The Garba of Butch

Reflections of a "Son-cum-Daughter"

By KALYANI PANDYA

"What a fine son you have," she began, addressing my mother who was seated next to me at the mandir on Sunday morning. She clapped her hand firmly against my back as she nodded at us, smiling in warm approval. My mother searched my face and then hers, I was smiling back and entertaining the notion of asking this auntie if she was considering introducing me to some suitable girls she knew of, stopping myself only at the thought of my mother's shocked embarrassment. The auntie continued, "He plays dholak so nicely!" She tapped the skin of the dholak cradled in my lap. I bent over it and braced myself for Mum's uncomfortable reply. "This is my Son-cum-Daughter," she sighed, shaking her head at my impossibly short hair, my posture hunched over the dholak, dripping sweat. I nodded on cue and thought I might emulate some long-lost feminine gesture that would determine my sex for all of us. But my hair was much too short to toss and my hands too callused from the dholak to be convincing of my femininity. I decided to grin my best boyish grin and hoped it would charm us all out of the situation.

"Oh!" she said, turning apologetically to my mother, "she's a girl?!"

I shrugged my shoulders and interjected, "Yeah, so they say—"

"You play the dholak very nicely," she said before disappearing into the crowded mandir. I looked at Mum who was trying to forget what just happened, in vain.

It's not as if I had much choice in the matter. I didn't choose my butchness—it chose me, just kind of inhabited me ever since I can remember. My mother, may God bless her, tried early on to intervene. After all I'm her only child and she didn't want me to turn out, you know, queer or anything like that. So I tried my hand at Bharatnatyam lessons in which it was painfully obvious that I would earn my nickname, "Bhess"—water-buffalo in Gujarati. My body betrayed me at every turn. While the other little girls danced daintily, I slouched and slumped until our teacher, exasperated, gave up on trying to wrench my fingers into shape.

"You have hands like oven mitts!" I thought I heard her exclaiming as turned away from my wretched alaripu.

Well, I wasn't going to be a classical dancer, anyway. After all, I'm Gujarati and we're folk dancers, right? So Navratri became Mum's new hope and I learned to dread the autumn ritual of pressing my body into the confines of a sari, or ghaaghri polka, or worse, chanya choli. I mean, those blouses! I resembled a male wrestler in a bikini top. My appearance on those occasions might have shattered even my mother's denial.

"You look beautiful ..." she'd manage, weakly, as my reflection in her bedroom mirror assaulted us both. My hair, in untameable curls fell haphazardly across my face which was painted in her Avon colors. Garish earrings dangled from my earlobes which, unaccustomed to the weight, were throbbing. I was hopeless at femme drag. My grandmother gasped as she found me seated on the sofa with my legs spread wide, elbows on knees, hunched over.

"Aarey, Indu!" she shrieked, calling my mother. The two of them held their breath, as I practiced sitting "like a lady." And that's how I sat all night, stiff as a board, in one corner of the gymnasium, watching in frustrated envy as young men, in the comfort of jeans and t-shirts, played dandiya raas with pretty girls. I stared jealously at Chimanbhai, his cotton kurta soaked from the effort of playing his dholak, matching, bol for bol, the clapping hands of beautiful women.

"Come on, Kalyani," my friends urged me, "come and do garba with us." It was Bharatnatyam class all over again. I couldn't move. I'd stand up only for the aarti, and then head home, undoing the safety pins and hooks right in the car, anxious to flee the prison that bound me. I'd sigh with pleasure as my mother unraveled the cloth from my body. "Don't rush so," she'd warn as I squirmed, "you'll tear it." It wasn't until I was in my Marks and Spencer's men's paisley print pajamas that I felt restored to myself. I'd make mother a cup of steaming Ovaltine and we'd sip it and devour our leftover prasad.

"What will we do with you, Son-cum-Daughter?" she'd sigh.

"Why do we have to do anything?" I'd ask her. She'd shake her head at me, resigned.

But I should confess, I did try to do something about myself. I thought I could expel this thing from my body, this thing that made an auntie yell "Get away! It's for ladies!" when I tried to use the women's washroom at the Mandir.

Somehow I convinced myself, perhaps out of love for my mother who is hyperfeminine as a Hindi film heroine, that if I applied myself to "becoming a lady," the magic spells of *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *Cosmopolitan* would cast this thing out of my body. I did amass a fairly respectable collection of *Vogue,* but my good intentions faded with every issue I bought and I knew it. But in retrospect I guess they made this lonely butch's nights a little warmer ...

Reasoning that the Eurocentric bias of mainstream fashion magazines had stunted my transformation from an Amitabh to a Rekha, I took to observing closely the desi women around me—a task which became increasingly enjoyable. I lingered outside the same Bharatnatyam classes that I had once abhorred, devising increasingly elaborate schemes to pass the open class door. Fortunately, mother had chosen to encourage my interest in tabla and my tabla classes were at the same center. It was just a matter of manipulating the time so that my arrival and departure coincided with that of the dancers. They floated up the concrete stairs, laughing airily, their long, lovely necks, and graceful limbs leaving me drooling and inarticulate, lumbering towards them, lugging my tabla bag. My hands were already ruined from my passion for the dholak, the bleeding blisters turning into calluses.

"See?" I showed my mother, overjoyed, "if I keep playing, I'll get a thick callus here!"

My mother gave me a sample of her Avon moisturizers.

Even if Mum held onto it, it became clear to me that I had long abandoned the hope, that I might, some day, exude femininity. I stopped fighting this thing that had cashiers calling to me: "Excuse me, sir, you forgot your change." This thing that filled my body with my father's walk, his posture, his voice, even traces of his mustache. I took a deep breath and faced the reflection that met me in the mirror: a queer woman in Mark's and Spencer's drawstring pajamas. And I made a decision: I would embrace this thing that had been with me, it seemed, since the day I emerged from my mother's body. Whatever I was, it had remained steadfast as a loyal friend, despite all of the betrayals mother and I had committed against it. Not the finest saris in the world, nor the most expert beauty tips, had eradicated its presence in my life—not even when in grade 10 I shaved my legs. It eased itself in my body time and time again, manifesting itself in the loudness of my laugh, the deepness of my voice, settling itself comfortably inside of me, until every aspect of my being, finally, relaxed with it.

Though I've yet to seduce one of those Bharatnatyam dancers, since coming out, I've delighted in the thing I call my Butchness. The very first time I wooed a woman with yellow roses and chocolate biscuits, the very first time I tried to impress a woman by shoveling snow from the driveway while she watched from the warmth of the indoors, the very first time I took my femme partner in my arms and felt her fingers loosening my tie and the buttons of my dress shirt—each of these moments were another homecoming, moving me closer and closer to that queer woman in the Marks and Spencer pajamas. She was strange and she was beautiful and she was, finally, Me.

My mother doesn't say very much about me but still it's her brief description that best sums up my life as an out South Asian Butch. Designing the salwar I would wear at my best friend's wedding party, she didn't hesitate telling the tailor, "sew it like a man's suit." Not even his puzzled inquiry startled her out of herself.

"Ladki hain ya ladka?" (Girl or boy?)

"Dono!" she said, "Ladki aur ladka." (Both—girl and boy)

It's true what they say, a mother just knows. ▼