

Analysing Notions , Perceptions and Truth of Transgenders with the help of Lili : The Portrait of the First Sex Change.

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Abstract

The word transgender is often used as an umbrella term for persons whose identity, gender expression or behaviour does not conform to the biological sex to which they were assigned at birth. Transgender people were always a mystery to society. Some consider them as an abomination of natural order where as some consider them with pity. This paper focuses on the general notion, perception and truth about transgender by analysing literary works and adaptations.

Keywords: Transgender, Gender Studies, Intersex.

Introduction

Who is a transgender or a trans-sexual? What is the difference between a transgender and an intersex person? The answers to these questions will lead us to the fundamentals of queer theory. Another major factor to be incorporated with this is the difference between sex and gender. Biological sex refers to an individual's anatomy whereas the term gender is more culturally rooted. For example, from childhood boys are given the colour blue and girls pink. Boys are given toy cars and trucks and girls are given dolls to dress- up. The children are raised by the society to take on certain roles and to meet certain expectations as adults based on their gender.

In general terms, the word transgender refers to people whose gender identity does not match with their biological sex. For example, a person born with male genitalia may feel that he is a female and therefore tries to act as one. Usually they might dress up as females, use feminine names, usage of feminine pronouns and engage in activities that are typically associated with women in that culture to assert the fact that they are female by gender. A trans-sexual person goes a step higher than a transgender. They identify themselves as the opposite sex and take hormone treatments and surgeries to fully have their desired bodies. People who have intersex condition have an anatomy that is not fully male or female. Mostly people with intersex conditions are noticed by parents and doctors since there is something unusual about their bodies. Most people confuse a transgender and an intersex person as the same but in truth they are different. In many cases an intersex person decides to stick on to any one of the sexes and will undergo hormone treatment and sex reassignment surgery as transsexuals do and some intersex people claim themselves to be transgender. Thus, these terms do overlap at certain levels. Transgender has become an umbrella term for all these communities. There is another community of people called androgynous people; they do not fit neatly into the typical masculine or feminine gender distinction. They may identify themselves as non-gender, gender neutral, agender, between genders, non- binary, gender queer or gender fluid. Among these terms, gender fluid is commonly used.

The term Queer has become a common term for those who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, intersex, transgender or by and for people who prefer to use the term as an alternative to LGBT labels. Recently, there is a notion that heterosexual individuals whose sexuality and gender does not conform to society's norms and expectations have used this term queer to explain their way of life. Queer theory is formulated by ideas that suggest the instability of identities or deterministic, regarding an individual's sexual preference and

gender (Abrams and Harpham 327).

Heteronormativity assumes heterosexuality and binary relation between male and female as sane and queer theory destabilizes the assumptions and privileges of secure heteronormative models of study and everyday life and politicizes and acknowledges the fluidity and instability of identities. The works of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler are often considered as the founding texts of queer theory. Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick are also early writers in defining queer theory (329).

Methodology

Foucault says that home has become a single locus of sexuality and heteronormativity became the yardstick for what is considered as normal and all others are considered as either abnormal or shameful and often got penalized (Green). The religion considers homosexuality and deviant sexuality as taboo and uses its propaganda to suppress the identity of the queer people. Sexuality of the individual is often considered as their dignity and acceptance. Heteronormativity is the default orientation according to religion and people are forced to leave the religious community because they are considered as abnormal. Sexual diversity is often suppressed causing individual's identity crisis (Epstein).

Transgenders have existed in society from ancient times. The presence of transgender characters in mythologies across the world proves this point. They are often considered as deities and are worshipped. In mythologies LGBT characters are found along with cross-dressing and androgynous people. In Greek mythology there are several instances that prove the existence of homosexuality, bisexuality and LGBT themes. Homer never explicitly states the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. However, the reader can understand the romantic relationship between the two. Patroclus' death at the hands of the Trojan prince Hector sent Achilles into a rage which resulted in the brutal murder of the Trojan prince and his body was dragged around Troy. Other myths also disclose that Achilles was struck by the beauty of the Trojan Prince Troilus (Hard 25-34).

Zeus selected a young mortal Ganymede to serve as his cup bearer on Mount Olympus. This relationship provided the foundation of the custom of Pederasty, the practice of Greek men having erotic relation with adolescent boys. Hermes, the wing- heeled messenger of the Gods is said to have male lovers. "Myths suggest a romantic relationship between Hermes and Perseus. Many Mythological texts and artwork connect Daphnis to the satyr pan, God of Music. Pan, depicted in sculpture chasing both men and women, is considered to be the first identifiable bisexual in mythology. Dionysus best known as the God of wine is also known as the God of transgender and intersex people" (Hamilton 125-140).

