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Unfolding the Transgender Labyrinth in Mason Deaver's *I Wish You All the Best*

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Abstract: The history of transgender communities is complex and distinct from that of other groups. They experience hurtful judgment and rejection from society, even from their own families. Though there have been extensive studies concerning transgender issues, their problems are not solved completely. They still face various hurdles to live a normal life, which satisfy their inner self. Mason Deaver is an American transgender author who represented these problems in literature. Deaver's *I Wish You All the Best* depicts the complexities of the coming-out process of a transgender protagonist, who struggles in a cisnormative world. This paper explores the complex struggle that transgender people undergo while trying to live with their true identity. They fail to disclose their identity due to fear of society's transphobia or gender discrimination. Disclosing the gender identity itself is a major problem for these individuals. Transgender people hide their identity to get a social life as people of other genders. This paper brings out the complexities of disclosing gender identity, the psychological toll of hiding one's true self, and the societal misconceptions that perpetuate discrimination. By shedding light on these issues, this paper aims to focus on the need to transform the cultural norms of society and to create a more inclusive and compassionate society that embraces diversity and supports the well-being of transgender individuals. This paper also examines the tension between the character's life of their predestined fate and their quest for meaning in a gender-biased world.

Keywords: *Transphobia, Nonbinary, Gender Expression, Gender Dysphoria*

Gender identity in the modern world has undergone a major shift from the rigid binary gender structures to a new self-determined gender structure, giving prominence to the individual's perspective rather than society. From childhood itself, children are taught to behave according to certain social norms that are already decided based on their gender assigned at birth. Society ignores the fact that there are a group of people who are nonbinary. Transgender people fail to disclose their identity due to society's transphobia or gender discrimination. Disclosing gender identity itself is a major problem for these individuals. Transgender people hide their identity to get a social life as other genders. Society builds up certain misconceptions, and as a result, these people with different gender identities suffer. The struggle they undergo is very complex. A majority of transgender people struggle to find their place in society and even to reveal their gender. Over the years, it is true that some changes have taken place in society's attitude, and literature can be seen as a reflection of this shift in social perspective. British transgender activist Stephen Whittle has comments in his foreword to *The Transgender Reader*, "Cultural spaces and historiographies are constantly reframing the community, the identities, culture and language. We see new languages being developed constantly; for example 'per' as a pronoun developed by UK community members with non-existent gender identities, and similarly the US term 'hir' for those who have both" (Stryker and Whittle xi-xii).

Trans characters started to appear in fiction and stories, and trans people themselves began to narrate their lives in order to find a place for them. Many trans authors have portrayed the pains and pangs of transgender and Mason Deaver is such a transgender author who has brought insightful thoughts through their characters. Even though there emerged works showing the complex lives of transgender individuals, many of these were not accepted wholeheartedly. "Transgender studies can be considered queer theory's evil twin: it has the same parentage but willfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favour sexual identity labels (like gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual) over the gender categories" (Stryker 212).

Mason Deaver's *I Wish You All the Best* embodies the struggle of a transgender protagonist towards the journey of self-exploration in a gender-based society. Deaver's authentic portrayal makes this work a prominent study of transgender individuals. Benjamin de Backer, the transgender protagonist of *I Wish You All the Best*, undergoes a great internal struggle to reveal their gender identity. Benjamin was called Ben or Benji by their¹ loved ones. Ben was a common child as others until they realized that a difference in their own mindset. Ben had got all kinds of consideration and care from home and from the surroundings. The society that Ben lived in followed the typical patterns of gender. For instance, a boy having long hair was against the norms. At the beginning of the novel,

1. The use of pronouns 'they', 'them' and 'their' refer to Ben

Ben's mother advises them to schedule the date of a haircut as it had grown too long, which does not suit the societal norms of being a boy. Ben comes to a realization of their inner self and identity at the age of eighteen. Ben finds out the pronouns for transgender people as 'they' or 'them'. It was an arduous task for them to reveal the truth about gender to their own parents. Ben lost interest in daily activities and could not enjoy the family jokes. Ben feels uncomfortable while sitting in home, which should have been the most comfortable place, together with one's own parents.

Ben's only thought was escaping their body and revealing one's true self. It took several days or months for Ben to gather the courage to tell the fact. Mariam, another transgender character, who knows the difficulty of having this heavy weight on their chest, supports Ben to reveal the truth. Ben had a misconception that parents would respect and accept the truth. But when it was revealed Ben was kicked out of house. However, Ben had not expected such a harsh reaction from their parents. Ben was shocked by the reaction from the parents, and they could see only darkness. Father was angry and his scary look frightened Ben. Mother also could not do anything to accept or understand Ben. Their father shouted "Get out of my house, just get out here" (Deaver 14).

