

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the study

Sex and gender are the two basic features that greatly influence the formation of our identity as a human being. When a baby is born, they are immediately classified into a specific sex category based on their genital organ, giving them their first identity as a human being. Consequently, the baby will be raised according to gender that fits their sex categories. As they grow up, sex and gender will continue to play a significant part in their life, as it dictates to a significant degree, how they view themselves both as a person and in relation to other people, ideas and nature (Weinreich and Saunderson 2003, 56).

To some, the term sex and gender may sound identical, but sex and gender actually refer to a wholly different concept. When we talk about sex, we refer to the biological distinction between men and women according to their genital organ. Sex is therefore more natural than societal. Gender on the other hand, typically refers to the social process of dividing up people and social practices along the lines of sex identities (Beasley 2005, 11). In another word the society define our gender based on our sex identity, that is if you are a female your gender identity must be feminine, and men must be masculine.

This classification of gender based on the category of sex however, is not wholly accurate and has been heavily criticized. Judith Butler, one of the leading theorists in gender studies argues that gender is something that is not fixed nor

consistent with the sex of a person. Rather, it is formed through continuous repetition of a set of acts that are developed and naturalized over time (Butler 1999, 43). She asserts that gender is a process with an end result, performance needs to be done in order to be recognized. In another word, sex does not limit gender, and there are ways to express gender without catering to the rigid binary category of sex.

However, within our society, there are already pre-existing ideas regarding the range of behaviors and attitudes that have to be in line with sex categories. These are called ‘traditional gender roles’ or ‘sex roles’ (Tyson 2015, 85). These so-called ‘traditional gender roles’ or ‘sex roles’ usually exist in a society that is deeply patriarchal. Traditional gender roles view men as strong, independent, rational, and assertive while women are weak, dependent, emotional, and submissive. It also dictates how men and women should dress, like skirts are for women, or men cannot wear high heeled shoes and many other gendered practices that we know of today. Our constant exposure toward these ideas, makes us take it for granted and render us unaware of gender expression beyond this definition.

These ‘gender roles’ or ‘sex roles’ are mostly just societal programming done by the patriarchal society to justify women's subjugation under heteronormative norms using these stereotypes. Heteronormativity concept refers to the social attitudes which define gender as a binary category and naturalized sexual attraction as directed to the oppositional gender (Hofstatter and Torsten 2011, 1). This notion of heteronormativity along with gender roles compel people to act in accordance with the societal expectation of male and female.

As we may have seen, men and women have almost reached equal grounds in terms of treatment. In this modern era, women are allowed to work and receive equal payment to men. They are allowed to study in the field that is usually male-dominated. They receive various accommodation in their workplace to assist them in juggling their careers and their role as a mother. However, that is not always the case. A few decades ago, women had to fight tooth and nails to achieve the situation that we know of today and received various offenses and mistreatment along the process. Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the very first feminists in history, was insulted, called a bitch, a hag, and many disparaging terms just because she demanded to be treated equally as men (Beasley 2005, 37). Throughout history, women of all ethnicities and backgrounds that strived for this equal rights were treated with contempt because they were seen as defying their nature as a weak and submissive being.

Not only women but men that act and dress like women, crossdressers, homosexuals, transgender, and many other identities that do not fall under the category of the heteronormative standard also receive the same treatment. They are seen as a social pariah, a disgrace to the society, and treated as an outcast. They are forced to conceal and suppress their true self in order to be accepted by the society. On the other hand, the existence of these people, also known as Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer or LGBTQ as conveniently termed for the people that do not conform to the heteronormativity, are undeniably valid. They live among us as part of the society.

In the world, the LGBTQ community keeps growing by the years, as the era changes, and the society is more accepting of their existence. Pride month are held throughout the world for the community to celebrate their existence also as a way to raise awareness of the impact of the LGBTQ community to the society. The celebration is held in June annually to commemorate the Stonewall riots in New York City, a critical event in the modern struggle for LGBTQ rights in the United States (Rosenberg 2016). The month-long celebration is held in the urban pace all over the world where new members of the community are welcomed into the long-standing tradition and are educated about the history of their community and the people who helped to shape them.

In mainstream media, the representation of LGBTQ community has also begun to be encouraged. Songs and books about queer themes have begun to pop up. In 1972 the world celebrated the first-ever depiction of a same-sex couple in American drama series *That Certain Summer* (Witt et al. 2009). In Indonesia, even though the majority of people are still close-minded in the matter, slowly but surely the LGBTQ community has begun to worm their way into acceptance. As we may have seen happened to Lucinta Luna, a famous singer who has come out as transgender a few months back. Insult and slander have been thrown her way, but many also show her support and praise to her bravery in coming out in the largely religious community.

Despite the immense support however, the transgender and gender non-conforming people still face serious mistreatment by the society. Every day they are subjected to social and economic discrimination because of their gender

identity or expression. The majority of transgendered persons have experienced mistreatment and violence of some kind like losing a house, being fired from their jobs, and denied access to the healthcare they needed. Too often, the government and the public turn a blind eye over this fact, and the lack of data of anti-transgender discrimination has hindered the work to address this issue (Grant et al. 2012, 1).

