

# Gender Performativity of Characters in 2000s Indonesian Novels

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**Abstract**—This study aims to analyze the gender performativity of lesbian and gay characters in 2000s Indonesian novels. The research is based on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity with a research design based on a literary sociology approach. Data in the form of quotations are collected by reading and note-taking techniques. The data were analyzed using a hermeneutic model to find out the gender performativity of the characters created by the author. The results showed that the performativity of lesbian and gay characters in the novel included physical and conversation, sexual activity, and homosexual talk. The performance of lesbian and gay figures as a form of gender identity cannot be separated from the coming out process. Lesbian and gay characters will hide their sexual disorders from other characters to maintain their relationship with their environment so that conflicts do not arise. Lesbian and gay characters perform performances as a form of their identity as lesbian and gay. The author created the gender performance of the lesbian and gay characters in the 2000s Indonesian novel to gain self-identity.

**Index Terms**—gender performativity, novel character, Indonesian novels

## I. INTRODUCTION

Every society has role expectations depending on gender, culture, and social changes (Shahwan, 2022). Lesbian and gay is a minor community in society (Rokhmansyah et al., 2018). Apart from being a little community, issues related to LGBT are controversial issues in the global order (Fatinova et al., 2019). Its successful dissemination was achieved through a series of longstanding movements (Encarnación, 2014). Various sources document that LGBT people experience physical, psychological, and structural violence in many countries, one of which is Indonesia (Arivia & Gina, 2016). Violence is a feature of lesbian and gay life in high- and low-income countries (Badgett et al., 2019).

Many lesbian and gay people experience acts of violence, which is further exacerbated by laws that tend to discriminate against lesbian and gay people (Fatinova et al., 2019). Discrimination against lesbian and gay stems from stigmatizing those who choose to be 'different' from the surrounding community. This stigmatization is growing so thickly in the context of Indonesian society. It has finally led to homophobia in society, namely the fear of homosexuals—in the context of this research, lesbian and gay—which sometimes stems from religious beliefs (Yudah, 2013). Homophobia is also closely related to the emergence of hate crime. The word hate is not always about hate but also about bias and prejudice. Sometimes the things that cause hate crimes are dislike, fanaticism, irrational thoughts, and previous unpleasant experiences with objects that then become targets of hatred (Jacobs & Potter, 1997). In a homophobic society, there is no sense of security for the homosexuals. Even at home, they are misunderstood and ridiculed (Yu, 2022).

Since 2016, lesbian and gay groups have been under pressure through mass media coverage (Rokhmansyah et al., 2022). News in the mass media in 2016, especially online news, was filled with hate speech (media backlash) that hit lesbians and gays. Various things about lesbians and gays are discussed from multiple points of view and interests. Still, most of the news leads to one direction, namely cornering lesbians and gays. Its cornering is done by giving stigma, such as having deviant behavior; considered "sick" so it needs to be cured; violates religious morals and societal norms so that they need to be straightened out and fostered; as well as abnormal and sinful so that it is inappropriate to live in Indonesia and its development must be suppressed (Listiorini et al., 2019). The existence of lesbians and gays who are always discriminated against encourages Indonesian writers to raise the issue of lesbians and gay in their literary works,

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for example, in novels. The author also tries to offer information regarding the whereabouts of lesbians and gays and their lives.

Lesbian and gay are not only related to sexuality issues. However, talking about lesbians and gay cannot be separated from the issue of gender identity. Gender identity is an effect produced by individuals because it displays practices. Butler calls it a gendered act, which is socially agreed as a marker of identity as a man or woman. Identity is formed performatively through discourse. According to Butler, gender is not understood as a fixed identity and origin of all the action, but gender identity is shaped by time and institutionalized through repetitive actions. Therefore, identities can change because they are influenced by social conditions and occur repeatedly. For example, physically, someone is male, then this can change according to a performance carried out by each individual and then change their identity to be different (Butler, 2006).

