

DISSOCIATING REALITIES AND TRANS-FORMING SELF IN DAVID EBERSHOFF'S *THE DANISH GIRL*

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Abstract: Since its film debut in 2015, *The Danish Girl* has garnered major attention on the novel which was originally published in 2000 by David Ebershoff. As portrayed evidently in both mediums, Einar Wegener is depicted as a transgendered individual who suffers from gender identity disorder. However, this paper intends to argue that Einar could potentially suffer from Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), or more commonly referred to as multiple personality disorder. To specify, the current paper contends that Einar dissociates himself from the reality he is grounded in and becomes another character upon any overwhelming situation. Dissociation happens when the subject is subjected to extreme reality and breaks under pressure, thus, creating another persona as an act of self-protection to defend himself from the situation. As such, this article will shed light on the issue by providing textual evidences which helps in reading Einar as a patient of DID instead of being a transgender.

Keywords: *dissociation, dissociative identity disorder, multiple personality disorder, the danish girl, alter*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a critical age. If parents do not take care of their children during that period, the children might suffer the consequences in the future. Physical, sexual or emotional abuse will lead to trauma in later years. One of the effects of being traumatized can show itself in the form of dissociative identity disorder (DID) which was known as multiple personality disorder. This disorder was not known before and nowadays more diagnostic tools helped the psychologists to have information about this disorder. Moreover, people have more access to the services which help them with child abuse which was hold in secrecy in the past. Janet (1889), a French psychiatrist was the first to emphasize the role of trauma in the

genesis of dissociative symptoms, which at the time were called hysteria (McAllister, 2000, p. 26). Almost four decades of research passed to reach authoritative information about dissociative identity disorder and its symptoms. After years of research, researchers come upon this psychological problem as an independent disorder called dissociative identity disorder.

Dissociative identity disorder patient has problems with his memories as part of his memories cannot be recalled by the patient. He is also confused about his own identity. In fact, dissociation is a coping mechanism in which the traumatized patient dissociates himself from the situations

that reminds him of those violent memories he suffered during his childhood. In other words, "dissociation allows the person, or host who may be unable to deal with an overwhelming stress, to be controlled by an alternative personality, the alter" (McAllister, 2000, p. 25). The stressful situations can be threatening to the patients who were traumatized before and at those crucial moments the alters evolve to cope with those stressors or triggers. One should notice that "James L. Spira warns us that although a history of ongoing sexual or physical violence by a family member is frequently present, the therapist must not assume apriori that family members were involved in the abuse or that direct sexual or physical violence is always the case" (Harrison, 2006. p. 1). The triggers should be recognized scientifically and analyzed carefully rather than dealing with the DID patient with preassumptions.

As the patient dissociates himself, there are alters who evolve. "Watkins and others differentiate the concept of *alters* from that of ego states because the alters in DID have 'their own identities, involving a center of initiative and experience, they have a characteristic self representation'" (Gillig, 2009, p. 26). The alters switch and control the patient's behavior and thoughts. The switching of the alters can take seconds, minutes, hours or days. As a result of the switching, there is a sense of confusion about who a person is. When the patient cannot define what he likes or cannot remember what he has done, a sense of confusion of identity is involved. Each identity state remembers different aspects of the patient's life; however, the host personality is not conscious of the other personalities. Putnam emphasizes that "each personality holds different memories and feelings and performs different functions" (1989, p. 37). The current paper intends to focus on David

Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl* in the light of dissociative identity disorder in order to prove that Einar Wegener underwent surgery not because he was a transgender but because he suffered from dissociative identity disorder.

METHOD

There are multiple controversies about multiple personality disorder which makes it difficult to understand, diagnose, treat or discuss. Multiple personality is a state in which various alters dominate the main personality. However, one should notice that multiple personality disorder was considered to be schizofrenia at first. "Freud abandoned dissociation for repression. Janet was marginalized by psychoanalysis and the discrediting of his mentor, Charcot. Behaviorism disregarded multiple personality" (Fink, 2010, p. 61). Later on, the psychologists note that multiple personality disorder as a chronic posttraumatic condition.

