



Corporeal Reclamation in Vivek Shraya's Art: *Asserting the trans woman*

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Abstract

Women's writing as a field of study emerged to include marginalized narratives into mainstream consciousness. The definition of a woman, however, is complicated and subjective. With the emergence of gender queerness, the rigid gender binary distinction is insufficient in capturing the essence and experience of being feminine. Through this paper, we will strive to redefine the idea of a 'woman' by studying the narrative of a trans woman¹. This questions the implicit assumption of femininity being associated only with womanhood. The primary aim is to arrive at a more inclusive definition of being feminine and of being a woman. This paper will trace Vivek Shraya's oeuvre to redefine the notions of gender identity and subconscious sex through the reclamation of the feminine by repossessing the body. Vivek Shraya is a prolific artist who has dabbled in the fields of music, visual arts, films, theatre, and writing. Shraya describes herself as a trans, bisexual, person of colour, and identifies with the pronouns she/her. The works being studied primarily are: *I'm Afraid of Men*, *The Boy and the Bindi*, *Part-time Woman*, *God Loves Hair*, and *Trisha*. The question is: Is it possible to construct a gender-fluid feminine identity and redefine womanhood through corporeal reclamation as illustrated in Vivek Shraya's work? As authors of this paper, we acknowledge the fallacy of studying the reclamation of femininity by the trans identity, without identifying as trans. However, our attempt is only to construct a more comprehensive definition of womanhood by sincere understanding and effort.

Keywords: Trans Woman, Sexuality, Woman, Corporeality, Gender Studies, Vivek Shraya, Feminism, Transfeminism.

“the only thing
required
to be
a woman
is to
identify
as one.
- period, end of story.”

— Amanda Lovelace

¹ This paper primarily focuses on trans women. This does not imply the exclusion of other trans narratives. Our aim is to include those who identify as a woman in women's art and literature and redefine womanhood by dissociating it from ideas of femininity and masculinity. We recognize the fluidity of gender and support the same.

1. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the classification of a person based on their anatomy, external genitalia, internal reproductive system, chromosomes, and hormone levels. Traditionally, sex is seen as being binary, i.e. an individual can either be biologically male or biologically female. However, science has determined that sex varies. Certain individuals are born with *differences of sex development (DSD)*, i.e. “a sex chromosomal makeup that varies from XX (female) or XY (male), and/or people who have hormonal levels that do not fit neatly in a male/female binary, and/or people who have genitals that are usually associated with both the male sex and the female sex”. (Thomas, 2019). Historically, they have been identified as “hermaphrodite”.² This is now seen as a derogatory term. Western medicine defines it as ‘intersex’. However, individuals who do not necessarily follow this medical understanding of sexual binary may not identify as intersex.

Sexual orientation “refers to the persons (if anyone) to whom you are attracted sexually, romantically, and/or emotionally.” It may change or evolve whereas sexuality refers to the way individuals “organise their erotic and sexual lives” (Thomas).

Gender is defined as “the ways culture and society reinforce what is masculine to go with male sex and what is feminine to go with female sex” (Thomas). Notions of gender identity have often been confused with biological sex. While heteronormative³ identities are considered ‘normal’, gender is a complex and nuanced term. It arises from the interplay of many factors that differ for each individual.

According to Thomas, gender roles are a “cultural set of behavioural expectations assigned to individuals on the basis of their sex.” Biological sex usually becomes a marker for gender roles. Gender roles refer to societal ideas about the roles of individuals. For instance, dolls are associated with girls and cars with boys. Gender identity refers to a person’s deep *sense* of their own gender. It may or may not correlate with their assigned sex.⁴ It was first coined by Robert Stoller and Ralph Greenson in 1964, which helped to separate the social role of gender from the psychological sense of one’s gender.

This idea is furthered by the American author, speaker, spoken word performer, musician, activist, and biologist, Julia Serano. Serano identifies as a trans woman and is known for her transfeminist works such as *Whipping Girl*, *Outspoken*, and *Excluded*. In *Whipping Girl*, Serano uses the term “experiential gender” as “which we live, feel, and experience firsthand and the genders of others, which we merely perceive or make presumptions about but can never truly know in a tangible way” to understand the complex nuances of gender. She differentiates it from “perceived sex (or perceived gender)” which she defines as “the gender we are assigned by other people.”

1.1 Transgender and transsexuals

*Transgender*⁵ is an umbrella term that refers to gender diversity. It comprises transgenders, transsexuals, non-binary, and various other gender identities. Transgender is contrasted with

² Hermaphrodite is a mythological term derived from Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. According to Diodorus Siculus, he was born with both male and female physical sex traits. Ovid attributed this phenomenon to Hermaphroditus’ fusion with the nymph Salmacis.

³ Heteronormative is the belief that heterosexuality is the “normal” mode of sexual orientation. It reinforces alignment of sex, sexuality, gender roles and gender expression.

⁴ Assigned sex refers to the sex assigned at birth to an individual based on their external anatomy.

⁵ Leslie Feinberg was one of the first to use transgender as a political and an umbrella term.

cisgender⁶ which refers to people whose gender identities align with their assigned sex at birth. Sometimes, the term transgender is shortened as trans and should not be confused with transsexuals. For Serano, transgender includes ‘transsexuals, intersex, and genderqueer, as well as those whose gender expression differs from their anatomical or perceived sex (including crossdressers, drag performers, masculine women, feminine men, and so on).’

