

### Symbolic Mythology: The Portrayal of Gender Fluidity in Kae Tempest Selected Poems

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#### Abstract

*Myth in literary works tends to be used as a traditional story which typically aims to represent and explain certain natural phenomenon. One of those phenomenon are the existence of multi-binary or even non-binary gender which at first known as mythological story of Tiresias that become a real social issue recently. Related to myth, this article is aimed to identify and elaborate the term neutral and gender fluidity correlates to the mythology of Tiresias from Oedipus in the account of hybrid sign by Pierce. Tiresias representing the fluidity term of gender which in the written poems by Tempest's selected works has symbolical meaning. The data was taken from selected poems in Kae Tempest anthological poetry and collected using proposed sampling technique. The criterion of the sampling is the use of mythological symbol. As a result, the research found there are several symbols, icons, and indexes used to represent neutral gender into Tiresias such as snakes, name of Tiresias, sex, body, and prophet. More than that, some figurative language also used to strengthen the implication of Tiresias implicitly in poem such as like a lady. Besides, typography also found to represent fluid identity such as ones and yous. Thus, this article is contributed to the embodiment of hybrid sign concept applied in literary analysis poetry. Moreover, it is also contributed to the development of gender theory which enlarge the knowledge about fluidity and neutral term of gender.*

#### INTRODUCTION

Literature as a product of imaginative impulses from the author is considered as the bridge between myth or legend and the reality. Author from past to present more recognized of narrative scene of literary works. Thus as in the process of creation, authors have their strong beliefs and acceptance of the undeniable created truth.

Myth in literary works tends to be used as a traditional story which typically aims to represent and explain certain natural or social phenomenon. In literary

works, the supernatural beings are commonly used through the period of time to represent certain phenomenon symbolically. Poet somehow mythologizing their life and imbues his or her creative influences with supernatural power (Ruley, n.d.) Therefore, in certain cases some authors inspired by the legend and the myth to at the last create a literary works such as poetry, prose, drama, and novel.

Myth in a poem enables people to place an individual lives and state in a larger context or setting through its

symbolism and imagery as well as figurative and allusive language. Myth is a form of poetry, as stated by Hickey (2009), poetry represents a huge world beyond logic based on the phenomenon of human beings in their lives that embodies the ideal, belief, and dream of society. In poetry, myth is used as a symbol to compare and represent a life of imagery in a real phenomenon. As found by Harits and Sari (2016), poem by Edgar Allan Poe entitled *The Raven* has portray types of cyclical symbolism of archetype imagery namely divine world, human world, animal world, and mineral world which related to expression of sorrowfulness of the author.

Poems has defined myth in is as a collections of stories and its elements to express inner symbolism of human existence and profound the most aspects of mortal life. Nader (2015) found that myth constitute a special system with the contemporary Arabic poetic speech's structure by profoundly connect the nation's beliefs, tradition, and spiritual heritage. He found out that the Sisyphus mythological story has been adapted symbolically into the Arabic poems. Thus, it is also found that certain Palestinian poets also attempted myth of Sisyphus to break the thick veil towards a new and bright dawn by symbolizing Sisyphus as sacrifices.

In particular, Kundu, (2018) has also found that myth also being represented as connecting symbol of human life in English poems by T.S Eliot. In T.S Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land', Eliot equivalently correlated the 'object, situation, and event's chain' in myth with 'particular emotion' he used to present the meaning. Kundu stated that by the use of myth, Eliot was able to differentiate intellectual poet and reflective poet. Thus, reflective poet is those who consider thought as experience and modify their sensibility. By that way,

Eliot created the waste land itself into a myth.

Myth can represent lots of social problems such as gender. Gender has been discussed over decades however the recent cases had found a new controversy. Katz-Wize (2016 in (Hunt and Hunt, 2018) had found that recently, by a research of 452 participants,- 58,2% of them stated to have changed their sexual orientation once in their life and 64,6% of them had transitional gender. Thus, the period of gender transition is called gender fluid and the new term of gender in which person is not defined as masculine or feminine classified neutral.

