

LITERATURE AS AN ARENA OF POWER: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF POWER AND RESISTANCE IN THE NOVELS “*LARUNG*” AND “*CANTIK ITU LUKA*”

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Abstract

This study explores the themes of power and resistance in two significant Indonesian novels, *Cantik Itu Luka* by Eka Kurniawan and *Larung* by Ayu Utami. Situated in the post-reform era of Indonesia, these literary works serve as critical sites where socio-political issues such as colonialism, patriarchy, militarism, and resistance are interrogated and reimagined. By applying Norman Fairclough's framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research examines how the novels' language, narrative structures, and socio-cultural contexts collectively construct and challenge prevailing power dynamics. The analysis reveals that both novels function beyond mere reflection of Indonesia's socio-political landscape; they actively produce counter-discourses that resist hegemonic ideologies. Through their complex characters and subversive storytelling techniques, the texts question dominant narratives, especially those related to gender inequality and authoritarian control. The findings demonstrate that these works symbolically oppose systemic oppression by highlighting nuanced interactions between resistance and power. Ultimately, this study argues that literature in postcolonial Indonesia plays a vital role as a medium of cultural and political critique. The novels by Kurniawan and Utami exemplify how fiction can articulate forms of resistance that challenge and deconstruct established power structures, thereby contributing meaningfully to ongoing debates about identity, history, and emancipation in Indonesian society.

Keywords – critical discourse analysis, arena of power, ayu utami, eka kurniawan

Introduction

The transformation of women's roles in Indonesian society has been significantly reflected through literary works, which in turn catalyzed the emergence of the feminist literary movement. Influential female authors such as NH Dini have been instrumental in portraying the crucial and autonomous roles of women across her literary corpus, challenging traditional gender roles and expectations (Hatley, 1990). This disruption of the stereotypical notion encapsulated in the phrase "*helaka katut, surga nunut*"—which implies women merely follow men into both misfortune and paradise—underscores a broader shift towards female agency. Contemporary writers, notably Ayu Utami, have

continued this legacy. Her groundbreaking novels *Saman* (1998) and *Larung* (2001) present bold narratives where female characters assert equality with men, defy patriarchal norms, and seek sexual and political autonomy (Budianta, 2000).

Literature in Indonesia serves not only as a space for artistic expression but also as a battleground for ideological and socio-political discourse. Novels like Utami's *Larung* and Eka Kurniawan's *Cantik Itu Luka* (2002) exemplify this dual function. These works critique systemic oppression and illuminate the complex realities of post-New Order and post-colonial Indonesia, particularly regarding gender and power. The critical portrayal of

hegemonic structures through female characters placed in authoritative yet conflicted roles invites a deeper examination using Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) (Lovell, 2018). This methodological lens reveals how narrative and language are deployed both to reinforce and resist dominant ideologies.

Larung and *Saman* are particularly significant for marking the rise of a new generation of Indonesian women writers in the 2000s. *Saman*, published during the Reformasi era, immediately captured public attention and sparked national discourse, to the extent that the phrase, “If you haven’t bought this book, it means you are not keeping up with the times,” became popular (Hoadley, 2001). These novels foreground gender equality and portray female protagonists who demand parity with male counterparts in social, political, and sexual spheres. Through their resistance to patriarchal constructs, Utami’s characters represent a feminist reimagining of Indonesian womanhood.

The gradual transformation of gender inequality in Indonesian society has been closely tied to the rise of feminist thought and activism, which is reflected in contemporary literature. This shift is particularly visible in Ayu Utami’s *Saman* (1998) and *Larung* (2001), where female characters embrace their autonomy and challenge traditional gender roles. These novels break away from earlier depictions of women as gentle, ornamental, or subordinate to powerful male figures. Instead, they present multidimensional female protagonists who assert their agency, both intellectually and sexually (Budianta, 2000; Paramaditha, 2013). This study adopts a feminist literary criticism framework, incorporating gender-based analytical tools, to investigate how these texts reframe

women’s identity and power. The alignment of female strength with male authority in these narratives represents a significant ideological shift within post-New Order Indonesian literature.

