

IDENTITY CRISIS OF A TRANSWOMAN IN CASEY PLETT'S LITTLE FISH IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

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Transgenderers are free from any sexual orientation; they are neither masculine nor feminine and are usually counted as cross-dressers or third gender. Since the inception of society, they have been facing abuse, stigma, lack of social acceptance and discrimination at the end of other fair sex. Homosexuality has always been marginalized by society, and literature pertaining to this theme has been criticized by many. But the emergence of queer communities has supported the rights of the LGBTQ population and has given trans writers a platform to present themselves globally. The purpose of this paper entitled "Identity Crisis of a Transwoman in Casey Plett's Little Fish in the Contemporary Era" is an endeavor to analyze the identity crisis that has been experienced by the main character of the novel. Casey Plett is a Mennonite trans novelist from Manitoba, Canada. In her Lambda Literary Award (for Transgender Fiction) winning novel, Little Fish, she attempts to showcase society through the eyes of her protagonist Wendy Reimer, a transwoman. In this book, the author is able to present heterosexual or cisgender people's opinions towards queer community; suffering and struggle queers confront in social life. As a trans writer, she is able to showcase the psychology of transgenderers, the various challenges trans people encounter due to harsh environments and the kind of anxiety issues they experience in contemporary society. This marginalized and vulnerable population of the world faces lots of mental and physical turmoil, whereas trans authors have become a voice for them in the modern era.

Keywords: Transgender, identity, discrimination, homosexual, queer, psychology, physical turmoil

INTRODUCTION

Identity defines a person or a thing, it could be the similarities or disparities that make them different from the Rest of the world. And identity is a developing process of personality which continues with life. It has been explored from the viewpoints of philosophy, psychology, sociology and economics. Erik H. Erikson, a renowned psychologist, coined the term 'identity crisis' in *Childhood and Society*, 1950 and presented eight stages of psychological development which build, modify and lose the identity of an individual. On the other hand, James E Marcia, an American developmental psychologist, in his Marcian theory of identity explains four identity statuses. Identity foreclosure is the first state where without exploring alternatives a commitment is made as these are based on parental beliefs and ideas. Identity diffusion is the second status where avoiding commitment produces social isolation, an individual may or may not experience much anxiety. Third status is moratorium, which suggests that individual is in the midst of crisis, either her commitments are missing or not well-defined. The fourth is identity achievement after experiencing crisis, Marcia considered "a likely progression would be from diffusion through moratorium to identity achievement". This fourth status is resolution to identity crisis and shows commitment of individual. This paper studies the trauma of identity crisis experienced by a transwoman in Casey Plett's *Little Fish*.

A variety of culture and blend of communities form a society around us. Human beings remain united in the society but it has certain borders based on the factor of caste, religion, language, gender etc. Transgender or third-gender is a marginalized group treated as an outcaste in existing social order. Their status in society has always remained a matter of conflict as this community never adhered to prevailing social norms. So, identity of transgenderers doesn't correspond to the assigned sex at birth or biological sex in which they were raised. Being a transgender relationship of self to body and self to others become complicated. They differ from cisgender in many aspects, and hence face social and economic challenges. The novel *Little Fish* takes us to the journey of Wendy's life and explores her internal plight as well as her collision with the external world.

Identity crisis encountered by Protagonist:

The story takes place in Winnipeg, Canada, where majority belongs to Mennonite community and this community has firm belief in Christianity. To them obeying teachings of Jesus and following his examples is the utmost duty of human beings and those who go against the norms should be punished for their sins. In her essay “ ‘She Sleeps with her Girlfriend:’ A Twentieth Century Excommunication” Priscilla Beth Riemer talks about her experience of banishment from a Mennonite church for being a queer. In the given quote she said:

I am nothing. Without Christ, I am nothing...

“You are nothing!” “I am nothing!” “You are nothing!”...

