

Women and Prostitution in Suparto Brata's Novel *Kremil*: A Radical Feminist Study

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Abstract. Prostitution is a pervasive social reality that widely recognized as a 'social problem'. Its emergence is often linked to the societal perception of women's subordinate power, compared to men, in various aspects of life. This perception extends beyond social reality, as the objectification of women is also evident in literary works, thereby reflecting broader societal views. Therefore, a study from a radical feminist perspective is crucial to exploring the issue of prostitution as it affects women. This study employed a feminist literary criticism approach utilizing qualitative research methods. Data was collected from the novel *Kremil* by Suparto Brata, published in 2002. The research aimed to describe the elements of radical feminism present within the text. The findings indicate the presence of radical feminism elements in the novel. The power imbalance between men and women is portrayed through the doctrines of marriage and traditional bonds that subjugate women. Conversely, the loss of virginity and engagement in prostitution are presented as manifestation of women's agency or power over their own bodies.

Keywords: Radical Feminism, Women, Feminist Literary Criticism.

1 Introduction

Issues concerning women—including oppression, violence, gender bias, and their struggle for recognition—are extensively discussed topics within society. Patriarchy and its inherent ideology are frequently identified as primary factors of gender inequality, contributing significantly to the oppression and violence women endure.

The values embedded within patriarchal ideology profoundly shape societal mindsets and behaviors. These values often objectify women, then, diminishing their agency and positioning them as subordinates rather than active participants in their own lives. Within a patriarchal culture, men are typically accorded a higher social standing than women. This hierarchical structure can lead to the normalization of harassment against women, even in seemingly minor instances. Such dynamics are intrinsically linked to the unequal power relationship between the dominant (masculine/superiority) and the dominated (feminine/inferiority). Consequently, women are frequently subordinated, leading to stereotypically diminished functions, roles, and societal positions.

Indonesian literary works frequently feature women, either as central subjects or as objects within their narratives. Gender issues, particularly those revolving around the portrayal, existence, and relationships of women in connection to men, are common thematic focal points. For example, Suparto Brata's 2002 novel, *Kremil*, serves as a compelling literary representation of real-world socio-cultural dynamics, reflecting the context in which the author created the work

The relationship among literary works, social reality, and feminism is intrinsically close. Literature frequently acts as a mirror reflecting societal realities, including issues of gender and the injustices experienced by women. Feminism, as both a social movement and an ideology, utilizes literary works to analyze, critique, and transform patriarchal narratives prevalent in society, while also advocating for gender equality. Therefore, this interplay—between literature, social reality, and feminism—is complex and dynamic

This study employs the theory of "reading as a woman" [2] to analyze the women's issues presented in novels. This theory, particularly within feminist literary criticism, underscores the importance of interpreting texts with an acute awareness of gender perspectives and their influence on meaning. This approach critically examines how female characters are portrayed in literary works—whether as active subjects or passive objects—and how patriarchal ideology might influence the text's construction. Therefore, the position of "reading as a woman" not only deepens understanding of the text itself but also illuminates how the text is shaped by its social, cultural, and gendered contexts, prompting readers to respond critically

One prominent theory within feminism is radical feminism. Its fundamental premise posits that the oppression of women by men is deeply rooted in the male gender itself and its patriarchal ideology. Consequently, radical feminists view men as being biologically and politically integral to the problem. This perspective considers the physical domination of women by men, including sexual relations, as a fundamental form of oppression. [3]

Radical feminism critically examines the body and reproductive rights, sexuality (including lesbianism), sexism, power dynamics between women and men, and the private-public dichotomy. The concept of "the personal is political" is central to addressing women's issues within the private sphere, particularly those considered too taboo for public discussion. Unfortunately, misinformation and negative portrayals (often termed "black propaganda") frequently target radical feminists.

In alignment with feminist goals to dismantle male domination, feminist literary criticism functions as a form of negotiation rather than confrontation. This critical

approach aims to overthrow dominant discourses, not compromise with them. Feminist literary criticism extends beyond a mere perspective. It demonstrates sophistication through strategic alliances with various critical theories [4].

