



## **Transcending Transgender Taboo: Tracing Gender Identities And Bodily Controversies In Janet Mock's *Surpassing Certainty***

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### **Abstract**

Dance keeps up the vibrance with its aesthetic qualities and social purposes. But when dance is held in the hands of power, the very purpose of dance is questionable. The turmoils and turbulence that occur in the life of Mock in *Surpassing Certainty* paint the aspects of dance with different hues. Dance has become the major factor that determines the life of Mock, the central character of the novel. Mock survives only because she decides to become a professional dancer. This paper discusses the tenets of dance in various scales to exhibit the causes and reasons behind her success as a dancer.

**Keywords:** Transwoman, Powerplay, Hegemony and Gender Identity.

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### **1. Introduction**

The origins of dance as an art form are too difficult a task to be traced or explored. To be precise, it is a form of self-expression of inner feelings, and angst and is considered to be purely divine for the inner instincts are manifested through a form which is not only embalming but also enchanting. This paper aims to include the tenets of the Hindu religion for it is the only religion which sees lord shiva as a transgender, the combined forces of Shakti and Shiva. According to Hindu mythology, dance is very closely associated with Gods and Goddesses as it is believed that, Natarajar, one of the incarnations of Lord Shiva, is known as the lord of dance, The shastras of Bharatanatyam, also specify Ardhanari, as another incarnation of Lord Shiva as half man and half woman, appears in the posture of a dancer. The incarnation Ardhanari acclaims that dance as an art form belongs to every man, woman and transgender. Although Janet Mock had no exposure to dance in the context of Hinduism, her choice of becoming a dancer at nightclubs is in tandem with the tenets of the Hindu religion in considering dance as a universal form of self-expression devoid of all sexes and gendered identities.

Dance has emerged as one of the deciding forces in society which is capable of determining the identity of genders and sexes. Even when the chief dancer, Natarajar, is a man, society denies the choice of practising dance as a profession for man as it is considered to effeminate man and rejects him the opportunity of becoming one. Likewise, transmen and women are also denied to have the privilege of practising dance as a profession because the profession is exclusively tailor-made for women. Janet Mock had to choose, her vocation as a stripper at a nightclub because, the western

audience wanted women to strip when dancing. To Mock, the license to strip was only permitted through dance at strip clubs. Hinduism as a religion allows Gods to dance but not men because, when Gods dance, it is an expression of anger whereas, for men, it is an expression of their livelihood. The paper aims to question the biased opinions that exist in the dance forms for men on the one hand. It also highlights the contradiction that when men cannot choose dance as a profession, how could society allow transgender to dance?.

Although a lot of dance studios exist around the world, it is usually considered, archetypally accepted that dance as a profession is only for women because when men learn to express themselves, they exhibit qualities of being effeminate. Moreover, society sees dance as a form of profanity and that's one of the reasons why Mock decided to become a stripper than choosing any other vocation. Keeping in mind, the options for a trans woman to choose among professions are too limited and curtailed. To Mock, dance is an expression of self-love and that is one of the reasons why she chose to dance at nightclubs. To her, the purpose of choosing to dance is to explain the struggle with her body. In one of the interviews given to the Los Angeles Times, she explores the journey of trials which she underwent due to her biological and sociological demands at the strip club and says,

Surpassing certainty means, there is a sense of us knowing ourselves without any compromise. Knowing unapologetically, we are something which goes beyond just being there. There is something even more certain in the world and sometimes it is just us speaking out the truth and showing up as our full selves. (www.latimes.com)

The above quote is an example to show that Mock learnt two important life lessons in her twenties, and that's why she has even labelled her novel's subtitle as, "What my Twenties Taught me". To her, the first lesson is to express her biological changes and the second is to express them through dance. That's one of the many reasons that she chose dance not only as a profession but also as a form of expressing herself. Mock in *Surpassing Certainty* gains an identity as a dancer and as a transwoman.

According to general social stigma, dance is deemed as a shackle to sexes other than females as society uses dance as a tool to trap them in name of their biological identity. It is exploited to keep their emotions and aspirations under social clutches. They are, in general, subjugated in the name of the dance and prohibited to practice it by mentioning that the art form mustn't be practised by anyone except a woman. On the other hand, to Mock, dance has become a medium of liberation. It has bestowed her with a better identity and status in society. Dance has changed her life. Dance has given her many new opportunities to make new friends, find her love, flourish in her profession and define herself as a gender which was under question for almost twenty years. Overall, dance has brought happiness into her life and it has made it very colourful.

Dance is a form of art which exists through ages, among genders and cultures. It survives and flourishes amidst national, social and regional disparities. As Rumi says, "Dancing is not just getting up painlessly, like a leaf blown on the wind; dancing is when you tear your heart out and rise out of your body to hang suspended between the worlds" (98). In Oriental countries, the ethnic dance forms which exist since time immemorial, are considered to be feminine. It is believed to have effeminated the men who have been practising them. In Western countries, dance is deemed to be an art form meant for both men and women. But they reject to include transmen and transwomen in the realm of dance as a profession. In a similar way to how man has to fight against the subjugation in Oriental countries, in connection with limiting the access for dance to men, Janet Mock takes up a fight against the European society and pitches into dance as her profession.

