

# UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTING TRANSGENDER ISSUES IN ALEX GINO'S *GEORGE*

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The twentieth century was deeply distributed by World Wars. Order was shattered and confusion, chaos and anguish enveloped the world. The wars inflicted a permanent sense of instability. The prevailing political condition had enormous effect on the type, style of writing. The twentieth century hence witnessed the maximum number of schools of thought. The list includes Structuralism, Post structuralism, Feminism, Psychoanalytical Criticism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Naturalism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism, Vortices and other social movements like Nazism, Fascism and Communism in various parts of the world.

The second half of the twentieth century threw light on Queer Literature along with the many new and unusual themes it dealt with. The word 'queer' means something that is 'strange, unusual or unexpected' according to the Cambridge Dictionary. Eve Sedgwick describes the term queer in her *Tendencies* as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of any one's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically'. *The Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* defines it as:

the sexual identity and its related cultural theory and it emerged as the academic response to the Stonewall Riots in 1969, initially as a challenge to the academy, but very rapidly became a standard inclusion in most humanities and social sciences faculties. It would be an exaggeration to claim that Queer studies has become mainstream but its exceptional status is certainly a thing of the past. As a field it has become substantial enough to generate several subfields including Asian Queer Studies, Black Queer Studies, Queer Cinema, and Queer Nation. (Buchanan 393)

The Stonewall Riot of 1916 symbolically became the impetus for the formation of civil rights movements and organizations for the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Also this incident marked the first attempt in history by the homosexuals to claim equal rights.

The origin of queer studies can be traced back to the controversies between the essentialists and the social constructionists. John Boswell opened up the issue for discussion in his *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* which states that when one goes through the pages of history he can observe that gayness/gay identity has been present throughout. Judith Butler was a writer who threw light on the issues of sexualization of identity politics. Butler questions the definition of identity which is considered to be inseparably intertwined with sex and gender demarcations. Such cultural connotations to a person's sexual identity question the very personhood of a man, since his 'weirdness' fails to conform to the cultural norms. Her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* discusses the concepts of sex, gender and sexuality. In *Undoing Gender* Butler focuses on the medical treatment of intersexuals, showing insight into the unlivable conditions of trans people for deviating from normality.

Eve Sedgwick is against the concept of universalizing one's conception of sexual identity. She concentrates on the confusion, instability and undecidability amidst which the binary division of sex was formulated. The point she makes is that the rigidity with which binary divisions are made is totally unfair and unacceptable. Lee Edelman rearticulates the problem of sexual politics again in his *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*, published in 1994, giving importance to the contemporary issues.

LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. The first three are societal phenomena, orientation dependent on the emotional or sexual interest toward others, while transgender is an identity denoting term- gender identity. It is important to note that transgender people also have a definite sexual orientation. For instance, a transgender woman transitioned into a man may naturally be attracted towards other women and fall under straight women category. On the other hand, a transgender woman transitioned into a man may be interested in men and has to be considered a gay. The term 'gay' was initially and popularly used to refer to men, though it includes women too who are attracted to the same sex; 'lesbian' is a term strictly pertaining to women. A bisexual person has the characteristics of both sexes. Bisexual need not only refer to a person who is always attracted to both sexes, but one who is not exclusively and definitely homosexual or a heterosexual in his interest. This orientation develops gradually along with physical and psychological growth and importantly, may vary in degrees. The lesbian/gay criticism emerged initially from feminism. In queer studies, a process of deconstruction of the existing binary divisions takes place.

Gender and sex are two complex terms, which very often are wrongly interpreted. Sex is the biological determination whether one is a male or a female. Gender is a social construct, what the society believes is a man or a woman. Gender identity is, knowing all this, how one sees oneself; it is the personal sense of being a man or woman. Transgender people are those who have a gender identity different from

their assigned sex during birth. Transgender is an umbrella term which includes transsexuals, transvestites and genderqueer.

“Alex Gino loves glitter, ice cream, gardening, awe-ful puns, and stories that reflect the diversity and complexity of being alive” ([www.alexgino.com](http://www.alexgino.com)). Alex Gino was born and brought up in Staten Island, New York. Alex has been an LGBT activist since 1997. They have been a member of NOLOSE, a queer, feminist organization. They are now a part of We Need Diverse Books campaign which aims to educate and empower children regarding all diversities of lives. Alex Gino is literally a stereotype-breaker. They said in an interview with Michele Rizzo in [www.tucsontalespublication.com](http://www.tucsontalespublication.com) dated March 24, 2017 the following: “I am the kind of feminist that says that’s okay. Pink is okay. It’s not required, but it’s not wrong”. Just like there is a widespread misconception that women authors’ novels are for women readers, there is also the thought that the transgender novels are written only for the transgender audience, which is absolutely erroneous. It is directed as much to the general audience as it is towards the trans readers themselves. These books aim to educate both, serving as a tool for understanding for the former, and as a guide and support to the latter. Alex Gino themselves declares this up straight in an interview with Book Circle Online, which is the world’s first online network with shows dedicated to the intimate discussion and dissection of various books. . “Right! This is not a book for trans people; this is a book with a trans main character” ([www.bookcircleonline.com](http://www.bookcircleonline.com)).

