

Rose Tremain's Sacred Country: The depiction of a Transsexual's life

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Abstract

This article explores the hidden voices of transsexual individuals, focusing on the life of Mary Ward a six-year-old born into the wrong body. The history of prominent stories about transsexuals began in the 1960s; examples of these prominent stories include April Ashley and Caitlyn Jenner. Bringing to light the life of someone who is transsexual, at a time when this is a fairly unknown topic, offers hope and comfort to those who are part of this minority. Rose Tremain's *Sacred Country* depicts the theme of 'peripheral voices' (1952) and Mary's journey to becoming Martin. Through this we can explore the underlying issues faced by transsexuals in a society that considered this subject taboo.

The stigma surrounding the transsexual community is portrayed throughout Rose Tremain's *Sacred Country*; interestingly Tremain incorporates other subplots that describe other individuals' problems which are similar in the sense that they can't express who they truly are. Together they portray the difficulties the LGBT community faced predominantly in the 1950's to 1980's, and how society constrained them. On why *Sacred Country* is such a significant novel with regards to transsexuality, Emma Parker states that the text 'is significant both because it makes the FTM visible and because it subverts the myth that manhood is an inviolable state, or sacred country, inhabited by a privileged group of subjects: real men.'¹ This offers insight into the title of *Sacred Country* and depicts how unheard topics, such as the female to male transition, is portrayed in the novel. The novel conveys the story of a young girl who, like many, felt like she was trapped in her own body. Tremain illustrates Mary's realisation that she is a boy from the initial chapter, 'I am not Mary. That is a mistake. I am not a girl. I'm a boy.'² Her awareness begins a series of events in which Mary subtly expresses her desire of becoming the opposite sex.

Transsexuality was comprehended as a taboo subject when it was written and even more so during the time period that this novel was set in. Tremain notes that *Sacred Country* was written at a time in which 'there was no "trans community" but just a scattering of isolated individuals wrestling with a dilemma which hardly anybody understood.'³ For post-war Britain it was an unknown subject; in the novel the character 'Sonny', Mary's biological father, is an example of how being ill-informed can have detrimental effects upon transgender individuals. He wanted Mary to be male, 'Pray it's a boy. Pray and pray.'⁴ This subtly foreshadows the relationship between

¹ Emma Parker, 'The Real Thing: Transsexuality and Manhood in Rose Tremain's *Sacred Country*', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 18, (2007) 303-326, p.303.

² Rose Tremain, *Sacred Country*, (London: Vintage, 2002) p.6.

³ Edwin Gilson, 'Interview: Rose Tremain on her seminal novel based around a transgender protagonist before Brighton book event', *The Argus*, < <https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/16168070.interview-rose-tremain-on-her-novel-based-around-a-transgender-protagonist-before-book-event/> > [accessed 18 April].

⁴ Tremain, *Sacred Country*, p.45.

Mary and her father. She was confused; she didn't know what this feeling was. Instead of helping her, Mary's behaviour was met with violence. 'When they got home after the thistledown show, Sonny hit Mary on the ear eight times with the flat of his hand.'⁵ In sharp contrast, Mary's grandfather Cord offered compassion. Mary wished to be called 'Martin', she felt this was more of an appropriate name and Cord didn't question why, simply he responded with, 'Very well. A bit peculiar, but who cares?'⁶ Tremain provides her protagonist with someone that normalises her and treats her like she isn't an outcast from society. This may not always have been the case for individuals going through this at the time.

Tremain portrays another relationship within the novel that shows an interesting analogy to Mary's character. Within the novel it becomes quickly apparent that Mary, understandably, suffers from a deep internal conflict. Her wish to be 'normal' and accepted, contrasts harshly with her desire to be able to express herself as she wishes. Society struggles to accept something that isn't deemed normal and as Tremain suggests, this can have a ruinous impact upon an individual. Within *Sacred Country*, Mary grows to despise her brother Timmy. In one instance she compares him to a frog, 'With his goofy eyes and the way he gulped when he cried and the way his cheeks got slimy with tears, he was like a frog.'⁷ The figurative language that Tremain employs in this example connotes how Mary believes him to be an inferior boy; he isn't worthwhile of having such a title. With further analysis, Mary later voices how she wants to inflict pain on her brother. 'Mary decided to kill him that night, Christmas night, 1955.'⁸ Tremain begins to convey a more malicious side to Mary and this depicts the turmoil faced by transsexuals. It may not have been intentional, but Mary's underlying issues in wanting to be a boy affects her and Timmy's relationship.

