

The Paradoxality of Gender Representation in the Gender Bender Korean Drama Mr. Queen

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ABSTRACT

Korean dramas are increasingly in demand in Indonesia. Its themes related to gender and sexuality are now in great demand, because the issue of gender inequality is increasingly being voiced in South Korea and Indonesia. One of the most talked about dramas in Indonesia when broadcasted was Mr. Queen by TVN (South Korean cable TV channel) in 2020. The drama consists of twenty episodes and can be watched by global fans through video on demand platform Viu, on smartphone and pc. There is even a version that has been dubbed in Indonesian, showing that the drama is very popular within the Indonesian audience. Mr. Queen is a Saeguk (drama set in the Joseon era) and is a remake of the popular Chinese web drama Go Princess Go (2015), which is an adaptation of the novel of the same title. Mr. Queen—like Go Princess Go—can be categorized in the genre of fusion and gender bender, because it tells the story of a male chef named Jang Bong Hwan from the Modern era whose soul crosses space and time until he entered the body of the Queen in the Joseon period (Queen Cheorin), presenting a new depiction of the queen; instead of the traditional feminine queen, Queen Cheorin portrays a masculine woman. Mr. Queen overturns gender and its relation to gender discourse in South Korea. However, using Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis, it is evident that the gender representation in Mr. Queen is paradoxical; as if offering a gender discourse that breaks the dominant discourse, but in fact it still represents woman as passive subject who continues to be exploited.

Keywords: representation; gender; gender bender; drama; body

Paradoksalitas Representasi Gender dalam Drama Korea Gender Bender Mr. Queen

ABSTRAK

Drama Korea semakin diminati di Indonesia. Temanya terkait gender dan seksualitas kini banyak diminati, karena isu ketimpangan gender semakin disuarakan di Korea Selatan dan Indonesia. Salah satu drama yang paling banyak dibicarakan di Indonesia ketika ditayangkan adalah Mr. Queen oleh tvN (saluran TV kabel Korea Selatan) pada tahun 2020. Drama ini terdiri dari dua puluh episode dan dapat ditonton oleh penggemar global melalui platform video on demand Viu, di smartphone dan pc. Bahkan ada versi yang telah di-dubbing dalam bahasa Indonesia, menunjukkan bahwa drama ini sangat populer di kalangan penonton Indonesia. Mr. Queen adalah Saeguk (drama berlatar era Joseon) dan merupakan remake dari web drama populer Tiongkok Go Princess Go (2015), yang merupakan adaptasi dari novel dengan judul yang sama. Mr. Queen—seperti Go Princess Go—dapat dikategorikan dalam genre fusion dan gender bender, karena bercerita tentang seorang chef laki-laki bernama Jang Bong Hwan dari zaman Modern yang jiwanya melintasi ruang dan waktu hingga memasuki tubuh Ratu pada periode Joseon (Ratu Cheorin), menghadirkan penggambaran baru seorang ratu; bukannya ratu feminin tradisional, Ratu Cheorin menggambarkan seorang perempuan maskulin. Mr. Queen menjungkirbalikkan gender dan hubungannya dengan wacana gender di Korea

Selatan. Namun, dengan menggunakan analisis wacana kritis Sara Mills, terbukti bahwa representasi gender dalam Mr. Queen bersifat paradoks; seolah menawarkan wacana gender yang mendobrak wacana dominan, namun nyatanya tetap merepresentasikan perempuan sebagai subjek pasif yang terus dieksploitasi.

Kata kunci: representasi; gender; gender bender; drama; tubuh

INTRODUCTION

Korean dramas are increasingly in demand in Indonesia, beating interest in Indonesian dramas (sinetrons) (Azasya, 2020). Certain things related to postmodernism such as the blurring of realism, a breakthrough in animation culture, and the emphasis on visuals that are often found in dramas make this show so fun to follow from week to week. Some Korean dramas creators are getting bolder in making various genres that are of interest to the audience, including gender bender.

