



**AN ANALYSIS OF QUEER REPRESENTATION  
IN ZEN CHO'S *BLACK WATER SISTER***

**TAN JIA YUIN**

**20AAB00249**

**SUPERVISOR: MS. GHEETA A/P CHANDRAN**

**UALZ 3023 - FYP2 REPORT**

**SUBMITTED IN  
PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR BACHELOR OF ARTS (HONS) ENGLISH EDUCATION  
FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE**

**OCTOBER TRIMESTER 2023**

## **Acknowledgements**

Foremost, I'll like to offer my warmest thanks and appreciation to my supervisor Ms Gheeta A/P Chandran for her continuous encouragement and advice throughout the many months undertaking this research paper. Without her patience and careful guidance, I wouldn't have been able to complete the final year project.

Next, I would also like to sincerely thank my fellow friends, especially Tok Shu Qing and Wang Lifei, for their continuous support not only while completing my final year project, but throughout my degree life in UTAR. The times we spent together in class and socialising was very much cherished and I will look back on it fondly.

Last but not least, my thanks must also go to my family, for being unwavering pillars of strength and the love that they gave throughout the four years pursuing my degree in UTAR, without whom none of this would be possible.

## Approval Sheet

This research paper attached hereto, entitled An Analysis of Queer Representation in Zen Cho's Black Water Sister prepared and submitted by Tan Jia Yuin in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) English Language is hereby accepted.



---

Supervisor

Date: 15/12/2023

Supervisor's name: Ms Gheeta A/P Chandran

## **Abstract**

This study explores how Zen Cho's novel published in 2021, *Black Water Sister*, navigates through queer themes and representation, as well as how it tackles issues related to the queer community. In this study, the researcher investigated how the novel depicts the queer characters, as well as how heteronormativity within the setting of the novel affects the queer protagonist. Textual analysis is used to examine the text to discover how the themes correlate within the context of queer theory. The conclusion of the study finds that the queer characters in the novel are compelling and multidimensional while also allowed to be confident in their sexualities despite the issues they faced, creating diverse queer representations. The downsides of heteronormative ideology in general society are also seen through the viewpoint of the protagonist, by how it negatively affects the protagonist's mind and action within the text.

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Approval Form</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Background of Study.....	7
Statement of Problem.....	11
Research Question.....	12
Research Objectives .....	12
Significance of Study .....	12
Definition of Key Terms .....	13
Scope & Limitation of Study .....	15
Conclusion.....	16
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>16</b>
Queer Writings & Representation in Young Adult Fiction.....	17
Queer Writings & Representation in Malaysian Literature in English .....	19
Queer Writings & Representation from a Female Perspective .....	20
Conclusion.....	22
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Queer Theory.....	23
Application of Judith Butler’s Contributions to Queer Theory.....	25
Methodology .....	26
Conclusion.....	27

<b>CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS &amp; DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>28</b>
Representation of Members of the Queer Community in the Text .....	28
a) Jessamyn Teoh.....	28
b) Sharanya .....	33
The Impact of Heteronormative Societal Expectations Towards the Main Character.....	37
a) Impact Towards Internal Action.....	38
b) Impact Towards External Action.....	40
Conclusion.....	44
<b>CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>45</b>
Summary & Findings .....	45
Implications of Study .....	47
Recommendations for Future Study.....	48
Conclusion.....	49
<b>References.....</b>	<b>50</b>

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As the local Malaysian literary scene grows, it is critical to consider how literature has always been an invaluable tool that acts as an instrument for social change in society. Literary works have the potential to foster massive change by shining a light on issues pertaining to people of minority communities and help bring awareness to their everyday struggles. Representation of queer people in literature can help encourage more discussions and bring more awareness of their issues to the forefront of Malaysian society.

This study will focus on Zen Cho's novel *Black Water Sister*. The main aim of this paper will be to analyse how nonconforming sexual identities and orientations are represented in *Black Water Sister*, as well the discrimination and the social bias that Malaysian queer people face living in a restrictive heteronormative society. Chapter 1 of this study will look into the background of the study, problem statement, research questions and objectives, significance of study, definition of key terms, and the scope and limitations of the study.

### **Background of Study**

Released to critical acclaim by critics worldwide, *Black Water Sister* by Zen Cho stands out among other Malaysian fantasy works when it was first published in 2021 by Ace-Berkley Publishing Group. Cho has already received praises for her past work, such as her debut novel *Sorcerer to the Crown* and *The True Queen*, but *Black Water Sister* would be her first novel set in modern-day Malaysia ("About- Zen Cho", n.d.). As a Malaysian that is currently living in the United Kingdom, the premise of *Black Water Sister* is somewhat inspired by her personal real-life experiences as a Malaysian living abroad from her home country. The book was well received by reviewers and received numerous praises for the story, even receiving nominations for the 2022 Ignyte Award and World Fantasy Award.

Set against a backdrop of present-day Malaysia, the novel stars Jessamyn Teoh, who is a US-born Malaysian that just moved with her family back to Malaysia from the United States to start a new life. Like a fish out of the water, she is faced with the daunting task of trying to adapt to her new living situation while also being jobless since graduating from Harvard. On top of that, Jess has been hiding her identity as a lesbian from her family, as well as keeping her long-distance relationship with her girlfriend, Sharanya, a secret from them too. Jess' troubles only escalate when she realises that she can hear the voices of her dead maternal grandmother. Immediately, she is dragged into the secret family business of the supernatural and paranormal, playing as a medium for her dead grandmother. While she tries to help her grandmother settle her worldly mission for vengeance, Jessamyn finds herself getting increasingly caught between two worlds, and must find a way to resolve her issues before the supernatural takes over her life (“Black Water Sister- Zen Cho”, n.d.).

Jessamyn's inner conflicts with her sexual orientation is prominent throughout the plot, echoing the real-life issues that many queer people face on a daily basis in today's heteronormative society where discrimination towards the queer community is widespread. Like Jess, many real-life people who identify as being queer or part of the LGBT+ community are forced to stay closeted and hide their identity from friends and family due to fears of being stigmatised and ostracised by people who may not be accepting of them.

According to Annamarie Jagose in *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, while the term 'queer' does not have a universally agreed upon exact definition, the term 'queer' is commonly understood as an catch-all umbrella term to refer to people of the LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community who do not neatly fit into society's conventional understandings of sexual and gender identities (1996). The queer or LGBT+ community consists of individuals



who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender, which has led to widespread discrimination against queer people for not fitting in with the traditional norms of society. Many around the world even find themselves facing the possibility of being criminalised or being targeted in hate crimes due to the lack of anti-discrimination laws that protect their rights to freedom of expression (UN. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015). However, the rise of the LGBT+ movement has seen public opinions and attitudes towards queer people among society shift and become more positive, leading to wider acceptance and recognition of the queer community worldwide.

The rise of understanding and acknowledgement of queer and LGBT+ issues have also led to the formation of queer theory, which seeks to challenge how society traditionally labels certain forms and expressions of sexuality and gender. The term ‘queer theory’ was first popularised by Teresa de Lauretis in her 1991 work entitled *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*. Since then, other prominent thinkers such as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner would expand and develop the discipline further. According to Judith Butler, who is one of the most influential contributors to the development of queer theory, the theory questions the rigid heteronormative model embedded in society and aims to break down the notion of a ‘standard’ ideal of sexuality and gender (1999). Overall, queer theorists and thinkers utilise queer theory as a means to question any kind of fixed identity categories and binaries present in human identities.

Nevertheless, while there has been more recognition of the issues of the LGBT+ and queer community in Malaysia, it is still considered as a highly divisive and hot debate among the local society, with many political and religious groups continuing to heavily condemn and stigmatise those from the queer community (“Malaysia: State-backed discrimination”, 2022).

Despite the fact that public opinions towards queer issues have become more receptive throughout the years, by and large the queer community in Malaysia still frequently face widespread discrimination and stigma (Jerome et al., 2021). Legal protection and recognition for queer people is also not recognised in the eyes of Malaysian law, forcing many queer people to stay closeted and hide their identities in fear of being ostracised.

At the same time, the emerging popularity and interest in Malaysian literature has also seen more and more local works exploring topics that are considered as taboo or sensitive issues in traditional Malaysian culture, challenging the perceptions and biases of local readers (Quayum, 2003). Notably, since the first publication of queer stories in the anthology *Mata Hati Kita/The Eyes of Our Hearts*, there has been an increasing trend of local literary works that explores queer themes and identities of divergent sexualities and gender orientations, such as the aforementioned *Black Water Sister* and Joshua Kam's *How the Man in Green Saved Pahang, and Possibly the World*.

