



Gender Stereotypes and Androgyny in Contemporary Fiction: A Literary Analysis of Emily Henry's *Book Lovers* (2022)

Fatiha Iasya¹, Indrani Dewi Anggraini²

¹ fatihalaw@gmail.com

^{1,2} Universitas Pamulang

Abstract

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This study analyzes the issue of gender stereotypes as reflected in three characters from Emily Henry's novel *Book Lovers* (2022). Employing a qualitative approach, the research focuses on describing and interpreting the characters' behaviors, personality traits, and social roles to uncover how gender expectations are constructed and challenged within the narrative. The analysis is grounded in Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory (1981), which provides a framework for understanding how individuals internalize and perform gender roles based on societal norms. The findings reveal that the novel portrays a range of gendered traits—femininity, masculinity, and androgyny—across both male and female characters. The main character, Nora Stephens, in particular, subverts traditional gender stereotypes by embracing traits typically associated with masculinity, such as ambition and assertiveness, while also engaging with her emotional and relational self. Meanwhile, male characters are shown to exhibit qualities traditionally coded as feminine, such as empathy and vulnerability. Ultimately, the study concludes that *Book Lovers* presents a nuanced exploration of gender identity, illustrating how characters can resist and redefine stereotypes. By doing so, the novel supports a more flexible and inclusive understanding of gender, in line with Bem's concept of androgyny as a path to psychological adaptability and self-development.

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✉ Corresponding author:

B3 Building, Kampus Viktor, Pamulang, Tangerang Selatan Indonesia 50229 E-mail:
fatihalaw@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Gender, as a fundamental category in human identity, plays a critical role in shaping how individuals are perceived and how they navigate the world. While humans are biologically classified into male and female, gender itself is not a biological certainty but a social construct—shaped and reshaped by cultural, historical, and societal norms. The way societies define and differentiate gender roles often leads to the emergence of gender stereotypes: generalized beliefs about the characteristics and behaviors appropriate for men and women. These stereotypes are embedded in social expectations and are widely reproduced across various platforms, including literature. As contemporary literature continues to mirror, critique, and reshape cultural realities, it becomes a powerful medium for examining how gender identities are constructed and contested.

According to the World Health Organization and scholars such as Judith Lorber and Raewyn Connell, gender is not merely a reflection of one's sex, but rather a deeply rooted social structure shaped by norms, roles, and behaviors historically assigned to men and women. Connell (2002) emphasizes that gender evolves over time and across contexts, while Lorber argues that gender is a learned identity shaped through continuous socialization. One result of this process is the persistence of gender stereotypes, which Brannon (2004) defines as fixed societal assumptions about the traits and roles of men and women—such as associating logic, strength, and leadership with masculinity, and empathy, emotion, and domesticity with femininity. These stereotypes not only limit individual expression but also perpetuate structural inequalities.

To better understand how individuals internalize and resist gender roles, Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory offers a critical framework. Bem (1981) proposed that people are guided by cognitive structures—or “schemas”—that classify behaviors and traits into masculine and feminine categories. These schemas influence how people perceive themselves and others. Importantly, Bem introduced the concept of androgyny, referring to individuals who exhibit both masculine and feminine characteristics. According to Bem, androgynous individuals demonstrate greater psychological flexibility and are more resilient in navigating rigid gender expectations. The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), a widely used measurement tool, categorizes individuals based on their alignment with masculine, feminine, and androgynous traits.

While much research has focused on historical or feminist literary texts, there remains a growing interest in how contemporary popular fiction reflects or challenges gender norms. One notable example is Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), which interrogates the intersection of gender, race, and identity through the lives of twelve characters. Evaristo's novel illustrates the complexity of gender performance, showcasing characters who conform to or reject gender expectations in nuanced ways. Characters such as Morgan represent androgynous ideals, while others like Amma and Dominique use political activism and creative expression to challenge societal constraints.

Within this expanding body of gender-focused literary criticism, Emily Henry's *Book Lovers* (2022) presents a timely and compelling site of analysis. Though categorized primarily as romance fiction, *Book Lovers* goes beyond conventional romantic tropes to explore deeper issues related to gender role reversals and the disruption of stereotypes. The protagonist, Nora Stephens, defies the traditional image of the romantic heroine. She is assertive, career-oriented, and emotionally guarded—traits often associated with

masculinity. Meanwhile, the male character displays emotional vulnerability and sensitivity, challenging dominant ideals of male stoicism. The dynamic between characters reflects a more fluid understanding of gender identity, aligning with Sandra Bem's advocacy for gender flexibility and androgyny.

