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Politics of Memory and Identity in Contemporary Indonesian Literature: A Study of the Novel *Beauty Is a Wound* by Eka Kurniawan

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Abstract

This article examines the politics of memory and identity in contemporary Indonesian literature through a narrative analysis of *Cantik itu Luka* by Eka Kurniawan. The novel represents traumatic events erased from the official state memory, such as colonialism, the 1965 massacres, and cultural repression during the New Order era. By blending the aesthetics of magical realism with local mythological elements, Kurniawan constructs an alternative narrative that challenges hegemonic historiography and gives voice to subaltern perspectives. This study employs a qualitative approach through literary discourse analysis, integrating postcolonial theory, memory studies, and historiographic metafiction. Data were collected through close reading of narrative elements that represent collective violence, hybrid identity, and female agency. The findings indicate that *Beauty Is a Wound* not only conveys social critique but also functions as a cultural archive that articulates marginalized collective memory. This research contributes to Indonesian literary studies by positioning fiction as an ideological space capable of challenging dominant structures of representation and reconstructing history from critical and plural perspectives.

Keywords: *Beauty Is a Wound*, collective memory, postcolonial, subaltern, magical realism, literary historiography

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji politik ingatan dan identitas dalam sastra Indonesia kontemporer melalui analisis naratif terhadap *Beauty Is a Wound* karya Eka Kurniawan. Novel ini merepresentasikan peristiwa-peristiwa traumatis yang terhapus dari ingatan resmi negara, seperti kolonialisme, pembantaian 1965, dan represi budaya pada masa Orde Baru. Dengan memadukan estetika realisme magis dan unsur mitologi lokal, Kurniawan membangun narasi alternatif yang menantang historiografi hegemonik dan memberikan suara bagi perspektif subaltern. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui analisis wacana sastra dengan mengintegrasikan teori pascakolonial, studi memori, dan metafiksi historiografis. Data dikumpulkan melalui pembacaan mendalam terhadap elemen-elemen naratif yang merepresentasikan kekerasan kolektif, identitas hibrida, dan agensi perempuan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa *Beauty Is a Wound* tidak hanya menyampaikan kritik sosial, tetapi juga berfungsi sebagai arsip kultural yang mengartikulasikan memori kolektif yang terpinggirkan. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada kajian sastra Indonesia dengan memosisikan fiksi sebagai ruang ideologis yang mampu menantang struktur representasi dominan dan merekonstruksi sejarah dari perspektif kritis dan plural.

Kata Kunci: *Cantik itu Luka, memori kolektif, pascakolonial, subaltern, realisme magis, historiografi sastra*

Introduction

Literature is not merely a vessel for aesthetic and artistic expression; it also plays a strategic role in shaping and reproducing social, historical, and cultural realities within society (Altun, 2023). It functions as a discursive space where various ideologies converge, confront, and negotiate, enabling the emergence of critical practices, resistance, and the recovery of collective memory that has been previously repressed (Imtiaz, 2024; Hafiz, 2023). In a postcolonial nation such as Indonesia, the role of literature becomes increasingly significant as it articulates historical experiences often excluded from official state narratives, including colonialism, the 1965 massacres, and cultural repression during the New Order era (Taum, 2020; Mulya & Bramantya, 2022). Within this framework, literary works can be understood as alternative cultural archives that provide space for the representation of marginalized voices, particularly those who have experienced collective trauma but remain unacknowledged in institutional historiography (Nugraha, 2021). This perspective aligns with Assmann (2011) concept of cultural memory, which emphasizes that collective memory is not solely constructed through formal state mechanisms, but also through symbolic and imaginative narratives offered by cultural texts such as literature.

The publication of *Beauty Is a Wound* marks a pivotal moment in the trajectory of post-Reformation Indonesian literature. The novel not only presents thematic complexity such as violence, identity, and historical legacy but also offers a narrative approach that transcends the conventions of social realism. Through a fusion of magical realism, local mythology, and socio-political critique, Eka Kurniawan constructs a narrative structure that enables the dismantling of repressed histories while exposing the collective wounds left by various regimes of power (Ningrum et al., 2022). This narrative experimentation reflects the spirit of the post-Reformasi generation, which no longer views literature as merely documentary, but as a symbolic medium of resistance against the state's dominant narratives. More broadly, this strategy parallels tendencies in global postcolonial literature, where writers adopt alternative narrative forms to challenge hegemonic historiography and deconstruct identities shaped by historical violence (Christanti, 2022).

