

# Transphobic Experiences of Julie Anne Peters's Luna

Dr. S.J. Kala<sup>1</sup>, Ms. Shivani. S<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor of English, Fatima College, Madurai

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, Fatima College, Madurai

**Abstract--Transgender is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of gender identities and practices. This research paper traces the Transphobic Experiences of the character Luna with reference to Julie Anne Peters's novel Luna. This paper also explores Liam's self-discovery of his true self as Luna and unfolds the transphobic issues of social stigma, family exclusion, misgendering, shame and violence faced by Liam as Luna.**

**Index Terms--Gender identity, Misgendering, Transgender, Transphobia**

Human beings are endowed with distinct characteristics and they are defined on the basis of sex and gender. Sex and Gender are interrelated and complex issues. Sex refers to the biological difference that defines men and women while "Gender is generally assumed to follow from those biological elements that make up one's sex" [1]. It refers to a person's self-representation as male or female, or a set of social expectations based on individual's gender presentation or expression. The term, "Gender" was first coined in early 1950s by John William Money, a psychologist and sexologist of New Zealand known for his work in developmental sexology and psychoendocrinology. He also defined the ideas of sexual orientation, gender role and gender identity.

As a social construct, gender is based on society and culture. This multi-faceted system establishes certain gender assumptions on the basis of binary forms. According to this classification, the concept of gender identity emerges from a particular culture. The most prominent factor of gender is gender identity. In the Journal American Psychologist gender identity is defined as, "A person's deeply felt, inherent sense of being boy, a man, or male; or girl, a woman or female; or an alternative gender that may or may not correspond to a person's sex assigned at birth or to a person's primary or secondary sex characteristics" [2]. This definition of gender identity also stresses upon

how a person feels internally and expresses externally their identity, regardless of the biological sex.

People often assume that gender identity is congruent with assigned sex. They associate femininity with women and masculinity with men. However, it is not the same for everyone. In some cases, men exhibit feminine qualities and women prefer to be masculine. Others consider being neither masculine nor feminine or a combination of both and some fall into the category of third gender. Therefore, people who do not identify with gender binaries are termed as non-binary. The umbrella term, 'Non-binary' connects with all other gender identities rejecting the binary standards. Some of the non-binary individuals may be termed as agender, transgender, gender queer or gender fluid.

The gender stereotypes vary and change across different cultures. When an infant is born, his or her sex is determined on the biological chromosomes, anatomy and hormones. Nevertheless, the people of transgender explore a different gender identity which is not similar to their biological sex. "The root of the word transgender comes from the Latin word trans, meaning 'across'. A Transgender literally means 'across gender'" [3]. The words 'Transgender' and 'Trans' are relatively new and widely used in 1990s. The expression encompasses a range of people who experience a gender mismatch between their natal sex and the gender identity. This includes 'transvestites' or 'transsexuals', 'cross-dressers', 'two-spirits' and in particular refers to those who feel like their apparent sex fails to align with their true gender.

A set of assumptions arises about what it means to be transgender, rather not dealing with sexual orientation, transition or even with their gender expression. Some people realise that they are trans at an early age whereas it takes time for others to realise that they are transgender. It is all about one's internal sense of feeling and reflection of true self to the outer world. Probably, the older terms 'transvestite' and 'transsexual' were commonly used in Western Nations and later replaced by the words trans, transgender or

cross-dresser. Over the years, the indigenous people of Native America encounter both male and female traits in individuals and called as Two-Spirit.

In fact, there are several categories to classify transgender people especially as Trans woman who is marked male at birth turns out to be a female or labelled as male to female (MTF) and Trans man assumed female at birth, later relates with male identity (FTM). These gender non-conforming individuals may or may not identify with one gender or exhibit both male and female features. In accordance with these socio-cultural variations, the trans people adapt to live in an environment indulging in hormone therapy, transition or with sex-reassignment surgery.

The literary representations of transgender are mostly written in Latin and German evolved during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The earliest instance emerged from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In 1928, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* is considered as the first transgender novel portraying the gender changes of a poet from male to female. Apart from Orlando, there existed a range of fictional works centering on the struggles and issues faced by trans community. The trans pioneers like Louise Lawrence and Virginia Prince worked along with researchers like Alfred Kinsey and Harry Benjamin in publishing the book *Transvestia* (1952) which discusses about Transvestism. Under the guidance of Louise Lawrence, Harry Benjamin's book *The Transsexual Phenomenon* presented the concepts of Transsexualism.