The blind prophet Teiresias was famous in Greek Mythology for being transformed from a man to a woman for seven years. During his female years he became a priestess of Hera, got married and even had children according to Hesiod. After years he was changed back to his male form by the Gods. Athena the Goddess of wisdom and patron of Athens was a virgin known by most mythologies, but she expressed a romantic attraction to the Attic maiden Myrmex. Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love identified as a homosexual is the greatest patron and ally of lesbians and homosexuals in Greek Mythology (Hard 39-68).

Hermaphrodites, perhaps is the earliest literary reference to an intersex person is the child of Hermes and love Goddess Aphrodite, who in their youth encountered the nymph Salmacis, who attempted to seduce the youth to join their forms together permanently. The creature thus formed is depicted with womanly breasts and form but with male genitals. The story of Calisto is the partial account of a lesbian connection when Zeus took a female form to lure the girl. (Hard 80-110)

In Hindu mythology the concept of the androgynous form of lord Siva (ArdhaNaarishwaran) is the synthesis of masculine and feminine energies of the Universe. The deity appears as half male and half female split, each depicting the corresponding sexes (Ellen 15). Arjuna became Bruhannala, a transgender person because of the curse of Urvashi. There is the reference to Shikhandi who is also a transgender person in Mahabharata (Pattanaik 26). These analyses prove that in every culture there was the acceptance of transgender and bisexual as mythical figures.

Transgender people suffer a lot in society. They are considered as abnormal, stigmatized, beggars who are a shame on the heteronormative society. Most of the transgender people lack even the basic rights to live in countries. Lack of legal protection resulted in denial of employment which leads to extreme poverty. The LGBT community still faces considerable stigma based on their preferences and is characterised as mentally ill, socially deviant and sexually predatory. These people lose their beloved ones and often end up as orphans because of their identity. 1980's is the latter part of the Trans Dark Ages. A Trans Lady called Allison says: "It was bloody dangerous to be Trans (and yes, it often still is). I was very fortunate, in that I achieved something like 90% passing privilege within 6 months. I was also very careful. Nonetheless, I was assaulted more than once during the early months, and escaped what could have been severe beatings". (Washington, "My Experience during the Trans Dark Days")

The hardest part at that time was the lack of proper information. If Allison had known about this earlier, she would have changed long ago. Trans people often get assaulted and humiliated in public. Most of the gay people kept their identity as a secret since same-gender relationships were considered as a taboo at that time. Recognized transsexual people became an object of curiosity and were often considered as subjects for studies. Sex reassignment surgeries started gaining popularity and trans people got awareness about their identity. The extraordinary case of Lili Elbe was kept a secret at first, but through a friend's indiscretion the secret leaked out, and the case was reported in the German and Danish newspapers and caused a great sensation in the year 1931, some years before Lili's death.

The strange case, as it may be called at that time, is compiled by Neils Hoyer, partly from his own knowledge, partly dictated by Lili herself, her diaries, and her letters. This biographical account was approved by the surgeon who performed Lili's Surgery. In many cases trans people are often stigmatised for their preferences and choice but Lili was an exception in this case. Her family and friends supported her in becoming what she wanted to be. The case falls within the domain of sexual pathology and comes with in the case of sexual intermediary. Lili was actually an intersex person. It took nearly forty years for her to realise that.

The book is the story of a well-known Danish Painter, whose identity is shrouded in this book under the name of Andreas Sparre, born in the 1880's. At about the age of twenty he married, and was sufficiently leading a normal life both psychologically and physically as a male and was able to fulfil his functions as a husband. The feminine notion of Andreas aka Einar Weigner is explored on the occasion of a simple party. It started out as fun, his wife made him cross dress as a female to accompany her for a party. The disguise was so successful that more of those cross dressings happened. The cross-dressed Einar was given the name Lili. Gradually he feels that a change is happening within. He felt that "Lili" was a real individual, who shared the same body as his male self –Andreas.

As time passed, the second self, Lili became more evident and there arose a struggle of dominant identity. He began to suffer from strange disturbances every month from the

bleeding of nose and elsewhere which he regarded as the representation of menstruation, he sought the help of many doctors for relief, but they were unable to do so. Andreas began reading books on Sexual pathology and gradually understood perhaps he has undeveloped female organs. The whole case is reported seventy years ago. The medical field was not developed enough to oversee such a case. Even today the success rate of reassignment surgery is low. "I cannot write about my last operation- it was an abyss of suffering." (Elbe location 1044) This was recorded by Lili herself in the hospital. "In the year before her death, Elbe had divorced Gerda, given up painting, and was embarking tentatively on a relationship with a French art dealer" ("The tragic true story behind The Danish Girl - The Telegraph") "It is not with my brain, not with my eyes, not with my hands that I want to be creative, but with my heart and with my blood," she wrote. "The fervent longing in my woman's life is to become the mother of a child. (Elbe location 999) The characters in the book have identity crisis. The sexuality of each character in the book is unique. The protagonist Einar is a man who has the confused set of identity and is struggling to explore his true self and his wife Gerda, who is also a painter and ardent supporter of her husband, struggles for her own space. The reading of the book gives us solid implications that Gerda may herself be gay. She depicted erotic drawings of women with women in her paintings. Their friend Larson is the model of Gerda, and she is the one who has given the name Lili to Einar. Critics state that the three individuals are gay, and they supported each other.