Education emerges as a critical driver of gender equality, and the historical marginalization of women is understood not as a reflection of inherent inferiority but as a consequence of systemic denial of equal opportunities (Subrahmanian, 2005). Literature, through the gender lens, becomes a medium to critically explore the status and representation of women, providing insight into both societal norms and the author’s ideological stance. A gendered reading thus emphasizes the themes of emancipation, equity, and the humanization of women, resisting their objectification (Beauvoir, 1949; Tong, 2009).

Larung further extends the political and philosophical discourse begun in *Saman*, featuring female characters engaged in underground political movements. Despite being subjected to state violence and institutional repression, these characters challenge moral and spiritual norms, particularly those governing women’s bodies and sexuality. Utami critiques the state’s role in regulating women’s autonomy, especially through moral codes and patriarchal control (Heryanto, 2008). Similarly, Eka Kurniawan’s *Beauty Is a Wound* (*Cantik Itu Luka*, 2002) uses the story of Dewi Ayu—a prostitute—and her descendants to trace Indonesia’s historical trajectory from colonial rule to the New Order era. Employing magical realism, dark humor, and political allegory, Kurniawan portrays women’s bodies as contested terrains where power and ideology intersect (Foulcher, 2012; Hellwig, 2014).

The socio-historical context of both novels shows the existence of prevailing ideologies that influence society's views on gender, sexuality, nationalism, and power. Therefore, it is important to use methods that can deconstruct the discourse mechanisms in the text, such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Research using this method goes beyond the plot and characters of the novel to examine how language is used as an ideological tool in the work, both to uphold and challenge power. This study seeks to show how power relations are negotiated, challenged, and reproduced in literary works through a critical examination of *Larung* and *Cantik Itu Luka*. In this case, literature functions as a platform for the conflict between emancipation and domination, which reflects and creates social meaning in modern Indonesian society.

The shift from the New Order to the Reformation was a pivotal moment in Indonesian political and cultural history. The authoritarianism, militarism, and strict censorship of the New Order (1966–1998) limited public space for expression, including literature. After the fall of Soeharto, the Reformation period unleashed a wave of liberation that sparked the emergence of various counter-discourses, especially in the literary world. Previously suppressed topics including sexuality, religion, and government violence began to be discussed by writers. In this context, Ayu Utami's *Larung* (2001) and Eka Kurniawan's *Cantik Itu Luka* (2002) can be seen as artistic and political literary expressions. Historical trauma, colonialism, women's bodies, and power are discussed in both books. Through its investigation of spirituality and sexuality, *Larung* offers female characters who challenge patriarchal systems and state dogma. On the other hand, *Cantik Itu Luka* reveals the systemic violence that has plagued

women since the colonial era to the New Order through stories filled with satire and magical fiction.

In both books, the dynamics of hegemonic power are demonstrated, but there are also examples of resistance in the form of symbolic actions, irony, or alternative language. This study seeks to uncover the ways in which power is expressed and resisted in both works through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology. Thus, literature is positioned as a symbolic space where ideological forces collide, compete, and negotiate—a zone of power.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the Critical Discourse Analysis framework developed by Norman Fairclough. This approach views discourse as a social practice that reflects and shapes power relations. The three main dimensions of Fairclough's CDA are:

1. Text: linguistic analysis of word choice, metaphor, and narrative structure.
2. Discursive Practice: how texts are produced and received.
3. Social Practice: the relationship between texts and broader social structures.

The idea of power in this situation is both productive (creating subjects) and repressive (oppressing). Conversely, resistance is an attempt to undermine the prevailing discourse through words, actions, or symbols. According to Jorgensen (2002), Fairclough's method is known as text-oriented discourse analysis, and aims to unite three traditions: 1) linguistic textual analysis, which includes Michael Halliday's functional grammar; 2) sociology's macro-sociological examination of social practices, which includes

Foucault's theories but lacks a methodology for text analysis; and 3) sociology's micro-sociological interpretive tradition. According to Fairclough, it contributes to the formation of social relations, social identities, and systems of knowledge and meaning. Discourse has three purposes, namely relational, ideational, and identity functions (Jorgensen, 2002:67).

The theory behind Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) views language not only as a means of communication but also as a social reality. It suggests that language reflects and represents social power structures. The premise that people use language to achieve various social goals is supported by this perspective, which was first put forward by Halliday (1978) and Kress (1989). Fairclough also emphasizes the need to link language analysis to social theory, which takes into account social institutions and behaviors alongside broader ideological backgrounds. By considering social and ideological contexts, CDA offers a comprehensive and critical analytical framework for understanding language use in diverse contexts. As such, CDA serves as a foundation for investigating the relationship between language use and unequal power relations in language studies, as Fairclough (1989, p. 1) states.

