She's the Man: Gender Performativity in Queer YA Fiction

Ella McKnight and Emily Thornton, Simon Fraser University

Introduction

Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating is a 2021 YA romance novel by Bengali-Irish author Adiba Jaigirdar. The novel follows two Queer teenage girls, Hani and Ishu, as they navigate their personal and familial relationships in a secondary school in Dublin, Ireland. When Hani's white friends doubt her bisexuality, Hani asks for help from Ishu, another Bengali student. Hani proposes a fake dating scheme so she can convince her friends of her bisexuality and in return Ishu can become popular enough to make Head Girl. Aware of how they are perceived by their peers, Hani and Ishu do their best to make their fake dating believable to their heterosexual peers; they go on dinner dates and triple dates, to parties, and to cultural gatherings together. During these dates, Hani takes on a feminine role by people-pleasing and caring more about appearances. Ishu is portrayed as more masculine because of her assertive and confident attitude. Judith Butler, a critical gender theorist, might suggest that society's compulsory heterosexuality influences the characters. Hani performs her gender to fit into society and Ishu performs the masculine roles seen in heterosexual relationships to make their relationship appear as real to their heterosexual peers. In this essay, we will analyze how the Queer characters in *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* are influenced by heteronormative gender and dating stereotypes. Our analysis will be interpersed with our creative writing, which will demonstrate our understanding of the characters and speculate as to where the story could go if we bring Butler's gender theory into it**.**

Judith Butler is a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. In the early 1990s, the post-structural theorist wrote a book called *Gender Trouble.* This work questions the heterosexual assumptions in feminist literary theory and movements (vii). *Gender Trouble* proposes that "nothing is natural, including sexual identity and desire" (Williams 2372), which means that anatomical features have been prescribed with set expectations regarding sexual desire by society; people live or "perform" in the ways that society and culture expect them to. Butler does not

argue that sex does not exist, but that gender is a constructed and reproduced part of identity. This means that actions in our normal daily routine can differ depending on our gender and are only normal to us because our thoughts have been shaped by society. In an interview with Big Think, Butler calls these actions performative, not because they are fake, but because we are enacting our lives as a specific gender (07:16). Modern society, according to Butler, is "ill-equipped" to recognize people whose bodies do not fit into the heteronormative institution and there are consequences of being a "deviant" such as homophobia (Williams 2373). Butler says many in society refuse to allow trans people to define themselves because they would then feel that "their own self-definition is destabilized" (Big Think 10:55). People often feel insecure when what they have known to be true about gender and sexuality gets more complicated. However, Butler writes in Chapter 3 of *Gender Trouble* that, whether a person is Queer or straight, the perceived notions of gender are impossible to uphold because they were created a very long time ago. They write, "The loss of the sense of the 'the normal,' however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when 'the normal,' 'the original' is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one can embody" ("Subversive" 189). This means that it is absurd that deviating from society norms makes society uncomfortable, because norms are not original: they are reproduced versions of older ideal behaviour. It is impossible to behave in an idealistic way because we have culturally and socially changed.

Butler's theory of gender performativity allows us to challenge what we consider normal and break free of the unattainable pressures put on us to act in a certain way by society. Analyzing Hani and Ishu's story through the lens of Butler's concept of gender performativity adds nuance to their struggles; not only are they dealing with the pressure of coming out as Queer in a difficult stage of life, but they are also learning how deeply heteronormativity is rooted in society. In the following paragraphs, we will demonstrate how Hani and Ishu are subjected to performing gender roles.

Hani's Performance

The perpetuation of gender norms has had, and continues to have, an influence over societal perceptions of gender. Many individuals believe that a "real woman" is determined by biology (Butler, "Subversive" 191). However, academics such as Clark and Paechter, and Gardiner have explained that the societal interpretation of what defines a "real woman" goes beyond the sex assigned at birth. Those who identify as a woman are often expected, by society and peers, to act womanly. Butler states that "we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right"

