

# Butch and femme roles of lesbians



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Butch and femme roles were extremely important to the community in the forties and fifties; it was the butch role that was the most visible, and therefore the most likely to cause public scorn (Weissman and Fernie). The two sources, *The Reproduction of Butch - Femme Roles* by Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and *Forbidden Love* by Aerlyn Weisman and Lynne Fernie focus particularly on the function of the butch role among working class lesbians in Buffalo. These sources draw on articles, oral histories and interviews of lesbians from the early twentieth century. Both the resources state that, although "gender-appropriate" styles and behaviors were rigidly enforced in order to maintain a clear distinction between the sexes, butch women's choice to not only reject traditional femininity but to also actively adopt masculinity was perceived as a threat to the very order of society and a prelude to social chaos. Despite the fear, and likelihood of harassment by police and other straight men, the courage of butches to claim their identities in many ways prepared the way for later generations of lesbians to break free from the narrow conventions of socially constructed womanhood and claim access to a kind of power traditionally held only by men (Weisman and Fernie). As a result, male representations of lesbian sexuality have had the most influence in shaping attitudes towards butch and femme identities throughout the twentieth century. Such representations have almost always assumed the lesbian role -playing is an imitation of heterosexuality.

The main theory underlying the feminist disregard of role - playing is that roles depend on sexual difference, which is naturally hierarchical, polarizing, and oppressive. Sexual difference is the grounds on which heterosexual roles

are built, and thus contains within it an inherently unequal distribution of power. In the relationship of a butch and femme, since the identities of both are built on popular cultural stereotypes of male and female behavior, they tend to reinforce the inequality in power inherent in this dichotomy. In addition, in most cases one of the partners is active, strong, dominant, and initiating whereas the other partner is passive, weak, submissive, and enduring. The partner who is dominant in this equation mimics the role of a male in a heterosexual relationship, whereas the passive, weak and submissive characteristics belong to that of the female. Thus, because the butch- femme roles have the potential for being just as sexist as heterosexual roles, they imitate the latter, especially when talking about power relations between two partners. (Weisman and Fernie)

According to Judith Roof's article, "The Match in the Crocus: Representations of Lesbian Sexuality," the representations of lesbian sexuality in the dominant discourse often evoke the phallus by calling attention to its absence or substitution in sexual relations between women, so that it appears and seems necessary, at least symbolically, because of the inconceivability of sexuality without a phallus present. Therefore, lesbians are often depicted as having appropriated the penis, masquerading as though they really had it, and thereby assuming male privilege and acting upon it. This evokes the stereotypical image of the lesbians by phallogocentric discourse and is seemingly embraced by the lesbian community in the form of butch roles. What Roof's analysis makes possible is an understanding of the ways in which the dominant ideology has a vested interest in making the butch - femme role playing appear to be a mere replica of heterosexuality,

as a way of calming male anxiety over the threat of female appropriation of male dominance. Thus, because the absence of the phallus requires them to achieve the balance through role playing, they merely are merely imitating the heterosexual norms.

Butch - femme roles were particularly prominent in the working-class lesbian bar culture of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, where butch-femme relationships were the norm, while butch-but and femme-femme were taboo (Kennedy and Davis 244/81). Most of the lesbian community existed primarily in bars, since these were the only places where people could gather publicly, break the isolation of lesbian life, and develop both friendships and lover relationships (Kennedy and Davis 243/80). Just as in straight bars, "picking up" another type in lesbian bars was often the reason for attending the party. Although there are a few exceptions (like Nairobi in *Forbidden Love* who sent a rose to her desired person), the butch was typically the one who made the first move towards the femme who just sat and looked pretty. This idea of the "male" butch having to make the first move, replicates the role of a heterosexual male who usually is the one to make the first move at a club.

The objective of a butch was to satisfy and keep his femme safe (Weisman and Fernie). This reiterates the notion of one of the partners being in control, strong, and dominant, whereas the other is weak, and needs the help of a "man" to keep her safe (Weisman and Fernie). This goes hand in hand with the notion of the society that perceives women to be inferior to men because they need a man to look after them. It was always the butch who put up with the discrimination, and bashing to keep their "woman" safe. Further, "the <https://assignbuster.com/butch-and-femme-roles-of-lesbians/>

butch is never attracted to another like herself. Rather, she is always attracted to a more feminine type of person” (Kennedy and Davis 251/84). This can be paralleled to the idea that heterosexual males are not supposed to be attracted to the same type of person, but of the opposite sex. Therefore, though they are trying to show a discourse to heterosexual relationships, the fact that society is predominantly heterosexual subjected them to the widely known heterosexual structure.

The role playing in the bedroom does not strictly and always follow pleasure being received only by one partner. Just like the sex life of heterosexual couples butch and femme complement each other in an erotic system in which the butch was expected to be both the giver and the doer (Kennedy and Davis 244/81), however not always. In simpler terms, as shown in “Forbidden Love” it was always the butch on top, and the femme on the bottom. Though this earned them a destruction of taboo around the sexuality of lesbians, it can be taken further by the notion that in the sex life of heterosexual couples, the female is the one on the bottom, and the male is the one who is taking charge, and dominant, and therefore on top.

In contrast to a butch, a stone butch is a woman who is strongly masculine in character and dress, tops her partners sexually (and sometimes emotionally), and who does not wish to be touched genitally. Not all stone butches identify in female terms; some are known to identify with male pronouns, while many stone butches do not even identify themselves with lesbian or within the lesbian community. A common partner for a stone butch is a stone femme; a femme who bottoms sexually or who wishes not to touch the genitals of her stone butch partner. Moreover, the characteristics of

stone butches can be found in many men, who wish to pleasure, but do not expect anything in return; that is - to be total givers. These men get their “zing” from pleasuring their woman, identical to the role of a stone butch.

(Weisman and Fernie)

By wearing the attire of a man, the butches earn privileges that a heterosexual man would have. The femme, or the woman, who wears feminine clothes, does not have the same privileges of that of the males. Wearing “manly” clothes gives a lot more mobility and freedom to the butches, which parallels the liberation that heterosexual males get and their females do not. Moreover, the only way for women to achieve independence in work and travel and to escape passivity was to “pass” as men (Kennedy and Davis 245/81). Wearing “manly” clothes therefore also permitted these “men” to earn higher salaries and get better jobs (Weissman and Fernie); similar to how getting a job was known to be a man’s responsibility in the heterosexual structure.

Though there have been ongoing debates on the roles of butch and femmes, there is no doubt that their role - playing imitates the functions which are evident in a heterosexual constitution. There are many reasons that have compelled these lesbians into taking up these heterosexual identities; one being the identification and visibility of the role of females in a society dominated by heterosexual notions of relationships, and another being that taking up the “male” characteristics, was the only way to let the society view their homosexual relationships as somewhat heterosexual. Thus, butches and femmes took on the notion of the heterosexuals by imitating

their masculine style of clothing, sex habits, stratified positions and social behaviours.