

## GENDER AMBIGUITY AS SEEN IN DAVID LEVITHAN'S *EVERY DAY*

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### Abstract

This research is aimed to (1) show how gender ambiguity is portrayed in David Levithan's *Every Day* and (2) find out the implications of gender ambiguity in the novel. Therefore, this research applied queer theory in relation to the representation of same-sex desire and queer in the novel.

To analyze the data, this research used qualitative descriptive content analysis. The data of the research were the expressions related to (1) gender ambiguity and (2) the implications of gender ambiguity in the work of David Levithan's *Every Day*. The primary instrument of in this research was the researcher himself while the data sheet functioned as the secondary instrument. To ensure the data trustworthiness, triangulation was applied in this research.

The results of this research show the representation of gender ambiguity in the novel through the main character and the main character love's experience. A, the main character in the novel, happens to be genderless and has to move from one body into another every day. Because of it, A is able to see many different lives from many different perspectives, including being a male or female, a man and woman. Furthermore, the story develops since the day A meets the girl named Rhiannon and falls in love with her. Both of them then encounter so many problems due to their love relation. Although at first Rhiannon cannot believe that this kind of relationship would last long, she finally accepts A for whatever A is. The study also reveals that there are two implications of gender ambiguity in the novel: distinguishing gender and sex and excluding gender in love relation.

**Keywords:** gender, gender ambiguity, queer, *Every Day*, David Levithan

### INTRODUCTION

For many years, the validity of what actually means to be a man or woman has been questioned since the phenomena related to gender appear to the surface of the society in almost all around the globe. Biologically, it is right to say someone is male or female. Yet, to say that sex and gender are actually the same thing is the thing that need to be considered.

The fact is that now, the phenomena in such groups with same-sex desire does exist and they even demand the right to live with whoever they love. In America, Human

Right Campaign writes that late 2013 is considered as the greatest achievement for people who do same-sex desire, indicated by the declaration of the right for LGBT by president Obama. In addition *The Rainbow Times* which is New England's largest LBGTQ newspaper since 2006 even puts his speech which shows that the president Obama proclaims June 2013 as LGBT Pride Month. In, a tribe named Bugis, even has more than two genders. In fact, they even have five genders which are all accepted culturally and socially. Yet, they are biologically male and female. However,

Indonesia is a country which officially accepts only two genders and yet it allows this to happen as the reason of preserving culture. In short, Bugis tradition leads to the idea that sex is not something that determines gender.

Butler, in her book entitled *Gender Trouble* mentions that gender is not the result of nature but it is socially constructed (1990: 6). This also means that male and female behavior are not the result of biology but is rather constructed and reinforced through several factors. Considering this statement, it can be assumed that gender has a close connection with human behavior. One of the example is that Many things are considered to be men's or women's belongings or interests, yet that fact is still questionable whether this fact are already embodied within human since they are babies or only the concept which is invested to obtain certain purposes.

Michel Foucault, a philosopher and also known as one of the most influential thinkers who contribute to poststructuralist and also a gay, simplifies gender in a form of sexuality: who one wants or what one wants. (Sprago, *Facoult and Queer Theory*, 1999: 13). His statement refers to the role of someone in form of sexuality and how it functions or takes a part in society.

Furthermore, Sprago, based on Foucoult's idea, also espouses the idea of queer theory in which it defines against the normal or normalizing, like poststructuralists which contend that a concern on human as a single individual needs to be deconstructed and troubled. He also mentions that queer theory defines diverse range of critical practices and priorities such the representation of same-sex desire in reading literary texts, songs, films and images, and it has such political and social power relation of sexuality (1999: 8-9). Considering the statement above, it can be assumed that queer theory can possibly be applied to see the representation of same-sex desire, gender problem, also political and social power through literary texts.

David Levithan is an American author who keens on discussing LGBT fiction for young adults. Even from his first debut in writing novels, he clearly shows supportive acts toward LGBT by his novel entitled *Boy Meets Boy* (2003). In addition, even since his first novel, Levithan successfully gains many awards. In 2012-2013, his book entitled *Every Day* which is going to be analyzed in this research, has a unique concept where the main character has to inhabit different body every day and soon becomes best-selling. This concept enables

the main character to experience various kinds of lives without boundaries. At first, it seems that he wants to offer a story about how to live a life without boundaries. However, he uses love as a device to develop the plot, where the main character named A falls in love with a girl named Rhiannon. Since then, the story becomes a unique love story. The main character is believed to be the representation of same-sex desire and could portray gender ambiguity and same-sex desire through literary text. In addition, this research is conducted as the researcher believes that the phenomena related to gender problems exists even until now.