Lesbian and gay issues, especially gender identity, are widely adopted to create literary works. Many Indonesian novels present lesbian and gay issues through stories of lesbian and gay life in society. So far, marginalized groups, especially lesbian and gay people, have not received heterosexual groups. In Indonesia itself, heteronormativity is the dominant ideology perpetuated by the ruling regime of truth, such as the state, religion, medicine, and even the family. The media also does not escape from the extension of the truth regime to shape lesbian and gay stereotypes. Most people perceive lesbian and gay issues and homosexuality as harmful and forbidden.

The lesbian and gay life described by the author in literary works is the same as real life. LGBT characters in the novel are depicted as having to cover their identities from society. They keep trying to show their identity by coming out. Lesbian and gay characters come out as a form of self-existence and show their existence. Lesbian and gay coming out is an attempt to understand themselves and their sexual orientation (Chirrey, 2003; Rokhmansyah, 2018b). Coming out is considered as the process of their life journey. Coming out is also a form of identity performativity as a lesbian and gay.

This study describes lesbian and gay performativity, mostly gay and lesbian ones, in Indonesian novels in the 2000s. The analysis is based on the theory of performativity developed by Butler (2006). The concept of performativity is a performative action that is repeated and then changes. Changes to each person's body who is changed are an imitation of the original. Butler questions and opposes gender identification by arguing that gender (masculine and feminine) and gender (male/female) is a social construct (Wu & Bai, 2021). Thus, gender is a category that is always changing.

Butler analyzes the way in which constructed gender categories are naturalized through repeated performance. As Butler points out, "gender is not a noun, but neither it is a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by regulatory practices of gender coherence" (Hu, 2021). Gender does not have to be understood as a stable (fixed) or agent-centered identity (locus of agency), the origin of all actions. Still, gender is an identity formed by time and institutionalized through repeated actions. Therefore, identity can change because it is influenced by its social and repeatedly occurs (Amuthavalli & Rajkumar, 2022; Butler, 2006). For example, outwardly a person is male, then this can change according to a performance that each individual performs and then change their identity to be different. Sex, gender, and sexual orientation are fluid, unnatural, and changing—and constructed by social conditions (Morrisan, 2014).

The notion of performativity might imply that people are free to do whatever they want (Godec, 2020). Butler (1993) has warned that performativity is not the only product of choice. Instead, they are produced through the forced citation of a norm, the complex history of which cannot be separated from the relationship of discipline, regulation, punishment (Butler, 1993). Simply put, one cannot simply choose how to be gendered without regard to their physical body or the expectations associated with a particular body (gender, racial), at least without the risk of being deemed 'fit' with dominant norms and expectations (Godec, 2020).

Butler actually states that they—the queers—are groups of people who are 'victims' of social construction. Identity, gender, gender can actually not only be changed according to the wishes of the individual himself but also shaped by certain social and cultural discourses that regulate their clarity (Francis & Paechter, 2015). The statement that a person's identity never stays describes the freedom of each person's body, more so how he is free to do anything with his body and is free to be anything (male or female) if they want to change it.

Butler's concept above can be exemplified through the transsexual phenomenon. A person who has been transsexual is assumed to have 'changed' his natural condition. For example, a man who feels his feminine identity changes his sex type to become a woman's body. Then automatically, after sex, as a biological fact is changed to the opposite, it will impact changes that determine the legitimacy of the individual to act by the fixed rules on sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Thus, if viewed from Butler's point of view, transgender and homosexuality are not social deviations but are variations in human identity based on performative actions (Butler, 1993, 2006).

Thus, it is emphasized that transgender people are not imitating the original but are inspiring that the original does not exist; there are only layers of performances to form an effect that is indeed considered natural. This practice also parodies traditional notions of so-called femininity and masculinity. The penis doesn't have to be masculine, and the vagina doesn't have to be feminine either. The idea of genuine or primary gender identity is parodied in cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of *butch/femme* identities (Butler, 2006). There is no gender identity behind gender expression because gender is a never-ending process of imitation, repetition, and performativity. Gender identity, therefore, is not a fixed thing.

