

# Ava's Gender Performativity in Lili Wilkinson's *Pink*

Vanny Bintang Pratiwi

Usma Nur Dian Rosyidah

*English Department, Universitas Airlangga*

## **Abstract**

The present study attempts to reveal the negotiation of the main character's gender performativity towards heteronormativity which is depicted on Lili Wilkinson's *Pink*. By using this novel, the study investigates the main character namely Ava Simpson who is classified as a lesbian and wants to cover her lesbian identity in her new school. The study uses queer theory especially for the notion of gender performativity. The understanding of gender performativity is mostly taken from Judith Butler's idea. By doing a close-reading method of qualitative research, the data collected is from both the novel as the primary source and other reliable sources as the secondary source. The data is analyzed by revealing the issue and examining Ava's gender performativity towards heteronormativity. In the investigation, it is discovered that as a lesbian who used to wear black clothes, Ava keeps negotiating with the heteronormativity by changing her daily performance to become more girly with pink color.

**Keywords:** Heteronormativity; Negotiation; Performativity.

---

## **1. Introduction**

Humans were born distinguished by two things; that is based on their sex and their gender. Sexual categories related to biological status determined genitally are categorized as male, female or intersex. However, gender relates to attitude, feelings, and behaviors which is associated with a person's biological sex. Usually, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors start from a social construction influenced by the surrounding society. As an example, there is a construction stating that a female should be feminine while a male should be masculine and it is called as a gender role.

Gender is a cultural concept between feminine and masculine that has been created by social construction rather than by biological aspects but done through construction and formation of humans themselves. Three gender ideologies have created various social constructions within their process. Social construction proceeds through tradition so people are unconscious about what has happened because it is made by humans. In this case, gender is generated by the influences of the social environment. Every human in this world always has a norm to live their everyday life and they get norms from their parents, schools, society, etc.

Gender is the result of individual performances done repeatedly until it becomes recognized. It means that someone can choose her or his gender attribute based on his or her personal willingness. However, someone's daily performance is not only based on someone's personal willingness but also based on the social norms in his or her society. As an example, when a girl goes to school, she must wear a skirt even though she feels more comfortable with her trousers. It means that school has a norm that should be followed by the students. The example above relates to heteronormativity phenomenon that often happens in daily life.

Heteronormativity is a norm or belief which requires a good couple to be based on heterosexual norms. Moreover, as well as it should be, females have to be feminine and males have to be masculine. However, queer theory focuses on "mismatches" between sex, gender, and desire. Queer has been associated with heteronormativity because queer is a term that is contrary to heteronormativity.

The phenomenon of negotiation in a heteronormative society, in fact, is also able to be seen through a novel written by Lili Wilkinson entitled *Pink*. This novel has won Stonewall Award Honor book for children and young adult books in 2012. Moreover, the author, Lili Wilkinson was awarded The Barbara

Jefferis Award in 2010. *Pink* talks about how Ava Simpson (the main character in this novel) faces a problem related to her lesbianism and her choices of daily performance.

From the explanation above, the writer is interested to analyze this novel, *Pink*, written by Lili Wilkinson as the object of her study. Since the writer focuses on Ava's daily performance negotiation toward heteronormativity, the writer will use gender as performance and performativity theory by Judith Butler as the approach in analyzing this novel.

Performativity relates to the heteronormativity issue and it is able to be said that performativity connects with a person's effort to be accepted in their hetero society by changing his or her original appearance. In this way, performativity reverses the idea that an identity is about a person's actions in gesture and speech. According to Judith Butler, she states that gender performativity actually wants to show their family history instead of hiding it by replacing heterocentric assumptions and reveal their heterosexual identities in which those are just construction, unoriginal and imitations of themselves. (Salih 55)

There are three related studies which use the *Pink* novel as the main source. The first study entitles "*Pink and the Queer Heterotopia*" written by Lili Wilkinson, then, the second study entitles "*Shy, Gentle Kisses and Soft, Sweet Cuddles: the Sex Lives of Lesbian Teenagers Versus Gay Male Teenagers in YA Literature*" written by Dr. B. J. Epstein, and the last study entitles "*Neither Very Bi Nor Particularly Sexual: The Essence of the Bisexual in Young Adult Literature*" which written by Bonnie Kneen. Those studies analyze the same novel used by the writer but the difference between those studies and this study is on the theory used.

