

## A Study on the exploration of gender identity through art and costume in the movie ‘The Danish Girl’

Anissa Lamare<sup>1</sup>, Nisha Jain M<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>II year MA Journalism Students, Kristu Jayanti College, Bengaluru.

Correspondence E-mail Id: editor@eurekajournals.com

### Abstract

Movie has a social impact. There are several studies proved that the existence of a reciprocal relationship between the movie and the reality. Movies reflects reality and also an individuals’ perception can also be effected through the movies, Hence this research is an attempt to study the spectrum of gender and not the binary biological sex of a person through the life of Einar and Lili portrayed in the movie “The Danish Girl.” This study is set to focus on the different realms of gender and identity. The purpose is to be able to differentiate the two in order to come at a limited conclusion. As mentioned above, the concept of gender identity is constantly evolving and in such a scenario, it is important to analyze the presentation and representation of the same in the visual space. It is imperative to capture the realities and subtleties of gender identities being portrayed, covering the attitude of the characters present and comparing it to the present reality. The Danish Girl gives an insight into the mind and life of Einar and his transition from a man to a woman named Lili through art and costumes. His journey in finding his identity is depicted through both Einar’s and Gerda’s paintings.

**Keywords:** Gender, Movie, The Danish Girl, Gender Identity, Visual Space.

### Introduction

This research paper aims at exploring different dimensions in the realm of Sex, Gender Identity by analyzing the protagonists’ sexuality through art and costumes. The terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are interrelated, but their meaning is not equivalent. *Sex* refers to the male and female categorization of humans based on the different reproductive organs or genitalia. *Gender* as a concept is more dynamic. It is assigned at birth where a baby is labeled with the gender binary concept of male and female. Therefore, it can be said that while the biological sex of a baby is male or female, its gender is a mere assumption based on the same.

Today gender is something beyond binaries. *It is constantly evolving, molded and shaped throughout a person’s life.* In this context, there are possibilities where a person adheres to a

behavior corresponding to their own sex or doesn't correspond to the same, even identifying with a blend of both or in certain cases not identifying with either male or female. Hence, while sex is confined within very limited boundaries, gender is more of freely expressing one's behavioral inclination. Gender Identity is expressed through social changes such as clothing, behavior, body language, tone of the voice, certain physical attributes and the most commonly used today is their preferred Pronouns. For example, he, she, him, her, they, it, them, there are used profusely.

It is to be noted that *sexual orientation* and *gender identity* are two different concepts. The former is a sexual or physical inclination towards another human being be it male, female or transgender. The latter is only an identity that one discovers and chooses according to their personal experiences or how they see themselves or want society to see them. Hence, 'identity' is more psychological and vigorous.

The movie is directed by Tom Hooper, a highly critical director set the story in Copenhagen with Dutch painter, Einar Wegener husband to fellow painter Gerda Wegener.

## Objectives

The main objective of the study is to understand two broadly used terms of sex and gender by analyzing parts of Einar's life from frames depicted in the movie "The Danish Girl"

## Specific Objectives

- The study aims to identify the gender roles are taken and discarded by the main character through art.
- The study explores the existence of the possibility of Einar Wegener's realization and the path to his true identity as Lili Elbe through costumes.
- The study analyses if painting or art allows Einar get in touch with his inner self.

## Methodology

The researcher uses a qualitative content analysis to provide a wider view of the themes in the movie. The primary data is collected by analyzing the film, and secondary data was collected from books, journals, blogs, videos and film journals. The research is justified using theories backing up art and costume.

## Findings and Analysis

The Danish Girl explores the life a Danish transgender person, Lili Elbe who was among the first recipients of gender reassignment surgery in the 1920s. Originally known as, Einar Wegener, a reputed Danish painter who was married to his student, Gerda Marie Gottlieb. The movie is set in a normative society depicting the attitude of the people towards the entire concept of gender and identity and in the movie's context towards the transgender

community. The first sign directed towards Einar's identity starts at 04:13 minutes into the movie. The second instance is portrayed at 11:00 mins when Gerda uses Einar as a model to finish one of her portraits.

Einar instantly is fixated to the women's clothing (stockings) and comes in touch with his effeminate side in this scene. This scene showed an overwhelmed Einar confused at first but subtly comfortable with the situation. The common connotation out of this context is how Gerda forces Einar to put on women's clothes, but what is being implied in the movie is how Einar actually came in contact with his true self that he left in his childhood.

