"I AM A WOMAN":
PORTRAYING WOMANHOOD IN THE AUTO/BIOGRAPHY OF
AN INDONESIAN TRANSSEXUAL CELEBRITY

"Aku Perempuan": Penggambaran Nilai-nilai Keperempuanan dalam Auto/Biografi Selebritas Transeksual Indonesia

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Abstract: This paper examines femininity in the auto/biography of a transsexual celebrity, “Aku Perempuan: Jalan Berliku Seorang Dorce Gamalama” (2005). Her auto/biography was published in 2005. The auto/biography is not so much about celebrating her career as it is about endorsing her womanhood. I argue that these feminine roles expected of female celebrities can be performed by a transsexual (M2F) person as Dorce Gamalama but with the need to create a more convincing form of femininity than is required of a “natural” female celebrity. This research is conducted by reading the text closely, paying attention to the structure and the discourse presented. My examination of Dorce’s auto/biography shows that this question about being a real woman recurs as the auto/biographical subject struggles to claim an authentic feminine identity through her body and sexuality as well as through the feminine roles of motherhood and wifehood. This assertion of being a real woman is tightly connected to Islam as Indonesian local religious frame.

Key words: Dorce Gamalama, auto/biography, femininity, transsexuality, woman.
1. Introduction

The genre of autobiography has been traditionally male and masculine. However, along with the raising of feminism, women’s autobiographies have flourished well. Unlike men, women in general lack the autonomous space and time. Due to their perpetual domestic chores, they often find themselves write in fragments, interrupted by different jobs and calls in the house. Also, the issues considered to be important for women are often found to be trivial and unimportant in the writing of cultural history while actually the details of particular moment in time do contribute to history and to the way we are now. As Miller argues:

\[I\]t’s precisely the personal details of skirts, hair, shoes that make cultural history come alive: the inclusion of those daily issues of style that define a moment in a collective social pattern: pantyhose and tights have replaced the black stockings (Miller, 2002:57)

This “archetype auto[/]biography” as Stanley (1992) argues, is challenged especially by the publication of autobiographies of “ordinary lives” particularly by the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (when) as well as by auto/biographies written by feminists, who explores possibilities in different forms and expression of self and other. Celebrity auto/biography is a genre that arguably started to be recognized when the luxurious biography of Krisdayanti, SeribuSatu KD, written by Alberthiene Endah(2004), was published under the impression of it being an autobiography. Since then more celebrities ‘wrote’ their auto/biographies. Some of them actually wrote the book, or at least co-wrote it, like Tiara Lestari (Lestari & ARIESTANTY, 2007), some others had a writer, or team of writers, write their ‘autobiography’, for example “otobiografi Lenny Marlina” (Said et al., 2004), which was written by six people, namely: Titie Said, Salim Said, Lies Said, MuthiahAlhasany, Titien Sukmono, dan Yuni.

AkuPerempuan: Jalan Berliku Seorang Dorce Gamalama (“AkuPerempuan” will be the term used for further reference to the book) can be considered as an autobiography and a biography as well. Because Dorce Gamalama is both the writer and the narrator as well as the autobiographical subject of the book, this piece can be considered as an autobiography. On the other hand, the existence of the co-writer suggests that the book also tells the life of Dorce Gamalama by someone else other than herself, making the book a biography. Further elaboration of the term “auto/biography” will be offered in the theoretical review.

2. Theoretical Review

In this part, I discuss two theoretical approaches to frame my analysis on Dorce’s auto/biography Aku Perempuan. The first regards the term auto/bio used in this paper that implies the crossover of autobiography and biography in terms of how the narrative is written. The second part of the theoretical review elaborates the construction of femininity, paying close attention to the theories proposed by Judith Butler (1999) on gender performativity and theories on femininity and womanhood in the era of the New Order.

Apart from the significant value for elaboration of the auto/biography itself in terms of its genre, as I have briefly outlined, the auto/biography is also important because it elaborates the arguments regarding the complexity of gender construction. Dorce’s auto/biography shows how deeply ingrained the socially culturally embedded normative gender construction is through.

