



Viewpoint

Raising against the trauma of parenting: A trans woman's existent experience in 'Stuck in the Middle with You'

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Abstract

The term 'Transgender' is used to describe people who hold a different gender identity than their birth sex. Many transgenders are prescribed hormones and Sex Reassignment Surgeries by their doctors to change their bodies as part of the process of transition. Sometimes, not everyone in the transgender community will take these steps to live to their inner identity. A transsexual is one who wishes to transition to the sex he/she identifies. Jennifer Finney Boylan is a highly praised trans woman author and professor. She is an activist, and her involvement in social activities for LGBT people, especially transgenders, are highly notable. The work *Stuck in the Middle with You: A Memoir of Parenting in Three Genders* is a memoir about Boylan, and her transition from a man to a woman while being married and raising a family. It explores how changes in gender roles affect one's viewpoint of our family as parents. This paper deals with how Boylan's memoir reflects her role as a trans parent, and it also explores her journey from being a dad to both mom and dad.

Keywords:

Transgender, Gender, Sex, Transition, Parent

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Introduction

The term 'transgender' is coined in 1980s and first appeared in 1992 in the title of an influential pamphlet titled 'Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come' by Leslie Feinberg.^[1] She used this term to refer to a community who are marginalized or oppressed due to their difference in social norms of gender embodiment. Thus, it becomes an umbrella term for a community

that includes transsexuals, drag queens, butches, hermaphrodites, cross-dressers, masculine women, effeminate men, sissies, tomboys, and all others who exhibit transgendered phenomena. Susan Stryker, in her essay '(De) Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies', says:

"The field of transgender studies is concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes . . . makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles, and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy".^[2]

It helps to understand the assumptions about sex and gender, biology, and culture. It seeks to define who transgenders are by researching the cultural presentations, political movements, social organizations, and the lived experience of various forms of gender nonconformity. It works on the principle that people experience and express their gender in fundamentally different ways.^[3]

Gender differences and the issues of sexuality have created deeper divides in the society which staunchly believes in a binary gender system. The gap between male and female sexes is filled with a third space which consists of people who are neither male nor female. The dyadic male-female codes and norms make them an outsider, an oddity, and perhaps wretched creatures who have no right to live in this society. The failure of the cis community to realize that transgender have their own sexual identities has added to discrimination. This makes them the victims of various prejudices and violence.^[4]

As Delli Swararao opines, "Seldom, our society realises or cares to realise the trauma, agony and pain which the members of transgender community undergo, nor appreciates the innate feelings of the members of the transgender community, especially of those whose mind and body disown their

biological sex. Our society often ridicules and abuses the transgender community and in public places like railway stations, bus stands, schools, workplaces, malls, theatres, hospitals, they are side lined and treated as untouchables, forgetting the fact that the moral failure lies in the society's unwillingness to contain or embrace different gender identities and expressions, a mind set which we have to change".^[5]

The autobiographies of transgender people stand as a testimony that claims to record the collective trauma of the community. It has evolved into a new genre called trans narrative. Such personal narratives are important to celebrate trans identity. Most of the trans narratives share the specific tropes of sexual abuse, attempted suicide, and use of aggression as a means of survival.

Jennifer Finney Boylan is an authentic writer who has experienced both fatherhood and motherhood on both sides of the gender line, as a father for six years, a mother for ten, and for a time in between, neither or both. When her two children were small, Boylan came out as transgender, and her family encountered unique challenges and questions as she transitioned from a male to a woman and from a father to a mother. She questions what it means to be a father or a mother in this profound, tear-jerking, and humorous memoir and to what extent gender shapes one's experiences as parents.

Jennifer Finney Boylan became a well-known writer with the publishing of 'She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders' (2003). Gender issues became firmly established as a topic of popular discussion during her time, and she was drawn to nonfiction writing. Because gender issues were so central to her life, it seemed natural that gender would become a topic she revisited again and time again. Anyone who has given it even a fleeting thought understands that stepping beyond the so-called 'norm' and embracing a gender identity or expression that is not defined by the

traditional gender binary is not easy. There's a lot of fear and prejudice in the world, and the sad truth is that in order to find peace and happiness within ourselves, we frequently have to accept the loss of friends and family.^[6] However, when children are involved, the situation becomes even more complicated. *Stuck in the Middle with You* does an excellent job of analysing the role of gender (and gender transformation) in parenting and demonstrating that one's own health and happiness may coexist happily with that of one's children. There are some profound thoughts and sad tears involved, but most wounds heal with time, love, and compassion.^[7]