Related to myth, the term neutral and gender fluidity correlates to the mythology of Tiresias from Oedipus. Dokou (2017) had found that in Bonello's aestheticism, Tiresias has presented the gender-bending paradigm which blend also creativity between mythic universe with the paradoxes and archetype life in the medium of film. Thus, the recent gender phenomenon has been represented by myth in flowing images or symbols to explore that phenomenon itself. Take an example from this data sample;

*The boy in her is strong some days  
And calls out **for a girl to touch**  
The girl in her is full of rage  
And craves the things she hates so much  
———The Woman Tiresias stanza 10  
(Chapter Womanhood)*

**Watching his body like it wasn't his**  
He pushed his new shape  
To the edge of the clearing  
———The Man Tiresias stanza 8 (Chapter  
Manhood)

From the two data it can be observed the emergence of gender fluidity motifs which are represented through certain symbols such as *girl* (woman), *body* (appearance and feature), and *shape*

(self). In addition, the symbols represented are also in the form of imagery language which provides a description of certain nuances in poetry such as edge of clearing. Based on the two pieces of data above, it can be observed that in the Women's phase, the character feels a 'boy in her' for a certain period of time. This male power is sometimes strengthened due to homogeneous contact (lesbian) based on the meaning of the verse 'for a girl to touch'. However, this masculine feeling gets stronger in the Male phase when the character feels a 'new shape' or a new identity.

In Indonesia itself, a case of non-binary (neutral) people has arisen at August, 2022 in Hassanuddin University. As cited from CNN Indonesia (Online), a student declared himself a neutral person then got kicked out from the forum and bullied by internet citizen due to the unacceptable gender norm based on conservative culture. More than that, on October 2022, has also a daughter of Indonesian senior public figure stated herself a neutral. She is the daughter of senior entertainer Nadya Hutagalung who stated herself named Alex (BBC Indonesia, Online). Thus the cases mentioned prove that the gender fluid for queer and non-binary is exists in Indonesia also, not only internationally.

However, in term of literary works, the case of non-binary gender is still limited in Indonesia. Triadnyani (2018) in her article *From Gender Identity Operation to Power Reversal in the Novel Calabai* focuses on the socio-cultural problems faced by transgender people in the *Calabai* novel to identify forms of violence against the existence of trans-people in the Bugis ethnic environment. Derrida's theory of deconstruction is used by Triadnyani to describe the identity-ideology and culture of figures that turn pressure into strength

in the midst of social discrimination. Through descriptive-analytic analysis, the research found that personal recognition of one's cultural identity in order to be accepted in society is a continuous effort between humans to respect each other in accordance with Human Rights. Triadnyani uses a socio-cultural study method for the Bugis community which culturally recognizes five types of gender identities with the main character being a calabai in tribal society. However, the current transgender social conflict does not only focus on the existence of trans people but on the development of a new identity called non-binary. Therefore, Triadnyani's research is used as a reflection of the literature on cultural deconstruction faced by trans people in a conservative society so that this research is able to see social and cultural dynamics based on one's personal ideology.

Although the concentration of personal gender in Triadnyani's research does not focus on the existence of non-binary people, this research finds that the issue of minor gender identity is not only about ideology and culture but also the tendency for gender identity to change due to social influences and the dynamics of acceptance by society. Therefore, this research is relevant to be studied in literacy because it raises the similar concept of gender research. It has been researched beforehand that the non-binary people in Indonesia sounded their voice through anonymous poems online in twitter. But the amount of cases has arisen so that a data from an anthology poem by Kae Tempest is used to be analyzed.

*Ambiguity of Gender Identity in Shakespeare's Twelfthnight* by Dahlan (2018) is used as the second reference article. Dahlan uses Butler's theory of gender issues to focus on feminism and sub-versions of human identity. The play

by Shakespeare entitled *Twelfth Night* which became the main data was analyzed using the literature review method with documentation techniques and comparison of primary data with secondary data obtained from other literary sources. Dahlan argues that sex, gender, and sexual orientation depicted in drama are fluid and unnatural entities that are always changing due to social construction and deconstruction. Dahlan suggests the concept of gender identity ambiguity by the characters in the drama through disguise, which in this case also alludes to the issue of unstable gender change by an individual due to the influence of his environment.

