

Transphobia in the Netflix Series *When They See Us*.

Sreeparvathy M. S.

Student, Int. M.A English

Department of English and Languages

Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India

Dr. Sreelakshmi N.

Assistant Professor (Sr. Gr.) and Research Guide

Department of English and Languages

Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India

Abstract: This paper focuses on transphobia and how the character Marci Wise in *When they see us* lie victim to transphobia. Transphobia comes from people harassing or discriminating transgender mentally and physically because of the fact that they are uncomfortable or scared with their gender identities. For these people, or transphobes, any gender other than a cis-male or cis-female is wild and out of their imaginations. It has been found that transphobia can even create discrimination towards transgendered people in many ways of them being denied of jobs loans, housing, or health care just because of the fact that their gender identity is not matching up to the norms. It does not help the fact that transgenders are always on the look out for getting attacked, much like what happened to Korey Wise's sister, Marci wise in *When They See Us*. Some of the mental health issues that transgenders in common faces are paranoia, living in constant fear, isolation, depression, self hate, hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, and self disgust. As times goes on, the person would feel sad; disconnected from everything and everyone, an emptiness began to settle in their mind. In the fourth episode of *When They See us*, the viewers get a glimpse into the life of Korea Wise's transgender sister, Marci Wise. Her struggles, how the lack of acceptances from everyone but her brother affected her, how she was treated by her own mother as a disease and an abomination, and in the

end, how she died because people refused to see her as a person like them. This paper analyses the transphobia that Marci Wise has faced and the cause for it.

Index terms: Transphobia, hate crimes, transphobes, cis-male, cis-female

INTRODUCTION

Transphobia is a form of oppression and discrimination against those who identify as transgender. Transphobia can prevent transgender and gender nonconforming people from living their lives free from harm be it mentally or physically. It is a form of discrimination and oppression by people who fears or dislike people who are of third gender. Transphobia can lead to many negative attitudes towards the transgender people including aversion and disgust towards them, misunderstandings and irrational fear, disbelief towards their preferred pronouns, calling derogatory terms, bullying, abusing and even physical violence.

Violence against those who are transgender often comes from people they are close to, such as friends and family. Some families reject transgenders who are in their family and refuse to acknowledge their existence. But in some cases, families straight out physically abuse the transgender person. This often leads to the person who faced all the abuse to run away from home and ends up in the street with no support. More often this turn of events will leads the transgenders to either become prostitutes or they will end up getting murdered after treated wrongly by transphobic people.

People can have transphobic tendencies due to multiple reasons. For example, some people be transphobic to transgenders because they do not understand them or know the several obstacles the trans people faces. But transgenders are the people who suffers the most even if it is someone else's lack of knowledge. Also, most often transphobia is seen among one's own family due to the fact that they grew up in a household or a community were people stereotypes trans people and stuck with their own explanation of what a trans person is or is not. Since these beliefs are ingrained from a young age to the people living in that particular community, it is harder for people to make them revert back from their negative thoughts towards trans people. In some cases, the trans person's household

or where he is from always adhered to strict gender roles and anything other than what they know or what they are used to might not get acknowledged.

Some serious issues transgenders faces are the cissexists' bad attitudes towards trans people, misjudging and misunderstanding them, fearing their identity and aversion towards them. This is twenty first century and people are still not open minded enough to accept that the aversion they are feeling towards these trans people are misplaced and miscalculated. The unfair prejudice and discrimination the transgenders are facing just because of the fact that they also wants to express themselves through their sexuality just like everybody else is utmost concerning. This shows the unnecessary power people have given to societies' hands and how they are misusing the power. Society is not only judging trans people but also resorting to violence such as physical, verbal and psychological abuse. They incessantly use derogatory terms to call trans people to break their spirit and will. They knowingly refuses to acknowledge these trans people with their preferred pronouns and names. The struggles of these individuals are shown nowadays on TV series or books by writers who wish to see a bit of empathy from the audience towards these minority communities. The main motive behind their works are for people to see these minority communities' sufferings and struggles and portray how the unfair expectations from the society can ruin a person's life. These shows or books that talks about important matters and the writers who put forth these ideas for the aid of the oppressed communities should be more appreciated.

