

PROBLEMATISING TRANS ‘GENDER’ CATEGORY IN FIGHT-BOXING BY ANALYSING *BEAUTIFUL BOXER*

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Abstract

The research intends to look at the non-existence of the queer identity amongst all the gender identities recognized in the world. The study follows a cultural methodology with hints of an ethnographic framework where the underlying problem of the transgender athletes being unable to participate in the sports events due to biological reasons becomes an issue. A gender category of their own has not been approved of owing to other factors like unacceptable rights and freedom of the queer athletes and acceptable rights and laws of the sports authorities and other members of the dominant sex. A total of 25 articles with the primary text, a film, *Beautiful Boxer* has been taken up for the study which intends to analyze the above stated issues in a very detailed manner through the life of **Parinya Charoenphol**, a trans-woman fight-boxer. The research thereby showcases male-centric societies and the adversities of these trans-athletes that the research becomes useful to portray the lives of the trans-athletes and the need for the improvement in the perceptions of the society towards the trans-athletes to be able to recognize their identity as one amongst them.

Keywords: Beautiful Boxer, cultural, Gender category, Identity, trans-athletes, biological.

Introduction

Transgender individuals are those who encounter a dissident disagreement between their gender identity and their biological gender. Gender identity, synonymous to experienced gender, is the internal feel of gender in the individual. Transgender individuals in sports or the transgender athletes have been seen prominent in the world. Be it Alessia Almeri, or Mianne Bagger, Savanah Burton or Roberta Cowell, transgender athletes have portrayed their sheer dedication and resistance to all difficulties. Parinya Charoenphol is one amongst them who has fought her way to attaining success in the field of sports. It is not all roses for the transgender athletes. It is not permitted for these athletes to participate under the female category nor in the male category due to various biological reasons. They are questioned of their competitive advantage as well.

Why is it that the transgender individuals do not have a category of their own in all sports events? What are the conditions and rules these transgender individuals need in order to participate? What the conditions are as depicted in the movie *Beautiful Boxer* and why is this universally accepted? Was it wholly Nong Tum or Parinya Charoenphol's wish to undergo sex reassignment surgery to participate in Muai Thai Championships? How is the dilemma of queer identities in Thailand especially relevant to the dilemmas present outside this world? How does Parinya Charoenphol become a successful Muai Thai boxer after battling all the adversities as a transgender? Why does Parinya enact a small scene before all her matches?

Queer identities in the field of sports have been a growing, controversial and a debatable issue in the global era. The articles and the film *Beautiful Boxer* chosen for analysis here highlight the dilemma of sex categorization in competing sports events. The extraordinary struggles to actualize a female selfhood and de-masculinize any sport are the core issue of focus as seen in the movie. Muai Thai, a fight-boxing sport is seen as a masculine sport and the challenge by some feminine fighters makes it more interesting.

The participation of transgender individuals in sports events require confinement either to the female or the male category indicating no gender category of their own as portrayed by Asanee Suwan in the movie, *Beautiful Boxer* resulting in the loss of queer identity as a dominant gender identity.

The paper tries to probe into the controversies, conflicts, rules and conditions that the transgender sportspersons are exposed to just as Parinya Charoenphol's life story in the movie showcases. The right and freedom to choose one's gender identity are discussed by the higher authority or the Sports Board who are clearly not transgender individuals. The decisions made by the sports board do not actually adhere to the wants and needs of the transgender persons. Parinya undergoes a sex reassignment surgery in order to be able to participate in the sports championships which are disheartening. Despite the adversities that the character had to experience, there are complicated and irrelevant laws that banish the complete freedom and right of a transgender individual and null the gender identity of the character. The voices of these transgender individuals are shunned. The Sports Board with members of dominant gender make rules that are insensitive to the needs of the queer identity and this insensitivity is evident not only in the field of sports but also in many other fields, thus deeming it to be a universally accepted issue which is clearly sad. Therefore, the paper tries to probe into Parinya's inner conflicts and external conflicts and the controversies that hurt 'her' sentiments. 'She' fakes her reality to be 'herself' and considers all the laws daft and complicated. Still, she battles her way out and becomes a representative character of all the transgender sportspersons in the world.

