

Salasika

INDONESIAN JOURNAL OF GENDER, WOMEN,
CHILD, AND SOCIAL INCLUSION'S STUDIES



**VOL. 4
NO. 1**

**JULY
2021**

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The Inherent Link between Gender and Sexuality: A Queer View to the Portrayal of Women in *Herland*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Bombay Brides*, and *The Winner Stands Alone*

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ABSTRACT

Gender and sexuality are the two most complexly designed, culturally constructed, and ambiguously interrelated terms used within the spectrum of feminism that considers “sex” as an operative term to theorize its deconstructive cultural perspectives. Helene Cixous (2008) has noted in *Laugh of Medusa* that men and women enter the symbolic order differently and the subject position open to either sex is different. The body is just a word (Butler, 1990) that is strategically used under artificial rules for the convenience of “power” to operate. It has been a “norm” to connect one's sexuality with gender and establish that as a “naturally built” conception. The dichotomy of ‘penis/vagina’ over years has linked itself to male/female understanding of bodies. Therefore, the main argument in this paper is to draw few instances from some literary works, which have reflected how female/women characters are made to couple up with male/man characters. Those works, including Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), *Bombay Brides* (2018) by Esther David, Paulo Coelho's *Winner Stands Alone* (2008) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall apart* (1958), present the inherent, coherent compulsory relation between one's gender and sexuality, obliterating any possibility of “queer” relationships.

KEYWORDS: *body, gender, inherent link, phallogocentric society, sexuality.*

INTRODUCTION

Gender and Sexuality are not “inherently related” concepts. What is referred to by “sexuality” in this paper is the assumption that everyone is “naturally” heterosexual. The remaining sexualities are not even considered as designations to be included while identifying human beings. Though one's “sexuality” should not become a part of one's identity, it is considered one of the most important parts. Gender is a complex operative spectrum in a

society that functions in accordance with the numerous power dynamics operating with a hunger for establishing themselves, of which patriarchy and feminism are the two powers that deal intensively with gender. If patriarchy is regarded as a constantly mutating drug resisting virus, then feminism is an antidote to it.

Gender is nothing but “a set of rules” according to which bodies are defined and categorized under various headings (men/women/

LGBTQ/dalits/sex workers, etc). Bodies are to meet this expectation, otherwise, if they deviate from this mainstream, they are regarded as “disordered” bodies. This “set of rules” are nothing but a product of an endless practice which in turn makes them “natural”. Stevie Jackson and Jackie Jones have suggested in their article, *Contemporary Feminist Theory*, that “The concepts of gender and sexuality is a highly ambiguous term, as a point of reference” (Jackson, 1998, p. 131). Helene Cixous (2008) has proposed in *Laugh of Medusa* that men and women enter the symbolic order differently and the subject position open to either sex is different. Cixous (2008) has indicated that the center of the symbolic order is “phallus”, and everybody surrounding it stands in the periphery placing women (without intersectionality) as the victim of this phallogocentric society. Since “phallus” is regarded as the “center” in a patriarchal representation of the world, women “lack” it and, hence, are often regarded as ‘castrated’ or are marginalized as the “others”.

Patriarchy has molded ‘culture’ in such a way that every product of this ‘culture’, society and bodies inhabiting it, has been victimized under the strategic binarization of “this/that”. The reason to put “inherent” in quotes is only to make clear and emphasize the fact that the link between gender and sexuality is not natural. The literary texts used in this paper show the “hard work” of the authors to objectify, identify, and define the identity of “women” and the establishment of admirable heterosexuality. The theory used to analyze the stated texts is only an attempt to view them from a little

bit “queer” perspective, an effort to present how beautiful they would have been without the monochromatic shades of heteronormativity.

METHODS

This paper employed literature review as an overview of the previously published works on a specific topic, gender and sexuality. The term can refer to a full scholarly paper or a section of a scholarly work such as a book or an article. Either way, a literature review is supposed to provide the researcher and the audience with a general image of the existing knowledge on the topic in question. A good literature review can ensure that a proper research question has been asked and a proper theoretical framework and/or research methodology have been chosen. In other words, a literature review situates the current study within the body of the relevant literature and provides context for the readers. In such a case, the review usually precedes the methodology and the results sections of the work.

