

## Intersex - An analysis on Kathleen Winter's *Annabel*

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### Abstract

Annabel (2010), story of an intersex, narrates the struggles which an intersex individual and the family they belong to undergo in this socially constructed environment. The intersex individual is said to be 'doubly oppressed' - both within his/her own self and the outside world. This paper enumerates the struggles of all the characters, related to Wayne Blake/Annabel, the protagonist with a special focus on the plight of intersex individual, who try to identify 'his/her own self' in a gender biased society. The societal set up which is obsessed with the concept of male lineage is instilled in each and every individual. Kathleen Winter mirrors this through the life of Wayne Blake who overcomes these and tries to take up a life of his own.

**Keywords:** intersex, doubly oppressed, host society, gender biased, identity.

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### Introduction

Life and Literature can be viewed on a same scale for Literature mirrors life. Historical events, cultural reformations, life style changes and many other dimensions of life have found a place in literature. Similarly, literature has also been a forerunner in recording the voice of the downtrodden and the marginalised. It not only records but also kindles the minds of the people thereby making unimaginable changes in the lives of the voiceless. One such field which has found a place in literature is gender studies.

Gender describes those characteristics of women and men whose anatomical gender is universally assigned by the creator. It is man who assigns the various roles to them depending upon the societal construction. Simone de Beauvoir's words "One is not born a woman, one becomes one" clearly states that it is the representation imposed by society which becomes the key factor in defining a gender. The role of the third gender/intersex is still to be assigned by the Universe. Though we talk about LGBT literature, none of us are willing to accept those who fall under this category with an open heart. Intersex children are hence born with a state of flux and their confusion is further compounded due to lack of societal acceptance. Literature abounds in talks about inbetweenness/rootlessness of either men or women, but very little thought has gone into the subject of identity crisis which an intersex - a person born with atypical reproductive or sexual anatomy - undergoes in his/her home, among his/her relatives and in the society. As the host society turns a deaf ear towards LGBTQIA community, they look out beyond his/her state or country borders in order to escape the gender trap he/she is suffering. They move in search of greener pastures where their 'self' will never be at stake.

Terms like 'gender fluidity,' 'gender bending,' 'gender expression' and 'gender identity' are prominent in the present scenario. Gender Studies which, till three decades ago, dealt with the binary perception of gender has opened up its platform for these new categories. Gender Studies in the twenty first century has widened its scope by including the study of various experiences and manifestations of sexual relationships and gender forms. Queer literature or LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex) literature deals with the concept of 'gender fluidity' or 'gender expression.' Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (Lesbian), Kathleen Winter's *Annabel* (Intersex), Blake Worthington's *She-Male* (Transgender) and Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boys* (Gay) are a few examples in this genre.

### Intersex

Intersex is an individual born with both the sex organs which does not fit the usual 'boy' or 'girl' sex anatomy. Rather they are those born with both the 'boy' 'girl' sex anatomy which is difficult to find in some cases. Research states that the size of the sex organ decides to which sex the child will belong, for which, surgeries are done based on the decision taken by the doctors and parents.

Kyle Knight, a Senior Researcher of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights Program, in an article on Human Rights Watch website states regarding ban on Intersex surgeries,

“Intersex,” sometimes called “differences of sex development” in medical literature, refers to the estimated 1.7 percent of people born with sex characteristics – such as chromosomes, gonads, or genitals – that differ from social expectations of female or male. Except in very rare cases when the child cannot urinate or internal organs are exposed, these variations are medically benign natural variations of human anatomy, and do not require surgery.

This makes it clear that intersex is not an illness and no medical surgeries are required until medical emergency demands the same. Surgeries under the disguise of cosmetic surgery are still happening globally.

Gopi Shankar, an intersex who is very active in Tamil Nadu and throughout the world, founder of *Shrishti*, an NGO which functions from Madurai, has put in tremendous efforts to fight against the surgeries performed on intersex people. According to him a straight person cannot take the rights of an intersex in his hands. Basically an intersex feels that it is his/her right to live the way they want and it is not others, including their parents, who decide whether they have to be a male or female.

Gopi Shankar and his team inspired many to bring about changes in the legal system. Based on their plea a landmark judgment was announced on 22 April 2019 by Madras High Court for intersex children in India, recognising their consent rights and the right to bodily integrity. ie, ban on unnecessary medical surgeries on intersex infants and children. In fact, Tamil Nadu is said to be the first state in India, and second state in the world to provide stronger legal protection for the intersex children.

