

## Gender Dysphoria And Trauma Towards Main Character In *I Wish You All The Best* Novel By Mason Deaver

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze gender dysphoria and trauma in Ben de Backer, who is the main character of Mason Deaver's novel entitled *I Wish You All the Best*. This novel tells the ups and downs in the life of Ben de Backer as a non-binary who is still underage. The object of this study is to analyze the symptoms of gender dysphoria and trauma in a non-binary student, in this case, Ben de Backer, and provide an overview of mental issues as well as gender and sexuality for readers. In theory, the researcher wishes to develop theoretical knowledge of literature related to gender and mental health. Practically, this research is useful as a reference for readers who will carry out similar research, especially in terms of gender dysphoria and trauma in other literary works. This research is included in the type of literary criticism because the writer interprets and analyzes a literary work, especially a novel. The data in this study were taken directly through quotations from the novel, as well as from various other sources. The results of this study showed that gender dysphoria and trauma exist and have real impacts on human beings. Gender dysphoria can cause trauma if the response to the problem is rejection, which can lead to other major problems, such as anxiety, eating disorders, and depression

### INTRODUCTION

This study falls into the category of a literature study, with gender issues and mental issues as the main focus. Literature is a kind of art, usually written, which offers pleasure and illumination (Kennedy, 2019). Literature is a creative art of the author and is a creative imaginative result of the author forming an imaginative world (Jimmi, 2022). In addition, Jimmi and colleagues describe literature as a literary work that has many advantages when compared to other writings in the department of authenticity, artistry, beauty in content, and expression. Thus, it can be concluded that literature is a form of art in written form that is the product of a writer's creative mind. A literary work has distinct qualities that set it apart from other written works which are the value of authenticity, expressiveness, aesthetics, and artistry.

This study used *I Wish You All the Best* by Mason Deaver and the main character of said novel as the object of research. The main character, Ben de Backer, is a non-binary high school

student who struggles with gender dysphoria and trauma that follows because of the gender dysphoria. They came out as a non-binary person to their parents, only to be rejected strongly and be kicked out of their home to fend for themselves, before being rescued by their long-lost sister who left home a decade ago because of their parent's harsh and restrictive treatment to their children. Ben then starts over in a new environment while staying true to their gender identity, and lives their best life while doing so.

Non-binary is a gender identity that exists outside the gender binary, hence the name. Being non-binary means living as neither a man nor a woman (Abdullah, 2019). Meanwhile, gender dysphoria is a gender issue that can happen to anyone regardless of their gender identity. Gender dysphoria exists when there is a mismatch between one's assigned gender and one's experienced or expressed gender which then causes distress to the individual (Sarin, 2017). The distress can come in many forms, from being stressed, losing appetite, and even causing many more mental issues, and trauma is one of them. Trauma is a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress (Gerber, 2019). Meanwhile, Fogler & Phelps give a more specific term for trauma which is trauma and stressor-related disorders (TSRD), and elaborate that TSRD requires an external traumatic event to activate the emotional stress (Fogler, 2018).

The topic is indeed sensitive to some because gender studies and mental health studies are just relatively recent in getting a spotlight. The world is still progressing, and thus, both studies have just respected lately. However, the problems that are presented in this study are as real as any other problems in this world and probably have existed since the old days. Gender queerness is not a recent trend, it has existed since so long ago. Some of our most respected and influential artists and inventors, such as Sir Isaac Newton and Leonardo Da Vinci are known to be queer. The first known non-binary person from America, The Public Universal Friend, was born in 1752. In Indonesian culture itself, the diversity of gender identity is present, specifically in Bugis culture which acknowledges 5 existing genders: oroane and makkunrai, the equivalence of cisgender male and female respectively, calalai and calabai, the equivalence of trans male and female, respectively. And last but not least, bissu, known as the androgynous gender embodies both femininity and masculinity in their body.

As such, it is important to study the existence of gender identities, and the issues that came with it. The world is never a stagnant place to begin with and it will keep progressing, and so does language, the human tool of communication. This study aims to help spread awareness of the existence of non-binary as a gender identity, and their preferred pronoun they/them, and to respect the people within the spectrum. The English language is familiar with the usage of gendered pronouns as an alternative way to refer to someone when speaking, he/him/his for male, and she/her/hers for female. However, non-binary people who refuse to be gendered in the binary system preferred the usage of they/them/theirs as their pronoun to appear neutral. This is a recent evolution of English language, among many others evolutions that happens such as the emergence of slang words, shortened form of words and so on. As a user of English language, and because English language is the *lingua franca* of Planet Earth, the users must adapt to the evolution and should not refuse the evolution. This is the message of this study.

