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Women Identity Construction in Punk Subculture in *I Wanna be Your Joey Ramone* by Stephanie Kuehnert

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Abstract

Patriarchal culture creates inequality in gender roles, women is positioned as men's subordinate who must submissive to their dominant. Various stereotypes and stigmas are attached to women as persons who are weak, passive, dependence on men, and helpless. Patriarchal culture has rigid rules framework and values, and women who violate those rules and values would get social sanctions, such as mockery, harassment and marginalization. Punk culture as subculture, which challenges all the rules and values of patriarchal culture as the mainstream culture is also not detached from gender inequality which is built from those stereotypes and stigmas. This study aims to reveals how women in punk community construct their identities and empower themselves through punk rock music which is dominated by males. This study is descriptive analytical study, which applies the concepts of Performativity by Judith Butler and Female Masculinity by Judith Halberstam to see how women identities are constructed through the main character, Emily, a tomboy girl in searching and negotiating her identity as female punk rock vocalist to reach her dream as the first female Rock God. The tomboy main character utilizes her female masculinity in order to be recognized and accepted in punk rock band community. The female masculinity indicates that gender roles are social construction, which is shaped through performativity. The concept of female masculinity, which is offered by this novel, is one of the strategies to construct women identities and an alternative for women to empower themselves in males dominated community and also to deconstruct gender roles, which is considered fixed and stable.

Keywords: Identity, Gender Roles, Performativity, Female Masculinity, Punk Rock, Rock God

Abstrak

Budaya patriarki menciptakan ketidaksetaraan dalam peran gender. Wanita diposisikan sebagai subordinat yang harus mengalah kepada peran laki-laki yang lebih mendominasi. Beragam stereotipe dan stigma melekat pada wanita, di antaranya adalah anggapan bahwa wanita lemah, pasif, bergantung kepada laki-laki, dan tidak bisa apa-apa. Budaya patriarki memiliki kerangka dan nilai aturan yang kaku. Wanita yang melanggar aturan dan nilai-nilai itu akan mendapat

sanksi sosial, seperti ejekan, pelecehan dan marginalisasi. Sebagai sebuah subkultur, budaya *punk* menantang semua aturan dan nilai budaya patriarkal sebagai budaya mainstream juga tidak terlepas dari ketidaksetaraan gender yang dibangun dari stereotip dan stigma tersebut. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menunjukkan bagaimana wanita dalam komunitas *punk* membangun identitas mereka dan memperkuat identitas tersebut melalui musik *punk rock* yang didominasi oleh laki-laki. Penelitian ini berdesain studi deskriptif-analitis dengan menerapkan konsep performativitas oleh Judith Butler dan maskulinitas wanita oleh Judith Halberstam untuk meninjau bagaimana identitas wanita dibentuk melalui karakter utama, Emily, seorang gadis tomboy yang tengah mencari dan merenungi identitasnya sebagai vokalis wanita *band punk rock* untuk meraih cita-citanya sebagai *Rock God* wanita pertama. Karakter utama yang tomboy tersebut memanfaatkan maskulinitasnya untuk dikenal dan diterima di dalam komunitas *band punk rock*. Maskulinitas wanita tersebut menandakan bahwa peran gender adalah konstruksi sosial yang dibentuk melalui performativitas. Konsep dari maskulinitas wanita yang menjadi isu utama novel tersebut adalah salah satu strategi untuk membangun identitas wanita dan menjadi sebuah alternatif bagi wanita untuk memperkuat diri mereka sendiri di dalam komunitas yang didominasi oleh laki-laki. Selain itu, maskulinitas wanita juga dapat difungsikan untuk meruntuhkan peran gender yang selama ini dianggap pasti dan stabil.

Kata Kunci: Identitas, Peran Gender, Performativitas, Maskulinitas Wanita, Punk Rock, Rock God

