

# AMBIGUITY OF GENDER IDENTITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *TWELFTHNIGHT*

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## **Abstrak**

*Gender sering diidentikkan dengan jenis kelamin atau seks, meskipun mempunyai konsep yang berbeda. Gender dikaitkan pada laki-laki dan perempuan yang dibentuk oleh sosial maupun budaya. Pemahaman tentang wacana maskulin dan feminim dibentuk untuk mengidentifikasi identitas gender yang mana laki-laki harus berperilaku maskulin dan perempuan harus berperilaku feminim. Dengan memilih drama William Shakespeare berjudul Twelfth Night, kajian ini bertujuan untuk melihat bagaimana identitas gender digambarkan dan mendeskripsikan ambiguitas identitas gender yang ditunjukkan oleh tokoh dalam drama tersebut. Data diambil dari drama yang dianalisis dengan menghubungkannya pada data kedua dari berbagai referensi yang membahas identitas gender yang digambarkan dalam drama tersebut. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa seks, gender, dan orientasi seksual adalah sesuatu yang cair, tidak alami dan selalu berubah dan dikonstruksi oleh kondisi sosial. Perubahan identitas bisa dikatakan berubah dengan bentuk performativity yang ditampilkan yakni dengan penyamaran*

**Kata Kunci:** *Identitas Gender, Ambiguitas, dan Performativitas*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Gender is the nature and behaviour that is always associated with men and women who are socially and culturally formed. Men and women are sexually different, as well as behaviour and mentality. But its role in society can be aligned with certain limitations. Gender also refers to the socially determined roles, responsibilities, and character women and men in a given culture. The socialization can happen at home, school, media, and others.

Understanding of gender is defined as rules or norms of behaviour related to gender in a community system, because gender is often identified with sex and gender. Even though these two types of words are actually sex and gender have different concepts. Sex refers to an individual's membership in one of two biologically distinct categories, namely male or female. Meanwhile, gender refers to the physical, behavioural, and personality traits that

a group considers normal for its male and female members.

Butler mentions in his book that how we think and talk about gender and sex, is always based on social and cultural configuration. In a heteronormative view, we are bound by masculine and feminine discourses that have been formed before. For example, women must behave feminine and men must behave masculine, women must like men and vice versa (Butler, 1990). Social and cultural has formed an understanding about masculine and feminine. It can be seen by the performativity and behaviour. So that society notice that a man should be masculine and a woman should be feminine.

Based on the above understanding, this paper will try to analyze one of William Shakespeare's works entitled *Twelfth Night*. This play is one of Shakespeare's masterpiece. It is a comedy play written about 1602 and printed in 1623. This play tells about disguising the main

character for certain reasons. Disguise or identity forgery formed by social construction in this play becomes an interesting matter to be studied in relation to the gender identities that are formed. Disguise as a form of gender identity is the main thing in the analysis of this play and is associated with other gender issues, such as sexual identity.

There are several reasons of in choosing this topic to be analyzed. First, gender is an important issue that cannot be separated from everyday life. There are many gender problems that can be studied. In this case, the issue of gender identity will be analysed. According to the authors the issue of gender identity is an interesting fundamental thing to discuss. Second, Shakespeare is a great author in the world of literature. He has many worldwide works with a variety of issues that are displayed. Therefore, Shakespeare's works is felicitous to be analyzed. Third, *Twelfth Night* is one of Shakespeare's masterpiece works. Discussing about gender and sex, this play is very appropriate to be studied. This is because there is an ambiguity in the formation of gender identity in this play which is characterized by the existence of a disguise. These reasons make questions about gender identity that is not formed accordance with heteronormativity norms.

#### **a. Problem Formulation**

According to the background, gender identity is the main topic that will be examined in this paper. The gender displayed by the characters seem ambiguity. The ambiguity of gender identity displayed from several characters in the story becomes a problem that will be discussed. Therefore, the problem formulations in this study are:

1. How is gender identity displayed in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*?
2. Why does gender identity seem ambiguous in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*?

