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Negotiating Girlhood: Gender Expectations in Reda Gaudiamo's *Na Willa*

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Abstract

Reda Gaudiamo's Na Willa has received scholarly attention from various perspectives, yet its representation of the protagonist specifically as a girl remains underexplored. This study examines how gender expectations surrounding girlhood are represented and negotiated through Na Willa's everyday experiences. Using a descriptive qualitative design and qualitative content analysis, the study draws on Butler's gender performativity and Driscoll's conceptualization of girlhood as a culturally constructed category. The findings show that Na Willa neither simply reinforces nor rejects conventional gender expectations. Instead, girlhood emerges through differing expectations communicated by family, peers, and community, alongside Na Willa's own interests and experiences. Mak's selective responses further complicate these expectations by questioning some gendered boundaries while maintaining others related to Na Willa's position as a child. The novel thus represents girlhood through multiple possibilities, expectations, and boundaries rather than a singular model of femininity. This study contributes to gender studies in children's literature by highlighting girlhood as a negotiated category beyond a simple conformity-resistance binary.

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INTRODUCTION

Reda Gaudiamo's *Na Willa* (2018) presents the everyday experiences of a young girl who repeatedly encounters ideas about what girls should look like, how they should behave, and which activities are considered appropriate for them. Such representations are significant because children's literature can participate in circulating gendered norms, stereotypes, and expectations (Pownall & Heflick, 2023), while also providing space for established understandings of gender to be reconsidered (Latumeten & Janah, 2025). In *Na Willa*, however, these expectations are neither uniform nor consistently enforced; they emerge through interactions with family, peers, and community members who communicate differing ideas about appropriate girlhood. The novel can therefore be approached as a cultural space in which meanings surrounding gender are not simply reproduced but continually encountered and negotiated.

This representation of girlhood can be understood through Butler's (1990, 2004) theory of gender performativity, which conceptualizes gender as constituted through repeated, socially recognizable practices rather than as a stable identity, and Driscoll's (2002) conceptualization of girlhood as a culturally situated category shaped by particular understandings of girls and femininity. Read together, these perspectives make it possible to examine how repeated expectations and everyday interactions contribute to what becomes recognizable as appropriate

girlhood while remaining open to different ways of inhabiting it. Recent scholarship similarly demonstrates that girls' literature constructs culturally specific ideas about girlhood (Sardella-Ayres & Reese, 2020) and may represent girls negotiating or challenging normative expectations (Allen & Green-Barteet, 2023). Accordingly, this study examines *Na Willa* through the possibilities available to its protagonist, the expectations directed toward her, and the boundaries surrounding what she may or may not do, approaching girlhood as a culturally situated and negotiated experience rather than a singular model of femininity.

Despite the relevance of girlhood to these everyday interactions, this dimension of Na Willa remains comparatively underexplored. Existing studies have examined Na Willa primarily through character education, characterization, childhood development, narrative perspective, parental representation, and cultural identity, but have given less attention to how her experiences construct and negotiate her position specifically as a girl. Addressing this gap is important because approaching Na Willa primarily as a child may overlook how gender shapes the possibilities, expectations, and boundaries she encounters throughout her everyday life.

Existing studies on Reda Gaudiamo's *Na Willa* have approached the series from several perspectives. Studies concerned with its educational potential have examined character values and their application as teaching materials: A'yuningsih et al. (2025) identifies values such as honesty, responsibility, independence, courage, and confidence in *Na Willa* and considers their relevance to Indonesian language instruction, while Nursidiq (2023) similarly examines character education and the pedagogical potential of *Na Willa dan Rumah dalam Gang*. Other studies focus on Na Willa as a child protagonist. Rahmawan and Anwar (2024) examine characterization and relationships among Na Willa, her family, friends, and surrounding community, whereas Afiannisa and Pujiharto (2020) drawing on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, analyze the development of Na Willa's thinking and reasoning. Together, these studies establish scholarly attention to the series as educational literature and to Na Willa's characterization, development, and relationships within her social world.

