



A TRANSGRESSION LOOK INTO THE TRANSGENDER WOMEN OF IRELAND IN PATRICK MCCABE'S 'BREAKFAST ON PLUTO'

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Abstract

The transgender community, in general, has been widely judged and criticized because it is said to disturb the stability of heterosexuality and gender and sex binarity. By the introduction of new gendered/sexual categories; from transsexual to transgender to gender-fluid individuals and much more, all these categories are challenging the basis of societies, which are mainly established on a binary system and because these categories seem to be out of order, therefore it is extensively judged and put up for questioning. *Breakfast on Pluto* portrays the image of transgender women as a lost soul who is unable to find love, and therefore, demeaning her into prostitution and notoriety. Pussy is not portrayed as a normal woman but as a gold-digger, a woman of many affairs, and lastly as a woman judged by her society for choosing her own sexuality and gender. By giving liberty to any individual who stands outside of the binary category to carry out the role they intended for themselves, it will allow them not to live in fear of being scrutinized by their own society. However, if societies were to stop judging transgender individuals, they would be able to be a productive part of any society without being forced to live under the bridge or at the fear of being questioned or judged.

Keywords: transgender image, transgender struggles, binary oppositions, homophobia in the Irish society.

Özet

Transseksüel topluluk genel olarak geniş çapta yargılandı ve eleştirildi çünkü heteroseksüellik ile cinsiyet ve cinsiyet ikiliğinin istikrarını bozduğu söyleniyor. Yeni cinsiyet / cinsel kategorilerin tanıtılmasıyla; transseksüelden transseksüellere, cinsiyet akışkanlığı olan bireylere ve çok daha fazlası, iste tüm bu kategoriler, esas olarak ikili bir sistem üzerine kurulan toplumların temelinde meydan okuyor çünkü bu kategoriler sıra dışı görünmektedir, bu nedenle kapsamlı bir şekilde yargılanmakta ve sorgulanmaktadır. "Pluto'da Kahvaltı", ruhunu kaybetmiş, aşkı bulamayan trans bir kadın imajını ve bu nedenle onun fahişeliğe ve kötü şöhrete düşüşünü anlamaktadır. Pussy, normal bir kadın olarak değil, altın avcısı, pek çok işlere karışmış ve son olarak da kendi cinselliğini ve cinsiyetini seçtiği için toplum tarafından yargılanan bir kadın olarak tasvir edilmiştir. İkili kategorinin dışında duran herhangi bir bireye, kendileri için amaçladıkları rolü gerçekleştirme özgürlüğü vererek, kendi toplumları tarafından irdelenme korkusu içinde yaşamamalarını sağlayacaktır. Bununla birlikte, toplumlar trans bireyleri yargılamayı bırakırsa, köprüünün altında yaşamaya zorlanmadan ya da sorgulanma veya yargılanma korkusu olmadan herhangi bir toplumun üretken bir parçası olabilirler.

Anahtar kelimeler: *transseksüel imaj, transseksüel mücadeleler, ikili karşıtlıklar, İrlanda toplumunda homofobi*

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Introduction

The transgender subject is not a new subject to the literary field. The earliest western fiction to touch the issue of transgender is *Metamorphoses* by the Roman poet Ovid between 3-8AD (Johnson,2020). Followed by many literary works that touched on the same subject. But one of the most recognizable novels to touch on the transgender subject is *Orlando* written in 1928 by Virginia Woolf. A noble English man who one day wakes up in the body of a female (Winterson,2018). The transgender subject has been discussed since 3AD till our current days, therefore, marking the importance of other gendered categories.

