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Resistance, Resilience, and Acceptance in Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl*

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Abstract

Gender identity may diverge from the sex assigned at birth. This journey often proves painful for transgender individuals and their families. The resulting discrimination, the taunts, hurts and haunts it brings with itself are immeasurable and devastating. Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* beautifully brings out the remarkable transformation of a transgender girl, Amanda Hardy. This paper analyses her trans-ness and transgender experience. The psychological conflicts and the chaos in the mind of Amanda and how she could face alienation, gender discrimination and aversion to society are also analysed.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, gender identity, alienation, transgender, trans-ness, gender dysphoria, coming out

Society has made up unwritten rules and estimates to accept to include a person to be a part of the society. When the shadowy expectations get broken, it will alienate the person concerned, discriminate against them and leave them with unwithered wounds and burns. People change a lot all the time. One changes physically, mentally, socially and the relationships that we have with one another change. Some grow to be strong, and others become weak with time. Gender refers to the subjective self-identification of a person as a woman or a man. So, why should the identification of gender cause such havoc in the minds of the people?

Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* narrates the remarkable transformation of a transgender girl, Amanda Hardy. Amanda, a new girl in school in Lambertville, Tennessee seemed

to be outwardly no different from any other girl has a secret that she never dared to share with anyone. She wished she could make friends and fit in, but the secret she laid in her heart resisted her from getting too close to anyone. She had transferred to a school for her senior year to keep the secret of her gender identity and her coming out. Amanda's reflection on her struggles reveals her resilience: "For as long as I could remember, I had been apologizing for existing, for trying to be who I was, to live the life I was meant to lead" (Russo 292). This heartrending statement highlights Amanda's struggles with self-acceptance.

Andrew Hardy (Amanda before the transition) was living a life of lies. He was bullied, hopeless, and lost in the world of Masculine gender. He did not belong to the world of the boys, and he could not accept his own body. He was beaten in a bathroom and later moved to Tennessee to live with his father. Andrew felt that he could find his solace by living the future he imagined. She transitioned to her true self when he became Amanda Hardy.

I think I could deal with just being gay or whatever. It feels wrong that I'm a boy, though. When my hair gets long and people mistake me for a girl, I feel happy. I try to imagine what kind of man I'll grow up to be, and nothing comes. I think about being a husband or a father and even it's with a man I feel like I'm being sucked into a black hole. The only time I feel like I have a future at all is if I imagine I'm a girl in it. (Russo 37-38)

True philosophy and understanding of life reflect in Amanda's thought process. She felt that secrets may be part of life, and everyone was probably hiding something or was lying to themselves.

I looked up at the cross again and wondered if I was supposed to hear this particular sermon at this particular moment for a reason. I decided that the people who had said God didn't love me, who said I didn't have a place on Earth - they were wrong. God wanted me to live, and this was the only way I knew how to survive, so this was what God wanted. This was what I wanted. I had chosen to live, and it seemed like, finally, I was doing just that. (Russo 99)

Amanda developed a relationship with her boyfriend, Grant, but she was terrified to disclose her identity. Though he was an open, honest and lovable boy, she could not bring herself to tell him she was transgender. One part of her yearned to tell the truth, but the other part worried about the result. So her mind wavered. She was so tired of cowering, hiding and she wanted to tell the truth aloud. She informed him bluntly that she has a past, and he would not want to get involved with it. But he was assertive that everyone has a past, and it doesn't mean that she cannot have a future. Amanda couldn't help but like and let him into her life.

Though she acknowledged him as her boyfriend, she knew that her life was not a normal one. She reflects in her mind without saying it aloud: "I think I like you, but I'll never have a normal life. I think you like me, but you will never understand who I am" (Russo 74). The sweet and understanding words of Grant could not fully overcome the mental agony and conflict of Amanda. "I'm a big boy. I've been knocked down before and I'll be knocked down. Again, I can handle things, that ain't simple, and I can handle things that are hard. I want you, and whatever it is about you that you think makes you so complicated, couldn't make me want you less" (Russo 87).

