

Transphobic Assaults Experienced by Felix Love in *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender

Ratna Asmarani¹ and Cristyvilda Priskila Rini¹

¹Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, Semarang 50275, Indonesia
ratnaasmarani@lecturer.undip.ac.id

Abstract. Gender transition which happens more and more today can serve as an outlet to escape from the strictness of gender binary. However, gender transition faces inevitable consequences as experienced by Felix Love, the main character in Kacen Callender's novel entitled *Felix Ever After*. Even though he has declared or coming out as a transgay or a trans guy who like males instead of females, he still has to encounter several assaults done by transphobic people. To analyze the problem, several concepts are used, such as, the concept on gender transition, deadnaming, and transphobia. The methods applied are library research method, close reading technique, qualitative research method, and contextual research method. The result shows that transphobic assaults produce devastating effects for the gender transitioning person. However, the supports from friends and support group bring out the tenacity of Felix Love. Finally, he can overcome the transphobic assaults, even he can punish the assailant in his own way and continue his life. The multifaceted transphobic assaults open other discussions on novels with transgender theme.

Keywords: transgay, transphobic, deadnaming, *Felix Ever After*

1 Introduction

Gender transition happens more and more nowadays. Gender binary or male and female genders are not the only genders. The complexities of gender are skillfully crafted in a novel entitled *Felix Ever After* written by Kacen Callender [1]. It is about a young, black girl who decides to have a transition into a trans boy. However, as a trans boy he experiences devastating attacks that he tries to overcome. To analyze this situation, several concepts are applied.

The first concept is gender transition. Gender transition happens when a person feels that he/she is not comfortable in his/her present gender identity. If that person decides to have the gender identity that he/she wants to be, that person may personally choose to become a trans gender or even a transsexual by performing medical operation to the genital [2]. However, having become a trans person does not mean that he/she will have peaceful life forever.

One of the problems that may be faced by a trans person is deadnaming. Deadnaming

happens when intentionally or unintentionally someone reveals the birth name of the transperson [3]. For the transperson, deadnaming may cause harmful effect since it is trespassing the personal boundary that he/she wants to keep. Similar to deadnaming in afflicting harmful effect is misgendering in which someone whether intentionally or unintentionally uses the wrong pronoun to refer to a transperson [4]. Both deadnaming and misgendering are a form of outing, that is, intentionally or unintentionally, revealing a transperson's gender identity without his/her approval. Outing is different from coming out in which the transperson himself/herself declares his/her gender identity [5].

Usually, deadnaming is done by cis people [6] or people with cis gender. Cisgender is a person whose gender identity conforms with the given genital or sex at birth [7]. However, deadnaming can also be done by other gender identity such as gay or lesbian. Another term that is relevant for the analysis is misogynist. A misogynist is "a person who hates or discriminates against women" [8]. There is also a possibility that a transperson has to face transphobia. Transphobia is the fear (phobia) or prejudice against non-binary person including transgender, transsexual, intersex. The trigger of transphobia is the strong belief that people's genders must be binary [9].

The term transphobia now tends to be replaced by the term transmisia, which is the hatred (misia) of non-binary person [10]. Although hatred (misia) is more suitable than fear (phobia) to reflect the negative attitudes or actions towards non-binary person, in this article the term transphobia is used because it is more widely known. Transphobia which is harmful to transperson may be in the form of deadnaming, discrimination, harassment, and violence. Online harassment "can take place online, through the posting of photos of trans people without their consent, spreading rumours or sending hateful messages or encouraging others to do the same" [11]. However, transperson may seek help from "friends, family, a therapist, or a support group" [12].

2 Methods

Research methods are used to support sound academic analysis. There are several relevant research methods that are applied in this analysis. To gather relevant data, library research method is used (George, 2008: 21) [13]. To support the library research method, close reading technique (Phelan, 2021: 60) is used [14]. To analyze the data, qualitative research method (Creswell, 2009: 177) is used [15]. Finally, to conduct literary analysis, a contextual research method (Beard, 2004: 6) is used [16].

3 Result and Discussion

Through his novel entitled *Felix Ever After*, Callen Callender portrays the experience of a transgender named Felix Love facing transphobic attacks from certain people around him.

