

Transgender and Constructions of Identity: Positioning Motherhood and Mothering

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Abstract

The biography namely, *Becoming Nicole: The Transformation of an American Family* that chronicles the story of transition of transgender child, Nicole Maines (Wyatt prior to transition) is, in my perception, primarily the story of Kelly Maines, Nicole's mother and her struggle to successfully deal with Nicole's gender dysphoria. The paper explores questions such as how the mother of a transgender child can realize the potentiality of motherhood and mothering and translate them into a site of agency, autonomy and authenticity? How can the maternal role of nurturance become the role of power and empowerment for both the mother and her transgender child? Finally, how the tradition of motherhood and mothering can become an act of resistance to defy and subvert the conventional discourses that naturalize transphobia and to instill in a transgender child a sense of self, self-worth and happiness?

Keywords: Agency; Gender dysphoria; Motherhood; Nicole; Transgender.

Marginalization or the process through which 'persons are peripheralized based on their identities, associations, experiences, or environment' has, of late, been one of the major topics of concern in literature. Various groups such as women, Dalits, transgender people to name a few are recognized as the constituents of marginalized community of India. What interests me particularly is the transgender community the issues of which I bring today to the table for discussion and deliberation, as it is this community that faces prejudice and humiliation and hatred and violence (or transphobia) at the hands of the society; it is this community that suffers from discredited status of being mentally disordered or/and sexually depraved; and it is this community that continually wages battle for equality, inclusion and recognition in society (and overcome transgender invisibility). In a nutshell, the transgender phenomenon forms the major part

of the 'cultural crisis of the millennium', to put it in the words of Susan Stryker, a transgender woman and an American Professor and Theorist whose work focuses on gender and human sexuality.

To understand the transgender community and its concomitant complexities and crisis as portrayed in Indian texts based on transgender's life, in this paper I analyze the American biography, *Becoming Nicole: The Transformation of an American Family* by Amy Ellis Nutt. Before moving on, let's take a look briefly at the plot of the biography, *Becoming Nicole*.

Becoming Nicole chronicles the true story of a transgender girl, Nicole Maines (Wyatt Maines prior to transition) who, along with her identical twin, Jonas is the adopted child of Kelly Maines and Wayne Maines. It wasn't long before Kelly and Wayne noticed a marked difference between Jonas and Wyatt. Where Wyatt loved princesses, dolls, Ariel the mermaid and to dress up like them, Jonas preferred Power Rangers, sports, trucks and other things that little boys are 'supposed' to like.

As the twins grew into toddlers, confusion over Wyatt's gender identity due to his persistent statements that he was a female began to trouble both Kelly and Wayne. Wyatt's explicit dislike for masculine clothes prompts Kelly to research about gender dysphoria that he was suffering from and, to the best of her knowledge, she soon arrives at the conclusion that Wyatt is a transgender. She accepts Wyatt's identification as a girl and supports his inclinations to dress up, behave and be a girl. Repeatedly, she barrels past the resistance, indifference and unsupportive behavior of her husband, Wayne who harbours feelings of personal shame and embarrassment due to Wyatt's femininity. Kelly realizes the need of medical help for Wyatt from pediatric endocrinologist, Dr Norman Spack to guide the process of Wyatt's transition. Dr Spack helps Maine understand the transition process that would involve taking puberty suppressants followed by female hormone, estrogen and then the sex reassignment surgery at the age of 18.

As Wyatt enters the fifth grade in school, new challenges await him. One of the major challenges is the legal change of name from 'Wyatt' to 'Nicole'. Another obstacle that Wyatt, on stepping into the fifth grade, has to face in his transition is single-sex restrooms for students in school. The school authorities agree that Nicole, in accordance with her gender identity, should use the girls' restroom. But this decision is strongly contested by Paul Melanson, grandfather and guardian of Nicole's class fellow, Jacob. To desist Nicole from using girls' restroom, Jacob is instructed by Paul to

follow Nicole into girls' restroom. Paul's opposition of Nicole using girls' restroom is based on the argument that if Nicole who is physically a boy can use girls' restroom so can Jacob.