As the book conveys, this normative construction not only affects biological women, but perhaps in a more rigid way, transsexual women, such as Dorce Gamalama. In this paper, Dorce Gamalama will be referred to as Dorce, in accordance with the way she is generally and commonly addressed.
2.1 Auto/Biography: Writing a Life Lived

This paper discusses and defines the term “auto/biography” as a critical intersection of the overlapping practices of autobiography and biography. It is informed by the critical approaches both to biographies and autobiographies and argues that the term “auto/biography” is appropriately applied to the new forms of autobiographical practice being generated in Indonesian mass culture by many Indonesian female celebrities, including Dorce Gamalama.

Initially Lejeunne (1989: xvi) offered the conventional definition of autobiography as “retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his [sic] own existence”. In his later works, this definition has been expanded to include the different ways of “referential self-expression…in contemporary culture”, as Eakin (1989: xvii) argues: “Someone” might well include someone else, a ghostwriter, say, or oral historian, while the “prose narrative” in question might in fact be a transcript or oral discourse, broadcast on the radio or presented in film. The ownership implicit in the phrase “his own life,” moreover, was now frequently a subject of litigation.

In this way, autobiography, which generically means “self-life-writing” (Stanley, 1992: 43), can potentially include biography (“life-writing” written by others).

As Lejeune has outlined, the boundary of autobiography and biography is becoming blurred. The same argument is raised by Bakhtin (1981: 132) who asserts that “there could not in principle be any difference between the approach one took to another’s life and to one’s own, that is, between the biographical and the autobiographical point of view.”

Following Bakhtin, Marcus (1994: 15) argues that “autobiography” is a “hybrid form” where the “perceived instability and hybridity… are inextricably linked to the problematics of selfhood and identity, with the boundaries between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, ‘private’ and ‘public’ becoming the sites of the greatest concern.” Thus, her use of the term “auto/biographical” suggests this collapse between autobiography and biography as well as the blurring of various domains that establish auto/biographical subjects. Particularly important in this paper is the blurring of private and public implied in the use of the term auto/biography. As the term “autobiography” suggests, the clear difference between “self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object” (Marcus, 1994: 7) assumes the containment and the distinctiveness of the subject. Likewise, it also implies the knowability of the autobiographical subject.

The form of a conventional or traditional autobiography relies on the establishment of an integrated and unified self, and the narration of a life story marked with success in the public domain. In these conventional autobiographies, the auto/biographical subjects are assumed to be known and knowable.

Generally, the subjects/objects of these traditional auto/biographies have been male, and their reputable success in the public domain establishes the worthiness of their auto/biographies. Yet these texts created from the ground of public achievements have raised questions about how the public and the private are revealed [or not] in conventional or traditional auto/biographies. This particular issue is relevant to the depiction of construction of femininities in women’s auto/biographies. As “bildungsroman” has been recognized as the generic form of auto/biography (Stanley, 1992), male autobiographies have generally been understood as more stable, since they draw on more clearly defined understandings of male subjectivity and male achievement while women’s auto/biographies have been understood to reflect the more complex terrain of fragmented feminine subjectivities and the location of women’s lives in the private sphere.

I argue that the use of the term “autobiography” does not sufficiently cover the specificity of the core texts studied in this thesis, which I show in the analysis to be
fragmented yet coherent and drawing on complex ideas of public and private. Within the specific context of Dorce Gamalama’s life narrative, the term “auto/biography” represents more accurately the authorship of the narrative and the point of view from where the narrative is written.

2.2 Femininity and the Cult of Womanhood

In her widely-acclaimed book *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues against sex/gender distinction and opts for a more flexible framework of gender in the way that gender, namely femininity and masculinity, is not essential, rather performative, which she defines “quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler, 1990: 278).

In this perspective, it must be understood that gender is not stable and is not to be immediately attached to a particular sexed body. It is also clear that for Butler gender is no more constructed than sex, as demonstrated in her widely cited argument (Butler, 1999: 7).

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.

The consequence of this argument is not that gender is simply the different clothing and masks one can put on and take off, rather it suggests the contingency and fluidity of its construct. As the editors of *Judith Butler’s article Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions* (Salih & Butler, 2004: 91, original emphasis) argue in the preface:

If gender is “doing” rather than a “being,” a verb rather than a noun, it is not action that is done by a volitional agent who is free to select her/his gender “styles” (Butler’s word). Instead, the subject is “done” by gender; it is the effect rather than the cause of a discourse which is always there first.