However, Serano cautions that the term transgender might expunge the experiences of different individuals in its attempt to be inclusive. She cites the example of transsexual men and male crossdressers. While they are both male-identified transgenders, they face a completely different set of issues concerning their respective gender identity. The comprehensive term ‘trans’ privileges those identities that conspicuously “transgress” gender norms. Furthermore, ‘trans’ has been used by cisgenders to differentiate the ‘other’, i.e, one who is not cis. This kind of opposition establishes an ‘inherent normality’ and thus, comes off as cissexist.⁷ Serano suggests the use of the term “gender variance” in lieu of trans. She defines *trans* as “people who (to varying degrees) struggle with a subconscious understanding or intuition that there is something “wrong” with the sex they were assigned at birth and/or who feel that they should have been born as or wish they could be the other sex.”

Further, Serano gives the concept of *subconscious sex*. For her, the phrase ‘gender identity’ is problematic as it implies two decussating ideas. First, it refers to the gender that transsexuals *choose* to identify as, and secondly, the gender which they subconsciously *feel* themselves to be. She calls this subconscious feeling of gender ‘subconscious sex’. She chooses the word ‘sex’ over ‘gender’ based on her personal experience:

“I prefer “sex” because I have experienced it as being rather exclusively about my physical sex, and because for me this subconscious desire to be female has existed independently of the social phenomena commonly associated with the word “gender”.” (Serano, p.106)

For her, gender identity is the ‘intersection of subconscious and conscious sex’. The categorization of individuals as contrary to their own identity is an aspect of Transphobia. Therefore, one must be cautious when applying terms to individuals who may not self-identify with them.

Thus, transgender refers to those who have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from their sex assigned at birth while transsexuality refers to those who *physically* transition from male to female sex or vice versa.⁸ MTF (Male-to-Female) and FTM (Female-To-Male) are common abbreviations used to define individuals who transition from male to female and female to male respectively. This paper uses the terms ‘trans women’ and ‘trans men’ to refer to MTFs and FTMs who self-identify as women and men respectively.

Gender non-conforming individuals may prefer gender-neutral pronouns. It is to be noted that gender-neutral pronouns are not specifically ‘she’ or ‘he’ but a pronoun that resists the gender binary such as ‘they’/‘them’/ ‘theirs’. Leslie Feinberg coined the terms ‘ze’ and ‘hir’ for pronouns outside the gender binary.

1.2 Woman

The term ‘woman’ is usually used to refer to “an adult female human” (Venes, p. 2539). In social structures, various gender roles associated with women are termed as ‘feminine’.

⁶ While *trans* means “on the opposite side of”, *cis* refers to “on the same side as”.

⁷ “Cissexism, which is the belief that transsexuals’ identified genders are inferior to, or less authentic than, those of cissexual”. (Serano 2007)

⁸ Hence, Vivek Shraya is a transgender and not a transsexual. Specifically, she is a trans woman.

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Debates around the idea of 'woman' have focused around nature vs. nurture i.e, whether being a 'woman' is connected to having the female genitals or whether 'woman' as a category emerges with experience.

The latter idea was presented by the French intellectual Simone de Beauvoir who suggested that "no biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human *female* presents in society" and "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." The idea of womanhood being *experienced* rather than inherently existing was then advanced by American philosopher Judith Butler. She theorized that gender is not fixed and is a socially defined set of practices and traits that have, over time, grown to become labelled as 'feminine' or 'masculine.'

In light of the feminist movement, language has evolved and scholars have started to redefine the idea of a 'woman' by altering the word itself. Some feminist theorists use the term *womyn* instead of *women*. Other spelling variations⁹ include *womban*, *womon* (singular), *wimmin* (plural), and *womxn*.¹⁰

1.3 Trans woman

In her *Trans Manifesto*, Serano defines trans woman "as any person who was assigned a male sex at birth, but who identifies as and/or lives as a woman. No qualifications should be placed on the term "trans woman" based on a person's ability to "pass" as female, her hormone levels, or the state of her genitals" (Serano, p.19).

This special emphasis on 'passing' as a trans woman arises from a history of medical discrimination against trans women. As society is obsessed with over-feminising trans women, sex reassignment surgeries are seen as the basis for being 'woman enough'. This includes long-drawn therapy and hormonal treatment. In order to transition as a woman, many transsexuals would have to exhibit 'outward femininity' to get assent from their therapists. These therapists would often base their analysis on the absence or presence of 'female clothing' such as skirts and makeup and in some cases the male therapists' attraction to the trans woman.¹¹ The perverse fascination with the categorisation of trans women into 'pre-op' (pre-operation) or 'post-op' (post-operation) is a constant violation of their identities.¹²

Thus, these gatekeepers¹³ and institutions fall into the trap of gender essentialism.¹⁴ The attack on transsexuals should be read as an attack on feminist virtues itself. Yet, the relationship between transsexuals and feminists is fraught with tension. The most

⁹ In feminist theory, the *male-as-norm* holds that language referring to females consists of the container *-man*. For example, the suffix *-ess* (as in *actress*) or the use of *man* to mean 'human', and other such devices, strengthens the perceptions that the male category is the norm. Thus, the corresponding female category is considered a derivation from the 'male' and hence, less important.

¹⁰ *Womxn* is used by intersectional feminists, to avoid sexism in the standard spelling which is contained and derived from the word *man*.

¹¹ Kessler and McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, 118. Some have also claimed that Harry Benjamin only worked with trans women who he thought were attractive (Rudacille, *The Riddle of Gender*, 88).

