Essentialism, Culture, and Beliefs About Gender Among the Aravanis of Tamil Nadu, India

Ramaswami Mahalingam[1]

The purpose of this study was to investigate the gender beliefs of the Aravanis, a transgender community in Tamil Nadu. Gender transgression and gender transformation (attempts to change gender) tasks were used to examine the essentialist notions of the Aravanis' beliefs about gender. A total of 100 Aravanis participated in the study. In the gender transgression task the Aravanis endorsed both male and female gender transgressions. In the gender transformation task the Aravanis believed in the male to female transformation but not in the female to male transformation. I argue that the asymmetry in the Aravanis' responses suggests that their beliefs about gender are consistent with Hindu patriarchal beliefs that feminine gender is essential and primordial, whereas masculine gender transformations are viewed as part of the male prerogative. The marginalized gender experience of the Aravanis influenced their judgments about gender transgressions but not their beliefs about gender transformations. I also discuss the implications of a cultural psychology of gender.

KEY WORDS: Hijras; gender; culture; transgender.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the role of social location and marginality (Fiske, 1993) in essentialist beliefs about gender (Fuss, 1989; Taylor, 1996). Gender theorists and feminists have objected to the essentialization of gender on two grounds. First, essentialist thinking has been rejected because of its dichotomous masculine/feminine assumptions about gender. For example, several ethnographic reports of non-Western cultures suggest the fluidity in gender roles (Trawick, 1990; Wiken, 1982). Second, essentialism has been viewed as an ideological tool of those in power, and, for this reason, essentialist beliefs about gender are resisted by those who are at the margins (Fiske, 1993; Stoler, 1995). This paper addresses the following two theoretical concerns: (a) whether members of an alternate gender group essentialize gender; and (b) whether their marginalized gender status has any influence on their beliefs about gender.

Gender and Essentialism

Previous research on gender roles has documented children's recognition of gender constancy (Bem, 1981, 1993). Gender role research documents the stages of development that mark qualitative changes in children's beliefs about gender. Recent research on cognitive development (Gelman & Wellman, 1990) suggests that even young children have a "theory like" understanding of social categories such as race (Hirschfeld, 1996, 1997) and gender (Taylor, 1996). *Cognitive essentialism* refers to an early *cognitive bias*, a heuristic cognitive tool used to make inferences about various social categories. This early cognitive bias provides a causal mechanism to explain a social phenomenon such as race, caste, or gender. For instance, Taylor (1996) found that even 4–5-year-olds believed in essentialist notions of gender. Folk theories of social groups are driven by an essentialist bias to assign social groups a distinct ontological status. Granting such a status also presumes that the group has an essence that is immutable and unchangeable. The "fixed" nature of the essence

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[1]To whom correspondence should be addressed at Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1109; e-mail: ramawasi@umich.edu.

is believed to result from a biological mechanism (e.g., blood, gene, DNA) or to be socially transmitted (Mahalingam, 1998).

Social essentialism refers to the belief that essentialism is an *ideological tool* that legitimizes power relations (Fuss, 1989; Grosz, 1994). The intuitive appeal of essentialism to make things appear natural has been deployed to justify existing power structures that favor those in privileged positions. According to critics, a belief in a biological basis for group differences also tends to legitimize social hierarchies along race, class, and gender lines. The link between social power and essentialism has been pointed out by feminists and critical theorists (e.g., Fuss, 1989; Grosz, 1994). Feminists argue that essentialism has been invoked to justify gender differences.
According to Grosz (1994),

> Women's essence is assumed to be given and universal and is usually, though not necessarily, identified with women's "biology" and "natural characteristics." There are cases in which women's essence is seen to reside not in nature or biology but in certain given psychological characteristics—nurturance, empathy, supportiveness, non-competitiveness. Essentialism thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibility of change and thus of social organization. (p. 84)

Although many feminist psychologists have questioned essentialist representations, some feminist theorists have also favored the strategic use of essentialism, the need to have a *corporal entity*, in order to construct a discourse for the empowerment of women (Spivak, 1989).

The social and cognitive approaches to essentialism emphasize different aspects of beliefs about gender, and they raise some interesting questions about how to think about gender. Theorists from both perspectives agree (to different degrees) that essentialist beliefs about gender form the basis of gender stereotypes. What are the specific contexts in which essentialist discourse of gender is invoked? Such discourse cannot occur in a social vacuum or only in textual modes.

