

Latifa Y Al-Hajeri

S00024283

Hanan Muzaffar

English 415

Identity Performance: Middlesex's Quest for Social Acceptance Throughout the
Generations

Social norms shape the ways in which we live our lives, with heteronormativity being one of the most prevailing. Heteronormativity is a social theorist term to explain and explore the way in which both gender and sexuality are separated and organized in a social hierarchy. Throughout the ages gender roles have seen no major alteration, societies were held to similar dichotomous standards as modern times. These standards are rigid and inflexible and when people force themselves into standards they do not inherently and categorically feel comfortable with, damage inherently occurs.

This conflict between social norms and personal desires is manifested in almost every theme of Jeffrey Eugenide's *Middlesex*. Where it is argued that one's sense of identity hinges upon social perception and social norms. Here, all identities are created and persevered consciously and/or unconsciously in an attempt to achieve social acceptance. Eugenides successfully demonstrates that when the role society carves out, is ill fitting and social norms are strained, happiness and self-realization are often the casualties.

Social norms are used by individuals to establish their own sense of identity and to understand the identities of others. "People use accessible categories to make sense of their social context. They investigate how well the categorization accounts for similarities and differences among people (called structural or comparative fit) and how well the

prototypical properties of the categorization account for why people behave as they do (called normative fit)” (Hogg and Reid 12). While most people adhere to the normative fit of the society in which they are established, there are instances in which this is a struggle and people try to force themselves to fit into these potentially harmful social norms to avoid social ostracizing.

In *Middlesex*, Jeffrey Eugenides explores the lives of three generations of a Greek American family, the Stephanides. While the family originates in a tiny village in Greece, overlooking the famed Mount Olympus, the generations travel from Greece to the metropolis of Detroit, Michigan to the suburb of Grosse Pointe, Michigan. Throughout the travels and trials of the family, each of the Stephanides is trying to achieve an identity that conforms to the social norms of their environment.

In the beginning of the book, it is revealed that the main character and narrator was the subject of a medical study “Gender Identity in 5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites.” The family history is revealed as one of inbreeding, potentially blaming this medical condition on the inbreeding of the Stephanides. “Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome,” the tale begins. “Sing how it passed down through nine generations, gathering invisibility within the polluted pool of the Stephanides family...How it blew like a seed...where it drifted through our industrial rains until it fell to earth in the fertile soil of my mother’s own mid-western womb,” the narrator continues (4). Already, one can presume the correlation between the cause of the incest and inbreeding as creating and effecting the genetic mutation of the narrator, Calliope (Cal) Helen Stephanides. Immediately, the cultural taboo of incest comes into play and has challenging consequences.

Siblings Lefty and Desdemona are in Greece, living alone after the death of their parents. When Lefty tells his sister he remains in town after selling silk to find a woman, she becomes very upset, angry and possibly jealous. “It made her mad. Also, I suspect, a little jealous” (27). In these early pages, Desdemona did not guess at his real intentions, revealed when Lefty goes to a church and prays intently. “*I am not worthy to come before Thy throne...I don't know why I feel this way, it's not natural...You made me this way, I didn't ask to think things like...Give me strength, Christos, don't let me be this way, if she even knew...He prayed for five minutes*” (31).

Lefty realizes that the way he feels, whatever secret he is hiding, is contrary to the rest of natural or normative society. When he goes to a brothel at the end of the night, he lays with a whore. “A few times he calls out a name, but by then he is too stoned to notice...By the way, I'm Irini. We don't have a Desdemona here” (32). Despite loving his sister, Lefty prays to be normal and is so desperate to assume an identity which is in line with what he knows he ought to be, he is willing to forego his own ideas of domestic bliss in order to achieve an identity which is socially acceptable. The siblings attempt to imagine an identity of a man and a woman, lonely and in love, in a socially acceptable manner for their town: as cousins. In this situation, it is insightful to consider Baudrillard's theory on simulation. Baudrillard argues that society has become so reliant upon maps and models that society has forgotten what life was like before the models and maps were created and utilized (Felluga). This concept ties back into the theme of the Incest Taboo creating culture from nature. Before the maps and models of heteronormativity, it was nature alone which ruled and dictated breeding regardless of incest potential. Lefty and Desdemonda, in that moment, are wishing to exist in a time before the rules and regulations of heteronormativity were established. In nature, their

love would have been normal and understandable; this was not the case in socially structured Greece, nor in America.

