

**THE REPRESENTATION OF FANDOM DISCOURSE IN RAINBOW ROWELL'S *FANGIRL*  
(*REPRESENTASI WACANA FANDOM DALAM NOVEL FANGIRL KARYA RAINBOW ROWELL*)**

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**ABSTRACT**

Through *Fangirl*, Rowell delivers the phenomena of fandom in two different points of view. She shows the portrayal of fans who see fandom as a common thing and she also exposes the depiction of people who give a bad perspective to fandom. The discourse of fandom in the novel is constructed through the fictional characters. There are main character and supporting characters who have different perspective in the way they interpret a text. Stuart Hall's theory of representation and encoding/decoding are applied to analyze the discourse of fandom in the novel. In *Fangirl*, Rowell shows that the meaning of text is not only produced by one sided group or writer only but also the readers. The meaning is produced through the representation of its discourse. To show the discourse of fandom in the novel, this research sums up the position of the characters into three groups based on Hall's theory. They are dominant hegemonic position, negotiated position and oppositional position. The result of this research shows that the novel *Fangirl* represents the all three hypothetical positions of decoding process. The construction of fandom discourse in the novel closely relates to today's American society thoughts of fandom; they partly reject and partly agree with the work of fandom. On the other hand, the author of *Fangirl* puts novel as the original products that are more worth-appreciating than fan products particularly fan fiction. Rowell puts back to its hierarchy that the position of sub culture is underneath the dominant culture.

Keywords: Representation, fandom, discourse, encoding/decoding

**ABSTRAK**

Melalui *Fangirl*, Rowell menyampaikan fenomena fandom dalam dua sudut pandang. Di satu sisi dia menunjukkan pandangan seorang fan yang menilai fandom sebagai kegiatan yang wajar dan dia juga menunjukkan gambaran orang-orang yang memberi penilaian buruk terhadap fandom. Wacana fandom di dalam novel dibentuk melalui karakter fiksi. Di dalam novel *Fangirl* terdapat pemeran utama dan pemeran pendukung yang memiliki perbedaan pandangan dalam menginterpretasikan sebuah teks. Teori representasi dan encoding/decoding oleh Stuart Hall diaplikasikan untuk menganalisa wacana fandom di dalam novel. Di dalam novel *Fangirl*, Rowell menunjukkan bahwa maksud dari sebuah teks tidak hanya dibentuk oleh satu pihak atau penulis saja tetapi juga bisa dibentuk oleh pembaca. Sebuah makna dibentuk melalui representasi wacana itu sendiri. Untuk menunjukkan wacana fandom di dalam novel *Fangirl*, penelitian ini merangkum posisi karakter menjadi tiga grup sesuai dengan teori Hall yaitu posisi hegemoni dominan, negosiasi dan oposisi. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahawa novel *Fangirl* merepresentasikan ketiga posisi proses decoding. Konstruksi wacana fandom di dalam novel memiliki keterkaitan dengan pemikiran masyarakat Amerika tentang fandom; sebagian dari mereka menolak dan sebagian menerima. Disisi lain penulis *Fangirl* meletakkan novel sebagai produk asli yang lebih layak untuk di apresiasi dibandingkan produk dari fan terutama fan fiction. Rowell mengembalikan lagi hal tersebut kepada hirarkinya bahwa posisi budaya subordinasi masih dibawah budaya populer.

Kata Kunci: Representasi, fandom, wacana, encoding/decoding

**Introduction**

Fandom is abbreviation of fan kingdom. According to Busse and Hellekson (2001:6) "fandom is the community-centered creation of artistic fannish expression such as fan fiction, fan art, and fan video which are mirrored in the creation of the book, with constant manipulation,

renegotiation, commenting, and revising, all done electronically among group of people, mostly women, intimately involved in the creation and consumption of fannish goods. In other words, fan is a person who is really interested in and adores something. Fan activity that is included into the fandom becomes a culture.

Fandom is a culture which belongs to popular culture and also subordinate culture because not all people widely favor and well-liked into it even subordinates this culture. In fact some people see fandom as a useless activity and give a bad perspective to people who are active in it. The phenomena of fandom, popular culture and subculture do not only exist in a real life. Some authors use those phenomena as the idea of their literature products.

*Fangirl* is a literary work that represents the fandom discourse construction. Therefore, to analyze such discursive construction, we will apply theory of representation by Stuart Hall (1997). The novel tells about Cath as the female main character who is a fan of fictional characters from *Simon Snow* novel series written by Gemma T. Leslie. Rowell describes Cath as a typical fan-girl who buys the merchants and stuffs related to the novel she likes and writes fan fiction. She cannot differentiate her real life and delusional thoughts and prefers to communicate with her cyber friends who read her writings rather than her new college friends and her roommate in the dorm. On the other hand there are supporting characters that have a different perspective with Cath in the way they interpret a text.

