

Kimberly peirce's 1999 film, boy's don't cry – critical review



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On the surface, Kimberly Peirce's 1999 film, *Boys Don't Cry* appears to be an archetypal feminist text on lesbianism. Feminism, however; does not exist in a vacuum and the film does not fit neatly into any one particular application of feminist thought. Indeed, I chose this particular film precisely because it articulates several contentious issues overt across most feminist discourse such as gender and biology, male dominance and male violence; all of which have helped inform various contemporary understandings of feminism. Individuals experience the world around them and construe a reality by way of its various representations in popular culture. By deconstructing and appropriating radical feminist discourse to selected scenes and identities portrayed in *Boys Don't Cry*, I hope to contribute to a progressive, popularized, common sense understanding of feminism.

The Many Faces of Radical Feminism

I chose to apply a radical feminist analysis because it provides an important foundation for a variety of feminist movements. This group of feminists get the "radical" label because they view the subjugation of women as the most fundamental form of oppression. An oppression that cuts across boundaries of race, culture, and economic class. 1 Radical feminism questions why women and men adopt certain characteristics based on their biology. While all radical feminists agree that women (and men) must be freed from repressive gender roles under patriarchy, attempts to delineate between biologically-determined behaviour and culturally-determined behaviour has forged a major rift among radical feminists.

In *Feminist Thought* (1998), Rosemarie Tong makes a distinction between radical-libertarian and radical-cultural feminism. ² This distinction is largely based on the sex/gender debate over biology versus the socialization debate on gender/sex differences. Radical-libertarian feminists espouse individual liberties and equality, attributing the gender of one's biology to little more than a construct of patriarchy. Radical-cultural feminists reject the liberal notion of autonomy and see gender as biological with the view of women's differences as special. ³ While the sex/gender debate may be over-inflated, I apply this distinction to the following analysis of the film *Boy's Don't Cry* as it contributes to a more complete understanding of the issues raised throughout.

Synopsis of the Film *Boys Don't Cry*

Boys Don't Cry, is a dramatized documentary that tells the story of protagonist Brandon Teena, born Teena Brandon, played by Hillary Swank; a biological female who created a male identity for herself. Brandon was born in 1972 and died at the hopelessly young age of 21. *Boys Don't Cry* tells of the last two weeks of Brandon's life in 1993. Brandon is a transgendered individual; he was born a female, but feels that he would be more content living as a man. She leaves her brother and hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska, where everybody knows her as a female, to start a new life as Brandon in Falls City. Brandon is welcomed among a group of peers, both male and female. Brandon's deception is fated for failure from the beginning, but Swank's enthusiasm is infectious, and when Brandon starts romancing Lana (played by Chloe Sevigny), he finds a soul mate with whom he can transcend socially-prescribed sexual boundaries.

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Eventually, Brandon's past catches up with him. When he fails to appear at a Lincoln, Nebraska on a court summons in the name of Teena Brandon, he is arrested and left to face the truth. With Brandon's true sexuality is revealed, Lana's previous boyfriend, John, played by Peter Sarsgaard and his side-kick Tom (Brendon Sexton III) hunt Brandon down and brutally rape and her. Brandon accepts his fate with surprising calm. The story ends shortly thereafter when John and Tom, out of fear and anger murder Brandon, ending his tragically short life.

Androgyny

While there is disagreement among radical feminists as to the value of androgyny in theory and in practice, simply stated an androgynous individual is one that encompasses a system of traits that either have no gender value, or have some aspects generally attributed to both sexes. ⁴ As advocates of androgyny, radical-libertarian feminists would applaud Teena Brandon's identification and expression of her masculine side. Out of respect for the protagonist, I will henceforth, refer to Teena as Brandon, and will apply use discretion while applying the gendered articles him /her interchangeably.