Throughout fleeing to America, Lefty asks Desdemona whether she will marry him if they survive the journey. Accepting his offer, the two attempt to simulate an experience so thoroughly that it becomes the reality the two strive to manifest (Felluga). Lefty and Desdemona so desperately want to be an ordinary couple and not siblings who are in love with one another, they create an entirely complete charade to mask the truth and create a new reality, concocting an elaborate plan to make their relationship appear normal and within the confines of social acceptance. “It wasn’t the other travelers they were trying to fool; it was themselves” (68). They reinvented themselves in a socially acceptable way, willing themselves to assume that identity fully, trying to trick their own minds into believing the fairytales they had made up. Unlike their cousin Lina, who hid her homosexual nature from her husband and society, thus hiding her natural desires, Lefty and Desdemona's heterosexual desire for each other is acceptable to society as long as they manage to live the lie of not being brother and sister. Their relationship is heterosexual, but it does not expand the bloodline. In addition, they subvert the idea of a cultured society in their incest, so they assume the label of an identity which will not leave them without either a culture or a society. They are embraced by American society and accepted. And even though their eventual incestuous genetic mutation manifest in Cal(lie) will not be so lucky as Lefty and Desdemona, she/he is able to adopt a performance of heteronormativity to an extent later, in Berlin.

An important aspect of heteronormativity is the idea of gender performance. This idea is established and introduced by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*. In it, she explores the idea of gender as one which is not objective and natural. Instead, gender is

revealed to be an effective manifestation of behavior where activities and performances are repeated. This repetition allows for the re-enactment and the re-experience of the socially established meanings and norms within the masculine/feminine dichotomy (Butler 190-192). To be socially acceptable and attain the status of heteronormativity with respect to gender performance, gender and sex are limited and dichotomous. Males portray masculinity and masculine traits. To their contrary, females portray femininity and feminine traits.

Cal(lie)'s sex is not so easily determined. Cal(lie is constantly worried about his/her body and how it compares to other females around him. Upon considering the transformation from pre-adolescent being to a full woman growing breasts and menstruating in human development's anticipation of procreation, Cal(lie) notices "It could happen any time. Except, with me, it didn't. Gradually, as most of the other girls in my grade began to undergo their own transformations, I began to worry less about possible accidents and more about being left behind, left out" (285). Even though she dresses the part of the female, there were physical manifestations of gender that Cal(lie)'s body could not create and properly perform. "Girls are becoming women. Not mentally or emotionally even, but physically. Nature is making the preparations. Deadlines encoded in the species are met. Only Calliope, in the second row, is motionless...."Remember me?" she says, to nature. "I'm waiting. I'm still here" (286). No matter what tights, skirts, heels or purses she dresses with or accessorizes with, Cal(lie) exists as something not entirely in line with social norms. Even though she is attempting to perform as a feminine heterosexual woman accepted by society for the normative portrayal of identity as suggested by Judith Butler and her ideology of gender performance, Callie fails. Callie does not biologically develop in the normative manner,

she does not become physically and sexually aroused by men and she does not feel comfortable and confident in her own skin. Callie fails as a heteronormative woman and she fails to be a woman to the extent demanded of her by society and her anxious family. More so, in attempting to conform, Callie becomes tense, stressed and disillusioned with herself and her odds of happiness in American society.

