

# Middlesex: Is it Really a Social and/or Psychological Problem or a Medical Condition?

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**Abstract**—*Middlesex*, the title of Jeffrey Eugenides' epic 2002 novel, promises ambiguity. The inconsistency between the hybridity implied by the title of the novel itself and its writer's contrastingly boundary-conscious first line points to a contradiction at the heart of the narrative. This discrepancy is underscored by the novel's conclusion, which apparently celebrates intersexuality while simultaneously endorsing gender conventions. *Middlesex* represents the reality of transgender experience in order to critique prejudices against those deemed "Other" in terms of sexuality or gender. In this paper, I historicize Eugenides' novel against these developments in order to shed new light on Callie's refusal of corrective surgery and on Cal's subsequent choice to live as a "stealth" man, to employ the term used by transgender and inter-sexed communities to describe individuals who do not publicly disclose the fact of their gender transition.

**Keywords:** Deficiency, Incest, Intersex, Transgender, 5ARD.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The novel features a narrator as protagonist, Cal (previously Calliope), who literarily embodies sex and gender middle grounds: she/he is a male pseudo-hermaphrodite or, more precisely, somebody who was born apparently a girl, was subsequently brought up as such, but finally underwent a painful process of physical, psychic, and cultural transformation that turned her/him into what society considers to be a man. The narrator offers an extensive scientific report that may account for these shifts in sex and gender. However, science cannot fully explain the existence of an uncertain and unstable gender-sex identity that, echoing Judith.

Butler's notion of performativity, does not allow for any sense of closure. "I'm not androgynous in the least," the narrator says, "5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome allows for normal biosynthesis and peripheral action of testosterone, in utero, neonatally, and in puberty. In other words, I operate in society as a man. I use the men's room. Never the urinals, always the stalls.... I've lived more than half my life as a male, and by now everything comes naturally. When Calliope surfaces, she does so like a childhood speech impediment. Suddenly there she is again, doing a hair flip, or checking her nails. It's a little like being possessed. She rises up inside me, wearing my skin like a loose robe".<sup>[1]</sup>

"As the girl's gender identity was firmly established as female at the time her condition was discovered, a decision to implement feminizing surgery along with corresponding hormonal treatments seems correct. To leave the genitals as they are today would expose her to all manner of humiliation. Though it is possible that the surgery may result in partial or total loss of erotosexual sensation, sexual pleasure is only one factor in a happy life. The ability to marry and pass as a normal woman in society are also important goals, both of which will not be possible without feminizing surgery and hormone treatment. Also, it is hoped that new methods or surgery will minimize the effects of erotosexual dysfunction brought about by surgeries in the past, when feminizing surgery was in its infancy."<sup>[2]</sup>

This small portion of the case study report is discoursed in the text titled *Middlesex*, written by Jeffrey Eugenides, the researcher is going to discuss in this paper in detail. Here, the focus would be on 'intersex' narrator who, according to his own beliefs "born twice: first as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974".<sup>[3]</sup> Moreover, the narrator feels "another birth (third birth) (is) coming on" at the age of forty-one.<sup>[4]</sup> That is how the narrator starts narrating his story by using the symbol of the river or the city – both, here, are used as the symbol of civilization or evolution, and also, of reproduction – especially, the river. Moreover, any river and city carries many secrets with them; Detroit is one of them for the readers, here. The suburban Middlesex street, Grosse Pointe is also an appropriate example for the theme and plot line and for the name itself, too. It is a house used as a symbol in itself for the modern conveniences and life-style; providing a hint of the future hybridity or the strong thematic changes in people's lives who are living in it.

In Cal, Eugenides presents a figure who is not only perceived by himself and others as tragic in the 1960s and 1970s but who holds to the un-livability of intersex identity in the twenty-first century. The textual strategies the novel deploys may reflect the difficulties of living with a "disqualified" identity," but they also affirm the validity of

that disqualification. Cal's condition, - a genetic problem- "5-alpha reductase deficiency," is not the only, and by no means the most common cause of intersexuality, but it is the only form emphatically linked to incest. Thus, this paper concentrates on the psychological problems Cal faces after he meets the doctor with his family in New York, how his life changes; his perceptions change towards himself and the people like him in the society. At the end, he confirms his individual 'identity' without attending any kind of medical intervention - 'corrective' surgeries.

The text comes in front of the readers with remarkable storytelling capacity of the narrator, beautiful and appropriate blending of the mythological things/characters/meanings with the modern psychological approaches although there are sturdy and standard touches of genetical science here and there. Even the past is recreated by the narrator. Thus, it claims triumphantly for its complex yet strongly-engaging narrative voice containing so much variety of tone and moods according to various situations and places. Sometimes it becomes very sad and tragic but majority of times it becomes comic (and has a touch of pun, also) in such a length that would give a reader impression of irony and/or comic elements with the strong touch of farce altogether.

