

LESBIANISM IN VICTORIAN NARRATIVE IMPLIED BY SARAH WATERS' FINGERSMITH

(Lesbianisme Dalam Cerita Narasi Victoria Ditunjukkan Oleh Sarah Waters Pada Novelnya Fingersmith)

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Abstract

This research discusses lesbianism and how the reconstruction of lesbian identity in Victorian narrative depicted in *Fingersmith*. There are three problems in this research, how is the ideal woman in Victorian era, how is the representation of lesbianism in *Fingersmith* and what is the ideological agenda behind Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* portraying lesbian identity. In writing this novel, Waters rewrites past representations that have traditionally been male dominated to female perspectives. To criticize heterosexuality especially in Victorian era as the dominant feature, she uses lesbianism as agenda. This research employs qualitative method that uses Queer theory from Judith Butler to observe the problematic binary classification of sexual desire (homosexual and heterosexual). The result of this research, there are some regulations in Victorian era to suppose an ideal woman. The representation of lesbianism in this novel shown by Sue and Maud transform from a passive women become active participant in society. They are trapped in the house as a prison under controlling Maud's uncle. They gain independence and through lesbian relationship. Through this novel, Waters admits working with an agenda to give a voice toward lesbianism. She narrates other view to the Victorian women, not only submissive on the men's hand but also creative to revolt authority.

Keywords: Lesbianism, Queer, heterosexual, homosexual

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mendiskusikan lesbianisme dan bagaimana rekonstruksi identitas lesbian di era Victoria yang digambarkan dalam *Fingersmith*. Ada tiga permasalahan dalam penelitian ini yaitu: bagaimana perempuan yang ideal di era Victoria, bagaimana gambaran lesbianisme dalam *Fingersmith* dan rencana apa dibalik novel *Fingersmith* karya Sarah Waters dalam menunjukkan identitas lesbian. Dalam menulis novel ini, Waters menulis kembali gambaran masa lampau yang secara tradisional telah didominasi laki-laki terhadap sudut pandang perempuan. Untuk mengkritik heteroseksual khususnya di era Victoria sebagai ciri-ciri yang menonjol, dia menggunakan lesbianisme sebagai rencana. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif yang menggunakan Queer teori dari Judith Butler untuk mengamati sepasang permasalahan penggolongan dari hasrat seksual (homoseksual dan heteroseksual). Hasil dari penelitian ini, ada beberapa peraturan untuk menggambarkan seorang wanita ideal di era Victoria. Gambaran lesbianisme di dalam novel ini di tunjukkan oleh Maud dan Sue yang berubah dari seorang wanita yang pasif menjadi peserta aktif di dalam masyarakat. Mereka terjebak di dalam rumah seperti sebuah penjara dibawah pengawasan paman Maud. Mereka memperoleh kebebasan melalui hubungan lesbi. Melalui novel ini, Waters memuat karya dengan sebuah rencana untuk memberikan sebuah suara terhadap lesbianisme. Dia menceritakan padangan lain pada wanita Victoria, tidak hanya tunduk pada laki-laki tetapi juga berdaya untuk menentang kekuasaan.

Kata Kunci: Lesbianisme, Queer, Heteroseksual, Homoseksual

Introduction

Fingersmith by Sarah Waters set during 1860s in the decade of Victoria era. It is constructing an explicitly lesbian relationship between Sue Trinder and Maud Lilly. Sue is a petty thief from the Borough in London, while Maud is an heiress in the countryside. It is not common for a novel with narration of Victorian era describing lesbianism. In this era, it is characterized by rigid morals and social values, religious worship and strict ideas on family life (Milena, 2011:1). In many ways, Victorian English people's attitudes towards sex seem puritan. With the portrait of Victorian era, writing about lesbian is not historically accepted.