Based on the background of the study, the writer proposes statements of the problems are formulated as follow:

1. How is Ava's daily performance?
2. How does Ava negotiate with heteronormativity of her society?

## **2. Discussion**

The writer of this study chooses a novel by Lili Wilkinson entitled *Pink* and published by Harper Collins in 2009 to be analyzed. In writing this novel, Wilkinson was basically inspired by her own experience with her friends. The story of this novel is about Ava, a sixteen years old girl who is a lesbian trying to change everything about her personality and sexual orientation at her new school by wearing pink clothes to cover her lesbian identity. Since the novel contains gender performativity issue, the writer analyzes it using the framework of queer literary criticism about gender performativity and challenging the heteronormativity. In this chapter, the writer divides the analysis into two sub-chapters. In the first sub-chapter, the writer analyzes the main character's daily performance. In the second sub-chapter, the writer analyzes the main character's negotiation in facing a heteronormative society that becomes the main point of this study.

### **2.1. Ava's daily performance**

There is a certain form of sexual expression that in a lesbian couple they are marginalized as a butch-femme lesbian. Butch-femme couples resemble heterosexual couples in terms of clothing, grooming, and personal style (Tyson 335). Butch-femme identity is often characterized by differences in physical appearance and also associated with gender-typical behavior. Consequently, that butch-femme relationship exists in mimicry of heterosexual gender roles. Butch is shown as being masculine while femme as being feminine and if that person has both roles between butch and femme it can be called as an androgynous (Levitt and Hiestand). Their masculine and feminine appearance made them feel more comfortable and help them to attract partners.

The masculine and feminine appearances are portrayed in the two characters of this novel, namely Ava and Chloe. Thus, Ava can be recognized as a masculine. The masculine style of Ava is also explained in the novel.

I wore a reasonably unchanging wardrobe of black jeans and black tops-black tanks in summer and a grandpa cardigan in winter. (7)

It is explained previously that Ava dresses up like a masculine person, or it is said that Ava behaves as a butch, which is well known that butches are wearing men's clothes and adopting traditional gender roles as being masculine men. In traditional gender roles, describe men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; while women are oppositely described as the opposition above of men, namely emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. (Tyson 85)

## 2.2. Ava's negotiation towards heteronormativity

In this subchapter, the writer attempts to discuss Ava's negotiation toward heteronormativity. By living in a hetero society, it can be a challenge for Ava who realizes herself as a lesbian. There is a conflict inside herself that she does not want other people to know about her identity while she also wants to adapt and be accepted in her surroundings in which these things make her doing negotiation. By doing her negotiation, Ava has any effort that help her to negotiate in her heteronormative society, such as when Ava tries to observed her new society and considering what a good manner that she should behave, which is a manner related to the how Ava find a new friend and how she dressed up in Billy Hughes School. Accordingly, in order to reveal Ava's negotiation, the writer divides the discussion into three aspects; Ava's Society, Ava's Relationship, and Ava's Fashion Style.

## 2.3. Ava's physical appearances

In this sub-chapter will deeply explain how Ava dressed up in her new school. The fashion style of Ava in her new school is different from before, it is because the process of her appearance changes is a part of Ava's negotiation toward heteronormativity. In the first time Ava comes in Billy Hughes School, she tries to differentiate some behavior between her old school and Billy Hughes School. Ava also observes the physical appearances of all Billy Hughes students.

All of the other kids at Billy Hughes wore fitted jeans or just-above-the-knee skirts. There was plenty of white and pink and blue and even some green and the occasional splash of red. But nobody wore black. (20)

The first part of this novel introduces Ava always wearing everything whose color is black. However, after she observes about all of Billy Hughes' students' styles, she realizes that she is unable to dress like that in Billy Hughes. There is no student at Billy Hughes School who wears black clothes. That makes Ava lack self-confident to wear black clothes in Billy Hughes.

