

Tomboy And Feminine Representations: Gender Standards in Children's Literature Written by Children in The Comics Next G

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Abstract

This study has two primary objectives. First, to analyze how the representations of tomboy and feminine characters are constructed in *Komik Next G*. Second, to examine whether this representation reproduces conventional gender stereotypes or offers alternative meanings of femininity. The method employed is qualitative descriptive using Stuart Hall's representation framework (encoding, representation, decoding). Data sources consist of verbal and visual elements from *Komik Next G*, collected through non-participatory observation and note-taking techniques on story panels. Data analysis involved four stages: identifying visual/verbal signs, classifying gender expressions, interpreting cultural meanings, and a systematic comparison utilizing data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. The results indicate that *Komik Next G* predominantly reproduces conventional binary gender standards. Femininity is constructed as a natural, ideal norm through visual and verbal attributes and operates through the hegemony of friendship and social rewards. The tomboy identity, while predominantly framed as a deviation requiring correction, is not entirely devoid of agency: the character demonstrates moments of active resistance, autonomous spatial negotiation, and an ambivalent inner desire that complicate a reading of pure passivity. However, this agency is ultimately subjugated and channeled toward a normative resolution, with any remaining resistance reduced to a tolerated "mischief" that leaves the feminine visual standard intact, children as text producers have deeply internalized hegemonic gender norms, underscoring the urgency for critical guidance in children's literacy programs to encourage more inclusive gender narratives.

Keywords : *Children's Literature, Komik Next G, Stuart Hall's Representation, Tomboy, Feminine*

Introduction

The issue of gender inequality in children's literature reflects how children perceive their surroundings and how they understand and represent gender standards. Existing scholarship often shows that binary gender norms dictate how characters should behave (Nisya, 2024). Female characters in children's literature, especially comics, are represented as beautiful, graceful, coquettish, and prone to crying, while male characters are represented as heroes, brave, strong, and unyielding (Liliani, 2015). The struggle for gender identity in children's literature, especially female characters who do not align with heterosexual norms that require children to behave feminine and masculine, the presence of tomboyish or feminine female characters creates issues that reflect the social construction of gender roles from an early age (Noble, 2022).

To analyze how gender representation is constructed and communicated to child readers, this study employs Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory. Among Hall's three approaches reflective, intentional, and constructionist his study adopts the

constructionist approach, which holds that meaning is not inherent but actively produced through two interrelated systems of signification: conceptual maps (mental concepts) and signifying practices (shared linguistic signs) (Hall, 1997). Within this context, comics serve to reflect the gender realities surrounding them, but also actively construct understandings of feminine and masculine gender. The act of perfect representation shapes the formation of gender standards that are introduced to children in their role as readers.

Research related to gender representation in children's literature has actually been conducted, particularly on the feminine and masculine images of characters, and the character formation of gender values and children's psychology in children's literature. Existing studies do not look at the fundamental problem of gender standards. Two tendencies from existing studies can be mapped. First, studies focusing on the analysis of character images (Wahyuni et al., 2022; Sihaan, 2023; Nisya et al., 2024; Rahma, 2025; Nugraha, 2025; Qur'ani, 2025; Marta, 2025; Suud, 2025) demonstrate that character images are consistently formed and negotiated through cultural media such as folklore, fairy tales, comics, and children's literature. These studies thus open an analytical space for understanding image transformations within cultural, gender, and social frameworks. Second, which has been researched by (Rokhayati, 2021; Atqi, 2022; Politis, 2022; Lindsay, 2023; Tso, 2023; Zhang & Soo, 2024; (Potter, 2024); Yuan, 2025;). The emphasis on character formation of gender values and psychology of children in children's literature, as well as children's literary works foster a broad and structured imagination.

While previous studies have significantly highlighted the construction of gender in children's literature, there are gaps that have not been filled. First, most studies have focused on children's novels and short stories, while comics, as a medium with its visual-verbal characteristics, have rarely received attention ((Nugraha et al., 2025). Second, existing studies tend to discuss gender representation in general or focus only on tomboy characters, without conducting systematic comparisons between tomboyish and feminine representations within the same corpus. Third, comics written by Indonesian children, such as Next G Comics, produced by readers of children's age, have never been studied specifically This study aims to address these gaps by comparatively analyzing how tomboyish and feminine representations are constructed in Next G Comics, while simultaneously filling the gap in the study of children's literature in Indonesia (Dallacqua & Low, 2020).

