



GENDER AND IDENTITY IN JEFFREY EUGENIDES' MIDDLESEX

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Abstract: “Middlesex” is a Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, published in 2002. Primarily a coming-of-age story and family saga, the 21st-century gender novel chronicles the effect of a mutated gene on three generations of a Greek family, causing momentous changes in the protagonist, Cal’s life. The novel holds the themes of nature versus nurture, rebirth and the differing experiences of what society constructs as polar opposites, such as those found between men and women. It discusses the pursuit of the American Dream and explores gender identity. The novel traverses through the strenuous process of identifying one’s true self. Cal, born and brought up as a girl, later identifies herself more of a man. Cal belongs to the intersex community, reluctant to undergo any surgery, s/he decides to live as s/he is- heterosexually identified masculine intersexual. The study explores the identity crisis experienced by the narrator Cal in the novel Middlesex. How a person like Cal, labeled as “impossible” finds the constraints of gender hard to live in is analyzed.

Keywords: Jeffrey Kent Eugenides, Middlesex, Gender, Identity

Jeffrey Kent Eugenides, born in Detroit – Like Calliope Stephanides in “Middlesex”, is a Pulitzer Prize winning American author. He has written three novels and several short stories. “The Virgin Suicides” (1993), “Middlesex” (2002), and “The Marriage Plot” (2011) are his novels. Most of his novels are set in his hometown and are deeply rooted in his personal life and observations. He dreamed of becoming an author at a young age. Inspired by Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man during his high school days, for him being a writer was the best he could be. He also draws inspiration from modernists like Faulkner, Woolf, Musil, and John Barth. Eugenides is a significant postmodern writer. Famous for his experimentation in writing characterized by unusual narrators and narrative techniques, Eugenides regards himself as a slow and deliberate writer.

Jeffrey Eugenides' “Middlesex” is many things; it is a Pulitzer-prize winning novel, it is a bestseller, and it is the second novel by Eugenides. It is also the tale of a family spanning several generations, a novel that deals with history, immigration, and assimilation. Furthermore, “Middlesex” is a book that brings up subjects like racial tensions, family problems, religion, and incest. It could also be labeled a coming-of-age novel or a portrait of how the United States appeared to Greek Americans from the turn of the nineteenth century to the 1970s. The book’s author said in an interview that “the book, just like its hermaphroditic narrator, was meant to be a hybrid. Part third-person epic, part first-person coming-of-age tale” (interview with Eugenides, quoted in Shostak, 384).

Over the course of the novel, he is a young girl, a homeless young man, a peep-show worker and in the end, he works as a diplomat stationed in Berlin. The narrator tells the reader the story of his family’s journey from a small village overlooking Mount Olympus to Grosse Pointe, Michigan, but also the story of how his anatomy came to be male. Cal is born with 5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphroditism, which means that Cal’s body has XY chromosomes just like genetic males, external genitalia resembling those of a female, and from puberty onwards a hormone balance that is dominated by testosterone, and lacking estrogen and

dihydrotestosterone, also known as DHT. These factors result in the fact that Cal is raised as a girl by the name of Calliope, or Callie for short, but is later examined by lead medical specialists when he does not develop as most girls do and finally becomes male-identified and takes the name of Cal. The first 250 part of the novel do not deal with Cal directly, but with the events that led up to him inheriting the mutated gene, which seems to be due to his paternal grandparents being third cousins, but also brother and sister, and their son, Cal's father, marries the daughter of their cousin. The transition of Cal challenges the binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Apart from mapping how Cal's gender identity is portrayed and explained, the project uses Judith Butler's theories of how gender is culturally constructed and performative to an investigation of the normative violence exerted on intersex people by non-intersex people.

"Retrospective Sex: Rewriting Intersexuality in Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*" by Rachel Carroll, *Journal of American Studies* Teeside University (2010), the article primarily discusses how the intersexuality of Cal is portrayed in the novel. Carroll explains how intersex theorists have found that it is common for intersexed bodies to be treated as a "medical emergency" even when such an existence poses no threat to the individual. In her opinion Cal's escape from the hospital is to "preserve a normative sexed identity as male and sexual identity as heterosexual" (Carroll 188).

"Theory Uncompromised by practicality: Hybridity in Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*" by Debra Shostak (2008), Shostak discusses the discrepancy between the theories of hybrid identities and the practical implications of those in real life, where "real life" is represented by the novel *Middlesex*. She argues that one cannot occupy a place in the middle when the options available are binary. Shostak's most pressing point seems to be that the poststructuralist theories of gender, of deconstruction of the gender binary and/or the heterosexual matrix, are a "utopian fantasy" (Shostak 386-387), and that in reality it is impossible to live as an intergender individual, a situation where a person identifies as a gender outside of the binary of man-woman.