She smelled like summer and apples and honeysuckle. I wanted to be her. (23)

Ava realizes that she is different from them so Ava tries to imitate their physical appearances. From that sentence, it shows that Ava wants to imitate her friend's appearances.

The imitation process of gender appearances relates to the Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* that reality on gender are created by the sustained social performances that they were significant and not separated from agents, or actors, preceding the performances as in the theatrical model. (21)

The theatrical sense here is presented by Billy Hughes' society while Ava is an actor who tries to imitate appearances of her friends.

For the first time Ava attends Billy Hughes, she wants to be accepted with her ordinary appearance but after Ava meets Alexis and another friend in Billy Hughes she thinks that she has to cover her lesbian identity. It happens because she realizes her lesbian identity stays against the norms accepted by her heteronormative society, particularly in Billy Hughes. Thus, Ava really wants to change her appearance in her new school because Ava does not want other people to know about her identity. Otherwise, she also wants to adapt and be accepted for her surroundings.

In the process of her negotiation, Ava tries to conform to gender stereotypes in her community. From birth, children start to learn about some gender stereotypes and roles from their parents and the environment. Some parents raise their children by teaching some stereotypes simply through specific toys given to their children based on their gender.

I never wore pink. Pink wasn't cool.

Pink wasn't existential. Pink was for princess and ballet shoes and glittery fairies.

When I was five, I only wore pink. Pink everything, from my undress to my socks to my little frilly dresses to my Flik Flak watch...

All my toys were pink. I only used pink pencils. I insisted on having my bedroom painted pink. (6)

From that quotation above, it shows that Ava has a stereotypical view expecting that a little girl always imagines herself as a princess and dresses according to their gender norm.

Gender stereotypes are also related to the gender construction which is constructed by the society that women have to be feminine and men have to be masculine. The categorization of feminine and masculine are relative because it depends on society's judgment. In this novel, there is a gender stereotype from Ava's gaze that she makes some gender stereotypes for all of the students.

Alexis sprang to her feet. "Ethan."

Vivian nodded and smiled. "Ethan."

Ella-Grace winked at me. "Ethan."

This was all going very fast. "Who is Ethan?" I asked.

"Tall," said Alexis. "Handsome. Athletic. Academically solid. *Very* eligible".... (24)

From that quotation, it reflects that the students of Billy Hughes School have their own perception about a man who is masculine. They require that a masculine man has to be handsome, athletic, and smart because they think physically attractive does not complete without having intelligence.

Her name was Josie, and she had almost-white blond hair kept neatly in place with a shiny red headband. Her lips and fingernails were painted the same shade of red, and she was wearing far too much makeup. (17)

The evidence is also one example of another gender stereotype depicted in this novel that it is about a woman who is categorized as feminine. That explanation about her friend point of view makes Ava conclude that gender stereotype of her Billy Hughes friend should be like that. After all of her observation of her friends' gender stereotype, Ava determines which manner that is considered appropriate to perform in Billy Hughes in order to make an adaptation in her new environment.

To be accepted by the society, Ava negotiates with the norms applied in her society. Ava tries to change her performance and it starts from the changing of her daily physical appearance by selecting a pink color for her school clothes.

I rubbed the soft wool against my cheek and then stood in front of the mirror, holding the sweater against my body. I didn't need to put it on I knew it fit perfectly. I knew because I'd tried it on at the shop. And it was so beautiful, so soft, so . . . pink. I just had to buy it. (6)

Ava thinks that it is better for her to try dressing like a girly girl in general. Ava has her own perception about girly-girl appearance and she thinks that girly girl always relates to the pink color. There is evidence about Ava's opinion of pink color.

Pink was for girls.

Girly girls who wore flavored lip gloss and read magazines and talked on the phone lying on their perfect, lacy bed-spreads with their feet in the air. Girls who spent six months looking for the perfect dress to wear to the school formal.