#### **b. Review on Related Studies**

In this study there are three references relating to the material object of this research. *Twelfth Night* research is found in three journals with different titles, but analyses the drama with the same perspective, namely gender or feminism. The first journal titled *Gender Trouble in Twelfth Night* by Charles (1997). In this paper, the author focuses on sexual identity and homoerotic or homosexual representation in *Twelfth Night*. While the second journal entitled *Romance and Gender Positions in Twelfth Night* by Jastrem (1999). The story of the collaboration between the characters in this drama and the position of gender identity are the main focus of the study contained in this journal.

The third journal, entitled *Writing Women, Writing Max: Metaphors of Impression-Possibilities of Agency in Shakespeare's Rape of Lucrece and Twelfth Night*, is written by Maxwell (2016). In this paper, the author conclude explains that by extension, the same is true of male-female interaction, even if female vulnerability is made material and imagined as intrinsic although such forceful encounters might be a daily part of life, Shakespeare's passage reminds us that he frequency of an act does not affect its morality by specifying that the "weak" are "opposed" in exchange. Since the trope of the counterfeit inserts questions of value into discussion of impression, it implies that class difference may work like gender difference and offer a basis for forceful impression. The sun is the most often gendered male (as counterpart to the female moon or mother earth) and flowers

are strongly gendered female in other Shakespeare texts (only women get deflowered). By mapping both of these positions onto women, Shakespeare is further destabilizing the claims of gender difference offered by the signet-seal trope and once again suggesting that Lucrece has agency in her encounter with the maid and that she plays the marble to her maid's wax. The maid unaware of the events that have transpired, cannot authentically copy Lucrece's sorrow. No amount of knowledge would enable her to be genuine copy, she cannot ever be Lucrece or feel Lucrece's pain-yet she can choose to put on "sorrow's livery" in order to declare her allegiance to Lucrece, and she can create for herself imagined sorrows of a magnitude sufficient to threaten her selfhood since sympathy promises violence to the gentle sex who drown their eyes and break their hearts over other's sorrows.

These journals are used as reference material for the authors in analysing this research. Although there are several things in common with the material of analysis with the journal above, but the focus of researchers in examining gender identity seen from the point of view of performativity or disguise becomes something different from previous research.

### **c. Theoretical Framework**

Butler (1990) said in her book entitled *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* that how we can talk about sex and gender, it always according to configuration of social and culture. It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical

conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/ cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. Butler, (1990) On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant "culture" that "constructs" gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny.

Identity is a premise nor that the shape or meaning of a coalitional assemblage can be known prior to its achievement. Because the articulation of an identity within available cultural terms instates a definition that forecloses in advance the emergence of new identity concepts in and through politically engaged actions, the foundationalist tactic cannot take the transformation or expansion of existing identity concepts as a normative goal. It would be wrong to think that the discussion of "identity" ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that "persons" only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility. Sociological discussions have conventionally sought to understand the notion of the person in terms of an agency that claims ontological priority to the various roles

and functions through which it assumes social visibility and meaning. Within philosophical discourse itself, the notion of “the person” has received analytic elaboration on the assumption that whatever social context the person is “in” remains somehow externally related to the definitional structure of personhood, be that consciousness, the capacity for language, or moral deliberation. Although that literature is not examined here, one premise of such inquiries is the focus of critical exploration and inversion (Butler, 1990).

Taking from Simone De Beauvoir's thesis: "One not born, but rather become, a woman", Judith Butler emphasizes that subjects are always subject in process. Butler considered that the feminist view had previously focused on alignment between men and women, which assumed a pre-existing subject. This assumption decreases the view that a woman must be able to realize that her identity is a construction of society, and this awareness makes her return to her original subject, after successfully breaking away from the social construction in which she is located. According to Butler, that is different. The subject in Butler's mind is the actor who plays his role (perform their identity) on the stage. While identity itself is a series of processes that will never end (Butler, 1990).

