



Performing Dual Gender: Female Characters' Masculine and Feminine Acts in *Birds of Prey* (2020)

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Abstract:

This research will explore how is dual gender performativity depicted in female characters and how does dual gender performativity influence them to face the injustices situation in the film *Birds of Prey* (2020) by the female characters: Harley Quinn, Renee Montoya, Black Canary, Helena Bertinelli, and Cassandra Cain. This research analyzes the film by visual and textual from selected scenes. The visual includes something that appears and visible, such as: facial expressions, gestures, body languages, clothes, makeup, fashion, and action. Meanwhile the textual data comes from a dialogue that is spoken by the female characters to support the visual aspects. This research uses gender performativity theory by Judith Butler to deeply analyze. The result shows that society has a big role to set the standards and as a human, especially women must be able to stand on their own feet to face the injustices. Dual gender performativity divided into masculine act and feminine act which is marked with something that they wear, visible and also from the characters' dialogue to strengthen the findings by Butler's approaches.

Keywords: Dual Gender Performativity, Feminism, Women Empowerment.

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Introduction

The big pressure of women in patriarchal societies has its long and struggling history. For centuries, in the first wave of feminism women have been figured as a 'damsel in distress', women portrayed as weak, poor, fool and powerless than men. (Kachel et al. 2016) society often sets the standard about "traditional masculinity" and "traditional femininity". For several times, men are set as stronger and more powerful figures than women (Adil et al. 2017). These injustices start a conflict among the gender roles. The gender role strains such a big pressure, expectation and trouble for someone who tries to fulfill the societal's expectations (Pleck, 1981). Society bordered the standards about feminine and masculine from their signature characteristics, including looks, fashion, style, hobby, and habits that have been set in the past, most of them are

unable to choose whatever for their life, like job, education, hobby, etc. Slowly feminism attracts women to refuse all the bad things happening to herself and push her to pursue justice and equality for the better life's quality for themselves and the other women. ([Azi et al. 2021](#)). The fact is, women and men are human, they stand at the same level in many aspects, in job, in medical aspect, law, and others. As mentioned before, women also have degrees and abilities that are equal to men in the humanity aspect so that women have an equal position with men ([Fatihayah, 2022](#)). From that point, feminism rises to the ground and be the light for women's movement.

Feminism is an advocacy of women's rights on the basis of sexuality, Feminism is a belief that men and women are equal all the way. It is also a women's movement that advocates for women's rights ([Jayastu, 2022](#)). The movement and ideology that aims to achieve gender equality within the framework of human rights. ([Jawora, 2023](#)) the feminist movements have been campaigning against women's forced subjugation and refusal to be granted human rights. From this movement, hopefully the women can achieve more equal rights in some aspects of life, such as: education, job, position, and the other things that are equal with the men. Then there is an action called 'Women empowerment'. Women empowerment is an ability or process that gives women greater strength, power and control for all of their choices in their life (Ramadhan, 2024). Women empowerment also gives a chance to get better education, job, position, rights, opportunities, etc. ([Wulandari et al. 2022](#)).

Meanwhile in this era, dual gender performativity is needed for women to chase the quality. Dual gender performativity is an ability of someone who can use their masculine and feminine side depending on the occasion. Dual gender perfromativity is must done by women to have the power. By having a power, women can be everything, women are powerful enough to stand with their own feet; they can draw their dreams, pursue higher education, and other things that men can do, not only accept their fate without movement ([Setianto & Win, 2020](#)). Dual gender performativity underlined that masculine also can be owned by women and feminine can be owned by men. So, men and women have the same right and position in every single aspect of life ([Ni'mah & Karima, 2022](#)). All of the problems that are mentioned exist in the film *Birds of Prey* (2020).

The researcher found several previous studies that have similar topics and academic fields that might help this research. The previous studies that are listed below are expected to know more the differences and then make a research gap to show the contrast and what's new between this research and the previous studies.

The first previous study comes from ([Wulandari et al. 2022](#)), titled "The Portrayal of Women Empowerment Through the Main Character in North Country Movie". The researcher examined women empowerment in North Country movie. By using a qualitative descriptive method, The study analyzed the character from North Country movie named Josey in empowering herself and the other character. Revealing Josey's ambition to empower herself and others, She pursues to achieve the right and make an equality. The gap with the recent research is in the setting (between *Birds of Prey* and North Country movie)

The second is research by [Setianto & Win \(2020\)](#), titled "The Applicant of Girl Power Through Third-Wave Feminism in *Birds of Prey*". The researcher examined girl ambition during third wave feminism in the movie *Birds of Prey* (2020) by Cathy Yan. The researchers focused on Harley Quin's power. By using a qualitative descriptive method, researchers collect the data from the movie's scene and describe it. Researchers

focused on third-wave feminism. The gap with the recent research is in how feminism creates women empowerment to empower herself and others. Meanwhile the previous study talks about girl power in Third-Wave feminism.