The sex reassignment surgery is an antidote and healing to the suffering transgender. If the person wants to be categorized into the normal domain of societal gender classification and be a part of heteronormative society, he or she will undergo surgeries to get their desired identity. The case of Lili Elbe is nothing but a quest for her own identity amidst existing challenges. She has successfully removed her male parts and has become a woman. The biggest problem in the field of reassignment surgery is that the individual can become what they want but can't biologically fulfil the role of that gender completely.

The procedure of sex change surgery of Einar aka Lili started at the age of forty-seven. The proper procedures are unknown since the library and archive of the Institute for Sexual Research were destroyed by the Nazis in May 1933. The letters and her notes along with personal knowledge had helped the biographer to compile the documents together and formulate them into the book. The original edition was known as *Man into a Woman* and later came the edition *Lili: A Portrait of the First Sex Change*.

The movie *Danish Girl* which the researcher has taken into account for comparative analysis is actually an adaptation of the book *The Danish Girl* which in turn is the adaptation of the original work *Lili: A Portrait of the First Sex Change*. The adapted book *The Danish Girl* is a loosely woven tale of the original book. In the adapted book „*The Danish Girl*’, the character Lili is presented as an epiphanic realisation of Einar when he dresses up as a female for a party. The conscious of Einar as Lili becomes clear and is given a more sympathetic outlook than a positive change.

One day Gerda's model fails to show up for posing so she recruits slim Einar to put on some stockings and a dress to fill in. He begins to quietly admire the garments and is fascinated by them. More of the transition of the painter is shown when he says that Gerda's night gown is beautiful, then in next scene we find him wearing Gerda's gown under his clothes. The director uses multiple instances to state the change in the couple's lives. The conflict of acceptance in their life is depicted in three scenes. The character Lili is born as a separate individual when Einar rejects the offer to attend a ball but is encouraged by Gerda to go fully transformed by dress, stockings and heels, makeup, and wig as Lili Elbe, Einar's

cousin. He immediately gained the attention of several men. The kiss from one of the men in the ball made Gerda angry and sad. This particular instance left the female character in anguish and misery. The later scenes show that the wife is starting to accept the feminine side of Einar. Soon there is a conflict in identity and Lili takes over Einar. The character Lili is presented as a suppressed identity seeking to outlive the male self.

The wife Gerda is also presented as a loving female and a struggling artist who uses Lili as her model for painting and becomes successful. She is tormented by the fact that her husband has a confused identity, and she is helpless. The audience is given a sympathetic account of the tragic story of Lili Elbe who died in the process of sex change surgery and his wife as a hapless woman. The original Lili and Einar are completely opposite to the visual representation. Lili existed in Einar from his childhood itself. She was lively, enthusiastic and often is the muse of Einar's works.

The vast landscape paintings of Vejile are the beauty and passion contributed by Einar's second self, Lili which made him a famous painter in Denmark. His femininity was always with him. He had a feminine side from his childhood itself. In the book there is an instance where he kisses his friend Hans Axcill, and the boy Hans was beaten by Einar's father. Gerda, in the movie seeks the help of Hans to cope up with the situation. Later with the help of both Lili was sent to Dr Kurt Warnekros for the revolutionary sex reassignment surgery. The movie end when Gerda and Hans visits a familiar Landscape in Einar's Painting and the scarf of Gerda flies freely. The movie act as a medium to propagate the idea of transgender as sympathetic and is problematic

Conclusion

The original book *Lili: A Portrait of the First Sex Change* is much different from these adaptations. These adaptations removed the original intention and voice of the book and the artist in order to make it commercially successful and to fit into a heteronormative society. The 'normal' people nowadays like to have a sympathetic approach to the Trans and intersex people. It is fairly sure that ninety percentage of the audience cried after watching this movie. The entertainment industry had made the outstanding story of a Trans woman's journey into a feeble voice that fought against fate to be accepted.

The original Lili, Gerda and other characters are not like this. They are not noble and extremely pathetic as the movie has portrayed. These characters were lively and free with human passion and flesh as any other humans. They are not sympathetic neither are they courageous. The original characters had their lives centred on a non- heteronormative circle where we find each character having their own unique Gender Identities. Gerda herself is found to be a bisexual woman and Lili, a trans woman. There are a lot more characters in the book including the man who kissed Lili and many more.

The main thing was that Lili was never suppressed. In fact, Einar could never realise his feminine part until his forties. His journey was a remarkable one, since at that time there was no proper information and scientific advancements to deal with these people. Many suffered their condition as „fate“ and lived as intersex. The case was considered as highly confidential but later it was out and inspired a lot of trans people to have courage and to live their life embracing their true identity.

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