Breakfast on Pluto is one of the present-day contemporary novels that discuss the topic of transgender. Written in 1998 by the Irish writer Patrick McCabe who was born in 1955 in Clones, Ireland. McCabe wrote many novels, His short story *The Call* won the Irish Press Hennessy Award, while his two other novels; *The Butcher Boy* and *Breakfast on Pluto* were both shortlisted for The Booker Prize for Fiction. (Hahn,2002). In writing *Breakfast on Pluto* Patrick McCabe intended for Patrick ‘Pussy’ Braden to be a cheerful transvestite breaking the stereotypes of the Northern Ireland literary protagonists. Weaver says, *Breakfast on Pluto* “is a wretchedly uplifting story within a story, with Puss as ringmaster, gaily writing his memoirs for his psychiatrist as he dips in and out of sanity” (Weaver,1998).

Fathered by a priest after raping his housemaid in the small town of Tyeerlin, Braden was left to be raised by a strict foster mother ‘whiskers’, filled with personal vengeance which took a toll on his mental health, forced him to look for love and acceptance in the wrong places. Dr. Terence Patrick’s psychiatrist suggests that Pussy’s attraction and love for the opposite sex is due to fathers

Bernard's ‘starved vestment’ (*Breakfast on Pluto*,7). Rejected by a father and abandoned by a mother, Pussy tries to find attachment and coherence in dressing as Mitzi Gaynor who he thinks resembles his mother, Elly Bergin.

The image of transgender women in Patrick McCabe’s novel *Breakfast on Pluto* is somehow demeaning and patronizing. Although McCabe’s excellence in portraying the struggles of transgender women in the homophobic Irish society is by some means genuine and realistic, the novel one way or another is forcing and limiting transgender women in a circle of misbehaviors and lewdness acts.

Choosing one’s own gender identity should not be an act of struggle and brawl to prove normality to a society ruled by a binary system. Transgender individuals can exist and coexist in a regular way similar to binary individuals if only given the freedom and liberty to enact their true selves without being judged or held accountable for their choices. Why should individuals with other gender identities feel excluded and outcasted in their own societies? When will the segregation of the other come to an end? And why it is so important for societies to cling to a binary system? All these questions will be answered in accordance with the image, the struggles, the binary opposition, and the homophobia of Irish society notions.

It is time for transgender individuals to have an honorable representation in literature away from obscenity and immodesty. It is time for societies to depart from a homophobic view regarding the other, regarding any notion that stands outside the binary box. It is time to end the struggles and difficulties of the other. It is time to create a safe space and a haven for any individual that chooses to carry out his/her life in a manner that does not correspond to the expectation of society.

Breakfast on Pluto is the novel to discuss these types of issues and to answer these questions. It is a novel that encompasses the portrayal, the struggle, the view of a conservative society regarding transgender individuals.

Discussion

The representation of transgender individuals in *Breakfast on Pluto* is somehow a stereotypical one, from violence to prostitution the reader is able to grasp the hostility projected by the Irish society and the lewdness Pussy had fallen into. Millions of transgender individuals are experiencing high rates of violence, discrimination, and bias in the physical world (Flores, White Hughto, Reisner, & Pachankis, 2015), and it seems that even in literature transgender individuals are represented in the same way.

The term transgender is used to describe a person whose gender identity differs from the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth(M.W.D). Transgender individuals usually use gender expression to express their gender to other people, by wearing certain clothes, by wearing makeup, or even pieces of jewelry. Many transgender individuals decide to express themselves in alignment with societal norms, therefore, expressing themselves in a very traditional way to "pass" as the gender with which they identify. For example, a male-to-female transgender person might wear skirts, makeup and produce feminine behavior and manners. (Kate, Bornstein, 1994). In the third chapter Pussy is seen wearing his mothers' lipstick and his sisters' dress "[b]eing much too busy dabbing on whiskers' lipsticks", "My dress! He's wearing my favorite dress!' and putting on a quite a performance"(Breakfast on Pluto,12-13), therefore, Patrick Pussy choose to represent himself as a male-to-female cross-dresser and from now onward we are able to observe the shaping of Pussy's feminine character. As Pussy was unable to receive acceptance from his family he turned to fantasize about celebrities to find love and acceptance, "Hello, Patricia!' into the mirror and pretending I was dancing with Efrem Zimbalist Junior!"(Breakfast on Pluto,12), "pretending this time that I was dancing

with Lorne Greene out of Bonanza!"(Breakfast on Pluto,14). Hence, the frustration to be accepted became a constant on his mind "But I was so frustrated-dying to dance with Efrem so much that I couldn't get it out of my mind!"(Breakfast on Pluto, 14).