The happiness in the family disappeared in a minute. This was the mindset of most of the families in the society. Being a non-binary person or having such a person in the family other than male or female was totally unthinkable. Society does not provide the same privileges to non-binary persons like a male or female. They too need equal rights as others to live a life as they wish and to express their opinions. The Queer communities fight really hard to ensure freedom and equality for all. "Our fight with the world seemed so pointless. But we couldn't give up and fight either. The world would only be too happy to silence us. But we couldn't afford to be silenced. We couldn't afford to be thrown in jails and forgotten altogether" (Tripathi 56). Transgenders when they get mature, find it difficult or troubling to live due to gender dysphoria. In *I Wish You All the Best* Ben was eighteen when they (Ben) comes to decide to live with their true identity.

Ben de Backer felt depressed and lonely when they were kicked out of the family. After getting out of the house, Ben decides to leave the hometown and calls their estranged sister, who left home ten years ago. There also Ben faces issues in disclosing the fact regarding gender. "I take a deep breath and force the words out slowly. I'm nonbinary" (Deaver 58). Ben was anxious about their future and thought about their parents. The thought of the day when they got out of the house was a nightmare for them. It was impossible for Ben to even imagine meeting with the parents again. They could not even think about facing their classmates with this new identity. A society based on a male/ female binary gender structure made it impossible for them to know what to do next. Ben could not perform anything that could comfort them. They wanted to come out and live with a true identity and to be called with

the right pronouns like ‘they’ or ‘them’. As a teenager, it was not possible for them to live independently without having proper protection or finance. Familial rejection lead Ben into mental trauma and a feeling of insecurity. When transgender persons are denied home acceptance they move into psychological trauma which leads them to vulnerability and exploitation. They face financial instability and health crisis in addition to homelessness. Ben’s anxiety increased as there was nothing happened in front of them. The place of solace where Ben spent their childhood rejected them. The novel depicts this mental agony in a very realistic way. Ben’s loss of memory and stomach tightness clearly capture the mental stress they had undergone.

However, Ben had a strong desire to be free from their inner conflicts and they hoped for a better future. Ben had to face hard realities when they were out of the house. Ben was pushed into homelessness and there was no money with them to move. Ben had to sit in the cold weather without a pair of socks. Mason Deaver portrays this moment very sympathetically and brings out the inner feeling of Ben. Hannah, Ben’s estranged sister, is the hopeful figure that appeared in Ben’s mind. Hannah was kicked out of house long years ago because of her relationship with Thomas.

Hannah and her husband, Thomas Waller, understand and accept Ben. That acceptance was a great ray of hope for Ben. Hannah provides food and shelter for Ben. She understands Ben’s anxiety and difficulties; and helps Ben resolve issues with the help of the psychiatrist Dr. Bridgette Taylor. It was very difficult for Ben to open up everything to the doctor. Hannah’s introduction and the doctor’s friendly attitude helped them to overcome the fear. At the beginning, Ben was reluctant to disclose their life in front of others. However, the doctor’s way of talking impressed them, and regular appointments with the doctor relieved Ben of their mental agony. It is clear from the conversation that Ben was affectionate to their parents and expected that they would accept Ben with their real identity. Unfortunately, Ben’s parents could not accommodate such a behaviour from their ‘son’. They pushed their ‘son’ to disappointment. Parents may have a lot of reasons for not accepting their child in the true sense, but, the real reason is that the society they live in mould them and their attitudes. They may have thought that their prestige in society would be lost if they had a nonbinary child. Therefore they rejected Ben outright without thinking from the child’s perspective. This incident is not a single problem in society. Most of the nonbinary people face this same issue when they reveal their real identity. They are pushed out of their comfort zones and affectionate places into mental agony and psychological distress. They do not even get proper medication.

Ben was brought to a new school to continue their studies. But in the new school, Ben did not want to reveal their identity because of the anxiety regarding its acceptance in the new school. They said, “I don’t want to tell them, I blurt out. I’m nonbinary” (Deaver 28). Not only that, Ben was certain

that they would be calling them the wrong pronouns in school. “As the months passed, I felt it all bubbling over. Every comment at home or at school. Every time I was called Mr. or sir” (Deaver 289). Ben goes through these inner conflicts several times and accepts all of them calmly as they have no other choice. They were not completely happy, however, they tried to look like a normal student. Ben was joyful that when their sister used the word ‘sib’ to call them, also felt satisfied when Hannah and Thomas used correct pronouns.