Despite the increasing popularity of novels like *Book Lovers*, scholarly attention toward gender representation in commercial romance fiction remains limited. Much of the existing literature on gender and fiction tends to focus on classic or overtly feminist texts, while works like Henry's—which subtly subvert expectations within mainstream genres—are often overlooked. This presents a critical gap in understanding how gender stereotypes are navigated in accessible, widely-read literature.

The aim of this study is to analyze the portrayal of gender stereotypes in *Book Lovers*, focusing on three central characters and how their behaviors, relationships, and self-presentations either reinforce or challenge traditional gender expectations. By applying Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory and the concept of androgyny, this research seeks to reveal how the novel navigates the complexities of gender identity within personal and professional domains.

This study contributes to contemporary literary scholarship in several key ways. Theoretically, it brings gender psychology—particularly Bem's framework—into conversation with modern romantic fiction. Methodologically, it broadens the scope of literary criticism to include commercial and popular texts as sites of meaningful social discourse. Culturally, it sheds light on how mainstream narratives can reflect evolving gender norms and offer alternative models of identity. Ultimately, this analysis of *Book Lovers* not only enriches discussions of gender in literature but also highlights fiction's power to question and reshape societal expectations.

METHOD

This study used the gender scheme data approach from Sandra Bem (1981) to analyze the gender stereotype in the novel *Book Lovers* by Emily Henry (2022) and used qualitative methods to conduct research. Textual data was obtained in the form of words by the writer by reading the novel and analyzing the problems that arise. Descriptive qualitative research is conducted to determine the value of one or more variables without comparing or connecting them with other variables. This study used a descriptive qualitative method to analyze *Book Lovers* (2022) novel as the subject of analysis, with a specific emphasis on uncovering the gender stereotype apparent in the novel. Creswell (2014) states one of the methods utilized in a descriptive qualitative research is a documented study, which entails sourcing information from books, articles, and journals. That qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. As stated previously, qualitative research centres on in-depth analysis of text in the novel for ensuring the accuracy of the collected data. Qualitative research often takes an inductive approach to data analysis, focusing on discovering relevant patterns, new themes, or variables that emerge from the data collected. The data analysis process in qualitative research is flexible and open to changes as the research progresses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, this study analyzes the gender stereotype of the novel *Book Lovers*. The focus is on the characters and storyline, examined through Sandra Bem's theory of stereotypical gender plots. This theory includes the key elements of analyzing gender stereotypes and the main character's dealings with gender stereotypes reflected in Emily Henry's *Book Lovers*.

1. Gender Stereotypes Reflected in Emily Henry's *Book Lovers*

Gender stereotypes are perceptions or assumptions attached to individuals based on their gender identity. These stereotypes often stem from social norms that define how masculinity (qualities associated with men), femininity (qualities associated with women), and androgyny (a combination or flexibility between the two) should be expressed.

1.1. Femininity and masculinity of Nora Stephens

Femininity in the character of Nora Stephens highlights not only the systemic injustice inherent in traditional gender expectations but also the intricate emotional struggles she faces as a woman navigating societal and personal challenges. Nora's character underscores how femininity is often burdened by conflicting demands: society expects women to be emotionally expressive and nurturing while simultaneously penalizing them for showing vulnerability or assertiveness. This duality places women like Nora in an impossible position, where their emotional authenticity is stigmatized, no matter how they choose to express it.

“That’s the thing about women. There’s no good way to be one. Wear your emotions on your sleeve and you’re hysterical. Keep them tucked away where your boyfriend doesn’t have to tend to them and you’re a heartless bitch.” (Henry, 2022, p. 6).

These quotations reflect on femininity, particularly through the exploration of gender stereotypes that burden women with emotional double standards. This phrase highlights how women's emotional expression is often unfairly framed. If a woman displays her emotions openly, she is considered excessive or hysterical (a negative stereotype associated with emotional and vulnerable femininity). Conversely, suppressing her emotions to protect others or maintain relationships is seen as cold or uncaring. This narrative illustrates how femininity is often constructed in society as something that must be perfectly balanced, but in practice, this balance is nearly impossible to achieve. Such expectations show the emotional burden placed on women, who are expected to manage not only their own feelings but also the emotional comfort of others (Bem, 1981). This reflects traditional stereotypes of femininity, where women are seen as ideal emotional caregivers but are also subject to unfair criticism when they fail to fulfill this role according to society's standards.