Butler rejected the principle of identity, which has a beginning and an end. From this, it can be understood that Butler's view is that a person can have masculine and feminine identities at the same time or feminine and masculine at different times. Likewise with male feminine or female masculine. It is, of course, also affects the issue of sexual orientation. If a person's sexual identity is not final unstable, there should be no compulsion for a woman to like men and vice versa. But society certainly does not want that. As also mentioned above, the subject is shaped by culture and discourse, where a rule is propagated through repetition. This rule makes a phenomenon as if heterosexuality is a normative relationship between sex, gender, and sexual orientation. A person with a male body must behave masculinely and like women as the opposite sex, and vice versa. This rule has been ingrained from the beginning. Butler quotes from Freud's theory of melancholia that infants have rejected incest and homosexuality. Different from these natural obligations is considered deviant and not by the norm (Butler, 2006). From the context of 'normal gender' above, there is some acceptable and desirable gender performativity in a certain space. However, some may violate social norms and create negative social impacts (Godec, 2020).

Butler means performativity, which is a gender identity formed through roles, gestures, words, and desires, which includes a performance that is influenced by the environment of each individual, which is then realized in himself. According to him, the act of performativity does not stand alone because it is influenced by the public, making a personal change to a more appropriate and comfortable direction. In interpreting one's identity, it can be determined from three things: the performativity of conversation and physical activity, the performativity of a homosexual's conversation, and then the performativity of a homosexual's sexual activity. Your goal is to simulate the usual appearance of papers in a journal of the Academy Publication. We are requesting that you follow these guidelines as closely as possible.

## II. METHOD

This study is a qualitative research (Hudiyono et al., 2021; Rokhmansyah et al., 2021) article using a queer approach. The queer approach is generally used as an approach to lesbian and gay studies, which focuses on natural and unnatural behavior related to homosexual behavior (Rokhmansyah, 2017). It is also an approach to studies that includes all types of sexual activity or identity divided into normative and deviant categories. This research's object is Indonesian novels with the theme of homosexuals, especially novels that address gay and lesbian issues. The novels used are Indonesian novels published after the 2000s, namely "Kembang Kertas" (2007) by Eni Martini and "The Sweet Sins" (2013) by Rangga Wirianto Putra. The note-taking technique was used as a data collection technique in this study. The first step in the research is carried out by applying heuristic reading, which is repeated reading of the object of research to obtain a complete picture of the novel's contents. The next stage, namely recording data in the form of quotations and allegedly supporting the research (based on the formulation of the problem), then recorded on the data card to facilitate sorting and tabulating the data (Saputri & Setyowati, 2022; Wibowo et al., 2021). This research is text research, so this research was conducted with a retroactive reading model to get an in-depth interpretation of the data that is thought to answer the problem formulation, and that has been previously collected (Rokhmansyah, 2018a). The close reading method is also used as a research analysis method to reveal the performativity of lesbian and gay characters.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Performativity tends to be in the form of bold sentences like declarations. In this case, the binding action performed is not just shown. The power of performativity is very calculated in this case to show identity. Butler claims that to determine one's identity, a person has the right to choose the gender that is deemed appropriate. Gender is something that cannot be formed and determined but is thought to be repeated and believed. Performativity is a professional identity declaration (Purwani, 2019).

The self-identity of lesbian and gay characters in the novel is described as changing; this is based on the analysis results carried out on the three novels that are used as the object of research. The self-identity of lesbian and gay figures is a form of gender performativity possessed by these lesbian and gay figures. According to Butler, performativity is a gender identity that is formed through roles, gestures, words, and desires; it covers the performance that is influenced by the environment of each individual, then realized in himself. The act of performativity does not stand alone because it is influenced by the public, making a personal change in a more appropriate and comfortable direction (Butler, 2006).