("Subversive" 190), meaning that societal treatment of an individual may change if they do not act according to how the norm indicates they ought to act. Clark and Paechter point out that young girls are punished by peers when their actions and physical appearance do not reflect characteristics associated with femininity. According to Gardiner's descriptions of feminine characteristics, Hani's physical appearance reinforces the idea of Hani as feminine. Hani plans what she wears thoughtfully and strategically for fake dates with Ishu (Jaigirdar 81), and wears makeup, dresses, and perfume (143). Wearing a scent is not necessarily gendered, but our society has made a distinction between men and women wearing scents.[18] Magdalena Petersson McIntyre claims that consumer goods mould ideas and images of femininity and masculinity through their marketing and lead consumers to believe that products are to be used by specific genders. Petersson McIntyre explains that "designed goods are necessary props in an ongoing iteration of an unstable gender norm" (341). If designer goods are used as props, then wearing perfume is one tool that individuals, such as Hani, use in their performance of femininity. Women are the target consumers for most cosmetic products. Hani admits that her "dressing table has so many bottles and vials and brushes that [she] could probably start [her] own beauty line" (56). Hani's excess amount of makeup may indicate that she wears makeup frequently and therefore is constantly performing her gender.

Hani also outwardly performs her femininity through her clothing choices. Hani and Ishu are required to wear uniforms at school (79). Hani describes her school uniform as "puke green" (79), demonstrating her dislike of its appearance and showing that she cares about what she wears. The uniform makes her free-time clothing choices more important, as she is not frequently able to decide what she wears. Gardiner discusses the association between dresses and being "womanly." She argues that not wearing dresses or tearing a dress while wearing it can indicate that the character in literature is less feminine than individuals who wear dresses (Gardiner 2, 14). Hani specifically chooses to wear a green dress with a white floral pattern on her first fake date with Ishu (81). Later, she wears a purple dress with lace to Dierdre's party (116). Flowers and lace are largely associated with femininity, therefore Hani is enhancing this image of herself as feminine through the designs of the dresses. Hani appears to care about her public appearance. She plays with her hair and Ishu frequently takes note of Hani's long hair and how it is styled. Hani's hair is described as long, black, and falling to her waist (43, 117).

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[18] Marketing typically targets women as consumers of "perfume" and targets men as consumers of fragrance by labeling it as a "fragrance for men" or a "cologne."

Ishu draws attention to its noticeable length and the large effort it would take for Hani to maintain. Ishu states, "you have such long, thick hair. It must take a lot of work to keep it that way" (117). Hani supports Ishu's guess when she details how she cleans her hair with special products and uses oils, conditioners, and Mehndi in her hair care routine (117). Despite the extra effort it takes for Hani to care for her hair, she chooses to keep her hair very long. Gardiner cites Justine Larbelestier's novel, *Liar,* in which a character says, "You have to stop suppressing the girl parts of yourself. Is this why you keep your hair so short? Why you never wear skirts or dresses?" (quoted in Gardiner 17). She claims that female literary characters are made more boyish-looking by cutting their hair short, therefore rejecting femininity. If short hair on women is viewed as a masculine hairstyle, then this would imply that long hair is viewed as feminine. Maintaining her long hair style may be another way that Hani performs her femininity.

Throughout the novel's fake dating trope, Hani is portrayed as polite, passive and non-confrontational in her striving to please people. Clark and Paechter cite *Hey* (1997) in their explanation that the pressure from other school-girl peers "to be 'nice,' that is, kind, polite and unassertive, prevents girls from fully expressing or asserting themselves" (271). This indicates that being passive in our expression of ourselves is associated with being considered nice. Clark and Paechter point out that characteristics of niceness and politeness are heavily valued in young girls and have a large impact on their ability to make and maintain friendships. When Hani becomes frustrated with her friends, she explains that "[she's] not supposed to get angry" (215). Hani's confession supports Clark and Paechter's claim because it implies that her passive attitude is important in maintaining her relationship with Aisling and Dierdre. Similarly, Elizabeth Sharp's article differentiates between valued femininity and excessive femininity. She states that "the emotional restraint to be "calm" and nice despite things not going [their] way, fit[s] the niceness prescription of valued femininity" ("Modern Bridal"). Sharp indicates that being "calm" and "nice" are heavily valued characteristics in their association with being feminine. Hani's kind and polite attitude is an example of perfect femininity. While Hani's avoidance of using curse words may be a result of her cultural customs, it also supports the image of Hani as polite. Hani is hesitant to show anything other than kindness because she knows it could mean the end of her friendship with Aisling and Dierdre. Hani appears to be aware of Butler's claim that not performing your gender "correctly" can have social consequences. At the end of the novel, Butler's statement is supported when Hani's boldness and assertiveness on behalf of Ishu coincides with the end of her

friendship with Aisling and Dierdre. While readers know that they were already not good friends to Hani, it is ultimately Aisling and Dierdre who walk away from the friendship.