The third previous study by ([Güneş, 2023](#)), titled “Female Gaze And Harley Quinn”. The researcher explores the female gaze in Harley Quinn, how Harley Quinn is portrayed as a female and how the camera shoots Harley Quinn in *Birds of Prey* (2020). By using a qualitative deep analysis method, researchers collect some pictures and explain the meaning through this picture. The gap with the recent research is in the focus of the context, the recent research about gender performativity, meanwhile the previous study focuses on female gaze.

The next previous study by ([Ni'mah & Karima 2022](#)), titled “Women’s Emancipation In Movie: A Feminism Analysis In *Birds Of Prey* By Cathy Yan”. The researchers focused on male gaze domination, woman objectification, female gaze, and also Harley Quinn’s comparison in this movie, *Birds of Prey* with *Suicide Squad*. By using qualitative deep analysis about the movie, The researchers collect some pictures and capture it in their article and give an explanation about the picture. The gap with recent research is in the focus of the movie and the focus of research. Recent research focuses on women empowerment by portraying gender performativity and focus in movie *Birds of Prey* only, meanwhile the previous research focus on woman emancipation, female gaze, and comparison to other movies.

The last previous study by ([Azi et al. 2021](#)), titled “Representation Of Woman In Superhero Movie Entitled “*Birds Of Prey*” By Cathy Yan” . The researcher focused on Women emancipation to break free from the male domination, femininity awareness, portraying women as a superhero, and mention Harley Quinn after break from *Joker*. By using a qualitative descriptive method, the researchers watch movies several times and capture some pictures that are needed, then researchers classify and collect them into the same group. The gap with recent research is the focus of main discussion, this previous study focuses on feminism, and portraying women as superheroes, meanwhile the recent research focuses on dual gender performativity as a part of women empowerment.

This study will talk about dual gender performativity, gender expression, feminism, and woman empowerment by the female characters in the film *Birds of Prey* (2020) in order to raise the effort of the woman to stand and empower herself. The next following research questions how is dual gender performativity depicted in female characters? and how does dual gender performativity influence them to face the injustices situation?. This study uses thematic analysis with Butler’s gender performativity theory to approach. This study uses thematic analysis method to analyze the data by collecting some film’s scenes. Basically gender is divided into male and female, but societal pressure requires women to be able to use their masculine and feminine (Butler, 1990). Dual gender performativity is an ability of someone who can use their masculine and feminine side depending on the occasion. Dual gender performativity is portrayed in the film *Birds of Prey* (2020).

“*Birds of Prey* (2020)” (and the *Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn*) done by Cathy Yan released in 2020. *Birds of Prey* (2020) is a colorful, high-octane superhero story told from the unreliable perspective of Margot Robbie (Harley Quinn). Following her story after breakup with the *Joker*, Harley finds herself without the "immunity" her relationship once provided, making her a target for every criminal she has ever wronged in Gotham City. The main threat for her comes from the narcissistic

and sadistic crime lord Roman Sionis (Black Mask), who seeks a legendary diamond that contains the account numbers to the Bertinelli family fortune. Harley Quinn's survival becomes tied to this diamond when she strikes a deal with Sionis to recover it from a young pickpocket named Cassandra Cain.

Character Harley Quinn in "Birds of Prey (2020)" which is controlled by Cathy Yan. Margot Robbie was the Queen. Birds of Prey (2020) portrays Harley Quinn after she broke up with the Joker, and she is portrayed as strong, powerful, and beautiful women against crime, injustice, and unfair situations. Harley Quinn is able to play a feminine or powerful role depending on the situation. She becomes a beautiful and innocent girl when she tries to attract the male enemy, but she turns into masculine, strong, and unbeatable when she is ready to beat the enemy and facing the struggles. She stood up for herself after breaking up with the Joker and let feminism fulfill inside her. Dealing with the heartbreak, it drives Harley Quinn to be a versatile woman who can be strong and beautiful at the same time. This study not only focuses on Harley Quinn, but also focuses on the other female characters (Renee Montoya, Black Canary, Helena Bertinelli, Cassandra Cain). In this movie, the female characters portray gender performative as their action of dual gender performativity. They switch their feminine and masculine sides smoothly. According to [Butler \(1990\)](#), gender is supposed to be transparent, because it is a symbol and everyone deserves to know it. The female characters portray the feminine side to tempt the villain and try to steal their attention by their action. But they can turn into masculine women and fight against the enemies to protect themselves and others.

