

# PESSIMISM TOWARDS GENDER DECONSTRUCTION IN *X: A FABULOUS CHILD'S STORY* BY LOUIS GOULD

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## ABSTRACT

*Research focuses on Lois Gould's complex position in feminism movements as displayed by the pessimistic tone in one of her works. The primary data for this research were taken from the short story *X: A Fabulous Child's Story*, published in 1972. The research used qualitative method that lies on library research, and to help analyze the topic, books, websites, and scientific journals were used. Kate Millet's concept of an androgyny was also applied in order to study further about the character of X. The result of the discussion shows that even though considered progressive for its era for its effort to deconstruct rigid gender divisions, this short story also comes with an irony with its ending. The ending demonstrates that human beings cannot be free from sex and gender barriers. This result supports the idea that Gould is trapped between the feminist and the antifeminist movement.*

**Keywords:** sex, gender, feminism, pessimism, androgyny

## ABSTRAK

*Penelitian berfokus pada posisi kompleks Lois Gould dalam gerakan feminisme seperti ditunjukkan oleh nada pesimis dalam salah satu cerpennya. Data primer diambil dari cerita pendek *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* yang diterbitkan pada 1972. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif yang bersandar pada penelitian kepustakaan, dan untuk membantu menganalisis topik, beberapa sumber sekunder digunakan. Konsep manusia androgini oleh Kate Millet juga menjadi bahan referensi untuk mendalami karakter X. Hasil penelitian kemudian menunjukkan bahwa walaupun tergolong progresif pada zamannya karena berusaha mendekonstruksi kategori gender yang kaku, cerpen ini juga membawa ironi dengan akhir cerita yang kembali menunjukkan bahwa manusia tidak bisa lepas dari sekat-sekat seks dan gender. Hasil ini mendukung ide bahwa Gould terjebak di antara gerakan feminis dan antifeminis.*

**Kata kunci:** seks, gender, feminisme, pesimisme, androgini

## INTRODUCTION

After being absent for about 40 years, in 1960s (and continued until 1970s), feminists struggled to acquire the rights and equality for women. The feminists active in that era, for example Kate Millet and Marilyn French, are commonly known as radical feminists. The focus of radical feminist movement is the difference between sex and gender that leads to oppression to women. They were questioning the concepts of masculinity and femininity that put social and psychological burdens on women. The radical feminists also challenged the existence of misogyny in several aspects of life, such as law, science and sociology.

In the midst of radical feminist struggle, an author named Lois Gould (1932-2002) started her career. Besides writing fictions like *Such Good Friends* (a novel written in 1970), Gould also published articles in newspapers and journals. Her writings mainly discuss about women's attitudes towards personal issues, namely sexuality, marriage and divorce. What is interesting about Gould is she was positioned between the feminists and the anti-feminists. She admitted it in one interview:

*"My fiction works represent neither a popularization of feminisms nor a politicization of literature, nor are they intended to achieve neither of these dubious purposes. I have been reviewed by feminist critics who say my work is anti-feminist and by anti-feminist critics who say the reverse."* (Oliver, 2002)

Seeing her ambiguous position in feminist sphere, I am interested to analyze one of her works, the short story *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* (1972).

The main plot of *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* is about a child named X who represents an ideal human being who has both masculine and feminine traits. When this short story was published for the first time, the issues of sex and gender were widely discussed, and *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* has given an advanced reaction to the differences between sex and gender. I will discuss that particular topic in my research, which was conducted to show that *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* is in a difficult position, just like Gould's position in feminist movements. This short story tries to deconstruct gender differences through the androgynous character X, but on the other hand, it offers an ironic ending and shows pessimism towards gender deconstruction.

### Review of Related Literature

A number of academic journals and books were used as references for this research. The journals and books referred to mostly talk about gender, sex and feminism movements, as related to the topic of this research.

The basic terms of sex and gender will be explained in this part. Sex refers to a person's biological condition related to the sexual organ. Meanwhile, gender is a socially constructed term and it has rooted deep in everyday lives. Judith Lorber in Taylor et al (2007:41) stated: *"Most people find it hard to believe that gender is socially constructed and recreated out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life."* However, as shown by the different and various gender rules in various societies, it is agreed that gender is constructed by human beings. Gender is related to sex in a way that it *"starts with assignment to a sex category on the basis what the genitalia look like at birth."* (*ibid*). If you have a penis, you have to be masculine, and you should have feminine traits if you have a vagina.

