

# Analysis of Gender Dysphoria in Anna-Marie Mclemore's When the Moon Was Ours

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# Analysis of Gender Dysphoria in Anna-Marie Mclemore's *When the Moon Was Ours*

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## ABSTRACT

This research is conducted to analyze gender dysphoria in Anna-Marie Mclemore's *When the Moon Was Ours* where the emphasis is on the main character named Samir, a woman named Samira with different gender identity. Gender Dysphoria is a condition in which a person experiences discomfort with biological sex and feels pressure due to it. This research is conducted with the aim of revealing the reflections or characteristics as well as the causes and effects of gender dysphoria in this novel. This research uses the theory from A. Yarhouse to answer the characteristics and effects of gender dysphoria, and to find the causes the theory from Susan Stryker is applied. In addition, the writer also uses the theory of Queer from Butler as a support in formulating the problem. This research is a type of literature research that used descriptive qualitative method. The first research finding shows the reflections or characteristics of gender dysphoria experienced by the main character in the novel which refers to the discomfort between her gender and her gender identity, she has a desire to be a figure of another gender, and she has a desire to be treated as a figure of that gender. On the other hand, this also affects the feelings possessed by the main character who wants to have a distinctive feeling from another gender. Second, the causes of gender dysphoria experienced by the main character is caused by social and cultural factors which include the Pakistani tradition called Bacha Posh and the emotional dynamics of her family environment. Finally, the impacts of gender dysphoria experienced by Sam the main character in this novel are mental illness, attempting to end her life, feeling uncomfortable in the school environment, experiencing stigmatization and discrimination and tendency to isolate herself.

Keywords: Genderdysphoria, Gender Identity, Queer

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Perceptions of gender and sex are often interpreted in the same way by society, even

though the two have distinctly different meanings. Sex refers more to the biology which contains male and female, reproductive and each feature are God's gifts that cannot be exchanged and are absolute (Nagoshi, et al., 2014:5). In gender identity disorder, it is defined by the dominant sex (strong and persistent), as well as chronic discomfort with that sex. Gender disorder has a feeling that he feels trapped in the wrong body (Mark A, 2015:14). He feels that he does not match the sex he has, so that he wants to be the opposite sex. This is psychologically called gender dysphoria.

This study applies queer theory as the ground theory. Scholars specializing in queer theory have formulated multiple theories that demonstrate the fluidity, adaptability, and changeable of gender. One prominent figure in this field is Judith Butler, whose work is crucial in comprehending these concepts. Butler asserts that gender is performative, implying that gender's existence is dependent on the enactment of gender roles and behaviors (Butler, 2002:187). In addition, queer theory highlights that the understanding of biological sex is constructed through discourse rather than being an inherent, biologically determined reality. This perspective surpasses the feminist perspective that considers sex as biological and gender as socially constructed (Felluga, 2011:4). Queer theory asserts that sexuality can be characterized as a fluid, ever-changing, and fragmented phenomenon. This is due to the vast diversity that exists within different expressions and experiences of sexuality, we cannot fully understand human beings in terms of limited ideas such as homosexuality or heterosexuality. Gender dysphoria is a disorder suffered by patients who feel when their biological sex does not match their gender identity. Gender identity disorder consists of, transgenderism, transsexualism. Gender dysphoria occurs when an individual experiences distress due to a misalignment between their psychological and emotional

gender identity and their biological sex, leading to feelings of depression.

The causes of gender dysphoria can explain where culture and social life can have a biological influence on a person's gender changes based on related supporting factors (Stryker, 2008:6). Professionally both can provide a reflection of cultural change, this phenomenon of gender dysphoria is adapted to the theme raised in Anne-Marie McLemore's novel entitled *When the Moon Was Ours*. The objective of this research is to find the characteristics of gender dysphoria that reflected in Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours*. Furthermore, this study investigates the underlying factors contributing to the gender dysphoria experienced by the main character, Sam, and aims to uncover the effects of gender dysphoria on various aspects of his life.