In *Black Water Sister*, the story is set in a heteronormative Malaysian society where there is stigma and prejudice against queer identities, leading to the protagonist Jess to hide her lesbian status from her family to avoid disappointing them, creating stress and inner conflict within Jess as she navigates through an unfamiliar culture. Throughout the book, Cho does not shy away from highlighting the issues that characters with non-conforming sexual identities face, helping to push forward the issues of real-life queer people in modern-day Malaysia.

This paper will analyse the depictions of queer identities and the issues that the protagonist faces as a closeted queer in Zen Cho's *Black Water Sister* through the lens of queer theory.

## **Statement of Problem**

There has been an emerging trend of Malaysian literary works in English that features queer characters that do not conform to society's expectations towards gender and sexuality in the story (Chin & Quayum, 2021). However, there is still little research done for Malaysian literature works that have explored these topics or features queer representation, especially for fiction works. While there have been attempts to address this gap, there is still little research into how queer people and queer themes in general are being portrayed specifically in Malaysian fiction works. The study of queer representation in Malaysian literature fiction is important as it could provide new perspectives as another indicator of current Malaysian perceptions towards queer people in general.

Additionally, by looking into how local literary works explore queer themes and how it represents queer people, it could bring to light how the current Malaysian society views queer people and their identities in general. While there is some research done that also investigates how queer movements have spread in Malaysia such as through social media (Mokhtar et al, 2019), there has been little investigation into how literature can also play a part in exploring the perceptions of Malaysian society towards queer people. By also looking into how queer people are portrayed in literary works, it could be possible to gauge the current sentiments of Malaysian society and be able better understand the discrimination that queer people face by society through the literary text (Jerome, 2022).

## **Research Questions**

Based on the issues raised, the following research questions are proposed:

1. How are members of the queer community and non-conforming identities represented in Zen Cho's *Black Water Sister*?
2. How does the heteronormative societal expectations in the text impact the main character throughout the plot?

## **Research Objectives**

With regards to the research questions above, the study aims to:

1. To investigate how members of the queer community and non-conforming identities are represented in Zen Cho's *Black Water Sister*.
2. To discover how heteronormative societal expectations in the text impact the main character throughout the plot.

## **Significance of Study**

The rise of Malaysian literature that explores queer diversity and topics can reflect the sentiments of Malaysian society towards queer people as a whole and show us the direction where it may be heading towards. Literature and other forms of art often reflect the norms and values of society at the time it was produced (Dubey, 2013). From the written works produced during a certain era, one can learn how the culture, beliefs, traditions, and morals of a society is like as how it is memorialised in the written words. Thus, modern literary Malaysian works also function as a representation of current Malaysian society. Furthermore, literature also can have a major impact in shaping the developments and future of society (Ismail, 2008).

Through reading written works, readers are encouraged to challenge their way of thought, view arguments from a different point, and develop critical thinking skills. Fiction works can be a vehicle for readers to better engage with complex and sensitive themes and topics in a way that may not be as succinctly conveyed in non-fiction (Seifert, 2020). The author is able to exercise more freedom in delivering their message through the medium, without the need to be shackled to mere retellings of real-life events. Instead, they can be more creative in engaging their audience on a more emotional level, while also encouraging their audience to further contemplate our understanding of our own reality. Fiction can provide readers with a different way of engaging with problems and issues in the real world, helping to see issues and problems through a new perspective (Lo Basso, 2020).

By being exposed to works with queer themes, readers may be able to reconfigure their previously withheld biases and assumptions about queer identities, and reshape their opinions on queer identities (Banks, 2009). Therefore, by analysing how queer themes are tackled in literary works, policymakers and political authorities can gauge the current developments and perceptions of the local community towards queer identities and better understand where Malaysian citizens stand on this topic.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

#### **1. Queer**

For the context of this study, the term is broadly used as an umbrella term that refers to individuals that do not identify as a heterosexual (attraction to the opposite gender) or cisgender (having a gender identity that aligns with birth sex). The term is sometimes used synonymously with LGBT+.

## 2. LGBT+

An acronym for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans communities ("LGBT+," n.d.). Variations of this acronym may include additional letters standing for other gender and sexual orientations. For convenience's sake, the term 'LGBT+' is generally understood to also encompass every other category of gender identities and sexuality.

## 3. Heteronormativity

A system of compulsory heterosexuality or heterosexuality hegemony placed upon society that restricts sex and gender to a binary relation (Butler, 1999). It assumes gender is restricted to the masculine/male and the feminine/female, and that sexual attraction towards the opposite sex is the 'natural' state.

## 4. Homophobia

The prejudice or negative set of preconceptions towards gays and lesbians that further extends towards bias against any form of sexual relations and practices deemed as homosexual in nature (Barker & Scheele, 2016).

## 5. Closeted/To be in a closet

The action of hiding your sexuality from others, especially if someone identifies as part of a marginalised sexuality or gender identity in the queer or LGBT community (Barker & Scheele, 2016).

## **Scope & Limitation of the Study**

The scope of this study is to analyse the queer elements present in Zen Cho's *Black Water Sister* and find out how queer people are being represented in the story as well as the challenges that they face as a direct result of their identity. The study will explore how queerness is being integrated into the story, such as having queer characters featured in the story or tackle some form of issue related to queer identities. But due to the limited scope of the subject, this study is subjected to several unavoidable limitations. The findings of this study may not be applicable to other ranges of contexts due to the nature of the research. The text studied will be subjected to the biases and subjectivity of the author, and the thoughts and opinions expressed through the text cannot be representative of the entirety of the Malaysian literature genre. It can only reflect a new emerging trend in Malaysian literature that tackles queer topics and subjects, helping readers connect with the challenges faced in the story.

Additionally, queer theory is a very broad approach that aims to deconstruct our current oversimplified understandings of sex, identity, and gender in society (Barker & Scheele, 2016). It challenges the notion of rigid binaries and instead acknowledges that human sexuality and gender identities covers a wide spectrum that is ever-changing and fixed. The theory has been expanded on and contributed to by many prominent thinkers over many decades and have since encompassed a broad range of ideas. Therefore, to further narrow down the scope of discussion, Judith Butler's work and contributions towards queer studies will be the main contributor towards the understanding of queer theory in this study. Butler is one of the most influential contributors towards queer theory and is best known for their books *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), which have been instrumental in subverting the conventional ideals of gender and sexuality (Szorenyi, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

The components in chapter 1 begins with the introduction to the research topic entitled “An Analysis of Queer Representation in Zen Cho’s *Black Water Sister*”, followed with the background of study and statement of problem to help readers better understand the issues proposed through the study. In response, sections on research questions, research objectives, significance of study, definition of key terms, and scope and limitation of study are developed based on these issues in chapter 1 of the study.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Through literature, writers are able to offer their insights and views through written text into how diverse identities experience and are affected by the sociopolitical and cultural conditions of their time. By looking into how *Black Water Sister* depicts the experience of those with non-conforming sexual identities and orientations, readers may glean some information into some of the discrimination and the social bias that queer people face.

The main aim of this chapter will be to look deeper into the issues of relevance to this study, which is how queer representation is presented in young adult fiction and Malaysian literature written in English. The study will also seek to relate the importance of the queer female viewpoint in literature. Supporting works by other authors will be presented to further support the arguments and provide further reading and perspectives on these topics.



## **Queer Writings & Representation in Young Adult Fiction**

The young adult (YA) literature genre targets adolescent readers that are around the ages of 12 to 18. During this age period, many teens would often find themselves exploring new experiences as they enter a transition stage from childhood to adulthood, and this is reflected in the YA genre. Many YA fiction explore themes of coming of age, relationships, and romance, reflecting the concerns of youths as they navigate through the complexities of life. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the YA genre is no stranger to exploring queer themes, as teens are starting to form their own unique self-identity and understand their place in the world. Long before the first instance of legalisation of marriage equality and enactment of laws protecting the rights of the queer community, YA novels have been giving a voice to marginalised queer identities, creating queer stories that explore non-heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality. Queer themes in YA novels can not only give a sense of identity and representation for those that have never felt like they fit within society's restrictive ideas of gender and sexuality, but it also can help acquaint young readers with an empathetic and humanising perspective of queer characters, creating a path towards the acceptance of the queer community. Today, the queer YA subgenre is flourishing, seeing a huge rise in popularity among readers as the scope of representation of different queer identities and sexualities widen and grow.

In "*The Wonder of a Target Audience: On the Growth of Queer Young Adult Literature*" (2018), Seville examines the past and present of how queer YA fiction has developed over half a decade of development and progress. When queer characters start emerging in YA fiction, they are often killed off at some point in the narration, creating an undesirable message that queer people are not worthy of living. However, representation began to improve throughout the next few decades, as more and more people sympathised with the queer movement. By the

present day, queer YA literature has become more widely available than it has ever been, increasing queer representation and stories for youths to find themselves in.