### **Analysis of *Annabel***

Kathleen Winter's debut novel *Annabel* is a story which portrays the life of an intersex child Wayne Blake/Annabel in Labrador, a small seaside town. This work was short-listed for all three big Canadian literary prizes in the year 2010. This debut novel runs around a theme which was untouched. The main characters in the novel are Treadway Blake, Jancita Blake, Thomasina, Graham Montague, Annabel, the protagonist Wayne Blake and Wally. The story opens with a prologue. A blind hunter Graham Montague and his daughter Annabel are floating on a canoe for it is the hunting season. The hunter is asleep and the small girl drifts sleepily into the water and she finds a caribou on the shore. As she tries to reach to the animal, she upsets the boat and they both perish. The death of Annabel becomes symbolic as we find both Annabel's are in reality dead one because she disobeyed and the other because his parents chose to hide the sexuality.

The imagery of caribou, the only member in the deer family in which both the male and female grow with the antlers, is also akin to the story. This caribou depicts the appearance of Wayne Blake/Annabel who is a hermaphrodite. This emphasizes the main theme in the book about intersex. The story is set in a cold wilderness land Labrador a small fishing village. This land is very symbolic which mirrors the entire life of the characters in the story. The inhabitants of this village lead half their life in the forest hunting for their livelihood. The setting highlights the difficulty of leading a life in the land of wilderness.

The story at large, concentrates on the theme of isolation or loneliness, prevalent in the life of the characters. The theme of loneliness is purposely brought in by the author in order to mirror the life of Wayne Blake/Annabel. Wayne Blake the protagonist is an intersex child who is born to Treadway Blake and Jancita. He is born with both the reproductive organs; he appears neither fully as a boy nor fully as a girl, but both at once. Only three people are privy to the secret – the baby's parents and the midwife and trusted neighbor, Thomasina. The midwife Thomasina is the one who gives Wayne Blake lot of support to lead his life as he wishes. Wayne Blake tries to find a unique identity for himself in the gender dominating world.

You define a tree and you do not see what it is; it becomes its name. It is the same with woman and man. Everywhere Wayne Blake looked there was one or the other, male or female, abandoned by the other.” (350).

Wayne Blake is not fully aware of his real self until he enters the menstrual cycle. His parents too found it difficult to raise him in this restrictive environment. They live in such a village which has set norms for living their life as a man and as a woman. Their circle is such that they will not be ready to accept the intersex child. The male and female halves of the child, the boy's and girl's identity: they 'become and unbecome.' At times it is beautiful and at times a cruel process. This sidelines both Treadway and Jancita. Wayne Blake is not able to get close to those from whom he actually should get his love. His father spends more time in the bush than at home. His mother sits for hours in her kitchen doing nothing.

Wayne Blake feels lonely in his house. Though he tries to grow in the hyper-masculine hunting society of his father, his shadow self Annabel, a girl is never fully extinguished. He tries to wear a sequined bath suit of a girl when alone is in his bedroom.

Treadway, Wayne Blake's father is a fascinating character who is also static in his thoughts. He is a solitary person who does not lead a life like any other ordinary man in that land. He is not able to connect with this family as he connects himself with the woods. He does not want people to 'become and unbecome.' He wants them to "be." The way he understands the world around him is entirely different. He is very open to the power of land and its wilderness:

he felt the secret in the house exactly as he felt the  
presence of a white paradigm behind him in the snow  
and he understood the secret's details, its identity as  
easily as he would know the bird was a white  
ptarmigan before he turned around and saw it.  
He knew his baby has both boy's and girl's identity (150).

For the livelihood he lives half of his life in the forest. Whenever he wants to speak out he goes far into the wood and speaks to the owl, where both Treadway and Owl share the same physical traits. The owl lives only in its world and never bothers to come to Labrador. He assumes that the bird is alone and he tries to share his deepest emotions with the bird. His difficulty in accepting the ambiguity of the child is made very explicit by the author. Knowing well that the bird will not reply he pours out the sad plight of his son Wayne Blake.

I wish, I could bring him in here with me for a good six months. Longer. Forget about the medicine that keeps him being a boy. Hospital medicine, not the medicine in the trees, the turpentine, the smell of the blasted boughs what would happen". (432)

Treadway always wants Wayne Blake to be a son that the world will accept. Treadway is really depressed to raise such a child in the village. Hence he says "if I brought him here and never took him back? We could live here." (431) Treadway is ready to lead a life with his son far away from the judgemental world - in isolation. He finds strength in solitude.

Jancita, Wayne Blake's mother is tormented greatly and she wishes for a world in which her child did not have to be confined to something smaller than who he was. She always wants her child to simply be identified. She also wants to have a world of their own, just as Treadway wants one, in order to raise the female part of her child. "My face is a mask, and I have murdered my own daughter" (28). She feels handicapped as a mother who is unable to raise such a child.

