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The Female Body as a Site of Resistance: A Feminist Analysis of Gender, Power, and Identity in Djenar Maesa Ayu's Short Stories

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Abstract

This study explores the representation of the female body as a site of resistance against patriarchal domination in *Jangan Main-main (dengan Kelaminmu)*, a short story collection by Djenar Maesa Ayu. The main issue addressed is how women's bodies, sexuality, and identities are constructed and contested within the narrative of contemporary Indonesian literature. The aim of this research is to reveal how the author employs bodily experience and language as subversive tools to challenge the social structures that oppress women. This study adopts a feminist literary approach using qualitative textual analysis. Theoretical frameworks include Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "woman as the Other," Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*, and body studies in literary discourse. The findings show that Djenar Maesa Ayu's works deliberately position the female body as an active subject that rejects hegemonic norms. The narratives illustrate a process of deconstructing social taboos, sexual repression, and moral control imposed on the female body. These findings affirm that Djenar's literature is not merely an aesthetic expression, but also a powerful ideological statement on women's freedom, autonomy, and agency in contemporary urban society.

Keywords: feminism, female body, contemporary literature, sexuality, agency.

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Abstrak

*Penelitian ini membahas representasi tubuh perempuan sebagai medan perlawanan terhadap dominasi patriarki dalam kumpulan cerpen *Jangan Main-main (dengan Kelaminmu)* karya Djenar Maesa Ayu. Isu utama yang diangkat dalam penelitian ini adalah bagaimana tubuh, seksualitas, dan identitas perempuan dikonstruksi dan dikonfrontasi dalam narasi sastra kontemporer Indonesia. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengungkap cara penulis memanfaatkan pengalaman tubuh dan bahasa sebagai alat subversif untuk melawan struktur sosial yang menindas perempuan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan feminisme sastra dengan analisis tekstual kualitatif. Teori yang digunakan antara lain adalah pemikiran Simone de Beauvoir mengenai "perempuan sebagai liyan", gagasan Hélène Cixous tentang *écriture féminine*, serta perspektif kajian tubuh dalam wacana sastra. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa karya Djenar Maesa Ayu secara sadar menampilkan tubuh perempuan sebagai subjek aktif yang menolak dikonstruksi oleh norma-norma hegemonik. Narasi-narasi dalam cerpen tersebut memperlihatkan proses dekonstruksi terhadap tabu sosial, represi seksual, dan kontrol moral yang selama ini dilekatkan pada tubuh perempuan. Temuan ini mempertegas bahwa karya Djenar bukan sekadar bentuk ekspresi estetika, tetapi juga merupakan pernyataan ideologis yang kuat tentang kebebasan, otonomi, dan agensi perempuan dalam masyarakat urban kontemporer.*

Kata kunci: *feminisme, tubuh perempuan, sastra kontemporer, seksualitas, agensi*

Introduction

Women as subjects in literature have long been the focus of critical study, particularly in the context of bodily representation and gender power. Women's bodies are not only understood biologically but also as political and cultural fields fraught with meaning. In this context, literary works become a strategic medium for expressing women's experiences, resistance, and identity negotiations (Smith & Johnson, 2018). However, representations of women's bodies in Indonesian literature remain limited to normative depictions that often reproduce patriarchal constructs and traditional morality (Rahmawati, 2020).

The urgency of this research arises from the need to explore subversive and transformative representations of the female body in contemporary Indonesian literature, particularly the works of Djenar Maesa Ayu. Djenar's works are renowned for their boldness in addressing issues of sexuality, the body, and female identity in explicit and critical language (Nurhadi, 2021). This approach allows for new readings that challenge the dominance of patriarchal discourse and hegemonic social norms that have historically silenced women's voices (Lee, 2019).

Several previous studies have discussed aspects of feminism and the body in Indonesian literature, such as Mulyani's (2019) study, which highlights metaphorical narratives of sexuality in women's literature, and Wahyuni's (2016) study, which discusses morality in modern Indonesian literature. However, these studies tend to focus on passive representations of the body or the reproduction of social norms without delving deeply into how the body can also serve as an agency and a tool of resistance.