Christine A. Jenkins and Michael Cart's publication *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* (2018) is indispensable when it comes to a more in-depth understanding of the history of queer representation in YA literature. Since the publication of the first book with queer content in the 1960s, the subgenre has undergone an evolution in its depiction of queer characters, and the book provides useful criteria in identifying the good and bad of how queer representation is depicted in YA novels throughout the years. The book also further explains how some outdated depictions of queer characters may be harmful and identifies titles that provide a great and positive representation of the queer community.

Themes of coming out and homophobia are also prevalent in queer YA literature. As adolescents discover and explore their sexuality and gender orientations, many queer teens may be daunted by the scary prospect of coming out as queer to their family and friends, especially if they have experienced homophobia in their life. "*Queer representations: Coming out and homophobia in selected young adult novels*" (2022) examines the coming-out process of several popular YA novels through the perspective of the queer protagonists. From the study, it discovered that homophobia plays a big role in how the characters make peace with their identities. The representations of queer characters in these works are also positive, showing that the queer YA subgenre has come a long way since its early beginnings.

## **Queer Writings & Representation in Malaysian Literature in English**

Historically, queer people are often discriminated against in society, leading to many queer people experiencing prejudice by others in daily life. Malaysia, in particular, is ranked as one of the least accepting countries in South-East Asia when it comes to queer acceptance (Manalastas et. al, 2017). Malaysia's civil and Syariah law criminalises "unnatural offences" and "indecent behaviour" that targets queer and LGBT+ "behaviour" such as the law as written in Penal Code Section 377 ("LGBTQ legal guide", 2021). However as queer issues are being raised globally, public receptivity towards queer people and issues is also increasingly becoming more positive and understanding (Jerome et. al, 2021). One of the ways this sentiment has been reflected is through the emergence of writings and literature that tackles this topic in some shape of form, often showing queer people in a more positive light that could encourage empathy towards the discrimination and prejudice queer people face. Queer writings start to emerge into the Malaysia literary scene, especially in the form of short fiction writings that are published by indie publishers (Chin & Quayum, 2021).

The analysis of queer Malaysian literature has started to gain traction in recent years, of note is the study titled "*Malaysian Queer Literature*" by Collin Jerome (2022), which analyses the new literary genre as well as queerness in select short stories from *Body 2 Body - A Malaysian Queer Anthology* and *Mata Hati Kita/The Eyes of Our Hearts*. The study mainly utilises the analytical method as established by Blackburn, Clark, and Nemeth (2015), and discovered that queer Malaysian focuses on the elements such as sexuality and gender identities, allowing readers to reevaluate their existing ideologies on the discrimination of queer people and help open up a dialogue surrounding the treatment of queer people in society.

Another study by Collin Jerome in “*A Place I Could Call My Own: Queer Malays and the Meaning of ‘Home’*”, also explored some aspects of queerness but from a Malay perspective in the story *Tiada Sesalan (No Regrets)* and explores the concept of ‘home’ for queer Malays through Malay culture and religion (2020). Both studies investigate themes of queer identities and sexualities from a Malaysian perspective through stories written by local authors.

### **Queer Writings & Representation from a Female Perspective**

The rise of queer representation and visibility in literature has also lifted queer voices and viewpoints and brought them to the forefront of society, allowing the marginalised community to be able to share their experiences and highlight the discrimination and issues that they have been facing. It is a welcomed development. However, not all queer voices are being lifted equally. Early queer and LGBT movements were overwhelmingly white, cis, and gay-oriented events, which is a trend that continues to persist to this day. Although gay men also have a space in the queer movement, it has left some sections of the queer community underserved. Women and the female voice can still find themselves underrepresented in the mainstream queer movement and media. Queer female voices shouldn’t be ignored and sidelined, as their experiences can be distinct from that of straight women or queer men. Queer women writings are often distinct from that of the male perspective, focusing more on the oppressions of the patriarchal system and taking a more critical view of the heterosexist norms of society. The female perspective in queer literature merits a closer look and must be more adequately represented to better encompass the full range of experiences within the queer community.

In “*Lesbian history and gay studies: Keeping a feminist perspective*” (1992), the writers dived deeper into the lesbian feminist viewpoint in gay studies. Arguing for the lifting of lesbian culture rather than just absorbing as part of the mostly male culture that queer studies currently

occupy, the study debates on various approaches that could be taken to put a brighter spotlight onto lesbian history and the female perspective to better discover the impacts of social structures and dynamics on the lives of the queer minority.

The female experience in the 19th century of China is a dominant and reoccurring theme in the story *Snowflake Secret Fan* by Lisa See. Through the lens of queer theory, Naihao Tan looks closer into how the two heroines express their mutual love for each other and unravel their cognition of gender identity living under feudal China culture and moral norms. The study “*Interpret the Laotong identity and emotions of Lily in Snowflake Secret Fan from the perspective of queer theory*” (2023) acknowledges that both heroine’s identity as women plays a huge part into how they express their love and friendship for each other.

Caroline Jones’ study titled “*From homoplot to progressive novel: Lesbian experience and identity in contemporary young adult novels*” (2013) expands on how lesbians have been represented in YA novels. While there are more novels featuring lesbian characters published than ever before, Jones acknowledges the need for more critical attention into the lesbian perspective and its importance in reaffirming the sexuality and personality development within queer children. Being double marginalised as a woman and lesbian in the patriarchal heteronormative society, young lesbians deserve to be able to have their place in the world ‘normalised’ and celebrated despite their differences in experience.

## **Conclusion**

The components in chapter 2 begins with a deeper insight into the issues that are presented in the study. Chapter 2 further elaborates on the existing queer representation in YA fiction, Malaysian literature in English, and the presence queer female perspective in fiction. A review of past studies is also provided as further understanding of existing studies and research in this particular area of study through a summarised overview of relevant past research.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

To reveal how the heteronormative societal norms of Malaysia are impacting queer characters and how they are represented in Zen Cho's *Black Water Sister*, it is necessary to further explain why a specific approach has been chosen to collect and analyse the data from this study. It is important that the selected approach be justified and valid for the topic at hand to answer the research objectives that has been laid out in previous chapters.

Chapter 3 will dive further into queer theory as well as explain the main concepts surrounding it, with a focus on Judith Butler's contributions and works in relation to queer theory. The chapter will also explain the research methodology that will be undertaken for this study. A conceptual framework will also be proposed to further explain the process and variables that will be utilised in this research study design.

## Queer Theory

Queer theory refers to the study and theorisation of gender and sexuality that do not conform to the ideas of ‘heteronormativity’, which refers to the standard of making heterosexuality as the default and challenges the idea of heterosexuality as the norm in society. According to queer theory, heterosexuality is promoted and reinforced as the ‘preferred’ orientation through institutional arrangements and socio-cultural norms. Queer theory encourages critical thinkers to deconstruct the ideas behind the rigid binaries and categorisation processes around identity and sexuality.

First coined by Theresa de Laurentis in the article “*Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*” (1991), the term queer theory was used to challenge the usage of heterosexuality as the benchmark and refuses the concept that sexuality is something that can be easily defined. Her work was also informed by early philosophers such as Michel Foucault, whose works are used as the early framework that queer theory is based upon (Watson, 2005). Other notable figures include Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick whose works were one of the founding texts in queer studies and challenges the idea of a binary view of complex human sexualities, arguing that human sexuality is complex and cannot be easily categorised in binary terms.

As such, people who do not identify as cisgender or heterosexual have banded together under the umbrella term of ‘queer’, which has come to be a label that signifies someone whose sexual orientation and gender identity runs counter with established societal ideals and norms of sexuality and gender identities. While it has a history of being used as a derogative slur against those deemed as ‘deviants’ in society, it has since been reclaimed by the queer community to refer to the wide spectrum of LGBT+ people under its umbrella (Cheves, 2023).

According to queer theory, heteronormativity refers to the internalised presumption that heterosexuality is the ‘normal’ and ‘ideal sexual’ orientation in society, while any other forms of expressions of gender and sexuality are considered as ‘deviant’ (Pollitt et al, 2021). This internalised message is instilled since young and reinforced through the social environment. Men and women alike are expected to constrain themselves within the rigid gender, sexual, and family binary as dictated by societal norms with little to no room to experiment in their lifestyles, lest they be seen as ‘abnormal’. It is ever encompassing and affects every aspect of daily life, such as how someone dresses, their behaviour, and ideologies (Wilkerson, 2013). These pervasive societal standards can be pressuring for even cis-hetero individuals to live up to and conform to these expectations. The consequences of heteronormativity for people who identify as part of the queer community can be even more severe, as they may find themselves struggling to live up to these unrealistic societal expectations.