Hani is an interesting character to analyse through the lens of Butler's theory of gender performativity because she subconsciously performs her gender to fit in with her friends. She feels "expected" to act in certain ways and believes she's not supposed to get angry. Based on this analysis, Hani hurts herself when she performs her gender because she cannot express her true feelings. To demonstrate how Hani maintains her femininity to please others, we have added a scene to further highlight the compressive nature of gender. Below is an original scene written by Ella McKnight that shows how Hani is influenced by heteronormative pressure. The scene is based on Hani and Ishu's conversation about the difficulties of caring for Bengali hair types at the end of Chapter 16.

"Doesn't it all just get in the way? In physical education class, I mean." asks Ishu, as she thinks of Hani's beautiful hair.

Hani sits behind her on the bed, brushing Ishu's hair.

"Not really." Hani lowers her brush from Ishu's waves. "I played football and rugby and I had no trouble with my hair."

Ishu's eyes widen and she turns to face Hani. "You played rugby?" She can't imagine Hani playing a sport like rugby. It's so… hard-core.

"Yeah, my brothers taught me and I played on a team for a while." Hani smiles fondly, recalling her favourite sport. She used to love running on the field with her team and the competitive nature of the game.

"Why don't you play anymore?" Ishu asks.

Hani's smile falls. "I don't know," she replies. "My fupi didn't like me playing it. She thought it was too tom-boyish."

"But isn't there a national women's team now?" Ishu asks.

"You're right, there is a national women's rugby team in Ireland, but that doesn't really matter to my fupi. She didn't want me to be wasting my time with sports. Last year, Aisling asked Deirdre and me to join the cheerleading team, so I did. It was fun, too."

Although Hani's expression is pleasant, Ishu hears the disappointment in her voice.

"But it's not the same as rugby, is it?" Ishu asks.

"Well… not really," says Hani. She plays with her bracelet. "It really hurt when I had to tell my parents I wanted to quit rugby, but I felt like I was expected to."

"You can do whatever sport you want, Hani. It doesn't matter what people think," says Ishu. She smiles.

This re-imagining and addition to their conversation in Chapter 16 highlights how Hani complies with heterosexual gender norms. When Hani says that her fupi (aunt on her mother's side) doesn't like her playing rugby, Hani is showing how ideals perpetuated by her female family members have contributed to how she lives her life. To be "tomboyish" is to go against what heteronormative society believes a woman should be (Gardiner). Hani quits rugby because she feels expected to, showing that she is very influenced by societal constructions of gender and femininity. The scene exemplifies how performing gender hurts young women because she feels that she cannot play the sport she loves.

Ishu's Performance

We can view Ishu as more masculine. Many of her traits are the opposite of Hani's feminine traits. Hani's long hair is seen as feminine and therefore Ishu's short hair may be masculine. Hani and Ishu also contrast in whether they wear makeup (56, 205) and their attitudes towards wearing dresses (115). Hani's physical representation of femininity is more clearly described than Ishu's physical presentation as masculine. However, we can see Ishu performing masculinity through her actions and attitudes. David Vogel's article parallels information found on the *Men's Minds Matter* website and in Clark and Paechter's article: the dominant masculine norm in our society is being competitive, courageous, emotionally strong, and independent. We see these traits associated with masculinity in Ishu's character. Ishu is the opposite of Hani in her courage and ability to say what she is thinking. While Hani's restraint from speaking her feelings and standing up for herself are performing as feminine, Ishu's qualities of courage to speak up for Hani is a masculine-associated trait. During a conversation with Ishu, Hani says,

> "You're like…super smart. The smartest person in our entire year. Not just in results. You also just know…so much. About so many things. And you always speak your mind and you can stand up to anybody. You're basically like…invincible." "So…everybody at schools thinks I'm superman?" Hani turns back to me with another smile that lights up her whole face. "No." she chuckles. "They think you're a lot of things they're afraid to be…so it's easier to just not interact with you." (170)