This kind of mistreatment is oftentimes a result of the heterocentric prejudice against all kinds of identity that does not fall under the neatly formed heteronormative standard. Those who defy this standard may be seen as deviating the societal norms and risk discrimination and ostracisation. That is why transgender people, whose gender expressions do not conform to this binary category of men and women are being subjected to discrimination by the society.

The term transgender itself refers to the definition of a person whose sex assigned at birth does not resemble their gender expression or gender identity. The term covers a various range of gender identities such as transsexuals, masculine women, feminine men, and others who chose to identify their gender differently from that assigned to them at birth (Beasley 2005, 152).

It is imperative then, for us to consider the implication of heteronormativity and its operation within the society before jumping to any form of unwarranted bigotry toward transgender people. It is also important for us to educate others about the matter, so that we can bring to an end or at least lessen the widespread discrimination that they are being subjected to by the society.

This issue of transgender discrimination is a prevalent theme in the novel *If I Was Your Girl* by Meredith Russo. The novel itself tells a story about Amanda Hardy, a male-to-female transsexual girl who was forced to live a new life in a new town and hide her identity because of trauma from her violent past. In the book, we witness through Amanda the constant struggle and discrimination she received just because of her identity as a transgendered person. With her book, the writer as a transgender woman herself tries to convey to the reader these struggles that commonly experienced by a transgender individual.

Since the novel's publication, the book has garnered positive responses from readers of all ages and backgrounds. It has received prominent awards such as Stonewall book award and Walter Dean Myers Honor Book for its outstanding takes on transgender issues. Russo's honest and meaningful portrayal of the character, Amanda, cannot help but make the reader captivated over her compelling tale. The book is the first book ever written by a transgender writer about transgender teen experience and is considered a valuable contribution to the meager body of transgender literature.

Despite the stellar reviews and various interesting issues that the book covers, there is still very limited research conducted on *If I Was Your Girl*. The writer is able to locate only one study conducted on the text, which is a journal article written by Janita Mayestika, Henny Suharyati, and Agnes H (2019) entitled *Anxiety Aspect of The Main Character in The Novel If I Was Your Girl by Meredith Russo*. In this study, the researchers discuss the anxiety experienced by Amanda Hardy, the main protagonist of the novel. Through the analysis, they find

that internal and external factors such as gender identity disorder and harsh environment contribute in inducing anxiety to the character. Causing Amanda to experience a few difficulties that hinder her from socializing efficiently in a new setting.

Evidently, there is still a lack of study conducted on *If I Was Your Girl* that applies queer criticism approach. This is rather surprising considering the major themes of the novel revolve around the issue of gender. The topic of gender's role and importance within the society is heavily discussed throughout the book. It revolves around the story of a transgender individual named Amanda Hardy, who choose to express their gender in a way that does not conform to the society's expectation.

One of the major concepts of queer theory is the fluidity of self-identity. Queer theory challenges the essentialist's notion that there is transcendental essence within ourselves that defines who or what we are. Rather, queer theory argues that selfhood is not predetermined nor prescribed to us but shaped and developed by social codes, our behavior and activities, power structure within society, and various other aspects that are continuously changing. (Bresler 2011, 226-227). Therefore identities are completely subjective and vary among each individuals from time to time.

Judith Butler is one of Queer Theory's leading theorists. In one of her most influential works, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* (1999), she asserts that just like identity, gender is performative. This means that gender is not determined by a universal concept of who we are but is

formed through a series of repeated actions. In another word, gender is determined by what we do at a particular time, not by our supposed essence. For Butler gender is the result, not the cause of our performances (Butler 1999, cited from Bresler 2011, p. 228).

Because of its growing popularity and relevance in making sense of gender, Butler's gender performativity has become one of the major theories within queer studies. Many studies have been conducted on the topic across various media within multiple fields. Anette Kirkvik's paper entitled "Gender Performativity in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Hunger Games*" (2015) offers an accurate and detailed account into the application of Butler's Gender Performativity in a literary text. This paper explores gender and sexuality performances in both dystopian works, as well as the main protagonist's effort in challenging heteronormativity that is present within the world they live in. Sadegh Ahmadi, Hossein Aliakbari Harehdasht, and Ehsan Karaminejad's paper on "Gender and Performativity in Contemporary American Novel: A Butlerian reading of *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn." (2019) is another exemplary work that applies Gender Performativity in the novel *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn. Another notable work that applies Gender Performativity in a literary work is a journal article written by Bakhtiar Sadjadi and Sirwe Hojabri entitled "Gender, Performativity, and Agency in Virginia Woolf: A Butlerian Reading of *Orlando*" (2019). This article ventures on the notion of gender, performativity, and agency that are demonstrated on Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*.