Pussy left his village Tyreelin because he was not accepted by his society, he moved to London without any education or any work experience as the case for many transgender nowadays to find acceptance. As a result of the shortage of experiences, the only way for survival was through his own body. According to data collected from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, transgender people overall experience high levels of discrimination in every aspect of their lives, as well as a high level of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and police violence. As a result, they are more likely to engage in the sex trade in order to earn an income. (Fitzgerald, 2015). For McCabe to limit Pussy in sex trade is a clear image of the stereotypes that follow transgender people "It was a miracle I found my way to Piccadilly Circus at all, there at last to begin my trade."(Breakfast on Pluto,64), It is a demeaning and belittling description of the transgender individuals. McCabe portrays Pussy as a female moving from one male to another to find acceptance and love in the arms of men. even her attitude and description of herself is one of degrading and humiliating "Naughty Pussy, gold-digging girl!"(Breakfast on Pluto,81). However, not because Patrick decided to cross-dress as a female and associate himself with a female figure that he needs to travel down the road of prostitution and profligacy, it is due to the responses of society that he went down the road of prostitution and profligacy.

Through Pussy's self-image and the unworthiness he felt, his struggle began first with the rejection of his biological parents, and the rejection of his foster-mother of his feminine side. When Whiskers saw him in the floral dress "-slapping me, would you believe!-saying that this it, this is definitely the end-and then, can you believe it, collapsing hopelessly into tears!"(Breakfast on Pluto,13). Pussy first experienced violence at home,

a home that is supposed to be a safe space for him to be whoever he wants. Second, the struggle with the society around him and the violence he was under from the society "For some reason, at this precise moment, when he began to strangle me," (Breakfast on Pluto,69). Violence against transgender individuals is a result of society not accepting any individuals who stand outside of a binary box because individuals like Pussy are seen to fondle with society's natural order. According to Harold Garfinkel, there is a natural attitude toward gender, this attitude encompasses a series of unquestionable axioms about gender, along with the belief that we are two and only two genders and that the male/ female dichotomy is the natural. That we only exist in either a masculine or feminine manner and any deviation from this notion is a joke or a pathology, ergo, only the binary opposition of gender is natural and the other is a flaw. (Garfinkel,122-28). Pussy being located outside the natural due to his cross-dressing and transgressorsim is extremely challenging. Hence he is searching for acceptance and approval from people around him by looking for love ubiquitously "Let go of me! You don't love me! None of you love me!"(Breakfast on pluto,198).

The violence projected on Pussy, as McCabe portrays it, is a result of a traditional homophobic society. Many people around the world are facing violence and murder, simply because they don't fit into a binary box. According to the reports by *The Trans Murder Monitoring Project* conducted by *Transgender Europe*, every 36 hours a trans person is murdered. An immense percentage of 99 of the victims were male-to-female transgender and 65 percent were sex workers as shown in reports released in 2015. (Lagata, Balzer, & Fedorko, 2015). McCabe outstandingly represented the violence and assault which pussy had to endure, from being tortured by a police officer and accused of bombing a restaurant "I'll fucking give 'im politics!, and was about to return to the cell to knock some more sense into his suspect"(Breakfast on Pluto,149). Drawing a picture of a lunatic bastard laughing at photos of disfigured people and mocking it, saying it is all for politics, hence, Pussy undergoing torture along with his inner struggles created a heavy burden on his

