

# ROOTS OF DESIRE: COMPARING TRAJECTORIES OF LESBIAN IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIAN AND ENGLISH PROSE

Tira Mariana

Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi

[tira.mariana@uinjambi.ac.id](mailto:tira.mariana@uinjambi.ac.id)

This comparative study explores the multifaceted trajectories of lesbian identity formation—or “becoming”—in 13 selected contemporary Indonesian and English short stories. By synthesizing narratives sourced from grassroots and digital literary platforms, this research proposes a six-point typology of the “roots” of lesbian desire: conscious choice, spontaneous desire, long-term interaction, early environmental exposure, sexual exploration, and responses to marital trauma. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and Adrienne Rich’s concept of the lesbian continuum, the study critically deconstructs essentialist myths of sexuality. The findings reveal a clear cultural divergence: Indonesian narratives frequently frame lesbian becoming as a strategic and agentic choice to resist state-sponsored heteronormativity and “State Ibuism,” whereas English narratives tend to emphasize the fluid, visceral, and spontaneous nature of desire. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that lesbian becoming functions as a radical reclamation of female agency and as a literary sanctuary from patriarchal failure across both traditions.

مستخلص

البحث

Abstract

**Keywords:** *Lesbian identity, Comparative literature, Indonesian prose, English prose, Queer theory, Identity trajectories.*

كلمات

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Keyword

## 1. INTRODUCTION (مقدمة)

The narrative of “becoming” a lesbian in contemporary literature is far from a monolithic experience; it is a multifaceted “Herstory” that challenges the traditional boundaries of gender and desire. In both Indonesian and Western literary landscapes, the portrayal of same-sex attraction has shifted from being a “silent deviance” to a site of active political and personal negotiation. As noted by Boellstorff (2005), sexual identities in the

Indonesian archipelago are often shaped by a tension between national heteronormative ideologies and the emerging visibility of queer subjectivities. Consequently, literature serves as a crucial medium for women to articulate desires that are often marginalized by "compulsory heterosexuality"—a term coined by Rich (1980) to describe the systemic social pressure that directs women toward emotional and sexual subordination to men.

The process of identity formation in these stories raises a fundamental question: is sexual orientation an innate destiny or a fluid socio-psychological development? While essentialist views might argue for a biological "given," Butler (1990) deconstructs this by asserting that gender and sexuality are performative, characterized by a "slippery" and unfixed nature. This theoretical shift allows for a broader interpretation of lesbianism, not as a static category, but as a "continuum" that encompasses a wide range of female-centred experiences (Rich, 1980).

Furthermore, recent scholarship suggests that the "coming out" or "becoming" process is deeply intertwined with "affective triggers"—such as trauma, long-term bonding, or even accidental encounters—that disrupt the heterosexual life script (Ahmed, 2019).

Previous studies on Indonesian literature have noted a shift in how same-sex desire is portrayed. Dede Oetomo (1996) and Tom Boellstorff (2005) provided foundational insights into the emergence of "lesbi" identities in Indonesia, noting that while gay men were more visible, lesbian narratives remained largely domestic or hidden. More recently, research by Wieringa (2003) in *The Shadows of the Morning* explores how Indonesian women navigate heteronormativity.

The academic discussion regarding lesbianism in literature has evolved significantly over the last few decades, moving from themes of invisibility and tragedy to agency and fluidity. Global queer literary studies often oscillate between Essentialism (being born gay) and Social Constructionism (identity formed by environment). Adrienne Rich's (1980) seminal essay, *"Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,"* argues that heterosexuality is a political institution forced upon women, and the "lesbian continuum" includes all forms of female bonding. Research by Zimmerman (1990) in *The Safe Sea of Women* discusses how lesbian fiction often portrays the "coming out" process as a transition from a world of male-centred violence to a "safe space" among women.

The representation of non-heteronormative identities in literature has undergone a significant transformation in the last five years, shifting from a focus on marginalization to an exploration of agency and intersectionality. Recent studies in Indonesian literature, such as those by Pratama & Nurhadi (2020), have highlighted how contemporary Indonesian authors use queer characters to challenge the "New Order" ideology of *State Ibuism*, which strictly enforces heteronormative roles for women. Similarly, Wijaya (2022) explored the concept of "Safe Spaces" in Indonesian digital lesbian fiction, arguing that these narratives provide a subversive platform for women to negotiate their desires away from the public eye.

In the global context, recent scholarship has moved toward "Queer Affect" theory. Ahmed (2019) and Giffney (2021) emphasize that "becoming" is not a static arrival but a continuous process shaped by domestic objects, trauma, and bodily sensations. This aligns with the findings in this study regarding how "spontaneous feelings" and "long-term interactions" (such as those in the stories of A.K. Naten and Sakura) function as affective triggers for identity shifts. Meanwhile, Puspita and Inayati (2023) emphasizes that contemporary Indonesian literature has become a vital space for navigating queer identities, offering a direct challenge to the deeply rooted heteronormativity within the region's social fabric."

Despite the increasing number of works featuring lesbian characters, there is a significant lack of comparative analysis that categorizes the specific "roots" of this identity shift across different cultural frameworks. This study addresses this gap by analysing selected Indonesian and English short stories to map out a typology of lesbian emergence. By examining these narratives, this article aims to demonstrate that "becoming a lesbian" is portrayed as an agentic journey toward self-actualization, where women reclaim their bodies and emotions from patriarchal structures. Through this comparative lens, we can see how literature functions globally as a sanctuary where "women know what women want," providing a voice for those who have been historically silenced.

In recent decades, queer literary studies have increasingly shifted from questions of representation toward questions of process, affect, and agency. Rather than asking whether lesbian characters exist in literary texts, contemporary scholarship interrogates how lesbian identity is narrated, negotiated, and legitimized within specific socio-cultural constraints. This shift is particularly significant in postcolonial and Global South contexts, where sexuality is entangled with nationhood, religion, and moral governance.

