

## MYTH AND MODERNITY PORTRAYED IN ALI SMITH'S 'GIRL MEETS BOY'

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**Abstract:**

*The book *Girl meets Boy* (2007) is a part of the Canongate myth series, reinterpreting Ovid's myth of Iphis in a modern tale that defies genders. Smith offers a well-written, memorable version of the myth of Iphis from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Smith employs the style of stream of consciousness in her work. The novel is comparatively short, where the opening segment interchanges between the two main characters Imogen and her sister Anthea; and it mainly emphasizes on their childhood memories. The remaining sections alternate between the perspectives of both sisters using the first-person narration. The sister's relationship becomes edgy when Anthea falls in love with a boy who is actually a girl named Robin. As Imogen finds out her sister's queer relationship, her homophobia comes to the surface, mainly when Anthea and Robin spray-paint feminist slogans all over the town. Ali Smith constantly blurs the lines between the genders that depict strikingly the idea that gender is not a fixed dichotomy but is fluid. The stories behind these characters discuss political ideas that more in depth. The climax of the novel is dramatic as it progresses the idea of metamorphosis as not only being subjective but also being dogmatic and social. Altogether this delicate novel concerns feminism, gender inequality, sexuality in its fluidity, as well as problems of globalisation and ecological issues in its 21<sup>st</sup> century wave.*

**Keywords:** *Gender-blending, homophile, homophobia and metamorphoses.*

Ali Smith is a Veteran Scottish novelist who tends to polarise opinion. *Girl Meets Boy* was written as a part of the Canongate Myth Series wherein contemporary authors were asked to re-imagine classic myths. Smith selects the myth taken from Ovid of Iphis and Iantheto base her contribution on. *Girl Meets Boy* uses the myth of Iphis, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as a springboard for a short, wise, beautifully structured story about love, social responsibility and change. The novel does not identify itself just as are telling of a myth but tries to explore the old themes of the myth in a different light.

*Girl Meets Boy* is the story of two sisters, Anthea, the younger, subversive, fearless, thoughtful and philosophical; Midge (Imogen) the older, conventional, terrified, slightly more active and sociable person. The sisters as children grew up in Inverness, being told parables and fantasies by their entertaining grandfather. The novel has been put into sections according to their narrations: in the first, the younger sister Anthea tries to fit into the world of her elder in the hope of adapting it but it all ends in vain. In the second section, Imogen, Anthea's sister, attempts to accept the fact that her sister is gay. Then, Imogen grows into a much more complex and interesting character in the next section which moves from Imogen's viewpoint.

Like any novel, this one has its very own story. Beginning, "Let me tell you about when I was a girl, our grandfather says." (Smith 1) Quickly establishing a world of unfixed parameters, of shape-shifting, as young sisters Anthea and Imogen absorb their grandfather's stories. But the grandparents are never to be seen further in the story as they take a boat and sail off around the world on their own, making life weighty with its disappointments for the sisters. Anthea and Midge grow up and return to live in their grandparent's house in Scotland and to work together on the Pure creative team, an unscrupulous firm that sells bottled

water but stealthily planning to take the world under its control in mean ways. Midge has been able to secure her a job as a “Creative” for the multinational conglomerate Pure. And Anthea finds herself easily distracted one day during a “Creative” brainstorm session by one certain vandal in a kilt. Anthea falls in love for the first time in her life, with this vandal, who is a woman named Robin. Anthea joining forces with the vandal, spreading slogans: “ALL ACROSS THE WORLD, WHERE WOMEN ARE DOING EXACTLY THE SAME WORK AS MEN, THEY'RE BEING PAID BETWEEN THIRTY TO FORTY PERCENT LESS. THAT'S NOT FAIR. THIS MUST CHANGE.”(11)

The relationship between Anthea and eco-warrior Robin is pleasing and does not bring awkwardness to the readers. Anthea initially mistook Robin for a boy, but later when she finds out that Robin is a girl, there is no change of feelings as Anthea still thinks that, 'She was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life.'(smith 12) Their subsequent relationship is incredibly sweet. Robin can be viewed as a gender queer character using Iphis as their graffiti tag, performing her protests in a kilt and by Anthea's descriptions of Robin as having 'a girl's toughness. She had a boy's gentleness.'(smith 12)

'She was as meaty as a girl. She was as graceful as a boy.'(13) There is a continual reference to water when the fluidity of gender is discussed in Robin's characterization which crafts a luxurious flow as the pair's relationship blossom. A story concerning love ought to cherish the feeling of love, in all its enthusiasm and joy, and *Girl Meets Boy* fits aptly in that space. The poetic flow in this novel can be felt as clear water, fresh air and open sky. It is Modernism mixed with Romance, and at its heart lies one of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Iphis and Ianthe's tale of love and gender fluidity.