ANALYSIS

When They See Us, a Netflix true crime series directed by Ava DuVernay, is the story of five teenage kids, four blacks and one Hispanic kid of ages ranging from fourteen to sixteen years old. It talks about how these five kids, later named as The Central Park Five, were wrongly accused of attacking and raping a 28-year-old woman in New York City's Central Park. The story had everything needed for an emotional roller-coaster ride - death, discrimination, injustice, history, tragedy, philosophy, hopelessness, intensity, disease and love. The series delves into social injustice, systemic racism, transphobia and crime. As you delve deeper and deeper, you begin to view the life from various perceptive. It shows you a glimpse of how other people live especially the socially oppressed communities like Blacks, Hispanics and transgenders; the injustices they face on a daily basis. The story of the five kids is one that makes you stay awake at night. The incessant dehumanization of the five teenagers by the media,

the NYPD bending over backwards with their fake stories to get the kids who's ages ranging from fourteen to sixteen behind the bars, the refusal to acknowledge them as kids instead of adults, all points towards to the systemic racism and discrimination the boys had to endure during their tender age. The series consists of one season and four parts were the fourth part almost completely focuses on Korey Wise, the sixteen-year-old kid who was not even in the suspect list but ended up having to go to adult prison just because the police department wanted someone to glue together their fake story. The fourth episode shows Korey Wise's time in jail where he was brutally physically abused and had to live in confinement, away from sunlight or any contact with other inmates to survive in jail. There the audience see him gradually losing his mind. He started making up his own stories in his head. He started visualizing how everything would have gone if he had not got wrongly accused of rape. How his life would have turned out to be. On one of these days dreaming session by Korey, we meet another character, Marci Wise, Korey's sister.

Ava DuVernay, the director of this series, never shied away from showing the injustice that happens in the criminal justice system in her works like the minidrama series *When They See Us* and the documentary, *13th*. This particular issue, as admitted by her, is a passion of hers. She is wildly interested in how as a scourge of humanity people are turning a blind eye to the criminal injustice that's happening before them. About 2.2 million people are behind the bars, who are getting inhumanly and unfairly treated. But even then, she is astonished at how people are letting the justice system put a veil over their head without even asking questions even if they know what they are doing is wrong. She is astonished at how easily people wants to turn a blind eye on other people's suffering if it is not happening to them forgetting the fact that they could easily be the next victim of criminal injustice. Although the character Marci Wise's cause of death was unknown other than the fact that she was murdered, its clear from the series that she didn't get any justice after her death either due to systemic racism much like her brother Korey, because more often than not, the police misreport the names and genders of the trans people that the gathering of their data is very hard and Marci Wise, during her earlier life known as Norman Wise, used variety of names for her during her life. This made it harder for Korey to trace her death and to find out what happened to her and who killed her. The story remains a mystery till now.

The short but eye-opening story of Marci wise happens in the fourth episode. Her life and struggles are shown to the audience through Korey Wise's flashback memories or day dreams. It became known to the audience that Marci is the brother of Korey they saw in the beginning of the series on episode one, where she was addressed as Norman Wise instead of Marci. Although Marci's story is just a side plot to the series, it still left a profound impression on

the audience. Ava DuVernay handpicked the person, Isis King, to play the part of Marci herself. Isis King is a transgender herself and she said in many occasions that the reason she was able to portray the character so well was she could relate to a lot of things Marci went through.

Marci was born as a male but she was always fond of female clothing and fashion. From a small age itself, she found happiness in cross dressing. At the moment, she didn't understand her fascination towards it and often found herself being subjected to incessant mockery and name calling for it. At such a young age, she didn't understand why everyone was bothered with her interests, what wrong did she do to make everyone mock her. But once her mother, Deloris Wise, started to bully her just like all the other kids, she realized the unfairness of it all.

Korey was the only person who treated her normally like everyone else should. And for the same reason, they were the closest. Marci is shown in the series as an influence and a mentor to her brother, Korey Wise. She was extremely strong and proud even when the whole world was against her. When it became obvious that the people around her is not going to change their narrow-minded way of thinking unless she changes, she stopped caring what everyone else says and began to embrace her femininity. She started wearing feminine clothes in public in order to express her sexuality more. This made quite a bit of a rift between Marci and her mother. Her mother kept calling her an abomination and how she was a disease to everyone.