Lesbianism is a challenging symbol toward heterosexual repressive system. People often undermine the naturalness of heterosexuality as a legal sexuality, but lesbian desire "challenged the both female sexual passivity and the sexual supremacy of men" (Hawkes 2004:127). By the 1950s lesbianism was considered as much of a threat to patriarchy as male homosexuality. Thus, "the diagnosis of lesbianism was a way to limit women's freedoms, while re-establishing male dominance both in and outside of the bedroom" (Hawkes 2004:170).

In the late of 1970s, Lesbianism was theorized under the flag of Queer theory. It focuses on the structures of power, knowledge, politics and social institutions that create traditional categories of sexuality and all of which have been based on the heterosexist values of Western patriarchal societies. It is based on theories of Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, and influenced by Adrienne Rich's concept of a compulsory heterosexuality. Queer theory has provided a way of transgressing conventional categorizations on sexuality. Therefore, to analyze this novel, Judith Butler's theory is chosen to observe the problematic of binary classification of sexual desires (homosexual and heterosexual).

Through this novel, Waters criticizes heterosexuality especially in Victorian era as the dominant feature. Her work has particular agenda. Sue and Maud's lesbianism is used as agenda by Sarah Waters to deconstruct the system in Victorian which was dominated by heterosexual oriented perspective.

Therefore, this novel shows how the representation of lesbianism to struggle against male oppression by promoting the other sides of lesbianism. Thus, this research discusses lesbianism in *Fingersmith* and how the reconstruction of lesbian identity in Victorian era depicted in the novel.

Research Methodology

This research uses qualitative method. Qualitative method also can help the researcher interpret and give a better understanding about the complex reality of a given situation portrayed in some textual data. In this research, the textual data are taken from variety of documents related to the topic. The data from *Fingersmith* are selected and collected by quotation of the novel. Then, those quotations are interpreted by using the writer's own sentences, previous researchers and explanation.

There are primary data and secondary data in this research. The primary data are the information pointed to lesbian act taken from selected events and characterizations in the novel. Secondary data are *Victorian People and Ideas* and *Sex and Sexuality robbing the Problematics* books. Those books give information about social political condition in Victorian era, their cultures, norms and paradigm related to lesbianism, and the secondary data to support the analysis. In data processing, this thesis starts to analyze the novel by reading and understanding it. Then, using a descriptive method to describe the facts followed by analysis activities. Afterward, the data that have been taken from *Fingersmith* are analyzed by using Butler's Queer theory.

Results of Data Analysis

From the analysis, Waters focuses on the way in which the genre of the historical novel enables to represent the past in female perspective. It is rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past. To challenge masculine domination, the novel opens a narrative that there was existing homosexuality in Victorian era. The results of this thesis show that *Fingersmith* acknowledges female's silence based on social decorum with its heterosexual obligation engenders moments of weakness. Lesbianism is represented as a challenging symbol toward heterosexual repressive system.

Discussion

In Victorian era, peoples related their behaviors to proper manner that was something inflexible. "Manner was sanctified and moralized" (Himmerlfah, 1987:5). It is hypocrisy. They moralize society and judge someone based on the ideal moral, for instance to live properly means to be heterosexual not homosexual. Man even is not barred to live with more than two wives but they are banned to live in homosexual relationship. The intellectual manner that can be interpreted as being oppositional to them is expelled. With the moral system educated in churches and

schools, it can be associated if anything that confront them lean to be viewed as subversive.

The standard of moral in Victorian era is the standard of religious belief. Elaine Showalter states that “the nineteenth century had a cherished belief in the separate spheres of femininity and masculinity that amounted almost to religious faith” (Showalter in Baseerman, 2010:2). There are behavioral norms for men and women that become standard practice for asserting one’s proper gender codes, for example men are expected to behave heroically, presenting a strong attitude that directly asserts their roles as the dominant gender.

Church and society decide what is considered as immoral sexual behavior. As Cohen observes, woman must be virgin when they marry (Cohen, 1993:69-72). Victorian English people’s attitudes towards sex also seem orthodox. Law forbids sexual relationships between men. It means that those who have homosexual relationship can be punished. Cohen also observes that Victorian English men are free to take benefit of lower class women to please their sexual desires.

