

# READING TRANSGENDER IN *KINKY BOOTS* AND *REALITA CINTA DAN ROCK 'N ROLL* MOVIE : BRITISH AND INDONESIAN TRANSGENDER

Sukarni Suryaningsih

## ABSTRACT

Gender as a social construction upon sexes, according to Judith Butler, is a performative act, there is no distinction between normal and abnormal as it is part of performance. As part of minority groups, the social construction about transgender is often in poor perspective. They are seen as funny characters who become stock of joke and attract cynical expression since they behaves abnormally. Though not quite different with real life, the depiction of transgender characters in movies is more various. This paper is going to compare the idea of how transgender characters play his roles in *Kinky Boots* movie and *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n Roll*. The first movie's setting is in British society, while the second one is in Indonesian society. By comparing and examining the representation of transgender in different background, this study enriches the idea that this minority group is depicted in more or less similar.

Key words: transgender, *Kinky Boots*, *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n Roll*, performative act.

## INTRODUCTION

Commonly, transgender refers to the idea of gendered appearance which does not match with one's biological sex. The concept may cover transvestites, transsexual, cross-dresser, gender queer, drag queen/drag king. As gender is not similar with sexual orientation, the gendered appearance do not relate to a certain sexual tendency either; a transvestite may a male who fulfill his feminine inner calling to dress like a woman, yet he is female sexually oriented person. The term transvestite itself was firstly discovered by Magnus Hirschfeld in the early part of the 20th century and he points out that transvestite concerned more with psychological gender signs such as dress and names. In general, the emergence of transgender is as old as human civilization tracing back to 1480s BC in Egypt Kingdom when pharaoh Hathsepshut had to invent a hybrid gender for a pharaoh which by definition should be a male.

In Indonesia, the existence of transgender nowadays is more obviously seen than five or ten years ago. In public places, we could see males who perform in female gendered appearance, completed with distinctive female attributions and body gestures. On mass media, we watch male public figures who act femininely and may dress in "female motives and colors". Apart from the number, which needs to be surveyed statistically, the celebration of freedom of expression, especially after the Reformation Era, becomes one of the factors why those transgender looks are back and forth in our surroundings.

Furthermore, British society also experiences the development of transgendered people. Though statistically difficult to obtain the data about gender identity, based on the survey done by GIRES (Gender Identity Research and Education Society) in 2009, it is assumed that in the U.K. there were 300,000 transgendered people defined as those who cross dress (Reed et.al, 2009:13).

The idea about transgendered both in Indonesia and British society also appears in its movies. *Kinky Boots* which put Northampton as its setting of place and *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n*

*Roll* with its Jakarta's setting depict how transgendered life in the two cultural opposite countries. *Kinky Boots* which is the production of Virgo VCD, was firstly released in 2006 and talks about the collapse of shoe factory Price & Son. Charlie Price, the fourth generation owner, should drudge seeking the solution to survive the company, otherwise he has to sell it. In the midst of his many serious problems, Charlie met Lola who happens to be a transvestite, working as a singer in a transvestite night club. The unique friendship between Charlie and Lola – the man and the transvestite- in rescuing the company raises many interesting sequences in *Kinky Boots*.

Produced in the same year, *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n Roll* tells about the journey of finding identity of two good friends- Ipang and Nugi. As rock lovers, they dreamed of having a popular rock band and becoming a famous music star. Finding out that their family condition does not support them, these two young men decided to live with Nugi's father outside the town. Instead of getting peacefulness, Nugi and Ipang should keep a good relationship with Nugi's father who turns out a transvestite, Mama. The presence of Mama which changes Nugi and Ipang emerges some important points.

**Taking those two movies as the object of the study, this paper is going to analyze the presence of transvestites** in relation to their social environment, the conflict they faced and how they manage to adapt or reconcile with its surroundings. By applying qualitative content analysis, the discussion in this paper will put Judith Butler ideas on performative gender as its main theoretical perspectives

## **THEORITICAL FRAMEWORKS**

In her essay on gender, Simone de Beauvoir points out that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman”. This doctrine amplifies the idea that if sex is a fact, the role of sexes is a matter of cultural and historical condition in which it develops through times and social setting. Thus body, to her point of view, is a dynamic “historical situation” to which it embodies cultural construction. In this understanding, then female and being a woman is two different things in which the later represents how culture and history shape the idea of the biological fact- fragility, domesticity.

In relation to the dynamic ideas of de Beauvoir, Judith Butler furthermore underlines that gender identity therefore is not a stable one, it keeps on changing for it is a repetition of acts through time. Taking the analogy from acting performance, Butler argues that in everyday life acts constitutes shared experience and collective social action in which it becomes social action when it is performed repeatedly. She explains that “gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed “(Butler, 1990:527). Therefore gender can be neither right nor wrong, neither original nor fake.

## **ANALYSIS**

Aside of its genre and the number of its appearances in the scenes, the representation of transgendered figures in *Kinky Boots* and *Realita Cinta dan Rock'n Roll* has some important points to ponder.