For Butler, an identity has no origin, and has no an end. Subject identity is seen from each performative action, but it cannot be said that this action follows its predecessor, or there is always an actor. Because an identity does not have a beginning or an end, then for Butler a gender cannot be based on a person's biological entity. The only basis for the entity, gender and sexuality is action. Because action is always changing, identity is always changing. The

subject is never a final identity, but always in process (Butler, 1990).

Butler's notion of 'performativity' is most famously associated with the views on gender and is important for critical legal thinkers because performativity is deeply entangled with politics and legality. Her focus on performance and performativity enable discussants to move beyond analyses of legal definition or status to consider the political and social discursive forces that construct and normalize legal or political practice. For Butler, performativity is not solely an extension of discourse theory as her later works suggest bodies “speak” without necessarily uttering. This brief review will provide an abbreviated history on the conceptual genesis of the term “performativity,” how Butler (re)defines and employs it, and finally how Butler's account may be useful for critical legal thinking.

Identity is always related to the marking process, this has been regulated by a law that applies universally. When said subject is the result of construction, it means that the subject is the result of these rules. In other words, the subject is not only limited by discourse and social culture, but is shaped by culture. Embedded and scattered rules through this repetition process have been available, and the work directly limits and shapes one's identity. This rule has been automatically formed in the reference to the gender hierarchy and requires a heterosexuality lifestyle (Butler, 1990).

In the heterosexuality paradigm, gender comes first and determines human actions. How someone speaks, walks, thinks and how someone loves, has been arranged from the start by gender. However, in the queer theory paradigm, which is in line with Judith Butler's thoughts,

gender or sexual identity is present later after individuals perform performative actions. The essence of Butler's thinking is the absence of natural conditions for humans other than the appearance of his body. Sex, gender, and sexual orientation are social constructions (Butler, 1990).

#### **d. Research Method**

The method can be interpreted as a work to understand the object that is the target of the study. Because literary work is an aesthetic fact that has its own characteristics, the method used to approach it is also different. The method in literary studies has its own scientific size which is determined by its characteristics as a system, namely the literary system. In literature research, the selection of methods is closely related to the characteristics, objects of research, problems and research objectives (Chamamah-Soeratno, 1994). The following will describe the research method and method of analysis.

The method used in this study is qualitative descriptive. Qualitative methods are used because of several considerations. First, adjusting the qualitative method is easier when dealing with reality. Second, this method presents directly the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the respondent. Furthermore, third, this method is more sensitive and more adaptable to the many sharpening of shared influences and to the patterns of value faced.

#### **e. Data Collection Techniques**

The author collects data by collecting data related to gender identity in the work itself. These data are divided into two parts, namely primary data and secondary data. The primary data of this study is in *Twelfth Night* created by William Shakespeare. While secondary data is a

collection of data outside the drama/play, such as books, journals, essays and others related to the object of research.

#### **f. Analysis Method**

Data analysis methods are basically ways to sort out, classify qualitative data so that later certain relations can be established between one data category and another. The discussion method that will be used in this research is the reading method. In this case, the text will be read in *Twelfth Night* to establish communication with it. This communication will run continuously and back and forth between the text and the reader, considering the text itself only exists when the reader reads and literature can only produce a response when read.

## **2. DISCUSSION**

*“Conceal me what I am, and be my aid for such disguise as haply shall become the form of my intent. I'll serve this duke. Thou shalt present me as a eunuch to him”*

(Shakespeare, 1960)

At the beginning of the play, Viola and the captain find them self in ashore in Illyria. Because she realizes the danger involved in being a lone woman from a foreign region, Viola decides to dress as a boy and serve duke Orsino as his page. She asks the captain to present her as a eunuch, a castrated man. This would serve as an excuse for her unusual high voice for a man. Viola shows her independence and strength in her decision to cross-dress, to act as someone she is not and will never be. Though woman were not viewed as strong, especially those of lower status, Viola displays the idea that gender itself does not make anyone more or less powerful.