“The uptight, manicured literary agent, reading manuscripts from atop her Peloton while a serene beach scene screen saver drifts, unnoticed, across her computer screen. I’m the one who gets dumped.” (Henry, 2022, p. 2).

In these quotations, the phrase “I am the one who was dumped” expresses self-deprecation, reflecting the internalization of societal narratives that often position women as vulnerable. This highlights the emotional struggles and perceived inadequacies associated with femininity (Bem, 1981). Nora Stephens represents a form of professional

and emotional masculinity often attributed to men in classical narratives—that of being ambitious, assertive, emotionally controlled, and protective of those she loves. In her work as a literary agent, Nora is highly rational, perfectionist, and does not let feelings interfere with her logic, reflecting the stoicism and logic-value dominance often associated with masculinity.

1.2. Androgyny of Nora Stephens

Androgyny, as a combination of traditional traits associated with femininity and masculinity, is a recurring theme in the characters of Nora Stephens, Charlie Lastra, and Jacob. Each of these characters displays qualities that transcend rigid gender norms, blending strength and vulnerability, ambition and empathy, logic and emotion, to create multidimensional identities.

“They called her the Shark, but she didn’t mind. The name fit. For one thing, sharks could only swim forward. As a rule, Nadine Winters never looked back. Her life was predicated on rules.” (Henry, 2022, p. 72).

The quotation reflects androgyny in how it portrays a reaction that blends emotional intensity with assertiveness, traits typically associated with femininity and masculinity, respectively. The narrator’s visceral response to reading the line, “They called her the Shark,” combines the raw emotional vulnerability of feeling startled or shocked with the directness and boldness conveyed through the expletive-laden reaction, “What the fuck.” This interplay captures an androgynous expression of character. The emotional weight implied by the “gut punch” feeling aligns with traditionally feminine traits of sensitivity and introspection, while the bluntness and confrontational tone of the verbal reaction lean toward masculine assertiveness. Together, these elements create a response that is neither wholly masculine nor feminine but rather a fusion of the two, showcasing a complex, balanced human reaction that transcends rigid gender norms.

“I’m the city person. Not the one who meets the hot farmer. The other one. The uptight, manicured literary agent, reading manuscripts from atop her Peloton while a serene beach scene screen saver drifts, unnoticed, across her computer screen. I’m the one who gets dumped.” (Henry, 2022, p. 2)

This quotation reflects elements of androgyny through Nora as someone who embodies traits traditionally associated with femininity and masculinity. The “well-groomed” and “uptight” descriptions align with conventional feminine traits, emphasizing precision, professionalism, and attention to appearance. These qualities reflect that women should maintain neat and composed outward appearances. The balance between these contrasting traits—feminine beauty and emotional depth with masculine ambition and self-awareness—emphasizes an androgynous identity. Nora does not fit into one gender archetype; instead, she critiques societal expectations and embraces a diverse sense of self, blending traditional gender norms into a cohesive and authentic personality.

2. The Response of Main Character on stereotype in Emily Henry’s *Book Lovers*.

The main character of gender stereotypes that are still often found in everyday life. These stereotypes relate to society’s expectations of how a woman should behave, play a role, and make decisions in her life, whether in terms of work, personal relationships, or lifestyle choices. The protagonist is portrayed as an ambitious, independent woman who does not follow the traditional version of the ideal woman, which is usually associated with

being gentle, and submissive.

2.1. Fighting gender stereotypes

Nora Stephens faces various gender stereotypes, which become essential to the storyline. Through the story's development, Emily Henry explores how Nora confronts these stereotypes in complex and human ways. She doesn't have to change himself to meet other people's expectations. Instead, she learns to accept herself and understands there is nothing wrong with being ambitious or career-oriented, even if it doesn't fit typical gender stereotypes. Henry uses Nora's character to show how women can redefine their roles without being trapped by traditional labels or societal expectations.

“I can still smell her lemon-lavender scent, feel her arms around me, hear her voice – Let it out, sweet girl. Just one look and those five words, and it would all come spilling out.” (Henry, 2022, p. 155).

This quotation depicts a figure who acts as a source of emotional comfort and support, often associated with stereotypes of traditional female gender roles, particularly in motherhood or nursing roles. Gender stereotypes can be seen in the depiction of a “lemon-lavender scent,” often associated with softness and warmth and traditionally considered feminine. In addition, phrases such as “Let it out, sweet girl” reinforce nurturing imagery, where the female figure is portrayed as a solace capable of understanding and encouraging emotional release.