Therefore, it is not uncommon for queer folks to not reveal their sexuality and gender identity with friends, family, or the wider community out of fear of being stigmatised and ostracised. To do so is to be ‘in the closet’, which means that they have not ‘come out’ and disclosed their status as someone in the queer community to their loved ones (Resnick, 2021). Majority of people who are queer will choose to stay in the closet, especially if there are laws criminalising the existence of LGBT people and their rights in their country (Poitras, 2019). People may choose to stay in the closet completely or partially due to a wide variety of factors, ranging from fear of physical harm due to retaliation, loss of close relationships, potential for discrimination, and being in violation of anti-LGBT+ laws.



## **Application of Judith Butler's Contributions to Queer Theory**

For the purpose of this study, the main resources that are used to inform queer theory are the influential works of Judith Butler, who is best known for writing the books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993). Butler's works were critical towards the formation of modern understandings of queer theory for her understandings of sex and gender. According to Butler, our understandings of gender are a social construct and are performative in nature, rather than something we are born with in nature (Butler, 1990, p. 33). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler challenges the assumption that gender and sex are something that is constant and argues that gender is something that people 'do' and is constantly learnt based on social conventions (Butler, 1990, p. 143). Social, cultural, and political practices and factors play a part in constructing society's ideal of sex and gender. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler further elaborates on the concept of performativity as described in *Gender Trouble*, critiquing the concepts of sex and gender of other philosophers, and providing a new perspective on the categorical construction of bodily representations of the self. Their work is often used to challenge heteronormative societal norms and helped to inform the discourses surrounding gendered behaviours (Salih, 2002).

Through using the lens of queer theory as a theoretical framework, the relationship between the representation of sexuality and gender can be analysed in literary bodies of text, providing a framework to investigate how heteronormativity is ever-present and permeates culture and society. Queer theory encourages thinkers to see sexuality and gender identities as something that is fluid rather than static and oppose the assumption that identities that do not conform to heteronormative ideas are deviant and abnormal (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018).

By applying Butler's ideas and understandings of sexuality and gender identities to *Black Water Sister*, it can help illustrate the troubles that Jessamyn faces as a queer female living in a heteronormative Malaysian society and bring to light the discrimination and anxiety she faces as someone who doesn't fit into the rigid hetero-binary ideals of society.

### **Methodology**

In this study, the qualitative method of textual analysis as outlined by Mckee (2003) will be utilised to analyse Zen Cho's *Black Water Sister* to answer the questions posed by the research questions and objectives of this study. Textual analysis is utilised as this study deals primarily with literary text, putting more of a focus into the construction of the elements of a text and seeking to explain how it contributes to the overall meaning of the literary text. A critical reading of the novel that focuses entirely on the text will be taken as the text of the novel will be the primary source of data in this research.

After a critical reading of the novel, the data will be interpreted and analysed based on key elements of queer theory. Judith Butler's understanding of queer theory will underpin this study. Queer theory is chosen to analyse the literary text as the theory is used in literary analysis to challenge the rigid heteronormative views of sexuality and gender dynamics, and is an important tool used to legitimise different expressions of sexuality and gender outside social norms.

From the findings of the analysis, a discussion will be formed based on the result before wrapping up the study with a conclusion.

Therefore, the conceptual framework of this study is proposed as such:

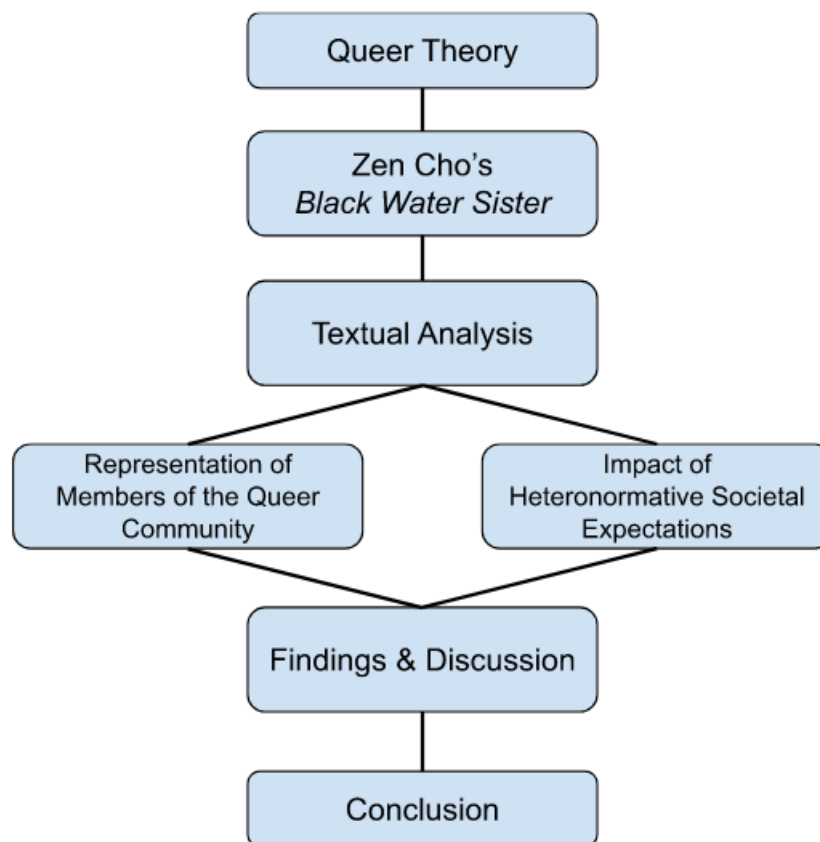


Figure 1. *The Conceptual Framework based on the Proposed Ideas for the Study.*

## **Conclusion**

The components in chapter 2 have further elaborated on queer theory and explanation of key terms and concepts related to the theory. Judith Butler's works have informed the bulk of the researcher's understanding of queer theory, as their works are influential and relevant to answering the research objectives and questions of this study. Finally, a detailed explanation of the research methodology and theoretical framework of this study was provided.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

In this chapter, a detailed report of the findings and data collected as outlined according to the research objectives of the study will be done. The findings and raw data are then arranged into main topics and subtopics to better present it in a logical manner. If needed, supplemental context and clarification will be provided alongside the findings to better explain how the data collected ties with the objectives of the study. The main topics presented in this section are titled as:

- i) Representation of Members of the Queer Community in the Text
- ii) The Impact of Heteronormative Societal Expectations Towards the Main Character

Next, a thorough analysis and interpretation of the findings will be conducted to form a discussion to provide new critical insights and understanding of the research questions that were proposed for the study. Through evidence based upon the text as well as the findings, an explanation of its significance will also be presented.

### **Representation of Members of the Queer Community in the Text**

In the novel *Black Water Sister*, two queer characters are present within the novel. The main character, Jessamyn Teoh, or also known as Jess, is the protagonist of the story who also identifies as a lesbian. Additionally, she is also in a romantic relationship with an Indian girl named Sharanya, who is the other queer character present in the story.

#### **a) Jessamyn Teoh**

As the main protagonist of *Black Water Sister*, most of the main plot and narrative of the story is driven by her actions and revolves around her. As the story is written from her point of view,

the narrative of the story is seen through Jess' perspective and readers have a first-hand experience on how events are affecting Jess as the plot moves along.

It was established that prior to the beginning of the narrative, Jess had already known that she wasn't straight, and identifies as a lesbian. Jess was already aware of her own sexual preference towards the same gender and was also in a long-distance relationship with another girl named Sharanya, who lives in Singapore. The text is quick to establish this from the first paragraph, as depicted as follows:

The first thing the ghost said to Jess was: Does your mother know you're a pengkid?

The ghost said it to shock. (Cho, 2021, p. 1)

Later in the same chapter itself, it would be revealed that '*pengkid*' is a slang in Hokkien for lesbians. Although both Jess and the reader would not immediately realise the meaning of the word '*pengkid*' at that time, it would in hindsight serve to establish that she was a closeted lesbian. It also indicates that she had not openly divulged this information to her mother and was still in the closet. This was evidenced as the ghost, who was the spirit of Jess's grandmother Ah Ma, was only able to learn of this aspect of Jess by unknowingly following her as an unseeable ghostly spirit, explaining why Ah Ma had said it in a surprised tone.

The following paragraphs confirms that Jess was a closeted lesbian, as seen when her mother was physically startled and expressed shock upon Jess asking her the meaning of the word '*pengkid*' in Hokkien:

“So what does ‘pengkid’ mean?”

“It took some badgering before Mom broke down and told her. Even then she spoke in such vague roundabout terms (“you know, these people... they have a certain lifestyle...”) that it took a while before Jess got what she was driving at.

“You mean, like a lesbian?” said Jess.

Mom’s expression told her all she needed to know.

After a moment Jess laughed. “I was starting to think it was something really terrible.”