### **Method of Research**

From the problems mentioned above, this article tries to discover the construction of fandom discourse in the novel *Fangirl*. This research uses qualitative method to find and analyze the data in the novel that related to fandom discourse. The data are collected using the documentary method. The primary data are taken from the novel written by Rainbow Rowell entitled *Fangirl*. The data are all narrations, dialogues and statements in the novel that are related to fandom discourse as the main discussion in this research. The secondary data are taken from some books that give me lot of information and facts about fandom. The secondary data are also supported by several additional electronic journals and articles related to the fandom discourse and the theory of representation.

In the first step of analysis, the data are analyzed using encoding/decoding in order to find the position of the characters in the novel and to interpret fandom discourses; either they belong

to hegemonic dominant position (pro), negotiated position (in-betweenes) or oppositional position (contra).

Next, In order to find the significant discourse in the novel, I try to draw the relationship between the narrations, dialogues and statements in the novel that is related to the fandom discourse with the context of fandom in the United States in 2010s. Stuart Hall's theory about representation and constructionist approach are used in this step as the main tool. It helps to find the relationship between the narrative events in the novel that are related to the fandom discourse with the context of fandom in the real society.

After the second step is done, I try to find the critical position of the author. This step focuses on the position of the author to find her critical idea either she is pro or contra to the fandom. I try to break down this by relating the discourse of fandom with information about the author.

## **Result**

*Fangirl* delivers the representation of fandom discourse through the literary work. The discourse of fandom in the novel constructs by the fictional characters that show the different perspective to fandom. In *Fangirl*, Rowell describes Cath as the female main character who is a fan girl. She is a typical fan who buys the merchants and stuffs related to the novel she likes and writes fan fiction. She cannot differentiate her real life and delusional thoughts and prefers to communicate with her cyber friends who read her writings rather than her new college friends and her roommate in the dorm. Rowell also exposes the positive and negative effects of writing fan fiction to a fan's life. On the other hand Rowell portrays the supporting characters into two groups, first are those who are pro with the work of fandom. The second are those who are contra toward it. The pro characters see fandom as a common thing. The contra characters see fandom as a useless activity and they underestimate the fan products.

## **Discussion**

Lewis (1992:1) states that fans are those who wear the color of their favorite team, buy stuffs related to their idol, and know in detail everything about that even they will do everything to the one whom they adore. As a fan, Cath buys stuffs related to the novel she likes, actives in

fan community known as fandom, and spends half of her day to play with the fictional characters of Gemma T. Leslie by writing fan fiction. Those portrayals can be seen from the quotation below.

“Wear whatever. Wear something that doesn’t have Simon Snow on it, so that people won’t assume your brain stopped developing when you were seven.” Cath put on her red CARRY ON T-Shirt with jeans, and redid her ponytail. (Rowell, 2013:69)

The quotation above takes place in Cath’s dormitory when her roommate, Reagan asks her to go out. From the quotation above, it can be seen that although Reagan has told Cath to wear anything except something about Simon she still wears it. Cath puts on her favorite *Carry On* T-shirt. Actually it is still related to Simon Snow. *Carry On* is one of the most popular fan fictions about *Simon Snow*.

The other depiction that shows Cath collecting stuff related to Simon is that she has posters of Simon Snow. It can be seen in the following proof.

At the bottom of the box were Cath’s Simon and Baz posters. She laid these out on her bed carefully – a few were originals, drawn or painted just for Cath. She’d have to shoes her favorites; there wasn’t room for them all on the corkboard and Cath had already decided not to hang any on the walls, out where God and everybody would notice them. (Rowell, 2013:11).

The quotation above shows that Cath collects the posters of Simon and Baz. They are two main fictional characters in the novel she likes. She does not only care of them but she also keeps the posters and other stuffs of hers in a save place where everybody cannot touch or harm Simon and Baz. Cath does not only hang up her poster in the dormitory but also in her room at home. In Cath’s home there is a full-size cutout of Baz, baring his fangs and smirking, hanging from the rail of Cath’s canopy bed (Rowell, 2013: 95).

If it is connected with Halls theory of decoding process, through the depiction of collecting stuffs; t-shirt and posters, Cath position belongs to dominant hegemonic position. Hall (2005:124) states that the one whose belong to the dominant hegemonic position are those who take connotation meaning from the text without question. They agree with the concept which is offered by the encoder. In the novel, Cath wears t-shirt and collect poster related to her fandom. It shows that Cath is influenced by the text (the fictitious characters in *Simon Snow* novel series).