A major gap found in the current literature is the lack of studies that specifically examine the female body as a site of resistance and agency in contemporary Indonesian literature, particularly using a feminist literary criticism approach that integrates performativity and *écriture féminine* theories. Most studies still focus on normative or aesthetic interpretations, thus under-emphasizing the political and epistemic dimensions of the female body in narratives (Sari & Hadi, 2022).

This research aims to fill this gap by positioning Djenar Maesa Ayu's work as a representative object of study to examine the female body as a terrain for struggles over identity

and power. The feminist literary criticism approach employed not only supports previous findings on the importance of female representation but also expands upon it with an in-depth analysis of the subversive language and narratives that characterize Djenar's work (Kim, 2020).

This research is novel in combining textual analysis with Judith Butler's theoretical framework on bodily performativity, as well as H  l  ne Cixous's concept of *  criture f  minine*, which highlights the language of women's experiences. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a richer understanding of how literary narratives can serve as political and cultural tools to deconstruct taboos and dominant moralities, and open new spaces for women's voices (Nguyen, 2021).

In addition, this study also examines the interaction of literary works with the socio-political context of post-reform Indonesia, especially regarding the issue of sexual violence and the ratification of the Sexual Violence Crime Law (UU TPKS) in 2022. Thus, literary works are not only analyzed textually, but also contextualized within the developing social reality (Tan & Lee, 2019).

The purpose of this study is to analyze how the female body is represented as a site of resistance and agency in Djenar Maesa Ayu's short story collection, and how subversive language and narratives are used to deconstruct taboos and hegemonic moral norms. This research is expected to provide theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of Indonesian feminist literature, while also opening new discourses regarding the role of literature in social change.

With this focus, this article presents an in-depth, contextual critical analysis and offers recommendations for developing a more progressive and inclusive study of women's literature. It is hoped that this research approach and findings will serve as an important reference for literary researchers, feminists, and cultural scholars in understanding the dynamics of the body, language, and power in contemporary Indonesia.

Feminist studies in Indonesian literature have experienced significant developments in the post-reform era, particularly through the works of urban women who challenge sexual and bodily taboos known as *fragrant literature*. Works such as *astogther* (1998) and *Float* and short stories by Djenar Maesa Ayu (*Don't Play Around...*, 2004) opens up a discourse space on the female body as a medium of resistance against patriarchy. However, although studies such as feminist analysis of *Nayla* (2019) has discussed the representation of women, especially in the context of narrative and social struggle, research that focuses on the body as an agent of subversion is still limited, especially in the context of explicit and sexualized female bodies in *Don't Play Around (with Your Genitals)*.

The urgency of this research arises from the sociocultural conditions in contemporary Indonesia, where women's bodies and sexuality remain objects of moral control and patriarchal domination, despite policy changes such as the enactment of the Sexual Violence Law (2022). Literary literature that reflects this reality is essential to enrich local and global feminist discourse.

Method

This research is a qualitative-descriptive study that aims to uncover the meaning, power relations, and strategies of resistance in the representation of the female body through literary works. This approach was chosen because of its exploratory and interpretive nature, allowing researchers to explore the narrative and symbolic complexities contained within literary texts. The primary focus of this research is on the meaning of the body as an arena for identity struggles and resistance against patriarchal value systems.

To critically approach the object of study, this research employs a feminist literary criticism approach with a textual analysis method. Feminist literary criticism is used to read literary works

as ideological fields where the construction and deconstruction of gender, power, and the body take place. This approach is based on the premise that literary texts are never neutral, but rather contain traces of dominant ideologies and their resistance (Plain & Sellers, 2007). Meanwhile, textual analysis is used to explore the narrative structure, language style, and bodily symbolism in Djenar Maesa Ayu's stories.