Social psychological research shows that whenever people display counter stereotypical behavior, their actions are judged more negatively by others (Fiske, 1993; Signorella & Liben, 1985). Typically, such critical evaluation of counter stereotypic gender or ethnic behaviors, such transgressions from group norms (e.g., aggressive Japanese or nurturing men), presupposes an essentialist reasoning where people

deviate from the way they "ought" to behave. In the case of gender, Fiske (1993) argued that the power of gender stereotypes is that they prescribe what men or women ought to be, and any deviant behavior is punished or judged especially negatively. Therefore, an evaluation of gender transgressions would be valuable in helping us to understand the complex interactions among gender, culture, and power.

Aravanis, the Transgressors

Feminist psychologists contest the universalization of male/female dichotomy as a dominant axis to understand gender. Ethnographic reports suggest that several cultures have alternate conceptions of gender that defy the Western assumption of a bipolar conception of gender. Wiken (1982) documented the presence of Xaniths, the in-between status of men, in Oman. Xaniths are men who dress differently from most men but not entirely like women. They provide homosexual service to men who are not Xaniths. Their Xanith status is temporary and can be reversed by performing a manly sexual act with a woman from a dominant sexual position (Wiken, 1982).

Callender and Kochems (1986) studied the Beradache tradition among Native Americans. Beradaches are typically males who abdicate their gender status. As "not" males, who embody the essence of both males and females, they are believed to possess spiritual powers. Often Beradaches are the shamans for their communities. Nanda (1990) studied Hijras (also called Aravanis in Tamil Nadu, South India). Aravanis are men who dress as women and take nontraditional male occupations (e.g., cooks, dancers). They also provide homosexual service to non-Aravani men. In characterizing the "not men" Callender and Kochems (1986) observed four features that are common to all these "not-men" categories, some of which distinguish them from Western notions of homosexuals: (a) they dress differently from most men; (b) they do not have sexual relationships with women; (c) they seek occupations that are nontraditional; (d) they do not have any sexual relationships among themselves.

Nanda's ethnographic research on Hijras (Nanda, 1990) confirmed Callender and Kochem's characterization. According to Nanda, an unofficial account lists about 500,000 Hijras all over India. The British ethnographic reports (Agrawal, 1997) documented the presence of castrated men, also called Hijras. In north India, there is a tradition of asking Hijras to bless newborn babies. Hijras are considered

auspicious because they embody both males' and females' spirits. Nanda (1990) characterizes them as a "third gender" that is neither male nor female.

In Tamil Nadu, Hijras are known as Aravanis. Most of them do not finish high school because they are constantly teased by their peers. They dress in saris, give themselves feminine names, and refer to each other in female kinship terms. After becoming Aravanis, most of them leave their natal homes, and join the Aravani community. They are shunned by family members, especially their male kin, and offer material as well as emotional support to each other. Aravanis are more than cross-dressers. Many go through a sex change operation or take hormones to become a "perfect" female, and many also become sex workers to serve non-Aravani men. At times they maintain a monogamous relationship with a man they call a husband.

The general public reaction to the Aravanis has been ambivalent, a mixture of awe and disgust. Often they are objects of ridicule and serve as a metaphor for impotence, a symbol for a man who lacks masculinity. However, in north India, one of the Hijras recently ran successfully for an election to the state assembly.

Aravanis are very proud of their gender transgressions, but so far, there has been no systematic study of the Aravanis' beliefs about gender. Most anthropological accounts use Aravanis as an example (Agrawal, 1997; Nanda, 1990; Vedanthan, 2001) to challenge the dichotomous notion of gender as male or female. Vedanthan (2001) argued that the Aravanis overidentify with women and try to "mimic" (Bhabha, 1994) the feminine ideal. However, there has been no systematic cognitive psychological study of their beliefs about gender. The Aravanis are an interesting group for studying essentialist beliefs about gender for a number of reasons. First, as gender transgressors, their everyday lived experiences challenge many essentialized notions about gender. Second, the marginalized status of the Aravanis provides an opportunity to examine the interactions among essentialism, power, and social location.

