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TAILORING A FEMININE SELF: CROSS- DRESSING AND GENDER-CROSSING IN *THE DANISH GIRL*

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Abstract

This paper is a study of Tom Hooper's movie, *The Danish Girl* which narrates the life of one of the earliest transsexual, Lili Elbe. The paper would be focusing on the aspect of transvestism/cross-dressing and the process of 'male-femaling' associated with it using the theory put forward by Richard Ekins, the prominent social psychologist. According to Ekins's study, there are five phases in the career path of a male femaler which may take place in three major modes, body femaling, erotic femaling and gender femaling. The protagonist of the film, Einer Wegener, at a particular stage in his life, realizes that he is trapped in a wrong body and finds the need to free himself from the bondage. Set in 1920's, when the studies on transgenderism had not been developed, Einer tries desperately to seek an answer for his cross gender behaviour passing through the five stages of a body female until he consolidates it through a sex reassignment surgery and becomes a transsexual. The paper also tries to analyze the importance of sartorial practices in defining one's gender identity. Borrowing from Ekins, terms like male femaling and female have been used instead of transgender/transsexual.

Key words: Cross- dressing, transgender, transsexual, male femaling, body female etc

The term 'transvestiten' was coined by Magnus Hirschfeld in the beginning of the 20th century to denote all types of cross dressing including transsexuals. He identified ten variations of transvestism which encompasses different groups like homosexuals, heterosexuals, bisexuals, asexual, fetishist and transgendered people but they were called transvestites in lieu of these terminologies. Among them, those who cross dress with the desire for sex change was termed as the complete transvestite. Later, in 1953, Benjamin differentiated between transvestism and transsexualism. He said, "Cross-dressing exists (with few exceptions) in practically all transsexuals, while transsexual desires are not evident (although possibly latent) in most transvestites" (qtd in Docter 58). Though a transvestite or cross dresser need not be a transsexual, and both a transvestite and a transsexual come under the broader category of 'transgender', it could be deduced that 'transvestism' has been an important phase in the lives of most of the transsexuals. The life narratives of many transsexuals testify this fact. Most of the transgendered people, during their

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childhood and adolescence adorn themselves in the clothes of the opposite gender or the gender they consider themselves to be, since, dress is one of the strongest cultural codes exhibiting one's gender identity. Sometimes they fail to recognize the reason for such behavior. This is the stage of gender confusion or anxiety. What seems to be a private affair in the beginning would turn out to be a permanent marker of identity in the later stages of the life of a transsexual.

Many models of transgender identity development have been formed. The models developed by theorists like Anne Bolin and Frank Lewins on Male to Female transsexuals begin with gender confusion and anxiety moving towards their identity as a woman, then a transsexual and finally, a natural woman denying the identity of a transsexual. The prominent British sociologist, Richard Ekins who has written extensively on gender identity, puts forward the major phases in the life of a male femaler based on his field study conducted on 200 participants. In the initial phase, according to Ekin's study, the first instance of cross-dressing may happen by chance or upon somebody else's encouragement. This need not necessarily be in childhood but can even happen in adulthood. The cross dresser, unable to rationalize the behaviour, would consider it as a temporary aberration. The wish to be a girl is dormant in the person but feels it as something unacceptable and not 'normal'. This was considered to be a primary deviance by many deviancy theorists,

especially, when the studies on transgenderism remained underdeveloped. The term, 'deviant' itself has pejorative connotations associated with it but is vital in understanding the plight of these individuals in society since what is normal/natural are decided and dictated by the society.

The film, *The Danish Girl* is a biopic of Lili Elbe who is considered to be one among the early recipients of sex reassignment surgery. In the film, the central character, Einer Wegener, an artist realizes that he belongs to the opposite gender during an epiphanic moment, while being asked to pose as a female model for his wife's painting. Einer refuses at first but when forced, he wears the stockings, shoes and lays the gown across him. That is the first instance when noticeable changes happen in him. He starts running his fingers involuntarily around the beaded cuff revealing his feminine self. When Ulla, Gerda's friend turns up with a bouquet of lilies, she playfully places it in Einar's hands and calls him Lili, the name that he adopts for his female persona. Even before this particular incident, Einar gets an explicit sensual pleasure when the feathered hems of gowns brush his cheek during one of his visits to the costume shop in the Opera house. In the beginning femaling phase, the person would not try to disclose his cross gender behaviour to others.