Mom was still in prim schoolmarm mode. “Not nice. Please don’t say such things in front of the relatives.” (Cho, 2021, p. 3)

Not only does it establish that her mother expresses discomfort at openly discussing the topic, but also heavily suggests to the reader that the mother must have been completely unaware that Jess was a lesbian. While Jess’s nonchalance response to the word ‘*pengkid*’ shows that Jess is accepting of her own queer identity, the mom’s response suggests the opposite. The mom’s reluctance to discuss or mention the topic to her relatives further reveals that the mom finds queerness as an unacceptable taboo topic. Based on the mother’s reactions, she does not know that Jess isn’t straight, otherwise her response would have included some level of acknowledgement to it.

Jess’s queer identity as a lesbian as well as her relationship with Sharanya remains hidden from her family throughout the course of the story, creating an inner conflict within Jess as she grapples to keep her sexual orientation a secret from her family. Jess was born in a family who holds heteronormative and conservative values, where topics on same-sex sexualities and LGBT+ are considered taboo. Being all too familiar with her family as well as how Malaysian society in general views the queer community, Jess was more than aware that coming out as queer could “come with a risk to their job, their family and social connections, even their lives”

(Cho, 2021, p. 227). She is afraid of disappointing them if they ever found out about her secret.

This can be seen in the following excerpt:

What was the worst secret her parents could learn?

The truth about Sharanya, of course, and what that meant about Jess. That was still the worst. Jess would rather Mom and Dad knew she'd spent the afternoon yesterday trying to strangle a man than that they find out about Sharanya. They would probably be more understanding about the former than the latter. (Cho, 2021, p. 182)

From the excerpt, it can be gleaned that Jess is deeply worried about disappointing her parents by being a lesbian. Jess firmly believes that her parents will not be accepting of her, making it "all the more vital to preserve their illusions about her" (Cho, 2021, p. 124). Her fears of her parent's disappointment were brought to the forefront when the goddess Black Water Sister traps her in an illusion during the climax, where Jess's deepest fears were manifested as her parents finding out about her relationship with Sharanya. Jess was tormented by the dream scenario of her parent's immense disappointment and shame at the reveal of her secret, further highlighting how she had become trapped by the stigma of identifying as part of the queer community.

Jess' characterisation as someone who is cautious about her self-image as a 'perfect' daughter remains consistent and pivotal throughout the plot, as she would continuously struggle with sharing any struggles she experiences. When she was interrogated by her mother about her involvement with the goddess Black Water Sister, she finds it difficult to relate her troubles to her mother, unsure of how much to divulge lest her mother becomes too worried. "A lifetime's habit of caution" (Cho, 2021, p. 191) has led to her being unable to voice her own difficulties

to her family, presenting Jess as a character that has suppressed their own true self due to fears of alienation from society and family.

Additionally, throughout most of the story Jess would maintain contact with Sharanya through video calls as a source of comfort, and Jess would share some of her life troubles with her. Sharanya is trusted with Jess' most intimate troubles and secrets above all else, including Jess' own parents. This can be seen when Jess tells Sharanya about the weird dreams and voice she has been hearing in her mind:

She told Sharanya about the bizarre things her brain had been up to in the past few weeks. (Cho, 2021, p. 20)

However, Jess' relationship with Sharanya would also struggle over the course of the story, as Jess becomes more overwhelmed with the pressure that she faces dealing with her family troubles. As Sharanya becomes increasingly frustrated with Jess distancing herself from Sharanya due to Jess' reluctance to discuss her troubles with the paranormal and family issues, their relationship also becomes increasingly strained. When the struggling relationship eventually came to a head due to conflicts over Jess' unwillingness to open up emotionally, Sharanya decides to break up with Jess.

Overall, the characterisation of Jess portrays her as a complex individual whose identity as a lesbian has a pivotal role in the formation of her own identity and motivations behind her behaviours and actions in the story. While she experiences inner conflicts related to her sexuality, her identity as a lesbian was secure and is allowed to exist as it is without being questioned. It normalises her queer identity, showing it as something that is as it is.



Her troubles with fully accepting her queer identity as well as her crisis with coming out mirrors the struggles and reality of real life Malaysian queer experiences, who face similar forms of prejudice and stigma from a heteronormative Malaysian society (Singaravelu & Cheah, 2020). While she is comfortable with her sexuality, she is unable to fully embrace and express it due to the patriarchal and conservative Malaysian society that is generally unaccepting of the queer community. The story sheds light on how heteronormative ways of thinking oppresses marginalised communities and criticises how the concept of traditional sexual and gender binaries is restrictive and obstructive towards actual human experiences.

At the same time, Jess' character isn't solely defined by her sexuality. Throughout the story, Jess also must navigate through other issues, such her issues with family, romantic relationships, and the paranormal, helping to create a multi-faceted character whose sexuality is only part of what makes the person whole. Her characterisation parallels the modern-day evolution of queer identity representation in young adult literature, where queer narratives have been expanded to increase visibility of the varied spectrum of queer experiences that real life individuals experience (Lewis, 2015). Like Jess, the representation of queer characters in fiction is no longer rooted in negative stereotypes and have begun to be more humanised and developed. Jess is given her own hopes and dreams distinct from her sexual identity, as well as flaws that make her a realistic and relatable character. It helps to normalise Jess outside of her own queer identity, instead of just being reduced and stereotyped to having her sexuality be her entire personality.

#### **b) Sharanya**

As the love interest and long-distance girlfriend of Jess, Sharanya is another prominent queer character present in the text. Although her role in the plot is mostly told from Jess' perspective,

Sharanya still plays an important role as a secondary character who helps Jess navigate through her emotions and feelings throughout the story, as well as act as an initial catalyst for the internal changes that Jess goes through by the end of the story.

In the exposition stage of the story, Sharanya is introduced as a supportive romantic partner of Jess. Through phone calls conducted in the wee morning hours, Sharanya acts as a grounding presence for Jess even though they couldn't meet up physically. As a caring partner, Sharanya also tries to provide solutions to Jess's problems, such as when Sharanya suggested that Jess was possibly under a lot of stress when Jess told her that she had been hearing voices in her head. She even helps Jess find nearby psychiatric clinics and professionals, creating "a list of places to call" (Cho, 2021, p. 21), showing her concern for Jess's well-being.

"You've been carrying a lot, Jess." Her expression was soft, the earlier tension between them forgotten in her concern. Jess wondered, not for the first time, how she'd manage to score someone like her. "This will help." (Cho, 2021, p. 21)

In the text, Jess also describes Sharanya as "the one person she could trust with everything" (Cho, 2021, p. 118), showing Jess' absolute trust in Sharanya as she would confide her problems and frustration to her via phone calls. The phone calls allow Jess to sort through her emotions and problems that she has been facing. Their conversations show the care and love they have for each other, even though they are physically apart.

However, as the story progresses, cracks in the relationships begin to form as they would come to a head over their disagreement with how Jess was not willing to be fully open with her parents. Prior to the story, they had already come to an understanding about Jess' conflicted

relationship with her mom and Sharanya was aware of Jess' reasons for staying closeted and hiding their relationship from her parents. Knowing that, Sharanya would also encourage her to be more daring to pursue her own life, as she felt that Jess was holding back from her true potential due to wanting to please her parents.

“I love that you're so supportive of your parents,” she said earnestly. “But you have to live your own life, Jess. It can't always be about them. Your parents wouldn't want you to give up on your dreams for them. (Cho, 2021, p. 20)

But as Jess' troubles with her family life and dealings with the spiritual side of her family piled up, Jess started to circumvent talking about her actual troubles with the paranormal to avoid being perceived as insane. Eventually, it created an emotional distance with Sharanya, which came to a head in the climax of their relationship. As Sharanya became increasingly frustrated with how poorly Jess was handling her family issues and her insistence on hiding their relationship, Sharanya pushed for Jess to come out of the closet in an effort to get Jess to be more open about her feelings.

“You know what it's like with my parents,” said Jess. “They couldn't even begin to deal. I can't do that to them, after all the shit they've been through.”

“I'm not asking you to tell them now. I'm asking you, when are you going to be ready? You can't hide behind your parents forever.” (Cho, 2021, p. 227)

As seen from the excerpt above, Sharanya was not concerned with immediately revealing their relationship as much as she was aware that Jess' insistence on staying closeted contributed to how Jess was unable to express her true self and feelings to her parents. Sharanya was

concerned with how Jess' fear of her parent's rejection is ultimately hurting Jess herself too, leading to Sharanya pushing for Jess to come out of the closet despite always being "the first to say nobody should feel pressured to come out if they weren't ready" (Cho, 2021, p. 227). Their disagreements in opinion would lead to the breakdown of their relationship, and Sharanya breaking up with Jess.

