

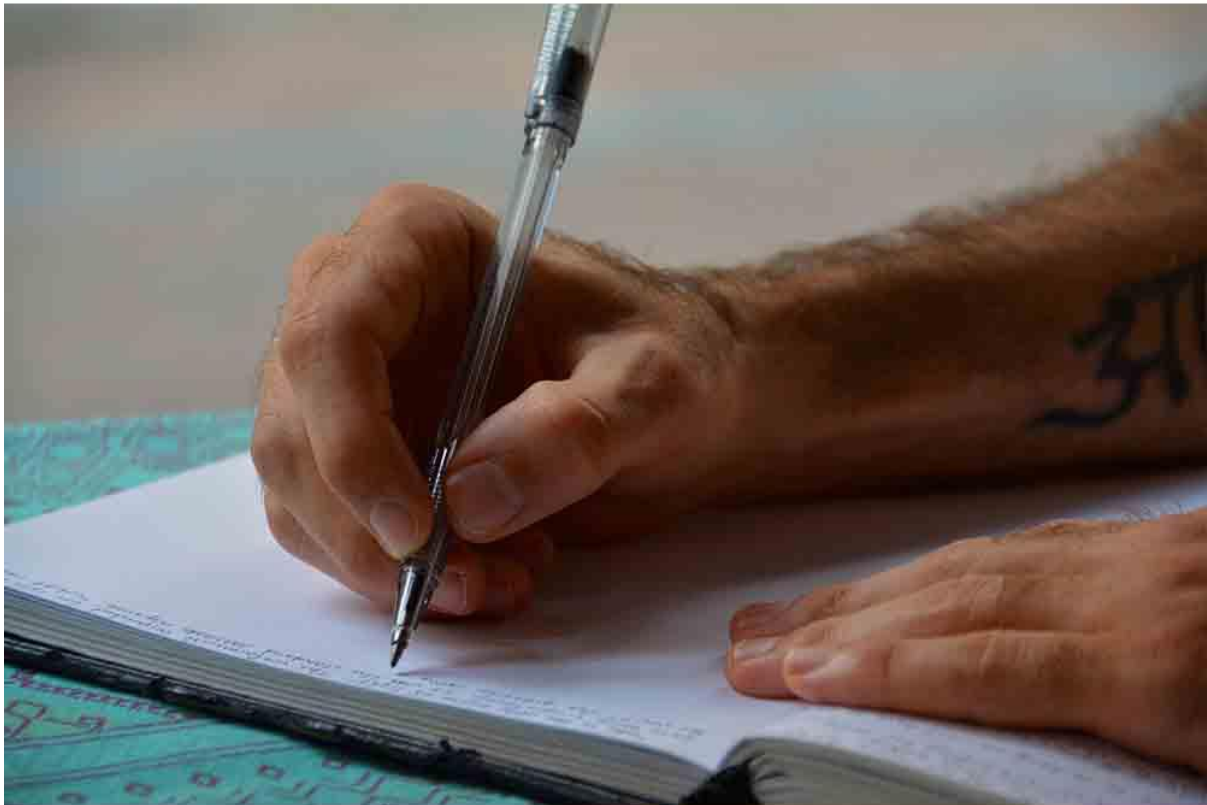
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### Analysis of Trauma in *Luna* using Performativity and Gender Dysphoria

#### Abstract

Gender is culturally constructed and the concept of gender varies from one culture to another. It is not natural but a *performance*, a role-play. The paper “Analysis of Trauma in *Luna* using Performativity and Gender Dysphoria,” depicts the plight of Liam-an attractive senior in high school who is a transgender-through the eyes of his sister, Regan. The novel traces Liam’s discovery of his true self-Luna, who can only reveal herself at night. Liam feels that he is a caricature, a puppet that lives up to the expectations and norms of the society, so much so that, he feels depressed and has suicidal tendencies; his body betrays him, and hinders him from his true identity, which creates trauma. He finally resolves to transition and transform into Luna, akin to a butterfly. Regardless of the disagreeable reception from his society, he endeavours to embrace his hidden self and sexuality, with the support of Regan. The general attitude of the society is still far from accepting the Queer community, even though the Supreme Court decriminalized Section 377 of the IPC; in such a scenario, the paper “Analysis of Trauma in *Luna* using Performativity and Gender Dysphoria,” attempts to depict that there is no “absolute” sexuality but sexual fluidity.

Key terms: Gender , Gender Dysphoria, Performance, Performativity, Gender identity, Transgender, Sexual Fluidity, Gender expectation, Assigned gender, Experienced gender, Sexual orientation.

