

Indistinguishable Gender Ideology and the Transcendence of Bissu Gender in Bugis–Makassar Literary Representations

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ABSTRACT

Indistinguishable gender ideology in literary works refers to a concept in which the roles, attributes, and social positions of female and male characters are no longer confined by traditional binary stereotypes (masculine–feminine) or biological determinism. This concept is closely related to gender transcendence, understood as an ideological meaning rooted in the internal cultural framework of Bugis–Makassar society. This study examines the representation of indistinguishable gender ideology and the transcendence of Bissu gender in modern Indonesian literature set within the socio-cultural context of Bugis–Makassar society in South Sulawesi. It analyzes how gender roles, characteristics, and issues are constructed and represented in selected literary works. Focus of research includes the shifts in gender narratives over time, the stereotypes that are reproduced or deconstructed, and the social implications of these representations. The study employs a qualitative descriptive content analysis method applied to a selection of significant novels, short stories, and poems within the canon of modern Indonesian literature. Data were collected through close reading of literary texts, identification of patterns in the portrayal of male and female characters, and thematic analysis of issues related to identity, power, and gender relations. The findings reveal that Bissu transcend conventional gender categories, integrating both masculine and feminine elements within a single embodied existence, and are regarded as cosmologically “complete” beings. In this context, Bissu do not occupy a position of gender absence; rather, they exist at a different ontological level beyond ordinary gender divisions, functioning as intermediaries between the human and the spiritual realms.

KEYWORDS

Gender ideology; transcendence; Bissu; literary works

INTRODUCTION

The concept of gender equality in Bugis–Makassar society extends beyond the binary distinction between men and women by recognizing multiple gender identities and their respective social roles. Within the Bugis cultural system, five gender categories are acknowledged: oroané (male), makkunrai (female), calalai (biologically female individuals who assume masculine roles), calabai (biologically male individuals who assume feminine roles), and Bissu, who embody both masculine and feminine elements within a sacred identity. This system reflects a culturally specific understanding of gender diversity embedded in social, spiritual, and cultural practices (Cummings, 2002)

Contemporary discussions on gender diversity often refer to non-binary or indistinguishable gender identities, which challenge rigid distinctions between biological sex and socially constructed gender roles. According to Pelras (1996) Bugis society recognizes five gender categories. Butler (1990) argues that gender is performative, produced through repeated acts, behaviors, and expressions rather than fixed biological attributes. From this perspective, non-binary identities represent valid forms of gender expression that may transcend conventional norms and expectations.

However, the Bugis concept of Bissu differs significantly from modern non-binary frameworks (Robinson, 2005). Bissu are not merely positioned between male and female categories; rather, they are believed to transcend and integrate all gender elements into a unified existence. As ritual leaders and custodians of tradition, Bissu hold an important spiritual role within Bugis cosmology. According to Suryadi (2018), the gender transcendence of Bissu is deeply rooted in customary and spiritual belief systems, functioning as part of a sacred order that mediates relationships between humans and the spiritual realm (Rohmansyah, 2018).

Representations of calabai and Bissu figures frequently appear in literary works by South Sulawesi authors, including “Arajang” by Khrisna Pabichara, “Jangan Tanyakan tentang Mereka yang Memotong Lidahku” by Faisal Oddang, and Calabai: Perempuan dalam Tubuh Lelaki by Pepi Al-Bayquni. These narratives portray gender-transcendent characters as culturally significant yet socially marginalized, often experiencing rejection, stigmatization, discrimination, and violence. Such depictions reflect broader social tensions surrounding gender diversity while highlighting the unique cultural construction of gender within Bugis society.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive-interpretative approach to examine the representation of indistinguishable gender ideology and the transcendence of Bissu gender in modern Indonesian literary works. The qualitative approach is selected to enable an in-depth exploration of meanings, symbols, and discursive constructions of gender within literary texts situated in the socio-cultural context of Bugis–Makassar society.

The primary data consist of selected literary works that explicitly depict *calabai* and Bissu characters, including the short story “Arajang” in *Gadis Pakarena* by Khrisna Pabichara, “Jangan Tanyakan tentang Mereka yang Memotong Lidahku” in *Sawerigading Datang dari Laut* by Faisal Oddang, and the novel *Calabai: Perempuan dalam Tubuh Lelaki* by Pepi Al-Bayquni. These texts are purposively selected based on their thematic relevance to gender diversity, cultural representation, and the presence of non-binary or transcendent gender identities within the Bugis context.