She did not dare to reveal that she was transgender, but she only says it was complicated and turned his head to face her. His eyes darted away, and she kissed him. Holding him still, she said, "I like you more than anyone I've ever met. It's just there are things that are really hard to say." Grant stared at me his eyes boring into mine, and I felt naked right then, like he could see everything, the things I wanted him to know and the ones I didn't too" (Russo 159).

The experience of gender identity reinforces the lifelong struggle of a transgender person, and Amanda is no exception to this. She was well aware of the suffocation of self by social norms. Her adolescence as a transgender individual became a stressful time for her. When the teens of her age enjoyed the outside world during weekends, she isolated herself at home. Her words relayed how she had spent her Saturday nights for almost ten years. "Video games in my room: all alone, late into the night, until my fingers ached and I was tired enough to fall asleep without my thoughts swirling. An actual high school party had always been a distant, exotic thing, something that one only existed in movies" (Russo 41).

Her enthusiasm in establishing her identity had begun as a child itself. But the reaction of her father and the outcome was different from what she had thought initially. He frowned angrily, and he merely asked why her teacher thought that she was serious. And he convinced himself by making her admit that it was only a joke. Ironically, Amanda replied thus to Grant later in the story: "I was always a girl, always" (Russo 292). When her father warned her to be careful with the boys, she was unhappy and angry but she also knows that her father was correct. "I wasn't sure who I was angrier with - him for trying to control me, or myself for arguing, when a part of me still suspected he was right" (Russo 142).

The resilience and acceptance came very late in the case of Amanda's father. Amanda thought that her father hated her for being transgender. But his feelings were the outcome of fear and doubt if society would accept her. There were times when he forgot that she was a girl - like an instance when he addressed her, Andrew. Amanda mistakenly thought that her father hated her: I remembered the days after I woke up in the hospital and realized I was still alive. I remembered having nobody to keep me company but nurses and Mom and the television - no friends, no family, no Dad. I remembered suspecting, for the first time in my life, that he might not actually care if I lived or died. (Russo 34) But the reply he gave her was heartwarming and moving. He said, "You hold a baby when it takes its first breath, you sing it to sleep, you rock it when it cries, and then you look away for what feels like a second, and your baby doesn't want to live anymore. You're my *child*" (Russo 34).

Her mother supported her in the gender realignment surgery, and without her support, Andrew would not have become Amanda. When she was a child, she had written a story in which Amanda was mistaken as a son, and she grew up to be a woman. Her childish heart yearned for acceptance as a girl, and that made her create a fantasy story. In this story, Amanda discovered herself to be a girl with the help of the time machine. When she handed over the story to her father, she was so proud and exhilarated: "I just knew Dad would be so happy when he found out that he had a daughter and not a son, but maybe he would also feel silly that he and Mom made such a silly mistake? When he tried to do boy things with me he always frowned and stopped, so I did not think he wanted a son really, which was fine because I hated sports" (Russo 69).

The acceptance came after a terrible fight and disagreement between her parents. The mother argued that her father was pushing manhood onto her son (Amanda). "You're going to get him, put him in the hospital because you're afraid of your buddies knowin' you raised a fairy" (Russo 125). The acceptance came when Amanda was identified with gender dysphoria and later wanted to end her life knowing that she can't live as a boy. The mother accepted her lot thinking that Andrew Hardy was gonna die one way or the other. She had to grab the choice that gave her a daughter in exchange while the other option left her with no one. "Anything. Anyone is better than a dead son" (Russo 17). She started considering her as a daughter, and she also believed that being a girl means being afraid. "Being a girl in this world means being afraid. That fear'll keep you safe. It'll keep you alive" (Russo 233).

Amanda often wondered if joy could ever be felt by itself without being tainted with fear and confusion. Being merry for a person means that misery will always be around the corner. She didn't make out when she could see the end of things, and it was brought upon by her friend Bee. The day when Amanda became the homecoming queen became the day the secret was out, and it hurt her badly. She was at a loss for words, and she escaped from the gym. When she had prepared herself to express and embody her most authentic self, she was devastated by the hard truth.

