Gender Stereotype in Indonesian Movies: The Representation of Gender Stereotype in "Lovely Man" (2011)

Tria Hani Fatonah[1] , Salsabila Putri[2], Elsa Maidarini[3], Dinda Angelia[4]

[1234]English Literature, Faculty of Letter, Universitas Pamulang, Indonesia

[1234]triahanif03@gmail.com, paulinasalsa53@gmail.com, elsamaidarini1@gmail.com, mauchesdwn@gmail.com

[1234]Universitas Pamulang

Abstract

This study explores the representation of gender stereotypes and the experiences of transgender individuals in the Indonesian film Lovely Man (2011), directed by Teddy Soeriaatmadja. Using a qualitative narrative analysis, the research examines how the film portrays societal norms, discrimination, and personal identity through the relationship between Syaiful, a transgender woman, and her daughter, Cahaya. Guided by Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity and Michel Foucault's (1978) discourse on power, the analysis reveals how the film challenges traditional gender expectations and critiques systemic marginalization. Through visual, narrative, and dialogic elements, Lovely Man exposes the emotional and social toll of stereotyping while affirming the resilience and humanity of marginalized individuals. The film's nuanced portrayal of gender identity and familial acceptance fosters empathy and encourages viewers to question societal biases. Although the study is limited to a single film, it highlights the transformative potential of cinema in addressing gender-based discrimination. The findings suggest that Indonesian cinema can play a vital role in promoting inclusive narratives and reshaping cultural understandings of gender and identity.

.

Keywords: *Gender Stereotype, Lovely Man, Gender Discrimination, Indonesia Movie, Indonesian Film*

INTRODUCTION

Gender stereotypes are powerful cultural constructs that continue to shape social expectations, institutional norms, and individual identities across the globe. These stereotypes are deeply embedded in cultural practices and media representations, often perpetuating binary notions of masculinity and femininity. In the Indonesian context, these stereotypes are heavily influenced by traditional patriarchal values, religious interpretations, and social conventions, which privilege cisgender and heterosexual norms. Individuals who deviate from these established norms—such as transgender persons—frequently encounter social exclusion, institutional discrimination, and cultural marginalization.

Film, as a cultural and ideological medium, plays a dual role in this dynamic. On one hand, films can reinforce prevailing norms by reproducing stereotypical gender roles and identities; on the other, they can also subvert, question, and resist such conventions. The cinematic space thus becomes a vital site for analyzing the negotiation between conformity and resistance to gendered expectations. In this regard, Lovely Man (2011), directed by Teddy Soeriaatmadja, serves as a compelling case study. The film narrates a powerful story of Syaiful, a transgender woman working as a sex worker, who unexpectedly reunites with her estranged daughter, Cahaya, a devout Muslim. This encounter unfolds over the course of one night, revealing layers of personal identity, familial tension, social judgment, and cultural stigma.

The central aim of this article is to examine how Lovely Man portrays gender stereotypes, particularly in relation to the transgender experience within Indonesian society. The study is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, whose work remains essential for analyzing gender identity and institutional power. Butler (1990), in her seminal work Gender Trouble, argues that gender is not an innate or fixed characteristic, but rather a set of repeated performative acts that are socially regulated. These performances solidify the illusion of stable gender identity, enforcing conformity to cultural scripts of masculinity and femininity. When individuals disrupt or reject these performances, they expose the constructed nature of gender and are often labeled as deviant.

Complementing Butler's theory, Foucault (1978) emphasizes the role of discourse and institutional power in shaping social norms. Through mechanisms such as the legal system, religion, education, and medicine, society classifies, controls, and disciplines bodies and behaviors. Power, in Foucault's view, is not merely repressive but productive—it constructs what is considered "normal" and "abnormal," and thereby legitimizes discrimination against those who do not conform. In the case of transgender individuals, this power manifests in moral judgments, exclusion from public life, and structural inequities in access to employment, legal protection, and healthcare.

Drawing from these perspectives, this article investigates how Lovely Man represents gender identity and stereotypes in Indonesian society. The following research questions guide the analysis:

1. How does *Lovely Man* portray gender stereotypes?
2. What forms of discrimination are depicted in the film?

3. How does the film challenge or reinforce societal norms regarding gender identity?

Although discussions of gender stereotypes are gaining traction globally, research on LGBTQ+ representation in Indonesian cinema remains underexplored. Much of the existing scholarship has focused on the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and the limited presence of non-heteronormative identities in mainstream media. When LGBTQ+ characters do appear, they are often portrayed in comedic, tragic, or hypersexualized roles that further marginalize rather than humanize them. In contrast, Lovely Man presents a rare and empathetic portrayal of a transgender character as a nuanced, fully developed individual. It neither sensationalizes nor victimizes Syaiful's identity but rather presents her as a person navigating complex social realities.

