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## **THE CONCEPT OF GENDER IDENTITY IN *MIDDLESEX* AND *THE VIRGIN SUICIDE* BY JEFFREY EUGENIDES**

**JEFFREY EUGENİDES'İN MİDDLESEX VE THE VİRGIN SUİCİDE ADLI  
ROMANLARINDA CİNSİYET KİMLİĞİ KAVRAMI**

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**Öz**

In the contemporary century, people have tackled by countless social problems, as a result of, conflicts which caused by the new life, exclusively after Second World War the majority of society was lost and there was absence of identity, as well as the distinction between genders made lots of problems. In extension gender was directly associated with identity. As a result, authors debated those subjects within many different interprets. To explain more, the term "Identity" in literature refers to distinct meaning, for instance, national, race, ethnic and gender identity. Those topics were discussed in wide extent thus, this article attempts to show the concept of gender identity from the perspective of the famous and award-winning American writer Jeffrey Eugenides. In both of his novels *Middlesex* and *The Virgin Suicide* obviously he deliberates these subjects, besides many other themes. *Middlesex* is the book about a hermaphrodite person it displays the suffering of the protagonist because of the absence of

identity. On the other hand, *The Virgin Suicide* is a story of five girls who commit suicide one after another, consistently absence of identity is one of the reasons beyond their murder. This paper discusses the author's method and the similarity and differences between both of the books. It concentrates on the concept of identity in addition, the matter of gender is another concern of this article.

**Key Words:** Identity, Gender, *Middle Sex*, Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicide*, Hermaphrodite

### Öz

Günümüzde toplum II. Dünya Savaşı'ndan sonra yitilen canların, kimlik yitimlerinin ve yeni bir hayatın getirdiği sayısız problemle yüzleşmektedir. Ayrıca kadın erkek arasındaki cinsiyet rolleri bakımından ayrımı da birçok soruna sebep olmuştur. Açıkçası cinsiyet kavramı doğrudan kimlik ile ilişkilendirilmiştir. Bunun sonucunda yazarlar bu konuları birçok farklı yorumla tartışmıştır. Dahası, edebiyatta kimlik kavramı farklı manalarda kullanılır; örneğin, milliyet, ırk, etnik ve cinsiyet kimliği. Bu konular geniş bir şekilde işlenmiştir; bundan dolayı, bu makale ünlü ödüllü Amerikalı yazar Jeffery Eugenides'in bakış açısından cinsiyet kimliği kavramını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. *Middlesex* ve *Masumiyetin İntiharı* adlı romanlarının ikisinde de birçok başka konunun yanında bu konuların üzerinde durmaktadır. *Middlesex*, çift cinsiyetli bir kişiyi konu almaktadır ve ana karakterin kimlik yoksunluğundan dolayı vermiş olduğu çabayı göstermektedir. Öte yandan, *The Virgin Suicide* sebebi kimlik yoksunluğu olan ve birbiri ardından intihar eden beş kızın hikâyesidir. Bu makale, yazarın yöntemini ve her iki kitap arasındaki benzerlik ve farklılıkları tartışmaktadır. Makale kimlik kavramı üzerine yoğunlaşmıştır ve buna ek olarak cinsiyet sorunu bu makalenin başka bir meselesidir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kimlik, Cinsiyet, *Middle Sex*, Jeffrey Eugenides, *Masumiyetin İntiharı*, Çift Cinsiyet

### Introduction

In modern literature gender and identity is a controversial subject, in countless literary works those two subjects are dominant concept of the work, because they are essential issues in the society. Identity has a fundamental role in our lives, human beings by nature tend to address people by names, nations, race, and color to select their identities. This selection sometimes causes various problems in the society, because the selection is not just on the level of names, it goes further, for instance, addressing people by different names leads to classification, and this classification leads to division, as a result it makes different classes and groups within the society's framework, as well as, it gives

priority to a specific part rather than the other. In extension, there is a lack of communication between society's classes because of those measurements. Considering the ideal identity or the ideal group in the society has not a stable unity, it changes from society to another. According to researches A measurably huge contrast was found between the prosocial conduct levels of kids in connection to sex. With respect to sex contrasts, preschool instructors evaluated young ladies as more prosocial than young men. In like manner, the prosocial conduct point midpoints of young ladies were higher than those of kid (Yoleri & Seven, 2014: 255). Classically the color, race, and nation make many problems with the issue of identity. People who eliminated by

