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## BREAKING THE COCOON: GENDER CONFORMING IN ALEX GINO'S GEORGE

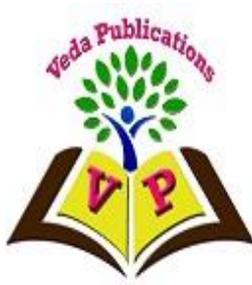
Geetanjali Rathore

(Aadarsh Sanskrit Mahavidyalya, Himachal Pradesh)

Email: [Manu.rathore2@gmail.com](mailto:Manu.rathore2@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT



Gender in the contemporary epoch resonates as the most generic term. In reality, the term gender encapsulates the crux of human existence and innumerable ways of being. Increasingly we have begun to ascertain one or the other digressed facet of gender and the human kind acquaints itself with a novel and defines a previously unidentified existing way of being. Transgender people find it difficult to conform to their gender identity and they languish in the unrecognizable world created by the incongruity of their bodies and minds. Present paper seeks to address the incongruity and reception of transgender men and women by family, friends and at workplace through Alex Gino's novel *George*.

**Keywords:** *Gender, Identity, Heteronormativity, Gender Confirming, Body Mind Incongruity.*

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Gender in the contemporary epoch resonates as the most generic term. In reality, the term gender encapsulates the crux of human existence and innumerable ways of being. Increasingly we have begun to ascertain one or the other digressed facet of gender and the human kind acquaints itself with a novel and defines a previously unidentified existing way of being. Gender has now developed into an umbrella term and it encompasses gays, lesbians, heterosexuals, queers and transgender. The gender discourse is yet in the process of formation and not yet all-inclusive therefore, there are many social stigmas and psychological pressures concerning the identity of transgender, which requires deliberation. The present article focuses on the gender identity struggle of the transgender protagonist of Alex Gino's book *George*. George is ten year old, assigned male sex at birth but always feels like a girl. The author refers to George the protagonist as she. George wants to participate in the school drama *Charlotte's Web* as the female spider Charlotte and not as Wilbur the pig. George's friend Kelly eventually helps her to perform as Charlotte thus asserting her desire to be a female. The novel elaborates George's endeavor of gender conforming to her latent identity, her social, physical, mental and day today struggles like bathing and confusion in using toilets. It also deliberates on issues like psychological trauma of a transgender child in school, home and with friends and siblings. It also ascertains a positive streak of acceptance in the younger generation, whereas the elders lacking in the nuances of these very many identities.

Transgender males or females find it problematic and depressing to identify with their life and biological sex. The bizarre incongruity prevents them from living a life that is normal according to them. A baby born with male reproductive organs or female reproductive organs fails to identify with their respective assigned genders. There is a perpetual desire for transition over to the other side and gain a desired identity and feeling of inclusiveness. The process of transitioning is absolutely life altering and thus requires great debate with one self. Alex Gino, the author of *George* is a transgender, does not identify with any gender in particular, and prefers to

use 'they' or 'them' for addressing. Therefore, the novel *George* could be the most authentic account of the kind of struggles that transgender endure in society. The emergence from a fake identity is neither easy nor appreciated because it subverts the usual heteronormative existence of society. Due to very many choices, the gender discourse is progressively burgeoning into a giant episteme where each gender is a different discourse in itself. Despite such a huge happening, the essentialist stance of heteronormativity, confronts as a dilemma to the people of other genders, therefore, a lackadaisical approach on the part of diverse genders in conforming and simultaneously gaining acceptance by not only society but also family members, siblings and workplace. Prior to conforming and asserting a desired identity, the most challenging task for a transgender person is to ascertain the kind of identity they would like to live with. Negotiation and negation with oneself leads to ascertaining and finally accustoming with the new identity. In the present novel, George has complete conviction of her identity but her psychological trauma is because she cannot perform her identity like any other person.

Even when George, the protagonist, is not aware of the worldly identity issues, she goes to her mother's room and uses her makeup and sandals to get ready like a girl. By the time, she is a ten year old she is sure of the disparity between her biological and psychological self. She cannot biologically connect with her identity but psychologically she is very clear of being a female. She is so sure of her female identity that she secretly hates it if someone calls her a "boy or mister". (Gino35) She is principally concerned with conforming to her gender candidly without any social or cultural judgements and marginalization. In the school play *Charlotte's Web*, George wants to play the role of Charlotte, the female spider, rather than Wilbur the pig. She is immensely distraught on not receiving the teacher's consent to perform her preferred role. The unhappy experience seeps down in her conscience and at night, it turns into a Freudian nightmare where she feels something suffocating her intensely and it is actually her bedsheet entangled in her feet. Her



teacher's dismissal bore the image of charlotte deeper in her mind and the author says:

Still she could not shake the image of being charlotte, as she ate her cereal and milk, as she dressed in jeans and T-shirt, as she brushed her teeth; she pictured herself greeting the audience with a fine "salutations". (Gino 25)

George cannot bring herself to perform a male role in the play since she cannot identify with it.