At 15:08 mins, Einar watches his wife undress but is drawn to her night gown, followed by a comment "it's pretty." Einar goes on embracing more of his feminine side at 18:40 mins when Gerda finds him in her nightgown. Gerda however embraced what she thought was her husband's playful character.

At 23:05, Einar dresses up in women's clothing, puts on makeup for Gerda to sketch. An evident sign of Einar's fondness for the feeling of being a woman is shown here. Up to this point, Einar has only dressed as a woman at home but after a short while, Einar dresses up as Lili for the first time outside to attend the Artists' Ball. Lili at 29:00 is approached by a man, Henrik Sandahl at the ball who flirts with her and even kisses her on the lips. At first, she pulls away but surrenders to the feeling. Gerda finds both men kissing.

Actor Eddie Redmayne plays the character of Einar Wegener and Lili, and Actress Alicia Vikander plays the role of his wife, Gerda. As the movie opens, it is seen that they both enjoy happy married life, one completing the others incompleteness. They are shown as a couple trying to conceive. In the Danish Girl, he is well-known landscape painter who is appreciated by society for his work. Gerda, also a painter on the other hand, is seen to be not as successful as her husband in terms of work.

Einar is a stiffly male character who at first takes the upper hand for his work while Gerda is the more dominant figure in their relationship as husband and wife. This is also depicted through the camera angles, as Gerda is taken from low angles and Einar from high, which ascribes her power and him to not have so. It is through her that Einar is able to liberate into being Lili. The first instance which instigates the feminine side of Einar is when Gerda uses him as a model to finish one of her portraits. Einar instantly is fixated to the women's clothing and comes in touch with his effeminate side in this scene.

The common connotation out of this context is how Gerda forces Einar to put on women's clothes, but what is being implied in the movie is how Einar actually came in contact with his true self that he left in his childhood. After the first instance, Einar goes on embracing more of his feminine side and takes charge of his life as Lili. The more he developed his likeness for the feeling, the more he became more comfortable with the same.

Einar slowly starts to align with the second character that he plays which is Lili. At first, he only used Lili to represent the model that Gerda was painting but after a while he got more acquainted with her and brought her (Lili) home as well. This was when Einar started realizing what he left in his childhood and was slowly starting to reconnect with his past. Throughout the movie after the instance, Einar wanted to be addressed as Lili and this disrupts the marriage as well as Gerda.

Gerda was of the thought that it was her fault that her husband was starting to act like a woman and that is the common perception of the society would have as well. But in this context Einar is in touch with the other side because of his wife's help and not by force. At 35:00 mins, Einar confronts Gerda about his connection when he becomes Lili and how he realizes what he had left in his childhood and was slowly starting to reconnect with his past.

Gerda pleads for Einar to leave Lili behind. This was followed by a non-convincing answer from Einar, "I am going to try." After this instance, Einar seems fixed to the image of Lili and is adamant to be addressed as the latter. From 37:00 to 39:00 mins Einar secretly explores his feminine side by observing the reflection of his physical form in the mirror leaning towards a feminine body posture. At this point, Einar connotes the first strong sign of wanting to be a woman as he tucks his male anatomy to form that of a female.

Right after the scene, Gerda is seen to be in distress while she looks at her sketch of Lili helplessly. However, finds herself surrendering to Lili's beauty and sketches her all over again.

This scene shows that Gerda has also gotten used to Einar being Lili and how coincidentally she is able to effortlessly portray her husband as Lili through her paintings. This depicts a state of dilemma and acceptance as well. Another scene follows where Gerda's paintings of Lili were displayed in an art gallery in Paris. Einar attends the event only to find himself aroused by people's comments for Lili.

At 56:15 mins Einar goes to a brothel but only to observe a woman's naked body and her postures. He finds himself imitating the woman's hand movements over his own face. At 1:01:58 mins, Gerda invited Einar's childhood friend, Hans Axlil to their house in Paris. However, Gerda and Hans find themselves greeted by a fully dressed Lili.

Lili's role becomes more and more dominant with the paintings and costumes and this became more evident at 1:06:39 when Lili spends the night beside Gerda for the first time in a nightgown. After the scene, Einar is nowhere to be seen. Lili settles in, while Gerda also shows support amidst remorse for the sudden changes.

