

## Quintessence of Gender Identity with Special Reference to the Novel *The Danish Girl* by David Ebershoff

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### Abstract:

*A transsexual is defined as a person who sturdily recognizes with the opposite sex. This person may identify with the opposite sex to the point of judging that he or she is, in fact, a constituent of the opposite sex who is ensnared in the incorrect body. This becomes one of the major reasons that the person experience serious distress with his or her own natal sex. This research paper examines the life of a transsexual and the analytical decisive factors. It addresses the omnipresent issue of choice and it also elucidates why transsexuals, who are only trying to be contented with their factual identity, are so effortlessly misinterpreted. Through making chronological and social assessments, this study endeavors to divulge how gender and social individuality is constructed and deconstructed by gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans people in the light of the selected novel *The Danish Girl*.*

**Key words:** Transsexual, Factual identify, Gender, Sex reassignment surgery, Atrocious homophobic hostility.

Just as Einar was about to beg them to leave the studio, to let him change out of the dress in peace, Greta said, her voice soft and careful and unfamiliar, "why don't we call you Lili?" (1.67)

The basic implementation that standardizes the existence of an individual in a society amid culture is 'Gender.' This has been

the focus of study in various interdisciplinary works since the 1970s. But, with the emergence of feminism, according to chronological, ecological, societal and cultural divergences, this theory is divided as sex and gender. Now, considered as an ideological apparatus of the prevailing culture, gender is used to further label the individuals as heterosexual men or women. The existing patriarchal system resorts in bifurcating individuals as strong, sturdy, dictatorial men at the crest of the hierarchical array in society and puts women in derivative positions as well as shunning the individuals who do not fit into groups of masculinity and femininity. Patriarchy also labels gender radicals, who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans people, as not the normal members of society and puts them into marginal status. These people have existed in various cultures from ancient times to present and are subject to inequity and they have to put in great efforts to call for their subsistence. Thus, gender is created depending on the prevailing principles and on its requirements to uphold the social stability.

Classifications of sex, distinct gender and explicit sexuality have formed a constant point of reference for a great deal of feminist theory. These constructs of identity serve as the points of epistemic departure from which theory emerges and gender itself is shaped. According to Judith Butler,

The sex, gender distinction and the category of sex itself appear to presuppose a generalization of “the body” that preexists the acquisition of its sexed significance. This “body” often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as “external” to that body. Any theory of the culturally constructed body, however, ought to question “the body” as a construct of suspect generality when it is figured as a passive and prior to discourse. (103)

Butler holds the notion that the conceptualization of gender is not universal but erratic. People tend to vary with the gender

allocated to them, some do not change what gender they have from birth, and some people impersonate gender. Therefore, in order to take off their gender roles in society, they resort to surgery or cross-dressing in order if a male wants to turn into a female. Thus, gender is not only composed of binary oppositions but includes multiplicities. It is something dynamic outside the individual. The circumstances that form the gender do not materialize from a single chronological or social epoch or stipulation. Since gender is the cultural structure of the societies, assigned characters and statuses are not permanent.

The novel *The Danish Girl*, likewise on the above conception of gender and sex is loosely based on a true story. It is a story about a male transformation into a female gender and questions the society, "What to do when the person you love has to change?" It is a convincing representation of transgender life in the early twentieth century. An adaptation of the diaries of Einar Wegener, one of the first trans women to undergo sex reassignment surgery. The transgender world is showcased: first, as Einar and then later, as Lili. The novel opens with Einar, a landscape artist, who is married to Gerda, a painter of portraits. Both artists are compassionate and sometimes unwilling to each other's career ambitions. In the start, it is Einar who has more success in Copenhagen, and then later it is his wife, who becomes renowned painting Lili.

All this starts with a simple favor asked by a wife of her husband while both are painting in their studio, setting off a transformation neither can foresee. Uniting fact and fiction into a unique idealistic vision, *The Danish Girl* expressively portrays the unique intimacy that defines every marriage and the noteworthy story of Lili Elbe, a pioneer in transgender history, and the woman ragged between devotion to her marriage and her own aspirations and requirements.

What begins one evening as a game Einar dressing up in one of his wife's gowns as cousin "Lili" for artists' ball turns into the means for his sexual change and discovery of who he

actually is? Lili falls in love with Henrik and Gerda learns to fall in love again with Lili. Both Danish girls care intensely for each other, and Gerda identifies and values Lili for who she is, in a jerking and sympathetic revival of love. In many ways, it is Gerda's trial, which is the spirit and arousing throb of *The Danish Girl*. She is the other Danish girl left to love first her husband as Einar Wegener, then as her best friend, Lili Elbe. Gerda struggles with the hurt, torment, and bewilderment all indexed concurrently on her face as she stands by the love of her life.