"Theory and Text: Frames of narrative techniques employed in Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*" by Arathy K.P University of Kerala (August 2018), the article explores the narrative patterns of the novel. Eugenides puts Cal as Omniscient first person to narrate the events in his life. According to the author, the complicated narrative patterns adopted in this postmodern novel cannot be framed into a single form or style. The chapter division for every novel which marks a change of scene or shift of focus to other characters so that the reader could go and adjust with a different strand of the plot and to make their comprehension easier. Eugenides creatively made his divisions on chapters in a metafictional and more ironical way.

In the basis of methodology, the primary source of the research paper is the novel itself. Secondary sources being library books and the resources from the web were analyzed and studied. Both the resources were read several times. After setting the theme, a detailed study was conducted.

Gender is identified as a spectrum rather than a set of binaries. Sex is biological. The topic of gender is hard to address but Eugenides has confronted the ideas of gender and sex in his novel "*Middlesex*". The fictional story of Cal as an intersex individual who possess both male and female biological traits inclusive of genitalia, chromosomes, and sex hormones and doesn't fit into the gender binary gives a better understanding of intersex individuals. "*Middlesex*" reimagines the scope of who intersex people are, and what kind of representation they receive.

In the 1999 preface to the second edition of her book "*Gender Trouble*", Judith Butler writes that she "opposed those regimes of truth that stipulated that certain kinds of gendered expressions were found to be false or derivative, and others, true and original" (Butler 8). As the point of departure of an essay about literature, this quotation might seem queer, in the older definition meaning "odd", but to understand queer theory one must realize that what we consider to be "true and original" is merely a cultural construction. Relating this to gender identity one could argue that the gender binaries are not something God-given or inherently true, and may therefore be treated as something that can be critiqued or changed. How is gender constructed then? Annamarie Jagose writes, in her book "*Queer Theory-An Introduction*", about Ferdinand de Saussure's theories that "language does not so much reflect as construct social reality" (Jagose 79). This is something that Butler seems to agree with, since according to her "the juridical power of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside this field" (Butler 7).

The entangled plots and storylines provide sufficient room for the discussion of the complexity of the theme. The historical perspective, the societal background, culture, and biological or genetic information caters to the complete creation of the protagonist, Cal. The conflict between science and culture can be identified right from the start of the story. The scene of Milton convincing Tessie how they can choose to conceive a girl child with the help of scientific evidence and the efforts made are finally futile as Cal decides

to live as their son towards the end. The novel contains a lot of reflection and introspection not only from the characters, but also from the readers. The existential and ethical dilemmas conveyed in a book that investigates the genetic history of its teller makes the reader question their own understanding of human existence. Milton's infatuation with science is evident. While Tessie's ethics and Desdemona's means of deciding a baby's sex builds up the necessary complications of Cal's sex.

In recent years more and more research has been done on the effects of sexual correction. A great deal of the research shows that many struggle for a variety of reasons, but the reason that seems to be the most prevailing is the fact that a great number of those having undergone genital corrective surgery suffer sexually and socially later in life. The theme of sexual correction of ambiguous genitalia is highly relevant in Middlesex. Though most of these surgeries (at least the preliminary ones) are performed in infancy, it is Cal's refusal to undergo adolescent surgery that spurs her/him to run away.

The intentions of Dr. Luce and his actions indicate the monopoly in the debates and discourses on sex and gender identity formation in the 1970's. Cal's rebellion against Dr. Luce is also against the gender identity establishment. In Dr. Luce's clinic for sexual disorders, homosexuality was not only considered pathological it was illegal. Sex between people of the same sex was not legalized on a federal level in the United States until 2003. Cal/lie's fears of being unnatural at this point in the novel seem to lie not so much in her fear of a deviant biological sex, but rather in the indefinable abyss of complex and confusing intelligibility. Distrusting Dr. Luce, not least because he is always trying to outwit her with his clever questions and degrading examinations, Cal/lie puts her expensive private education to good use and heads for the library. Simultaneously as her parents are being told the "good" news of Cal/lie's impending corrective surgery, s/he is following the research trail of "hypospadias" to "eunuch" to "hermaphrodite" and finally to "monster" in the enormous Webster's dictionary at the New York Public Library.

Cal's time with Zora plays an important part in the formation of Cal's understanding of self. In a space that resides like a parallel universe in the novel, Cal becomes a student at the intersex and hermaphrodite "school" of Zora in San Francisco. Ironically, through the intellectualization of gender, biology and culture, as taught by Zora, Cal comes to feel safe in the exploitative sex industry. It is here that s/he meets others that are similar to him/herself. By comparing and contrasting him/herself to Zora, an intersex person also, though with AIS (Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome), Cal realizes the scarcity, and importance, of kinship in his/her situation. Cal takes all the learning he can from Zora, becoming her apprentice of philosophy almost, realizing that her understanding of gender is profound and far ahead of its time. On a narrative level, the teachings of Zora appear parallel, though chronologically separate, to Cal the 42-year-old struggles to redefine himself and as such function as a sub-text or meta-commentary to what is going on with grown-up Cal. Hence the Bildungsroman plots of teenager and grown man begin to grow ever closer to one narrative climax.

