



## The Sexuality Construction of the Main Character, Puang Saidi, as a Bissu in Pepi Al-Bayqunie's Calabai: Perempuan Dalam Tubuh Lelaki (2016) - A Queer Analysis

Agnes Setyowati Hariningsih

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universitas Pakuan, Indonesia

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### Abstract

This article will mainly focus on how the main character's sexuality is constructed as a bissu, the gender-neutral identity considered as a sacred individual figure in the Bugis tradition in Pepi Al-Bayqunie's novel Calabai: Perempuan Dalam Tubuh Lelaki (2016). Puang Saidi, the main character, is a calabai, a person whose effeminate soul is 'trapped' in a man's body, who is destined to become a bissu. Using descriptive analysis and queer theory suggested by Judith Butler that gender is performative rather than 'essential', this study aims to elaborate how Puang Saidi's sexuality is socially and culturally constituted. In queer study, one's complex sexuality and subjectivity are critically discussed along with its relation to contemporary culture. Additionally, to become a sacred bissu, he must suppress his sexual desire and leave the worldliness to dedicate his life to help God keep the nature balanced. By applying Cultural Studies perspective, the research finding reveals that besides being socially and culturally constructed, Puang Saidi's sexuality as well as subjectivity is also negotiated within cultural hegemony. Finally, we would argue that Puang Saidi performs a quite complex sexuality. In addition, his subjectivity as a 'Muslim' bissu suggests that cultural power also plays a role in constructing his identity.

**Keywords:** *Bissu; Sexuality; Literature; Queer Theory*

### Introduction

As an archipelagic and plural state, Indonesia has a number of different local cultures that are lived by its people. Geographically, the country approximately has about 6000 inhabited and 11.000 uninhabited islands. Additionally, there are also more than 500 ethnicities as well as 737 local languages spoken by the natives. Even though Indonesia is not an Islamic state, the majority of its people are Muslims. During the Dutch colonial era and Japanese period, diversities and the geographical location of the Indonesia caused logistic problems, and it persisted until the beginning of independence era (Gordon, 2005 in Davies 2018). Therefore, a number of efforts as well as approaches had been taken to unite the country through Malay language and form the state called *nusantara*.

The diversities in Indonesia vary from ethnicities, languages, and even gender. In some areas of Indonesia, such as South Sulawesi, East Java, Papua, gender is not limited to only two traditional genders (male and female). Ben Murtgah (2013) argued that transgender has long been part of Indonesian tradition, such as *Reog Ponorogo* and *ludruk* in West Java, *ludruk*, *bissu* in South Sulawesi. Nevertheless,

the discussion of homosexuality has long been a public debate in the country. Though it is inevitable that homosexuality has been identified and practiced in many parts of Indonesia, media, and pop culture, the issue still remains a closed book and very sensitive to be publicly discussed.

As a matter of fact, Indonesia openly holds heteronormativity, but in terms of law the government is legally neutral to transgender and homosexuality which means that there are no specific state laws which prohibit the existence of this non-normative gender (Oetomo, 2006). Arguably, though homosexuality has been identified and practiced in many parts of Indonesia, it does not mean that it is socially and culturally acceptable. Anti-LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) sentiment still rises, and has been severely promoted by other parties, particularly by religious groups. For example, the Indonesian Ulema Council known as *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI), released a *fatwa*, a non-legally binding edict, No. 57, 2014 which promoted the prosecution of any LGBT related activities. Boelstorff stated that in 2016, the hashtag #daruratLGBT was rising in Indonesia signing that it was the worst situation in the past three decades as well as emphasizing that the state and its society are strongly homophobic.

Therefore, it is always challenging to pay a close attention to homosexuality issue in its relation to the dominant power in the context of Indonesia. How a person identifying her or himself a non-heterosexual subject constructs his or her sexual identity has always been academically interesting. This study is endeavoring at analyzing the main character, Puang Saidi, as a *Bissu* in Pepi Al-Bayqunie's novel, *Calabai: Perempuan Dalam Tubuh Lelaki* (2016). Puang Saidi is a *calabai* (a person whose effeminate soul is 'trapped' in a man's body). Serving as a *bissu*, a transgender priest in the pre-Islamic, ancient *Bugis* religion as well as a respected position in society who becomes an intermediary between humans and gods in local animist beliefs, Puang Saidi has to deal with the dominant power represented through society in constructing his sexuality to become a *bissu*.

