

The Coping Strategies Done by the Transgender in Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl*

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Abstract. Being a transgender is not easy even in the modern or postmodern eras as it is represented in Meredith Russo's novel entitled *If I Was Your Girl*. Since transgender often face unbelievable obstacles in their life, they have to find ways to survive. This paper will focus on the coping strategies done by the transgender character to have a new life. This study offers a different perspective on the complicated existence of transgender. The analysis is supported by the concepts on transgender and coping strategies. The methods applied are library research method, close reading technique, qualitative research method, and contextual research method. The result shows that personal choices of coping strategies are needed in order to survive as a transgender. The existence of transgender is considered not only complicated but also controversial, thus it is a source of inexhaustible studies to be pursued by many researchers.

Keywords: transgender, coping strategies, contextual, *If I Was Your Girl*

1 Introduction

Being a transgender is not easy as it is represented in Meredith Russo's novel entitled *If I Was Your Girl* [1]. It talks about a young boy, called Andrew, who decided to take a surgery before puberty to change his male given sex. He became a young female, called Amanda. However, in order to survive as a transgender, Amanda had to apply certain coping strategies. This paper will focus on the coping strategies done by Amanda so that finally she can have a nice life as a young girl.

In order to support the academic analysis, two relevant concepts are borrowed; namely, the concepts on transgender and coping strategies. The issue of transgender is already implied in Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble*. She stated that not only gender is not the same as sex, but also gender is not the direct outcome of gender, so that sex and gender might be incongruent (Butler, 1990: 8) [2]. Butler's implied the issue of transgender. The simple but clear definition of transgender is given by Yarhouse in which he stated that transgender is someone who accumulatively in years realizes that the given sex from birth does not agree with the growing gender identity (2015: 20) [3]. Stryker emphasized that being transgender means moving away from the expected (2008: 28) [4] because sex is not tightly correlated with gender, so it is possible to have the incongruence between sex and the expected gender (Bevan, 2017: 43) [5].

The second concept borrowed is about the coping strategies. According to Skinner, E and Zimmer-Gembeck, M., A coping strategy refers to “how people respond to stress as they contend with real-life problems” (2007: 124 in Taylor, n.d.) [6] [7]. Although there three kinds of stress coping; namely, “task-oriented coping, emotion-oriented coping, and avoidance-oriented coping” (Cohan, Jang, & Stein, 2006; Endler & Parker, 1990 in Smith, et al, 2016: 319) [8] [9] [10], this analysis will focus on “emotion-oriented coping” which is “more helpful for stressful events that cannot be changed” (Sharma, 2003) [11] as faced by the transgender main character. The strategies of emotion-oriented coping is “to regulate the negative emotionality associated with a perceived stressor by engaging in conscious activities related to affect regulation” leading to positive responses such as “emotional disclosure, seeking social-emotional support” (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004) [12] or negative responses such as “rumination, suppression, self-blame” (Parker & Endler, 1996) [13] in (Smith, et al, 2016: 319). Professor James House at the University of Michigan gave a clear definition of social support as a coping strategy as follows: "aid and assistance that one receives through social relationships and interpersonal exchanges" which has four types; namely, “the emotional social support, the instrumental social support, the informational social support, the appraisal social support” (in Sharma, 2003). Meanwhile, coping has several goals, one of them, “reducing uncertainty” is suitable for the analysis (Karoly 1999) [14] in (Krohne, 2002: 9) [15].

2 Methods

There are methods used to support the academic analysis. The first is library research method to gather relevant data (George, 2008: 21) [16]. The data can be extracted from books or journal articles. The second is close reading technique (Phelan, 2021: 60) [17] to support the library research method. In this method, the content is deeply observed to extract meaning. The third is qualitative research method (Creswell, 2009: 177) [18] as the general analysis of the data in which the selected data are interpreted academically. The last is a contextual research method for the literary analysis (Beard, 2004: 6) [19]. In this method the analysis involved the social and psychological condition surrounding the events.

3 Result and Discussion

Feeling different since a child, young Andrew faces a confusing life. Not belong to a heterosexual group, he has to decide personal coping strategies to lead the life he wants starting from the life-changing decision.

3.1 The Main Cause Leading to Coping Strategies

Young Andrew as the only son is very timid and close to her mother since he was a little boy (Russo, 2016: 144). Her mother tells him that when she was expecting a baby, she thinks that the baby will be a baby girl (Russo, 2016: 173). Andrew's hidden desire to be a girl is expressed in his writing, a school task, about what he wants to be when he is an adult. He draws a picture of a lady scientist as his manifestation in the future (Russo, 2016: 49). All these indicate that young Andrew is not the same as other young boys. His uncertainty about his sex and gender leads to long sessions with a counselor who finally concludes that Andrew suffers from "Gender identity disorder" (Russo, 2016: 25).

