

An Analysis of Gender Performativity in the Film *Lovely Man*

Herryono Soegiarto 

English Literature Département, Universitas Bumigora, Indonesia

Jl. Ismail Marzuki No.22, Cilinaya, Kecamatan Cakranegara, Kota Mataram, Nusa Tenggara Barat, 83127

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Correspondence:

Herryono Soegiarto

youreemail@mail.com

ABSTRACT

Teddy Soeriaatmadja's film *Lovely Man* (2011) presents a nuanced depiction of gender performativity through the protagonist, Ipu, a transvestite confronting societal shame while navigating his relationship with his daughter, Cahaya, who adheres to heteronormative standards. This study seeks to examine the representation of gender performativity in the film through the lens of Judith Butler's theory, which posits that gender is not an inherent quality but a construct that is perpetually enacted and negotiated within daily life. The employed research method is qualitative analysis, utilizing a critical discourse analysis methodology with an examination of representation within the film. The study's findings indicate that Ipu's gender identity is not static, but is expressed variably depending on the social setting. Within the transvestite and sex worker subculture, Ipu's gender presentation is embraced; nevertheless, in familial and broader societal contexts, his identity is repudiated and socially stigmatized. This film critiques the notion of gender binary by illustrating how Ipu, despite embracing his feminine identity, retains elements of masculinity in his paternal role. Consequently, *Lovely Man* serves as both an exploration of the intricacies of gender identification and a critique of the inflexibility of societal gender conventions.



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INTRODUCTION

In many cultures, gender is often understood within a binary framework, assuming that individuals must strictly conform to either male or female categories based on predetermined norms. Gender is a concept that extends beyond the biological differences between men and women; it is also a social construct that dictates how individuals should act, dress, and assume roles within society (Bonvillain, 2020; Mikkola, 2008; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2011). However, in social reality, numerous individuals express gender in more complex ways that cannot be confined to rigid classifications. One such group facing significant challenges in this regard is *waria* a term in Indonesia referring to individuals assigned male at birth who embody feminine gender performativity (Toomistu, 2022). Waria often embody feminine

characteristics in terms of dress, behavior, and self-expression while navigating complex social and cultural expectations (Hegarty, 2017; Monro, 2005).

One of the most compelling topics in gender theory is the concept of gender performativity. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity asserts that gender is not an essential or innate trait but rather a social construct that is continuously produced and sustained through repeated actions. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is not a fixed identity that one inherently possesses but rather something that is performed in everyday life (Butler, 2002; Butler & Trouble, 1990). This means that being male or female is not solely a biological fact but rather a product of repeated gendered practices that align with prevailing social norms.

Gender performativity operates through social conventions that compel individuals to conform to the categories of male or female. However, in practice, individuals can challenge, modify, and negotiate their gender roles. This concept dismantles the idea that gender is a static entity and instead highlights its fluid and contextual nature. By understanding gender as performative, we can see how individuals, such as *waria*, do not merely present their gender expression as a personal choice but also as a result of continuous interactions with evolving social norms. Butler's theory broadens the understanding of gender as a spectrum rather than a rigid binary, emphasizing that gender expression can also serve as a form of resistance against societal norms that limit individual autonomy in determining one's identity (Monro, 2005; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018, 2021).

Teddy Soeriaatmadja's *Lovely Man* (2011) presents a compelling narrative on the complexities of gender identity through the character of Ipu, a *waria* navigating life amidst deep-seated social stigma. As an individual expressing feminine gender identity, Ipu faces not only discrimination from the broader social environment but also an emotionally charged encounter with his daughter, Cahaya, who was raised in a heteronormative setting and holds particular expectations about her father. The encounter between Ipu and Cahaya becomes the film's focal point, as both must confront a reality that diverges from their initial perceptions (Izharuddin, 2020). For Cahaya, a father is conventionally perceived as a masculine figure, whereas for Ipu, his identity as a *waria* is an inseparable part of himself.

Through this tension-filled and emotional interaction, *Lovely Man* illustrates that gender is not an inherent or fixed trait but rather a social construct that is constantly negotiated in different contexts. Ipu's gender identity is not only demonstrated through his personal expressions such as clothing, speech, and behavior but also interacts with societal expectations that often reject diversity beyond established norms. At the same time, the film highlights how the father-child relationship can evolve beyond the gender constraints imposed by society. The mutual understanding that develops between Ipu and Cahaya is not only an emotional journey for both characters but also a reflection of how gender performativity operates in daily life and how individuals continuously negotiate their identities within social frameworks. Thus, *Lovely Man* is not merely a film about personal identity; it also serves as a critique of social constraints that often limit individuals from expressing themselves in alignment with their true identities.