In other words, Butler argues that “gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status” (Butler, 1990: 271). In this way, while gender is not supposed to be immediately connected to sex, gender remains within the framework that the society will accept as “natural”, which is the cohering connection between sex and gender. In this way, the body receives the regulatory discourses in the form of repeated “stylization” which results in gender being performed in accordance with the ideological framework in the society.

Using the term “heterosexual matrix”, Butler further argues that gender has not only constructed sex but also constructs sexuality the way in which it points to heterosexuality, which she calls “heterosexualization of desire” (Butler, 1999: 17). Thus the normative ideal is always the heterosexual the way in which sexuality other than heterosexuality is shunned and relegated as “constitutive outside” of heterosexuality. Thus, for Butler, one does not only perform one’s supposed gender but also one’s supposed desire based on the “heterosexual matrix”. In this way, heterosexuality is one of the keys factors of gender normative ideal, which I show in this paper.

In her very important work on the way women are perceived, *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860*, Barbara Welter (1966) argues that there are four foundational attributes that build the construct of true womanhood, namely piety, sexual purity, submission and domesticity. These attributes are closely related to their [hetero]sexuality, to the way women are positioned in relations with men and/or their husbands. As Roberts argues, although Welter did not particularly perceive the cult of womanhood as a form of ideology, later feminist theorists maintain that this concept of true womanhood remains strong and it shows that the “‘trueness’ was part of the ideological work [the true women] perform” (Roberts, 2002: 151)
Later movement towards “New Woman” which seemingly aimed at transgressing the normative separate domains of women and men, domestic and public, ironically appeared to fall back on the normative idea of true womanhood which goes back to the concept of true womanhood prevalent in the 19th Century America (Holmes, 2008). This has also been discussed by Faludi (1991), who argues that media has brought backlash to feminism by building public opinion about the different ‘ailments’ and other normalities and disorders feminism inflicted on women, which consequently lead women back to the domestic space, the supposedly natural domain for women.

In Indonesia, particularly during the New Order, the similar type of cult of womanhood can be found in the form of Panca Dharma Wanita. Panca Dharma was considered to be the pillars of what it means to be a true woman in Indonesia. Although Panca Dharma derives mostly from Javanese values, the state interference has caused it to affect the wider scope of Indonesian women, whether they are Javanese or not. Panca Dharma Wanita was initially aimed at the wives of civil servants, whose membership in KOPRI (Republic of Indonesia Civil Servants Corps) was compulsory. It constructed a woman as a wife or as a mother or as both. It ruled that “a wife is (1) to support her husband’s career and duties; (2) provide offspring; (3) care for and rear the children; (4) be a good housekeeper; and (5) be a guardian of the community” (Sunindyo, 1996).

Such construct of womanhood was first coined by Madelon Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis (1987) as Ibuism. The term suggests that Indonesian women’s sexuality is framed as an “ibu” – a mother. Julia Suryakusuma (1996) further developed the idea, arguing that Indonesian women’s sexuality is not only structured within the personal domain, but is also more broadly a state construct and founded in State Ibuism. Considering Panca Dharma Wanita as the predominant construct of Indonesian women’s femininity as mother and wife, it can be argued that in the normative construct of Indonesian womanhood, a woman’s subjectivity dissolves in that of her husband, and in her children. She exists only when she is a wife and a mother.

Though neither KOPRI nor Panca Dharma still exists nowadays, their legacy remains strong. The so-called new woman in Indonesia cannot simply do away the expected roles of being a wife and a mother to be considered complete. Looking at the different auto/biographies of Indonesian celebrities, I argue that these values of womanhood being in domestic sphere are still very much prevalent nowadays with some modification, adjustment and adaptation to different extents without truly subverting the normative construct of womanhood. In the particular case of celebrity femininity, which arguably represent the [ideal] construct of femininity in general, the cult of womanhood is presented as: fulfilling the criteria of ideal beauty, having the skills and capacities for domestic works, married (hopefully to a successful man), a mother, which apparently is also shown in the auto/biography of a transsexual celebrity such as Dorce Gamalama.