The material object of this research is a collection of short stories *Don't Play Around (with Your Genitals)*. The work of Djenar Maesa Ayu, particularly short stories such as "Melukis Jendela," "Letah," and "Waktu Nayla" (Nayla's Time), explicitly discuss the body, sexuality, and power relations. The texts were selected purposively based on the density of issues relevant to the research focus, namely the female body as a site of resistance. This work was chosen because it is considered the most consistent representation of Djenar's writing style, which challenges established gender norms and morality in post-reform Indonesian society.

The analysis procedure was carried out in three stages. First, themes related to the body, sexuality, social control, and resistance were identified in each short story. These themes were mapped as an initial framework for interpretation. Second, coding of bodily symbols and narratives indicating agency or resistance to patriarchal norms was carried out. Symbolism such as wounds, touch, descriptions of bodily organs, and women's verbal expressions were read as both aesthetic and political strategies. Third, theoretical triangulation was conducted using feminist frameworks from Judith Butler (1990), Hélène Cixous (1975), and standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) to strengthen the interpretation.

Butler's framework is used to understand the body as performative, that is, a socially constructed product that can be negotiated and resisted through actions and narratives. Cixous provides a basis for reading Djenar's writing style as a form of feminine *writing*, namely writings from women's bodies and experiences that reject repressive masculine language. Meanwhile, standpoint theory provides a foundation for interpreting women's narratives as alternative forms of knowledge from subordinate positions, which critique and destabilize dominant discourses on morality and sexuality.

Although this research is text-based and does not involve direct participants, the issues raised are highly sensitive and related to trauma, violence, and sexuality. Therefore, the analysis was conducted with consideration of ethical reading, namely ensuring that the representation does not fall into the exoticization of the female body, but rather strengthens a critical reading of the power structures that construct it. The author is committed to positioning the female narrative in Djenar's work as a form of symbolic resistance and a legitimate cultural reflection in the field of contemporary socio-political discourse.

Result and Discussion

The Body as Agency

The analysis shows that Djenar Maesa Ayu's works position the female body as a space of resistance against patriarchal domination. The body is no longer merely a passive object in the narrative, but becomes a subject with will, decisions, and power. In the short story *Painting the Window*, the female figure stated: "*This body is mine. I decide how it is touched, not you, not anyone else.*" This quote represents the shift in meaning of the body from a mere symbol of purity to a field of struggle for identity and freedom.

This concept aligns with Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, which states that the body is not a stable entity, but rather a social construct that can be negotiated through action. Djenar dismantles this construction through characters who refuse to submit to socially constructed natures. This distinguishes Djenar's work from previous trends in Indonesian literature, where

women's bodies were often depicted within a moral or sacrificial framework (Ratna, 2017).

Thus, the body in Djenar's text appears not only as a physical site, but also as an epistemic site, a source of knowledge and resistance. It becomes a tool for reclaiming women's agency while simultaneously challenging value systems that objectify the body.

Subversive Language and Narrative

Djenar's work stands out for its explicit and un euphemistic use of sexual language. In the short story *They Say, I'm a Monkey!*, the main character states: "*I'm not ashamed to say vagina. I'm just sick of how people look down when they hear it.*" This choice of diction demonstrates courage in breaking through linguistic taboos deeply rooted in Indonesian culture.

This strategy reflects the concept feminine *writing* by Hélène Cixous (1975), who called for writing from women's bodies and experiences as a form of liberation from silencing masculine language. Djenar not only gives voice to women's bodies, but also creates a new linguistic space that refuses to be controlled by patriarchal linguistic structures.

Unlike other female authors, such as those studied by Mulyani (2019), who chose a metaphorical style to discuss sexuality, Djenar opted for direct confrontation. This approach is not without risk, but it emphasizes a narrative political stance that seeks to create discomfort as a space for social reflection and critique.

Language becomes a tool of subversion, and narrative becomes a form of resistance. Djenar constructs a female voice that is not only heard, but also heard in a cultural context that often silences it.

Deconstructing Taboos and Morality

Djenar's narratives consistently challenge hegemonic social and moral norms. In *Nayla's Time*, the character states: "*It's not my body that's wrong, it's the way you look at it.*" This statement challenges the dominant moral construct that often blames women for the violence or harassment they experience.