*George* is a novel which follows the same story line as *Luna* does. The story is told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator who relates the story with perfect intensity making sure to mention minute details which gives the story a realistic touch. *Goerge* is throughout referred to with the female pronoun ‘she’ by the narrator. This gives the impression that the narrator is a keen observer of not just the physical looks of *George*, but penetrates into the troubled psyche of the protagonist.

*George*’s pet name is gee-gee which itself, at the first instance the reader wonders, resembles a girl’s name. The same is the reason why *George* secretly adores her name. *George* too hates her body, her physical self to a great extent that she hesitates to take bath at all. [www.psychiatry.com](http://www.psychiatry.com) says “While some children express feelings and behaviors relating to gender dysphoria when Four years old or younger, many may not express feelings and behaviors until puberty or much later. For some children, when they experience puberty, they suddenly find themselves unable to identify with their own body. Some adolescents become unable to shower or wear a bathing suit and/or undertake self-harm behaviors” She also develops the fear of growing a beard. “Even she was sometimes fooled by her body” (Gino 180). A sense of being betrayed by the body is developed in the mind of the protagonist.

While Mom made dinner, *George* headed upstairs to take a bath. She took off her shirt while the tub filled, waiting until the last possible moment to take off her pants and

underwear. She immersed her body in the warm water and tried not to think about what was between her legs, but there it was, bobbing in front of her. She washed her hair with lots of shampoo so that the suds would cover the surface of the water. She scrubbed her body, stood with a splash, and dried off with her fuzzy blue towel. Then she wrapped the towel around her torso, up by her armpits the way girls do, and ran a small black comb through her hair (Gino 44).

One question which keeps echoing in George's mind is: "*Mom, what if I'm a girl?*" (Gino 46). A transgendered person's first anxiety is if the family would accept him. George is fully aware of the surgery to transform and is eager to try it. The internet is the teacher to the protagonist. George treasures a denim bag filled with women's magazines in secret. She would sit in the bathroom and admire the faces for hours, assuming she would turn to be like one of them one day.

Just as George contemplates on her transition dreams, her mother enters and repeats words like my boy, son and man which is literally torturous to George's ears. Reality and the imagination are juxtaposed. A sudden shift from one to the other is a catastrophic experience to the child. The stereotypes have been inlaid in a child's unconscious just from the moment it is born. Just like we are made to believe that girl children love dolls while boys go for sports cars, George too believes that pink is righteously a girlish color. She once wanted to project herself in pink wondering this would make people understand she is a girl.

Just as the word queer means weird George symbolically sympathizes with the theme queer at an instance. "Deep inside George worried that she was even weirder" (Gino 61). George is desperate to join the girls when she watches her class girls during the games period. So George abstains from games confused which side to join.

Transgender people are considered to be cultural defectors. Humiliation, hatred and isolation envelope their world. In this novel George has a soulful supporter Kelly who is her best friend. Apart from herself she reveals her true self only to Kelly who accepts George as she is. "Then I think you're a girl too!" Kelly leaped onto her best friend and gave her a hug so big they both nearly toppled over" (Gino104). Kelly starts addressing George as if addressing a girl which makes George feel alive for the first time in forever. Kelly is George's only companion who provides her hope. George says "Sometimes *transgender* people don't get rights" (Gino 105). This is the voice of the entire transgender community. The "sometimes" subtly means all the time.

George becomes truly thrilled when the teacher announces the idea of a drama performance of *Charlotte* the play. The protagonist who is desperate to show the world her real self clutches on to the Charlotte and becomes secretly crazy with the desire for playing the role of Charlotte. This is mostly due

to the reason that playing Charlotte would project George as a girl to his Mom. This, George thinks, would be a way to overcome the fear of confessing in person. George becomes so obsessed with Charlotte (second obsession next to the denim bag) that she starts feeling Charlotte is her own representation as a female. So when her classmates make fun of Charlotte she feels her own vulnerable self insulted. George deeply empathizes with Charlotte. Though Charlotte is an imaginary character George feels a strong sense of affinity towards Charlotte. Kelly, though she too is interested in playing Charlotte, understands George's plight and is ready to sacrifice the role.

George is compared to Charlotte at many instances in the novel. Charlotte exposes her talent of spinning beautiful designs, while George by playing the role could be able to exhibit his true self through art. "George hung up and twirled around the house, like Charlotte spinning a glorious spiderweb" (Gino 135). This comparison is repeated again in the novel which makes the reader feel George is inseparable from Charlotte. Finally George succeeds in playing Charlotte, which is the happiest experience for her. She is at once filled with joy and remorse: joy because she has finally made it, and regret because she has hurt the feelings of her family and teachers. The paradoxical emotions overwhelm her.

The mother once catches sight of George dressing up as a girl and tries to warn her. She also finds out the denim bag of magazines. After some time George reveals the truth to her mom which mom takes rather lightly and ignores, though she fears secretly. There is an attempt to inhibit the emotions of George, which however does not work out. "Because I'm a girl" (Gino 129). There is an urge to transition in George. Though she is still a child, she could not wait for years to make the transition. She feels it is intolerable.