The novel *Kremil* vividly depicts nightlife. While its narrative about life in a red-light district—featuring individuals who are discarded, abandoned, or self-abandoned—may not present groundbreaking insights, it explores a unique aspect. The stability found in prostitution within the novel represents an attempt to redefine one's existence as a woman. This portrayal suggests that being a prostitute can signify controlling and subjugating men, rather than being controlled and subjugated by them, as is often the case within the institution of marriage. Through a radical feminist analysis, the main character's resistance to the oppression she experiences becomes clearer.

2 Research Method

This research employs radical feminist theory. Radical feminist is a framework and movement that investigates the fundamental causes of women's oppression. This theory asserts that the oppression women experience originates from a deeply ingrained patriarchal system within society and culture, which is further sustained by various forms of violence and discrimination

This research utilizes a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature review. The primary focus is to describe aspects of radical feminism as they relate to gender inequality depicted in Suparto Brata's novel, *Kremil*. The research process involves the following steps: 1) data collection through reading and comprehension of the novel; 2) data classification; 3) data analysis using radical feminist theory; and 4) drawing conclusions.

3 Results & Discussion

As mentioned in the introduction, this study focuses on one theory of feminism, namely radical feminism. Based on this, the study focuses on the forms of resistance carried out by female characters in Suparto Brata's novel *Kremil*.

3.1 Power Relations Between Men and Women

The oppression women experience stems from their subordinate position as the "second sex" within a gendered class system. Radical feminists contend that biological factors underpin these gender distinctions. Men's physical control over

women constitutes a form of oppression against them. This perceived power over women's bodies and lives often leads men to act without restraint.

3.1.1 The Doctrine of Marriage

The patriarchal worldview often dictates that marriage is the sole path for women to gain support and validate their existence. It is often presented as an unavoidable destiny for women. This perspective assigns women the primary functions of fulfilling men's (husbands') sexual needs, attending to all their husbands' requirements, and bearing offspring within society. Consequently, the notion of a husband's ownership of his wife empowers men to demand complete devotion, service, and obedience from women. In the novel *Kremil*, the character Boyani embodies a woman who endures profound suffering and exhausting struggles. Born into poverty, she was compelled to assist her parents with farm work and selling used goods. At a young age, she was married to a man from another village and relocated to his home. Following her marriage, Boyani became the sole provider for her family, juggling the roles of wife, daughter-in-law, and financial supporter. Ultimately, Boyani rebelled against these circumstances, left her marriage, and found herself in *Kremil* [5].

The inferiority of women (wives) to men (husbands) is strongly evident in the novel. The traits of obedience, loyalty, submission, and compliance to her husband are the duties and responsibilities of a wife. Although Boyani's character plays an essential part in providing economic support for her family, her contributions are not acknowledged as a form of women's struggle for existence. Instead, her freedom is further restricted.

3.1.2 Traditional Value Bonds

Society creates rules to be restrictive for women. These rules are typically not neutral or beneficial, but rather disadvantageous.

“I was locked up, forbidden to associate with other men, not allowed to go to parties, socialize with male or female friends... I was pampered by my mother, and whenever possible, my face was covered so that other men wouldn't consider me beautiful...” [6]

The hegemony of Javanese values in the quote above demonstrates that women must maintain a feminine image. Women are controlled by rules in every aspect of their behaviours. If they do otherwise, there are consequences, including receiving "indecent" comments, being inappropriate, and being judged as incompatible. In this

regard, women are at a disadvantage. They are expected to be loyal, devoted, and physically perfect, as expected by men.

3.2 Women, Sex, and the Body

Radical feminists believe that the oppression of women by men is rooted in male gender and patriarchal ideology. Therefore, men, both biologically and politically, are an integral part of the problem. Radical feminists question issues that have been considered taboo for society to discuss. These issues include sexual violence, women's freedom to determine their own satisfaction, and various cases of sexual harassment experienced by women.

3.2.1 The Desire to Lose Virginity

In the novel, Ningsih defies conventional expectations by losing her virginity outside of marriage. As a commercial sex worker, she consciously chooses to engage in sexual acts without commitment. She believes that by doing so, women can achieve equal power over their bodies with men.