“You are nothing unless you get saved, nothing without Jesus Christ.” Every instinct in my six-year-old body knew he was wrong, rebelled against the self-hating mantra that had begun in my head. I tried to stop it, but it wouldn’t...

It got louder and louder until it filled up my body and spilled over, drowning everything in its cruel, relentless rhythm. And I began to believe him.

Undue importance to the rejection of self leads to highly dangerous self-hatred and forces people to believe that they are nothing. And when these Mennonite beliefs are imposed on society, particularly LGBTQ community, comprise violence, sexual abuse and assault, and led to depression and suicidal tendencies. The protagonist, Wendy – another Reimer – grew up as a transwoman in a Mennonite Church and experienced violence of Mennonite people, including the pressure to deny the self. In *Little fish*, Plett tries to give voice to the violence tolerated by the queer community. Wendy said,

I’ll bet a million fuckin’ Mennonites were trans. They probably all killed themselves or they lived stoically and added into their triumphant to bear for God. (Plett 36)

Plett expresses this idea by taking up the concepts of suffering, anti-individualism and self-denial through the life of Wendy, a transgender woman, in November and December after her Oma’s (grandmother) demise. When Wendy picks up a call after her Oma’s funeral, she learns from Anna Penner, a family friend, who was quite close to her Opa (grandfather), Henry, that he may have been like her, which Wendy takes as he was transgender. This information brings a storm in her life and she wants to seek more from Anna about her Opa. Besides this she struggles with daily violence of transgender life, job insecurities, uncertain housing, harassment and abuse, sex work and the threat of suicide: Wendy envisions her death and laments the suicide of her friend Sophie, another Mennonite trans woman.

Wendy and her friends Sophie, Lila and Raina, have gone through a transition surgery and this action makes them a social outcast. Throughout the book, Wendy and her trans community show boundless love to one another by appreciating the beauty of trans individuals, but to cis community, trans have no right to dream of a future and deny the desire for self. In the opening scene of the novel, Sophie claims that life and age is “Different for trans people”:

[Sophie said] “I don’t just mean the difference in how long trans people live. And I don’t just mean in the sense that we have two kinds of age. But the difference with transsexual age is what can be expected from you. Cis people have so many benchmarks for a good life that go by age.”

“You’re talking about the wife, the kids, the dog,” Wendy said.

“More than that. And also yes, that. It didn’t stop being important,” said Sophie. “Cis people always have timelines. I mean, I know not every cis person has that life, but – what are the cis people in my life doing? What are they doing in your life? Versus what the trans people in your life are doing? On a macro level. Ask yourself that.”

“Is that just cis people or is it straight people?” said Lila.

“Yeah, maybe,” said Sophie. “I just mean: How mainstream society conceives of age doesn’t apply to us. I swear it doesn’t.” (Plett 11-12)

Sophie, who wanted to pursue her dreams, ultimately failed because transgender people are not expected to have prospects as cis people have. Beginning the novel with this conversation sets up that novel closely expresses the problems dreaming future and possibilities and sets a perception for the readers that attainment of transgender dreams is difficult. When Wendy and Raina find a right apartment for them, Wendy “feels[s] like [she’s] gonna grow old here” (Plett 284), suggests a positive future expectation which is directly contradicts the usual shortened lifespan of transgender people. Trans people usually die young, because social discrimination results in depression and suicide, as well as their unjustified working conditions such as low-paying jobs weakens them economically.

Wendy feels much younger with her friends, so that with Lila “she felt younger, much younger, like she had in certain fleeting moments when she’d hung out with Sophie” (Plett 271). Her frequent reference to this fact is an

important phenomenon that trans people feel safe in their own community, whereas straight people disrespect their existence. She even brings an honest attention to trans people age when she asks “Did she know any trans girls older than her, besides Dex and that old lady at the support group? If Wendy made it to sixty, that’d be alright, no?” (Plett 279). Wendy’s these questions generate a sense of certainty that transgender age has taken up her ability to dream; her intermingled long thoughtful statements such as:

Now, this morning, smoking in her fluffy slippers and moon-blue nightgown, air snaking into her window, this question turned itself around in her mind.