INTRODUCTION

Gender dichotomy in patriarchal system creates inequality in gender roles. The masculine is positioned as the dominant, and the feminine is the subordinate. The dominant, then, is viewed as the stronger, the more powerful, aggressive, independent, and most of the time, successful one. On the contrary, the subordinate is considered as the weaker, dependent, passive, and unfortunately, less successful one. These stereotypes and stigmas are not only existing in mainstream culture, but also existing in subculture like punk culture, which is claimed as the rebellion movement to the mainstream culture. Punk is a subculture who produced a no-sense noise in the middle of life crisis in 1970s through their Do-it-Yourself (DIY) lifestyle such as trashy cut-up clothes, spiky hair, pogo dance, the rebellion (Hebdige, 1979:114). Punk noise voices anti-mainstream, anti-establishment, anti-status quo, the anti-institutional and anti-religious idea as a form of deconstruction of mainstream tradition. Carrying out the action, they choose to make anarchy action to liberate themselves from the marginalized group. Even though in theory, punk opposes norms and values of the mainstream culture, but in reality, punk adopts many gender codes and conventions of the mainstream culture. Since the male punk outnumbers the female ones, it is their definition of punk subculture that focuses on masculinity aspects that prevails. In effect, the failure to meet the standard of punk masculinity by the opposite gender can lead to the marginalization, oppression, and the most extreme one, the expulsion from the community.

Music, specifically punk rock is one of the media through which punk subculture voices their aspiration and rebellion to the mainstream culture. Like all other aspects in punk subculture, punk rock music is also dominated by male

musicians. It is one of harsh music genre which is produces a fast and loud music tone that accompanied by the electric guitar and the screaming without melodizing the songs of the vocalist's harsh timbre voice. Electric guitar itself presents as men instrument which is tend to be the emblematic symbol of masculinity (Bayton, 1997:37). They also perform brutal actions in their performance. Hence, punk rock performances can construct a masculine image for the person who performs it (Griffin, 2012:67), as brutality is often identified with masculine traits and behaviors.

In the midst of the male punk existence in performing punk rock music, there was a youth female movement fighting for their position in punk rock music community which was called as *Riot Grrrls*. *Riot Grrrls* is a social movement of female youth culture that combines feminist consciousness and punk aesthetics, politics and style (Garrison, 2000:142). They were groups of female punk which try to equalize their position in punk community through punk rock music performances. In a dominated punk rock music scene, female punk musicians' voice are hidden and overlooked. Despite the fact that women position in punk subculture is relatively more equal to those gender counterparts if it is compared to its position in the mainstream culture, yet by ignoring their voices and underestimate their passion and talent along with male punk community's rejection of female punk rock performances in punk rock music, it is an obvious indication that they still experience gender discrimination and oppression. *Riot Grrrls* started their movement to reject gender oppression in female punk community by using masculine codes as a tool of their movement without problematizing how this female movement uses masculine performativity like performing punk rock music, applying masculine attributes, and doing masculine behavior, to challenge the social construction of gender (Kearney, 1995b:89). In other words, *Riot Grrrls* is the reflection of female punk struggle to explore their passion, be accepted and for the most important part, be successful as female *Rock God*.

Several researches about *Riot Grrrls* movement and gender identity have been conducted by several researchers, particularly in feminist and gender studies. By using ethnographic method, Kearney (1995a) examined the collective identity constructed by *Riot Grrrls* movement through applying anti-fashion style, performing Punk Rock band (Women in Rock or Punkettes), and persuading feminist separatism among women inside and outside punk rock community by creating *Riot Grrrls*zines. They persuaded women to emphasize femininity in adulthood in order to counter the ironic display of gender and generation in female youth culture. As a result, they can liberate and empower themselves as the counter-cultural movement of patriarchal corporate capitalist by reformulating the adolescent girlhood into a powerful movement of political identity.

Conducting auto-ethnographic study and deploying Butler's performativity, Griffin (2012) explored the themes of the body, gendered performativity, and gendered spatiality. She found that punk attempts to resist oppressive within gendered and make a renegotiation the notions of masculinity and femininity in punk performativity. In addition, Griffin found punk scene has provided spaces where dominant and negative gendered relations can be challenged, and it can explore the new identity for feminine group in attempts to reject oppressive aspects of mainstream society. Examining *Hunger Games* Series by Suzanne Collins

through the lens of Halberstam and Gardiner's Female Masculinity, Parvarthi (2017) analyzed male and female characters actions as competitors, which reflect masculinity and power. She found that almost all female characters perform masculine actions to gain freedom and superiority. They also gain power which is associated with masculine traits by imitating the hegemonic masculine performances.