This shows how fast most families turn against you even if they proclaims how much they love you and care about you just a few moments ago. Love and care turns meaningless in these frantic competition to get the societies approval. This scene shows us how as soon as a concept that is unfamiliar to you come face to face with you, the first instinct of yours is to abandon everything and run the other way. The only thing Deloris Wise, cared about was how the society will look at her now because her son is on his way to become a daughter now. She didn't care about how Marci felt, she didn't care about her mental health, about the bullying she had to suffer. All she did care about was how people are going to think about her family now. For a fleeting moment's approval, she disregarded her own child's life. To think that this is the life transgender people go through on a daily in itself is heart-breaking because this is not an isolated story, this is the story of millions of other transgenders in the world. People like Marci Wise, Isis King, Marci's little sister, Vanity Wise, another transgender woman, all had to go through the same experience.

What's admirable about Marci is that after getting stuck in a society where she is easily misjudged and looked down upon as if she was a plague, she still managed to not let her virtues go astray. She was a real role model for Korey whose memories of her made his time in jail a little less insane. Her being someone Korey always looked up to and his mother being someone he is bound to love even if he knew what she does to his sister is wrong, more often than not Korey is caught up in between the drama between Deloris and Marci. It is during one of these situations that Marci tells the family that she is officially a woman from that day onwards. This resulted in Deloris calling her degrading names and disregarding Marci's identity as a woman and saying Marci will never be a real woman. Deloris refused to call her daughter Marci even after repeatedly being told that her name is not Norman anymore but Marci. This might seem a petty little incident for anybody else, but for a transgender, calling them by their preferred name is the utmost acknowledgment of their identity they so badly want from everyone.

Deloris didn't just stop at refusing to acknowledge Marci as a woman, she proceeded to kick her out of her house despite Korey's protest. Korey begged Marci to ignore their mother's words and asked Marci to stay with them but Marci gently but surely refused Korey's wishes and told him it is better to leave a place where she is not even considered as a person let alone a woman. Arguments with one's family is always stressful but argument with your family over your sexuality is hundred times stressful. When it comes to people from LGBTQ+ community, they always go through existential crisis and mental health issues and paranoia. What they wanted most during their confusing times is someone to support them but the sad reality is that only few people are blessed with such a support. And Marci was definitely not one of them. During a time when her mother should hold her hand and walk with her, she got kicked out of her house by the same mother.

After this incident, Korey didn't know what happened to her or where she went because he soon got wrongly accused and arrested for a crime he didn't commit. Marci being his older sister and mentor was the one thing that got him through mentally exhausting moments in jail. And years later, into his sentence, one day in 1990, he gets notified that his older sister got murdered. Nobody knows how. Nobody knows why. Ava DuVernay directs the scene in such a way that Korey sees Marci one last time while he was mourning but his final vision of her doesn't look like the person he last saw, but the person she wanted to become.

CONCLUSION

The side character Marci Wise from the series *When they see us* is the representation of the unheard stories of many individuals who are left hurt and unnoticed. Even though the series mainly focuses on the five boys and the systemic racism they faces, Marci's story also spread awareness among people about transgender people. People are quick to judge a person in similar shoes as that of Marci, drawing their own disgusting conclusions before getting to know them just because they are not familiar with the notion of a gender other than male and female. This show helps people to see transgenders as real people with feelings and greed for normal life just like any other human. People saw how normal Marci looked, how normal Marci behaved, nothing like the vile image they created in their mind due to their own insufficient knowledge. The fact that the character of Marci was played by another transgender woman, Isis King, who went through the same situations during her transitions says a lot because she herself is an example how this situation and suffering Marci endured in her life was not an isolated situation but a common occurrence among transgender people. Being able to express oneself is the best form of freedom and when that freedom gets taken away from you because other people can't accept you just the way you are, makes you mentally and physically tired. What people can do is be a little more understanding, be a little more empathetic and strives towards a future were everybody can just be themselves without the pressure induced by the society and your own family.

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