

## The Preservation of Femininity in A. K. Summers' *Pregnant Butch*

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### ABSTRACT

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This study examines the depiction of femininity in the graphic novel *Pregnant Butch* by A. K. Summers. The novel follows the story of Teek, who is experiencing pregnancy as a butch lesbian for the first time. This article investigates Teek's sustaining femininity throughout her pregnancy journey as a butch. A butch itself is a gender expression that holds a masculine role in lesbian relationships. The researchers took the data of this analysis is taken by reading the graphic novels thoroughly, approaching the analysis from Teek's perspective, compiling a list of dialogues and interactions, and categorizing the collected data into specific themes. Using a qualitative method, the researchers in this analysis underline the uniqueness between masculinity and femininity illustrated in the graphic novel. In conclusion, Teek's experience of femininity during pregnancy enriches her butch identity, emphasizing her ability to balance both masculine and feminine aspects of herself. The study highlights the significance of feminine elements in Teek's unwavering expression of femininity.

**Keywords:** *A. K. Summers; Butch; Femininity; Lesbian; Pregnant Butch*

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### INTRODUCTION

Human beings exhibit diversity through cultural, ethnic, political, social, and sexual differences, leading to a range of agreements and disagreements in various viewpoints (Felix, 2016). Sexual diversity includes individuals within the LGBTQ+ community, where a lesbian is defined as a woman who is romantically or sexually attracted to other women. The concept of 'sapphic' refers to female homosexuality, originating from the Greek poet Sappho of Lesbos, known for her expressions of love for women in her poetry (Swiner, 2023). Within lesbian relationships, distinct roles known as "femme" and "butch" is adopted, emerging in the twentieth century as a way for lesbians to identify and connect (Swiner, 2023).

In basic terms, a "butch" is lesbian who adopts a more masculine appearance and takes on traditionally masculine roles. Conversely, "femmes" express their identity with a strong sense of femininity, mirroring how butches embody masculinity (Swiner, 2023). Butches often lean towards masculine clothing, behaviors, and sexual roles. Some may choose hormone therapy or undergo breast reduction surgery as part of their transition (Harrow, 2022).

It is essential to recognize the diversity within the lesbian community, which encompasses various subtypes categorized into six stereotypes: the out lesbian, the

closeted lesbian, the bisexual lesbian, the feminine lesbian, the butch lesbian, and the attractive or "hot" lesbian (Annati, 2020). In the context of lesbians, who are women, although not all women identify as lesbians, but all women are inherently perceived with femininity. The connection between women and femininity is deeply ingrained, suggesting that femininity is an intrinsic aspect of womanhood, implying that women are inherently linked to femininity (Harrow, 2022).

Within patriarchal norms, femininity is often regarded as inferior, while masculinity is viewed as superior. This stereotype suggests that the partner presenting with more masculine traits assumes a dominant role, leaving the more feminine partner to take on nurturing responsibilities. It is commonly assumed that the partner with a more masculine or boyish presentation handles financial matters and assertive tasks, reinforcing societal masculine stereotypes. This stereotype implies that a masculine presence is essential for the functionality of any relationship, reflecting sexist and patriarchal norms (Putri, 2023; Wallace, 2022).

In lesbian relationships, there are numerous opportunities for couples to create families, which may involve having a baby and embracing parenthood. Same-sex female couples who opt for parenthood encounter added difficulties as they navigate the complexities of family planning and pregnancy (Rogers, 2020). Confronting existing stigmas, discrimination, and heterosexism, the experience of pregnancy within a heteronormative framework adds further stressors, increasing their vulnerability. For queer families, transitioning into parenthood requires a challenging renegotiation of personal roles and identities to align with society's expectations of a "parent" (Rogers, 2020).

One of the literary works that explores the theme of queer pregnancy is portrayed in A. K. Summers' graphic novel and also happens to be a memoir entitled "Pregnant Butch". Where the main story centers around the character Teek, who initially identifies as a butch but later develops a desire for pregnancy. The story follows her journey through the experience of pregnancy as a butch, starting with her fantasies about pregnancy with her high school ex-girlfriend. Despite unconsciously yearning for motherhood since her teenage years, she is not previously considered becoming pregnant on her own (Summers, 2014).