In the novel, Ningsih explains complexity of sexuality between men and women through her thoughts. She opts to disregard the concept of sin, positing that sexual relations inherently occur at a subconscious level. This subconscious realm, she argues, is where power imbalances emerge. This relationship leading individuals to objectify their partners rather than engage with them as equals. Consequently, genuine equality in relationships remains elusive.

Moreover, within patriarchal culture, a woman's virginity is often considered her most valuable asset. This idea of virginity is certainly not far from the idea of female religiosity. Because women are considered religious, they will guard their virginity and bestow it only upon a "deserving" man. From radical feminist perspective, such women are considered devoid of desire because they are bound by the rules that legitimize it.

Ningsih, through her attitudes or actions, attempts to challenge patriarchy. She asserts that women possess the right to control their own genitals without being influenced by the existing social environment. She reclaims control over female sexuality by demanding the right to practice whatever brings women pleasure and satisfaction. The ideal sexual relationship is one of equal partners who both give explicit consent and negotiate to maximize each other's sexual pleasure and satisfaction, in whatever form they choose. [7]

3.2.2 Sex, Body, and Prostitution

In the novel *Kremil*, female characters assert their right to do whatever they want with their bodies. The slogan "the personal is political" highlights that oppression in the private sphere is, in essence, a public issue. This statement implies "women are the owners of their own bodies." Within the narrative, sexuality and prostitution become ways in which women reclaim and represent their bodies.

Women's sexuality has been heavily regulated within patriarchal societies. This regulated sexuality includes shaping feminine sexuality to be desirous of and dependent on masculine sexuality. However, the novel suggests that the inherent diversity in individual sexual expressions allows women the freedom to choose their own sexuality, select their desired partners, and express their desires as they see fit.

The characters Ningsih, Boyani, Maryuni, and Tumini, who work as commercial sex workers, cannot be separated from prostitution. Therefore, their bodies and sexuality become arenas for the struggle of various interests and changes. Sexuality and prostitution are arenas for the contestation of various biological, psychological, economic, cultural, and political interests. Private sexual activity gains a social function when it becomes intertwined with the survival of individuals and their communities. In this process, when sexuality serves purposes such as procreation, economic gain, desire satisfaction, psychological fulfillment, or even societal demands, it inherently requires other individuals as intermediaries.

From a radical feminist perspective, prostitution and eroticism—or female desire—are considered natural and should be acknowledged by all women. Eroticism, in this view, is a woman's most profound source of energy, deeply rooted in her power and her capacity for self-understanding. It encompasses not only sexual matters but also a woman's emotions and knowledge. Patriarchy, however, has alienated women from their own eroticism, often stigmatizing it as pornography. However, these two concepts are distinct: pornography primarily focuses on sensation without genuine feeling. [8]

I once wanted to live a happy life with my ideal Arjuna. But my mother had another man in mind. An aspiring engineer. I felt a similarity to Mrs. Yuyun's love for Mariyun. I didn't like being pressured and forced like that. Because my mother kept forcing her will and ended my relationship with my Arjuna in a humiliating manner. I didn't want to marry the man my mother chose. I rebelled and ran away from home [9].

The phrase "I don't want to marry the man my mother chose" is related to radical feminist views that reject marriage not only in theory but often in practice as well.

The determination to become a prostitute is an attempt to define one's existence as a woman and demonstrates that being a prostitute means dominating and subjugating men, not being dominated and subjugated by men, as in the institution of marriage.

4 Conclusion

This research elucidates the intricate relationship between social reality and literary works. It explores how authors, as members of society, represent women in literary works. The depiction of prostitution in the novel *Kremil*, when analyzed through the lens of radical feminist theory, is revealed as a powerful form of resistance. Through this depiction, women in the novel assert the fundamental principle that "women are the owners of their own bodies. Sexuality and prostitution are the means by which they represent their bodies.

The novel *Kremil* reflects life in the Kremil red-light district in Surabaya at that time. *Kremil* tells the story of women who choose their own path in life, even though it may be despicable to some. It depicts women's struggle to rediscover life on their own terms.

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