3. Results and Discussion

In this part, I elaborate the portrayal of Dorce as a [trans]woman, her constant struggle with her gender and sexuality, her bodily experiences and her sense of self as a woman. Most importantly, I emphasize how the works involved in asserting her identity as a woman, which includes the close observation and submission to the normative ideas of femininity as outlined in the cult of womanhood.

3.1 Dorce’s Auto/Biography and the Notion of Becoming a Woman

As a genre, Dorce’s auto/biography can be considered as a bildungsroman. It tells a story about a person who has successfully overcome various difficult drawbacks, disadvantages and difficulties to finally triumph. As Stanley (1992: 11) argues:
The autobiographical archetype is the Bildungsroman, the tale of the progressive traveling of a life from a troubled or stifled beginnings; in which obstacles are overcome and the true self actualised or revealed; and then the tale may, prototypically, end, or it may go on to document yet further troubles turned to triumphs.

In fact, the first chapters of the book engage mostly with her struggle as an orphan as well as an "abnormal" child. In this aspect of her narrative, I find her to be ironically amusing. She can talk with good humor what is actually painful. For example, she tells about an event in which she fell asleep after giving a massage to a client in a cargo liner, unaware that the ship was sailing to Africa. She woke up later in the middle of the sea. Upon realizing it, she writes wittily, "That's my first experience of going abroad". Going abroad is considered as a prestigious experience, and it is only done by the rich and the successful. The ability to travel abroad is in itself a mark of success. Thus, instead of signifying it as a failure to determine her life, she signifies it as an achievement.

Her optimism and her determination to persevere also mark her individuation and difference. She is different. In fact, she represents herself not just different from "common" people, but also different from her group of the transgender. She is not just a common transgender. She writes that a lot of transgender pretend to be transgender only to get money as prostitutes (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005). This, interestingly, brings Dorce's work to the characteristics of those of male autobiographers that tend to glorify one's difference signified as one's excellence over others. However, her work also bears the supposedly typical characteristic of women's auto/biography, especially in her description of her relationship with other women and her efforts to be identified as similar to other women, such as evident in her recollection of her impression of the former President, Megawati Soekarnoputri. She writes (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 82):

Performing in the presence of Ibu Mega is the performance that I can enjoy most. I feel comfortable. I don't know, probably because we both have the same instinct, feelings, and hearts. Because we are both women.

Paying attention to the quotation, it can be argued that her work constitutes a genre of auto/biography that both glorifies difference but at the same time also celebrates a kind of female bonding. Important in her work is her relationship with her grandmother, who happens to be among the first who acknowledges the girl behind Dorce's old boy self.

Chronologically, the first chapters of Dorce's auto/biography engage mostly with her struggle as an orphan as well as her experience as an 'abnormal' child/boy, particularly in her tendency to play with and to be like girls. This is reflected in the titles of the chapters in the auto/biography which are arranged in chronological order:

1. My name used to be Dedi
2. The difficult beginning
3. I want to be a woman
4. My big decision: Get a sex change operation
5. Pros and Cons I had to face

In addition to the poverty that she had to bear, born as a boy but increasingly feeling that s/he was a girl, Dorce describes the disorientation she experienced as a boy, as she was becoming more and more aware of his/her "abnormality". The lack of familial support, except that from her poor grandmother, increasingly added up to her feeling unwanted and out of place. This absence of a sense of belonging is presented by the first point of view narrator, or the "I" voice. As she reveals, Dorce did not go to school and ended up making her living and educating herself in the street as narrated in AkuPerempuan (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 9):

I went anywhere by foot. Nobody gave me any allowance. Finally the feet that were supposed to take me to school took me to
the street. I felt more familiar with the street. There was my real school. There I learnt to be dismissed, insulted, accepted, and loved.

As reflected in the titles of the later chapters, “My life and career as a woman”, “I believe in true love”, “My spiritual journey”, “Becoming a real mother”, “Rumah Gadang and Dorce Halimatussa’diyah Foundation”, “Only women shall give me my final bath”, the hardship is overcome. Dorce the auto/biographical subject of the first five chapters is not the same Dorce in the last chapters where she has become a contented and successful celebrity. Through the final five chapters, Dorce is portrayed to have transformed herself in a way that falls into the category of bildungsroman plot where the protagonist has come to a full round and has accomplished a much better life starkly different from her humble beginning. Public achievement, generally intertwined with financial success, is a conventional signifier of bildungsroman.