While reviewing the case of non-binary and the new pronoun of they/them/their through the novel *I Wish You All the Best*, several problems rise to the surface: gender dysphoria, and trauma. Then, this study aimed to analyse the effect of Gender Dysphoria to the main character in *I Wish You All The Best* Novel and how the trauma affected the main character in *I Wish You All The Best*

Novel. The approach used in this study was through analyzing the life of Ben de Backer as an example of a non-binary person, how they perceive the world, how they feel when people misgendered them, and what could happen to a person with gender dysphoria and trauma.

## METHOD

The method of research used in this study was descriptive qualitative. Descriptive qualitative is the most frequently proposed rationale for the use of a descriptive approach to provide straightforward descriptions of experiences and perceptions (Doyle et al., 2019). In this case, the study is centered on the experiences and perceptions of Ben de Backer, the main character of the novel. The writer tried to capture the world through Ben's eyes to understand the trouble they underwent for being non-binary and having gender dysphoria. This is important to answer the questions presented above.

The subject of this study, as mentioned before, is the novel *I Wish You All the Best*, the main character Ben de Backer, and the supporting characters of this novel. In carrying out the study, the writer tried to understand the plot of the novel as a whole and to understand the characterization of the characters, both Ben de Backer as the main character and all the supporting characters that are present to build the plot. After studying them all, the writer then gathered the necessary data to conduct this research, both from the novel itself, journals, books, and websites that are appropriate and legitimate. When the necessary data are gathered, the writer then compares the experts' opinions and relates the data they provided to the main character Ben de Backer to analyze their actions, feelings, and emotional state. Then, the writer locates the prominent quotation directly from the novel to preserve the authenticity of the data. The writer then presents the data that has been processed in the paper as evidence to answer the aforementioned questions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Data Analysis

Gender dysphoria is a condition that occurs in the main character of said novel, Ben de Backer, which will be one of the two main focuses of this paper, namely gender dysphoria and trauma. In this sub-chapter, the focus is mainly on gender dysphoria in itself (Skordis et al., 2020). Gender dysphoria has been explained in the previous chapter, thus the writer will not be explaining what gender dysphoria is all over again. Gender dysphoria is the main issue of the main character Ben de Backer, and in fact, Deaver presents the problem in the very beginning of the story by presenting the symptoms of gender dysphoria as felt by Ben de Backer. The writers then analyzed the passage provided by Mason Deaver and discussed the passage by using his own voice and opinion, but still referring to the expert's opinion in the previous chapter. This analysis was also to answer the first question as presented in the first chapter's sub-chapter 'statement of the problem', which is 'How does Gender Dysphoria affect the main character in *I Wish You All the Best* novel?'. The quotation sourced from the novel was presented by a numbering system to indicate the number of data taken from the novel and will be underlined to emphasize its presence.

1. On page 3.

*“Ben, honey, are you feeling well?”*

*Mom plucks the plate from in front of me, with most of my dinner still on it, untouched. I'd taken maybe one or two bites before it fell into my stomach like a rock and what little appetite I'd had to begin with was gone.*

*"Yeah, I'm fine," I tell her. Always easier to just tell her that. It's better than having her pull out the thermometer and every bottle of medication we have in the cabinet. "Just a lot on my mind."*

*There. Not a total lie.*

*"School?" Dad asks.*

*I nod.*

*"You aren't falling behind, are you?"*

*"No, just a lot going on." Again, not a total lie. Is it even a lie if I'm just withholding certain information."*

From that quotation, it can be inferred that Ben felt a loss of appetite due to the gender dysphoria that they felt at the moment. As mentioned in the previous chapter in the sub-chapter of the definition of gender dysphoria, gender dysphoria symptoms include 'neglecting themselves' which is true in this case. Eating is a basic necessity for a human. In fact, through the nourishment of food, a human being can function and perform their daily tasks with ease. Surely as a high school student, Ben knows this fact because schools teach science to their students. However, the condition made Ben unable to maintain their daily needs and end up neglecting themselves.

Followed up by another data on the same page, page 3 to be exact, where Ben's mom asks: "Ben, honey, are you feeling well?" to which Ben replies with "Yes, I'm fine, .... Just a lot on my mind." Despite the narrative, which is in the form of Ben's inner thought saying "Always easier to just tell her that (I'm fine). It's better than having her pull out the thermometer and every bottle of medication we have in the cabinet." This passage and data, collected from a single page show that Ben is compulsively lying and withholding certain information from their parents to give them ease of mind correlates with the symptoms provided in the previous chapter, mainly 'becoming withdrawn or socially isolated'. This shows a withdrawal in a social setting, in which Ben cannot express what they feel is truthful and holds back certain information to avoid conflicts. This is unhealthy because a human being should be able to live and express their feelings with ease and without any pressure from people around them to be mentally okay. It is amazing how much information a single page of a novel can hold if the readers pay attention to it.