This research will prove that in Next G Comics, the representation of tomboys and femininity does not merely reproduce rigid binary gender standards, but also displays negotiation and resistance to dominant norms of femininity. This is important to study because Next G Comics is a unique product born from the creativity of children themselves, thus potentially offering a different perspective from children's literature written by adults. In addition, this proof is needed to understand how children as text producers interpret and construct their own gender identities amidst the flow of heterosexist gender discourse. The main problems that will be answered in this research are: (1) how are the representations of tomboys and femininity constructed in Next G Comics? (2) Does this representation reproduce conventional gender standards or does it offer an alternative new meaning of femininity?

Method

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method with Stuart Hall's representational approach. This approach was chosen because it is able to unpack the process of meaning production through language, symbols, and visual elements, where meaning is not fixed but is constructed socially and culturally. Data were collected through non-participatory observation and note-taking techniques, involving systematic observation of visual panels and verbal dialogues in *Komik Next G* without researcher intervention in the text production process, followed by detailed documentation of relevant signs of gender representation. Stuart Hall's representational theory explains that meaning is produced through three stages, namely encoding, representation, and decoding, which involve the mental system and the language system in the process of signification. The data source for this research is the verbal and visual texts from *Komik Next G*, a comic by Indonesian children published through a creative literacy program. *Komik Next G* is unique because it is produced directly by children aged 8 to 14 years, thus offering an authentic perspective on how children construct and interpret their own gender identity, in contrast to adult media which is generally filled with industrial interests and dominant ideologies. The data was selected appropriately with a focus on tomboyish and feminine female characters who are the main unit of analysis (Creswell, 2014).

Data collection was conducted through three systematic stages. First, recording all available and accessible editions of *Next G Comics*. Second, selecting comics that explicitly feature female characters with tomboyish and feminine characteristics. Third, in-depth recording and documentation of visual panels and dialogues representing the gender expressions of both character types. The data collection technique used was free listening and note-taking, in which researchers carefully observed scenes, dialogues, and visual elements in the comics and then recorded data relevant to the research focus. In the context of children's literature research, it is important to note that comics function as a medium for transmitting cultural values and social norms, including the concept of gender constructed by children's writers.

Data analysis was conducted through four stages based on Stuart Hall's representational framework, considering two main representational systems: the mental system (the children's author's concept of gender) and the language system (the verbal and visual elements used to express that concept). The first stage involved identifying signs of gender representation in visual aspects (such as appearance, gestures, and costumes) and verbal aspects (such as dialogue and narrative). The second stage involved classifying the representations into tomboyish and feminine categories. The third stage involved interpreting the meaning of the representations in relation to prevailing binary gender norms in society. The fourth stage involved a systematic comparison between the two representations to conclude whether the comic texts reproduce conventional gender stereotypes or negotiate and resist dominant gender standards. This analysis process followed a qualitative data analysis model that includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles, 2014).

The data validity test in this study was conducted through source triangulation and theory triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from various editions of *Next G Comics* to ensure consistency in the findings of gender representation. Theory triangulation was conducted using the perspective of Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory combined with the concepts of stereotypes and hegemony from cultural studies. In the context of comics as a medium of representation, it is important to understand that illustration and narrative are never

value-neutral; both are representational practices that actively construct meaning about gender, identity, and social relations. A feminist literary criticism approach was also used to uncover the gender ideology at work behind children's texts, particularly in examining how gender standards are reproduced or negotiated through tomboyish and feminine characters. This study emphasizes that children's literature is not merely entertainment, but an important realm for the transmission and negotiation of cultural values that shape how children understand themselves and their social world.

Results

This study analyzes the comic "Next G: Tomboy Becomes Feminine" (Edition III, 2019), a work that exists in two layers of text: (1) a professionally mediated version, with a story by Salsabila Lailathia Zaen and illustrations published by Muffin Graphics; and (2) the author's original manuscript, drawn by Salsabila herself. The comic centers on two female characters Dinda, coded as feminine, and Fero, coded as tomboy and follows Fero's transformation from tomboy to feminine. The findings below are organized around the visual and verbal signs of each character and the three phases of Fero's transformation.

The Feminine Figure: Dinda Visual Signs



Visual 1

Dinda's feminine identity is established through visual signs from her first appearance on page 9. She is positioned in the foreground center of a full-body panel, with Fero placed slightly behind her. Her attributes are rendered in detail: a neatly pressed school uniform with a knee-length skirt and glossy shoes, a medium-sized ribbon on long, flowing hair, and facial features marked by blush, large eyelashes, and a smiling expression. Her open-palm gesture toward the bus reads as helpful guidance rather than an assertive command.