As she grows up, she discovers her desire to become pregnant and carry a baby herself. Embracing her butch identity while managing her femininity in Teek's pregnancy journey, she then seeks to expand the understanding of being butch beyond traditional gender roles. With her partner's backing, she opts for self-insemination to bear a child. Through the trials and complex experiences of pregnancy, Teek's identity as a butch lesbian who is also undergoing femininity becomes a central theme of her journey (Summers, 2014).

## **METHOD**

By using a qualitative method, certain concepts and written data are analyzed to answer the question in this paper. Written through the description, online and offline scripts are used to explain correlations between the Pregnant Butch graphic novel and

the idea of femininity alongside literary concepts and cultural studies ideas. Analysis data is formed by reading the graphic novel intensively, comparing the literary work with feminine condition ideas, analyzing the dialogue and the written narratives, quoting it into the article, and writing a list of references related to both primary and secondary sources of analysis.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Portrayal of Femininity in Teek's Butch Pregnancy

Teek demonstrates her femininity as a pregnant butch throughout the graphic novels written by A. K. Summers. Her femininity as a pregnant butch are understood through her thoughts and what others say when her surrounded people meet her in person. Butches' masculine presentation often leads to confusion and mistaken identity as men (Schrader, 2021). They face societal discrimination due to their non-feminine traits, a phenomenon known as "butch-phobia." The label of butch can be restrictive, implying toughness, coolness, and emotional detachment, making it challenging for some to express their emotions. The term "butch" carries stereotypes of mimicking male chauvinism and conforming to heteronormative norms, perpetuating the idea of replicating the heterosexual world by being butch or femme (Schrader, 2021).

Teek perceives that enhancing a butch identity includes embracing her femininity, that is pregnancy. Teek seeks to defy societal norms by expressing her wish to get pregnant while identifying as a butch. Pregnancy is a universal experience for women, including butches, who should not be marginalized from this aspect of womanhood (Gunn et al., 2021). This notion is exemplified in her initial steps toward embracing pregnancy, as evidenced in the following quote;

*New York is not renowned for its gallantry where pregnant women are concerned. So imagine how often you're offered a seat when most people take you for just another fat guy on the subway (Summers, 2014, page 2)*

In the quotation above, while pregnant women typically receive seats on public transport, Teek often finds herself mistaken for a fat guy. This situation highlights the unique challenges faced by pregnant individuals who identify as butch, as they struggle to have both their identity and pregnancy acknowledged in real-life scenarios. Due to her masculine appearance and weighty belly, Teek is perceived solely as a fat guy by others (Summers, 2014). Experiencing pregnancy as a butch presents Teek with a multifaceted journey, navigating a gender identity that defies conventional norms. Teek seeks to coin her own term as existing labels fail to capture her essence accurately. Harrow argues that 'butch' is inherently flawed – not male, not female, masculine but not male, female but not feminine (Harrow, 2022).

Nevertheless, the decision of her pregnancy poses a threat to her identity as it inevitably leads to a more feminine appearance. With the onset of physical changes during pregnancy, labels such as "pregnant," "mother," and "patient" become attached to the individual regardless of their personal preferences. Kristeva's perspective resonates with the notion that many women undergoing pregnancy feel a loss of

identity and autonomy (Carson, 2020; Kristeva, 2005). Thus, Teek, while identifying as a butch, seeks a feminine experience through pregnancy, introducing a fresh perspective to the concept of butchness.

Many lesbians perceive embracing a "butch" identity as entailing a dominant role in relationships, while "femme" individuals often take on a more submissive role. This perception associates "butch" traits with assertiveness, control, and aggression. However, sapphic relationships come in diverse forms. For example, two "femme" individuals may be in a relationship, as may two "butch" or masculine-presenting individuals (Manders, 2020; Putri, 2023). Teek's experience as a butch and mother, navigating pregnancy, adds to the diversity of sapphic relationships. Such relationships are not only varied but also distinct and unique, as illustrated in the following quotation;

*There were a few other people I needed to "come out" to.  
"I'm going to have a baby"  
"You want same?"  
"no x-ray"  
"we strongly recommend--"  
"im pregnant"  
"oh--um congratulations i guess"  
Though it offered the benefit of refusing x-rays and  
mammograms, pregnancy was mostly disruptive to a set  
of hard-won, casual relationships (Summers, 2014, page 40)*

During her pregnancy, Teek encounters situations where she feels compelled to come out about her pregnancy to certain individuals, such as the barber. She informs the barber about her pregnancy, but the barber assumes she means adopting a child. In reality, Teek is the one who is pregnant and she is excited to share the news. This underscores society's reliance on traditional gender roles, leading to the assumption that masculine individuals will not experience pregnancy (Summers, 2014).

