around … to underplay her femininity … There was no point in attracting undue attention "(Goswami, "This is How we Lived", para 31). However, they were not often lucky enough, and after being spotted, were summoned to the camp.

In one such incident, a woman named Bogi bai was once picked up from her house at night. The next morning, her mortal remains were found, dumped off in the fields. The reason could have been due to her putting up a stiff resistance against her molesters. Here, the narrator attempts to rationalise (perhaps, out of fear) the psychology of soldiers in committing such heinous crimes against women. Perhaps, it could be because they were dehumanized by the nature of their duty. The narrator states:

> These soldiers do not even have the illusion of fighting for a cause. They face death every day for a pittance, to send home a few thousand rupees every month. Out of that if they spend fifty rupees on buying the bodies of our women, it does not seem like a bad bargain to them. It is perhaps like a routine trade, an outlet for their frustrations. ("This is How we Lived", para 33)

However, such empathy does not seem to be genuine, but engendered by the fear of not getting killed. The reality is that women must endure pain, trauma, and stigma of becoming sexual playthings in conflict situation. In a way, they must bear the ignominy of their bodies being invaded despite their will or desire.

Submitting to mortification of the body, however involuntarily, is the only means of remaining alive. Therefore, these molested women utter nothing, just wash themselves "ten times, maybe a hundred, and try to forget it happened, till it happens a second time perhaps, and a third" (("This is How we Lived", para 34). Such submissions happen to be a way of life for women caught in militarised society, and it in a way, constitutes gross violation of their human rights.

As already indicated, it would be wrong to assume that only women become victims of patriarchy or "toxic masculinity" in militarised society. The situation of men, too, can be quite precarious. This becomes evident in Aruni Kashyap's short-story "Before the Bullet" from his anthology *His Father's Disease*, in which a US returned boy, Digonto, who stayed for six years and completed his Ph.D, is shot in the head by the army without the slightest provocation or motive. Digonto's only fault was that he did not disembark from his bicycle while crossing the army camp on the way to his house after eight long years. He did not get down from his bicycle because he was not aware of the existence of the army camp as it was established after he went abroad to pursue his doctoral dissertation.

However, his ignorance was interpreted by the paramilitary forces manning the camp as sheer arrogance and audacity. He was insolently demanded to show his passport and other documents, which he promptly obliged. They looked at his passport and went through its pages several times, perhaps intending to detect some discrepancy. When he asked them with a slight hint of irritation if they were done with the checking, the officer giving him a long, cold stare, gave him permission to leave.

But the interaction with the US returned boy made the officer experience resentment as well as trepidation. The thought of meeting a confident, strapping, English-speaking, US returned boy, possessing swagger and chutzpah, were unpalatable to the officer. This narrator notes that "[the] officers were used to submission, earned from the fear that they had spread in the last five years" (Kashyap, "Before the Bullet", para 33). Officers did not like the confidence of men who were educated in Delhi or London or the US. He was fearful lest the "story of a young local lad who did not dismount from is bicycle, who spoke in

English went around ... It would create confidence in the minds of the villagers" (Kashyap, "Before the Bullet", para 34). These were considered sufficient grounds to shoot Digonto in the head as he cycled away. This story illustrates how in militarized society, it is both women and men who are rendered vulnerable and precarious by power. The notion of precariousness, or precarity in intersection with gender will figure in the next section.

Gender and Precarity

The word "precarity" has two meanings. The first is general, and it implies an ontological condition of precariousness that is trans-historical, existential, and affective. The second meaning is related but is more specific. It implies human vulnerability and fragility in the face of powerful, instrumental forces, including market forces. So, precarity implies a condition for those who are elided from the neoliberal, capitalist state's schema. They could be gender identities who are disenfranchised, landless, and vulnerable to various modes of social, economic, and political exclusion. Therefore, the connotation of precarity is instrumental and determined by hegemonic power-relations. Gender figures prominently while dealing with what Judith Butler termed as "precarious life" in her book of the same title. In this discussion, Sibanandi Kakoti's two short stories "Amlabristi" (translated/transcreated as "Bitter Rain") and "Siddhi" (Attainment) will be explored.

Coming to the first story "Amlabristi," it is about the plight of a landless woman named Dalimi, who was the single parent to her adolescent daughter after her husband had forsaken her after a few months of their marriage, leaving her pregnant. The story is particularly relevant in the present context of Assam as the issues highlighted in it are so much a part of our present "developmentalist" narrative, engendered by neoliberal policies and measures. Many parts of Assam are witnessing arterial extensions and metal scaffoldings in the form of multi-laned highways and long bridges over interminable riverbanks.

