

THE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN ALICE WU'S *THE HALF OF IT* (2020) MOVIE

Rifka Mawarni¹

English Literature Study Program, Law and
Language Faculty, Stikubank University
e-mail: rifkamawarni@mhs.unisbank.ac.id

Yulistiyanti, S.S, M.Hum²
Stikubank University

e-mail: yulistiyanti@edu.unisbank.ac.id

Abstract

The Half of It is a movie directed by Alice Wu. The story follows the story of Ellie Chu. She has a homosexual interest in a girl named Aster Flores, but instead of pursuing her feelings, she helps a boy woo Aster through letters and text messages. The purpose of this study is to analyze gender performativity represented in Ellie character in *The Half of It* movie and to find out how society treats Ellie when she performed gender performativity. This research used the qualitative method. The research is done by finding the correlation between data that represents the correlation of fact as explained in the Theory. The theory used in this research is Gender Performativity Theory by Judith Butler. The researcher used The Gender Performativity Theory as it applied to the situation that happens to the main character throughout the movie. The result of this research can be described as follows. First, Ellie has several gender performativity according to body construction, color coding, and dressing, her act against the division of gender traits, her gender traits, gender nature, homosexual desire, and the act of questioning the construction of gender. Second, there are different treatments by society when the main character, Ellie Chu represents her gender performativity. It can be summed up as negative treatments and positive treatments. The negative treatments are persecution, gender stereotype, and stigma. The positive treatments are understanding, supporting, and affirming.

Keywords: Gender, Gender Performativity, Gender Traits, Homosexual, Society Treatment

INTRODUCTION

Gender refers to the characteristics of women and men that are socially constructed. This consists of norms, behaviors, and roles related to being a woman or a man as well as relationships with each other. As a social assemble, gender varies from society to society and might alternate over the years. Gender is hierarchical and produces inequalities that intersect with other social and economic inequalities. Gender-primarily based discrimination intersects with other elements of discrimination, consisting of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographic region, gender identity, and sexual orientation, among others (Parfitt, 2015).

Gender is also used to illustrate the distinctions in behavior among women and men can be described as masculine and feminine. The gender distinctions increase the problems of male and female where male is related to masculinity and female is related to femininity. In every construction, the biological distinction between men and women is defined into social tags and illustrations. Feminist writers insist that biological variations are intensified by masculinity and femininity in the social portrayals. A pattern of distinctions by way of gender is recognized while

the person is both masculine and female. As an example, crimson and blue are gendered colors, the former seemed feminine and the latter as masculine. In addition to being "sturdy" and "tough" is masculine. Being "vulnerable" and "smooth" is related to a feminine person. There are other numerous different characteristics that are classified as masculine and feminine (Mishra et al., 2015).

In the past, masculinity and femininity are standards that represent the social consequences of being male or female the traits and characteristics which describe men and women provide men advantages over ladies. Nowadays, these social labels of masculinity and femininity are blurring. There is a continual transition in the conceptualization of human entities as influenced by entirely biological or social influences. Women's objectives have shifted; women's lives and positions have widened (Mishra et al., 2015).

This research used Alice Wu's *The Half of It* movie as the research subject. *The Half of It* is a 2020 American coming-of-age comedy-drama film written and directed by Alice Wu. The story follows a Chinese American protagonist. The character is a high scholar, Ellie Chu, who lives in the fictional, very white town of Squahamish with her immigrant father. She is in love with a girl named Aster Flores, but instead of pursuing her feelings, she helps a boy woo Aster via love letters and text messages. The Protagonist Ellie does not have stereotypical traits as a woman in the common belief. Her character, personality, and traits are blurred between feminine and masculine stereotypes.

METHODOLOGY

The research used the qualitative method. Qualitative research is the most commonplace method utilized in literary research to identify social condition, norms, gender, gender role, ethnicity, religion, and many more. The result of this study is provided in a form of words, not numeral explanation as in quantitative research (Faruk, 2018). The analysis was carried out through finding the correlation between data that constitute the correlation of facts as explained in the theory (Faruk, 2018). The study is designed to discuss upon gender process. This process, however, could not get very far if the recognition of sex of the main character is not significant. As a consequence, the study was designed to identify how social situation constructs gender based on the sex of the characters in the novel.

