



Representation of Gender Identity in Dean Atta's *The Black Flamingo*

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Abstract

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The background of this study is based on the concept of gender identity as a social and interactive process through which individuals recognize themselves as male or female. This study aims to analyze how gender identity is represented in *The Black Flamingo* by Dean Atta and to examine how the main character navigates and negotiates his gender identity throughout the novel. A qualitative method was employed, and data were collected through a narrative analysis of the novel. The analysis applied Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity to explore how the text portrays issues of gender and identity. The results indicate that the protagonist reflects his gender identity through expressions of both masculinity and femininity. The study also reveals how the character deals with gender identity as both a performative and normative construct. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the character embodies multiple aspects of gender identity, alternating between feminine and masculine traits, and ultimately resists traditional gender norms to assert his authentic self.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender refers to the socially and culturally constructed characteristics attributed to men and women. For a long time, gender was viewed as divinely ordained or biologically determined, as if these roles were innate and immutable. However, as Fakih (2008) argues, gender distinctions are in fact products of social construction rather than biological fact. From this perspective, gender represents the socio-cultural attributes, behaviors, mentalities, and norms that define how societies distinguish between men and women in non-biological terms.

Gender identity, therefore, is a subjective sense of belonging to a particular gender category, typically male or female. Through social interaction, individuals come to recognize and internalize gender roles that are culturally assigned to them. When these roles are accepted, they become part of an individual's self-concept. Crooks and Baur (2005) explain that people differ in how deeply they internalize societal expectations of masculinity and femininity, meaning that each person's identification with gender norms varies. For example, from birth, male children are often expected to develop masculine traits and heterosexual attraction, while female children are expected to embody femininity and be attracted to men.

In this sense, gender distinctions arise through cultural and social processes that begin at birth and evolve throughout life. Socialization shapes the behaviors, values, and identities of men and women, which vary across time and cultural contexts. As Muawanah (2009) notes, although human social roles continuously evolve, the idea of gender as an inherent divine attribute often remains persistent in society. Consequently, gender must be understood as a socio-cultural construct that influences how individuals behave, present themselves, and identify with particular gender groups.

The issue of gender identity continues to emerge in contemporary contexts, as illustrated by public cases in Indonesia. One such case involved Raul, a student at Hasanuddin University, reported by *Pojok Bogor* (2022). During an orientation session, a lecturer asked Raul to state his gender identity as recorded on his ID card. When questioned, Raul responded, "di tengah-tengah pak," meaning "in between, sir," to express a non-binary gender identity. This case exemplifies how traditional gender classifications continue to be challenged in modern society, particularly among younger generations who express identities beyond the binary framework.

The writer chose this topic because gender identity remains a significant issue globally and continues to attract attention through mass and social media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and Facebook. These platforms serve as effective tools for raising awareness and advocating for gender inclusivity. Literature, as a medium of social reflection, also plays a vital role in representing and questioning gender identity. Many contemporary literary works explore how gender identity is constructed and performed through characters' behaviors, actions, and self-expression. One such work is Dean Atta's *The Black Flamingo*, which vividly portrays the journey of self-discovery and the negotiation of gender and sexual identity. Through this novel, readers can examine how gender identity is represented and how the main character resists traditional gender norms to affirm his authentic self.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research method to analyze *The Black Flamingo* (2019) by Dean Atta. Qualitative research focuses on understanding human experiences, behaviors, and perceptions through detailed descriptions in natural contexts. As stated by Moleong

(2017), qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena experienced by research subjects, such as behavior, perception, motivation, and action, holistically and descriptively through words and language within specific natural settings. Similarly, Creswell (2014) emphasizes that qualitative research adopts a strategic approach to ensure that the selected methods align with the study's objectives and research questions.

The data for this research were collected from the novel *The Black Flamingo* (2019), particularly from narrative passages and dialogues that reflect aspects of gender identity. These textual elements were examined to identify how the main character expresses and negotiates his gender identity throughout the story. The data were presented in the form of direct quotations from the novel to provide clear evidence for analysis.

Data collection was carried out through several stages. First, the researcher read *The Black Flamingo* multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of its themes and issues related to gender identity. Second, narrative elements and character development were identified and categorized based on their relevance to the research focus. Third, passages that revealed aspects of the protagonist's personality, experiences, and internal conflicts related to gender identity were marked for further examination.

The data were then analyzed using Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity as presented in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. This theoretical framework was used to interpret how the novel portrays gender as a performative act shaped by social norms and expectations. The analysis focused on identifying representations of masculinity, femininity, sexual orientation, and non-binary identity within the protagonist's narrative. All relevant excerpts were analyzed to explain how the character's experiences reflect broader issues of gender construction and identity formation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion of the study based on Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. The analysis is divided into two parts: (1) the reflection of gender identity in *The Black Flamingo* by Dean Atta (2019), and (2) the character's negotiation of gender identity in the novel. The discussion focuses on how gender identity is portrayed through masculinity, femininity, fluidity, and sexual orientation, as well as how the protagonist Michael navigates these aspects. The novel depicts a character who challenges conventional gender roles, demonstrating how societal constructions of masculinity and femininity based on biological sex are subverted through Michael's journey of self-discovery and expression.

