

Gender-Bending Catastrophe in Meredith Russo's *If I was your Girl*

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Abstract

Transgender – People who are not masculine or feminine, bi-gender, and considered as third gender and broadly cross-dressers. They are independent of sexual orientation. They experienced the gender dysphoria and typically called as transgender. They experienced the high mental health issues than the normal population of U.S. because of the discrimination, stigma, lack of acceptance and abuse which they face on regular basis in the society. *If I was your Girl* which projects the struggles and sufferings of the protagonist named Andrew and later transforms into a transgender with a name. Humanity starts with love and this article highlights the life of a transgender in the modern society and focuses on the moral values that make the humans a complete human being.

Keywords: Transgenderism, discrimination, modern society, alienation, love, humanity, identity.

The existence of third- gender begins from the pre-historic time and continues to the present. In the middle ages, People who lament for being born a man instead of a woman has been seen as an early account of gender dysphoria. Evidences document Transgender priests, and records of woman dressing as men to vote, fight and study. Third-gender people of ancient period were arrested and humiliated for cross-dressing. These issues progressed with the process of Transition in the mid1990s. Analysis and focus towards these third-gender resulted in the birth of numerous terms and studies. Transgender, as an oppressed being faces several current controversies over their rights and identities because of false beliefs and cultural practices. They have been pulled down to alienation by their family and society due to their disorder of gender identity. The view towards Transgender people differs according to the place, culture, mindset, tradition, customs etc., but discrimination is the only concept that has been fixed on third-genders for decades.

Transgender people and the issues that affect them have become more visible. They have increasingly become the focus of cultural battles. Laws have been passed throughout the world for the progress of Transgender education, health care, employment, identity, equality etc. Transgender rights have emerged as a central feature in many countries. Majorities of countries support policies banning discrimination against Transgender people and strengthened the foundation for their rights to marry, adoption rights, rights to change their identity

documents. Very little awareness has been conducted to examine attitudes on particular policies affecting Transgender people. This involves their exposure to risks, discrimination, marginalization, and their access to supportive resources. Most of the youth Transgender experience negative reactions of their gender typical behaviors, as well as they have confusion in their identity and sexual orientation. They noted problems like lack of safe environments, poor access to physical health services, and inadequate resources to address their mental health concerns. Above all they are not given proper care and support both by their families and communities.

Thus they become members of a marginalized and vulnerable population that experience more psychological and health problems than the other social groups. This paper firmly stands on the fact that, success and happiness can exist only in ‘Acceptance’. When Amanda realizes and accepts herself as the novel ends, her experience real happiness as she thinks, “I wasn’t sorry I existed anymore. I deserve to live. I deserve to find love” (). Janet Mock, the first Transgender American writer whose debut book, *Redefining Realness* tells the story of herself, through which she speaks for the Transgender rights. Meredith Russo, being a Transgender herself has brought the issues and challenges faced by Transgender through the character Amanda Hardy in her debut novel. As an eye-opening novel it gives the reader a broader view about the third- gender community. Andrew Hardy from his recognition of femininity in himself comes through discrimination, stigmatization, humiliation in several phases through which Russo has portrayed the position of Transgender in society and family. Andrew, who remained isolated in dark after his Transition to Amanda Hardy physically, comes out seeking for acceptance and identity which views the writer’s target to present the readers about the needs and rights a third-gender earns for. Russo writes about her novel in her author’s note, “Inspiration to pursue an ever broader understanding of our lives and identities, as well as your own understanding of gender and sex” (). With an increasing issues in the world, one of the major social issues concerning within the countries is the identity of Transgender. In defining their socio -cultural exclusion and inclusion problems and development process in the society, anxiety and frustration are the common barriers that are been tied up with the Transgender people till now, which Russo presents through Amanda as she thinks, “I wondered if joy could ever be felt by itself without being tainted with fear and confusion, or if some level of misery was a universal constant, like the speed of light” (73).

Society pictures those Transgender communities not as a creation of nature but as a creature that is far apart from species. The issues faced by Transgender vary in each places and culture. In Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, third-gender identity was drawn upon some myths and false beliefs, as people believed that being a Transgender as some kind of mental illness. Many other countries around the world organized debates over gender identity. Russia ranks last in supporting Transgender rights and Transition. In the US, the rights of Transgender issue became a major political issue where twenty-four percent of respondents were against changing gender at any circumstances, which shows that the respondents in the US are the most opposed of any other country even more opposed than Russia. The harsh reality is that the

society is itself responsible for that bad behavior of Transgender people as they are been disowned by their own families and because of the harsh treatment of Cis-genders. Russo brings a contrast in presenting the American societal views on Transgender. Amanda faces many traumas in her school as she gets avoided by her peers and also her father's attempts to make her enroll in sports like boys due to his inability to accept his son as a Transgender. Through which Russo presents the mindset of people and the status of Transgender and their horrible situations among the neglecting society. She also requests her readers and society for equality and to treat them as human beings with extra comfort and care. Russo shows her expectation from society to accept the Transgender community by highlighting how Amanda gets support and confidence from her family, Trans mentor, and friends which help her to come out from isolation to the real life what she earned for. 'Support' and 'accept' lays as major theme of the novel and also in the lives of each Transgender as it the only weapon and medicine that could give them confident life with no fear and conflict.