Scholarly attention has also extended to the film adaptation of *Na Willa*, based on the first novel in the series. Priyono et al. (2026) examine the representation of Na Willa's parents through character education, highlighting how their parenting practices communicate values such as independence, cooperation, and integrity. Although focusing on the film rather than the novel, the study further demonstrates scholarly attention to the significance of Na Willa's relationships with her parents, particularly in relation to her development and character formation.

Other studies have examined the narrative and cultural dimensions of the *Na Willa* series. Using Genette's narratology, Zahro and Indrastuti (2024) highlight the novel's child-centered narrative voice, particularly Na Willa's position as both narrator and protagonist, which presents childhood experiences from the child's perspective. Questions of culture and identity have also received considerable attention. Hakim (2020) examines how Na Willa's Chinese-Indonesian and Javanese background is negotiated and contested through everyday encounters, while Romala (2021) explores how culturally specific elements are preserved through foreignization in English translations of Indonesian children's literature. Rahayu et al. (2026), meanwhile examine multiculturalism in *Na Willa dan Rumah dalam Gang*, emphasizing the child protagonist's active role in negotiating cultural diversity alongside the continuing influence of adult figures. These studies demonstrate scholarly interest in the series' representation of childhood, cultural identity, and the negotiation of cultural difference.

Despite growing scholarly attention to *Na Willa*, its representation of Na Willa specifically as a girl remains comparatively underexplored. Existing studies have examined the series through character education, characterization and cognitive development, narrative perspective, parental representation, and cultural identities, establishing Na Willa as a child whose experiences develop through relationships with family, peers, and community. Less attention, however, has been given to how Na Willa's everyday interactions construct and negotiate her position specifically as a girl. This gap matters because examining her primarily as a child may overlook how gender shapes the possibilities, expectations, and boundaries she encounters throughout her everyday life. This study addresses this gap by examining girlhood through the possibilities available to Na Willa, the expectations directed toward her, and the boundaries surrounding what she may or may not do.

Scholarship on gender and girlhood in children's literature demonstrates that literary constructions of girlhood are culturally situated and shaped by particular ideas about appropriate ways of being a girl (Sardella-Ayres & Reese, 2020). Female child protagonists may navigate and reimagine established understandings of femininity (Spencer, 2019), including through resistance to normative expectations (Allen & Green-Barteet, 2023). et reducing girl characters to conformity or resistance may overlook the complexity of their representation, as the "girl" itself is constructed through culturally situated and sometimes contradictory discourses of femininity (Marshall, 2004). This complexity is particularly relevant to *Na Willa*, where girlhood emerges through differing and sometimes contradictory messages encountered in the protagonist's everyday life. Drawing on Butler's (1990, 2004) theory of gender performativity and Driscoll's (2002) conceptualization of girlhood, this study therefore aims to examine how gender expectations surrounding girlhood are represented and negotiated through Na Willa's everyday experiences and interactions.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the representation and negotiation of gender expectations in Reda Gaudiamo's *Na Willa*. Qualitative research is concerned with developing an in-depth understanding of phenomena through non-numerical data and is particularly useful for examining meanings, relationships, social norms, and gender roles (Oranga & Matere, 2023). More specifically, qualitative descriptive research seeks to provide a comprehensive account of a phenomenon while remaining relatively close to the data rather than producing the higher level of abstraction associated with methodologies such as phenomenology or grounded theory (Sandelowski, 2000). This design is appropriate for the present study because it seeks to identify, describe, and interpret how meanings surrounding girlhood emerge through Na Willa's everyday experiences and interactions rather than to quantify their occurrence or generate a new theoretical model. The selection of the research design is therefore based on its alignment with the purpose of the study, which is an important consideration in qualitative descriptive research (Kim et al., 2017; Villamin et al., 2025).

