



METAMORPHOSIS OF A HERMAPHRODITE: THE STORY OF CAL

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Abstract

Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* traces the trials and adversities faced by the Stephanides family as they pursue the American Dream. The American Dream has always been the most sought after reason for coming to America. It has the foundations in the idea that anyone can come and make a life for themselves; no matter what their beginnings might be, how rich or poor one is or what one's lineage is – for America is the land of opportunity. It is a part of this saga of transformation but the melting-pot syndrome only melts the first layer. The book depicts the tribulations of attaining an identity especially while dealing with the revelation that the American Dream is a delusion that has already disappeared.

Keywords: hermaphrodite, identity, transformation

The opening lines of 'Middlesex', reminds us of 'David Copperfield', Callie tells us that she was born twice; first as a girl and then as a boy. 'Like Tiresias, I was first one thing and then the other.' (3) Thus Eugenides takes us through the saga of the Stephanides family. Callie is born a hermaphrodite into a family of Greek immigrants. Calliope is not like other girls. In the process of her development, she uncovers a guilty family secret and consequently creates a new genetic history that turns the female Callie into the male Cal, one of the most audacious narrators in contemporary fiction. The narrator Cal, now at the age of forty-one, explains the roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time.

Callie's story begins with her grandparents – Lefty and Desdemona in Bithynios, Turkey. Eleutherios "Lefty" Stephanides and Desdemona live in a village high on the slope of Mount Olympus, above the city of Bursa in Asia Minor. Desdemona harvests silkworm cocoons which is sold by Lefty. "He had never had any interest in the family livelihood. He couldn't judge silkworm cocoons by feeling or sniffing them as his sister would. The only

reason he brought the cocoons to market was that women were not allowed" (Eugenides 30). The siblings are orphans who share a close relationship ever since the death of their parents in the ongoing Greek-Turkish war. "For as long as she would remember he'd always been on the other side of the goat's hair blanket that separated their beds." (24)

Later, this innocent love turns incestuous. Lefty realizes his unnatural sexual desires for his sister and he prays, "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" (31).

When the Turkish army invades Bursa and Smyrna, the siblings are forced to flee. The whole city is burned down to ashes. Lefty and Desdemona board a ship amid the Great Fire of Smyrna and set sail for the United States to the only relation that is left in the world – their cousin Sourmelina. On the ship – their histories unknown to the other passengers – Lefty and Desdemona pretend not to know each other. They act as strangers meeting for the first time and start to stage interactions, cordial

at first. Cal says his grandparents enjoyed their simulated courtship. When people were within earshot, they engaged in first- or second-date conversations, making up past histories for themselves.

Once in America, they contact their cousin Sourmelina Zizmo who lives in Detroit, with her husband Jimmy Zizmo. Lefty and Desdemona start living with Jimmy and Lina. Jimmy Zizmo gets Lefty a job at the Ford Motor Company. While there, Lefty graduates from their English school with "Ninety-three percent" (105). His success, however, is marred by an investigation into his home. The Ford authorities find out that Jimmy has a police record and as "Mr. Ford can't have workers maintaining such associations" they dismiss Lefty from work (105).

One night, after the couples see an erotically charged performance of *The Minotaur*, both couples (Lefty-Desdemona and Jimmy-Lina) have sexual intercourse and conceive the same night. Desdemona learns from Dr. Philobosian, who fled Turkey with her and Lefty that there is an increased chance of genetic disease for children born from incest.

"We now know that most birth deformities comes from the consanguinity of the parents."

"From the what?" asked Desdemona.

"From families intermarrying."

Desdemona went white.

"Causes all kinds of problems. Imbecility. Hemophilia. Look at the Romanovs. Look at any royal family. Mutants, all of them." (116)

Meanwhile Jimmy begins to falsely suspect that Lefty and Lina are having an affair. Jimmy's suspicion forces him to ensnare Lefty onto a thin sheet of ice. Jimmy's plot does not go as per his wishes and he crashes on the ice. His body could not be recovered as "the ice had refrozen during the night and a few inches of new snow had fallen" (126).

Desdemona births a son – Milton – and Lina, a daughter – Tessie – and the families embraces the

reality of Jimmy's disappearance holding a funeral despite never recovering the body. Terrorised with the genetic impediments instigated by incest, Desdemona shuns Lefty's presence. Lefty spends his time setting up a speakeasy. Disregarded and unnoticed, Lefty vents out his anger at Desdemona and demands her assistance in running the family. She procures work at a temple managed by the Nation of Islam that teaches women how to raise silkworms.

While working there, she gets an opportunity to listen to their leader, Minister Fard, who expounds on the perils and treachery of the white people. The sting of her incest pricks her and she becomes distressed at the status of her relationship. The leader, Minister Fard gets arrested for instigating human sacrifice when realization struck Desdemona that he is in fact Jimmy himself.