Feminist theory argues that gender difference builds a hierarchy between men and women and creates stereotypes. For instance, men are believed to be physically stronger than women and women tend to be softer and more delicate. It is also noted that not only behaviours but also objects are

gendered. Clothes, toys and even household tools are divided into based on gender. This definition of sex and gender was used as a theoretical framework to analyze the primary data.

## METHOD

The first step of this research is to find and select the data. The primary data were collected from Lois Gould's short story entitled *X: A Fabulous Child's Story*, first published in 1972. To analyze and interpret the data taken from a literary work, qualitative method and feminist approach became the best option. Library research was conducted, either in libraries (Binus University libraries and Depdiknas library) or on the Internet. In order to keep the analysis on academical and theoretical track, books and academic journals related to the topic were used as references. Moving on the next step, the data are then divided into intrinsic elements namely characters and theme, and extrinsic elements, such as issues of sex and gender. After data had been analyzed and interpreted, a conclusion was taken and the result of the analysis was written down, following the format.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The structure of *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* is going to be discussed first. The characters in this short story are X, the Jones couple, the scientists who invented X, the school principal, other children, and The Parents' Association. Even though there are a number of characters, it seems that characterization is not the most important aspect here. For instance, Jones is a common name, showing that the couple who raise X are ordinary people. Gould did not provide the readers with a clear explanation about the couple as well. The use of third person point of view does not give a further understanding about characterization since the narrator does not go inside the characters' mind (this kind of narrator is known as limited narrator). Several aspects are also left undescribed such as the exact time and place of the story. The plot happens in the Jones' house and X's school, but Gould never mentioned the precise city or country. Furthermore, the story starts with '*Once upon a time*' that indicates the uncertainty of time, reminding readers of a fairy tale. What can be concluded here is that theme is the most significant element of *X: A Fabulous Child's Story*, therefore this research will focus only on the theme that the short story intends to deliver.

*X: A Fabulous Child's Story* tells about the Jones couple who are struggling to raise baby named X (who is apparently a result of an experiment). Through the hard times experienced by the Jones, readers are taken to see how the world is full of gender differences, and it is shown by simple things, such as names. Names have been divided into male names and female names. In other words, biological condition influences the labeling to one's self. In this short story, the baby has been given the name X so '*nobody could tell whether it was a boy or a girl*'. By giving the name 'X', Gould tried to avoid the conventional female and male naming. The name 'X' also indicates something unknown because the scientists do not want other people to know what actually X's sex is. A challenge could appear, which is when other people have to refer to X as a singular third person since in English there are two pronouns for that: either 'he' or 'she'. To handle this problem, the narrator refers to X with 'it', as if X is a genderless creature.

The short story keeps focusing on the division of the world into masculine and feminine spheres. One example is about clothes. The Jones' relatives sent 'a tiny football helmet' with a hope that X is a baby boy, and the neighbours sent 'a pink-flowered romper suit' because they thought X is a girl. Football helmet suggests toughness, a masculine attribute, meanwhile pink flower pattern is associated with femininity. Even in the clothing store clothes have been categorized based on sex

differences. Through this condition, Gould pointed out that the binary opposition of masculine/feminine exists and constructs the normality. Thus, when someone is outside that binary opposition, he or she will be considered weird or abnormal. To name that abnormality, Gould used the name 'X'.

X is raised without the conventional gender categorization. This can be seen in the manual given by the scientist to the Jones: *On page 1,654 of the Official Instruction Manual, the scientists prescribed: "plenty of bouncing and plenty of cuddling, both. X ought to be strong and sweet and active .."*. 'Strong' and 'active' are often categorized as masculine characteristics; on the other hand, 'sweet' is a feminine attribute. It is hoped that X will combine those aspects of masculinity and femininity inside it. When buying toys, the Jones do not want to be trapped in gender categorization as well. They opt for toys that deconstruct the gender categorization, for example 'a boy doll' that cries 'Pa-Pa' (instead of 'Ma-Ma') and 'a girl doll' that can speak 'I am the president of Gen-er-al Mo-tors'. The boy doll owned by X can cry, an act considered as a weakness for males, and the girl doll could have a career in public. The girl doll is even the president of a car factory, considered as a masculine sphere. The Jones are educating X without the rigid gender division, and it makes X grow to be a child that can do many things. Through this, Gould underlined how gender division actually often limits someone's ability and if someone is free from that division, he or she actually can do more things and explore their talents.