In addition, Stehlíková (2022) in his thesis entitled "New Future Selves:" Gender Fluidity in the Short Stories of Jackie Kay and Ali Smith found that in Scotland there is also a growing ideology of gender fluidity which is expressed in literary works in the form of short stories. The research took data from a collection of short stories by Jackie Kay and Ali Smith using qualitative research methods. Stehlíková focuses on the elaboration of the theoretical framework of gender: postmodern feminist and queer by Butler and Marinucci in the performance of characters by identifying social regulations, intersections, and gender plurality represented through cultural symbols.

The research found that gender tendencies that are fluid and not fixed can be influenced by binary homogeneity habits of same-sex couples as well as the tendency for covert orientation changes that start from the ambiguity of individual performance in terms of gender. Thus, this study used selected poems from an anthology entitled *Hold Your Own* by Kae Tempest that is well-known for the mythical symbolism of Tiresias to represent her life as a gender-queer person as data source. Tempest

also well-known for her bright notion in her poetry so that 'they',-pronoun to address a non-binary is awarded as Next Generation Poet 2015. In Indonesia, the publicity of non-binary gender-themed literary works is mostly in the form of novels. However, the emphasis is only on changing male to female gender (calabai) without any change back to the previous gender, such as the notion of gender fluidity.

Thus, data in this study is taken from poetry by English poets with the aim of studying the dynamics of a person's gender change so that it can be used as study material in dealing with a gender-neutral situation in a conservative country like Indonesia. In addition, previous research focused on the views of the characters and the subject of the poem on themselves as non-binary, while this research focused on symbols that express the subject's identity to a certain gender and change and acceptance of fluidity itself. This study aimed to analyze 1) How is non-binary gender presented in Kae Tempest's selected poems and 2) What is the meaning of non-binary gender represent in the selected poems by Kae Tempest.

## METHOD AND THEORY

This research is a descriptive research of literary research due to the use of data in the form of selected poems in the anthology of *Hold Your Own* by Kae Tempest. The literary works contained in it are products of individual creativity in which there is a reflection of certain social and cultural life. This research used mimetic approach including literary semiotics by Abrams (1979) as model analysis because those literary analysis pays attention on the artificial aspects of life of the works.

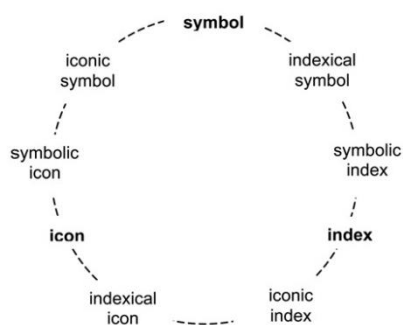
Therefore, to capture environmental and individual reflections in data analysis, semiotic structural analysis is

used as by the mean of symbol, meaning, and imagery icon occurred in a poetry, the aspects of life portray as the message of the poem can be depicted clearly. In structural analysis, aspects of language style and the intrinsic elements of the poet's constructors related to the system of symbols and signs that appear are analyzed in order to be able to interpret the meaning contained in the poem. In general, this research is a research with content analysis method.

According to Zuchdi (1993:6) content analysis is an analytical technique in understanding symbolic messages in the form of documents, paintings, dances, songs, literary works, articles and other data in the form of unstructured data.

According to Zuchdi (1993:61), content analysis can be done in a qualitative descriptive manner. The research data is in the form of qualitative data so that the analytical method used is description and description.

To answer the problems, this research used the theory of Semiotics by Pierce (Charler and Daniel, n.d.). The theory of semiotic which is applied is mainly discuss the mythological symbol that correlated to the existence of gender fluid in Kae Tempest selected poems. Therefore, the hybrid signs of Pierce is used to identify each connections of the symbol, poem, its meaning, and gender fluid in reality.



1. 1 Hybrid Sign

From the hybrid sign diagram above, it can be seen that there's a connection between each typical semiotic features by Pierce that explained the relation of each meaning into concrete meaning.

## RESULT AND DISUCSSION

This research found several symbol correlates with Tiresias mythology represent the fluidity of gender felt by the subject in the poem. Therefore, the analysis can be explained as follows.

### Data 01

She must be more than **sex** and **body**?