Primary source was a detail work published by the writer which being analyzed. As a result, the primary data source of this study was *The Half of It* movie by Alice Wu. The researcher used all the dialogues, narration, acts carried out by characters as the primary source of this study. The secondary data used were the previous researches and journals that were related or similar to the studies. In the process of analyzing data, the researcher used the theory to interpret the data and to discover the relation between the data and the theory. At the first part, the researcher identified data that represented the social construction of gender in the novel using Gender Performativity Theory as defined in this study. In the second part of this study is how society treats Ellie when she performed gender performativity. This analysis used Gender Performativity theory advanced by Judith Butler.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented in two parts based on the research questions presented. In the first part, the researcher discusses how gender performativity represented in Ellie character in *The Half of It* movie. In the second part, the researcher presents how society treats Ellie when she performed gender performativity.

Gender Performativity Represented by Ellie's character in The Half of It Movie

The writer will use Gender Performativity Theory by Judith Butler as an approach to find out the gender performativity represented by Ellie Chu as the main character of *The Half of It* movie despite the common social construction of gender found in society.

Body Construction

Ellie referred to herself as a girl also based on her body configuration. When she talks she referred herself as a girl. Also, this label is what she tells others when she characterized herself. Ellie labeled herself as a girl is in line with what society believes in female body characteristics. Those characteristics include relative lack of body hair, thicker hair on the head (in some cases), rounded hips/figure, a decreased ability to generate muscle mass at a fast rate, decreased upper body strength, breasts, ability to nurse children, a menstrual cycle, and increased body fat composition. Ellie in her unconscious mind referred to herself as a girl based on only her body configuration.

Color Coding and Dressing

It is also shown in the movie how people wear colors according to the common gendered cultural beliefs. In the first twentieth century, the gender difference in dressing color starts emerging. In this term, the body is inscribed to the cultural meaning of identifying gender and sex. "Blue has been the symbol of masculinity and strength, at the same time as pink represents sweets and femininity"(Paoletti, 2012).

Ellie Chu wears outfits that tend to have dark colors and long sleeves that usually represent a boy in the common belief. Her attitude to choosing different color attributes is against the belief that society constructed a boy's color and a girl's color. Ellie likes to wear square patterns and unattractive colors. It is also in line with her character that is not like to stand out in the crowd and wears whatever she feels comfortable with. That is the reason why Ellie Chu wears outfits that tend to have dark colors and long sleeves to conceal herself from the attention.

Ellie's attitude about the way she dressed, also impact people's viewpoint. In this case, when Ellie tries to apply the social construction of how a girl must look, Paul finds that it does not suit her. Paul stated that she looks weird, just not like her usual self. When Ellie is forced to look more presentable by looking more feminine than her usual appearance for her school performance, she agrees that it does not suit her. She looks weird in the feminine style. She admits it effortlessly that she does not belong in that. She realizes that her normal style is against the social construction of how people should look.

Division of Gender Role

In the film, Ellie takes the role of the breadwinner of her family. Ellie makes extra money writing homework papers for her fellow student. She seizes every opportunity to make money by herself. Ellie in this film is also the person in charge of many of her household affairs instead of her father. When there is a problem in their household, Ellie is the one who solved it. She takes a big part in their financial field. After her mother passed away, her father went through a long phase of shock that affected all aspects of his life including his social life and work. This makes Ellie have to take on her father's responsibility. Ellie also performs most of her father's duties as station master and signalman. She does the job despite in society; there are invisible principles of people supposed to act according to their roles. The division of roles undergone by the people is based on what sex label is attached to the society. Women are domesticated while men are doing outside and do all the work.

Gender Traits

The institutionalized gender performativity is repeated in the movie even to the traits of individuals. Ellie responds the situation around her by using her rational thought and not using

her feeling. Ellie thinks the act of the boy in the movie she watches is illogical and unreasonable. She does not use her feeling to sympathize with the boy's actions which most people think that it is romantic. This situation is odd as society believes that men are associated with their masculinity, handsomeness, and cold or even harsh personalities and they tend to move according to their minds. In other words, men prioritize their rationale as to how they are responding to some situations. Meanwhile, Ellie tends to use her logical thinking and not her feeling. It is different from the common gender traits in the *Half of It* film.