Method

The data sources that are used for this research will be divided into 2 sections, primary data and secondary data. The primary data collected from the film's scene of Birds of Prey (2020). The primary data is a capture from the film's scene of female characters, including Harley Quinn, Helena Bertinelli, Black Canary, Cassandra Cain, and Renee Montoya. The primary data contains visual data and textual data. The visual data is a screen capture that contains their gestures, body languages, movements, physical appearances, style, makeup, facial expressions, and action sequences. Meanwhile textual data is a transcribing and characters dialogue which shows the portrayal of feminine and masculine as representing gender performativity. The secondary data comes from several books, journal articles and academic discussion that related with this topic, especially [Gender Trouble \(1990\)](#) by Judith Butler.

The data collection is done by watching the film several times to get the best understanding about the film, and also taking a little notes to mark the small important part. The researcher also needs to use a feature forward, pause, and rewind to make sure of every detail aspect in the scene to get the best visual data to analyze by Butler's theory. The visual data is collected by taking some scene's captures, then the researcher starts to compile the visual data and the small data to remember the details to best analyze the data.

After some scenes are captured, the data will be analyzed by thematic analysis by taking attention to all of the aspects that appear in the screen capture. The action is done by the female characters and all of the supporting aspects, like: visual aspects include: gestures, body languages, movements, physical appearances, style, makeup, and facial expressions. This study also uses textual analysis based on the characters' dialogue. The data analysis uses Butler's approach about dual gender performativity. The textual data

is made more accurate and strengthens the visual data by showing the atmosphere and the ambience of the scenes.

Result

This section contains analysis from some scenes that were selected from *Birds of Prey* (2020). The analysis focuses on the visual aspect, dialogue, characters' interactions, and their behavior that indicated masculine or feminine side. This section aimed to answer the research question on the how is dual gender performativity depicted in female characters and how does dual gender performativity influence them to face the injustices situation.



Figure I. *Black Canary sings a song that highlights men in a club (0.26.13~0.26.15)*

This screen capture shows Black Canary. She is a club singer and is singing on the stage. She appears with her soft makeup, long wavy hairstyles, wearing mini dresses and she puts on some accessories like gold necklace, earrings, nose piercing and some stuff on her hair. She sang a song like magic to make the club's visitors, who were mostly men, feel calm. The transcription of Black Canary is singing "It's men's world". This scene demonstrates a feminine girl trying to catch the male character's attention by singing a song that highlights men and her soft facial expression. The portrayal of feminine performativity because the society press someone to fit in ([Butler, 1990](#)).



Figure II. *A group of male characters are happy to listen to Canary's voice and cheers (0.26.32~0.26.35)*

This screen captures a group of male characters in a club. They appear with black outfits and some of them wear black glasses too. They are so happy and they really enjoy the entertainment, Canary's voice. Most of them are smiling, and also a man who sets a fierce expression. They bring a glass of cocktail and they are ready to cheer. This scene demonstrates that men really enjoy women as their sexual desire (Canary's body and voice). According to [Butler \(1990\)](#) the heterosexual matrix happened by men who were attracted to women.



Figure III. Harley Quinn is happy because she got treated by a man (0.29.25~0.29.27)

This screen captures Harley Quinn. She looks happy when the male character starts the conversation, especially when he will pay for her drink. Harley Quinn looks so feminine when she appears with bold makeup by adding something shining on her eyebrows, red lip. Her hair is also portrayed as feminine style and also her accessories like blue earrings. Harley's emotional jumping after becoming sad and becoming happy because she was provided by the male character. The transcription is "I'll treat you" and she answered "yeah". From this part, Harley Quinn acts like a girl perfectly. This scene demonstrates that naturally feminine energy is being provided by the male. According to [Butler \(1990\)](#) Something that repeatedly several times will create an identity.