By disrupting the logic of linear historical narrative, *Beauty Is a Wound* does not simply offer a personal or tragic story but builds an aesthetic space that allows for negotiation between official history and alternative memory. The use of magical realism in Kurniawan's work is not merely stylistic; it is a discursive strategy that symbolically infiltrates the gaps of established historical authority (Mauludani, et al., 2025). This is exemplified in the portrayal of female characters who rise from the dead or supernatural beings that defy the logic of reality metaphors for the resurgence of silenced voices buried by state power. Through this approach, Kurniawan rejects a passive stance toward history and instead positions literature as a domain in which the past can be reinterpreted from a marginalized or subaltern perspective (Rahayu & Kurniawan, 2023). In this sense, the novel not only addresses structural issues such as colonialism and violence, but also critically interrogates the question: who has the authority to narrate the past? Therefore, *Beauty Is a Wound* can be seen as a literary intervention against the dominance of singular, state-sanctioned historical narratives in Indonesia.

The concept of an alternative archive, as developed in *Beauty Is a Wound*, does not merely function to revive marginalized historical experiences but also serves as a symbolic form of resistance against the state's monopoly over historical meaning. Rather than adopting a documentary-realist mode, Kurniawan chooses an aesthetic strategy that deviates from convention, blending absurdity, the grotesque, and the supernatural. This opens narrative space for infiltrating zones of history left untouched by official accounts. Within a postcolonial framework, such narrative techniques enable the reconfiguration of collective identity fragmented by colonialism and postcolonial repression. The use of dark humor, repeated violence, and characters who defy conventional moral logic functions not only as an aesthetic of disruption but also as a means to blur the boundaries between tragedy and fantasy. These elements form a subversive critique of the linear and normative logic of power. In this context, literature emerges not as a mirror of official history but as an ideological apparatus capable of critically challenging dominant representational structures through flexible and resistant narratives.

Several previous studies have explored *Beauty Is a Wound* in relation to power, history, and trauma, particularly as a critique of the New Order, colonialism, and patriarchy. However, the majority of these studies have tended to focus on thematic or structural readings without explicitly integrating memory studies as a primary analytical framework. Yet the narrative structure and aesthetic strategies employed in the novel strongly suggest a complex layering of collective memory. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by reading *Beauty Is a Wound* through the lens of memory and postcolonial representation, a perspective that has been relatively underexplored in existing scholarship.

Based on this background, this research aims to analyze how *Beauty Is a Wound* constructs an alternative narrative through strategies that merge the politics of memory, identity, and the aesthetics of magical realism. By integrating postcolonial theory and memory studies, this study argues that the novel not only delivers social critique but also functions as a counter-cultural archive that revises Indonesian history from a marginalized perspective. Ultimately, this research contributes to expanding the interpretive horizon of contemporary Indonesian literature as a discursive space that critiques power and resists official memory.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using literary discourse analysis, oriented toward a critical reading of narrative structure and the ideological context of the text. This approach was chosen for its capacity to explain how literary texts function as spaces for meaning production in

negotiating history, identity, and collective memory. The primary object of this study is the novel *Beauty Is a Wound* by Eka Kurniawan, selected for its narrative complexity in challenging dominant historiography through the aesthetics of magical realism and postcolonial storytelling strategies. Data were collected through close reading techniques, focusing on narrative elements that represent historical trauma, power dynamics, and subaltern figures such as women and the lower classes. The analysis concentrates on segments that exhibit temporal disruption, identity hybridity, the use of magical symbols, and resistance to linear historical logic. The interpretive process was conducted reflectively with reference to postcolonial theory (particularly the concept of the subaltern), cultural memory theory, and the notion of historiographic metafiction as an aesthetic strategy. The validity of the study is ensured through theoretical triangulation and critical engagement with previous research in the fields of contemporary Indonesian literature and global postcolonial studies.

Results dan Discussion

This study adopts thematic analysis as the primary method for interpreting Eka Kurniawan's novel *Beauty Is a Wound*. Through close reading techniques, various narrative segments in the novel are categorized into major themes that reflect the symbolic and ideological structures embedded within the text. These themes are not selected arbitrarily, but rather based on their relevance to the theoretical frameworks of postcolonialism, memory studies, and the narrative strategy of magical realism. The categorization process serves to map how the novel constructs an alternative narrative of history and identity through its narrative structure and cultural symbolism.

This thematic classification also forms the basis for identifying representations of power, resistance, and trauma experienced by marginalized groups particularly women, the lower class, and victims of structural violence. By integrating both narrative and ideological dimensions, the findings are presented in the following table to provide a comprehensive overview of the relationship between the literary text and the politics of memory it embodies.