While Western queer literary criticism has extensively explored themes of coming out, authenticity, and fluid desire (Sedgwick, 1990; Jagose, 1996; Ahmed, 2019), comparatively little attention has been paid to how lesbian identity is articulated as a trajectory of becoming within restrictive cultural frameworks such as Indonesia. Existing studies on Indonesian queer literature have predominantly focused on visibility, marginalization, or resistance (Boellstorff, 2005; Blackwood, 2010; Wieringa, 2003), leaving a significant gap in understanding the narrative mechanisms through which lesbian subjectivity is formed and sustained.

Moreover, most comparative studies between Western and non-Western queer texts tend to privilege thematic similarity rather than structural difference. As a result, lesbian identity is often treated as a universal category, obscuring the culturally specific conditions under which desire becomes intelligible. This study addresses this gap by shifting the analytical focus from identity as an outcome to identity as a process—what this article conceptualizes as the "roots of desire."

The novelty of this research lies in its typological approach. By mapping six recurring trajectories—conscious choice, spontaneous desire, long-term interaction, early environmental exposure, sexual exploration, and trauma response—this study offers a systematic framework for analyzing lesbian identity formation across cultural contexts. Rather than positioning lesbianism as either biologically innate or socially constructed, this typology demonstrates that identity emerges through layered interactions between affect, memory, power, and agency.

Furthermore, this study contributes to comparative literature by foregrounding digital and grassroots archives as legitimate literary spaces. By including texts from alternative platforms such as SepociKopi and Read These Lips, this research challenges the dominance of print-based, canonized literature and highlights how marginalized voices construct counter-narratives beyond institutional publishing. In doing so, the article positions lesbian prose as both a literary and political intervention—one that reclaims narrative authority in environments where lesbian existence is routinely erased or silenced.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK (نظريات)

### 2.1. Defining Lesbianism: Etymology and Theoretical Evolution

The term "lesbian" ([ˈlezbɪən]) fundamentally refers to a woman who is sexually, emotionally, and/or romantically attracted to the same sex. While the term is often used as

a simple identifier, its academic definition has evolved through various historical and political layers. Etymologically, the word is rooted in the Greek island of Lesbos, the home of the poet Sappho (c. 610–580 BC), whose homo-erotic poetry laid the earliest literary foundations for female-to-female desire.

To understand lesbianism as a complex identity, it is necessary to examine the definitions provided by key scholars. Humm (1995) defines lesbianism as a condition of emotional and sexual relationships between women who self-identify as lesbians. She emphasizes that the term serves both as a noun (referring to the identity of the individual) and an adjective (describing characteristics, objects, or activities related to female same-sex desire). This definition is expanded by Faderman (1981), in her seminal work *Surpassing the Love of Men*, adopts a broader historical perspective. She uses the term to describe "romantic friendship" and emotional attachments between women throughout Western history, arguing that lesbianism is not always defined by genital contact but by a primary intensity of female bonding. Conversely, Broton (1996) adds a socio-historical dimension, defining the "lesbian" as a woman who "usurps a male cultural role" and is oriented toward female companions for sex. Her analysis of Roman-period texts suggests that early conceptualizations of lesbianism were often tied to the subversion of traditional gender hierarchies. Zimmerman (1990) suggests that being a lesbian is a "way of seeing," a unique perspective that challenges the male-centered world. In this view, lesbianism is not just a sexual orientation but an epistemological position—a lens through which a woman interprets her reality and her relationships. The last, Wittig (1992) offers one of the most radical definitions in *The Straight Mind*. She famously declares that "lesbians are not women," arguing that the term "woman" only has meaning within a heterosexual system of exploitation. For Wittig, a lesbian is someone who has broken away from the social contract of heterosexuality.

As a conceptual category, lesbianism thus fluctuates between a biological reality, a sexual preference, and a political choice. As Jagose (1996) points out, the category of "lesbian" is inherently unstable and always in the process of being redefined by the women who inhabit it. This diversity in definition is essential for analyzing the "slippery" nature of identity shifts in prose, as characters often move between these different modes of being—from emotional bonding (Rich) to radical autonomy (Wittig).

## 2.2. A Brief Herstory: From Western Roots to the Indonesian "Lesbi"

The historical trajectory of lesbian identity is not a linear progression but a fragmented "herstory" that varies significantly across different cultural and political landscapes. Understanding this history is essential to contextualize the "becoming" of the characters in the selected prose.

### 2.2.1. The Western Context: From Invisibility to Legal Recognition

In Europe and North America, the late 19th and early 20th centuries were marked by the "medicalization" of same-sex desire. According to Foucault (1978), the 19th-century homosexual became a "personage," a case history, and a type of life. For women, this era was a transition from "romantic friendships" (which were socially acceptable) to the clinical category of "sexual inversion." Smith-Rosenberg (1975) argues that in the 19th century, intense emotional bonds between women were a female rite of passage, yet by the turn of the 20th century, these bonds began to be viewed through the lens of pathology.

The mid-20th century, specifically the Stonewall Riots of 1969, acted as a catalyst for a more radical political identity. The 1970s saw the rise of Lesbian Feminism, where being a lesbian was framed as a political choice to resist patriarchal dominance. As Stein (1997) observes,

this era shifted the focus from "what one does" (sex) to "who one is" (identity). By the turn of the 21st century, the struggle in the West shifted toward institutional inclusion—demanding legal recognition for same-sex unions, inheritance rights, and healthcare equality. The trajectory in Western prose, therefore, often reflects this journey from clinical "inversion" to "civil rights" and "queer fluidity."