In the Online Cambridge Dictionary, gender bender means "a person who wears the clothes and copies the behavior of the opposite sex". However, in various popular culture products today, gender bender refers to story (narrative) and visual genres that obscure gender identity, where a person looks or behaves contrary to gender in general. Currently, the literature that discusses gender bender is still very limited, even though the genre has been found in various popular culture products, especially anime, drama and manga. Gender bender is not just for fun. In fact, gender bender is often seen as a form of resistance to a massive culture that tends to contrast gender only at two poles, namely women and men. Gender bender is also believed to be a culture that has existed for hundreds of years in Japan (Sukmasari, 2019).

Some of the most popular gender bender genre dramas include Moonlight Drawn by Clouds (2016), Sungkyunkwan Scandal (2010), Secret Garden (2010), You're Beautiful (2009), and Coffee Prince (2010) (Desy, 2017). These dramas (except Secret Garden) feature a female figure who hides her identity by looking and behaving like a man, while Secret Garden tells the story of a man and a woman whose bodies and souls change.

Now dramas with themes related to gender and sexuality are becoming very popular, because the issue of gender inequality in South Korea is increasingly being voiced (Kim et al, 2016: 3). In addition, the positive response on various international platforms to dramas with these themes motivates drama creators to create diverse presentations, bringing fresh air to the audience. One of the most talked about dramas in Indonesia when the drama was broadcast was Mr. Queen, which was broadcast by TVN (in South Korea) in 2020 and is still being watched by Indonesian Korean dramas fans through the Viu video on demand (vod) application, there is even a version that has been dubbed in Indonesian, showing that the Korean drama is very popular within the Indonesian audience.

Mr. Queen is a Saeguk drama (drama set in the Joseon era) and is a remake of the popular

Chinese web drama *Go Princess Go* (2015), which is an adaptation of the novel of the same name (Song, 2016). *Mr. Queen* – like *Go Princess Go* – can be categorized in the gender bender genre, because it tells the story of a male chef named Jang Bong Hwan (hereinafter referred to as Bonghwan) from the Modern era whose soul crosses space and time until he entered the body of the Queen in the Joseon era (Queen Cheorin). Bonghwan's soul tried hard to return to its original body, but these efforts were fruitless. Meanwhile, he was forced to deal with many parties for his safety, including fighting the king who considered Queen Cheorin as a threat because she came from the Kim clan who tried to make him as their puppet. Various unique events that invite laughter continue to be presented in *Mr. Queen*, presenting a new depiction of the queen; instead of the traditional feminine queen, Queen Cheorin portrays a masculine woman. The behavior of Queen Cheorin facing various challenges from her surroundings amid doubts about her own identity is the most interesting thing in the drama.

In South Korea, sexist and misogynistic behavior is still widely embraced by young people. This can be seen, among others, in the controversy over the female archery athlete who won three gold medals at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, An San. She was strongly criticized, even demanded to return her medal because she was considered a feminist and disturbing the community; based on his short hair, the fact that he attended Gwangju Women's University, and it is known that he is a fan of the idol group Mamamoo (Pasinringi, 2021). Even though South Korea has become a developed country and its K-Pop culture and Hallyu wave is global, the gender gap in South Korea is still very large.

Gender is often contradicted and attached to certain genders according to tradition, such as men being masculine and conversely, women being feminine. According to Butler (1999: xxiii-xxiv), it continues to be reproduced and becomes the norm that perpetuates the physical and emotional binary opposition of masculine and feminine gender; strong/weak, rational/irrational, macho/gentle, active/passive, hard/soft. This then becomes the dominant discourse which is considered natural or just happens. Whereas according to Butler, in the end, if the categories that are used as markers of one gender or another become uncertain or unstable, then "gender reality" becomes a crisis, the boundaries between real and unreal become blurred, and it is no longer clear what constitutes a difference. Gender differences that were previously considered natural then become realities that can be replaced and modified.

