



# Tracing Gender Dysphoria in the novel *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides

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## Abstract

This research paper deals with the aspect of Gender Identity in the novel *Middlesex* written by American writer *Jeffrey Eugenides*. The main aim of this Research Paper is to deal with the area of internal struggle of the main protagonist Calliope in the novel for gender identity and gender incongruence. The paper will trace the struggle of people belonging to intersex community who undergoes severe psychological trauma of feeling someone else rather than the role assigned to him/her by the society by using novel *Middlesex* and tracing Gender dysphoria in protagonist of the said novel. The feel and fear of being a misfit to accept oneself as an intersex is the basic outline of the research paper. The psychological term used for confusion within oneself as Intersex or Transgender is “Gender Dysphoria” and this research paper will be focusing on this area. This project will also focus on a Chromosomal disorder 5- alpha Reductase Deficiency Syndrome, a disease or a condition where a female starts to grow Penis in between her Vagina and vice versa, making him/her as an intersex. The key points such as being Intersex with different sex organs and lack of courage to admit physical as well mental changes will be the main areas that this project will deal with.

**Keywords:** *Gender Dysphoria, Heterosexuality, Hermaphrodites, Intersex and Chromosomal Disorder.*

## Introduction

Acceptance of belonging to LGBTQ+ community is one of the most difficult part in a person's life. Not much is talked about LGBTQ+ community in our society it was only after novel

*Middlesex* by Jeffery Eugenides and later after a decade followed by *Annabel* written by Kathleen Winter that issues of intersex are raised.

The researcher here will focus on the internal struggle that Calliope the intersexual protagonist goes through in its life in the novel *Middlesex*. The term intersex is defined by The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica as follows

"Intersex, in biology, an organism having physical characteristics intermediate between a true male and a true female of its species.....Arthropods, mammals, and birds have been known to be gynandromorphic."

From the above definition we can conclude that the individuals who have both characteristics of male and female are known as intersex. This being said it is important to understand that being an intermediary of both sexes an individual is bound to develop confusion of Gender identity.

Psychological term for this confusion is called *Gender Dysphoria*. Definition of Gender Dysphoria according to American Psychiatric Association is:

Gender dysphoria involves a conflict between a person's physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he/she/they identify. People with gender dysphoria may be very uncomfortable with the gender they were assigned, sometimes described as being uncomfortable with their body (particularly developments during puberty) or being uncomfortable with the expected roles of their assigned gender.

The above definition simply means "Born in the wrong body" is Gender Dysphoria. An Intersex often feels that he/she is trapped in wrong body. Their souls are of opposite gender whereas their

body states a different story all together. People belonging to LGBTQ+ community are not only violated by society but they are mostly struggling with their inner self.

"The philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler famously coined the term gender performativity in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*. There, she posited the theory of gender, or the body, as one that acts and performs according to the conventions of gender, conventions that are influenced, from the start, before one is even born."

The internal conflict is result of lack of courage to accept oneself as Queer; a word which itself means "Strange". They try to oppress their feelings because a certain invisible code of conduct is issued by society where a particular role is assigned to their respective gender and if a person fails to fulfill the role properly they are treated with inferiority. In order to avoid such circumstances many times we observe that Queer people either dislocate themselves or they try to live in their own bubble by minimizing their social network and by avoiding any social gatherings.

Susan Styrker has also talked about Gender Dysphoria in her book *Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines Practical Info* Uncovering current educational resources, assessment tools, and recommendations in support of the many different types of transgender individuals has been difficult for professionals as well as for consumers who are experiencing gender concerns. In 1979 the Harry Benjamin International Gender

Dysphoria Association (HBI-GDA) drafted its "Standards of Care for Gender Dysphoric Persons," which consists primarily of recommendations for hormonal and surgical treatment for transsexuals. Over the years that document and its subsequent revisions have come under sharp criticism for being too narrow in scope and pathologizing to transgender individuals.