With this in mind, in looking into Sharanya's characterisation in the text, her role is one that not only serves as a supportive partner for the main character, but also one that challenges the main character's beliefs and worldview. Sharanya is patient and willing to provide some advice that could help Jess overcome the issues that she is facing. But her failed attempts at trying to get Jess to warm up to the idea of coming out also shows that she can also be brutally tactless in emotionally surging moments. Sharanya is a character made interesting for her contradictions against her previous assertion that queer people shouldn't be forced to come out if they don't want to, proving that she can be flawed even in her best intentions. Her characterisation helps to tell a more varied and diverse narrative of queer characters who are allowed to be imperfect, creating a more realistic depiction of queer people. It subverts the stereotype of how some queer characters in media have been portrayed as "one-dimensional pastiches" free of the nuances that make them seem human (Gutowitz, 2022). Like Jess, Sharanya isn't solely defined by her sexuality, avoiding the pitfalls of the stereotype of queer characters being characterised only by their obsession with their sexuality (Jones, 2015). Overall, Sharanya's character further reflects the need for queer characters that are complex and diverse in nature, as how people in the queer community are in real life.

At the same time, the text's depiction of Jess and Sharanya's queer relationship also helps to normalise the existence of non-traditional relationships, asserting that queer relationships also

face the same kind of challenges and difficulties as in any other ‘traditional’ male-and-female couple relationships. Just like any other person, both Jess and Sharanya have their own lives, interests, and goals, without necessarily brushing away their queer status. The casual, non-judgemental narrative of their romantic relationship is treated seriously, and never framed as something that is unnatural and deviant. The queerness of their relationship isn't the source of the conflict they faced, rather it's the fear of judgement and rejection that plagues Jess that creates the focal conflict in the relationship. By acknowledging the positive yet complex same-sex romantic relationship in the story, it challenges the idea that heterosexuality is the default, and that any other forms of sexuality is deviant.

### **The Impact of Heteronormative Societal Expectations Towards the Main Character**

According to Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, the mandating of the binary sex/gender system by cultural institutions through formal laws has led to obligatory heterosexuality within the dominant culture. This has caused gay and lesbian cultures being characterised as the ‘Other’, falling ‘outside’ of cultural understanding of sexual categorisation, in a system where compulsory heterosexuality is viewed as the norm and any other forms of sexual and gender expressions are considered as in a position of “subversive or resignificatory relationships to heterosexual cultural configurations” (Butler, 1990, p. 154). In reaction, queer theory argues that the naturalised institution of heterosexuality is actually a socially regulated construct created through political discourses rather than having any basis in nature.

As the story is set within a contemporary modern-day setting of Malaysia where people of the queer community face issues of severe discrimination and prejudice from society, Jess also faces the challenge of navigating through heteronormativity and hegemonic forces as the story progresses through the plot.

### **a) Impact Towards Internal Action**

As Jess navigates through the challenges presented to her in the text, she also faces the challenge of being in a society that is largely heteronormative in nature, where heterosexuality is considered as the norm and any other forms of sexual orientations and gender identities are 'deviant'. As a closeted lesbian, Jess is fully conscious of societal expectations of her as a woman and hides her true sexuality from her traditional-minded parents, who have expressed their biases against homosexuality. This has created an impact on Jess's mind and emotions, affecting her attitudes, mental processes, and the decisions that she makes throughout the story.

As seen prominently throughout most of the plot, Jess was always constantly hiding her own queer identity from her mother and father, creating an immense fear of a scenario where Jess's parents find out about the truth of her being a lesbian. Jess' fear of having her lesbian identity be revealed to her parents was so great that it has contributed to Jess' need to be seen as 'normal' to her parents, creating excessively high personal expectations for herself. Throughout the text, there are multiple uses of the word 'instinct' in describing how Jess feels the need for immediately hiding anything deemed 'ugly' and about her life, including the truth about her sexuality. An example of the usage of the word 'instinct' can be seen in the below excerpt:

She hadn't even considered telling her parents what was going on before. Her instinct for hiding the unwelcome parts of her life from them had kicked in automatically. (Cho, 2021, p. 115)

While the excerpt itself is in reference to how she has been troubled by the voices of her deceased Ah Ma and her increasing entanglement with the spiritual world, it also alludes to how her 'unwelcomed' sexuality may have contributed to Jess' emotional distance from her

parents. Furthermore, Jess was afraid of disappointing her family by not fitting in with social norms as expected of a woman like her, and the text also explicitly acknowledges it as her worst fear. When the goddess Black Water Sister attacked her in a dream scenario where Jess was given a scenario of her parents confronting her after discovering her secret relationship, it further exposes her fear of being shamed due to her sexuality.

Shame crashed over her like a wave, stealing her breath. For a moment she couldn't speak, but she had to, she had to take the look off their faces- (Cho, 2021, p. 342)

Jess was immediately enveloped in intense shame upon the fake 'discovery' in the dream, exposing her mental agony that her parents will not accept her if they knew she wasn't straight. It further ties in to Jess' fear of being alienated from her family when the dream version of her mom revealed that Jess' aunt is forcing them to move out as "she doesn't want her family to be exposed to this kind of lifestyle" (Cho, 2021, p. 343).

On the whole, her actions and thoughts surrounding her sexuality exhibits how Jess is well aware of the suppression and subjugations that the queer community face in Malaysian society. Feeling trapped by societal constraints as well as the expectations placed on social attitudes, this has led to Jess developing anxieties and stress over her sexuality and relationship with Sharanya, as it would be perceived as something outside the 'norms' of a hetero-dominant society.

Her reactions are in line with studies done that demonstrate higher depressive symptoms due to heteronormativity among sexual minorities, especially among womenkind. Women also exhibit increased challenges due to the disparity in social and institutional power dynamics

between men and women, leading to women relying more on support networks from surrounding communities (Habarth, 2008). Jess' views surrounding the reactions of her closed ones reflect how heteronormative societal expectations affect how queer-identifying individuals are negatively impacted by it, affecting their identity formation. While the coming out process may provide a stable mental wellbeing in queer youths, it may also have disastrous impacts on their relationship with family. It can create what was once a loving relationship into one that is hostile against the queer youth, putting them in a difficult position of either being true to themselves or being alienated by family (McDermott et al., 2021).

#### **b) Impact Towards External Action**

This subsection will further look into how heteronormativity and heteronormative societal expectations have impacted the main character on an external level. Just as much as how heteronormativity has an impact on Jess' internal actions, it also bleeds into her external actions, which encompasses observable actions that she takes in the text.

As mentioned in the previous subsection, Jess was very aware of the heteronormative societal expectations placed upon her shoulders, which ties into Jess's actions, movements, and dialogue with other characters. In the excerpt below from the first chapter, Jess can be seen speaking in a casual manner with her mom after being pressed by her mom not to mention the slang '*pengkid*' to the relatives, as she considers it a dirty word. Her mother's shock at hearing the word had caused her to accidentally break a hair band in response.

“I don't know what you're worrying about,” said Jess, bemused. “If they are anything like you, I'm not going to be saying anything in front of the relatives. They'll do all the saying.”



“Good,” said Mom. “Better not say anything if you’re going to use such words.”

The hair band lay forgotten on the floor. Jess swept it discreetly into the garbage bag (Cho, 2021, p. 3).

While Jess’ conversation and tone sounds relaxed, it is heavily implied from the text that Jess’ measured reaction was not congruent with her actual feelings on the topic. Her casual remark seems to belie her worries of her mother’s latent homophobia against lesbians. The usage of the word ‘discreet’ in sweeping away the hair band implies that the hair band may have been a metaphor for Jess’ true opinions on homosexuality, which is not spoken out loud due to Jess’ awareness of her mother’s opinions on the topic and wanting to avoid broaching it.

Jess would continue to display the tendency of being dishonest about her actual thoughts and what she does say aloud as the text progresses. In reaction to her mother’s statement that Jess was raised well despite the challenges that her parents faced in the past, Jess’ simple affirmation at her remark was a way of dismissing the topic without actually looking deeper into it, hinting at her hesitance and worry that who she really is would disappoint her mother.

“You turned out OK,” Mom said again. She took the picture from Jess, smoothing it out and putting it on the pile of things to keep.

“Yeah,” said Jess. She wasn’t sure whom they were trying to convince. (Cho, 2021, p. 6)

Jess’s anxieties of coming out also ties into her secret relationship with Sharanya. To avoid her relationship, and by extension her sexuality from being found out by her family, Jess took great lengths to ensure that it is never exposed. Jess always insisted on having her calls with Sharanya

held early in the morning when no one was likely to stumble on or overhear her conversations. Arranging for the calls to be done in the early mornings was very inconvenient for Jess, as evident by how she overslept and almost forgot to video call Sharanya one morning. Nevertheless, Jess persists in having the calls done in the early hours even if she is exhausted from waking up early and continues doing so until the end of the relationship.