The study is conducted through library research, involving systematic engagement with relevant textual and scholarly sources. Adlini et al. (2022) describe library research as a method of collecting data through the examination of relevant theories and materials from sources such as books, journal articles, and previous studies. Reda Gaudiamo's *Na Willa* serves as the primary data source and object of analysis, while scholarly books, journal articles, and previous studies concerning gender performativity, girlhood, and children's literature serve as secondary sources supporting the theoretical framework and interpretation. The primary data consist of narrative passages, dialogues, character interactions, and everyday events that reveal how Na Willa encounters meanings and expectations associated with being a girl.

The textual data are analyzed using qualitative content analysis through close reading, identification, coding, comparison, categorization, and theoretical interpretation. Qualitative content analysis is compatible with qualitative descriptive research because it enables textual material to be systematically organized according to recurring meanings and patterns while maintaining a close relationship between the analysis and the original data (Sandelowski, 2000). The analysis begins with repeated close readings of the novel to identify episodes in which girlhood becomes relevant to Na Willa's experiences, particularly through statements, practices, permissions, corrections, prohibitions, and distinctions concerning appearance, behavior, play, activities, and interactions. The selected passages are then coded according to the gendered meanings expressed within each interaction and compared to identify recurring patterns as well as differences in how particular characters position Na Willa as a girl. The data are subsequently grouped according to the relationships emerging across these episodes, including the repetition of gender expectations, the construction of boundaries between girls and boys, different responses to those boundaries, and distinctions between expectations based on gender and those associated with Na Willa's position as a child. This process of organizing textual material through classification and interpretation is consistent with qualitative library research as described by Adlini et al. (2022).

The resulting patterns are interpreted through Butler's (1990, 2004) theory of gender performativity and Driscoll's (2002) conceptualization of girlhood. Butler's framework is used particularly to examine how repeated everyday practices and statements make particular associations between femininity and behavior appear recognizable or natural, while Driscoll's conceptualization situates these practices within the culturally constructed meanings surrounding girls and girlhood. The analysis also attends to differences and contradictions among the selected episodes rather than assuming that all gender-related interactions perform the same function. For example, restrictions based on Na Willa's status as a girl are distinguished from boundaries associated primarily with her status as a child, while characters' responses are examined for whether they reproduce, question, modify, or otherwise negotiate recognizable gender expectations. From these comparisons, possibilities, expectations, and boundaries are used as interrelated interpretive dimensions for synthesizing how girlhood is represented across the novel: expectations refer to culturally recognizable ideas about what girls should be or do; boundaries concern the limits placed around particular forms of behavior or participation; and possibilities refer to ways of inhabiting girlhood that emerge within, alongside, or beyond those expectations. These dimensions are therefore not treated as rigid or predetermined coding categories, but as a means of synthesizing the patterns identified through the textual analysis.

The trustworthiness of the analysis is maintained through systematic and transparent engagement with the primary text. Credibility is supported through repeated close reading and by grounding analytical claims in direct textual evidence from *Na Willa*. Dependability and confirmability are addressed by consistently applying the analytical process of identification, coding, comparison, categorization, and theoretical interpretation across the selected data, thereby maintaining a traceable relationship between textual evidence and the resulting interpretations. Particular attention is given to episodes that complicate emerging interpretations, including instances in which apparently restrictive responses are better explained by Na Willa's age than by gender alone. Such attention to differences and contradictory evidence helps prevent the analysis from forcing every interaction into a predetermined opposition between conformity and resistance. This systematic and transparent relationship between data, analytical categories, and interpretation contributes to the rigor of qualitative descriptive analysis (Kim et al., 2017; Villamin et al., 2025).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The analysis identified recurring patterns in how girlhood is represented through Na Willa's everyday interactions with family, peers, and community members. Gender expectations emerge through distinctions concerning activities, appearance, behavior, and what girls and boys are considered able or expected to do. However, these expectations are not communicated uniformly, as different characters establish, reproduce, or question particular boundaries surrounding Na Willa's position as a girl. The result further distinguish between boundaries associated with gender and those related to Na Willa's position as a child, particularly in relation to adult femininity. Taken together, these patterns show that girlhood in *Na Willa* is represented through differing expectations, boundaries, and possibilities across the protagonist's everyday experiences.