## 2. On pages 4-5.

*Mom giggles to herself and sets the dishes aside. "So, what did you do today?"*

*"Nothing. Drew a little bit, worked on a few projects that are due after break, nothing too exciting." Again, just withholding information.*

This passage is quite similar to the previous passage in which Ben lies and withholds information from their mother. In the passage, they act as if their day was normal and even

boring. However, the truth is their day was far from normal, as shown in the third data on page 5 in the following paragraph. In this passage though, Ben shows another symptom of social withdrawal in which Ben does not being truthful to even their mother, a person who is usually the closest to a child.

3. On page 5.

*“Mostly my day comprised absolutely freaking the fuck out about what I was about to do, rewatching videos on YouTube about how people did this, rereading old messages from Mariam, and almost throwing up the peanut butter sandwich I’d made for lunch. You know, typical, everyday stuff.”*

This passage, further reveals what Ben’s routine is actually like. Rather than doing the usual things a student does, Ben is worrying about their gender and how to present the truth to their parents. It shows that Ben is freaking out about the outcome of the coming out, and even rewatching YouTube videos on how people come out on the internet, and rereading old messages from Mariam, another non-binary friend of Ben de Backer, who provides emotional support for Ben about their gender identity. This passage specifically shows Ben ‘almost throwing up’ to a lunch they made by themselves, showing an eating disorder as a side effect of gender dysphoria mainly caused by stress and fear of what the future holds. Yet, depressingly, Ben describes it as a ‘typical everyday stuff’ which in all honesty should never happen to anyone let alone be a daily occurrence that they have to endure. Thus far, it can be assumed that not only does gender dysphoria affect Ben’s social skills, daily activities, and thought process, but it also shows that gender dysphoria affects Ben’s eating habits and causes an eating disorder in Ben de Backer.

4. On page 5.

*“Mom sets the last of the dishes on the drying rack just as I’m stacking the Tupperware in the fridge. “Are you sure you’re okay? You didn’t eat anything weird, did you?” Mom reaches up to touch my forehead again, but I manage to avoid her. “I promise, I’m totally fine.” Liar.”*

This data taken from page 5 shows another instance where Ben is withdrawing from social settings, this time not only lying about their condition but also avoiding physical touch from their mother. A mother is, again, usually the closest person to their child because it is through a mother’s womb a baby is birthed. However, Ben avoids simple physical contact due to the stress that is building up inside their mind, caused by gender dysphoria. This is a serious issue, because according to (Alvarez, 2020), “I found I was able to thoughtfully use physical touch to change the mood of my children.” And further (Morris et al, 2021) explains that “Research suggests that physical touch may help to stimulate the production of oxytocin, a hormone implicated in parenting.” And, it is known that oxytocin is the hormone that is responsible for the ease of childbirth, breastfeeding, and strengthening the bond between parents and children.

This hormone is also useful in increasing trust, empathy, and bonds in a relationship. Typically, oxytocin will improve through physical intimacy like kissing, hugs, and sex. Thus, with the lack of physical intimacy between Ben's mom and Ben, Ben lacks the oxytocin hormone to maintain trust, empathy, and bond in a parent-children relationship with their mother. Complicating the problem even further, because trust, empathy, and a well-maintained bond between children and parents is important to build a child's confidence.

5. On page 6.

*"It's weird, I usually love this movie to death, but tonight? It's almost irritating. But I don't think that's actually the movie's fault. I feel uncomfortable, no matter how I sit, it's like I have to escape my body somehow."*

This data, taken on page 6 shows Ben feeling uncomfortable watching their favorite movie. Usually, as stated in the quotes, Ben loved the movie to death. However, their love for the movie that night is not sufficient to even sit together with their family peacefully. Ben even thought that they would like to escape their body that day. While that line signifies that they simply would like to escape their body, figuratively, to evade the upcoming uncomfortable situation where Ben decides to come out to their parents, the line can also signify Ben's discomfort with their own body, because the body and the gender that they identify with does not resonate well.

## Discussion

Trauma is a disordered psychic or behavioral state, an emotional upset, that is results from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury (Gerber, 2019). The symptoms of trauma are reexperiencing, emotional avoidance and numbing, hyperarousal or hypervigilance, negative cognitions about oneself and one's future, disordered attachment, and even dissociation – the psychic defense of disconnecting from reality (O'Shea Brown, 2021).