Recently, the contemporaries have developed a keen interest in the area of transgenderism which points out an enormous growth and differentiation in Queer Literature. Moreover, several authors of LGBTQ fiction like Meredith Russo, Lisa Williamson and Charlie Jane Anders target teenage audience highlighting the relationships and hardships of transgender community. Besides these, Julie Anne Peters, the critically acclaimed and award-winning author is also known for her contributions on young adult fiction featuring LGBTQ characters.

Julie Anne Peters was born on January 16, 1952 in New York, United States. As a teenager, witnessing stonewall riots, Julie lived through the most terrible years of being gay until it was made legal. Almost all the works of Peters is unique and every character shares his or her journey which is deep or personal.

Her works introduce a deluge of themes dealing with homosexuality, gender discrimination, rejection of gender identity and also the lingering effects of transgenderism that prevail in the society. Her novel *Keeping You a Secret* (2003) highlights the journey of Holland who experiences homophobia as she discovers her sexuality. In *Luna* (2004) Peters explores Liam's life journey of self-discovery as Luna where her trans identity is rejected by the society. *Far from Xanadu* (2005) and a short story collection *grl2grl* (2007) chronicles the hurdles of homosexual relationships.

Julie Anne Peters's young adult fiction *Luna* is narrated by Regan, sister of Liam who is a transgender. The story explores Liam's life journey of self-discovery which had been denied by the society. Throughout the novel, Liam feels unhappy to be born as a male and wishes to live a satisfied life as a female. Every night, under the moonlight, Liam transforms into Luna presenting her inner true self. As a supportive and protective sister, Regan is the only person whom Liam blindly trusts the most and hides his secret from everyone. After years of struggles and hardships, Luna decides that he is no longer willing to hide his identity and finally ends in transition to live fully as a woman.

The plot is narrated from Regan's perspective mainly focussing on her worries, sacrifices and thoughts on Liam's identity. As a sister, Regan shares a unique relationship, struggles with the fact that her brother is now her sister and deals with all the consequences of Luna's change. In an interview with Cynthia Leitch Smith, Peters admits,

To be authentic and honest, the narrator, the main character, would need to act in the role of observer. I decided to create a sister for Luna, Regan. Regan would be Luna's confidante throughout life and in that way she could see and relate to the reader, the childhood manifestations of being born transgender. [4]

This thought-provoking novel of Peters explores the themes of discrimination, hatred, identity crisis, depression and transformation. Apart from battles and bigotry, the author strongly expresses the feeling of loved and excluded.

The gender variation in the society opens the way for multiple forms of prejudice like homophobia, transphobia, cissexism and misogyny. Apart from

such forms of discrimination, Julie Anne Peters's *Luna* reflects the transphobic experiences when a trans individual do not live up to the gender ideals. Peters portrays the strong aversion of transphobes towards the trans community. The research paper probes into the parental rejection, social discrimination, hatred, shame, violence and misgendering experienced by the trans individual Luna. Besides these, the paper also exposes the state of depression, isolation and confusion when the character negotiates her desires and expresses her trans identity. It also discusses the transphobic experiences of Luna who travels through the difficult phase of social stigma, hatred and rejection because of her gender identity.

The transgendered people are teased, excluded, laughed at and targeted causing transphobia in the trans individuals. The ideology of transphobia emerged when people encountered other genders, apart from binaries. Julia Serano, an American writer and trans-bi activist in her book, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* defines, "Transphobia is an irrational fear, of aversion to, or discrimination against people who gendered identities, appearance or behaviours deviate from societal norms" [5]. Hence, the complex term extends beyond 'phobia' stressing negative attributes such as extreme dislike or prejudice, rejection of trans identity and refusing to acknowledge the transsexuals or transgender people.