Moreover, the references of monstrosity and abnormality are provided in immense variety in the text, too, as much as one of the chapters is named 'Minotaurs'. Even the subject experts or doctors interpret things in an odd way with their biased eyes and minds. The things are complicated because of such behavior from various groups of people everywhere. There are some others who humiliate and misinterpret the problems. Many of them want to take disadvantage of the wrong circumstances or situations and by doing so, majority of times; they exploit someone's bodily weaknesses to gain money. They mistreat people who are not so-called 'normal' according to the social norms set by some orthodox ideology. Cal remarks, "But I was beginning to understand something about normality. Normality wasn't normal. It couldn't be. If normality were normal, everybody could leave it alone. They could sit back and let normality manifest itself".<sup>[5]</sup>

Book Four of the novel opens with Calliope's full realization of her/his hermaphrodite status, a condition that she/he still tries to fix with the help of the *Webster's Dictionary*, the ideological book that classifies her/him as "monster".<sup>[6]</sup> However, the established notion of monstrosity has also been ironically undermined by the narrator in her/his continuous play with the binary Same/Other and their reference to "humanity." If, in categorical terms, the monster is a being other than human, the narrator has progressively stressed that, from the beginning of the twentieth century, people have also become other than human. We have become post-human entities. Borrowing from strategies incorporated in the American novel by Thomas Pynchon, and continued by cyberpunk and minimalist authors, Eugenides also reports in *Middlesex* on the technological change of the human self

into the post-human entity suggested by Norbert Wiener already in 1954.<sup>[7]</sup> The shift, according to the narrator, started in 1913 when people stopped being human and became a mere mechanism in the assembly line of Ford's car factory in Detroit.<sup>[8]</sup> The assumption of post-humanity means for the narrator the understanding that her/his story is virtually a movie ("and so now, having been born, I'm going to rewind the film,"),<sup>[9]</sup> and that, as corresponds to cybernetic beings, our insides are "a vast computer code, all 1s and 0s, an infinity of sequences".<sup>[10]</sup> The traditional limits of monstrosity imposed by the categorical dictionary become, thus, subverted by the kaleidoscopic ironic narrator.

Even the Greek theme based narrative style is so perfectly set in this text that the narrator is not the hero with any vice or weakness of his own but s/he has to face 'unusual' kind of life because of the fate. And finally the narrator achieves the success in accepting the truth regarding the gender issue as well as the family secret is open so he gets to know the reason behind his being a person with 5-Alpha Reductase Deficiency syndrome. There are plenty of intertextual references used in the novel which shows writer's preparation before writing this work and also, some other trans-sexual syndromes are discussed (with the live examples of people suffering from the problems) like Carmen - "a pre-op, male-to-female transsexual"<sup>[11]</sup> and Zora - "a lady, having Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome"<sup>[12]</sup>, also. The narrator learns about many types of hermaphroditism like hyperadrenocorticism, feminizing testes, cryptorchidism and also Klinefelter's Syndrome from Zora's manuscript.

The term true hermaphrodite implies the presence of both ovarian and testicular tissue. In contrast, a pseudo-hermaphrodite represents a disagreement between the phenotypic (genital) and gonadal (based on the histologic characteristics of the gonads) sex. For example, a female pseudo-hermaphrodite has ovaries but also has male external genitalia; a male pseudo-hermaphrodite has testicular tissue but female-type genitalia.<sup>[13]</sup> Here, in the case of Cal, we can understand that the hidden testes in his abdomen and hypospadiac penis concealed inside his/her so-called clitoris which prove him a pseudo-hermaphrodite male.

5-alpha-reductase deficiency is a condition that affects male sexual development before birth and during puberty. Basically, mutations in the SRD5A2 gene cause 5-alpha-reductase deficiency. Being genetically male, these people, with one X and one Y chromosome in each cell, and they have male gonads (testes). The SRD5A2 gene instructs for making an enzyme called steroid 5-alpha-reductase 2. The work of this enzyme is to direct male sexual development. Explicitly, it is in charge of a chemical reaction that converts the hormone testosterone to DHT. Here, in the people who have 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome, their bodies, however, do not produce enough of a hormone called dihydrotestosterone (DHT) because of the mutations' existence in SRD5A2 gene. DHT has a critical role in male sexual development, and a

shortage of this hormone disrupts the formation of the external sex organs before birth.