Learning What It Means to Be a Girl: Repeated Gender Expectations

Throughout *Na Willa*, ideas about what it means to be a girl emerge repeatedly through the protagonist's everyday interactions with the people around her. Rather than being communicated through a single explicit definition of girlhood, these ideas appear through seemingly ordinary comments, instructions, comparisons, and corrections concerning appearance, behavior, interests, and activities considered appropriate for girls. The recurrence of such moments is significant when viewed through Butler's (1990) understanding of gender as constituted through repeated social norms and practices. What appears culturally recognizable as "girlish" or appropriate for a girl acquires its apparent naturalness precisely because these expectations are repeatedly articulated and enacted in everyday life. Na Willa's encounters consequently demonstrate how girlhood becomes socially legible through small and recurring distinctions between what girls and boys supposedly look like, prefer, or are permitted to do. These moments do not necessarily determine how Na Willa understands or performs her gender; rather, they constitute the social expectations with which she repeatedly comes into contact and through which particular meanings of girlhood are made available to her.

One of the recurring ways in which gender expectations become visible in *Na Willa* is through the distinction between activities associated with girls and boys. Na Willa describes her own playroom as a space filled with objects associated with domestic activities:

> "There are lots of cooking things in my playroom, all mostly made of clay. There are pots and pans, and a pestle and mortar too—each one in miniature" (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 11).

Although the passage does not explicitly state that these objects are provided to Na Willa because she is a girl, the domestic character of her play environment becomes significant when placed alongside the activities available to Dul. His play extends beyond the home and includes marbles, kite-flying, and the more physically adventurous activity of catching moving trains. When Na Willa wants to accompany him, Dul discourages her:

> "You'd better not come with me to catch the train. Mak will be so angry with me. And I've never seen a girl jump onto a train like me" (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 21).

His reasoning explicitly makes Na Willa's gender relevant to the boundary he establishes. Rather than suggesting that Na Willa is physically incapable of participating, Dul draws on what he recognizes from experience: jumping onto trains is something he has not seen girls do.

Read through Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, the contrast illustrates how gendered distinctions can acquire the appearance of naturalness through repeated and recognizable practices. Cooking-related play appears within Na Willa's ordinary environment, while activities involving greater physical mobility and risk are practiced by Dul and understood by him as

belonging outside girls' usual behavior. Dul's statement—"I've never seen a girl"—is particularly revealing because it points toward repetition itself: what girls have habitually been seen doing becomes a basis for determining what another girl is expected to do. From Driscoll's (2002) perspective, such a distinction also demonstrates how girlhood carries culturally situated expectations concerning the spaces and activities considered appropriate for girls. Na Willa's desire to participate nevertheless introduces a possibility beyond that expectation. The episode therefore begins to establish a tension that recurs throughout the novel: the culturally recognizable boundaries of girlhood do not necessarily correspond with the possibilities Na Willa herself imagines or wishes to explore.

The association between girlhood and domestic forms of play becomes more visible in Na Willa's interactions with other girls. When Ida enters Na Willa's playroom, she immediately proposes,

> "'Let's play being mums,' says Ida. She comes into my play room, where my toys are arranged" (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 35).

The suggestion corresponds with the domestic objects already present in Na Willa's play environment and introduces motherhood itself as something that can be rehearsed through girls' play. A similar pattern appears in Na Willa's friendship with Ida:

> "With Farida, I only play cooking and dolls and singing. We play the same games every day" (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 45).

Here, domesticity and care-oriented activities recur as familiar forms of play between girls. More significantly, when Na Willa proposes an alternative, Farida explicitly categorizes the activity according to gender:

> "Once I asked Farida to play marbles. She refused. She said that playing marbles is kind of a boy's game" (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 45).

The distinction previously articulated by Dul is therefore reproduced from within Na Willa's relationships with other girls: particular activities become recognizable as belonging either to girls or boys.

