

A Deconstruction of Masculine Hegemony: Identifying the Gender Pluralities through Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*



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The analytical endeavour based on British novelist, short story writer, and critic A.S. Byatt takes into concern the notions “Theorizing Masculinity” (17), “Masculinity in Disguise” (119), and “Non-Male Masculinities” (131) included in Todd W. Reeser’s *Masculinities in Theory* (2010). If we take Reeser’s views on “Non-Male Masculinities” (131), we observe that he examines masculinity “in its recurring relation to other kinds of bodies besides male ones” (132). Reeser even takes on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s view in *Constructing Masculinity* (1998) when he writes “sometimes masculinity has got nothing to do with... men” (12). Reeser yet again subverts the established notion of masculinity by conversing on “Female masculinities” (131) and depicting the traits of “power or virility” (131) ascribed to the female body. He even extends his views on such masculinity by taking Judith Halberstam’s observations in *Female Masculinity* (1998) where she writes that “far from being an imitation of maleness, female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity” (1). Therefore, Reeser uses the concepts of “effeminacy” and “female masculinity” (133) as tools to “destabilize imagined binary oppositions between male masculinity and female femininity” (133). He specifies these as “power [which] is so closely linked to masculinity that it may appear as inherently masculine” (133). The subversions of Phineas’s masculinity are thus analysed through the theoretical framework propounded by Reeser.

Through the very beginning of “Byatt’s *The Biographer’s Tale*”, one can observe the particular traits of Phineas Nanson laid down by the writer. This clearly does not resonate with the definite characteristics of masculinity which “can be easily ascribed [as]... “muscular,” “strong,” “hard,” “brave,” and “in control” (Reeser 1). Masculinity as depicted by Todd W. Reeser “is the opposite of femininity. We can also make a list of adjectives that do not describe masculinity- such as ‘weak,’ ‘soft,’ and ‘emotional’” (1). Even “The man who ignores and overcomes his sickness or illness can be seen as masculine” (Reeser 12). In Reeser’s view, “We may think of masculinity as hard, solid, stable, or reliable, but that illusion may simply be part of the way in which it functions” (5). Even though “Masculinity is very often tied to power,” Phineas appears to be a male who is intensely willing to play the submissive and inferior role in a relationship (Reeser 7). According to Reeser, “any study of masculinity has constantly to take femininity, homosexuality, and other common forms of alterity into account in order to articulate definitions of masculinity fully” (40).

As the narrative progresses, Phineas joins as a part-time dog’s body in the hope of visiting the Maelstrom soon enough and resolving the mystery surrounding Destry-Scholes’s death. It was in this very place that Phineas got introduced to the owners, Erik and Christophe. They were

“one large and blond, one slight and dark. They both wore oil-coloured seamen’s sweaters, wide-necked and cable-stitched. They both wore large, round spectacles, with frames in that iridescent multi-striped light-weight metal” (Byatt 106). Phineas could very well sense that “they were almost certainly a couple, from the way they looked at one another” (Byatt 107). This brings us to the very brink of doubts that revolves around masculinity. In Reeser’s opinion, “We all know certain men whom we would not label as ‘masculine’ or whom we might call ‘effeminate’ or something else denoting an absence of masculinity. When we see such men, masculinity becomes visible because of its perceived absence” (1). These men sharing a love relationship is considered effeminate according to the societal norms. They fail to fulfill the very dictums of heterosexual masculinity according to the perceived norms of the conventional social order. They even subvert the societal idea of perfect masculinity by being least bothered about the certainty of lack of productivity in their relationship: “We shan’t have *any* children, dear...Or maybe a few anonymous test-tube ones” (Byatt 205). This very textual instance proves that “If masculinity’s hegemonic operations can be hidden, they can also be subverted, male power can be destabilized, and experiences outside hegemony can be created” (Reeser 8).

