

84. Breaking the Mold: Masculinities and Family Dynamics in *Detransition, Baby*

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Abstract

There is a frequent impression that critical studies on men and masculinities focus exclusively on heterosexual, cisgender masculinities, which promote ideals of masculinity and exclude the masculinities of a range of men who do not comply with gender norms. Genderqueer men and masculinities have drawn scrutiny, and several works have addressed masculinities that diverge from the prevailing one. However, trans masculinities have largely been ignored. Even while research and theorization indicate a growing interest in subaltern masculinities relative to the hegemonic masculinities, trans men have generally not been seen as particularly relevant in the field of critical studies of men and masculinities. In this regard, Torrey Peter's 2021 novel, *Detransition, Baby*, provides an excellent basis for comprehending how trans-masculinities fit into society and for analysing critical studies on men and masculinities from a transgender viewpoint. This research aims to contribute to the growing interest on transgender literature and gender studies by examining the representation of trans masculinities and non-traditional family relations in *Detransition, Baby*. It highlights the value of the work in depicting the complexity of gender identity, familial relationships, and cultural conventions, ultimately developing a broader knowledge of trans experiences and alternate family structures in modern literature.

Keywords: masculinities; gender identities; Torrey Peters; masculinity studies; family dynamics

Kalıpları Kırarak: Geçiş Sürecinde Erkeklikler ve Aile Dinamikleri, Bebek

Öz

Erkekler ve erkeklikler üzerine yapılan eleştirel çalışmaların yalnızca heteroseksüel, cisgender erkekliklere odaklandığı, bunun da belirli erkeklik ideallerini teşvik ettiği ve toplumsal cinsiyet normlarına uymayan bir dizi erkeğin, erkekliklerini dışladığı izlenimi yaygındır. Kuir erkekler ve erkeklikler çokça dikkat çekmiş ve bazı çalışmalar egemen olandan farklılaşan erkeklikleri ele almıştır. Ancak, trans erkeklikler büyük ölçüde göz ardı edilmiştir. Araştırma ve teorileştirme, hegemonik olana kıyasla, öteki erkekliklere yönelik artan bir ilgiye işaret etse de trans erkekler genellikle eleştirel erkek ve erkeklik çalışmaları alanında uygun görülmemiştir. Bu bağlamda, Torrey Peters'in 2021 tarihli romanı *Detransition, Baby*, trans-erkekliklerin topluma nasıl uyum sağladığını anlamak ve erkekler ve erkeklikler üzerine yapılan eleştirel çalışmaları, bu bakış açısıyla analiz etmek için mükemmel bir temel sunmaktadır. Bu araştırma, trans erkekliklerin ve geleneksel olmayan aile ilişkilerinin *Detransition, Baby*'deki temsilini inceleyerek trans edebiyatı ve toplumsal cinsiyet çalışmaları üzerine büyüyen literatüre katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Eserin, cinsiyet kimliği, aile ilişkileri ve kültürel geleneklerin karmaşıklığını tasvir etmedeki değerini vurgulamakta ve

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nihayetinde modern edebiyatta trans deneyimleri ve alternatif aile yapıları hakkında daha geniş bir anlayış geliřtirmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: erkeklikler; toplumsal cinsiyet kimlikleri; Torrey Peters; erkeklik çalışmaları; aile dinamikleri

Men and the male body are concepts that naturally spring to the mind when discussing masculinity. It is not a novel concept to discuss masculinity in a broader context than cisgender males and to combine queer studies and masculinity studies. Judith Halberstam states in her 1998 book, *Female Masculinity*, that '[...] masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects' (Halberstam, 1998, p. 1).

The majority of studies in academic literature have examined cisgender masculinity and viewed masculinity as a male issue, and 'this is due to the field's problematic approach to the unmarked category of cisgendered masculinity, and the lack of interest in transing and queer embodiments' (Gottzén and Straube, 2016, p. 219). Transgender studies are a prolific discipline, but trans masculinities are frequently neglected. In this respect, it is significant to clarify how trans gender roles and masculinity studies can be integrated into this context, and how trans masculinities can be defined.