Lili is seen to be happier now than when she was Einar. Gerda also agrees to paint more of Lili's portraits in this moment of happiness. However, Gerda finds herself hurt because of the entire process. She also comes to a realization that there is no more marriage. At this time,

Lili stays at home and does all the work of Gerda. Lili tries to find Einar but also realizes that he no longer exists except in physical form. The scenes after this follows Einar's search for help from doctors wherein the end he meets a surgeon from Berlin who agrees to perform a sex reassignment surgery to fully turn Lili into a woman. Throughout the journey, Gerda and Hans are supportive of Einar's decision till the end. Gerda never stopped painting Lili till her last breath.

### **Discovering Himself through Costumes**

In the movie, *The Danish Girl*, the costumes of the actors, especially focusing on Einar and Lili, are important in understanding the moods, behaviors and changes that occur in the lives of the characters. In the opening of the movie, Einar is seen in a stiff masculine pantsuit. It starts at this neck, giving an almost choking sensation and is rigid. This masculinity does not match with Einar's body language or personality. He is shown to be a lean man, with a touch of femininity. This is made evident when he touched and felt the different fabrics of the costumes at the ballet company. The movement was shown to be delicate, gentle and his fascination with them was clearly depicted. When Einar is dressed in men's attire, it gives the stiff, claustrophobic feel. He looks lost and there is a disassociation from that body that is evidently visible in his eyes. After Einar and Gerda move to Paris, as a man Einar is seen dressed in atypically male outfits.

At first Einar was uncomfortable when Gerda hands him the stockings and asked him to model, but the longer he held it, the more he adapted to it. Looking at his legs in stockings and feet in sandals, he smiled femininely at it. His excitement was made evident with his sharp intake of breath. He gently caressed the hemline of the dress and he seemed to be almost in a trance. As Lili, his dresses, are free flowing and they add to the persona that is Lili. He is beaten up for dressing that way as well.

This is the depiction of the larger attitude and struggle that transgender people have had to face since it all began. Non acceptance from the society and being victims of harassment are inseparable parts of their life. Non heterosexual people have always been victims of violence and abusive treatment for not following the conventional norms.

A scarf that Lili gets for Gerda becomes a symbol of her herself. In the last sequence, where Gerda stands at the landscape, the scarf unties itself and flies into the air. That itself is the representation of Lili, finally free, more importantly as who she was. She was not bound by anything or anyone, and lived her life on her terms. She had the courage to stand up for herself when she tells Gerda referring to the surgery that it was something she should do for herself and that's the way it was.

### **Art and the Life of the Characters**

As both of the characters are artists, it naturally plays a vital role in their relationship and life. Gerda in terms of the painter and artist is seen to be not as successful as Einar in the

beginning of the movie. She was even told that she had not been able to find her subject matter yet. It is when she started to paint Lili that her popularity increased as did respect for her work. The paintings of Lili were an instant sensation among the people and aided in the success of Gerda.

Einar's most popular painting is that of the landscape named *Poples along Hobro Fjord*. This place has historical relevance as it relates to Einar's childhood friend, Hans Axlil who kissed him. This can be considered the latent trigger that he gets in adulthood. This is the painting that he never completes and is consistently working on. In the Danish Girl, Einar tells his wife Gerda that he "Won't disappear into the bog, the bog is in me". This can be considered as a foreshadowing of the future, to the fact that Lili is his true identity no matter what he or anyone else does to keep her down. After radiation therapy, Einar could not paint anymore. He was determined to stay as Lili.

The power of Gerda's Lili, is accurately described by Lili when she says, "What you draw I become. You made me beautiful and now you've made me strong. Such power in you." This was after her first operation. This is a summation of the journey that they have embarked on, Gerda being able to aid in her spouse's journey of discovering her true self. Gerda put her needs in the behind and was with Einar, even after he became Lili. She was the one who was most affected by this, yet she was also the one who stood steadfast by her spouse' side supporting him to become who he wanted to be.

Art is also one of the main factors that contribute to Lili exploring her feminine identity. Every time that she models for Gerda as Lili, she is shown to become more comfortable with her identity. He is adapting his femininity and he exhibits his in his body language as he poses for Gerda. "Don't make her a slut" warned Gerda and he replied saying that he couldn't help it as she excites Lili.

### **Other Aspects-Gender Roles**

In the backstory of how Einar and Gerda meet, it is said that it was Gerda who approached him. She was the one who propositioned him, which is unlike the convention of a man approaching a woman. The surprise of the audience who were listening to this story also contributes to the unconventionality of it. This seen even when Hendrik Sandahl, a man approaches Lili. Einar blushes at this story, and nods in agreement. This illustrates that Gerda was the dominant one in the relationship.