Figure IV. Harley Quinn is fighting against the male character (0.49.14~0.49.16)

This captured scene shows Harley Quinn when she is fighting against the male character. She appears with a boyish style. She wears white tshirt, shortpants, short hair and no makeup. Harley Quinn fights against the male characters after she tries to unlock Cassandra's cage. She moves like a fighter, She jumps and is ready to puch the male character. No matter how many times she falls apart, she will take a chance to take revenge and stand for herself as a superhero ([Penney, 2022](#)). This scene demonstrates Harley's masculine side. Her adrenaline jumps a lot when she is in a dangerous situation, when she has to face some bastards. According to [Butler \(1990\)](#) society can push someone to be versatile just to be strong and stand for herself.



Figure V. Renee Montoya interrogates Bertinelli as an assassin (1:04:00~1:04:05)

This scene shows Renee Montoya as a detective who interrogates and looks for Helena Bertinelli after she killed an old man with her crossbow. Helena Bertinelli was portrayed as a victim of the family murder tragedy in the past. Helena grew up and became a crossbow killer and killed the mafia who murders her family and it is related with gender performativity (Butler 1990). Bertinelli breaks her limit from an innocent girl turns into a deadly assassin who takes back her family's revenge.



Figure VI. *Black Canary hugs the man (1:06:44~1:06:49)*

This captured scene shows Black Canary calming down a man who was mad at the bar. Canary puts her body closer into the man's body and hugs him, it makes him feel warmth and safe. Canary appears with long hair, makeup, and soft expressions that represent the feminine. The man is calmed by Canary, it is obviously portrayed from what he says "you soothe me, little bird". The habit is done several times and it becomes a smooth action (Butler 1990). So here Canary succeeds to make him feel calm.



Figure VII. *Harley Quinn asks the girls to be a team (1:22:54~1:22:59)*

In figure VII portrayed Harley Quinn stands with her confidence in front of the other girls and she asks them to make a team, empowering each other. She appears with her bold makeup, twin ponytail hairstyle, girly clothes, soft facial expression with necklace hanging around her neck. Stuck in the middle of a hard situation makes Harley Quinn become a great leader. She tries to ask the other girls to become a team against Sionis and his allies. Harley convinces them to work together and support each other. She says "Yeah, we're gonna work together".



Figure VIII. *Black Canary uses her powerful scream (1:31.11~1:31.15)*

This screen captures Black Canary screaming very loudly when she is surrounded by the Sionis' allies. She screams against them. She appears with a boyish look. She wears a mini top, choker, messy hair, soft makeup and an angry expression really clearly portrayed from her face and it represents masculine performativity. This scene runs without a dialogue, just Canary screams against the enemies. This scene portrayed masculine side that can be owned by women to be able to stand for themselves and even save someone's life. The society's pressing someone until they are able to do something crazy ([Butler, 1990](#)).



Figure IX. *Cassandra Cain tries to distract the man (1:36:46~1.36.50)*

The final scene captured shows Cassandra Cain and a man who catches her. Cassandra looks upset, fear, and powerless besides the man who caught her. Cassandra Cain appears with her simple look, no makeup, just fear expression. With a heavy breath, she looked at Harley Quinn in front of her and said "I steal something from you". She wants to distract a man and give a chance for Harley to save her. This scene demonstrates Cassandra's feminine side to save her life. ([Butler 1990](#)) The society's pressure makes someone able to save their life.

Discussion

This part reveals the main findings from analyzing some scenes from *Birds of Prey* (2020). The findings directly answer the research questions on how is dual gender performativity depicted in female characters and how does dual gender performativity influence them to face the injustices situation. By giving attention to visual aspects, dialogue, characters' interactions, and their behavior that indicated masculine or feminine side by the selected female characters. All of the analyses use gender performativity theory in discussion ([Butler, 1990](#)).

According to findings, The dual gender performativity in *Birds of prey* (2020) divided into two sections, masculine and feminine. The dual gender portrayed by the female characters. The visual aspects like gestures, body languages, physical appearances

matter, and there are some aspects that also support the discussion, like the dialogue or the transcript from the characters. It indicates feminine side when the female characters appear with their bold makeup, feminine clothes, pretty hairstyle to tempt the male characters and makes him feel dominant ([Niza, 2022](#)). Also the dialogue that supports their feminine performativity. Gender is shaped by the societal norm ([Butler, 1990](#)). Selected scene's captured show how society sets them to be feminine and how they use their feminine side for the sake of saving their life. From some collected scenes, the female characters use their feminine side not because they are weak and hopeless, but because society requires them to act feminine to reach their goal. From figure 1 Canary tries to attract the men by her voice and it works in figure 2. The men think that they are at the highest level, they can treat women as they like. Male's character tend to be dominant ([Niza, 2022](#)).