¹² The media usually shows footage of trans women before and after operation. More often than not, the 'pre-op' trans woman is extremely 'manly' while the post-op trans woman is seen with lipstick and 'women's wear' and thus, very 'feminine'.

¹³ Gatekeepers include medical practitioners and the entire body of scholars, sociologists, sexologists, academicians and the like concerned with regulating the trans identity and choosing other's sex and gender for them.

¹⁴ Gender essentialism is the belief that a person, thing, or trait is inherently and permanently male and masculine or female and feminine.

controversial relationship can be traced in Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979):

“All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves. However, the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist violates women's sexuality and spirit, as well. Rape, although it is usually done by force, can also be accomplished by deception.” (Raymond, 1979, p. 104)

Feminists, such as Raymonds, do not regard transsexuals as ‘normal’. They see them ‘infiltrating’ and ‘appropriating’ women's bodies and call transsexuals ‘sexist’. They frequently erase the FTM¹⁵ discourse. Such attacks are based on oppositional sexism¹⁶ as they do not take into account the actual experience of transsexuals.

The reason for this can be assigned to the pathologisation of transsexuals by the gatekeepers. The transsexual community was a ‘curiosity’ for sexologists. By the early twentieth century, European scientists had begun to experiment with ‘sex-change’ (Meyerowitz, 2002) and transsexuals were ‘diagnosed’ with ‘Gender Identity Disorder’¹⁷. The period also witnessed the emergence of gender dysphoria clinics. Sandy Stone provides a critique of such clinics:

“The origin of the gender dysphoria clinics is a microcosmic look at the construction of criteria for gender. The foundational idea for the gender dysphoria clinics was first, to study an interesting and potentially fundable human aberration; second, to provide help, as they understood the term, for a “correctable problem”.(Stone, 1991, p. 9)

The current Diagnostics Manual by the American Psychology Association (DSM-V, 2013) has replaced the diagnostic category of Gender Identity Disorder with Gender Dysphoria to lessen this stigmatization. Transgender activists consider these classifications as the propagation of the gender binary and call for the removal of gender dysphoria as a disorder.

2. Femininity and Feminism

Femininity, interchangeably known as womanliness or girlishness, includes attributes, behaviours, and roles generally associated with women and girls.

In the 1930s, scientific efforts were made to *measure* femininity and masculinity on an *M-F scale*, pioneered by Lewis Terman and Catherine Cox Miles. These models were based on the popular notion of femininity and masculinity being inherent and innate qualities that serve as opposites to one another. The idea that imbalances between these qualities lead to mental disorders was adopted by other researchers and psychologists. Sigmund Freud's theory about the activity-passivity as a personality dimension postulated that ‘active’ is gendered ‘masculine’ and ‘passive’ is gendered as ‘feminine’. Hence, any deviation from the normative gender roles was considered ‘ego-alien’ or something a person might struggle to control, balance, or release. His theory also posited the idea that the traits associated with women were a result of ‘penis-envy.’

¹⁵ Female-to-Male and Male-to-Female identities are abbreviated as *FTM* and *MTF*. They were originally associated with individuals who underwent medical transitions. These terms are not treated as abbreviations indicating a transition from one sex to another anymore. Instead, they are used to simply categorize individuals in a way similar to the categories of *man* and *woman*.

¹⁶ Serano defines oppositional sexism as “the belief that male and female are rigid, mutually exclusive categories”. It works in sync with traditional sexism and ensures that “those who are masculine have power over those who are feminine, and that only those that are born male will be seen as authentically masculine.”

¹⁷ According to the DSM-IV (1994).

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Over the years, *femininity* has been largely accepted as being socially constructed due to popular feminist theory. Simone de Beauvoir pioneered this school of thought and influenced the second-wave feminists who believed that the differences between femininity and masculinity had been culturally constructed.¹⁸

In 1959, a Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman presented an argument that women are socialized to present themselves as “precious, ornamental and fragile, uninstructed in and ill-suited for anything requiring muscular exertion” and to project “shyness, reserve and a display of frailty, fear and incompetence.” (Ziegler, 2010, p. 10)¹⁹

Traits such as *passivity* and *tenderness* are usually associated with women while *aggression* and *intelligence* are associated with men. According to second-wave feminists, girls were socialized with toys, games, television, and school to conform to *feminine* values and behaviours. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan stated that the foundation of women's subjugation was built on the social construction of femininity as ‘childlike’, ‘passive’ and ‘dependent.’ She thus called for a “drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity.”²⁰

In 1998, a Dutch psychologist and researcher Geert Hofstede stated that only behaviours directly connected with procreation can be described as feminine or masculine. Yet, every society worldwide recognizes many additional behaviours as more suitable to females than males, and vice versa. These are arbitrary choices dependent on cultural norms and traditions. Hofstede suggests that feminine behaviours include ‘service’, ‘permissiveness’, and ‘benevolence’.

3. Trans femininity and Transfeminism

Julia Serano critiques both “sexist interpretations” and “feminist interpretations” of femininity. She recognises that “while biological gender differences are very real, most of the connotations, values, and assumptions we associate with female and male biology are not.” Serano espouses this theory because she has undergone hormonal therapy. She experienced an overall increase in her emotional drive, sensitivity, and sensory experience. According to her, the overwhelming testosterone in her body (before hormone therapy) was like “a thick curtain draped over [her] emotions.”