At the same time, Jess would also take on actions in the text that ‘matches’ what is expected of her in societal norms, to avoid any suspicion that she is a lesbian as well as for her own secret agendas. To avoid her mother’s incessant prying into her activities, Jess lies and pretends that she was going on a date with a guy, rather than just going to a meet up with Sherng, a male character in the text.

All in all, the conduct and conversations that Jess undertook in the text further demonstrates the impact that heteronormative societal expectations have on it. It permeates across her daily affairs, constraining Jess from being able to truly express her true nature, creating a disconnect from her actual thoughts and undertaken actions. It also leads to self-policing of external actions, even in situations where there is no immediate harm or rules against it. This is demonstrated through Jess’ careful replies and answers to her mother’s concerns in a bid to avoid being perceived as ‘normal’. Her actions mirror that of real-life queer young adult’s experiences with being in the closet, as they also frequently engage in concealment behaviours (Bridge et al, 2022). Heteronormative ideals have ingrained into Jess that she must act in a certain way as expected of her gender, and any form of questioning against it is deemed as ‘improper’ and is better left unsaid.

Additionally, Jess' need to hide any parts of her life that can be seen as something that strays outside the norms of society is a manifestation of her fears. The secrecy of the relationship is not only detrimental to her sleep schedule but is also contributing to the strain on her romantic relationship. Jess' continued efforts on maintaining the secret show how Jess prioritises keeping the relationship a secret from her family above her own comforts. It further confirms how Jess places the secret of her sexuality above all else, all in an effort to fit in with the societal expectations placed upon her. It has the immediate effect of stopping her mother from discovering the true reason for the meet up, while also providing the benefit of preventing her parents from having any suspicions on Jess' sexuality.

Jess was also willing to tell fibs that indicate that she is acting within what is expected of her gender, showing that she has an awareness of the performative nature of heteronormativity. Taking advantage of the ritual performativity of her gender, Jess' lie also exposes how trivially easy it is for her to embody the role of a straight woman that fits within heteronormative societal norms. Jess' actions echoes the concept that "gender is always a doing" (Butler, 1990, p. 33). According to Judith Butler, heteronormativity operates on a "system of compulsory heterosexuality", dictating a strict yet unwritten set of rules on how the binary genders should act. Any form of deviance is unacceptable and considered as failing their gender. Therefore, by acting according to her 'traditional' gender role where women are expected to be romantically interested in men, Jess' actions call into question the constructed nature of gender performativity that is almost theatrical in action, rather than a state of nature.

## **Conclusion**

After analysing the data collected under the two different sections, a phenomenon is discovered related to the significance of the themes to the research objectives.

In view of the two queer characters present in the text, both characters are represented in a non-critical perspective through the author and are allowed to be queer without judgement by the narrative itself. Furthermore, it acknowledges that they are complex characters who have their own issues and difficulties as they are sexual minorities.

Additionally, the text also elaborates on the impacts of heteronormativity upon the main character Jess, affecting both her internal and external actions. It shows how heteronormative societal norms have far-reaching consequences upon the mentality and measures taken upon a queer individual, highlighting its prevalence as well as the need to address such beliefs.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

A focus will be placed on summarising the findings and discussion from the previous chapter, highlighting key points, and providing an overall view of the researcher's thoughts. The findings of the study are also compared and contrasted with past studies mentioned in the literature review. Next, an implication of study will be done to find out how results from the study justifies further research into the area, with respect to the impact the findings have in real-world scenarios. Recommendations for future studies will also be provided to assist future researchers in crafting new research ideas that can further investigate any issues faced by the researcher in this study, as well as to further elevate this field of research. The chapter ends with a conclusion that encompasses the entire study.

### **Summary & Findings**

The study has been undertaken by the researcher to investigate how the author Zen Cho has depicted and represented queer characters in her novel *Black Water Sister*, as well as how heteronormativity in the setting have impacted the queer main character in any way. Through textual analysis based on Judith Butler's understanding of queer analysis, the findings yielded from the text revealed interesting insights.

Upon closer analysis of the findings, it is found that the depiction of the two queer characters, namely Jess and Sharanya, correlates with the recent developments and evolution surrounding queer representation in the young adult (YA) fiction genre. As elaborated in Seville's study on the changes of queer YA fiction over the past 50 years (2018), the general trend has leaned towards portraying queer characters in a wider scope of stories rather than the narrative treating their queerness as an 'issue'. Representation in queer storytelling is also in the rise, with a surging trend in stories with positive representation. The findings of the story correlate with

this development, where while the queer characters in *Black Water Sister* still face some struggles and biases as sexual minorities, the main focus of the plot centres around the mystery surrounding the main character's spiritual family's past. As observed in *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* (2018), Jess and Sharanya's multidimensionality in characterisation as well as their nuanced treatment by the narrative follows the rise of such trends within the genre in YA literature since the 21st century. Therefore, the results from this research signals that the depictions of queer characters in *Black Water Sister* is on par with the growing acknowledgement of the importance of positive queer representation in fiction, normalising the existence of real-life queer people in the wider society.

Through fiction, the narrative of *Black Water Sister* also sheds light on the difficulties of being queer in Malaysia, echoing the struggles that other queer characters face in other Malaysian literature featuring queer themes. Throughout the story, heteronormativity and the stigma against sexual minorities in Malaysia creates a profound impact on Jess as she navigates through challenges presented to her in the novel, impacting her daily activities as well as affecting how she views the world in general. Similarly, Collin Jerome's study on Malaysian queer literature (2022) found similar themes present on the widespread stigmatisation and discrimination of queer folks in Malaysia. The rise of this new literary genre can be seen as a response towards the negative labels that have been forced onto the queer community by the government and society, pushing back against these misconceptions while providing a platform to help people rethink conversations surrounding sexual identities and gender expressions. *Black Water Sister's* themes of heteronormativity and sexual discrimination contributes to Malaysia's growing collection of queer literature, creating a chance for readers to understand the need for the acceptance of the local queer community.

In addition, Jess' female perspective also brought unique challenges that compounds with her identity as a closeted lesbian. Caroline Jones' study on lesbian experiences and identity in modern YA novels (2013) highlighted a link between the embracing of sexuality and self-empowerment in lesbian characters featured in other texts. In *Black Water Sister*, Jess' fears of her parents discovering that she is a lesbian lead to her being closed off, creating lower life fulfilment as well as repressing her true self. Jones' study acknowledges that women who go against mainstream norms are marginalised socially, causing many queer women to hide any forms of non-heterosexual expression to avoid being rejected by their close community.

### **Implications of Study**

The findings of the study bring upon several implications upon the current field of study. The study helps to fill a knowledge gap in relation to the trend of queer Malaysian literature, which has only existed in the 21st century (Jerome, 2022). As a relatively new literary subgenre under Malaysian literature, the results of the study reaffirm previous studies on queer Malaysian literature, helping to build upon current understandings of the emerging local literary genre.

Besides that, in accordance with studies that revealed a link between fiction literary works and its use to identifying and exploring real-life problems (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016), the study can also be used to identify and recognise changing perspectives and opinions of mainstream Malaysian society. It shows that there is a demand for growing awareness and tolerance towards queer issues and discourses, which could lead to a huge shift in societal opinions in the future.

Nevertheless, this study is subjected to several limitations. The study is restricted to a limited scope of area of research, using only one sample of text as a case study into the representation

of the queer community through the context of Malaysian literature in English. As so, it may not be suitable in to be generalised into a broader view of how queer characters in Malaysian literature in English are being represented on an encompassing scale. Additionally, due to the unavoidable nature of qualitative research, the study may also be subjected to the personal biases and views of the researcher despite best efforts taken to minimise it.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

Based on the limitations of the study, future studies may be able to address some of the issues and concerns through several changes to gain new insights into the research problem. The field of study will benefit from further studies investigating how similar works in Malaysian literature in English depict and tackle queer issues as well as queer representation. By focusing on how other local works explore similar topics, comparison studies between different works can be made, allowing for future researchers to learn more about queer representation in Malaysian literature in English.

Moreover, while the advantages of qualitative research are that it can help researchers gain a more in-depth understanding of the findings, researcher bias may interfere with the results of the study. Therefore, future studies may overcome this issue by utilising a mixed-method approach to the research question to avoid the cons of utilising the qualitative approach alone, allowing for the collection of accurate hard data while also being able to analyse it in detail.



## **Conclusion**

Chapter 5 of this study has provided a summary of the findings and discussion of the study, relating it to past studies on similar topics. It also investigates the implications the results have on this field of study. Limitations of the research are also addressed, with recommendations for future researchers provided if they wish to explore the topic in-depth.

Overall, the research study was conducted to analyse queer representation in the novel *Black Water Sister* in regard to how it depicts the two queer characters in the series, as well as the impacts of heteronormative societal expectations towards the main character, Jess. Through textual analysis, it is revealed that both queer characters are presented in an impartial manner by the narrative, acknowledging their queer sexualities and the issues that come with it, while also being dynamic characters who drive the plot of the story. The study also looks into the impacts of heteronormative societal norms have on the queer characters, highlighting its harmful effects towards queer folks and the need to overcome heteronormativity in society.