Nevertheless, queer pregnancy, especially among individuals such as Teek who identify as butch, faces limited acceptance in a heteronormative society. The prevailing traditional views on childbearing in today's society present obstacles for those seeking non-traditional family setups beyond the typical heterosexual nuclear family model. Queer families frequently encounter difficulties related to pregnancy because of prejudiced attitudes based on heterosexism (Rogers, 2020).

As a result, conversations about queer motherhood often involve queer couples being asked, "Who is the biological mother?". This question comes from preconceived notions about traditional gender roles. In Teek's situation, the assumptions may differ, with some believing she cannot conceive due to her butch identity, leading to speculations about whether her partner is carrying the pregnancy or if they are considering adoption (Hudak, 2023). This highlights the uncommon occurrence of queer pregnancy, particularly within the realm of a pregnant butch.

Pregnancy is a significant phase for many individuals, encompassing biological, emotional, and social aspects crucial for the well-being of caregivers and their

newborns. Teek's conflicting emotions reflect her effort to retain femininity while navigating the tensions between her personal preferences and the baby's health. Her choice to prioritize the baby highlights her dedication to motherhood, underscoring the challenge of reconciling femininity with a butch identity. This inner struggle highlights Teek's ability to balance being a pregnant woman and a butch, embodying the concept of a pregnant butch (Kristeva, 2005; Summers, 2014).

Experiencing pregnancy as a butch lesbian involves being prepared for assumptions that one is either the feminine partner carrying the pregnancy or considering adoption, as illustrated in the following quote;

*We Invited All Our Friends, Including Some We Hadn't Seen In A Long While. Due To The Arcane, Nature Of The Term "Second-Parent Adoption" A Couple Of Straight Friends Showed Up And Were Astonished To Discover I Was Pregnant! Second-Parent Adoption- Truly A Half Assed Accommodation To Gay Humanity (Summers, 2014, page 62)*

At the gathering, Teek and Vee invited a diverse group of friends, including heterosexual and non-heterosexual individuals, to celebrate their upcoming baby shower. Speculations circulated among some guests that Teek and Vee chose adoption as their path to parenthood. However, for the surprise of everyone there, it is revealed that Teek is pregnant (Summers, 2014).

Teek faces misunderstandings about her pregnancy, with some assuming it involves adoption or that her partner is pregnant one. Even within her non-heterosexual social circle, the impact of heteronormative attitudes is evident, as baby showers are commonly linked with heterosexual couples. While baby showers are meant to be joyous occasions to prepare for a new arrival, they can reinforce gender norms and heteronormativity, potentially leading to a discomfiting experience for individuals who do not fit into those traditional roles (Whisenand, 2022).

Moreover, throughout Teek's pregnancy journey, she aims to maintain her masculine role in the relationship, but as her body undergoes noticeable transformations, she can no longer hide her feminine characteristics. This realization leads Teek to recognize her inherent womanhood and to set aside her butch masculinity in favor of her femininity in maternal instincts. She willingly adopts the feminine traits of a pregnant woman, such as wearing maternity clothes for the well-being of her future child, driven by a profound longing to be an exemplary mother (Summers, 2014).