However, more than just portraying Dorce as person of public and financial achievement, the auto/biography also presents Dorce as a person who has a great accomplishment in her spiritual and religious life. Her desire to be bathed only by women represents two things. Her ‘true’ identity as a woman and her complete transformation, namely physically and spiritually.

In Islamic tradition, the passing persons are given final bath and only family and persons of the same sex can give this bath. Thus, this desire to be bathed only by women signifies her ultimate desire to be completely acknowledged as a real woman.

Second, while she has gradually transformed herself into a woman, first in/through her performance of gender then through her sex [change], she has also proved to have altered in terms of her religiosity.

The Dorce in the final chapter is certainly not the Dorce in the early chapters where she is narrated to be indifferent to religion, although she describes herself as having not completely lost her grip of religion (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 30): “Fortunately, I managed to get out of drugs because basically I am not a drug addict and I still had some faith in God albeit only slightly”.

Throughout the book it is constantly discussed how Islam plays an important role in the construction of Dorce’s identity. Expressions and utterances bearing religious messages are scattered throughout the book. Dorce’s portrayal shows that she considers Islam not only as a religion but more importantly as her way of life. Even during the period when she was under the constant influence of drugs and alcohol, she claims that she still tried to hold on to Islamic teachings. In particular she tells about her determination not to have sex outside wedlock. She writes “I have tried everything. Except for prostitution. Alhamdulillah, I have never wanted to prostitute myself. Although I wasn’t really pious, but I still had religious pillars and dignity” (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 104)

One of her religious struggles concerns her sex-change surgery. At that time, a lot of people condemned her for changing her supposed destiny and considered that she had committed a great sin. In the auto/biography, Dorce recalls that although the surgery made her feel more at ease with herself, deep in her heart she felt afraid. One chapter in her auto/biography, “Pro Contra that I have to face”, talks about the implications of the sex-change operation, particularly religiously. This conflict reached its peak when she was intending to conduct the pilgrimage to Mecca. In Islam, the religious ritual is closely connected to the sex of the person. Thus, going on a pilgrimage represented a great test for her womanliness and her identity as Muslim [woman]. In this pilgrimage, as in other religious ritual prayers, women and men are separated. Thus one’s sex has to be clear before she or he can participate in communal prayers As she narrates (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 64)

I have always wanted to go on a hajj. However, before I had the sex-change surgery, my heart was filled with doubts. How am I sup-
posed to do my prayer: wearing the veil and be in the same line as the women, or be in the line of the men? Those doubts vanished when I had become physically and legally a woman. But other questions emerged when I wanted to do the hajj. Can I do the pilgrimage as a woman? Will other people accept my presence? How would people feel about it? Am I ready to receive people’s comments?

This situation shows that one’s sex is not just a private matter as she needs to be recognized as a woman not only medically but also religiously. And it needs a person of authority to endorse her being a woman. As Dorce reveals in her auto/biography, the Chair of Indonesian Ulemma Council ruled that she required a physical examination to affirm her sex. She finally went on the pilgrimage as a woman, after receiving this medical and religious recognition.

The depiction of Dorce as a good Muslim woman, as she narrates in her auto/biography, cannot be separated from her performance as a celebrity. The picture of her with a former minister shows that her being accepted as a Muslim woman, as denoted by her attire during the pilgrimage, is recognized by a figure of authority. Apart from the hajj pictures, Dorce includes images of herself with four former Indonesian presidents which endorse her acceptance by the figures of authority.

In this auto/biography, the plot that represents her journey to the final chapters [of her life] signifies a complex form of transformation in which physicality, sexuality, gender and religiosity are closely intertwined in the portrayal of the auto/biographical Self. In the context of portrayal of female celebrities in Indonesian culture as I will further elaborate in section 3.4, apart from the narrative of success in terms of public achievement, the appeal and acceptance of the public towards celebrities are also closely connected to the way they are perceived religion-wise.