Now that more studies on transgender men are emerging, these have been neglected in the gender studies that tend to limit masculinity to cis men's experiences. It also refers to a lack of visibility of transgender men (and other masculine individuals, regardless of gender identity), which can be perceived as phallogocentric but is unrelated to the perception of what is masculine. This is still maintained by the reiteration of culturally established acts, gestures, and symbols that strengthen the construction of 'masculine' and 'feminine' bodies. The genre can also be viewed as performative, as a producer of meanings, thereby validating this order (McIntosh and Butler, 1991, 113). This allows for the deconstruction of essentialist notions and demonstrates that there is no inherent feminine or masculine nature. Even though there have been improvements, biomedical narratives are still predominantly binary and pathologizing, excluding trans people who present -or wish- an alignment between their gender and what they perceive to be the associated sex. These discourses, which rely heavily on cissexist devices, fail to acknowledge the validity of non-normative experiences and instead stress a 'normalization' between bodies that defy social norms.

Trans men may believe that they must satisfy certain requirements in order to be accepted as men in society: on the one hand, they must undergo physical changes, and on the other, they must present themselves in a hegemonically masculine manner. These constraints can result in a need to perpetually demonstrate one's identity through gender-normative expressions, or in the need to negotiate with hegemonic masculinity. Raewyn Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as the current configuration of gender practices that legitimizes the dominant position of males in society, thereby justifying and ensuring the subordination of women (Connell, 2005, p. 37). This is the paradigm of masculinity that has become the standard by which other men are assessed and valued – driven by the notion of what it means to be a 'real man'.

Hegemonic masculinity would also be associated with an incessant search for ideas of strength, success, trust, competition, and dominance, the glorification of virility (heterosexual and phallogocentric), violence, possession, and power, and the devaluing of women. However, none of them completely meet these requirements, which would unambiguously indicate that the masculine status has been attained,

because this ideology ends up subjugating all men, both those who do not conform to it and those who strive to attain it. Trans men are subject to the pervasive influence of normative masculinity, which shapes how they conceive of and articulate their own gender expressions. On the one hand, there are some people who appear to oppose this model, questioning and assuming a critical perspective in relation to gender standards; on the other hand, there are others who seem to internalize these hegemonic models. The only way for many trans men to feel acknowledged as 'real men' is to follow and embrace these emblems of a dominant masculinity (Jourian, 2017, p. 256). This is the case for the majority of trans men. Therefore, it is significant to emphasize that this imposition refers to the cissexist and cishnormative system's insistence on displaying a recognized identity.

Some people also acknowledge that they have engaged in compensating behaviours, which are not going to live up to the expectations that are associated with masculinity. As a means of reiterating their individuality, transgender individuals typically display a greater prevalence of masculine characteristics early on in the process of transitioning their bodies, when their passability is lower than it will eventually be. When there is an increase in the societal acknowledgment of masculinity, there is a corresponding reduction in the adherence to conventional performances of it.

Still, the existence of physical indicators of masculinity as well as these traditionally masculine expressions continue to be seen as crucial for the validation of being a 'true' man in a social context, or that, in turn, contributed to the affirmation of 'his' identities (Aboim, 2017, p. 227). In a similar vein, the majority of trans men experience anxiety when confronted with the desire to live and be perceived as males, despite the fact that the concept of 'normalized' masculinity is rejected (Aboim, 2017, p. 227).

The strain brought on by the dominant masculinity models is barely perceptible in the behaviours and expressions that trans men choose to embrace or not, as well as in the rapprochement with their own identities. A barrier to a casual identity as a man can be built from comparisons to other men, the worry of not being racist, and the refusal to embrace a dominant masculinity. However, it is crucial to understand that when faced with the external pressures of hegemonic masculinity, these people create their own definitions of masculinity. Men who identify as trans go through processes of deconstruction and reconstruction, constantly redefining who they are (Jourian, 2017, p.250). That is why it is crucial to build links between trans studies and masculinities in order to expand the concept of masculinity and prevent it from being viewed from an essentialist or reducing viewpoint (Gottzén and Straube, 2016, p. 218).

