
The Gender-based Issues and Problems of the Western Civilization

Nina Here Nor There

When thinking about sex and gender, there is often thought to be a binary. Male versus female and man versus woman, these statuses are thought to be solid and unchanging. People are assumed to be either men or women, a gender assignment based upon a sex assignment. The social creation of the gender binary and the many different ways in which gender identity differs for each individual person are often overlooked when discussing these issues. Even LGBTQ people may sometimes have a difficult time grasping the concept of identifying on a spectrum, not being able to be confined to one box. When someone does not fit under the idea of identifying with the sex that they were assigned at birth, many people in the LGBTQ community may automatically assume that person to be transgender, or identifying with the 'opposite' gender. What is often overlooked is the idea that gender exists upon a continuity. There is a common misconception that the gender that you identify with first is inherently your identity. What this fails to recognize is the fact that gender identity is a journey of self-discovery. Your own gender identity is fluid and capable of changing throughout your life. What many people fail to understand is that gender identity is not black and white or one or the other; it is a spectrum, or maybe even a kaleidoscope, in which each individual has different experiences, perceptions of oneself, and ways in which they want the world to view them- all of which can change throughout a person's life.

In Western society, gender is taught and known to be inherently linked to biological sex. Infants are categorized by birth as either boy or girl, depending on their genitalia. This binary concept fails to recognize even the existence of intersex, much less the distinction between sex and gender. Biological sex exists with an inexhaustible amount of possible variations. This in itself shows the flawed thinking that occurs with the idea of sex binary. Beyond anatomy, there is also the construct of gender as a binary, thinking that there are only two possible genders. What this idea misses is the notion that there are many different factors playing into gender. These include gender identity, gender expression, and biological sex. These ideas and more play into the creation and expression of an individual's gender. Accordingly, each individual has a different experience with gender and has a distinct gender identity. Gender is not set in stone and is certainly not dictated by one's biological sex. It exists along a spectrum, meaning that there are an infinite number of possible identities. There are many ways that an individual could identify, and they are not dictated by the binary that is given to us by society.

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Gender, and the expectation of conforming to the gender binary, begins at birth. Society surrounds us with messages of gender on such a day-to-day basis that we usually fail to notice them. From the time children are born, they are instilled with a set of gender expectations. These include the notion of pink being for girls and blue being for boys, girls playing house and boys playing outside, and much more. In *Nina Here Nor There*, Nick's father expresses his wish that he would adhere to the gender expectations surrounding women. He routinely asks things such as whether Nick is going to grow out his hair or why he stopped wearing earrings. These small things create a much larger picture of a gender binary, and they become so normal to us that we fail to realize the harmfulness of attempting to force people into boxes.

The existence of gender and the gender binary also creates a certain privilege surrounding gender. Nick's friends talk about not wanting to be a part of male privilege although they expressed the identity of male. Gender creates privilege in that male privilege is pervasive in our society. In the book, there was often the question of the morality of transitioning to men and leaving behind women to deal with male privilege. These characters seemed to realize that even if they do not identify as women, they can still support them and help to dismantle this privilege. This privilege is created by the idea of the gender binary, and therefore the dominance of the male gender. Those seen to be the 'opposite' gender are then seen to be lesser.

Another type of privilege that was discussed was that of being able to 'pass.' Nick discusses the privilege that he had when he was seen as a woman using the women's bathroom. There were also instances in which some of his transgender friends talked about being able to 'pass' as cisgender men, something that Nick envied. The privilege of passing as one gender or the other is something that is also created by the gender binary. This privilege only recognizes two genders as being valid. Therefore, if a woman is dressing in more masculine clothes, society generally assumes that she is attempting to put forth the appearance of a man. This fails to realize that gender occurs along a spectrum and that people do not need to identify as man or woman. There are an infinite number of possible identities, and they do not need to adhere to what society deems acceptable.

There is a certain expansiveness to gender that is often overlooked. Society dictates to us that we must be one or the other, and that we must know immediately and constantly what our gender is. Even sometimes in the LGBTQ community, there is a failure to realize that gender can change throughout one's life and is not set in stone. As one grows and changes, their relationship with their gender and their identity can change as well. As seen in *Nina Here Nor There*, Nick's relationship with his gender changes drastically throughout the book. He went more than thirty years without questioning his existence as a woman and just feeling generally uncomfortable in his own body. Throughout the book, as Nick learns more about the fluidity of gender, he is able to become comfortable with himself and realize his identity. There was a moment when he talked about how he did not always have the feeling of being a man, like

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some of his transgender friends did. After gaining more knowledge about gender, he was able to figure out that he did not need to have his gender set in stone. This shows how fluid gender can be, and how it is not always necessary to know exactly how to define your gender to someone. The most important part is being able to be comfortable with yourself. Nick's story also shows the importance of realizing that your relationship with gender can change throughout your life. Just because you have identified as one way before does not mean that that has to be your identity forever. Like all things in life, gender identity is fluid and able to transform. Gender is expansive and inexhaustible, something that grows with a person.

Gender exist in countless different forms and expressions. It is not something that can be dictated by society, but rather by personal identity and feeling. Gender can change throughout a lifetime, as many times as it needs to. There is no right way to 'do gender.' One must view gender not through a binary, but through a kaleidoscope. It is fluid and ever changing, and different for everyone. Knowledge about gender and its fluidity is so important in the journey of self-discovery. As Nick Krieger said, "[we were all so different before], before we understood that queers received nine adolescences like cats received nine lives, and the permutations of gender were infinite, the complexities a challenge to explain in a language only built to hold this or that , when many of us were other, something we could see here long before we could speak it" (191). Gender is a journey and in the attempt to deconstruct the binary that comes along with it, one must recognize the value of an ever changing identity.

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