Data collection is conducted through close reading techniques, focusing on narrative structures, characterizations, dialogues, and symbolic elements that reflect gender identities and roles. Relevant textual segments are identified, categorized, and documented to capture patterns in the representation of gender, particularly in relation to indistinguishable gender ideology and Bissu gender transcendence.

The data are analyzed using qualitative content analysis, complemented by a gender studies perspective. The analysis involves several stages: (1) identifying representations of gender roles and identities within the texts; (2) examining how these representations reinforce, negotiate, or deconstruct dominant gender ideologies; and (3) interpreting the socio-cultural and ideological implications of such representations within both local (Bugis–Makassar) and broader contemporary contexts. The theoretical framework draws

on gender performativity and the social construction of gender to contextualize the findings within contemporary academic discourse.

To ensure the validity of the analysis, the study applies interpretative rigor through repeated reading, cross-textual comparison, and contextualization within relevant cultural and theoretical frameworks. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how literary texts articulate complex and fluid conceptions of gender that transcend binary classifications.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Gender Role of Bissu in Bugis Makassar Society, South Sulawesi in Literary Works

The gender role of Bissu—understood as an integration of male and female elements—differs significantly from other gender identities within the Bugis social system. In addition to being regarded as sacred figures who hold important social and ritual functions, Bissu are expected not to privilege or emphasize any single gender identity, whether masculine or feminine. Instead, they are required to embody a state of neutrality, integrating both dimensions harmoniously. From the perspective of dominant societal norms, such a position may appear inconsistent with “idealized” gender roles. However, within the traditional context of Bugis society, this condition is not only accepted but also culturally legitimized. Becoming a Bissu is far from simple; beyond maintaining gender balance, a Bissu must possess specific ritual competencies and cultural knowledge.

In the short story “Arajang” by Khrisna Pabichara, the author positions the first-person narrator (“Aku”) as a central voice recounting the painful realities of birth and life as a *calabai*. The narrative opens with a depiction of the hardships experienced by the protagonist:

“It is not easy to be a man, nor to be a woman. But it is even more difficult to be a *calabai*, a man who resembles a woman. In my hometown, Malakaji, a village at the foot of Mount Bawakaraeng, men are only required to be skilled in horseback riding, martial arts, farming, or trading. Being a woman is even simpler—one must be able to cook, wash, and care for a husband and children. But not so if you are a *calabai*. You will be led by fate into a ‘realm in between,’ experiencing the pain of insults and harassment that recur as if they were daily sustenance.” (*Arajang*, p. 37)

The narrative does not primarily focus on comparing gender roles; rather, it centers on the life trajectory of the protagonist, who is born as a son admired by his father but gradually develops in ways that diverge from normative masculinity. The protagonist’s early life, marked by abilities typically associated with boys, becomes a source of pride for his father. This paternal admiration shapes the narrative until the protagonist ultimately transforms into a respected young Bissu, following a life journey marked by ridicule, familial rejection, and other forms of suffering.

“I felt as if I had been reborn. I felt revived by Batara from a dark and suffocating death. I began a new life filled with promise, peace, and joy—a life without insults or mockery. Now I have become the youngest Bissu, respected by many. I am the most ‘manly’ of men, skilled in performing *manggiripiercing* my body with knives, swords, kris, or badik. At the same time, I embody the most ‘feminine’ of women, sacred because I never menstruate, untouched by blood, as my body cannot be penetrated by iron or steel.” (*Arajang*, p. 47)

The figures of *calabai* and Bissu, as part of indistinguishable or non-binary gender identities, emerge from gender roles that have long been embedded in Bugis–Makassar society and can often be identified through occupational choices that fall outside socially

normative expectations. Socially, many *calabai* engage in domestic labor within family structures—roles traditionally associated with women or mothers. In this regard, they do not conform to their biological sex as male, but instead perform gender roles that reflect a divergence between biological identity and social function. This phenomenon underscores the fluidity and cultural specificity of gender construction within Bugis society, where identity is not strictly determined by biological sex but is negotiated through social roles, cultural expectations, and symbolic meanings.