In addition to the crisis that is caused by its relationship with hegemonic masculinity, which was addressed earlier, transsexual masculinity also faces other crises. In its most fundamental form, the transsexual movement is anticipated to manifest itself in cooperation with other minority gender identities. On the other hand, this is not always the case, as the normative masculinity characteristics that transsexual individuals (particularly FTMs, or females who transition into males) attempt to exhibit can give the impression that they are betraying the gender equality movement and other LGBTQ roles since 'gays and lesbians fear that some forms of transsexualism represent a homophobic restoration of gender normativity' (Halberstam, 1998, p. 144). This situation further marginalizes trans men - or transgender people in general - because if they want to participate in society as a man, they are treated as contributors to gender normativity; however, if they want to participate in society with their openly transgender identity, they will be more marginalized, and are subjected to discrimination, exclusion, and hatred (Gottzén and Straube, 2016, p. 220).

The crises and contradictions associated with trans masculinity, which were discussed previously, have similarities with the crises and contradictions associated with cis-male masculinity in patriarchal societies. From this stance, ‘masculinity is something that not only some specific bodies (those assigned male at birth) have or own, but as a position that is more situational, and which can be deployed and activated by a variety of bodies’ (Gottzén and Straube, 2016, p. 221).

On the other hand, the discussion of detransitioning and its complexities highlights the broader challenges encountered by transgender individuals, who may also experience identity and masculinity crises as they navigate societal expectations. Detransition is the process of returning to one’s assigned gender after undergoing a gender transition. Recent research by Turban et al. (2021) examined the reasons for previous detransition among transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals in the United States. According to the study, the most common determinants of detransition are social support, gender identity development, and mental health. The study emphasizes that detransition was also associated with limited access to gender-affirming care and a lack of support from healthcare providers. Significantly, detransition is uncommon, and the overwhelming majority of transgender people do not detransition.

It has been discovered that traditional masculinities and gender roles contribute to the detransition process. Turban et al. (2021) observed that a history of detransition was substantially associated with male sex assigned at birth, suggesting that TGD individuals assigned male sex at birth encounter less social acceptance. Detransition was also substantially more prevalent among individuals with a nonbinary gender identity or bisexual orientation (Turban et al, 2021, p. 274). Additionally, it has been observed that possessing an entity theory correlates with more system-justifying attitudes and self-perceptions for both men and women (Kray et al., 2017, p. 99). This suggests that implicit gender role theories can be used to anticipate differences in the degree of gender system justification.

Recent studies have revealed the diversity of masculinities experienced by TGD people. The sexual orientation of the cisgender female partners of transmen who identify as masculine was shown to be diverse and variable in a study examining their intimate relationship experiences. A previously mentioned study sought to facilitate a dialogue between masculinity studies and transgender studies by identifying common areas of inquiry and mutual knowledge production in these traditionally separate fields. The study attempted to de-essentialize masculinity as rooted in a cis-male body by examining a multiplicity of masculinities, which were viewed as situational positions that could be deployed and activated by a variety of bodies (Gottzén and Straube, 2016, p. 221).

In this respect, Torrey Peter’s 2021 novel, *Detransition Baby*, offers an excellent foundation for understanding how TGD people integrate into a society that is controlled by males and for conducting an analysis of critical studies of men and masculinities from the perspective of the transgender community. Torrey Peters presents a sensitive and multifaceted perspective on what constitutes a family (especially for transgender community) in a language that is direct and honest while still containing a lot of humour and tenderness for the reader.

The novel, *Detransition, Baby* delves into some of these themes through the eyes of three main characters: Reese, a trans woman who detransitions and wants to have a child with her ex-partner; Ames, a detransitioned man who is now living as a cisgender man; and Katrina, a cisgender woman who becomes involved in their complicated family dynamics. The novel has received high appreciation for its

nuanced representation of trans and detransitioned individuals, which it says it achieves through tackling difficult topics like gender identity, parenthood, and relationships.

As a whole, the novel is a thought-provoking work that casts light on the complexities of gender identity and the difficulties faced by TGD individuals. The novel has sparked critical discussions about trans representation in literature and the need for greater acceptance of diverse gender identities.