At first, Cal(lie) does not understand her biological nature. She realizes there are girls and boys in society, there is no real room for the Middlesex that she is. She begins to blame her family's failure to fully Americanize themselves, blaming her diet for her lack of development (289). As Cal(lie) was not entirely feminine, she was also not entirely masculine. For example, sports are often a sign of masculinity and heteronormative behavior. Despite not fitting in physically as a female, Cal(lie) also did not fit in physically as a male when it came to masculine behaviors and practices. "I wasn't very good at sports. Softball, basketball, tennis: I was hopeless in every one. Field hockey was even worse" (293). Cal(lie) was able to exist between the gender and sexual organized categories of identity and heteronormative classification during a time when gender roles were particularly dominant and expected. This helps to support the idea of gender being incapable of existing as a fixed and objective aspect of human life. "If one is able to exist between gender and sexual categories of identity, then one provides a counter argument to the idea that gender and sexuality are fixed and/or natural human characteristics and provide a way to challenge or 'queer' our understandings of these categories" (Gray).

Self-conscious shame continues to manifest in Cal(lie). In the showers, he/she waits until all the other, developed girls leave the area before undressing. When doing so, he/she still maintains cover, never fully exposing his/her own nudity. Eventually, Cal(lie) is sent to boarding school (299-300). She continues to play the part of the female. She has

her lip waxed and undergoes the painful process to appear female/feminine. Her bathroom is stocked with feminine products, “Two pink Daisy razors...instant shampoo. A tube of Dr. Pepper Lip Smacker...my Epi*Clear Acne Kit; my Crazy Curl hair iron; a bottle of FemIron pills which I was hoping to someday need; and a shaker of Love’s Baby Soft body powder” (311). All of the accessories are in place to reinforce the idea and the performance of the female, despite the fact that much of it she did not need nor particularly want.

Cal(lie)’s body is compared to her brothers at one point in a general manner. He is trying to enlighten her about masturbating and reveals, “Physiologically it’s pretty much the same. I mean, the penis and the clitoris are analogous structures” (316). This is an ironic statement due to the fact that there is a hierarchy and if female is the absence of male and the vagina is the absence of the penis, it would be difficult to conceive the two as analogous structures. Additionally, for the processes of reproduction, a man must ejaculate or orgasm and the female does not necessarily orgasm when having sex; conception can occur without this act. Chapter Eleven may be trying to educate Cal(lie) but he is actually underscoring the fact that Cal(lie) is different. The entirety of her difference lies in the structure of the genitals. Cal(lie) is a hermaphrodite, with neither a clear penis nor a clear clitoris. This is a primary aspect which makes Cal(lie) different and existing outside the heteronormative classification of human beings.

Throughout her life, Cal(lie) performs her gender as she believes she should in an effort to establish and enjoy social norms. Cal(lie)’s parents also work from their perspective to reinforce the idea of their child as a daughter. They promote certain activities and practices as a part of the female experience. These include getting her mustache waxed off and going to “a ladies’ doctor” (308, 340). When Cal(lie) asks, “Who

says I'm a lady?", her mother just responds, "Very funny" (340). The appointment is established in order to make sure that everything is alright and ensure Cal(lie) is developing as a normal adolescent female would. It is no secret that Cal(lie) is not developing breasts, but this was not uncommon for some women in her family to be more flat-chested. The biggest concern seemed to be that Cal(lie) was not having her period.

Cal(lie) wishes to receive her "womanly stigmata" more than anything (353). Finally, after her prayers went unanswered by God, "Sickness, reverie, devotion, deceit—they all came together. If God doesn't help you, you have to help yourself" (358). When Cal(lie) explains her condition to her mother, she is extremely relieved. "Oh, honey...Oh, thank God" (358). Cal(lie) realizes that in order to fit in with normal society, she has to manifest various behaviors. Since she cannot have a period, she pretends to receive one in order to fit in with society and have a normal social identity. "With Nixonian cunning, Calliliope unwrapped and flushed away a flotilla of unused Tampax. I feigned symptoms...I did cramps the way Meryl Streep did accents" (361). In an effort to truly establish her normative identity, she falsely marks her periods on her calendar.

