

Self-Deception and Disillusionment of Gender Roles in the Selected Literary Representations of Tiresias

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Abstract

Gender for a very long time has been dogmatically preached and taught as a binary concept consisting of two parts namely – male and female. But, simultaneously there have been many such individuals who fail to align themselves in one of the two groups and consequently face confusion about their role in society, which has allotted a strict set of duties and expectations to both sides. This feeling of alienation is better known as Disillusionment and it has been widely represented and discussed in Literature and Philosophy. One such figure, that represented this dilemma in all its realistic context was the Greek mythological prophet of Apollo – Tiresias, who is said to have lived life both as a man and woman. Tiresias' gender ambiguity has been often represented in various works of literature, often in the context of showcasing his disillusionment towards Gender roles. It can furthermore be elaborated by using Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of 'Bad Faith' which explains how an individual act in an inauthentic way because of external pressures of the society with the help of 'Self-Deception'. This paper tries to analyze all the literary representations of Tiresias to study the phenomenon of disillusionment of Gender-Roles.

Keywords: Tiresias, Gender, Disillusionment, Self-Deception, Bad Faith, Gender roles

INTRODUCTION

Human Being is a social animal, which means Society is the center of Human existence and the Society demands that its members follow certain unsaid ethical rules to be a respectable member of the Societal family. One of the predominant requirement for being a part of the society is to strictly follow the so called 'Gender Roles' designated to the only two accepted and biologically justifiable sectors of gender, that is Male and Female. It often becomes quite the social predicament when a human being is unable to choose between the two given choices. Social attitude towards such an individual who does not align themselves to their biological sexual orientation is, to put it lightly, Difficult. This notion will become further comprehensible if we contextualize it by representing gender ambiguity

through an individual whose plight has been extensively written about in literature.

Tiresias, was a prophet of the Greek God Apollo who belonged to the Grecian city of Thebes because of which he was often called a Theban. In terms of literary existence, Tiresias received his initial mentions in the works of Ovid, Sophocles, Euripides, Pindar etc. And hence, his story too has many versions depending upon the authors. Now to relate Tiresias to the Gender Ambiguous category. The reason 'Tiresias' is one of the central figures associated with Gender-fluidity is because he is said to have lived life both as a man and a woman. There are a few different versions of the story depicting his transformation – In one of the versions, He is punished by the Greek Goddess Hera for striking a pair of copulating snakes with his staff by being

transformed into a woman for seven years. In other versions the reason for his transformation is not clear however, He is still associated with Hera as he was summoned by her to solve a debate between her and Zeus about which gender has more pleasure in copulation as he had experienced both. Hera believed it was the male, but Tiresias said it was the female, and angered by the answer Hera is said to have blinded him. In few other versions, He was blinded by Goddess Athena for having seen her bathing. The point being, Tiresias was not only a reciprocal figure in terms of Gender, instead the foreseer was by and large a liminal figure comprehensively because of several reasons such as – He was blind but still had ‘The Sight’ which means his gift of prophecy, He has lived his life both as a Man and Woman, He is depicted to have existed both in the mortal world and also in the ‘Underworld’, as a result of this he functioned as a mediator between Gods and the humans.

This interchangeable perception acquired by Tiresias due to his situation, made him a popular figure for authors to represent Gender Ambiguity. This paper will contextually analyze some of these selected works such as the French surrealist play ‘Les Mamelles de Tiresias’ (English translation – The Breasts of Tiresias written by the ‘Father of Surrealism’ Guillaume Apollinaire, Orlando by Virginia Woolf, the song ‘The Cinema Show’ by Genesis, the French film ‘Tiresia’ by Bertrand Bonello etc.