These repeated encounters demonstrate how gender norms are sustained through ordinary practices rather than requiring a single authoritative source that dictates appropriate behavior. Ida's suggestion to play motherhood, and her preference for cooking and dolls, as well as her classification of marbles as a boys' activity collectively repeat recognizable associations between femininity, domesticity, and particular forms of play. Through such repetition, these activities can acquire the appearance of being naturally associated with girls, even though the narrative simultaneously reveals them as socially recognizable conventions reproduced through everyday interactions.

Na Willa's response, however, complicates this repetition. Although she participates in cooking, playing with dolls, and other domestic games, she admits;

> "But I get so bored playing cooking and making *pecel* with *uleg*, frying tiles with hibiscus oil, sand porridge" (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 45).

Her boredom does not amount to a wholesale rejection of femininity or of the activities associated with it; after all, she continues to participate in these games. Rather, her desire to play marbles alongside her dissatisfaction with repeatedly performing the same domestic games suggests that the possibilities she imagines for herself are broader than those currently available within her play with Ida. The episode therefore complicates a simple opposition between conformity and resistance. Na Willa participates in recognizable practices of girlhood while simultaneously desiring

activities positioned beyond their conventional boundaries, illustrating how girlhood in the novel is negotiated within, rather than simply accepted or rejected against, the gendered expectations surrounding her.

"You Cannot Be a Boy": Constructing the Boundaries of Girlhood

While gender expectations in *Na Willa* often emerge through repeated everyday practices, they also become explicit when particular behaviors or possibilities are marked as incompatible with being a girl. In these moments, girlhood is constructed not only through expectations concerning what girls should do, but also through boundaries that distinguish what they supposedly cannot be or do. Such boundaries make the social norms surrounding girlhood particularly visible, as Na Willa's actions and desires are measured against culturally recognizable ideas of femininity.

The boundaries surrounding girlhood become particularly explicit in Na Willa's conversation with *Mbok*, her caretaker.

'Then I want to be a boy,' I say.

'How? You're a girl. You'll always be a girl!'

'I'll keep my trousers on.'

'That's impossible, Noni. You're a girl. A girl!'

'But I want to be like Mak!' I say. And I start getting annoyed.

'Ora iso! Ora iso! Wedhok, yo wedhok!' says Mbok (which means No! You can't!

You're a girl and will forever be a girl!) (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 8)

When Na Willa declares, "'Then I want to be a boy,'" *Mbok* immediately responds, "'How? You're a girl. You'll always be a girl!'" Na Willa proposes a seemingly simple solution—"'I'll keep my trousers on'"—but *Mbok* rejects the possibility again, insisting, "'That's impossible, *Noni*. You're a girl. A girl!'" The exchange culminates when Na Willa explains, "'But I want to be like *Mak*!'" and *Mbok* responds, "'*Ora iso! Ora iso! Wedhok, yo wedhok!*'"—translated as "No! You can't! You're a girl and will forever be a girl!". *Mbok*'s repeated insistence constructs girlhood as a stable category whose boundaries Na Willa cannot cross. Being identified as a girl consequently becomes connected to assumptions about the appearance and behavior considered available to her.

From Butler's (1990) perspective, however, the exchange exposes a tension between gender understood as a fixed identity and the socially recognizable practices through which gender becomes legible. Na Willa's association of trousers with being a boy, although expressed through a child's understanding, demonstrates how clothing functions as one of the visible signs through which gender distinctions are recognized. *Mbok*'s repeated correction, meanwhile, returns Na Willa to the category of "girl" and the boundaries attached to it. From Driscoll's (2002) understanding of girlhood as culturally constructed, the disagreement can instead be read as a negotiation over which possibilities are available within the category of the girl. The scene therefore concerns not simply whether Na Willa accepts or rejects girlhood, but a more fundamental question of what being a girl is allowed to mean.