While Einar/Lili stay at home, Gerda goes to various events, gets her paintings exhibited and is also the savior of the two when she takes the opportunity to move to Paris for both their sakes. Her for work and Lili for her life. There is a fluid exchange of gender roles, as though the movie, Lili adopts more and more feminine behaviors.

## Body Language

The scene where Einar fixes Gerda's lipstick, he is shown from a low angle, showing that he has the upper hand here. This could be considered as a foreshadowing, as who Einar was at that moment and who he went on to become are quite different in terms of personality. Lili was confident and bold, whereas Einar was quiet and shy

Even when Ulla Paulson, who was supposed to be the original model names Einar, Lili, his face is encapsulated with pure joy. He accepts the name even though it was a playful thing. He depicts this excitement even as he gracefully and playfully accepts being Lili. She almost immediately becomes a part of him.

In Gerda's sketch of Lili as she sleeps, she is shown to be at peace. This is immediately after she finds that Einar wore her petticoat. He is shown to be sleeping in a feminine manner, with his hands at his neck.

At the suggestion that he go to the ball as lily, he seems most positively excited. Lili is more confident than Einar is and enjoys that it is an outrageous idea. Lili, right from the beginning knew what she wanted. She was confident enough to ask for it. She has her own thought process, and a personality that she doesn't try to hide. She was openly herself. He learns the mannerisms of becoming a lady, in the way he walks, the way he holds his hands. He tries emulating the women he sees, at the market.

In a conversation that happens between Gerda and Ulla, where she tells Ulla that she can't find Einar, Ulla responds by saying that it's because Einar isn't there. This can also be understood on the level that the more Lili is Einar, the lesser he becomes.

Einar also has monthly bouts of nosebleeds, cramps and headaches. This could be his body imitating a typical female body that goes through menstruation. When he consults the doctors on this, his condition is met with disdain, scorn, and a superiority attitude. They see Einar as having an abnormality that can be fixed with radiation. This in turns backfires when Lili remains in him and Einar can no longer paint. It helped him to accept his true identity as Lili. Progressing further as the movie proceeds, Einar is diagnosed as being homosexual and a schizophrenic.

"There was a moment when I was just Lili." It is this moment that something changes in Einar and Lili is known to take permanent residence in his life. "I thought you might not come back." Gerda says this to Einar after he storms off after a confrontation about Lili kissing Hendrik. This could be referring to parts of Einar that have dissociated from himself. He also tells Gerda that, "it's not what I wear. It's what I dream." He dreams of being free from what he called a mistake of nature.

The movie narrating the life of Einar transitioning into Lili Elbe in itself is set in a heteronormative society in the 1920's. The movie depicts the social structure of a marriage in

time where defined gender roles existed. Einar though always effeminate had to leave that part behind because of the norms set through a marriage.

Throughout the movie, the main signs have been art or paintings and costumes. It is through this unconventional freedom that allowed Einar to get in touch with Lili. The changes in the art of both Einar and Gerda, evolve to reflect the changes in their personality, vis a vis gender.

## Conclusion

The Danish Girl, is a summation of the journey of two individuals bound by marriage, but who go on to have their own identities, outside the norm. It also depicts a supportive spouse though Gerda who not only had to deal with a broken marriage but also a complete transformation in her spouse. The film also highlights the importance of accepting one's gender identity. In the film, the protagonist is able to do so through her art. The evolution of her character is related closely to the evolution of art in the film.

Through her costume, Lili is able to explore her earlier latent feminine side. By modelling for Gerda, she not only understands herself better but also has the opportunity to be more comfortable with herself.

## References

1. Anagol, P. (2005). The emergence of feminism in India, 1850-1920. A shgate Publishing, Ltd.
2. Berelson, B. (1952). Content analysis in communication research.
3. Jackson, S. (2018). Young feminists, feminism and digital media. *Feminism & Psychology*, 28(1), 32-49.
4. Mendes, K. (2015). *Slutwalk: Feminism, activism and media*. Springer.
5. Mullally, S. (2004). Feminism and multicultural dilemmas in India: Revisiting the Shah Bano case. *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 24(4), 671-692.
6. Stemler, S. (2000). An overview of content analysis. *Practical assessment, research, and evaluation*, 7(1), 17.