



## DISCOURSING SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN THE INDONESIAN LITERATURE AND PUBLIC POLICIES: MAPPING SOCIAL GAPS

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### Abstract

The research investigates the position of LGBT individuals within the Indonesian literature and the Indonesian public policy frameworks. Employing a descriptive-qualitative approach, analysis and interpretation of literary works and public policies are conducted through repeated readings and library studies. Additionally, a personal interview was conducted to enhance the analysis. The research focuses on three main aspects: (1) representation of LGBT literature in Indonesia, (2) exploration of how the Indonesian public policies affect the Indonesian discourses on homosexuality, and (3) examination of how the Indonesian LGBT literary works highlight the gaps and challenges within those policies. To unveil the three aspects, several sources are also used alongside the method, like personal interviews, reviews, articles, essays, and books. The research highlights literature's role as both a medium to resist and a critique of the social injustice in these LGBT individuals experience in society.

**Keywords:** Indonesian sexuality, Indonesian literature, LGBT, public policies, social gaps

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### INTRODUCTION

Gender is considered something unstable and unfixd as it is rather a social construction (Foucault, 1990; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). Therefore, most of the discourses regarding gender will likely consist of numerous forms with various focuses. In addition, the society, through its social conventions, will likely recognise two genders, which are male and female. This will later confirm the notion that the difference in how males and females perform lies in its social convention (Butler, 1990). Thus, for an individual to be recognised as a homosexual, he would have to be acknowledged as a man first (Angelianawati, 2020).

The discussion regarding gender in Indonesia has moved from the conversation about normative gender like heterosexuality to the marginalised sexual identity, which is homosexuality (Blackwood, 2007; Angelianawati, 2017). This discourse remains deeply contested across institutional domains, including state legislation, religious interpretations, social norms, and traditional customs. Sexuality is fundamentally structured by complex intersections of power and cultural expectations (Blackwood, 2007; Angelianawati & Schmidt, 2017). Social structures in Indonesia define acceptable sexual behaviours through a narrow heteronormative lens that prioritises heterosexuality, marital conformity, and reproductive imperatives. Same-sex relationships are systematically characterised as deviant, challenging established cultural and moral paradigms. Sexual expressions diverging from heteronormative expectations are overwhelmingly perceived as morally transgressive. Cultural media platforms significantly perpetuate this marginalisation by presenting limited and predominantly negative representations of homosexuality. Media representations render LGBT experiences invisible or pathological, effectively reinforcing systemic exclusion (Boellstorff, 2007; Angelianawati, 2017).

This research critically explores the representation of homosexuality in Indonesian literary works and examines how these portrayals intersect with public policies. By analysing selected literary texts and legal frameworks, the study reveals the social gaps and symbolic violence embedded in Indonesia's response to sexual diversity. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to understand how literature functions as both a mirror of social cases and a medium of resistance. Using a qualitative approach supported by library research

and interviews, the paper contributes to the broader discourse on gender, literature, and state ideology in contemporary Indonesia.

To further explore how literature reflects and resists the marginalization of sexual minorities, it is essential to examine how homosexuality is represented in Indonesian literary works. These portrayals are shaped not only by cultural and religious norms but also by societal taboos surrounding sexuality. As a result, authors often employ subtle narrative strategies to address themes of eroticism, desire, and same-sex relationships. (Alisjahbana, 1948; Ahmad, 1995). In addition, erotic stories would have to be published through a minor or “underground” publisher. The publication of erotic series of Enny Arrow and Valentino in the 1980s - early 1990s is an example. However, the issues regarding sexuality and its preferences will likely lead to the normalisation of the so-called deviant characters, including homosexual characters.