Power and control are at the heart of Fairclough's CDA concept. How language is used to uphold or subvert established hierarchies of power is a central question posed by AWK. According to Fairclough, discourse can have a particular ideological impact as a type of social practice. A powerful instrument for creating and perpetuating power gaps between different social classes, genders, and majority and minority groups is discourse, which is

created, reproduced, and consumed in a particular social context in this case (Suprapto, 2018, p. 2). The CDA model developed by Fairclough emphasizes how language shapes social reality and shows power imbalances in society. Through the presentation of their respective narratives, this model explores how social groups engage in linguistic competition. Because discourse places language at the center of power practices, it can uphold or change the power structures of society.

Three interrelated analyses are included in Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis paradigm, namely:

1. Text

The text dimension is the initial phase of analysis in Norman Fairclough's AWK model. This dimension is concerned with the linguistic study of written and spoken texts. This layer of study involves a thorough linguistic examination of the word choice, syntax, style, and meaning of the text. The structure and meaning of the text can be understood by applying the principles of structural or functional linguistics (SFL).

2. Discursive Practice

This dimension of discursive activity is concerned with the process of production, distribution, and consumption of texts. Fairclough examines the production of texts and their interpretation within a particular social and ideological context within this context. In this analysis, elements such as the creator of the text, the target audience, the method of distribution, and the audience's interpretation are all considered.

3. Sociocultural Practice

The analysis of sociocultural practices focuses on the study of the relationship

between texts and the wider social and cultural context. This analysis focuses on the role of texts in the creation and maintenance of identities, knowledge, and power structures. Textual representations of social and institutional interactions and activities also fall into this category.

Method

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive method with a focus on the content analysis of two novels: *Larung* and *Cantik Itu Luka*. Data in the form of text excerpts containing elements of power and resistance are analyzed using Fairclough's AWK framework. Literature study is also used to understand the socio-political context and dominant discourse that shape the two novels.

This study focuses on the content analysis of two novels, *Larung* and *Cantik Itu Luka*, using qualitative descriptive methodology. Using Fairclough's AWK framework, data in the form of text excerpts with components of resistance and power are studied. The prevailing socio-political background and discourse that influence the two works are also understood through literature study.

This study uses a qualitative descriptive methodology with the aim of understanding and interpreting the meaning of literary works as a whole. This method was chosen because it is in line with the characteristics of contextual and narrative data. Creswell (2021) emphasizes that qualitative methods are used to investigate and understand the meaning that is considered to originate from social or humanitarian issues, both individually and in groups. According to Creswell, qualitative researchers seek to understand the significance of phenomena by considering the

perspectives of participants in an unchanging environment.

The primary data source for this study is sections of the novels *Larung* and *Cantik Itu Luka*, which discuss the themes of resistance and power. Three dimensions encompass the analytical technique, namely Norman Fairclough's *Critical Discourse Analysis* (AWK): (1) text analysis, which is the study of linguistic and narrative structures in texts; (2) discourse practices, which include the production and consumption of texts; and (3) social practices, which investigate the relationship between discourse and more general social structures (Fairclough, 1995). Furthermore, this study utilizes literature studies to support the political, ideological, and historical background of the two books.

Understanding how ideology and power are presented, upheld, and contested in specific discourse practices is achieved through this study. The three elements of Fairclough's CDA model work together to provide a comprehensive and critical study of texts and discourse practices. In addition to examining the structure and content of texts, Fairclough's CDA investigates the sociocultural, ideological, and social contexts in which the texts are created and understood. Therefore, a more critical understanding of how language and discourse function to shape and maintain systems of power in society can be gained from Fairclough's CDA. This system of power is constructed through a network of power that includes complex relationships between colonial and racial relations, patriarchal gender interactions, and capitalist relations (between social classes) (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2007, p. 24).

Finding and Discussion

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used in this work to analyze it by examining its history. In *The History of Sexuality*, published in 1978, Michel Foucault claims that authority operates not only through repression but also through the creation of language that shapes the subject. According to him, social networks are where power is distributed and influences our speech, thoughts, and behavior. The idea that "where there is power, there is resistance" is crucial to understanding the dynamics of domination and resistance in literary works, he asserts.