Another Cath’s behavior in her daily life as a fan is writing fan fiction. Rowell describes Cath as a fan who does not only buy merchants and stuffs of her favorite novel but also writes fan fiction. According to Monroe (2013:1) fan fiction refers to a massive underground subculture

of fan literature written by fans and for fans. Fan fiction authors use the storyline, characters and setting of their favorite novels, television shows, or comic books and write their own stories about the original work. It means that fan fiction's authors borrow the characters from their favorite literary works and re-write it using their own idea. Fan fiction's authors publish their work in online forum which is shared with other fans. The quotation which portrays that Cath writes fan fiction in novel *Fangirl* is as follows.

“The whole point of fan fiction,” she said, “is that you get to play inside somebody else’s universe. Rewrite the rules. Or bend them. The story doesn’t have to end when Gemma Leslie gets tired of it. You can stay in this world, this world you love, as long as you want, as long as you keep thinking of new stories—” (Rowell, 2013:123-124).

The understanding of fan fiction through the point of view of a fan can be seen from the quotation above. It is like the way of fan to show their love to the text that they like. Thomas (2006:229) says that fan fiction for these young people is a way of responding to the texts they love, and a way of exploring alternative possibilities for their favorite fictional characters. In other words, when fans write fan fiction they can do everything they want. For instance when fans are not satisfied with the plot or ending of the original text they can change the story as they want. It shows the whole point of writing fan fiction that is to satisfy their desire.

Fan fiction authors usually post their work on the internet. Therefore the other fans all around the world can be free to access it. Cath publishes her writing in page in the internet called Fanfixx.net. The quotation is presented below,

She flipped open her laptop while chewed on a carob-oat bar and clicked through to her Fanfixx account. There were a bunch of new comments on her page, all people wringing their hands because Cath hadn’t posted a new chapter of carry on yesterday.

*Hey, guys, she typed. Sorry about yesterday. First day of school, family stuff, etc. Today might not happen either. But I promise you I’ll be back in black on Tuesday, and that I have something especially wicked planned. Peace out, Magicath.* (Rowell, 2013:15).

The quotation above shows that Cath in Fanfixx.net uses the username Magicath. In that online site Cath is really kind and care about others. She greets her cyber friend and asks for apologize because she has not posted her fan fiction yet. Writing fan fiction becomes Cath’s hobby. It is not just a hobby actually but it shows that Cath dedicates herself to write fan fiction. By writing fan fiction she can play with Simon and Baz all the time, create her own alternative universe, get friend in cyber world and so on.

FanFixx.net is a fictional fan online forum in the novel *Fangirl*. In this forum, fans can upload their writing, read fan fiction written by other fans, give comment, and review others fan

fiction. In other words, it is the most possible place where fans from all around the world meet and talk together about their favorite texts in online.

In *Fangirl*, Cath writes slash fan fiction. According to Busse and Helekson (2006:10) slash fan fiction is one of fan fiction's genres which the stories posit a same sex relationship, usually one imposed by the author and based on perceived of homoerotic sub-text. In addition Jenkins (1992: 192) says that fan and academic writers both characterize slash as a projection of female sexual fantasies, desires, and experience onto the male bodies of the series. In other words, slash consists of the author's imagination about male bodies in the series for example novel, movie, television program series, and so on. Slash is one of the most favorite genres among other genre in fan fiction. The portrayals of slash fan fiction in the novel *Fangirl* are as follows.

“Simon wouldn't like that.”

“Simon doesn't care. He's in love with Baz,”

Levi guffawed. (*You don't get many opportunities to use that word, Cath thought, but this is the one of them.*)

...

“Simon isn't gay,” he said.

“In my world, he is.”(Rowell, 2013: 123)

From the quotation above it can be seen that in the original novel, Simon and Baz are not gay but Cath writes them in her fan fiction as a gay couple who fall in love each other. Cath changes the sexual orientation of the characters from the mainstream relationship (heterosexual) to the gay couple (homosexual). By writing slash fan fiction, it shows that Cath gives a different response to the text. It can be seen that Cath does not completely agrees with the concept in the original text. Through the three position of decoding by this depiction Cath belongs to the negotiated position because she has her own idea or opinion to decode the text. She puts her own desire to the characters from the source text and re writes them in fan fiction.