3.1 Felix Love as a Young Transgender

Felix Love is a 17 years old trans male living with his father after the mother leaving them years ago to have a new family of her own. He is a student at St. Catherine's high school, a good school for young people talented in art. Felix and his father have just moved to Harlem to get cheaper apartment (Callender, 2020: 10). Felix appearance is as follows: "me having brown skin, and being queer, and being trans on top of that". He also has to have regular the hormone injection at a clinic at Callen Lorde, Manhattan (Callender, 2020: 93-94). Felix Love wants to remove all traces of his previous existence as a girl by getting rid of all of the old photos. However, his father asks him to keep several old photos (Callender, 2020: 16) although Felix himself always feels a kind of nausea whenever seeing the old photos (Callender, 2020: 17). Felix has a close friend, named Ezra Patel, who is very supportive and always stands up for him in difficult situations.

3.2 The Transphobic Assaults Experienced by Felix Love

Felix Love, the young trans male, undergoes many forms of improper experience that can be classified as unpleasant treatments and transphobic assaults. The unpleasant treatments come from two people, Felix's own father and one of Felix's school friends called Declan. The transphobic attacks all comes from Felix's school friends: Marisol, James, and Austin.

The Unpleasant Treatments

Felix's father loves Felix so much. He supports Felix's decision to have a transition from a young girl to become a young man by having "top surgery" and regular hormone therapy. He works so hard to collect money to pay for all those medical treatments (Callender, 2020: 16). It is difficult for him to call his trans son with his new name because deep in his heart the father misses his little girl (Callender, 2020: 14, 44). Thus, the unpleasant treatments from the father are not deliberate or for the purpose to hurt Felix's feeling.

Felix also experiences unpleasant treatment from Declan, one of the school friends who is always sarcastic to him. This can be seen when they are in conflictual situation:

Declan clenches his jaw. "I'm the fraud? Really?"

Ezra points at Declan. "No. Don't go there."

Declan rolls his eyes. "Christ. That's not even what I meant" (Callender,

2020: 8).

The word “fraud” here impliedly refers to Felix’s being a trans male or not the real male from birth. However, Declan acknowledges that he is wrong. On another occasion, Declan also hurts Felix’s feeling by referring to the traumatic gallery incident (Callender, 2020: 62). The gallery incident will be comprehensively discussed later. Declan, who realizes how deeply he hurts Felix, apologizes shortly after that (Callender, 2020: 67). This shows that Declan says unpleasant things to Felix if he is triggered by emotional situation.

The Transphobic Assaults

Chronologically, the first transphobic assault is from Marisol. She is a beautiful girl and a school mate of Felix. They used to date, just lasting a couple of months before breaking up. Marisol makes a harsh accusation to Felix:

“Well,” she said, “you deciding to be a guy instead of a girl feels inherently misogynistic.” She told me, “You can’t be a feminist and decide you don’t want to be a woman anymore” (Callender, 2020: 19-20).

Marisol’s accusation is absurd because there is no connection of being a trans male and a misogynist. A misogynist is a person, usually a man, who hates or underestimates women while a transgender is a person who has a transition of gender due to a strong feeling of being in the wrong body and gender. Marisol makes this accusation carelessly and without any burden because she has a big self-confidence and is an intimidating person (Callender, 2020: 19). The humiliated Felix has no courage to tell Ezra, his best friend, about it even though Marisol always tries to make fun of him (Callender, 2020: 49-50).

The second transphobic assault is from James, another school mate of Felix. James is not a close friend of Felix. Without any reason, James approaches Felix and suddenly he says as follows: “Hey,” he says, “so your name’s really--?” (Callender, 2020: 25). By mentioning Felix’s previous name, the name when Felix is still a young girl before transitioning, James shows his intolerance to transgender. His action can be categorized as transphobic assault.

The most devastating transphobic assault starts with the display of seven big-sized photos of Felix before transitioning in the gallery of St. Catherine’s school:

Photos from my Instagram.
Photos of who I used to be.
Long hair. Dresses. Pictures of me with these forced smiles. Expressions showing just how uncomfortable I always felt. The physical pain is strained across my face in those photos (Callender, 2020: 20).