This literature review is a type of review article. In this sense, a literature review is a scholarly paper that presents the current knowledge including substantive findings as well as theoretical and methodological contributions to a particular topic. Literature reviews are secondary sources and do not report new or original experimental work. Most often associated with academic-oriented literature, such reviews are found in academic journals and are not to be confused with book reviews, which may also appear in the same publication.

Literature reviews are a basis for research in nearly every academic field.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

It's important to understand gender as inherently linked to one's sex, which in turn controls or states one's desire/sexuality, and that this very understanding is "natural". To say, nothing is natural. Body is just a word (Butler, 1990) that is strategically used under artificial rules for the convenience of 'power' to operate. Though Feminism started with the voices of women claiming their rights back during the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, feminism eventually views gender equality as not only associated with women but also with all oppressed and suppressed sections of societies irrespective of anything. Feminism stands for "inclusivity" that can act as a core for Gender Equality. Equality can only function if society starts including all voices that demand equal rights as humans before getting tagged by rights based on their genders. This is a time when society moves beyond identifying bodies with "natural" identities. Gender is just a word that is traveling without destination and, until we try to fix its destination, all humans can be treated equally irrespective of gender. Therefore, for a world beyond gender difference, society needs to stop marking and "demarking" human identities based on "body". Hence, it is important to focus on deconstructing the stereotypical gendered methods of scrutinizing by the assistance of gender theory so that the dehumanization of humans,

particularly, in the literary texts can be solved a bit.

Sexuality is not with whom we have sex, it determines towards whom we are sexually attracted. It has been a "norm" to connect one's sexuality with one's gender and establish that as a "naturally built" conception. The dichotomy of "penis/vagina" over years has linked itself to male/female understanding of bodies. However, sexuality becomes more complex because it draws the "desire" of a human body into consideration, and when it does so, it establishes an inherent link between sex and gender and desire. According to Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), "sex" is not "natural"; sex (male/female) is seen to cause gender (masculine-men/ feminine-woman) that is then seen as a kind of continuum. Butler has emphasized the fact that identity is free-floating and not connected to one's "essence rather performance". Mary McIntosh, in her article *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, has said, "The way forward, instead, involves recognizing that gender attributes are performative rather than expressive" (McIntosh, 1991, p. 114). Desire or sexuality then becomes "free-floating" and not connected to one's gender/sex. The problem arises when society determines the connectivity and tries to establish the coherence between sex/gender/desire by presenting a human body with "vagina" as a "woman" who "desires" a man confirming the heterosexuality and following it as the "ideal norm". Perhaps this "ideal norm" makes any "body" trying to deviate from the "legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality" (Foucault, 1976, p. 38), a victim of patriarchy. In

support to this, Michel Foucault has said in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) that "The legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality, had more right to discretion. It tended to function as a norm, one that was stricter, perhaps but quieter" (Foucault, 1976, p. 38). Butler has deconstructed this inherent connection and the "compulsory order" of sex/gender/desire by stating that it is not sex that leads to gender and desire. Further, Butler explains that it is the "mis-pre-understanding" originating from one's "normative" desire. It means that heterosexuality is a "norm", so a "man" has to have a "natural" phallus stating that it is a desire that leads to gender leading to sex. About this, he has commented that "If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (Butler, 1990, pp. 9-10).