### **The Continuation of Teek's Femininity as a Pregnant Butch**

Each individual who identifies as a butch expresses their identity in a personal and unique way. Teek defines herself as a mother with a distinct identity, in which she identifies herself as a butch dyke. Her individual identity showcases how her maternal instincts, particularly as a pregnant butch, develop throughout the narratives and the dialogues. Despite her unique identity, Teek shares the desire to bear a child like any

other woman (Yuliastuti et al., 2021). Teek's pregnancy serves not as a time to emphasize her masculinity but rather as a period to soften those traits and fully embrace her femininity, as highlighted in the following quote;

*I worried whether butchness itself might preclude my chances of getting pregnant. The more feminine the woman, the more fertile, right? Studies show that lipstick and a new bag...increase fertility by 21% (Summers, 2014, p. 11)*

After considering the idea of having a baby, she becomes concerned about the possibility of conceiving and her fertility. With her identity as a butch, she worries that she may not meet the typical feminine standards for pregnancy. Nonetheless, she remains confident in her ability to successfully carry a child. This demonstrates that, despite identifying as a butch, she holds a desire for pregnancy and is ready for the journey. Similar to many women, Teek shares the longing for pregnancy, regardless of her self-perception or the extent of masculinity she embodies. This underscores that, as a woman, she inherently possesses femininity (Summers, 2014).

The complex stages of Teek's pregnancy as a butch introduce her to numerous challenges. Despite these obstacles, Teek remains committed to proceeding with her pregnancy, a journey that also involves maintaining her femininity. Her sense of femininity acts as a motivating factor, sustaining her aspiration to become a mother. In contrast to the idealized notions of femininity and motherhood as idyllic states, Teek's experience is characterized by emotional complexities, marked by fluctuating between states of manic exaltation or depression and aggression (Kristeva, 2005; Lombardi, 2019).

Furthermore, as a butch mother, she participates in feminine tasks such as breastfeeding and wearing a nursing bra, all while fulfilling her duties as a butch (Summers, 2014). Despite these situations, she remains dedicated to embracing her identity as a butch mother. One of the primary reasons is her recognition as a woman and a nurturer of another life. The role of motherhood is viewed as a personal decision and an expression of innate potential (Kristeva, 2005).

Furthermore, Teek, in her role as a butch mother, demonstrates androgynous behavior by effectively balancing her masculine and feminine roles. Androgynous individuals exhibit masculine and feminine characteristics (Yuliawati, 2022), displaying qualities such as assertiveness and submissiveness, as well as rationality and emotionality, adjusting their behavior according to the context. The feminine and masculine aspects complement each other within androgynous individuals, highlighting their flexibility, competence, and adaptability beyond those who solely embody masculine or feminine traits (Yuliawati, 2022). Initially, as a pregnant butch, she dedicates significant efforts to maintaining her butch identity. However, as she nears the end of her pregnancy, she shifts her focus towards ensuring her own and her child's health and overall well-being, prioritizing these aspects strictly conforming to her butch identity. It is crucial to recognize that her increasing concern for her future

child does not diminish her sense of butch identity but it is also magnify her femininity, as demonstrated in the following quote;

*There was a time when slides could be a joke... when gender could be floute....when tits could fall off. but yesterday vee bought me a nursing bra. I thought I was a space alien, a do-it-yourselfer, exempt. Well, I quit. There's no use denying it. I am an eternal woman (Summers, 2014, page 78)*

Teek reflects on her pregnancy experience as a pregnant butch, contemplating how certain items, such as slippers, can challenge societal gender norms. She also considers redefining the traditional associations with breasts (Summers, 2014). However, her viewpoint evolves when her partner, Vee, purchases a nursing bra for her. This prompts Teek to reassess her previous beliefs and ultimately embrace her womanhood, acknowledging her femininity. This pivotal moment marks the beginning of her realization that, despite her prior efforts to adhere to a butch identity, she fundamentally identifies as a woman. Teek willingly sheds her previous masculine image in favor of her child's well-being (Summers, 2014).

Teek remains committed to her choice to pursue pregnancy, determined by the challenges she may face (Summers, 2014). She holds firm confidence in her capacity to accomplish this objective, embracing a distinctive butch identity that diverges from the typical pregnancy experience of most women. This demonstrates her preservation of femininity within her butch identity. Despite recognizing that pregnancy could present challenges to her butch persona, Teek remains unwavering in experiencing femininity as a butch (Carson, 2020; Kristeva, 2005).