It is through Erik and Christophe that we observe “two heterosexual men [posing] as a gay couple to procure certain domestic partner benefits” (Reeser 126). In Reeser’s opinion, “Becoming gay can be a way, then, to create a bond, with homosexuality serving as a trope for a kind of male-male intimacy often viewed as lacking in heterosexual men. In these kinds of representational flirtations, the idea of a male-male relationship is viewed as attractive—and becoming gay (metaphorically or temporarily) can be a way to deconstruct certain traits of masculinity. Appropriated male homosexuality can thus serve as a technique to move into a new space of masculinity critical of the gender status quo” (126).

While masculinity is constructed as an ideology “we are given the message that a certain kind of masculinity is valid or more valid than another” (Reeser 21). As Phineas comes in close affinity to these individuals and begins to share an intimate friendly bond with them, his masculinity too falls under the very domain of doubt. Phineas could retrieve a whole new latent self that had been lying dormant until now. He thinks “for the first time in my [his] life” that “it would be the right, nor the wrong thing” (Byatt 107). According to Phineas, “The expressions of male-male intimacy are more likely to reaffirm their masculinity” (Reeser 2). This actually proves the mental ability of Phineas to acknowledge homosexual love. This indeed makes him an individual who has strange likeness for the unlikely. His growing desire to “fit into their intimacy,” shows his emotional necessity to be a part of this different world (Byatt 107). This, in fact places several challenges against the male identity of Phineas. Phineas not at all feels uncomfortable with the strange behaviour of his employers. Rather he enjoys the way in which they “seduced” their clients “by words and images” (Byatt 107). This makes Phineas one of them. He is unable to realize the concealed emotional aspect that detaches him from the masculine dictums of the world. His extreme likeness of these men brings about a question regarding his “sexual orientation” (Byatt 108).

Notably, Phineas constantly harbours the intense desire to get “suited” to this new environment and belong to their intimate world (119). The more Phineas strives to be a part of this new world, the more he gets detached from his actual quest. He eventually begins to feel “claustrophobic” in the intellectual environment. He seems to “perceive an increase in the mustiness or fustiness of the air” in the Linnean Society. He happens to be more comfortable in the non-intellectual “human space” (Byatt 122). He projects the utmost necessity to belong to the world of the unfamiliar male figures, Erik and Christophe. Phineas claims Puck’s Girdle to be his “first human space I [he] had ever enjoyed sharing” (Byatt 122). This shows his utmost abhorrence towards the life that he has been living until now. This “human space” (Byatt 122) exhibits the “positive models of masculinity in which masculinity operates in a non-hegemonic way, moments in which men break or attempt to break their own hold over power” (Reeser 8). Phineas’s masculinity also falls under the premises of unresolved doubts and constant series of questions. This can be observed through his delightfulness in being the tool of possession of these men.

According to Reeser, “The common understanding of Adam’s creation, for example, makes the original man a heterosexual victim of a woman’s seduction, and some believe that these aspects of Adam’s creation apply to all men... Images can be turned into myths when they become so widespread that culture takes them for granted as a narrative of masculinity” (23). But such a narrative of masculinity seems to get totally overturned by Erik and Christophe. Phineas seems immensely fascinated by the unconventional utopic world of these men. They subvert the societal notions of gender roles. They share responsibilities in both the masculine and feminine duties “as they moved about kitchen and office” (Byatt 124). Their relationship seems to be a perfect one to Phineas the more he observes them closely: “They brushed hands, they touched each other” (Byatt 124). Phineas gradually starts growing a tremendous need to become an object of acceptance in their world. Phineas never has a feeling of irritation or annoyance because of their “brush of fingers” ruffling his hair or the “touch [on his] shoulder” (Byatt 124). He rather asserts, “I have to say, I was grateful” (Byatt 124). This reveals the hidden self of Phineas that constantly struggles to break through the societal shackles. Phineas’s “queer masculinity” seems to find an expression through Reeser’s viewpoint who claims that “For a heterosexual man that sees the possibility of appropriating femininity as difficult or undesirable, queer heterosexual masculinity may provide an outlet to question gender normativity” (126). Phineas’s being comfortable in such an unconventional milieu exposes the concealed desire of homosexuality that rests within his very being.