Mak's Selective Negotiation of Gender Expectations

While Na Willa encounters several expectations that establish particular boundaries around girlhood, these boundaries are not consistently reinforced by the adults around her. *Mak*, in particular, occupies a more complex position in relation to the gender expectations directed toward her daughter. At times, Mak opens possibilities beyond what others consider appropriate for girls; at other times, she establishes boundaries of her own. Her responses therefore demonstrate that the negotiation of girlhood in the novel is not structured through a simple opposition between

conformity and resistance, but through selective and contextual decisions about which expectations are maintained, reconsidered, or given different meanings.

Mak's selective response to gender expectations is particularly visible when she and Na Willa search for a kindergarten. Upon encountering *Taman Kanak-Kanak Putra Sejati*, Mak expresses her dislike of the school's name. When Na Willa asks why, Mak explains, "'*Putra* means boys. *Sejati* means true.'" Na Willa then asks, "'But what about the girls?'" to which *Mak* replies, "'Exactly. Where are the *putri*—the girls? I'm not sure if they take girls as pupils'" (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 93). Rather than accepting the masculine term as an unremarkable or universal designation, *Mak* draws attention to the absence of girls from the language through which the school identifies itself. Her objection consequently concerns not whether Na Willa is capable of attending school, but whether girls are recognized as belonging within the possibilities that the institution appears to offer. *Mak*'s response draws attention to how gender expectations can operate through everyday language and institutions, not only through explicit instructions about how girls should behave. Importantly, *Mak* does not simply tell Na Willa what to think. Her questioning prompts Na Willa to notice the absence herself through the immediate response, "'But what about the girls?'" Mak therefore opens a possibility for her daughter to recognize and question a gendered boundary rather than simply accommodate herself to it. This episode illustrates Mak's role in the negotiation of girlhood not through a wholesale rejection of gender categories, but through her willingness to question particular conventions when they appear to limit or exclude the possibilities available to girls.

Being a Girl, Being a Child: The Boundaries of Childhood

The boundaries surrounding Na Willa's experiences are not always determined by gender. As much as she is positioned as a girl, she is simultaneously positioned as a child, and some limitations placed upon her emerge from expectations concerning childhood rather than femininity. Recognizing this distinction is important because interpreting every restriction directed toward a girl as a gendered restriction risks overlooking the different social meanings operating within her everyday experiences. The negotiation of girlhood in *Na Willa* therefore also involves understanding how gender intersects with age, particularly in moments when what Na Willa wants to do is considered inappropriate not because girls should not do it, but because she is understood as too young to do so.

The distinction between being a girl and being a child becomes particularly visible when Na Willa witnesses Ida's sister, Mbak Tin, crying before her wedding. Ida initially provides Na Willa with an explanation based on what she understands to be customary, telling her that "'it's kind of normal to cry a lot when you are a bride'" (Gaudiamo, 2019, pp. 66–67). Unable to understand Mbak Tin's reaction, Na Willa later asks *Mak* about it and enthusiastically imagines marriage through its visible attractions: "'I really want to get married! I'll wear a beautiful long shiny dress and a crown and I'll put lipstick on'" (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 68). *Mak* responds by shifting Na Willa's attention from the appearance of the bride to the adult responsibilities associated with marriage:

> "'Marriage means you are ready to be a woman and take care of a house and your husband. It means having children. There are so many things that have to be done'" (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 68).

Her explanation invokes a conventional association between womanhood, marriage, domestic responsibility, and motherhood. From Driscoll's (2002) perspective, the exchange demonstrates how culturally recognizable ideas of femininity can connect girlhood to anticipated adult

womanhood, making marriage and domesticity part of the meanings through which Na Willa begins to understand what becoming a woman may entail.