This action is called an outing, which is a form of transphobic assault. However, the doer of this transphobic assault is unknown yet.

Before the photo gallery incident is solved, a series of transphobic assaults emerges in the form of cyber assaults. A mysterious account under the name of *grandequeen69*

contacts Felix and sends a message: “Did you like the gallery?” (Callender, 2020: 37). It directly refers to the outing of Felix. It shows that the sender is a transphobic person enjoying the humiliation of Felix. The anonymity indicates his/her being a coward who has no courage to humiliate Felix face to face.

The cyber transphobic assault continues. There is another message from grandequeen69 to Felix: “Why’re you pretending to be a boy?” (Callender, 2020: 80). Felix’s response is in the form of argumentative explanation: “I’m not pretending to be a boy. Just because you haven’t evolved to realize gender identity doesn’t equal biology, doesn’t mean you get to say who I am and who I’m not. You don’t have that power. Only I have the power to say who I am” (Callender, 2020: 81). However, it does not stop the cyber transphobic assault. The anonymous sender replies to Felix’s response is more hurtful: “I’m not trolling you. I’m just telling you the truth. You were born a girl. You’ll always be a girl” (Callender, 2020: 93). The sender insists on telling Felix that he is a girl. Felix’s defending himself is as follows: “I’m not a girl. You don’t get to tell me who I am. You don’t have that power. What do you get out of messaging me like this?” (Callender, 2020: 108-109). However, it has no impact on the anonymous sender. He/she is certainly enjoying torturing Felix through cyber transphobic assault.

The last cyber transphobic assault is the sharpest. Besides humiliating Felix by considering him as non-existing thing, it also mentions Felix’s mom:

I heard that your mom abandoned you.
I would, too, if I had a daughter that was pretending to be a boy.
....
That’s what you don’t get. You don’t exist.
You’re nothing.
Do you really think you matter to anyone?
You don’t matter. You don’t even matter to your own mom (Callender, 2020: 169-170).

Only a limited friends of Felix know about Felix’s mother who leaves him and his father to have a family of her own when he is still a young girl.

3.3 The Impact of Transphobic Assaults to Felix Love

Felix is not a robot. He is a human with feelings. The unpleasant treatments and the cyber transphobic assaults concerning his being a transgender definitely gives certain impacts on him. When the father deadname him, although unconsciously due to his still unable to forget that now he has a son not a girl anymore, the impact is that it “sends a stabbing pain through my chest, this sinking feeling in my gut” (Callender, 2020: 14). Felix’s hurt feeling is trying to be eased by Ezra, his best friend (Callender, 2020: 15).

When Declan mentions the humiliating photo gallery incident in the class debate, Felix cannot control his emotion and kicks Declan’s chair causing him to fall on his back (Callender, 2020: 62). Again, Ezra tries to lower the tension between them so

that Felix will not be expelled from school which does not tolerate violence in school (Callender, 2020: 63).

When Marisol always tries to humiliate Felix in front of friends in the circle, this is what is felt by Felix: "It's embarrassing, on the edge of humiliating, and I don't want to deal with the awkwardness" (Callender, 2020: 50). Felix feels distressed but he does not know how to confront Marisol who is intimidating and full of self-confidence. When, on another occasion Marisol still humiliates Felix, Felix finally tells Ezra about her absurd accusation to him as a misogynist. It makes Ezra so angry and because Marisol does not feel saying anything wrong, Ezra decides to break his friendship with Marisol (Callender, 2020: 132, 134). When James all of a sudden deadnames Felix, Felix feels "He might as well have punched me in the gut" (Callender, 2020: 25). Felix's emotional hurt is so visible that Ezra wants to hit James right away but is stopped by Felix due to the school's intolerance on violence (Callender, 2020: 25).

The incident of photo gallery inevitably produces devastating impacts on Felix is as follows "I can't fucking breathe" (Callender, 2020: 20) and "my stomach twisting" (Callender, 2020: 21). His emotional distress is represented by the physical pain. Again, Ezra helps by taking down seven big-sized photos on the wall and tries to soothe Felix's feeling (Callender, 2020: 21).