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The second stage that Ekins refers to is fantasizing femaling. The masculinity is under threat in this stage but still the female tries to maintain the boundary between the two selves. In this stage, cross dressing is partial whereas in the third phase, this fantasy becomes stronger and cross dressing becomes serious. It does not limit itself with dress but the femaler tries to perfect it with ornaments, make-up and other accessories. When Einer remarks that Gerda's body is pretty, she playfully tells him that she would let him borrow it to which Einer replies, "I might enjoy that"(15:47-51). Einer had already started fantasizing him as a woman though he does not let the feeling intrude his marital life. Gerda also notices Einer wearing her lace edged slip underneath his shirt but tries to be unmindful of that incident. Even at this stage, cross dressing in Einer is not rampant yet he is doing/ performing female in private. Richard F. Docter, in his survey conducted among cross dressers finds that eighty five percent of the participants cross dressed before the age of fifteen. Nevertheless, he warns us against making such sweeping generalizations since cross dressing can begin at a later stage in life too for which Einer Wegener is an example. Gerda, awe struck by the femininity of Einer's features, tries to create a new Wegener through her paintings. Watching the paintings, an explicable expression starts radiating in the eyes of Einer. Gerda's encouragement brings out the

incubated femininity in Gerder. Einer starts developing the feeling that he is acting out/'performing' in front of others as Einer Wegener and that his true self is that of a woman. For the same reason, he concedes to dress up as a woman for the Artist's Ball when Gerda suggests of giving something different, to go as someone else for the party. Gerda applies make up over his face, once again to be her female model, but to her surprise his movements become more and more feminine. Now, Einer has begun using make up and accessories of a woman and learning to imitate the movements of a woman. He gets more interested than Gerda at the prospect of going in disguise for the Artist's Ball. In Gerda's absence, Einer rehearses his role before the party wearing the slips and shoes. In fact, he is doing femaling, to put in Ekins's words. "Not only is the female 'betwixt and between' two worlds, but he has no clear notion of what he is doing or its likely outcome"(Ekins43). The film has been criticized for the fake portrayal of transgendered people since imitating the gestures of a woman alone does not transform a man into a woman. Though Einar Wegener's initial role playing as a woman, giving too much importance to dress, lipstick and other accessories seem to testify the criticism, it is the self which precedes the gestures. If Einer's self were not that of a woman, he would not have agreed to cross dress for the party and he would not have been doing female in

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private. In one occasion, Gerda questions Einer whether she was responsible for his change for which he retorts that the instinct had always been in him. This is further proved from an episode from his childhood when his friend, Hans recalls that he looked pretty wearing his grandmother's apron that he couldn't help kissing him.

In the Artists' Ball, Einer dressed as a woman, passes successfully who is introduced by Gerda as Einer's cousin Lili. Meanwhile, a man named, Henrik who doubts the true identity of Lili as a woman gets sexually attracted towards him which becomes intolerable for Gerda. While Henrik is a homosexual, it is the self of Lili that responds to his advances. Performing femaling becomes more frequent in Einer's life and he feels more comfortable in being Lili than Einer. When Gerda reminds Einer that they were playing a game, Einer replies, "I know we were but then it changed"(35:46-52). In men who start cross dressing at a later stage in life, particularly after marriage, the divorce rate has seen to be increasing according to studies. While cross dressing as such do not affect the marital life of many, the gradual transformation of the person to the opposite gender through cross dressing will. Gerda, unlike other wives, did not want to abandon Einer and promises to support him throughout even at the cost of losing her husband to Lili for ever. In the third phase of doing femaling, the female vasillates

between cross-dressing episodes and tries desperately to stop what he is doing. Einer, too attempts to return to his former self many a times but to Gerda's agony, he is unable to discard the Lili out of him. Still, the situation remains incomprehensible and when Gerda compels him to consult a doctor, he gets agitated and leaves the apartment. In doing femaling phase, the female, apart from cross dressing, may also try experimenting with hiding male genitalia to make it appear as vulva. In a scene from the costume shop, we see Einer admiring his naked body in a mirror. He tries to make it more feminine by hiding his genitalia and trying to make an approximation of a vagina between his thighs. The frequency of performing as female increases at this stage.

The fourth phase is constituting femaling, where the person tries to find meanings for his activities either through professional guidance or associating him with similar people/groups. Considering the setting of the film, *The Danish Girl*, 1920s was a period when studies on social psychology/psychology had not been advanced or even begun. Behaviours like this were presumed to be deviance or perversion which required psychiatric treatment or legal punishments. The consequences were really daunting that people with such behaviour feared to come out of their closets. Terms like transsexual or transgender were not even coined and

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hence, it was impossible to identify oneself with those kinds of groups. Oliver Cauldwell, the prominent twentieth century sexologist who introduced the term, transsexual in English was more tolerant of transvestism but regarded the transsexual as mentally unhealthy. He connected it to 'unfavourable childhood environment' but Harry Benjamin was more empathetic and favoured a biological explanation. He, like Narcyz Lukianowicz considered transsexualism as an extreme form of transvestism where the candidate is no longer satisfied with mere cross-dressing and would go for a sex change. Einer is taken to Dr. Hexler who diagnoses it as a chemical imbalance. Despite the radiation treatment, when the condition did not improve, Hexler tells Gerda, "I am afraid your husband's aberrant thinking persists.