### 2.2.2. The Indonesian Context: The Emergence of the "Lesbi" Subject

The history of lesbianism in the Indonesian archipelago follows a distinct path, shaped by post-colonial nation-building and the digital revolution. Boellstorff (2005) famously notes that prior to the late 20th century, there was no indigenous category that perfectly mapped onto the Western term "lesbian." While homoerotic practices may have existed in various traditional cultures (such as the *bissu* in Bugis society or *warok-gemblak* in Reog Ponorogo), these did not necessarily constitute a "lesbian identity" in the modern sense. The term "lesbi" emerged as a nationally distributed subject position in the early 1980s. This was a period of "New Order" hegemony, where the state enforced a strict gender ideology known as State Ibuism. As Suryakusuma (2004) explains, the state defined women primarily as "Ibu" (mothers) and "Istri" (wives) whose duty was to serve the patriarchal family and the nation. In this oppressive climate, "lesbi" identity became a form of "hidden transcript" (Scott, 1990).

Furthermore, Wieringa (2003) highlights that the 1965 political upheaval in Indonesia also had a gendered impact, where the destruction of the progressive women's movement (Gerwani) led to a long period of silence regarding female autonomy and desire. It was only after the Reformasi in 1998 that lesbian voices began to appear more prominently in the public and digital spheres. As Blackwood (2010) suggests, Indonesian lesbians (or *tombois* and *femmes*) navigate their identities by negotiating between local family expectations and global queer discourses. Consequently, the "becoming" narrated in Indonesian prose is often a struggle to find "suaka" (sanctuary) in a society that demands heterosexual conformity as a mark of national citizenship.

### 2.3. Queer Performativity and the Fluidity of Identity

This study is primarily grounded in Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. Butler deconstructs the essentialist view of sexuality, positing that gender and desire are not innate biological essences but are "constructed through a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 140). This framework is essential for analysing the "slippery" and unfixed nature of lesbian identity within the selected prose. It allows for an interpretation where sexual orientation is seen not as a static destination, but as a continuous process of "becoming."

By applying Butler's lens, this research examines how spontaneous awakenings and sexual explorations function as ruptures in the heteronormative script. These moments are viewed as performative shifts that challenge the stability of heterosexual hegemony. Complementing this, Annamarie Jagose (1996) notes that "queer" demonstrates the impossibility of any natural sexuality, suggesting that identity is a site of constant reconfiguration rather than a predetermined fate (Giffney, 2021). To further understand the "slippery" nature of lesbian identity, this study incorporates Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1990) concept from *Epistemology of the Closet*. Sedgwick argues that "the closet" is not merely a place of hiding, but a fundamental structure that shapes the knowledge of identity in the 20th century. In the context of the analyzed short stories, "becoming" a lesbian involves a complex negotiation with this "closet," where the act of coming out or staying hidden is a strategic performance of power.



Furthermore, Michel Foucault's (1978) genealogical approach in *The History of Sexuality* provides a vital foundation for analyzing the trajectories of desire. Foucault posits that sexuality is a "historical construct" and a "dense transfer point for relations of power" (p. 103). This perspective is crucial when analyzing the Indonesian prose, as it allows us to see how the characters' desires are not just personal feelings, but responses to the disciplinary power of the state and religion. As Annamarie Jagose (1996) notes in her seminal work *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, "queer" is a term that "demonstrates the impossibility of any natural sexuality" (p. 3). By integrating Jagose's view, this research highlights that the trajectory of "becoming" is a movement toward a category that is inherently unstable and always in flux.

#### 2.4. Socio-Literary Perspectives: The Lesbian Continuum and Patriarchal Resistance

To bridge the gap between individual identity and social structures, this research employs Socio-Literary Analysis. As argued by Albrecht (1954), literature serves as a social document that reflects the dialectical relationship between narratives and the social environment. In this context, lesbianism is examined as a response to the failures of patriarchal institutions.

This study utilizes Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of the "Lesbian Continuum" to analyse how female-to-female bonds serve as a site of political and emotional resistance. Rich's deconstruction of compulsory heterosexuality provides a framework to understand why traumatic experiences—such as unhappy or abusive marriages—act as catalysts for identity shifts. This is further supported by Michel Foucault's (1978) view that sexuality is a "dense transfer point for relations of power." By using this socio-literary lens, the research investigates how women seek emotional and sexual "sanctuary" with other women as a direct response to the oppressive nature of heteronormative structures. Ultimately, this positions lesbianism as a socio-political refuge, particularly within the Indonesian context where women's sexuality is strictly regulated by national ideologies (Wieringa, 2003; Suryakusuma, 2004).

In addition to Western theorists, this study also draws on the work of Tom Boellstorff (2005) regarding the "archipelagic" nature of Indonesian queer identities. Boellstorff suggests that the term "lesbi" in Indonesia is part of a "dubbing" process, where global queer terms are translated and adapted into the local national identity. This is supported by Saskia Wieringa (2003), who argues that female desire in Indonesia has long been marginalized by the "New Order" ideology which idealized the "submissive wife" (p. 75). By using Wieringa's socio-historical analysis, this study can better articulate why "becoming a lesbian" in the selected Indonesian prose is a radical subversion of the dominant cultural and political expectations of womanhood.

#### 2.5. Lesbian Identity, Queer Identity, and the Politics of Naming

While the terms "lesbian" and "queer" are often used interchangeably in contemporary scholarship, this study deliberately retains the specificity of "lesbian" as an analytical category. As Zimmerman (1990) argues, lesbian identity is not merely a subset of queerness but a gendered epistemology that centers women's experiences, desires, and relational worlds. Retaining the term "lesbian" allows this research to foreground female agency without dissolving it into a broader, and often male-dominated, queer discourse.

At the same time, this study acknowledges the productive instability of the term "lesbian." Following Jagose (1996), lesbian identity is understood not as a fixed position but as a contingent articulation shaped by discourse, power, and lived experience. This dual positioning—specific yet unstable—enables the analysis to trace how characters move in and out of identity categories while still naming lesbianism as a meaningful site of resistance.