## 2. METHOD

This study uses an extrinsic psychology literature approach in which literary works are analyzed based on the experiences of the main character in the novel using theory from the American Psychiatric Association. Descriptive qualitative method is used in this research. In qualitative research it is used to examine and understand the meaning of individuals or groups that are inherent in human social nature (Cresswell, 2014:22). Qualitative research method is a form of research procedure which includes descriptive data that relies on words in story descriptions, in order to explore events or phenomena that provides further explanations regarding humans and their behavior in the form of narratives which are analyzed using descriptive research methods. The data taken is original data from Anne-Marie McLemore's novel entitled *When the Moon Was Ours*. This novel contains 304 pages and published in 2016 by St. Martin Press. Meanwhile, secondary data sources are taken from books, journals, articles on certain sites and theses from other writers who explain the same problem as this research.

This research uses documentation technique as data collection procedure. Documentation is employed as a means to gather textual data. The documentation technique involves systematically searching for data relevant to the variables contained within the documentary sources. In this technique, the writer follows a series of steps, including reading and comprehending primary data sources. In order to proceed the further step, the novel of *When the Moon Was Ours* was read by the writer. Moreover the writer makes some notes related to research. The important parts of Anna-Marie Mclemore's *When the Moon Was Ours* was underlined by the writer. Therefore, the writer defining the important parts properly so that they can be easier to understand, then the parts of the notes are sorted and perfected and then linked to secondary data sources to fulfill legality in research.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This part discusses Sam's gender dysphoria consisting of the characteristic, the causes, the impact of his gender dysphoria.

#### 3.1 Characteristic of Gender Dysphoria

##### 3.1.1 Inconsistency Between Sex and Gender Identity

Some people with gender dysphoria will experience a feeling like trapped in the wrong body. Even though they are trying to pretend to be what he is supposed to be, they are feeling increasingly uncomfortable and oppressed. They will feel comfortable when living a life that is in accordance with what they want, namely living in a way that expresses the gender they want.

"Even with the undershirt that pressed it down and, through a shirt, made his chest flat as any other boy's, she never put her

hands here." (Mclemore's, 2016: 65).

According to the way he is written above, he does not have sex characteristics like women in general, namely breasts, because Sam's often uses a binder or tight binder to cover her chest so it does not stand out. A binder is a kind of tight elastic corset that covers the chest. That is usually used to increase self-confidence in appearances.

#### 3.1.2 A Desire to Erase One the Primary or Secondary Sex Characteristics

The main characteristic used to establish a correlation with the desire to go through sex change is the confusion between sex and gender. Individuals with gender dysphoria consistently experience discomfort when living with their original sex characteristics, like in this quotation;

"When he got dressed for school, he'd put the binder back on before he put on anything else. He didn't want anyone looking at him and deciding for him what he was." (Mclemore's, 2016:293).

From the quotation above, the secondary characteristic is that Sam keeps secret on his chest and Sam will feel shy if someone finds it. All the time he tries hard to hide her identity or her Samira's side. He avoids bullying and blasphemy from his friends and to avoid the environment in school life so that it would not turn bad. Therefore, he uses a binder to cover his bulge when wearing a

school uniform in order to appear as a boy.

### 3.1.3 A Desire To Have the Primary or Secondary Sex Characteristics of the Other Gender

Individuals who is struggling with gender dysphoria disorder consistently desire to have physical characteristics that align with their gender identity, as it brings them a sense of peace and harmony in their lives. It is hard to goes through life feels uncomfortable because of unfulfilled desires. They continue to struggles to strengthen their identity by doing everything they can to makes themselves more dominant in the sex they choose.

“She’d been saying this since he was in middle school, when he’d gone quiet so no one would notice his voice wasn’t lowering like other boys’. They’d written it off as evidence that he was waiting out his own voice change, self conscious of it hitching if he talked. Alone, in his room, Sam had practiced driving his pitch lower, so that when other boys, frightened into silence by unexpected cracks and breaks in their words, emerged with dropped voices, so would he.” (New Mclemore’s, 2016:88).