“I read once that sunflowers always orient themselves to face the sun. That’s what being near Charlie Lastra is like for me. There could be a raging wildfire racing toward me from the west and I’d be straining eastward toward his warmth.” (Henry, 2022, p. 194)

This quotation contains elements that can be attributed to gender stereotypes, particularly in emotional and romantic dynamics. The comparison of the self to a sunflower always facing the sun suggests a strong attraction and even emotional dependence on Charlie Lastra. In heterosexual relationships, such imagery is often used to portray women as emotionally dependent on men, who are depicted as sources of warmth, strength or stability. In addition, this metaphor reinforces the image of the man as the centre or focus, while the woman is portrayed as more passive, responding to the man's energy or attractiveness. Charlie is likened to the sun, a symbol traditionally associated with strength and vitality, while Nora positions herself as a flower closely connected to the man's presence and energy. This reflects gender stereotypes that often position men as the dominant figure or “giver” while women are the recipients or the affected.

2.2. Androgyny as a Form of Resistance to Gender Stereotypes

Androgyny as a Form of Resistance to Gender Stereotypes refers to the idea that a person, particularly a woman in this context, can exhibit both feminine and masculine characteristics without being bound to traditional gender roles that have been shaped by social norms.

“We were happy. But that’s not what Libby’s telling Sally. She’s saying, ‘Mom was broke, tired, and lonely. She put her career ahead of absolutely everything and was miserable because of it’.” (Henry, 2022, p. 223).

This quotation has elements of gender stereotyping, especially in the way it talks about a mother trying to balance her career and family. The portrayal of a mother who is “broke,

tired, and lonely” and “miserable” for choosing a career over everything else reflects traditional stereotypes of working women, where they are often judged negatively if they do not prioritize domestic or maternal roles. This narrative highlights the social pressure faced by many women in patriarchal societies—that choosing a career is perceived to risk making them feel lonely or unhappy. It reinforces gender stereotypes that career-oriented women are likely to experience personal dissatisfaction and are perceived as “abandoning” their traditional role as family caregivers. Libby points out that perceptions of women in these roles are often shaped by external narratives and social assumptions rather than reality or their own subjective experiences. This critique also reinforces the idea that women's success in the professional world is less valued if it is not accompanied by perfect family happiness.

“Ever since then, it’s been hard to imagine letting anyone close like that. Not when I’m so fucking broken, I can’t sleep anywhere but my own bed. Even here it’s hard, with Libby right next to me. I’ve just never trusted myself since then.” (Henry, 2022, p. 311)

The quotation challenges gender stereotypes by showing Nora's struggle to protect herself emotionally. Her inability to feel comfortable even in familiar surroundings, such as her bedroom, suggests a level of anxiety and emotional wounds that are not quickly resolved. Gender stereotypes often portray women as healers or caregivers who can rise from trauma quickly to support others. Still, Nora shows otherwise distrust of herself, reflecting a deep sense of isolation and doubt.

Nora also highlights the relationship with Libby, which shows emotional closeness yet remains insufficient to overcome her insecurities. In gender stereotypes, relationships between women are often depicted as a place to find emotional comfort. Still, this excerpt describes a more complex situation where the relationship does not fully heal Nora's wounds. Thus, while elements in this excerpt could be related to gender stereotypes, the depiction tends to be more personalized and multidimensional, not fully subject to traditional patterns

CONCLUSION

Gender stereotypes are social barriers that still limit the roles, opportunities and development of individuals based on sex. Its influence is evident in education, the workforce, mental health, and identity formation, especially in younger generations. Rigid gender roles can reduce self-confidence, increase social pressure and hinder the achievement of an individual's full potential. Gender stereotypes are social constructions that assign roles, traits and behaviors deemed appropriate for men and women. Despite progress towards gender equality, these stereotypes still have a significant impact in many aspects of life, including employment, education, mental health and identity formation. Gender stereotypes can limit individual potential, create inequalities in career and leadership opportunities, and create adverse social pressures, especially for the younger generation.

Gender stereotypes also have a significant impact on the workplace and education. Further research can investigate how gender bias affects career opportunities, leadership roles, and academic achievements. As efforts toward gender equality continue to grow, understanding the remaining barriers and effective strategies to overcome them is crucial. Beyond social and economic effects, future studies can also highlight the influence of gender stereotypes on mental health and identity formation. Restrictive gender roles can affect self-esteem, social pressure, and psychological well-being, especially among young people who are still in the process of developing their identities

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