What *about* the future? (Plett 278-79)

to short, concise questions like:

Go back to church?

Quit drinking?

Move away? (Plett 279)

Wendy’s these questions suggest that she’s unable to formulate a solid imagined future for herself.

A core conflict against dreaming has been inculcated by Wendy’s Mennonite upbringing, violence executed against her forcing self-denial in dreams. In her early dreams, she is portrayed as man:

She had sex dreams. Only sometimes did she have sex dreams..

a girl was fucking her over an old television in an abandoned gym. (Plett 13)

in one of the other dreams:

That night in her dreams she had a dick again. (Plett 64)

These dreams force her to accept cisnormativity as well as self-denial. Later, her dreams shift to her female identity, but her feminine identity is always dishonoured through rape:

In Wendy’s dreams some night later,...

She was clothed, wearing jeans and a plain shirt, but a man was in her...

She shrieked and pulled and pulled, but he was laughing. (Plett 191)

These feminine dreams begin when she starts taking Medroxyprogesterone, new hormones- a final step toward her transition and her own desires for her life. But these dreams showcase punishment for desiring to become female:

In her dream that night...

The old man John exploded and followed Wendy to the other rooms, and Wendy knew she’d get punished and there was nothing she could do to stop it. (Plett 237)

Plett projects the practicability of transgender dreams in society. In one of Wendy’s nightmare:

she dreamed of a man creaking up the stairs and slowly opening the door to her room and enveloping her in a cloud. She woke up – but she couldn’t move. She screamed “Help!” with all of her might, but her muscles wouldn’t move. She couldn’t fucking move! With a whisper of a “help...” gasping from her lips, she woke up for real. (Plett 288)

The “man creaking up the stairs and slowly opening the door to her room” (Plett 288) stresses the slowly approaching punishment for her transition and the cloud which envelopes her and powerlessness to move represent imprisonment. Near the close of the novel she dreams of Henry as woman, which represents her determination for future and life:

But before that dream with the man creaking up the stairs, Wendy dreamed of herself and Henry. They were sitting on a couch, and Henry was swaddled in long billowy clothing. Henry had a baby in her arms. . . . Everyone else was yelling and there was chaos and smoke everywhere, but Henry just stayed there and smiled at Wendy, and her smile got bigger and bigger with joy pouring out of her face, and as the couch grew scratchy and the air under it whirled and screamed, Henry pulled her feet onto the couch with the baby still in both arms and leaned forward on her knees in her long billowy clothing looking at Wendy, and she laughed with her radiant, pure lit-up smile getting bigger and bigger until both of their faces were almost touching with light light light shining from all of Henry’s soft lotioned body, until they were so close, Henry now silent and smiling at Wendy deep and big and light, and neither of them moved. (Plett 289)

In this dream, Henry is depicted as woman, referred to as “her” and “she,” wearing a dress-like garment (Plett 289). The portrayal of Henry as a woman affirms transgender life in opposition to society which tries to restrict trans people.

The violence and sexual assault also emerge in the novel in reference to Wendy, When she comes back from Montreal after her sex reassignment surgery to create a surgical vagina, she wishes “that could be pure, new and untouched, something she could nurture, take care of, give only to those who would be good to it” (Plett 221). But