Furthermore, the cultural context of Indonesia adds a unique dimension to this study. As a Muslim-majority nation with diverse ethnic and religious traditions, Indonesia presents a multifaceted landscape for gender discourse. On the one hand, there are local cultural traditions (such as the waria community) that have historically accommodated gender diversity; on the other hand, conservative political and religious groups often promote rigid heteronormativity. This tension is reflected in Indonesian cinema, where filmmakers must navigate censorship, audience expectations, and ideological constraints. As Creswell (2014) notes, localized qualitative studies are crucial for capturing how cultural texts interact with their specific social environments. This article, therefore, seeks to fill a gap in both academic and cultural discourse by closely analyzing how Lovely Man engages with gender stereotypes within the Indonesian setting.

In doing so, the article contributes not only to film and gender studies but also to broader conversations on visibility, representation, and social justice for marginalized identities. By examining the intersection of personal narrative and societal judgment, the study underscores the potential of cinema as a transformative space where dominant norms can be questioned, and alternative narratives can emerge. Ultimately, Lovely Man offers a powerful challenge to traditional gender stereotypes, inviting viewers to engage with empathy, complexity, and critical reflection.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative narrative analysis to examine how gender stereotypes and transgender identity are portrayed in the Indonesian film *Lovely Man* (2011), directed by Teddy Soeriaatmadja. Qualitative research is suitable for exploring cultural meanings in media texts, especially on complex topics like gender and discrimination. As Creswell (2014) explains, this approach helps researchers understand how individuals and societies interpret social issues in specific cultural contexts.

The main data source is the film *Lovely Man*, chosen through purposive sampling due to its focus on gender non-conformity and its notable representation of marginalized identities in Indonesian cinema. The analysis centers on visual, narrative, and dialogue elements that reflect or challenge gender norms and social expectations.

To collect data, the researcher watched the film several times, identifying and transcribing key scenes. Special attention was given to:

1. Character interactions (especially between Syaiful and Cahaya),
2. Dialogue related to gender, identity, and societal judgment,
3. Visual elements like clothing, gestures, and space,
4. Social settings such as streets, mosques, and homes.

The analysis was guided by two key theories:

1. Judith Butler's (1990) gender performativity, which explores how gender is expressed and constrained through repeated actions shaped by social expectations.
2. Michel Foucault's (1978) power and discourse, which examines how institutions and cultural narratives maintain control and marginalize non-conforming individuals.

Scenes and dialogues were thematically coded into categories such as:

1. Gender performance and resistance,
2. Social discrimination and exclusion,
3. Family relationships and reconciliation,
4. Religious and moral judgment.

To enrich the interpretation, the study used triangulation, incorporating:

1. Film reviews and critiques from Indonesian media,
2. Interviews with the director and actors (when available),
3. Academic literature on gender and Southeast Asian cinema.

This layered approach offers a well-rounded analysis that connects theory with cinematic representation. Since the study involves only textual analysis of a film and no human participants, ethical clearance was not required. However, care was taken to use respectful language, especially regarding transgender issues.

Overall, this method helps reveal how *Lovely Man* both reflects and challenges dominant gender stereotypes in Indonesian society, offering insight into how media can influence cultural understanding and promote social change.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lovely Man (2011) presents an intimate, emotionally charged narrative that examines the complex intersections of gender identity, religious belief, and social marginalization. The film centers on Cahaya, a devout young Muslim woman, who reunites with her estranged father, Syaiful, now living as a transgender woman and

working as a sex worker in Jakarta. Through their overnight encounter, the film powerfully depicts the emotional and societal struggles of individuals who challenge normative gender roles, offering both critique and reflection on the systemic discrimination they endure.

One of the most striking themes that emerges from the film is the stigma and marginalization faced by Syaiful as a transgender woman. From the beginning of their reunion, Syaiful is subjected to verbal harassment and public scrutiny. She navigates the streets of Jakarta under the weight of social judgment, facing economic hardship and exclusion from conventional employment opportunities. These experiences echo Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which asserts that gender is not a stable identity but a series of socially sanctioned performances. Syaiful's identity defies binary gender expectations, making her a target of discrimination. The film subtly portrays this through microaggressions—people staring, mocking, or dismissing her—and through structural barriers, such as her dependence on sex work due to limited job access for transgender individuals.

Despite these challenges, *Lovely Man* does not portray Syaiful as a passive victim. Her emotional strength, dignity, and maternal instinct are foregrounded, offering a counter-narrative to common stereotypes of transgender individuals in Indonesian media. Rather than sensationalize her identity, the film humanizes her, demonstrating that she is capable of love, care, and moral reflection. This nuanced portrayal resonates with Butler's (1990) argument that challenging dominant gender scripts can reveal the constructed and arbitrary nature of gender roles.