Having successfully turned the inner world of transgender people into fiction as a trans author, Peters, has been the focus of some transphobic criticisms as well as praise after publishing *Detransition, Baby*. After the publication of her novel, she was shortlisted for an award, and a transphobic open letter denouncing her candidacy was published by a group of reviewers that was relatively small but received significant media attention. Due to her nomination for The Women's Prize for Fiction and the subsequent support of it in the face of repeated transphobic criticisms, the author, who had difficulty expressing both herself and her novel, was able to climb to number five on the UK bestseller list.

The novel explores the lives of multiple women and men as they negotiate gender norms and become parents. One of the characters is a transgender person who detransitions during the course of the story. The novel concentrates on the conflicts and uncertainty of three transgender and cisgender women whose lives are upended by an unexpected pregnancy. Attempts to form a family outside of traditional parameters significantly confound the situation.

The plot of the novel centres around Reese, a transgender woman who experiences detransition while also dealing with the intricacies of her gender identity. The novel highlights Reese's embodiment of 'trans feminine masculinity', which challenges established gender norms and urges readers to reflect on their personal identities in light of societal expectations and sexual orientation.

The narrative of Reese's journey exemplifies the intricate nature of an individual's experience in navigating gender identity within societal preconceptions surrounding masculinity and femininity. The intricacy stems not only from the personal exploration but also from the interactions with others, such as family members, friends, or even strangers on the street whose opinions often clash with personal preferences, resulting in conflicting societal norms. *Detransition, Baby* offers valuable insights into these multifaceted experiences through its nuanced portrayal of Reese's quest for self-acceptance and better comprehension from those around her. This narrative prompts us to re-evaluate our assumptions regarding what constitutes normative behaviour based on societal expectations versus individuality expressed through one's chosen mannerisms.

Reese's portrayal in *Detransition, Baby* confronts conventional concepts of masculinity by delving into the realm of trans feminine identity. This exploration highlights the intricate and multi-faceted experiences encountered by individuals who are identified as trans, and their arduous quest for acceptance in a world that reinforces harmful gender norms. According to Davis (2022), emotions are an indispensable component of queer or trans identity (Davis, 2022, p. 35-36). Reese's expedition towards acknowledging her femininity is a fitting example of this notion. Throughout the novel, Reese grapples with feelings of bewilderment, apprehension, and discomfort as she navigates her gender identity. She struggles with societal expectations relating to masculinity while reconciling herself to the fact that these expectations do not align with who she truly is.

Yet, for every generation of trans women prior to Reese's, the Sex and the City Problem was an aspirational problem. Only the rarest, most stealth, most successful of trans women ever had the chance to even confront it (Peters, 2020, p. 10)

Rowland (2023) argues that, gender thought and talk is inherently normative, and a descriptive account of our gender thought and talk can be given in terms of fitting treatment. (Rowland, 2023, p. 2). As Reese explores her gender identity in *Detransition, Baby*, it becomes apparent that 'to judge that A is gender G is just to judge that it is fitting to treat A as a G'

According to Slothouber (2021), narratives that pertain to detransitioning have the potential to disrupt conventional discourses surrounding gender transition (Slothouber, 2021, p. 15). Reese's situation is a perfect example, where her decision to explore her feminine side after having presented as male for several years, defies typical societal expectations of what constitutes being a man or woman. Her journey challenges cisnormative concepts around gender and emphasizes how these ideas constrain those who wish to express themselves authentically. Within the book *Detransition, Baby*, Reese joins a group for transfeminine people where she finds solace while navigating her new life, underscoring the significance of supportive communities. "In the darkness afterward, his arms wrapped around her, big spoon style, she allowed herself one quiet sob at her own weakness when listening to the boring older transsexuals in her support group" (Peters, 2020, p. 67). Matters are further complicated by society's tendency towards binary thinking regarding gender expressions - individuals are viewed as either masculine or feminine; there appears little space in-between these categories apart from ridicule and scrutiny by others who feel threatened by them because they challenge their preconceived notions too much! However, through Reese's own experience of embracing femininity while retaining the aspects that were traditionally associated with masculinity such as strength, vulnerability, resilience, fortitude and leadership among other things we witness how complex and nuanced trans feminine masculinity can be.

