

**THE MODERN TIRESIAS: A CRITIQUE ON CAL,
THE PROTAGONIST OF JEFFREY EUGENIDES' *MIDDLESEX***

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Abstract

Literature reflects a fascination with the regime of man's identity. Contemporary English literature projects man's quest for identity against the background of a fragmented and confusing world. The novel Middlesex written by Jeffrey Eugenides guides us through the everyday life of the protagonist Cal/lie. Working almost as a fictional biography, it presents us the complexities of not being like everybody else.

Key words: Gender, gender identity crisis, intersexuality, heterosexuality, sexual binaries, homosexuality, hermaphrodite

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“Eugenides does such a superb job of capturing the ironies and trade-offs of assimilation that Calliope’s evolution into Cal doesn’t feel sudden at all, but more like a transformation we have been through ourselves” (Freeman 29).

It is a fascinating question that how literature makes ordinary characters seem extraordinary and, at the same time how it makes extraordinary characters seem like more common. The novel *Middlesex* written by Jeffrey Eugenides guides us through the everyday life of the protagonist Cal/lie. Working almost as a fictional biography, it presents us with the complexities of not being like everybody else. It is this balance between creating a character one can relate to, at the same time, as this character is ‘other’ to the readers that makes this novel so powerful. The novel deals with a central question that all strive to answer in life: who am I and how do I want to live my life.

Middlesex is a dream of the transcendence of categorization; of humanism, love and understanding. Jeffrey Eugenides acknowledges in his literature that there is no possible way to anticipate the genetic disorders, unfalteringly strict mothers or the implications of the cultural label. The conceivability of humanness is imperative to the oppression of intersex individuals. If they are continuously ‘othered’ beyond humanity, they are in danger of remaining unintelligible, not only in terms of sexual categorization, but as human being altogether. It is precisely this fear that makes *Middlesex*’s protagonist Cal’s choice of gender identification so profound.

“But in the end, it wasn’t up to me” (Eugenides 439). As Cal, the protagonist of the novel says throughout the novel, the issue of Cal’s gender identity is not up to him to solve because of the genetic discourse in which Eugenides participates. This is most clearly

represented by the number of pages that the author spends on detailing the incestuous family affairs that lead up to Cal being born with a mutation on a specific chromosome. Due to this, Cal is robbed off any power over his own gender identity, and the social stigma of incest can be argued to be transformed to being an intersex.

The gender binaries are not something god-given or inherently true, and may therefore be treated as something that can be critiqued or changed. From the beginning of the novel itself the readers can find examples of the gender identity crisis that the protagonist undergoes. Cal says that, "I was born twice: first as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and as a teenage boy in an emergency room near Petrosky, Michigan, in August of 1974" (1). These words themselves are suggestive of the death of Calliope Helen Stephandies and the resurrection of Cal Stephandies. In other words, the transformation from a female body to a male body. Even before the birth of Callie, her gender was up for debate. As her parents wished for a girl, Cal's grandmother predicted that the child would be a boy. So, from this point itself, Cal's gender identity was a little bit of confusing or ambiguous. In her 1999 preface to the second edition of her work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler writes that she "opposed those regimes of truth that stipulated certain kinds of gendered expressions were found to be false or derivative, and others, true and original" (8). This means that there is no body that is by its own appearance a gendered body, but a body becomes gendered by the culture prescribing significance to what is present and what is absent.

In his narrative, Cal seeks to justify who he is through his experience. Though living as a heterosexually identified masculine intersexual, Cal, the narrator insists that Callie, the homosexually identified female remains within him. In the search for identity that exists within the narrative, Cal demonstrates that identity is fluid and changing with every experience that one can be 'other' even to oneself. Cal's narrative not only establishes a space for the 'other' but for the 'impossible'. Cal's 'impossible' life refers to his transformation from Callie to Cal and his ability to accept Callie and Cal, not as other or oppositional to each other, but as parts of the whole of himself. Moreover, Cal himself demonstrates that he can be simultaneously masculine and feminine. Just like Tiresias in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, enjoyed the life as a woman and man in his life time, Cal too

accepted and enjoyed both the lives. At the same time, there is no doubt in the conclusion of Cal's narrative that identifies as a masculine intersexual. According to Cal, the reality of identity is what one can get used to.

Cal's narrative is an acknowledgement and the acceptance of the 'other' within himself as inevitable and as a completion of his identity. However, the novel extends beyond himself to the reader, demonstrating that to accept Cal's narrative is to accept the possibility of 'otherness' not only within his story, but within ourselves. Although Cal says that he lives as a man, there are several instances in *Middlesex* that seem to indicate that his gender identity does not fit into the binary of man-woman. Eugenides' use of the word 'hermaphrodite' throughout the novel implies that *Middlesex* does not speak on behalf of the intersex individuals in society, but in fact exerts some kind of normative violence. Thus the novel *Middlesex* shows how literature can introduce new ideas, broaden our horizon, and perhaps also challenges the existing understanding of particular topics such as gender and gender identity.

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