The results of the writer's analysis show that Ben is indeed traumatized by the actions of their parents, who coldheartedly dump Ben out of their own home, as previously stated in the earlier paragraph. The data from page 12 shows Ben getting kicked out by their parents right after Ben came out as a non-binary to them. The writer recognizes an initial form of shock and trauma on the same page from Ben de Backer. Ben is shown to have trust issues towards people, even as far as having trust issues over their sister, their flesh, and blood, wondering whether their sister will respond the same way as their parents did earlier. Not only that, Ben also felt deep regret towards their action even when it was not Ben's fault to be themselves. Not to mention the after-effects that are present following the incident, namely inexistent appetite, which could fall into an eating disorder, that is presented on page 13. The inexistent appetite keeps popping up in the following pages almost constantly, fortifying the writer's argument that Ben's trauma is further developed into an eating disorder. Ben also experiences a panic attack, and dissociation, on page 60, which was triggered by their parents stalking them at Hannah's house one night when Ben was left home alone. In that data, Ben was depicted as not being able to speak and move because of the trauma and fear of their parents and being forced into hypervigilance by the situation. And it does not stop there, the trauma also affects Ben's sleeping pattern. While it is true that Ben had the problem since the beginning, the trauma worsens it, as shown on page 15 of the novel and most prominently on page 65 where it is stated that Ben cannot even sleep without reexperiencing the trauma that

happened because of their parents kicking them out of the house and stalked Ben in the comfort of Hannah's, Ben's sister, house. It is also stated on that page that Ben struggles to sleep even a wink, forcing Ben to pull an all-nighter on a school night, despite fully knowing that they have to sleep at night to be able to function properly at school. Not to mention where Ben's therapist, Dr. Taylor, diagnosed Ben with depression and anxiety on page 110. It was apparent that Ben was depressed and anxious due to the trauma that scars Ben mentally, from various pages in the book where Ben has very low motivation in pursuing their academic field, very low affinity to create new bonds with people and actively avoiding social interactions despite the person who tried to pursue Ben, Nathan, is very tenacious, and feeling incongruency between their actions vs their wants. Ben is also shown as extremely anxious, which is most apparent when they have to confront topics that are related to their fear, and what has been causing Ben emotional upset, such as when Ben is encouraged to talk about their relationship with their parents, their sisters, and the idea of joining a community. Ben's anxiety is shown physically when they constantly fidget with things to be able to speak about those kinds of things. From the writer's analysis, it can be shown that Ben shows 5 out of 6 symptoms of trauma as stated by NHS UK. The symptoms shown in Ben are reexperiencing, emotional avoidance and numbing, hyperarousal or hypervigilance, negative cognitions about oneself and one's future, and dissociation. Ben also experienced anxiety and depression, which was the symptom of gender dysphoria that appeared much later after Ben experienced the trauma. Thus, strengthening the writer's belief that, the fact that gender dysphoria, if dealt with the wrong way may cause trauma, and the trauma then in turn worsens the case of gender dysphoria. Showing the link between the two problems, and at the same time clearly showing the impacts of gender dysphoria and trauma, and its potential danger to people, even in real life. The analysis has answered the three statements of problems that were presented earlier.

However, every solution has its problems. Though Ben had it rough, the therapy and medications that are provided by their psychologist have been proven to be a potent outlet in helping Ben recover from the mental damage that has been inflicted on them. The sessions with Dr. Taylor, and their conversations, are a progressive, solutive, and constructive step in solving Ben's trauma and gender dysphoria. It is shown near the end of the novel that Ben finally had a career on their own as an artist for Mariam's YouTube channel and found true love in Nathan. This ending signals that, no matter how hard things are, nothing is impossible. Medical and professional help are always there for everyone who seeks them.

This research provides an initial overview of gender equality and liberal feminism as reflected in the character of Princess Jasmin in Aladin. However, there are still gaps in this research that can be developed (Solehah et al., 2022). A deeper study of the representation of women in popular literature and its influence on gender equality could provide a more comprehensive understanding.

This research highlights the role of film and media in conveying messages about gender equality. Therefore, more research can be done to explore the influence of other popular media in building gender equality awareness and how it can affect people's perceptions (Anggraini et al., 2020).

Finally, in the context of education, this research shows the importance of introducing the concept of gender equality to students from an early age. Inclusive education and learning that promotes gender equality can help change stereotypical perceptions and shape positive attitudes toward women's roles in various fields.

## CONCLUSION

This study has hopefully answered all two statements of the problems in the introductory part, mainly in answering the impacts of gender dysphoria and trauma. While it is true Ben de

Backer is fictitious and is just a character of a novel, every character is designed to be as human-like as possible by their writers to create a good story. Thus, the impacts that are caused by gender dysphoria and trauma to Ben, namely discomfort due to the asynchronicity of physical appearance and expressed gender, discomfort or distress, low self-esteem, becoming withdrawn or socially isolated, neglecting themselves, reexperiencing the trauma, emotional avoidance and numbing, hyperarousal or hypervigilance, negative cognitions about oneself and one's future, and dissociation are real, and can also affect people in real life. Despite that, the fact that Ben finally got better through the help of medical and professional help was also real. To conclude it all, yes, gender dysphoria and trauma could be very harmful to people in real life, but with the right treatment, people can also heal and come back stronger from the ordeal.

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