The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the Aravanis' implicit theories of gender. Aravanis are living examples of gender transgression, and gender-bending is central to their identity. They dress and act like women and pride themselves on being "super-women." If they are a "third gender" (Nanda, 1990), will their gender theories be different from those

prevalent in the dominant culture? As they seem to transcend the masculine/feminine dichotomy, do they subscribe to a more fluid, nonessentialist notion of gender? The major prediction was that the Arvanis' theories of gender would be fluid. To examine essentialist beliefs about gender, two gender tasks were developed: (1) a gender transformation task (GTR), and (2) a gender transgression task (GTRG). The gender transformation task uses four different transformation techniques to ascertain whether someone can change gender.

METHOD

Participants

Informal estimates suggest that there are at least 10,000 Aravanis in Madurai, a southern city in Tamil Nadu. Through a snowball sampling method, 100 Aravanis (Age $M = 31.84$, $SD = 7.84$) were recruited through personal contacts from the city of Madurai. When approached, all participants were enthusiastic about participating in the study. Among the participants, 52.4% did not finish high school, 42% finished high school, and 99% were earning less than 24,000 rupees a year (approximately about $480 a year). All of them were from Hindu backgrounds.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two story conditions. After listening to a story, participants were asked to judge the appropriateness of the gender transgression for each of the eight cross-gender characteristics (see Appendix A) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *very inappropriate* to 5 = *very appropriate*). The order of presentation of the items was randomized. The mean score across the eight responses on the scale is the gender transgression score (GTRG) for each participant (see Appendix B). A higher score means that the desired gender transgression is judged more negatively, and a lower score means that the gender transgression is judged less negatively by the participant.

Procedure

Participants were interviewed at a time and place convenient for them. To accommodate their work schedule, the interviews were conducted over a period of 2 weeks, with a separate session for each task. Each participant completed the gender transgression and the gender transformation task followed by a general demographic questionnaire. On average, each session took between 10 and 12 min. Two native speakers

of Tamil were trained to present the task. The tasks were translated by a bilingual translator from English to Tamil and later back translated by another bilingual translator into English and verified for accuracy. The Tamil translations were modified to the satisfaction of the two translators.

Gender Transgression Task

The gender transgression task consisted of two story types. One story (Story A) provided a brief description of a boy who acts like a girl. Another version described a story of a girl who acts like a boy (Story B). There were eight behavioral items that are stereotypical of either males or females (see appendix A). The participants were asked to judge the appropriateness of the cross-gender behavior on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 to 5 (1 = *most inappropriate* and 5 = *most appropriate*). The gender stereotypical nature of the items were rated by 10 native speakers (5 men and 5 women). There was 95% agreement between the raters.

Gender Transformation Task

The same participants were randomly assigned to one of the two story conditions. In one condition, participants listened to the story of a girl who wanted to become a boy (Story A), and in the other participants listened to the story of a boy who wanted to become a girl (Story B). After the vignette was read, the protagonist in the story was provided with four different mechanisms for gender transformation. The four mechanisms were (a) superficial change; (b) surgical change; (c) change initiated by a Guru; (d) change by good Karma. Each mechanism was presented in the form of a vignette (see Appendix B). The superficial transformation (GTR1) suggests that by changing one's clothes and gender specific behavior, one can change one's gender. The second mechanism (GTR2) suggests that a surgical procedure will change gender. The third mechanism (GTR3) presents the possibility that a Guru (a holy person) can change one's gender. The last vignette (GTR4) suggests that good Karma can change one's gender (i.e., if one does a lot of good things in this life, in the next life one can born with a gender of one's choice). The interviewer read the story and presented each mechanism. The order of presentation of the mechanisms was randomized. Participants were then asked to judge the likelihood of changing one's gender by each means on a Likert scale (1 = *very unlikely to change* to 5 = *very likely to change*). A higher score means that the desired gen-
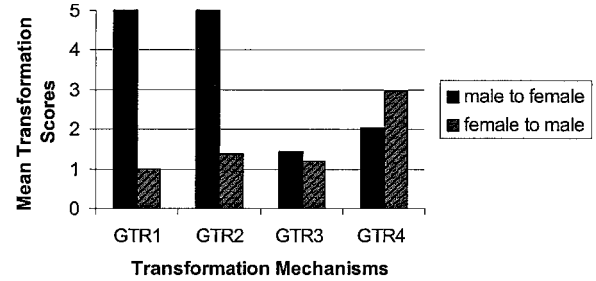
Fig. 1. Gender transformation scores by story type. The higher score indicates that the transformation mechanism is more likely to change the gender. GTR1 = Superficial transformation; GTR2 = by surgery; GTR3 = by a Guru; GTR4 = by good Karma.

der transformation is more likely to happen, and a lower score means that the gender transformation is less likely to happen. The mean scores for each vignette by story type are shown in Appendix B, Fig. 1.

