

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter elaborate the introduction of the study. This chapter provides the background of the study, research question, objectives of the study, significance of the study, and scope and limitation of the study. All sub-chapters of the introduction of this study are needed as a basis to this study.

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Literature acts as a reflection of society. The representation of women in literature not only mirrors the norms, expectations, and power dynamics of a particular culture but also actively shapes and influences how society perceives gender roles. One of the fundamental forms of social construction in society is gender, which serves as a framework for determining how women and men are expected to act in their social environments (Gunawan & Tobing 2023).

In this study, the concept of social construction specifically refers to the construction of gender roles, the societal expectations, behaviors, and norms assigned to women and men, rather than social constructs in general. Gender is not merely a biological distinction but a social construct that is developed through cultural norms, institutional practices, and daily interactions, shaping both individual identities and societal expectations (Khabibah et al. 2025). Understanding gender as a socially constructed phenomenon is crucial to analysing how women's roles and freedoms are produced, reinforced, and challenged within patriarchal systems.

The concept of the social construction of gender plays a crucial role in shaping how women are perceived and treated within society. In this context, “breaking social construction” refers to efforts to challenge deeply rooted understandings of women's identities, particularly those reinforced by tradition and social roles. Understanding the necessity of breaking such constructions requires first examining how gender is socially produced and maintained. Social construction theory posits that gender is not a fixed or innate attribute but is created and

sustained through social interactions and cultural norms (Lorber, 1994, p. 2). Lorber (1994) describes gender as a social process involving the assignment of roles, behaviors, and expectations based on perceived differences between men and women, emphasizing that these roles are shaped more by cultural factors than biological ones. Similarly, Singh (2024, p.285) highlights how power dynamics and social discourses construct women's identities, reinforcing that gender roles are socially imposed rather than naturally determined.

In line with these perspectives, Bell Hooks in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) offers a critical view of how patriarchal power can be resisted not only through structural change but also through personal awareness and transformation. Hooks argues that feminist theory must center the experiences of those at the margins women of color, working-class women, and other historically excluded groups who have often been left out of mainstream feminist discourse. She explains that “to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (Hooks, 1984, p. ix), emphasizing that the margin is not only a place of exclusion but also a site of radical possibility. Moreover, she stresses the importance of raising consciousness and engaging in everyday acts of resistance as meaningful forms of struggle, stating that “feminist movement is pro-woman. It does not privilege women who are educated, capable, and upper-class. It is for all women” (Hooks, 1984, p. 28). Her framework broadens the concept of resistance to include personal narratives, everyday defiance, and the rejection of traditional roles, thereby aligning with the objectives of this study in analysing how literary characters resist gender-based oppression both individually and collectively.

To understand how gender roles are constructed and challenged in different societies, this study employs a comparative literature approach. Comparative literature allows for a broader and more comprehensive view of literature by comparing works from different periods, cultures, or countries to examine how social values are represented and questioned. As Hokenson (2000) explains, comparative literature provides a “panoptic view” that transcends national

boundaries and enables a deeper understanding of how cultural contexts influence the creation and interpretation of literary works.

Comparative literature does not merely compare similarities or differences between texts but also explores how cultural values, ideologies, and worldviews of a society are embedded within literary works, and how these elements shape meaning within the narrative. Özyön (2022, p.37) emphasizes that this field includes studies of intertextuality, influence among works, cultural representation, and the values embedded in texts, all of which help readers understand how different societies construct meaning through literature. This approach is particularly useful when discussing gender issues, as it can reveal how patriarchal ideologies emerge or are resisted in various literary traditions and historical contexts. As Tötösy de Zepetnek (1998, p.14) emphasizes, comparative literature contributes to “modern knowledge” by enabling cross-cultural and interdisciplinary analysis, fostering meaningful dialogue between literatures, and promoting inclusion of marginalized voices. His systemic and empirical approach underscores the importance of method in literary studies, suggesting that it is not the “what” but the “how” that matters in comparative analysis. This aligns with the objective of this study to explore how different cultural narratives reflect and resist patriarchal constructions of gender.

Comparison in comparative literature is crucial because it can uncover universal themes, such as women’s resistance to oppression, while also highlighting the unique ways in which each culture portrays these struggles. Hokenson (2000, p.3) also notes that the field has increasingly focused on “cross-cultural intertextuality,” which serves as an essential foundation in literary studies especially in today’s globalized era where national and linguistic boundaries are becoming less significant.

This study examines two novels, *Gadis Pantai* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer and *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, both of which portray the struggles of female characters in confronting social constructions that restrict their freedom and identities. Although set in different cultural and historical contexts Indonesia in

the early 20th century and the United States in the 19th century both novels explore how women resist patriarchal norms that confine them.

Gender construction in society involves the development of roles, characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors deemed appropriate within a particular culture (Angelia & Widyaningrum 2024). In patriarchal systems, women are often expected to be obedient, submissive, and confined to domestic roles, while men are positioned as dominant figures in public life. In *Gadis Pantai* and *Little Women*, such gender expectations serve as significant obstacles for the protagonists. However, these female characters do not fully submit to the established norms. Instead, they exhibit acts of resistance against the systems that seek to limit their autonomy, making both novels critical studies in the context of challenging gender-based social constructions. As Gurung (2025, p.148) argues, gender roles are socially constructed attributes that vary across cultures and historical periods, influencing societal expectations and shaping individual identities. This reinforces the idea that literature can serve as a powerful medium for challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for a more equitable society.