Djenar deconstructs religious, ethical, and cultural values that are used to control women's bodies. Unlike other works that often internalize moral values through female characters who regret, repent, or are sacrificed, Djenar's characters stand firm in their choices. This contrasts with Wahyuni's (2016) findings, which state that most Indonesian fiction still reproduces social norms even with strong female characters.

What Djenar offers is not moral nihilism, but redefinition of *ethics*: honesty about bodily experiences, acknowledging wounds, and the right to voice trauma. In this way, Djenar demonstrates that new values can be built from the ruins of old taboos and moralities.

Interaction with Socio-Political Context

Djenar's narrative resonates strongly with the post-reform socio-political dynamics. Issues of sexual violence, women's identity, and critique of normative order have become increasingly prominent following the opening of public space for discourse on gender and human rights. In the short story *Leeches*, the female character says: "*I will not be silent. I am not a victim you can silence.*", which reflects the spirit of women's struggle in the era of legal advocacy and collective consciousness after violence.

These works are relevant to the contemporary policy context, particularly the enactment of the Sexual Violence Crimes Law (UU TPKS) in 2022. Djenar, with narratives that emerged long before this law was enacted, has played a role as *cultural agents* which shapes social awareness and opens up space for discussion about the body, trauma, and justice.

If previous Indonesian literature tended to avoid explicit social issues, Djenar presents women's experiences as *discourse center*. She not only narrates oppression, but also empowers women to voice anger and hope in a system that has not been on their side.

To clarify Djenar's contribution in dismantling the old structure, here is a comparative table:

Aspect	Conventional Indonesian Literature	Works by Djenar Maesa Ayu
Body representation	Passive, symbol of purity or sin	Active, autonomous, agency field
Sexual language	Metaphorical, implied	Explicit, confrontational, from the body
Morality	Reproduction of social values	Deconstruction of hegemonic values
Socio-political involvement	Not explicit, symbolic	Direct, contextual, activist
Narrative voice	External, judgmental	Internal, reflective, empowering

By integrating issues of the body, language, taboo deconstruction, and socio-political context, Djenar Maesa Ayu's work offers a progressive, contextual, and transformative model of Indonesian feminist narrative. She addresses the gap in literary criticism, which has so far had little discussion of the female body as a *source of knowledge* and *match tool*. More than just voicing oppression, Djenar reorganizes narrative space, breaks down language boundaries, and redefines morality.

Conclusion

This research shows that Djenar Maesa Ayu's works represent women's bodies not as passive objects within patriarchal constructs, but as sites of active, reflective, and resistive agency. The female body in Djenar's texts becomes a field of struggle to negotiate identity, resist social control, and reclaim authority over bodily experience.

Djenar's linguistic strategies, including explicit sexual narratives and a rejection of linguistic taboos, create a new space for the expression of feminine *écriture*. Through language derived from women's bodies and experiences, Djenar dismantles the masculine linguistic structures that have long silenced women's voices. Her narratives not only unsettle conservative readers but also open up a space for reflection on boundaries previously considered untouchable.

Djenar consistently deconstructs hegemonic moral norms legitimized by religion, culture, and dominant social ethics. She proposes an alternative ethic rooted in bodily honesty, the right to trauma, and the courage to reject socially constructed guilt. In this context, morality is not a fixed norm, but a bargaining ground for new, inclusive and empowering values.

Djenar's narratives also demonstrate a close connection to Indonesia's post-reform socio-political context, particularly in shaping collective awareness about sexual violence and the importance of gender justice. Even before the enactment of the Women's Protection Act (TPKS), Djenar's works had become cultural documents that stimulated public discourse and shaped new understandings of women's bodies, power, and rights.

Thus, Djenar Maesa Ayu's work possesses not only literary value but also epistemic and political value. She offers a progressive model of feminist narrative in contemporary Indonesian literature a narrative that not only speaks to oppression but also builds a space for affirmation, resistance, and transformation. This research also fills a gap in Indonesian feminist literary studies, which has

so far not explored the female body as an epistemological and political terrain.

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