SELF-DECEPTION AND DISILLUSIONMENT

One of the earliest attempts of theorizing this concept of the human mind banishing its true nature in order to fit into the acceptable mold of society was made by none other than the Father of Psychology, Sigmund Freud. In his ‘Psychoanalytic Theory’, Freud talks about two competing forces which dominate the personality of a human being, namely – Cathexis and Anticathexis. While Cathexis is the force that harnesses its energy from the true desires of a person often seeking its inclination from the ‘Id’ (the part of the unconscious mind containing a person’s deepest desires), whereas the Anticathexis draws its energy from the human ego that blocks the socially unacceptable needs of

the Id. This occurrence can also be observed in the case of a gender ambiguous individual who faces a dilemma regarding the social accountabilities they should adhere to. Often such individuals have to conceal their true traits as a result of being afraid of being declared as an outcast by the society.

This conundrum is efficiently portrayed in the character of Tiresias and one such novel based on the myth of Tiresias is ‘Orlando: A Biography’, a novel penned by the celebrated author Virginia Woolf which was based on the life of her close friend Vita Sackville-West who was an eminent writer and also popular for being bisexual. In Orlando, Woolf tries to draw a parallel between Orlando the titular character with abilities to change his gender inspired by Sackville-West and Tiresias, who is known for similar characteristics. Orlando’s inner turmoil over his inability to choose between the two conventional choices of sexual orientation and the fact that he always had to conceal the unconventional side of his gender identity can very well be detected in the following lines from chapter four of the novel – “Different though the sexes are, the intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the others takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male and female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above”.

Furthermore, exploring the notion of Disillusionment. Firstly, it is required to understand the term comprehensively. Disillusionment can be delineated as the grievous sadness experienced when one’s expectations and beliefs regarding something is thwarted. Disillusionment is experienced in terms of gender identity when an individual faces the nefarious backlash from the society against their unconventional gender orientation. This may result in the individual expressing disappointment and grief over the loss of their freedom to choose and disruption of their fundamental rights as a result of declining the societal expectations. We get a glimpse of this disillusionment in the play called ‘Les Mamelles de Tiresias’ (English translation – The Breasts of Tiresias) written by Guillaume Apollinaire. It is a surrealist play whose protagonist, a women

named Therese expresses her grief over her ambitions being cut short because she is a married woman now. For instance, while talking about her wishes Therese says –

“..... I want to go and fight the enemy

I fancy being a soldier one two one two

I want to make war and not make babies”

And when her husband asks her to oblige to her womanly duties, she continues in the same vein saying –

“After I’ve been a soldier I want to be an artist

..... And I want to be an MP a barrister a member of the government

A minister the president of the State

And I want to be a doctor curing bodies or brains

..... I want to be a mathematician a philosopher a chemist

A page in a restaurant a little telegraph boy”

Thus, the character of Therese is portrayed to possess masculine ambitions according to the society and she experiences disillusionment when time and again she is reminded of her gender roles as a woman. This crushing realization leads her to experience disillusionment and she expresses her sadness by calling her breasts, which are the symbol of her womanhood – ‘ birds of my frailty’ and eventually destroys them in order to become a man.

The mental state that follows the feeling of disillusionment is called Self-Deception. Therefore, it is safe to say that Disillusionment is the concept that paves the way to Self-Deception. When an individual convinces themselves to believe in a socially acceptable version of the truth so as to avoid facing the consequences of being unconventional, it can be termed as Self-

Deception. Several attempts have been made by philosophers and psychologists to analyze and demonstrate this occurrence. One of the most prominent theories explaining self-deception is Jean Paul Sartre’s theory called ‘Mauvaise Foi’ popularly known as the ‘Bad Faith’ Theory. It describes the situation where a human being displays uncharacteristic behavior because their true self is harshly criticized by the society. The individual manifesting this phenomenon also sacrifices their virtues and fundamental freedom in order to deal with the societal pressure of fitting in.