Therefore, Norman Fairclough (1995) uses Critical Discourse Analysis to view language as a social practice that contributes to the change and reproduction of social institutions. The three components of Fairclough's discourse analysis methodology are (1) text analysis (linguistic structures), (2) discourse practices (the act of creating and consuming texts), and (3) social practices (the broader social and ideological background). According to this theory, literature is a type of discourse production that reflects and influences the dynamics of societal power.

Representation of Power in Larung

In *Larung*, power is represented through military figures and the New Order state. Characters such as Cok and other military figures express the state's hegemony over the bodies and choices of individuals, especially women. *Larung* and his friends try to fight this order through subversive spiritual, sexual, and political practices.

Example quote:

*"Saman and Larung's
bodies do not belong to*

*the state. We are not
subject to any doctrine."*

This quote shows resistance to the standardization of identity carried out by the state. The quote emphasizes that the characters in the novel *Saman* and *Larung* are not willing to surrender control over their bodies and identities to the state or any institution. Women's bodies, in this case, are presented as autonomous areas, not objects that can be controlled through moral, legal, or cultural regulations. Rejection of "any doctrine" shows an anti-doctrinaire and anti-authority attitude, especially towards the way the state dictates the behavior, identity, and even sexuality of its citizens.

The state in this context can be understood as a representation of power that tends to standardize identities through the education system, law, religion, and media. Women are often the target of these efforts to regulate and control. In Ayu Utami's work, resistance to this standardization is manifested through a narrative that dares to explore the sexuality, spirituality, and freedom of thought of her characters.

The body becomes a field of struggle as well as a symbol of freedom. By stating that their bodies "do not belong to the state," the characters assert ownership of themselves and refuse to submit to dominant norms. This reflects the spirit of postcolonial feminism that not only opposes patriarchy, but also the state as an agent of internal colonialism.

Furthermore, this quote also reflects a critique of the New Order state ideology that demands stability through standardization, both in the form of gender roles, morality, and political expression. In that context, Ayu Utami's work emerges as an alternative voice that challenges the established order and

demands space for diversity of identities and life experiences. In Fircalaugh's critical discourse analysis, there are three stages, namely the text level, discourse practice, and social practice in analyzing the novel *Larung* and *Cantik itu Luka*, as follows:

1. Text Level

At this level, we see how word choice, sentence structure, and metaphors are used to represent power and resistance. Representation of power: Words such as "state hegemony," "military," and "doctrine" indicate repressive and authoritarian power. Military figures such as Cok not only act as individuals, but also as symbols of the New Order state's dominance. The phrases "state hegemony," "military," and "doctrine" carry a strong semantic load, which directly points to a repressive and authoritarian power structure. These words do not merely function descriptively, but rather construct meaning about how power works in the socio-political context of Indonesia, especially during the New Order.

"State hegemony" refers to the state's ideological dominance over society, as stated by Antonio Gramsci. The state does not only rely on physical force (repression), but also controls the consciousness of society through education, media, religion, and culture. In this case, the dominant narrative is produced and reproduced to create obedience, even without direct violence.

"Military" in this context is not only a state defense institution, but also a political actor active in regulating civilian life. In the discourse of the New Order, the military became a symbol of masculine, hierarchical, and coercive state power. Figures such as Cok in *Larung* or *Saman* do not only act as individuals with a military background, but as metaphors for state militarism,

namely the way the state maintains stability with violence and tight control.

Meanwhile, the word "doctrine" implies a one-way imposed value system. In this text, doctrine is not something that is voluntarily agreed upon, but rather imposed as the sole truth. This doctrine can refer to state ideology, politicized religious norms, or social rules that oppress individual freedom, especially against women and marginalized groups.

The character of Cok, in his role as a military officer, does not stand alone as a fictional character. He becomes a symbol of the power of the New Order state that internalizes violence, fear, and control over the bodies and minds of society. His relationship with the female characters in the novel shows the clash between the masculine power of the state and women's efforts to be free from the oppressive system.

Thus, the analysis of this text shows how the diction used by the author explicitly forms a discourse of criticism of power. Saman and Larung use language as a tool of resistance—against the official state narrative, against militarism, and against doctrines that imprison individual identities.