However, she argues that much of the conventional differences in *gender* arise from socialization instead of biological distinctions. She stresses that post her hormonal transition, her sexual orientation, preferences, hobbies, “levels of aggression, competitiveness, nurturing, creativity, intelligence, and [her] ability to read maps or do math” have remained the same.

¹⁸ They believed that biological differences between females and males were innate.

¹⁹ These ideas influenced psychological and sociological research and thus, two well-known personality tests, the ‘Bem Sex Role Inventory’ and the ‘Personal Attributes Questionnaire’, emerged which measured femininity and masculinity on separate scales. Using these tests, the researchers realised that the two characteristics varied and were independent of one another.

²⁰ Mary Vetterling-Braggin continued this discourse and argued that *feminine* characteristics arose from early human sexual encounters which were mainly “male-forced” and “female-unwilling” because of male and female anatomical and biological distinctions. Furthermore, Carole Pateman, Ria Kloppenborg, and Wouter J. Hanegraaff argued that *femininity* was the result of coercion by the patriarchal social order in order to maintain itself.

She states that most interpretations of feminism overlook the fact that feminine traits are separable and can be exhibited by individuals regardless of their gender. According to her “...the only quality that all feminine traits share is that they all tend to be associated with women (albeit not exclusive to them).” She coined the term “oppositional sexism” to refer to “the belief that male and female are rigid, mutually exclusive categories” and it delegitimizes expressions of femininity in men by creating binaries of “real” and “fake” traits. According to her, traditional sexism only exacerbates the situation as it posits that femininity is inferior to masculinity, in some instances even suggesting that certain traits exist to ‘please’ or ‘benefit’ men.

She then bifurcates “feminist interpretations” into “unilateral”²¹ and “deconstructive”²² feminism and states that both share the following beliefs that should be severely critiqued:

- “(1) femininity is not a natural form of expression, but rather one that is socially imposed;
- (2) most women are “duped” into believing that their femininity arises intrinsically rather than due to extrinsic forces such as socialization or social constructs;
- (3) people who are “in the know” recognize that gender expression is artificial and easily malleable, and thus they can purposefully adopt a more radical, antisexist gender expression (e.g., androgyny, drag, etc.); and
- (4) because feminine women choose not to adopt these supposedly radical, antisexist gender expressions, they may be seen as enabling sexism and thus collaborating in their own oppression.” (Serano, 2007, p. 506)

Serano envisions an idea of femininity that doesn’t discriminate on the basis of gender. She calls to drastically alter the traditional view of feminine traits and “recognize that feminine expression is strong, daring, and brave.” This idea is now recognised as *Transfeminism*.

Transfeminism²³ is “a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond” (Koyama, 2003, p.1). It is “an approach to feminism that is informed by trans politics” which aims to include non-binary individuals into the discourse. Recent advocates of trans feminism such as Serano, Koyama, and Diana Courvant state that it incorporates major themes of the third wave of feminism and critiques the idea that all women share a common experience. It questions the gender binary and insists that the transgender experience be recognised as a valid experience in mainstream feminism.

²¹ According to Serano, unilateral feminism includes feminists of the 1960s and 1970s (such as Betty Friedan) who viewed sexism as a matter of women being oppressed because of men. She states that in unilateral feminism “sexism is often described as arising from a patriarchal system that kept women oppressed via two interrelated tactics: (1) placing belittling meanings and assumptions onto women’s bodies, and (2) coercing women into femininity, a program that was seen as inherently stifling and which fostered (or was the product of) women’s subservience and subjugation to men.”

²² Serano states that deconstructive feminists share the belief that the category “woman” is socially constructed and therefore doesn’t exist independently of societal norms. Serano writes “deconstructive feminists set out to deconstruct our very notions of “woman” and “man,” exposing the assumptions and expectations that enable sexism.” She situates these feminists in the timeline of 1980s and 1990s and includes the theories of Judith Butler into this discourse.

²³ Sandy Stone, Kate Bornstein were pioneers of this movement. In 2002, Transfeminism.org was created to promote the Transfeminism Anthology Project by Diana Courvant and Emi Koyama. The word transfeminism was coined by the pair. The site primarily devoted itself to introducing the concept of transfeminism to academia and to finding and connecting people working on transfeminism projects and themes through an anthology of the same name.

4. Trans narratives in literature

There is a severe dearth of trans narratives in popular culture. Most of the literature concerning issues about the experiences of non-binary individuals is cast away as 'Transgender Studies', rarely included within canonical writing. This process of excluding literature by trans authors results in the *othering* of the trans community as a whole. It can be interpreted as a manifestation of transmisogyny. A definition of trans literature that tackles this issue is presented by Tom Leger: "[it] is a body of cultural work that resonates with or illuminates or otherwise serves transgender communities." (Bellot, 2016)

Leger further voices concerns about narratives written by cis people who may not have enough experience and/or knowledge about the issues in question. The fallacy that emerges is one where trans characters become either "narrative devices" or "obstacles" (Bellot). They are usually used as foils to the female/ male protagonists (cis), in order to highlight their 'natural' hyper 'femininity' or 'masculinity'. Alternatively, they are seen as rebellious characters who are ridiculed for their transgressive gender expressions, thus suggesting the futility of non-conformity to the patriarchal norms.