To explain the concept, Sartre said the popular line “Consciousness is what it is not and is not what it is” which showcases the evading nature of reality in the mind of a human being and because of this uncertain nature the reality can be altered by an individual as a result of backlash and pressure from the society. This quality is also accurately revealed in Tiresias’ literary representation. In the above mentioned play ‘Breasts of Tiresias’, the consequence of Therese’s transformation into a man is the disillusionment faced by her husband. While previously addressed with masculine titles such as ‘Husband’ and ‘Monsieur’, after Therese’s transformation the members of the society such as ‘The Policeman’ addresses him as ‘Pretty Girl’ which baffles him into reacting – “He thinks I’m a girl” and when the society becomes persistent in treating him as a girl, the husband’s disillusionment causes him to resort to Self-Deception and believing that he is a woman indeed. This self-deception is evident when he declares –

“Since my wife is a man

It’s right for me to be a woman

I’m a respectable wife-monsieur

My wife’s a Man-Madame”

The terms ‘Wife-Monsieur’ and ‘Man-Madame’ used by the husband bear a striking resemblance to Tiresias as he is said to have been both man and woman. Another marginal gender-role

displayed by the character of the husband in the play is when he gives birth to several babies and is asked by a reporter about how he plans to raise the children, to which he replies –

“When I’m done with
bottle feeds, I hope they’ll cater
to my needs”

which shows that he wishes to play the role of a parent as well as a child. This trait is highlighted when the reporter comments –

“So you’re like a kind of
daughter-father

Is there a maternalized
paternal instinct in you”

with the term ‘maternalized paternal instinct’, the play theorizes this feeling of experiencing the perception of both the male and female genders. This apparently is a result of Self-Deception. Another work depicting Tiresias that touches upon this subject is the song ‘The Cinema Show’ by the band Genesis. In the lines –

“Once a man, like the
sea I raged

Once a woman, like the
earth I gave

But there is in fact more
earth than sea”

taken from the song confirms the humanistic notion of self-deception which is, that even after trying effortlessly to hide your true self, the true nature of the personality still dominates the counterfeit personality.

When Self-Deception is adapted by an individual, the natural reaction of the mind is to face confusion over its true identity. This eventually leads to ‘Gender Ambiguity’. Gender ambiguity is the inability displayed by a human being to confirm one of the two conventional choices namely – Male or Female. The person experiencing gender ambiguity is often either biologically or mentally unable to adhere to the gender roles of Male or Female. We further explore another work centered on Tiresias, the French film ‘Tiresia’ by Bertrand Bonello. This

film tells the story of a Transgender Woman Tiresia, who is abducted by an obsessed admirer and kept hostage. As a result of the situation, Tiresia is unable to access the hormones that help her to enhance her feminine side and starts transforming back into a man. This forces her to come to terms with her long suppressed masculine side and eventually results in gender-ambiguity. The film also illustrates another side of Tiresias – his blindness and the art of prophecy. The other character in the film, the abductor gets into an accident as loses his sight and hence depicts the other half of Tiresias’ personality. And by depicting the two qualities of Tiresias existing as two separate individuals, it elaborates the concept of ambiguity with imminent clarity as it expounds that often the two aspects that the gender ambiguous person has to choose from are as dominant as two separate personalities.

CONCLUSION

Tiresias can be presumed as one the central literary figures in representing the phenomenon of disillusionment and self-deception. The various philosophical and behavioral aspects of Tiresias’ personality give a layman’s perspective to the complexities of Sexual Orientation and Gender-Ambiguity. The analysis not only reveals the personality traits of gender ambiguous people but also elaborates the societal hostility towards the individuals displaying an ambiguous sexual orientation. And Tiresias as a character emerges as a champion of the liminal sector of the society and gives an effective voice to their plight. Also, the fact that Tiresias being a marginal figure in the representation of gender is endowed with the gift of foresight and wisdom is an indirect indication to fact that susceptibility to unconventional ideas is a human beings path towards enlightenment. And the ability to experience life from the viewpoint of both the genders is an exceptional achievement as it says at the ending of the play ‘Breasts of Tiresias’ –

“So sing from morn to
night

And scratch wherever
you itch

Feel free to go for black
or white

It can be fun to switch

Just mind you get it
right”-

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