Brandon is typically portrayed in masculine clothing - loose fitting jeans worn with plaid button down style tops and cowboy boots. She tapes down her breasts and adorns her genital area to create the look of a penis and scrotum through clothing. Appearance, however; tells just a part of the story. Portrayed as a lonely individual struggling to find his place in a hostile world, Brandon is dealing with a gender identity issues of " crisis" proportions

Brandon is portrayed as an androgyne, but not the ideal to which many radical-libertarians appealed. In *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millett suggests that androgyny is a worthy ideal only if it encompasses those masculine and feminine traits that of themselves separately worthy. ⁵ If such an ideal compilation of traits truly exists and freedom from one's cultural restraints on biological sex is the measure of success, Brandon was not very successful. Other radical-libertarian feminists are more flexible on the matter and maintain that there is no one way to be androgynous. ⁶

Cultural-feminists would argue that the female sex is superior and therefore, androgyny is not a desirable goal at all and Brandon's desire to live as a man is indicative of a heterosexual "false consciousness" under patriarchy.

Should Brandon wish to wear comfortable clothing, she should do so only in the company of women where she would be free of patriarchal restraints. ⁷

Sex, Gender and Lesbianism

Brandon is a biological female who chooses to have sexual relationships with women and casual relationships with men. Having stated the facts, it becomes obvious to the reader that Brandon does not celebrate his female sex and is likewise uncomfortable with the female menstruation cycle.

Furthermore, Brandon vehemently rejects the term 'lesbian' as something shameful and denies his female biology until the two antagonists force an admission. Arguably a victim of patriarchal constructs, Brandon is neither able to divorce himself from the physicality of his female genitalia nor is he able to embrace it. It becomes obvious that Brandon's own struggle with

sexual identity cannot be understood from a purely libertarian or cultural perspective.

Most radical feminists agree that heterosexuality has probably been forced upon many women, who free from patriarchal constraints may have chosen lesbianism, however; radical-libertarians do not disavow heterosexual sex as do radical-cultural feminists. 8 Brandon's identification with 'the male' and his obvious attraction to the female sex combine to reveal an individual who is trying to forge an identity somewhere between the two extremes of patriarchy and separatism. On the surface, the radical libertarian would applaud Brandon's sexual orientation as atypical patriarchal norms and the radical cultural feminist would applaud Brandon's choice of sexual partner, yet would abhor her desire to seek friendly camaraderie with men.

It is a common misunderstanding that radical feminists, by nature of their ideology, are all separatists. Some radical-cultural feminists do call for total separation, however; the idea of separation need not necessarily imply a contradiction within radical feminist discourse. 9 Separatists are sometimes literal, sometimes figurative. The rationale is simply that by 'separating' from men women are able to see themselves in a different context. Many feminists, whether or not separatist, think a temporary separation is a necessary step of personal growth. 10

Sexual Pleasure vs. Sexual Violence

While sex has always been a pervasive element of popular culture, the film *Boys Don't Cry* illustrates a more socially and politically charged sexual discourse has emerged in more recent years. There are two fairly graphic (by <https://assignbuster.com/kimberly-peirces-1999-film-boys-dont-cry-critical-review/>

mainstream standards) sex scenes that taken together, are entirely in contradiction. Paradoxically, and to the delight of radical feminists, the first sex scene portrays an experience of shared, mutual pleasure; yet at the same time challenges patriarchal gender norms. Likewise, the second sex scene, an explicit demonstration of sexual aggression, serves to codify popular discourse on the violent male tendency.

During his lovemaking with Lana, Brandon deals with his lack of male genitalia (a perceived shortcoming), by employing the use of some sort of strap on penis. While sexual experience between Brandon and Lana appears to be one of 'pleasure-with', 11 radical cultural feminists would probably reject this scenario as "bad heterosexual sex" as it perpetuates the patriarchal myth of the vaginal orgasm. 12 On the contrary, radical-libertarian feminists proclaim women should assume complete control of their sexuality and practice whatever provides pleasure and satisfaction. 13 Arguably, had Brandon and Lana been spared their tragic fate, it is plausible that together they would have explored the positive aspects of both "masculine" and feminine sexuality beyond culturally defined gender roles, forming something new and equal along the way.