those identifications concerned as a less or inferior category, so that the conflict of identity begins at this point. Furthermore, the matter of gender is another factor which contributes in identity's case. In the literature it is also observed that identity is so important, the identity of the protagonist and the characters influence the reader and effects on the story itself. Authors choose their characters carefully as well as they give names to the characters intentionally, moreover, the gender of the character is selected accurately to deal with the concept of the story. In another word the factor of gender, names, and nation...etc. plays a significant role from the beginning of the story until the end, so that the writers effort to make a harmony between the hero and identity of the work. Authors usually form a specific picture for the protagonist, and giving names contribute to this formation. Authors describe the personal, social and geographical identity of the literary character in a literary work in order to convey the reader. Frequently the characters have given more than a name like a nickname or a religious name this process is also to define the identity, sometimes through the name of the character readers can guess the identity of that character, as well as, we can recognize a lot of detail information about the characters by the way that they make a speech about other people or through the way of introducing themselves we can reveal their social standing. In their thematic configurations as an element authors make use of the strong connection between names and the sense of personal identity. So names indicate to positive qualities or negative qualities (Windt-Val, 2012, pp. 281-282). Point to characters identity in literary works is a necessary element to clarify the formation of the work to the readers. To complete the organization of the work and to be reached to the audience easier. To explain more our discussion concentrate on contemporary American literature because

the writer belongs to this field and environment. Identification is an existing theme in American literature especially the matter of race. A contemporary American scholar organizes the importance of race in American literature, it extended to the writers too, for instance, the attention increased to the racial category of whiteness specifically that the white authors they actively invest the production of whiteness as a category of racial and national identity. Furthermore the concept of whiteness evolved in American literature with an interest in establishing the historical, social, and gendered contexts of its production (Demant, 2010: 5).

From the first moment of birth, the gender of the baby declares its identity as a girl or boy which means this person will pursue the life with carrying "female" or "male" term in lifetime as an identity. Regarding gender, there are contradictory results in the literature. Gender is found to be effective in adolescence in favor of boys on emotional self-efficacy (İkiz ve Baki Telef, 2013: 1204). Selecting gender and imposing many rules on human under the shade of gender minimizes the ability of a person, because according to gender society set the role and position of each person. The concept of priority and inferiority is applied too. Then the next step is naming the baby which also related to the identity. The name of the person could give a religious and racial meaning besides the gendered reference. In extension from the childhood, people try to build their identity according to their gender because this is the first classification every person goes through it in the life. It is the first journey to reveal your identity, later on it will be followed by other classifications as nation, race, and color...etc. the gender determines human's behavior in the society it extends to small details in the life, for example, the color and style of clothes are quite different for each gender. Those classifications have no solid basis beca-

use it is changeable from society to another. Even the names could be altered, for example, *Evelyn* was an available name for a male in Britain, long after in American culture it had become exclusively a name for a female, and so on (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, pp. 7-8). Surrounding people by those rules make an inner conflict and obstacles. To act spontaneously and explain what you exactly are and clarify your tendency which reveals your identity is not an easy matter because people are bounded by society's regulation. Jeffrey Eugenides comes from a hybrid family and he lives in a multi-cultural community. He is from a Greek family who immigrated to America which causes a confusion in recognizing the clear identity so that Jeffrey draws many materials for his novels from his own experience and life. As a result, we see unique trace in his works (Ciglanic, 2013, pp. 4-5). In *Middlesex* Jeffrey evidently, refers to the role of gender in determining identity, as well as, the importance of a name. The protagonist in the novel claims "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974" (Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 2002: 3). These lines clarify that, the author provides two identities to the hero first as a female second as a male, in another word the statement "I was born twice" is an evidence of gender role in selecting identity of the person. It shows that the same person examined two different life because of gender distinctions, first, her identity was a female but later on she transferred her gender into male so that her identity has been changed too, in addition when she born her parents called her "Calliope" which is a name for female, but when she transferred her gender to male she changed her name to "Cal" which is more masculine name. This demonstrates that names indicate to genders so the gender indicates the identity. Gender identity could be defined as a "recognition of the perceived social gender attributed to a

person. Typically a male is perceived as a boy or a man where boy and man are social terms with associated cultural expectations attached. Similarly, a female is perceived as a girl or woman. The distinctions made between boy and girl and man and woman are of age and usually again represent differences in societal expectations that go along with increases in maturity." (Diamond, 2002: 322). In a way or another gender has a significant role in building identity and this pattern in determining identity is associated with social concepts.