## 2.6. Affect, Embodiment, and the Temporality of Desire

Recent developments in queer affect theory provide a crucial lens for understanding the temporal nature of “becoming.” Ahmed (2019) emphasizes that affect is not merely emotional response but an orientation—something that directs bodies toward or away from objects, people, and futures. In the context of this study, affective triggers such as touch, memory, or trauma operate as directional forces that reorient female subjects toward same-sex intimacy. This affective lens complicates linear narratives of sexual awakening. Rather than depicting lesbian identity as a sudden realization, the texts analyzed here suggest a layered temporality in which childhood memory, adult trauma, and present desire intersect. Desire, therefore, is not discovered but accumulated. It resides in the body as what Ahmed calls “sticky” affect—attachments that persist even when socially disallowed.

## 2.7. State Ibuism, Heteronormativity, and Literary Resistance

In the Indonesian context, lesbian identity cannot be separated from the ideological regulation of womanhood. Suryakusuma’s (2004) concept of State Ibuism provides a critical framework for understanding how female sexuality is disciplined through the idealization of women as wives and mothers. Within this ideological structure, heterosexual marriage functions not merely as a personal choice but as a marker of national belonging. Literature, therefore, becomes a crucial site of resistance. By narrating lesbian identity as choice, sanctuary, or survival, Indonesian authors destabilize the moral authority of state-sanctioned heterosexuality. These narratives do not merely depict deviance; they expose the violence embedded within normative institutions. Through Butler’s (1990) notion of subversive repetition, lesbian characters perform womanhood differently, revealing heteronormativity as a fragile construct sustained by repetition rather than truth.

## 3. METHOD (طريقة \ منهج البحث)

This research employs a qualitative comparative approach focusing on literary hermeneutics and socio-literary criticism. As emphasized by Palmer (1969), literary hermeneutics allows for a deep interpretation of the meaning behind textual structures, which is essential for understanding the nuances of “becoming” narrated in the stories. To analyse how literary texts reflect and critique the social institutions of marriage and patriarchy, the study applies Albrecht’s (1954) socio-literary framework, which treats literature as a social document that mirrors the tensions within a given society. The data for this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique, a method that targets specific texts based on their theoretical relevance to the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary data consists of 13 selected short stories (9 Indonesian and 4 English) that specifically portray the trajectories of lesbian identity formation.

These primary sources were drawn from 4 sources: 2 are printed short stories collections and 2 significant digital and grassroots platforms that serve as alternative archives for queer narratives. The Indonesian data were sourced from *Kumpulan Cerpen Dan Puisi Lesbian Muda Indonesia “Pelangi Perempuan”* (2008) published by Institut Pelangi Perempuan, *Kumpulan Cerpen “Un Soir Du Paris”* (2010), published by PT. Gramedia Pustaka Utama and *SepociKopi.com*. The *Institut Pelangi Perempuan* is an Indonesian Youth Lesbian Centre that published a collection of writings on May 17, 2008, to commemorate the International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO), documenting the struggle against systemic discrimination. Similarly, *SepociKopi* functions as an independent online magazine and digital archive (founded in 2007) dedicated to educating and providing

a platform for lesbian literary voices in Indonesia. Meanwhile, the English data were retrieved from *Read These Lips*, a queer digital publisher specializing in e-anthologies. Unlike traditional print media, these digital platforms utilize the internet as a safe and accessible medium to connect lesbian communities and bypass the geographical and social restrictions of brick-and-mortar distribution.

Following the qualitative data analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), the analysis was conducted through three systematic stages:

1. **Data Condensation:** Identifying and extracting textual units—including dialogue, internal monologues, and specific narrative events—that describe the "roots" or triggers of the characters' sexual orientation.
2. **Data Display:** Categorizing the findings into a six-point typology (choice, spontaneity, interaction, early exposure, exploration, and trauma-response) to facilitate a clear cross-cultural comparison.
3. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:** Interpreting the categorized data by integrating Queer Theory and Socio-Literary analysis to reveal the socio-political implications behind the identity shifts.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, the study applies theoretical triangulation, validating the textual evidence against multiple frameworks of gender and social studies (Denzin, 2012).

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents an in-depth analysis of the trajectories through which lesbian identity is constructed and negotiated in the selected Indonesian and English short stories. Rather than treating lesbianism as a fixed sexual orientation, the findings demonstrate that "becoming" a lesbian is articulated as a dynamic process shaped by affect, memory, trauma, choice, and socio-political pressure. The discussion is organized into four major thematic trajectories that correspond to the six-point typology proposed earlier: spontaneity and performativity; marital trauma and the lesbian continuum; affective memory and early exposure; and political agency as conscious choice within Indonesian heteronormative hegemony. This study analysed 13 short stories consisting of 9 Indonesian and 4 English works. To provide a clear overview of the primary data used in this research, the following table lists the titles, authors, and origins of the stories:

Table 1.

No	Title of Short Story	Author	Year	Publisher
1	Lelaki yang Menetas di Tubuhku	Ucu Augustine	2010	Kumpulan Cerpen "Un Soir Du Paris". PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama
2	Sebilah Pisau Roti	Cok Sawitri	2010	Kumpulan Cerpen "Un Soir Du Paris". PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama
3	Bilik Religius	L. Moslem	2008	Kumpulan Cerpen Dan Puisi Lesbian Muda Indonesia "Pelangi Perempuan". Institut Pelangi Perempuan
4	Lari	Nuage	2008	Kumpulan Cerpen Dan Puisi Lesbian Muda Indonesia "Pelangi Perempuan". Institut Pelangi Perempuan



5	Bunga Sakura di Hati Nia	Sakura	2008	Kumpulan Cerpen Dan Puisi Lesbian Muda Indonesia "Pelangi Perempuan". Institut Pelangi Perempuan
6	Menggapai Langit ke-7	E. Vedosa	2008	Kumpulan Cerpen Dan Puisi Lesbian Muda Indonesia "Pelangi Perempuan". Institut Pelangi Perempuan
7	Serious	A. K. Naten	2008	Kumpulan Cerpen Dan Puisi Lesbian Muda Indonesia "Pelangi Perempuan". Institut Pelangi Perempuan
8	Ketika Langit Senja	Alvi A.H.	2008	Kumpulan Cerpen Dan Puisi Lesbian Muda Indonesia "Pelangi Perempuan". Institut Pelangi Perempuan
9	Lesbi	T. F. Awuy	2010	<i>SepociKopi</i>
10	Serious	Lorenza Marteli	2009	ReadTheseLips
11	The Blush	Renee Strider	2009	ReadTheseLips
12	The Eyes of March	A. K. Naten	2009	ReadTheseLips
13	Memory Puzzled	Samantha	2009	ReadTheseLips

Based on the data presented in Table 1, the analysis is categorized into four major thematic frameworks: Deconstructing the Essentialist Myth: Spontaneity as Performativity, The Lesbian Continuum and Survival: Responding to Marital Failure, Affective Triggers and Body Memory: The Subversion of Childhood, and The Political Agency of Choice in Indonesian Hegemony.