By applying a queer analysis through Butler's performativity as well as cultural studies perspective, the critical question arises. How the main character's sexuality is constructed along with its contestation with the dominant power will be the focus of this analysis.

### **Research Methodology**

Taking an academically specific interest in queer studies, this qualitative research will focus on how the main character constructs his sexuality as a *calabai* to become a *bissu*. The subject research is Pepi Al-Bayqunie's novel *Calabai: Perempuan Dalam Tubuh Lelaki* (2016). The quotations which represent the main character's sexuality will be the primary data which will be analyzed using queer perspective as well as Butler's key concept of performativity. Other external related literatures and sources will also be utilized to contextualize the analysis. The quotations that are analyzed will also be translated into English.

In this study, the term sexuality refers to a set of complex relations on how sex is ruled as well as organized within a social and cultural context, politics, and economics. Sexuality is not limited to private affairs, but also with the intervention of state, media, religion, medical, and so forth (Yulius, 2015: 9)

As a critical perspective, cultural studies approach will also be used to see how the power relation plays an important role in the main character's subjectivity. As argued by Barker (2000) that cultural studies perspective aims at examining the cultural phenomenon and its relation to power. In other words, it is arguable that culture cannot be understood apart from other aspects of social life. Additionally, as suggested by Barker, Meg-John & Scheele, J (2016), cultural studies approach also entails the study of all relations between all the elements in a whole way of life such as politics, economics, erotic, society, and ideology.

It is inevitable that queer perspective is also utilized in this study as the main character's sexuality is problematically complex. The term 'queer' refers to all subjects whose sexuality cannot conform the heteronormativity. Unlike the term LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender subjects as social category), the word 'queer' includes all non-heterosexual subjects without an obsession to formulate a specific yet problematic gender category which potentially lead to an exclusion of all subjects who do not conform to it.

Academically, queer theory can be utilized as an approach to non-normative sexualities, but it is not a theory of homosexuality (Gaunlett, 2005). In line with Gaunlett, Barker and Scheele argue that there are a number of overlapping definitions of it. Queer theory would suggest that identity a fluid entity which is a little more than a pile of social and cultural things that an individual has previously expressed or has been said. Furthermore, like any other aspects of identity, gender is seen as a performance. It is always challenging the traditional view of masculinity and femininity which are said as a social construction built on the binary divide between men and women, which is also a social construction. To sum up, the term 'queer' can be understood as an 'umbrella' term for all non-heterosexual subjects who challenge the LGBT "mainstream". It can also be a way of challenging norms around gender and sexuality through different ways or thinking of acting (Barker, Meg-John & Scheele, 2016).

One of queer concepts used in this study is Butler's performativity. In this concept, Butler said that gender is a performance, and ... "*there is no gender behind the expression of gender; .... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.*" (Butler: 25). In other words, Butler severely rejects the concept of gender as taken for granted because basically one does not have any gender identity which informs his or her behavior. According to her, one's behavior is his or her gender.

Butler also suggests that sex and gender are socially and culturally constituted within hegemonic norms, or a derivative as well as integral performativity. All assumptions behind the idea of sex are a just repetitive practice, or just a long process of imitation. For example, we already recognize gender as something of an achievement. If a woman puts on a new dress and make-up, she might declare, 'I feel like a woman tonight'; similarly, a man who has put on overalls and picked up a power drill might see himself in the mirror and say, 'What a man!' (Gaunlett, 107)

Citing Butler, Gaunlett argues that gender then, is what you do at particular times, rather than a universal who you are. Therefore, gender or sexuality is an imitative structure, or a result of process of imitation, reiteration, and performativity. She then argued that if gender is a performance, it can be challenged or reinvented. The scope of this study is limited only to the main character, Puang Saidi, who is a *calabai*. In the long process of becoming a *bissu*, his sexuality will be the spotlight of the analysis as his sexual identity cannot be separated from the hegemonic norms.

## **Result and Discussion**

In this novel, Puang Saidi is the main character of the story. Biologically he was born as a male in *Bugis* tradition but performs effeminate attributes when he grows up. There are five genders acknowledged in *Bugis* tradition: men, women, *calalai* (trans men), *calabai* (trans women), and *bissu* that is believed to represent gender neutrality as this identity is a combination between both male and female characteristics. In *Bugis* tradition, *bissu* is considered as an honorable figure in the society.

