

Revisiting Sexuality and Trauma: An Analysis of Tom Hooper's film, *The Danish Girl*

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Abstract:

Trauma can be defined as any event or experience that is extremely perturbing and deeply distressful; leaving the sufferer completely devastated both mentally and emotionally. Trauma is a wound of the mind that lingers throughout the life of the victim who experiences the traumatic events. Cathy Caruth in her groundbreaking works of Trauma Studies discusses how literature can act as a window to the traumatic events and experiences. Those people who decide to go through gender transformation have also become the victim of wounded experience by some catastrophic events happening around them. The 'society' considered them schizophrenic and confused in terms of their responsibilities and performances. They have to perform themselves being 'normal' in order to sustain themselves in society. Repression of their feelings and suffering from identity crises often end up by giving them an incurable wound. Here, in *The Danish Girl*, though the emphasis is given upon the sufferings and traumatic experience of Einer in the process of becoming Lili but, Greda, who constantly being together with Einer also went through the same kind of traumatic experience.

Keywords: Trauma, wound of mind, gender transformation, normal, identity crisis.

Introduction:

This paper is an attempt to discuss the traumatic experiences of the characters of the film, *The Danish Girl* (2015), directed by Tom Hooper. Here, though the emphasis is given upon the sufferings and traumatic experience of Einer in the process of becoming Lili but, Greda, who constantly being together with Einer also went through the same kind of traumatic experience. The opening of the film, *The Danish Girl* is itself is a problematic one where, the image of lake acts as a mirror where the image of three trees is reflected. The disturbing term transgender indicates a particular group of people who fantasies being a woman/man by wearing woman/man dress and make gestures like woman/man. The film, *The Danish Girl* unfolds the problematic question- what circumstances make Einar Wegener become transgender. This film is in a way a reflection of transgender life. All over the world, the concept of transgender is a taboo thing. As Elizabeth Loftus proposes: "they have tendency to search evidence for supporting their prejudice. It is not easy to throw away the convictions before long. That is because we intended to verify those convictions". (Semium, 1993:530).

Objectives of Study:

1. To examine how Hooper portrays in his film, *The Danish Girl* the public antagonism to the queer and the traumatic events faced by the major characters.
2. To analyze the issues of marriage between Queer and Straight characters as depicted by Hooper in his film vividly
3. To explore the camouflaged identities of the queer and their traumatic state of hiding in the film.
4. To study how space becomes a medium in the film to reflect the worlds of straight and queer people.

Research Methodology:

As it is a literary research, both analytical and descriptive methods along with comparative methods to some extent have been adopted. The necessary information of this study is collected from both primary and secondary sources. Here, the primary source consists of the film,

The Danish Girl whereas; secondary sources have been procured from the theoretical discourses, research articles published in the recognized journals and so on.

Literature Review:

The discussion of gender- identity & sexuality are widely discussed topics in literature; especially in the LGBTQ community. It occupied a major part in the creative works. For example, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, which presents the journey and discovery of the protagonist Arjie's discovery of him being 'funny'. He being different from in the heteronormative society makes him 'funny'. He suffers from an 'identity crisis' as the different ideologies of society never allow such 'different behavior'. Another example is the screenplay by Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette*, where the protagonist Omar became the victim because of his homosexual behavior, which left him as a 'nowhere man'. *The Danish Girl*, the film directed by Tom Hopper in the year 2015, is one of the influential works in dealing with the notion of gender identity, especially the 'trans- identity. It opens a new way of interpreting the 'trans identity. In the work 'This is truly me': A Lacanian approach to *The Danish Girl*, Andres Armengot Sans, offered a Lacanian interpretation of transsexuality, the mental journey of a woman trapped inside the male body. Another essay The Issue of Gender Identity Discussed in *The Danish Girl* by David Ebenshoff by S. Mrinalini presents the gender identity of the LGBTQ community regarding Judith Butler's concept of gender construction. Various other works study various aspects like fashion, social impact on trans people.

Trauma and Transgender people:

Trauma in the general sense of the term means wound. In its Greek origin, this term means a physical injury from an external cause. But in the present context this term is also used to indicate the mental wound and suffering of a person. Simply, trauma is a disturbed mental and emotional condition; an injury caused to the psyche by some catastrophic events, which overwhelms a person and his response mechanism. Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* described the nature of

trauma by stating, 'excitation from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield'. (365)

Those people who decide to go through gender transformation have also become the victim of wounded experience by some catastrophic events happening around them. The 'society' considered them schizophrenic and confused in terms of their responsibilities and performances. They have to perform themselves being 'normal' in order to sustain themselves in society. Repression of their feelings and suffering from identity crises often end up by giving them an incurable wound.