Gender Nature

Ellie Chu is the one who makes the decision in the film. She is also the one who decides for what she and Paul need to do while facing their difficult circumstances. She guides Paul on how he should behave and talk to Aster. She starts giving Paul orders. It shows how she is more dominant or the person in control in their two relationships. She does not feel the need to wait for the opposing gender to save her or decide for her.

Homosexual Desire

Ellie Chu in *The Half of It* movie is described as having a homosexual inclination toward her high school friend, Aster. At first, Ellie does not dare to express her feeling to Aster as herself. Ellie is reluctant to be honest about what she really felt and what she wanted to express because of the Paradigms and perspectives of the people, especially in the devout city of Squahamish. She chooses to convey her feeling for Aster by pretending to be Paul.

The significant evidence that Ellie has a homosexual desire toward Aster is when she ends Aster going to a hot spring in the forest together. Ellie reacts aggressively to the thing that is supposed to be common between the same sexes. Before they dive into the hot spring, they take off their outer clothes. Even if Ellie has the same sex as Aster, Ellie cannot bring herself for watching her undresses because Ellie considers her as the opposite gender.

The opposite thing happens when Paul tries to kiss Ellie even if they have different sex. Ellie feels disgusted by that action. She considers Paul as the equal gender She does not see Paul as her sexual orientation target. Hence, she considers that Paul act rudely to her by kissing her by force.

The Act of Questioning the Construction of Gender

Ellie herself does not sure that she comprehends that she is different. Being raised in a gender-constructed society, from an early age she learns what constitutes female and male behavior from her family and friends, the media, and institutions including schools. Ellie does not sure about the gender construction within herself. The structured gender for females is often portrayed as being emotional, caring, and in need of protection. And males are often characterized as being rational, career-driven, and strong (Lorber and Ferrell, 1991). She wonders what the common girls, the people who have the sex as her, usually discuss as she does not feel akin to it. She does not do all the things that the common girl tends to do. All of those make her the construction of gender since she feels that she is different from what the common gender contractions are.

Society's Reactions to Ellie's Gender Performativity

In *The Half of It* movie, there are different treatments by society when the main character, Ellie Chu represents her gender performativity. It can be summed as negative treatments and positive treatments when Ellie Chu represents her gender performativity.

Negative Treatments

Persecution

In the film, Ellie also gets persecution from her peers. A group of teen boys bullies her almost every day when she is riding to go the school. The act of persecution toward Ellie keeps

repeating in the *Half of It* movie. The rejected Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) people generally do not learn how to build a relationship with peers or families. As a result, it creates a state of loneliness and isolation for them (Cole, 2007). Ellie usually just ignores the people that bully her. She is used to being outcasted and she also does not mind since she prefers to be alone most of the time. She feels that nobody can understand her until she starts exchanging letters with Aster where she feels that finally, there is someone who understands her. The intensity of persecution against Ellie is increasing through the film. The peak of the persecution against Ellie is that it is not only verbal abuse but it became physical abuse. The group of boys sabotages the piano that wills Ellie use to perform. They destroy the piano so that Ellie gets humiliation by the other students. Many people are guilty of persecution against LGBTQ people, whether consciously or unconsciously. LGBTQ people are faced with everyday persecution from society, peers, family, or even school teachers and administrations. In addition, the lack of support and guidance affects LGBTQ people in many aspects (Jocelyn-Blackman, 2022).

Gender Stereotypes

In this film, gender stereotypes happen to Ellie. Edwin, Ellie's father unconsciously puts a stereotype on his daughter. As Edwin thinks according to his daughter's sex, Ellie will have a romantic interest in Paul as the opposite sex. He never thought of the possibility that Ellie could have a romantic interest in the same sex as her. He just realizes that it can be truly possible when Paul challenges his opinion. A gender stereotype is a widely held belief or generalization about the behaviors and characteristics attributed to women and men. These socially accepted and often unconscious ideas start to form in infancy. Gender stereotypes shape self-perception, and attitudes to relationships and influence participation in the world of work (Institute of Physics, 2018).

Stigma

In the film, Paul is outrageous angry when he finds out that Ellie has a romantic interest in Aster. Not only just because he feels betrayed, but he also sees it as a sin. It is something that is not supposed to happen. Since he is raised in religious family background, he believes that a romantic relationship only can be done by the opposite sex. He applies the stigma and prejudice in his belief that is against the romantic relationship within the same sex. He believes that everyone who opposed it will be put in hell.