Review of Literature

Major transgender theories and research indicate studies about the adversities of the queer individuals and their societal pressures. Not much research has been done in the field of sports, for the benefit of transgender athletes. 'Queer identities in general', 'Muai Thai', 'Queer identities in Thai', 'Gender relations in sport and Gender Dysphoria' are some of the topics that various researchers have concentrated upon recently

Earlier studies however have focused upon the psychological emotions and feelings about being a transgender or a queer individual. The reference to Coy Matthis, a child prone to such queer discrepancies has been linked to the life of Nong Tum or Parinya Charoenphol. Major transgender athletes like Alessia Almeri, Mianne Bagger, Savannah Burton have similar personalities as Parinya herself, battling out their difficulties and achieving their goals. This is

however in contrast to the past research on attributes of transgender women who showcase their lesser motivation to participating in sports events. Therefore, the psychology of these individuals are given much focus rather than just focusing upon the personalities like the prior research studies. This shows the importance levels attributed to the individuals.

Methodology

The paper progresses as an action research using cultural methodology. The issues concerned with queer individuals are a way of life, an acquired one which the society adopted. In the film, Kitiarsa (2007) identifies the cultural change in Thai men after the economic crisis in 1997 that affected queer identities in Thailand. Muai Thai or fight-boxing films highlight the pressurizing responsibility felt by the Thai men to face the nation's economic downturns. With feminization, commercialization and internationalization taking its toll on the Thai men, they shift culturally from a male domain to a more feminized and an internalized prospect. Fight boxing, a sport so controversial for the gender groups has perpetuated the importance of gender identity. Michel Foucault, the French philosopher's theory is in direct reference to Morris' discursive regime concept. The psychoanalytic notions of Parinya Charoenphol in *Beautiful Boxer* is captured perfectly which revolves around the Foucauldian-Morris theory.

Methods

Twenty-five articles related to the transgender individuals in sport and gender identity were taken up to come up with this research paper. Apart from the research articles, the primary text taken for the paper is the film, *Beautiful Boxer* that highlights the dilemma of sex categorization in competing sports events. The extraordinary struggles to actualize a female selfhood and de-masculinize any sport are the core issue of focus as seen in the movie. Muai Thai, a fight-boxing sport is seen as a masculine sport and the challenge by some feminine fighters makes it more interesting. A real life story of Parinya Charoenphol depicted in the movie frames the 'ambiguous and fluid' gender construction in the world generally and in Thailand specifically. For Charoenphol (popular as Nong Tum), contesting in the notion of manhood seemed quite a challenge. Therefore, the establishment of a dominating identity in any sports event is a major challenge on a personal and an interpersonal level as seen through Charoenphol's life story in the film.

Limitations

Physical appearances could determine questions of one's gender identity. As in the case of Charoenphol in the movie, female attributes in a masculine personality compelled to choose a dominant sex. With context to U.S sport, Title IX has been an important component in girls' and women's institutional subversion of masculine privilege. Charoenphol's desperate will to participate and compete in Muai Thai Championships made 'her' change from a masculine person to that of a feminine one. A complete qualitative study is the basis forming the core of the study. Not every athlete would want to undergo one and due to financial constraints, some may not be able to do it but as specified by the sports board, all these athletes have to comply with all the conditions and rules in order that they can participate. The one limitation that has persisted with regard to the issue is that the matters concerned with adding a separate gender category for the transgender individuals in sports events has not been implemented and the idea does not even originate which makes it a minimal matter of concern. The movie is criticized on the grounds that it is too 'long and simplistic' in the sense that such an emotionally provoking story must be

projected in a monotonously simple way. Details are excluded which affects the viewers' sympathy to the character and to all the personalities with the same character role played in reality in this world. Though the reviews indicate that the movie beats the purpose, the message is sent across. The message meaning the gender identity is a complicated and a difficult issue indeed. The sex reassignment surgery maybe approved but the debate about the competitive advantage that is evident in these athletes which is highly a contested issue. Nong Toom's conversation in the movie elaborates on this point:

"My life isn't like a rose. I've never been like other people. Ever since I can remember, I've always been given. Life will take you on many roads, but only you can decide to find a way to be yourself... The most difficult thing is trying not to forget you really want to be" (Translation).

There is also the limitation of a very limited physiological research done on the competitive advantage levels of these athletes which inhibits the sports studies and research done in the field of sports which is depressing. This also shows the failed implementation in sports policies practiced worldwide and that the practices are not attempted to be improved and altered. The research is therefore very limited and thus qualitative by nature. A quantitative research to increase the applicability and generalizing of the research findings to find conclusions about transgender athletes and sports drawn from it becomes necessary.