Girls who liked boys. (7)

Girly girl is usually known as a slang term for a girl or woman who dresses and behaves femininely. The feminine style relates to the wearing pink color, using make-up, using perfume, dressing in skirts, dresses and blouses, and talking about relationships and other activities which are associated with the traditional gender role of a girl (Duits 141). The term girly girl of Ava's perception relates to the Duits' argument about a girly girl. In this novel, Ava says that girly girl is a girl who is flavored lip-gloss and Duits also says that girly girl is a girl who is wearing makeup. By looking at the notion above, it shows that Ava is considered that she is not a real girly girl.

The first part of Ava's negotiation in Billy Hughes is the imitating process of being a girly girl. Ava realizes that firstly she has to change her appearance in which previously she used to wear anything in black color. Ava chooses a pink color because she thinks that pink color is a sign of femininity as well it relates to Koller's argument that pink color is associated with 'blossom and flowers' or likely to be sweetness, softness, and delicacy. (Koller 410)

As I walked up the gravel drive, I felt like a princess. I was a Cinderella, finally out of the cellar and off to the ball. I'd spent all my Christmas money on clothes and wore new jeans and a fitted white shirt under my beautiful pink argyle cashmere sweater. (13)

That quotation explains about the first time when Ava wears pink clothes in her new school, Ava feels that she looks like a Cinderella figure concerning that Cinderella is characterized as beautiful, soft, nurturing, and submissive. Cinderella's character is similar to a description of a woman in traditional gender role. Ava feels that she is more feminine than before, as explained in the first sub-chapter that Ava's daily performance in her old school does not look like feminine as in Billy Hughes. In the first sub-chapter, it also mentions that Ava becomes a butch in her relationship with Chloe. The butch character relates to a masculine man and this character is the opposite of feminine character, the thing that Ava does in Billy Hughes School.

#### 2.4. Ava's Behavior

In this sub-chapter will deeply explain how Ava tries to get acquainted with some of her new friends in the school, then she has two groups, one is a Pastels and another is a Stage-crew. The first time she makes friendship is with Pastels, it happens when Alexis visit Ava and she introduces herself and another her friends.

Ava interested to be a member of Pastels rather than Stage-crew, because Ava thinks that the appearance and behavior of people in Pastel are more feminine and good-looking, the characterization of them is suitable with Ava's performance plan. The shreds of evidence people in pastels are:

There were three petite, perfect girls:

Alexis with her pixie blondness; Vivian, a sleek and sophisticated Malaysian girl with the most beautifully manicured fingernails I'd ever seen; and Ella-Grace, the girl with brown braids who spoke French and Japanese. I felt like a great clomping dirty giant next to them. (21)

From the quotation above, it shows that the process of Ava in making friends with Pastels becomes the first part of Ava's negotiation. As stated before that Ava wants to cover her lesbian identity and try to be more different from her in the past. The quotation is also one example of a gender stereotype depicted in this novel that it is about a woman who is categorized as feminine. Ava realizes that Pastels is a group of people who match with Ava's expectation, such as a girly girl.

In addition, Ava also has some friends from Stage-crew, it happens when Ava was failing to follow the audition and she chooses to participate in the Stage-crew.

Jules introduced me to others.

The geeky girl was Jen. She gave me a friendly, metal-filled grin and some sort of strange salute that I thought might be from *Star Trek*. The fat, curly-haired boy with the dorky glasses was Jacob, and the Asian boy was Kobe. The redheaded boy was Sam. (56)

The quotation above, explains that Ava is more refers to being friends with Pastels, not Stage-crew. It because the character of Stage-crew members is identical with having big physic and the task is considered as a tough job that requires muscle strength so that Ava feels uncomfortable to keep in touch of anything about Stage-crew. It does so because Ava wants to avoid looking so masculine that her negotiation as a girly girl may become failed. Moreover, there is evidence that Ava always thinks about Pastels and their lifestyle even though she is being with Stage-crew.