The normalisation of the characters in the Indonesian LGBT-themed books shows a lamentable fact, causing one to be unable to embrace their sexual orientation. It follows the discussion about human nature or *kodrat* in Indonesia. The lesbian and homosexual in Djenar Mahesa Ayu’s novel *Nayla* or Ayu Utami’s *Saman* is an example. In *Nayla*, the character Nayla is portrayed as one who longs for her parents’ presence. It later leads her to develop a same-sex relationship with Juli. For the book to be accepted and published by the Indonesian major company, the character of this book will have to be normalized according to her *kodrat* as a woman who should be with a man (Ayu, 2005; Angelianawati, 2020)

Another example is Laila in Ayu Utami’s *Saman*. In the book, Laila wants to have a sexual encounter with Sihar. To do so, Laila asks Shakuntala to teach her the technique for making love. Both later involve the same-sex relationship, but by the end of the book, Laila is normalized. She is later portrayed as a woman attracted to a man (Angelianawati, 2020). This fills the Indonesian frame about *kodrat* itself. This conception of *kodrat* often causes a normalization towards homosexuality and later fills the concept of symbolic violence as addressed in the Bourdieusian concept (Bourdieu, 2002; Angelianawati & Schmidt, 2017; Angelianawati, 2020). Symbolic violence in Bourdieusian concept refers to the inequality, which later results in the oppression of the less-capital ones by the more capital-rich ones. In this case, it occurs in the form of restriction of sexual preference and the form of obligation of sexual preferences only between males and females.

In contrast, the practice of *warok-gemblakan* rituals in Ponorogo, Eastern Java, is an example. A *warok* should maintain his mystical power by avoiding any intimate contact, including with a woman, because a *warok* shall live celibately. However, it leads to a *warok* sometimes likely has a sexual encounter with the substitute, which are boy between the ages of eight to seventeen. These boys are later referred to as *gemblak* (Petkovic, 2008; Angelianawati, 2017).

Furthermore, in the context of *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding school), the strict gender segregation limits interaction between male and female students. This separation can lead to increased same-sex interactions among students. In certain reported cases involving male students, sexual misconduct has occurred in which one student engages in non-consensual physical contact with another while the latter is asleep, culminating in the perpetrator’s sexual gratification without intercourse. Another ironic fact about this practice is called *nyempet*. It refers to an activity of *menyerempet* or stumbling over. Meanwhile, *mairil* itself refers to those *santri* who play a female role, likely the victim of the molestation (Boelstorff, 2005; Syarifuddin, 2005; Angelianawati, 2020).

These practices are lamentable considering that the attacks and violence towards Indonesian LGBT individuals have been increasing since the start of 2016. It includes the police raids, crackdowns on the queer activists, political rhetoric, marginalisation, and discrimination. People can remember the public raid of a gay sauna in Jakarta, arresting 141 men, and the public canings of two homosexual men in Aceh (Dearden, 2017). This condition is different from other countries in which homosexuality is tolerated as a celebration as a part of human rights, allowing people to embrace their sexual preference.

Concerning it, some parades and festivals are conducted to prolong its celebration. In Taipei, people will perform a gay parade likely every October. The parade will take place in downtown Taipei and will be attended not only by LGBT activists but also the celebrities. In addition, the Songkran festival in Thailand gives extra space for LGBT individuals to embrace their sexual preference and express it freely in public (Chang, 2017; Angelianawati, 2020). In its peak of celebration, Thailand also legalized same-sex marriage in January 2025 (Head et al, 2025).

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a descriptive-qualitative approach. It focuses on interpretation and object analysis through repeated readings. As qualitative research prioritises quality, data content, depth, and evidence, it aims to explore and understand individuals or groups related to social or human problems (Indriyanto & Angelianawati, 2023). The primary focus is to answer three key aspects (1) representation of LGBT literature in Indonesia, (2)

exploration of how the Indonesian public policies affect the Indonesian discourses on homosexuality, and (3) examination of how the Indonesian LGBT literary works highlight the gaps and challenges within those policies. To cover the three aspects, a library study is employed to gather information on Indonesian LGBT literary works and classify the data through the Indonesian public policies. Several sources are also used alongside the method like personal interviews, reviews, articles, essays, and books.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the representation of sexual orientation in Indonesian literary works. It then also examines the social gaps in Indonesian public policies regarding homosexuality in Indonesia. It later highlights the intersection between literary works and public policies, outlining how literary works become a reflection of social resistance.

