

Transgender in *The Danish Girl Film* and Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* : Queer Criticism

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Abstract

This article attempts to analyze the characters of Einar Wegener, who turns to be Lili Elbe, in The Danish Girl Film, and Eriko, a transwoman in Yoshimoto's Kitchen. Both of them are transgender women, but their intentions behind it are completely different. The study aims at comparing two different literary works coming from two different cultures, nationalities, and historical background. Employing the Queer Criticism, this article unveils that Einar, The Danish Girl Film, wishes to change his gender and sexuality because of his desire to be a real woman. To get his new identity, he is willing to leave his wife, Gerda. While, Eriko, in Yoshimoto's Kitchen, turns out to be a transgender mother in order to take good care of her only son, Yuichi, after 'her' wife dies. It is concluded that a sexual desire is the distinct factor found out in the study.

Keywords: *Queer criticis; transgender; sexuality*

A. Introduction

Society for many years has tried to close their perspective about homosexual people. But through times, the amount of homosexual people is going up. They often raise their voice to get their rights and acknowledgment from the society. Society often judges that nonstraight people are irrational and psychologically ill. They cannot comprehend the concepts and roles of gender and sexuality.

Through queer criticism, it can be studied that sexuality cannot be driven only by biological sex nor

gender roles. Through someone's lifetime, his sexual orientation can change. Some aspects that may affect it are someone's will, creativity, and desire. The point of queer criticism is identifying that a person should have been seen as the whole individual, not only physically but also the psychic.

The Danish Girl focuses on the story of the main character, Einar Wegener, who was born as a man in mid-1920s. He was a Danish landscape artist. Both with his wife, Gerda Wegener a portrait artist, whom asked him to stand in for a female model. The act of posing as a

female figure unmasks Einar's lifelong identification as a woman, whom she has named Lili Elbe. This sets off a progression, first tentative and then irreversible, of leaving behind the identity as Einar, which she has struggled to maintain all her life.

While *Kitchen* tells a story about Eriko, a transgendered father-to-mother of Yuichi Tanabe. Her former male name is "Yuji". She considers herself to be an adoptive mother to Mikage, Yuichi's friend. She owns a gay club. Eriko was, and still is devoted to his wife and her memory who had died from cancer. "Yuji" knows he will never fall in love with another woman and decides to become a woman. She lives for the day and to the fullest which makes her character much more beautiful than her plastic surgery shows. Her charm captures Mikage instantly. Eriko dies fighting her stalker after he stabs her, and Eriko kills him with a barbell at the club.

Comparative Literature focuses on the study of literature from different cultures, nations, and genres, and explores relationships between

literature and other forms of cultural expression. According to Henry Remak in Susan Bassnett, American School of Comparative Literature is to find out what lies beyond the similarities and differences (social, economic, political conditions, cultures, architectures, beliefs, religion, and many others) and thus, the things beyond the similarities and differences of the literary works are not only limited to literature but can go further to other disciplines (1993:31). Comparative literature can be applied in Queer Criticism that is reflected in *The Danish Girl* and *Kitchen*.

The article writers will study how queer criticism concepts are described in *The Danish Girl* and *Kitchen* and find the differences and similarities of the two characters. The article writers will apply American School of Comparative Literature, and Queer Criticism concept.

This research is a descriptive qualitative research. The data sources of this research are taken from the two compared stories, *The Danish Girl* and *Kitchen*. This research analysis is done by interpreting the data through

description and explanation. The writers also use deductive and inductive techniques.

B. Research Method

A contemporary approach to gender representation was introduced by Judith Butler, who suggests that gender is not the result of nature but is socially constructed. That is to say, male and female behavior and roles are not the result of biology, but are constructed and reinforced through media and culture. Butler argues that there are a number of exaggerated, disruptive ‘tongue-in-cheek’ representations of masculinity and femininity, which draw attention to the idea that gender is socially constructed and cause what she refers to as ‘gender trouble’.

Queer theory challenges the traditionally held assumptions that there is a binary divide between gay and heterosexual, and suggests that sexual identity is more fluid.

A summary of Butler’s key points on gender representation and queer theory:

- Nothing within your identity is fixed.