Whenever she imagined her child grow up without  
interference from a judgmental world, she  
imagined its male and female halves as complementing  
each other, and as being secretly, almost magically  
powerful. It was the growing up part she did not  
want to imagine - harm from the cruel reactions  
of people who do not want to understand. (28)

Almost all the characters suffer from a sense of loneliness or isolation. As a teacher from St. John Jancita settled in Labrador just for the sake of love. She isolated herself from the routine married life and felt worried about her child:

Now Jancita sat in her kitchen in Croydon Harbour holding her baby, Wayne Blake. Instead of longing for her youth, the cinema and the street life she used to know, she found herself bereft of the old wistfulness and its absence was harder to bear than its existence (58)

Infact, it is the threat of the judgmental world which frightens Treadway and Jancita to behave in a different way with Wayne Blake. They decide to do surgery but it is not within their reach. They try to give him pills to stop the growth of his system but to their bitterness Wayne Blake enters the menstrual cycle. It is at this moment that Wayne Blake becomes his female self. Wayne Blake has no idea of the circumstances that surrounded his birth yet he is aware that the other children did not have those odds which Wayne Blake faces. Even after the long struggle Treadway insists his son be normal in the eyes of society but Jancita and Thomasina do not allow him to.

Thomasina and Wally, his childhood friends are the only people who have truly understood Wayne Blake to a great extent. Thomasina is the person who knows him from his birth. She, in remembrance of her daughter Annabel, identifies Wayne Blake's female side and names him Annabel. She is a different person who has ventured to travel all over the world. She has taught him about the bridge which connects two lands. Infact, the author has brought the ideology of bridge through Thomasina just to make it clear that, as the bridge which connects, Thomansina gives hope to the ambiguous Wayne Blake:

She was a person who froze someone's character  
in her mind, calling this one egoistical and that one  
not nearly confident enough and another one  
truthful or untruthful. To her people were rivers,

always ready to move from one state of being to another. She felt that it was not fair to treat people as if they were finished beings(41).

She unlike Treadway feels that people are 'becoming and unbecoming.' It is this attitude of Thomasina which gives Wayne Blake the energy to push his life in the restricted environment. Wayne Blake, who struggles hard to lead his life, escapes the confines of his home town and settles in St. John where he is able to live fighting against the freedom to confront his dual identity. This move is possible only because Thomasina makes him understand his inner self.

Wayne Blake meets Wally, a singer in St. John who is very clear about her ambition in life and who also knows Wayne Blake, but not his secret. She has a positive influence on him. It is because of her that Wayne Blake takes steps to be independent and seeks freedom both mentally and physically. Wayne Blake feels very happy and comfortable in her company. He feels as if

life at this minute was blossoming inside him instead of lying dormant. He felt the electric presence of his own life and he did not want that feeling to end, although he knew it had ended in the past and that it would end again. She whispered into his ear and the piece of her breath was warm with cool edges. (452).

Wayne Blake himself was very stiff and unresponsive. He was at times very pensive and introvert. He never used to react to anything which happened around him. When a group of boys hit him too he did not react and it was an instance where he had to save his life. Even when Thomasina told him about his real identity he was not bothered. This reflects that he was lonely and detached from his ownself. The author has planned well to bring the concept of hope through these two characters. It's because of them that the story moves forward. Self-determination which these two have inculcated in Wayne Blake is very remarkable. Though Wayne Blake was tortured by Mr. Henry, who raped him in the cloakroom, still he was able to survive happily in his home town.

### **Conclusion**

As an author Kathleen Winter has assigned justifiable roles to all the characters but eschewed from giving a sad ending to the story as she seems to follow the words of E.M Forster "only connect." She tries to usher in happiness in the life of Wayne Blake by preparing him to live his life in spite of the contraries that assail it.

In an interview she has made it clear that it is "the point of view" which matters for a happy life. She feels that the way Thomasina encourages Wayne Blake, is the only point of view which has led him to lead a healthy life. Through Thomasina, Winter makes it clear that people like Wayne Blake need our concern. The words "I wouldn't call it a disorder. I would call it a different order. A different order means a whole new way of being. It would be fantastic. It could be overwhelmingly beautiful, if people weren't scared." (208-209) makes it clear as how the author wishes the world to be.

Winter's main intention is not to show a magical character but to focus upon the erroneous judgement of human beings in failing to recognize the legitimacy of intersex and the transgender people. She makes it clear that to leave such people in destitute is really cruel because "break apart, separate, these are hard words" according to Wayne. She intentionally wants to ward off the loneliness felt by such people. Self-determination of Wayne Blake is what she insists on as she had to face many hardships due to his dual gender.

Kathleen Winter's debut novel, *Annabel* explores a new frontier--the search for a new identity in the world enmeshed in the rigid categories of male and female gender. She lays bare the inner turmoil experienced by parents and friends in raising such a childlike Wayne Blake/Annabel desperately needs to identify herself as a female. The broader effect of gender constraints in a claustrophobic, smaller rural environment like Labrador and urban environment in St. John's, on the quest for identity is sensitively delineated and the transition of Wayne Blake from gnawing sense of loneliness to a life ensconced in human dignity and self esteem is skillfully negotiated by the author to raise awareness in society about the dire need for 'inclusion' and 'identity' of such a microscopic minority who have been living on the margins of society.

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