Phineas seemed more obsessed with his newfound sexuality than his quest for intellectual stability. His growing dependency on Erik and Christophe gradually erodes away the small speck of strength and individuality left within him. His very existence becomes merged with terror as he finds himself the only one to deal with the strange customer, Maurice Bossey. The very gigantic physique of Maurice and his bizarre outlook make Phineas encounter “sweet images of terror and pain” (Byatt 171). His incapacity and tepidness overshadow his mind with a growing number of questions: “Had they left me alone with Bossey as a *test*?” (Byatt 171). Phineas even

confirms his volatile state of mind and his unmanly traits himself. He confirms being “in a state of continuous terror” at Puck’s Girdle during the absence of Erik and Christophe, who were enjoying their holidays (Byatt 200). Phineas himself asserts that “I am not a brave man” (Byatt 200). He subverts the conventional belief of the society by attributing the manly qualities to the men who are considered to be effeminate owing to their sexual orientation. He finds his job “so delightful because of the openness and insouciance of Erik and Christophe” (Byatt 201). This again makes him the societal being that is able to locate manliness within effeminate creatures. Phineas’s growing eagerness about the return of Erik and Christophe makes him more restless. He tried to be “sensible and rational, worked harder and harder both on photographs and the quotations, and on my [his] work at Puck’s Girdle” (Byatt 200). His “over-excitement” while waiting for their return can never stand in comparison with his desire in searching for the facts to aid up his research work (Byatt 200). His undeterred interest in fulfilling their expectations can never be witnessed during his intellectual quest when he is striving to write a biography on Destry Scholes.

Incidentally, Phineas is able to discover the perfectness of life through the behaviours and traits of these men who are socially imperfect beings. He becomes increasingly aware of his inferiority the more he gets to know about their friendly connections: “They were full of laughter...[and] chattered with a mixture of affection and malice about their new acquaintances” (Byatt 202). Phineas agrees on envying “their world of endlessly interconnected friends and acquaintances” (Byatt 202). Although Phineas claims to be aware of their unconventional intimate relationship, he seems to admire “their grave and settled affection—love—for each other” (Byatt 202). This again raises many questions regarding Phineas’s masculinity. An entirely undiscovered side of his physicality gets revealed through his intense willingness to belong to the world of these imperfect men. Such doubts regarding Phineas’s maleness also arises in the minds of these men. Even though they are impotent themselves they reveal themselves as strong enough to bring their doubts regarding Phineas’s masculine self to the forefront. Their impression regarding Phineas gets exposed through the presents that they bring for him after spending a long holiday together. They are doubtful about Phineas’s manliness and decide to give him something that he is lacking, “a Japanese netsuke with a tiny gnome-like person with an enormous phallus” (Byatt 202). They prefer to present Phineas with a tiny gnome that resembles his own short, tiny physique. Along with that, the “enormous phallus” totally brings about the manner by which they have visualized Phineas till now (Byatt 202). This can also be observed as the main reason they have allowed Phineas to enter their unconventional, utopic world.

They have been harbouring a strong doubt regarding Phineas’s masculinity since the very beginning. This perception about Phineas ultimately gets revealed through the type of presents they give him. Their baffling thoughts regarding Phineas’s sexual desirability can be located through the other present that they bring for Phineas, “a beautiful silver paperknife with a handle in the form of a naked Janus-figure, young and nubile, male one side, female the other” (Byatt 202). It can be clearly observed through this that Phineas’s entire existence is clouded with confusion. He gets immensely furious after detecting the challenges against his masculinity:

The next few minutes were horrible. I do not remember them clearly. I do remember throwing the Easter eggs with some violence at both of them. I remember hearing my own voice screaming incoherently... I remember screaming and growling and howling- yes, and weeping- in complete sentences. (Byatt 203)