Cal(lie) continues to portray herself in a heterosexual normative manner in her relation with Jerome where her interjection is limited to asking him not to touch her breasts, as she has stuffed her bra with tissues in an effort to continually express the portrayal of a socially normative female. In order to allow herself to take part in the heterosexual mating ritual of heteronormative behavior with Jerome, Cal(lie) places herself, mentally, in the Object's date's place, as her actual desire is for the Object (375). Though she has physical differences, Cal(lie) performs her gender as she knows society demands her to: she sleeps with a male. When Jerome tries to recreate the process the next morning, Cal(lie) admits to him that even though he is very into her, she does not

actually feel the same way toward him (379-380). A heteronormative behavior did not reconcile with Cal(lie)'s true identity, so she attempts to act in a more natural manner, and starts a relationship with the Obscured Object. However, their short break from the heteronormative is challenged when the Obscured Object and Cal(lie) are caught by Jerome. In the ensuing fight and chase, Cal(lie) who became involved in a brief physical confrontation with Jerome in a non-heteronormative experience, is seemingly punished for her abnormal sexual dalliance with the Obscured Object and the strange physical fight between Cal(lie), a perceived female, and Jerome, an established male. Cal(lie) is hit by a tractor and rushed to the hospital, at which time her physical differences are established by the doctors there. Despite multiple opinions, Cal(lie) is a hermaphrodite, resulting from a genetic mutation.

This strange identity is not in line with heteronormative behaviors and identities. Cal(lie) struggles with this experience and this identity. Even when attempting to treat her condition, Cal(lie)'s parents ignore the obvious. "The gray door was unmarked except for an extremely small, unobtrusive hallway sign halfway down that read: Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic. If my parents saw the sign, they pretended not to. Milton lowered his head, bull-like, and pushed the door open" (Eugenides406). Due to social norms, there is still the propensity on the parents' part to establish and embrace a heteronormative identity for their child, despite the fact that Cal(lie) was never, individually, upset by her "crocus" (406-407).

As they speak with the doctor, it is obvious that a main consideration regarding the performance of gender and heteronormative behavior is based on the genitals. Their construction seems incredibly important to society at large, as though it is the genitals which determine the gender of the individual. If Cal(lie) did not have female or male

exclusive genitals, what gender could she possibly be? No matter how she tried to perform gender, with waxing sessions or make-out sessions with females, Cal(lie) still expressed an in-between identity not normal to contemporary society. It was unsettling to her parents and those around her. Without the proper genitals, it seemed, there was no conclusive way to perform gender, as though sexual behavior was the primary expression of such identities. The doctor explains to Cal(lie)'s parents, "I'll be frank. This is a complicated case. By complicated I don't mean irremediable. We have a range of effective treatments" (413). Cal(lie)'s perceived condition can be fixed. However, 'fixing' her condition simply means establishing a heteronormative identity for Cal(lie). She would not, as a treatment option, be allowed to remain in her present state, raised as a female with chromosomal and hormonal indicators classifying Cal(lie) as male.

"Which one turns you on? The woman or the man?", Cal(lie)'s doctor asks her (Eugenides 419). A heteronormative identity would dictate, based on her rearing, an answer involving the male. Hormonally and chromosomally, the heteronormative identity would dictate an answer involving the female. Cal(lie), sex, and gender are not so clear cut. "The true answer was neither. But truth would not do. Sticking to my cover story, I managed to get out, very quietly, "The boy"..."The guy's cock turns you on?" I nodded, barely, wishing it would be over. But it was not over for a while yet" (Eugenides 419). She portrays and acts a specific gender, her "cover story" in an effort to secure for herself an identity which would allow her the greatest social freedom, if not the greatest personal oppression.