In this study, the performativity of a character is seen from three aspects: the talk and physical performativity, the talk performativity of a homosexual, and the sexual activity performativity of a homosexual. Appearance and physical performativity are ways of knowing someone's identity. Sexual talk performativity refers to the way a homosexual person interacts and codes the interlocutor. It was done to justify that he was a homosexual. The performativity of sexual activity in a homosexual can be seen from how he treats his homosexual partner (Butler, 2006; Ritzer, 2003).

This performativity will show the identity of the homosexual characters in the novel, both as lesbian and as gay. The identity of a character as gay or lesbian can be influenced by parenting that affects sexual orientation. It can also be seen from sexual relations, use of aliases, body shape, way of appearance, how to speak and think, and behave.

### A. *Performativity of Lesbian Character*

Juliet and Kartini characters are two lesbian characters in “Kembang Kertas” novel. The authors describe them as a lesbian couple. Juliet plays a *butche*, a lesbian who plays a boy. Meanwhile, Kartini acts as a female figure (*femme*). *Butche* and *femme* are lesbian couple relationship positions. It is related to the sexual performativity of the lesbian couple.

By nature, a lesbian is a woman who has prominent femininity, and it can be seen from the woman's appearance. Even though a lesbian is synonymous with someone who looks like a man, they still have a feminine side in terms of appearance, such as paying attention to their hair's neatness just like women in general. However, the masculinity of a lesbian will appear when a person is interacting with their lesbian partner. It is considered as a form of physical and sexual performativity of a lesbian.

Kartini characters are not described as male. Kartini figures are still depicted as women in general. Kartini is described as having characteristics like normal women who have an attraction to the opposite sex, even marry and have children. In the following quote, Kartini is described as a complete woman through the process of pregnancy—which is the nature of women (Armalina & Hayati, 2022).

*Kartini kehilangan kata-kata, masih tak percaya oleh kenyataan yang diterima, dirinya hamil. Tuhan, benarkah semua itu? Air mata telah memenuhi mata Kartini, jatuh meleleh di pipinya. Dalam hidupnya baru kali ini Kartini mersa Tuhan demikian baik memberinya rasa sebagai perempuan yang sesungguhnya. Perasaan seorang perempuan hakiki. Dia seorang perempuan, lalu akankah setelah ini ia akan memiliki perasaan seorang perempuan yang normal?* (Martini, 2007, p. 79)

[Kartini was at a loss for words, still unable to believe the accepted reality, she was pregnant. God, is all that true? Tears have filled Kartini's eyes, melting them down her cheeks. In her life, this is the first time Kartini says God is so kind as to give her a feeling as a real woman. The sense of an intrinsic woman. She was a woman, and would after this, she will feel like a normal woman?]

Kartini's character also identifies herself as a lesbian through the performativity of homosexual conversations. Kartini's character tries to give codes to show that she is not interested in men. Kartini's character did it at the beginning of her household life with her husband, namely during sexual intercourse.

*Kartini menelan ludah getir. Menarik nafas panjang. Mungkinkah dia akan memberikan anak buat Romi, jika setiap berhubungan intim dia selalu mengakhiri tiba-tiba. Dia benar-benar merasa janggal dan aneh dicumbu oleh laki-laki yang kini menjadi suaminya. Sungguh! Walau berkali-kali dia coba untuk merasakannya dengan nikmat, seperti waktu melakukannya dengan Juliet* (Martini, 2007, p. 70).

[Kartini swallowed bitterly. Take a deep breath. Is it possible that she will give a child to Romi, if every time she has sex, she always ends suddenly. She really felt strange and strange, being teased by the man who is now her husband. Really! She tried to taste it with pleasure many times, like the time to do it with Juliet.]

Kartini's character also performs conversation with Juliet and Nadia, who are both lesbians. Interaction with other lesbians is used as a tool to exchange ideas and have sexual relations. They build their community among lesbians. The community is used as a forum for self-actualization both in their environment and in the broader community. The lesbian community is an essential forum for expressing complaints about being a lesbian. They in their community can freely manifest their true identity (Kasnadi, 2017).