### The Indonesian LGBT Literary Works: The Representation of the Repressed Indonesian LGBT

The Indonesian literary arena showed a significant increase in the LGBT especially homosexuality-themed in the 2000s (Mujiarso, 2006; Angelianawati, 2020). However, the discourses regarding Indonesian homosexuality began in the 1970s and long before that. There are also a queer and a homosexual character in the Indonesian urban legend. The *Setan Botak*, a gayish-style evil with bald hair who becomes a close friend of Miryam in *Si Manis Jembatan Ancol* is the example (Zainuddin, 1966).

The homosexual character is later implicitly portrayed at *Relung-Relung Hati Sisi* written by Mira W in the 1980s. Since then, the mainstream media started highlighting the voices of LGBT individuals, including gay and lesbian with a notable rise after 2002 (Boellstorf, 2005). This shift also reflects the broader socio-political changes following the end of Soeharto's regime, which suppressed such themes of sexual diversity. During his regime, the most considerable one is the vision of a heterosexual relationship (Maimunah, 2007).

By the matters, the fall of the regime allows works like Ayu Utami's *Saman* (1998) to openly discuss marginalized genders like homosexuality and its issues. This work later inspired other writers and encouraged them to explore not only themes about sexuality but also the issues regarding homosexuality. This trend led to the flourishing of Indonesian LGBT-themed including Andre Aksana's *Lelaki Terindah*, published in 2000. These works normally circle the exploration of sexual preferences, the discovery of the characters' sexual preference, the denial, rejection from the heteronormative society, and the normalisation of the homosexual characters to return to their *kodrat*.

In terms of exploring and discovering sexual orientation, this example can be seen in the lesbian continuum relationship depicted in Ayu Utami's *Saman*. In the book, it is portrayed when Shakuntala had her first sexual awakening with her *pesinden* friend. It says,

*Ia seorang pesinden. Aku pun datang padanya untuk berguru ...Tapi ia juga membacakan aku Serat Centhini dan menyanyikan keluhan dengan suara duka ...Suatu malam, ketika aku duduk dalam sebuah ruang dan mengagumu dia menyanyi...lelaki dalam diriku muncul dari belakang tubuhku seperti energy yang lepas...Mereka melepas kain masing masing dan berdekatan*

(She is a *pesinden*. Then, I came to her to learn...But she also read me *Serat Centhini* and sang with a sad voice...One night, when I was sitting in the room and admiring her voice... The male side in my body emerged from the back of my body like a liberated energy...They [the male side of her and the *pesinden*] took off each other's *kain* [traditional clothes] and got close one to another). (Utami, 1998, p. 149)

Shakuntala's narration is the depiction of the internal struggles of accepting themselves and their sexual preferences. The denial of the LGBT characters follows typical it. It then depicts the painful journey of an LGBT individual faced in the Indonesian heteronormative society. This portrayal and depiction are also crucial to the story because they humanize their personal experience, too, as an individual. An example of this case is,

*"Rafky memejamkan matanya. Mencoba menikmati sentuhan dan cumbuan gadis itu. Gagal. Ia tidak merasakan apa-apa. Hatinya meronta mencari-cari apa yang salah. Rafky mengerahkan konsentrasinya kuat-kuat. Tapi justru bayangan itu yang berkelebat di sana. Wajah Valent yang tampan. [Rafky tries to close his eyes and enjoy the touch and the kisses the girl gave. Fail. He does not feel anything. His heart suffers trying to look for something that does not seem right. Rafky tries to concentrate but he comes into flash. The face of sweet Valent.]* (Aksana, 2004, p. 123).