Nicole's harassment at school continues and despite repeated requests by Kelly to school authorities to provide protection to Nicole, school authorities remain complacent. The incompetency of the school compels Kelly to file a lawsuit in the court against the school for its discriminatory attitude towards a transgender child. The bill of the Maines family that would allow business owners to decide who could use which restroom is defeated in the court and the school authorities makes it clear to Kelly to withdraw all support from Nicole.

Though proceedings begin again for the lawsuit of Maines, the latter loses in their district. Finally, it is in the Maines' state supreme court that the Maines' family wins. It is a remarkable victory that has far-reaching ramifications not only for the Orono school district but for schools across Maine. The final step towards Nicole's complete transformation into a girl is the sex reassignment surgery. Nicole's family, particularly Kelly stands by her and supports her to go through the medical procedure successfully.

The book has an epilogue by Nutt, the biographer in which she quotes an exchange that takes place between a girl and a boy at Nicole's elementary school. The two students discuss the meaning of transgender. The boy names Nicole to cite an example of a transgender but the girl says she wasn't aware that Nicole was a transgender to which the boy retorts: "Yeah, it isn't a big thing, you know". The girl comments: "Oh, I know. It doesn't really matter. As long as she's happy".

What sets the biography, *Becoming Nicole* apart from other texts such as Mimi Lemay's *What we will become: A Mother, a Son and a Journey of Transformation* or Hillary Whittington's *Raising Ryland: Our story of Parenting a Transgender Child with no Strings Attached* is that while, in the latter two stories, the entire family of the transgender child helps and supports his/her transition, in *Becoming Nicole*, it is solely the transgender child's mother who understands and accepts her transgender child's inner turmoil due to gender dysphoria and stands by him at every stage of his transition. The following examples from *Becoming Nicole* clearly bring out Kelly's husband, Wayne's unacceptance of Wyatt as a transgender child and his passivity and reluctance in supporting Wyatt's transformation.

Example one, Wayne would ignore Wyatt's presence in the home, not to

mention his utter unacceptance of Wyatt as a transgender child. Nutt observes that as Wyatt, the little child played around Wayne, 'Wayne pretended not to see him. He didn't look up. He didn't want to look up'. Example two, speaking about Wayne's absolute disinterest in Wyatt and his desire to transform, Nutt writes: 'Wayne...couldn't get his mind around Wyatt's gender-bending behavior, so he retreated - to the woods to cut down trees, to the gym to work out his frustrations, to the pool or the lake to swim until he was exhausted.' Example three, Wayne's own admission to himself towards the close of the biography that 'it had been Kelly, *not he* (emphasis added) who had been there for Nicole since day one' is the noteworthy evidence of Wayne's non-supportive behavior towards Wyatt's desire and process of transformation.

The above examples foreground Kelly's role of a mother in her transgender child's transition and lead me to explore the vicissitudes of motherhood in context of a situation where a mother is confronted with the difficulty of facing her transgender child's desperate and unyielding desire to transform into a girl on the one hand, and the indifferent and even hostile attitude of her husband towards their transgender child and his need to transform on the other hand.

Most of the reviews of the biography, *Becoming Nicole* too reveal a similar story - lack of acknowledgment of the crucial maternal role of Kelly in the life of her transgender child and his transition. The Minnesota Psychological Association, in its review of *Becoming Nicole*, states: 'This fascinating book is as much Nicole's family's story as hers'. Another review of the book observes: 'What is clear in this gripping account is the strength of the emotional bond within the family as Wyatt became Nicole, a bond that deepened as the stakes increased and pressure mounted.' Yet another review of the biography that is available on the website namely, *Gender Analysis with Zinnia Jones* points out: '...the book also chronicles the personal growth of Nicole and her family as they all come to terms with her gender.' This neglect of Kelly's massive single-handed contribution towards Nicole's life as well as the process of transition accounts for my emphasis on and about motherhood in context of Kelly in *Becoming Nicole*.