Findings and Analysis

The study sums up the context of transgender individuals' mindset and the society they are involved with. It reveals the conditions that the transgender individuals have to undergo in order that they can cross the hurdle for participating in sports events. But the very requirement of having the queer identity to have just one dominant sex seems quite insensible and 'sexist'. The articles and the movie picture the establishment of a dominant identity in sports events as an adverse condition and this gender construction through an ethnographic framework is a growing trend in the global era which is still debatable.

It has been found that the transgender athletes cannot possibly participate under the female category since they have higher testosterone levels. Also, they cannot participate under the male category as they have lower testosterone levels. This dilemma puts them in a situation where they definitely have no choice left and the solutions for the transgender athletes are very limited. They will have to a sex reassignment surgery that leads them to participate under one dominant sex category. In fact, to enable the inclusion of transgender athletes in 2004, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that transgender people could participate in all future Olympic Games provided they were 'medically transitioned'. This medical transition process refers to prescribing cross-sex hormone treatment for 2 years and has undergone gender-confirming surgery. The same went with Nong Toom, a male-born athlete with female attributes, had to undergo a sex reassignment surgery to be able to participate in the Muai Thai or fight-boxing championships.

It was also found that the athletes did not quite feel comfortable to participate just in female or male category. But the ethnographic narratives indicate clues about the Harper studies as well.

Harper studies indicate the exploration of androgenic hormones and thereby the athletic ability. The study was to explore the long-distance running times of eight transgender female individuals pre and post testosterone suppression. Harper had arrived into conclusions that owed to reduced testosterone and haemoglobin levels with the transgender female individuals post-

transition would have the same endurance capabilities as a cisgender or a dominant sex female individual. Therefore, more emphasis on the physiological research is needed to derive more depth from this sensitive issue.

The paper finds hints of Michel Foucault's Foucauldian theory but has its primary stand on Teresa De Lauretis, a prominent critical theorist's Queer theory that became prominent in the 1990s which highly influences self as well as the social construct that the character is brought up in. It stems into normative and deviant strands that is quite evident in the movie *Beautiful Boxer*. The main character in the movie ends on a hetero-normative strand of the queer theory. The challenges as a feminist becomes evident in Parinya Charoenphol as she strives to stand out of the social norms that the society restricts and traps 'her'. 'Cross-dressing, sex reassignment surgery, gender ambiguity' focus on the analytical framework in the setting up of the queer theory and these become very prominent in Charoenphol's case. Her struggles to come out of the gender-identity cocoon is very evident in her 'cross-dressing' mannerisms etc. Heteronormativity or the attempts to normalize the practice of heterosexuality in the society is suggested by the movie wherein the character, Charoenphol is forced to undergo the surgery in order to be able to realize her dreams of becoming a fight-boxer. This heteronormative concept is questioned by the queer theory which becomes the primary focus of the paper as to arrive at a conclusion so as to enable the transgender individuals to have their own 'respected' queer identity.

The understanding of all the social and self-conceived notions and pressure in relation to being a transgender is depicted well through the primary text for the research paper, a film called *Beautiful Boxer*. The film portrays the real life story of Parinya Charoenphol, a transgender Thai athlete who had to bear much humiliation and agony to be able to participate in the Muai Thai Championships. The film is a medium to highlight that the transgender category does not exist among the male and the female categories in sports events, that the transgender athletes cannot particularly participate under the male category nor under the female category, that there are norms and rules that the higher authority imposes on them, that the rights and freedom of these transgender individuals are highly prejudiced and biased. The film is a solid evidence to indicate that the queer identity clearly have no roles and motives. Their choices are limited yet there are some who have crossed all the hurdles to shun their adversities and achieve what they sought to achieve. It is a Muai Thai film where the economic downturns have contributed immensely in pressurizing the Thai masculinities. When Nong Toom kisses a defeated, surprised and a barely conscious opponent, he proclaims:

"The crowd love it whenever I did that, especially the reporters but they don't know that I kiss to say, 'I'm sorry, I don't like to hurt strangers but in the ring you have no choice'." (Translation)

A real-life story of Parinya Charoenphol depicted in the movie frames the 'ambiguous and fluid' gender construction in the world generally and in Thailand specifically. For Charoenphol or popular as Nong Tum, contesting in the notion of manhood seemed quite a challenge. Female transgenderism as pertinent in Charoenphol's case refers to the Thai term 'kathoei'. Therefore, the establishment of a dominating identity in any sports event is a major challenge on a personal and on an interpersonal level as seen through Nong Tum's life story in the film *Beautiful Boxer*. An instance from the text being, Jack, the reporter in the movie played by Keagan Kang asking Charoenphol or Nong Toom a question.

