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From Einar to Lili: A Queer Reading of Transgender Embodiment in The Danish Girl

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Abstract: This essay examines *The Danish Girl* from a queer theoretical perspective, emphasizing how the movie depicts gender identification, metamorphosis, and self-discovery. The story highlights the emotional, psychological, and social complexity of transgender experiences and is based on the life of Lili Elbe, one of the first people to have gender confirmation surgery. The movie highlights the conflict between internal identity and external conventions as well as the flexibility of gender through Einar's transformation into Lili. The themes of unwavering love, resiliency, and navigating one's identity within the constraints of heteronormative society are highlighted by Lili and her wife Gerda's developing relationship. This study uses Judith Butler's gender performativity theory to critically analyze how gender is portrayed in the movie as performative and socially constructed. Additionally, it draws attention to the persistent difficulties that transgender people confront and promotes increased empathy, societal acceptance, and acknowledgement of gender variety in modern discourse.

Keywords: The Danish Girl; Queer; Transgender; Gender; Rights; Identity



1. Introduction

This paper undertakes a critical analysis of the film *The Danish Girl*, which is adapted from the true story of Einar Wegener—later known as Lili Elbe—one of the first known recipients of gender confirmation surgery (David Ebershoff, 2016). The narrative follows Einar's gradual realization and acceptance of her transgender identity, highlighting her transition into Lili and the emotional complexities this process entails. Central to the storyline is the shifting dynamic between Einar and her wife, whose eventual support underscore's themes of love, identity, and resilience. From the theoretical framework of queer theory, this study examines the film's representation of gender fluidity, self-identification, and the formation and negotiation of social identity. It further interrogates the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of transgender experiences, advocating for increased societal inclusivity, empathy, and recognition of gender diversity.

While strict conventional rules are increasingly being replaced by more inclusive and pluralistic principles, marginalized groups have started to gain more attention as society has progressed. Issues pertaining to the visibility, rights, and acknowledgement of sexual minorities have become more prominent than ever in this increasingly open social environment. Transgender people are usually considered a sexual minority together with homosexuals and intersex people, but transgender people are in fact special because they do not face the problem of sexual orientation, but cannot identify psychologically with their innate sex and think that they should belong to another sex. They do not face the problem of sexual orientation, but the psychological inability to identify with the sex they were born with and think they should belong to another sex. Not all transgender people change their biological gender through medical means, but some people want to achieve psychological and biological gender unity, so they choose to become transgender. As a marginalized demographic, transgender individuals constitute a small fraction of society, and their visibility in the public sphere is often limited to portrayals in mainstream media—particularly film and television. *The Danish Girl*, which garnered significant acclaim in 2015 by winning multiple awards including the Golden Globe and Academy Award, stands as a prominent example of recent cinematic engagement with queer theoretical narratives (Li Ershi, 2009). Directed by British filmmaker Tom



Hooper and featuring acclaimed performances by Eddie Redmayne, Alicia Vikander, and Ben Whishaw, the film adapts David Ebershoff's (2016) novel of the same name. With a refined and restrained cinematic style, it narrates the poignant journey of a celebrated Danish painter in the 1920s as he gradually embraces his authentic gender identity and emotional truth.

In the West, queer theory first appeared in the 1990s as a critical framework that questioned conventional ideas about gender and sexuality. It includes all identities and cultural manifestations that diverge from prevailing heteronormative norms. Queer theory challenges the sociocultural conceptions of sexual orientation, gender roles, and biological sex, contending that these identities are formed via continuous socialization and cultural conditioning rather than being intrinsic or immutable. According to this perspective, conventional gender binary classifications serve as tools for normative control and limitation.