Sex and body's all she got

Like all hard lessons, learn it softly

It only is until it's not

——— *The Woman Tiresias stanza 10*

(Chapter Two: Womanhood)

In the data 01, it can be seen that the poet giving two **symbolical index** for binary system. Sex and Body are two well-known symbols for gender problem. In terms of gender, activist of gender equality for example do not accept the term of body or sex to define person. Sex is a given feature from what human was born with which is classified only by two such as a girl or a boy. It is also happened to body, which is given as only two types and features, a boy's typical body, and a girl. Thus, between sex and body, it is unrecognized a third type.

As an index, sex and body is used to represent that human are born in two classifications only. However, the gender theory argued the term of sex and body as mind define a person. A person can be born in 'woman's body' or classified in 'man's sex' however in their mind and heart, they could be another. A man can be gender-ly a woman according to gender theory.

Thus from the line, the contradiction between common sex symbolism with the gender reality is represented. The line

‘sex and body’s all she got’ explained that sex and body is something you born with. However, the next line stated ‘it only is until it is not’ argued that even though people born man or woman, they cannot be judge as how it is. Human each has their own right to choose who they are.

It is also strengthen by the line ‘like all hard lessons, learn it softly’ can be interpreted as an encouragement from the poetry to those who are questioning their gender that they have to find it slowly and try to understand themselves to stand for something. This is certainly an interpretation of fluidity of gender. As mentioned by Katz-Wise (2020) that people begin to develop their gender identity multiple times by multiple social context, defined as gender fluidity, where diversity is more likely applied to a person whom not as girly as girl or a girl acts boyish or even a boy feeling like a girl.

#### Data 02

She will **be prophet** one day  
For the moment  
She soaks up all that she can  
She will own it

——— *The woman the boy became, stanza 26 (Chapter 2: Womanhood).*

The second data shows the use of **icon and index** in contrary also. First, the term prophet is used as an icon of the mythology being referred in the poem, Tiresias. He has a well-known archetype story of a woman who turns into a man, a blind prophet who turned into a woman by cursed, and so on. Thus, in the line of the poetry, it is saying ‘SHE will be PROPHET one day’. From the emphasized, it can be seen there is a contradiction in the line itself. The term prophet is used for a man, while woman given a name as prophetess. However, in the poem it is stated that ‘she’ as

identified a pronoun for a woman will be a prophet in which identified a man. Therefore, it is resemblance two interpretations; (1) it is the correlative symbol for Tiresias myth and (2) it is representing a gender ambiguity in the poem.

First, as the poem mainly telling a story of Woman Tiresias, it is implicitly telling a story of a woman that has gender changing in herself feeling a soul of a man. Therefore, the icon of prophet here can also classified as index. As a cause of gender fluidity, the poem doesn’t described its subject as ‘purely woman’ there it caused the use of term ‘prophet’ attached to pronoun ‘she’ which is contradict each other. So, the term she and prophet is a kind of indexical icon to represent the fluidity of someone’s gender that cannot be defined as the binary system.

Second, the term she will be prophet also representing an ambiguity of a gender. The poet intentionally use the pronoun she to refer a prophet to express genderless term. Genderless is also identified as neutral in gender theory the same umbrella for non-binary people. A neutral-self people do not identify themselves ‘she’ and ‘he’ by pronoun and also addressing name such as Mister or Madam/Miss. Therefore, in European country there is use of pronoun ‘they/them’ for those who classified themselves non-binary or neutral. In this case, the poem telling she will be prophet rather than she will be prophetess is also interpret as the declined for binary system by address.

#### Data 03

How many **yous** will you carry  
Weeping and desperate to marry?  
How many **yous** will you churn out  
Turn out the light for the night

——— *The woman the boy became, stanza 26 & 28 (Chapter 2: Womanhood).*

The next data is the term of multiple self in a soul or body representing by the notion 'yous'. As it can be seen from the way of typography there is no plurality in you by adding 's'. However, the poet used the 'yous' with 's' to identify the plurality in one person. It clearly accused someone that have more than one self inside them that being carried on. This is representing the neutral people who be called as pronoun 'they/them'.

Yous in the data in correlation to the pronoun 'they/them' as identity of neutral can be classified as **index** because it is representing a cause and relatable connection. Moreover, there are two terms of you use in a line, 'how many YOUS will YOU carry' which indicated that this plural you is indexically been in a you (plurality in oneself).

