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THE ISSUE OF GENDER IDENTITY DISCUSSED IN *THE DANISH GIRL*
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ABSTRACT

Gender identity is a personal conception of oneself as a male, female, both or neither. Judith Butler says that a gender is something that is socially constructed and it will not always depend on ones physical aspect. There have been a lot of struggles and protests by the people of the LGBTQI (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Intersex), fighting for their rights and place in the society. This paper is a study of one such struggle that a character faces in *The Danish Girl*, a fictionalized version of an autobiography by Lili Elbe. The character goes through a phase of uncertainty regarding the gender and, decides to take up a gender reassignment surgery to end the confusion.

Keywords: Gender identity, LGBTQI, Social construction, Rights, Gender reassignment

Gender identity is a personal conception of oneself as a male, female, both or neither. There have been a lot of struggles and protests by the people of the LGBTQI (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Intersex), fighting for their rights and place in the society. This paper is a study of one such struggle that the character faces in *The Danish Girl*. Lili Elbe was born as Einar Wegener, who was a famous painter of the nineteenth century He realises that he wants to be a woman after his marriage to Greta Wegener and changes the name to Lili Elbe. Lili was one of the first few to go through the gender reassignment surgery but, lost life due to complications.

The Danish Girl is the debut novel of the New York based writer, David Ebershoff. He is a twentieth century writer, editor, and teacher. He has authored three novels and a collection of short stories - *The Danish Girl*, *The 19th Wife*, *Pasadena* and *The Rose City* respectively. His books have been translated into more than twenty-five languages. *Pasadena* and *The 19th Wife* are The New York Times Bestsellers. *The Danish Girl* was made into a movie which was nominated for the Oscars. It was also named by the New York Times as one of the twenty-five books that have shaped the LGBTQ literature. *The Rose City*, too, was turned into a television movie. His books were honoured by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Lambda Literary Foundation, and the American Library Association. *Out* magazine featured Ebershoff twice in the out 100 list of influential LGBT people. He worked as an Executive Editor at the Random House and is currently a teacher of graduate writing programme at Columbia University.

The Danish Girl is a fictionalized version of an autobiography, *Man into Woman: The First Sex Change* by Lili Elbe. Wegener was born in 1882, in Veile, Denmark. He was a successful painter in Copenhagen. After

his marriage to a fellow painter, and also his student Greta Gottlieb, Wegener slowly started his transition into womanhood. *The Danish Girl* shows this transition after his marriage.

While Einar is relatively successful with his landscape paintings, Greta is still struggling for her own work to gain some recognition. When she is commissioned to paint the portrait of Anna Fonsmark, a famous opera singer, Greta asks her husband to pose for her when her subject is not available. She asks him to hold a bouquet of lilies while wearing Anna's dress, and seeing how he seems so pleased with the experience, she suggests that she would call his alter-ego 'Lili'. One day, they venture out to the Artist's Ball with Einar dressed as Lili, and tell the others in attendance that she is a cousin of Einar.

The couple moves to Paris, where Greta tracks down Hans, a childhood friend of Einar who has now become an art dealer. Greta gains much popularity in France, but her husband stops painting all together. He begins visiting a peep show in order to learn how to move more like a woman. Einar becomes increasingly melancholic with being Einar. He feels as though he should be Lili all the time, and contemplates suicide. Greta and her brother Carlisle take Lili to see many doctors, who all misdiagnose him and want to either commit him for schizophrenia, or perform a labotomy. It is not until they meet Professor Bolk, that they discover that the best option is for Lili to live her life to the fullest. The professor has developed a method to conduct a surgery to physically change a man into a woman.

When the surgery is performed, it is discovered that Einar had been born with ovaries which were underdeveloped, making him also biologically female. After the surgery, Lili returns to Copenhagen with Greta. They continue to live together even after divorce. Lili lets her know that she will be going back to Dresden in order to have an ovarian transplant surgery. Greta thinks that this is too risky and refuses to accompany her. Carlisle is the one who ends up going with Lili to Dresden. The surgery is performed but with serious complications. Lili is infected, and it is suggested that she will not live much longer. Carlisle decides to take Lili out for what the reader assumes is a last walk along the Elbe, a river in Dresden.