Jeffery Eugenides used the throwback technique in both of the novels, so the characters in the novels are narrating the story. In *The Virgin Suicide* the story is told by a group of teenage boys they were the girl's neighbor and they witness on their murder, and in *Middlesex* the story is told by the protagonist and he goes back through the history of his/her family to discover many facts about the old generation of the family. So that there is an overlap between times and events. In addition, He presents the importance of revealing the gender's identity in his novel *Middlesex*, at initial events before the birth of the hero the whole family is wondering about the gender of the baby. The grandmother tries to reveal the baby's gender by a traditional method and she declares that the baby is a boy, the mother is not pleased by hearing this news because she wants a baby girl (Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 2002: 5). This scene happens with all people, from the first time parents wonder about the gender of their babies which indicates its identity. From the very beginning of the book, Jeffrey shows the family's desire for revealing the gender identity. At following pages in the book there is a conversation between the characters about gender identity:

Though the topic had been brought up in the open forum atmosphere of those postprandial Sundays, it was clear, that notwithstanding the impersonal tone of the discussion, the sperm they were talking about

was my father's. Uncle Pete made it clear: to have a girl baby, a couple should "have sexual congress twenty-four hours prior to ovulation". That way, the swift male sperm would rush in and die off. The female sperm, sluggish but more reliable, would arrive just as the egg dropped. (2002: 8)

This part of conversation is kind of irony, Cal's parents this time try to determine the sex of the baby by scientific information. The parents want to have a baby girl because already they have a son. So that they did the extreme they could do just to have a girl and the ironic part is they had a girl, but at the end she decided to continue her life as a male by transferring her gender. It is the opposite expectation to the grandmother's opinion. As it mentioned above she guesses that the baby is boy, but the baby born as a female whereas she changed her gender to become a male. Thus the grandmother's expectation is true. These two scenes of the book give an ironic notion about gender identity. As well as the role of gender identity in determining someone's destiny. Moreover the attention to gender identity is highlighted from both parents and the society rather than personal identity which is quite neglected. In spite of that *Middlesex* is a novel about a hermaphrodite person, because of a biological disorder becomes intersex person as well as the main idea in the novel is the protagonist but the author states that the book is going around different topics:

It was more of an opportunity to make a different kind of book. I wanted it to be about many things. In a way, some people say, the book is not about a hermaphrodite at all. And I understand that, it's about reinventing your identity on different levels, be that Greek to American, female to male -- and there's other instances of it in the book. So, making the book turn into a family saga was something that allowed me to talk about a range of things and a range of characters and

a range of a historical period. I was eager to do that, as opposed to constructing the book as merely the story of a hermaphrodite. People have these simplistic ideas about what the book is about. I'm trying to get the message out to potential readers that it is not merely about a sex-change or something like that, but it really is a sort of family saga with this narrator. (Eugenides, 2003: 1)

Once again Jeffrey insists on reinventing your identity on many levels like gender, racial, and national identity. As well as he wants to show a historical reality and a picture of society from different periods of time. Thus it is a family saga shows revealing identity on different levels. The book shows many different characters that make a variation of identity within the novel. The protagonist describes each one to gives a clear idea to the readers. It shows the character's perspective about identity in general and also about the protagonist's condition in particular, which clarify the identity could not be defined in a specific way. As well as the concept of gender and sex they could not be limited. Because both of sexes and genders have merits and demerits in common. Basically *Middlesex* discusses different topics but obviously, the reader observes that the traditional notions of gender are highlighted (Lewis, 2013, pp. 1-2). A hermaphrodite protagonist narrates a story of his life. Who goes from identifying as a female in her childhood to identifying as a male in his adulthood. To show up the suffering of those rare issues in the society, as well as to indicate the importance of gender in identifying a person. In counterpart his book, *the virgin suicide* is the story of five girls, it focuses on the last years of their lives, and their eventual suicides. It narrates their condition during the years of suicide. The girls are (Cecilia) thirteen, (Lux) fourteen, (Bonnie) fifteen, (Mary) sixteen, and (Therese) seventeen. The story occurs in the 1970s, but as it mentioned before the writer used the tech-