The constant struggle for a unified self of multitudinous hybridity within the novel is compelling. It seems that despite a great deal of evidence to the contrary, the hybrid possibilities of gender, race and nationality that the novel is saturated with, our protagonist is constantly pulled towards a binary understanding of sex and a unitary understanding of self. Always struggling to be one or the other, even when performing as the in-between, Cal seems ever wary of the un-intelligibility that may reside in settling somewhere on the margins. As for the project of deeper romantic and sexual love, this surfaces in the climactic moment of older Cal's Bildungsroman. It is in his love scene with Julie Kikuchi that Cal finally exposes himself completely. Despite his performance as heterosexual man, Cal's body is still intersex and therefore potentially repulsive to a binary-adhering lover. It seems however that he and Julie manage to transcend this together. Though we do not know how they fare in the end, there is a feeling of optimism in this scene that is further highlighted through its juxtaposition with the scene of Cal guarding the doorway for his father's funeral. As both Cals move forward, performing what they themselves feel to be true, it is under the covers with Julie that Cal is born for a third time; reborn not as a girl or a freak, but as a human being, a being that is deserving of love.

It should be emphasized that because of modern medical practices, if Cal had had any other intersex condition than 5-alpha-reductase-deficiency, it would have been caught at childhood and "corrected", simply because the medical industry for the most part still navigates from the binary of male/female, even for children that at birth are obviously somewhere in between. Thus, it is how we are perceived in the eyes of others (in the medical practice of most postnatal wards as abnormal and unnatural, in need of "fixing"), that first denotes what we may become.

Concepts of hailing and intelligibility, and the impossibilities of traversing these invisible boundaries are relevant to the discussion and emancipatory struggles of all oppressed others and thereby to identity at large. In order to truly understand the discourses of oppression, we must look at the mirrored oppressions of other similar discourses, of other minorities also struggling for intelligibility in society at large. In many ways the discrimination against queer people today parallels the segregation of African Americans practiced throughout

much of the 20th century, the suppression of women throughout history, and finally the struggles of the Intersex movement today.

Gender and identity of Cal, throughout most of the novel, is not up to him to solve. Eugenides gives immense details about the incestuous family affairs that lead up to Cal being born with a mutation on a specific chromosome. Due to this, Cal is robbed of any power over his own gender identity, and the social stigma of incest can be argued to be transferred to being intersex. Afterwards, Cal is brought to Dr. Luce who focuses on the “sex of rearing” and tries to determine which the “prevailing gender” is. Dr. Luce also examines “the external manifestations of what he called [Cal’s] gender identity,” which ultimately is the culturally constructed performativity of gender according to Butler. Luce also picks up on the way Cal writes, something that he has learned at all girls’ school. To summarize, Cal has been forced by the heterosexual matrix to lie to Luce, and perform gender in the way that he has been taught when everyone thought he was a girl. Once again, Cal is not in control of his gender identity.

In “Middlesex” there is also the character of Zora who identifies as intersex instead of man or woman, and says that “we’re (intersex individuals) what’s next.” She is in many ways a foil to Cal, and only appears in the novel for a short period of time and does not seem to leave a lasting impression when considering Cal’s views which are apparent throughout the whole novel. Seeing how Cal narrates in retrospect and the narrator seems to be distancing himself from ISNA, one can argue that Zora’s views are refuted. Cal claims that he does not fit into any theory about gender identity, not “the evolutionary biologists’ and not Luce’s either,” and he does not feel comfortable with “the essentialism popular in the intersex movement.”

Mapped out above are arguments that Eugenides has constructed the novel so that Cal’s male gender identity is a direct effect of his genes, which are the result of the incest in his family. Butler argues that there is no true or original gendered body, and ideal sexual dimorphism is just culturally constructed based on non-existent originals. Cal manages to perform “man” well enough to be understood by others as a man, regardless of how he identifies.

Eugenides places Cal within a frame of genetic determinism and the heterosexual matrix, which leads to Cal having no chance to either identify as he wants, alternatively live as he identifies. Although he says that he lives as a man there are several instances in “Middlesex” that seem to indicate that his gender identity does not fit into the binary of man-woman. The fact that Cal is somewhat hesitant in his attitude towards ISNA, and that the word “hermaphrodite” is used throughout the entire novel implies that “Middlesex” does not speak on behalf of the intersex individuals in society, but in fact exerts some kind of normative violence.

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