The others chatted amicably about school and teachers, but I was far too busy sulking to really listen. Anyway, I was not here to make new friends. I had plenty of friends already. Nice friends. Who dressed well and took some pride in personal grooming. I was just here so I could hang out with Alexis and Ethan and the others at lunchtime. (58)

Moreover, in this novel also shown that the students have the concept that their relationship should be a heterosexual relationship I expected as the natural aspect of human life or it can be called as a heteronormative. Moreover, students also have the concept that their relationship has to follow heterosexual which is between man and woman and it is portrayed in the novel when Pastels try to match Ava with a man in Billy Hughes.

"So is there someone special?" asked Ella-Grace...

"No," I said at last. "No one special."

Vivian clapped her hands together. "Our first task as your new best friends!" ...

"Aaron," said Ella-Grace.

"Too emo," replied Alexis.

"Dario."

"Too short."

"Luke."

"Gay."... (24)

From the quotation above, it shows that Ava's friends try to match Ava with some boys in Billy Hughes because, as a new student in Billy Hughes, Ava does not have a boyfriend yet. It implies that Ava's friends' mindset is dominated by heterosexual. Especially, when some of Ava's new friends match Ava with Luke, they disagree because Luke is labeled as a gay by Ava's friends.

As stated before that Ava has held coming-out in her old society, such as her family and her school. The coming-out process consists of many stages, and the process is not exactly the same for each person. The coming-out process does not solve any individual's problems because the process is not as simple as they declare that they are homosexual but the coming-out is also a process to make them acceptable as a homosexuality in the society. (Butler 124)

Ava as a new student in Billy Hughes School, Ava tries to get acquainted with some of her new friends in the school, then she has two groups, one is a pastel and another is a Stage-crew. In these two groups, Ava finds that they are homophobic.

I didn't feel entirely comfortable with this conversation. It sounded like Jules was being homophobic and possibly misogynistic as well. (71)

Alexis scoffed. "That is so *gay*."

I jumped a little. It wasn't like she was saying it to be homophobic, but it was still kind of offensive. (120) Therefore, in Billy Hughes School Ava does not do coming-out yet because the novel shows that homophobia influences Billy Hughes' students, especially Ava's new friends. The evidence telling Ava does not do coming-out yet is shown when Chloe asks about how Ava passes her days over in Billy Hughes.

I chewed my bottom lip for a moment, then looked up at her. "I haven't come out at Billy Hughes. They don't know about me. About you." (174)

That quotation means that Ava has not come out yet because she feels comfortable with her new friend. Ava does not let her friends know about her true identity. Ava prefers to cover her lesbian identity rather than to discover it by having coming-out as a lesbian in her friends.

After all of her appearance changes, then it is followed by the changing of her point of view about romance. Ava, who is a lesbian, also tries to have a boyfriend. Through this negotiation, Ava really wants to be considered as a heterosexual person.

For a moment, I forgot about the pink sweater and exploring the possibility of maybe thinking about perhaps sort of Liking Boys. (16)

That explanation relates to Butler's suggestion that heterosexuality is a matter of imitation and parody, rather than a natural product of sexed and gendered bodies and, as such, it is essentially unstable. Indeed,

it is an instability that enables the possibility of resistance and changes in her account. Butler also draws on the insights of gay and lesbian sexuality, and desire, to suggest that reproductive heterosexuality is a normative ideal and, as such, fictional. (117)

My phone chimed and I flipped it open. It was a text from Alexis: -Ethan is extra-hot today. I think it's your influence!-

I smiled and snapped the phone shut.

"Your boyfriend?" Sam asked.

How did he know about Ethan? People must be talking about us. If people were talking, that meant that it wasn't all in my head. Something was happening between me and Ethan. I shrugged and smiled. (177)

That quotation is the reflection when Ava feels happy because already know that almost all people notice her as a heterosexual person. Ava also thinks that she was a success to negotiate toward hetero-norm in her new society, and it is done by covering her lesbian identity.