With further regard to the internal conflict faced by Mary, there are other instances that depict the disgust she feels within herself. The filling for her tooth that she acquires symbolises the destruction of Mary and the formation of Martin: 'As Gilbert began to drill into her decaying tooth, she felt Mary annihilated a little more each second, Mary becoming fragments, pulp. Martin reaffirming himself.'⁹ Similarly, when Mary has an operation it correlates back to this earlier moment when she says, 'I remembered how, in the past, I had imagined pain was my ally. I had imagined that if I suffered enough, I would become a man, of my body's own accord.'¹⁰ This train of thought from the protagonist creates empathy within the readers. Tremain doesn't hold back on harsh details, it's a bold text that portrays the mindset of an individual who's struggling.

In relation to the boldness of this novel, the inclusion of human emotions allow readers to fully immerse themselves in Mary's struggle. As Tremain conveys Mary's infatuation with Lindsey the text navigates portrays same-sex infatuation. Not only this but Mary assumes the male role, wishing to protect the female figure as a man typically would. 'Mary thought one day I will be like Ranulf Morrit. I will be tall enough to bend down and kiss Lindsey's mouth. I will not be able to show off with Greek, but I will care for her.'¹¹ The desperation she expresses brings to light, again, how in the society she

⁵ Tremain, *Sacred Country*, p.45.

⁶ Tremain, *Sacred Country*, p.54.

⁷ Tremain, *Sacred Country*, p.31.

⁸ Tremain, *Sacred Country*, p.51.

⁹ Tremain, *Sacred Country*, p.70.

¹⁰ Tremain, *Sacred Country*, p.288.

¹¹ Tremain, *Sacred Country*, p.96.

lived in, she was unable to express herself in the way she desired. Tremain offers consolation to transsexuals who may have suffered with this.

Tremain further examines how societal pressures can affect transsexuals; how it can be closely linked to mental health. Mary confides to Miss McRae how she believes she is unwell: 'I'm ill, Miss McRae. I can't work. It's something internal'¹² and seeks help by going to the doctors. Mary's supposed 'condition' is disregarded as a 'delusion'¹³ by the doctor and as a result she torments herself, convinced no one will ever believe her. This portrayal by Tremain enlightens people on some of the inner struggles faced by people who are considered 'different.'

Towards the end of the novel, Mary has undergone multiple surgeries such as a bilateral mastectomy and a hysterectomy and her outward appearance is male. Interestingly, as she is beginning to look male, the name 'Martin' is used more frequently to address her. Seemingly, only now can the majority of society begin to believe what she says and accept who she is, when her appearance matches her name. This correlates with the feeling of transsexuals being trapped in their own body. We can now start to believe that Mary is nearing the end of her battle and she can express herself in the way she has wanted to for twenty years.

However, whilst suffering from the pain of her surgeries Mary questions her actions, 'why couldn't it have been simple? Why couldn't I have just accepted being Mary Ward? The answers are: because it wasn't. Because I couldn't. Because I am not Mary Ward. And no one – not Harker, not Sterns, not I – can explain it better than that.'¹⁴ This is a phenomenon that can't be explained, yet society has to define and categorise everything, and if it isn't normal then why should it be accepted? The judgements placed on individuals makes their journey more difficult and throughout *Sacred Country*, Tremain has portrayed this through Mary, bringing to light sensitive issues faced by transsexuals navigating societal pressures.

¹² Tremain, *Sacred Country*, p.150.

¹³ Tremain, *Sacred Country*, p.152.

¹⁴ Tremain, *Sacred Country*, p.293.

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