Paul is just one example of how devout people in the Squahamish are. The people in Squahamish are a religious community. Almost most of the people there go to the Church every Sunday. Even from an early age, young people find themselves regularly exposed to messages about how boys and girls should look, behave, and act. They live according to the belief that is exposed to since they are young. In this case, it shows how the religious belief impacts their reaction to something that in their belief is categorized as a sin or deviation. The negative regard from others leads to negative self-regard (Allport, 1954). Similarly, the basic tenet of social evaluation theory is that human beings learn about themselves by comparing themselves with others (Pettigrew, 1967).

Positive Treatments

Understanding

Paul tries to reflect his view of Ellie's gender performativity. He starts by searching about Ellie's gender performativity on the internet. He does that to understand more about the subject he feels unfamiliar with. Paul also tries to understand that Ellie has different gender performativity from

what he usually knows and believes. He puts himself in Ellie's shoes to understand her feelings. He realizes that continually pretending to be something they are not is suffocating.

Despite of his belief, Paul also tries to understand that Ellie has different gender performativity. He tries to erase his unconscious bias toward Ellie. The unconscious bias arises because we have to process vast amounts of information every second. Our brains tend to make assumptions based on previous experience and can cause problems by affecting our beliefs and treatment of others. Although admitting and dealing with our own biases can be challenging, it is important to identify, reflect on and even discuss them with colleagues (Institute of Physics, 2018). It is similar with what Paul does to Ellie.

Supporting

Parents of LGBTQ people can have an important impact on their child's current and future mental and physical well-being. In the film, Edwin tries to open the talk with Ellie. He wants to support Ellie to be everything she wants to be. Edwin tries to open the talk with Ellie. He brings up Ellie's dead mother in comparison to himself. He does not want Ellie to have a similar fate as him where he goes through a long phase of shock because of his wife's death. That situation affects all aspects of his life including his social life and work. He just surrenders himself to the situation and treatment he receives without trying to do anything. He wants Ellie to have a similar path to her mother instead where she can be herself and live her life to the fullest. After hearing that, Ellie feels relief as if her burdens are lifted, and try to keep moving forward.

Affirming

In the film, Aster accepts that may be from the start that Ellie is the one with who Aster feels a romantic interest. She has not considered it that way in the first place because it is something different from what she has been taught before. Then she realizes that maybe she feels the same way toward Ellie. When affirmations are repeated frequently, many individuals begin to acknowledge them, allowing them to make positive changes in their lives (Mccoy, 2022). Ellie does not hesitate anymore to express her feeling. She tries to be true about how she wants to live her life despite of the society construction.

Later in the film, Aster also expresses her feeling toward Ellie. It shows that the affirmation not only encourage Ellie but also Aster to reciprocate Ellie's affection. Aster affirms Ellie's gender performativity towards her. Aster accepts Ellie's kiss as a token of her love for her. She does not push away Ellie's affections. Aster admits that she may have had feelings for Ellie too. At that moment Aster is not sure about her feeling but maybe after some time, she will figure it out.

CONCLUSION

The writer can draw the following conclusion after watching *The Half of It* movie and analyzing all the things related to the main character, Ellie Chu's gender performativity. The writer tried to find the answer to the two problems that are found in *The Half of It* movie.

The first problem is about how gender performativity is represented by Ellie's character in *The Half of It* movie. Several acts, traits, behaviors and decision-making indicated Ellie Chu's gender performativity throughout the film. Those are body construction, color coding and dressing, her act against the division of gender traits, her gender traits, gender nature, homosexual desire, and the act of questioning the construction of gender. Those indications are analyzed using Gender Performativity Theory by Judith Butler. The method used to analyze gender performativity is describing how the gender performativity of someone according to Judith Butler's viewpoint.

The second problem is about how society treats Ellie when she performed her gender performativity. In *The Half of It* movie, there are different treatments by society when the main

character, Ellie Chu represents her gender performativity. It can be summed up as negative treatments and positive treatments. For the negative treatment are persecution, gender stereotype, and stigma. For the positive treatments are understanding, supporting, and affirming.

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