One can see in Aksana's *Lelaki Terindah*, that Rafky, the character, still thinks within the Indonesian heteronormative framework. Living with the dogmatized heteronormativity, Rafky feels the urge to normalise himself. One of his ways is to call a call girl during his Bangkokian trip. Unfortunately, instead of Rafky feeling relieved, he is left with a question of his sexual preference. It is primarily because Rafky is portrayed as a metrosexual guy with no problems finding a girl. The normalisation process in Aksana's *Lelaki Terindah* and self-

denial will lead to another problem later. Rafky feels like he loses his dignity after he experiences a same-sex sexual encounter. He feels he is no longer a real man. He says, “Valent telah merebut harga dirinya sebagai lelaki sejati [Valent has taken dignity as a real man away] (Aksana, 2004, p.87).

As can be seen, the common thread of the Indonesian LGBT-themed literary works is the rejection and marginalisation of the characters in society. These characters are used to live within the Indonesian heteronormative relationship; thus, when they find out that they possess a sexual preference that is different than most people, they often belittle and question themselves. They later long for acceptance and recognition of their existence. These depictions of the LGBT characters outline their challenges in society. It also comes out as their resistance towards the heteronormative society they live in, as what it says in Hendri Yulius Wijaya’s *Stonewall Tak Mampir di Atlantis*,

“ di antara L, G, B, dan T  
Masih ada 22 abjad lain menanti  
Untuk diperlakukan setara...”

(among L, G, B, and T; there are other 22 alphabets; awaiting to be treated; equal) (Wijaya, 2020)

Through those literary works, one can see that Indonesian literary works with LGBT themes often depict the lamentable reality faced by the Indonesian LGBT individuals. They struggle to embrace their sexuality and its preferences as they live in the framework of an Indonesian heteronormative relationship. Thus, the existence of LGBT-themed literary works in Indonesia can be seen as a form of resistance towards the heteronormative relationship. It is unfortunate that, despite it being a portrayal of resistance, the Indonesian literature on homosexuality often fails to present the issue. The representation and depiction of the homosexual or lesbian characters are frequently being normalised in those works being published globally.

### **Questioning LGBT in the Indonesian Public Policies**

In May 2017, a police raid on PT Atlantis Jaya revealed the institutional mechanisms of LGBT persecution in Indonesia. Law enforcement seized personal items, including documentation and technological devices, during an operation targeting a same-sex event. This intervention became a significant media narrative that exposed the systematic marginalisation of sexual minorities. The incident highlighted the complex legal and social vulnerabilities of LGBT individuals within Indonesian society. Media coverage transformed the raid into a public spectacle that further stigmatized and isolated sexual minority communities.

Two days after the incident, two men were sentenced for homosexuality under the *Sharia* law in Banda Aceh, Aceh Province. They were arrested in April, after being found in bed together by their neighbours, who broke down the door of their home. On 23 May 2017, these men stood on the stage in a mosque’s courtyard, wearing white gowns while the *algojo* – executioner lashed their backs with canes. Hundreds of people flocked to witness this public caning and cheered as these men were punished. This incident happened following the police crackdown two days earlier in Jakarta.

As one of the world’s largest Muslim-majority countries in the world, Indonesia presents a complex and often contradictory space for LGBT individuals. The Indonesian government does not explicitly criminalise homosexuality. Yet Indonesia is still considered not really friendly when it comes to homosexuality. As an illustration, the Indonesian government only recognizes two genders, which are male or female. Therefore, society will likely consider the practice of homosexuality as deviant, sick, and in need to be treatment (Angelianawati, 2020).

An example of Indonesian laws that regulate homosexuality is stated in the Indonesian Pornography Law No. 44/2008. It includes sexual intercourse, which is considered deviant. It says,

*Setiap orang dilarang memproduksi...menyebarkan, menyiarkan, menawarkan, memperjualkan atau menyediakan pornography yang secara eksplisit memuat: pesenggamaan, termasuk persenggamaan yang menyimpang, kekerasan seksual, masturbasi dan onani, ...* [ Everyone is forbidden to produce...distribute, broadcast, offer, encash or provide pornographic services explicitly that included these contents: sexual intercourse included the deviant ones, masturbation.