1. Gender Identity Reflected in *The Black Flamingo* by Dean Atta

Butler (1990) argues that gender is not an inherent or fixed trait but rather the product of repeated performative acts that construct and reconstruct gender meanings. In *The Black Flamingo*, this perspective allows for an in-depth analysis of Michael's actions, dialogues, and experiences as forms of performance that deconstruct traditional gender binaries. Michael's journey illustrates that gender identity is deeply intertwined with social, cultural, and political structures, and that individual agency can disrupt normative gender expectations.

1.1 Femininity

Michael's early interest in Barbie dolls reflects his exploration of femininity as part of his identity, challenging norms that equate masculinity with the rejection of feminine traits. His mother's supportive response legitimizes this expression, enabling Michael to embrace femininity without shame as a valid form of identity and self-expression. As Atta (2019, pp. 7–8) writes:

I told mummy two months ago, "If you only get me one present this year, please can it be a Barbie?" Mummy comes upstairs embracing me in a soft, warm, Mum-smelling hug. "Oh darling, I can get you a Barbie for Christmas, if you still want one."

This passage highlights Michael's desire for a Barbie, a toy long associated with femininity and gendered ideals such as beauty, domesticity, and passivity. By asking for a Barbie, Michael engages with a symbol that reinforces certain gender expectations, illustrating how gendered behavior is socially influenced rather than biologically determined. Furthermore, the phrase "if you still want one" suggests the fluidity of desire and identity, aligning with Butler's (1990) notion that gender is not fixed but subject to change and individual agency.

Michael's fascination with feminine symbols is further illustrated in another scene, as narrated by Atta (2019, pp. 9–10):

Later, I blow out six candles on my Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles birthday cake and make my wish for a Barbie.

Here, the juxtaposition of "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles", a symbol often linked to masculinity, strength, and action, with Michael's wish for a Barbie underscores the flexibility of gender identity. According to Butler (1990), gender is constituted through repeated performances. Michael's desire for a Barbie, despite the masculine context of his birthday, demonstrates that gender expression is not bound to traditional roles but can be fluid and personally meaningful.

Michael's exploration of femininity culminates in the moment he receives a Barbie doll as a Christmas gift, as described by Atta (2019, p. 13):

Christmas morning, I race downstairs to find a present under the tree. No wrapping paper, just a pink bow on the box. Mummy has bought me a Barbie! But she got it wrong. It's not the goddess, but I hug her anyway. "Thank you, mummy."

Michael's reaction, "It's not the goddess", reveals a tension between his idealized image of femininity and the reality of the doll he receives. This discrepancy reflects how cultural standards shape and often constrain gender identity. While Barbie symbolizes a mainstream ideal of femininity, Michael's disappointment highlights the limitations of such symbols in capturing the full complexity of gender expression. This moment illustrates the instability of gender identity, caught between personal desire and socially imposed norms, and critiques the rigid constructions of femininity perpetuated by popular culture.

1.2 Masculinity

The following passage illustrates the early tension between masculinity and femininity in Michael's self-perception. The contrast between Daisy's glittery red dress and Michael's black

boxer shorts symbolically juxtaposes culturally coded gender expressions. As Atta (2019, p. 75) writes:

When Daisy arrives in a glittery red dress, I'm wearing nothing but my black boxer shorts, sulking on my bed. I wonder how that dress would look on me? Think for a moment, before remembering I'm feeling sorry for myself.

Michael's state of undress, "wearing nothing but my black boxer shorts", positions him in a passive role that challenges dominant masculine norms. His contemplation of how Daisy's dress would look on him reveals a desire to explore feminine expression, yet this is immediately followed by self-reproach. This internal conflict demonstrates how social constraints limit gender performance, creating what Butler (1990) terms "gender trouble", the tension experienced when navigating conflicting gender expectations. Michael's momentary curiosity about cross-dressing represents both a challenge to gender boundaries and the internalized pressure to conform to masculine norms.

Later in the narrative, Michael confronts external pressures to perform masculinity through physical violence. This scene reveals how masculinity is constructed and enforced through social interactions. As Atta (2019, p. 45) narrates:

I think of running. I think of taking a beating. But suddenly I feel this force within me. Fight or flight? I grab Alistair's hair with my left hand and drag him around the circle two, three times, then lift his head up to see his long hair part to make way for his pretty face and slap him hard with my right hand, down to the ground.