### 3.2 Body and Sexuality

In this part, I discuss how Dorce as the auto/biographical subject presents herself as a [true] woman through her body and sexuality, womanhood and femininity, as well as her spiritual and religious journey. As I have explained in the previous part of this paper, following Welter (1966) and taking into account the supposed pillars of womanhood in Indonesia, I analyze how Dorce’s auto/biography portrays Dorce as a true woman by juxtaposing the portrayals to the different aspects of true womanhood having been elaborated.

Throughout the auto/biography, Dorce is engrossed with her body and sexuality. On the first page, already she reflects the complexity and irony of her birth as a boy. She notes, “[A]nd they named me Dedi Yuliardi; a boy’s name. They thought I was a boy” (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 1). Through this very strong statement, she points out that people were wrong when they thought she was a boy. The statement introduces her desire for recognition of her sexuality and gender orientation as a woman. She wants to be a woman, but she found that society did not accept her as a woman because she did not have a female body. Thus, she located her body from the very beginning as a source of identity conflict. She writes (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 25):

> I am different. Since I was seven years old, I feel there is something trapped in my body that is growing to be more conflicting when I was ten years old. Something wants to be freed. My young mind understood that another soul that was trapped [in my body] was considered an abnormality by my family.

> She was not the boy she was supposed to be. She writes that she was soft-spoken and that she liked playing with girls’ toys and with girls. What I find particularly worthy of note is her bodily memory of wanting to wear skirts. Her embodied desire to wear women’s clothes is the manifestation of her desire to be a woman, or even arguably, and complicedly, her embodiment of a woman.
in a man’s body. She continues (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 26):

Really, I wanted to wear skirts. The wish grew stronger when I tried to refute it. I wanted to feel the skirt embracing my body, hanging in my waist, moving flowingly between my two legs and when the wind blew, it would reveal my underwear and I would blush like a shy girl.

Having begun cross-dressing since early age, Dorce increasingly finds that a woman’s clothes fit more to her sense of self. One section in her auto/biography “The difficult beginning” is entitled “My first tight skirt” and relates her desire for and pleasure in wearing women’s dresses. She had secretly been ‘borrowing’ her aunt’s skirts just for the pleasure of wearing a woman’s dress. As she reveals, women’s clothes had attracted the feminine part of her soul (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005). In this way, she shows that women’s clothes are an important part of her identity and that being/performing a girl entails actively taking on the work of being a girl that all women do. Only in her case she has to do it in a more complicated and difficult situation. She narrates how she feels complete when wearing women’s clothes, “Every time I am wearing [a woman’s clothes], I feel a feeling that is complete. Full. Flying” (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 28). The first skirt of her own marked one important milestone for her in becoming a woman (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 29).

So when Bambang Brothers gave me my first salary, I rushed to Pasar Rumput, trying to find the right skirt for me. I chose a very sexy tight skirt. As soon as I arrived home, I tried it on. There were mixed feelings because it was my own skirt, not my aunt’s skirt that I used to secretly wear. I looked at myself in the mirror with so much pleasure. That day was an important moment in my search for self-identity. A nice skirt on an eleven-year-old boy’s body.

As she explained, she looked at herself with pleasure because the image in the mirror reflected a woman, a woman that she wanted to become. Yet, the image only played what is outside and not what is inside, and not the body that had alienated her sense of self. The skirt reveals her sense of being a woman and conceals the part of her that is not – her body, her sex. At the same time, the mixed feelings that Dorce felt could arguably be attributed to the fact that the mirror reflected an ambiguous image of herself, the one she cannot easily recognize as herself. The image also problematizes her sense of ‘natural self’ as, paradoxically, the image of a ‘woman’ with a woman skirt feels to represent the more natural part of herself.

As Garber argues, “one of the most important aspects of cross-dressing is the way in which it offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of ‘female’ and ‘male’, whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural” (1992: 10). Thus, while Dorce was acutely aware that she was not naturally a woman, she was also aware that through some work and adornment, she can fulfill her longing to be one, which ironically feels more natural to her.

At eighteen, Dorce joined Fantastic Dolls, a transgender musical group. Her entry to this group marked another important milestone. Her name, ‘Dorce’ was the name given by the leader of the group. As she recalled, “[f] here was no more Dedi. He was buried deep as the name Dorce began to emerge” (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 29). Performing in this group, Dorce can indulge herself in performing in dresses as a singer and as a woman.