### **3. Conclusion**

From the data that have been gathered to be analyzed, the writer draws the conclusion to answers the statements of the problem. In this novel, Ava's daily performance is clearly pictured as a lesbian and she has a girlfriend namely Chloe. In the analysis above, it is explained that Ava becomes a butch in her relationship with Chloe. Butch identity always relates to the behavior of a masculine man, because butch-femme relationship imitates the traditional gender roles, which is butch as a masculine while femme as a feminine. In this novel, it also explains that Ava used to wear black clothes before she went to Billy Hughes School, and she used to behave like masculine men.

After Ava moves to Billy Hughes School, Ava does some changes with her appearance in order to be physically recognized as feminine by changing her daily appearance with pink color which is known that pink color always relates with femininity. In this case, Ava tries to adjust herself with the norm of hetero society by doing some appropriate behaviors to become a feminine woman and find a boyfriend in order to cover her lesbian identity from her surroundings society.

In order to be succeeding both to be accepted and to cover herself as lesbian, Ava changes herself both in appearance and in performance. In appearance, Ava tends to use anything in pink color in Billy Hughes which previously she loves to wear black. In performance, Ava tends to avoid any activity In Billy Hughes that looks so masculine such as joining stage crew and she also starts to search for a boyfriend. All of Ava's efforts are done to point herself to look more feminine than before in which society will label her as totally girl adapting heteronormativity or simply to be recognized as a straight girl.

The norm applied in a society that is heteronormativity and Ava's true identity as a lesbian make her doing negotiation as mentioned previously. Ava is afraid that people in Billy Hughes will stay away from her because she is a lesbian but she is unable to change her identity as a hetero girl and she wants to be recognized as a part of her hetero society. The condition makes Ava negotiates with the norm applied and covering herself that does not follow the norm. Thus, Ava pretends to act like a hetero girl that is mostly described femininely. However, Ava's effort to negotiate does not succeed because her girlfriend namely Chloe presents to all of Ava's Billy Hughes friends and admit their relationship in front of Ava's friends. Chloe's action makes Ava's effort in doing negotiation in order to be accepted as a hetero girl and cover her lesbian identity breaks down. After all of her friend knows that Ava is a lesbian, Ava becomes accepted as her lesbian identity.

### **4. Works Cited**

- Bressler, Charles E. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*--4th ed. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- . *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

- Creswell, John W. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. United States: Sage Publications, 2009.
- Duits, Linda. *Multi Girl Culture: an Ethnography of Doing Identity*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2008.
- Epstein, B. J. "Shy, Gentle Kisses and Soft, Sweet Cuddles: The Sex Lives of Lesbian Teenagers versus Gay Male Teenagers in YA Literature." *Write 4 Children* (2012): 17-26.
- Fakultas Ilmu Budaya. *Pedoman Penulisan Skripsi, Tugas Akhir, dan Artikel Ilmiah*. Surabaya: Universitas Airlangga, 2012.
- Istarlev, Arlene. "How Queer: The Development of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation in LGBTQ Headed Families." *Family Process* (2010).
- Kneen, Bonnie. "Neither Very Ni Nor Particularly Sexual: The essence of the Bisexual in Young Adult Literature." *Children's Literature in Education* (2014).
- Koller, Veronika. "Not Just a Colour': Pink as a Gender and Sexuality Marker in Visual Communication." *SAGE Publications* (2008): 395-423.
- Lee, Atticus. "The Role of Butch/Femme Relationships in Transgender Activism: A Codependent Mutualism." *Stanford University* (2009): 18-23.
- Schmitt, Kaci. *Exploring Dress and Behavior of the Emo Subculture*. Dissertation, Theses and Capstone Project. Kennesaw: Kennesaw State University, 2011.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide--2nd*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006.
- Wilkinson, Lili. *Pink*. Australia: Happer Teen, 2009.
- . "Pink and the Queer Heterotopia." *Write 4 Children* (2011): 17-28.
- Wilkinson, Lindsey and Jennifer Pearson. "School Culture and the Well-Being of Same-Sex-Attracted Youth." *Gender and Society* (2009): 542-568.
- Woodhouse, A. *Fantastic Women: Sex, Gender, and Transverism*. Mac. Milan: Hampshire, 1989.