Mr. Queen as a drama which is a product of the culture industry tends to respond to the needs of its consumers, as well as "teaching" them a certain point of view; "The more strongly the culture industry entrenches itself, the more it can do as it chooses with the needs of consumers – producing, controlling, disciplining them; even withdrawing amusement altogether: here, no limits are set to cultural progress" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2006:56). If we refer to Foucault's definition (through Hall, 2013: 28) that representation is the production of knowledge through discourse, then as Conran and Nugroho (cited by Chri, 2021) argue, *Mr. Queen* with her story of "breaking conservative norms" is one of the signs that South Korea is experiencing a change

in social norms.

Meanwhile, *Mr. Queen* has a slightly different plot and ending from the *Go Princess Go* version, which should be noted. In *Mr. Queen*, Bonghwan's soul entered the body of the opposite sex and Queen, and he tried hard to return to his original body. But unfortunately, all his efforts to no avail. He only managed to return to his original body at the end of *Mr. Queen*, after she overcame all enemies of Queen Cheorin and King Cheoljong, and the Queen's soul returned to her body. Queen Cheorin was depicted again as feminine but with the addition of masculine traits. Meanwhile, Bonghwan returned to his original body in the Modern era, and he smiled happily knowing that the King and Queen are living happily as the best King and Queen in South Korean history. Whereas in *Go Princess Go*, Zhang Zhiyuan – a playboy from the future who possessed the body of Zhang Peng Peng the Queen – died in the body of the Queen, then returned to the Modern era and was still looking for the King he loves. A remake doesn't have to be exactly the same as the original version, especially to suit the audience and the platform on which the drama is being broadcasted; *Go Princess Go* is shown on the online video service LeTV, while *Mr. Queen* is broadcast on the cable television service TvN first and then distributed to some platforms such as Viu. However, what is shown in *Mr. Queen* is something that the audience is prone to believe naturally and consequently perpetuates the dominant gender discourse.

In the theatrical and phenomenological, there is an assumption that the act is gender-adjusting; “the gendered self to be prior to its acts” (Butler, 1988:520). If we refer to this assumption, then the identity of the character played is considered as something that is natural and certain and becomes a standard (natural). Butler opposes this assumption by adopting Beauvoir's thoughts in *The Second Sex*, specifically formulating the concept of stylized repetition of acts – the repetition of actions in certain ways – which he offers in the theory of performativity. “[...] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, 1988:520).

Performativity gives an understanding that when an actor builds their identity with the identity of the character they play, they are simultaneously building an illusive identity. Illusive here means that the identity is an object that is trusted by actors and production crews, so that later it becomes something that is considered a natural identity by the community. This becomes easy because the “body” is often used as a passive medium which is affixed with certain attributes or signs by cultural sources (Butler, 1999:164). That is, the “body” is considered blank, neutral, or otherwise, “destroyed” so that it can be rebuilt into what cultural sources want, which is then considered to be something natural. Meanwhile, World Economic Forum reported that in 2022 Indonesia was ranked 92nd in global gender gap index and South Korea was ranked 99th. It shows how Indonesia and South Korea are still far behind in women empowerment and gender equality. Therefore, it is important to analyze how spectacles such as *Mr. Queen* which is much loved by the community, produces knowledge about gender,

which is then very likely to be used as a reference by the community.

METHODS

Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis was chosen as the research method here because it can help explain who is the subject and who is the object in the text, the position of the creator and audience, as well as the micro-level context in the drama *Mr. Queen* (aired by TvN in 2020 and accessible via Viu until now) and macro is in the context of South Korean and Indonesian society. The analysis was carried out using four structures in Sara Mills' *Critical Discourse Analysis* (1995:123-156), namely character/role, fragmentation, focalization, and schemata.

In the character/role structure and fragmentation, it is examined how the character of Queen Cheorin was constructed in the text, including her character and body, both narratively and visually. In the focalization structure, the point of view of narration is examined, either through dialogue, monologue/voice over, or cinematography. Meanwhile, in the schemata structure, the chart or narrative pattern is examined, then analyzed its relation to the dominant gender discourse in society. Using this method, it is hoped that the results of this study can explain how the politics of gender representation in the gender bender drama *Mr. Queen* and its relation to gender discourse that develops in society.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Paradox of Women as Active Subjects

According to Mills (1995: 123-124), drama audiences use a series of complex experiences to read and understand the characters in a drama, and relate them to ideological messages. Then when watching something new, the audience learns a new set of skills to interpret ideological knowledge about men and women, which is different from what was previously known (patriarchal ideology). Therefore, it is very possible to reconstruct the ideological message through the characters in the drama, especially through the character of Queen Cheorin who was the protagonist in the gender bender genre drama.