The cathexis of growth is getting to be more of an obsessionin our everyday lives. This is bolstered by regimes of thought that are vehement in their push for

urbanisation, yet glossing over sustainable development, and disregarding the emotional attachments of people and community, and regarding monetary compensation as the only possible transaction between the state and the "subjected" subjects. Perhaps, the ideology of developmentalism is rooted to the principle of capitalist pragmatism in which "structures of feeling" need to be bracketed off by instrumentality, that is, the logic of market forces. It is this ontological condition of precariousness which is existential and transhistorical, and the specific sense of "precarity" (which is political economy) that Sibananda Kakoti attempts to portray in "Amlabristi."

An important question that the story attempts to raise is what happens to the precarious lives caught in the grip of the state's "growth" narrative, and deprived of their tangible possessions (even if not safeguarded by the legal machinery)? Are the lives of the landless and disenfranchised of any consequence to a regime that has rejected the social contract? What happens to precarious subjectivities enmeshed in the web of patriarchy and the state apparatus? The story attempts to address these problematic issues in a nuanced manner.

In the story, Dalimi's hardships – being a single parent to an adolescent girl, having no legal claims over an encroached government land, and one who is forsaken by her husband – are presented. Thus, she was consigned to living her life as a "widow" without being one, and without means or stable resources. The disadvantages of a subaltern woman – without any means of achieving upward mobility – is starkly indicated. Being a single parent of an adolescent girl made her situation even more precarious.

Gender theorists like Toril Moi for instance, consider the binary constitution of "masculinity" and "femininity" as social constructs. In this story, this notion of social construction of gender is given an interesting treatment. The "performative" aspect of gender identity is underscored through the transformation that Dalimi must undergo, to keep herself and her daughter safe. A single woman is often assumed to be available, desirable, a temptress, an object of scopophobia. Therefore, patriarchal codes stipulate maintenance of a comfortable distance from men lest she arouses their sexual appetites. Dalimi has to assume almost a butch identity

through "masculine" performativity. She acted belligerent, wrathful, bitter, hostile on the external front. She had to maintain such an obnoxious attitude so that it would keep proverbial wolves at bay.

The story highlights the difference between those possessing legal rights over immovable property over those having none. Unlike other villagers who had legal possessions over their lands due to which they received handsome compensations from the government, Dalimi's plot of land was under the provisions of *eksonia mati*, which implied that the government could stake claim to it and confiscate it anytime without granting any compensations to the encroachers/settlers. Thus, for precarious subjects like Dalimi, the state's developmentalist agenda turns out to be a bane. It leads to dispossession and eviction. Her macabre death by being run over by a gigantic bulldozer is symbolic of the might of a hegemonic ideology that has succeeded in pulverising the principles of welfare state economy. In such a reconfigured political, economic, and ideological space, the disenfranchisement of precarious subjectivities, who are also twice marginalised, placed at the "other" pole of the binary, becomes more starkly evident.

Another story of Kakoti titled "Siddhi" (Attainment) can also be read in this light. In this story, the hardships of a migrant worker named Kanak and his family, is depicted. Kanak will fall under the category of the "precariat," which has been defined by Brett Neilson and Ned Rossister in "Precariat as a Political Concept" (2008) as an emergent political subject whose social relationships to capital or the state were not determined by wage labour but by their exclusion from steady jobs and from the status of citizen worker.

Kanak, hailing from a remote district in Assam, comes to the city in search of work opportunities, and is lucky to find temporary shelter in a tract of land possessed by a rich Gwahati-based businessman, named Jadab Kalita.

Kanak earns his meagre livelihood by running a tea-stall in the office owned by his master and landlord. He barely earns enough to afford two square meals for his family of four. Since he does not possess a plot of land or have a regular job, he is often dogged by anxieties of being evicted from the land in case it was put up

for sale. The rising inflation made his situation even more precarious. He could not afford even staple food items like onions and potatoes, which his children craved.

In sharp contrast, rich people like Jadab Kalita lived lavishly. They went to huge shopping malls and splurged their money purchasing fancy items. What the precariat considered as unaffordable luxuries (like potato and onion) were claimed as free coupons by the rich. Thus, the sharp contrast between lives of the rich and the poor is tellingly indicated. It may be noted that inflationary trends do not affect the purchasing power of the rich. It only affects the like of poor, disenfranchised subjects. This is eventually shown at the end of the story, where Kanak and his family must suffer the pain and hazard of walking all the way back to the hill, after a sudden curfew is imposed in the city, as they tried to claim the coupons for potatoes and onions generously given to Kanak by his master, Jadab Kalita. After collecting the said coupon and exhausting his meagre savings, he and his family members are faced with the prospect of walking a long way from the city to their ramshackle hut in the foothills.

It is as if the poor must suffer hubris for even small aspirations like entering a mall. Thus, what stands out in this story is the documentation of the life of the "precariat," a class that needs to be researched more by gender theorists, since precarity is a condition that can affect people across gender identities.

Another precarious subjectivity that is forced to remain in the closet due to their sexual orientation is the LGBTQ community. Writings from Northeast India has not (till now) presented their identitarian problematics to the extent that it should have been done. Yet, there are stories where the third sex have found poignant, evocative expression. This dimension is taken up in the next section.