In the context of *Lovely Man*, the concept of performativity can be used to analyze how Ipu expresses his gender identity as a *waria*, how his gender performativity is accepted or rejected in different social spaces, and how he still retains elements of masculinity in his interactions with Cahaya. Using a Butlerian approach, it becomes evident that Ipu's gender identity is not fixed or static but rather something that is continually negotiated and performed in various situations.

Given this background, this article aims to analyze how *Lovely Man* represents gender performativity through the character of Ipu, how his gender identity is negotiated in different social contexts, and how the film critiques the rigid and binary conceptualization of gender within society.

METHOD (FONT SIZE 12)

This study employs a qualitative analysis method using a critical discourse analysis approach and film representation analysis to understand how gender is constructed and performed in this film. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to examine how language, dialogue, and cinematic discourse in *Lovely Man* construct and negotiate gender identity, revealing how the film subverts or reinforces dominant gender norms (Fairclough, 2013). Meanwhile, film representation analysis focuses on cinematic elements such as characterization, cinematography, dialogue, and character interactions to identify how gender performativity is portrayed in various social contexts. The primary data for this study is sourced from *Lovely Man*, which is analyzed using a descriptive-interpretative approach based on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. The descriptive-interpretative approach is a qualitative research method that involves both describing and interpreting data to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Timulak & Creaner, 2022). This technique enables an in-depth examination of how the character Ipuay presents his gender identity, how the social environment responds to his gender expression, and how the film serves as a critique of the dominant binary gender concept.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Gender Identity and Performativity in Character

The film *Lovely Man* narrates the journey of Cahaya, a young Muslim woman who wears a hijab, in search of her father in Jakarta. Her father, Syaiful, turns out to be a *waria* named Ipuay, who works as a sex worker in the capital city. Within the framework of gender performativity, Ipuay's character illustrates that gender identity is not a fixed or inherent trait but rather a fluid and continuously negotiated construct.

1) Ipuay as a Representation of Gender Performativity

In *Lovely Man*, Ipuay embodies the complexity of gender performativity, demonstrating that gender identity is neither essential nor static but rather something that is repeatedly enacted and negotiated within specific social contexts and interpersonal relationships. As a *waria*, Ipuay expresses a feminine gender identity in his daily life. He wears women's clothing, applies makeup, and interacts with his surroundings using gestures and speech patterns that align with conventional notions of femininity. In the world he inhabits, this gender performativity is not merely an external display but an internalized identity that has evolved beyond the biological role assigned to him at birth. However, the complexity of his gender identity becomes more evident upon his reunion with his daughter, Cahaya. The previously severed father-daughter relationship provides space for another aspect of Ipuay's identity to emerge his masculinity, which surfaces during their interactions. As a father, Ipuay retains a protective instinct toward Cahaya, evident in his firm and authoritative tone when advising her about the harsh realities of life. At certain moments, his feminine expression seems to be overshadowed by a more dominant masculine performance, reflecting the traditional societal expectation of a father as a protector and guide.

Nevertheless, the reemergence of masculinity does not negate his *waria* identity but rather underscores the fluid and situational nature of gender. In one social space, Ipuay fully embodies his *waria* identity, embracing all attributes of femininity, while in another particularly in his interactions with Cahaya he re-assumes the masculine role he once inhabited. The film explicitly illustrates that gender is not confined to a rigid binary of male and female but instead exists on a spectrum that shifts depending on social contexts and personal relationships. By portraying such a nuanced character,

Lovely Man challenges normative understandings of gender and invites discourse on the idea that identity should not be strictly defined by traditional roles dictated by society.

2) Conflict Between Gender Identity and Social Roles

The conflict between gender identity and social roles in *Lovely Man* is reflected in the dynamic relationship between Cahaya and Ipu, where expectations and reality collide both emotionally and socially. Cahaya, having been raised in an environment that upholds heteronormative values, expects her father to embody the conventional image of masculinity strong, responsible, and aligned with the traditional role of a male head of the family. However, upon reuniting with her father after years of separation, she is confronted with the reality that Ipu has embraced his identity as a *waria*, a stark contrast to the paternal figure she had envisioned. This encounter creates emotional tension, as Cahaya struggles to reconcile her childhood perception of a father with the person standing before her.

For Ipu, his *waria* identity is not something he can or wants to abandon merely to meet his daughter's expectations or conform to societal norms. To him, gender identity is an intrinsic part of his lived experience in Jakarta, something that cannot simply be negated to fit the traditional understanding of masculinity. The film effectively highlights that gender is not merely a personal identity but is deeply influenced by societal expectations that dictate how individuals should behave based on their biological sex. This tension underscores how society often imposes rigid boundaries on gender, where men are expected to exhibit masculinity and women femininity, leaving little room for more fluid and complex identities such as that of Ipu.