for the first time when she casually discloses her transition, she immediately experiences sexual assault as the man “tugged the front of her skirt out and stuck his hand in with a twinkle-eyed cry, like someone doing magic for his grandkids, and his fingers momentarily felt like insects on her poor, healing cunt”. (Plett 224). Phrases like “twinkle-eyed cry” and “doing magic for his grandkids” seem like a harmless and cute experience but this momentarily cuteness is immediately switched with a disgusting “insects”. The sentence reinterprets the man from a magical grandfather to the dirty old man who molests children. Wendy herself fails to understand the change from magician into a molester and to make the assault less threatening, she reduces her desire to take care of her vagina, asserting that “she realized how dumb, pointless, childish, and princess-like it’d been to think any part of her body could be kept sheltered and untouched and loved. The thought went up in ashes without remorse or sadness”(Plett 224). Plett reveals how gender roles are fixed and rigid in the society that a transwoman is considered as an object to satisfy the carnal desires of man. In one of her experiences “a hook of flesh wrapped around her arm and suddenly her body was being tugged to the side...The guy said , *Ohhhh, I’m gonna fuck you*. He pulled on her arm, trying to lead her somewhere (Plett 91).

The novelist propagates that the life of almost all transwomen is no better than that of Wendy in a way or the other. Sophie, Wendy’s friend, another Mennonite transgender character in the novel, also presents the characteristic of saying everything is “fine” after experiencing extreme violence. Even after a call gone bad as a sex worker, she replies to Wendy’s text saying “Hey I’m okay. Like, I’m not. But I’m okay” (Plett 120). Sophie’s constant confirmation that she is okay actually contrasts the response of her friends who are extremely worried about her safety. When they hear that her call has gone wrong, they quickly reach out to help, formulates plans to get her out of that situation. The contradiction between Sophie’s response to the threatening situation in which she finds herself and her friends suggests that Sophie’s using “fine” is purely misleading. Sophie messages that “She’s fine. Like, physically. I mean, she said he was rough – but, like, she doesn’t need to go to the hospital or anything” (Plett 118). The concept of Sophie being fine is finally revealed as a pretention when she commits suicide. Sophie talked to Lila on call for hours because she was “in a bad place” (159), she claims that she will be fine and is not going to kill herself (155; 159-60), even “ma[king] plans to hang out again” (155). Sophie’s sham beliefs were so convincing that even Lila is convinced that “everything was fine” (160). Sophie is a reminder that, in the Mennonite world, saying “fine” can cover up a lot of violence.

Wendy’s experiences in life continually fluctuate understanding her own ability to be loved and her desire to love others. This mixed feeling towards love made her relationship complex with Anna, who she “want[s] to love” even though she is “so, so tired of loving her people [the Mennonites] and them not loving her back” (150). Wendy’s identity generates a strong mistrust in the existence of love and she compares the phone messages of Anna and a client:

She bent down and heard: “... my prayers every night since you informed me [about Sophie’s death] on my answering machine, dearest Wendy. I have been thinking about you. And, wishing God’s angels may surround you and bless you. I know you are loved, Wendy. You are welcome in my home at any time ...” . . .

“You have yourself a good day. ‘Bye now.” There was a long, scuffling click.

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She got home and listened to Anna’s message again. Then she got a call from a guy she’d never seen before. He sounded real. (193)

Here, Anna’s love and the love of a client are purely in contrast to each other and have a great effect on Wendy’s mind. Love of client is based on sexual gratification on contractual basis but love of Anna seems unreal to her shows Wendy’s disordered understanding of love.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper is to reveal identity crisis of protagonist, Wendy Reimer, a transwoman, in *Little Fish*. There are certain factors that causes one to be transgender and these factors are external and internal. The external factor for Wendy is support of her family and the medication she has gone through to change her hormones. Meanwhile, internal factor that she undergoes a genetic disorder. She has gone through a transition surgery at the age of twenty but the unacceptance of society inclined her towards alcoholism and hooking. She has failed to cope up with this situation and experienced a sense of inferiority in the world of cisgender people. Though trans people feel a sense of positive identity in their own community but to society, it is negative identity or no identity. Marcia’s third status Moratorium is visible in Wendy’s character, which suggests that individual is in the midst of a crisis: though Wendy wants to be loved, but she has failed to get any positive resolution

because she was unable to handle her situation and her need to commit suicide shows her bad self-confidence. Plett presents the ceaseless struggle and inner psyche of her character in her quest of identity.

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