## 4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION (بحث ومناقشة)

### 4.1. Deconstructing the Essentialist Myth: Spontaneity as Performativity

In both English and Indonesian prose, these "becoming" trajectories serve to dismantle the idea that sexuality is a fixed, biological essence. Across both Indonesian and English prose, spontaneous desire emerges as a powerful narrative device that destabilizes essentialist assumptions about sexuality. Rather than presenting lesbian identity as something pre-given from birth, these texts emphasize moments of rupture—unexpected bodily reactions, fleeting encounters, or accidental intimacy—that disrupt the heteronormative script. In the English short story "The Blush" by Ruth Strider, the spontaneity of lesbian desire is depicted as a physical rupture. The protagonist experiences a "blush" that she cannot control:

*"A sudden warmth, a flush that wasn't shame but something more primal, crept up her neck as their hands brushed. It was a recognition of a hunger she hadn't named."*

This spontaneous feeling is a classic example of Butler's (1990) performativity. The "blush" is a bodily act that betrays the heterosexual performance. The fact that it is "unnamed" suggests that the character is in a state of "becoming"—transitioning from a heteronormative subject to a queer one through a single, accidental touch. Similarly, in the Indonesian story "Lari" by Nuage, we see the element of Sexual Exploration. The character does not wait for a "feeling" but actively seeks out the experience to verify her identity:

*"I wanted to know if the touch of another woman could heal the jagged wounds left by that man... I let her hand wander, searching for answers."*

This exploration is a proactive trajectory. The character uses the female body as a site of discovery. By comparing "The Blush" (accidental) and "Lari" (exploration), we see a trajectory of "becoming" that is fluid. Whether it happens by accident or through a deliberate search for "new sexual practices," the result is the same: the deconstruction of the myth that one is "born" a certain way. Instead, desire is portrayed as something that can be awakened or discovered through the "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990). The emergence of lesbian identity through "spontaneous feelings" challenges the binary of nature versus nurture. In the story "*Lesbi*" by Tommy F. Awuy, the character Gesty explicitly states, "*This fact is not artificial... I just fall in love with the same sex spontaneously.*" Critically, through Butler's (1990) lens, Gesty's "spontaneity" is a rupture in the heteronormative performance she was expected to enact for her parents.

Furthermore, the English story "*Serious*" demonstrates the fluidity of sexuality where the narrator questions her own identity after an encounter with a bisexual woman. The narrator's internal dialogue—thinking she "might be that way" despite never experiencing it—illustrates Butler's claim that identity is a "slippery" construct. This deconstructs the negative stigma that lesbianism is a "bad trip" or a temporary phase; instead, the text portrays the character's return to a lesbian partner after a failed marriage as a reconfiguration of the self, proving that sexual orientation is a repetitive and evolving performance rather than a static essence.

At an analytical level, spontaneous desire in both Indonesian and English prose functions as a performative rupture rather than a biological revelation. These moments—often triggered by accidental touch, fleeting intimacy, or unanticipated emotional resonance—interrupt the heteronormative script that characters are expected to perform. Drawing on Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, spontaneity should be read not as randomness, but as the exposure of the instability of heterosexual repetition itself. What distinguishes these narratives from essentialist discourse is the absence of inevitability. The characters do not retrospectively claim that they "have always known"; instead, desire appears as something that happens to the body before it is cognitively processed. This temporal disjunction—where the body recognizes what language has not yet named—aligns with Ahmed's (2019) notion of affect as orientation. Desire, in this sense, reorients the subject toward women without requiring an immediate identity declaration. Comparatively, while English texts often aestheticize spontaneity as an internal awakening, Indonesian narratives frame it as a moment of disruption with social consequences. This distinction reflects differing cultural stakes: in contexts where lesbian identity is socially permissible, spontaneity is introspective; where it is stigmatized, spontaneity becomes politically charged.

#### 4.2. The Lesbian Continuum and Survival: Responding to Marital Failure

In the trajectory of "becoming," the domestic sphere often shifts from a place of service to a site of radical transformation. In C. Sawitri's "*Sebilah Pisau Roti*", the path toward a lesbian identity is paved by the ruins of a failed heteronormative marriage. The story utilizes the kitchen and the bread knife as central metaphors. For the protagonist, the bread knife is no longer a tool for domestic duty but a symbol of the sharp divide between her past life and her emerging self. The text illustrates the emotional coldness of her marriage:

*"The coldness of my husband's bed drove me into the warmth of her kitchen... In the steam of the soup and the rhythmic sound of chopping vegetables, I found a love that didn't bruise my skin."*

This quote is vital because it highlights a Trauma-Response trajectory. The movement toward another woman is not portrayed as a "sin" or a "deviation," but as a search for sanctuary. According to Adrienne Rich (1980), the "Lesbian Continuum" includes the range of woman-identified experiences that provide emotional support against patriarchal violence. In Sawitri's narrative, the "bruises" left by the husband are healed by the "warmth" of the female kitchen. Furthermore, the act of "becoming" here is a gradual realization of worth. The trajectory follows a path of Long-term Interaction where the friendship with another woman provides the safety that the institution of marriage could not. The "rhythmic sound of chopping" suggests a new routine, a new "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990) that constructs a queer identity out of the fragments of a broken domesticity. In the Indonesian socio-literary context, this story critiques the "ideal family" myth promoted by the state. By choosing the "warmth of the kitchen" shared with a woman over the "cold bed" of a husband, the protagonist performs an act of Socio-Political Resistance. She redefines her identity through the lens of survival and care, proving that the roots of desire are often watered by the need for a life free from patriarchal bruises.