It was said that Queen Cheorin's character became very different after she survived a suicide attempt at the palace lake and Bonghwan took possession of her body. Bonghwan was the male chef in a modern-day South Korean court. After being possessed by Bonghwan, Queen Cheorin's demeanor became very far from being elegant and became very masculine. Queen Cheorin's way of speaking was also vulgar with a high tone of voice, and often used vocabulary that was not known in the Joseon period. This was very different from the temperament of the royal daughter of the future queen of Joseon in general and can be seen in the poster of Figure 1:



Figure 1. Poster for the drama *Mr. Queen* on the Viu page.

Queen Cheorin bravely and cleverly seduced the great Empress Dowager's heart in order to get her own wish. She was also able to face his political opponents, both women and men, intelligently and bravely. Queen Cheorin even very bravely confronted the king and concubines who were hostile to her. In one scene in episode 4, Queen Cheorin strongly criticized the king who intended to kill her because of the power imbalance between them, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Queen Cheorin says that the King intends to kill her because she is weaker than the King.

The scene is an external focalization that shows the point of view of women who dare to speak about gender inequality in front of men. Focalization serves to provide meanings from the identification of consciousness through fictional events presented in the text, and can be said as the point of view of the whole text that contains a certain ideology (Mills, 1995:145).

The character of Ratu Cheorin seems to represent women as active, rational, empowered, and active subjects in the public sphere (masculine character), contrary to the dominant discourse that women (female) must be feminine, whose associations are passive, irrational, weak, and only active in society private domain (Connel through Dennis in Ross (Ed.), 2012:111). Interestingly then, the relationship between Queen Cheorin and the King improved until they both fell in love with each other. The character of Ratu Cheorin represented a woman who actively broke the dominant gender discourse and could get what she wanted. But unfortunately, all of these things became paradoxical when viewed from the schematic: all of this was done by Bonghwan, a man from the future who possessed Queen Cheorin's body.

The modern cooking skills and historical knowledge of the Joseon era that Queen Cheorin used in dealing with the problems she faced were none other than the knowledge possessed by Bonghwan. Meanwhile, Queen Cheorin's own skills (playing traditional music, knitting, and general knowledge from reading books) could not make her survive, as at the beginning of the story it is shown that Queen Cheorin tried to commit suicide because she felt helpless as a future Queen. But after Bonghwan took possession of her body, Queen Cheorin managed to get the King's love she had always wanted, and she was able to escape the pressure of her Clan.

Mr. Queen schematic was similar to Snow White and Aurora (Disney classic) who is beautiful full of talent but became so helpless that she needed to be saved by the Prince. This concept is also known as damsel in distress, which refers to a young female character who is positioned in danger to move the story; be the motivation of men to act or save it. In *Mr. Queen*, the helpless Queen Cheorin was saved by Bonghwan. However, the similarity of the schemata is not easily recognized by the audience, because there is an unpredictable pattern, namely Bonghwan possessing Queen Cheorin's body and not being her lover.

The audience seemed to be directed to judge that Queen Cheorin only benefited from Bonghwan possessing her. Throughout the narrative *Mr. Queen*, not once was Queen Cheorin shown refusal of Bonghwan who occupied her body. This shows that Queen Cheorin enjoys Bonghwan's achievements through her body, including how the King now loves her. Moreover, judging from its symbolic meaning, Bonghwan, which is said to have originated in modern times, was a phallic symbol. According to Massey (1994:179), space and place are important in the construction of relations between genders; both reflect and influence the way gender is constructed and understood. Therefore, to borrow Lefebvre's view (through Massey, 1994: 182-183) about Picasso's painting, modernity is an abstract space that symbolizes the phallus. So, Queen Cheorin who was possessed by Bonghwan seem to mean getting privileges that she will never have as a woman.