Midge's reaction to her sister turning into 'a gay' is both humorous and emotional. The main discomfort for her is the neighbours and what might they think about her sister as she concerns much more on Anthea's well being, Midge's worries is expressed as: 'My sister is going to grow up into a dissatisfied, older, predatory, totally dried-up abnormal woman like Judi Dench in that film Notes on a Scandal.'(smith 24) The sudden discovery that her sister is a lesbian shakes her worldview substantially. Directly on its heels comes a work-related discovery that makes her further re-evaluate her assumptions. Imogen tries to come to terms with the fact that her sister has suddenly fallen madly in love with a woman. She is horrified and upset and worried, but the love she feels for her sister is expressed only when Imogen struggles hard to understand her sister and tries to get acquainted with the new scenario. Meanwhile a new brand of water, Eau Caledonia was introduced by the company and Midge is invited to a fortified chamber-like place known as Base Camp for the experts to work on as a promotion. In the Base Camp her boss, the baleful Keith, reveals Pure's long-term scheme for universal supremacy and exploitation. The role that has been given for Midge as promotion is to publicly lie hiding the evil intentions of the company.

The climax of the novel is a happy gay wedding with the couple's family, separated parents, friends, surprisingly the Gods, including Venus, Juno and Cupid, and also has speeches with apologies. It is noteworthy to mention the imagination of Smith that runs rude and it even captivates the reader making them cheerfully run with her but then comes: “Uh-huh. Okay. I know. In my dreams. What I mean is, we stood on the bank of the river under the trees... that we truly wanted to go beyond our selves... And that's the message. That's it. That's all”.(smith 160) These words reflect the simpler or better declaration of hope for the two lovers on the ultimate social and political sanction of gay marriage.

Smith always trusts her readers and let them make their own conclusions in most of her work and even in this novel Smith did not state any social comment or led any political attack. But still, this book contains some brave and open observations and clarifications on homosexuality as Imogen understands her sister is gay but compelled to heed to the chauvinist, homophobic ideologies of her conformist male friends. Most of the writers bring out their hatred towards men in describing them as malicious in all aspects, but Smith never attempts that as the utterances of the very men is enough to ridicule them.

In *Girl Meets Boy*, Ali Smith encourages her characters to undergo metamorphosis and one such is the protagonist, Imogen. Imogen represents following social norms and is shocked when her younger

sister falls enamoured with Robin. Robin, by whom the plot takes a twist, has dedicated her life to social and political awareness and meets Anthea after spray painting 'world fresh water statistics' on the Pure sign. Smith employs the myth of Iphis to open widely about the killing of millions of baby girls that are done worldwide concerning their gender as reason and complexly intertwined the fact on bottled water companies exploiting the freshwater resources of people in rural India, in a way that is accepted and relevant to the plot. The novel stands as an intelligent combination of love, rebellion and mythology and also gives a chance to Iphis and Ianthe to be message boys or girls or both or neither.

Ali Smith has brought out the modern-day reinterpretation with humour and her ideal 'flowy' linguistic versatility. This short novel extends into the issues of homophobia, corporate and social responsibility. Being a gay romance novel, it also covers the absolute steep feeling of falling in love in a different aspect. *Girl Meets Boy* is a delicate story with a real hard message of thorough objection at its heart. The conclusion of the novel is rather joyful as a Shakespearean comedy than the shocking picturisation of Ovid. It's clear that the myth of Ovid stays as the string in Smith's novel, which attaches different themes into it through its witty and amusing form. The story seems to be an amalgamation of seriousness and playfulness; the tone of gender-blending seems to be playful whereas it is far more serious in its message about transformation. The delighting feature in this novel is the creativity which does the amazing trick of merging the contrasting rudiments evenly. This short novel touches the entire extreme corners such as myth-making and corporate trickeries; inseparable attachment of Inverness and the illuminant places of love; the transformation of two dispossessed sisters and civil rights protests. The fragments of modern life were brought together in this work of art to create an awareness of what's right and wrong about our world.

Thus, the myth discussed in the novel can be taken in both personal and cultural way but Smith insists that the metamorphoses or the transformation should be taken both in an individual and global manner. The seditious myth was brought to life by Ali Smith as a modern-day satire which has the political ideas tugged under a romantic comedy. There is a seamless blend of romance, comedy and corporate gluttony that keeps the balance of myth and modernity in its place. The easy yet poetic read fuses the current gendered and queer politics in the base of Ancient Greek Romance and aptly places in the thoughts of modern lovers to contemplate on it.

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