The quotation above explains that Sam is feels shy of his real voice. It can backfire on him if other boys notice his strange voice. This

section does not tend to shows sexual characteristics but something hidden that cannot be seen by the eye. Female pitch sounds higher than male. The typical range in adult females is 165 to 255 Hz, while the male range is 85 to 155 Hz. From the text above shows if Sam is really wants to be a boy in general. He often trains himself by lowers his pitch to have the secondary sex characteristics of his assigns sex.

### 3.1.4 A Desire to be a Figure of the Other Gender

The desire to be a figure of another gender has becomes a feature of gender dysphoria. To lives a life that is in accordance with the desires gender figure is a desire that must be realizes. It can be seen from how to behave, dress, etc.

“But he wanted both. He wanted to be a boy who grew into a man, and for there to be space in the world for him. His mother set down the knife. “Is that really what you want?” Sam’s mouth was still too dry, his breath too used up from saying the words all at once, to answer.” (Mclemore’s, 2016:227).

The text above explains that Sam's wants to live life as a boy. Sam feels comfortable when he plays a boy. The thing that Sam is most concerns about how he can stick with one name to emphasizes his gender. Besides that, he must also keep his name

as Samira. He actually cannot make a clear decision yet because there are many things to consider. From the conversations that are carried out by both parties, it is very deep, where Samir not only talks about wanting to change his name but also his body. If he is willing to stick to her chosen name, what she desires most is for him to also be prepared to embrace his whole appearance of a boy and lead his life the way he wants to be.

### 3.1.5 Desire to be Treated as the Other Gender

In addition to the desire for a physical transformation to another gender, individuals with gender dysphoria also desire to be treated as a person of the gender they identify with. In this case, it will in fact be more difficult to get good behavior based on the circumstances of the gender he wants. But they never give up to fights for the rights they want and to get the same treatment as people in general.

“He folded his tongue against his teeth, bracing for her questions. Her asking what he meant, and him having to tell her that he wanted not to go back to being Samira, but to go forward as Samir. That being a bacha posh had been a lie he told himself to pretend he was like the girls whose mothers and fathers dressed them as boys, but who then grew up to be

women.” (McLemore’s, 2016:226).

Her mother asks him about the decision that will be his choice. Samir feels that he really feels alive as Samir. The desire is not to carry on the tradition, he is doing this because he wants to be who he is meant to be. The comfort he finds in being a man makes him feel guilty for believing in the inconveniences of being a boy. Regardless of whether he deceives others or not by doing what he desires in the moment, the practice of Bacha Posh ultimately serves as a self-deception. He is a product of Pakistani cultural norms, and his desire to be treated as a genuine man stems from a longing to be perceived as such permanently, rather than temporarily adopting the male role imposed by tradition on girls.

### 3.1.6 A Desire to Have Typical Feeling as the Other Gender

Individuals with gender dysphoria desire not just the physical characteristics of the opposite sex, but also the emotions and responses associated with that gender. They, like any other human being, seek for acceptance and affection from others since it is an important aspect of their natural character. This longing reflects a powerful and undeniable feeling. This quotation as evidence

“His tongue flicked against his teeth, but then he bit it, stopping himself. It was still enough to let her guess what he didn’t finish saying. I don’t want you to map me.

I want you to love me.”  
(Mclemore’s, 2016:153).

Sam loves his best friend, Miel. Miel is his bestfriend since his childhood, and she is Latin girl. Sam experiences uncertainty when it comes to expressing the truth within his heart, as he is weary of love and struggles to articulate his emotions effectively. Sam yearns for Miel's affection, desiring to be loved not just as a friend, but as a romantic partner of the opposite gender, similar to the desires commonly experienced by teenagers in the throes of love.

### 3.2 The Causes of Gender Dysphoria Experienced by Sam

Cultural elements impact Sam's gender dysphoria in this story. Social elements include a wide variety of issues but in the context of this novel, they especially refer to the emotional dynamics inside the family during the parenting process. Emotional dynamics is a behavior that appears to have consequences which are the effects of previous actions that occurs in previous events and can also be a trigger to causes events in subsequent events. (Rosyidah,et.al .,2010:117).