“Analysis of Trauma in *Luna* using Performativity and Gender Dysphoria”

Judith Butler, in her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, writes: “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (25). Butler’s theory of identity as performativity, influenced postcolonial and feminist theorizations. Gender is assigned and performed in various discourses- law, medicine, religion, family, sexuality-and it cannot exist outside this system of discourses. Butler employs Michel Foucault’s theory in “Discipline and Punish” and the aid of deconstructive ethos and the postmodernist notion of gender. Butler adopts Foucault’s argument- soul is the prison of the body- and how oppression on prisoners is not internalized but “marked” on their bodies. Backed by Foucault’s argument, Butler holds that the predominant cultural agent, *gender*, operates on the body. This upholds the concepts of binaries like masculinity/femininity and the identities of heterosexuality/homosexuality. Like poststructuralism and deconstruction which refuses a monolithic and unified identity, Butler is against the traditional notion of ‘gender as fixed.’ “All bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no “natural body” that pre-exists its cultural inscription.” Butler reveals that gender is a fabrication. Pramod K. Nair in *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, distinguishes the difference between “performance” and “performativity”; he writes: “Performance presupposes a subject” and performativity argues that it is in the act of performing that the performer is born/constructed” (189).

In the novel *Luna*, Julie Anne Peters uses the narrative voice of Regan- a straight “Genetic girl” (GG) - depicts the life of Liam, the “Transgender girl” (T-girl), and his trauma of being trapped inside the wrong body. The novel moves back and forth between the present and the past. The only support that Liam receives is from his sister. While Liam suffers from Gender Dysphoria which causes the trauma of being in the wrong body, Regan suffers Psychological trauma. She sacrifices her social circle of friends and her boyfriend- Chris- in order to protect and safeguard Liam’s secret identity. Thus her social life is “utter void.” She could not bear at the thought of her brother being labeled as a freak. By presenting the novel from a “straight”- Regan- person’s point of view, the readers realize that it is not only the transgender -Liam- who undergoes untold sufferings but his family and friends as well.

Liam names himself as ‘Lia Marie’ but later changes his name to ‘Luna’- a girl who can be seen only in the moonlight. Liam realizes that his “body betrayed” (Peters 50-51) him from his childhood days. He is jealous of Regan because she possessed the body that he desired. At night, inside the confines of Regan’s room, Liam dresses up as Luna, his true self. At the young age of six, Liam loved to play the role of ‘mommy’, while he asked Regan to play the ‘daddy’, and Regan recounted the memory: “takes my Samantha doll from me and cradles her in his arms” (5). Jack has huge expectations of Liam and wants his son to join the basketball team. He understands that his son is highly intelligent and yearns for Liam’s successful future; he does not want Liam to end up like him. Liam idolizes Jack, and relentlessly endeavours to live up to his expectations, thus he pushes himself despite his abhorrence- towards football and basketball, his assigned gender as male - and goes for tryouts in sports.

“Gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a “doing” rather than a “being”” (GT: 25). Liam cross-dressed in Regan’s room at night and woke her up to ask her opinions on how he

looked as a girl and his dress, make-up, wig and accessories. The only escape from gender expectation and gender role was Liam cross dressing as Luna. He wanted to pass as an ordinary girl and dreamt of shopping with Regan; Liam's dreams and excitement seemed quite ordinary for Regan because every "genetic girl"-as Liam puts it- aspired to be beautiful and popular. Regan was flabbergasted when Liam asked her to go shopping with her. Even though she knew that Liam was a "black hole" sucking the life right out of her; she loves him and is ready to sacrifice her life, herself, for him. At first, she is unable to comprehend the terms like "transgender," "genetic girl," "Sex Reassignment Surgery(SRS), " "Drag," "transsexual" to name a few. It is towards the end that she realizes and comprehends these terms; she is unable to grasp the cost of revealing Liam's identity and asks him about the expenditure of the surgery and hormone treatment, but later understands that it cost him his dignity. Regan always felt the burden of living in the shadow of her intelligent brother and felt that she had to live up to her teacher's expectation as well as the society's expectations. She was noted by her Chemistry teacher, Mr. Bruhnac, because her brother -Liam- excelled in his studies.