The visual of Queen Cheorin was female, but in fact it was Bonghwan or the male figure behind it who did many things and made Queen Cheorin powerless. Bonghwan, who was originally a cis man character, had to struggle with the fact that he was now in a woman's body, and had to experience the reality of being a woman for herself. This is the uniqueness and attraction of the gender bender genre, because the genre plays with gender stereotypes and is not fixated on dominant gender discourse. This also seems to confirm the new point of view offered by Ljungback (2017) in analyzing relations between genders in the schemata of classic Disney films.

Ljungback sees that female characters in Disney classics become active subjects who are manipulative by exploiting their femininity, in order to attract empathy and affection. Consequently, the victims in the schemata are the men who follow the women. In *Mr. Queen*, Queen Cheorin seem to cleverly take advantage of Bonghwan, while Bonghwan actually had to sacrifice many things for Queen Cheorin who he didn't know. However, based on the observations that had been made, Ljungback's point of view does not apply to *Mr. Queen*,

because neither Queen Cheorin nor Bonghwan can determine when to enter or leave Queen Cheorin's body.

Then after Bonghwan left the body of Queen Cheorin, Queen Cheorin returned to being a feminine woman, although it was shown that she had become more assertive, brave, and liked to speak harshly. The scene was located at the end and showed that Queen Cheorin had become more empowered. Ironically, this shows that the masculinity of Queen Cheorin's character so far was that Bonghwan's gender is male. This means, gender politics in the character of *Mr. Queen* actually perpetuates the dominant discourse that attaches masculinity to men and femininity to women. Queen Cheorin turned out to be not an active subject, because her actions were determined by others, not by her own choices. Queen Cheorin was a representation of women as passive subjects who were given a double standard; women are still constructed as feminine, but on several occasions they are expected to be more masculine in order to take care of themselves and the people around them, especially their partners.

Mr. Queen overturns gender and offers what the majority of the audience (women) want, which is to be a woman and be free to choose gender. However, *Mr. Queen* still adopts and perpetuates the patriarchal ideology that positions women as recipients of action while men act, and contrasts women with men and feminine with masculine. *Mr. Queen* describes the people of South Korea who want to be free to choose their gender, but unfortunately this desire cannot be realized.

The Illusion of a Masculine Female Body

Throughout the narrative, the character of Queen Cheorin was always visualized by Shin Hye Sun (Hyesun), one of South Korea's top actresses. Physically, Hyesun describes the ideal beautiful figure of a South Korean woman who is widely represented by the media: white skin, slim body and proportional height, curvy waist, plump buttocks, flat stomach, sharp nose, and thick hair. Queen Cheorin's appearance was maintained like the Queen of the Joseon Kingdom who was elegant and always arranged complete with various accessories. She used layers of clothing, especially for the marriage ritual with the king, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. A brief description of the Queen's attire in the wedding ritual.

In this cut, the voice over by one of Ratu Cheorin's maiden was an external focalization, explaining that the multi-layered Queen's clothes were arranged so that the upper part was slim and fit the body and the lower part expanded; all for the sake of impressing a perfect and

ravishing figure. The dominant discourse of the beauty of the female body in certain parts such as breasts, buttocks, and hips was reproduced in this scene.

Queen Cheorin was also required to wear a headdress which made her complain because it was so heavy, but her maiden said that Queen Cheorin had to endure the stifling weight; as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4. A brief explanation of the Queen's attire in the wedding ritual.

The focalization shows a patriarchal point of view with a dominant gender discourse that objectifies women's bodies and demands their obedience; represents the image that must be shown by women through the way they dress.