- Your identity is little more than a pile of (social and cultural) things which you have previously expressed, or which have been said about you.

- There is not really an ‘inner self’. We come to believe we have one through the repetition of discourses about it

- Gender, like other aspects of identity, is a performance (though not necessarily a consciously chosen one). Again, this is reinforced through repetition.

- People can therefore change.

- The binary divide between masculinity and femininity is a social construct built on the binary divide between men and women – which is also a social construction.

- We should challenge the traditional views of masculinity, femininity and sexuality by causing gender trouble. Source: (GAUNTLETT, D. (2008). *Media, gender and identity: an introduction*. London, Routledge.)

Queer Theory is a theory about homosexuality that suggested that sexual orientation is not only seen from one aspect, such as gender (masculine/feminine) or sex (male/female). Sexual orientation using both these aspects to identify someone. The Focus of the theory is the willingness of identity where a

person cannot be seen only physically, but also seen in terms of the psychic.

According to Mann and Patterson, although sex and gender are closely related, yet the perception of them are not the same. They can form the base of social relation.

“Gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has had gender-specific manifestations. But although sex and gender are related, they are not the same thing, and they form the basis of two arenas of social practice.” (Reading Feminist Theory: From Modernity to Postmodernity. Susan Archer Mann, Ashly Suzanne Patterson. p 130)

Lois Tyson, in her book entitled *Critical Theory Today* states that, Queer theory determines someone's sexuality as a changeable progress. It can be influenced by the social environment.

“Queer theory defines individual sexuality as a fluid, fragmented, dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities. Our sexuality may be different at different times over the course of our lives or even at different times over the

course of a week because sexuality is a dynamic range of desire.” (Tyson: 335)

“For queer theory, our sexuality is socially constructed (rather than inborn) to the extent that it is based on the way in which sexuality is defined by the culture in which we live.” (Tyson: 336)

She also describes that sexuality cannot be controlled by the definition of natural sex (male or female) nor gender roles in society (masculine or feminine). Sexuality can pass over these categorizations, since it has a will of its own.

“Sexuality is completely controlled neither by our biological sex (male or female) nor by the way our culture translates biological sex into gender roles (masculine or feminine). Sexuality exceeds these definitions and has a will, a creativity, an expressive need of its own.” (Tyson 335)

C. Results and Discussion

TRANSGENDER IN *THE DANISH GIRL* FILM

This research studies the phenomena of Queer Criticism in *The Danish Girl* and *Kitchen*. Based on the definitions of queer criticism

above, gender is not the result of nature but is socially constructed. Queer theory also suggests that sexuality can be described as a fluid, fragmented, dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities. It means that through Queer Criticism perspective, someone's sexuality's desire can change over times.

In *The Danish Girl*, Gerda provokes Einar to wear make up and a dress, because he has to be a model for her painting. By these consequences of events, it triggers Einar to create Lili's image within him. It also means, unconsciously, Gerda has supported him to be a woman. This statement is supported by the following quotation:

"Gerda sweeps a layer of foundation over Einar's face. When she's done, he opens his eyes. Einar takes in his blanked-out face in the shaving mirror. Gerda goes to apply eyeliner."

"Einar's breathing feels slightly laboured now. The dress weighs heavily. His head moves slightly, feeling it brush at his neck. His fingers curl involuntarily around the beaded cuff."

"Einar peels off his shirt. Underneath, he wears Gerda's lace edged slip. Gerda gaps

slightly.. Einar has outdone her with this imaginative twist. But she rises to the occasion. Feels the fabric against his body."

When Einar appears in public as Lili Elbe in a ball for the first time, Einar meets Henrik and falls in love with him. He feels the secret intimacy with another man, and his sexual desire to be a woman begins to rise. The following quotations describe the statement:

"Three times a charm.. we see something shift in Lili.. Henrik senses it.. he kisses her. When he releases her, she gasps, and he kisses her again, finds his passion returned this time.. when she finally catches her breath she can't look at him."

"Lili lets herself be drawn closer to him.. he strokes her face. Lili smiles, adoring. Henrik kisses her and she responds eagerly. His hand works its way down her body, between her legs. Lili squirms, uncomfortable."