Victorian England was also known for its oppressive societal restrictions. With advancements, the gap between the upper and lower classes continued (Altick, 1973:45). It was the middle and upper classes that controlled Victorian society. Meanwhile the lower class sank deeper into the darkness. The term Victorian reminds the traditional values of Victorian society that the upper class dictated morality in society. They forced strict moral standard that were expected to be typical for members of society. Despite England’s monarch was female, Victorian society was a patriarchy. The cultural standards permitted men to control moral rules. In society, men were projected to hold decent jobs, marry reputable women, and create the next generation of appropriate British citizens. While women were raised to marry, breed English children, and live quietly in the household (Altick, 1973:56).

In Waters’ novel, new ideas of what it destined to be a woman, what she should be allowed to do, say, think, and desire began to be challenged. It also happened in the reality of Victorian era by the late 1890’s, women had been weary of waiting for permission to have the same rights on economic and education. These nontraditional women grew well. They are guided by their own thoughts and wishes rather than society. The New Woman also wanted the freedom to voyage on her own. Respectable women were habitually accompanied by a chaperone, but the New Woman fought this strict control by riding a bicycle, which was considered scandalous for women.

It occurred because in 1847 Queen Victoria had established a Ladies College.

The chance for higher education, women could decide to leave the home-sphere and begin probing for jobs previously held only by men. With a job, the woman could be financially sovereign; she did not have to get married for financial security, and she would enable to control her life and choices. Some women started to wish to remain single.

Abrams gives an example that Victorian ideal women is like Frances Goodby. She is pious, no life of leisure for her. She is diligent and she gives constant devotion to her husband, as well as to her God. She accepts her place in the sexual hierarchy. Her role is the helpmeet and domestic manager (Abrams, 2001:4).

Women always have lower position than men. The unspoken norm in society is for women to be in domestic space. They are childbearing while men take on public concerns. It results men’s authority to dominate women. The repression to women is a common phenomenon at Victorian era. However, this repression seems natural so that many Victorian women are not considered this norm as oppression. They tend to consider that women who follow these rules and norms are identical with the ideal women. For New Women, they regard that the oppression has allegedly occurred in many aspects of their life such as their educations and job opportunities. “How men determine women to be good wife and to be domestic labor has increased women to get physical and verbal violence” (Qasim, 2005:2)

In the space of sexuality, it has own prejudiced view to women and their sexualities in the Victorian era. Men perceive women as a sexless creature. Women are supposed to comprise no sexual desire. Their desires are to please the men’s wishes.

“There are many females who never feel any sexual excitement whatsoever ... The best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of the home, children, and domestic duties are the only passions they feel”

(Acton, 1998:180)

Acton sees that women have sexual desire like men. Although industrial revolution in Britain gives a huge effect in social or economical space, women’s position in society does not change much and their attitudes to the sexual relationship are still puritan. Society with masculine standard believes that a good woman does not have sexual desire. They are uncomplicated in sex since they “are not very much troubled by sexual feeling”. Acton acknowledges that some women have an appetite for sex, but he sees as unusual sexual desires that “surpass those of men, and shock public

feeling by their exhibition". Therefore, Acton concludes that women do not concern in their own sexualities. If they do it will be a shock to the public and their male partners. (Acton, 1998:179)

Marriage for women is often based on a financial condition. Financial matters are important for the lower classes. Marriage is the way for lower class members to upgrade their social status. This condition then is questioned by the movement called New Women.

Acton sees a woman should sacrifice her personal desires for her man. Thus, the depiction of women as an angel in the household became the idealized as Victorian women's behavior. In Victorian era, there was the idea that women were selfless creatures who were engrossed in the family life that their identities did not surpass the role of a mother. Abrams (2001:3) also sees that this physical separation of the home and the workplace mean that women lost touch with production. They put themselves solely within the domestic sphere. In the home, women are offered a moral duty, towards their families, especially their husbands, and towards society as a whole.