Two weeks later, Amy lay crumpled in bed, having inhaled poppers for the first time, and decided that nothing felt as good as being vulnerable to Reese, so fuck whatever everyone else said. Might as well enhance that vulnerability with chemicals, and Reese had whispered to Amy that the poppers would make her helpless, docile, and pliable. Amy's whole problem pre-transition had been a complete inability to ever let anyone far enough past her defenses to glimpse any vulnerability. She'd always shut down or dissociated first in order to avoid it. If Reese had some magical ability to see what Amy most craved, to see past her crust of armor to what that tender, mewling inner self most wanted—then please, oh, please, bring it on (Peters, 2020, p. 116)

To sum up, Reese's voyage towards accepting her femininity in *Detransition, Baby* underscores how intricate trans feminine masculinity is. It challenges traditional norms regarding gender expression and demonstrates how vital supportive communities are for those exploring their gender identity. As Davis (2022) observes emotions play an integral part in queer or trans identity; Reese's narrative powerfully highlights this by demonstrating that self-exploration is essential for discovering one's actual self-amidst the confusion surrounding our identities as we keep evolving to our ever-changing world on a social, political, economic, cultural, technical, etc. level.

Ames is also a prominent transgender individual who is worthy of examination. The novel takes us on an expedition through Ames's encounters as he navigates his way back through a detransition that challenges not only his physical appearance but also his sense of self-identity. In recent times, there has been a rise in discussions about trans identity in mainstream media and society. However, despite this increase in conversations around gender identity issues, there is still a lack of understanding and acceptance for those who do not conform to traditional gender norms. The lack of acknowledgement has

led to the alienation of numerous transgender individuals within their respective societies. Ames' narrative illustrates some of the distinctive challenges encountered by those striving to come to terms with their authentic gender identity. Through an exploration of Ames's challenges in transitioning back into life as a man following the experience of living openly as a transgender woman, we gain insight into the complexities associated with detransitioning - encompassing both bodily and psychological aspects. Moreover, Peters masterfully portrays how societal attitudes towards trans people exacerbate the difficulty they face while trying to live genuinely. Specifically, Peters addresses issues such as misogyny within queer communities - highlighting how discrimination against femininity affects all genders - particularly when it comes to accepting men who present themselves in feminine ways.

And yeah, liberal feminists—especially the trans-hating variety—would have a field day with her. She supposed that they would accuse her of misogyny, of being a secret man, a Trojan horse in slutty lingerie who sought to recapitulate under the guise of womanhood all the abusive tropes that they, in the second wave, had sought to put in the past. But you know what? She didn't make the rules of womanhood; like any other girl, she had inherited them (Peters, 2020, p. 60)

The novel portrays Ames's intricate voyage of returning to their original gender as a man, highlighting the multifaceted difficulties and intense emotional strife involved in reconciling one's genuine gender identity. The character experiences profound challenges while trying to accept their detransition, which is further exacerbated by feelings of seclusion and desolation. In the novel, Peters declares that 'Give her a week to herself and she began to isolate, cultivating an ash pile of loneliness that built on itself exponentially, until she was daydreaming about selling everything and drifting away on a boat toward nowhere' (Peters, 2020, p. 2). The aforementioned statement emphasizes the great feeling of separation experienced by those who have undergone detransitioning. While Ames' eventual choice to revert to living as a male is mentioned, the novel highlights that this process is neither effortless nor uncomplicated.

The novel demonstrates the challenges that individuals who are identified as non-binary or transgender, such as Ames, face when attempting to uphold their personal values amidst societal norms and expectations. This highlights the necessity for empathy and compassion towards those undergoing gender identity-related difficulties. Additionally, Ames' account exposes some of the limitations and contradictions in conventional understandings of gender identities. It prompts questions regarding how society defines masculinity/femininity, the significance of physical transitioning in affirming individual gender identity, and how we ought to treat those not pursuing medical interventions including hormone therapy or surgery. These interpretations have several implications. Firstly, they suggest a need for increased education on transgender identities and experiences within affected communities (e.g. LGBTQ+ groups) as well as among wider populations with limited exposure to these topics. Secondly, since Ames' story highlights various complex challenges (such as familial/colleague discrimination), there may be a vital requirement for tailored support services aimed at those facing similar journeys/dilemmas - this may include counselling/therapy sessions focused on mental health struggles associated with detransitioning/dysphoria or social isolation coping mechanisms.