Einar feels he has a feminine side since he was a boy, back in Vejle, when he feels the attraction with Hans. When Einar gets older he realizes that there is Lili, whom lurks

inside him. The proof of the statement can be found in these quotations:

Gerda: "There have been other men?"

Einar: "There was another, but it was a long time ago... that boy Hans... back in Vejle."

Hans: "We were just little boys, you know, playing around? Anyway, Einar just looked so pretty in that apron-I kissed him! Next thing I know, his father's chasing me out."

Einar's desire to become a woman grows more deeply, he not only wants to appear as a woman physically, but he also wants to change his gender and sexuality. He secretly imitates and studies a woman's gesture from a prostitute:

"As Gerda buys fish, Einar is distracted, observing and copying the movement of the female customer beside him."

"Einar turns on the lights, quickly pulls off his coat. He traces the shape of his 'breasts' with trembling hands. He quickly strips off shirt, trousers... He pulls off his underwear, returns to the mirror, pushes his cock back between his legs, squeezing his thighs tight until he has an approximation of a vagina. He rounds his shoulders, takes in the arresting transformation, breathless with excitement,

terror. A sense of impending inevitable transgression."

"Einar studies the girl and gradually his body begins to mirror hers, a parody of female abandon. We see his reflection in the glass now, gradually eclipsing her..he breathes, an almost orgasmic gasping breath of relief."

Einar's struggle has left his identity behind as Einar and reveals his lifelong identification as a woman, whom he calls her as Lili Elbe. The statement can be proved by these quotations:

Hexler: "So tell me about Lili. Where does she come from?"
Einar: "Inside me."

Einar: "I don't think I can give you what you want." He looks away, ashamed. It's unbearable. Gerda approaches him. He looks like Lili dressed as Einar."

Lili: "Can I borrow a nightdress?" Gerda shocked. "No..we've never done that. Lili's never spent the night"..Einar confesses, "It doesn't matter what I wear. When I dream, they're Lili's dreams."

Einar: "Every morning I promise myself I'll spend the whole day as Einar. But there's so little Einar left."

Hans: "You need building up."

Einar: "No. I think Lili's thoughts. All the time. Even here, now, I'm having to work so hard just to.. to be me. To be THIS."

TRANSGENDER IN YOSHIMOTO'S *KITCHEN*

Kitchen plays an important role in the novella, where the three main characters, Mikage, Yuichi, and Eriko meet and discuss their life, their experience, their loss, and even their weaknesses. Kitchen in Japanese culture is more than just a place for cooking, as it is stated as follows:

In Japanese culture the kitchen is not simply a room, an architectural space devoted to cooking. Instead, it is a place where "official discourse about national identity, gender, sexuality, family, and motherhood are enacted against the imaginary landscape of real and found memories and images of individual lives" (Buckley, 2000).

According to the author herself, the main themes in her work are "the exhaustion of young Japanese in contemporary Japan" and "the way in which terrible experiences shape a

person's life" — additional issues explored in *Kitchen* include transexuality and the loneliness inherent in modern Tokyo life.

In the novella, Eriko is not only Yuichi's mother, but was formerly his father, Yuji. It is told that after Yuji's wife died, he decides that he is really a woman, and undergoes the surgery to become one.

His name Yuji is transformed to 'Eriko'. Yuichi confides his transgender mother, Eriko, to Mikage:

... "She's had plastic surgery." "Oh?" I said, feigning nonchalance. "I wondered

Why she didn't look anything like you." "And that's not all. Guess what else—she's

a man. "He could barely contain his amusement. "Yes, but. Could *you* call

someone who looked like that 'Dad'?" he asked calmly. He has a point, I thought.

An extremely good answer. (Kitchen, 1988: 14).

Eriko has also gone through a time in her life when she is sad and confused about what to do. Yuichi tells Mikage that his "real" mother is another woman and that Eriko, who is transgendered, is Yuichi's biological father. Yuichi could accept the transgender of his father. They

could converse comfortably and happily around. *That they could be this cheerfully normal in the midst of such extreme abnormality.* (Kitchen, 1988: 31).