In order to understand point of view and struggle of LGBTQ+ community Queer theory was established in 1990's. Feminism had a strong base for queer theory. Some of the most influential

writers in this field who are said to be the pioneers in this field are Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. These writers put forth many theories and basically all of them revolved around 'mismatches found in gender role played by Queer people, and gender role which should be played by Queer people according to society. Queer theory challenges heteronormativity of society and targets for acceptance of homosexuality and Queerness. The term "intersexuality" was coined by Richard Goldschmidt in

1917. The first suggestion to replace the term "hermaphrodite" with "intersex" was made by Cawadias in the 1940s.

Being different and unique is not always appropriate as society takes it differently. Intersex population all around the world struggles with discrimination, violence, high suicide rates, etc. The discrimination and violence that Intersex individuals face may be a result of people trying to punish those whom they perceive are transgressing gender norms. Intersexes are mostly traumatized by their closed one's which, include their parents, friends and relatives. Many times it is observed that parents refuse to accept an intersex or transgender as their kid, this is remarkably shown in a novel by Arundhati Roy *Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Mahesh Dattani is one of the best contemporary writers who write about marginalized classes such as womens, gays and hijras. His play *Seven Steps around the Fire* whose title itself is symbolic as it represents seven rounds taken around the holy fire during marriage in Hinduism, revolves around the theme of violence faced by transgenders in India.

Some countries even had rules for not allowing queer people to join armed forces such as USA.

The following article helps us to highlight the situation.

Every day, every armed force in every country is served by people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) personnel. For the first time, a considerable number of armed forces have policies

which explicitly permit LGBT individuals to serve. The first of these militaries was the Netherlands, in 1974. The US policy which banned from service anyone whose homosexuality or bisexuality was made known — referred to as ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ (DADT) — was repealed in 2011. Yet

many other countries have policies in place to exclude LGBT individuals.

**Scope and Significance:** This research paper has a limited scope as I have selected only one novel due to lack of time but I have tried to highlight the main purpose of this study that is the courage of acceptance of oneself. The internal struggle and conflict that an intersex undergoes through in it’s life before accepting it’s identity. We come across many articles which describes how society treats LGBTQ+ community but we never try to understand what they feel within themselves while coming to their self-acceptance. It is very important to understand their Psychology and take necessary steps in order to make their life better.

**Objective:** Every study or research work has its objective. A work without an objective is a work without soul. The main objectives of my research are as follows:

- To highlight the internal struggle of intersex people for self-acceptance.
- Trying to understand Intersexes psychological state or “Gender Dysphoria”
- Extent of severity of circumstances due to their emotional imbalance
- Internal conflict and their results leading to traumatic circumstances.

The novel *Middlesex* describes the psychological state of protagonist of the novel Calliope who is an intersex. In this novel the reason for being an intersex is also explained, a chromosomal disorder which is caused due to autosomal recessive gene. The condition is called as 5- alpha Reductase Deficiency syndrome or 5ARD.

5-alpha-reductase type 2 deficiency (5-ARD) is an autosomal recessive sex-limited condition resulting in the inability to convert testosterone to the more physiologically active dihydrotestosterone (DHT). Because DHT is required for the normal masculinization of the external genitalia in utero, genetic males with 5-alpha-reductase type 2 deficiency are born with ambiguous genitalia i.e. 46,XY disorder of sexual development (DSD).

In other words 5 ARD is an enzyme which converts Testosterone into Dihydrotestosterone (DHT), this enzyme is responsible for masculinity in males and when these copies of enzymes are defective then that person is 5ARD positive. This is a rare disease and is mostly seen in Papua Guinea, Egypt and some parts of Arabia. The novel *Middlesex* starts from Papa Guinea and it is said that this condition results due to incest marriage that take place between brother and sister and in novel *Middlesex* it can be seen that Lefty and Desdimona are brother and sister and so are Tessie and Milton parents of Calliope.

In order to trace the internal struggle or Gender Dysphoria in the novel the researcher will highlight some of the parts where it can be clearly seen that Calliope was not able to accept herself as an intersex.

She always felt inferior due to her man-like characteristics which started appearing when she was thirteen, she used to walk like a man and was always afraid of being called an Ape women or Tomboy and to avoid showing her face to anyone she used her hair as sheild.

“I don’t see why you won’t let Sophie do something to your hair Because I see what she does to her hair . . . .

Sophie has a perfectly nice hairstyle Ow!

Well, what do you aspect it's a rat's nest

Just leave it

Be Still”

When Chapter Eleven commented on her looks she got annoyed because she understood exactly that her brother was able to see the man in her face rather than a woman and in order to avoid any such comment she ran to room.