This is a profound representation of Rich's (1980) "compulsory heterosexuality" failing. The marriage is not just "unhappy"; it is a patriarchal cage. The move toward another woman is a search for "sanctuary." This is mirrored in the English data where the "failed marriage" acts as a catalyst. The trajectory here is not purely about "sexual preference," but about emotional survival. Furthermore, "Bunga Sakura di Hati Nia" by Sakura demonstrates how Long-Term Interaction solidifies this transition:

*"Nia never expected that her friendship... would culminate in a kiss... It was a longing that had been sedimenting for a decade."*

When we combine the "trauma of marriage" with "long-term interaction," we see that "becoming a lesbian" is often a gradual migration toward safety. In the Indonesian context, as seen in **"Bilik Religius" by L. Moslem**, this "sanctuary" even takes on a spiritual or hidden dimension. The characters move away from the "inharmonious" public life of a wife into a private, affective "orbit" with another woman. This shift proves that lesbianism is a radical reclamation of agency—a way to "heal the jagged wounds" by choosing a partner who offers mutual respect rather than patriarchal dominance. The data regarding "Unhappy Marriages" provides a visceral critique of Compulsory Heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). In *"The Eyes of the March"*, Leah's transition to Blaine after being pressured into marrying a "bastard" like Graham Pryce III is a literal escape from patriarchal domesticity. A Leah, later becomes a lesbian, had to get married with a man named Graham Pryce III because of her family pressure, especially her parents. They pushed her into marrying him because he is from a wealthy, influential, and politically well-connected Pryce family. Unfortunately, it is not a happy marriage life. Leah is not happy in this marriage. Her husband is portrayed as a bastard. Actually, she wants to quit this marriage and leaves him, but she cannot. She is too afraid because her own family and her husband's family pressure, especially if they find Leah is now in love with her gay woman.

Another woman who finally becomes a lesbian because of her unhappy marriage life is found in *"To Dance with No Music"*. It is clearly stated by the narrator that she had married foolishly and divorced bitterly. One day, she met a lesbian and set their life together. "I had married foolishly and divorced bitterly.....Then I enter her orbit. We came to each other late, already middle-aged and set in our ways."

Rich's "Lesbian Continuum" is evident here: lesbianism is not merely a sexual preference but a form of emotional sanctuary. This is further emphasized in *"Tahi Lalat di*

*Punggung Istriku*", where the wife's sexual shift happens almost instantaneously during a massage by Ratri. While the narrator finds it "strange" that a woman married for 27 years could change so easily, a critical Queer reading suggests that the wife's body responded to a "sensual romantic touch" that her husband had withdrawn. Her "spontaneous" transition is a reclamation of the body from a marriage that had become a site of neglect. As Rich suggests, these women are not "turning away" from men as much as they are "turning toward" women for the respect and wisdom they never gained from the patriarchal institution.

Across the Indonesian corpus, failed heterosexual marriages emerge not merely as narrative background but as structural catalysts for lesbian becoming. These stories reveal marriage as an institution that promises protection yet frequently delivers emotional neglect, bodily control, and psychological harm. Within this framework, lesbian relationships are not depicted as moral deviation but as affective survival strategies. Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of the Lesbian Continuum provides a crucial interpretive lens here. Rather than framing lesbianism narrowly as sexual orientation, the continuum encompasses emotional reliance, shared domesticity, and long-term intimacy between women. In the analyzed stories, lesbian identity develops gradually through trust, care, and repetitive affective labor—elements systematically denied within patriarchal marriages.

At a comparative level, English narratives similarly employ marital failure as a trigger, but often emphasize personal liberation over structural critique. Indonesian texts, by contrast, explicitly expose marriage as an ideological apparatus tied to State Ibuism and compulsory heterosexuality. Lesbian becoming thus functions as a form of exit—from both emotional violence and state-regulated femininity.

#### 4.2.a Domestic Space as Queer Sanctuary

This subsection extends the discussion in 4.2 by foregrounding domestic space as a crucial site of lesbian survival and affective security. In many of the analyzed texts, kitchens, bedrooms, and private rooms function not merely as backgrounds but as queer sanctuaries where women reclaim bodily autonomy and emotional recognition. In Indonesian narratives, domestic space operates as a hidden yet vital refuge, enabling intimacy under conditions of social surveillance. In contrast, English texts tend to frame private space as a zone of comfort rather than concealment. This spatial distinction reflects differing cultural risks attached to lesbian visibility and reinforces the argument that lesbian becoming is deeply shaped by socio-political environments.

#### 4.3. Affective Triggers and Body Memory: The Subversion of Childhood

The category of "Early Exposure" highlights how lesbian identity is often formed through affective triggers (Ahmed, 2019) that disrupt the domestic script. In Ucu Agustine's *"Lelaki Yang Menetas Di Tubuh Ku"*, the 8-year-old protagonist witnesses a "romantic scene filled with lust" between two women. The "wheezing sound" and "lusty moaning" become a permanent body memory that influences her adult certainty. *But suddenly, my eye's corner catch those movement. A spark of scenes which later gives a big influence in my life. Absolutely, unseen hand of fate inserts its key in the door and opens it for me to be entered, slowly in that night. A door in which then I enter with my shaky but eventually I live with certainty.* This spectacle gives a big influence to her life even up to she grows up and becomes an adult woman. This childhood memory influences her sexual orientation and finally makes her become a lesbian.