Visual 2



Visual 3

The panel backgrounds carry the same coding. On pages 15 and 16, all four panels set in the accessories-shop interior (Visual 2 and 3) are filled with floral motifs heart-shaped flowers, curling vines, and leaf patterns across backgrounds, borders, and empty spaces. By contrast, the seven panels depicting Fero's outdoor and sports activities (pp. 10, 14) contain no botanical decoration, using only minimal motion lines and ground shadows.



Visual 4

On page 21, the panel marking the culmination of Fero's transformation shows the setting around the now-ribboned Fero also filled with floral motifs.

Verbal Signs



Visual 5

Dinda's dialogue turns on three significant utterances. First, on page 9, her opening line is not a casual greeting but a directive: "Fer, try changing your appearance!" It is spoken before any external event, so that the conflict is initiated by Dinda herself.



12

Visual 6

Second, on page 12, she says: "You're a girl, try to be a little feminine!"



Visual 7

Third, on the final page, she closes the story with: "You're welcome. Glad you're feminine!"



Visual 8

Across these exchanges, Dinda never apologizes for removing Fero's ponytail without permission. On page 11, when Fero rejects the change "What the heck?! I don't like it!" Dinda offers no apology and repeats her directive, "You're a girl, try to be a little feminine!" (p. 12), before the celebratory closing remark, "Glad you're feminine!" (end page).

The Tomboy Figure: Fero Introduction of the Character



Visual 9

Fero is introduced through a text-box narration on page 9: "Fero, a tomboy and mischievous child." The label is delivered in third-person narration that precedes any action or dialogue by Fero, and it pairs "tomboy" directly with "mischievous."

Moments of Agency



Visual 10

Before her transformation, Fero is shown with clear agency. On page 10 she takes a tennis ball from Novan: "Hey! Have you seen my tennis ball?" she asks while watching the boys play, then takes the ball with "Hehehe, borrow it for a minute." In the bottom-center panel of the same page she is drawn with a sly, slanted face and narrowed eyes, holding the ball, while the boy whose ball was taken is shown slumped and helpless.



Visual 11

On page 13, when Fero enters the accessories shop, she stands somewhat apart from her friends, who shout "Kyaaa!" at the sight of ribbons; her position at the edge of the panel and her blank expression set her apart from the feminine world. In the same panel, however, an internal monologue appears as a mental image of Fero with ribbons in her hair, followed by the mumbled "...let's try..." It is the only point in the comic where Fero's interest in femininity surfaces without direct external pressure.

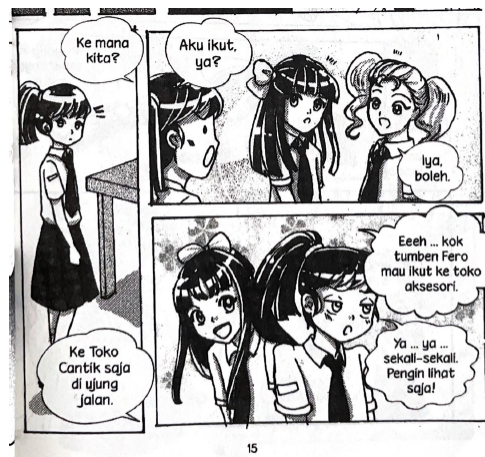
The Transformation: Three Phases

Fero's transformation from tomboy to feminine unfolds in three phases marked by progressive changes in visual and verbal signs.



Visual 12

Phase one transformation without consent (p. 11). Dinda removes Fero's ponytail while she is not paying attention, then announces, "TARAAA! So, how about it, Fer?" followed by "You've become cuter and more feminine." Fero responds, "What the heck?! I don't like it!" and "What's the difference from usual?!" The narrative does not pause on this rejection; Dinda neither apologizes nor withdraws.



Visual 13



Visual 14

Phase two internal conflict and negotiation (p. 15). Fero follows her friends to the accessories store with a hesitant excuse: “Yeah... yeah... once in a while. Just wanted to look!” In the store, when her friends offer her a ribbon “This one suits you” (p. 16) Fero replies, “Here, let me put it on?!” and runs away, though the following panel implies she then buys a ribbon of her own.