mind causing to bounce off the walls in a police cell and act as an insane person "Much of this attribute to police harassment"(Breakfast on Pluto,72). McCabe clearly illudes that harassment against transgender individuals is the reason for their inadmissible behaviors. These actions by police or Silky String is a reflection of societies actions toward transgender, these actions are the result, as said before, of a homophobic traditional society. Pussy was reared in a traditional Irish village where people are still in touch with their traditions "The Nolan Family at No.39, The square, Tyreelin, are at the table having tea and not watching telly at all."(Breakfast on Pluto,156), another example of these traditions is that they still attend mass every single Sunday. By introducing pussy as a controversial character, McCabe is challenging what seems to be a fixed idea and ideals which post-independent Ireland has cherished and encouraged, such as gender, family, church, and rural life. (Persson,42). Irish society is strictly gendered says Louise Ryan in her exploration of Irish women and men in a nationalist narrative just before and after independence, as quoted by Ake Persson in his article *Crossing Boundaries: Transgressorsim as Resistance in Patrick McCabe's "Breakfast on Pluto"*. The harassment of Tyreleen community and the disapproval of Pussy physical appearance is very evident in the novel "Look at him! He's wearing womens' clothes! , jesus! Look at that"(Breakfast on Pluto, 38), since "it is a small, enclosed village here,' Terence said,"(Breakfast on Pluto, 58) which left Pussy "ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of a major cosmopolitan city!"(Breakfast on Pluto, 95). As the Catholic church at the heart of the Irish construct, it is largely policed the Irish community norms and rules along with gender norms(Meaney,2011). According to Ryan, as quoted by Persson, there is vivid discrimination between masculine and feminine, whereas the masculine is pious, sober, and camaraderie, the feminine is domestic, familial, and sisterly. (Persson,43). If gender construct is at the heart of the Irish post-independent period, it is also prominent in the nationalism of Northern Ireland and the conflict of Northern Ireland. (Persson,43). Caroline Magennis states, "the conflict in Northern Ireland seems

particularly masculine, that is, the figureheads of the main political parties are all men and those engaged in violence appear to be almost exclusively male.”. Magennis adds that “ The rhetoric of sectarian conflict is unashamedly masculinist and, at times, borders on the misogynist”. Therefore, any other discourses, such as gender and race are marginalized in favor of national and unionism discourse, thus, any discourse is viewed as counterproductive in the national struggle (Magennis,9).

Thus it is safe to say that the dominant narrative of Irish identity and culture is based and reclines on a strict gender division between masculinity and femininity (Persson,44). However, by introducing a character as Pussy a transgender, a cross-dressing female not interested in the Irish conflict, McCabe challenged the true identity of the Irish community, which is considered to be a misogynist. Moreover, these strict divisions between the two genders, is what created a homophobic society. Marjorie Garber argues, that cross-dressing and transgressing, has ‘the extraordinary power [...] to disrupt, expose and challenge putting in question the very notion of “the original” and the stable identity’(Garber,16). According to Garber cross-dressers and transgender individuals are somewhat challenging the binarity of gender, which was considered to be a stable unite and form of social structure in the Irish community . McCabe allowing Patrick to be the narrator of the novel while she is in a psychiatric ward question the credibility and the reliability of the narrator, as well as, questions the authenticity of the events. As Jennifer M. Jeffers rightly says, “ The tricky part of the novel [...] is that we are under the power of an “unreliable” narrator, so much so that it is difficult to tell if anything happened in the manner that Pussy presents it”.(Jeffers,157). Jeffers adds that the unreliability stems from the fact that the details of the rape, his mother, and his father is a collective data from Benny who vaguely remembers the girl. Besides too, the vaguest of the narration is also evident in Patrick’s association with the London explosion, the reader can read it in two ways, either she was involved in luring the soldier to the non-existing party, or she was just looking for fun and a good time. This duality of interpretation forces the