It was right after his visit to the Linnean Society that Phineas develops an association with the “pollination ecologist,” Fulla Biefeld (Byatt 110). He had been in search of more facts about Destry-Scholes’s subjects of the unfinished biographies. It is at this very place where he meets the Swedish woman “who reminded me [him] of a Picasso ceramic” (Byatt 109). Phineas is busy observing the “stout” physique of Fulla, which was “Like a squat S, with breasts pushing forwards and buttocks pushing backwards, and solid calves under a denim skirt with a leather belt” (Byatt 109). Phineas is so deeply engrossed in observing the “form” of Fulla that he “did not notice her face” (Byatt 110). The fact that Phineas has been deeply enamoured by the voluptuous body of Fulla proves that he is also attracted towards the female gender. This shows that Phineas is not only suffering from psychological confusion but also a physiological one. His sexuality gets divided between his attractions towards the male as well as female sex.

But Phineas’s attraction towards Fulla’s body cannot be related simply to the notion of objectifying women and visualizing them as the element of sexual desire. Phineas is rather charmed by the essence of masculinity that vehemently lies within the feminine self of Fulla. Although “the male body is the most common purveyor of masculinity,” the notion seems to differ as we observe Fulla (Reeser 17). Her masculinity is indeed something that Phineas as a male is lacking. “The stalwart legs furred with strong, brass-gold hairs” (Byatt 117) seems to provide a sense of security to Phineas. Phineas became “claustrophobic” in the “mustiness” (Byatt 116) of the Linnean Society Library. This shows his inability to perceive new knowledge. It also brings out his hidden self that is frightened to confront the depths of intellectuality. At this very moment, Fulla becomes his saviour: “I slipped to my knees, losing consciousness, and my hands ran down solid thighs, strong knees, warm, muscular. The door opened and I found myself at the feet of Fulla Biefeld” (Byatt 117). He regards Fulla as someone on whom he can be heavily dependent. This brings out his realization of the submissive nature within him and his lack of dependence on himself. Fulla’s masculinity becomes more vivid and it becomes apparent that “the cause or the origin of masculinity cannot be directly linked to the male body” (Reeser 18).

In Reeser’s view, “masculinity should be examined in its recurring relation to other kinds of bodies besides the male ones” (131). The fact that he regards Fulla as a masculine figure can be detected through the manner by which he constantly associates her with males: “Fulla Biefeld put on wide, narrow oval-lensed glasses, surrounded like those of the male couple in Puck’s Girdle, with iridescent titanium” (Byatt 118). This seems similar to Reeser’s opinion that “we all know women who we consider to have certain amount of masculinity and men who we do not” (36). It seems that Phineas is more attracted towards the masculine stature rather than feminine, reticent

beauty. He seems to be enticed by the masculine aspects in Fulla that he himself is lacking. Phineas meticulously observes Fulla's face for the first time while conversing with her regarding his research. He observes that:

Her face is not beautiful. Her nose is sharp, her eyes too deep under the bristling ledges of her pale brows, her mouth too big for her (smallish) face, and set in what is almost a permanent expression of disapproval. Her eyes are not blue but greenish, flecked with brownish streaks. Her eyelashes are actually quite thick, but so pale that they are only visible in certain lights. (Byatt 119)

Fulla's masculine essence seems to get a profound expression through Reeser who proposes his views on "a woman in a male-dominated world" where the "culture does not automatically accord her the possibility of having masculinity" (18).

Fulla's projection of masculine traits reverberates Reeser's observation of "non-male masculinities" (132). He asserts that "Masculinity inscribed on the female body is not simply male masculinity transposed, however, but should be viewed as another type of masculinity that may nonetheless have connections to male masculinity" (132). Taking the views of Judith Halberstam in her ground-breaking work *Female Masculinity* (1998), we locate her assertion that "far from being an imitation of maleness, female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity" (Reeser 132). Similar to effeminacy "female masculinity destabilizes imagined binary oppositions between male masculinity and female femininity" (Reeser 132). It "may contribute to a larger cultural anxiety about what a woman is or should be, or it may evoke a threat that men will lose their supposedly natural hold on masculinity if women do not take flak for breaking out of their assigned gender" (Reeser 132-133). "Female masculinity opens up a space for male masculinity to question the very naturalness of the link between sex and gender or between the male body and masculinity" (Reeser 134).