Ben was not happy with their body because they did not want to look like a man. They feel that they do not belong to it. Even the name of a boy was not agreeable, and they thought it as a complicated process to change the name. Ben was anxious about the result of the meeting with Dr. Taylor. The doctor made a keen effort to convince Ben to recover from traumatic experiences.

Gendered language and misgendering upsets Ben and they were disappointed and got upset. “Every time Nathan uses the wrong pronouns for me, it feels like a stab to the gut” (Deaver 290). Whenever Ben hears the wrong pronouns they become disturbed. “You gonna be sick, man? Someone asks me...I’m not a man, I whisper under my breath” (Deaver 153). Such situations reveal Ben’s internal struggle to cope up with the norms of society because of his assigned gender. Transgender individuals affirm their identity after a lot of self exploration and confirmation. Yet they face discrimination and marginalisation to a large extent. “I still feel like I’m going to be sick. This was exactly how it felt before I told my parent.” (Deaver 57). Ben did not have the courage even to disclose the reality in a society that has many presupposed notions. Ben’s parents also had communication issues with their kid. The parents do not try to understand the real problem of their kid. The mother asks about Ben’s problem and they say they are fine, and she believes it. Another painful moment was when they tried to tell the truth to their close friend Nathan. “I want to tell him. I say those five little words and they feel like they could end the world. That I’m nonbinary”(Deaver 290). They felt it awkward when hearing words like “dude” or “my man”. They say “It’s gender neutral enough for most people, but not for me”(Deaver 297). Nathan was another hopeful figure in Ben’s life during the new life in new school. Nathan was ready to accept Ben and made a friendly alliance. They spent time together and enjoyed the moments. Here Deaver depicts another reality that the process of coming back is possible for the nonbinary people if the society loves them.

The new school was one where Ben could gradually make many friends. Their group activities were very interesting and it relieved them from disappointments. The art teacher Mrs. Liu was very encouraging. Her positive attitude was highly motivating for Ben. The school opens a space for Ben’s self exploration. Ben was interested in painting pictures and they got exposure and encouragement from the new school. Nathan was the best friend whom they met in the new school. They become close

friends, and Ben visits Nathan's house. They(Ben) became attracted towards Nathan when they saw the photos of teenager Nathan, and that was not expected from their assigned gender. They realize it quickly and think, "And why am I thinking about that? Different thoughts. Different thoughts". (Deaver 111)

Another significant point in Ben's life was their contact with the character Mariam. Mariam, a nonbinary friend of Ben, whom they met through an online platform. Mariam's videos helped Ben to identify their true inner self. The affection shown by Mariam was a key source of courage to Ben. Most of the time when Ben felt stressed, they went to Mariam's word to get relieved. They believed Mariam was the only person who could know them as what they are. Mariam was an ardent supporter and a place of consolation for Ben. Ben spent their free time watching the latest videos of Mariam. During the chats with Mariam, Ben converses without hiding anything. As a nonbinary friend, Mariam could understand the real psyche of Ben than any others. Actually Mariam enabled Ben to move forward in life with the real identity. They maintain mutual respect and understand each other. Mariam turns out to be a beacon of light in Ben's life. Mariam motivates and encourages Ben to stay strong in the midst of the binary gendered social restrictions.

Gradually, Ben starts to enjoy meeting with friends, and their interest towards Nathan compelled Ben to disclose the truth. Fortunately, Nathan was a good friend who understood Ben's condition and accepted them. It was difficult for Ben to hide the gender identity and live within the boundaries set by the cultural codes. The moment disturbed Ben psychologically for days, but when it was revealed they felt great relief and happiness. Each transgender person desires this relief. They desire a world that wholeheartedly accepts them as they are. Ben could come back to his life only because there were some people who thought to accept them. Ben successfully returned and enjoyed life. But this coming out and identity formation are not easy processes. Many people like Hannah, Thomas, Nathan, Mariam and a few others paved the way for Ben to come back to normal life. This does not happen in everyone's case. Some transgender individuals need medical transition to overcome gender dysphoria while some need acceptance and social inclusion like changing names or pronouns or changing the way they dress. Society needs to change in order to accept them and give them proper healthcare and opportunities.

Ben is the representative of the transgender community which struggled hard in order to find a true self and identity. It is a great achievement to fight and achieve a life as they wish. Ben had faced cruel rejection from parents and left home without anything in bad weather conditions. But their confidence and the decision to reveal their gender identity led to attaining a life of happiness. Even though Ben's journey for the exploration of self was difficult, they could live among a community that

supported them. This young adult narrative of Mason Deaver definitely encourages the reader to go in search of their true inner self and also to build up a more supportive atmosphere for nonbinary people.

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