Yet the episode does not simply position marriage as the expected destination of Na Willa's girlhood. Na Willa interprets *Mak*'s explanation through the terms of her own childhood, concluding that Mbak Tin must be sad because "she won't be able to play any more," ride her bicycle, or run around noisily with her friend (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 69). When Na Willa consequently decides, "'if that's what it's like, I don't want to get married,'" *Mak* does not correct her by insisting that marriage is inevitable. Instead, she tells her that marriage belongs to a distant future, after she has grown older, completed her education, and earned her own money, emphasizing, "'You still have lots of time'" (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 69). *Mak* therefore simultaneously introduces Na Willa to a conventional model of adult femininity while protecting the possibilities of her present childhood from being prematurely organized around it. The boundary she establishes is primarily temporal: Na Willa does not yet need to become the woman she is being told about. Girlhood consequently emerges here as a space between culturally recognizable expectations of future womanhood and the continuing freedoms, activities, and possibilities of being a child.

The distinction between girlhood and adult femininity becomes even more explicit as Na Willa and *Mak* prepare for Mbak Tin's wedding. Na Willa expresses her enjoyment of dressing up and asks, "'Can I put some lipstick on too, Mak?'" explaining that she wants "red lips like Mak" because she finds them beautiful (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 70). Her desire demonstrates an attraction to a recognizable practice of femininity and, more specifically, a desire to imitate her mother. *Mak* nevertheless responds, "'Absolutely not, Willa,'" but importantly explains the prohibition in terms of age: "'Because lipstick is not for children. You and the other little girls—none of you need any lipstick'" (Gaudiamo, 2019, p. 70).

Mak therefore does not construct lipstick as something inappropriate for girls because it is feminine; she herself wears it, and Na Willa explicitly identifies *Mak*'s appearance as desirable. Instead, she distinguishes between a form of femininity available to adult women and what she considers appropriate during childhood.

This distinction further complicates the boundaries through which girlhood is constructed in the novel. From Driscoll's (2002) perspective, Na Willa's desire to imitate *Mak* illustrates how girlhood can be situated in relation to culturally recognizable forms of adult femininity, while *Mak*'s response simultaneously establishes a boundary between the girl and the woman. Significantly, *Mak* does not discourage Na Willa from understanding herself as beautiful or feminine without lipstick; she turns Na Willa toward the mirror and repeatedly affirms that Na Willa is beautiful even without the red lipstick on. The restriction therefore does not function as a rejection of Na Willa's femininity but as a refusal to treat adult feminine practices as necessary to her present girlhood. Much like her response to marriage, Mak allows adult femininity to remain a future possibility without requiring Na Willa to perform it prematurely. The episode consequently reinforces the importance of age within the novel's negotiation of gender: being a girl does not require Na Willa to already perform being a woman.

Discussion

Negotiating Girlhood: Possibilities Beyond a Singular Script

Taken together, the findings suggest that *Na Willa* constructs girlhood not through a singular model of femininity but through the repeated and sometimes competing meanings that surround its protagonist. The recurring expectations concerning appearance, behavior, play, and distinctions

between girls and boys correspond with Butler's (1990, 2004) understanding of gender as constituted through repeated socially recognizable practices. Their repetition across ordinary interactions makes particular associations—such as domesticity with girls and greater physical freedom with boys—appear recognizable as appropriate forms of gendered behavior. Read alongside Driscoll's (2002) understanding of girlhood as a culturally situated category, these patterns demonstrate how being a "girl" acquires meaning through expectations about how girls should behave, what they may do, and which social spaces they may occupy. Girlhood in the novel is therefore produced not through a single instruction but through the accumulation of everyday practices and interactions through which gendered meanings become familiar.

However, the findings also demonstrate why these repeated expectations should not be understood as producing a uniform script that Na Willa simply follows or rejects. The differing positions expressed by Dul, Farida, *Mbok*, and *Mak*, together with Na Willa's own varied interests, reveal that the meanings surrounding girlhood remain open to negotiation. This is significant in relation to Butler's (2004) argument that gender norms depend upon their continued enactment and may therefore be inhabited in different ways. Na Willa participates in recognizable forms of femininity—she enjoys dressing up, domestic play, and the prospect of wearing lipstick—while simultaneously desiring activities categorized as masculine. Her participation in femininity therefore does not prevent her from extending beyond some of its conventional boundaries. This complicates a conformity-resistance binary frequently associated with discussions of literary girls: rather than becoming meaningful only when she rejects normative femininity, Na Willa demonstrates how multiple and seemingly contradictory desires can coexist within the experience of girlhood. Such a representation aligns with recent scholarship emphasizing the culturally situated and potentially multiple constructions of literary girlhood rather than treating the girl as a singular or self-evident category ((Sardella-Ayres & Reese, 2020; Allen & Green-Barteet, 2023).