To elucidate the concepts of 'motherhood' and 'mothering' in context of Kelly, I refer to two well-known critics Adrienne Rich, an American radical feminist and Andrea O'Reilly, Director of the Association for Research on Mothering, York University, Toronto, Canada. Adrienne Rich has defined the term 'mothering' as an experience that is 'female-defined and focused on women's interests...(and) had (have) the potential to be empowering

for women'. O'Reilly has used the term 'mothering' to denote 'negation to patriarchal motherhood...(that) it seeks to...implement a view of mothering that is empowering to women'. Analysis of Kelly's role as the mother to a transgender child has led me to add a different dimension to the concept of 'mothering' that I call - 'humanistic mothering'. Kelly's mothering is neither controlled by a male (her husband, Wayne) nor aimed at countering male authority in the process of child rearing. Rather, Kelly's agency and autonomy as regards her mothering of her transgender child can be attributed to two factors - one, Wayne's passivity and disinterest towards the predicament of gender dysphoria of his transgender child, and two, Kelly's own humanistic life orientation - the second factor that is particularly elaborated upon and forms the major part of the paper.

Rich's definition of 'motherhood' as a patriarchal institution that is male-defined, male-controlled and oppressive to women implies lack of autonomy, passivity, and blind obedience and complete subservience to patriarchy for a mother. In the light of the above-stated contention, Kelly's instance presents an oppositional discourse of motherhood. Kelly displays activity and agency right from the moment she and her husband, Wayne observes gender incongruity of their child, Wyatt. Where Wayne refuses to accept the gender-bending behavior of Wyatt and retreats into a self-made cocoon, Kelly promptly springs into action and attempts to get to the roots of Wyatt's problem of gender identity. Anthony B. Pinn's observation in *What is Humanism and why does it matter?* succinctly brings out Kelly's humanistic outlook to Wyatt's problem: "...although human life is fraught with hardships, humanity is capable of addressing its problems with appeal to reason and the scientific method." Kelly intuitively believes that there was some medical explanation to Wyatt's feeling and behaving in a certain way and extensively reads literature related to sex, gender and sexual orientation. She is intelligent to take cue how to manage Wyatt's gender problem from the TV news about a couple in New York city who allow their son to dress up as a girl or from the interview at Oprah Winfrey show of Jennifer Finney Boylan, an English professor at Colby College in Maine who happened to have once been a man.

Kelly redesigns the conventional timidity and passivity attached to the maternal role and forges ahead to tackle every challenge that confronts Wyatt. As a result, by the fourth grade in school, Wyatt, with Kelly's support is able to wear a girl's bathing suit to swim lessons, and then culottes to perform at the school Christmas concert. Kelly helps Wyatt wear feminine clothes at home and at school that he loves with confidence; Kelly enrolls Wyatt in the girls' softball team that he desires so earnestly; Kelly

sends a flurry of letters to school authorities to ensure that Wyatt is allowed to use girls' restrooms at school; and then, Kelly approaches the court and Wyatt Maines legally becomes 'Nicole'.

Pinn's conviction that for a humanist, a non-theistic stance produces clear thinking and robust action serve to transform in positive ways the range of life options available particularly to those who suffer most in our current world community stands true in case of Kelly's mothering. Kelly's strategies to ensure Wyatt's happiness and protection from transphobic society arises from her firm belief: "He (Wyatt) was unhappy as a boy – that was the bottom line, and so her job was to help him be happy."