Furthermore, an obsession with hyper feminization is observed in literature with regards to trans women. Most narratives focus on the archetypal trope of the "deceptive" or "pathetic" transsexual (Serano, 2007, p. 56). The 'deceptive' trans women are seen as dominant and powerful because they successfully 'pass' as women. For these characters, the ultimate resolution is achieved by revealing their male genitals and thus, uncovering their 'real' sex. On the other hand, the pathetic transsexual is the comic figure, perpetually unsuccessful at 'passing' as women. They are seen tripping over their heels, practising walking with a feminine gait, and often failing at these tasks. Hence, they are viewed as 'harmless' as opposed to the seductive 'deceivers' who intend to 'harm' others. These reinforce the gender binary by classifying the 'deceptive' trans woman ('post-op') as a 'mistake' and the 'pathetic' trans woman as a caricature.

Literature of this kind does not accurately represent the experiences of people from the trans community. Hence, there is an enormous gap between literature that is proclaimed as trans literature and literature that truly addresses the concerns of the people. The inclusion of trans narratives, especially written by people who identify as trans, into the mainstream is thus necessary.

5. Vivek Shraya

Vivek Shraya is a Canadian musician (of Indian origin), trans activist, writer, visual artist, and fashion icon. She was assigned the gender of a 'boy' at birth and was conventionally put in the binary spectrum. However, Shraya realised while growing up that something was amiss. Hence, she now identifies as "a trans, bisexual, person of colour" and her preferred pronouns are 'she/her'²⁴.

Shraya resides in Calgary, near her hometown of Edmonton. She works as an assistant professor at the University of Calgary and teaches a creative writing program. She has been greatly influenced by her mother. She believes that her identity is the result of the amalgamation of her specific racial, immigrant, and gendered experience.

²⁴ Thus, she is an MTF trans woman.

Instances of being misgendered, victimised, and alienated have been ubiquitous in this experience. This is reflected in her work as the same theme runs through her memoir *I'm Afraid of Men* (2018), her music album *Part-Time Woman* (2017), a series of illustrated short stories *God Loves Hair* (2010), a photo essay *Trisha*, (2016), illustrated children's book *The Boy and the Bindi* (2016), her exhibition *I learned that I had a body* (2018), and among many more. Much of her oeuvre resists the idea of sameness, “celebrating the fact that we are all different, that it's [this] difference that makes humans beautiful” (Shraya, 2018). She extends this idea to the world of fashion by curating fashion events, modelling, and collaborating with designers. She runs her own stylebook called #VSSstylebook.

Shraya promotes artists by publishing their work under the imprint *VS.Books* which she describes as ‘a mentorship and publishing opportunity for an Indigenous or Black writer, or a writer of colour, over the age of 50 living in Canada.’ She provides an art grant under *VS.Arts Grant* which supports musicians ‘in Canada who [are] Indigenous, Black or persons of colour, between the ages of 18–28, to create their debut EP recording’.

Her art explores themes such as microaggression²⁵, misogyny - both external and internalised, and transmisogyny²⁶. She attempts to challenge the patriarchal structure and create a space for trans women in mainstream media. Shraya emphasizes the necessity of such narratives in an interview about her book *I'm Afraid of Men*:

“...And no, it wasn't actually cathartic or healing... But being committed to the project, this work felt necessary. What is “liberating” or comforting is knowing that many men will have to encounter this title—whether in bookstores or online. That I don't have to carry the burden of my fear alone. There is also comfort in the ways in which women and gender non-conforming people and even some men have claimed and celebrated the title as well.” (Shraya, 2018)

Thus, her work seeks to repurpose the hatred Shraya has experienced into creative expression that initiates a discourse around gender conformity, femininity, and womanhood.

6. Corporeal Reclamation

A recurring theme in Shraya's work is her attempt at organically reclaiming her *femininity* by accepting and revelling in her body through the appropriation of certain symbols that represent her individuality. This is illustrated in her works such as *Part-Time Woman*, *Trisha*, *The Boy and the Bindi*, and *God Loves Hair*. Furthermore, the exhibition titled, *I learned that I had a body* (which includes *Trisha*) and the short film *I want to kill myself* (2017) aspire to enunciate the psychological damage that society's rejection had caused.

6.1 Body

She echoes Serano by stating that her sexuality is not associated with her assigned sex. While in most cases, people ‘align’ their gender with sex, science acknowledges *gender variance*. This disjunction between her subconscious and assigned sex thus evokes anxiety in Shraya. She has grappled with her identity due to being misgendered incessantly. Her non-conformist

²⁵ “The everyday slights, indignities, put downs and insults that people of color, women, LGBT populations or those who are marginalized experiences in their day-to-day interactions with people.” (Derald W. Sue)

²⁶ Transmisogyny (sometimes trans-misogyny) is the intersection of transphobia and misogyny. Transmisogyny includes misogyny, sexism, transphobia, and cissexism towards trans women and transfeminine people that may not be experienced by cisgender women or trans men. This term was coined by Julia Serano in her book *Whipping Girl*.

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body presents a challenge to the social mores which has often resulted in her being ostracised and persecuted. Herein, lies the trouble:

“Unfortunately, any ambiguity or nonconformity, especially in relation to gender, conjures terror. This is precisely why men are afraid of me. Why women are afraid of me, too.” (*I'm Afraid of Men*, p. 88)

While this palpable sense of fear curbs any semblance of unique gender expression, her oeuvre aspires to identify, question, and subvert these barriers. She procures a sense of her *body* and *self* through the censure that it has endured. This is illustrated in the short film *I want to kill myself*: “I learned I had a body through your²⁷ condemnation of my body.” Thus, her work attempts to *reclaim* the *body* that is despised by the world.