This phenomenon can be further elaborated through the concept of gender identity as an integral component of an individual's overall identity. Meissner (2005) defines gender as an internal experience of the self that constitutes a fundamental aspect of personal identity. Furthermore, gender identity can be divided into two dimensions: core gender identity and gender role identity. Core gender identity refers to the internal sense of being male or female, typically formed at an early age (around two years old), and is often associated with biological distinctions. In contrast, gender role identity refers to an individual's perception of their own gendered attributes—whether masculine or feminine—which is shaped by sociological, biological, and psychological factors.

In literary works that depict the lives of *calabai* who later choose the path of becoming Bissu—such as the short story “Arajang”—there is a clear representation of gender ideology that underpins the construction of Bissu as a distinct yet equally significant gender role within society. The existence of Bissu, believed by the community to serve as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realms and regarded as sacred beings, positions them as central figures in traditional ceremonies. Their perceived spiritual purity further reinforces their authority and the attribution of supernatural or ritual power.

Historically, the presence of Bissu predates the arrival of Islam in South Sulawesi, particularly before Islam became the official religion of the Gowa–Tallo kingdom in the sixteenth century. Bissu are regarded as sacred beings believed to have descended from the heavens alongside *To Manurung* and the first king of Luwu, Batara Guru, as narrated in the epic literary work *I La Galigo*, one of the longest epic texts in the world. Within this framework, the gender role of Bissu—embodying both male and female elements—differs significantly from other gender identities. In addition to their sacred status and important social functions, Bissu are expected to maintain neutrality by not emphasizing either masculine or feminine traits exclusively.

Prior to the Islamization of South Sulawesi, Bissu functioned as ritual specialists within Bugis kingdoms, serving as intermediaries between humans and the divine, often communicating through the sacred language of *toriolo*. They played a central role in royal ceremonies, acting both as servants of the king and as spiritual custodians within the community. However, during the post-independence period, Bissu faced significant challenges, particularly from the Darul Islam/Indonesian Islamic Army movement, which regarded their practices as heretical and superstitious. This resulted in persecution and marginalization. In contemporary contexts, the survival of Bissu traditions is further challenged by issues of leadership continuity, regeneration, and the need to adapt to rapidly changing socio-cultural conditions.

The representation of *calabai* who later become Bissu is also evident in the short story “Jangan Tanyakantentang Mereka yang Memotong Lidahku” from the collection *Sawerigading Datang dari Laut* by Faisal Oddang. This narrative portrays the lives of Bissu as marked by struggle under conditions of persecution, where they are forced into displacement, living as fugitives who must continuously move from one place to another, from one forest to another, in order to survive. As part of indistinguishable or non-binary gender identities, *calabai* and Bissu are depicted as experiencing marginalization from

early life within their own families, including humiliation and social rejection—echoing patterns observed in earlier literary representations.

“Sissy, go away—just stay in the kitchen. You don’t belong playing football with us.”

“I remember it well—insults and mockery like that were what brought us closer. You had no friends to play with in your childhood, and neither did I. ‘Sissy!’—that was how our peers cursed us. You would run off in tears, slowly making your way toward me. I would join you in crying, because we were the same, Upe—I felt it too. But now, everything is different. People bow their heads, showing respect and reverence toward us. In this Bugis land, no one dares to insult a Bissu. With a single spit, we could strip them of their manhood like a castrated dog. The *dewata* resides in every breath we take, Upe...belive me”

(“*Jangan Tanyakan tentang Mereka yang Memotong Lidahku,*” p. 36)

The presence of Bissu within Bugis society, particularly in social terms, has generally been well accepted, as they are granted a cultural space that frees them from stigma. This acceptance is grounded in the belief that Bissu serve as representatives of the *dewata* (divine beings). Moreover, the role of Bissu in the early formation of Bugis society was highly significant. Historically, the existence of Bissu is considered contemporaneous with the very origins of the Bugis people themselves. In its early stages of civilization, South Sulawesi society was deeply shaped by mythological narratives, both in oral and written forms. These include myths of figures such as *Simpurusiang* in Luwu, *Sengingridi* in Bone, *Petta Sekkanyili* in Soppeng, and *Puteri Tamalate* in Gowa—all identified as *To Manurung*, whose presence played a crucial role in shaping the cultural patterns of Bugis and Makassar societies in South Sulawesi.