Hani notes that Ishu is "a lot of things they're afraid to be" (170), which shows Ishu's boldness is apparent to many of the people in their school. Hani's statement implies that all the students in their all-girls school do not have Ishu's courage to be outspoken. The inability to see Vogel's masculine-deemed trait in such a large pool of girls supports courage and boldness' association with

masculinity. Ishu's response about being Superman compares her personality to a male heroic figure rather than a female figure. The choice to say Superman rather than Superwoman, or another female hero, may indicate that Ishu identifies her characteristics as masculine as well. Hani also describes Ishu as the smartest person among all their peers. Ishu competes with Nikhita in academics (209) indicating that Ishu is competitive, another trait Vogel associates with masculinity. Hani hints at Ishu's competitive nature when she calls her the smartest in their year (170). To be the best or smartest indicates a competitiveness to be in and maintain the top spot. This suggestion that Ishu is competitive is further supported by Ishu's drive to compete and win the Head Girl position (116). Ishu also displays the emotional strength Vogel describes as a dominant masculine norm. Vogel explains that boys are teased for crying, as it is seen as being emotionally weak. Ishu points out her performance as emotionally strong when she states,

> "I can't help the smile that tugs at my lips, or the tears prickling behind my eyes. I feel like I've picked this up from Hani–too many emotions. I'm not really a crier, but ever since becoming friends with Hani…." (334)

This statement describes Ishu's previous ability to act emotionless. She claims that she was not previously an individual who cried. Ishu's school peers see her as "invincible" (170), and being seen as emotionally weak would not coincide with this image. Ishu's characteristics grouped together may be associated with masculinity, especially because they are characteristics that she is not noted to share with the other girls at her school. Hani points out in her statement that the other students think that "it's easier to just not interact with" Ishu (170) because she is different from them. This demonstrates what Butler describes as a consequence for not "properly" performing her femininity. Ishu's intellect and lack of friendships makes her the target of Aisling's bullying. Butler argues that not performing one's femininity should not be cause to view someone differently. Gender is a social concept. An individual's anatomy is separate from their gender, and both of these can be separate from their performance (Butler, "Subversive" 187). Ishu's gender is separate from her masculine characteristics. However, her deviation from societal ideals is not a result of her consciously addressing heteronormativity, but rather her conforming to heteronormative ideas. Her masculine-associated characteristics push her into taking on the heterosexual masculine roles in her Queer fake relationship with Hani, and is therefore still influenced by heteronormative attitudes.

A Fake Relationship

Often in heterosexual relationships, there are actions defined by gender. We have unconscious biases or expectations regarding how people should act in a relationship based on their gender. Through the reproduction of these expectations, dating roles have become normalized and people who date often feel pressured to conform to them. This is called compulsory heterosexuality. Butler explains that "compulsory heterosexuality [holds] claims to naturalness and originality" ("Subversive" 169). With this being a common assumption among society, it makes sense that Hani and Ishu would base their fake relationship on heterosexuality and the roles associated with it. When Hani begins to take on roles associated with women in heterosexual relationships, Ishu fills the male role. They each naturally have characteristics associated with one gender, so they fall into those roles unconsciously. This is shown on their first fake date when Ishu pays for Hani (91–92). Ishu's reason for paying for Hani's meal is that Hani is managing an aspect of their fake relationship that Ishu doesn't want to—posting on social media. In the scene, she thinks to herself,

> "I know that I already told Hani that we would be paying for our own meals, but all things considered it seems a little unfair to make her pay when she's the one handling all the Instagram stuff. I mean, it's not like I could considering I have three followers, and one of them is Hani. When we get the bill, I'm quick to hand over my debit card. Hani settles me with a glare, though I can tell that it's harmless. It has more humour in it than anything else" (91–92).

In Hani and Ishu's relationship, Hani takes on the emotional labour of appealing to social media so that they can prove that their relationship is real. It is a common assumption that feminine-identifying people value emotional and social relationships more than masculine-identifying people do, but it is a fact that female adolescents use social media to facilitate friendships more than males:

> The more female adolescents perceive the possibility to easily and constantly access to their friends online, the more they tend to experience validation within the relations (e.g., frequent online interactions with friends, together with public demonstration of affect, may be synonymous with validation among friends); conversely, males reported to perceive less validation within friendship relations when they experience higher accessibility to friends online. (Angelini 26028)

Hani cares more about her friendships and social persona, and this relates to her putting effort into maintaining a social media presence. Ishu's lack of social media

presence reflects that she does not find validation through social media and friendships, as most teenage females do.

