



The Traumatic Consequences of Becoming a Transgender in Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl*

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Abstract. The issues of transgender is becoming more or more common not only in real life but also in works of literature in the modern and postmodern eras. However, these issues are still vulnerable and controversial ones as well as not being discussed openly among the laymen. The aim of this paper is to analyse the traumatic consequences of becoming a transgender in Meredith Russo's novel entitled *If I Was Your Girl*. The focus of analysis is on the verbal and physical bullying, verbal resistance from patriarchal figures, parents' divorce and attempted suicide, and moving to another town/school. This study helps to critically and academically understand one side of being a transgender that is a complicated phenomenon. There are three concepts to support the analysis; namely, the concept about transgender, the concept about trauma, and the concept about bullying. The methods applied are library research method, close reading technique, qualitative research method, and contextual research method. The result shows that becoming a transgender is not only a difficult decision but also entails various terrible events before and after the decision. All these represent the traumatic consequences that must be faced by the transgender. Regarding the multifaceted issues of transgender, the topic of transgender endlessly opens various new paths of studies to be taken by many researchers.

Keywords: Transgender, Trauma, Resistance, Suicide

1 Introduction

Being a transgender means leading a life against the widely accepted heteronormativity. Meredith Russo's novel entitled *If I Was You* [1] talks about the life of Andrew, born as a male, who decided to become a transgender by having a surgery before puberty. Before and after Andrew's changing into Amanda, this main character had to face many unexpected traumatic experiences. This paper will focus on the traumatic consequences experienced by the main character due to becoming a transgender.

An academic analysis needs academic supports. There are three concepts used as support; namely, the concept about transgender, the concept about trauma, and the concept about bullying. Judith Butler's opinion in *Gender Trouble* implied the issue of transgender since she clearly stated that because gender is not the same as sex and that gender is not the direct outcome of gender, then sex and gender might be incongruent. (1990: 8) [2]. Thus, there is a possibility of someone to become a transgender.

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As for the term transgender, Yarhouse stated that transgender is someone who realizes that the growing gender identity gradually does not agree with the given sex [3] which is in line with Stryker's opinion [4]. This might happen because sex is loosely correlated with gender thus sex and its expected gender might be incongruent leading to transgender [5].

The second concept borrowed for the analysis is the concept of trauma. Balaev stated that trauma "refers to a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self" [6]. The harmful "traumatic experience" is emphasized by Balaev as repeated negative effects that can appear any time (2008: 152). There are also three "Posttraumatic stress reactions"; namely, "Intrusive Reactions, Avoidance and Withdrawal Reactions, Physical Arousal Reactions" ("Psychological Impact of Traumatic Experiences", n.d.: 1) [7]. Besides, there are also "Trauma reminders" in which anything can make a traumatized person remember the "traumatic experiences" ("Psychological Impact of Traumatic Experiences", n.d.: 2).

The third concept borrowed is about bullying. According to Heidarizadeh, bullying is one of the causes of trauma [8] in which "bullying is identified as a specific conduct of aggressive behaviour" [9] [10]. According to Klomek *et al.*: "Direct victimization ... Physical abuse would be kicking, hitting ... verbal abuse would be threatening, name calling, insulting, spreading rumours" [11][12]. Olweus [13] added that "Passive victims are characterized as possessing low self-esteem and internalization of problems such as anxiety and depression, having few friends, rejected and socially isolated by their classmates [10]. While according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) there a close relationship between bullying and suicide [14] and [15].

2 Methods

There are several methods to support the academic analysis. The first is library research method to gather relevant data [16]. The second is close reading technique [17] to support the library research method. The third is qualitative research method [18] as the general analysis of the data. The last is a contextual research method for the literary analysis [19].

3 Result and Discussion

In Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl*, it is represented that the traumatic consequences of the transgender character are in the forms of verbal and physical

bullying, resistances from the patriarchal figures, parents' divorce and attempted suicide, and moving to another town/school.