It is important to realize that gender and sexuality are not "natural" because it is not compulsory for a person to "feel" as a woman to be sexually attracted towards a male as the following literary texts have attempted to show. Though the "feeling" as a woman is obliterated in the texts, only women who adhere to the social definition of what a "woman" should be are exhibited. Mandatory pairings of male with female and female with male source out of the accepted strategic division and the definition of what "woman" and "man" is and moves towards the creation of "ideal pairings". Patriarchy defines "women" as only

those with "vaginas" and the "intersectionality" completely essentialized for "identity" is only defined in a parameter to "body" and "sex". This, over years of "cultural practice" has resulted in being "natural" and it is important to understand the intersectionality of the term "woman" that has been essentialized by our "benevolent patriarchal" world. The identity of a "woman" is trapped in the supposed links between "sex" and "gender" to be inherently related and "culturally" bound. The concept of "women", as defined by Butler, is that "women are the sex which is not "one". Within a phallogocentric language, women constitute the unrepresentable. Women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity (Butler, 1990, p. 13). Because women are "marked", society project the plight of "women" and restrictions imposed upon them. Simone De Beauvoir has stated in *The Second Sex* (1949) that men are considered universal, so they are left unmarked while women become "women" because they are marked, restricted and norms are imposed upon them.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Reflecting on certain instances, I would start with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) describing how "sex" and "gender" are essentialized in "women" and how bodies with a vagina are generalized to have similar experiences in terms of identity, desire. It seeks to address the question of how the 'body' is identified with "symbols", how the definition of feminism in this novel is nothing but an embodied patriarchy, how the queer aspect is

completely obliterated, how “parthenogenesis” is implemented to adhere woman and their body to be worshipped as “virgins”, how motherhood supposedly ‘completes’ a woman, how seclusion is “un-utopic”, how heteronormativity is presented by introducing men into woman's land, and how Gilman discards the importance of treating women as human beings. In the novel, *Herland*, Gilman presents an isolated society of women who reproduces via parthenogenesis (asexual reproduction). The result is a perfect social order characterized by peace, freedom from war, conflict, and domination. Further, when delving deep, Gilman also attempts to show what her novel constitutes, a world comprising bodies that are defined as “woman”, nurtured and established as an accepted identity of what a ‘woman’ is. Gilman fails to realize that the bodies depicted in *Herland* are the product of her imagination in which Gilman tries to put hues of reality including a tone of sadness and words whose meanings can and always change and evolve, like the word “body”. One can never definitively “grasp” the exact, correct definition of any “body”. Judith Butler has argued in *Gender Trouble* (1990) about the “metaphysics of substance” in which she writes about the definition of “self” and quotes from one of the critiques of “metaphysics of substance”, Michel Haar, stating that “self” is the very “notion of psychological person as a substantive thing” (Haar, as cited in Butler, 1990, p. 29). Further, Butler, to emphasize the fact that body is just a “word”, quotes “...The subject, the self, the individual, are just so many false concepts, since they transform into substances fictitious

unities having at the start only a linguistic reality” (Haar, as cited in Butler, 1990, p. 29).

Gilman’s attempt to describe what a woman is and how they should be treated in the society from where the ‘three men’ come makes *Herland* “naturally patriarchal” and not “natural”. In *Herland*, patriarchy (chaste, virgin, ultimate mothers) is imposed on women with a minute shift in activities and appearances in respect to men. Gilman forgets that any “body” trying to deviate from the “legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality” (Foucault, 1976, p. 38) is a victim of patriarchy. Perhaps Gilman’s *Herland* aims to create such “ideal” pairings of “male” and “female” where the women consider sex as only an “ideal” process to have a “child”, not for “pleasure”, and as something they do not discuss much (as portrayed at the end of the novel). It then makes the novel adhere to what Michel Foucault has said in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) that “The legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality, had more right to discretion. It tended to function as a norm, one that was stricter, perhaps but quieter” (Foucault, 1976, p. 38). Gilman may also move within the vicious circle of patriarchy when she obliterates the queer aspect and ignores any possible lesbian relationship in her *Herland* by establishing only the two possible aspects of this “woman-land”, “mother-love” and “sister-love” (Gilman, 2015, p. 76). She tries to cover up that “woman” can also be sexually attracted to another “woman”. We can refer to Adrienne Rich’s essay (1980), *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, where she mentions how lesbians are obliterated from literature and even

from the mainstream feminist movement. She argues that society has made heterosexuality "natural" so that it can be used as a violent political device to render women in a subordinate situation. Women are psychologically conditioned to think that they need to get a man to be sexually satisfied. They are restricted from enjoying the comfort of their own body with the same-sex body. Lesbian motherhood is presented as inappropriate and this forces women to accept heterosexuality as "natural" and obligatory and, thereby, fails to understand that female sexual bonding is the only way that women can experience women's identification.