#### Data 04

He swings from above  
And breaks open the fortress,  
The **snakes**, now apart,  
Seem smaller, more awkward.  
They flee for their love.  
The boy, swaying and nauseous  
Falls to the floor  
More raw than before,  
More tortured.

\_\_\_\_\_ *Tiresias stanza 16 (Chapter One: Childhood)*

The next symbol that occurred is snakes. In the mythology, snakes cannot be separated from the story of Tiresias himself. In Greek mythology, Teiresias (Greek: Τειρεσίας) is described as a blind seer from Thebes. He was known for having turned into a woman for seven years.

One day it tells that Tiresias saw two mating snakes but he hit the animal. Hera the Goddess was displeased to see this and then punished him turned into a woman. As a woman, Teiresias became

Hera's priestess. Thus, this story matched with the previous data that says 'she will be prophet' because as a woman Tiresias was told to be Hera's prophetess.

In some versions, it says that after seven years as a woman, Teiresias found another pair of mating snakes. Teiresias punches the animal again (in other versions it lets it go) and it turns back into a man. Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of snakes in the poem representing 'Tiresias' as an implicit symbol for the myth and also an icon for Tiresias itself. Thus, snakes has a function of **symbolic-icon** because it is well-known symbol to address Tiresias as one of the myth icon.

However, the interpretation of the poem itself telling a meaning of Tiresias's narrative when he was cursed by Hera. Tiresias who was actually a man has to be cursed to be a woman. Thus, it is represent in the line the feeling of the boy who breaks the snakes life of mating (shows by line 'the snakes now apart, flee for their love) now has to fall to the floor which represent the cursed itself. In the time, the cursing boy felt so tortured as he lost his self and having a new identity as woman.

#### Data 05

The best boys would feel **like a lady** in your arms  
The best girls would fuck **like a man**, given half the chance  
The good **ones** are good ones because they are whole ones.  
We're our best when we mean it.

\_\_\_\_\_ *Man down stanza 6 (Chapter Three: Manhood).*

The data above shows a fluidity of gender by the stating of 'best boys feel like a lady' and 'best girls would f\*ck like a man'. In this case, there will be no boy normally having feeling of a lady unless they have the inner self that

defined them a woman in man. It also happened to a girl that conservatively will not giving a sexual performance as a man. However, the poem indirectly giving contradiction statement of certain sexual identification of man and woman to represent that there is no concrete definition on how man or woman should do. People can be both or none of them.

Beside that, the term like 'yous' previously also found in this data. In the data five, the poet used the term 'ones' as a repetition to emphasize the multiple self in one self again. The plurality in someone's inner self is considered fluid as it is also changing in certain period. Thus, the gender is.

#### Data 06

Born with the bodies that need to release.

Find me inside you.

Let me be all that I am.

**Tiresias.** Wringing my hands.

Tiresias. Singing the hymns of the land.

——— *Mandown stanza 13 (Chapter Three: Manhood).*

The data used a very specific iconic symbol namely Tiresias itself. It stated that the subject of the poem born with a body that need to be released which is implicitly telling there is another identity inside the body that was born. Moreover, it is emphasizing also the notion 'fine me inside you' which mean the body was born with more than one identity so that the subject need to define himself to show his or her or their true identity. Therefore, the icon of Tiresias occurred in the next line.

#### CONSLUSION

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that in poetry, myth is used as a representation of a world beyond human being that can correlate and portray the real phenomenon in life. Myth in poetry mostly used as a symbol

and icon that by Pierce theory has a function to compare and guide the interpretation of the poetry to the story of the myth and reality. Gender and the phenomenon of gender fluidity also cannot be separated from the myth. The myth of Tiresias is something that truly happened in human real life even though the form is different. Thus, the changing and ambiguity of gender which recently developed to be gender fluid defined the existence of non-binary or neutral people and their fluidity of identity. Tiresias as the symbol of a person who has turned identity and sex from woman to man in the myth is used to correlates the fluidity of neutral gender in reality. There are several symbols, icons, and indexes used to represent neutral gender into Tiresias such as snakes, name of Tiresias, sex, body, and prophet. More than that, some figurative language also used to strengthen the implication of Tiresias implicitly in poem such as like a lady. Beside, a typography also found to represent fluid identity such as ones and yous.

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