3.2 Coping Strategies

Finally realizing his condition, young Andrew makes big personal decision to start his coping strategies. He does not want to be confused anymore due to the incongruence between sex and gender

3.2.1 *Deciding to Have a Surgery*

After knowing that he suffers from "Gender identity disorder", young Andrew decides to have genital surgery before puberty to prevent permanent change into male body construction such as broad shoulder, big and deep voice, facial and chest hair. He also to take pills for that, too (Russo, 2016: 210-211). He also visits support group (Russo, 2016: 40-41) and feels comfortable with his trans mentor, Virginia (Russo, 2016: 41).

3.2.2 *Avoiding the Problems*

Because the bullying does not stop even after Andrew has become Amanda, her mother who has divorced with her father decides to have Amanda live with her father and finish her school there (Russo, 2016: 104). Based on the previous traumatic experience whether as Andrew or Amanda, in the new town and school Amanda plans not to trigger attention to avoid arising any problem. However, her plans fail due to many causes. The first one is that Amanda as a new student is too beautiful to be ignored (Russo, 2016: 7). The second one, as a teenager Amanda cannot help falling in love with the cool and sweet Grant, even though Amanda has tried very hard to avoid Grant (Russo, 2016: 61).

3.2.3 *Revealing the Secret*

Previously Amanda has decided not to tell anyone about her being a transgender. However, when she sees how depressed Bee, one of her friend, is Amanda wants to ease Bee's depression. Bee miserably tells Amanda that she has been raped many

times since she was young and now she also has to keep her secret as a bisexual. To ease Bee's dejected feeling, Amanda wants to show that Bee is not the only one who has a big secret to hide. Amanda tells Bee that she is a "transsexual" and Bee promises not to tell the others (Russo, 2016: 136). Amanda also wants to tell her secret to Grant, her lover, through a letter but Grant, without reading it, burns it saying that he can accept whatever secret Amanda has (Russo, 2016: 149).

3.2.4 *Facing the Consequence*

However, Bee is not a good friend. Even though she has already has a girlfriend, suddenly in her drunkenness she has a crush on the beautiful Amanda. Being rejected, Bee publicly open Amanda's big secret a moment after Amanda is chosen as a Homecoming Queen (Russo, 2016: 179). Unable to face the sudden humiliation, Amanda runs away from the school hall. Amanda is chased and is almost raped by Parker, a boy whose crush on Amanda is completely ignored by her. Fortunately other good friends of Amanda help and save her (Russo, 2016: 157).

That traumatic event drives Amanda to return to her mother's home to hide from everyone. Fortunately she has a caring, supportive, and encouraging mother and trans mentor, Virginia. Both try to boost Amanda's spirit and self-confidence (Russo, 2016: 201). Unexpectedly, Amanda's father comes to visit Amanda and her mother. For the first time father and daughter has a deep talk. Her father acknowledges that although at first he is angry and confused by Amanda's decision to become a transgender, he has a deep love to Amanda and always worries about Amanda's safety and happiness (Russo, 2016: 208-209).

The sincere love and support from her parents and Virginia make Amanda decide to return to her father's house and continue her study in her school and face whatever consequences that wait for her there. Unexpectedly, her close girlfriends supports her and accept her as she is (Russo, 2016: 215). Even other students who are not close to her greet her as if nothing shocking happens before (Russo, 2016: 217). Encouraged by those encouraging responses, Amanda is determined to face the most scary unsolved problem in her life; namely, her love relationship with Grant after his knowing her condition as a transgender. Grant honestly confesses that at first he is confused and speechless with the sudden news, but after he has time to think over it he states that he keeps loving Amanda. Thus Amanda tells her whole story starting from her birth certificate to Grant and the novel ends (Russo, 2016: 221).

4 **Conclusion**

Meredith Russo's novel *If I Was A Girl* shows that to survive as a transgender is not easy. Andrew (before transitioning as Amanda) has to apply personal coping strategies after knowing that he suffers from "gender identity disorder". However, a series of coping strategies started by Andrew cannot be all executed by Amanda due

to her deep compassion to her friend leading her to open her secret and her inability not to fall in love with Grant. Nevertheless, finally Amanda can face all the consequences with the support of the people who accept her as she is.

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