Thus, Gilman's "feminism" excludes, assumes, and works towards establishing heteronormativity. She fails to individualize her "feminist text" by generalizing "men" as a source of evil fumbling at the threshold of patriarchy as she considers only one gender as the victim of patriarchy, and not the 'other genders', rather than maintaining the compulsory link of male and female bond.

Esther David's book, *Bombay Brides* (2018,) reveals how this "mandatory" coupling of a female/woman with a male/man is needed. All the characters and partners, particularly women, only delve into the complex web of marriage, motherhood, wifeness, family, and sacrifices of "self-hood". Meanwhile, the "men" are very much adulterous, prone to domestic violence justifying their behavior under the pretext of "situations" and as the "center" of all. The women are mostly introduced and presented in terms of "beauty", particularly bodily features, and are considered

to be "valued". Take for example the relationship between Joseph and Flora who get married to each other due to their beauty. Joseph immediately starts an affair with another woman when Flora gets pregnant and begins to gain weight. Similarly, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) also describes such prevalent male dominance and promiscuous relationships of males and "pregnancy" becomes the time for men to have another affair. David presents a particular culture of Bombay and Allahabad, yet this compulsory connection of a female body to be in love with a male body is vibrant in her work. She shows the different relationship structures and complexities of marriage life, how relationships are molded according to religion and end with the "ideal couple" – Juliet and Rahul Romiel pairing up. However, the "norm" of women suffering remains through the plight of Juliet, who at the end comes to know about both her pregnancy and her husband's, Rahul, death as indicated by the novel, "On the fifteenth day when the conflict in Israel ended, Juliet received a message...We mourn the passing of a civilian, Rahul Romiel Abhiram, of Indian origin, aged thirty-two years" (David, 2018, p. 212). Motherhood and wifeness all crumble up along with the already crumbled selfhood for many women characters like this.

Emphasizing this "inherent" link between one's gender and sexuality, Paulo Coelho in his internationally bestselling work *The Winner Stands Alone* (2008) portrays the mandatory nature of a "woman" to be in a relationship with a "man" adhering to the maintenance of the norm of "ideal couple", man/woman. Consideration of heterosexuality as

“ideal” and “perfect” form and norm of social order and the very remaining sexualities as the derogatory ones results in this assumption that the gender “man” must have a “sexual desire” for the gender “woman”. The “naturalization” of this created “norm” gets prominently depicted in the relationship of Igor, a psychopath Russian mobile phone mogul, and Ewa, his former wife, who leaves Igor to marry another man, Hamid. Coelho’s focuses on pointing out the rise of “Superclass”, and in this process, Coelho narrates the tension within and between the characters in a twenty-four-hour period which apparently may seem to be a loosely narrated plot describing the struggles of individual characters like Igor, Ewa, Jasmine, Gabriela and an ambitious detective hoping to resolve the case of his life. However, reading between the lines, the assumed “compulsory” nature of gender and sexuality gets reflected particularly in the last part of the novel when Igor finds Ewa and Hamid and says, “You betrayed me, not just during the two years you’ve spent with this man, but during all the years we spent together” (Coelho, 2008, p. 358). We can see how great personalities have always held on to this “compulsory link”, “ideal couple”, in their literary works to make them sound unique, perhaps that stands to be ‘ironic’ enough when analyzed through the post-structuralist queer feminist perspective. The very common dialogue of the ‘hero’ and ‘heroine’, “I love you”, has always been reflected in the man/woman relation as when Ewa says to Igor, “Igor, let’s just drop the whole thing,” and she says something in Russian, “I love

you. Let's go away together” (Coelho, 2008, p. 361).