## a. Social Reactions

The two transgendered characters in these movies represent different social status. Lola works in entertainment world in where she works as a nightclub singer who has to struggle hard to work almost every night. In the opening scenes of *Kinky Boots*, Lola-dressing in red colored dress and lipstick- is singing in front of her transgendered friends and male spectators as well who keeps on yelling or mocking him. In relation to his social status, Lola's work can be taken as middle class profession and for transgendered person working in the entertainment world apparently is one of the best choices to get money professionally.

Reversely, Nugi's father- called Mama, is depicted as an upper class housewife who lives in a beautiful luxurious furnished house. Practicing modern dance in his extravagant livingroom, Mama represents a high class transgendered character.

The choice of profession to illustrate Mama and Lola is interesting to compare since it gives impact to how the two transgendered characters experience social interaction and reaction. As a middle class singing worker, Lola should be able to manage his relationship with various kinds of society. It is to say that his exposure in open social interaction attracts social response and pressure as well. On the contrary, since Mama's life deals with domestic affairs, he is much more immune from social reactions and much more protected from social pressures.

The very first social reactions to Lola can be seen when Charlie-the Price and Son company owner forbides her to visit him in Northampton, whereas he asked Lola as his shoe model to save his company financial problem. The forbidness means that Charlie accepts the common general idea that dealing with transvetites is something embarrassing, a deal that must be kept secretly. It can be read from the following excerpt:

Charlie : Sorry it's a bit messy. Um, we... I thought we agreed that I'd come to London.

Lola : I have to warn you, Charlie from Northampton, I've a habit of doing exactly the opposite of what people want. In fact some might say that attempts of certain people to make a man out of me as a child is the reason that I now wear a frock. If I get the feeling somebody didn't want me to come to Northampton...

Charlie : No, no, no.

Lola : Also, I can tell from years of experience when I'm being smuggled in through a rear door.

Charlie : That's the rough stuff room.

Lola : Is it?

(*Kinky Boots*, CD 1, 34:05 – 34:43)

When Charlie finally succeeded in persuading Lola to be his shoe model, he promised him to take the boots to London once it is already finished. His reason is more because he wants to hide Lola's existence before his employers. Charlie does not want his staffs know he made boots for a transvetite. Yet, Lola –who notices that he's not accepted coming to Northampton-suddenly shows up in Charlie's factory without notice. He understands that most people will try to hide his coming through a rear door. This confession illustrates that transgendered people experience discrimination once they interact socially, once they perform gender identity as something opposing to his biological sex. The discrimination according to Judith Butler is taken as cultural punishment. She says "performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishment both obvious

and indirect..culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism...” (Butler, 1990:528)

Among his friends, Mama looks convenient with his life since most of them enjoy his companion and seemingly do not pay attention to his performance. Similar to *Kinky Boots*, the transgendered character in *Realita Cinta dan Rock ‘n Roll*- which is casted by Indonesian movie legend, Barry Prima- can get along better with female characters to male characters. Lola is a good acquaintance for female shoe workers in Charlie’s company, while Mama is also a nice friend for his female dance friends. Somehow, Mama is not depicted having social interactions with more various kinds of society apart of her dance friends. In other words, the domesticity of Mama characters does not allow him to meet with other characters outside his family circle. In this case, Mama therefore is much more protected from social pressures. Though in his conversation to his ex-wife, he says :

Mama : Kamu nggak tahu rasanya menjadi orang seperti aku. Selalu dipandang sebelah mata, dihina, ditertawakan. Tapi yang paling menyakitkan kau kalau sampai annakku sendiri tak bisa menerima aku. (menangis)  
Ibu Nugi : Sabar. Sabar ya.

(*Realita Cinta dan Rock ‘n Roll*, CD2, 28:26-29:27)

## **b. Family Conflict**

Though social pressures become the main drawback for a transgendered figure in dealing with the society, inevitably he also deals with personal conflict. The major personal conflict is mostly caused by his relationship to his nuclear family. Both in *Kinky Boots* and *Realita Cinta dan Rock ‘n Roll* do not present the cause why Lola and Mama want to perform like what woman usually does. Since childhood, Lola was trained by his father to be a boxer. Yet he could not ignore his inner passion to wear woman dresses. After the harassment done by Don- the most macho man in Charlie’s company who underestimate him, Lola recalled his experience:

Lola : Boxer. Get out of here. I’m serious. He had me doing training. Weights. I could bench-press 93 kilos. I owe all my spectacular muscle definition to my father. What, and he never... The whole wearing frocks thing... Ah, well he wasn’t stupid. He knew there’d be very few cross-dressing heavyweight champions. Yeah. No, he disowned me. Wouldn’t see me. Even when he got lung cancer, he wouldn’t. So, it’s ironic really. [sighs] Fags got him in the end. Ba-doom-doom. Tshh! I mean, that’s what it was all about. Fitting in. Melding in. Not standing out. As far as he was concerned, if you’re big and you’re black and you’re a boxer then you are sorted. If you’re big and you’re black and you’re in a... you know... strapless cocktail dress, that’s not so good. That’s what my dad wanted, an’ all.