Her memoir 'Stuck in the Middle with You: A Memoir in Parenting in Three Genders' is a serious examination of how gender roles influence one's perceptions of themselves as parent. What characteristics distinguish a mother, is it possible for a man to be a father? What criteria should one person employ to describe themselves, and where should those criteria originate? These are some of the questions that may have been answered through Boylan's transformation from man to woman. She intersperses and supports her own narration with other interviews with people like Augusten Burroughs, Richard Russo, and Ann Beattie, who talk about their own families. Each of them has vastly different backgrounds, but their stories gradually and subtly reveal common connections.

The psychological trauma produces confusion and anxiety in the lives of transgenders. They continue to live with concern about what is wrong with them. When they realize that they are different from the normal being, they find themselves odd and unsuitable for the normal world. Right from childhood, Boylan always found something wrong with her own body.^[8] Her parents named her James Boylan, as she was assigned as a male by the doctors by looking at her male genitalia. She finds it hard to live in a body which doesn't correspond

with her inner sex. She was caught in a dilemma where she was not sure to what sex she actually belonged. Because she was not satisfied with her boyish physique, but at the same time, she found that the body of the girls differ from her body. This conflict between the physique and psyche tormented her a lot. It was during her mid-age, she confirmed that she is transgender, i.e., a trans woman.

Boylan was afraid to tell this truth to others because of the fear of being discriminated, ridiculed, and the thought of prejudice. She kept it a secret and hidden for years, which was not an easy job for Boylan. She often cross-dressed and went outside wearing feminine clothes and makeup. This eased up her desire to become a female. She had been in a series of relationships as a boy because she thought that someone would make her forget about her trans identity through their love. She says, "nobody really gets cured by love, but transsexuals are hardly the only people who believe romance will lead them outside of themselves. You can't fault a person for hoping that love will make her into someone else, someone better".^[9] At last, she fell in love with Deirdre (Deedie) and married her. She was having a happy life as husband and wife. They became parents to two children, Zach and Sean.

Even though leading a happy life with a loving wife and sons, Boylan was not able to cage up her feminine self of her. Her life appeared to be perfect on the surface, but she couldn't fool himself. In her thirties, she understood that she had two options: live a life of deception or do something about it and tackle the problem. Thus, eventually, she opened up about her trans identity to her wife. Deirdre was given a detailed explanation by James in the hopes that she would comprehend. It was a shock to her wife and but she was determined not to leave Boylan alone during this tough time and decides to stay together as a family.

Boylan wife, Deirdre had to adjust to the loss of her husband, and her sons had to adjust to

the loss of their father. Deirdre stays with Boylan during her transitioning period and was happy for Boylan's transition from a man into a woman. Boylan's children accepted her for what she is and called her "Maddy" (half mommy, half daddy), which they believed had a profoundly positive effect on them.^[9] Boylan's sons are thoughtful, loving, and well-rounded people. Even in her own life, Boylan presents both sides of the issue. She has supportive and non-supportive family members. She was comfortable in her womanhood in some contexts and uncomfortable in others. Boylan's journey from a man to a woman while being in a married relationship is a tough and hard one. When it comes to parenting, she feels,

I wonder sometimes if I am fathering my children without maleness, Deedie and I have very different relationships with our kids. There was a time when I thought, No, I need to be more womanly with my sons because otherwise I'm short changing my identity as a female. But now I believe that parenthood is a mutable experience. There's a lot of room for me to be whoever I want to be with my children without having to lose any of my own identity.^[9]

Jennifer Boylan ends the book with an interview conducted by novelist Anna Quindlen, who interviews Boylan and her spouse. They discuss the prejudices and secrets, as well as the experiences of Maddy vs. Daddy and a few tough issues. *Stuck in the Middle with You* is a wonderful addition to the many parenting books, and it offers a new perspective for both men and women. Boylan had been a father for almost six years when she realised she couldn't keep up the act of being a man any longer. She decided to transition by undergoing sex reassignment therapy, and changed her name from James Boylan to Jennifer.^[9] Deirdre, her wife, decided to stay married and raise their two sons together. Boylan fears that her transition might harm the boys. But to her surprise, they are happy,

well-adjusted young men who believe their family is even somewhat unique, as told in alternating sections by Jennifer and in interviews with other writers about family and raising children. She confesses that she was extremely fortunate throughout her transition because many things could have gone wrong, but it did not. In her another book of Boylan, *She's Not There*. When Jenny (Jennifer Boylan) asks her wife about the surgery,

"Do you want the surgery, Jenny?"