In order to scrutinize the issue of gender ambiguity, the researcher applies the Queer Theory in relation to gender ambiguity to show how gender ambiguity is portrayed in the work of David Levithan entitled *Every Day* and to find out the implications of gender ambiguity in the novel.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a content analysis technique in analyzing the data. According to Krippendorff (2004: 18-19) content analysis is a method applied in qualitative research to analyze data in the

form of text, since text can be varied from maps, pictures, artworks, signs, songs, symbols. Each text produced definitely has subjective, sentimental meanings both for its readers and its author. Thus, the researcher intentionally conducted this research to show how gender ambiguity is portrayed and find out the implications of gender ambiguity as seen in David Levithan's *Every Day*.

Four steps were done in this research to collect the data: reading, note taking, interpreting, and categorizing. Firstly, the researcher read David Levithan's *Every Day* carefully and then did rereading it extensively until he comprehended the novel. Secondly, taking notes and highlighted the content of the novel that could be used as data was done by the researcher. These two steps were the most significant in the data collecting technique. Thirdly, the researcher examined the data and tried to interpret them. Categorizing the data into a particular form of data sheet, and highlighted the part of the questions, related to the findings, to amplify the significance of them was the last step done by the researcher. Furthermore, the researcher used the data sheet to ease him seeing the progress of the research during the process of collecting data. The form of data sheet is

presented below. The researcher used triangulation and was supervised by his thesis supervisor to validate the data.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **A. FINDINGS**

#### **1. The portrayal of Gender Ambiguity in**

##### **The Novel**

From Sprago's statement which says that queer theory focuses on diverse range of critical practices and priorities such the representation of same-sex desire can be found in literary texts, songs, films and images (1999: 9), it can be concluded that it is possible to see the representation of same-sex desire and queer in literary text. Since David Levithan's *Every Day* is considered as the novel which also depicts those things, identifying gender ambiguity as the basic idea of same-sex desire through its unique concept becomes possible. Therefore, the idea of analyzing this novel as the novel depicting the representation of same-sex desire or to be précised here, gender ambiguity, is led by Sprago's idea.

The researcher would explain the portrayal of gender ambiguity through (1) the genderless main character and (2) the main character's love experience as these two things are considered as the things used by the novel to deliver the idea of gender

ambiguity. On the other hand, these two things are assumed to be the things that strongly carry the issue of gender ambiguity in the novel. The data and the explanation about the portrayal of gender ambiguity in the work of David Levithan's *Every Day* are as follow.

##### **a. The Genderless Main Character**

To be in a gender is not merely about being a man or woman, especially when it is about loving someone or having sexual desire. Defining gender has to be started by seeing through collective intellectual engagements with the connection among sex, gender, and sexual desire (Sprago, 1999: 8-9). However, people take gender in accordance to the societal values. Many of them do not even realize that the meaning of being in a gender can still be argued. Those who are aware of gender ambiguity are judged against normality. Therefore, those people try to convince others about gender ambiguity through various ways, including literature as it is the most possible way to talk about gender since it is taboo. Thus, some literary works can be considered portraying gender ambiguity.

David Levithan's *Every Day*, through its genderless main character, is believed to show gender ambiguity in some ways. Even in the beginning of the story, it

has given a hint that the novel, with its concept, would depict gender ambiguity through *A*, the main character of this novel. “Every day I am someone else, I am myself—I know I am myself—but I am also someone else. It has always been like this.” (Levithan 2012:1). The quotation shows that *A* as the main character does not have exact body and *A* has to move from one body to another without even considering or choosing the gender or sex *A* is going to inhabit in every day. This also means that *A* is genderless and it enables *A* to be able to see the world from many different perspectives, including being male or female, a man or a woman. From this understanding, the researcher believes that the ambiguity of gender would be carried in the novel through its genderless main character.

Since *A* inhabits a different body every day, *A* encounters and experiences the situation that no one ever does. *A* happens to dress and act like women and men. *A* even finds out that being human is not something that can be defined as simple as it is seen. “We all contain mysteries, especially when seen from the inside.” (Levithan, 2012:3). This datum shows that humans consist of many things which is still being left unanswered and some of them are assumed

to be the understanding of gender ambiguity as some people consider it as something constructed. In addition, since *A* experiences and sees many different lives from many different perspectives, it can be assumed that the novel, through *A*, is able to show that gender is ambiguous.