nique of flashback and repetition. So that the story is told two decades later by a group of boys who lives nearby the girl's house. The middle-aged man is narrating the story of girls because of that he still obsessed with them. The girls committed suicide one by one in an ambiguous situation. The news of girls' suicide spread out over in a fast way. People were wondering about the reason why the girls are committing suicide? Although the parents tried to count it as an accident murder, not suicide. The family lives in suburban, Mr. Lisbon is a math teacher and his wife is a housekeeper. The novel tries to show the environment of suburban and its problem. Add to the family's treatment for their children. Lisbon's family had five girls, all of the girls are teenagers. The girls try to explore the life and to find their identity. They live in an isolated environment, on the other side, a group of teenage boys are living in the neighborhood so that both of the genders are curious to explore the other world of another gender. The boy's spy on the girls in order to get closer to their life. Thus they try to interpret all the events and reasons beyond girls' suicide. Jeffrey states that "I narrowed this larger town consciousness down into the "we" of the boys" (Schiff, 2006: 5). So he depicts the whole society to the sound of boys, to shows that the society is an audience and it could not take any action to solve problems. In extension *the virgin suicide* has been inspired by a real story the writer claims:

The Virgin Suicides came to me in two stages. The first occurred when I met a babysitter of my nephew back in Detroit, and she told me that she and all her sisters had tried to commit suicide. I was obviously astonished by that, and I asked, "Why?" She said, "I don't know. We've had a lot of pressure." I only met her once, for a few minutes. I don't know why she divulged this to me, but she did. That stayed in my mind—the idea of many sisters in one family all being suicidal. About a year and a half later, I started to write a novel about this idea and was searching for

the proper narrative voice to handle the material. I wanted to tell the story through the consciousness of the town in which these girls had lived and died. (p. 5)

So it is a depiction of a group of teens attempt to reveal their identity and find a way in this life. Moreover, the writer formed the story in a sequence to reach the reader little by little. As well as to give a complete depiction of the murder of Lisbon's girls. In particular, Cecilia was kind of different from the other girls. She was more intelligent and more isolated. So that she was the first girl who commits suicide. Cecilia firstly attempts to commit a suicide by cutting her wrists with a razor while taking a bath. They found her unconscious but they could save her life. Cecilia was more aware and she was writing her diary, in this diary, she shows her loneliness and isolation from the society. As well as she raises many questions. She loses her sense of identity and she was conscious of the reality. After her first attempt at suicide, her parents in order to stimulate her, for the first time they allowed the girl to attend the school's homecoming dance. That was practically the first time Lisbon's girl and the neighborhood boys become too close to each other. Subsequently, Lux lose her virginity with her boyfriend. Cecilia still insists on death after her first failed attempt at that night of the party she throw herself from the window of her bedroom and immediately she passed away. After this Cecilia and Lux accident, Lisbon family completely isolated the girls. In addition, they pull out the girls from school. The girls live imprisoned in their house. Then the rest of sisters gradually committed a mass suicide. After all, Lisbon family left the place whereas the neighborhood stays wondering why the girls commit suicide, without catching any satisfying answer (Delva, 2012-2013: 7).

After her first attempt of suicide the doctor tries to discover the reason during the checkup he said, "What are you doing here, honey? You're not even old enough to know how bad life gets". And it was then Cecilia

gave orally what was to be her only form of suicide note, and a useless one at that, because she was going to live: "Obviously, Doctor," she said, "You've never been a thirteen-year-old girl" (Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 2002, pp. 7-8). In the previous text, it obviously shows the two different perspectives between adults and teens. And the neglecting of a teenager which leads to disaster sometimes. The doctor seems to associate suffering to adulthood as if teenager or children are impervious to it, but Cecilia answered him firmly that you cannot examine what she has gone through and he has never been a thirteen-years-old girl. This scene is similar to Cal's speech, the protagonist of *Middlesex* when his/her mother told him/her that if she didn't change her gender would be a better choice for her the conversation between them claims that:

Tessie was going to try to accept things. She felt crushed by what had happened to me but she was going to endure it for my sake. We embraced. Tall as I was, I laid my head on my mother's shoulder, and she stroked my hair while I sobbed. "Why?" she kept crying softly, shaking her head. "Why?" I thought she was talking about Milton. But then she clarified: "Why did you run away, honey?"