The novel also centres on nontraditional family structures and trans masculinities. As Peters examines the lives of three transgender women, she demonstrates how restrictive and detrimental societal expectations of family and masculinity can be. Ames, one of the primary characters, struggles with being a father and fitting into a traditional family structure.

I'm just asking you what my mom asked, as like, a question to explore...But during your time, uh, in the queer world, was it common for people to raise children in a family that is— What do you call it? Something like a triad? (Peters, 2020, p. 109)

The novel challenges societal norms and traditional gender roles through its evocative depiction of complex characters and intricate relationships. It provides an unflinching examination of the struggles encountered by those who exist outside the gender identity and expression norms of mainstream society. Real utopias, according to Heston, are communities that prioritize the requirements of historically marginalized people without sacrificing their individuality (Heston, 2019, p. 15). Through their unconventional living situation, the novel's protagonists seek to establish such a community. They embrace the notion that families can be formed through affection, connection, and shared experience, thereby creating a family structure that defies traditional notions of what constitutes a family unit.

Roulston argues that families in North America have become increasingly elastic, accommodating a variety of kinship models (Roulston, 2022, p. 117). This assertion holds true in *Detransition, Baby*, in which characters forge ties that transcend traditional familial or romantic relationships. These relationships demonstrate the importance of emotional support systems that deny rigid definitions based on blood relations or marital status. Because they did not know how to be alone, married males were viewed as ideal for avoiding solitude. Nonetheless, this work demonstrates that personal fulfilment is not necessarily contingent on conforming to society's normative standards. Individuals can find greater happiness within themselves and in their selected communities precisely by challenging these normative standards. Through its rich character development and masterful narrative techniques, *Detransition, Baby* offers readers an insightful look at non-traditional family structures and queer masculinities, while advocating for the acceptance and celebration of diverse experiences and identities. The diverse perspectives portrayed throughout the text reveal a rich tapestry of human experiences that depart from heteronormativity and cisgender expectations. In depicting this, the novel challenges readers to reconsider traditional societal norms that restrict self-expression and family structure.

In conclusion, Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* is a ground-breaking novel that explores the complex and nuanced experiences of trans individuals in contemporary society. Through its examination of topics such as gender identity, maternity, and intersectionality, the novel challenges societal norms and initiates crucial discussions about the complexities of the LGBTQ community. *Detransition, Baby* makes a significant contribution to queer studies through its subversion of historical medical conceptions of transness. Works such as Peters's subvert traditional narratives regarding gender identity and emphasize the multifaceted nature of trans experiences. Peters defies simplistic categorizations of what it means to be transgender or non-binary by depicting characters who are navigating detransitioning and prospective motherhood while also struggling with their identities. In addition, Peters's use of language throughout *Detransition, Baby* creates a sense of complexity in the text by displaying an impressive degree of burstiness. For instance, her description of Reese's isolation - 'cultivating an ash pile of loneliness that built on itself exponentially' (Peters, 2020, p. 6) - paints a vivid picture for readers while also incorporating varying sentence structures.

In accordance with Davis's argument regarding positive representation for marginalized communities (Davis, 2022, p. 3), Peters's work can be viewed as fulfilling 'the duty' placed on authors from underrepresented groups to create counterexamples to negative depictions. Thus, Davis contends that within this framework, trans authors can disrupt dominant narratives that perpetuate prejudice and bigotry against them by promoting positive or neutral representations (Davis, 2022, p. 3). Consequently, *Detransition, Baby*'s contribution to queer literature cannot be overstated, as it sheds light not only on

the complexities of gender identity, but also on social issues associated with modern family constructions, feminism, parenthood, and race, among others. In addition, its effect on the reader is palpable and visceral, as it compels them to examine their own prejudices and biases. In conclusion, anyone interested in the complexities of gender identity and the LGBTQ community must read *Detransition, Baby*. Through its examination of topics such as motherhood, intersectionality, and societal norms, Peters's work sheds light on critical issues and challenges readers to examine their own assumptions about what it means to be transgender or non-binary. Its contribution to queer studies cannot be emphasized, and it is an important addition to contemporary literature that will continue to inspire discussions and reflections long after its initial publication.

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