The "fight or flight" dilemma represents a pivotal moment where Michael must choose between conforming to or resisting violent masculine norms. His decision to fight constitutes a performative act that temporarily affirms dominant gender expectations, demonstrating Butler's argument that gender is constructed through repeated actions rather than inherent qualities. The physical violence becomes a means of establishing dominance within the masculine hierarchy, revealing how gender norms are enforced through bodily practices.

Michael's subsequent reflection on this incident further illuminates his critical awareness of masculine socialization. As he confesses to his mother (Atta, 2019, p. 47):

"Mummy," I say, and go into the kitchen, where she is drying the dishes. "Some older boys made me fight with another boy from choir. He didn't do anything to me but they told me I had to. I only hit him once and then ran away. I don't like the way boys get bigged up for being violent. There's so much fighting at my school. At elementary school it was just play fighting but now they're not playing."

This reflection captures Michael's growing consciousness of how masculinity is socially produced. The transition from "play fighting" to serious violence marks a developmental shift in gender expectations, where physical aggression becomes a required performance of masculinity. Michael's critique of how "boys get bigged up for being violent" demonstrates his resistance to these norms, aligning with Butler's concept that gender performances can be questioned and subverted rather than passively accepted.

Michael's ultimate rejection of hyper-masculine environments is crystallized in his statement: "But I don't want to stay here. It's all just fighting and soccer. I want to go to a school with girls" (Atta, 2019, p. 50). This declaration represents a conscious refusal of the masculine

culture that valorizes sports and physical aggression. By seeking an educational environment that includes girls, Michael attempts to escape the constant pressure to perform traditional masculinity, illustrating his desire for a space where multiple gender expressions can coexist beyond restrictive binary norms.

This passage marks a significant transition, illustrating how external representations of masculinity shape Michael's self-perception while highlighting the tension between personal curiosity and socially prescribed gender norms. As Atta (2019, p. 114) narrates through Michael's voice:

Mum, Anna, and Daisy go shopping for swimsuits. I decide to stay home. "Just get me black trunks, no Speedos," I say. While they're gone I Google "Speedos" and the first page of results brings up pictures of Tom Daley. I'm still looking at them when Mum, Anna, and Daisy return.

Michael's specific request for "black trunks, no Speedos" represents a conscious performance of hegemonic masculinity, where swimwear becomes a signifier of gender identity. His verbal rejection of Speedos demonstrates compliance with masculine norms that avoid clothing perceived as feminine or revealing. Yet his subsequent private Google search reveals an underlying curiosity about alternative masculine expressions, creating what Butler would identify as a moment of gender trouble, where performed identity conflicts with private exploration.

This internal conflict intensifies as Michael contemplates his secretly packed pink Speedos, imagining joining "all the men who know who they are and don't mind wearing tiny speedos" (Atta, 2019, p. 127). The pink color, culturally coded as feminine, combined with the revealing swimwear represents a potential challenge to conventional masculinity. That Michael feels compelled to hide them illustrates the powerful social constraints governing masculine performance, while his fantasy of joining confident Speedo-wearing men signals his desire for a masculinity defined by self-knowledge rather than social compliance.

Michael's gender negotiation becomes more overt through his decision to cut his hair, described as a deliberate act of self-redefinition:

In my bedroom, I go right up close to the mirror as if to kiss my reflection. I pull back my hair away from my face, trace my left cheek, bone and jawline, run my left index finger down my nose, then pick up the scissors: This is the change. I cut. (Atta, 2019, p. 247)

This intimate ritual represents what Butler (1990) would identify as a performative act that reconstructs gender identity. Through cutting his hair, a potent cultural symbol of gender, Michael actively reshapes his masculine presentation, asserting agency over the social codes that define male appearance.

Similarly, Michael's refusal to wear makeup for the school dance demonstrates his internalization of masculine boundaries. When Daisy offers concealer, Michael protests, "No way... I'm not wearing makeup! I'd rather miss the stupid dance" (Atta, 2019, p. 75). This vehement rejection underscores how cosmetic products remain culturally gendered, with Michael perceiving makeup as incompatible with masculine performance. His willingness to miss the dance entirely rather than violate this gender norm reveals the power of social conditioning in regulating masculine expression.

Throughout these moments, Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a crucial framework for understanding Michael's journey. Gender emerges not as an innate quality but as a social construct continually produced and reconstructed through repeated actions and interactions. Michael's negotiations with swimwear, hair, and makeup all represent performative acts through which he both conforms to and challenges masculine norms. *The Black Flamingo* thus illustrates how gender identity is negotiated within the tension between social structures and individual agency, demonstrating that personal actions can both reinforce and disrupt conventional gender binaries.