Ambiguous gender identity is a problem that will be examined in this study. To find out how gender identity and why the identity is ambiguous, the writer tries to explain some

important points in accordance with the concept of Judith Butler's thought which became the theoretical basis for this research. This can be seen through the subjectivity and identity displayed in the story, then performativity and gender and sexual identity itself.

#### a. Identity and Subjektivitiy

Identity according to Jenkins (2008) is the capacity of human to ask questions about 'who' and 'what' and are attached to every action taken by an individual. Identity is closely related to subjectivity in every individual or character in fiction. The concepts of subjectivity and identity are closely related and virtually inseparable. Subjectivity refers to the condition of being a person and the process of being personal, that is how the subject is formed. Identity is expressed through various forms of representation that can be recognized by others and yourself.

Identity is an important issue in *Twelfth Night*. This is because the identity in this play is displayed unusual, that is, the identity becomes ambiguous. Ambiguity of identity is shown by the character in this play. Besides that, Identity ambiguity is also related to gender issues. Gender in this can be seen by how the character show themselves. For instance, a female character becomes a male character in this play. This can be seen from Viola as a young woman who plays the role of being a man, Cesario. In accordance with Butler's thought, this case is natural. According to Butler (1990), identity cannot be based on biological entities, that a man must always be masculine and vice versa. Because according to Butler, a person's identity is not based on sex or a birth, but rather as a response to restrictions such as the prohibition of incest and the prohibition of homosexuality. Therefore, identity is formed by performative

action and the action is always changing, identity also changes where performative action is shaped by cultural construction.

Based on the explanation above, Viola is as a subject and plays the role of identity as a woman experiencing identity blurring. She, a woman character, formed a new identity as a Cesario. The new identity is displayed by performative actions that is shown by Viola. Besides that, it is also due to cultural construction. The cultural construction that is the cause is the situation and condition of Viola who is stranded in a new area, Illyria, and forms a new identity that is different from the gender that should be. As in the following quote:

**Viola** : *There is a fair behaviour in the thee, Captain; and though that nature with a beauteous all Doth oft close in pollution, yet of thee. I will believe thou hast a mind that suits With this thy fair and outward character. I prithee, and I will pay thee bounteously, Conceal me what I am, and be my aid For such disguise as haply shall become the form of my intent. I'll serve this Duke; Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him; It may be worth thy pains, for I can sing And speak to him in many sorts of music, That will allow me very worth his service. What else may hap to time I will commit; Only shape thou thy silence to my wit.*

**Captain** : *Be you his eunuch and your mute I'll be; When my tongue blabs, then let mine eyes not see.*

**Viola** : *I thank thee. Lead me on*  
(Shakespeare, 1960)

The dialogue above shows how a new identity is created by Viola who becomes Cesario. Disguising is one of the ways that is done by the character in the play to form a new identity, in this case, Viola becomes Cesario. It is practiced by main character in *Twelfth Night* because of certain reasons. Cross-gender identity is caused by social construction as seen in Viola's reason. The reason is to survive in new environment so she forms new identity as a

eunuch for Orsino. It will facilitate her to survive by disguising in new identity.

One of the central motifs in this play is identity and mistaken identity. Identity has a double sense. On the one hand, identity differentiates one thing from another noting the individuality of each. On the other hand, identity also implies likeness or resemblance. When we say two things are identical, we usually mean they are exactly the same, like identical twins. And this tension between likeness and difference generates much of the action in the comic and romantic plots. Both plots depend on Viola and Sebastian being identical in appearance, yet two different people.

Shakespeare's genius for playing with words and his ability to reveal the tenuous connection between words and the things they represent is both astounding and unsettling. His ability to reveal the unstable nature of identity itself, however, is profoundly disturbing. All the character in this play are either taken in by another character's disguise or perpetrate a deception regarding their own identity.