2. Discursive Practices

This section examines how texts are produced and received, and how intertextuality plays a role.

a. Production and distribution of texts:

Ayu Utami's *Larung* was produced in the post-Reformasi era, where critical expressions of the New Order became possible. The author used literary forms to channel counter-hegemonic discourses that had previously been censored. Ayu Utami's *Larung* is a typical product of the post-Reformasi

era, a period when state control over cultural expression began to loosen. The 1998 Reformation paved the way for freedom of speech, abolished strict censorship practices, and enabled criticism of the state, the military, and dominant social institutions such as religion and the family. In this context, *Larung* functions not only as a literary work, but also as a political artifact—representing voices that had previously been silenced under the New Order regime.

Ayu Utami uses the medium of literature to channel counter-hegemonic discourses, namely counter-narratives to the dominant discourses formed by the New Order state. With an explicit, experimental writing style that does not obey conservative moral rules, *Larung* expresses a freedom that was previously impossible to write and publish openly. The production of this novel, published through independent publishers and distributed amidst the growth of new literacy communities, marks the transformation of Indonesia's post-1998 cultural field. Here, the distribution of texts is no longer hierarchical and state-centric, but instead opens up space for alternative expressions from below. In addition to being a response to political change, *Larung* can also be read as part of a shift in symbolic economy (Bourdieu), where literature is no longer subject to the logic of the state, but becomes a field for the struggle for meaning, values, and social representation. Ayu Utami—and her novels—contribute to forming a new cultural landscape that is more plural, critical, and open to discourses that were suppressed during the New Order, such as feminism, sexuality, and non-conventional spirituality.

b. Intertextuality

Structurally and thematically, *Larung* cannot be understood as a stand-alone

text. It is full of intertextuality, namely the relationship and references to other texts, whether in the form of political history, social discourse, or spiritual and cultural narratives. Ayu Utami consciously builds a narrative that links the repressive history of the New Order, gender discourse, and alternative spirituality as a tool for criticism and resistance.

First, this novel contains many references to political violence that occurred during the New Order, such as the kidnapping of activists, military violence, and the silencing of public opinion. Through figures such as Larung and Shakuntala, readers are invited to recall the collective trauma that was never truly resolved by the state. In this case, *Larung* does the work of "counter-archiving", namely recording and reviving history from the perspective of victims and women.

Second, this novel is intertextual to the discourse of feminism and sexuality. Ayu Utami inserts a discourse about women's bodies that are not subject to domestic norms and religious morals. Sexuality is not presented as an object of exploitation, but as a tool of resistance and a source of knowledge. This shows the connection with global feminist texts, especially from the postcolonial feminist tradition and body politics feminism. Third, the alternative spirituality aspect in *Larung* also shows the connection with non-dogmatic narratives that reject formal religion as the only path to the meaning of life. The characters seek spirituality through non-conventional practices, such as meditation, traditional beliefs, or personal relationships with nature and spirits. This is where *Larung* links spirituality, sexuality, and politics into a single discourse of liberation that deviates from the grand narrative of New Order modernity.

Through this intertextuality, Larung builds a complex network of meanings and rejects the simplification of identity and life experience. This novel becomes a space where marginalized narratives—whether alternative history, women's bodies, or spirituality—can have a voice and find their form of expression.

3. Social Practice

In the dimension of social practice, text is understood not only as a product of language, but as a representation and at the same time part of a broader social practice. This means that text is always bound to and reflects the dynamics of power, ideology, and social structures that apply in society. In this context, the New Order State and the position of women in the narrative are the main keys in understanding the structure of social relations that are presented.

a. State Power and Ideology

The New Order State not only appears as a political actor, but also as a hegemonic agent that seeks to shape collective consciousness through control over the body and sexuality.

This is in line with Michel Foucault's thinking about how modern power works through biopolitics, namely the regulation of population, bodies, and private life norms through public policy, moral discourse, and legal apparatus. The state, in this text, not only limits public political space, but also intervenes in private and domestic areas, such as regulating morality, gender roles, and dress norms. The individual body, especially the female body, becomes a field of ideological articulation where the state forms "obedient", "moral", and "norm-compliant" citizens.

b. Women's Bodies as Political Loci

Women's bodies are represented not only as passive objects of state power, but also as locus of contestation—a space where various ideological interests collide. Larung and other women in the text become important figures in revealing how the patriarchal state makes women's bodies objects of control, but at the same time, these bodies also become tools for expressing resistance.