Her music album *Part-Time Woman* examines the conventional definition of a ‘woman’ and redefines femininity. The six tracks embark on a journey that traverses her visceral fear²⁸, lack of acceptance in society, and finally culminates in Shraya accepting her body. “Part-Time Woman”, “Hari-Nef”, and “Brown Girls” discuss the “legacy of being a woman” and the lack of acceptance she experiences in the world. The eponymous track questions the superficial requisites that society demands from each gender, as exemplified in:

“How many high notes do you have to reach?
How many hours do you have to bleed?” (7-8)

Further, the track challenges and subverts the exclusive vision of conventional ‘beauty’ that is overtly feminised:

“I don't shave
I don't wear makeup
No skirts
I don't dress up” (1- 4)

These are critiques of the constructed, outward, and artificial wholeness of a ‘full-time woman’, that is favoured in the media and the society as a whole. She questions the ramifications of such an idea on the trans community with the refrain: “Does that make me a part-time woman?”

This exposes the hypocrisy of the society in dismissing women as ‘superficial’, ‘vain’, and ‘deceptive’ for adhering to these conventions and presupposing a natural standard of ‘beauty’ which can be traced back to an arbitrary set of events. This standard benefits patriarchal institutions and serves to further alienate individuals who experience gender variance. For instance, when transsexuals attempt to experiment and express themselves through these ‘feminine’ articles, the media spurns them and labels them as either ‘pathetic’ or ‘deceptive’ (Serano).

“Hari Nef” and “Brown Girls” take the form of a dialogue between Shraya and all the women in the world to encourage the subversion of these rigid ideals. She discusses the idea of the *body* that does not need to be moulded into “both a shield and an ornament” (*I'm Afraid of Men*, p. 24).

²⁷ ‘Your’ here refers to the society as a whole.

²⁸ as exhibited in the tracks “Sweetie”, “I'm Afraid of Men”, and “Part-Time Woman”

Thus, by challenging the norms of beauty, Shraya reclaims her body and the album culminates with “Girl, It’s your time” which proudly declares this reclamation of her *self*:

“I’m never gonna hide you
Never gonna fight you again
Not for any man.” (6-8)

Shraya’s assertive stance enhances the visibility and freedom of her body. Yet, the journey is not smooth. This reclamation of her *femininity* threatens to engulf her fluid gender identity into the trap of societal hyper feminization. Shraya’s dissonance arises from the fact that she won’t be perceived as her subconscious sex unless she submits to the conformist ideal of a ‘woman’. For instance, as thinness is often seen as an “amplification of femininity”, a muscular build is associated with ‘masculinity’. Hence, the distribution of muscle mass in Shraya’s body is another form of discrimination against her subconscious sex.

As Shraya is a trans woman and not a transsexual²⁹, she often voices the concern about her body not being viewed as conventionally *feminine* enough to be gendered a woman:

“...I often don't feel trans enough because I haven't physically altered my body and I still often get read as male which is something that I talk a lot about...As someone who has also been seen as not queer “enough” because I have had relationships with both men and women...there's not just one way of being queer, there's not just one way of being trans.” (Indigo | Chapters 00:00:33 - 00:01:31)

In fact, she believes that the assertion of her trans identity allowed her to appreciate both her ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ traits as complementary to each other:

“As a girl, I’ve grown to appreciate my chest hair—a black flame rising from my bra—more than I ever did when I was a boy who regularly waxed and trimmed to adhere to the ’90s standard.” (*I’m Afraid of Men*, p. 50)

Thus, Shraya seeks to trace the relation between gender and *body* by *claiming* and *reclaiming* symbols that make her feel ‘feminine’ in conjunction with her ‘masculine’ traits, in order to assert her trans identity. She seeks to abandon her perceived gender, establish her womanhood, and envisions a society where experimentation and fluidity in gender are commonplace and celebrated.

6.2 Symbols ‘rooted’ in Shraya’s work

Shraya constantly employs symbols that represent her unique experience and hark back to her ancestral roots. They incorporate her religion, race, and familial relations, and thus assert her multifaceted identity.

An important figure in Shraya’s life is ‘Ardhanarishvara’³⁰ who emerges as the source of her confidence in her autobiographical book, *God Loves Hair*.³¹ In the book, Shraya’s protagonist explores and experiments with his identity in various ways and finally finds

²⁹ Shraya has not undergone sex-reassignment surgery.

³⁰ The Ardhanarishvara is a composite form of the Hindu deities Shiva and Parvati. Ardhanarishvara is depicted as half-male and half-female, equally split down the middle. One half is the male, Shiva and the other half is the female, Parvati.

³¹ *God Loves Hair* is a collection of autobiographical short stories that deal with Shraya’s experience of growing up as a queer boy of Indian-origin in Canada. It confronts social norms about sexuality which are sharpened by racial and ethnic beliefs.

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solace and acceptance through this religious figure. The story of Ardhanarishvara is contrasted with Ramayana.³² The rescued Sita, Rama's wife, is subjected to a test of purity which she passes, whereas the male Rama undergoes no such procedures. When Sita's chastity is questioned by society, Rama exiles his wife in the forest. Rama and Sita are avatars of Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi.