"Jack: But I still don't understand how your parents can be so...accepting...of the fact that you wanna be a girl

Nong: They know it's my karma. I did bad things in past life, so I had to suffer in this life.

Jack: Where did you learn that from?

Nong: In the temple, when I was a monk" (Translation).

The idea of sex change arrangement cannot obviously be a very easy issue. They may have financial constraints. Parinya Charoenphol in the movie had money problems as well. Even during the fight, the Muai Thai or fight-boxing, the player had to face so many problems as the men who fought with 'him' took advantage of her female parts and attributes.

In Thailand, kick-boxing or fight-boxing is also considered a national sport. However, one of the country's most famous kick boxer became this trans-woman, Charoephol herself. The macho image of the sport was believed to have been tarnished by the pre-fight preening that Charoenphol was engaged into. She did a little preening of portraying her makeup before the match. This was judged by the audience to be an entertaining act and the player herself was thought of to be an entertainer herself. Later, after she started winning many awards and accolades, they took her to be a serious player. The effeminate manner was also questioned whether it was a publicity stunt. **In 1999, the money got from kick boxing was used by her to undergo sex reassignment surgery.** Determiners like psychological evaluation and hormonal injections were necessary to undergo this process. This shows the levels of difficulty a transgender athlete must undergo to be able to pursue what the athlete likes.

There were superstitions concerning the presence of a woman in the boxing ring as seen in the movie. This shows the male-centric society she grew up in. Charoenphol retorts:

"What I did was a personal choice. I did not try to speak for others. I just thought that I wanted to do this. I never dreamed I would go this far and have this life... I'm quite happier now than before ..." (Translation).

This shows her will and patience. This also shows that not all athletes are negative to the idea of changing their sex and the participating in the games. But the whole idea of having a gender category for transgender individuals exclusively could remove all the hitches that tie up with this biological law from the sports authority. . Biological gender versus gender identity can be a conflicting issue as the queer groups are forced to accept the norms of the gender identity and forget about their biological gender. The above stated idea has been the center of focus for all the researchers recently. Thai films as *Ong Bak* and *Beautiful Boxer* themselves proclaim the queer scenes to be openly projected and be normally accepted. This notion is however not true. Charoenphol had to struggle both emotionally and physically to fight for 'her' rights. The gender ethics are not always right and the acceptance of these gender-identity related issues seems very vague. The gender ethic stating that all transgender athletes undergo a sex reassignment surgery apparently is misconceived to have enabled people to lead 'a happy and a productive life in the society'. This surgery is a legal reform to recognise the changed gender status of post operative transsexuals. The categorizing of sexes in sports events is considered a key issue in genetic dispositions of competitive justice according to the physical advantage as a male athlete. Transgender women are imbued with features as motivation, self-confidence, a will to achieve and succeed and androgyny, these are imbibed from sports. As suggested by the queer theory, the character in the movie, overcomes all her struggles and challenges to pursue what she is interested at, (here her interest lay in fight-boxing) thereby becoming the representative character for all the sportsmen in Thailand specifically and the world in general as a trans-woman. The hetero normative idea perceived in the end of the movie becomes quite problematic as the

transgender individuals do not wholly accept the idea of undergoing a sex reassignment surgery and become an individual belonging to the category of a dominant gender.

Conclusion

The need for a different sex category for the transgender becomes prominent for obvious reasons. One, it preserves the queer identity and does not inhibit the identity in the society. Secondly, it gives the transgender individuals, the confidence needed whilst their game. Thirdly, the societal inhibitions and notions either about the male-centric sport or about the queer identities in general which are negative would ward off. Fourthly, the freedom and rights of the Sports authority and Boards will cut away and the general mass will celebrate to voice their opinions and their free minds. Fifthly, the dilemma of undergoing uncertain biological changes or the sex reassignment surgery for that matter would be cut off. With all these due advantages, the pursuit of the research paper becomes very important. Being forced to refer to someone by gender identity rather than by biological gender could violate some people's religious beliefs.

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