In *Gadis Pantai*, the protagonist, a young girl from coastal Java, is coerced into marriage with a Bendoro within a patriarchal and feudal system. As a mistress, she becomes emblematic of women's powerlessness in the face of feudal authority, legitimized by local customs (Toer, 2000, p. 45). Saragih et al. (2022) note that *Gadis Pantai* represents the struggles of common people whose lives are controlled by the nobility. The main character experiences multiple forms of injustice—losing agency over her own body, being forced to submit to her husband, and even losing custody of the child she births. Nevertheless, she manifests resistance against the oppressive system that seeks to control her.

In contrast, *Little Women* depicts the March sisters' confrontation with social expectations that demand conformity to idealized domestic roles. Jo March, in particular, rejects the notion of the "ideal woman" by pursuing a career as a writer, illustrating that education and intellectual pursuit can be potent tools of resistance (Alcott 1868, p.112). Jo challenges the rigid gender norms of her time by asserting

her freedom and ambition, and Alcott uses her character to critique the societal pressures placed upon women. The novel portrays women's resistance to traditional roles not only as a personal journey toward self-realization but also as a broader social critique of the patriarchal structures that seek to limit them.

Despite their different cultural and historical contexts, both *Gadis Pantai* and *Little Women* explore the theme of resisting patriarchal oppression and women's quest for autonomy. The protagonists face societal norms designed to constrain their freedom, but they do not wholly accept these limitations. Their acts of resistance symbolize a broader rebellion against entrenched social constructs regarding gender.

In outlining the analysis of resistance to the social construction of gender, this study analyses the forms of social construction experienced by the female protagonists and the ways in which they resist these constructions, comparing how their struggles unfold within different cultural and historical contexts. The writer needs to examine how patriarchal power, freedom versus limitation, and the tension between individual autonomy and social norms shape the lives of the female protagonists. To support this analysis, the writer applies Judith Lorber's theory of *Paradoxes of Gender* (1994). Lorber (1994, p.13) argues that gender is a human production that depends on everyone constantly 'doing gender'. According to Lorber, gender is not an innate trait but a social construct produced and reinforced through socialization, interaction, and institutional norms. Gender roles are culturally created rather than biologically determined, and they function to maintain hierarchical structures where men hold dominant positions while women are subordinated (Lorber, 1994, p. 32).

There are fifth previous study that relate to this study based on data and theory. The first previous study is by Mareta & Afriana (2024), entitled *Gender Inequality Analysis Represented in "Little Women" by Louisa May Alcott*. This study analyses gender inequality in the novel *Little Women*, highlighting aspects of subordination, stereotyping, marginalization, workload, and violence against women. The second previous study by Febrina (2018) entitled *Feminism in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Novel Gadis Pantai*. This journal discusses feminism

in *Gadis Pantai*, especially related to economic rights and women's roles in the family. The third previous study by Rahmadani & Manaf (2020) entitled *Representation of Women in Gadis Pantai by Pramoedya Ananta Toer*. This study discusses the representation of women in *Gadis Pantai*, using feminist literary criticism to examine gender roles and the power structures that oppress women in the novel. The fourth previous study by Brkljač (2024), entitled *Little Women and Feminism: Book and Movie Narrative*. This study examines the feminist themes in *Little Women* and compares its portrayal in the original novel with modern film adaptations. The study explores gender roles, women's family duties, domesticity, marriage, and societal expectations in different periods. The fifth previous by Smithers (2021), entitled *Shifting the Focus: A Comparative Analysis of the Protagonists of Louisa May Alcott's Little Women and Greta Gerwig's Little Women*. The thesis provides a detailed comparison of the four main protagonists Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy between Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation.

There are several differences between previous studies and this study. First, previous studies focused on analysing *Gadis Pantai* and *Little Women* separately, without drawing direct comparisons between them. Meanwhile, this study takes a comparative approach, examining how both novels depict resistance to socially constructed gender roles in different cultural and historical contexts. Second, previous studies have primarily used feminist theory, gender inequality theory, and discourse analysis to explore gender oppression. In contrast, this study applies Judith Lorber's *Paradoxes of Gender Theory* to analyse how gender roles are created, reinforced, and challenged within the social structures portrayed in both novels. Therefore, this study is necessary to provide a comparative analysis that highlights how gender is socially constructed and resisted in different cultural settings, distinguishing it from previous study.

## 1.2 Research Question

1. How is gender constructed in the protagonist's life as it depicted in the both novels?
2. How do the protagonists' resist the construction as represented in both novels?

### 1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To compare the social construction of gender experienced by the protagonists in the two novels.
2. To compare the ways in which the protagonists in both novels resist traditional gender roles.

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

Hopefully, the result of this study can provide several benefits to the readers both theoretically and practically in understanding how literature shapes and challenges gender roles in society. Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to the field of literature, especially in analysing the comparison of social constructions and the forms of resistance portrayed by the protagonists in *Gadis Pantai* and *Little Women*. By applying Judith Lorber's theory of *Paradoxes of Gender*, this study helps explain how gender roles are socially constructed, sustained, and resisted within different cultural and literary contexts. Furthermore, this study highlights how literature becomes a powerful medium to explore, critique, and question dominant gender expectations across societies.

Practically, it is hoped that this study will encourage readers to raise awareness of how literature can influence our understanding of gender and inspire social change. In addition, this study is expected to serve as a useful reference for students, academics, and researchers who are conducting related studies in literary analysis, particularly those focusing on the social construction of gender and character resistance in comparative literature.

### 1.5 Scope and Limitation of the Study

The scope of this study is the theory used, namely Judith Lorber's *Paradoxes of Gender*. This theory is applied to explore how gender roles are constructed through societal norms, and how the protagonists in both novels respond and resist those constructions. Lorber's framework offers insights into how masculinity and femininity are not innate but are shaped by cultural expectations and sustained through repeated social practices. The limitation of this study is the focus on the utterances of characters and authors in the novels *Gadis Pantai* and *Little Women*.