For Teek, embodying Butchness extends beyond mere masculinity; it represents a nuanced affirmation of femininity and a means of affirming her identity as a woman. This viewpoint strongly resonates with Teek's circumstances (Stonewall, 2020). Teek's acceptance of femininity among her bodily changes does not diminish her butch identity; she remains dedicated to her butch identity but her femininity holds the most dominant. It is showcasing her readiness to temporarily prioritize her pregnancy experience over her butch identity (Kristeva, 2005; Summers, 2014). This is evidenced in the following below;

*I give up it is too hot. I am too tired. look at me how you like. I am not myself. I am not tintin. I am not the incredible hulk. I am tears and I am snot. I am anemic and I am purple veins. I am boobies. I am done (Summers, 2014, page 79)*

During her nine-month pregnancy, Teek surrenders her entire butch identity, meaning that she enhances her femininity by adjusting her masculinity. She is no longer upholding her masculinity as she fully embraces her femininity through motherhood. The quoted passage vividly depicts a profound maternal passion, emphasizing that despite her dedication to her butch identity, her ultimate longing is

motherhood, surpassing any other aspirations, including being a butch (Summers, 2014).

Despite her earnest desire to maintain her butch identity, Teek finds it unattainable during her nine months of pregnancy as her physical appearance undergoes a notable transformation into a maternal body. Confronted with this change, Teek has no choice but to accept and embrace the alterations within her own body, constituting the most challenging aspect of her pregnancy as she seeks inner peace (Summers, 2014).

The key to Teek's success lies in her adept balance of preserving her butch identity while prioritizing her femininity during pregnancy. In the story's culmination, she consciously prioritizes her femininity not because it dominates over her masculinity, but because her masculinity naturally recedes. Teek effortlessly maintains this equilibrium, embodying enduring womanhood (Summers, 2014). Her journey as a butch mother enhances her self-awareness as she navigates both her masculinity and femininity while embracing her role as a pregnant butch. Despite her butch identity, this underscores her engagement in androgynous behavior, encompassing both masculine and feminine roles (Yuliawati, 2022).

During pregnancy, women undergo a transformative journey where they welcome another version of themselves, embarking on a new path. Despite her identification as a butch, Teek encounters femininity deeply intertwined with the emotional bond between mother and child. This distinctive attribute of women deepens their empathy and fosters a natural inclination toward motherhood. As this inclination develops, it evolves into enduring love, symbolizing a mother's endless affection and nurturing, perpetuating the timeless representation of maternal love (Kristeva, 2005; Lombardi, 2019). This experience enabled Teek to explore her butch identity in a multifaceted manner, embracing not only her masculine traits but also her femininity through pregnancy. This exploration of both masculine and feminine aspects is rooted in Teek's preservation of femininity and profound connection to the transformative journey. The various stages she navigated illustrate her dedication and commitment to pregnancy, underscoring her unique way of upholding femininity (Kristeva, 2005; Lombardi, 2019).

## **CONCLUSION**

The depiction of Teek's retention of femininity as a pregnant butch initiates with her early fantasies about pregnancy during high school. As she transitions through the stages of womanhood, she consciously decides to experience pregnancy as a butch, undergoes childbirth in this role, and eventually nurtures her son as a butch mother. Throughout her journey from pregnancy to motherhood, she steadfastly maintains her butch identity while embracing inherently feminine experiences. Women progress through various life stages, evolving from daughters to women and eventually mothers or grandmothers, demonstrating remarkable courage in embracing new beginnings, particularly the arrival of new life.



In Teek's role as a pregnant butch or a butch mother with masculine traits in lesbian dynamics, she seeks to delve deeper into her butch identity, challenging the notion that being butch solely entails assuming a masculine role. Despite being a lesbian and a butch, she embodies eternal womanhood. Like any woman, Teek, as a butch lesbian, experiences femininity. As she engages in traditionally feminine experiences, her masculinity naturally recedes without being overshadowed by her femininity. Teek's journey as a pregnant butch and a butch mother underscores the significance of maternal passion in her life, enabling her to effectively balance her masculine and feminine roles.

Despite encountering various stages, Teek persists in pursuing her desire for pregnancy, unwavering in her determination. Consequently, her identity becomes even more distinctive as she experiences pregnancy within the context of her butch identity. Initially, Teek grapples with femininity amid her commitment to maintaining her butchness during pregnancy. However, she ultimately embraces her authentic self, recognizing her inherent femininity while identifying as a butch. This illustrates that while being a butch may define her outward identity in the lesbian community, her femininity remains an intrinsic aspect shared by all women, regardless of their level of masculinity.

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