Dorce realizes that sex and sensuality are part of being a [true] woman. She actually writes a subchapter on her sensuality in which she admits that she feels she is a true woman when a man admires her sensuality. She then grew to like performing in her sexy dresses.

Interestingly, the ambiguous identity as a transgender paradoxically validates the womanliness in her because if she fails to be a man, then she is perhaps a woman. However, her body remained ambiguous. Her
biologically male body failed to signify her as male but at the same time, it did not fully compliments her feminine gender.

Her decision to undergo sex-change operation marks her ultimate desire to become a woman completely. As she remembers it was the most radical decision she has ever made in her entire life (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005). The chapter concerning this operation depicts the complexity of the project. As shown in the narrative, her physical/genital change raises not only the issues of the material body but also about issue of religion and ethics, which ultimately caused uproar, even rage.

As narrated in the auto/biography, initially her newly sexed body a national controversy. The discussion on the rage and controversy resulting from the operation imply the normative idea of the given sex the ways in which sex is constructed as the natural and the essence of the self. The sex-change operation evokes protests and condemnation because to conduct a sex change is perceived as an act of defiance towards God. Dorce narrates an instance in which she tells how people refused to acknowledge her being a woman even after her operation and marriage. She was, however, defended by her then mother-in-law, which made her really happy. Identity needs to be confirmed by others, and in this instance, the mother-in-law represents authority that can override the refutation.

Another point to note in the different portrayals post the operation is the sense of need for Dorce to explain herself and to defend her decision, which she does in the narrative through the citation of the Quran and most importantly through the inclusion of the legal proceedings that confirm her legal status as a woman. This act of defense and the attempt to explain things can be considered to represent the sense of guilt that nevertheless haunts her even long afterwards. This also explains that her identity as a woman, unlike women who were naturally born female, Dorce needs to constantly work on her womanhood and her identity as a woman. She needs to claim her identity as a woman and convince people of her being a real woman.

Unfortunately, despite the sex-change operation, and the legal proceedings, she remains conscious that she will not be able to fully function as a woman. This longing and envy for the womanly physical experience is accepted as her lack that cannot be fully compensated. She reflects (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 28):

I will never experience the womanly worry when the first blood soils a girl’s underwear. Then with care, whisper the peculiar occurrence to her mother, who will smile understandingly. The first menstruation is an important event in a girl’s life that I will never enjoy. And most importantly, I will never be able to become pregnant. That’s the woman’s fate that I will never be able to obtain.

Dorce is quite clear in her acceptance of not being able to conceive and become a biological mother. However, as dictated by sexuality construct during the New Order, becoming a mother is part and parcel of being a good woman. Thus, her attempt to become a real woman must include her being a mother, as I will elaborate in the next section.

3.3 Womanhood and Femininity

This subsection examines how the auto/biographical subject in “Aku Perempuan” performs her womanhood and femininity without the security of a ‘natural’ female body.

Apart from gestures, feelings, and other typically attributed feminine characteristics, femininity is very often closely related to the acts of giving, sacrifice, worship, and chaste, which are tightly interconnected to the construct of American women in the late 19th Century as argued by Welter (Welter, 1966) that includes piety, sexual purity, submission and domesticity.

In the case of Dorce, despite her desire to perform completely as a woman, she questions how she should present herself in public, she became conscious that she did not want to be that kind of sexy sensual woman.
She asks [herself]: “Is it correct that to be a woman I have to be so sexy? Is it the core of being a woman?” (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 41). Dorce seems to think that there are different ways to be a woman, different ways to be feminine. Being sexy is one of them, but a woman can also be a woman without having to expose her womanly figure, which seems to go hand in hand with her persistence to embrace her being a Muslim.