Differing from the previous related studies, this study aims to reveal the construction of women identity construction in punk subculture, which focuses on Emily, the main character of a punk feminist novel by Stephanie Kuehnert entitled *I Wannabe Your Joey Ramone*. The novel tells a story about a young female punk rock musician who becomes the victim of gender oppression in punk community, but struggling hard to free herself and her female fellows from male punk domination. She encounters bullies, oppression, and discrimination from her punk community members as she struggles to construct her gender identity to gain power and social privilege through her performance as a famous punk rock band vocalist. By adopting and performing female masculinity, she is able to negotiate and construct her gender identity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses descriptive analytical method to reveal the gender construction within the main character's gender identity, and how she gains power and privilege through masculine performativity. First, we examine the external and the internal factors which influence the main character's identity construction. Then, we analyze the data by deploying gender performativity theory by Judith Butler to reveal Emily's gender construction through the repetitive acts and performances. Since Emily got used to masculine performances, this study will borrow the concept of female masculinity by Judith Halberstam to analyze how masculinity is performed by women to gain power and privilege in the male dominated society.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Emily was a female punk who proudly constructed her gender identity as a tomboy girl. The construction of her tomboy identity was influenced by some external factors such as family, society and punk community, and the phenomenon of *Riot Grrrl* movement in 1990s. Family was one of crucial factors which affected Emily's gender identity as a tomboy. Parents usually teach their children the concept of sex and gender including how they behave based on their biological sex that becomes the basic framework to assign their gender identity that is culturally held by society. Unfortunately, as a girl, she lacked of femininity exposure as her mother left her when she was 4 months old. Instead, she was deeply affected by her father masculine upbringing. Michael repeatedly introduced Emily to the development of punk rock music, punk rock recordings, and taught her how to play a guitar which exited Emily's interest in punk rock music. "The basement held crates and crates of other records, as I grew older, that became the place I ran to immediately after dinner" (Kuehnert, 2008:8). The basement became Emily's favorite place because she would find some gorgeous rock music records which influenced her to be the female *Rock God*. It was also a place where Michael always motivated Emily to follow her passion in punk rock music. "I'd been Daddy's little girl, and all that mattered to me was making him smile, which

he did most when I sang or mastered a new song guitar” (Kuehnert, 2008:33). Michael also attuned Emily to masculine attributes, but he failed to familiarize feminine traits such as feminine outfits to her. As a result of her father’s treatment, Emily preferred to enact masculine performances and attributes rather than feminine ones. In this case, Michael reflected how father’s figure constructed masculinity within their child’s gender identity through masculine performativity (Halberstam, 1998:2).

Indirectly, Michael transformed the energy of punk rock music to construct her daughter’s gender identity to be more masculine. In fact, Emily’s masculine performances proved that gender is not what one is but what one does. In this sense gender is a condition one enacts. Therefore, gender is not a stable identity from which various acts proceed, rather it is an identity constituted through a stylized repetition of acts (Butler, 1990). In spite her biological sex as a female, who must perform femininity by the heteronormativity codes and conventions, yet through her masculine “stylized repetition of acts,” she was not only violate the social construction of gender, but also attest that gender identity is unstable, fluid, and fragmented. It was also evidence that family roles represented by father’s dominant nurture and the absence of mother’s figure, became one of the major factors which heavily influence the construction of a child’s gender identity, in this case Emily’s masculine identity (tomboy).

Her passion to punk rock music and her strong determination to be the first female *Rock God* in punk rock music community led her to establish a female punk rock band. Unfortunately, her efforts met strong rejection from male punk members. She was bullied, insulted, and humiliated not only by male punk musicians, but also her teacher and her classmates for the fact that she was a woman above of all. Even though she had been intensely involved in punk community since she was 14 years old by joining in River’s Edge—a legitimate punk music club which created an intricate underground punk rock network—she still only regarded as “slut” who slept with any *Rock God*. “Awwww, you’re in a band, huh? Do you play an instrument? Do you sing as good as you suck dick? Do you—Ahhhh! Jesus Christ!” he wailed after my fist slammed into his face (Kuehnert, 2008:49). Emily was underestimated and bullied by the male punk musicians and enthusiasts who assumed her as merely as a groupie—young woman who follow her favorite band to have sex with band members—with no musical talent except having sex with them. However, Emily did not stay quiet. Instead, she tried to resist the male domination by punching the man’s face.