RESULTS

In this study of transgression I explored two general theoretical questions: (1) whether Aravanis were tolerant of gender transgressions; (2) whether there was a main effect for the story type. To answer these questions, an analysis of variance of GTRG scores was conducted.

In general, the Aravanis approved of gender transgressions. The mean scores for Story A and Story B were 4.9 ($SD = 0.9$) and 5.0 ($SD = 0.0$), respectively. A one-way analysis of variance of GTR scores by story type (nature of transgression: male transgression and female transgression) showed no main effect for story type. The findings suggest that the Aravanis tolerate gender transgression irrespective of the direction of the story type.

The theoretical questions of interest for each mechanism in the transformation study are (1) whether the Aravanis believed in changing gender, and (2) whether there was a main effect for story type. The gender transformation scores were calculated for each mechanism (GTR1, GTR2, GTR3, and GTR4). There was a significant main effect for story type for each mechanism. A one-way analysis of variance of the GTR1 scores showed a main effect for story type, $F(1, 97) =$ infinity, $p < 0.000001$ (*F* value approached infinity because there was no variation in the responses for both versions). A boy was seen as being more likely to be able to become a girl than girl was to become a boy. A similar story effect, in the same direction was found for GTR2, the surgical mechanism, $F(1, 97) = 790.3$, $p < .00001$. For GTR3,

there was no story effect. That is, a holy person cannot change the gender of a boy or a girl. However, the story effect was in the opposite direction for the Karma vignette, $F(1, 97) = 14.3$, $p < .0001$. A significantly higher number of Aravanis believed that a girl was more likely to become a boy in the next life because of good Karma than a boy was to become a girl.

DISCUSSION

The Aravanis' beliefs about gender were complex. They generally believed that a girl could not become a boy, whereas a boy could become a girl. This trend was true for all mechanisms except for the Karma mechanism; they believed that good Karma might change a woman into a man in the next life.

The story effect was the strongest for the superficial transformation (GTR1). The Aravanis believed that if the boy dressed like a girl and acted like a girl, he would become a girl. They also believed that a girl would never become a boy by changing her dress or the way she acts. The Aravanis also thought that surgery would transform a boy into a girl but not a girl into a boy, and the differences in judgment scores between story types were significant. They also believed that a Guru could not change a boy into a girl or a girl into a boy.

The transformation tasks tapped the Aravanis' essentialist beliefs about gender and also provided opportunities to explore whether the Aravanis have a fluid notion of gender. Indeed, the Aravanis held fluid a notion of male identity but not female identity. They essentialized female identity more than male identity. The most significant difference was found for the superficial transformation task (GTR1).

Many gender constancy tasks in the developmental psychology literature have been designed to determine the age at which children understand that cross-dressing will not make a boy into a girl or a girl into a boy (Bem, 1981, 1993). At the outset, the response pattern of Aravanis may look similar to those of younger children who did not have an elaborate theory-like understanding of gender. By contrast, I argue that the Aravanis' theory of gender is more elaborate and is rooted in their experience, as well as in culture-specific beliefs about gender. There is one important difference between Aravanis and young children. Unlike young children who believed that cross-dressing would change the boy into a girl and a girl into a boy, there were asymmetries in the Aravanis' essentialist representations of gender. The Aravanis' responses indicated that they believe that female identity is more essential than male identity; they believe

in the permeability and fluidity of the male identity but not of female identity.

However, the Aravanis were more gender egalitarian when it comes to gender transgressions. The duality of their lived experience (as males who are not-men, but rather hyperwomen who transgress the accepted gender norms of males) might have heightened their sensitivity to gender crossing. This experience likely resulted in their egalitarian attitudes toward gender transgressions but not to gender transformation. Therefore, the Aravanis did not judge gender transgressions as inappropriate, irrespective of the gender of the transgressor.