Even though "masculinity plays an important role in the exertion of power," we can detect a reversal of roles here (Reeser 31). While Phineas regards Fulla as his rescuer, at the same point of time he resents her presence. He looks at her as the one who destroys his happy existence in the utopic world of Erik and Christophe. He regards Fulla as the "Valkyrie" who swept in "to defend me [him]" (Byatt 206). At the same moment, he feels that he could have resolved the matter by kissing his admired men: "I might have injured one, or both of my employers seriously. Or we might- so to speak- have kissed and made up" (Byatt 206). Even at such an importune moment, he is extremely unwilling to leave his happy abode. He is so very comfortable with these men that he is certain of the fact that he can kiss and make up with them.

Moreover, Phineas is not only inferior to Fulla in terms of intellectual ability. He seems rather much more comfortable in playing the role of a submissive partner while sexually bonding with her. Phineas's sexual attraction towards Fulla becomes visible right from the very moment when he observes her "stout" structure at the Linnean Society that resembles a "Picasso ceramic" (Byatt 109). He is so very enamoured with Fulla's "breasts pushing forwards and buttocks pushing

backwards” that he has hardly any interest in looking at her face (Byatt 109). Fulla exhibits both her oozing sexual appeal as well as her strong masculine traits through the “solid calves under her denim skirt” (Byatt 109). These traits indeed make her Phineas’s saviour who had been feeling utterly “claustrophobic” in the intellectual environment (Byatt 116). Phineas is rescued from his gradual descent into suffocation and unconsciousness as his “hands ran down solid thighs, strong knees, warm, muscular” (Byatt 117). Even inside this brawny, fibrous structure, it is only possible for Phineas to encounter “yielding soft flesh” (Byatt 117). “The stalwart legs... furred with strong, brass-gold hairs” appeared to Phineas as a site of security where he can “lose consciousness completely” (Byatt 117). Phineas discovers the light of consciousness inside the darkness of Fulla’s “skirt” (Byatt 117). He could revive his senses after attaining the sight of “the slight wiriness of her pubic hair pressing against what appeared to be alternately crimson and emerald knickers” (Byatt 117). As Phineas’s nose becomes “alive with Fulla Biefeld’s sex,” we can easily derive his attraction emerging out of his discovery of Fulla’s masculinity concealed within the female self (Byatt 117). Phineas deliberates on his “weakness” as well as his tendency to “tremble” (Byatt 117). These can be viewed as evidences of his own awareness of his lack of masculinity. Getting “slipped to my [his] knees” right at the first encounter with Fulla, proves his acceptance of submission against the traits that he is lacking since the very beginning (Byatt 117). This again brings out the latent feminine self within Phineas. Such a characteristic aspect of Phineas finds its perfect revelation through Reeser who claims that “There are traditionally feminine aspects in many brands of masculinity. The sensitive man, for instance, is one brand of masculinity dependent not on a rejection of femininity but on its necessary incorporation into what a man is or should be” (37).