At times, Regan regards Liam as self centered. She placed the blame on Liam and Luna. She longed to be a part of the "Chosen Ones" of Shannon Eiber, a popular girl at school. She is attracted to a boy named Chris yet distances herself from him. She knows that she would unconsciously or consciously spill the beans regarding Luna. This is the major reason why she does not involve herself with her peers and they nickname her as "stuck up" which hurts her more than she actually cared. Luna was also the reason why she lost Carmen, her only best friend; it also caused a rift between her and Chris, it almost broke her friendship with Alyson. Her favourite part time job at the Matera's house, as baby sitter, was completely lost due to Luna. She wanted to be adopted by Matera's because they represented the perfect

couple cum parents. The loss of her job as a baby sitter was a shock to her because it was the only place devoid of Liam. She says that she loves her brother but hates his transition.

Regan started having her doubts and questions regarding gender identity upon uncovering Liam's dual identity as Liam and Lia Marie. Regan labels her dad and Mr. Bruhnac as sexist. While Jack covertly disapproves his wife's job and her being a busy working woman, who is no longer the 'insignificant other,' Mr. Bruhnac overtly displays a male chauvinistic attitude towards women. She observes the two children Coddy and Mirelle that she babysits; she realizes that there is a reversal of gender expectations, when Coddy plays with a Barbie doll. She remembers Liam saying that, when kids acted "out of role," they were labeled as tomboys or sissies. She also notes that gender scales did not extend equidistant in both directions. She gives an example: "if you were a girl you could be off-scale feminine and that'd fine, but if you acted or felt just a little too masculine, you were a dyke. Same for guys"(6). Liam was always dressed in role, as he called it, "boy role." He wore long sleeved shirt and buttoned it till his chin; tucked his kaki Dockers, "which were ironed with military precision" (2). He studied the behaviour of girls, how they talked, gestured and moved. He had memorized Alyson's behaviour- the way "she tossed back her head" and how she "bit her bottom lip." He absorbed, memorized and imitated their gestures and moves. Thus "gender is performativity" says Butler. Gender is culturally and socially constructed, hence it is not natural.

Regan knows how Liam felt, he once told her that there was no place for him in this world; "he did not fit anywhere. He really was off the scale"(6). She does not see Liam/Luna as a freak. But she is fed up of her life and duties, placing the blame on Liam. Later, she recognizes the truth told by her inner voice. Liam was "a boy by day and girl by night," but the problem resided in the fact that he was a girl, all the time, in his mind. It was so strong that it was hardwired into his brain. "As a boy, he had to play to their expectations. Dress the

part. Act the role.” This series of repeated acts constitute ‘Gender.’ Like Foucault, Butler agrees with the concept of gender as the effect of discourses controlled by power structures. Butler argues that there is no gender identity prior to or outside of language because identity is the effect of discourse.

Jack is upset when he finds the wish list of Liam- A Prom Barbie, a Bra- and he is repulsed at the thought. He is insecure about the true identity of his son and is haunted by suspicions. He even searches the basement- the secret place in which Liam hides his make-up kit, cologne, dress and other accessories- to find no trace of drugs and is relieved when Regan informs him that Liam is not a drug addict. Jack is disappointed with Liam’s friends - comprised of only girls. Both Mr. and Mrs. O’Neill are embarrassed when Liam asked for a bra as his ninth birthday gift; he took hold of the cake with a pink ballerina-meant for Alyson- than the cake with miniature golf figures. The O’Neill family realizes that their son is different; he does not adhere to the normative expectations of masculinity. Jack doubted whether his son was gay and confronts Regan but she is unable to say that Liam is a girl, hence she is attracted to men. Jack laughed at Luna when Liam cross-dressed and revealed her true identity; Regan narrated, “Luna found my eyes. And died inside” (225). Jack is unable to comprehend Liam when he says, “birth anomaly,” “I’m a transsexual” and “transgender;” he cannot accept his son’s identity as Luna and shouts: “You’re sick, You are sick... you look like a clown” (225). Luna refuses to obey and his father replies: “I hate you, I hate you!” (225)

Mrs. Patrice O’Neill was disillusioned with her role as homemaker- a twenty four hour service provider with no pay or respect- and finally becomes a working woman, living her dream. She copes with Liam’s issue by avoiding him. She is preoccupied with her job as a wedding planner; she pretends to be an unconcerned parent, a mother, because she is not able to handle it and does not wish to face it; it is evident in the line: ““I can’t handle it

today” (224). she screamed sounding on the verge of hysteria.” She felt claustrophobic with the burden of being a housewife, and decided to break free and, venture outside from the domestic confines of her house. Her plight is not obvious and comprehensible to Jack and Regan. But Liam is able to fully understand his mother. He knows what it feels like to be trapped and chained to others’ expectations. His dream of living as ‘Luna’ is harder than his mother’s dream.