While the Vishnu and Lakshmi duo reinforces the gender binary in the Ramayana, the amalgamation of Shiv-Parvati as Ardhanarishvara celebrates non-binary identities. Shraya had been conditioned into accepting the conventional gender roles, practised by her parents. Thus the image of the Ardhanarishvara was monumental as it presented an alternative:

"It [Ardhanarishvara] is as though I have found an old picture of myself or the answer to a question that I didn't have the words to ask...I am not invisible anymore" (*God Loves Hair*, p. 110)

Thus, through the ethnic and religious symbol of the Ardhanarishvara or the one who blends the 'two sexes', Shraya finds acceptance and validity.

Another symbol is the "bindi" that is tethered to her Indian roots and her mother. The appropriation of the 'bindi' asserts her feminine 'brown' identity. She states:

"I will say that transness has allowed me to embrace my brownness in important ways, if only through seemingly superficial gestures like wearing a bindi or Indian jewellery. And yet these gestures are crucial to me as someone who felt I had to assimilate into whiteness and maleness to endure." (Shraya, 2018)

This is the premise of the picture book *The Boy and the Bindi*. The young boy's fascination with his mother's bindi urges him to emulate his mother. He experiences "peace", "calm", and establishes a strong link to his female ancestors, especially his mother, through it. The "bindi" is an unconventional expression of his 'inner' self which ensures that he doesn't "hide" in society. The "bindi" thus highlights issues of acceptance and reclamation of inner identity through physical symbols associated with the identity in question.

For Shraya, her mother is the primary source of inspiration for her outward expressions of femininity. She represents the esoteric feminine domain that had been denied to Shraya thus far. This can be detected in *God Loves Hair* which includes a short story named "Lipstick" that echoes her need to gain access to her mother's "secrets and her powers." The only way *into* the inaccessible feminine world was through imitation and "becoming" like her mother by trying her mother's lipsticks and dresses. She hopes to unlock her subconscious sex by being 'authorised' to possess it.

This is also exemplified in the photographic essay titled *Trisha*. It is a series of diptychs where Shraya recreates photographs of her mother from the 1970s. It is both a tribute to her mother and an attempt to connect to her own body by retracing her roots. The recreation of these images stems from Vivek's everyday life and her effort to imbibe the qualities of her mother. This is stated in: "I modelled myself—my gestures, my futures, how I love and rage—all after you." (*Trisha*)

³² Ramayana is an epic, traditionally ascribed to the Maharishi Valmiki that narrates the life of Rama, prince of the legendary kingdom of Kosala.



(Shraya's mother)



(Vivek Shraya)

Trisha was the name her mother would have given her daughter. She longs to wield that femininity by accepting and embodying the persona of Trisha, who can be regarded as her subconscious sex. As the closest link to her (Trisha) is her mother, she seeks to personify the image of her subconscious sex so that it helps 'him' be her (self). Thus, Vivek *is* Trisha.



(Source: vivekshraya.com)

Furthermore, Shraya laments the 'crushing' patriarchy that forced her mother to yearn for sons in lieu of a daughter. The essay attempts to bind Shraya to that unborn daughter and to critique the burden or "weight" she must have had to endure. These restrictions put on her *body* by the patriarchal society fasten her to the experiences of her mother:

"..My earliest prayers were to be released from my body... Then I remind myself that the discomfort I feel is less about my body and more about what it means to be feminine in a world that is intent on crushing femininity in any form. Maybe I got my wish to be you after all." (*Trisha*)

Thus, Shraya uses symbols as a means to embrace her identity and reclaim her 'othered' body.

6.3 Fashion as an expression of the self

Just as symbols become important for Shraya's assertion of her inner identity, makeup and fashion help alter her physical self to reflect her inner femininity. This aids the repossession of her identity from the 'yous'³³ who had stigmatised her identity.

Initially, the title of *I'm Afraid of Men* seemed contentious to her project as she worried about her "inner strength" being dismissed by the "vulnerability" it lay bare. She decided to counter this by attaching a series of pictures shot in the woods of her hometown where she is seen wearing a silver jumpsuit in stark contrast to the woods. The woods serve as a metaphor for "masculinity/fear itself". She thus employs the freedom of expression that

³³ The 'you' section in *I'm Afraid of Men* is a series of anecdotal accounts from childhood to adulthood which trace multiple 'yous' who have built and violated her identity.

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she derived from clothing and makeup to reflect her true 'inner' self. This act of empowerment allows Shraya to accept her non-conformist body.



(Source: vivekshraya.com/projects/books/armour)

In *I'm Afraid of Men*, Shraya narrates her experience of wearing her mother's blue Jordache jacket during her teenage years. The incident ends with her being spat on repeatedly, in public, by a 'you'. Drawing from her experience, she uncovers the underlying transmisogyny behind such an incident. The empowered act of feminine expression that the jacket allowed was quashed brutally. This exposed the rigid heteronormative associations with clothing that need to be altered drastically. Furthermore, she critiques the oversized clothing that the society coerces the non-conformist *body* into wearing, to 'hide' itself.

Such instances of misogyny forced her to make compromises in daily life. Her attempt to assert her individuality through fashion is thwarted by the constant aggression she faces:

"The weight of these minute-to-minute compromises is compounded by the fact that because of my fear of violence from men, I seldom dress the way I want to in public and wear makeup only on weekends or when I'm performing. This means I'm often still seen as a man." (*I'm Afraid of Men*, p. 14)

Being gendered as a man originates from the perception of gender being associated with secondary cues, such as secondary sexual characteristics, style of clothing, and even hairstyle. Briefly, the stereotyping of gender expression allows the affixation of misgendered labels that threaten people's gender identity.