Similarly, in *"Memory Puzzled"*, Samantha, a 5 year-old child, Samantha's memory of Chris (her mother's partner) wearing a "man's undershirt" serves as a counter-performativity. Seeing a woman inhabit a masculine aesthetic provides Samantha with a

visual model of existence outside the heteronormative family. Critically, these stories show that "becoming" is often a process of unearthing a "key" that was inserted in childhood. These memories act as a subversion of the "normal" family life, allowing the characters to enter a "door" of identity with certainty later in life.

In A.K. Naten's "Serious", the environment serves as a foundational "orbit" that shapes the protagonist's comfort zone. The text reveals:

*"Since I was a child, I spent more time with my aunt who lived alone and her masculine female friends. To me, the world of women was a complete world. I saw no urgency for a man's presence there; the air was lighter, the laughter louder, and the love more honest."*

From a Socio-Literary perspective, this environment functions as a "counter-hegemony." While the larger society practices compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), the protagonist's micro-environment offers a different reality. The "masculine female friends" of the aunt provide a "stylized repetition" of gender that is non-traditional, making the eventual transition to a lesbian identity feel natural rather than disruptive. This is a crucial "Affective Trigger" where the memory of a safe, female-dominated space in childhood overrides the societal pressure to marry. Similarly, in "Menggapai Langit ke-7" by E. Vedosa, the exposure is described through a sense of wonder and longing for a space that felt "different" from the norm. The trajectory is not about a sudden change but an alignment with a long-held internal "Body Memory." When the character encounters queer representation or lived experiences of homosexuality in her youth, it acts as a mirror, allowing her to recognize her own latent desires.

This environmental factor suggests that the "Roots of Desire" are often nurtured early on, where the absence of patriarchal surveillance allows for the exploration of a "sanctuary" that is both emotional and sexual. The trajectory of early exposure complicates linear models of sexual awakening by foregrounding the role of childhood affect and embodied memory. Rather than serving as deterministic origins, these early encounters function as affective residues that resurface later in life as certainty rather than confusion. Drawing on queer affect theory, particularly Ahmed's (2019) notion of "sticky" affect, these memories persist within the body even when socially suppressed. The texts suggest that lesbian becoming is not always a rupture from childhood norms, but often a return to an unregulated affective recognition formed prior to heteronormative discipline. These findings challenge dominant coming-out narratives that privilege adulthood as the sole site of sexual realization. Instead, the stories articulate becoming as a temporal layering where childhood impressions, adult trauma, and present desire coexist. In this sense, lesbian identity emerges not as discovery, but as recollection.

#### 4.4. The Political Agency of Choice in Indonesian Hegemony

In the Indonesian stories such as *"Bilik Religius"* and *"Bunga Sakura di Hati Nia"*, the emphasis on "Choice" is a strategic political act. Unlike Western narratives that often focus on "discovery," these Indonesian texts frame lesbianism as a deliberate decision. In contemporary Indonesian prose, specifically in U. Augustine's *"Lelaki yang Menetas di Tubuhku"*, "choice" is not merely a personal preference but a strategic political act. The protagonist in Augustine's work explicitly rejects the heteronormative script:

*"I chose this path not because I was born this way, but because I refuse to let my body be a colony for men. By choosing her, I am reclaiming the territory of my own skin."*

This quote is a pinnacle of Political Agency. Using Butler's (1990) framework, this is a conscious subversion of the "performative acts" required by the state. In Indonesia, where



the state often regulates female bodies through domesticity (*State Ibuism*), the "choice" to become a lesbian is an act of decolonizing the self. Furthermore, in "The Eyes of March" by A.K. Naten, the choice is framed through the lens of intellectual and emotional compatibility that transcends gender:

*"I looked at him, and then I looked at her. The choice was clear. It wasn't about which gender I was 'supposed' to love, but about which soul allowed me to be free. I chose the freedom of her gaze."*

This trajectory highlights that "becoming" can be a rational, agentic decision based on the pursuit of "Subjective Liberation." It challenges the essentialist myth that one must be "born gay" to be valid. Instead, these stories argue that the right to choose one's partner and identity is a fundamental reclamation of power. In the context of Suryakusuma's (2004) critique of state-regulated sexuality, choosing to follow a "homosexual desire" despite the "bitter consequences" is a radical act of subjectivity. These characters acknowledge that while the desire might be a "calling" or "destiny," the act of living it out is a conscious choice. By doing so, they demand a "place in society," shifting the narrative from being "victims of orientation" to being agentic subjects who negotiate their existence within a repressive hegemony. This cross-cultural divergence aligns with the findings of Wijaya and Thompson (2024), these narratives in the Global South often manifest as a complex negotiation between local traditions and global queer discourses.

By framing lesbianism as a "choice," these Indonesian authors are not just writing fiction; they are writing a manifesto for female autonomy against a repressive hegemony. This confirms that the 'choice' made by Indonesian characters is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a broader global movement of reclaiming queer subjectivity within restrictive cultural frameworks." One of the most distinctive features of Indonesian lesbian prose is the explicit articulation of choice as political agency. Unlike Western narratives that often naturalize lesbian identity through authenticity discourse, Indonesian texts frame becoming as a conscious decision undertaken in full awareness of social risk. Within the ideological framework of State Ibuism (Suryakusuma, 2004), heterosexual marriage is constructed as a moral obligation tied to national identity. Choosing lesbianism, therefore, constitutes an act of refusal—not only of men, but of the state's claim over female bodies. This refusal aligns with Butler's (1990) notion of subversive repetition, where dominant norms are destabilized through alternative enactments of womanhood. Importantly, framing lesbian identity as choice does not negate affect or desire. Rather, it foregrounds the ethical courage required to inhabit desire within repressive structures. Choice, in this context, is not voluntarism but resistance.

#### 4.4.a Choice, Risk, and Ethical Courage

Building upon the notion of choice as political agency, this subsection emphasizes that choosing lesbian identity within Indonesian contexts entails substantial ethical and social risk. Choice here is not synonymous with freedom, but with courage—an embodied willingness to face familial rejection, religious condemnation, and institutional marginalization. By situating lesbianism as ethical courage, the narratives reposition agency not as individual autonomy alone, but as a moral stance against structural injustice. This reinforces Butler's notion of subversive repetition, where alternative performances of gender and intimacy expose the fragility of heteronormative norms.