“Do you know what kind of child you were?” his mother said, a laugh under her words. “To say there needed to be a man of the house and that you were going to be that man? To declare you were going to be a whole new person so that everyone would know there was a son taking care

of his mother?” Sam set the knife against the orange. He could do this. If he could do nothing right with Miel, at least he could do this for his mother. (Mclemore’s, 2016:224).

As a single parent living alone with Sam after her divorce, Sam's mother requires a "Guardian" figure to support and take care of them. This leads to the adoption of the Bacha Posh tradition, where Sam is expected to assume a new identity. Sam's inclination to protect his mother stems from the impact of their past divorce, while also being influenced by being born as a Pakistani girl and the adherence to cultural traditions, specifically the Bacha Posh tradition.

“Bacha posh were words he’d first heard from his mother’s mother. If he didn’t follow the path set out by those words, he might forget her drawings of saffron crocuses, or how sure her hands looked separating mint leaves from their stems, the green never bruising. He’d been so sure he could become Samira if he gritted his teeth hard enough, wished it hard enough, pressed his fingernails into the heels of his hands so hard his knuckles paled.”  
(Mclemore’s, 2016:225).

Her grandmother gives her so many memories that she becomes one of the

girls practices the Bacha Posh custom. Bacha Posh has a masive impact in Sam's life. Sam's grandma creates up the opportunity for her to explore her identity through another persona. Bacha Posh signifies a cultural practice in which a girl lives as a male until she reaches maturity and is ready to marry, at which point she transforms back into a woman to fulfill the role of a wife. Bacha Posh is just a passing phase designed to satisfy the wishes of households without men.

### 3.3 The Impacts of Gender Dysphoria

People with gender dysphoria disorder have effects such as feelings of anxiety, to attempts suicide. In theory, there are several impacts experiences by someone with gender dysphoria disorder:

#### 3.3.1 Anxiety disorder

"He would never be free of this. Of any of it. How he wanted Miel in a way that hurt as much as the tightening of his lungs against the cold water, a desperation for a breath in matched only by the impossibility of taking one. How he was losing the feeling that one day, he could live the life that matched the name his mother had given him." (Mclemore's, 2016:143).

The anxiety experiences by Sam comes from his own mind he feels that one day he really ends up with the Pakistani customs he lives and instead he will becomes a

complete man. The peculiar feelings he has for Miel makes him even more uneasy. He wants to makes Miel his life partner instead of him living to marry a man like heterosexual people do. He fears to returns to his original form, namely Samira and lives with her future partner. He feels fear because he is completely unprepared. "Look,"

#### 3.3.2 Suicide Attempts

Suicide is an act that is prohibits by all groups because it is a terrible and heinous thing, whether it's just a plan, an idea, or both are bad things. Most people with gender dysphoria experiences this and only a few people can go through this phase, this is due to strong pressure from the community.

"Sam stared down into the river. If he gave himself up to it, maybe it would do to him what it had done to Aracely, turning him into what he truly was. Maybe it would give him a body that matched this life he had built. Or maybe it would make him want to be a woman called Samira. And if it did neither of these things." (Mclemore's, 2016:142).

The text explains that Sam's gives up on his life choices. He is confuses and lost hope. He once hearsa story from Aracely that he is born as a boy named Leandro. It



is like magic, when he tries to save his sister who sinks into the river. But a miracle saves both of them and changes the figure of his sister into a woman, the figure she wants all the time. From what was told by Aracely Sam becomes motivated and he hopes that a miracle can change it as soon as possible. But at first he has a poor outlook on life. If this does not work out as expected then he will throw himself into the river and end his life.

### 3.3.3 Functioning at School May Disturbed

A teenager who has gender dysphoria disorder is most likely to experience disturbances in their school environment, because adolescents are still very unstable with their emotions so that someone who looks different in their environment will become material and the center of attention to be treated differently.

For once, that was working in Sam's favor. Mr. Woods looked between both of them. Then he landed on whatever conclusion he'd been scraping toward, and his eyes stayed on Sam. "Detention," he said. "After school. One week." (Mclemore's, 2016:165).

Sam tries hard to defend himself against the bad perception that arises from his theme of himself. Her friend Reese, Sam lost control and gets into a fight with her

because she teases Sam with negative intentions. Sam lives a pretty tough life in his school environment. Reese does not understand Sam but she purposely teases Sam odd looks appearance as a boy.