Shraya laments the lack of freedom of expression she had in her youth because of these stereotypes. She believes that her creativity, especially in fashion, had been curbed by society. However, she has redeemed that freedom and she states:

"I see myself as someone who was stylistically adventurous in my teens, and I have reclaimed that in my 30s." (FASHION)

Over the years, Shraya has emerged as a fashion icon and has been covered by esteemed magazines such as FASHION, Elle, and Vogue. She has also dominated fashion runway shows (Fashion Art Toronto), curated fashion events (Mass Exodus), and collaborated with designers (Mic. Carter’s label L’Uomo Strano).

Her social media presence as an influencer is instrumental in shaping fashion trends. She now runs her own stylebook called #VSSStyleBook. Her vision for the fashion world is a more inclusive space for queer and non-binary folk.

In an interview with Cityline, Shraya critiques the hypocrisy of androgynous or gender-neutral fashion stores having garments segregated according to the gender binary. She recounts her experience of getting misgendered and dismissed in these outlets. Hence, she views online shopping as a safer and more inclusive alternative.



Elle, April 2020



Canada’s best dressed— The Globe and Mail

Shraya declares that her mother is her greatest style icon and as a child, she was drawn to her mother’s ‘contemporary Bollywood aesthetic’. She associates this aesthetic with glamour and regality and has even been a part of the MAC Canadian originals campaign.



MAC Canadian Originals campaign (source:vivekshraya.com/style/)

Shraya defines her relationship with fashion as an *armour* that helps her navigate her daily life, proclaims her ethnicity, and asserts her trans identity. She exemplifies these ideas in an essay discussing the significance behind wearing red lipstick:

“For a trans girl, wearing red is a defiant choice—red refuses to be invisible. Before I even open my mouth, my red lips echo the color of blood, declaring: I am alive. They assert my sexuality—and yours, daring you to desire, to admit desire for what is often cast off as undesirable. My red lips are a manifestation of my rage, a reminder that I will no longer contain my anger inside my body, that I will not be silent about misogyny and white supremacy.” (Elle, 2019)

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Shraya's art is an act of rebellion against the suffocating societal norms that had conditioned her to hate her own body. Her creative expression allowed her to abandon this self-condemnation and to acknowledge her body, accept it, and then assert her *being*.

7. Definitions for the future

This section proposes new definitions to incorporate the nuances of terms such as femininity, woman and then presents a vision for truly representative trans literature.

As authors of this paper, we comprehend femininity as a subjective concept. Femininity is the expression of the *feeling* that cannot be restricted or measured by any rigid structure, scale, psychological analysis, or tests. Scientific research suggests that femininity arises partially from biological differences in sex (Hollows). However, to limit gender expression to just biology is condemnatory. Non-binary individuals who express themselves through femininity present strong counters of such a reduction.³⁴

Femininity relies on subjectivity, experience, and inner expression. Being gendered as 'woman' leads to a set of experiences that sensitises an individual in a certain way. Thus, the outward manifestations of femininity vary according to societal conditioning as well. However, calling it 'performative' or 'artificial' expunges the inherent nature of femininity which could lead to sexism (oppositional and traditional) and transmisogyny.

Shraya's overt expression of femininity includes associating with symbols such as wearing a bindi or a saree, experimenting with fashion, makeup, etc. This, however, does not suggest that these will be considered as appropriate symbols for other people's feminine expression. Many trans women may choose to physically transition to assert their selfhood but that does not reinforce the patriarchal claim of binary genders. On the contrary, it establishes the fluid nature of sex, subconscious sex, biological sex, and gender; all of which cannot be defined by societal conditioning alone.

Hence, we posit that the definition of a 'woman' should be extended to include *any* person who identifies with the term, regardless of their assigned sex, perceived sex, sexual orientation, sexuality, race, caste, class, gender expression, and/or (non) conformity to gender roles. Using these definitions, we envision literature and academia as a more inclusive space for all individuals. Trans narratives shouldn't just be confined to the all-inclusive category of 'Transgender Studies'. Their experiences will always remain marginalised unless an effort is made to view them as normal, relatable, and important.

Shraya's quest for existing symbols such as the "bindi", the lipstick, her mother, and the 'Ardhanarishvara' helps her establish her identity. As her experiential gender and subconscious sex have always been feminine, being gendered as a 'man' is a violation of her identity and femininity. She thus encourages the separation of feminine expression from the existing gender norms.

The enduring idea is that *femininity* and *masculinity* are only modes of expression and identifying as a particular gender has no direct correlation with either. While people's expression of femininity and masculinity varies, for Shraya, the assertion of her womanhood and her femininity is through corporeal and physical reclamation.

Hence, considering the socially constructed nature of the term 'woman', the notorious exclusion of trans women's narratives from this category in academia and mainstream society is a cause for concern. Furthermore, the popular portrayal of the stereotypical transgender character trope as being 'deceptive', 'hyper feminised', or 'pathetic' is hurtful and inaccurate. It only fuels the existing hatred and ignorance about the fluidity of gender and transgender expression. While the word 'trans woman' captures the unique experience of an individual

³⁴ "All people have both androgens (which include testosterone) and estrogens in their systems, although the balance is tipped more toward the former in men and the latter in women." (Serano 86)

more accurately, it inadvertently creates a distinction between a 'woman' and a 'trans woman'. Thus, the need of the hour is for societal institutions to acknowledge the distinctions between gender and sex, in order to understand the necessity of the inclusion of trans women's narratives in the prevailing discourse about feminism.

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