In the novel, Saidi is the son of Puang Baso who has long been dreaming of having a boy in his marriage. As Saidi grew up, his father noticed that Saidi was 'different' in term of his gender. Unlike any other boys who perform their masculine characteristics, Saidi shows his effeminate characteristics. Since he was a child, he had been questioning his existence as a human being and asking himself as well as God why his soul does not conform to what is expected by the society.

*“Gerak-geriknya lembut, tindak-tanduknya gemulai. Ia suka berdandan, senang pula memakai rok. Selain gemar bermain rumah-rumahan dan masak-masakan, ia juga senang berkumpul dengan teman-teman perempuan dibandingkan dengan teman laki-lakinya. Ia lebih memilih menumbuk tepung di kolong rumah ketimbang mengambil kayu di hutan. Ia juga lebih senang menjunjung daripada memikul barang bawaan, sebagaimana lazimnya anak laki-laki”* (Al-Bayqunie, 2016: 11).

“He was very gentle, and feminine. He loves to wear make-up and a skirt. He also likes to play any girls’ stuffs such as pretending to clean the house, and to cook. He also likes to hang out with his girlfriends than his boyfriends. He prefers to grind the flour in the kitchen instead of looking for woods in the jungle. He prefers carrying things with his hands that putting them on his shoulders” (Al-Bayqunie, 2016: 11).

He never expects to be biologically born as a male with effeminate soul. The young Saidi liked to show his feminine traits such as using his mother’s make-up. Knowing the fact that he is ‘different’, Saidi has been trying so hard to change his gender identity to become a woman as it is psychologically against his feeling. Since he knew that it was against the social and cultural norms, Saidi had continuously been dealing with his inner conflict and people around him. He had been lying to himself and trying so hard to act as a heterosexual man as expected by his parents. Therefore, finding his ‘truest’ identity is a difficult, long process in life for him.

His Muslim father was once mad at him as he found out that he was using his mother’s lipstick. Then, Saidi had often got punishment. He was physically beaten by his father for his feminine attitudes as he wanted him to be a ‘real’ man and accept his destiny to have been born as a man. He has been trying so many ways to make Saidi act as a man as suggested in Islamic teachings. Therefore, Saidi had been under pressure since he was young as his father never thought of what he was feeling as a *calabai*, but wanted him to be a ‘real’ Islamic man. As seen in the following quote.

*“Kalau kamu tidak mau dicap kafir dan dilaknat Allah, Nak,” imbuah Ayah, “buang jauh-jauh sifat calabai dalam dirimu. Camkan itu. Islam melarang laki-laki berperilaku seperti perempuan. Mumpung kamu masih remaja, belajarlah jadi laki-laki tulen. Kalau sudah dewasa, jadi calabai betul kamu nanti. Pasti susah berubah!”* (Al-Bayqunie, 2016:3).

“Son, if you don’t want to be an infidel who is cursed by Allah” He said, “Kill your calabai characteristics within yourself. Keep that in mind. Islam prohibits men who act as women. As you’re still young, you still have a chance to be a ‘real’ man before it’s too late. It’ll be so hard to change it when you become a calabai.” (Al-Bayqunie, 2016:3).

From the above quote, it confirms what Butler suggests that gender is performative as well as dynamic. Additionally, in terms of one’s sexuality, it cannot be separated from the hegemonic norms which only legalize two binary genders while those who do not conform the notion will be socially excluded as well as considered as ‘abnormal’ subjects. Saidi was expected to be a ‘real’ man by his father meaning that he was forced to play a role as a male. Due to this social-cultural expectation, Saidi was trying so hard to act ‘normal’ though he knew that it was against his feeling, and impossible for him.

Not only from his father, his sexuality as a *calabai* was also rejected by the society. He also used to be forced to go out from a village because a *calabai* was not allowed to live there. ... *“Calabai wasn’t allowed to live in this village”, Said a man. “God curses him”, “Calabai brings bad luck”, “Throw him out!”* (Al-Bayqunie, 2016:68). This means that one’s own sexuality becomes the common affairs, so that one cannot choose their preferred sexuality. This also confirms to what Yulius (2015) suggests that sexuality is not limited to private affairs, but also with the intervention of state, media, religion, medical, and so forth.

The social rejection of *calabai*, *calalai*, and *bissu* was also narrated in the novel. The Islamic militant sympathizers of Kahar Muzakkar were provocatively active in arresting and killing the *bissu* as their existence contradicts to Islamic teachings. Therefore, the remaining *bissu* who escaped from this conservative group were going and hiding in the woods. Additionally, it was also said that *bissu* was often politically associated with Indonesian Communist Party in South Sulawesi so that any related *bissu* activities were prohibited and considered to be *bid'ah* which then had to be eradicated. All *bissu* were severely forced to convert their belief to Islam.