Liam is disappointed at his body: “No one will ever know the person I am inside...All they see is ... nothing.” Liam sees himself as “A caricature I’ve created. A puppet, a mime, a cartoon character.” (20). Whatever Jack said to Liam, on his ninth birthday, “caused a rift” in his universe. “A black hole opened up and swallowed him-Lia Marie-whole.” He receded, retreated and withdrew. He was “dying inside” and every day he felt the same old pattern of “hiding, lying, holding her in.” Liam’s depression and suicidal tendencies resulted from the gender role that he had to play, which resulted in his strained, conflicting dual identity as Liam/Luna. Living up to his father’s expectation had traumatized him, so much so that, he consumed pills and attempted suicide. He wants to be free and to transition. He wants “to be her”, wants “to be Luna.”

Liam’s only birthday wish is that he would pray to God, to fix him. He is saddened thinking about how he could “never be a bride” but always a bridesmaid. He falls into self loathing and self pity, when he says that he cannot do anything right, he is wrong, all wrong. He pleads with his sister to help him die and to pour the pills down his throat; he states that he was not meant to be born. From that moment on, Regan grants him the permission to wear her nightgown to bed and to use her room to dress in and whatever he wanted. He checks the history on Transgender, and gives instances of Philo-who wrote about men transforming into women; King Henry the Third of France- referred to as “her majesty;” Abbe de Choisy wrote: “I thought myself really and truly a woman” and finally the example of Joan of Arc-

who in her mind was a man. Teri Lynn transitioned and Liam is overjoyed at Lynn who is living the life that he wanted. Lynn calls it: 'remaking herself.' After the surgery, the picture of Teri Lynn -the male, a sad vacant and dead person like Liam- "blossomed and sprung to life;" the way Liam broke free when he morphed into Luna. In Luna's case, narrates Regan, the butterfly is forced to rein in her wings and reinsert herself into the cocoon. Every day "she has to become this shell of a person." Being Liam- an actor, a hologram- meant fulfilling the assigned gender while being Luna signified his experienced gender.

Some of the traumatizing experiences in the novel occur when Luna goes out in public during the day. She receives cold stares from men and women, while teenage boys stalked her in the mall, and coffee shop. She was brave to morph into Luna and attend school but she is harassed by Hoyt who calls her a "pervert" and "fag." The humiliating experience strips the dignity of both Luna and Regan, yet Luna is brave for she faced Hoyt alone. She then becomes a strong and determined spirit and dressed as Luna she goes to the airport. At first the security guards make fun of her and denied her entry, after she removes her bra and wig, and she is granted entry. Liam was unable to control his desire of transforming into Luna at the Matera's house, and he was caught wearing Elsie's negligee along with her ear rings, bra and was threatened by Mr. David Matera who held a knife in his hand. Liam emerged as Luna during his birthday and his father did not accept her as his child, instead, he tried to land a punch on her, he overtly says that he hates Liam. When there was a slumber party for girls at O'Neill's house, Liam wanted to be a part of them but his father termed him as a boy with "raging hormones" and prevents his chance. Later he comes with food and all the girls gather around him, seeking his attention, especially Shannon. His toenails and fingers are painted with nail polish and he blows it like he had polished his nails a hundred times. The music was on and Liam suddenly morphed into Luna by moving her hips and legs, the way girl's dance. All the rest stared at Luna and labeled her as "gay" and a "freak." People noticed his

weird behaviour which was not in congruence with his assigned gender. This instills terror in Regan. There is a striking memory that Regan had of Liam, it so happened that while swimming, Katie and Regan began waddling stark naked in a kiddie pool, and suddenly he removes his swimming trunks and begs to his sister and Katie, to “take it off”(226) as he thrashes and tries to yank off his penis. When the mother enters the house to answer a phone, she says: “what have you done? Oh my God.” She leaves with Liam and replies to Mrs. Camacho, “He cut his...his leg” (226). She informs her not to speak about this incident to Jack. This vivid and disturbing scene shows an anti-essentialist view of gender, which means that the biological sex does not always stand in congruence with sexuality and gender identity. Regan is shocked when Liam tells her about the promise that she made with mom. Liam could not stop himself from transforming into Lia Marie, despite his mother’s warning. This cross-dressing was not an act but her true essence and identity. Liam kept the promise because his mother told him about his father’s reaction and how he would never be able to accept his transgender identity. One of the difficult situations that Liam faced in his life was to reveal his inner identity as Luna to his father and Alyson; Liam insisted upon unveiling Luna to his best friend Alyson. Alyson thinks that he was telling a joke, in the end truth dawned upon her. She was adamant and refused to listen to both Luna and Regan’s word. Alyson was in love with Liam; her dream was to marry him. After she realized the truth through the words of Regan- about how Liam’s cuticles had traces of nail polish, how he badly wanted a bra on his ninth birthday, how he behaved and danced during the slumber party, how he hated his body – she understood that he was not gay as she thought he was; she not able to cope up with the transgender identity of Liam and left them. Alyson underwent a psychological trauma; her childhood friend and lover is a Transgender and she was a girl trapped in a boy’s body, inside her mind she was a girl but outside her body betrayed her. This resulted in the creation of fault lines in Alyson’s mind. She was confused regarding her

