

Exploring Intersexuality: A Discourse on Ambiguous Gender in *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides

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Abstract

Societal norms that acknowledge gender as binary, anything outside or within is either rejected or frowned upon. Living a life not belonging to either of the gender brings in trauma and alienation. Jeffrey Eugenides in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Middlesex*, introduces Cal Stephanides, who is an intersex or someone who displays female gender schema though having dominant male genes. While growing up Cal goes through tumultuous phase when he realizes that he is neither truly a girl or a boy. This paper tries to analyse the psyche of an individual who is unable to determine their life because of their ambiguous gender. Fear of rejection from the loved ones, dread of not being able to fit in and anxious about not able to discuss their body and experiences with anyone are some of the issues discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Gender, psyche, intersex, trauma

‘Psychoanalytic Criticism’ is explained by Peter Barry in his work *Beginning Theory* thus: “Psychoanalytic Criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses some sort of techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature . . . is based upon specific theories of how the mind, instincts, and sexuality work” (Barry 92). Psychoanalysis is a method to treat the disturbed mind by probing inside a person’s unconscious mind and trying to find the reason for their behavior or actions.

In the novel *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides introduces us to a different kind of person named Callie, who is born as an intersex, brought up as a girl and lives his life as a man. He

brings into our notice to the condition of 5 alpha reductase deficiencies, which is basically where a person has ambiguous genitals at birth and they make matters worse during puberty. This paper tries to breaks into the psyche of an intersex person and tries to break down the reason behind their decision to become male.

5 Alpha reductase is a condition which affects the sexual development before birth and during puberty. People who are affected by this condition are genetically male and do not produce enough hormone that helps in their sexual organ development. They are born with external genitalia that look more female and sometimes end up with ambiguous genitalia. During puberty male hormones help in developing the secondary sex characteristics like voice thickening, extreme growth etc.

The psyche of an individual is greatly dependent on the physiological aspects as well. A child seeks acceptance and approval of their being from the people around them, which is usually generated by comparing the similarities and differences in every aspect of life. But when the dissimilarities outweigh the similarities, it makes an individual question their existence and find it difficult to fit in. According to Freud there are three components of human psyche – ego, super ego and id. Ego is more of the conscious part of the human mind which helps the body to behave normally as it is expected of from the world around us. Super ego is the subconscious part which makes the decision. It runs through the possibilities of right and wrong and helps in decision making and fuelling the ego. Id is the unconscious part which holds the deepest darkest dreams and desires which is always kept in check by the super ego.

Callie is raised as a girl, and she shows all the traits of a girl till she reaches puberty. Though the major changes happen during her early teenage years, it is important to understand her childhood. “I was brought up as a girl and had no doubt about this” (226). Her childhood was as normal as any other little girl's. As a child, Callie behaves and acts like a girl, and probably this is the reason the people around her were ever suspicious about her gender. It is also evident that she always knew she was beautiful, and with all that attention on her from a very young age, it only made her more confident and outgoing. “The beauty that I possessed as a baby only increased as I grew into a girl. . . . Elderly waitresses bent close to take my order. Red –faced boys appeared at my desk, stammering “y-y-you dropped your eraser”” (278).

As children grow older and reach puberty, they become more curious and confused about their bodies and sexuality. With society being conservative and old-school, the children are left to find the answers on their own, as the parents are of no help in the department. Freud explains that, “With the beginning of puberty the changes set in which transform the infantile sexual life into definitive normal form” (Freud 55). Though it is normal, it also is traumatic even for a normal child. Secondary sexual characteristics affect the child most as it is visible to everyone around. These characteristics sometimes occur early, sometimes late, sometimes drastic, sometimes mild, but all these things bring in lot of emotions in a teenager. They could be relieved, excited, confused, horrified or worried.

It is the same case with Callie. As she turns twelve, she sees that the girls around her are developing and becoming more secretive; she also notices that they behave as if they know more than her. “During the growing months, quite a few of my schoolmates had—as adults liked to say—“developed”” (282). The physical changes were evident: girls were growing modest, turning their backs to dress, with visible darkness up their sleeves; boys’ voices dropped two octaves; they got peach fuzz on their upper lips and foreheads; and their noses broke out.

Callie tries at first to compare herself with the ‘developed’ girls and is disappointed. “. . . I looked down at my own body. There it was, as usual: the flat chest, the nothing hips, the froked, mosquito-bitten legs. Lake water and sun were making my skin peel” (282). The visible changes that she witnesses make her feel as though she is missing something. Callie was getting more and more desperate to prove to others that she also belonged to the trending category. And in order to prove it, she asks her mother to buy her a bra. But to her disappointment, her mother laughs it off, and she becomes extremely frustrated. ““I am sorry honey. But its just you’ve got nothing to...to...to hold it up.”A tantrum edged scream. Twelve-year-old feet running up the stairs...up into my bedroom, where, after locking the door...”

Her frustration only grows with every passing day. And to make matters worse, she is transferred to an all-girls school when she graduates from the seventh grade. The change that she is witnessing around her only makes her more and more desperate. “No breasts. No period, either. All through sixth grade I’d waited and then through the summer afterward. Now I was in seventh grade and still I was waiting” (295). Callie plays goalie in school’s field hockey team, and being a flat-chested girl, locker rooms turned out to be the more difficult as she has to use an open shower after practise or change clothes with her fellow players. To

make matters worse, what she finds around her is quite unlike what she is. Eugenides explains her feelings thus: "...only a bundle of emotions: envy, certainly, but also disdain. Inferiority and superiority at once. Above all, there was panic" (M 297).