Many people of trans community are unable to express their gender identities because of transphobia. Elizabeth Boskey, a researcher and clinician focusing on LGBTQ+ health, acknowledges that, "Individuals may not think of themselves as transphobic but still exhibit transphobic behaviors and beliefs" [6]. However, some trans people face internalised transphobia - a transphobia that they direct at themselves. In many other contexts, these transphobic prejudices result in other ways of expression including social exclusion, suppression, misgendering, shame and violence. Due to discrimination based on their gender identity and expression, people of trans community are humiliated and neglected worldwide. These marginalised minorities of trans people confront mistreatment, cruelty, harassment which remain unnoticed. From childhood, the victims of transphobia experience transphobic discrimination through parental rejection. "Family rejection and estrangement

have a material impact. For some kids, the only option is leaving home. Others have no option at all: their parents kick them out" [7]. In the novel, Luna unveils her trans identity, she undergoes a series of hostilities and animosities especially from her family and her close circle of friends whenever she played the mommy role and cross dressed as a female. Like Luna, a kind of discomfort arises in some families when they tend to realise that their children are transgender they disown them instead of considering them to be a part of the family.

Nicholas M. Teich highlights that, "Parents, siblings, spouses, children, loved ones and friends connected to a transperson may feel as if they have no concept of what it would be like to be in the transperson's shoes" [8]. Luna too faces a similar situation in her life. Luna's parents revere and strictly follow gender roles prescribed by the society. Jack, Liam's father wants his son to be happy, normal and behave like other children. He thinks playing baseball will do Liam good but Liam dislikes doing male roles. When Luna exposes her original identity, her dad misinterprets it as gay. "Like I said, I'm a transsexual TS, if you prefer. I was supposed to be a girl, and I am, but I was born in the wrong body. Think of it as a birth anomaly" [9].

The parents of transgender community may react with anger and hostility not bothering about the inner struggle of their child when they reveal their true identity. In some cases, the parents' mistake that their child as gay or lesbian but never consider them as transgender. Luna's attempts to establish her identity as a transgender turn futile. Her own father fails to accept her as trans and eventually, Luna's female identity is questioned. When Luna exposes her inner self, with rage and disgust, Jack tries to punch her and tells her to leave the house if she wishes to live her life as a transgender. As a result, Luna who is usually dependent on her parents for care, support and other needs receives discrimination and faces different challenges in her daily life.

The transgender and gender diverse people face social exclusion because of transphobes discomfort, prejudice, negligence and ignorance. Serano writes, "In a world, where people are viewed as being either female or male, and where all people are assumed to be cisgendered and cissexual, those of us who are transgendered and transsexual are effectively erased from public awareness" [10]. This incomplete feeling

of gender disparity occurs when Liam shows up as Luna in public. Luna's strong desire and preference to wear female clothes has been rejected by the society. She expects the society to treat her like a normal human being and not as a criminal. Certainly, the society fails to understand what it is like to be a transgender.

Trans individuals like Luna are denied a decent life in this universe. They never feel like belonging to this world. The whole gender norms end up judging people like Luna who are harmless instead they are discriminated for who they are: "The whole gender expectation thing was too confusing to me. Why couldn't people just be accepted for who they were" [11]. Another chaotic situation takes place at Materas house when Liam transforms into Luna. Regan loses her job as a babysitter because of Liam's cross dressing. With crucifying looks the Materas exclude him from their house. Eventually, the Materas share the same prejudiced notions in judging Luna's dual identity.

Some trans people hate their bodies and hate being trans whereas others are glad to be trans. It is not defined as self-hatred but as a strong disgust against the social structures that defines and forces them to pretend as something they are not meant to be. Liam chooses a name as 'Lia Marie' but later changes into Luna, a girl visible only in moonlight. He considers himself as a caricature and a puppet who is rooted firmly inside the social norms. With disappointment, Liam asserts, "No one will ever know the person I am inside. All they see is nothing" [12]. The girl in him is trapped in a boy's body. His body betrays him and does reflect his inner image.

Transgendered people do not possess any inbuilt sensors that pop up and tell them that they are trans. At the initial stage, many are aware of the indifference and feel wrong about their body. Arlene Lev, the author of *Transgender Emergence*, calls this self-awareness as "reaching out" [13]. Lacking with the gender similarities, Liam develops an aversion towards his own genitals and attempts to remove his penis. He begs his mother and Regan to "take it off" assuming that his aligned sex does not match his trans identity. For his abnormal act, he was punished and locked at home. Thereby, Liam's mother finds his son with a knife and bleeding penis. This horrifying scene denotes hatred against his biological sex. He finds it

horrible to have dual identity and feels detached from his body.