Due to Hani's more feminine qualities and the fact that she does social media work in their fake relationship, Ishu takes on a more stereotypical, masculine role when she pays for the date. The action of masculine-identifying people paying for dates is very normalized and supported by the heterosexual-dominated society. Men are praised as gentlemanly, or chivalrous for paying for their significant others. It is not uncommon for Queer people who are more masculine appearing, to experience feeling pressure to take on the role of a straight man in a relationship. This phenomenon is explained by Michal Jones, in *Everyday Feminism*:

> As a non-binary, masculine or center person, I find myself pulling out my credit card by default while on dates, opening doors, and feeling pressures to dress and behave in certain ways. Because that is what is expected of me. And while there is nothing wrong with, for example, the conscious and consenting decision for me to pay for dinner, so much of that unconscious behaviour is rooted in greater systems of heterosexism and misogyny. ("How Queer Relationships")

Jones recognizes that their behaviour is influenced by society's compulsory heterosexism, and, when they date, they replicate heterosexual dating roles. Ishu, like Jones, has masculine traits that influence how she acts while fake dating Hani. However, like the male interviewees in "Queering Courtship," Ishu does not express that she feels expected to pay. "For the most part I pay … I don't feel like it's expected of me. It's something I like to do," says one of Lamont's interviewees (116). The only respondents who justified paying for dates were cis-men: "While they were often very critical of gender norms in other aspects of their lives, this norm went unquestioned and was portrayed as a non-gendered practice" (116), Lamont explains. This means that despite their sexuality, people with masculine traits unconsciously reproduce their gender through the act of paying for meals on dates, which further supports that Ishu subconsciously takes on the masculine role.

Another example of Ishu compulsively filling a masculine role in their fake relationship is when she mentions wanting to give her jacket to Hani. When Hani admits that she is feeling chilly, Ishu says "I would give you my jacket if I hadn't left it in my locker [...]. That would be like…the right thing to do, right?" (185). Ishu prescribes to the idea that giving your jacket to your date is socially agreed upon. However, this action is associated with men acting gentlemanly in

heterosexual dating, as supported by *The Gentleman's Journal*. In its discussion of gentlemanly etiquette, *The Gentleman's Journal* states that "If it mists into the air, you should ask if she's cold, and offer your jacket." They explain that this action often has romantic implications and in using the term "she" they imply that this etiquette guide is intended for heterosexual relationships. It is well known that this action was common in the olden days, but blogs such as the *Gentleman's Journal* and *Distractify* by Sarah Kester indicate that these actions/assumptions continue to this day. Kester notes the common use of men giving hoodies to women. This modern translation of the jacket-giving tradition has altered due to changes in style; however, the reason behind the action remains the same: making their female significant other feel protected. Ishu is constantly trying to protect Hani by standing up to Aisling and Dierdre. Ishu's desire to give Hani her jacket is another attempt to protect and comfort Hani.

In "Queering Courtship," Lamont writes that the members of the LQBTQ community she interviewed felt the dating practices in heteronormative relationships were too rigid. Most interviewees felt that for non-gendered dating practices, "there were no rules over who should ask for dates, who should contact the other person first after a date, or who should pay for a date" (114). One responder suggested trying activity-based dates rather than money-based dates, such as free concerts and hiking. If we were to speculate as to where the story would go if the author wanted to address compulsory heterosexuality in the novel, Ishu and Hani's date would not have been a traditional dinner date. Ideally, the girls would decide to find a space to date that isn't associated with conventional heterosexual dating practices because they would be more conscious of heteronormative pressures influencing them. Below is a scene written by Ella, that demonstrates how Hani and Ishu could have navigated dating as a Queer couple. The scene is inspired by Chapter 11 in the novel.