As for the cyber transphobic assaults done by grandequeen69, various emotional hurts are felt by Felix who is so helpless under the bombardment of humiliating messages. Felix feels 'numbness prickles' (Callender, 2020: 80), "Rage and fear and anxiety buzz through me, my stomach tightening until I feel queasy" (Callender, 2020: 82), "Pain sparks and fury burns through me" (Callender, 2020: 93), "I can feel the pain like it's a physical thing, filling my heart and spreading through me beneath my skin ... I can feel their words sinking into me, making it harder to breathe" (Callender, 2020: 170). These jumbled feelings manifesting in physical hurts clearly shows how deep Felix suffers from the anonymous messages.

3.4 Felix Love's Actions Against the Transphobic Assaults

Besides feeling deeply hurt by the transphobic assault in the form of disgraceful photo gallery incident and humiliating messages from grandequeen69, Felix does not keep silent. Secretly he investigates the person behind those two painful events since he is sure it is done by the same person. At first, he suspects Declan who is always cynical to him with or without reason. Felix even makes a fake account to be able to chat with Declan. However, after several days of chatting, it turns out that it is not Declan. It can be seen from Declan's words: "I'd never do something like that, not even to my worst enemy. That's like—I don't know, someone being racist or homophobic or any sort of ignorant shit. That's unforgivable" (Callender, 2020: 91). Declan is cynical but he is not a transphobic person.

After Declan is free from the suspected person, Felix focusses on grandequeen69. He

asks Leah who is an expert hacker to check the phone on several suspected transphobic people, like James and Marisol. However, Leah's efforts are unsuccessful (Callender, 2020: 107, 128). Beginning to feel hopeless, on one occasion Felix, Leah, and Austin incidentally have lunch together. Austin is a young gay person who has a short affair with Ezra, Felix's best friend. Felix is not close to Austin. He pays attention to Austin when Austin, who is deeply hurt after his breaking up with Ezra, accuses Felix as the cause because Ezra is actually in love with Felix. (Callender, 2020: 203).

Leah, who wants to neutralize the situation, asks Austin about the Ariadne Grande concert since Austin is obsessed with Ariadne Grande. Hearing the word "grande" and remembering Austin's grudge against him that is so real, there is a sudden click in Felix's head.

"It was you," I say.

....

"You really pissed me off," Austin tells me. "You know?"

... "It's not like it's easy to be gay, even if we are in Brooklyn, even if this is New York City, and now we have to deal with people like you taking our identity, taking our space."

....

But you're just flaunting it every chance that you get."

"I'm not flaunting anything. I'm just existing. This is me. I can't hide myself. I can't disappear. And even if I could, I don't fucking want to. I have the same right to be here. I have the same right to exist" (Callender, 2020: 204-206).

It is found out that as a gay, Austin wants to be close to Ezra, who is also a gay, but Felix is always beside Ezra and Ezra is so protective and caring to Felix. Austin is full of jealousy and envy. In his perspective, he is better than Felix. He is a white gay not like Felix who is an African American transgender and is not hiding his being a transgender.

Felix immediately reports Austin's transphobic actions to the Dean of St. Catherine and Austin is directly expelled from St. Catherine's school (Callender, 2020: 208). Thus, although at first Felix is overwhelmed by the continuous transphobic assaults, he does not remain silent. In his own way, with the help of accidental Leah, Felix can catch the person behind all those transphobic assaults.

4 Conclusion

A novel entitled *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender presents the non-hetero life of young people in New York, especially those who are still studying at St. Catherine's school. Besides the seemingly harmonious relationship among the queer students, there are unpleasant treatments and transphobic assaults experienced by Felix Love,

the main character who is a trans gay. The transphobic assaults are in the form of absurd accusation, outing, deadnaming, and continuous cyber bullying. It produces devastating emotional and psychological impacts that are manifested on various physical pains. After moments of being emotionally and psychologically staggered down, Felix stands up against the bullies in his own way. Using a fake account, Felix is able to erase Declan, from the main suspect. Leah's help of checking suspected people is also unsuccessful. By accident, Felix can find out the ruthless transphobic person behind the photo gallery incident and the devastating cyber transphobic assault when Leah mention Ariadne Grande concert to Austin. Austin's envy and jealousy to Felix are the reasons driving Austin to bully Felix in various ways.

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