The patient has various alters and each alter has his own activities, mentality and history. The alters have different ages, races, genders and names. Alters emerge as it is a way to cope with the difficult moments that the patient underwent. The alters emerge to defend the dominant personality. In case, the alters achieve their autonomy, their emergence will be problematic as they disrupt different situations. As the alters have sense of ownership of their own thoughts, feelings and activities, their dominance can disturb the patient's identity. Therefore, the switching of the alters can be disruptive since each alter has its own background. The aim of this paper is to indicate how Einar, in *The Danish Girl*, suffered from this disorder and what its consequences were.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Danish Girl is inspired by Einar Wegener and his wife's life. As the

novel opens Greta asks her husband Einar to wear stockings and shoes and be her model as Greta's model cancelled the appointment. Both Greta and Einar are painters and Greta needs a live model to paint; however, this incident evolves a new side of Einar. After wearing women's stockings and shoes, Einar shows interest in wearing them again to the extent that he wears women's dresses, wears makeup, and goes out with that female appearance. To conceal the fact that Einar is interested in cross dressing, Greta tells friends that Einar's cousin, Lili, visits them recently. However, when Greta mentions cousin, "my cousin?" Einar said, sounding confused" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 16). The sense of confusion and the fact that he does not remember he has another female alter indicates that he suffers from DID. Surprisingly,

This happened more than once. Greta would mention Lili to a friend, even to Anna, and Einar's face would pinch up, as if he had no idea who Lili was. He and Greta never spoke about afterwards, about his childlike miscomprehension: Lili who? Oh, yes, Lili. My cousin? Yes, my cousin, Lili. The next day the same thing would occur again. It was as if their little secret were really just Greta's little secret, as if she were plotting behind Einar's back (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 16).

Though Einar has appeared as Lili many times, mere mention of life does not remind him of any thing. It is like Einar and Lili are two strangers in one body. As Brand *et al.* note that "individuals with DID experience recurrent gaps in autobiographical memory" (2016, p. 257). Therefore, Einar and Lili cannot remember what the other alter did or experienced.

DID patients mostly suffer from this disorder since they have suffered physically, emotionally or sexually during

their childhood. Einar's childhood passed with difficulties. He had a sick father who could not support himself. "Einar would rest there and feel the weak heat from his father's bones, his ribs showing through his nightshirt. The green veins in his throat would pulse with exhaustion. Einar would take his father's hand and hold it until his grandmother, her body small and rectangular, would come to the door and shoo Einar away. 'You'll only make him worse,' and she'd say, too busy with the fields and the neighbors calling with sympathy to tend to Einar" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 17). Einar did not have a strong father to copy him as a role model; moreover, his grandmother was too busy to be able to give him the affection he needed as a child. "Yet despite his admiration, Einar also resented his father, sometimes cursing him as Einar dug in the bog, his spade cutting through the peat" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 17). He was deprived not only of his father but also his mother during his childhood that is the main reason why the emergence of Lili can be seen as an alter which seeks protection.

As McAllister (2000, p. 26) states that the abused child learns to dissociate, or temporarily leave consciousness, thereby placing the memory of the trauma into the subconscious, which later reveals itself as a separate personality. As the child grows and experiences repeated abuse, different identities or personalities evolve at different times.

As a man, Einar is the one who should provide his wife; whereas, as a woman, Lili can find a man who would express his love for her; the emotions and affections that he did not experience during his childhood.

Children play various roles while playing together. Once Einar's father "found Einar, small at age seven, in drawers, the amber beads twisted around his throat, a yellow deck- scarf on his head like long beautiful hair. His father's

face turned red, and his eyes seemed to sink into his skull. Einar could hear the angry rattle of his father's breath in his throat. 'You can't do that!' his father said. 'Little boys can't do that!' And little Einar replied, 'But why not?'" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 18). The father was very harsh and he did not give any reason for his cruelty. The time he was forbidden to play as a girl in childhood provides a situation for him in the future to create a female alter unconsciously and indicate that even men can be women and dress like women too.

Once, while Einar was playing with his friend,

Hans quietly said, 'light a fire. Boil some water. Drop few stone potatoes and mutton joint.' Then, more vaguely, his gravelly voice suddenly smooth, 'Einar. Let's pretend.' Hans found Einar's grandmother's apron with the cottongrass strings hanging limply next to the stovepipe. He brought it to Einar and cautiously tied it around his waist. Hans touched the nape of Einar's neck, as if there were a panel of hair he needed to lift aside. 'You never played this game' Hans whispered, his voice hot and creamy on Einar's ear, his fingers with their gnawed-down nail on Einar's neck. Hans pulled the apron tighter until Einar had to lift his ribs with an astonished grateful breath, his lungs filling just as Einar's father padded into the kitchen, his eyes wide and his mouth puckered into a large O (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 20).