And then, after all the waiting and desperation, Callie could finally see some difference. She begins to grow really tall; her voice starts to break; and hair starts to sprout on her body. These changes make her both happy and relieved. Though the secondary male sex characteristics start dominating her, she still looks more like a girl, and people have little doubt about her. After a brief time of happiness and contentment with the growth spurt, Callie starts to look slightly freakish. The worry in her parents' eyes about her only made her worry about herself more. And in defence, Callie starts to grow her hair longer so that the awkwardness of her body is not reflected in her face.

Like any other girl, she only wants to look beautiful and be accepted by the people around her. All her attempts are only on the surface for everyone to see. In her desperation to fit in the society, she pushes really hard, and to a certain extent she succeeds because for the people around her, these attempts are not extraordinary. The attempts that she was making were, of course, futile, not knowing what was in store for her in the future. For a teenager, it is a lot to take in everything that is going around without sharing it with anyone. She knows she cannot share her underdeveloped issue with her friends or else she will be the laughing stock; she cannot discuss her crush with her friends because she will be under the light of prejudice; she cannot discuss any of these issues with her own mother because she is already worried about her and she cannot worry her more and has to put on the 'everything is fine' mask.

The thing that confuses and troubles her most are the changes in her own body. She experiences male puberty, and her body gives her signs that she fails to understand and gets more confused about. She realises that whatever is happening to her is not normal, but she hopes that things will return to normal after some time, and till that time she has decided to wait and not share it with others.

But there were times when I felt that something was different about the way I was made. . . . It was in a state of becoming and might turn out fine if I waited patiently. Maybe it happened like this to everybody. In the meantime, it was best to keep everything under wraps. Which was what I was doing down in the basement. (330)

When her physiology is discovered, her ambiguous genitalia create quite a ruckus in her house. The doctor asks them to visit a specialist in New York who can correct the

problem. The parents are worried and unsure, but Callie is sure that she is not like other girls. “We were going to New York City to see a famous doctor. I didn’t know how long we’d be gone or what was wrong with me. I didn’t pay much attention to the details. I only knew I was no longer a girl like other girls” (396).

What follows after the incident is far too much for anyone to take in, let alone a teenager. Callie was still unsure about what was wrong with her. She only understands that something is seriously wrong with her because her parents are worried behind her back but pretend everything is fine in front of her. Her whole experience at the clinic was so traumatic that Callie became restless. In the day, she kept a brave face, and at night, she would fight her demons. “I tossed and turned every night, unable to sleep straight through. . . . It’s often said that a traumatic experience early in life marks a person forever, pulls her out of line, saying, “Stay there. Don’t move.” My time at the Clinic did that to me. I feel a direct line extending from that girl with her knees steeped beneath the hotel blankets to this person writing now in an Aeron chair” (424).

The whole procedure with Dr. Luce takes two weeks, and the results on the basis of the physical and psychological analysis led him to conclude that Callie is a girl and can be rectified by corrective surgery and occasional dosages of hormones. Callie’s parents are happy and agree with the procedure because they believe they will get their daughter back. On the day Dr. Luce presents them with his verdict, Callie has two revelations. The first revelation that Callie has is that in the society, she will never be considered normal. And the second revelation is that she is in fact a male.

After receiving all the high-level information and finding it too hard to process, Callie decides to run away to gain some answers and find meaning to her life, and then starts Callie’s life as a boy. And though she is a boy physically, her mannerisms were more feminine. In order to prove that she is a boy, she struggles to keep her female self at bay. She was more aware of the men around her and started observing how a typical male behaved in public. She decides to chop off her hair and dress like a boy. She also goes by the name Cal.

For the benefit of the reader the researcher will be using male pronoun to address the protagonist henceforth. During his adventure all by himself, Cal is discovered by Bob Presto, who seems to see through him. The reason for this is that he is in the freak show business. He is always on the lookout for such people to hire them in his club, the Sixty Niners. At first, Cal is uninterested, but his situation makes him go to Bob, as he offers him a job and pays

him. The club is more of a strip club, but it not only showcased men and women but also freaks like Cal. He would show off imperfect people to the audience. He lures them for their imperfect bodies, and people would crowd into the club just to get a glimpse.

Cal didn't feel much bad or embarrassed because he had been stripping for medical research and to strip in front of people who were watching from a keyhole didn't matter to him much. This also enables him to meet other gender ambiguous people, and he realises that he is not alone and that many others like him are around, trying to run away from the ridicule and prejudice. The knowledge itself liberates him and makes him realise that he is like other people but only different in how he is made. Though not the best place in the world, Cal learns to accept himself in that strip club. He realises that he is a part of society, but it is the society's perspective that is fogged by misunderstanding. It is in the strip club that he finds himself.

I wasn't the only one! Listening to Zora, that was mainly what hit home with me. I knew right then that I had to stay in San Francisco for a while. Fate or luck had brought me here and I had to take from it what I needed. It didn't matter what I might be compelled to do to make money. (489)

It is understood that the psyche of an intersex person is not different from that of any other human being. All they crave is recognition for who and what they are. They find it difficult to open up about their condition as they fear how they will be perceived by society.

This research paper has tried to decode the psychology of Cal Stephanides, who is an intersex. It is interesting to note that Cal's childhood was normal, and only during puberty did things change for him. The experiences he has are also quite normal; after identifying his gender, he does feel the pressure of fitting in with society. The only place he is accepted is the strip club, and only in the club is he able to connect with the people around him, who happen to be facing the same problem as him.

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