> "So…? We could go to a fancy restaurant or something?"
> "And you're going to pay for me?"
> "I said it's a fake date, Hum—Hani."
> "Then let's do something else. How 'bout a movie?" Hani suggests.
> Having never dated before, Ishu's confusion shows on her face. Ishu's parents always celebrate their anniversary by going to one of the fancy restaurants in town.
> "Are movie dates romantic enough?" Ishu asks.
> "I think going to the movies is a pretty typical date. Aisling and her boyfriend go all the time." Hani chuckles. "Plus this way we can easily pay separately."

> "I guess you're right, but I don't really like movies… you can't talk during them. Can we do something else?"
> Their conversation dies while they think of other possible dates. Ishu can hear her watch tick. The only person Ishu knows who could help them is her sister, but she would never ask Nik for something silly like dating advice.
> Hani's face suddenly lights up. "Oh! What about baking?"
> "Baking? What do you mean?"
> "We can bake some cookies together. Think about it, it's cozy and cute. We don't have to dress up or spend money, we can just show people that we're spending time with each other, privately. Like a real couple would do."
> Ishu doesn't mind the idea of their first date taking place somewhere comfortable and getting to know Hani more. At least she wouldn't have to dress up.
> "Okay," Ishu replies, "But I'm not a good baker."
> "That's okay, I'm not either." Hani smiles. "Let's do it at my place after school. My parents will be out of the house working on the campaign for a few hours."
> "So… we'll have the house to ourselves?"
> Hani snickers. "Yes. To burn as many cookies as we need to get an Instagram-worthy batch."

In this scenario, Hani and Ishu discuss where they want their first fake date to take place. With their status as high school students in mind, they understand going for a traditional restaurant date puts unnecessary financial pressure on them. Hani then suggests going to a movie but Ishu disagrees. She asks Hani, "Are movie dates romantic enough?" which implies that she has a fixed idea of what romantic dates look like. Ishu believes restaurant dates are romantic because her heterosexual parents go out for dinner dates. Finally, Hani suggests that they bake cookies. Baking is an activity that most people enjoy, or can find joy in doing with another person. Lamont writes that "Many LGBQ people emphasized how freeing it was to be queer and not feel the need to worry about normative heterosexual expectations. Instead, they concentrated on figuring out what would make them happy as individuals" (110). Ella's goal with the scene is to capture a moment where the couple choose a date that makes them both happy as Queer teenagers, with limited money and resources. By choosing a type of date that can make them both happy, they resist compulsory heterosexuality and do not perpetuate heterosexual dating practices.

A Real Relationship

Some readers may argue that Ishu does not perform her gender because she acts in masculine ways that contradict her gender. This would make Ishu a gender non-conforming character. However, Ishu's traits align with those associated with the masculine norm and result from her performing a masculine role in her fake relationship with Hani. At the beginning of their fake relationship, Hani and Ishu are the only two openly Queer students at their catholic school and their immediate influences are heteronormative, mono-ethnic couples—parents and friends. Hani and Ishu have no Queer role models or examples to show them how Queer couples can date without following heteronormative dating roles. Therefore, their fake relationship is likely modeled after a heterosexual relationship. Butler claims that gender is "an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" ("Subversive" 186). They explain that heterosexual relationships have previously been demanded for reproductive purposes and created a norm that continues to be upheld through heteronormative ideals of what dating and relationships look like (185). Therefore, Hani and Ishu are not just taking on heterosexual roles in their Queer fake relationship because of a lack of Queer role models, but also because their relationship is intended to look real to their heterosexual peers. Heterosexual individuals may not believe that a relationship is real if it does not resemble their norm.

The assertion that Hani and Ishu's fake relationship is based on heterosexual norms is supported at the end of the novel. It isn't until the lines of whether their relationship is fake or real begin to blur that their performative heteronormative roles blur as well. When Hani and Ishu begin to realize that their fake dating is not entirely fake, we see both individuals change. Hani ignores the polite and kind attitude that is expected of her when she stands up for Ishu. Kindness and politeness are seen in Hani excessively while they are fake dating, and therefore it is very noticeable when she strays from her previously built image. Ishu appears to give in to some of the characteristics associated with femininity, such as smiling more (328) and overcoming her competitiveness to befriend rather than compete with her sister. However, Ishu remains bold and assertive along with her new characteristics, which make her less conformative to her gender. When Hani and Ishu begin dating for real, they find their own way of dating, rather than imitating heterosexual relationships. Ishu claims that "before all of this started, [she] didn't even know what being in a relationship was, but now [she's] pretty sure [she] can write a guide to real dating" (336). Ishu's claim that she knows what it's like to really date someone demonstrates that following heteronormative dating rules was not authentic to them.