It was the first time, Einar was touched sensually and he felt great sensations because love was a far-fetched word for him as a child. But even this beautiful moment was interrupted with his father's presence. As they were playing, the father saw them. "'Leave the boy alone!' his father's walking stick was raised at Hans... Einar could hear the wheeze of his father's breath and the flat punch of his fist landing on Einar's cheek" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 20). It was

not Einar's fault that Hans intended to act sensually, but he was punished for acting like a girl. All the repression of the feelings showed themselves in the later years as Lili who evolves and needs male's attention. "Lili would study her profile in the mirror, first from the left, then from the right. She was sorry about leaving Greta to her newspaper and the cone of light from her reading lamp_ but not sorry enough to fail to meet Henrik at the proposed iron streetlamp" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 38).

Einar's identity is changed and he prefers to be female more and more from the time he could find a lover like Henrik who could give him love and attention that he was deprived of when he was a child. "Lili got home, and she washed her face and removed her clothes and climbed into bed as Einar" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 39). The identities switch and he will be caring husband again. "The next day Greta told Lili she should stop seeing Henrik. 'Do you think it's fair to him?' she asked. 'To deceive him like this? What do you think he would think?' but Lili didn't understand what Greta meant. What would Henrik think about what? Unless Greta plainly told her, often Lili forgot who she was" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 39). The switching of the alters are so sudden that even Greta does not recognize that it is not Lili whom she is talking to, but Einar. Therefore, he cannot remember who Henrik is and why she should stop seeing him. The two alters cannot remember or know what the other one has done. Each of the alters has their own experience of life and see life in different ways; therefore, they cannot know what the other alter does or thinks. Einar's personality is "split into distinct identities" and he cannot remember whatever happens to him by those identities (Harrison, 2006, p. 1). Einar promised to talk to Henrik later.

Once, out with Henrik, Lili was wondering what Henrik knows about

her. "A terrible shudder rose through Lili, and it suddenly was as if Einar were a third person there_ as if he were one step removed from Lili and Henrik's intimate circle of confession, witnessing it all. There he was, Einar in the young girl's dress, flirting with a younger man. It was an awful sight" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 39-40). This is the moment when alters meet. For the first time, Einar saw himself as Lili and he was ashamed of himself and the situation he was entangled.

Greta never complained about Lili but she greets her every time "as if she was an amusing foreign friend. She's hum and gossip as she helped Lili into her shoes" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 42). Lili as an alter has an independent identity and Greta respected her since she loved her husband. However, wherever there is the switching of the alters the other alter does not remember friends and people. Greta would say "we're having dinner with Hans... Lili asked "Hans who?" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 43). Hans is Einar's close friend, yet Lili does not know him since she is another alter. "How old was Lili? She was younger than Einar, who then was nearly thirty- five" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 50). The two identities are totally separate from each other. Lili said that she is twenty four. Einar and Lili have different ages as they are two different alters in one body.

The identities evolve so sudden that Einar might sleep as Einar and wake up as Lili. "The smell of blood woke Einar. He got out of bed, careful not to disturb Greta. She looked uneasy as if her face caught in a bad dream. The blood was trickling down his inner thigh, one slow hot line. A bubble of blood was caught in his nostril. He had woken as Lili" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 80). Each identity has its own features and here Lili as a woman bleeds. Despite being a man, the other female alter has her own experience of life. When Einar visited

many doctors to solve his problem and know what happened to him, he confirms that "there is another person living inside me... a girl named Lili" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 97).

Two different identities live in one body and Einar intends to come to terms with this disorder. He is so scared of his current situation that he tells the doctor that "like I don't know who I really am" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 99). He is confused about his identity and he is not sure whether he is a man or a woman and it bothers him. As a result of confusion, Einar undergoes operation to change his gender to female. But it is not certain whether he undergoes operation as a result of the fact that Lili as an alter dominates Einar or not. The novel ends open endedly "when she opened her eyes, Lili saw that Carlisle and Anna hadn't yet returned. She wasn't worried; they'd come back for her. They would find her in her chair" (Ebershoff, 2000, p. 178). After the operation, Lili is waiting for her friends to come and pick her. It is not mentioned whether she is pleased with her choice or not or whether Einar will emerge in the future or she would live as Lili for the rest of her life.

CONCLUSION

To reiterate, this paper has provided substantial merits which argue that the protagonist indeed suffers from dissociative identity disorder. While Einar is mainly read as a transgender who struggles from gender identity confusion, we propose that Einar's counter identity, also known as Lili (referred to as *the alter*) is a product of his early childhood trauma. The fact that Einar was denied the opportunity to express himself as a girl when he was young affects the stability of his gender identity as he grows older. As seen over and over again, his transformation, or switching to becoming Lili happens

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whenever there is dire situation of which Einar has no control of. Ultimately, the paper concludes that it is Lili who dominates the body (instead of Einar) and made the decision to have the surgical transformation to match her identity.

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