Her resistance toward male domination could also be traced by the way she behaved. The performances shaped their identity by identifying someone’s attitude, gesture, language, and all manners symbolic of the actor that would be seen in their performances in social reality (Butler, 1988:519). Emily often showed some behaviors which opposed her biological sex as a girl such as doing some rude actions and expressions, denoting some harsh words, and doing some mischievous activities, climbing tress and smoking that was commonly performed by boys. In Emily’s case, those masculine performances could be considered as a complaint for traditional femininity and male dominated society, and the resistance of the adulthood itself (Halberstam, 1998:6), but the most important notion is that it is the act of performing gender repeatedly which constitute who we are (Butler, 1994). In other word, Emily’s

gender identity is determined by her repetitive acts of masculine traits and behavior that she performs in the society, since identity itself is an illusion created by our performance (Butler, 1990).

Her resistance toward male domination was also incarnated in the establishment of her band, which she called “She Laughs” as a representation of a female punk band which did take no shit in the middle of punk male oppression at the age of 16 in 1993 at the time when *Riot Grrrls* started their movement in 1990s. Inspired by the spirit of *Riot Grrrls*, she, who always been a victim of male domination in punk rock musicianship since “girl was always being oppressed by patriarchal and capitalist system that robs their existence in society” (Wright, 2016:53), had a turning point and made a crucial decision to claim equal right to be the future *Rock God* in order to reject the oppression from punk community which still strongly held patriarchal norms and values in treating and positioning women. She voiced her aspiration and rebellion through her song lyrics, “Play it harder, Play it faster. Louder. Harder. Faster. So loud hard fast that I forget your name. After all, did I even know it in the first place?” (Kuehnert, 2008:11). Moreover, her song lyrics express Emily’s power standpoints which contain shared opinions and actions to oppose the dominant culture ideologies (Wright, 2016:53). “Harder” and “Faster” indicated the incitement for other female punk to resist the gender oppression in punk community.

Emily’s tomboyish and her passion to punk rock music, which tended to exercise all aspects of masculinity, had a great contribution in influencing Emily to perform masculinity instead of femininity that suits her gender roles. For instance, she always performed brutal action such as screaming and playing fast power chords with her electric guitar in her punk rock music performances on stage just to prove that she could perform punk rock music better than the punk rock male musicians. “I relied on fast power chords, and Regan concerned herself with volume over accuracy when it came to drumming. I didn’t sing, I screamed like the victim in a slasher movie. We had melodic influences, but we ignored them” (Kuehnert, 2008:85).

Mostly, the positions of the lead singer or the guitarist in punk rock band will be taken by punk male because they can produce a deeper voice with a harsh, abrasive timbre, and the severe voice of guitar electric can also create the image of masculine performativity (Leonard in Bodansky, 2013:32). However, Emily proudly undertook these masculine performances by being the vocalist and the guitarist of her band. She possessed a deeper voice and an amazing musical technique in playing electric guitar, which is considered as masculine musical instrument. In this performativity, it is possible to have “masculine traits” in a female body in social practice based on the actor’s performances without seeing the biological sex of the person (Butler, 1990:7— 10). She had a freedom to choose and to construct her own gender identity, even though to realize it, she must violate the norms and values of heteronormativity, which stated that masculine performativity could only perform by the male and vice versa. Her persistent efforts to embrace masculine attributes and transform masculinity within herself, repeated the masculine acts her whole life, and kept her spirit and determination to empower not only herself, but also her female friends, were parts of her resistances towards gender oppression and discrimination within punk

community experienced by female punk. Furthermore, Emily performativity practices through utilizing punk rock music were not only functioning as a tool to construct her gender identity, but also to gain “her power inheritance and social privilege” (Halberstam, 1998:2), which was to be accepted and recognized as punk rock musician as well as female *Rock God*.

CONCLUSION

In this novel, family and punk music community were the crucial factors in constructing Emily’s gender identity as a tomboy girl. The lack of mother’s presence and the father’s roles domination influenced Emily’s gender identity construction and performativity. Through hard working, self-determination and performing masculine performativity, Emily succeeded to gain power by transforming her position from merely a groupie to become the first female *Rock God* in punk rock music scene, which was dominated by punk rock music musicians, and to obtain social privilege as a *Rock God* of her own fronted-female band, which flourished her self-motivation and self-independence to dominate the punk music community, and negotiated the rigidly framework of heteronormativity. Through her music, she liberated herself from male domination and became the representation of punk girl who deserved the acceptance and the recognition from the punk community.

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