I nodded. "Uh-huh", I said.

"Well, you should have it", she said. "I mean, there's no reason not to".

"Yeah, but - If this one thing would keep us together, I'd be willing not to do it".

Grace laughed sadly. "Jenny, that's not what's keeping us together..."^[10]

On having a parent who has transitioned from being a male to female is not an easy one for the children to accept. Boylan had this constant fear about the trauma her children would undergo in their school and society when others found out about their transition. But the children were ready to face it together as a family. They happily called her Maddy, and whenever their friends enquired about the feminine look of their father, they were brave enough to say that male or female doesn't matter because Boylan is still the same person on the inside. Parenting, in spite of being a trans woman, doesn't seem much hard for Boylan as she was lucky enough to have a family that supports her.

Deedie says, "what I did get to decide is that I still do want to be married to Jenny. We do still love each other and we have a life together which is rich and rewarding. Our family is very close and very happy and very successful, and everybody appears to be doing what they want to do... we live where we want to live and we do what we want to do, and we're doing it together as a family. And that's not something that I feel trapped in, it's something at this

point that I totally embrace and am happy with".^[9]

One of the shocking turns of events which Boylan didn't predict was the sexual transition of her son Zach. When Boylan enquired about it, Zach said that she had always felt different about her own body, and now, she is aware that she is no longer a boy but a girl. She underwent sex reassignment surgery and facial recognition surgery with the support of her family and converts her name from Zach to Zaira. Boylan was happy that her son had now been transitioned into a daughter like she had been converted from being a father to a mother. The only thing that terrified Boylan was that now Zaira had transitioned her sex to female, she would more likely to face ridicule, harassment, and hatred from others. Since Boylan herself is a trans woman, she very well knew the aversion the gender binary society has over transgenders, especially towards trans women. But Boylan decides to be a supportive Maddy to Zaira.

Boylan has a knack for penning memoirs about mundane aspects of her life while still keeping them intriguing. Each section flows into the next, and everything is well-connected. Furthermore, it's refreshing to read a transwoman narrative that has a lot to do with the act of transition. This is all about being a father transitioning into a mom and figuring out what parenting entails at various stages of her life. She gets to compare and contrast what it's like to be a father and a mother.^[9,10]

It is vital, to be honest with oneself as well as with others. Being James, no matter how clever, sensitive, or brave she is, she thinks she is still a normal person, so she avoids conflicts and other situations that can make her uncomfortable. Even though she has the ability to live in a man's body, she does not wish to. As soon as she starts to embrace herself, she starts to feel better. James (Jennifer) becomes aware of the situation and begins to

act. In this situation, sex reassignment surgery is an act of trust and acceptance. She is aware of who she is and what she wants out of life. Therefore, even after marriage, James Boylan decides to transition into a female. She decides to transition not just from a male to a female but also from being a dad to a mom. Only one way leads to happiness, and it is quite difficult. Boylan aspires to depict the internal turmoil that all transgender people have as they mature and come to terms with their true identities.

Boylan wants people to be more aware of the difficulties people face while coming out to their loved ones and undergoing lengthy and expensive gender reassignment procedures. People must first recognize and understand that they have no control over anyone. The second thing to keep in mind is that no one is perfect. Deirdre tells James Boylan straight out that she dislikes his transformation and is afraid of losing him. It takes her some time to understand James' reasoning, but she eventually does. Jennifer Boylan's book is meant to show that everyone is different and that everyone's route to happiness is different as well. We must be courageous enough to confront our fears and fight for our goals. Acceptance and comprehension are also important issues. Jennifer Boylan appeals through her autobiography that the people of hetero-normative society should come forward to end up their sorrows and miseries. Demystification of transgenders will help in bridging the gap between heteronormative people and the transgender community. She believes that the humiliation they suffer from the society will be reduced only if the public become aware of their realities. In the process of writing her life story, Boylan has tried to articulate the voice of the oppressed sections of the society whose identity is restrained in the concealment of myths and social prejudices.

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