Whereas, long before Islam entered South Sulawesi, the *Bugis* had their own way of life and belief known as *La Galigo*, one of the world's largest literary works and a 14<sup>th</sup> century epic written by the *Bugis*. Then, in 1605, the head of Goa in South Sulawesi converted to Islam and was obsessed to share his belief to other heads of region (Ricklefs, 1993:48).

In the middle of his journey, Saidi finally met a group of *bissu*. This rendezvous had been his biggest dream to find his 'truest' identity as he felt really safe being around them. He also felt like he was in the right place among them as the *bissu* told him that he was destined to become a *bissu*. They told him that Saidi was chosen by God, and it was based on the hunch and signs that they felt before his coming.

After joining the group of *bissu*, Saidi started to reflect and understand his sexuality, then construct his identity to become a prospective *bissu*. Therefore, he started to learn and pass several stages of becoming a *bissu*. As narrated in the story, a *bissu* can be chosen from either *calabai* or *calalai* who dedicates his or her life to keep the nature balanced. A *bissu* was naturally selected from his special abilities, such as predicting the nature, being able to read certain manuscripts, etc.

After the death of previous *bissu*, Puang Matona Saena, Saidi was chosen to replace his position. Saidi had to follow several rules and go through several stages to become a *bissu*.

*“sebelum dilantik menjadi bissu, calon yang akan dilantik terlebih dahulu melewati proses Irebba. Tahapan pertama yang harus dilewati adalah berpuasa selama 40 hari. Sebagai calon bissu yang akan dilantik melalui upacara sakral Irebba, sebagaimana calon-calon bissu sebelumnya. Saidi juga harus melewati tahapan itu. Tidak ada pengecualian. Ia harus berpuasa selama 40 hari, diasingkan dan dipingit di tepi Sungai Segeri, bersemedi siang malam dan menjaga tubuhnya lahir dan batin agar terhindar dari bujuk rayu duniawi.”* (Al-Bayqunie, 2016: 213)

*“Before he was appointed to be a bissu, he must pass the process of Irebba. As the first stage of the process, he must do fasting for 40 days. Like the previously appointed bissu who was selected through the sacred ceremony of Irebba, Saidi had to follow the same things. No exception. He must do fasting, get isolated in the bank of Segari River. He had to be an ascetic and keep himself away from any worldly affairs.”* (Al-Bayqunie, 2016: 213)

From this quote, it can be concluded that Saidi had to follow some rules to be able to become a *bissu*, including repressing his sexuality and his sexual preference towards the same sex relationship. This implies that one's sexuality cannot be separated from other external aspects outside the self. This also confirms what Butler argues that gender is performative. Saidi had to perform himself as a *bissu* whose sexuality and sexual preference were repressed. In queer perspective, the idea of this gender neutral exercised by Saidi does not conform to traditional genders, *calalai* or *calabai*. Critically, it is arguable that one's sexuality is very complex, but can be negotiated within the culturally hegemonic norms. In this analysis, Saidi's complex role as a Muslim *bissu* can be concluded as a form of negotiation and an effort to fit in the society.

## Conclusion

As quoted by Butler that gender is a performance, and identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results, the main character, Puang Saidi constructs his sexuality as well as exercises his identity as a *bissu*, an honorable figure in the *Bugis* society that represents the femininity and masculinities. It is implied that the gender itself cannot be determined and defined as the main character can be said to be successfully performing gender neutral.

The analysis also reveals that the main character's sexuality cannot be separated from other external aspects which contribute to construct as well as negotiate his sexuality within hegemonic power. The rejection of Islamic teaching towards the existence of *bissu* narrated in the story was concrete evidence that the main character's sexuality as a *calabai* was not socially and culturally acceptable. This means that the main character's sexuality is forced to be disciplined into traditional gender, male and female. The failure of constructing a 'normal' gender by the main character challenges the notion which says that gender is taken for granted. The final achievement of the main character as an Islamic *bissu* also reveals that gender is very complex, and the gender neutral performed by *bissu* would suggest that his sexuality is queer, meaning that it cannot simply conform to any available sexual categories. Additionally, his conversion to Islam can also be interpreted as a strategy or negotiation to be socially and culturally accepted.

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