3.1 Verbal and Physical Bullying

When the main character is this a young boy named Andrew, he has realized that he is a girl in a male body. In the seventh grade he is attracted to his school friend named Marcus. When Marcus reads Andrew's diary in which it is written his desire to be a woman and his being attracted to Marcus, he is so angry and disgusted that he called Andrew "faggot" or homo and insultingly orders Andrew not to be near him anymore [1].

When the young Andrew becomes Amanda, she experiences a traumatic physical bullying shortly after becoming a transgender. It happens when she goes to a female bathroom in a city mall and accidentally meets "A girl from my school, her scream as she recognized me. Her father rushing in, his rough, swift hands on my neck and shoulders. My body hitting the ground" [1]. The girl who maybe does not know that Andrew surgically has become Amanda responds excessively that leads to excessive physical reaction from the father. The reminder of this traumatic event is a car behind her ear [1] and it makes her feel traumatic to use public female bathroom [1]. This is not the only traumatic physical bullying. When still as a timid Andrew, he is often locked in the school locker by school bullies [1].

3.2 Resistances from Patriarchal Figures

Andrew (later becomes Amanda)'s father is a typical patriarchal figure who is so happy when young Andrew shows his interest in male activities such as joining Little League or going hunting with his father [1] and he is so upset when in a short time only young Andrew stops coming to practice at Little League. His father strongly stops anything that leads young Andrew to the feminine side such as becoming so angry when young Andrew asks why his ears are not pierced or why he does not wear dresses [1], or when Andrew makes "oatmeal cookies" which he considers feminine work in the cabin when they go hunting with his father's friends [1]. Andrew's father also does not come and visit Andrew when he is in hospital after his attempt to commit suicide after his feeling hopeless with his condition [1]. Another resistance from a patriarchal figure comes from their pastor who instructs his mother to make his son become a straight person. His mother is so angry with such forcing instruction that makes them stop going to church [1].

3.3 Parents' Divorce and Attempted Suicide

Andrew's father urges young Andrew to join male activities such as Boy Scout, sports, or camping but result in Andrew get more and more bruises that makes his mother angry to his father [1]. The peak of their argument is when his mother bluntly says "You're gonna get him put in the hospital because you're afraid of your *buddies* knowin' you raised a *fairy*" [1] followed by her decision to leave her husband and lived with her parents in another country [1] which later leads to a divorce.

Young Andrew is getting more and more depressed with the realization that he is actually a girl trapped in a male body. When he is in "sophomore year" he decided to commit suicide by swallowing the whole bottle of painkillers actually prescribed for her mother who "broke her leg" [1]. Triggered by what is written by Andrew on a piece of paper "I should have been a girl" [1] given to the counselor and after long consultation, the counselor tells the mother that Andrew suffers "Gender identity disorder" [1]. Fortunately, the mother's response is relieving "Anything, *anyone*, is better than a dead son" [1] indicating her willingness to tolerate Andrew's desire to become a transgender.

3.4 Moving to another town/new school

After much consideration and detailed medical preparation, Andrew has a successful genital surgery that changes him into a woman called Amanda. However she has to drink medicine continually [1]. Evaluating the fact that before and after surgery the physical bullying does not stop, the mother decides to send Amanda to live with her father in another far way town for her safety in which nobody knows the transition. Amanda goes alone by bus with a black eye indicating the effect of recent physical bullying [1]. Amanda also moves to a new school with a new hope that she can start a new life as Amanda. However, the many stares directed to her every step on the first day at the new school makes Amanda so anxious due to her many previous traumatic experiences in her old school [1]. Those various stares represent the various conflicting events that will be faced by Amanda in her new school.

4 Conclusion

The case of Amanda in Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* shows that becoming a transgender is painful both physically and emotionally. Before her transition, as a timid Andrew he faces bullying, resistance, and domestic chaos leading to attempted suicide. After he surgically becomes Amanda, the bullying does not stop that forces her to move to a new town and a new school to hide her previous identity and to start a new life.

However, the fears of being known and bullied as transgender haunt Amanda every moment.

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