Besides that, Kartini's character also shows self-identification as a lesbian through the performativity of sexual activity. Kartini has a relationship with Nadia as a form of sexual outlet.

*Oooh, desah Kartini. Bibirnya menangkap kedua belah bibir Nadia yang basah dan manis seperti kanak-kanak menghisap gula-gula, tak ingin dilepaskannya. Jemarinya berlari menyusuri sepasang payudara yang menunggunya. Ia meremasnya bagai anak kambing pada induknya, memutir-mutir hingga jeritan Nadia terbang bagai segerombolan balon sabun* (Martini, 2007, p. 121).

[Oooh, sighed Kartini. Her lips cupped Nadia's lips, which were wet and sweet like a child sucked in candy, she didn't want to let go. Her fingers ran along the pair of breasts that were waiting for her. She squeezed it like a kid on his mother, twirling it until Nadia's scream flew like a bunch of soap balloons.]

Kartini is a woman. Kartini considered himself to be a man interested in women, as seen in the two quotes above. However, Kartini also had a relationship with her husband—a man—even though she was forced. Kartini considers that his attraction to women is normal, as men's normativity is attracted to women.

The activities carried out by Kartini and Nadia illustrate that what is called pleasure in sexual activity is not fixated on the anatomical binarity of the body, vagina-penis. The Kartini-Nadia relationship shows that pleasure in sexuality can occur even in the same two anatomical bodies, woman to woman, vagina to vagina. One of the essential things in sexual activity, namely orgasm, can occur without involving body anatomy differences (Setyorini, 2011).

In terms of sexuality, the relationship between men and women becomes a normative picture that appears in almost everyone's mind. The difference between men and women is a significant characteristic of heterosexual practice. Sexual practice between the two is defined as a person's identity in order to be considered normal. This idea explains that a "normal" state is seen when a person has a heterosexual partner, which refers to how heteronormativity is built in every social activity. Justification of normalcy seems to rule out other sexual orientations, such as homosexuality, as abnormal, especially those seen in men. The assumption that abnormal is one of the bullying attempts and the basis for

constructing homosexual characters as strange, including homosexual men. A series of heteronormative rules limit the space for homosexual men to relate to one another (Primiani et al., 2017).

### B. Performativity of Gay Character

Performativity as a form of self-identification is also carried out by gay couples in "The Sweet Sins" novel. The characters Rei and Ardo are described by the author as a homosexual couple in the novel. Just like lesbians, gays also have a role in homosexual relationships. Rei plays a woman who is depicted as depending on her homosexual partner. Ardo plays a man who tries to protect Rei as his homosexual partner. It also relates to sexual performativity in the gay couple.

Just like lesbians, gays are also naturally men who still bring out their masculinity. However, gay men will bring out their femininity when with their homosexual partners. As a man, Rei, who plays a woman in a homosexual relationship, keeps his appearance as a man. It is a compromise between environmental demands and the interests of one's inner norms and inherent in human nature (Rokhmansyah & Asmarani, 2018). Also, the character Rei does this to get along with other people and form an adjustment to the environment.

The conversational and physical performance of Rei's character that shows his identity as a gay person is when he is with his homosexual partner. As a boyfriend, Rei must be able to give the impression that he understands the situation of his partner, Ardo. Rei always tries to understand Ardo's feelings, both happy and bad conditions. When Ardo experienced an inner conflict when his parents arranged marriage, Rei tried to understand Ardo's situation by showing an ordinary attitude.

*"Oke...." Ia menghembuskan asap rokoknya. "Aku nggak tahu harus memulainya dari mana. Tapi, kamu tau Rezta Ardelia Kaselena?"*

*"Yang artis itu kan?"*

*"Ya. Aku dijodohkan dengannya oleh kedua orang tuaku."*

...