Gender and Queer Identity

Writer from Meghalaya, Janice Pariat's short story "Secret Corridors" from her anthology *Boats on Land* can be explored from the standpoint of what patriarchal society would term as "non-heteronormative" subjectivity. Pariat's story can be considered as a "coming-of-age" story and also a metaphorical "coming out" of

the closet. The story revolves around two introverted school girls – Natalie and Carmel. Natalie nurtures queer fantasies towards a classmate, a girl named Iba. She is besotted by Iba's body and used to fantasise about it in the classroom. The following lines from the story indicate this sensation of intimate longing towards a person of the same gender:

> It was a mouth that made Natalie think of forbidden things, like the forest behind her house, which she wasn't allowed to explore, or the pink roadside ice sticks sh'd been expressly instructed not to taste. That morning, the intricacies of chemistry didn't interest her as much as Iba's mouth, and the face to which it belonged, she thought, was just attractive. Boyish, some said, but not for Natalie. (Pariat, "Secret Corridors, para 1)

However, Natalie also knows that her desires are forbidden by the codified laws of patriarchy, which believes in (what Adrienne Rich terms) "compulsory heterosexuality" as the only legitimate expression of sexuality. Therefore, despite an over-arching desire to transgress socially-sanctioned norms, which are nothing more than social constructions of gender identities, she is not able to do so. Natalie is so distracted by Iba's presence that she often gets chided and penalised by teachers for not applying to her studies inside the classroom.

The other girl, Carmel, is reclusive, without friends, and an object of persistent bullying and gossiping by the other girls, especially on account of her striking beauty. They cast aspersions on her character, saying that she was promiscuous, and attributing the same to her mother's alleged scandalous past, in which the latter was supposed to have had "a string of affairs with some naval officers in Bombay" ("Secret Corridors, para 5), which in all likelihood, indicated the possibility of Carmel's siblings having different fathers. The girls at the school concocted rumours of "Carmel meeting boys after school … taking them home" (para 5) and indulging in forbidden pleasures. Natalie, who always wanted to be part of Iba's group would disparage Carmel, just to win Iba's approval. She would lie that Carmel smelled of "old socks and sour milk" (para 13) much to the amusement of all girls. So, in a way, most conversations of this group centred on Carmel as an object of "abjection" – particularly her imprudent promiscuity, and lack of hygiene culture.

Hence, as Natalie pretended to be heteronormative in the presence of the girls, and indicated the presence of a "secret passage" that led to the All-Boys's St. Edmund's school, only to impress Iba, she was apprehensive that if her confidential information turned out to be false, she might become an object of "scorn" for Iba. All the girls began to eagerly hunt for the secret passage. They reached the abandoned room where they were forbidden to enter by the school authorities. But they were not able to locate the secret passage. This was perhaps due to the fact that it was a mere fiction created by some overactive imagination with no corresponding reality, whatsoever. However, they were detected, and taken to task. Natalie, as expected, became an object of derision for Iba, and called an "idiot" by the latter. As everybody left the room, Natalie heard the sound of a low, muted sobbing. She was gripped by horror, and thought the eerie sound to be the work of spirits. As she made her way into another room, she discovered that it was Carmel who was in tears.

It is at this point that Natalie began to feel empathy towards Carmel. She learnt that this abandoned place used to be a military hospital during the Second World War. She knew because her grandmother was a nurse and had met her grandfather, who was a British soldier, here. They were irresistibly drawn towards each other by this fateful encounter. It culminated into a passionate moment, where "the world with its scorn and derision, receded, and she (Natalie) was left with Carmel's mouth, which was soft and warm and tasted of tears. For a moment, the ghosts around them, and within, fell silent" (para 42)

This simple, poignant story raises several issues. For instance, it indicates how queer subjectivities are forced to live in the closet; how society never endorses any form of sexuality that is not governed by the notion of compulsory heterosexuality; how gender solidarity is mostly a salutary fiction, and so forth. People like Natalie would have to forever conceal their queer longings as it is often considered to be a form of sexual perversion, unnatural and abominable. They would have to go on performing their designated gender roles, as the act of "coming out" would lead to upsetting the socially-constructed and conditioned notions of sexuality. Therefore, it becomes necessary to advocate the idea of gender

sensitisation, and in terms in which we understand gender not as a normative category, but as an entity that is subject to slippage, to metonymic displacements. This idea of gender performativity is wonderfully theorised by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Janice Pariat's "Secret Corridors" brings out the ambivalence surrounding LGBTQ longings in a suggestive manner.

Conclusion

Thus, from the discussion, it can be concluded that representation of gender in contemporary short stories from Northeast India has been done from multiple trajectories. These trajectories affirm that gender needs to be understood from different dimensions or intersections. These intersections at times problematise a coherent understanding of gender, and make us aware of the slippage, or the fluid nature of gender identity. However, such an understanding of gender is liberatory and emancipative, and in that sense enabling.

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