Homosexual in Victorian era had drowned in a secret but it was an active subculture with its language and mode. "Homosexuality represented a double life, in which a respectable daytime world often involving marriage and family existed alongside a night world of homoeroticism" (Showalter, 1990:106). Therefore, through *Fingersmith* the same-sex desire, Waters wants to evoke other genders identity thus it allegedly the gendered women by the domination of masculine view.

Waters shows in *Fingersmith* that her heroines are trapped in domestic confines. She also explores female entrapment in domestic spaces. Maud and Sue are also characters with a limited worldview. They lives in isolation for years and do not know how the world works. Even Sue is uneducated and only familiar to the ways of the lowest class. Maud is silenced as a powerless young woman in the hands of a manipulative villain. When Gentleman elopes with her, she does not receive the freedom that she has estimated. They move to Lant Street, where she is oppressed by the Gentleman. Maud is a girl in a metropolis. When she escapes from Lant Street, she realizes that she has no opportunity. Her life becomes rough and even hopeless. On the other hand, Sue faces different problem. She is silenced by her class. When she is protected in the madhouse, she loses her right to speak: nobody knows to her side of the story because everyone believes Gentleman's version.

In Briar, the confusion of identities goes on extremity. Maud and Sue often believe that they have found the truth but then discover that they are wrong.

Maud thinks that the truth is that her mother has died in Briar, where she was raised until her uncle used her as a secretary. When Gentleman arrives at Briar and explains the story of the inheritance is added to her truth, she believes that she will end in Briar and lives with Gentleman in London "separately, of course ... when the door of the house is closed" (Waters, 2002:228).

When Maud arrives in Lant Street, she learns that her past is different. At the first time, she believes that her real mother is a murderer. Then she is swapped with the child of a lady and she was raised in Briar. When the story unfolds, her truth is subverted again. Mrs. Sucksby confesses that Maud is her own daughter, not the daughter of a murderer. Waters shows that her characters' identities are not something stable. They move from one particular identity to another. Butler in her essay writes that:

"Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. ...gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo"

(1990:270-271)

Gender as a performance reveals the fictional construct of different categories of identity. It arises due to different discourses and regimes of power. These identity categories do not pre-exist the regimes of power but it is performative products of them. Therefore, there is no notion an internal nature that dictates one's gender or identity.

Gentleman's death in *Fingersmith* is ambiguous. Even, Waters also gives another example of unstable identity through the character of a criminal. Through her novel, she seems questioning one stable gender and identity. The criminals in the novel function as part of the setting. They are presented to the reader as the people that surround Sue and Maud, but their characters are not described well by Waters. The characters often operate in a moral grey zone: they are neither good nor bad. The one thing that the inhabitants of Lant Street show is the belief that they are "honest thieves": "we were that kind of thief that rather eased the dodgy deed along, than did it" (Waters, 2002:7).

Sue is also one of the criminals, but she indicates herself that she is different than the others: "I think the

people who came to Lant Street thought me slow. – Slow I mean, as opposed to fast. Perhaps I was, by Borough standards” (Waters, 2002:14). Mrs. Sucksby keeps her from harm and abuse, so her life is never so hard. The Lant Street kitchen is described as the warmth and homeliness where happy ordinary people live together: “It was like stepping out of heaven, I always thought, to leave our kitchen on a winter’s night” (Waters, 2002:45). While Sue is staying at Briar, she feels so far away from Lant Street: “I lay and shivered, and longed with all my heart for Mrs. Sucksby, Lant Street, home” (Waters, 2002:62).

When she finally comes home from Briar, she discovers that Maud has usurped her place. The murder of Gentleman drives them apart. Some people in Lant Street try to save themselves. Dainty is the one that stays with Sue and looks after her when she is ill. On the other hand, Mrs. Sucksby’s love for Sue turns out to be a sham. Sue is the representation of money, and has to be kept safe. She is to be exchanged for Mrs. Sucksby’s own daughter and her fortune. At the end of the novel, she regrets her actions. She realizes that Sue cannot be concealed: “That she and your mother had been wrong. That they meant to make you a commonplace girl. That that was like taking a jewel, and hiding it in the dust. That dust falls away...” (Waters, 2002:543).