The belief of men and women as the only creation of God appeared as a furious reason for the exclusion of Transgender community in the society and religious places too. The catholic churches were against the process of Transition and criticized by considering it as a violation of the god created orders. Amanda feels cursed while hearing the words of a pastor who says, "A dishonest life is a life half-lived" (98). As Amanda lives as a girl by hiding her true identity as Transgender from the society feels guilty for being dishonest to her peers. She thinks God would not walk with her because of her dishonesty and feels alienated from God. This proves how religious views too condemn Transgender as a natural creation.

Amanda though lives a life as she wished; she has to move with restrictions and rules so as to keep her safe from the society without revealing her true identity. Her father worries if Amanda comes late to home and also when she gets affectionate with her peers, because he feels scared of the society which neglects to accept a Transgender. When Amanda is found with Grant, the guy whom she has fallen in love with, her father panics and threatens Amanda by saying, "I trusted you to keep your head down....people like you get killed by people like him" (141).

Those words of her father show the restrictions that are kept for Transgender and also the mindset of society that never refuse in humiliating the Trans people. Though Amanda's father supports her, in a way he too discriminates her by forcing Amanda to keep her head down which proves the influence of false belief in each individual. The third-gender people are proved to be stronger and talented than the Cis-genders as they possess both male and female features. Sakshi, a Transgender singer who became widely known recently in social medias for her unique capability to sing in both male and female voice, also she works as a make-up artist and play roles in movies as well. Shabnam Mausi Bano, was the first Transgender to get elected in public service. She was an elected member of the Madhya Pradesh State Legislative Assembly she is capable of speaking 12 languages. She fought for corruptions, unemployment,

poverty, and also used her power for bringing justice against discrimination of Transgender and as well as made an effort to create awareness on HIV/AIDS. Amanda moves to a different place by hiding her Trans identity to begin a fresh start to fade away her tormenting past. Like everyone else, to make friends and to fit in was her desire which made her to move forward. With the help of her Trans mentor Virginia, who supported her and had been an advisor in each and every moves of Amanda in her life and it is Virginia's warmth that Amanda seeks for to rest and to feel comfort. Amanda thinks of Virginia as, "She really was one in a million- she was the sister I never had, the watchful eye that had kept me safe" (197), because she feels secured in the presence of her Trans mentor, Virginia with her. Trans Mentors International organization was founded in 2009 to provide aid, support and assistance to Trans and non-binary identified individuals. The mentors remain as a responsible advisor as they have already been through their past experience to give support in the journey of Transgender towards healthy body and mind and in their pursuit of personal freedom, including the freedom to alter their bodies and change their gender roles. This program has now developed and spread worldwide with open websites for Transgender people to get guidance and advice. Russo has introduced the character Virginia to her Trans readers, to let them know about a path where they can get their problems solved. She has also suggested particular organizations in her novel as it ends. Third-genders who were deviants in healthcare clinics have now obtained special care and security for their strong well-being in both physically and mentally. Amanda gets more frustrated and distressed when she gets bullied by her school mates which draw her to make a dark decision called suicide, which most of the Transgender people end up with because of the intolerance of mental stress. As she swallows the pills, Amanda erases all her wishes, for which she craved for long, "I swallowed three more pills. I wouldn't be a friendless victim anymore. ... No more caring that dad didn't care about me... No more future with no love, no kisses, no closeness." (264).

She decides to end her life through which Russo has clearly portrayed the untold hidden dreams that live within each Trans individual which they try to succeed but fails due to the humiliating responses of the society. As Russo previews the overall fears in Transgender through Amanda, when she fears to get close with Grant and restricts herself to save her from ignorance which she had been experiencing for a long time like all Transsexuals. Amanda thinks, "I should be afraid of getting close to Grant...and there was so much about me that I didn't want him to know, that he could never know" (105).

Amanda blames herself as the reason for her parents' divorce to which Russo replies through her character Grant that, "just because you may be the reason for it, that doesn't mean it's your fault" (132). This is an advice that Russo gives not only to Amanda but for the entire Transgender community, the novel in a way remains as a guide and support of the third-gender as Russo being a mentor views safer path for Trans people through the protagonist Amanda. Meredith Russo who campaigns heavily for de-stigmatization shares her views through her debut novel by connecting her own life events with it. The novel is a book about loving oneself

and being loved for who one really is, as Amanda encounters severe traumas, discriminations and identity crisis, she overcomes all this by accepting a loving herself for what she really is. This chapter by analyzing the exclusion and inclusion of Trans community in worldwide, records several laws and steps taken for the growth in Transgender status. The equality for third-genders comes to reality only through the positive attitudes and responses of society towards them. Though there are effective measures taken for the mental and physical well being of Transgender, the lack in acceptance of the society remains as a barrier for these Trans people to move forward and succeed. It was only in April 2014 when Transgender got legal recognition by the supreme court, but still there remains work to be done in terms of social recognition, equality, dignity and social awareness. Setting organizations, health care centers, laws and supporting teams for Transgender could help them to survive like the Cis genders but, the removal of false believes and superstitious mind set of the society lies as the firm foundation for the progress and good fortune of Transgender community.

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