#### 4.5. Cultural Divergence in the Trajectory of "Becoming": A Comparative Synthesis

To further understand the "Roots of Desire," it is imperative to compare how the trajectory of "becoming" is culturally coded in Indonesian and English prose. While both literary traditions utilize the theme of sanctuary, the obstacles and the language of desire differ significantly due to the disparate socio-political landscapes.

##### 4.5.1. The Language of the Body: The English "Blush" vs. The Indonesian "Wound"

In English short fiction, such as Ruth Strider's "The Blush", the trajectory of becoming is often narrated through the physical and psychological "awakening" of the individual. The focus is heavily placed on the internal "micro-sensations." For instance, when Strider describes the *"flush that wasn't shame,"* she is utilizing a Western individualistic framework where the body is the primary site of truth. The character's "becoming" is a journey toward self-actualization. In sharp contrast, Indonesian prose like Nuage's "Lari" or C. Sawitri's "Sebilah Pisau Roti" often frames the body not just as a site of desire, but as a site of trauma and recovery. The language used is often that of "healing" or "escaping":

*"I let her hand wander... to see if it could heal the jagged wounds."*

In the Indonesian context, the trajectory toward a lesbian identity is frequently a reaction to the failure of the patriarchal "protection" promised by marriage. As Suryakusuma (2004) notes, Indonesian women are often defined by their roles as wives and mothers. Therefore, "becoming" a lesbian in these stories is a radical act of **re-bordering the body**. It is a shift from being a "body-for-others" (husband/state) to a "body-for-self" and "body-for-another-woman."

##### 4.5.2. Space and Sanctuary: Private Orbits vs. Public Defiance

The spatial dimension of these trajectories also reveals cultural nuances. In English prose, the "becoming" often happens in fluid, mobile spaces traveling, cafes, or new cities symbolizing a journey of discovery. However, in Indonesian prose, the sanctuary is often found in domestic, hidden spaces that are repurposed. In L. Moslem's "Bilik Religius", the sanctuary is carved out within the most private and sacred of spaces. This suggests that in a repressive hegemony, the trajectory of becoming must be "orbiting" beneath the surface of heteronormativity. The character does not necessarily shout her identity in public; instead, she subverts the domestic sphere from within. As Butler (1990) suggests, this is a "subversive repetition" where the woman performs the role of a "friend" or "housemate" while internally living a trajectory of deep queer intimacy.

##### 4.5.3. The Role of Choice and Political Manifesto

A striking difference lies in the explicit "Political Agency" found in Indonesian narratives. In U. Agustine's "Lelaki yang Menetas di Tubuhku", the choice to be a lesbian is presented almost as a decolonial manifesto. The character explicitly links her sexual choice to a refusal of male "colonization." In many English narratives (The Blush), the choice is framed more as a quest for personal happiness or "finding one's true self." The Indonesian data, however, often elevates "Choice" to a level of collective resistance. Because the pressure of "Compulsory Heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980) is so overt in the form of social and religious laws in Indonesia, the act of "becoming" requires a much more conscious and articulated "Choice" than in contemporary English contexts where queer identities may have more legal (though not always social) recognition. When these two stories are placed side-by-side, we see the cultural tension in lesbian narratives. The English narrative (*The Blush*) leans toward the Essentialist/Visceral model the idea that desire is an internal truth waiting

to be awakened. Meanwhile, the Indonesian narrative (*Lelaki yang Menetas di Tubuhnya*) leans toward the Existentialist/Political model—the idea that identity is a tool for liberation from social oppression.

When synthesized comparatively, the findings reveal two dominant narrative logics of lesbian becoming. English prose tends to privilege visceral awakening, where the body operates as the primary epistemological site of truth. Indonesian prose, shaped by structural repression, articulates becoming as an existential and political manifesto. Despite these differences, both traditions converge on a shared function of lesbian identity: reclamation of agency. Whether through affective rupture, emotional sanctuary, embodied memory, or political choice, lesbian becoming emerges as a strategy for reclaiming the self from patriarchal failure. Literature thus functions as a sanctuary where alternative female futures can be imagined and narrated.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS (خلاصة \ خاتمة)

This study has demonstrated that the exploration of the "Herstory" behind lesbian identity in contemporary Indonesian and English prose is not represented as a singular or essential state of being, but as a multifaceted process of becoming shaped by choice, affect, spontaneity memory, trauma, interaction, environment and agency. Through a comparative analysis of thirteen short stories, this research mapped six recurring trajectories that collectively dismantle essentialist myths of sexuality. These texts collectively challenge the notion of sexual orientation as a static or "artificial" construct. Instead, as evidenced by characters such as Gesty, Leah, and Samantha, lesbianism emerges as a valid and fluid performativity that disrupts heteronormative scripts. The findings reveal a significant cultural divergence. In English prose, lesbian becoming is frequently narrated as a visceral and affective awakening, where the body functions as the primary site of truth. In contrast, Indonesian narratives emphasize lesbianism as a conscious and political choice—a strategic response to patriarchal failure, state regulation, and compulsory heterosexuality. This distinction underscores the importance of situating sexual identity within its socio-political context rather than treating it as a universal experience.

Importantly, this study contributes to queer literary studies by proposing a typological framework that moves beyond binary debates of nature versus nurture. By conceptualizing lesbian identity through trajectories rather than origins, this research offers a flexible analytical tool applicable to other cultural contexts and literary forms. Finally, this article affirms the role of literature—particularly digital and grassroots platforms as a sanctuary for marginalized voices. In spaces where lesbian existence is denied legitimacy, storytelling becomes an act of survival and reclamation. Through narrative, women articulate desires that refuse erasure, challenge patriarchal norms, and imagine alternative futures grounded in mutual recognition and autonomy.

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