This law also further states that the definition of deviant sexual conduct includes bestiality, oral, anal, lesbian, and homosexual conduct. As a result, homosexuality is considered a disease, and its practitioners need to be normalised or straightened.

The Indonesian state law will likely always intersect with religious beliefs, norms, and cultural values. The regulation on LGBT is without exception. The legal law is aligned with the religious and *adat* actors to maintain and construct the dominant discourses. An example of this intersect is the implementation of Islamic law through the *fatwa* issued by Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) which contextualizes the perceive of homosexuality.

The *fatwa* mentions that a sexual intercourse should be done only within the frame of husband and wife. It also states that the same sex-orientation is not a *fitrah* – natural tendency. Thus, homosexuality does not go accordance to the *fitrah* and should be punished as it is considered as a disease and crime. The *fatwa* in the beginning of the first chapter says,

*Bahwa sesuai fitrahnya, Allah SWT menciptakan manusia dan makhluk hidup berpasang pasangan dan mengatur tentang kecenderungan seksual didasarkan pasangannya...* [Following their natural destiny, Allah has created humans in pairs and set a rule on their sexual preference]. (MUI, 2014)

From the aforementioned *fatwa*, it can be stated that MUI, as the religious actor, along with the *ulemas* considers that sexual preference should be based on God's guidelines. While religious actors consider homosexuality a crime and a disease, the LGBT activists believe that sexuality is a social construction. Unfortunately, the activists as well as the LGBT actors are the ones with lower capital and marginalised status.

Through those examples, the Indonesian public policies have not yet accommodated the needs of the Indonesian LGBT actors. The lack and the absence of anti-discrimination laws cause the LGBT actors to lack legal access when it comes to employment, education, healthcare, and other areas. In 2022, there was a discourse saying that the Indonesian Ministry of Home Affairs would help Indonesian transgender individuals obtain a national ID card (KTP). This effort aimed to avoid discrimination towards those so-called marginalized ones (Andayani, 2021). However, the implementation remained polemical and complex. A transgender person would have to go to the court and follow a long battle to get recognition of their new gender.

Another example of the prohibition for LGBT individuals to register themselves as a part of the Indonesian military or TNI. In 2020, 15 Indonesian military members were fired after being suspected of being LGBT individuals (n.a, 2020). Despite being dismissed from work, they were also sentenced to imprisonment, simply for disobeying the order from the superior in the Telegram letter (ST) from the commander regarding the prohibition of Indonesian military member and their family should disengage themselves in same-sex relationships. In accordance with that, a similar telegram was issued by the Army Chief of Staff (KSAD). The Army Chief of Staff's letter (No. ST/2694/2019), dated 5 September 2019, explicitly outlined disciplinary measures against military and civil servants involved in same-sex relationships. This regulatory framework represents a deliberate mechanism of institutional exclusion, effectively preventing LGBT individuals from accessing stable employment within state institutions. The policies extend beyond professional discrimination.

The aforementioned explanation shows one lamentable fact that, despite its pros and cons regarding LGBT, one can see that cultural, religious, and political factors heavily influence the public policies in Indonesia regarding homosexuality. The result is the significant marginalisation of LGBT individuals. Moreover, the societal attitude towards homosexuality is largely negative. One of the causes is the influence of the emphasis of heteronormative values in the cultural norms. It leaves the non-hetero identities stigmatized.

People can vividly see these attitudes in the media. The negativity and misleading portrayal led to the perpetuation of stereotypes and misinformation. Meanwhile, the Indonesian education system also supports the perpetuation of this stigmatisation. The Indonesian system lacks informative and comprehensive sexual education, including the sexual orientation and misinformation of the homophobic attitudes towards Indonesian LGBT individuals. This educational gap lamentably leaves the marginalized individuals vulnerable object of bullying and discrimination, affecting their physical and mental health. In summary, the Indonesian public policies still need to accommodate the needs of the Indonesian marginalised LGBT individuals and community. These people suffer from the conservative religious influence, societal stigma, lack of legal protections, and limited policies on expression. Addressing these issues will certainly require specific inclusive policies which protect the rights and dignity of individual regarding their gender or sexual preferences.