reader to think about the credibility of Pussy’s narration as a transgender woman and places transgender women in an incredible and impotence scale. Pussy’s memoir is an attempt to create herself, how she presents herself, the world and how she locates herself in the world in an opposite direction from the Irish culture. Pussy narration of her story vividly draws the reaction of Irish society. From being beaten by her foster-mother to the crud comments from by-passers about her dressing, as Pussy say “it becomes abundantly clear that I wasn’t exactly growing up to be Mr. “Most Popular Adolescent Boy” around town.”(Breakfast on Pluto,20), also shows that the community does not know how to deal and treat her, as she was always targeted by strange looks, gossip and offensive comments from a community that is not willing to accept her. for example, when she enters a market or any public space, “where conversations would stop dead whenever you walked in”(Breakfast on Pluto,194). The aggression from the society towards Pussy steams from their ignorance and the lack of knowledge on how to deal with her because they cannot define her with a binary concept, as they violently exclaim when she entered a pub “ ‘Who are you?’ No! Said: ‘Who or *What* are you!?’ ” (Breakfast on Pluto,193). Pussy’s appearance created confusion in the gendered Irish community, therefore, they are unable to understand and analyze her in connection with their notion about what is a male and what is a female. Moreover, McCabe portrays a more gruesome and violent picture of Pussy’s struggle and the assault she was under from a homophobic society. Her appearance and behaviors created cultural anxiety since Pussy does not abide or follow a conventional gender identity, a group of bikers verbally abuses Pussy in a club, “I’m sure—leather jackets, hefty boots and ‘kill the hooring Nancy queen!’”(Breakfast on pluto,50). Apparently, the violence and harassment are not always physical, where it reflects pain and injuries, sometimes it is verbal, and vandal. On one occasion some perpetrators steal her clothes from the line “they were dumped in the garden a few days later, ripped up and destroyed with all sort of obscenities scrawled on them in lipstick.”(Breakfast on pluto,195), hence, Pussy’s transgender lifestyle was

met with aggression and violence, because it seems that she threatened and disturbed tradition and gender identity. The lack of knowledge on how to treat and handle transgender individuals is what created a homophobic Irish society.

Conclusion

Although *Breakfast on Pluto*, was shorted listed for The Booker Prize for Fiction and received a good amount of critical and literary reviews, Clare Wallace calls Patrick McCabe "a caustic and a provocative voice in contemporary Irish fiction"(Wallace,143). His portrayal of dysfunctional, homophobic Ireland, have been notable, not for its originality of material, as much as for its combination of horror and humor to create a satire. (Wallace,2004).

Pussy felt extremely excluded from her society and community, she did not find acceptance and approval, neither from her family nor from her community, simply because she did not correspond to the expectation of a binary society, a society that sets a tone for what it means to be a male and what it means to be a female. Therefore, not abiding by the rules of society results in exclusion and rejection. In *Breakfast on Pluto*, the reader clearly and vividly can notice the attachment of society to the binarity of gender. These attachments are fueled by the fear of disturbing the natural order of things, as it shacks the foundation of what they perceive as normal, therefore, being fueled by fear results in violence and aggression toward anything that threatens the order of things. Pussy is seen as the opposite of the normal, she is lonely, not welcomed by people around her, and mainly not able to interact with her society. There is a clear segregation of transgender individuals since people are unaware of how to deal with and treat people that stands opposite of them. As long as people are not taught how to deal with and treat transgender individuals, and as long as people are unable to view transgender individuals as normal the segregation will continue. The struggles that transgender individuals are subjected to, is due to the lack of understanding, that choosing one's identity will not have a major effect on society and will not threaten the foundation of any society.

McCabe's portrayal of the Irish transgender women is extensively a demeaning one, maybe he intended to present the true reality of a transgender woman in a homophobic community, surely he succeeded in doing so, but limiting transgender individuals in a circle of lewdness and misbehaviors is somewhat faulty toward the transgender community. Not because transgenders are not accepted by society and are mistreated, that they need to fall into a circle of prostitution. We do understand the struggles that transgenders have to go through in order to prove themselves normal to their society. We do understand the oppression which they are under, we do understand the segregation and racism against them, however, we do need to understand and realize that the transgender stereotypes in literature are somehow degrading, outrageous and offensive. Therefore, I call for the dissolution of transgender stereotypes in literature, and the start of a new and more courteous roles in literature.

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