The verbal taunt was not the finale of the ill-fate. "Transgenders suffer from the lack of continuity in their identity, lack of self-esteem, overemphasized and unwanted distinctiveness and injustice at every turn" (Chakkunny 507). Amanda was sexually assaulted by Parker. "His shadow stretched out past mine. I remembered Mom telling me how frightening men were, all men really, how helpless it often felt to be a woman among men, and for the first time I understood what she meant" (Russo 249).

She had to fight with him and she was emotionally drained when she was at last rescued by Chloe, Anna and Layla. When Layla asked if she wanted to go to the hospital she turned it down: "The last thing I wanted was for a nurse to take pictures of me. The last thing I wanted was a night spent with police officers, who had probably already heard about me by now, and wanted to ask questions about my private parts instead of about what had happened. I just wanted to forget everything about tonight. I wanted it to be over" (Russo 252).

Amanda's journey is marked by self-discovery and pain. Moreover, her experiences underscore the significance of acceptance and empathy. As Heather Love points out, "many of the fiercest gender battles are fought on the bodies of newborn infants, elementary school children and adolescents – it is during childhood that the violence of making gendered individuals imposes itself with the greatest force" (Russo 159). This insight highlights the vulnerability of transgender individuals during childhood. Amanda's case is more or less the case of many transgender people who face the transition. But Amanda is resilient enough to return to Tennessee and face the world. She indeed deserves many friends who support her. When Layla says, "The truth is that you're my friend, Amanda. You're one of the most beautiful girls I've ever known, inside and out" (Russo 255), the readers' hearts also warm and cheer up for her.

In this way, this work is a contemporary work that deals with transgender issues and makes one want to befriend Amanda. Thomas E. Bevan quotes Linda Thompson's words: "Being transgender, like being gay, tall, short, white, black, male, or female, is another part of the human condition that makes each individual unique and something over which we have no control. We are who we are in the deepest recesses of our minds, hearts, and identities" (Russo 39). The absolute acceptance and embracing of oneself happened when Amanda determinedly started believing in herself: "I wasn't sorry I existed any more [*sic*]. I deserved to live. I deserved to find love. I knew now – I believed, now – that I deserved to be loved" (Russo 292).

It will help other young people who are having a hard time with their transitions. Fraser describes that transgender children experience "looking in the mirror and not seeing what others see" (2009). According to Ku Galinsky, & Wang, empathy can be produced by reading stories about individuals belonging to stigmatized groups or outgroups. This research paper shall eliminate the isolation contributing to distress and challenges faced by transgenders, and it will be helpful to better understand the transgender individual.

According to Kelly's theory Constructive Alternativism there is only one true reality. "I have a construction, you have one, a person on the other side of the planet has one, someone living long ago had one, a primitive person has one, a modern scientist has one, every child has one, even someone who is seriously mentally ill has one." And Amanda was fortunate to constructive

Alternativism – her gender identity, and she also gets the support of family and friends. Though she suffered from gender discrimination, she would win over the contempt and disapproval of society with the encouragement and acceptance of her family and few friends.

The researcher concludes with Juno Dawson’s poignant words that no panel, no scientist, no politician, not the WHO, no one can tell anyone how it feels to be male or female. And, whoever you are, however you are, you are equally valid, equally justified and equally beautiful. Meredith Russo states the experiences of transgender people are unique. Butler Judith affirms that social constructivists propose that there is no inherent truth to gender and it is arbitrarily constructed by social expectations and gender performance.

The researcher believes that the inclusion and acceptance of them show that we are humane. As a transgender woman, Meredith Russo in “A Note from the Author: To My Trans Readers” advocates them: “I know it hurts. I know it hurts so bad you can barely breathe sometimes. I know because I’ve been there. Please don’t leave us. I promise life can be good, and we need you too much” (Russo, *If I Was Your Girl*, Para 2). Since transgender persons are unique, it does not give any right to cisgenders to hurt them, and everyone is obliged to understand and accept transitions.

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