Kate Millet has a term for someone like X who has both masculine and feminine traits: androgyny. For her, androgyny is an example of an ideal human being (Tong, 2006:76). According to Millet, to deconstruct the gender segregation, everyone needs to have both masculine and feminine characteristics inside him or her. Masculine traits such as being active and rational do not necessarily belong to men only. Women also cannot claim being soft and emotional as theirs only. Since gender concept that implies inequality is a social construction, this concept can be deconstructed and reconstructed. One of the ways is through the concept of androgyny. The portrayal of an androgyny as an ideal human being is also shown by the school principal's opinion: *But X was an Xcellent student. All the teachers said it was a delight to have X in their classes.* The Jones let X to do either boys' activities or girls' activities so X is growing up to be a child with limitless talents.

Another interesting thing is that the Jones are raising X together, not only the mother who is often said to have the natural talent of nurturing. This kind of nurturing practiced by the Jones is in line with Dorothy Dinnerstein about the double nurturing (in Tong, 2006:209-210). Dinnerstein said that the traditional gender convention tends to put men in public space and women in private space (namely inside the house). She later explained that if men and women are given equality both in public and private space, the oppressive gender division to women can be eliminated. By raising X together, the Jones couple deconstructed the idea that only women who carry this responsibility. The fact that the father is involved in it refutes the conventional gender division.

Moreover, sometimes the Jones have a role exchange: *... X's mother had taught X how to throw and catch a ball properly, and that X's father had been sure to teach X what to serve at a doll's tea party.* X's mother teaches X to do a masculine hobby, and on the other hand, X's father joins X in doing feminine hobby. The text also does not show that the couple mind this role exchange. Not only affecting X, this kind of nurturing also affects the Jones couple. However, this double nurturing is not an easy thing to do. Knowing this, the scientists even gave a very thick manual book that has to be read by the Jones.

The society even mocks at this kind of nurturing, as represented by the Jones' relatives and The Parents' Association. When the Jones couple mentioned that their baby is an 'X' (and 'it', instead of 'she' or 'he'), the relatives harshly said, *"There is something wrong with it!"*. In the world divided into masculine and feminine spheres, X is categorized as a mistake. The society thinks the genderless X is an abnormality and keeps making a fuss over it. The Parents' Association said that X is a 'mixed-

up misfit' and has a identity crisis. They even force a psychiatrist to examine X since they think X is psychologically wrong.

When the older generation keeps thinking that X is abnormal, the younger generation has an innocent and open-minded perspective about X. X's classmates think that playing both boys' and girls' games will double up the fun: "*Come to think of it,*" said another one of the *Other Children*, "*maybe X is having twice as much fun as we are!*". Unconsciously, these children have torn down the barrier between masculinity and femininity. It seems that Gould wanted to show her hope of a genderless world for the younger generation.

Through X, Gould displayed an effort to deconstruct the division of the world based on sex and gender. As suggested by Kate Millet that an androgyny is an ideal human being, *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* shows how someone can actually combine masculine and feminine characteristics. However, I captured a pessimistic tone portrayed in the ending of the story. After the psychiatrist states that X does not experience any identity crisis and is not a 'mixed-up misfit', the readers are taken almost to the resolution. Yet the ending suggests an irony. At first, through X's life readers are taken to an ideal world that slowly eliminates the oppressive gender division, but the ending shocks the readers with its pessimistic tone.

Sex is an unavoidable biological condition, and the existence of the character Y shows that biological differences will always lead to gender inequality. After Y appears, the name 'X' undergoes a change of meaning. The name 'X' initially indicates something unknown, but then it refers to biological condition, which is female. In genetics, the chromosomes are divided into X and Y. If an individual has XX chromosomes, it will be a female; while it will be considered a male if it has XY chromosomes. By having Y (instead of Z or F, for example) in the end of the story, Gould reminds the readers about this inevitable biological condition. The fact that it is X who calls the newly-appeared character as Y shows that even an androgyny like X cannot escape the gender categorization.

## CONCLUSION

The short story *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* by Lois Gould brought a progressive point of view of gender issues for its era. Through the life of X, Gould offered the concept of androgyny that has successfully combined masculine and feminine traits inside it. The existence of X inbetween the rigid division of masculine and feminine has deconstructed the gender barriers. However, irony appears at the end of the story when the character Y appears. The name 'X' does not refer to the unspecified person anymore but more to sex chromosomes. This strengthens the complex position of Gould in feminist movements. With this short story, she seemed to offer an effort to deconstruct the oppressive gender categorization, but at the same time, I did not find an optimistic tone in voicing the effort.

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