People of trans community witness additional obstacles such as social stigma, harassment and other internalised feelings such as societal shaming which induce mental health problems. They experience shame or disgrace because of their body image which reduces their self-esteem and satisfaction with life. It is evident that when a trans person expresses their gender expression or sexual orientation, they are often ridiculed or ignored by the public for not satisfying the standards of the society. The societal shaming lead these trans-identified people consider themselves as undesirable humans and portray as mere objects that exist for the amusement of others.

In *Luna*, Liam always loved to play 'mommy role' and cross dresses as Luna in Regan's room with her attires and accessories. For instance, at the Taco Bell restaurant, Luna receives strange and disgusting looks from men and women for dressing up as an ordinary girl. Several people stalked her and unable to accept "as Luna – to be her", but all they observed "was a boy in girl's clothes" [14]. With full of determination, Luna visits the airport in female attire. Nevertheless, she is humiliated by the security guards who mock at her appearance and deny her entry. Afterwards, when she removes her wig and bra and then she is allowed to enter the airport.

In *Transgender Voices: Beyond Men and Women*, Lori B. Girshick, a sociologist points out that, "For others, messages of disgust that came from family members, peers, and friends had a profound, shame-inducing impact"[15]. Again, when there was a slumber party in Regan's house for her friends, Liam wished to be a part of them. He serves food and especially Shannon, friend of Regan, notices a change in his behaviour. Liam attempts to be feminine by painting his fingers and toe nails and he blows it like a girl as if he polished it hundred times. Suddenly, the music is played and Liam transforms into Luna dancing like other girls. Everyone stare at his weird behaviour and label him as 'gay'. Regan says,

*She exposes herself. Lia Marie. The change is visible, noticeable, at least to me. She throws her arms in the air and begins to gyrate her hips in double, triple time to the beat. Wild, out of control, as if she's been holding back for years. Which, I realize, she has. She may not even be aware she's out. [16]*

Thus, Luna is forever anchored in her assigned sex but never truly achieves to live in this condemned world with her identified sex.

Transgendered people are often targeted with transphobic violence such as bullying, harassment and mistreatment. Bullying can range from verbal abuse, physical assault, or passing sexual remarks. Transgender youth most commonly experience bullying related to gender and sexual orientation. In the novel *Luna*, Regan points out negative remarks about Hoyt Doucet mentioning, “He was evil. Satan incarnate. I despised him so much. He’d been Liam’s worst nightmare ever since the Doucets had moved in down the street a few years ago” [17]. The quotation proves that Hoyt Doucet’s aversion toward Liam. He is a school bully and a jerk who always made Liam’s life unpleasant. He considers Liam as abnormal and calls him ‘fag’ and ‘gay’. When Liam morphs as Luna in school, Hoyt rips off her wig and ends up in smacking her. With this incident, Hoyt Doucet exhibits transphobic violence and ill treats innocent people like Luna.

The right terms are normally to be used to describe transgender people. The wrong ones can discriminate and reinforce misgendering. “Pronouns are one of the most common ways people are misgendered ... misgendering someone is an act of disrespect” [18]. Refusing to use proper pronouns that match their gender identity or not addressing a trans person by their chosen name will likely pave way for discrimination and embarrassment. Misgendering can upset the minds of transsexuals and affect their personal growth. So, it is better to avoid talking or discussing about their gender out of shame or in confusion.

In *Luna*, misgendering occurs when Liam uncovers his inner identity to his father and to his best friend Alyson. Liam’s father initially takes him to be a gay and laughs at Luna when she uncovers her true identity on his eighteenth birthday. Regan narrates, “When she’s dressed, she wants you to address her by her chosen name - Luna. And use ‘her’ and ‘she’. It won’t be hard. She really is a girl” [19]. A similar situation arises when Alyson finds it hard to believe the truth that Liam is a transgender. She misgenders him as ‘gay’. She thinks it was a mere joke and refused to listen to the words of Luna and Regan. As a friend of Liam, she denies his trans identity but not as an enemy

as what other people do. Therefore, she tries harder to accept his identity but never abandoned Liam.