-Cal: I had to.

-Tessie: "Don't you think it would have been easier just to stay the way you were?"

- Cal: I lifted my face and looked into my mother's eyes. And I told her: This is the way I was. (Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 2002: 520)

It clarifies that adults always feel responsible on teenagers, there is a disconnection between those two worlds. In the virgin suicide, the doctor proposes that Cecilia doesn't know anything about suffering yet. He was astonished why a teenage girl would commit a suicide? In response, Cecilia shows no one could feel what exactly others are go-

ing through. In addition, Cal's mother proposes that it would be easier if she just stayed the way she was. He replied this is the way I was, although she born as a baby girl she always feels this is not her identity her tendency was more masculine, therefore; she changed her gender identity. Those quotes above are almost last words in the novel *Middlesex* that shows us the end of the story. The protagonist finds his gender identity by changing her sex. He starts a new life with a new identity. On the other hand, the end of *The Virgin Suicide* is quite different because the Lisbon girls were not able to face their fate and find their identities. However, the novel ends up with the death of all girls in an ambiguous situation but the narrator tries to explain and give a clue about Lisbon girls' life and death:

It didn't matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them, and that they hadn't heard us calling, still do not hear us, up here in the tree house, with our thinning hair and soft bellies, calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time, alone in suicide, which is deeper than death, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together. (Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 2002: 5.42)

Obviously, the girls remain in boys' memory, as well as, their ambiguous death. The narrator tries to show the insignificant of age and gender and the importance of love and attention. The novel ends up with a tragedy with a suicide of 5 sisters whom got depressed and hopeless about life, even though they were teenagers. Their suicide stayed unknown and vague to everyone, they were victims of a bad treatment of their parents. The girls' parents were overprotective in order to protect them they totally isolated the girls from the out world so that the girls felt more lost. They faced the reality by death, repeating this action by all the sisters is an

evidence of lost identity. The female characters were the same thus they choose the same fate as well. It is a depiction of gender identity and its role. In counterpart, the group of boys pursued to investigate the accident and they hold the girls in their memory. As if the writer wants to show us the power of males rather than females. The depiction of patriarchy society which females are always victims in it.

### CONCLUSION

In a brief summary, Jeffery's novels share various ideas and concepts in common, mostly, the writer discusses general problems in a modern society, which is almost associated with identity, race, nation, and gender. In addition, both of his novels expose many vital ideas and controversial subjects, but in particular, the role of teenager characters are highlighted because at this age people are eager to discover their identity. In his first novel *Middlesex* which is already discussed in this paper. He presents a hermaphrodite character the hero discovered this biological problem in his 14 years old. Through this character, the readers explore much historical and biological information. Moreover, the strength and wisdom of the character astonish the readers. There is no one could explain the absence of gender identity better than a hermaphrodite person. The hero describes the internal and external conflicts of being half male and half female within the same body. This concept extends to normal people as well. Human beings are not limited by their gender identity, a female could has masculinity and vice versa. Furthermore, everyone has a freedom in tendency, *Middlesex* is a book taught us how to explore your real identity within a hybrid society and multi-cultural background. Whereas the characters in *the virgin suicide* are five sisters, the absence of identity in this book depicted on two levels age and gender too. The girls are lost because they are teenagers and they attempt to explore the world but they are still immature to absorb everything around them. The absence of

gender identity is a basic factor in the novel. Largely, in *the virgin suicide* the concept of being female or male, is associated with the opposite sex for both the girls and boys in the neighborhood. They were curious about exploring female's and male's world. In addition accessing the world of opposite gender is linked with desire and sex. After some of the girls had sex with the boys their situation becomes worst. Having sex could not prevent them to commit suicide. Similarly in *Middlesex* desire and sex play a role in revealing the identity, for instance, the hero when she had a sex for the first time as a female, she feels her tendency is quite different. Frequently the wrong depiction of your identity and your environment leads to problems, as well as classifying things by different identity is not always equitable. Between right and wrong, it could be something in between. Identity could not be defined by race, gender, nation, and color...est. The true identity of everyone is the personality and it cannot be limited to outer appearance.

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