#### **b. The Main Character’s Love Experience**

Gender is only a label which is created for some reasons rather than biological aspects. Furthermore, queer theory criticizes the idea that male are supposed to act as men rather than women and fall in love with female which people usually see as normal for “gender is constructed” (Butler, 1990: 8). For this reason, queer people cannot find their place in gender.

Moreover, since *A*’s genderless state is considered as the thing that could show gender ambiguity, *A*’s love to a girl named Rhiannon can also be considered as the thing that could depict gender ambiguity even stronger. This idea is concluded from the fact that *A*, who has no exact gender, is able to feel the love since the day *A* meets Rhiannon. In addition, this fact can also be seen as a fact which is against people’s common perception of gender, that the one who is supposed to fall in love with girls are

men. That A can have the feeling of loving someone, in this case, Rhiannon, is represented by the datum below.

And as we drift into sleep, I feel something I've never felt before. **A closeness that isn't merely physical. A connection that defines the fact that we've only just met. A sensation that can only come from the most euphoric of feelings: belonging. What is it about the moment you fall in love? How can such a small measure of time contain such enormity?** now realizing it, you are just now arriving at the place you were always meant to be (Levithan, 2012:22-23).

The datum presented above shows that A who is genderless can, in fact fall in love with a girl named Rhiannon. Here, the novel seems to emphasize gender ambiguity. As most people believe that gender plays a significant role in loving someone, the love A has to Rhiannon can show that people's perception about gender is supposed to be reconsidered as the quotation also mentions that closeness is not merely physical. Moreover, as stated by Butler (1990: 8), gender is constructed by human with certain purposes (Butler, 1990: 8). Thus, this could also mean that it does not exist naturally as sex.

For Rhiannon, it is definitely something that she can easily believe. As Rhiannon starts to feel A's love for her

grows deeper, A's appearance does not affect her perception since A is someone who truly and deeply loves her. Moreover, In the end of the story, when A is about to leave Rhiannon, the novel shows that gender is not something that really matters to love someone. This is also represented in the datum below.

**"I love you," I tell her. "Like I've never loved anyone before." "You always say that," she says. "But don't you realize it's the same for me? I've never loved anyone like this, either."** "But you will," I say. "You will again (Levithan, 2012: 319).

Since genderless state of A is understood, this datum shows clearly that both A and Rhiannon love each other although Rhiannon never knows whether A is a man or woman, male or female.

## **2. The Implications of Gender Ambiguity in David Levithan's *Every Day***

### **a. Distinguishing Gender and Sex**

David Levithan's *Every Day* is one of famous novels which is considered as the novel which portrays the issue of gender ambiguity with its unique concept. It can be concluded that the novel, through its main character, A, seems to try to show people the idea about someone who is not tied up by

boundaries, including gender or sex. On the other hand A's genderless state is considered as the thing that can deliver the idea about life and show many possibilities which cannot be seen by human as they are tied up by so many things. In addition, Edelman's statement which says "queer is a zone of possibilities" (1996: 6) can be connected with this novel since it is considered as one of queer works. In other word, David Levithan's *Every Day* offers the example of the possibilities for people who do same-sex desire to have their place among society by explaining that gender and sex are actually two different things since most people still assume that gender and sex are actually the same since many things related to gender are considered ambiguous, unlike sex which is biological.

Furthermore, the idea of explaining the ambiguity of gender starts to pop up in the novel, especially when A possesses the body of a girl named Vic. A distinguishes gender and sex as something which is completely different, not as two thing which have the same meanings.

**Even before I open my eyes, I like Vic. Biologically female, gendered male. Living within the definition of his own truth, just like me.** He knows what he wants to be. Most people our age don't have to do that. They stay within the realm of the

easy. **If you want to live within the definition of your own truth, you have to choose to go through the initially painful and ultimately comforting process of finding it** (Levithan, 2012: 253).

The datum above strongly represents the idea of gender ambiguity. It explains that sex and gender are something which is completely different. Sex is biological. A person is destined to be male or female and it cannot be avoided or even denied. As for gender, it is something else. Somebody can possibly choose which gender he or she wants to be. Thus, it is not the product of nature, but the product of human. Since it is constructed, it can be affected by many factors. Thus, things which have a close relation to gender and sex, in which people often see them as the same things need to be reconsidered, for some people cannot achieve their position in its definition and limitation.