To her being, a man is equal to the *other* that does not relate to her own self. In the lack of this mind and body harmony Gorge's utter and intense struggle is visible when she mutters to herself, "Stupid, stupid, stupid. Stupid. Stupid body. Stupid brain. Stupid boys. Stupid girls. Stupid everything (Gino71). She so intensely believes that performing charlotte's role will help her break the cocoon and display her identity of a colorful butterfly. The author says," she had genuinely started believing that if people could see her onstage as charlotte, maybe they would see that she was a girl offstage too."(Gino 88) George's this desire for performance and stylizing herself can be explained with Butlers theory of performativity where Butler says," gender.....congeals over time to produce the appearance of a substance , of a natural sort of being". (Butler,33) However, Judith uses this definition to explain the social construction of gender but George through performance wants to create and congeal an identity for herself.

Other than exploring and living feminine facet of her personality, desire to perform on stage is also a yearning for receiving an acceptance from the society. The divergent gender streak is against the oppressive norms of the accepted traditions and culture therefore this earnest desire to seek the approval. Butler says," Gender is a corporeal style an act or a sequence of acts," a strategy which has cultural survival at its end, since those who do not "do" their gender correctly are punished by the society. (Butler 139-40) George has complete conviction that she is alone in her struggle. On the

contrary to live her identity George always tries to find some alone time. She tries to find acquaintance and friendship in the pictures of the girls in her hidden magazines. In the opening of the novel itself once she finds herself alone at home she takes her denim bag filled with magazines to the bathroom and sits there glazing through the glistening papers of the magazine staring at the girls and believing them to be her friends. Mesmerized by their makeups and lipsticks she imagines herself to be one among them. She gets perturbed when she hears her elder brother Scott coming up the stairs. She loves to stay in the bathroom with her magazine friends but not with her body. The incongruence between her body and mind is so strong that she almost hates her body just as she loves her desire. She cannot even endure to bathe with the body. Her hatred is visible when Gino mentions that while bathing:

She immersed her body in the warm water and tried not to think about what was between her legs, but there it was, bobbing in front of her .....then she wrapped the towel around her torso, up by her armpits the way girls do....(Gino 45)

Watching a transgender woman Tina's interview enables her to confront her real identity. She understands about the concept of transgender woman. In order to negotiate her identity and her inclination towards being a girl she reads the internet and finally understands the base of her desire. The author says:

George had seen an interview on television a few months ago with a beautiful woman named Tina the interviewer said that:

Tina had been born a boy, then asked her whether she'd had surgery. The woman replied she was a *transgender* woman.....George had since read on internet that you could take girl hormones that would change your body, and you could get a bunch of different surgeries if you wanted them and had the money. This was *transitioning*. (Gino46,47)



After jostling with self, the real tussle begins when even families of transgender people find it difficult to move from non-acceptance to acceptance. They face innumerable tempestuous situations before things arrive at a conclusion. George tries to broach the topic with his mother and receives outright rejection on the part of the mother. She tells her son to be open with her and discuss everything, but when George is about to open her mouth for discussion her mother says:

Whatever happens in your life, you can share it, and I will love you. You will always be my little boy, and that will never change. Even when you grow up to be an old man, I will still love you as my son". (Gino 47)

On hearing her mother, George decides otherwise and does not discuss anything with her. Although the author indicates George's mother half knew her child's identity. It is probably out of fear for her child and less knowledge about her identity, that she takes long to have a discussion regarding the issue with George. After enduring bullying at school from Jeff and Rick, George's mother addresses the subject with her and says:

George I am going to be honest with you. I worry about you. There are a lot of kids like Jeff out there, and plenty who are worse.....I mean being gay is one thing. But being *that* kind of gay ? (Gino128)