During the time when LGBTQ was highly sensitive and people were not ready to accept it, Greda stands by Einer. Moreover, it was Greda who helped Einer to explore his inner self and also helped him to establish Lili in the society. It is remarkable to note that one day when Greda was using Einar as her model Lili, she started posing like 'slut', Greda tried to stop her but Einar said, "It's your fault. You excite her." Greda started using Einar as the model for her portrait and also used to bring her to the artist ball as Lili as a part of experiments but, all these gave Einar the opportunity to explore her inner self, which he hide since his childhood encounter with Hans. These transformations of her husband started making Greda conscious about their relationship. She started having sleepless nights. She herself states that " I could not sleep... wondering about things... wondering when you (Einar) got so pretty?". Einar replied that "I (he) was always pretty, but you just never noticed". Her concern for her husband turns into her traumatic experience when she saw Lili and Henrik Sandahl kissing at the artist ball. Though she was experimenting with Einar by grooming him, dressing him like a lady but never ready to share her husband with anyone. She stated realizing her 'mistake' and very soon she declared her intention clearly in front of Einar, "I think it would be better if Lili didn't come here again". For her, Lili didn't exist in the real world it's just their creation. Later on when Einar confessed that Lili had been seeing Henrik Sandahl, but they went not too far, he also stated that Lili never cross limits with any man. Einar realized as a child, how Lili's feelings came out when she was with Hans. All these gave Greda a mental shock. She started getting mental sickness by thinking

about Einar and her relationship. One day when Einar left home in order to visit his favorite place where he can explore Lili keenly; Greda had a panic attack when Einar came back he found Greda in a very devastated state.

However, it is notable that Einer/Lili tries to find a solution for himself/herself which, later on arises as a burning social discourse because of Einer's sexual difference. It is worth mentioning that for psychoanalysis, sex is neither a mere biologic reality nor a pure cultural one, but it is rather placed in a frontier between these two domains. In his "Three Essays on a Theory of Sexuality" (1905), Freud says: "The drive refers to the representative psychic agency of intra-somatic stimuli, which is in a process of fluidity, whereas a stimulus is merely produced by singular excitations that come from the exterior world" (Freud, 1905: 153). Lili was a person who was born as a man who had underdeveloped ovaries which made him biologically a woman. This is what confuses her and also her wife. She realizes that she is a woman only when she is made to pose as a model, wearing dress and stockings, for Greta. Then on, her struggle to turn into a complete woman starts.

Sex is not an attribute or predicate, but a gap made of pure negativity. This is what the psychoanalyst Patricia Gherovici clarifies: Sexual identity for both males and females is always precarious because the human infant becomes sexed without fully symbolizing unconsciously a normal, finished sexual positioning. Psychoanalysis attempts to throw light on the ways in which sexuality fails to conform to the social norms by which it is regulated and on the various fantasies that are constructed to veil the structural failure (Gherovici, 2010: 5). This film is an odyssey for them who are struggling with the word 'transsexual' and also for those who wished to become, rather than simply appear to be, the opposite sex. Here, the audience can map the answer of those endlessly elastic questions such as, what is a natural woman, what does it mean to say you have been born into the wrong body, that you appear to be a man but, you are in fact natural woman. Judith Butler's influential book *Gender Trouble: 1990 Feminism and the Subversion of identity* focuses on the issues in gender identity and feminism. It emphasizes the importance of fluidity in a person's gender and

uses the term performativity to describe gender as a performance as part of third wave feminism, applies Foucault's ideas to the categories of gender and sexual orientation. The film strongly asserts that gender is not real. It unfolds the same that Butler asks-

Are there really masculine and feminine traits that come exclusively with the genes that make us male and female? Why do we care? Is anything really "abnormal"? Isn't every behavior just a performance, meant to please something? We're all actors and all the world's a stage, right? (183)

Conclusion:

To conclude, this film questions the so called universal statement Boys will be boys as it strongly follows the statement, All the World is a stage and Gender-Merely a Performance. Through the major characters Einer and Greda, Hopper tries to counter some statements such as- whatever you are that most people are not, whatever you are not that most people are. The film unfolds the trauma that LGBTQ people went through due to some traditional norms of mainstream society and also focuses on the unhappy married life of them as they try to live their lives by repressing their actual self and deceiving the other.

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