The doctor advises hormone injections, to increase the biological presentation of the gender, such as the creation of breasts, and reconstructive surgery, to "make Callie look exactly like the girl she feels herself to be...Her outside and inside will conform.

She will look like a normal girl. Nobody will be able to tell a thing. And then Callie can go on and enjoy her life” (428). This speech is extremely telling with respect to social perceptions and the presentation of gender as it pertains to sex, sexuality and heteronormative behavior. The doctor wants Callie to fit in. To do this, she must embrace the identity of Callie, whether it is medically manipulated or not. “A single surgery and some injections would end the nightmare and give my parents back their daughter, their Calliope, intact. The same enticement that had led my grandparents to do the unthinkable now offered itself to Milton and Tessie. No one would know. No one would ever know” (429). In this quote, Eugenides is able to categorize each event as simultaneous and linked: cultural versus natural, societal versus biological, and how these dichotomies are often established and perceived to contradict one another. Freedom is only offered, in American society as illustrated by Eugenides, through the embrace of the cultural and societal. Natural and biological perceived abnormalities can be *evolved* and *perfected* through social and cultural interference.

In response to the course of action proposed for her, Cal(lie) flees. She refuses to oppress her own identity further, especially as her identity is proposed by her doctor who promotes the social and cultural interference and manipulation of Cal(lie)’s identity and physical being. Understanding her family’s commitment to cultural and social heteronormativity, she abandons them so as to avoid causing them further pain, confusion and shame but also as an attempt to live freely without perpetually reinforcing shame upon her family. She flees to free herself just as much as she flees to free her family from shame and their own form of social oppression.

From the quest for the American Dream and immigrant status, to the marriage of Lina to a Greek American immigrant to the religious and social implications of incest and

the marriage between Eleutherios (Lefty) and Desdemona, to the introduction of Cal(lie) and his/her gender, conformity is everything. Everyone in the novel seeks to create their own, ideal, *socially acceptable* identity. While there are serious and important ramifications and considerations that start at this incestuous relationship and manifest in the genetic condition of Cal(lie) are a hermaphrodite, all of the characters involved perform gender in an effort to establish identity, all with the goal of social acceptance within the maintained sex/gender binary-frame society of America. Corrective surgery may have been the answer for someone else with Cal(lie)'s condition, but corrective surgery for Cal(lie), as he/she perceived his/her own sense of self and identity, would have been extremely detrimental and harmful. Living as a female was challenging because it was not entirely honest, but living as a male in the same geographic location would have been challenging in terms of culture and society. Cal(lie) fled, and eventually found happiness as an un-surgically corrected, masculine presented resident of Berlin.

Cal has a unique and unusual identity. However, all unique aspects of Cal were neglected and doctored by society in an effort to impress upon Cal and Cal's presentation the social and cultural norms dictated and promoted by society. Cal was created as a result of the unusual genetics of her family. The Incest Taboo authorizes that there should be no incest and that is that. As a result, there is not a general understanding of the genetic challenges that are presented through incest. Had there been a deeper understanding of incest challenges and ramifications as well as an open dialogue about the challenges instead of hiding away the incest conversation because of the taboo, Lefty and Desdemona might have been able to create their own honest identity and relationship and to also have been made aware of special considerations because of their relationships. They may have been prompted to be more careful and considerate in having children and,

pending different decisions, Cal(lie) may not have been born into the challenging situation that she was, presented with her own challenges and struggles as they pertain to identity and social acceptance. Through fleeing and an embrace of her true identity as Cal individually perceives it, Cal is able to escape the damage of the heteronormative/dichotomy obsessed society of America. Berlin, and its occupants, offer Cal the freedom to embrace how he truly perceives himself, and an environment which Eugenides does not portray as being as judgmental and rigid as America. Cal is offered opportunity and freedom of identity, but does need a geographic and cultural environment which is more receptive and open when compared to America.

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