“Chapter Eleven was quiet for a while. I tried to go on studying but felt him staring at me. Finally, exasperated, I closed my book.

“What are you looking at?”  
I said. There was a pause characteristic of my brother. Behind his granny glasses his eyes looked bland, but the mind behind them was working things out.

“I’m looking at my little sister,” he said.

“Okay. You saw her. Now go.”

“I’m looking at my little sister and thinking she doesn’t look like my little sister anymore.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked. Again the pause.

“I don’t know,” said my brother. “I’m trying to figure it out.”

“Well, when you figure it out, let me know. Right now I’ve got stuff to do.”

On a Sunday Sophie the beautician whispered in her ear that she has started developing a mustache and this made Calliope freak out and then she went at parlor to remove it.

During the age of 13 due to hormonal changes she started to feel arousal for the girls in her school when they used to change clothes in dress room. This made her question her identity as a Lesbian but however she was aware of the Croctus between her legs which cleared her doubts.

This was the time when the question of her own gender identity arose in her mind. Who was she?

Her lack of Menstrual Cycle which is considered as core of feminity effected her the most when she heard a conversation between her parents

“I’m worried about calli too, She still hasn’t gotten her period”.

“Hell she is only thirteen”

“She is fourteen. And look how tall she is. I think something is wrong”. Silence a moment, after which my father asked, “What does Dr. Phil say?” “Dr. Phil! He doesn’t say anything.

I want to take her to someone else”

She knew once she will meet gynecologist everything will be revealed about her gender hence she lied about getting cramps. In the theory The Transgender Studies Reader Susan Styker has mentioned same case about a musician who died of ulcer but didn’t visited doctor as he was scared that his sex of being a women will be identified..

Apart from physical changes the main change that occurred in Calliope’s life was when she fell in love with her best friend whom she called Obscure Object however as story progresses she met with an accident where it was discovered that she is an Intersex and was taken for examination to a Sexologist.

“He began to probe inside. “Relax,” he said. He applied a lubricant, huddled in closer.

“Relax.” There was a hint of annoyance, of command in his voice. I took a deep breath and did the best I could. Luce poked inside. For a moment it felt merely strange, as he’d suggested. But then a sharp pain shot through me. I jerked back, crying out. “Sorry.” Nevertheless, he kept on. He placed one hand on my pelvis to steady me. He probed in farther, though he avoided the painful area. My eyes were welling with tears. “Almost finished,” he said. But he was only getting started”.

After sessions were completed she came to know about of her being Intersex and she decided to know the meaning of this word so she visited library and started reading dictionary where she came to know about the meaning

“hermaphrodite —1. One having the sex organs and many of the secondary sex characteristics of both male and female. 2. Anything comprised of a combination of diverse or contradictory elements. See synonyms at MONSTER. And that is where I stopped. And looked up, to see if anyone was watching.”

Later she was informed by her parents that she will be operated and she will be able to live a normal life like a girl. Hearing this she went home with her parents and cried because she faked all of actions in front of doctor and now she knew that she would be trapped in wrong body. She got so scared that she fled away from her home explaining everything she felt in a note. Here we can see how her persona was affected. She was ready to run away from her dear ones rather than confronting about her true self. After running away she decided to live as Cal a boy and went for haircut, she started wearing jackets and she checked-in in hotels as boy. One night she was beaten upto death and was about to get raped by a group of boys in a park who recognized her as female the secret of her gets open when those boys found about her being intersex but she was saved by a taxi driver who was the first person she met after leaving home and he also owned a museum for bizzare bodies. She later started working there and finally met people like her, she gained confidence that she was not alone and also came to know about many things about intersexs.

However one day there was raid in museum and she was forced to call her home which she did and her brother took her home and she was informed about hers father's death but she was accepted as a boy in family. We can say that her running away turned out to be positive move as she gained self-confidence and was able to accept herself as queer person or as Intersex.

From the above points and from the information given we can say that Calliope was struggling for her acceptance. She felt strange or we can say Queer in her own body. She felt being trapped in a wrong body. As far as psychological aspects are considered she went through mental trauma to such an extent that she fled away from home.

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