Within the Bugis cultural structure, the role of Bissu is considered exceptional, as they are regarded as the primary mediators between humans and the divine through traditional ritual practices, often performed using the sacred language of the heavens (*Basa Torilangi*). Consequently, Bissu also function as custodians of oral traditions, particularly the classical Bugis literary tradition *sure’ I La Galigo*. In addition, they play a central role in organizing and conducting various traditional ceremonies, including rituals related to pregnancy, birth, marriage (*indo’ botting*), death, vow fulfillment, offerings, and protective rites (*tolakbala*).

Another significant literary work that explores the themes of *calabai* and Bissu is the novel *Calabai: Perempuan dalam Tubuh Lelaki* by Pepi Al-Bayquni. This novel narrates the life of a Bugis man named Saidi, a *calabai* who serves as the central protagonist. The narrative portrays Saidi as an individual who exhibits feminine traits and ultimately chooses the path of becoming a Bissu. Similar to the previously discussed short stories, the novel explores the internal struggles of its characters as they grapple with their gender identity from an early age.

The novel *Calabai* can be understood as a complex representation of the relationship between the individual, culture, and social structures within Bugis society in South Sulawesi. It not only presents the personal narrative of Saidi but also reflects the broader social dynamics that shape, constrain, and simultaneously provide space for identities that exist beyond dominant norms. Through a poetic and reflective narrative style, the author constructs the protagonist’s life experience as part of a wider social reality, in which identity is never autonomous but is continuously negotiated within the framework of cultural values and prevailing power structures.

The character of Saidi in the novel represents an individual who experiences tension between personal identity and social expectations. From the outset, he is confronted with

rigid gender norms that position men and women within clearly defined boundaries. Any deviation from these norms gives rise to various forms of social rejection, ranging from stigma to symbolic violence.

From the perspective of the sociology of literature, this experience illustrates how society actively constructs and sustains the categories of the “normal” and the “deviant.” These categories are continuously reproduced through recurring social mechanisms, thereby reinforcing dominant norms while marginalizing identities that fall outside established boundaries.

“Saidi chose to remain silent, waiting for what would happen.”

“Puang Matoa continued, ‘We live according to the path of destiny that has been ordained for us, Sir. Just as you never asked to live as a man, and your wife never asked to be created as a woman, we too never asked God to make us *calabai*. As human beings, we cannot choose what we are to become. We can only accept it. Even if you consider us abnormal, we can do nothing but accept it and surrender.’”
(*Calabai: Perempuan dalam Tubuh Lelaki*, p. 176)

However, *Calabai* does not merely dwell on narratives of marginalization. The novel also provides a space in which alternative identities attain cultural legitimacy, particularly through the presence of Bissu within Bugis tradition. Bissu are portrayed not only as entities that transcend gender categories but also as figures endowed with spiritual authority and significant roles within customary structures. This representation reveals a duality within society: on the one hand, there is rejection of difference; on the other, there is recognition of certain forms of identity that have been culturally institutionalized. This tension reflects a dynamic social reality that is not static but continuously negotiated in response to changing historical and cultural conditions.

Furthermore, the body in this novel becomes a primary locus of power. Saidi’s body functions not only as a medium for the expression of identity but also as an object of surveillance and social judgment. Norms embedded within society operate through the body, regulating how individuals are expected to behave, present themselves, and position their identities. In this context, power does not always manifest in overtly repressive forms; rather, it often operates through the internalization of values that lead individuals to unconsciously conform to prevailing standards.

At the same time, the narrative of *Calabai* can be read as a form of cultural resistance. By foregrounding the lives of Bissu and the protagonist’s struggle with identity, Pepi Al-Bayquni articulates voices that have historically been marginalized within dominant discourses. Literature, in this sense, functions as an alternative space for representing experiences that are often excluded from everyday social realities. Through such representations, readers are invited to critically reflect on established social constructions and to consider more inclusive understandings of identity diversity.

Thus, *Calabai* operates not only as a narrative work but also as a social document that reveals power relations, value conflicts, and processes of identity negotiation within society. The novel underscores that marginalization is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader social system, while simultaneously demonstrating that within this system there always exists the potential for resistance and transformation.