Through bodily experiences, whether trauma, memories, or physical actions, women in the text construct counter-narratives to state ideology. They are not merely sacrificed, but become active subjects who resist, reject, and redefine their identities and agencies.

c. Gender and Resistance to State Patriarchy.

Social practices in the text also show how the patriarchal system does not stand alone, but is legitimized by the state through regulation, education, and media discourse. The state and patriarchy support each other in forming a social order that is subordinate to women.

However, resistance comes from within the silenced body. Larung and other female figures prove that women's narratives cannot be completely suppressed. They reclaim narratives, seize meaning over their bodies, and refuse to be silent victims of history. In this context, text becomes a medium for the articulation of cultural resistance to state hegemony and patriarchal structures.

d. Social Awareness and the Emancipatory Function of the Text

By critically photographing social practices, this text can be read as part of a discursive struggle to dismantle domination. It not only documents structural violence, but also opens up

space for readers to question and dismantle the grand narrative that has been considered legitimate. Through the exposure of the dimensions of social practice, the text encourages critical awareness of readers towards power relations in society, showing that politics is not only in the parliament building or the state palace, but also in the bodies, language, and daily lives of individuals, especially women.

Power and Trauma in *Cantik Itu Luka*

In *Cantik Itu Luka*, power appears in the form of colonialism, patriarchy, and sexual violence. Dewi Ayu, the main character, is a prostitute who experiences repeated violence, but still survives in an ironic and satirical way. Power in this novel also works through myth and collective memory.

*"Beauty is a wound, they
say. But if so, why do the
deepest wounds happen to
the most beautiful?"*

The discourse of beauty as a tool of power is questioned and presented as a symbolic space of resistance.

Resistance: Body, Language, and Narrative

Both books show how language (sarcasm, metaphor), alternative narratives (subaltern experiences), and the body (sexuality, death) are all used to resist. In *Larung*, feminism and spirituality are used as tools of resistance. Black comedy and satire are used in *Cantik Itu Luka* to subvert the prevailing discourse.

Throughout history, the sociological approach has played an important role, especially in the Western world. The sociological approach seems to have disappeared for less than a century,

during the 20th century, when structuralism took center stage. After structuralism, the sociological method was re-examined. The intellectual basis of the sociological approach is the idea that literature and society are closely related. This relationship is caused by the following factors: a) authors create literary works; b) authors are members of society; c) authors utilize the wealth in society; and d) society reuses the results of literary works. Art in fact not only imitates life but also shapes it, this shows how writers and authors are influenced and influenced by society (Wellek and Warren, 2014, p. 109).

The rapid development of the humanities has triggered the development of sociological studies. The basic consideration is to provide balance to the two dimensions of humans, namely the physical and the spiritual. Today's scientists are increasingly aware that ignoring the spiritual aspect will in turn lead humans to mental degradation, even destruction.

In reality, only sex—as male or female—is determined biologically and naturally. On the other hand, sex and gender—namely, masculine-feminine—are defined culturally due to the reorganization of the intellectual superstructure and material infrastructure. As a result, femininity is a cultural psychological concept; someone "becomes" a woman rather than being born "as" a woman.

In general, feminism and postmodernism overturn conventional value systems by dismantling one school of thought, the grand narrative, including those found in literature and religion, patriarchy, ideology, and so on. Both of these developments have led to new ways of thinking about social life. As modern movements, postmodernism and feminism challenge

the legitimacy of the grand narrative, which Lyotard understands as homologies and stories that build metanarratives. Postmodernist philosophy demands that paralogy, multiple systems of thought, be used to legitimize homology.

Feminist literary analysis, grounded in its origins as a political, social, and economic movement, is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing upon diverse fields across the humanities and social sciences. Feminist criticism is marked by its methodological plurality and the multiplicity of its objects of inquiry. Within literary studies, this encompasses a range of topics, including popular literature by and for women, women authors and readers, female literary traditions, the linguistic features associated with women's writing, and the representation of female characters. As part of a broader effort to interrogate cultural constructions of gender, feminist criticism seeks to understand how literature both reflects and shapes gender ideologies.