### 3.3.4 Stigmatization

Stigmatization leads to a view of gives a negative character to someone. Sam is a victim to everyone for looking so weird, especially to the bonner girl's eyes. Four girls constantly intrude on Sam and Miel, obstructing their efforts toward pursuing their personal desires. One day they find a photocopy of Sam's birth certificate and they find out that Sam's is a woman. They plan to expose Sam's identity to everyone. People as bonner girls are only a small part of the many people in this world who do bad things to harm others especially those with gender dysphoria.

"How often boys at school had called Sam gay or a girl. Even with muscle filling him out, he didn't have the hard angles to his face or the wide spread to his hands to keep them from calling him feminine." (Mclemore's, 2016:125).

The text shows that Sam's cannot hide his aura as a woman. Even though none of his friends know about Sam's life in the past except for Miel and the bonner girls. As if his theme knows for sure that Sam

is a woman, this thought is very disturbing and makes Sam sick and really wants to be the person he wants.

### 3.3.5 Discrimination

People with gender dysphoria will most likely experience this incident from other people and from their surroundings. In this novel, Sam also gets discrimination in verbal form. But all kinds of discrimination whether verbal or physical are both bad. It can also have a negative impact on the victim.

“This town had never seen anyone like Sam. If they had, they hadn’t known. And Miel’s fear over this, their reaction to that which they did not know, made her fight to keep her breath quiet. Girls who’d once thought Sam was handsome might let it slip to their boyfriends, who would beat Sam up because they could not stand the thought of their own girlfriends liking anyone born female. Boys who hated that he’d matched them, hated that for so many years they had not known, would corner him when he went out to hang his moons. Fathers, holding shotguns the same as Mr. Bonner’s, would threaten him to stay away from their daughters.” (McLemore’s, 2016:149).

No one knows who Sam really is. Even though this text is purely speculative, it suggests the presence of an individual who will uncover the truth and exhibit a dual nature when interacting with Sam. That is the reason why Miel is so scared for her life. The other girls adore him a lot, his parents who are very close to Sam and there are often some guys who tease him with chants that he is a real man but basically his content is just a big lie. The point indirectly is only an act of discrimination launched through violence.

### 3.3.6 Negative Self Concept

An individual with a negative self-concept experiences pessimism, struggles to have self-respect, perceives themselves as undeserving of others' attention or care, and tends to be sensitive to remarks made by others, among other things. Sam has a negative self-concept on his mind.

“Look,” Aracely said. “I know what you’re going through.” “No, you don’t.” Sam sat up. “I still have to live like this. Nothing is gonna fix me. There’s no water that’s gonna make me into something else.” “And I’d start from where you are if it meant what happened that night didn’t have to happen,” Aracely said. “We don’t get to become who we are for nothing. It costs something.”

You're fighting for every little piece of yourself."(Mclemore's, 2016:168).

Aracely learns that Sam attempts suicide, and Aracely advises him that what he is doing is wrong. Sam has a fear that leads to anxiety. At the same time he is related to having a negative view of himself where he is unable to find out who he really is. He cannot accept himself completely. Samira's past is something she always denies, and her strange physical appearance to the other boys makes her look down on her. That is the reason why she tries to drown herself in the river to change herself like what Aracely experiences in the past.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The results of the study show that Samir experiences symptoms of gender dysphoria namely: (1) Discrepancy between biological sex and gender identity; (2) Yearning to remove either primary or secondary sexual characteristics; (3) Aspiration to possess the primary or secondary sexual characteristics of the opposite gender; (4) Longing to become the identity of the opposite gender; (5) Craving to be treated in accordance with the preferred gender identity; (6) Desire to experience emotions and sensations typically associated with the opposite gender. Samir's experience of gender dysphoria can be attributed to social and cultural factors prevalent in her environment, particularly the Bacha Posh tradition and the emotional dynamics within her family. These factors have had significant impacts on Samir's well-being, resulting in anxiety disorders, suicide attempts,

stigmatization, disruption of her school life, and a negative self-concept.

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