"After my real mother died, Eriko quit her job, gathered me up, and asked

herself, 'What do I want to do now?' What she decided was, 'Become a woman.'

...She says that before she became a woman she was very shy. Because she

hates to do things halfway, she had everything 'done,' from her face to her

whatever, and with the money she had left over she that nightclub. She raised

me a woman alone, as it were." (Kitchen, 1988: 15).

From Yuichi's accounts, it is clearly seen that after the loss of his wife, Yuji merely focuses on how to substitute a mother role for Yuichi and raise him after his mother's death. *She knew she'd never love anybody else.* (Kitchen, 1988: 15). What she cares in her life is only Yuichi's prosperity and future life. Yuji decides to become 'a woman' in order to easily take up the role of Yuichi's mother and find a job to continue supporting their life. In Japan, it is a

lot easier for a woman to find a job in bussines of entertainment. Therefore, after Yuji becomes Eriko, she manages a nightclub where she works at night and still manages her time to take care of Yuichi's wellbeing in the morning. It is an evidence that, in line with Queer Criticism, Eriko's transgender is not counted on sex (male/female) but rather on the base of social relation, mother –son relation. Meaning, his new identity is defined by the culture in which Eriko lives, that is a family bound.

Eriko tells Mikage she knows she has not been the perfect parent to Yuichi, because although he's "a good kid," there are some things she was not able to teach him, things that "slipped through the cracks." Eriko knows she does not teach Yuichi an effective way to deal with other people, and as a result "he's confused about emotional things and he's strangely distant with people."

The discussion really tells the reader how Eriko mostly feels worried about her son's emotional condition through his incoming real life, and Eriko herself never worries about her transgender condition she

now lives in. Referring back, as a father for Yuichi, never does Yuji spell a word of being trapped in a 'male body' which condition usually experienced by a transexuality. Therefore, the factor of transgender Eriko forms a conical aspect, defined by the culture in which she lives. Japanese culture demands her to dedicate her life as a mother for the prosperity of her son, Yuichi.

This man then adopted the life that would allow him to be happy.

Yuichi explains, "What she decided was, '**Become a woman.**' It was this

decision that allowed Eriko to become the person she really wanted to be.

She wrote in the letter to Yuichi, "But I have cheerfully chosen to make my

body my fortune. I am beautiful! I am dazzling!...I have loved my life."

The way Eriko chose to live did make her happy. (Kitchen,1988: 53).

In line with Queer theory, Eriko's individual sexuality is interpreted as a fluid, disintegrated and dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities. 'Queer theory defines ... Our sexuality may be different at

different times over the course of our lives ...' (Tyson: 335). And certainly, in the case of Eriko's transgender , there are no words, phrases, or statements in the story that reveal her sexual desires to show that she wishes to become a woman. Not until the death of 'her' wife does Eriko choose to become a transgender woman with her intention to only raise the son, the only one she has in her life.

Another aspect of Eriko's happiness was her philosophy of life. She believed one could be happy despite bad things happening. She tells Mikage,

"The ratio of pleasant and unpleasant things around me would not change.

It wasn't up to me. It was clear that the best thing to do was to adopt a sort

of muddled cheerfulness."

Eriko's words show only a kind of advise and good deeds to do in order to achieve happiness in life. Eriko never says a word of being trapped in the male body before becoming a woman. She never claims that she was not happy when she was a man, as Yuichi's father. Eriko never feels

mentally mistreated when she is a man. 'She' just loves her wife and the memory of her. It is in line with the Queer theory '... .. sexuality is a dynamic range of desires.'

Clearly, Eriko's transgender is not the one that belongs to transexuality, as the author of the novela says. Eriko's transgender is merely a factor of a substitute mother for her son, Yuichi. Eriko's words only reflect her wish to see the prosperous wellbeing of her son. She also expresses this philosophy in her letter to Yuichi. There are "people who do abhorrent things," she tells her son, and so there is the possibility that something might happen to her. In spite of that, she writes, Eriko is going to go on living her life.