Do you keep a lock on your wardrobe?" (50:17-24). He finally concludes that Mr. Wegener is insane which is resisted by Gerda in a fit of rage. Two days later, she receives a mail from Dr. Hexler on which was written that had no choice but to treat him for perversion. Both Gerda and Einer feel utterly distressed about his condition since no physician was competent enough to offer a solution. Meanwhile, Gerda's paintings with Lili as the model gain attention and she gets an offer to exhibit her painting in Paris and she accepts it. Einer, who is a frequent cross dresser now, is introduced as Lili to others, even to his friend, Hans. He sits dressed up

as Lili when Hans arrives at their house with Gerda. The same night, he asks Gerda for her night dress but she reminds him that Lili has never spent the night. Einer convinces her, "It does matter what I wear. So when I dream, Lili dreams" (1:06:07-20). Now, it is Lili who desires to pose as model for Gerda's paintings. Even when Gerda feels helpless and desperate without her husband, Lili makes vain attempts at transitioning to Einer. He has started looking more like Lili even when dressed as Einer. He admits, "I don't think I can give you what you want" (1:13:49-53). In a conversation with Hans, he says, "Every morning I promise myself I'll spend the whole day as Einer. But there is so little Einer left" (1:18:57- 1:19:04). He even thinks of killing Einer but the thought of killing Lili too prevents him from doing so. At this stage of 'constituting femaling', he takes much effort in understanding himself. He tries to solve the mystery through books and hence visits the Bibliotheque Nationale (national library of France in Paris) and reads works like *The Normal and Abnormal Man, A Scientific study of Sexual Immorality* etc. As suggested by Hans, Einer/Lili goes from one doctor to another only to be labelled as a homosexual and a schizophrenic. It is Ulla who understands Einer's condition better and she refers to a doctor who is interested in men like Einer. Finally, as proposed by Ulla, Gerda takes him to Dr. Warnekros who could make a correct diagnosis of Einer's condition.

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From Warnekros, Einer also comes to know that there are others like him. He suggests two surgeries as a cure; the first one is penectomy and the second, to construct a vagina. The doctor also warns him of an irreversible change and risks of failure and infection. Now, Einer has sorted out what/who he is. "Once the label has been adopted, past identities are typically re-interpreted in the light of the newly discovered 'condition' " (Ekins44).

In the final phase of consolidating femaling, the femaler decides whether the consolidation should centre on body femaling, erotic femaling or gender femaling. These three modes are akin to the concepts of sex, sexuality and gender. For a body femaler, the consolidation is through a sex changing surgery or in modern terms, gender reassignment surgery. With a completely feminized body, the person transforms into a woman and sheds the label of a transvestite/cross-dresser. The erotic femaler's focus would be on the sexual aspect while a gender femaler wishes to look and behave like a real woman. Here, body femaling happens in fantasy. From the above definitions, it could be deduced that Einer's/Lili's consolidation of femaling is centred around body. Hence, he goes to Dresden to undergo the surgery at Dr.Warnekkros's clinic. While the first operation proved to be a success, s/he contracts infection after the second one. Nevertheless, she dies a

woman in perfect joy, putting an end to the phase of a cross-dresser.

Throughout the film, dress plays an important role in dictating the identity of the central character as Einer or Lili. The role shifting happens with the sartorial practice in Einer. Initially, he identifies himself as Einer while wearing a male costume and Lili in a female costume. Gradually, he had to surrender to Lili's self for ever. Here, dress challenges the boundaries of the sexed body. A transvestite "can do more than simply express the distinction between sex and gender, but challenges, at least implicitly, the distinction between appearance and reality that structures a good deal of popular thinking about gender identity" (Butler 527). By repetition or "stylization of the body" (519), stylizations repeated for an unspecified period of time, Einer imbibes the gestures and movements of a woman which gradually turns out to be the signifier of his identity which is again consummated through surgery. Studying the identities of hijras, Gayathri Reddy also emphasizes the importance of both "sartorial and performative elements" in the "(re)construction of identity" (123). After the first operation, when Gerda calls her Einer, Lili responds, "For goodness' sake, Gerda, Einer is dead. We both have to accept that" (1:38:54-57). The surgery also means the metaphorical death of Einer giving way to Lili Elbe's name in history.

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