In the end of the novel, both women succeed in establishing their own voices. The finding of this new voice is Waters’ agenda of writing her novel. She wants to develop a new inferior voice comes outside. It is usual for postmodern novelist like Waters to rewrite the historical fiction in a kind of subversion. Waters does not intend to narrate a factual history but fictional history in which she is able to go beyond the boundaries of Victorian repressive narrative.

In *Fingersmith*, Waters shows the limitations upon female self-expression during the nineteenth century. When Maud and Sue are aware of their statuses for loving each other, they start to question and betray male’s domination. Their lesbian relations give a huge effect toward masculinity, especially in private madhouse Briar. Rich shows this action as lesbian continuum.

“I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range - through each woman’s life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny”

(Rich,1980:15)

In the disciplining space, Sue and Maud act on their lesbianism and liberate the concept of women entrapped in the private madhouse. Sue and Maud’s connection give a lesbian side in Briar. They manage to make Briar as their own when Mr Lilly dies and they collect their inheritances. “Once the ‘skeleton’ has been removed, states Lucie Armitt, “the house is permitted to return to ‘normality’” (Waters, 2002:123). In *Fingersmith*, the skeleton is the patriarchal figure of Maud’s uncle Mr Lilly and his library of pornography. The house is allowed “to return to normality” when Mr. Lilly dies.

Fingersmith is not history as it was because there is no certainty about the past. It is a version of history; one of several different possible histories. The story is a projection of lesbianism on to the past, in a setting that is based on our knowledge of the Victorian era. Sue and Maud bear a burden of being accepted as lesbians in the Victorian era. The lesbian couple in the novel find themselves quite alone in the story. It shows that England civilization considers lesbianism as a kind of menace. “Lesbians are sent to rehabilitation camps to learn through self-criticism the correct line about themselves” (1980:138). Lesbian women are just characters found in Maud’s uncle’s pornographic books. Lesbian characters are invented to satisfy men’s pleasures.

Consequently, lesbianism to Maud is something associated with pornography, with her uncle’s vulgarities, such as “the Lust ... of Men for Beasts” (Waters, 2002:211). To Sue, her feelings for Maud are simply unlike anything she has seen in the Borough. She does not understand clearly what a strange feeling has overwhelmed her heart. She loves Maud although it is abnormal for the society. However Sue has grown up with certain expectations of life in a conservative society where she knows what love is.

“I thought I knew all about love, in those days. I thought I knew all about everything. If you had asked me how I supposed I should go on, I dare say I would have said that I should like to farm infants. I might like to be married, to a thief or a fencing-man”

(Waters, 2002:13)

The thought that she is different provokes indistinct feelings. Sue must release all expectations in her society such as she is woman who will be the bride for a noble man or will give a good child to continue her generation. On the one hand, loving Maud is something completely normal to her, but on the other hand, her love distracts her conservative ideas. Their love is a first step towards the acknowledgment of their lesbian identity, but society’s constraints are still

too tough. They cannot break free from tradition to ascertain a new one. However, in the end of the novel, Maud and Sue develop their sovereign voices, as women or lesbians. They acknowledge their love for each other and confess their lesbian identities.

When Maud moves away from the fire, she says: "I like the shadows" (Waters, 2002:213). Her utterance can be interpreted in two ways: first, she knows that she is not an ordinary lady and is accustomed to life in the margins and second, she likes the shadows from the viewpoint of her life where pornography is the centre. Maud is very much aware of her marginal position in society: "They say that ladies don't write such things. But, I'm not a lady ... and "Like me? There are no girls like me" (Waters, 2002:546-547). However, in the Victorian publishing there are no girls like Maud, or if there were girls like Maud, they have been written out of history" (Miller, 1998:26). Finding evidence of the production, allocation and reception of pornography in the Victorian era is difficult because of its misconduct. The trade in pornography is hidden. For example, in Victorian England, "it was supposed that particular people could look at representations with limited emotional, social, and legal penalty while others could not" (Miller, 1998:34). Maud's uncle, for example, as a book collector and academic, can collect and talk about pornography freely under scientific space.