In figure 3 Harley Quinn acts like a female characters who hang her happiness to man just to get closer. She acts feminine and makes the male character fall into her charm. The man's ego becomes strong after he succeeds in asking Harley to be treated by him ([Niza, 2022](#)). In the 6th figure show Canary tries to calm down a man after a tragedy in a club. The last feminine aspect in selected scene 9, Cassandra Cain acts like a powerless girl just to give a support or chance to Harley Quinn to save her ([Ramadhan, 2024](#)). In scene 9, Harley Quinn is empowering herself and the others. She helps Cassandra to get out from the male character's caught, and she's emancipation the other woman ([Ni'mah & Karima, 2022](#)).

The masculine performativity also aligns with the visual aspects like gestures, body languages, physical appearances matter, and there are some aspects that also support the discussion, like the dialogue or the transcript from the characters. Some interactions like fighting that included anger expression, their action which fight and kill someone indicated a masculine performativity and it shaped society ([Ainiyah, 2025](#)). The other aspects that indicate masculine are from the facial expression and the belief to be a leader. The masculine performativity is portrayed from figure 4 while Harley appears with her boyish look. She is against the men when she tries to unlock an iron bar and save Cassandra Cain. Women are not purposed to show their beauty, but they are strong enough to protect themselves ([Niza, 2022](#)). She jumps against the male characters who block her way with her boyish look. The harsh society forces women to be strong and able to stand for themselves ([Butler, 1990](#)). They are shifting into masculine because the situations require them to be strong and powerful. Women are often portrayed as passive and obey instructions, but in this film women can lead a group and empower the others. Figure 8 shows Canary uses her powerful voice to know down the enemies, she appears bravely with an angry expression. The spirit drives someone to push their limit ([Penney, 2022](#)).

Another masculine performativity also appears in figure 5. Renee Montoya is a detective who inspects criminal cases, a job that is often done by man, but here's the shifting of dual gender performativity this job can be done by women ([Nurhidaya, 2022](#)). Scene 5 also shows a picture that a man was killed by Bertinelli, She kills him due to her family's revenge. The last is figure 7, it shows Harley Quinn stands in front of the other female characters with her confidence. Harley realizes that they will face a hard situation. She asks them to make a team, empowering each other appears with her bold makeup, twin ponytail hairstyle, girly clothes, soft facial expression with necklace hanging around her neck. Chain necklace identical with men's accessories, and the highlighted thing here is Harley's leadership. She is brave, ready, and she has the strong mentality to be a good

leader for her team (Sherick, 2021). All those bereavement is not an innate, but the society shaped (Aziimatussa'adah, 2024).

This movie shows that women not only act feminine, passive, weak, and hopeless, but also women can shift into strong and powerful if it is required to do so. Shifting dual gender performativity clearly portrayed by female characters. It looks good when they are shifting into masculine or feminine performativity with their gestures, body languages, facial expressions, and the sentence that they spoke. Dual gender performance depicted in this film by the female characters through their actions, look, and dialogue. They are able to use their masculine and feminine side because of the pressure from society.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, *Birds of Prey* (2020) directed by Cathy Yan successfully portray dual gender performativity by the female characters (Harley Quinn, Renee Montoya, Black Canary, Helena Bertinelli, Cassandra Cain) through the selected scenes to analyze. Dual gender performativity means they can perform as feminine and even masculine, even though they are women. This study uses gender performativity theory by Judith Butler to deeply analyze. By using Butler's theory, the research questions can be answered how is dual gender performativity depicted in female characters and how does dual gender performativity influence them to face the injustices situation. The researcher found some visual and textual aspects that drive into feminine or masculine performativity.

Basically gender is divided into 2 types, male and female, but in gender performativity by Butler, gender is shaped by the society. Masculine can be owned by women, and also feminine can be owned by men. Visual aspect, gestures, body languages, facial expressions, and dialogues are indicated masculine performative or feminine performative. From the finding, feminine performativity is often linked with feminine clothes, hair, makeup, and action. While masculine performativity is also related with boyish look, mentality, and action. This study is expected to give contribution in an academic field, especially about gender studies and can be a reference for further research.

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