Visual 15



Visual 16

Phase three acceptance (p. 20). Dinda gives Fero a ribbon as a gift: “I know you like this one!” and “So I bought it. Wear it, okay?” Fero accepts enthusiastically: “Hehehe... thanks, I’ll definitely wear it!” On page 21, when the ribbon is on and Fero sees herself in the mirror, she says, “Wow... wow! I’m so different...” and Dinda responds, “Wow... Fero, you’re so beautiful!”

The Final Panel



Visual 17

In the final panel (end page), the transformed Fero is surrounded by social approval: her friends compliment her (“So feminine, Fero!”), Dinda expresses delight (“You’re welcome. Glad you’re feminine!”), and even the previously teasing boys react with surprise (“Really?! That’s Fero?!”). Amid this approval, Fero delivers one last line: “But I still like being naughty, you know!”

Discussion

Read through Stuart Hall’s (1997) representational framework, these findings show that “Next G: Tomboy Becomes Feminine” operates as a practice of ideological signification that predominantly reproduces binary gender standards, even as it retains traces of negotiation and resistance. Meaning here is not inherent but produced through the interplay of visual and verbal signs, and the discussion below reads the findings for the feminine and tomboy figures in turn before drawing out the underlying mechanism and its implications.

Femininity as a Naturalized Norm

The visual signs surrounding Dinda ribbon, long hair, skirt, blush, eyelashes, smile, and nurturing gesture do not signify separately. In Hall’s (1997) terms they operate cumulatively as naturalized codes of a “good and proper woman,” functioning as the comic’s visual thesis on ideal femininity. The patterned distribution of floral motifs works the same way: rather than mere decoration, the florals act as contextual markers that construct feminine space as culturally distinct from tomboyish space, so that femininity extends beyond the body to the atmospheres coded as “appropriate” for feminine women. By page 21 this sign system visually “envelops” the transforming Fero, as if femininity were an atmosphere that arrives together with its visual attributes.

On the verbal level, Dinda is the story’s most consistent agent of gender normalization. Her opening directive frames Fero’s tomboyish appearance as a problem requiring correction even before the plot begins, revealing an internalization of gender norms so deep that the mere existence of a tomboy identity is enough to trigger the imperative to “fix” it. Her line “You’re a girl, try to be a little feminine!” is a clear instance

of what Hall (1997) calls naturalized meaning: femininity is presented as the logical, natural consequence of being a “girl,” asserted as fact rather than preference. In this sense the dialogue reproduces what Butler (1990) theorizes as the heterosexual matrix, in which sex is culturally constructed to determine gender and the two are required to remain in coherent alignment. Dinda’s closing line, “Glad you’re feminine!”, further frames femininity as something that pleases others and carries social value rather than something chosen for oneself; and her repeated refusal to apologize constructs gender tension as “normal” within female friendship rather than as a violation of personal boundaries.

The Tomboy: Stigma, Agency, and Forced Reconciliation

The introduction of Fero through third-person narration “a tomboy and mischievous child” brands her identity before she acts, presenting it as something already “known” by her social environment, while its pairing with “mischievous” packages tomboyishness with mild negative connotations of disorder. Within Hall’s framework this narration works as a prelude that invites readers to treat the tomboy as a “problem” before the story begins, and to read Fero’s arc as a journey from a problematic identity toward a better one.

Yet the findings also record genuine agency. When Fero takes the tennis ball without asking and laughs with confidence, she is drawn as dominant over a boy who appears helpless beside her one of the very few moments in the comic where a girl is positioned above a boy, and it belongs to the tomboy. The shop panel on page 13 is the most ambivalent sign of all: Fero’s mental image of herself with ribbons and her mumbled “...let’s try...” surface without direct external pressure, leaving open whether this is authentic desire or the internalization of feminine norms already at work before she is aware of it.

The three phases of transformation then trace a movement from rejection to acceptance. In phase one, Dinda’s removal of Fero’s ponytail without consent narrated as friendly concern and left unchallenged enacts the norm that “unfeminine” women do not have full control over their own bodies and appearances, so that others may “improve” them for their own good; this aligns with Atqi’s (2022) account of gender bias operating through power relations naturalized as goodness. In phase two, Fero’s euphemisms (“once in a while,” “just wanted to look”) reveal a tomboy identity internally structured to treat interest in feminine accessories as something to be excused. In phase three, the gift of a ribbon reframes normalization as affection, turning the object into an instrument of gender transformation; Fero’s “I’m so different...” and Dinda’s “you’re so beautiful!” imply that, before the ribbon, Fero was not beautiful, reproducing the stereotype that female beauty is conditional on conformity to feminine standards (Nisya et al., 2024).