"If a person hasn't experienced true despair, she grows old never

knowing how to evaluate where she is in life, never understanding

what joy really is," Eriko says. (Kitchen,1988: 41).

By dealing with death and loss, people are able to appreciate the sacredness of life, that is what Eriko tells Mikage. Anytime Eriko has time to meet and talk to Mikage, Eriko

always spells her philosophy of life, as if she wishes Mikage not fail to step the right path in her future life. Eriko also has the same hope for her son's future that has become her priority during her whole life as a mother. Never does the reader catch a word of transgender's dissatisfaction of her sexuality in her life. Her life is only for her son, Yuichi.

"It's not easy being a woman," said Eriko one evening out of the blue.

I learned it raising Yuichi. There were many, many difficult times, god knows.

If a person wants to stand on her own two feet, I recommend undertaking

the care and feeding of something. It could be children, or it could be house

plants, you know? By doing that you come to understand your own limitations.

That's where it starts." As if chanting a liturgy, she related to me her philosophy

of life. (Kitchen,1988: 41).

The statement reveals how Eriko realizes now that the duty of a mother is not easy at all, as Eriko collects of Yuichi's mother's hard work to take care of them, two guys, not to mention ,completing the daily

house work. This also emphasizes Eriko's guilt that she once neglects her wife's well-being. This could also be understood that Eriko's priority at the present is her son's well-being and his safety in the future. Furthermore, it becomes apparently clear that Eriko never experiences female physical trap when she is Yuichi's father. It can be concluded that the study just finds out one clear factor that forces Yuji to become a transgender woman. Her son's happiness, not sexual desires, is the factor of her transgender. In other words, Eriko's sexual orientation cannot only be seen from one aspect, sex (male/female) but also seen in terms of the psychic.

Yoshimoto, the author of *Kitchen*, ignores sex in the novella. It is clearly seen when Mikage and Yuichi do not become lovers when they live together in Eriko's house. Both of them are shown in their inability to make decisions while overwhelmed with grief after the loss of their beloved ones.

In the case of Eriko's transgender, it is definitely studied that Eriko never conveys words of

sexuality but family concern and good deeds advise when she converses with other characters in the novella. It also becomes clear that Eriko's transgender entirely reflects Japanese women as they try to find the appropriate models, for family, career, and perhaps romantic love.

"Iwao (1993) observes that for all their perceived passivity, Japanese

women have a number of choices in organizing their adult lives.

They may choose to be single, married, childless, and may work

full- or part-time.

It surely raises questions about what the Japanese young women should be in modern era. They lead their life in confusion, whether they want to be single, married, This complies with the theme stated by the author that ... "the exhaustion of young Japanese in contemporary Japan" and "the way in which terrible experiences shape a person's life".

D. Conclusion

Eventhough Einar and are both transgender, they have different

intentions. Einar wants to change his gender and sexuality because of his desire to be a real woman. To get his new identity, he is willing to leave his wife, Gerda. Despite his love and relationship with her, Einar chooses his individuality, he feels that he is a woman inside who is trapped in a man's body.

While, Eriko turns out to be a transgender mother when his wife dies, and he hopes to replace her role as a mother for his only son, Yuichi. It is caused by of Eriko's guilt towards his family, because Eriko often abandons his wife and Yuichi.

Yoshimoto, the author of *Kitchen*, ignores sex in the novella. It is clearly seen that Mikage and Yuichi do not become lovers when they live together in Eriko's house. In the case of Eriko's transgender, it is definitely studied that Eriko never conveys words of sexuality but family concern and good deeds advise when she converses with other characters in the novella.

It also cannot be denied that Eriko's transgender just reflects Japanese women as they try to find the appropriate models, for family,

career, and perhaps romantic love. It surely raises questions about what they should be as young women. It confronts with the theme stated by the author and quoted before the discussion of the article.

In conclusion, both of the characters in *The Danish Girl Film* and Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* are transgender. It means they are born as men, but through times they change their gender, for Einar and Riko, and sexuality, only for Einar, into women. Despite being apart in two different time and culture, Einar lives in Denmark around 1920s, while Eriko lives in Japan in modern era. They can defend their own desires why they change into women.

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