This is also, if not particularly, true in Asian culture. A true good woman/wife is exemplified by Sita who was requested by her husband, Rama, to prove her chastity after being kidnapped by Ravana, a giant king who loves her, by jumping into the fire especially made for her by her husband. Sita, on the contrary, never questions her husband’s loyalty to her. It is not part of her being a good wife and a proper woman to ask such questions. Femininity within this context is closely related to a woman’s ability to maintain her chastity and sexuality for the man who has legally married her. This is understood and practiced closely by Dorce, who claims never to have had sex with anyone except with her husband. For her (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 40, original emphasis),

Because I feel I am a woman I highly treasure my dignity. It has crossed my mind to maintain my “virginity” when I can finally marry the man of my choice. I want a husband who thinks of me as a real woman not a man pretending to be a woman. The first night is a sacred moment, a holy offering to the beloved one.

A few pages later, when talking about her fear in facing the genital surgery, Dorce once again refers to this act of sacrifice and worship, writing: “The fact is I want to do the surgery simply because I want to be able to fulfill my obligation as a woman. What I am doing is an offering for my future husband” (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 44). Femininity in this way is signified as suffering, offering, and sacrifice. A true woman is always prepared to sacrifice for her husband and dedicates her sexuality to her husband. Thus, the sex-change surgery can be considered as part of her effort to become a true woman.

In addition to her constant reference to being a good wife, Dorce the auto/biographical subject also finds motherhood an important milestone in her endeavor to becoming a [real] woman. She heavily contextualizes her femininity in terms of motherhood. A true woman is a mother. The chapter “Becoming a True Mother” starts with the statement, “Every woman will never feel her life to be complete if she has not had a child” (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 117). That statement is later elaborated: “she too has the same obsession as all other women in general. To give birth, to breastfeed, to take care and to bring up their children with love” (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 117). Early in the book, Dorce has also referred to children as a reason why she needed to go through the operation. As she narrates, “not only because I want it, but more importantly because I want to give the best to my child.” Although being a good mother may not necessarily requires her physical body as a woman, but as she discussed beforehand, she contemplated of being seen having a penis by her son and that idea disturbs her which led one way or another to her decision to go through with the sex-change operation.

Eventually, by the end of the book, Dorce has four adopted children, two boys and two girls. In this chapter discussing her being a mother, she tells of her struggle to raise children, given her complex and ambiguous past. She writes about how she educates the children and how she wishes her children to be successful and that the children will love her just as she loves them although she is just a foster mother. To be loved and to be shown that she is loved is part of being acknowledged as a true mother. Thus a true woman.

She is quite proud that one of her daughters will stand up for her when she is attacked for having a transsexual mother. Dorce writes: “It’s very touching. It makes me
feel loved by my children. Makes me feel like a true mother” (Gamalama & Gunawan, 2005: 126). The phrase “true mother” is repeated in the two paragraphs after this one as if to emphasize her desire to be acknowledged as a “real mother” thus a “real woman”.

4. Conclusion

Throughout her auto/biography Dorce has consistently portrayed herself as a Muslim woman, as reflected particularly by her constant references to and awareness of being a Muslim. She positions her Muslim womanhood as a perpetual project that will only end when she dies [as a woman], as reflected by the final chapter of her auto/biography, “Only Women shall give me my final bath”. In Dorce’s auto/biography, femininity is a constant project, and both the material body and the social, cultural and religious aspects of femininity are constant areas of struggle.

I maintain that the transsexual femininity performed by Dorce in her auto/biography elaborates and draws on the notion of normative femininity but at the same time reflects the artifice and construction of femininity. The title of the auto/biography, “I am a woman”, suggests the auto/biographer’s need for the recognition of her womanhood, which is less necessary when one is considered to be a “real” woman. The fact that Dorce Gamalama is not “naturally” female draws out her continuous and explicit efforts to be “authentically” female or “authentically” a woman. This particular notion of recognition is crucial in her auto/biography. The struggle for recognition implies a conscious effort to achieve what is considered as womanly or endorsed as true womanhood in the specific Islamic [and] Indonesian local culture. Her manifestation of femininity is thus a conscious and continuous enactment of womanhood, but the statements reinforce the fluidity and the contingency of femininity. This notion of working for the wished identity and femininity permeates throughout her auto/biography. Apart from the portrayal of her struggle with the body, the book also depicts her constant preoccupation to make her femininity recognized. The title of the book, I am a Woman, suggests her desire for such recognition. Dorce’s different and potentially fragmented roles as a woman, a mother, a Muslim, and as an entertainer are simultaneously recognized and denied.

References