Much of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* focuses on and deals with the story of Okonkwo, his tragic self-pride, and the culture of the Igbo community, which through the protagonist Okonkwo presents the cultural flaws that demand a change but along with many appreciations if viewed as a separate culture worth of respect. Culture, being a stratified, complex operative device, has both limited and freed many strategic divisions. *Things Fall Apart* is viewed under the lens of multiculturalism, so Achebe’s portrayal of this Igbo community must be viewed as a different culture that should be studied and enjoyed, as have indeed been done by many critics. Chris Abani in an interview, published by Goyal as an article, *A Deep Humanness, a Deep Grace: Interview with Chris Abani*, with Yogita Goyal, pointed out the cultural complexities of the Igbo community, the struggles through the tragic story of Okonkwo that is much more than just a response to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Regarding this, Abani says, “Whatever Achebe might have said prompted *Things Fall Apart*, a response to Mister Johnson, or a rebuttal of *Heart of Darkness*, his novel and the subsequent struggle of Okonkwo is larger than any of that, larger than the colonial moment” (Goyal, 2014, p. 232). The essence of multiculturalism has indeed made many critics appreciate Achebe’s effort of uplifting the African culture.

Despite these glorious hues of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), women have been presented in this novel as products and victims of the “compulsory” link of gender

(women) and sexuality (their desire that has to be for a man). African culture with its diverse affinities has marked many attentions on its uniqueness. Culture and presentation of women dice each other into a complex fabricated network of tension that portrays incomplete and inaccurate female characters in early African works. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a novel that presents women with a sense of lack, dilemma, product for polygamy, the child-bearer, wife and household maid for the husband, and the children's educator. The construction of the image of women in Achebe's work is nothing more than their relation to men. The concept of "body" has been the core identity of women in the Igbo culture. Identities with which women in the Igbo culture has been defined and marked are only bodily values like comparing the men's desire for women in the Igbo culture with the desire a man has for "wrestling" because one can win, conquer and subdue the other just like a man does to a woman while consuming her body as depicted in the novel, "Okonkwo cleared his throat and moved his feet to the beat of the drums. It filled him with fire...he trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue...like the desire for women" (Achebe, 1958, p. 31). The life of Okonkwo's "wives" is a representation of the women of the Igbo community. Their only role is to look after the children and serve food to their husband as described in the novel how the mother cook and the children serve, "Okonkwo was sitting on a goatskin already eating his first wife's meal. Obiageli, who had brought it from her mother's hut..." (Achebe, 1958, p. 33). Achebe attempts to show what his novel

constitutes, a world comprising categorized and defined bodies identified and believed merely due to the assigning of the "man" and "woman" terms on them.

Achebe obliterates any possibility beyond heterosexual marriage, and this marriage grows from the childhood understanding of males with immense masculinity and females with femininity for continuing the community. Nevertheless, this marriage is very insulting for the women as they are sold in accordance to how "ripe" and "fresh" they are for marriage, whether they are able to produce, they have got their period already. When men come to see and purchase the product they want to buy, the women (product) decorate their bodies with jewelry to be attractive along with their "natural ripeness" as stated in the novel, "She was about sixteen and ripe for marriage. Her suitor and his relatives surveyed her young body with expert eyes as if to assure themselves that she was beautiful and ripe enough" (Achebe, 1958, p. 51). Marriage in the Igbo community is nothing beyond a game where women are sold as brides with bride price as the novel depicts, "Marriage should be a play...In this way, Akueke's bride-price was finally settled at twenty bags of cowries...the two parties came to this agreement" (Achebe, 1958, p. 53). Physical abuse is very common. This is obvious in what Okonkwo does to his wives, excepts for Ndulue. Hardly any man in the Igbo culture treats women in equal terms. A man finds it is "okay" to beat and abuse women because they are inferior to the superior men who can do everything. This is clearly described in the novel,

“Uzowulu is a beast. My sister lived with him for nine years. During those years no single day passed in the sky without his beating the woman...when she was pregnant he beat her until she miscarried” (Achebe, 1958, 67).