In addition, Ragillia Harnum Sari's work entitled "The Struggle of Female-to-Male Transgender in Wrabel's *The Village* (2017) Music Video" (2019), marks the way in which the theory can be applied in audiovisual media. In her paper, she demonstrates how gender performativity portrayed in the music video with the assistance of John Fiske's Television Codes concept. Similarly, Hifa Leliyana (2018) thesis on "The Representation of Gender performativity on Einar Wegener/Lili Elbe, A character in *The Danish Girl* (2015) Film" analyzes the narrative and non-narrative aspects in the movie that demonstrate gender performativity on the character.

All the findings of these studies complement Butler's claim regarding the performative nature of gender. In a similar manner, the researchers demonstrate how the character(s) in the object of their studies display their gender in a conflicting fashion than what it is deemed acceptable by the society. Therefore, these studies are further confirming gender as manifested by an act of performance rather than an innate quality. Similarly, this study will elaborate on the way Amanda Hardy defies the societal expectation regarding gender norms by applying Butler's gender performativity theory in the novel *If I Was Your Girl*.

Another study that discuss transgender issue in young adult literature can be seen in Elisa Koesnanto's thesis entitled "The Portrayal of Transgender Self-Image in Julie Anne Peters' *Luna*" (2016). Her thesis explores the self-image formation of a transgender character in the novel through a psychoanalysis perspective. From the analysis, she finds that the character's failure on the phallic and genital stage on the psychosexual development stage cause the character to go

through gender disorder, which in effect, influence the main character's self image and triggers his anti-social behavior. Unfortunately, her analysis does not address the issue of gender formation in the society and it's effect to the character.

As we can see, there is still very limited studies on the discussion of gender performativity in young adult literature, especially one that centers on transgender issues. *If I Was Your Girl* is one of the very first Young Adult novel that bring up transgender experience with transgender main character. The novel presents the reader with a thoughtful representation of the difficulties and struggles that come with being transgender, especially for adolescents. That is why the writer considers this novel significant to be researched as it will gain understanding on the complexity of gender operation in the society and how it is affecting non-conformist individual like Amanda.

Based on what has been already explained above, this study seeks to fulfill the research gap in the lack of studies conducted on *If I Was Your Girl* using queer criticism approach. In this research, the writer focuses the analysis on Amanda's gender performances through her repeated actions, gestures, and other behavior she performed throughout the novel and the negotiation of her gender expression in a heteronormative society by using Judith Butler theory of gender performativity as the main theoretical framework.

1.2. Statement of the Problems

Based on the background of the study, the writer generates the statement of the problems that this research tries to answer, in which those are:

1. How does Amanda's gender performativity portrayed and how society reacts towards Amanda's gender performativity in the novel?
2. How does Amanda negotiate gender performativity with the heteronormative norms within the society?

1.3. Objective of the Study

Based on the statement of the problem proposed, the objective of the study that the writer tries to achieve can be described as follow:

1. To identify Amanda's gender performativity and reveal how the society reacts towards Amanda's gender performativity in the novel.
2. To discover the way in which Amanda tries to negotiate gender performativity with the heteronormative norms in he novel.

1.4. Significance of the Study

Hopefully, this research will provide the reader with helpful information regarding gender performativity and how it represented by Amanda as a male to female transgender character in the novel *If I Was Your Girl*. Aside from that the writer also wishes this research will give the reader a new perspective in understanding queer issues in a literary work and help them appreciate the history and literary production of transgender people or the LGBTQ community at large.

In a wider scale the writer it is also expected from this study that it will give more knowledge and foster more awareness of the oppression and marginalization the transgender community or the LGBTQ people in general have been subjected to by the society, which hopefully will lead to a community that provides much needed safe space where they can be themselves without fear of rejection.

Furthermore, there is still an ever-present need of study within Young Adult literature with its broad genre that brings to front various major issues that play an important part in an adolescent's lives. Hopefully, by conducting this research the reader of the novel will be able to empathize with the individuals within the novel. And for those who find themselves identify with Amanda as a character will find comfort to know that they are not alone in their situation.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

Gender Performativity: the act of repeating, citing, imitating a set of behaviour or conduct to become a particular gender (Butler 1993)

Heteronormativity : the social attitude which defines gender as a binary category and naturalized sexual attraction as directed to the oppositional gender (Hofstatter dan Torsten 2011).

Queer : a descriptive term used nowadays in popular and even scholarly usage for non-normative sexuality and gender minority categories. Frequently serves as an easier quicker

way of saying LGBTI (lesbian, gay, transgender, intersex)
(Beasley 2005).

Transgender : definition of a person whose sex assigned at birth does not resemble their gender expression or gender identity. The term covers various range of gender identities such as transsexuals, masculine women, feminine men, and others who chose to identify their gender differently from that assigned to them at birth (Newfield et al. 2007).

Transsexual : a transgender person who seeks to change their bodily sex, through surgical or hormonal injection means (Beasley 2005)