Therefore, through A, the novel offers the idea that the way people or the society sees gender and sex as the same thing needs to be reconsidered. While sex refers to biological aspects, gender refers to something else, something which is actually still ambiguous for it is created and also affected by various things such as cultural, social, and even political aspects as some

people think that they do not belong to two standardized gender. (Foucault in Sprago, 1999: 12).

#### **b. Excluding Love in Love Relation**

The novel is believed to explain the ambiguity of gender through several ways. Moreover, as the concept of gender that people or society has already been invested in them from time to time, their perception seems to be difficult to argue. As for people who try to live within their own definition, they would be judged as the one who are mistaken. This is represented in the novel through the datum below.

**We come to a corner where there are a few people protesting about the festivities. I don't understand this at all. It's like protesting the fact that some people are red-haired. In my experiences, desire is desire, love is love. I have never fallen in love with gender. I have fallen for individuals. I know it's so hard when it's so obvious...One of the protestor's signs catches my eye. 'Homosexuality is the devil works' it says. And once again I think about how people use the devil as an alias for things they fear. The cause and effect is backward. The devil doesn't make anyone do anything. People just do things and blame the devil after (Levithan, 2012: 142).**

The datum above shows how A, when he is in the body of a gay named Hugo, A attends gay festivities and

encounters the situation when many people who stand against it. The datum also shows the reason why they stand against the festivities. A seems to criticize the reason of the people who do the protest in the story, for they see homosexuality as false deed and even the devil's work. Furthermore, the novel through A shows the real life phenomena.

Therefore, it can be concluded that what actually matters is the feeling a person has. It has nothing to do with gender for it is still ambiguous. The novel explains that it is true that someone is born male or female biologically. However the novel tries to argue the idea of using gender as the parameter to love someone or to have sexual desire by offering the love story of A and Rhiannon. On the other hand it also offers the idea that gender has nothing to do with love or desire.

#### **B. Discussions**

Most people believe that gender and sex are basically the same thing. Moreover, the concept that men are supposed to wear pants instead of skirts and fall in love with women instead of men is believed to be people's perception. On the other hand, if this is how life works, group such as feminist and queer would never exist and

then argue the definition of gender. Those groups believe that gender is constructed and still ambiguous.

Furthermore, it has already become a common perception that gender and sex are basically the same and no one should ever argue this concept. However, people like Foucault and Butler believe that gender is constructed socially and culturally. They explain it in a different focus. While Butler concerns on gender equality between men and women, Foucault concerns more about the relation of gender and sexual desire. He also explains that it is right to say someone is male or female biologically. Yet, he argues the idea of using gender as the parameter to love someone or to have sexual desire.

This idea then leads to the existence of groups called queer or homosexual among society. They want their existence to be accepted by people or society as they really are. However, this would never be easy since the concept of gender people know now has already been invested in them from time to time. Therefore, many of those people start their movement by showing the idea of gender ambiguity through songs, images, books, and other products of art as they see the possibilities in putting an idea in the product of arts, including literary works.

In addition, they see the possibilities in offering the basic idea of queer in arts, including literary works since most people have already agreed that there is no restriction in creating arts.

David Levithan's *Every Day* is a novel which tries to show gender ambiguity. The story is about A who is genderless and has to move from one body to another every day. This enables A to see many different lives from many different perspectives including being male and female. A's life somehow portrays gender ambiguity, especially when A meets Rhiannon and falls in love with her. The love A has to Rhiannon has nothing to do with gender since A is genderless. As for Rhiannon, it seems to be difficult for her to have such love at first. However, as the time goes by, she falls in love with A and accepts A for what A really is, even though it also means that they have to face so many problems.

Moreover, it explains that gender is still ambiguous and cannot cover what love or sexuality actually is. Gender ambiguity is strongly shown by A's experiences in inhabiting different bodies while being genderless and A's love to Rhiannon. From these two factors, it can be seen that common perception of gender is still ambiguous as shown from the following

datum “I don’t understand this at all. It’s like protesting the fact that some people are red-haired. In my experiences, desire is desire, love is love. I have never fallen in love with gender. I have fallen for individuals” (Levithan, 2012: 142). and sex and gender are actually two different things, shown in the following datum “Even before I open my eyes, I like Vic. Biologically female, gendered male. Living within the definition of his own truth, just like me” (Levithan, 2012: 253). Furthermore, the reason to love someone cannot simply be defined by gender as it is something that deals with the feeling human possess. A is born genderless. Yet, the fact that A can fall in love and be loved by someone is found in the novel. This is represented in the following datum.