Kelly, undoubtedly shares a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that every individual has the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to one's own life. Hence, for Kelly, Wyatt's transition, if that's what was desired by him, needed to be nurtured; if Wyatt disliked masculine clothes then it was cruel to force him to wear them; and if Wyatt is given toys to play with or anything else only for the reason that Wayne (Wyatt's father) considered it inappropriate then it was 'all just too mean'. Kelly adopts a humanistic approach to the pressing problems of life of transgender child that have their origin in the baseless, age-old beliefs and traditions of society towards transgender community. She remains firm in her ideology that it is so important to give freedom to every person for one's conscious self-development and individuality, for one's sense of happiness and fulfillment. No wonder then, at every step of Wyatt's transition, Kelly encourages him to be what he truly felt within himself to be, even if that was contrary to the usual representations of transgender people in culture or media. Hence, Wyatt develops a distinct sense of self that is manifested in his optimistic consideration of the option of sex reassignment surgery – an option that is surrounded in the society with a host of misgivings, stigma and taboo.

If Kelly as a humanist sees the value of securing individuality for Wyatt, a transgender person then she is equally cognizant of promoting a collective life for him, something that very often, transgender people are deprived of by the society. This calls for 'deliberate living' which advocates "moving through the world in relationship to others and entrenched in the world in ways that recognize our interconnectedness, and hence deep responsibility to ourselves and to others". Thus, though Wayne shouts at Wyatt for wearing a pink princess dress that Wyatt is so fond of for the party that the Maines family had organized for new neighbourhood at Orono, Kelly responds to the situation in a more sensitive and deliberate manner. Trying

to balance the two desires – Wyatt’s experience of fullness and wholeness of life, and Wyatt’s experience of positive relationships – Kelly suggests to Wyatt that it would be wiser for them that is, Maines’ family to get to know their neighbours first lest they outrage them with the discrepancy that they might find in Wyatt’s gender and dress.

Kelly guides Nicole through a number of transitions and steers her family through one crisis one after another that befall during Nicole’s transformation. If, in Erik Erikson’s view, the essence of being female... (is) characterized as a ‘biological, psychological and ethical commitment to the care of human infancy’, then Kelly’s womanhood and motherhood emerges strong and exemplary. However, Kelly’s identity as a woman or a mother does not stop at love and nurturance in the conventional sense of the word. Kelly expands the vision of a mother, and adds ‘resistance’ to the perspective of a mother’s nurturance. Her act of mothering is no less than social activism too as she shoulders and embraces the task of educating people about transgender issues ‘on the playground, at school, in the supermarket’. She positions mothering as a role of power and empowerment as she makes an official complaint to Orono Police Department against the school’s orders for Nicole to use staff restrooms – a decision that meant for Nicole segregation from the rest of the students and humiliation too. Further, she carries out her well-thought out decision to file a lawsuit in the court alone (without Wayne) and thus, challenges the patriarchal structure wherein men handle legal and political affairs.

Humanist thinking, on Kelly’s part provides her a firm basis for democracy, social justice, human rights and support for transgender children like her child, Wyatt that would liberate them from their heritage of prejudice, injustice and discrimination. Wyatt (later, Nicole) wins friends at school and his family wins lawsuit in the court – and Kelly eventually proves her point that Wyatt was not disturbed nor sick nor bizarre nor freak who needs to be punished or ostracized from the society. Wyatt was only ‘different’ whose gender identity may be different from cisgender people but whose need for acceptance and social inclusion is similar to them.

Kelly’s consistent and continuous struggle to counter marginalization of transgender child is a remarkable example how humanism involves the enhancement of human engagement with self, others, and the larger world, and promotes the beauty of existence over and against its trauma and absurdity’. Kelly is an epitome of a mother who realizes the potentiality of motherhood to translate it into a site of agency, autonomy and authenticity; she represents how the maternal role of nurturance can become

the role of power and empowerment for a mother and her transgender child; and she exemplifies how motherhood can be an act of resistance to defy and subvert the conventional discourses that naturalize transphobia and to instill in a transgender child a sense of self, self-worth and happiness. It is in these ways that the reading and analysis of an American text, *Becoming Nicole* facilitates my further comprehension of Indian texts that delineate transgender life and experience.

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