Meanwhile, Queen Cheorin's masculine gestures were also restricted to conform to societal norms. Although as an actor Hyesun cleverly imitated bold and vulgar masculine gestures, this tends to be feminine, not masculine which is usually represented by men. Referring to Douglas (via Butler, 1999:167): “[...] *what constitutes the limit of the body is never merely material, but that the surface, the skin, is systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions; indeed, the boundaries of the body become, [...] the limits of the social perse*”. Hyesun's female body had been limited by taboos and norms in dominant gender discourse. In this case, the female body is represented as having the possibility of masculine gender, but within certain limits permitted by discourse in society. In addition, Queen Cheorin's body is also still fragmented like a woman's body in general: treated with voyeurism and male gaze.

Voyeurism refers to a visual presentation that encodes masculinity and positions women as passive and exhibited figures; the camera seems to be watching a female character who is not watching, in her own world or in her private space (Mulvey, 1996:62-68). In *Mr. Queen*, not only is the body of Queen Cheorin objectified, the body of the King is also treated as such. However, more fragments of Queen Cheorin's body appeared. Queen Cheorin's body was depersonalized, objectified, reduced to certain parts such as her chest, thighs, and hands, then the camera showed a very long shot of Queen Cheorin sleeping behind a room divider as shown in Figure 5.



Picture 5. camera peeking at Queen Cheorin from behind the room divider.

The voyage was carried out with an objective camera angle, it did not clearly show which character was looking at it, but seemed to represent the viewer's view. This represents women as objects of men's gaze (male gaze), where women seem to be natural objects. In contrast to the fragmentation carried out on the King's body: a subjective camera angle was used in the scene that show the physical allure of the King, where the King's body was clearly the object of Queen Cheorin's gaze.

Throughout the narrative of *Mr. Queen*, the audience was directed to guess whether the one acting with Queen Cheorin's body was Queen Cheorin herself or Bonghwan. But ironically, Queen Cheorin's body was treated as an object from the start, as many women's bodies have been. The masculinity shown in the movements of the character of Queen Cheorin did not change the fact that the female body tended to be presented as a passive medium, which Butler (1999:12) mentions, "*Within those terms, 'the body' appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself*". Women's bodies are interpreted culturally, and in *Mr. Queen*, the female body queen is allowed to adopt a masculine gender but is still interpreted as a natural male object of view.

CONCLUSION

Gender bender drama overturns character gender and is very likely to be an ideological tool to reconstruct gender discourse so that it is not too unequal as the dominant discourse in society. This can be seen in the representation of women through the character of Ratu Cheorin in the drama *Mr. Queen*. However, after being researched and analyzed using the Sara Mills discourse analysis method, it was found that the representation of women in *Mr. Queen* is paradoxical;

as if breaking the dominant gender discourse that subverts women, but at the same time positioning women as passive subjects who need help from men.

Queen Cheorin was helped by Bonghwan through a process that neither of them wanted, namely Bonghwan's soul entering Queen Cheorin's body. It is vaguely told that Queen Cheorin's own soul is still in her body, but who acts on Queen Cheorin's body is blurred; whether Queen Cheorin herself or Bonghwan. What is clear is that Queen Cheorin's body behaves as masculine as Bonghwan's. The expertise and knowledge used also belong to Bonghwan who came from modern times. This symbolically marks that Queen Cheorin gets privileges that she will never get as a woman, if not possessed by a male figure (Bonghwan).

Meanwhile, Queen Cheorin's body is still the object of the male gaze which seems natural. The camera works as a patriarchal ideology tool in disguise by showing the sexual allure of the body of Queen Cheorin and the body of the King, but the shooting angle is different. Ratu Cheorin's body fragmentation was taken from an objective camera angle, while the King's body fragmentation was taken from a subjective camera angle. This represents that the female body is naturally an object of male gaze (male gaze).

In the end, Mr. Queen did not succeed in offering a new construction of gender discourse. A masculine female body is only allowed when the male has full control over the body, just as Bonghwan's soul possessed Queen Cheorin's body. However, this is beyond the control of both Bonghwan and Queen Cheorin. When all of the King's opponents are nearly over and Bonghwan's soul returns to modern times, Queen Cheorin returns to being a feminine woman, albeit with a hint of the masculine influence of Bonghwan that her body remembers. This shows that in the end women are still expected to be feminine passive subjects, where masculinity is limited only when she supports her partner.

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