The negotiation of girlhood in *Na Willa* can consequently be understood through the relationship between expectations, boundaries, and possibilities. Expectations provide culturally recognizable meanings of what girls are supposed to be and do, while boundaries establish where particular expressions of girlhood become restricted or questioned. Possibilities emerge through the different ways Na Willa and those around her inhabit, reconsider, or extend these meanings. Importantly, the distinction between gendered boundaries and the boundaries of childhood further complicates this process: *Mak* may question conventions that exclude girls while simultaneously restricting practices she considers inappropriate for Na Willa's age. Girlhood is therefore not presented merely as preparation for adult femininity, but as a meaningful position in itself, situated between existing gender norms and possibilities that remain open as Na Willa grows. In this sense, Na Willa expands the representation of girlhood beyond either conformity to or resistance against conventional femininity. Girlhood emerges instead as an ongoing cultural negotiation in which recognizable forms of femininity can coexist with different interests, behaviors, and possibilities without requiring the protagonist to inhabit a singular script.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Na Willa* represents girlhood not as a fixed identity governed by a singular set of expectations, but as a culturally situated category continually negotiated through everyday interactions. Na Willa encounters repeated expectations concerning appearance, behavior, play, and distinctions between girls and boys, yet these expectations are neither uniformly reinforced nor simply rejected. Her own interests move between conventionally feminine practices

and activities positioned beyond their expected boundaries, while *Mak* selectively questions certain gender conventions without rejecting femininity itself. The distinction between being a girl and being a child further complicates these negotiations, as some boundaries surrounding Na Willa are associated with age rather than gender. Viewed through Butler's theory of gender performativity and Driscoll's conceptualization of girlhood, these findings demonstrate how possibilities, expectations, and boundaries coexist in constructing multiple ways of being a girl.

The findings contribute to discussions of gender and girlhood in children's literature by demonstrating the importance of moving beyond a simple opposition between conformity and resistance. Representations of girls need not be understood only according to whether female characters reproduce or challenge conventional femininity; attention should also be given to how gendered meanings are negotiated through ordinary interactions, relationships, and seemingly minor practices. In *Na Willa*, this perspective reveals that participation in conventionally feminine practices does not necessarily prevent the protagonist from exploring possibilities beyond established gender expectations. The study therefore highlights everyday negotiation as a productive way of examining how children's literature can represent girlhood as culturally recognizable while still allowing for complexity, contradiction, and multiple possibilities.

This study is limited to the first *Na Willa* novel and focuses specifically on gender expectations surrounding its protagonist through Butler's and Driscoll's theoretical perspectives. Consequently, it does not examine how the representation of girlhood may develop across subsequent books in the series or how other dimensions of Na Willa's identity interact with gender. Future research could extend the analysis across the *Na Willa* series or its film adaptation to examine whether possibilities, expectations, and boundaries surrounding girlhood change as the character develops. Further studies may also explore girlhood intersectionally, particularly in relation to Na Willa's Chinese-Indonesian and Javanese background, social and cultural environment, or other dimensions of identity. Such approaches could provide a broader understanding of how Na Willa constructs childhood and girlhood through the intersection of gender with other culturally situated experiences.

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Anna Anganita Theresia Latumeten: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing. **Ulum Janah:** Methodology, Validation, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing.

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Conflict of Interest

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Use of Artificial Intelligence

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used solely to improve the language, grammar, and readability of the manuscript, while Mendeley was used for reference and citation organization. All AI-assisted outputs were reviewed, edited, and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript.

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