In the context of cultural studies, feminist theory has also expanded its analytical tools to address systems of representation that privilege male-centered perspectives. Concepts such as *androcentrism* (male-centered worldview), *phallocentrism* (the prioritization of masculine authority), *androtext* (texts authored by men), and *gynotext* (texts authored by women), are key to this discourse. Similarly, gynocriticism, a term coined by Elaine Showalter, refers to a mode of literary criticism that centers female experience and seeks to construct a female literary tradition by focusing on women as both writers and subjects of literature (Showalter, 1979). These distinctions are essential for interrogating how

literature has historically reinforced or resisted patriarchal norms.

Feminist literary theory also recognizes that literary works function within a system of cultural production and reception. That is, the interaction between the author, text, and reader is not isolated from societal forces but is deeply embedded in them. This aligns with Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which conceptualizes cultural texts as sites where meaning is produced and interpreted within specific ideological frameworks. Literature, therefore, is not simply an artistic artifact but a social product that mirrors and negotiates the power structures of its time.

Seen in this light, the connection between literature and gender debates becomes clear. Literature operates not only as a form of representation but also as a mechanism through which cultural ideologies—particularly those surrounding gender—are reproduced, contested, or reimagined. Consequently, literary texts serve as critical sites for analyzing the ways in which women's roles and identities are constructed, challenged, and transformed within a given cultural context.

The findings of this study reinforce the assertion that women's subordination in literature is not an inherent truth, but a product of socially and culturally constructed discourse, as articulated by Barker (2013). By examining Ayu Utami's *Saman* and *Larung* through the lenses of postcolonial discourse theory and feminist literary criticism, it becomes clear that these texts challenge the dominant ideological systems that have historically placed women in subordinate roles.

The novels *Saman* and *Larung* present female characters who resist traditional

gender expectations. They are portrayed as intellectually capable, sexually autonomous, and politically aware—qualities that directly counter the dominant literary archetypes of the passive, emotional, or dependent woman. This supports Edward Said's (2001) theory that colonial and patriarchal discourses function through binary oppositions. Just as the East was feminized and constructed as inferior in Western colonial discourse, women have similarly been "Othered" in patriarchal systems. Utami's characters resist this othering by asserting agency within a society that seeks to silence them.

Further aligned with Foucault's (1978) concept of discourse and power, the findings reveal that literature can act as both a tool of subjugation and of resistance. Through culturally embedded narratives, dominant ideologies produce "truths" that normalize gender inequality. However, literary texts like *Saman* and *Larung* subvert these "truths" by presenting counter-narratives. These works expose how gender roles are not fixed but are shaped by historical, political, and cultural forces—offering space for contestation and reimagination.

Moreover, the novels highlight how subaltern women, as described by Spivak (1988), can reclaim their voice within oppressive systems. Utami's texts foreground women who are often excluded from dominant discourses—not only due to gender but also due to political and social marginalization. The depiction of their struggles—whether through political activism, spiritual exploration, or sexual liberation—illustrates how literature can serve as a platform for rearticulating identity and power from the margins. The research also dispels the notion that literature is detached from material realities.

Instead, in line with Loomba's (2005) argument, the study demonstrates that literary works are deeply political and ideological. *Saman* and *Larung* reflect the tensions of post-New Order Indonesia, using fiction as a vehicle for cultural critique and resistance. These texts critique not only patriarchy but also the institutional structures—state, religion, and culture—that support it.

Conclusions

According to the Critical Discourse Analysis paradigm, literary works function as a field of discourse where power is contested, validated, and resisted, in addition to reflecting socio-political realities. Through the bodies, words, and actions of the characters—especially women—*Larung* and *Cantik Itu Luka* depict power in a nuanced way, not as a single force that completely oppresses, but as a force that is constantly questioned and fought. In addition to being presented as victims of hegemonic institutions such as the military, state, or patriarchy, the female protagonists in both works also function as active participants who produce counter-discourses through real and symbolic forms of resistance.

Power in literary works is relational and dynamic; never absolute, but always contested, as shown by the AWK approach. Alternative interpretations of the dynamics of power in society are made possible by literary works, which also offer a platform for statements of opposition to the prevailing discourse. Therefore, literary works not only reflect existing power but also create space for changes in meaning, allowing readers to recognize the possibility of freedom even in the face of oppression.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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