CONCLUSION

All the above texts conclude with the reflection of the “ideal pairings” without any possibility of “queer” beauties. A text can have “infinite plurality” (Fish, 1980) of meanings, and it evolves and changes as there is no particular point where the meaning of anything could be “fixed”. In addition, Wolfgang Iser (1988) regards a text to be “inexhaustible” since it can be analyzed from numerous imaginations trying to fill the gaps provided in a text. Therefore, interpreting any texts within this inexhaustible network of interpretations makes these selected literary texts like *Herland*, *Bombay Brides*, *The Winner Stands Alone* and *Things Fall Apart* reflect the “compulsory link” of gender and sexuality with no queer possibility. We can see how great personalities have always held on to this “compulsory link”, “ideal couple”, in their literary works to make them sound unique, or perhaps to be “ironic” enough when analyzed through the post-structuralist queer feminist perspective. Within this complex network of interpretations, my perspective is just a part and one among many viewpoints that creates the delicately fabricated network of 'deconstruction' in the literary field.

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ABOUT

SALASIKA etymologically derived from Javanese language meaning 'brave woman'. SALASIKA JOURNAL (SJ) is founded in July 2019 as an international open access, scholarly, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal publishing theoretically innovative and methodologically diverse research in the fields of gender studies, sexualities and feminism. Our conception of both theory and method is broad and encompassing, and we welcome contributions from scholars around the world.

SJ is inspired by the need to put into visibility the Indonesian and South East Asian women to ensure a dissemination of knowledge to a wider general audience.

SJ selects at least several outstanding articles by scholars in the early stages of a career in academic research for each issue, thereby providing support for new voices and emerging scholarship.

AUDIENCE

SJ aims to provide academic literature which is accessible across disciplines, but also to a wider 'non-academic' audience interested and engaged with social justice, ecofeminism, human rights, policy/advocacy, gender, sexualities, concepts of equality, social change, migration and social mobilisation, inter-religious and international relations and development.

There are other journals which address those topics, but SJ approaches the broad areas of gender, sexuality and feminism in an integrated fashion. It further addresses the issue of international collaboration and inclusion as existing gaps in the area of academic publishing by (a) crossing language boundaries and creating a space for publishing and (b) providing an opportunity for innovative emerging scholars to engage in the academic dialogue with established researchers.

STRUCTURE OF THE JOURNAL

All articles will be preceded by an abstract (150-200 words), keywords, main text introduction, materials and methods, results, discussion; acknowledgments; declaration of interest statement; references; appendices (as appropriate); table(s) with caption(s) (on individual pages); figures; figure captions (as a list); and a contributor biography (150 words). Word length is 4,000-10,000 words, including all previous elements.

TIMELINE AND SCHEDULE

Twice a year: February and July.

PUBLISHING AND COPYRIGHT APPROACH

All articles must not have been published or be under consideration elsewhere. We are unable to pay for permissions to publish pieces whose copyright is not held by the author. Contributors will be responsible for clearing all copyright permissions before submitting translations, illustrations or long quotes. The views expressed in papers are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the journal or its editors.

CONTENT ASSESSMENT

All articles will be peer-reviewed double-blind and will be submitted electronically to the journal (journal@salasika.org). The editors ensure that all submissions are refereed anonymously by two readers in the relevant field. In the event of widely divergent opinion during this process a third referee will be asked to comment, and the decision to publish taken on that recommendation. We expect that the editorial process will take up to four months. We will allow up to four weeks for contributors to send in revised manuscripts with corrections.



Published by:

**THE INDONESIAN ASSOCIATION OF
WOMEN/GENDER & CHILD STUDIES.**

The Centre for Gender & Child Studies
Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana (CGCS UKSW).
Jl. Diponegoro 52-60, Salatiga, 50711.



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