Throughout the film, Cahaya undergoes an internal struggle between accepting her father as he is or adhering to the norms she has long believed in. Ultimately, *Lovely Man* illustrates that gender is not solely an individual matter that can be freely chosen and lived, but rather a social construct that is continuously negotiated through interactions with others. The film invites viewers to critically examine deeply ingrained societal norms and encourages a broader understanding of gender beyond the binary framework that has long been perceived as absolute.

3.2. Gender Performativity in Social Spaces

Lovely Man's gender performativity in social space shows how Ipu's gender expression is tolerated in one environment but rejected in another, therefore highlighting the great reliance of acceptance of gender identity on the standards and values that apply in a society. In the realm of transvestites and sex workers, Ipu's gender performativity is regarded as somewhat typical and tolerated. In this society, the transsexual identity is not only acknowledged but also forms part of daily life, where the manifestation of femininity is not debated or regarded aberrant. In this setting, Ipu can openly present herself, dress in women's clothes, make up, and speak and act in line with the gender identity she has developed without regard to rejection or criticism. Outside of this community, though, particularly in relation to the family and more general societal conventions, Ipu's gender expression starts to be debated and even approved. Her existence as a transvestite is enticed by social expectations that still regard gender as something linear and fixed when she encounters Cahaya and a more conservative environment. In a culture remaining under heteronormative standards, a guy who does not show masculinity is viewed as aberrant and frequently faces stigma or prejudice. Ipu himself understands he is seen with complete judgment outside his group and that he is not in line with the social responsibility he should be fulfilling as a father. This indicates that gender performativity is always negotiated in a larger social context, where there are groups that

accept and support but also those who reject and inspire people to follow current standards. It does not occur in a neutral place. Lovely Man thus shows how social variables continually shifting and varied form and impact a person's gender expression in addition to their own identification.

3.3. Deconstruction of Binary Identity

The film *Lovely Man* explicitly challenges the binary concept of gender through the interaction between Cahaya and Ipu, showing that gender identity cannot always be rigidly categorized as male or female. Since childhood, Cahaya had the image that her father was a man in the traditional sense, but when they met again, she had to face the reality that her father had formed an identity as a transgender woman. This challenges her understanding, which has always been based on a binary gender system, where one can only be permanently male or female and cannot switch between the two.

Ipu's identity itself reflects that gender is not something essential from birth, but rather a spectrum that can change according to social context and life experiences. He once lived as a man, had children, and played the role of a father, but along the way, he found his identity in the expression of femininity as a transgender woman. However, in her interactions with Cahaya, the masculine side of her still emerges in the form of protection and advice typically associated with a father figure. The change in identity that he experiences does not mean he loses all aspects of his masculinity, but rather shows that gender can be fluid and not always bound to a fixed category. Through the character Ipu, this film shows that gender is more than just a biological issue, but also a social construct that can be negotiated and lived in various forms. *Lovely Man* invites the audience to question the gender norms that have long been considered absolute and to broaden their understanding of identity diversity that does not always fit into the binary categories long established by society.

CONCLUSION

The film *Lovely Man* offers a complex portrait of gender performativity through the character Ipu, who lives as a transgender woman amidst the ongoing social challenges surrounding her. With a Butlerian approach, which emphasizes that gender is not something essential but rather a social construct performed repeatedly, this film can be read as a critique of rigid and binary gender concepts. Ipu not only faces stigma and discrimination from a society that still upholds heteronormative norms, but also has to confront the expectations of her daughter, Cahaya, who initially struggles to accept the reality that the father she has been searching for has lived a life with an identity different from what she imagined. In his life as a transgender woman and sex worker, Ipu displays feminine gender performativity through his way of dressing, speaking, and behaving, which proves that gender is not merely something inherent in a person, but something constructed and negotiated within a specific social context. However, in interactions with Cahaya, he still shows his masculinity in the form of protection and advice typical of a father figure, which demonstrates that gender identity can be fluid and contextual. This film invites the audience to question conventional understandings of gender, which are often limited by the male-female binary, and opens up space to understand gender as something more flexible and dynamic. Through the story of Ipu, *Lovely Man* highlights how someone can live and express their gender differently in various social spaces, and how gender identity cannot always be boxed into rigid categories. Thus, this film not only presents a powerful narrative about the search for identity and acceptance but also serves as an exploration of how gender continues to be shaped, negotiated, and performed in everyday life.

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