

**A QUESTION OF MAN'S IDENTITY: THE POTRAIT OF SOLDIER IN  
REBECCA WEST'S *THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIER*  
SEBUAH PERTANYAAN TENTANG IDENTITAS LAKI-LAKI : POTRET TENTARA  
DALAM NOVEL REBECCA WEST *THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIER***

**Iin Nurul Hidayati, Supiastutik, Irana Astuti**

Program Studi Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Jember

Jln. Kalimantan 37, Jember 68121

*E-mail*: Supiastutik@yahoo.com

**ABSTRAK**

*Artikel ini dibuat untuk mengetahui konstruksi identitas gender masyarakat Inggris seperti tercermin dalam novel Rebecca West yang berjudul *The Return of the Soldier*. Selanjutnya, artikel ini juga berusaha untuk menemukan bahwa konsepsi gender yang terkesan natural dan tak bisa berubah tersebut, pada faktanya adalah sesuatu yang labil. Identitas kelaki-lakian tokoh utama, Chris Baldry bisa dipertanyakan ulang ketika tubuh biologis laki-laki yang seharusnya menunjukkan sosok yang gagah dan pemberani, namun secara psikis bersebrangan. Ia justru tergantung di tangan seorang wanita. Perubahan perilaku Chris tersebut terjadi saat ia mengidap amnesia setelah kembali dari medan perang akibat shell shock. Hal unik terjadi disini, status Chris sebagai tentara yang menstereotipkan dirinya sebagai "yang maskulin", tragedi terjadi, dengan menjadi tentara juga menjadi akhir maskulinitasnya. Ia yang mengejar maskulinitas harus kehilangan maskulinitas. Oleh karenanya, teori performativitas Judith Butler digunakan sebagai pisau analisis untuk membedah bagaimana orang mendapatkan identitas gender yang telah terkonstruksi oleh masyarakat dimana subjek itu tinggal dan bagaimana seorang subjek kehilangan identitas gender tersebut.*

**Kata Kunci** : *Identitas Gender, Maskulinitas, Performativitas*

**ABSTRACT**

This article is made to show how gender identity is constructed in England and how the naturalized conception of gender is something unstable. Chris's portrayal as a dependent man in the hands of women is far from the image of the soldier as the picture of manliness. It confirms that all knowledge including biological knowledge is socially constructed. Thus, the character of Chris Baldry as the symbol of masculinity is questioned in this article. Chris' deviation occurs after coming home from the battle field because of shell shock. This malaise has made him forget the last fifteen years of his life. In war, his body is assaulted in the name of masculinity: men's bodies are expected to put up a performance where values such as courage, fierceness, and patriotism are reflected in physical action. When suddenly performance can no longer be sustained, his gender/masculinity becomes vulnerable. Therefore, Judith Butler's theory is used to conceive how a subject gets and loses his gender identity. This application confirms Butler's performativity that gender is not something fixed.

**Key words** : Gender identity, Masculinity, Performativity

**1. Introduction**

*The Return of the Soldier* was published in 1918. It was Rebecca West's first novel. This novel tells about the story of Chris Baldry, a soldier who has forgotten the last fifteen years of his life because of shell-shock. He returns to his

wealthy and beautiful estate to recover. Baldry is looked after by three women: Kitty, his wife whom he has no recollection of; Jenny, his cousin, whom he has known all his life and Margaret, a woman he has loved in his youth. Chris's portrayal as a dependent man in the hands

of women is far from the image of the soldier as the picture of manliness.

Military virtues such as heroism, death, and sacrifice are associated with the construction of manliness. Suffering and sacrifice are glorified as signs of loyalty to the nation and seen as a way to ennoble the men. Thus, the military with its own system of body reflexive practices has become a domain for gender politic. This notion is particularly significant in a war context. This stable identity is no longer maintained when the role and performance get a decisive meaning and Chris's amnesia can be seen as the outcome of an identity crisis.

This article uses Butler's theory of gender. Butler (1999:41) believes that there is no such thing as original gender identity, but rather normalized notions of gender which are purely cultural products. The two questions in this article are about how gender is constructed in England as the society where the story is told. This first question is continued to the second question about Baldry's identity. After he gets amnesia, all appearances that show he is a man in fact has failed. His identity characterized as powerful and patriotic man is nothing except the body that depends on other bodies. This occurrence emerges the second question about how the naturalized conception of gender in fact is an unstable and revisable one. His identity naturalized by society through his body is not stable one. He sometimes undergoes identity's crisis because of special occurrence. These two questions then can prove the failure of the fabrication of the soldier as the man's strength because there is no such thing of what people call as gender's identity. Gender identity is not something fixed.

## 2. Method of Research

This research uses qualitative method because the process of analysis tries to show the peculiar event appeared in the novel regarded as important one. The other events or elements that do not relate to the topic will not be observed. The main elements of this research to analyze are the construction of masculinity and gendered bodies.

There are some steps to get the data that the writer needs. The first step is reading and understanding the novel as well as highlighting the words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and dialogs that are related to the construction of

masculinity as shown by Chris Baldry. The second is classifying the required data based on Butler's theory in *Gender Trouble* by inputting them together with coding the data.

After the data have been collected, the data analysis is conducted done. This research tries to analyze the construction of gender in *The Return of the Soldier* and tries to prove that gender is unstable. From this question, it also proves that the concept of masculinity is also unstable. This concept is created based on the particular interest. Therefore, it firstly analyzes the effect of world war in Chris Baldry as the main character. It is important to know that world war makes him amnesia and has therefore forgotten the last fifteen years of his life. He is helped by some women to achieve his memory again.