**She holds me. She holds me so hard there’s no thought in it of letting go. “I love you,” I tell her. “Like I’ve never loved anyone before.” “You always say that,” she says. “But don’t you realize it’s the same for me? I’ve never loved anyone like this, either”** (Levithan, 2012: 319).

In short, the novel, through A’s existence, feeling or inner most desire is what matters to love someone. As for Rhiannon, she can feel A’s love to her and it does not matter for her whether A is in male

or female form, although at first it is difficult for her to understand it. In addition, Rhiannon can feel the love beyond the concept of gender.

Furthermore, gender ambiguity seen in the novel also has the implications. The novel offers the idea that gender is still ambiguous and it needs to be reconsidered when it refers to love or sexual desire. Moreover, the novel assumes that the definition of gender has to be separated from sex as they are two different things.

Many countries consider people who do same-sex desire as the one who is mistaken. They can even go to jail by practicing it. In short, although some countries have given them space for their existence, some still consider those people as the one who is completely wrong. Therefore, while being in a sex is defined as biological; the definition of having a gender needs to be reconsidered for it is still ambiguous and cannot encapsulate queer people’s existence.

Although David Levithan’s *Every Day*, with its main character is a fiction, it can also be considered believable as the issue brought and portrayed can be found in real life or among society. In short, this novel shows how gender ambiguity causes problem when it comes to sexual desire or

love and offers the possibilities for people who do same-sex desire or homosexuality to obtain their place in society as the novel explains that the gender and sex are two different things and people should not make gender as the parameter to love someone, for it is still ambiguous.

In addition, *Every Day* is not the first novel of David Levithan portraying gender ambiguity. *Boy Meets Boy* (2003), his first novel, can also be considered as the novel strongly portraying gender ambiguity and same-sex desire. Yet, *Every Day* offers another angle in offering the idea of gender ambiguity and same-sex desire. Here, A, the main character in the novel is not tied up by boundaries such as race, tribe, religion, sex, and even gender. In other word, A is neutral while the main character in *Boy Meets Boys* shows people about the problem caused by gender ambiguity through a boy who loves another boy. However, the discussion about gender ambiguity by using a genderless main character in *Every Day* can still be continued as the ending of the novel shows A who leaves Rhiannon for her sake.

In conclusion, the definition of being in a gender needs to be reconsidered when it refers to people's right to choose whom they love or their sexual desire. Therefore, people would never harm and discriminate others

just because they choose a different path. Discrimination should not exist among people because of gender or the definition of being or having gender and its limitation, for it is still ambiguous.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings and discussions from the analysis of Levithan's *Every Day* using Queer Theory explained by Foucault in chapter four, the researcher is able to draw the conclusions in relation to research objective mentioned in chapter one below.

1. The novel portrays gender ambiguity by using the genderless main character and the main character's love experience. A, the main character, moves from one body to another every day while having the same person to love, Rhiannon. Being genderless also enables A to see many different lives from many different perspectives, including being male and female. This is what enables the novel to deliver the idea of gender ambiguity. Furthermore, the love A has for Rhiannon is another thing which enables the novel in delivering the idea of gender ambiguity.
2. The implications of gender ambiguity can be answered as the portrayal of

gender ambiguity in the novel has been offered. The novel also assumes that gender is something which is completely different from sex and has nothing to do with love through A's genderless state and A's love to Rhiannon. Furthermore, The novel mentions about how society or people who stand against homosexuality or same sex desire treat and judge people who supports and believe in the idea of same sex desire or homosexual. In addition, the novel through A tries to tell and convince people that sex and gender are two different things, love is love, and desire is desire. To love someone, it has nothing to do with gender but the feeling for the person somebody loves. In conclusion, gender ambiguity is portrayed through the genderless main character of the novel and the main character's love experience. Furthermore, not only the genderless state A possesses and the love A has to Rhiannon can be used to portray gender ambiguity, but they can also be used to find out the implications of gender ambiguity in the novel.

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