Emerging partly from feminist discourse, the field of male studies has remained theoretically contested. Queer theory, as noted by Colin Wilson and Mao Xinggui, examines the complex relationship between non-heterosexual identities and pervasive heteronormativity (Judith Butler, 2013). Within this context, the film's protagonist experiences a pivotal moment of cross-dressing, which awakens the previously repressed female self, "Lili." This awakening provokes a crisis of gender identity, characterized by a growing alienation from the male body and a deepening desire for gender realignment, ultimately culminating in the decision to undergo gender-affirming surgery.

2. Gender and Rights

The definition of gender refers to the cultural construction of masculinity and femininity, as opposed to biological sex (male and female). Feminism refuses to attribute different characteristics of masculinity and femininity to biological traits and places greater emphasis on the role of social, cultural and psychological factors in the construction of gender identity. Historical stages of gender are different gender role patterns resulting from different expectations of men and women in different historical periods; the interaction of political, economic and cultural factors in gender construction in different societies results in gender systems in so-called different societies; communal principle is that gender formation is not spontaneously or



consciously cultivated by a particular group, but is the result of the mutual formation of men and women in the same society. It is the result of the mutual formation of men and women in the same society. From this theoretical construct and perspective, artists have begun new explorations and phenomenological research into gender production, and such research or artistic creation is based on phenomena.

At the beginning of the film, there is a scene in which Einar's wife Gerda, who is standing proudly painting a male model who is sitting upright, says with a special meaning in the face of his discomfort: "It's not easy for a man to have a woman staring at him. Of course, women are used to it, but it's uncomfortable for men to let women look at them. But I still find pleasure in it, if you give in to the woman's gaze." At this point, in Denmark, which is ruled by absolute male authority, Gerda reversed the traditional behold relationship, meaning that 'women are seen by men'. It is also an illustration of the deep-rooted power relations in patriarchal societies, where men have the absolute right to observe women and women must be placed in the passive position of observing while being overwhelmed by male power. As Chen Ran, "We do not claim to be 'feminist' or feminist in any way, we seek true gender equality, hyper-sexuality and a desire to break the long-standing norms and standards of life, culture and art that have been constructed for the world purely by men." (Li Jia and Meng Xue, 2010) Therefore, Einar's desire to change her gender through surgery, and through Gerda's support and encouragement, as well as the eventual transformation of her self-identity, can be said to be a magnificent struggle between the two to break the gender norms imposed by the male-dominated society, and in a society dominated by male power. This proves that "gender and power are inextricably linked and inseparable" in the theory of the Queer theory.

3. Results Self-identity

Since childhood, Einar has maintained a strong feeling of womanhood, a firmly ingrained identity. He used to play with his childhood pal Hans while wearing his mother's apron in his hometown of Vejle. In a moment of naiveté, Hans believes Einar to be a girl and gives him a kiss; however, Einar's father quickly stops him and gives him a severe rebuke. Under intense paternal control, Einar represses his feminine tendencies and plays the part that is expected of him as a man. As he gets older, he becomes known as a renowned landscape painter and takes on the role that

goes along with it in society. However, the feminine identity—Lili—continues to be ingrained in him and quietly shows up in his day-to-day activities.

Einar exhibits traits that are typically associated with women: he likes to be neat, enjoys watching his wife put on makeup, demands that lipstick be applied precisely, and gently fixes any flaws—actions that appear compassionate to others but are actually a reflection of his own desire and identification with womanhood. A deeper connection is formed when Gerda invites him to pose in women’s attire. He is mesmerized by the finesse of feminine fashion and the softness of silk stockings, and he projects ideas of owning and embodying such clothing. However, he continues to play the part of “Einar” while hiding the increasing presence of “Lili” out of commitment to Gerda and conformity to social norms.