Indistinguishable Gender Ideology and the Transcendence of Bissu Gender in Bugis–Makassar Literary Representations

The findings of this study demonstrate that the representation of *calabai* and Bissu in modern Indonesian literary works reflects a complex negotiation between dominant gender

ideologies and localized cultural frameworks. While contemporary gender discourse often frames non-binary identities within the paradigm of resistance to binary norms, the Bugis cultural system offers an alternative epistemology in which gender plurality is historically embedded and culturally legitimized. In this context, the concept of indistinguishable gender ideology intersects with, yet remains distinct from, the culturally specific notion of Bissu gender transcendence.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings resonate with Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which posits that gender is constituted through repeated social practices rather than fixed biological determinants. The literary representations analyzed in this study illustrate how gender identities—particularly those of *calabai* and Bissu—are continuously constructed, negotiated, and performed within specific socio-cultural contexts. However, unlike the predominantly Western framework of non-binary identity as a form of individual resistance, the Bissu identity is embedded within a collective cosmology that grants it spiritual authority and social function.

At the same time, the narratives reveal the persistence of hegemonic gender norms that regulate and discipline bodies perceived as “deviant.” The experiences of marginalization, stigma, and symbolic violence depicted in the texts reflect broader social mechanisms that sustain binary gender hierarchies. In this regard, the body becomes a site of power, as suggested by Foucauldian perspectives (Foucault, M. (1977), where social norms are inscribed, monitored, and enforced. Saidi's body, for instance, is not merely a personal entity but a socially contested space subject to surveillance and normative judgment.

Nevertheless, the presence of Bissu within the cultural and literary imagination introduces a counter-discourse that challenges dominant constructions of gender. Unlike marginalized non-binary identities in many modern contexts, Bissu occupy a paradoxical position: they are both revered and vulnerable, legitimized within ritual and spiritual domains yet simultaneously exposed to social and political pressures, particularly in periods of historical transformation. This duality highlights the dynamic nature of cultural systems, in which acceptance and exclusion coexist and are continuously renegotiated.

Furthermore, the literary texts examined in this study function as critical spaces for articulating alternative gender narratives. Through the use of personal storytelling, symbolic imagery, and culturally grounded perspectives, these works not only document lived experiences but also intervene in dominant discourses by foregrounding marginalized voices. Literature, therefore, serves as a site of cultural resistance, enabling the reconfiguration of meaning and the expansion of gender discourse beyond rigid binaries.

In this sense, the ideology of indistinguishable gender in literary representation does not merely dissolve gender distinctions but redefines them within a broader and more inclusive framework. The transcendence embodied by Bissu suggests that gender can be understood not as a fixed category but as a fluid, relational, and culturally mediated construct. This perspective challenges universalizing assumptions about gender and underscores the importance of contextualizing gender within specific historical and cultural settings.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the representation of *calabai* and Bissu in modern Indonesian literary works reflects a complex and culturally grounded understanding of gender that transcends binary classifications. The concept of indistinguishable gender ideology, as depicted in the analyzed texts, does not merely challenge traditional gender norms but also reveals the existence of alternative gender systems that have long been embedded within local cultural frameworks, particularly in Bugis–Makassar society.

The findings indicate that Bissu embody a form of gender transcendence that integrates masculine and feminine elements into a unified and cosmologically meaningful identity. Unlike contemporary non-binary discourses that often emphasize individual identity and resistance, the Bissu identity is situated within a collective cultural and spiritual system that grants it both legitimacy and authority. At the same time, literary representations of *calabai* and Bissu reveal ongoing tensions between acceptance and marginalization, highlighting the persistence of social stigma, symbolic violence, and normative pressures.

Furthermore, this study underscores the role of literature as a critical medium for articulating marginalized voices and reconfiguring dominant gender discourses. Through narrative representation, literary texts provide a space for negotiating identity, exposing power relations, and offering alternative perspectives on gender diversity. In this regard, literature not only reflects social realities but also actively participates in shaping more inclusive understandings of identity.

In conclusion, the ideology of indistinguishable gender and the transcendence of Bissu gender illustrate that gender is not a fixed or universal category, but a dynamic, fluid, and culturally mediated construct. These findings contribute to broader discussions in gender studies and literary studies by emphasizing the importance of local knowledge systems in challenging dominant paradigms and expanding the conceptual boundaries of gender.

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