The trauma faced by Lili is focused and the gender identity issues are represented. She was going through the transition phase in a time when the subject of LGBT was very sensitive, to the extent of considering it to be a sin. Doctors even considered them to be schizophrenic or mentally unstable as said earlier. Gender Identity is still an issue in the current scenario, where the relevant people are fighting for their rights in the society. Lili was a person who was born as a man who had underdeveloped ovaries which made him biologically a woman. This is what confuses her and also her wife. She realises that she is a woman only when she is made to pose as a model, wearing dress and stockings, for Greta. Then on, her struggle to turn into a complete woman starts.

Gender Identity as an idea was first discovered by John William Money who was a psychologist, sexologist and author. Gender Identity as a theory is later explained by Judith Butler in her book, *Gender Trouble*. "Whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is socially constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex" (Butler, 6). A gender cannot be constrained to the biological factor of a person. It depends on how the person is conceived by the public and also how the individual wants to appear to be.

"I need a pair of legs to finish her portrait, or I'll never get it done. And then I thought to myself, yours might do" (4). This is where it all starts. When Greta makes Einar wear the model's dress and stockings, Einar goes through so many thoughts in his head. He is at first hesitant to dress up as a woman. He requests Greta to keep this incident as a secret. The word dress itself makes him feel guilty, making him feel that he is doing some sin and something embarrassing. It is evident that people were always judged on their gender orientations and, a great painter such as Einar did not want to lose his reputation. The stage where the following conversation takes place becomes a key situation.

'I've been thinking about her,' Einar said.

'Who's that?'

'Little Lili.'

‘Then why don’t we see her again?’ (22).

Einar then on, starts dressing up as Lili frequently. Greta thinks what started as a fun game has made her husband turn into a woman, but, realises that she was the one who started it. She also makes use of Lili and makes her pose for the paintings, which makes her gain an instant fame.

When Einar dresses up as Lili again for the ball, everyone believes him to be a woman. He is also approached by a man called Henrik. Later in the novel, they fall in love with each other. Einar opens up to Greta that he was close to Hans during his childhood which in itself is a proof that Einar had the qualities of a girl at a young age itself. Before marriage, Greta found him to be a timid, tiny man. He was a professor and his physique made him look like a boy younger than Greta herself. All along, Einar never had the masculine qualities.

Einar confesses to his wife that he is completely changed now and is thinking of erasing Einar and bring Lili into life. Greta is forever going to lose her husband. Even then she supports and helps Einar with all her heart because she loves him so much that she cannot afford to lose him like her first husband. They move to Paris from Copenhagen so that Einar can have a private life and live as Lili without anybody knowing. Without Einar’s knowledge, Greta visits a famous doctor for an opinion on the gender change. The concept of a person thinking that they are outside the physical gender that is assigned to them was something that was considered as insanity in the early 1900’s. As expected, the doctor says, “It’s about sanity, wouldn’t you agree with me, Mrs. Wegener? ...I trust you’ll agree with me that we should do whatever it takes to get this demon out of him” (115).

Carlisle, Greta’s brother, takes charge of Lili and tries everything to make her turn into a complete woman. That is when they meet a doctor named Bolk who is ready to do the first ever gender reassignment surgery. Lili will have to go through three cycles of operation, in which the last one might put Lili’s life at stake. Though Greta supports Lili to go through the surgery, she does not want her to take up the last cycle, which is a uterus transplant. This will create the possibility of Lili getting pregnant. Lili has always wanted to be a mother.

Greta does not stay with Lili as she does not want to see her suffer. Carlisle stays with Lili throughout. Bolk reveals that the uterus has been infected during the transplant and, Lili will die any time soon. Carlisle and Anna do not reveal this to her. They take Lili to the Elbe, the river, where she gets her name from and has always wanted to go. She is taken through a wheel chair to the beautiful river, which will be her last and final visit.

The transformation of Einar to Lili has encouraged the community of the transgenders ever since. The author himself realised his life’s worth only after knowing the character of Lili Elbe. It is not the physical transformation from man to woman that makes Lilli a historical character, it is the realisation of her ‘identity’.

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