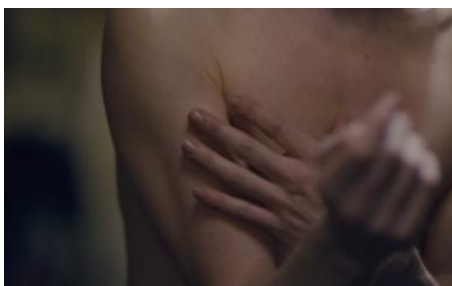
He tries to avoid Lili, but she is unavoidable. In an effort to fit in and navigate their world, Einar starts to pay close attention to how women behave in public, mimicking their speech patterns, body language, and social cues (**Figure 1**). However, this double life gets more and more intolerable. Einar feels very uneasy and alienated when he sees his own male body in the mirror, highlighting the internal struggle between his assigned identity and his true self (**Figure 2**).

Figure 1

Einar is observing and imitating the language, gestures, and expressions of women on the street.

**Figure 2**

Einar, naked, observing his male body in the mirror



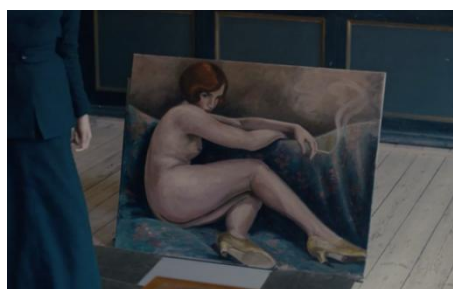
Gerda initially sees “Lili” as a fictional character she and her husband have co-created—a creative role-playing game that progressively degenerates out of her control. In the end, Einar’s path towards gender transition is an internal and personal one, even though Gerda is crucial in bringing Lili into the world. He starts to give up his old personality in search of a more genuine life as he immerses himself more and more in the persona of Lili.

The invitation Gerda receives to display her image of Lili in Paris—a unique opportunity for public exposure made possible by Lili’s presence—marks a turning point (**Figure 3**). Gerda is urged to keep playing Lili in the workplace, but in private, she finds it difficult to accept Einar’s change. Beyond the duties that their marriage imposes, Einar’s identity as an artist is vital and transformational, but she is blinded by her desire for him to achieve his role as a husband.

At first, Gerda doesn’t understand that Einar’s developing identity as Lili is inextricably linked to his artistic self. She doesn’t fully grasp the significance of Lili’s presence until she comes to terms with the fact that she is more than just a fictional character—rather, she is the primary inspiration behind her artwork. Lili turns becomes a muse and a mirror, reflecting both Einar’s actual character and Gerda’s creative vision. Einar achieves a sense of harmony and self-realization that goes beyond traditional boundaries by balancing his gender identity and creative identity through the realm of art.

Figure 3

Lily in Gerda’s works



It is not unusual for people to have a latent “Lili” in their psyche throughout early childhood—an internal sense of self that may deviate from socially acceptable standards. However, for transgender people, this early self-awareness is frequently stifled by a strong social order where parents, teachers, and larger institutions of society dictate behaviors that are firmly in line with one’s assigned biological sex. In this normative paradigm, alternative forms of identity formation are excluded because



the biology is positioned as the determinant of psychological development and social comportment.

It is possible to see Einar's quest for self-awareness as a symbolic return to childhood, a time characterized by imitation, hesitancy, and secrecy. Like a toddler mimicking an adult's actions without completely understanding the consequences, Einar carefully manages his identity out of a constant fear of being discovered. His repeated attempts to seek an explanation from medical professionals are always met with pathologizing diagnoses, such as schizophrenia or mental disease, which reflects a systemic inability to recognize gender variation outside of the binary framework.

Identity, according to Judith Butler and other theorists, is a dynamic and continuous process of production and reconstruction that is both self-performed and socially constructed. Identity develops as a repetitive process—a continuous balancing act between the self and the outside world. More than just a change in profession, Einar's transition from a suit-wearing, public-facing male artist to a cosmetics counter assistant signifies a change in social positioning that questions performative conventions and the gendered division of labor.

This social identity reconfiguration has the potential to be subversive in addition to being passive. Einar enacts a kind of resistance against hegemonic gender scripts by playing Lili, in addition to affirming an inner truth. His identification reveals the powerful nexus of gender, labor, and bodily visibility, serving as a place of both personal freedom and socio-cultural transgression.