Even though he is “alive with Fulla Biefeld’s sex,” Phineas is too afraid to enter in a sexual rendezvous with her (Byatt 117). He appears to be rather comfortable playing the role of the submissive partner during sex. Here, Phineas subverts the accepted notion of masculinity which believes that “sexual virility provides one ontologically seeming trait of masculinity” (Reeser 45). His meek self seems to have “trembled and exploded” at the very thought of a woman being dominant in a relationship (Byatt 213). He seems totally benumbed after witnessing the compelling vigorousness of a woman to sexually advance even before a man. We rarely talk about “her masculinity” in the way we talk about “his masculinity” or “her femininity” (Reeser 134). Fulla seems to project the “power” that is “so closely linked to masculinity that it may appear as inherently masculine” (Reeser 133). This very thought happens to make Phineas shudder: “And she opened the top two buttons of her shift, so I could clearly see her freckled brown breasts in their lacy cups... And when she saw me looking, she put up her quick little hands and pulled my face down between them. All of me, all of me, trembled and exploded” (Byatt 213). This again brings out the effeminate aspects within Phineas. Regarding effeminacy as something that “can actually masculinize a man”, Reeser proclaims that “Effeminacy often signifies the threat of a man becoming like a woman, but effeminacy is not necessarily the opposite of masculinity” (210).

Fulla seems to manifest the masculine traits and Phineas the feminine ones. He follows her whole-heartedly and derives his happiness and satisfaction through the fulfillment of Fulla’s sexual

expectations. The very being of Fulla protruding out through her “amazing” features and her “severe little face” is “like an electric pulse” to Phineas (Byatt 260). Each and every movement of Fulla, even “her sturdy feet in their Ecco sandals”, makes Phineas regard her as “an independent creature” which is totally opposite to his own entity (Byatt 260). Phineas’s constant realization of Fulla being “at the top” proves her strong ability that is vigorous enough to undermine the existence of Phineas (Byatt 260). Phineas demonstrates a discourse of masculinity that “evokes an anti-traditional masculinity, the image of the “new age sensitive man” and repositions masculinity as kindler, softer, and in touch with its feminine side. Given these differences, such discourses have the ultimate effect of constructing contradictory discursive masculinities. Similarly, masculinity may be contradictory within the context of a single discourse” (Reeser 33). According to Reeser:

In this gendered linguistic scenario, ‘masculinity’ would refer to something that would be obvious to anyone hearing the word, would have a stable referent, and would stand in direct opposition to ‘femininity.’... An ontology of masculinity is dependent on an assumed stability of other words linked to that essence as well, including perhaps ‘man,’ ‘power,’ ‘virility,’ or ‘penis.’ (36)

Such an assumption gets totally subverted through Phineas’s physique, which seems to oppose the proposed notions of masculinity. Focusing on several “phallic symbols,” there exist “myths [which] function as a way to make certain forms of masculinity seem eternal and unchanging, not open to change or variation, and not ideological in nature” (Reeser 22). Struggling with several conflicting ideas in his mind and constantly suffering from an inferiority complex owing to his not-so-sharp and “small” features and being someone who “was a little person, the child of a little person,” Phineas seems to raise several questions within his self regarding his masculinity (Byatt 3). This clearly emerges out of the associations of several bold features and physical traits with perfect masculinity by the society. Fidelma Ashe justifies this through the opinion of R.W. Connell in her work *The New Politics of Masculinity* (2007) where she brings about the argument “that masculinity is a relational term that only exists in contrast to what it is not, namely femininity” (145). There happens to sustain profound doubts regarding the masculinity of Phineas Nanson throughout the novel, which he himself realizes but is immensely afraid to resolve or even encounter.

Conclusion

Phineas, as a male projecting feminine traits, exhibits a predominant femininity and timid nature within his male self. The masculinity of Phineas, which deviates from the conventional form of masculinity, can be established by the theoretical ground propounded by Connell. She argues and wishes to “bring to light the conflicting interests of different groups of men” (*Masculinities* 238). She even argues that, “it is possible for men to refuse hegemonic masculinity” (*Masculinities* 220–24; *The Men and the Boys* 205). This becomes expressed through Reeser as he asserts that:

Instead of considering the two genders as opposites, one might think in Derrida's terms of femininity as “supplementary” to masculinity, meaning that masculinity can exist only by virtue of its dependence on femininity. While masculinity might be defined in language as inherently different from femininity, the very fact that it is the opposite of femininity suggests that its definition requires femininity. (37)

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