Through the case of writing fan fiction, T-shirt, poster and other stuff relate to Simon Snow that Cath has, it can be seen that she belongs to the dominant hegemonic position. On the other hand by writing fan fiction in a slash genre, it shows that Cath gives a unique response to the text and makes her does not completely takes the idea of the author from the source text. In this case Cath turns to be negotiated position. As told before that fan fiction is a text produced by fan for fan in order to get own pleasure and desire for herself and her fandom. Cath gives a point of view that slash fan fiction is a normal thing. It is real for those who write and read it. It means that by

writing slash fan fiction Cath takes double position; dominant hegemonic position and negotiated position in the same time.

In the end of the novel, there is strong depiction about Cath's change position. Cath write her own story and it becomes a winner in one of award for author. The depiction can be seen below.

When you break from behind the tree, it's because you want to. It's the first breath after a long dive. Branches snap under your feet, and the world is hotter and brighter. *Ready or not, here I come. Here I come, ready or not.* —from "Left" by Cather Avery, winner of the Underclassmen Prize, *Prairie Schooner*, Fall 2012. (Rowell, 2013:435)

The quotation above is placed in the last page of the Novel, *Fangirl*. It is a narration that is quoted from Cath's first novel "Left". It becomes a winner of the underclassmen Prize in one of award for writer; *Prairie Schooner*. No one complains about "Left" even with Professor Piper. It is more appreciated than "Carry On". In other words the position of fan fiction is still underneath the original text. It relates again with the people perspective about popular culture and sub culture. Novel belongs to the popular culture and fan fiction is still a subordinate culture. The position of subculture is always underneath the mainstream culture.

The concrete examples of fan fiction's authors that become the paid authors by writing their own original novel in the real life are E.L James the author of *Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy* and Cassandra Clare the author of *The Mortal Instruments series*. After publishing their own stories they continue getting their popularity.

The construction of fandom is also portrayed by supporting characters. The first supporting character is Wren. She is the biological twin of Cath. Before entering the university Wren as enthusiast as Cath when it is about Simon Snow. Wren and Cath were usually writing fan fiction about Simon Snow together. When they enter University Wren, they do not want to share a room with Cath and the point is that she is not too obsessed anymore about Simon Snow but does not completely left Simon Snow behind. Wren prefers to enjoy her new life as a university student. Wren is not a person who gives a bad perspective about fandom. She also is not really pro to Cath because Cath is still really active in it. She tries to make fandom activity and her real life balance.

Wren is not completely forgetting about how fandom works. She still reads Cath's writing in Fanfixx.net. Sometimes she runs Cath's account. "She was getting so many comments that Wren had taken to handling them for her, using Cath's profile to thank people and answer basic

questions” (Rowell, 2013:414). Wren pretends to be her sister to replay some comments in order to help her sister because Cath cannot handle it alone. There are too many comments in *Carry On*. Also when Wren has a spare time she comes to Cath and offers herself to be a beta reader for Cath’s writing. Beta reader is a person who reads, gives comment and suggestions about plot, characterization, grammar and so on before the fan fiction author upload their writing.

The second supporting characters is Levi. Levi is Cath's boyfriend. As Levi starts to like fan fiction, he thinks that fan fiction is not kind of plagiarism. In the quotation above, it shows that Levi agrees with Cath opinion, fan fiction is not exactly plagiarism because the story line is ours. Levi does not completely reject and agree with the practice of fandom. Actually he knows Simon Snow but he is not a part of that fandom. After he knows that Cath writes fan fiction he starts to like it. Through the response they show to interpret the text, they belong to the negotiated position because they do not reject the work of fandom and they also do not completely accept it.

The next supporting character is Proffesor Piper. In the novel *Fangirl* (Rowell, 2013: 107-108) Professor Piper says that Cath’s writing about Simon Snow is plagiarism because the characters are not Cath’s. Professor Piper said that Cath only steals someone else’s story and rearrange the characters. Cath does not agree with the professor’s judgment. She argues that she only borrows the characters from Gemma T. Leslie. She writes the plot and story line by herself. She emphasizes that the story is hers and she just borrows the characters not stealing. Professor Piper asks Cath to write an original story. Professor Piper’s arguments still completely reject her student to submit fan fiction in her class. Angela Thomas on her journal states that writing fan fiction in the classroom was once considered inappropriate and possibly still is. (Thomas, 2006:229). Thomas’s statement represents in the novel *Fangirl* through the Professor Piper’s perspective about submitting fan fiction as a class assignment.

The fourth supporting character is Reagan. She is Cath’s roommate in the dormitory, Pound Hall 913. Rainbow Rowell describes Reagan as sarcastic and cynical girl. She often becomes mean to Cath, but actually this is her way of caring. Reagan wants Cath to be more sociable rather than being all alone busy with laptop. As Professor Piper, Reagan is the character in the novel that rejects and disagrees with the work of fandom. The quotation is presented bellow.