Greta, Einar's wife possesses a remarkable amalgamation of liberty and loyalty. She is self-driven and intense personality, yet at the same time, she holds a deep sense of commitment to the two men she marries, especially Einar. She will do anything for him. She knows him better than he knows himself and recognizes even before Einar that he counters to dressing as a woman. Greta encourages Einar to live as Lili because she knows it is what Einar wants and that is always enough of a reason for Greta. Her career takes off with her paintings of Lili. She needs Lili as much as Einar. In an interview with David Ebershoff, he says, "I believe Greta is never fully honest with herself or her husband about how Lili has changed her life as an artist. Einar could not have become Lili without Greta, but Greta could not have become the artist of her ambitions without Lili. Their motives and actions are snarled and inextricable" (A&U 6).

Thus, the novel undertakes the life of a transgender individual with astonishing self-esteem, admiration, and complication. The valor to endure traumatic trial brain and sexual reassignment surgery, face atrocious homophobic hostility, and channel the self-belief to accept who he is in spite of these outrages, is the retort to the tribulations a transgender had or have to face in the past or even in the present day. According to Foucault:

The construction of stable bodily contours relies upon fixed sites of corporeal permeability and impermeability. Those sexual practices in both homosexuality and heterosexual contexts that open surfaces and orifices to erotic signification or close down others effectively re-inscribe the boundaries of the body along new cultural lines. (46)

We have two bodies, the first one is our own personal body that provides the completeness of the consciousness, and the other one is the public one formed in the social surroundings. It is not likely to obtain absolute autonomy on our bodies since we are reliant on others in our insights of our bodies. Social ties, regulations and customs form individuals beyond our individuals. “Gender in this story becomes something which is much more complex than a dichotomy, a series of categories, or a continuum” (Ekins 596).

The depiction of the emptiness in the trees in the novel is juxtaposed with the solitude and estrangement that Einar has to face because of his concealed or split characters he has in him. The story of artist Einar Wegener's daringly evolving from male to female offers timely hold to counteract the still current and often egregious misinterpretation and maltreatment the transgender population endures.

In reality, Einar truly felt that he did a full switch from man to woman; that with the blade of a knife he went from male to female. Einar was both man and woman, not one or the other, and that living his life as either would never have been exactly accurate. Physically this was true he had the physical personality of both men and women. However, most importantly, his consciousness and his character belonged to both genders, perhaps not equally, but even after the operation, Lili was not entirely female. How could she have been? She thought she was, but that was not the case.

If the inner reality of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and emblazoned on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false,

but are only produced as the true effects of a discourse of primary and stable individuality. In *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, anthropologist Esther Newton suggests, “The structure of impersonation reveals one of the key fabricating mechanisms through which the social construction of gender takes place” (100). Newton further writes:

As its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, “appearance is an illusion.” Drag says [Newton’s curious personification] “my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine.” At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; “my appearance ‘outside’[my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ [myself] is feminine. (103)

The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities. Within feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either humiliating to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme lesbian identities. Thus, the loss of the sense of “the normal,” however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when “the normal,” “the original” is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an idea that no one can embody. In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived. (Cultural Studies 213)

In addition, cases like Einar Wegener are encouraged to seek out for proficient consultation. However, he feels as an outcast. Therefore, he avoids being pathologies:

I am not a homosexual. That isn’t my problem. There’s another person living inside me, Einar said, rising from the chair. “A girl named Lili.” “And it breaks my heart. Dr. Mc Bride, continued . . . My only advice is that you restrain yourself. You’re going to have to always fight your desires.

Ignore them, Mr. Wegener. If you don't, well, then, you'll always be alone. (146)

Physicians ostracize Lili as the societal standard requires a stable gender identity that is assigned from birth. The doctors' reactions stem from the present system's manipulation of bodies. Not knowing what to do with Einar's desire to become Lili, Einar, Greta and their friend needs to be counseled by the physicians owing to the apprehension created by eccentrics over the protagonist. Various doctors believe him of schizophrenia when they learn about Einar and Lili. Thus, standing out of the gender norm leads to ambiguity and apprehension in straight minds whose reactions result in helplessness on the free-spirited individual like Einar Wegener.

Thus, Einar's self-respect is devastated after the treatments. He asks his friend after the treatment "But you don't think I'm schizophrenic, do you? That just does not make any sense. . . Do you think she believes I'm insane?"(149). Certainly, the protagonist's state of mind is baffled. He does not know how to feel due to the treatments he experienced. The more he tries to be visible as Lili, the more his situation gets challenging. Looking from the protagonist's point of view, his yearning to become Lili is quite normal. on the other hand, the environment he lives in makes him feel unusual like all other LGBT people. Because of this, Einar/Lili tries to find out his problem, and he reads about gender development theories such as *The Sexes*; *the Normal and Abnormal*; *a Scientific Study of Sexual Immorality*. Einar's passing from a man into a woman is not a simple operation. It confronts the compelled conventionality. Einar Wegener is altered into Lili Elbe with his own free will along with going beyond the institutionalized form of gender after having three surgeries.

Gender can be neither right nor wrong, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, gender can also be rendered thoroughly and radically hard to

believe. In its simplest terms, this novel is a demarcation of gender identity. Einar Wegener's changeover to Lili Elbe was a courageous attempt to live a true self in a time of misconstruction, misdiagnosis, and antagonism. Thus, for Einar and any transsexual, it is vital to find who that is, and Lili Elbe had the possibility to do so before her catastrophic bereavement.

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