However, this novel shows Waters' agenda to explore the lesbian through narrative frameworks. Two female characters search for a space and a means to express their lesbianism. By performing as madwomen, these characters navigate their ways out of the spaces that restrict their sexual expressions. They find and create ones that accept their lesbianism. Adrienne Rich challenges the taken for granted ideological construct of heterosexuality that oppresses lesbians particularly. Rich asserts that "one of the many means of heterosexual enforcement is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentedly into view from time to time only to become submerged again" (1980:220).

Butler also writes in *Gender Trouble* that her main aim is to ask "how do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis" (1990:xi) and how "one is a woman, according to this framework, to the extent that one function as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one's sense of place in gender" (1990:xi). It is important to note that "gender is very character as performative has the possibility of contesting its reified status" (1990:271). When normative categories of gender are deconstructed, the

way for lesbian and gay subject-positions are disclosed. Maud and Sue successfully deconstruct this normality of gender. The death of Mr. Lily and the gentlemen is a proof of the destruction of masculinity. Along with this destruction, Sue and Maud identities are "always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (1999: 43). She asserts that "the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything" (1999: 33). Butler's politics of identity depends on the assumption that the individual is able to select from a range of socially scripted alternatives in the auto-production of self-identity. The choice to be lesbian done by Maud and Sue is a decision to reject social recognition. It implicates the loss of a social identity. Identities are cultural performances that construct the originally materiality of sexuality. In short, gender is and has always been taken for granted. There is no a natural body before cultural inscription. Body is regarded as his social function. This social identity is often asked by Butler, "what can be meant by identity?, then, and what grounds the presumption that identity are self identical, persisting through time as the same, unified, and internally coherent?" (1999:16). Butler sees that identity can change contrastingly. Maud and Sue do this changing that results as a challenge for heterosexual with its masculine value.

Conclusion

From the data collection and analysis, it can be concluded that rigid morals and social values that create some regulations for what woman has to do. This repressive regulation seems natural so that many Victorian women are not considered this norm as oppression. They tend to consider that women who follow these rules and norms are identical with the ideal women. Waters describes Sue and Maud transform from one type of woman into another. They start as passive women, whose life are governed by the stronger forces surrounding them. Then they gain independence and become active participants in society. With Sue and Maud, Waters produces two motherless girls, two characters who are both more independent than the woman who has been conventionally socialized under the guidance of a mother. Sue and Maud's lesbian relationship undercuts the conventional importance of motherhood as well. Waters sees that motherhood is one of the factors to alienate women from the society into their houses, commonly called as the angel of the house. Waters sees that the oppression of women occurs firstly because of heterosexuality with its dominance masculine's values. She wants to evoke a space for the lesbian body that challenges the construction of femininity and refuses to any masculine agenda. There

also exists a prejudiced view to women and their sexualities in the Victorian era. Men perceive women as sexless beings. Women are believed to have no sexual appetite that needed to be fulfilled. Their desires are only to satisfy the men's needs. Therefore, Waters focuses on the way in which the genre of the historical novel enables to re-present the past and the present in female perspective. Waters' peculiar agenda to write the novel is distinctive. she admits working with an agenda to give a voice toward lesbianism. Out of the biographical assumption about Waters choice to live without men, Waters' enterprising effort to solve the imbalance power holder between men and women is more prone considered as his first thought. She narrates other view to the Victorian women, not only submissive on the men's hand but also creative to revolt repressive authority. Consequently, it has objected the heterosexual characteristic supposed to be Victorian narration. *Fingersmith's* main character intently brings the message for women to struggle against male oppression by promoting the other sides of lesbianism.

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