Many people with 5-alpha-reductase deficiency are born with outward genitalia that seem feminine. In some other cases, the external genitalia do not look clearly male or clearly female; it is, also, called ambiguous genitalia in that sense. There are some other examples where infants have genitalia which look chiefly male but often with micro-penis (in the condition, the penis size is unusually small) and the urethra has the opening on the underside of the penis. This condition is known as hypospadias in medicinal science.<sup>[14]</sup>

From the very first page, the readers get the idea that they are going to read about something unusual as the narrator, here, is having multiple identities but the identities are based on the professional or religious backgrounds rather than the gender identifications we normally refer to for everyone as male or female. The first person narrator describes him in this way, "My birth certificate lists my name as Calliope Helen Stephanides. My most recent driver's license (from the Federal Republic of Germany) records my first name simply as Cal. I'm a former field hockey goalie, long-standing member of the Save-the-Manatee Foundation, rare attendant at the Greek Orthodox liturgy, and, for most of my adult life, an employee of the US State Department".<sup>[15]</sup> But in the very next statement, the mood changes and he adds, "Like Tiresias, I was first one thing and then the other".<sup>[16]</sup>

The writer's focus remains the problem and its psychological solution rather than the various aspects of the society thinking about transsexuals and so even if sometimes, the narration becomes bit ironic, it provides with emotion of understanding and maturity. Body becomes an endless torture and mind becomes a never-ending tumult for the narrator. The constant possibility of 'Otherness' becomes severe for him. He is repetitively loud-mouthed and aggressive about the 'question of identity' one may have in this kind of situation.

Language seems to be inadequate to describe Cal's feelings and yet he uses language to communicate his experiences throughout the novel. He describes his anxiety about the language in this way, "I've never had the right words to describe my life, and now that I've entered my story, I need them more than ever".<sup>[17]</sup> His narrative, in this way, becomes not just any simple search for his identity but also he wants to rediscover it as a whole. His problematic relationship to language is influenced by his intersexual body and derives from society's deceptive notion of what Foucault refers to as every person's "true sex" in his introduction to Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite.<sup>[18]</sup>

The novel comes in front of the readers as a bunch of fragmented and incoherent experiences of the feminine as well as masculine versions of the narrator's life out of which he pursues a complete and coherent identity. This is the reason why Cal states, "I don't care if I write a great book anymore,

but just one which, whatever its flaws, will leave a record of my *impossible* life" (Italics are added for emphasis).<sup>[19]</sup>

The narrator gives a picture of his family members being people who seldom discuss 'sex' and never use any sexual terminology in their public conversation or exhibit their knowledge regarding it, also. Even a husband and wife do not talk about it normally but the conversation turns into suggestive or indirect references like the above example. Cal describes how his brother's sexual apparatus has a name but there is no tag available to Cal/liope's apparatus since at that time, the family knows Cal/liope as a girl. It gives a picture of Orthodox family in a real sense. The atmosphere of the house, also, confirms that there is a strong communication gap among the adults and the children of the house that becomes a hurdle in the path of development and understanding of the body for Cal. There is no one in the house who can guide him about what kinds of changes are taking place and why it happens in the specific way. The atmosphere is blocked by the inflexible rudimentary mentions but never the detail. They share an awful and dense silence particularly in the matter of 'sex' or discussion of it.

As the child psychology suggests that if any matter is restricted or not talked about in the family, the children of that household can never be comfortable talking or discussing about that type of matter during their whole lives. Children have so many questions as they grow up and if, at that stage, they are not answered or they are informed not to question related to something, they will stop asking questions at all. Likewise, Cal gets a new identity as the atmosphere of the house is orthodox and at school, he as Callie gets to know that there is a huge difference between the body Cal/lie possesses and the bodies of other girls.

Psychologically, if we consider the development of Cal's life, we can easily understand why gender is a cultural product and sex – a biological one. Intersexed people, according to the medical practitioners, have to be defined as a kind of "medical emergency"<sup>[20]</sup> and has to go through some or other sort of medical or surgical involvement, even if the intersex condition does not necessarily in and of itself pose a threat to the concerned person's immediate or even future health. These surgeries are done when the cases are babies/ infants. The biggest ethical questions connected with these kinds of interventions are related to the cosmetic surgeries on a case/patient that is, actually, unable to give consent and they are also not aware of the life-long medical intrusions afterwards and their horrid side-effects through which the subject sometimes loses his/her sexual functionality or eroto-sensual sensations. I would like to quote Cheryl Chase who criticizes these kind of medical practice by stating: "Pediatric surgeries literalize what might otherwise be considered a theoretical operation: the attempted production of normatively sexed bodies and gendered subjects through constitutive acts of violence".<sup>[21]</sup>

This narrative gives a chance to the writer to develop the narrator like Cal who has the knowledge of 'before' and 'after' like the binary logic. Cal puts it simply but thematically in front of the readers when he says, "Like Tiresias, I was first one thing and then the other".<sup>[22]</sup> Tiresias is one of the most important mystics and fortune-tellers in Greek mythology and a figure that symbolizes both the hermaphrodite condition of the narrator and his narrative omniscience and insight, since the mythological figure was able to experience the world both as a man and a woman.