A Hypothetical Sequel Scene for *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating*

Given Ishu's balance of feminine and masculine traits, Ishu's character could be used as a representation of a non-gendered character. Butler writes, "When the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force" ("Subversive" 185), which means that when our heteronormative ideals of gender are challenged or disrupted, they lose their influence over us because they are revealed as fake. Ishu can disrupt gender norms by using non-gendered pronouns to describe herself. To speculate where the story might go using Butler's theory of gender performativity as a lens, Ella has written a scene that would take place in the future of Hani and Ishu's relationship. In this hypothetical sequel of the novel, Hani and Ishu attend a college together and their immediate, heteronormative influences are challenged. The scene is written from Hani's point of view like many chapters in *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating*. The reason for this is that Ella is heterosexual and cis-gendered and cannot assume the emotions Ishu would be feeling during the scene. However, Ishu's perspective is inspired by Butler's feelings regarding gender as shown in the Big Think interview.

HANI

"Hello, first years!" a woman with dark curls calls out. From wall to wall, the classroom is full of first-year college students, including myself and Ishu. "Let's go around the room and tell everyone your name and pronouns! I'll start. My name is Saoirse, and I go by she/they pronouns."

I listen to students' names, look at their faces, and try to remember their faces. Gods, there are just so many people joining the Feminism club. I didn't want to join it originally, but Ishu tells me that it will look good on my CV. I feel a little nervous as the name game makes its way to me.

"My name is Abeba. I prefer she/her pronouns," says the girl beside me. With a smile, she turns to me. I'm next. I cough to relax my throat.

"Hi, I'm Humaira. I go by she/her pronouns. It's nice to meet you all."

My heart thumps against my chest. I never felt so nervous about introducing myself to other people before but I'm a University College Dublin student now. And so is my girlfriend.

"My name is Ishita," she says loudly and confidently. So confident, as usual. But then, she's silent. Everyone's silent, waiting for her to answer the other part of the question. I tap her hand gently to remind her. "Oh, um… I go by she/her pronouns."

The next person in line introduces themselves, but I look at Ishu.

"Everything okay?" I whisper.

Her cheeks look a little rosy but she nods.

After introductions are complete, our club leader hands out name tags. I write my name and pronouns on a tag, then stick it to my shirt. Then Saoirse, our leader, explains the type of things we will be doing, discussing, and reading over the year in the club meetings. They tell us how excited they are to share and discuss new topics in feminism with a group of fresh faces, and want to ensure that everyone feels comfortable. At the end of the meeting, Saoirse and their fellow upper-year students bring in boxes of pastries from the coffee shop across campus. Ishu and I move in and out of conversations, snacking on pastries, and getting to know some of our peers. The range of personalities takes me by surprise at first. I'm so used to being different from other people but it's not the same here. Lots of students are queer and a handful are Bengali, too. It's nice.

Ishu and I have coffee in the courtyard a couple of hours after the club orientation meeting. Our class schedules are very different this term, but we can share a couple hours each day without a conflict. Plus, we live in neighbouring dorms now—no need for buses.

"So… are you nervous for tomorrow?" Ishu asks. "It's our first day of classes. No more introductions and name-games."

"A bit. I'm more excited than nervous. You?"

"I'm tired of orientation. Let's get on with classes now." Ishu chuckles.

"That's so like you to think that way," I say with a smile. "How did you find the feminism club? Do you think it's worth attending?"

"Sure. It sounds interesting." Ishu replies.

"You seemed a little uncomfortable during introductions."

"I wasn't nervous. I was just distracted."

"By what?"

Ishu shrugs. "I was thinking about the whole pronouns thing. It's interesting. No one in high school went by they/them pronouns."

"You're right. I mean we were the only queer students at the time too."

"I don't like being defined by my sexuality, I already feel like I'm treated differently for being Bengali."

"I feel the same way," I say. "When we started dating, or rather fake dating, I felt like I had to prove my bisexuality to Aisling and Dierdre, but I never wanted to be treated differently because of it." I take a sip of my chai latte. So far, everyone Ishu and I meet feels the same way about starting college and changing lifestyles. It feels good to know I'm not all that different from anyone else.