An analysis on character of Chris Baldry is done to get information about gender construction and the failure for a man to achieve his whole identity. It then continues in second step; this step analyzes the concept of masculinity as shown by soldier. After knowing that Baldry gets amnesia and must be helped by women, from this step it is proved that masculinity is nothing. Masculinity characterized by strength, in fact needs femininity to achieve his fulfillment. From this step, it goes the last step; it analyzes the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of man's identity.

This third step is useful to know the shift of gender's identity. Finally, it will answer the second question that gender is not something stable. From this research, therefore, it is understood that there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by expressions that are said to be its results. Moreover, Butler says that "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself" (1991:21). This concept is applied to question again all the structure of masculinity and femininity.

To strengthen the analysis, this research is helped by R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. It is used to connect the characteristics of male power with the global practice of man. This is also applied to describe and identify aspects of male dominance. The theory of hegemonic masculinity concerns the

structure of gender relations and suggests a structure of control. This theory provides a way to see a framework for placing men in relation to women. Connel's theory is useful to explain how the political and social order is created in the image of men and expressed in specific forms of masculinity.

### 3. Result of Data Analysis

West's novel tends to show how gender is an unstable thing. Chris's portrayal as a dependent man in the hands of women is far from the image of the soldier as the picture of manliness. It confirms that all knowledge including biological knowledge is socially constructed. Moreover, using Butler's theory, it is understood that there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by expressions that are said to be its results. Chris's position therefore is not clear since his masculinity is destroyed by military system, precisely the place of forming masculinity concept.

### 4. Discussion

Chris's return home suffering from amnesia is the proof that modern warfare does not cause damage to the body, it also incapacitates the mind. It causes the breakdown of the soldier. Unfortunately, when Chris is discharged on the grounds of shell-shock and returns home, it is not easy for other characters to understand the true reason for his malaise. The difficulty to understand war neurosis is reflected in the passage through Margaret's words "not exactly wounded" (West, 1998: 12). In this case, she as well as many people in England at that time understand that a male body is considered both an object and a site of power defined in terms of vigor, competitiveness, strength, and assertiveness. The battlefield is basically another site for the discipline of male bodies as well as building manly characters.

After his return from the war, suffering from amnesia, Chris's behavior and posture reveal the opposite of the values inscribed in the hegemonic of patriarchy model. Chris acquires a feeling of sensibility, a sense of nostalgia, a particular emotional state, together with a certain passivity that brings him closer to the feminine site. Therefore, Chris's position stands for the man who has moved from the role of protectors (fighting in the war to protect the nation, the

community, women and children) to the man who needs protection (patients in psychiatric hospital relying on their physicians and therapists). His role is destroyed by his amnesia. He is not the part of pattern of hegemonic model. He has moved away from the symbol of masculinity along with the shift of his role in society. Connel says that "the first important attempt to create a social science of masculinity centered on the idea of a male sex role" (2005, 21), when Chris' role is not placed in his suitable way, his masculinity will be corrupted.

For this matter, Chris's body is not able to fulfill his function in social role. In other case, Jenny and Kitty have been living to secure a reality that is no longer present or it perhaps never existed. How truly happy has Chris Baldry been before the war?, Jenny and Kitty tries to recollect the memory of happiness when there is no war, hardness, or shell-shock. One of the way to give back Chris' body his social role is to recollect the memory of the past. On the other words, Chris is forced to fulfill his patriarchal role as to show his manliness and authority. Manliness is the embodiment of those ideals: courage, strength hardness, control over passions, and the ability to protect the moral fabric of society. Chris' body is functioned as the bearer of those ideal. His body then is nothing than social artifact. Unfortunately, this social function cannot be fulfilled because Chris's portrayal as a dependent man in the hands of women is far from the image of the soldier as the embodiment of the essence of manliness. This consequence proves that human body in his social function has endless number of ways in which the components of identity combine to make up masculine identity. Identity construction is arbitrary.

In *The Return of the Soldier*, Chris' amnesia also proves other thing. Unconsciously, it gives him a chance returning to a free word. He feels world where he can be himself and express his feelings and his true nature. Chris chooses his inner self by inhabiting his new fantasy world than by continuing to play an unrealistic role in real life as a man. His task as a man that is supposed to be a strong creature has collapsed here. By questioning the imposed masculinity model, he will be asserting his own right to a different masculinity. His masculinity is no more masculine since he has a different choice conducting his gender identity. It is because that gender is "performative" or in simply word, it is

“doing”. To describe gender as a “doing” may lead people to think of an activity similar to choosing an outfit from a pre-existing wardrobe full of clothes. However, this decision is not entirely free. In fact, people like to choose the clothes that suit the expectations of the social world without even realizing that one is also in “doing”.

## 5. Conclusion

This article is conducted to analyze the scheme of gender construction. *The Return of the soldiers* is West's novel portraying the conception of gender. Chris' masculinity in England is related to military system. Entering the army with its military system is the sign of man's masculinity. Unfortunately, this military system gives an impact toward his mind. He returns from the war suffering amnesia. Chris's behavior reveals the opposite of the values inscribed in the hegemonic model. Chris acquires a feeling of sensibility, a sense of nostalgia, a particular emotional state, together with a certain passivity that brings him closer to the feminine site.

Chris Baldry then becomes dependent being in women's hands. The consequence of his malaise and dependence on women's hands is that his masculinity can be questioned again. Chris' identity as a man in the past is always recognized as his unified masculine with his strength and bravery. When this attribute does not appear in his behavior, he gradually loses his identity. He is not the part of pattern of hegemonic model. He has moved away from the symbol of masculinity along with the shift of his role in society. This phenomenon proves that every individual is a discursive subject who must take up an identity from a selection of pre-established ways of being.

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