In a consideration of *Middlesex*, Thea Hillman, Board Chair of the Intersex Society of America, notes: "People with intersex continue to be used to satisfy the interests of others: as scientific specimens, as naked teaching models for medical students, as literary metaphors, as gags for popular sitcoms, and lastly – where we at least might get a cut of the profits! – as circus freaks and peep show attractions."<sup>[23]</sup>

Similarly, Cal is misused in many of these ways throughout the text. The medical practitioners and their ideologies are discussed in much detail by Cal. He portrays himself as a 'thing' for so many times: for example, he is a thing which can become something else, according to himself like Tiresias; the doctors use his body as an object; Dr. Luce tries to get advantage of Cal's condition to prove his hypotheses and to his students and other doctor – researchers, Cal is assumed to be an object which is very interesting thing for experiments. Cal clearly mentions their eagerness when in Dr. Luce's cabin, he meets two doctors – Dr. Craig and Dr. Winters<sup>[24]</sup> and also, mentions their treatment/ behavior towards Cal at the Gender Clinic. Cal remains an object for Ben Scheer who helps Cal a lot during Cal's journey towards California and he, also, wants to take advantage of the situation. The story takes a new turn and comes Presto, who gives Cal a job but at the place where he can misuse Cal's being 'intersexed' for his own welfare rather than any moral support and motivation to Cal.

Calliope's progression in textual power occurs when she has access to Dr. Luce's report on her case in which, to the protagonist's horror, the scientist recommends her/his castration.<sup>[25]</sup> Her/his panicky escape takes Calliope along different places and cultural motifs of the early seventies until she—now becoming an apparent "he"—settles in iconic San Francisco. Along her route West, Calliope cuts her hair and becomes Cal. Her/his fortunes take Cal to become a bum in Golden Gate Park for a short period. Subsequently, the protagonist discloses her/his "freaky" body to public contemplation in a peep-show. Seen from Butler's theory of performativity,<sup>[26]</sup> the protagonist surrenders to the commodification of the body in stage performances. Cal's father's death will bring her/him back to the Stephanides family and to the re-encounter with Desdemona, the mythic matriarch who unveils the biological reason—incest—that motivated Cal's hermaphroditic condition.<sup>[27]</sup>

In this final part of the novel, the narrator frequently speculates about the formation of gender and sex identity. She/he becomes ever more concerned about the works of constructionist and essentialist theorists on the formation of individual identity. Cal's digressions come to an end in one final act of dynamic conciliation that surpasses categorical thinking, biological determinism, and postmodern cultural criticism. The narrator's queer-oriented conclusion is that gender-sex identity and the new type of being that she/he represents are a result of both nature and nurture, a conclusion that may help readers to discover the categorical positions that also permeated postmodernist criticism and, especially, some forms of poststructuralist cultural analysis.<sup>[28]</sup> In the early seventies, postmodernism and post-structuralism combined to eradicate gender differences. Eventually the belief that identity was socially conditioned developed into a pamphlet war between the new generation of cultural critics and the traditional camp of so-called essentialists who contended that the role of biology was primordial in accounting for gender differentiation. Cal, narrator and cultural critic, explicitly refers to these theories and how they informed her/his own case.<sup>[29]</sup> Yet, in the end of the long narrative, she/he makes readers realize that *Middlesex* is also a novel about race, culture, and colonialism. Categorical discrimination is so entrenched that it may deprive the individual of the belief in the ultimate American myth: "I'm not sure," Cal says, "with a grandmother like mine, if you can ever become a true American in the sense of believing that life is about the pursuit of happiness".<sup>[30]</sup>

In this crossroad of contending identity theories, the narrator stands unsatisfied, conscious that her/his indeterminate identity is neither based solely on nature nor entirely socially constructed, but is a combination of both. A "strange new possibility is arising," she/he says at the end of *Middlesex*. "Compromised, indefinite, but not entirely obliterated: free will is making a comeback. Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind".<sup>[31]</sup> In order to reach such a conclusion, Greek-American author Jeffrey Eugenides has needed more than five hundred pages of intertextual irony, historical denunciation, modernist nostalgia, scientific research, and big doses of thoughtful digressions. However, the results add up in the demands for a new type of ethical responsibility, one that openly advocates for a hybrid space of tolerance for individuals and communities.

## REFERENCES

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