identity because of her love towards Liam and asks Regan, “what does that make me... a lesbian?” Alyson was the only person, who after abandoning Liam, came back and decided to be his friend again. In the end, both Luna and Regan are freed from their psychological trauma. Liam knew that they were “hurting each other” and decided to visit Teri Lynn in Seattle and undergo hormone treatment and surgery to transition into Luna. She assured her sister to think of her departure as a “rebirth” for both of them. Regan describes Luna: “An aura framed her, a glow. Her whole body seemed to be backlit as she blew me a kiss. I felt it land, a brush of butterfly wings against my cheek. It lifted me up, away...she’d freed us both” (256).

Julie Anne Peters in an interview conducted by Cynthia Leitich Smith, states that she decided to portray Liam through the third person narrative of Regan, so as to present the psychological trauma of not only Liam, but those closest to him- the people who are not transgender. In the novel, Peters employs the motif of the split between the body and the mind; dichotomy between sexual orientation and gender identity. The separation of the mind and the body is evident when Regan observed that Liam usually drove his convertible car with the top down, even during winter. She narrates: “As if he couldn’t feel the cold; as if his body wasn’t connected to his brain” (18). It created fault lines in the character of Liam/Luna. The novel depicts the concept of *performance* of Liam/Luna. Regan knows that Liam need only change his clothing, put a wig and apply make-up to present him as Luna. The “boy role” of Liam is another manifestation of performance wherein he has “to act”, “play his part,” repeatedly because he is “a male macho version of a son that dad has in his head” (20). The one wish that Liam had was to be reborn again, in the “right body.” The childhood incident at the swimming pool- when he abhorred his penis and wanted to “take it off” and “...cut his leg” (226) - depicts the incongruence of sexuality and gender identity in relation to a person’s biological sex. According to Oxford handbooks, Gender Dysphoria is defined as

the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one's experienced or expressed gender and one's assigned gender. Liam has Gender Dysphoria since he is uncomfortable with his body; he is jealous of Regan's body. Liam is torn between how he feels and thinks of himself as Luna- referred to as experienced or expressed gender- and his physical or assigned gender. This conflict results in his depression and suicidal tendencies. Luna is caged and tortured in Liam's body. The gender conflict is seen in Liam's cross-dressing, consumption of cross-sex pills, his change of name from Lia Marie to Luna, his self image and his decision to become transsexual through surgery. Liam expressed his feelings and behaviour relating to Gender Dysphoria at the age of nine and it went on during his puberty. One finds that Liam had a strong desire to be of the other gender; he had a strong preference for wearing clothes typical of the opposite gender; he had a strong preference for toys, games and activities stereotypically used by the other gender; he had a strong preference for playmates of the other gender; he had a strong dislike of his own sexual anatomy. By analyzing Liam's character through the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), it is proven that he suffering from Gender Dysphoria and the psychological trauma associated with his gender identity.

Luna is the symbol of true identity and essence that Liam endeavours to achieve throughout his life. Liam is a *performance*, a mere "hologram." Liam mentions that there are shades of grey to people's gender. Although his decision to transform as Luna - to undergo the Sex Reassignment Surgery in Seattle, not bothering about his education and career- may appear as against the normative standards of society, it is Luna's only chance to stop performing as Liam and start being: "This isn't a good-bye, it's hello...I'm starting my life over. The next time we meet, you won't even know me" (256). D.Y Chandrachud, currently a sitting judge of the Supreme Court of India, posits in the magazine *India Today*: protect "the fluidities of sexual experience" and "plural ways of life and infinite shades of love and

longing” (37). In order to prevent the trauma undergone by the transgender people -like Liam in the novel- the society must reform their attitudes of compulsory heteronormativity and give space for the queer community.

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