

Breaking the Gender Stereotype in Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner*

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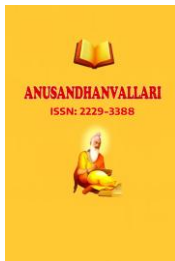
Abstract

This paper explores the nature and performance of the portrayal of female masculinity in an award-winning young adult novel "The Breadwinner" by Deborah Ellis featuring the female protagonists Parvana and Shauzia. The book is set in the tumultuous backdrop of Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. The book offers a compelling narrative that challenges traditional gender roles and norms, providing a lens through which to examine the multifaceted nature of masculinity. The theory of masculinity was always associated with men until the emergence of female masculinity which changed the traditional concept of masculinity. Through character analysis of female characters, this paper delves into, how the male figures in the story navigate their roles and identities amidst a repressive society. It investigates the impact of masculinity on female characters, highlighting the book's subtle yet powerful message about the fluidity of gender roles and the potential for reimagining masculinity in the face of adversity. Through the qualitative research method and content analysis, this paper aims to prove that women also have masculinity traits with the theory proposed on female masculinity by Judith Halberstam and masculinity traits explained by Hofstede. By analyzing the book within its socio-cultural context, this paper sheds light on the broader implications of "The Breadwinner" for contemporary discussions on gender and the redefinition of masculinity in diverse and challenging circumstances. Ultimately, it underscores the transformative power of literature in challenging and reshaping societal perceptions of masculinity and proves that masculinity can be performed with confidence, hidden emotions, aggressions, power, domination and the absence of male body form.

Keywords: female masculinity, masculinity traits, Deborah, Breadwinner

The word "masculinity" portrays the image of an attractive face, a masculine structure and other masculine qualities. Similarly, the word "feminine" depicts lovely and charming looking women with the quality of kindness. Masculinity is a social construct bounded by the society on men and boys which is not based on physical appearance or biological features

Masculinity is a traditional standard of male attitudes or conduct recognised by society. It shows that masculinity is not limited to one gender. Women also have virility through the characteristics of men like strength, aggression and masculinity. Literature produces creative works which portray human life in the form of literary texts. This paper examines Deborah Ellis's "The Breadwinner" to show how the protagonists Parvana and Shauzia prove that they have masculinity in themselves and they can act and lead a life like a man.



Education, health and life expectancy are determined by gender and it influences people's sexuality, relationships, and their ability to make decisions with its characteristics.

Gender is identified not only by male or female physique but also by individual's gender performance. Gender is always significant in everyday life and its significance is marked by the performance not by who played the role. It was constructed by the designed template for women by the society, it labelled 'feminine' as warm, lovely, domestic, sensitive and emotionally and physically weak,. Men are considered to be more competitive and emotional when compared to women. The framework called masculinity is described as detached, physically strong self-governing, energetic, authoritative and forceful.

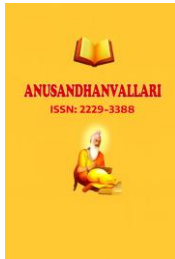
Based on the above references, it is clearly shown that men and women are segregated physiologically and psychologically in attitude, behaviours and emotions based on the framework given by the term called gender. In this paper, it is to be broken with the references from the novel "The Breadwinner" and a theory proposed by Judith Harberstam. This theory propounds that masculinity is not linked with the male borders or physical appearance, it can be seen in women too. The performance of masculinity is pictured in an act of crossed dressing which is the key to the narrator of the book. It is a novel set in Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban. In this story, as a boy, Parvana disguises herself after her father gets arrested, because he graduated from foreign countries. Parvana disguised as a boy and came out as a "Breadwinner" a term traditionally marked for males to secure food for their family. Because, during the time in Afghanistan, females were not allowed to go out in public without any male relatives. But for Parvana, there are no male relatives to accompany and take responsibility. Her father got arrested and her brother was killed by a landline. She is ready to secure food for her family as her mother had indicated that as a boy she would be able to move in and out of the market and no one could stop her.

As she needs time to find out her father, she needs to be a boy for months. Once Nooriya warns her like, if Parvana is going to be a boy outside, she should be a boy inside too. Nooriya also questioned whether someone comes by. Not only she does cross dress for going out and purchase food but also she has started reading letters and writing letters for illiterate citizens. Because she needs to take care of her deceased brother and broken mother. She turns out to be a real breadwinner.

Like other characters who did cross – dress and become male look, Parvana adopts completely and performs masculinity. Instead of feeling burdened, she has started enjoying the masculine performances including, her short hair, male attire, standing among men and boys, and the freedom she is tasting in the outside world. When she used to come with her father, she needed to close her face, feet and wants to invisible from others. But now she can breathe the fresh air.

After Parvana's father returned from prison, he didn't get distressed by her disguised appearance. As mentioned already he had education from foreign countries and always considered his daughter as Malali, he accepted Parvana as his daughter and son as well. All these changes and successful performance of masculinity show what constitutes and limits gender identity and differences.

The masculinity becomes invisibility to Parvana "now with her face open to the sunshine she was invisible in another way she was just one boy on the street she was nothing with paying attention to" (Ellis, 2001, p.70). She becomes unnoticed by the public and she can enjoy the freedom without any disturbances. But if it is female masculinity, it is contrast, it is marked and significant in public. So the unmarked can be attained by female masculinity if they do transgression. The cross dress allows Parvana to become explicit and wild as mentioned by her mother. Based on the social framework, Taliban masculinity does verbal and physical violence against women. It can be seen in Deborah's words "just before she left, man too young to have a beard. He has folded up a rope strung with four severed hands, like beads on a necklace. He was laughing and showing off his booty to the crowd (Ellis, 2001, p.122)



Parvana, disguised as a tea boy, started going to the market to read letters to illiterate people like her father. She found a Taliban who gave a letter. After reading the letter, she found the tears shed from his eyes and rolled on the cheek and found his tumbled hands when he put the letter back in the cover.

The depiction of Taliban masculinity can be figured out as violent and illiteracy. But it is opposite to the traditional masculinity. Through the depiction of cross dressed Parvana, Deborah Ellis proved that the gender potential performance can also be done by girls. But in some parts of the novel, it is shown that the female body becomes an obstacle for masculinity performances.

For Parvana, it is possible and successful because of the prepubescence. Her elder sister Nooria could not perform masculinity as she was mature. She said that no one would believe her as boy. Another evident too from Shauzia, cross dressed as a tea boy said she has started to grow and her shape has started changing. If her body shape changes too much, she will turn back into a girl and she will be struck. These evidences tied back to the traditional framework of gender limited to anatomy. But the girls whose performances are masculine which do not have any limitation.

In conclusion, even though Parvana is a female character, she portrays some masculine characteristics pictured by Deborah Ellis through her power, strength, aggression, ability to hide her emotions as well as sacrifice for her family. It is proved that Parvana's physical appearance, handling emotions and situations, behaviours are the same as men's. She dresses like a man and thinks like a man. She is intelligent enough to take decisions, decisive and dare to take risks like going out, and enquired the Talibans about her father, collecting human bones for her family and satisfying their needs. The way she takes responsibilities and being responsible and independent shows man's nature. It is concluded that gender stereotypes and the traditional outlook of masculinity are broken in this novel. Gender can be limited only by anatomy, the women can also perform the masculinity as men.

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