#### **b. Performativity**

The concept of performativity developed by Butler focuses the agency of words. Subjects performing are challenging the subject / object dichotomy. So, Butler does not eliminate the world. Subject, he widened the (what) capable of performing in influencing the world. Subjects' are not formed by culture, but subjects are formed and can only be formed from a series of repeated actions. In this case, Butler focused more on his theoretical studies on the psychological aspects of human beings who were the subjects formed by power rather than the material aspects of the body (Butler, 1990).

Performativity action is a form and part of the effort in creating identity. In this case it can be seen from the performance of Cesario as a man assigned to seduce Olivia. Original identity as a woman requires Olivia to perform performativity, namely disguise. Disguise with the aim of forming a new identity is used as a tool to launch Orsino's desire to have Olivia. As in the quote below,

**Duke** : *Dear lad, believe it; For they shall yet belie thy happy years, That say thou art a man. Diana's lip is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound; And all is semblative a woman's part I know thy constellation is right apt For this affair. Some four of five attend him, All, if you will; for I my self am best Hen least in company. Prosper II in this, And thou shalt live as freely as thy lord, To call his fortunes thine.*

**Viola** : *I'll do my best To oo your lady; yet, a barful strife! whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife.*

(Shakespeare, 1960)

Disguising is an important thing in this play. In addition to the above reasons, disguising as an ambiguous and new form of identity becomes a problem in the story. By disguising, Viola who was supposed to be an intermediary for the love story between Olivia and Orsino but Olivia just put a love for Viola. In this case the writer suspects that Shakespeare as the play writer deliberately plays the role of Olivia into a character who experiences sexual identity towards same-sex. This is because Olivia loves Cesario through body shape and gentleness of a Cesario. It is suspected also because Olivia never asked to determine whether Cesario was male or female. Olivia as if easily loves Cesario in the performance shown that is by having a soft physical like a woman. After Viola realized that, he condemned the disguise of the new identity he created.

**c. Gender Identity and Sex Identity**

Another level of identity confusion in *Twelfth Night* is gender identity. Viola embodies this confusion when she assumes the identity of a boy, Cesario. Of course, in Shakespeare's time all female roles were played by boys, so in this case a boy actor plays a woman character (Viola) who dissembles herself as a boy (Cesario). In a patriarchal culture, sexual difference is held to be an immutable law, traditional gender role behaviour was based on a natural biological fact rather than social convention. The indeterminacy of Viola/Cesario's sexual identity would show that maleness and femaleness were just aspects of a role, qualities that are learned, not immutable physical traits. When Cesario and Sir Andrew face each other in a duel, it is revealed that both are dissembling the role of being a man. The biological fact of Andrew's maleness is superfluous.

This study analyses gender identity constructed by performative actions of characters in the play. This analysis focuses on the main character in *Twelfth Night*. Viola who is also Cesario is a character who experiences an ambiguity in gender identity. Viola has two identities with two characters between Cesario as male and Viola as female. A new identity as Cesario is a manifestation of the identity ambiguity displayed. Both identities will be explained as follows:

**1). Viola as Herself**

Viola is a young woman. She was told at the beginning of this play that a grieving woman would lose her twin brother, Sebastian. He was stranded in a foreign area, Illyria, and had to survive. Not much is shown by Shakespeare about the identity of Viola than after becoming the figure of Cesario. However, Viola as a

woman is quite intelligent and compassionate. This can be seen when Orsino stories and entrusts him to help seduce Olivia. As in the following quote,

**Duke** : *What dost thou know?*

**Viola** : *Too well what love omen to men may owe. In faith, they are as true of heart as we. My father had a daughter loved a man, As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman. I should your lordship*

**Duke** : *And what's her history?*

**Viola** : *A blank, my lord. She never told her love. But let concealment, like a worm I' the bud, feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought, and with a green and yellow melancholy. She sat like patience on a monument, smiling at a brief. Was not this love indeed? We men may say more, swear more; but indeed. Our shows are more than will; for still we prove. Much in our vows, but little in our love.*

(Shakespeare, 1960)

In the above conversation it can be seen that Olivia feels finding herself in a good situation. She can tell with identity as Cesario but the true story of what she felt to Orsino. Although she loved Orsino, she did not directly and openly show her affection. She only subtly hints at her feelings, mixing a woman's identity with an ambiguous appearance of identity and vague masculinity. The language used in ambiguous gender identities shows that man and woman who have equal identities and are therefore exchanged.