Perhaps the Aravanis' notions of gender are driven simultaneously by two separate aspects of cultural experiences: one that guides their gender egalitarian norms, and another that shapes their essentialist notions of gender. Their marginalized and stigmatized lived experience as Aravanis might have contributed to their tolerance and acceptance of gender transgressions. They seemed to apply their egalitarian norms equally to male and female gender transgressors. Their social location played a role in a tolerant and a (relatively speaking) liberal view of gender within the Indian context. This finding is consistent with the claims of feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1991), which posits that marginalized experience provides a standpoint that is more objective, egalitarian, and equitable. For example, a comparison of Blacks and Whites on egalitarian measures suggests that marginalized groups are more likely to endorse hierarchy attenuating beliefs, whereas dominant group members endorsed hierarchy enhancing beliefs (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Culture, Gender, and Power

An essentialist representation of female identity, as a prevailing cultural ideology, is particularly salient for upper caste Brahmins. As interlocutors of the canonical forms of Hinduism and Hindu Scriptures, they strongly endorse essentialist representations of women. In a study conducted in Tamil Nadu, I (Mahalingam, 2001) examined beliefs about gender among Tamil Brahmins, using the gender transgression and gender transformation tasks. Brahmins, particularly Brahmin males, essentialized female gender more than did members of other caste groups. Although the Aravanis did not selectively essentialize female gender in the gender transgression task, they did essentialize female gender more than male gender.

The cultural construction of gender in India differs from gender concepts in the United States. For instance, Feinman (1981) found that Americans tolerate feminine gender role transgressions but not masculine gender role transgressions. The fluidity of gender identity has apparently been granted for women but not for men. Male identity is essential and associated with power, and the male gender transgression in the United States is associated with loss of status, whereas in India male gender transgression is viewed as a male prerogative (Trawick, 1990).

In Indian culture, the belief in goddess worship is linked to an essential representation of female identity as pure, strong, and powerful. Evidence from Indian folklore and mythology also suggests that female identity is seen as the core essence of gender, from which male identity emerges. Instances of gender transformation are abundant in cultural and religious myths. In such popular representations, typically a male becomes a female. There are very few instances of females becoming males. An important exception is the case of *Ambai*, a lead female character in the epic *Mahabharata* (Narayan, 2000). In the story, Ambalika vowed to reincarnate as a male warrior so that she could fight Bhisma to protect her honor. However, in the battlefield, when her reincarnate *Sikandi* encountered Bhishma in the battle field, Bhishma refused to fight Sikandi because he knew that deep inside he was Ambalika, a woman. Although at the mythological level harming a woman is against the honor code of warriors, in everyday life the constrictive nature of female identity, as well as asymmetries in beliefs about gender, become an excuse to legitimize violence against women and control women's power to choose nontraditional gender roles.

The findings from the present study raise some interesting theoretical questions, both in showing the complexities of essentialist notions of gender and the interaction between essentialism and marginalized epistemologies (Harding, 1991). One major issue has been whether the essentialist representation of gender, the belief in a corporeality of women, is a unitary belief system that navigates both our interpretation of various performative aspects of gender and the cultural grammar of moral derivatives for judging such gender transgressions. The Aravanis' beliefs about gender offer some insights about the complex interaction between social location and lived experiences. My findings suggest that essentialist representations of gender are multidimensional. The transformative and behavioral aspects of gender may be independent of each other.

Harding (1991) claimed that marginalized epistemologies would be empowering and would provide alternate perspectives that would challenge dominant beliefs about social categories. Standpoint epistemologists have argued that a marginalized social location provides a unique theoretical vantage point that embodies lived experience, challenges essentialized representations, and values "otherness," "alienation," and "bifurcation" (Brown, 1989; Daly, 1973; Harding, 1991). In her work on gay and bisexual psychology, Brown (1989) emphasized that marginality is a core experience that is constitutive of both gay and lesbian identities:

> Lesbian and gay male experience reflects the alienated, marginal world view, no matter how well an individual lesbian or gay man appears to be integrated into the dominant social context ... our experience of the world as outsiders may allow us to see differently, hear differently, and this potentially challenges the conventional wisdom. We may be freer to see, to speak, and to act other truths. (pp. 171–172)