George's struggle is so testing that even her mother considers her son a gay. When George expresses that she thinks she is a girl, mom tries to convince George that she has changed her nappies that she is a boy, and she should not conclude anything. She tells her that she should not give in to any forms of assertions and says, "Besides you are only ten years old. You don't know how you will feel in later years".(129) Even George's brother Scott thinks that she is a gay. The complex understanding of being a transgender woman comes very slowly to her brother and mother. The complex thought that George could be a girl trapped in a boy's body never crosses their minds. This situation resonates with what Sedgwick

in her *Epistemology of the Closet*(1990) states that "sexuality extends along so many dimensions that aren't well described in terms of the gender of object choice at all"( (Sedgwick 35) On her mother final addressing her as "that kind of gay" (Gino128) George retorts and says, "I am not any kind of gay." The author says, at least, George did not think she was a gay. She didn't know who she liked, really, boys or girls."(Gino128)

George had been unknowingly performing her role even as a three-year-old toddler. Her mother warns her that:

George I don't want to find you wearing my clothes. Or my shoes. That kind of thing was cute when you were three. You are not three anymore. . In fact, I don't want to see you in my room at all."(Gino 90).

It looked as if his mother dismissed her gender performance as some childhood game. Her mom's behavior and thoughts show that she somehow wanted to suppress George's feelings. She at least feels that her son is a gay, a different other, but she never broaches the topic with her son in the novel. It is more because of her motherly concern rather than shame or anything else. Her concern becomes visible after George finally performs charlotte's role at school. She takes time and compliments George next day when she returns from school. She says, "You were great in the play yesterday. I know I acted surprised at first, but I am proud of you for being yourself...you're one tough cookie. But the world isn't always good to people who are different. I just don't want you to make your road harder than it has to be." (Gino170) to this George replies "trying to be a boy is really hard."(Gino170) Her mother probably finally understands the dilemma of her child and a tear escapes her eye providing some relief to George

The teacher's rule that girls must audition for the female characters and boys should audition for male character shows the enforcement of gendering and gender oriented rules. It also points to the social construction of gender binary, normalization of heteronormativity and practice of cultural givens even by educators. The teacher



precipitously rejects George's audition for the role of Charlotte with a question," was that supposed to be some kind of a joke"? (Gino70) The teacher remains unaware of the psychological turmoil, which George undergoes after the dismissal.

Immediate acceptance of George's brother, an awkward acceptance by her best friend Kelly and a ready acceptance by her school junior shows a much more accepting new generation on the brink of sprouting. Principal's leniency towards George and a note for the support of LGBT community in her office shows a ready acceptance on the part of some sections of society. Although the principal's comment to George "my doors are always open for you"(Gino161) leaves the reader on an ambiguous note. Her advice to George's mother seems profound when she says, "well you can't control who your children are, but you can certainly support them, am I right?" (Gino160)

George's mother finds it difficult to understand the distinction, where as his brother Scott immediately understands the issue and leaves it with a simple, "oh! I thought you were a gay". Scott also confides in George that before leaving father asked him to take care of her because he thought of her as gay. He immediately accepts George at his words; Kelly on the other hand finds it awkward and confusing. When George tells Kelly about her true identity, she is confused and moves back in surprise and says," what? That is ridiculous. You are a boy. I mean"- she pointed vaguely downward at George- "you have a you-know-what, right?"(Gino91) Later Kelly coaxes George to play Charlotte in the evening session of the play without anybody's knowledge. The psychological pain, the extent of social aloofness is perceptible in George's tears when finally she performs Charlotte on stage. There is a sense of relief as if some puss filled boil empties of its contents. The author says:

The moment George reached the ground, she cried too. She slumped against the backstage wall, hugging her knees, as she cried in sadness and joy. Charlotte was dead but George was alive in a way she had never imagined. (Gino157)

Despite the awkwardness, Kelly understands the issue within a week. Kelly's plan for a zoo trip with the unknowing uncle Bill and George dressed up in a skirt grants George a whiff of freedom. With Kelly's support, George drops her inhibitions and uses the women toilet at the zoo just like girls.

There is a much optimistic streak of acceptance in younger generation whereas the older generation seems to be grappling with the primary nuances of different gender issues. Nevertheless, people who are staunch believers in the gender binary take recourse to Bullying, or not addressing the issue at all for the fear of society. The above issues necessitates taking into account the physical, psychological and emotional trauma of the transgender and facilitate their gender conforming as effortlessly as possible. Concisely, the least that can be done for the trapped bodies is to accept them unquestioningly and acquiescently.

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