The ending stages a mass social reward for the transformed Fero, and her final line “But I still like being naughty, you know!” can be read in two directions. It can be seen as a remnant of subversion; but, more critically, what survives is “liking to be naughty,” not “liking to be a tomboy” or “liking myself the way I am.” What Fero retains is a trait treated as cute and non-threatening rather than a fundamental gender identity: girls may be “a little naughty” as long as they remain visually feminine. This is precisely the mechanism Liliani (2015) identifies as the “conditional acceptance” of tomboy characters in Indonesian children’s literature.

Hegemony Through Friendship

The most significant finding is that gender hegemony here operates not through explicit coercion but through affectionate friendship. There is no antagonist and no punishment; all pressure comes through gifts, praise, care, and sincere invitations from Fero's best friend. Three hegemonic tools operate at once. First, normalization through language: "you're a girl, try to be feminine" presents femininity as natural fact rather than social construct. Second, social reward: the entire circle of friends and even the mirror responds positively to Fero's transformation. Third, the elimination of choice: the narrative never offers Fero the possibility of remaining a tomboy and still being accepted. In Hall's (1997) terms, this is how a dominant ideology reproduces itself through what appears to be free choice: Fero seems to "choose" femininity, but the choice is shaped by structures that reward it and frame tomboyishness as a condition of "lack." Sejati (2025) identifies a similar mechanism in contemporary Indonesian media, where stereotypes and hegemony operate through representations that appear natural and non-coercive.

Implications for Gender Standards and Children's Literacy

These findings carry three implications. First, for the study of Indonesian children's literature, they confirm that comics, as a visual-verbal medium, have representational characteristics that cannot be reduced to verbal analysis alone: background elements, panel composition, facial expressions, and body gestures all function as gender markers that reinforce one another. Second, for understanding children as text producers, the analysis shows that Indonesian children (aged 11–12) have internalized binary gender norms deeply enough to reproduce them in their own creative work; yet the original manuscript also reveals that this internalization is imperfect, carrying seeds of resistance and skepticism that often lack space to develop. Lindsay (2023) stresses the importance of literacy programs that both give children room to create and help them question the gender assumptions they reproduce. Third, for creative literacy programs like the one that produced Next G Comics, the findings point to an urgent need for critical mentoring toward more diverse narratives. That Salsabila herself questioned the premise of "tomboys becoming feminine" through the subtitle "It's Impossible!" shows that critical capacity already exists; what is needed is institutional space that nurtures rather than erases it (Yuan, 2025; Tso, 2023). A genuine literacy program teaches children not only how to tell stories, but also how to ask which stories are worth telling, and why.

Conclusion

Based on Stuart Hall's analysis of visual and verbal elements in the comic "Next G: Tomboy Jadi Feminin", this study concludes that the work predominantly reproduces conventional binary gender standards, rather than offering alternative new meanings of femininity. In this comic, femininity is consistently constructed as an ideal norm that is natural and has a high social acceptance value. In contrast, the tomboy identity is represented as a form of temporary "deviation" that inherently requires correction. This representation reinforces the view that characters who fall outside the boundaries of traditional femininity will always be directed to return to the visual and behavioral standards agreed upon by societal constructions.

This process of identity normalization does not operate through explicit coercion, but rather through the hegemony of friendship and the subjugation of agency. Feminine characters play a highly effective role as normalizing agents through gifts, compliments,

and caring, framing the tomboy's transformation as if it were a necessity in order to gain social acceptance and rewards from her environment. At the same time, visual elements such as floral settings and ribbon attributes, combined with normative verbal utterances such as "You're a girl, try to be a little feminine," work cumulatively to force the tomboy into reconciliation. The remaining resistance at the end of the story, which is only in the form of "mischief," further emphasizes the existence of conditional acceptance; women are allowed to be a little naughty as long as they remain absolutely subject to feminine visual standards.

These findings directly highlight the urgency of critical mentoring in the realm of children's literacy practices in Indonesia. The fact that this comic was produced directly by pre-pubescent children is clear evidence that heterosexist binary gender discourse has been so deeply internalized that they are able to reproduce it independently in creative spaces. This carries the important implication that children's creative literacy programs are no longer sufficient if they focus solely on facilitating technical storytelling skills. Moving forward, critical mentoring through the provision of safe institutional spaces is urgently needed, so that children are not merely passive consumers of ideology, but are able to reinterpret gender stereotypes and boldly explore more inclusive and diverse narratives.

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