The film also serves as a critique of institutionalized power, aligning with Michel Foucault's (1978) theory of disciplinary power. Foucault argues that institutions—such as religion, law, and family—regulate behavior and construct social norms, often marginalizing those who deviate. In *Lovely Man*, these institutions are present in the internal conflict experienced by Cahaya, who has been raised in a religious environment that views her father's gender identity as immoral. Her struggle reflects the internalized surveillance described by Foucault, where individuals internalize norms and become agents of their own regulation. Yet, through her personal interactions with Syaiful, Cahaya begins to question these inherited beliefs. The film uses their evolving relationship as a vehicle to challenge audiences' assumptions and invite empathetic engagement.

The narrative tension between religious morality and personal truth is a central element of the film's discourse. Cahaya, clad in a hijab and guided by Islamic teachings, initially approaches her father with judgment and discomfort. However, as the night unfolds, she begins to reconcile her religious identity with her emotional connection to her parent. This shift reflects the possibility of transformative understanding—a theme that adds depth to the film's exploration of gender identity. Rather than forcing resolution or confrontation, the film allows ambiguity and emotional honesty to lead the characters' development. In doing so, it opens a space for broader societal reflection on the plurality of identities and lived experiences.

Syaiful's dialogue and body language throughout the film reveal the emotional toll of systemic discrimination. Her resistance is not loud or violent, but quiet, grounded in survival, and at times melancholic. Her decision to protect Cahaya from the trauma of discovering her transgender identity earlier in life reflects a deep awareness of the social consequences attached to her gender nonconformity. This echoes Foucault's (1978) notion that power operates not only through overt control but through social conditioning, shaping what individuals consider acceptable or shameful.

Moreover, the film critiques the economic dimensions of discrimination. Syaiful's inability to find stable employment mirrors real-life struggles faced by many transgender individuals in Indonesia, who are often pushed into informal or underground economies due to exclusion from mainstream job markets. This aligns with studies on structural inequality and adds a layer of socioeconomic critique to the narrative.

However, it is important to note that the scope of this study is limited to a single film. While *Lovely Man* offers a profound representation of transgender experience and gender stereotypes, it cannot fully represent the diversity of voices or themes in Indonesian cinema. As Creswell (2014) notes, future research should consider comparative studies across multiple films to identify broader trends in the portrayal of LGBTQ+ identities in Southeast Asian media.

Lovely Man stands out as a rare and powerful cinematic work that challenges dominant gender norms and invites audiences to engage in critical reflection. Through the lens of Butler's performativity and Foucault's discourse on power, the film reveals how transgender individuals are marginalized by social structures, yet also affirms their resilience and humanity. The film not only critiques societal norms but also gestures toward the possibility of acceptance, reconciliation, and change.

CONCLUSION

Lovely Man offers a powerful and emotionally resonant exploration of gender stereotypes, particularly through its portrayal of a transgender woman navigating familial reconciliation and societal stigma. The film functions not only as a critique of rigid gender norms but also as a hopeful narrative that emphasizes empathy, understanding, and human dignity. Drawing on Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, the film illustrates how gender identities are socially constructed and regulated, while also showing the agency individuals possess in resisting and redefining those identities. Through the character of Syaiful, Lovely Man dismantles harmful stereotypes and presents a deeply human story that challenges dominant perceptions of gender non-conformity in Indonesian society.

Foucault's (1978) theory of power and discourse further reveals how institutions— such as religion, family, and social norms—uphold systems of control that marginalize those who defy conventional roles. The film highlights these power dynamics and, in doing so, opens a space for critical reflection and social dialogue. By portraying the

emotional and social struggles faced by marginalized individuals, Lovely Man invites audiences to question entrenched biases and to consider more inclusive and compassionate perspectives.

While this study focuses on a single film, its findings point to the broader significance of cinema as a medium for social critique and cultural transformation. As Creswell (2014) suggests, future research should explore a wider corpus of Indonesian films to gain deeper insights into the representation of LGBTQ+ identities and the shifting narratives around gender and sexuality. Such investigations are vital for promoting inclusivity and equity in both media and society.

Ultimately, Lovely Man serves as a testament to the power of storytelling in confronting discrimination, humanizing marginalized voices, and inspiring change. By challenging societal norms and encouraging empathy, the film contributes meaningfully to the ongoing discourse on gender justice in contemporary Indonesia. Addressing gender stereotypes in cinema is not merely a matter of representation—it is a step toward reshaping societal attitudes and fostering a more inclusive future.

REFERENCES

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* Routledge.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches.* Sage.

Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1.* Pantheon Books.

Soeriaatmadja, T. (Director). (2011). *Lovely Man* [Film]. Indonesia: Karuna Pictures.