“I can’t help it,” Reagan said. “You’re really pathetic.”

“I am not.”

“You are. You don’t have any friends, your sister dumped you, you’re a freaky eater ... And you’ve got some weird thing about Simon Snow.”

“I object to every single thing you just said.”

Reagan chewed. And frowned. She was wearing dark red lipstick.

“I have lots of friends,” Cath said.

“I never see them.”

“I just got here. Most of my friends went to other schools. Or they’re online.”

“Internet friends don’t count.”

“Why not?”

Reagan shrugged disdainfully.

“And I don’t have a weird thing with Simon Snow,” Cath said. “I’m just really active in the fandom.”

“What the fuck is ‘the fandom’?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Cath sighed, ... (Rowell, 201:41-43)

From the quotation above, it can be seen that both Cath and Reagan are debating about Cath’s life. Reagan thinks that Cath is completely abnormal by being a part of fandom, does not have friend in the real life and have an eating disordered behavioral. She just makes a friend with them who only exist in the internet. Reagan emphasizes that Cath’s fandom life is so pathetic. Reagan is typically person who is really realistic and does not have experience of becoming a part of fandom. That makes her to be really contra with Cath who is actually an active participant in the fandom of Simon Snow. Same with Professor Piper, Reagan belongs to the oppositional position.

Joli Jensen cited in Lewis (2001:11) states that one model of the pathological fan is that of the obsessed loner, who (under the influence of the media) has entered into intense fantasy relationship with a celebrity figure. It seems that person who enters fandom is judged as a person who has a mental disease. They spend their times with all stuffs related to their idols rather than to communicate with others. Cath spends almost all her day with her laptop to write fan fiction rather than to communicate with her new college friend or her roommate, Reagan. We can find the representation of a loner type of fan by Cath’s behavior as follows,

Plus she was starving. As soon as Reagan and Levi left the room for dinner, Cath was going to eat an entire jar of peanut butter. *If they ever left for dinner—Reagan kept banging on like she was going to type right through the desk, and Levi kept not leaving, and Cath’s stomach was starting to growl. She grabbed a protein bar and walked out of the room, thinking she’d just take a quick walk down the hall to clear her head. But the hallway was practically a meet-and-greet. Every door was propped open but theirs. Girls were milling around, talking and laughing. The whole floor smelled like burnt microwave popcorn. Cath slipped into the bathroom and sat in one of the stalls, unwrapping her protein bar and letting nervous tears dribble down her cheeks. God, she thought. God. Okay. This isn’t that bad. There’s actually nothing wrong, actually. What’s wrong, Cath? Nothing.* (Rowell, 20113:27-28).

From the quotation above it can be seen that Cath is unwilling to be part of the society in her campus. Reagan is her roommate but they rarely talk to each other. The quotation shows that Cath avoids Reagan and Levi in her room by walking out to the hall. Unfortunately, the hall is filled by other students. In the end she decides to be alone in the bathroom. She does everything by herself.

Another depiction of Cath as a loner is also found by the way she makes a friend with others. She is not a typical person who enjoys making a friend with everyone in her real life even she does not have desire to make a friend. Actually Cath is not interested in making a friend with everybody except for class project. Then she also becomes rude because of everyone who tries to make a friend with her. She rejects it. She only has few friends in every class such as T.J and Julian in American history class, Katie in political science and Kendra and Nick in fiction-Writing. None of those friends spread into Cath's personal life. No one ever invited Cath to go out or to parties except Reagan and Levi. (Rowell, 2013:142-143). By this depiction, it shows that Cath alienates her life from the society around her.

## **Conclusion**

In order to show discourse of fandom in the novel, this research sums up the position of the characters in the novel into three groups based on Hall's theory. They are dominant hegemonic position, negotiated position and oppositional position. For the dominant hegemonic position, there is only Cath who belongs to this position. Beside that in the same time Cath also belongs to the negotiated position. The supporting characters; Wren and Levi are on the negotiated position. On the other hand Reagan and Professor Piper belong to the oppositional position. In short, the novel *Fangirl* presents all positions by Hall's theory of Encoding/decoding on how fandom discourse is presented in the novel.

Rowell as the author of *Fangirl* gives portrayals that writing fan fiction can help the fan fiction author becomes a successful one with the original story and characters. On the other hand, she does not totally promote fan fiction. She still put the original story as the product that is more worth-appreciating than fan fiction. Rowell puts it backs to its hierarchy that the position of sub culture is underneath the dominant culture.

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