As young adults Milton woos Tessie which distresses Desdemona. Fearing her mistake to be repeated again, her machinations make Tessie accept a marriage proposal from Michael Antoniou (Father Mike), a short, young man preparing to be a priest. As a mark of his dissent, Milton volunteers to join the Navy.

Milton and Tessie, later, realise their love for each other and get married. Their son is named Chapter Eleven. Milton makes Lefty's business a success and Lefty is forced to sort the comforts of his young days - gambling. Lefty bankrupts himself which eventually makes him and Desdemona live with Milton and Tessie. Meanwhile, Tessie conceives and the parents hope for a girl. Prior to Callie's birth, Desdemona predicts that the child will be a boy. The parents, however, prepare for a girl.

Dr. Philobosian delivers Calliope. He is preoccupied by an attractive nurse to comprehend that Calliope is not actually a girl and she is inducted into the family as a girl child. Riots become commonplace in Detroit and despite Milton's efforts to physically defend his diner, it is burnt.

They relocate to Grosse Pointe wherein Milton starts Hercules Hot Dogs. Lefty succumbs to death and Desdemona becomes weary of life, "She didn't like being left on earth. She didn't like being

left in America. She was tired of living...A woman's life was over once her husband died" (271). When Callie turns twelve, she wonders why she has not entered puberty.

"Most spectacularly of all, girls are becoming women. Not mentally or emotionally even, but physically. Nature is making its preparations... Only Calliope, in the second row, is motionless, her desk stalled somehow, so that she's the only one who takes in the true extent of the metamorphoses around her... Calliope feels gypped, cheated. "Remember me?" she says, to nature. "I'm waiting. I'm still here."(286)

Calliope feels embarrassed changing clothes around her classmates and struggles with her body's development. When she is fourteen years old, Callie falls in love with a girl whom she refers to as the "Obscure Object". Calliope is invited to the summer house of the Object. She smokes with the Object's older brother Jerome and his friend Rex Reese. Calliope is terrified when Jerome initiates physical intimacy and is worried that Jerome might find something wrong with her during their sexual act, but "Reader, believe this if you can: he hadn't noticed a thing" (376).

The Object is jealous towards Calliope and they start a clandestine sexual relationship at night, which neither acknowledges during the day. One day, Jerome catches Calliope and Object in a conceding position and is vicious. Calliope attacks him and while trying to escape, smashes on a tractor.

At the hospital, the doctors refer her to a sexologist in New York named Dr. Luce. He is well-known for having redefined the principles for fixing gender. Dr. Luce's verdict is that she is effectively a girl with male hormones and suggests hormone therapy and a sex reassignment surgery. Calliope, accidentally, peruses the analysis and realizes that she is, genetically and biologically, a boy.

Upset over this revelation, Callie runs away and assumes a male identity as Cal. Now going by Cal, he hitchhikes across the United States, meeting all kinds of people along the way. Cal winds up in San

Francisco, where he joins a strip club called Sixty-Niners. Cal is given the job of portraying THE GOD HERMAPHRODITUS, half man-half woman.

"There have been hermaphrodites around forever, Cal. Forever. Plato said that the original human being was a hermaphrodite. Did you know that? The original person was two halves, one male, one female. Hen (check) these got separated. That's why everybody's always searching for their other half. Except for us. We've got both halves already."

I didn't say anything about the Object.

"Okay, in some cultures we're considered freaks," she went on. "But in others it's just the opposite. The Navajo have a category of person they call a berdache. What a berdache is, basically, is, someone who adopts a gender other than their biological one. Remember, Cal. Sex is biological. Gender is cultural. The Navajo understand this. If a person wants to switch her gender, they let her. And they don't denigrate that person – they honor her. The berdaches are the shamans of the tribe. They're the healers, the great weavers, the artists." (489)

Milton dies searching in vain for Cal and she returns back home for the funeral but decides to stay back with Desdemona. He says: "It'll be too complicated... I don't want to have to explain everything to everybody. Not yet. It'll be too big of a distraction. It'll be better if I'm not there" (527).

In a private moment, Desdemona identifies Cal's condition, associating it with stories from her old village about children born of incest. She admits to Cal that her husband, Lefty, is also her brother. As Milton's funeral takes place at the church, Cal stands in the doorway of his family home, assuming the male-only role in Greek traditions to keep his father's spirit from re-entering the family home. At present, Cal is a diplomat stationed in Berlin. He falls in love with Julie Kikuchi but is reluctant to admit it fearing her rejection. He gathers courage, opening up to her and she accepts him, and they begin their life voyage together. Cal accepts himself and his condition being in terms with it. His courage lies in the fact that he also pardons Desdemona who

believes that in some way or the other is responsible for his condition.

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