European nightclubs employ only men and women as strip dancers. There is no room for trans men and trans women to become one. Janet Mock challenges this social stigma to seek an identity as a dancer. She breaks through the stereotype and chooses to be a dancer, only because she doesn't choose to be a sex worker. She feels very much comfortable identifying the dancer than as a sex worker. To

be a sex worker, Mock doesn't need to be a woman. There is no need for her to hide her biological identity. But to be a dancer, her biological identity is certainly a hindrance.

The central character and trans woman, Mock in Janet Mock's *Surpassing Certainty* faces the conflicts that arise out of practising dance as a profession. She is a dancer who thrives to find her identity through dance. Dance has become a factor that determines her gender apart from her biological sex identity. Dance is a tool that transposes her gender identity from one to the other. It allows her to become or unbecome the other both physically and mentally.

Mock works in a strip nightclub called Club Nu which is run by a Korean lady who is known as Mama. Mock was previously working as a sex worker and she was referred by her friend, Cassie to join the club as a dancer. Mock is entirely happy and positive about the offer as she has been looking for a profession which would bring respect to her in society. She hates the way the sex workers are treated. She thinks that the sex workers are treated with hostility and inhumane tendencies. She looks for an opportunity to switch her job for a better profession which can remark her status in society with dignity and respect that is denied to sex workers.

Mock feels extremely relieved about joining this new job as a strip dancer as her previous job as a sex worker made her feel very low in society. It has affected her mental health to a very vast extent. She has suffered and endured marginalisation from every spear of life. Her social status of being a sex worker has haunted her and tormented her very being. It has made her question even her own identity as she never wants to be identified as a sex worker but she has no other means or ways to run her life. She was compelled to be one because she was offered no other job but only as a sex worker. She remarked on her profession as a sex worker in *Surpassing Certainty* as,

We have continuity in our bodies, which hold experiences that never leave us, experiences our bodies conceal so we can keep going. They hold tightly to them—until we have confidence to trust our bodies again, to loosen their grasp. This relaxation never came to me. My body did not rest. It did not yield. It remained clenched for nearly all of my twenties. (38)

Mock, in the novel, has never seen her father. She never had the opportunity to experience the warmth of her father. Also, if there is no father in a family, each elder of the family must become a breadwinner. They are compelled to replace the role of the father in place of the lack of family income. Mock is brought up by her mother along with her two brothers Jefferey and Chad. Mock was also born with a male biological identity but later there was a tremendous change which leads her to be stuck between the different gender identities.

Mock has seen the very worst things in her life after realising the problems she has with her biological identity and gender identity. Mock was born with a male biological identity whereas her psychological responses are stimulated by a female identity. Mock rejects the biological identity she was born with. She refuses to be the one that society wants her to be. She follows her heart more than her body. She starts to feel like a woman, behaves like a woman and slowly adapts herself into a transwoman, the identity in which she feels thoroughly comfortable. Her transformed identity has no social recognition. Hence, Mock is ordained to face multiple problems in connection with her identity, profession and social status.

It needs a lot of courage, perseverance and fighting spirit to stand against the rules, regulations and stereotypical ideologies of society. Society can never be amiable and approachable to those who fight against it. It is almost close to an impossibility that one could survive or find a space that seeks to fight against social stereotypes. The change that occurred in her persona can't possibly occur biologically. It needs a lot of transformational surgeries. To be a strip dancer, Mock needs to have a vagina which stands before her another problem.

The strippers at Club Nu are never sex workers or prostitutes but dancers. The club owner is very keen on holding her rules high and never letting them down for any reason. Mama is also of the opinion that she will never hire a woman with male physic as a dancer in her club. This idea of Mama has made Mock quite adaptive and comfortable with her new job because she feels more feminine and she is treated with femininity entirely. Mock has never seen a female vagina in person but only in videos and porn online. Still, she has managed to fake one, more similar to the female vagina that nobody in the club except her friend Cassie, knows the fact of her fake body part. Mock remarks on her faking body part as,

Pretending felt safest. I believed it was the only way I could make it. So I stripped myself of backstory and connection and flattened myself, distilled myself, made myself smaller and easier to contain and digest. I pretended that color, class, gender, and all the intersections of my identity and experience that othered me did not exist. (158)

Mock strongly feels that she has gained an identity which comes with a package of dignity, respect and a decent salary. These factors of being treated with respect in society as well as being treated as a woman in the nightclub (She calls herself a transwoman), have made Mock choose dance as a profession. But this decision can't be an easy one. Her decision has paved the way for many transgenders to follow her path and make innovative and daring decisions in connection with their profession and life. Also, through her decision, Mock decides to fight against the powerful social system which is determined not to allow people with uncommon biological identities to enter the common professional forums.

Society wants to keep them away and intact from every element of importance. It controls all the movements of transmen and women in society. It curfews their choices in all possible ways and compels them to have no choice at all. They are forced to be only sex workers and they are deemed to be unfit for any other respectable professions that ordinary men and women take up in society.

## 2. Conclusion

The novel, *Surpassing Certainty* attempts to deliver an important message. When the dance is performed as a hobby, there will be no restrictions in regard to gender identities. But when it comes to being a profession, dance must cross various boundaries like caste, creed, nationality, gender identity and every other social stigma. It precisely projects the power politics and plays behind determining the role of the profession in human life. Power corrupts humans absolutely. It plays a vital role in validating the survival of any human on the face of the earth. Art is said to be for art's sake and man's sake. But the stark-naked truth is art is for power's sake which is proven by *Surpassing Certainty*.

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