Since the physical self is not the real and the inner real self is hidden, the contrast between these two makes the protagonist feel lost. She feels people do not see the real her. "Nothing- certainly not a buffet dinner- could help the fact that Mom didn't see her" (Gino 129).

In the recent decades there is an assumption becoming popular that being gay is ok. The LGBT people being rejected and ill-treated, the gay people have acquired a certain degree of acceptance these days, while the trans people still do not enjoy such privilege. The author reflects on this view in the novel twice when Mom and George's elder brother Scott console him saying it is not bad if he turns out to be gay.

Apart from Kelly, Scott is the second person who approves of George being a girl. Sibling love is a major theme in the novel. "George had never been gladder to have an older brother" (Gino 142).

The audience reaction to George playing Charlotte deserves attention. As soon as the play is over almost everybody speaks of George. There is a mixed response: few look at him with wide eyes of

surprise while the others stare and show faces of disgust. However, more than all this his classmate Jeff, who constantly thought George is odd and calls her a freak, ridicules George and makes fun of her being Charlotte. People join Jeff in his comments to which George is speechless. George's compliment "I'm talking to George here. He's more of a girl than you'll ever be" (Gino 165) followed by dreadful laughter is definitely not a friendly compliment. This unwelcome behavior is psychologically a strategy to feel secure and self-esteemed. Every human being craves power. The victor within is reassured while the transgender individuals are rejected and discriminated. George, though filled with the doubts and fears of a transgendered teenager, is basically a confident child who stands by her will and speaks for it. She is worried over Mom's reaction to the play. When Mom questions she boldly says "I already told you. I'm a girl" (Gino 160). George then gains the acceptance of his mother. She is gracious enough to return the confiscated denim bag.

Kelly gives George the idea of dressing up as a girl to the Bronx Zoo. When Kelly says she could lend George her skirt "The hair on George's neck tingled just saying the word skirt" (Gino 167). The long suppressed emotions come alive and George perfectly presents herself as a girl. This is when she reveals her female name Melissa. On hearing Kelly call her Melissa George literally blushes and giggles. Long after their meeting that day Kelly calling out the name keeps echoing in her ears. On dressing up as Melissa George experiences freedom for the first time in life. "Kelly was right. Melissa's frame was thin, and she was too young to be expected to have curves. She was wearing girls' clothes and a girl's hairdo, even if it was short. She really did look like a girl" (Gino 184). George is glad to use the ladies toilet. "Melissa locked herself in a stall, delighted for the privacy. She lifted her skirt to see her underwear, covered in tiny red hearts. She pulled it down, sat, and peed, just like a girl" (Gino 193). How could a kid, less than 10, say a boy, wanting to behave like a girl, even wanting to pee like a girl, be tagged unnatural, or out of the normal order? How can it be queer?

George considers that day declaredly as a success. "I call today a success" (Gino 194). A kind of sisterly love develops between Melissa and Kelly. The best part for George in her life is that day at zoo- the pleasure and satisfaction of being oneself. "She was too busy remembering the best week of her life. So far" (Gino 195). Gino ends the novel in a positive note indicating the trans people will be accepted.

Disgust can be of great extreme, to the extent of inflicting pain and violence. The United Nations human rights chief has said in a 2015 report that the LGBT people are victims of pervasive violent abuse, harassment and discrimination. The recent decades have witnessed an increase in the number of hate crimes. This is indicative of the bigotry growing in human minds.

The following table represents the violence done to the transgender people as in 2001 recorded by James B. Jacobs and Kimberly Potter in *Hate Crimes: Criminal Law and Identity Politics*:

VICTIM OF	PERCENTAGE
Harassment or violence	59.5
Street harassment or verbal abuse	55.5
Violence	26.6
Being followed or stalked	22.9
Assaulted without a weapon	19.4
Object being thrown	17.4
Rape or attempt to rape	13.7
Assaulted with weapon	10.2

The plight of transgender people gets complicated by the societal criterion that their existence becomes livable only if they get recognized. “A life for which no categories of recognition exists is not a livable life, so a life for which those categories constitute unlivable constraint is not an acceptable option” (Butler 8). The transgender people are considered to possess ‘strange fits of abnormality’. For them, coming out means being odd, hence being ostracized from the family and society. Here George is left lonely except for the one friend who stands by him. The rest only despise him.

Transition of a transgender individual is actually the concern of the whole community. Transition fundamentally means change. Though not physical, mentally the society needs to amend the institutional set up in mind. Change should begin from the heart of every individual. The novel appeals for this transition among mankind. It is the responsibility of the whole community. Understanding and acceptance are the ultimate solution to all hatred, contempt and disputes. The transgender people do not need sympathy but acceptance and dignity as others. One’s natural physique cannot be called queer. The natural should be seen as normal. LGBT rights should be discussed and understood without inhibition. No betterment would be seen in their plight until awareness is raised, discussed and understood. This paper is an attempt to create awareness about the same.