2. The Main Character's Responses to Gender Identity in *The Black Flamingo*

Butler (1990) contends that gender identity is not biologically determined but socially constructed through cultural interactions and repeated performances that create the illusion of stable identity. This perspective highlights individual agency in challenging and reshaping normative gender expectations. In *The Black Flamingo*, Michael's journey illustrates how characters respond to gender diversity, some offering support and acceptance, while others reinforce traditional views. The novel ultimately emphasizes self-acceptance and societal growth toward inclusivity.

2.1 Normative Gender Identity

This section marks a pivotal transition in Michael's negotiation of identity beyond social norms. His early experiences reveal how gender and sexuality are continually shaped through denial, exploration, and self-acceptance. As Atta (2019, p. 28) writes:

I don't tell Emily that when no one else can see, behind the big tree, I kiss Callum, Jamal and Toby.

Michael's secrecy, "when no one else can see", reflects internalized fear of violating heterosexual norms. His hidden kisses with male friends demonstrate non-conformity to traditional expectations that boys should only express attraction toward girls. This fluidity aligns with Butler's view that gender and sexual identities are socially constructed and adaptable rather than fixed.

A crucial turning point occurs when Michael openly acknowledges his identity during a conversation with Daisy (Atta, 2019, p. 61):

I skip lunch the following day and go straight to B24 to sit with Daisy. Relief washes over me. "I don't know what to say, Michael. I already told you they were mean." "I know you did. I should have listened. I'm sorry," I say. "That's okay. Anyway, are you gay?" "Yes," I say. Finally, we're gonna talk about it.

Daisy's direct question creates space for honest dialogue, countering societal pressures to conform. Michael's simple yet powerful affirmation, "Yes", signals a transformative moment of self-acceptance and courage to claim his identity.

Michael continues to navigate his sexuality within social constraints while maintaining personal boundaries (Atta, 2019, p. 106):

Meeting a man is not a good idea. Just because I can, it doesn't mean I'm ready to lose my virginity to a stranger.

This reflection reveals Michael's internal conflict between desire and social expectations. His hesitation underscores how norms around virginity and sexuality influence his actions, illustrating what Connell (1992) identifies as the feminization of gay men through stereotypes that associate virginity with femininity.

2.2 Gender Identity as Performative

Michael increasingly recognizes how his choices symbolically contribute to identity formation. His exploration of drag exemplifies Butler's concept of gender as performance through deliberate aesthetic construction (Atta, 2019, p. 261):

A pink faux coat catches my eye. I ask, "Can I borrow this as well?" "Yeah, of course," says Katy. "There's a matching handbag, if you want it." It's coming together, I think. All I need now is a wig and makeup.

The pink coat, wig, and makeup serve as tools for performing gender identity beyond traditional masculine expression. This deliberate assemblage highlights how gender is constituted through repeated aesthetic practices rather than inherent qualities.

However, this performative process involves significant emotional labor and vulnerability (Atta, 2019, p. 266):

My desk is covered in makeup and wipes with the brown, black, pink, red, silver, and gold I've been trying to apply to my face, and now I'm a mess. When Mzz B arrives, I explain, "I'm not ready. I can't do this."

Michael's struggle with makeup mirrors the anxiety of meeting gendered expectations. His declaration, "I can't do this", reveals the pressure accompanying gender performance, while Mzz B's supportive response demonstrates how community enables continued identity exploration.

Through drag, Michael finds space to express and challenge gender norms freely. The community provides validation for non-traditional identities, creating an environment where he can develop comfort with his identity despite external challenges. This aligns with Butler's (1990) view that drag can subvert normative gender by revealing its constructed nature and creating possibilities for more flexible, inclusive understandings of identity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of Dean Atta's *The Black Flamingo* using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, it is evident that the protagonist Michael embodies gender as a socially constructed and performative identity rather than a fixed, biologically determined trait. Although assigned male at birth, Michael consistently demonstrates an affinity for feminine-coded objects and modes of expression, such as his early desire for a Barbie doll, while feeling disconnected from dominant masculine ideals that emphasize physical toughness and emotional restraint. His complex relationship with masculinity, sometimes rejecting it, yet still identifying as a man, highlights the fluidity and ongoing negotiation inherent in gender identity.

Michael's engagement with drag performance serves as a powerful manifestation of Butler's concept of gender as constituted through repeated acts. Within the drag community, Michael finds a space to freely and confidently express femininity, using clothing, makeup, and performance to deconstruct and reinterpret conventional gender roles. Through this practice, he not only challenges rigid societal expectations but also demonstrates that restrictive gender norms can be subverted through creative, flexible, and inclusive forms of self-expression.

For future research, this study suggests expanding the analysis of gender identity by incorporating additional theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality, queer phenomenology, or the social construction of identity across different cultural and literary contexts. Such approaches could further illuminate how race, class, and society shape the performance and perception of gender in contemporary literature.

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