4. Conclusion

According to Michel Foucault, "Sex is a way for individuals to acquire power, and it is a way for men and women to express their resistance to the mainstream "normal" discourse of society." This empowerment does come at a price, though, as sexual/gender identity terminology like "homosexual" and "transgender" are made possible by the establishment of normative discourse and institutional structure, which also integrates them into the discipline's network (Oksala, 2021). Identity is a social creation in discourse practice as well as a result of subjective experience, according to Foucault's power-knowledge framework. According to this interpretation of Lily's decision, she uses her free will to validate and rebuild her own existence in the conflict between identity regulations and social discipline. Condensing the light of her

soul into the essence of existence, she is actively “choosing” to become her actual appearance rather than passively “becoming” an identity predetermined by others. This metamorphosis suggests a full process of self-construction with moral and aesthetic autonomy in addition to gender replacement. Lily’s life path demonstrates a commitment to being true to herself. Her free will shows that people can acquire autonomy and integrity inside the disciplinary system, in addition to challenging the institutional structure of gender binary.

What *The Danish Girl* conveys in the film is only the tip of the iceberg of what transgender people go through. As people’s understanding of the construction of human gender and sexuality becomes deeper and more segmented, transgender and gender reassignment surgery are no longer a taboo subject as it once was. The soul and sex do not exist symbiotically, but independently of each other. Even if sex goes wrong, the soul can be corrected internally. May everyone stop being painfully attached to their inner alter ego and be able to live who they want to be. Just like the end of the film “Let it fly”(Figure 4).

Figure 4

End of the film



When Gerda looked at the scarf blown away by the wind, she seemed to whisper to Elna: “Go, but be who you really want to be.” This picture symbolizes a deep letting go and blessing, marking the spiritual opportunity for Lily’s individual identity awakening. In the film, Lily’s persistent pursuit of personality integration not only covers the unity of psychological and physiological levels, but also shows the transgender people’s desire for a “complete self” at the cost of her life. This pursuit of self-consistency is not only a redefinition of the body, but also a confirmation of the subjectivity of the soul. At the same time, Gerda’s feelings for Lily transcend the traditional categories of gender and desire, turning to a deep spiritual connection, reflecting a deep respect for individual free choice and identity construction.



As a representative queer film, this film truly reflects the tension between identity anxiety and social discipline that transgender people generally face in real life. In the process of constantly striving for individual identity and social legitimacy, the transgender group attempts to transcend the gender reference system set by the heterosexual normative structure and construct its unique gender position outside the mainstream gender discourse (Liu Weibang, 2022). From the perspective of gender studies, the film not only presents the individual process of gender cognition, but also touches on the structural relationship between gender and social power.

As Judith Butler puts forward in her classic work *Gender Trouble* (1990), gender is not an intrinsic or essential existence, but a performative behavior that is constantly repeated, executed and constructed in the social context. Gender is not “what one is, but what one does”(Butler, Judith, 1990). Lily’s experience is a vivid interpretation of this theory: she gradually “made” her female identity through the continuous practice and reaffirmation of her female identity, whether in clothing, behavior, or psychological identity. This performance is not false or disguised, but a subversive response to mainstream gender norms, and a political act to liberate gender from physiological destiny.

Gender issues can never exist independently from the social context in which they are embedded; the deeply rooted gender discipline model in social culture determines the path and feasibility of gender identity. Therefore, gender is essentially a social mirror that reflects its complexity and fluidity. Lily’s life experience not only provides a vivid case for gender diversity, but also reflects the subjective initiative of gender performance and the possibility of individuals striving for autonomous identity expression in the disciplinary structure.

Her brave choice and struggle process are not only a symbol of individual liberation, but also provide emotional resonance and identification demonstration for contemporary transgender people, encouraging them to face themselves, challenge discipline, and bravely “become their true selves.”

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