Ishu suddenly says my name, "Hani?"

"Yeah?"

"My parents and sister don't know this, but I think I prefer they/them pronouns. I'm used to she/her, but I just… it feels more comfortable to me."

"Oh." Ishu's moment of hesitation in the club orientation makes sense to me now. "So that's what you meant by being *defined*."

"Yeah. Sort of. You know, I never really fit in with everyone at school. I always felt like there were expectations for me to act in certain ways and care

about certain things. My gender doesn't really matter. I want to be seen as more than my gender. I want to be Ishu, who reads and spends time with their girlfriend. It's hard to explain but I believe that the parts of my identity that I've created and nurtured matter more than how people define being a woman. What I'm wearing or what gender I'm dating shouldn't matter."

"How long have you felt this way?" I ask Ishu. I've never thought about my gender this way.

"I've never felt connected to the labels given to me in high school but being here, in college, has made me think about my sexuality and gender more. I didn't know that I didn't have to conform to a gender category. And now I've met people, like me, who don't believe we have to pick between the binaries because some people can't imagine anything outside of them."

I open my mouth to speak, but Ishu quickly adds, "I don't expect you to share my feelings…it's just something I've been thinking about for a while now."

My heart warms for Ishu. They're learning more about themself and trust me to accept them. I really-really like them. I cover Ishu's hand with my own and smile, "I understand. Thank you for letting me know how you're feeling, Ishu. I'll call you by whatever name and pronouns you want me to."

Ishu blushes. "You still want to be my girlfriend… right?"

I chuckle and smile even more brightly. "Of course, silly."

Ishu looks relieved and I can tell they've been thinking about how to confess their thoughts about this for a while.

"Would you prefer that I call you my partner?" I ask.

"No, I like it when you call me your girlfriend."

I feel warm inside. "Good."

In this hypothetical sequel, Hani and Ishu are placed in a new environment. They are not in high school, but now in college. This change in setting is important because Hani and Ishu are not the only Queer students at the school and will meet more people through the feminism club who can show them how Queer individuals can break away from heteronormative influences. The feminism club is a diverse group of students who accept identities as "deviants" (Williams 2373) within a heteronormative society, making it a space where Ishu can comfortably question her own identity. In the scene, Ishu explains that she does not feel comfortable when she is made to confine herself to a category in her identity, such as her sexuality. She says, "...I believe that the parts of my identity that I've created and nurtured matter more than how people define being a woman. What I'm wearing or what gender I'm dating shouldn't matter," which is inspired by Butler's personal thoughts about gender in the Big Think interview. They state, "the gender that you are taught to be, should not determine how you live your life" (4:45-4:51). Ishu asks Hani to use they/them pronouns when referring to her, thus choosing an important part of her identity for herself. Hani

also challenges heteronormativity when she asks Ishu, "Would you prefer that I call you my partner?" We often assume a person's gender or pronouns, especially when we have known them for a significant period; however, asking a person for their preferred pronouns is a way to combat compulsory heterosexuality.

Conclusion

In their interview with Big Think, Butler proposes that society's expectations and desire to categorize people is an issue of freedom (4:45-4:51). Gender is a concept enforced by society through the idealization of heteronormative values. Heteronormative values have become unquestioned norms and influence the way we view gender, sex, and masculinity/femininity. Anyone who does not fit into the heteronormative "box" is pushed out by society. Butler argues that society's expectations of people hinder individuals' ability to be themselves without facing aggressive attitudes and therefore affect gender rights and gender equality. While we believe that our modern society is progressing to allow individuals the freedom to be who they want, Boyer and Galupo point out that even self-exploration is influenced by constricted ideas of gender and sexuality and the roles individuals are pushed to perform. *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* spotlights the social pressure to conform to the heterosexual norm while dating and shows how easily people are influenced by heteronormative gender and dating stereotypes. Inserting creative writing into our analysis has allowed us to actually use Butler's theory, and to understand Hani and Ishu from a different perspective. Our creative element also shows how important it is for young readers, Queer and straight, to read characters who do not perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality. Hopefully, *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* and other Queer YA novels will encourage readers to notice when they are being forced to, or are expecting others to fit into the heterosexual norms that society has created.

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