(*Kinky Boots*, CD 1, 44:35-45:30)

This becomes Lola's regret that he could not forget- that his father could not accept what he is, could not understand what he wants to be. His regret becomes unforgettable as his father did not to see him even up to the end of his life.

Meanwhile, the personal conflict also happens to Mama when Nugi, for his very first time, found out who he is.

- Mama : Aku tahu mungkin susah untukmu untuk menerima semua ini dan aku tahu kamu pasti kecewa dan marah. Aku tidak akan paksa kamu untuk menerimaku begitu saja. Tapi kamu harus tahu bahwa aku begini bukan tanpa alasan.
- Nugi : Yang aku tahu dalam keluarga itu cuma ada ayah dan ibu. Jadi yang lainnya aku nggak pengen tahu.
- (Nugi meninggalkan ruang. Mama sedih)

(*Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n Roll*, CD2, 06:35-07:36)

Gender identity of Lola and Mama is signified by the common idea of being man and woman. When they performed as men, Lola was used to practice boxing, while Mama was a martial art athlete – the sport which is so-called as male sports. When they perform as women, they become more sensitive, wear woman dress and jewelry, talk and walk attractively. Somehow, unluckily when they perform as women, there are some happenings which enforce them to use their power as a male to protect others.

### **c. Reconciliation**

It is taken as reconciliation to refer to the idea that when Lola and Mama perform as a man by showing his male prowess, the social and personal conflict becomes reconciled. Their domestic and social environment which at first seem rejecting them turn to accepting for Lola and Mama have shown their masculine roles. They may dress and act like woman, but when it is necessary they have to act as a man as expected by the social construction.

When Lola came to The Boot Café to have arm wrestling match with Don, he was supported by most of his colleagues in the shoe company. At first, Don seems to win the match. But then, Lola takes over. Approaching to its end, Lola understand that it would be better to let Don win the match because he will unable to bear the loss over a transvestite. Therefore, he relented. Don who understand that Lola has intentionally made him win changed his mind about transvestite and the whole things in the making of transvestite's shoe project. He accepts Lola and supports the project happily.

Mama is also experiencing the same thing either. Nugi who did not know that Mama is a good martial art athlete is surprised when he witnesses his Mama fighting against a pickpocket in a market. After knowing that Mama is such a fierce person, Nugi's acceptance emerges. He feels proud of him though his Mama performs like a woman. Not only acceptance, Nugi also can tolerate the peculiarity of Mama's characters. Although he was disappointed when he found out that his Mama's sexual orientation is to a man, at the end of the story of *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n Roll* it shows that Nugi accepts his Mama wholeheartedly by, for the first time, calling him Mama.

Those two examples symbolizes that gender performance even to transgendered people is still an active battling ground. Although their repetitive acts make them as women, some circumstances may enforce them to get out from the repetition, experiencing or doing things which is parallel to their biological sexes and pre-determined roles upon sexes.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is an interesting statement which is spoken over and over by Lola in *Kinky Boots* movie, that is : ladies, gentlemen and those who haven't made up his mind yet. Lola keeps on saying it every time he undergoes his performance as a transvestite singer in The Angel Club. Both in *Kinky Boots* and *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n Roll* movie, the phrase "those who haven't made up his mind yet" attracts some important notions. Though having different setting of social background, the depiction of transgendered figure on both movies is more or less similar- that they experience social pressure and discrimination, they have to deal with family conflict and finally they can reconcile with their surroundings after showing their prowess. The idea of showing the masculine power of Lola and Mama as the reconciling factor in the story gives understanding that Britain and Indonesia share similar cultural perspective in viewing the acceptance of transgendered people.

## REFERENCES

Corber and Valocchi ED. *Queer Studies An Interdisciplinary Reader*. 2003. Massachusettes : Blackwell Publishing

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. 1990. New York : Routledge

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" *Performing Feminism: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case. 1990. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Transl. H.M Parshley. 1974. New York: Vintage.

**Foucault, Michael. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Transl. Robert Hurley. 1980. New York: Random House.**

Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interest Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety*. 1992. New York: Routledge.

Halberstam, Judith. *In A Queer Time and Place*. 2005. New York: NYU Press.

*Kinky Boots*. CD Film. Touchstone Pictures/Miramax Films. 2006.

Reed, Bernard, et.al. *Gender Variance in The UK : Prevalence, Incidence, Growth and Geographic Distribution*. June 2009. <http://www.gires.org.uk/assets/Medpro-Assets/GenderVarianceUK-report.pdf>. Accessed: May 3, 2012.

*Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n Roll*. CD Film. Lembaga Sensor Film Indonesia No 327/VCD/D.sdp/4.2011/2006. 24 April 2006.