Table 1. Thematic Findings in the Novel *Beauty Is a Wound*

Main Theme	Description	Excerpt from the Novel	Theoretical Interpretation	Main Theme
Collective Violence	Representation of historical collective trauma due to colonialism and the 1965 mass killings.	“The bullet that pierced the body of the village woman became a silent witness to the nation's wounds.”	Physical wounds serve as a metaphor for historical trauma. According to memory studies, this reflects collective trauma omitted from official historiography.	Collective Violence
Subaltern Women	Female characters experience structural violence but also possess magical power as a form of resistance.	“Beauty is a wound, but also a power that can burn history.”	Referencing Subaltern Theory (Spivak), the female characters are not merely objects of history, but agents resisting patriarchy and state oppression.	Subaltern Women

Magical Realism	Supernatural elements coexist with reality, creating a non-linear narrative.	“A woman can float in the air, burning the painful past.”	This aesthetic functions as an alternative archive. Following Hutcheon, it is a strategy of historiographic metafiction that challenges the objectivity of official history.	Magical Realism
Critique of Power	A critique of authoritarianism, state dominance, and repression of public voices.	“The city was filled with those who silenced the voices of the people.”	Based on Foucault’s <i>Discourse and Power</i> , the novel becomes a medium of counter-discourse against the forces shaping collective memory and social order.	Critique of Power
Hybrid Identity	Characters embody fragmented identities torn between past and present, myth and history.	“Faces fractured between the past and the present, between reality and myth.”	In line with postcolonial theory, hybridity reflects the complexity of postcolonial identity that resists essentialism and singular nationalist narratives.	Hybrid Identity

Representation of Collective Violence as Historical Memory

Eka Kurniawan’s novel *Beauty Is a Wound* represents collective violence as an integral part of Indonesia’s historical narrative. Set in the fictional town of Halimunda, the novel portrays traumatic events such as colonialism, military violence, and the 1965 massacres. Kurniawan employs the technique of magical realism to express collective trauma that has often been marginalized in the state’s official historiography. One of the clearest examples of this representation is the depiction of mass killings targeting those accused of being members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in 1965. This event leaves deep psychological and generational scars, depicted through symbolic and imaginative narrative elements (Hutabarat et al., 2021).

This approach aligns with Jan Assmann’s concept of *cultural memory* (2011), which emphasizes that collective memory is constructed not only through formal institutions but also through symbolic and imaginative narratives presented in cultural texts such as literature. In this context, *Beauty Is a Wound* functions as an alternative cultural archive that records and gives voice to marginalized experiences (Gani & Marizal, 2023). Previous studies have highlighted this aspect as well. For instance, research by (Sidiq & Manaf, 2020) analyzes gender injustice in the novel in close relation to the representation of collective violence and historical trauma. Their findings emphasize how the female characters in the novel endure structural violence that

reflects the nation’s collective wounds.

Table 2. Representation of Collective Violence in *Beauty Is a Wound*

Aspect	Content/Example
Narrative Segment	The mass killings of villagers accused of being communists.
Quotation from Novel	“The bullet that pierced the body of the village woman became a silent witness to the nation's wounds.”
Symbolic Meaning	Physical wounds serve as manifestations of historical trauma that remains unvoiced in the country’s official memory.
Narrative Strategy	Magical realism: characters die and return to life in ways that defy realist logic.
Theoretical Interpretation	<i>Cultural memory</i> (Assmann): the novel serves as a cultural archive that revives repressed collective memory.
Relevance to Indonesian Context	Refers to the 1965 violence and New Order repression as diminished in state-sanctioned historical accounts

Although *Beauty Is a Wound* does not explicitly mention the events of 1965, the symbolism embedded in the portrayal of systematic violence against the "accused reds" reflects an effort to insert an alternative history through fiction. The depiction of characters killed without trial, their bodies discarded without recognition, and the silence that shrouds the village serves as a powerful metaphor for the state’s repression of collective memory. This approach is not simply a critique of historical events themselves, but a deeper interrogation of how the state controls memory and forgetfulness. This aligns with Jan Assmann’s theory of *cultural memory*, which posits that memory is institutionalized and reproduced through cultural symbols and narratives beyond formal archives.

Female Characters as Subalterns: Gender and Power Critique

The novel *Beauty Is a Wound* portrays its female characters as representations of subaltern groups who experience layered oppression resulting from colonialism, patriarchy, and unequal social structures. The protagonist, Dewi Ayu, along with her descendants, faces various forms of violence and discrimination, yet they also exhibit resistance against the structures of domination. According to Spivak, the subaltern refers to groups who are denied a voice within hegemonic power structures. In the context of this novel, characters such as Dewi Ayu experience marginalization and subordination, but they also attempt to reclaim agency through both verbal and non-verbal forms of resistance. A study by (Shofa & Istiani, 2025) reveals that the women in the novel resist patriarchal hegemony through complex and multifaceted strategies.