### **Intersecting Indonesian LGBT Themed Literary Works and the Indonesian Policies: a Challenge and Resistance**

Indonesian LGBT-themed literary works represent a critical narrative of struggle and resistance. These works emerge as a pivotal medium for voicing marginalised experiences, exploring the complex intersections of social norms, political constraints, and cultural dynamics. By challenging dominant narratives, such literature provides a nuanced platform for understanding the experiences of sexual minorities within Indonesian society. The Indonesian public policies, as a result, have been generally unkind and unfavourable to LGBT individuals. While the Indonesian constitution, state laws, regulations, and Indonesia's Criminal Code (KUHP) do not explicitly mention the Indonesian LGBT community, other rules and regulations are often used to attack and target the LGBT community. Furthermore, the political and religious leaders frequently come up with such propaganda in anti-LGBT rhetoric, leading to another marginalisation and persecution of the community.

As aforementioned, the Indonesian literary works in Indonesia serve as a form of resistance towards these oppressive policies and the norms. Several authors like Norman Erikson Pasaribu and Dee Lestari have used their writing to highlight the struggles and resilience of the LGBT community. In Pasaribu's *Happy Stories*, for instance,

the exploration of same-sex love and exploration of identity is mixed with the critique of the societal and millennial pressure to endure (Pasaribu, 2020).

The circulation of Indonesian LGBT themed does not only provides a medium for the LGBT individuals and communities to deliver their repressed voice but also becomes a challenge for the heteronormative beliefs that marginalise them. By having the LGBT character, depicting their struggle and their personal experience, the authors challenge the conservative and heteronormative forms that are embodied in Indonesian society. In this aspect, literature has become a powerful tool for voicing social critique and transformation. It invites and encourages the readers to see and understand the lamentable experiences of an LGBT individual from different perspectives.

One thing that should be highlighted is that even though the Indonesian literary works with LGBT themes function as a tool to resist social injustice, the struggle for LGBT rights in Indonesia still faces several obstacles. It includes the influence of the conservative, most likely religious group, and the anti-LGBT sentiments that circulate in society. Yet despite these challenges, the existence of the LGBT community and Indonesian LGBT themed literary works has become clear evidence of the continued activism and the growing visibility in the discussion of Indonesian LGBT and its issues.

This evidence can be seen in the use of social media platforms that have been used to mobilise a campaign and spread awareness about LGBT rights. These online platforms later provide a safer place for LGBT individuals to communicate and share their ideas and organise their resistance efforts. In conclusion, the connection between Indonesian LGBT literature and public policies highlights resistance. The LGBT communities and their allies can use literary works to resist the social injustice they face. In addition, they can also use the platform to organise an activity that supports the equality movement for a more inclusive LGBT-friendly environment, literature, activism, and digital platforms.

## CONCLUSION

Indonesian literary works critically examine the complex social experiences of LGBT individuals, revealing systemic marginalisation and resistance to social injustice. While homosexuality remains legally ambiguous at the national level, intersections between state laws, religious norms, and traditional customs (*adat*) create significant barriers for LGBT communities. Literary representations serve as a crucial platform for challenging discriminatory social structures. These works not only document the lived experiences of LGBT individuals but also provide a means of resistance against oppressive societal norms. By articulating their struggles through narrative, LGBT writers expose the institutional and social mechanisms that perpetuate exclusion and marginalization. The gap between literary representation and social reality remains stark. Despite literary efforts to highlight LGBT experiences, Indonesian society continues to impose significant legal, social, and cultural constraints on sexual and gender minorities. Literature thus emerges as a critical medium for voicing demands for justice, equality, and social recognition.

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