*Ketakutanku berwujud nyata akhirnya. Inilah alasan mengapa tiga hari belakangan aku selalu dihantui rasa cemas dan sangat-sangat tidak enak. Aku tidak hanya berusaha membuat Ardo tenang, tetapi juga mencoba meredakan gejolak yang ada di hatiku sendiri. Aku masih kaget (Putra, 2012, pp. 259–260).*

*["Okay..."] He exhaled the smoke from his cigarette. "I don't know where to start. But do you know Rezta Ardelia Kaselena?"*

*"That artist, right?"*

*"Yes. I was betrothed to her by my parents."*

...

*My fears became real at last. This is the reason why for the past three days I have always been haunted by anxiety and am very, very uncomfortable. I'm not only trying to calm Ardo, but I'm also trying to reduce the turmoil in my own heart. I'm still shocked.]*

Another form of conversation and physical performativity is when Rei tries to cover up his sexual identity so that other people do not know that he is gay. The process of coming out was only carried out by Rei to his close friends, namely Nyta, Maia, and Aby, while Rei was still closed to other people. Rei must always wear a mask when he is in a public area. Rei always tries to be expected and looks like a normal guy. Likewise, when he was with Ardo, Rei always looked natural to look like a normal man with his male best friend.

The coming out process carried out by Rei's character also includes the performance of homosexual conversations. The coming out that Rei did to Nyta, was not purely done on Rei's wish. However, this was done because he felt pressured by Nyta's insistence. As a close friend of Rei, Nyta tries to accept Rei's situation with her sexual disorder. Nyta's acceptance of Rei's condition is a form of support for Rei. In the novel, it is depicted that Nyta accepts Rei's condition as gay. As a feeling of support for Rei, Nyta asked to be introduced to Ardo (Putra, 2012, pp. 164, 193–195).

Homosexuality identification based on sexual activity can be seen when the character Rei and Ardo. Sexual activity between Rei and Ardo characters is a form of the performativity of homosexual sexual activity. It can be seen in Rei's desire to give the best to her partner manifested through sexual intercourse. For example, Rei tries to provide the best service by attracting Ardo's passion by bringing his body closer to Ardo's body. The activity was a form of Rei's affection for his partner, so that he wanted to have sexual relations with Ardo when Ardo's lust was at its peak (Putra, 2012, pp. 214, 262).

The characters' performativity in the two novels is a form of expression of their identity as lesbian or gay. A homosexual must make some compromises in order to maintain his identity. However, they still perform performativity, both in physical appearance, gesture, speech, desire, and role, which includes a performance influenced by each individual's environment, which is then realized in himself (Butler, 2006).

Generally, homosexual people will hide their sexual disorders from others. It is done to maintain a relationship with the surrounding environment so that there is no conflict between him and his environment. This closed attitude is done so that life continues to run in harmony. Disclosure of identity regarding his sexual identity as a homosexual is done when he is under pressure from others or when it is time to open up.

The performativity carried out by a homosexual as a form of gender identity cannot be separated from the coming out process. Coming out is the process of a person recognizing and personally accepting their sexual orientation and

opening up their sexual orientation to family, friends, and friends or the environment. Usually, coming out is done the first time against a close friend or fellow. When a homosexual feels comfortable with opening up to their immediate environment, they will try to open up to family members. With this coming out, people who already know the sexuality of a homosexual can accept or even reject it (Rokhmansyah, 2018b).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Lesbian and gay characters hide their sexual abnormalities from other characters to maintain relationships with their environment so that conflicts do not arise. Whereas lesbian and gay figures need to show their performance in life. The performance of homosexual characters—gay and lesbian—is done to gain self-identity. Performativity carried out by homosexual characters includes physical and conversational conversations, sexual activities, and homosexual conversations. Performativity carried out by a homosexual as a form of gender identity cannot be separated from the coming out process. Coming out is done as an effort to show their identity to the community. It is what homosexual characters in Indonesian novels try to do. That's what the novelists do to create gendered appearances of lesbian and gay characters in post-reform Indonesian novels to gain self-identity.

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