Brown's provocative portrayal of the affirming characteristics of marginalized experience needs to be examined in relation to the Aravanis' beliefs about gender. Certainly, their marginalized experiences seem to influence the way they rethink the behavioral aspects of gender and gender roles in general. They were able to uncouple beliefs about doing gender from their core beliefs about changing gender. Being transgressors themselves, they condone male as well as female transgressions. However, the cultural representations of gender also influenced the gender beliefs of the Aravanis. Although they called themselves a "third gender," or superwomen, they also believed that gender transformation is only a male prerogative, a part of patriarchal privilege.

The striking parallel between the Aravanis and the Brahmins suggests that cultural beliefs about gender are distributed widely across various sections of society, but social location does influence the degree to which gender is essentialized. The transgressive nature of Aravani identity influences the way they think about gender role transgressions. However, when it comes to gender transformation, they almost militantly essentialize female identity. Also, the Aravanis' beliefs about the fluidity of male gender identity validate their own quest to become women (Nanda, 1990). They strongly identify themselves with women, and, in fact, call themselves as "hyperwomen" (Jaffrey, 1996) because they embody hyperfeminine qualities. Their views are very close to those of the dominant Brahmin group's perception of gender. Ironically, the "hyperfeminine" self-construction of

the Aravanis is rooted in their hyperpatriarchal beliefs about female gender. In some ways the Aravanis internalize patriarchal ideology to an even greater extent than do heterosexuals. To a certain degree, these patriarchal beliefs subvert the empowering potentials of marginalized epistemologies.

Conclusions

Two gender tasks were used to explore essentialist beliefs about gender among the Aravanis. The data show that the Aravanis tolerated both male and female gender transgressions, however they believed in a fluid male identity that allows gender transformations for males, but not for females, except in the case of a transcendental mechanism such as Karma. That is, women who had performed good Karma are more likely to become male in the next life, whereas good Karma was less likely to change a man into a woman in the next life. This is consistent with their belief that men can become women in this life and do not have to wait for next life, as women do. The Aravanis' beliefs about gender are complex and multilayered. Although they held on to essentialist beliefs about gender in the gender transformation task, they did not extend these essentialist beliefs to their evaluation of gender transgressions. Essentialist notions of gender are complex and dynamic. They are shaped by social location, culture, and marginalized experience.

APPENDIX A: GENDER TRANSGRESSION TASK

Male gender transgression	Female gender transgression
1. Started growing long hair	1. Started growing short hair like boys
2. Started wearing a skirt	2. Wanted to drive motorbikes
3. Wanted to wear bangles	3. Started wearing pants
4. Wanted to wear flowers in his hair	4. Wanted to do carpentry work
5. Wanted to become a cook	5. Wanted to play cricket
6. Wanted to join a *Bharathanatyam* class	6. Wanted to play with boys
7. Wanted to become a nurse	7. Wanted to join the military
8. Wanted to play with girls	8. Wanted to learn to be a car mechanic

APPENDIX B: DESCRIPTION OF GENDER TRANSFORMATION MECHANISMS

Girija is the only child for her parents. Her father is a devoted priest in the Krishnan temple She is also a devotee of Krishnan. She wanted to become a priest after her father's retirement. She joined a Sanskrit school and learned all the Vedas. When she told her friends about wanting to become a priest, her friends told her only boys can become a priest; she wondered whether she can become a priest. She asked several people whether she can become a boy to become a priest.

GTR1 (*by superficial change*): One person told her that if she dresses like a boy and grows short hair she will become a boy.

1	2	3	4	5
Least Likely to change			Most likely to change	

GTR 2 (*by surgery*): One person told her that she can go to a hospital and the doctor can perform a surgery that will change her into a boy.

1	2	3	4	5
Least Likely to change			Most likely to change	

GTR3 (*by a Guru*): One person told her that she can go to a Guru and the Guru can chant a mantra and perform a ceremony that will change her into a boy.

1	2	3	4	5
Least Likely to change			Most likely to change	

GTR4 (*by good Karma*): One person told her that if she does lot of good deeds in this life, in her next life she will be born as a boy and she can become a priest then.

1	2	3	4	5
Least Likely to change			Most likely to change	

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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