**2). Viola as Cesario (Disguising)**

Disguising that made by Viola into Cesario are heteronormative assumptions. According to Butler, in a heteronormative view, we are within the scope of discourse between masculine and feminine. Heteronormative assumptions have been followed in identity, gender and sex. This is like in *Twelfth Night*, Viola disguised as a man, Cesario. This disguise is a new identity that is created and becomes ambiguous in the formation of gender identity and sexual identity.

Sexual identity or sexual desire is also displayed in a different form in *Twelfth Night*. Homosexuals are shown in drama directly or indirectly. Sexual desire for same-sex is shown directly through Antonio's character. He loves Sebastian, the young man he helped after a ship accident.

**Antonio** : *Pardon me, sir, your bad entertainment.*  
**Sebastian** : *O good Antonio, forgive me your trouble.*  
**Antonio** : *If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant.*  
**Sebastian** : *If you will not undo hat you have done, that is, kill him hom you have rcovered, desire is not.*  
 (Shakespeare, 1960)

The dialogue above shows how Antonio adores and loves Sebastian. He needs Sebastian's love and even Sebastian cannot accept his love, he wants to be a servant for Sebastian provided he can always close to Sebastian. It proves that sexual desire is shown by character of Antonio in this play.

Meanwhile, homosexuality is shown indirectly can be seen from the way Olivia loves, though, Cesario. It was suspected by the arena as if Olivia loved Cesario because she had a soft and smooth face and body like a woman. Physical appearance is one of the reasons someone likes another character in this play. Lovers like Olivia, Orsino and Antonio build fantasies that change the object of their affection into something more than them, thus disrupting the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality and unconsciousness through the performance of imaginary functions.

*"One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons – A natural perspective that is and is not"*  
 (Shakespeare, 1960)

At the closing of *Twelfth Night*, Sebastian finally appears in Illyria alongside his twin sister. At this point, Orsino and Olivia become

aware of the gender trouble that has been present throughout the tale. Orsino notes the striking similarities between Viola and her brother and suggests that the only difference apparent is their sexes. He notes that they look, sound, and dress the same yet are not because Viola is really female. This is a crucial line in the last act of the play because it pulls together the overacting theme that, although it is often seen as more, gender is merely a label. Though society contrarily recognizes vast divergences among men and women, Shakespeare points out the even more plentiful likenesses. In doing so throughout *Twelfth Night*, he speaks to readers and viewers alike about the ambiguity of gender as well as the strict societal constructs of male and female.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The conclusion that can be drawn from the results of the analysis above is that sex, gender and sexual orientation are something that is fluid, not natural and changing and constructed by social conditions. So, taken from Judith Butler's thought that homosexuality is not a sexual deviation but a variation in human identity based on performative action. Olivia is suspected of having a homosexual side by loving Cesario with all forms of femininity displayed seen from performativity in disguise. However, with the emergence of Sebastian, the form of a man from Viola, love or sexuality Olivia can turn into heterosexual or normal. Likewise, with the identity displayed in the story. Viola's identity disguised as Cesario.

Changes in identity can be said to change with the form performativity shown, namely by disguise. Viola experienced an error or ambiguity in gender identity and eventually

became herself at the end of the story by marrying Orsino. So, newly created identities eventually melt along with time. However, Shakespeare has succeeded in displaying an ambiguous gender identity in one of its best works.

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