## References

- About – Zen Cho*. (n.d.). Zen Cho – Fantasy Author. <https://zencho.org/about/>.
- Auchmuty, R., Jeffreys, S., & Miller, E. (1992). Lesbian history and gay studies: Keeping a feminist perspective. *Women's History Review*, 1(1), 89-108.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09612029200200006>.
- Awahaf Sahrani, Singh Daru Kuncara, & Eka Pratiwi Sudirman. (2022). Queer representations: Coming out and homophobia in selected young adult novels. *Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, dan Budaya*, 6(1), 286-307.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.30872/jbssb.v6i1.6286>.
- Banks, W. P. (2009). Literacy, sexuality, & the value(s) of queer young adult literatures. *English Journal*, 98(4), 33-36. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40503258>.
- Barker, M.-J. & Scheele, J. (2016). *Queer: A graphic history*. Icon Books Ltd.
- Black water sister – Zen Cho*. (n.d.). Zen Cho – Fantasy Author.  
<https://zencho.org/books/black-water-sister/>.
- Blackburn, M. V., Clark, C. T., & Nemeth, E. A. (2015). Examining queer elements and ideologies in LGBT-themed literature: What queer literature can offer young adult readers. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 47(1), 11-48.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X15568930>.
- Bridge, L., Smith, P., & Rimes, K. A. (2022). Sexual minority young adult's perspective on how minority stress and other factors negatively affect self-esteem: A qualitative interview study. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 34(3-4), 383-391.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2022.2051444>.

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Routledge.
- Cheves, A. (2023, June 14). 9 LGBTQ+ people explain how they love, hate, and understand the word “queer”. Them. <https://www.them.us/story/what-does-queer-mean>.
- Chin, G. V. S. & Quayum, M. A. (2021). The postcolonial millennium: New directions in Malaysian literature in English. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 57(5), 583-592. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2021.1982120>.
- Cho, Z. (2021). *Black Water Sister*. Ace/Berkley.
- de Laurentis, T. (1991). Queer theory: Lesbian and gay sexualities. *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 3(2), 3-18.
- Dill-Shackleford, K. E., Vinney, C., & Hopper-Losenicky, K. (2016). Connecting the dots between fantasy and reality: The social psychology of our engagement with fictional narrative and its functional value. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 10(11), 634-646. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12274>.
- Dubey, A. (2013). Literature and society. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 9(6), 84-85. <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-0968485>.
- Gutowitz, J. (2022, March 7). *Stop putting queer characters in everything and just tell queer stories*. Time. <https://time.com/6155025/queer-characters-tv-euphoria-yellowjackets/>.
- Habarth, J. M. (2008). Thinking ‘straight’: Heteronormativity and associated outcomes across sexual orientation. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and*

*Social Sciences*, 69(9-A), 3777.

[https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/60664/jhabarth\\_1.pdf](https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/60664/jhabarth_1.pdf).

Ismail, M. (2008, February 24). *Literature is the mirror of society*. Gulf News.

<https://gulfnews.com/general/literature-is-the-mirror-of-society-1.86134>.

Jagose, A. (1996). *Queer theory: An Introduction*. Melbourne University Press.

Jenkins, C. A., & Cart, M. (2018). *Representing the rainbow in young adult literature: LGBTQ+ content since 1969*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Jerome, C. (2020). A place I could call my own: Queer Malays and the meanings of 'home'.

*Indonesia and the Malay World*, 48(141), 247-260.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2020.1751948>.

Jerome, C. (2022, August). Malaysian queer literature. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 22(3), 139-154. <http://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2022-2203-08>.

Jerome, C., Ting, S.-H., Podin, Y. & Wan Ahmad, S. S. (2021). Public receptivity towards LGBT in recent times Malaysia: LGBT perspectives. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 11(14), 371-383.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i14/8943>.

Jones, C.E. (2013). From homoplot to progressive novel: Lesbian experience and identity in contemporary young adult novels. *The Lion and the Unicorn* 37(1), 74-93.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2013.0003>.

Jones, O. (2015, April 16). *We need to see realistic LGBT people on our screens, not toxic caricatures*. The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/16/need-realistic-lgbt-people-screens>.

Lewis, C, (2015). How far have we come? A critical look at LGBTQ identity in young adult literature. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, 30(2). <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2072>.

LGBT+. (n.d.). Council of Europe Portal. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/lgbt->

*LGBTQ legal guide: What laws are out to catch you?* (2021, April 19). Queer Lapis. <https://www.queerlapis.com/legal-resource-laws-part-1-laws/>

Lo Basso, F. (2020, September 21). *How reading fiction can shape our real lives*. The Greater Good Science Center. [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_reading\\_fiction\\_can\\_shape\\_our\\_real\\_lives](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_reading_fiction_can_shape_our_real_lives).

*Malaysia: State-backed discrimination harms LGBT people*. (2022, August 10). Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/10/malaysia-state-backed-discrimination-harms-lgbt-people>.

Manalastas, E. J., Ojanen, T. T., Torre, B. A., Ratanashevorn, R., Choong, B. C. H, Kumaresan, V., & Veeramuthu, V. (2017). Homonegativity in Southeast Asia: Attitudes toward lesbians & gay men in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, & Vietnam. *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 17(1), 25-33.

McDermott, E., Gabb, J., Eastham, R., & Hanbury, A. (2021). Family trouble: Heteronormativity, emotion work and queer youth mental health. *Health*, 25(2), 177-195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459319860572>.

- McKee, A. (2003). *Textual analysis: A beginner's guide*. SAGE.
- Morgenroth, T. & Ryan, M. K. (2018). Gender trouble in social psychology: How can Butler's work inform experimental social psychologists' conceptualization of gender? *Frontiers in Psychology, 9*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01320>.
- Mokhtar, M. F., Sukeri, W. A. E. D. W., & Latiff, Z. A. (2019). Social media roles in spreading LGBT movements in Malaysia. *Asian Journal of Media and Communication, 3*(2), 77–82. <https://journal.uui.ac.id/AJMC/article/view/14310>.
- Poitras, C. (2019, June 13). *The 'global closet' is huge- Vast majority of world's lesbian, gay, bisexual population hide orientation, YSPH study finds*. Yale School of Medicine. <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/the-global-closet-is-hugevast-majority-of-worlds-lesbian-gay-bisexual-population-hide-orientation-ysph-study-finds/>.
- Pollitt, A. M., Mernitz, S. E., Russell, S. T., Curran, M. A., & Toomey, R. B. (2021). Heteronormativity in the lives of lesbian, gay , bisexual, and queer young people. *Journal of Homosexuality, 68*(3), 522-544. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1656032>.
- Quayum, M. A. (2003). Malaysian literature in English: An evolving tradition. *Kunapipi, 25*(2), 178-195. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol25/iss2/17>.
- Resnick, A. (2021, July 31). *What does it mean to be in the closet?* Verywell Mind. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-in-the-closet-5192426>.
- Salih, S. (2002). *Judith butler*. Psychology Press.
- Seifert, C. (2020, March 6). *The case for reading fiction*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/03/the-case-for-reading-fiction>.

- Serpa, S. & Ferreira, C. M. (2019). Micro, meso and macro levels of social analysis. *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, 7(3), 120-124.  
<https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v7i3.4223>.
- Seville, S. (2018). The wonder of a target audience: On the growth of queer young adult literature. *The UCI Undergraduate Research Journal*.  
<https://archive.urop.uci.edu/journal/journal18/05-Seville.pdf>.
- Singaravelu, H. & Cheah, W. H. (2020). Being gay and lesbian in Malaysia. In N. Nakamura & C. H. Logie (Eds.), *LGBTQ mental health: International perspectives and experiences* (pp. 121–135). American Psychological Association.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0000159-009>.
- Szorenyi, A. (2022, October 19). *Judith Butler: Their philosophy of gender explained*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/judith-butler-their-philosophy-of-gender-explained-192166>.
- Tan, N. (2023). Interpret the “laotong” identity and emotions of Lily in “Snowflake Secret Fan” from the perspective of queer theory. *ICLAHD 2022*, 98-104.  
[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-97-8\\_13](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-97-8_13).
- UN. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2015, May 4). *Discrimination and violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity*. United Nations Digital Library. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/797193?ln=en>.
- Watson, K. (2005). Queer theory. *Group Analysis*, 38(1), 67-81.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0533316405049369>.

Wilkerson, A. (2013). I want to hold your hand: Abstinence curricula, bioethics, and the silencing of desire. *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 34(2), 101-108.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-013-9213-0>.