The second sex scene and one of the most brutal, portrays Brandon being raped by John and Tom, the very men who befriended the 'new kid in town'. The attack is portrayed as an act of angry retaliation upon their discovery of Brandon's biological female sex. One is immediately reminded of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970). An early radical-libertarian, Millet explains that male dominance and female subordination form the foundation of all power relationships under patriarchy.

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Should a woman refuse to submit to her subordinate role, men will use coercion to accomplish what conditioning has failed to achieve. 14 On its own, the radical-libertarian interpretation of rape risks justifying socially deviant behaviour and belittles the radical feminist view of sexual violence as part of a system of objectification of women under patriarchy.

Furthermore, the radical-cultural feminist marriage of violence and heterosexual activity risks subscribing to a conservative agenda by repudiating all heterosexual practices that support and normalize (male) sexual violence. 15

Perhaps even more frustrating for the audience is the fact that Brandon, after the brutal rape by these two men, still defends them, claims blame for the incident and continues to sleep in the shed on property the two men are familiar with and have access to. Initially, radical feminists alike would fault Brandon for his dependence on the rapists, however; both libertarians and culturists would justify this dependence under patriarchy. The radical-cultural feminists would maintain that Brandon's dependence is not surprising given there are no safe heterosexual relations where the dominant ideology is a system of male dominance and female subordination, and her rape is just one example of sexual objectification that occurs within this system of patriarchy. 16

In a similar fashion, radical liberal feminists maintain that the dominant ideology-patriarchy-requires structured dependency in order to exist. Women's subordination is therefore maintained for the benefit of patriarchy. It is not the idea of dependency that radical-libertarians so detest, individuals

have dependency needs at various stages in life, but the requirement of women to be dependent under patriarchy.

Working Together for a Better Tomorrow

While the libertarian and culturist dichotomy can aid our understanding of sex, gender and victimization under patriarchy, alone, neither provides a sufficient explanation of Brandon's sexual identity and the fate that became him. One's sexual understanding of self is in part a biological construct and a construct that develops through identification with one's peers and the society at large. Our understanding of sexuality cannot be separated from the historical context that defines it, and as such, the line between real versus apparent consent remains blurred. Socialist feminist Ann Ferguson addresses this dilemma "...sexuality is a bodily energy whose objects, meaning and social values are historically constructed. " 17

Convinced a female revolution in consciousness is the most crucial primary step towards a social revolution, radical feminists have been committed to encouraging all women to acknowledge their subjugated secondary status and to accept that no aspect of their lives – reproduction, sexuality, femininity – are free from patriarchal influences. 18

Both radical-libertarians and radical-cultural feminists offer valuable insight into female and male sexuality under patriarchy. Alone both theories appear insufficient to account the gamut of behaviours that make up contemporary sexual climate. Taken together they can provide a comprehensive understanding of sex roles and identities.

The debate over what defines the revolution and how to stage and carry out the revolution is a necessary process that reinterprets preconceptions while progressing towards a common goal. That common goal, simply stated, is the deconstruction and de-legitimization of all socially constructed sex-role stereotypes created under patriarchy. Disagreements among radical feminists as to the role and importance of biology become trivial in this context.

The argument that women should recognize existing cultural restraints and make efforts to rise above and/or move away from oppressive patriarchal influence is, on its own, an individualistic and insufficient response to a systemic problem. As demonstrated, Brandon seems neither able nor inclined to eliminate the gender factor from his own equation. Pop culture contributes tools of information dissemination to the feminist community. By challenging the limits and popular notions of all that is sexuality and gender, exploratory films like *Boys Don't Cry* lend a frame reference from which to gauge feminist theory and inform contemporary feminist movements.

As feminism enters its third wave, the opportunity exists for a new generation of feminists to seize a radical and new understanding of contemporary issues. One that borrows ideas, concepts and processes from both radical-libertarian and radical-cultural feminism and explores the ways in which feminist discourse intersects and negotiates with each other. The radical-libertarian's commitment to the deconstruction of gender roles and cries for individual freedoms and liberties combined with the radical-culturists commitment to the celebration of all that is essentially female,

contribute to the mandates upon which a viable remedy, practically linked to human nature, might be built.