Most trans individuals are subjected towards physical and psychological issues. The stress of transphobia on Luna leads her to depression, confusion and isolation. It is visible that Luna’s life is full of challenges and troubles witnessing transphobic prejudice, hatred, shame and discrimination from the society. She is odds with gender expectations and conflicting lives in a body that unfits her self-image. Eventually, she hides her inner feelings, thoughts and desires – all these experiences made her feel alienated and invisible. The prejudiced notion of not fitting into gender space distorts her and she disappears from the social community. The awkward reactions and sexual remarks about her body make her “disintegrate, implode and disembody” [20].

The most common medical intervention for transgendered people is transitioning. To break all the barriers and to eliminate from depression, Luna opts for gender transition. She tackles all the hurdles and obstacles with strong determination and willpower. Her strong desire and courage to be female makes her undergo Sex Reassignment Surgery in Seattle. Murat Altinay states the coming out process as, “... an important part of the conversation in a psychiatric setting because it affects the person’s quality of life as well as their safety and sometimes readiness for gender affirmation treatments” [21]. She thinks that revealing her transgenderism can be one of the most difficult steps in her journey. At the same time, the coming out process makes her feel safe and proud. Transitioning socially makes her to live in the world as her true self.

The global attitude of accepting Queer community remains stagnant and creates a set of roles and opinions for trans people to live accordingly that are different from their assigned gender. The novel brings out both positive and negative impacts on the readers. The positive side is as a transgender, Liam works as a game tester and builds PCs for people. He gains support from his mother, sister Regan and her best friend Alyson though not from his father, Hoyt Doucet and especially from his neighbours and others.

At the same time, Liam’s rigid environment surrounded with full of transphobes and strict gender ideals. His environment enforces two genders. One is to be masculine and other is to be feminine. With a male body, Liam is torn between the two genders,

being male at day and female at night. Liam's life is totally miserable. He desires to act the role of his identity but he is caged inside his body. Often Liam envies Regan's body and longs to be his dad's daughter and not a son. He hates his own genitals and rejects to perform male activities.

Apart from parental and social rejection, Luna wishes to move to a new place, enjoying her freedom to dress in her own room and to live a life like Teri Lynn. Finally, she decides to leave the home town, her parents and beloved sister Regan. Her life takes a new turn after the process of transitioning. Luna says, "This isn't good-bye... I think of it as a new beginning because that's what it is for me. A rebirth. I'm starting my life over. The next time we meet, you won't even know me" [22]. Like a colourful butterfly, she flies away to start her new journey as Luna. Even though, there are many laws to safeguard transgender people, the society must reform their actions and stop inflicting transphobia against innocent people like Liam in the novel. People have to change their mindset, join their hands to accept and provide space for trans individual like Luna who identified as a transgender and preferred to be called as Luna.

#### REFERENCE

- [1] Devor, Aaron, and Ardel Haefele Thomas. *Transgender: A Reference Handbook*. ABC-CLIO, 2019.
- [2] "Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People." American Psychological Association. 2015. *American Psychologist*, vol.70, no.9, pp. 832-864. doi:10.1037/a0039906. [https:// www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf](https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf)
- [3] Teich, Nicholas M. *Transgender 101: A Simple Guide to a Complex Issue*. 1st ed., Columbia University Press, 2012.
- [4] Smith, Cynthia Leitich. "National Book Award Finalists Announced." *Cynthia Leitich Smith*, 4 Jan. 2019, [cynthialeitichsmith.com/2004/10/national-book-award-finalists-3](http://cynthialeitichsmith.com/2004/10/national-book-award-finalists-3).
- [5] Serano Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Seal Press, 2007.
- [6] Boskey, Elizabeth. "Understanding Transphobia." *Verywell Health*, 13 Oct. 2020, [www.verywellhealth.com/transphobia-5077602](http://www.verywellhealth.com/transphobia-5077602).
- [7] Faye, Shon. *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice*. Penguin Random House, 2021.
- [8] Peters, Julie Anne. *Luna*. Little, Brown and Company, 2006.
- [9] Lev, Arlene Istar. *Transgender Emergence*. Taylor and Francis, 2013.
- [10] Girshick, Lori B. *Transgender Voices: Beyond Women and Men*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., University Press of New England, 2008.
- [11] Abraham, Anika. *Gender Identity*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Cavendish Square Publishing, 2021.
- [12] Altinay, Murat. "Transgender." *Pocket Guide to LGBTQ Mental Health*, edited by Petros Levounis et.al., Van Haren Publishing, 2020. pp. 61-85.