Additionally, (Padmasari & Nugraha, 2024), using a Marxist feminist approach, identify multiple forms of gender-based discrimination experienced by female characters, including marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, sexual violence, and double burdens. However, these characters also display resistance through negotiation, rejection of patriarchal norms, and active efforts to challenge oppressive structures. Febrianti et al. (2023) further

highlight subaltern representation in the novel. Drawing on Spivak's subaltern theory, Irmawati analyzes how the female characters subvert dominant structures by deconstructing binary oppositions between male and female roles. The study finds that, although these women occupy marginalized positions, they are capable of resisting and reclaiming their agency.

Table 3. Representation of Female Subalterns in *Beauty Is a Wound*

Aspect	Description
Main Character	Dewi Ayu.
Forms of Oppression	Marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, sexual violence, double burdens.
Forms of Resistance	Negotiation, rejection of patriarchal norms, active resistance against oppressive structures.
Theoretical Framework	Subaltern Theory (Spivak), Marxist Feminism.

Thus, *Beauty Is a Wound* does not merely portray female characters as victims of oppression but also as agents of change capable of resisting the very structures that subjugate them. Through the application of subaltern theory and Marxist feminism, this analysis reveals the complexity of female representation in the novel and highlights its contribution to opening discursive space for marginalized voices in society.

Magical Realism as a Narrative Strategy for Deconstructing Official Historiography

In *Beauty Is a Wound*, Eka Kurniawan employs magical realism as a narrative strategy to critique and dismantle Indonesia's official historiography. By blending supernatural elements, local mythology, and historical realities, Kurniawan constructs a narrative that challenges the state's claims to historical objectivity (Januarti et al., 2025). This approach resonates with Linda Hutcheon's concept of *historiographic metafiction*, in which fiction not only represents historical events but also reflects upon and critiques the ways in which history is written and understood.

One notable instance of magical realism in the novel is the resurrection of Dewi Ayu, the protagonist, from her grave twenty-one years after her death. This event not only introduces a supernatural element, but also serves as a metaphor for the reawakening of collective memory that has long been suppressed by state narratives. Through Dewi Ayu's character, Kurniawan brings to light traumatic events endured by society such as colonization, military violence, and the 1965 massacres that are often ignored or simplified in official historiography (Susanti et al., 2021)

Magical realism in the novel also allows Kurniawan to embed subtle yet incisive social and political critique. By merging fantastical elements with historical realities, he creates a narrative space that prompts readers to question the "truth" of commonly accepted historical narratives. This reinforces the novel's role as a form of *counter-discourse* to the dominant, hegemonic, and patriarchal historiographical framework. A study by (Egidia et al., 2025) also highlights the use of magical realism in *Beauty Is a Wound* as a tool for engaging with concepts of history, psychology, society, and gender. They argue that this approach allows readers to grasp the complexities of Indonesia's history through a more critical and reflective lens.

Table 4. The Use of Magical Realism in Deconstructing Official Historiography

Aspect	Description
Magical Realism Elements	The resurrection of Dewi Ayu, the appearance of ghosts of massacre victims, and other supernatural occurrences.
Narrative Function	Revoicing traumatic events omitted from official historiography and offering a critique of hegemonic historical narratives
Theoretical Framework	<i>Historiographic metafiction</i> (Linda Hutcheon), which emphasizes critical reflection on how history is written and understood
Social and Political Critique	Challenges the objectivity claimed by state historiography and reveals the violence and injustice experienced by marginalized groups

Through the use of magical realism, *Beauty Is a Wound* offers not only a rich and layered narrative, but also serves as a powerful medium for deconstructing and critiquing Indonesia's official historical discourse. This approach enables readers to revisit Indonesia's past from a more critical and reflective perspective, while simultaneously creating space for voices long marginalized by dominant historical narratives.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Eka Kurniawan's *Beauty Is a Wound* constructs an alternative narrative of Indonesian history through complex and subversive narrative strategies. By combining the aesthetics of magical realism, cultural symbolism, and postcolonial approaches, the novel functions as a counter-cultural archive that represents historical experiences omitted from the official state narrative. The research yields three primary findings: first, the representation of collective violence is not merely a historical backdrop, but emerges as a living trauma within the cultural memory of society. Second, the female characters are portrayed as subaltern figures who endure layered oppression yet retain agency to resist patriarchal power structures. Third, magical realism operates as an aesthetic strategy to dismantle hegemonic historiography through narratives that blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, myth and history.

By integrating postcolonial theory, memory studies, and historiographic metafiction, this study offers a conceptual contribution to the discourse of contemporary Indonesian literature. Literature is positioned not merely as a social mirror, but as an active ideological and aesthetic space that challenges dominant structures, gives voice to the silenced, and proposes new ways of understanding history, identity, and collective memory.

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