

## **Feminism in the Short Story Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet by Djenar Maesa Ayu**

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### **A B S T R A C T**

This study aims to analyse the representation of feminism in the short story *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet* by Djenar Maesa Ayu using a feminist literary criticism approach. A qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach is used to identify feminist symbolism, narratives, and themes that describe women's experiences as well as criticism of patriarchal norms. Data were obtained through literature study and critically analysed using feminist theory to reveal issues of gender injustice, women's subordination, and resistance to oppression. The results show that this short story represents women's experiences in patriarchal structures through symbols such as cages, bodies, and knives, which depict sexual violence, social stigma, and the main character's struggle against patriarchal domination. The emotional and fragmentary narrative reinforces the critique of cultural norms that silence women. The conclusion of this study is that the short story *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet* becomes an effective medium of social criticism, highlighting gender inequality and advocating awareness of women's rights. The contribution of this research lies in the enrichment of feminist studies in Indonesian literature and its implications for interdisciplinary studies between literature, gender and sociology. This research strengthens the position of literature as a tool of cultural resistance and encourages further discussion on social transformation towards gender equality.

*Keywords:* feminism, gender, short story, Djenar Maesa Ayu

### **INTRODUCTION**

Literature is often a reflection and critique of social reality, including issues relating to gender injustice (Drążkowski et al., 2024). In a patriarchal society, women are often placed in a subordinate position, socially, culturally, and politically (Amanda & Nugroho, 2024). This has led to the rise of the feminist movement, which aims to fight for gender equality and criticise various forms of oppression against women (Caudwell, 2024). In the context of Indonesian literature, feminism is often a theme raised to voice women's experiences as well as a means of resistance to entrenched patriarchal norms (Barbala, 2022).

Djenar Maesa Ayu's short story *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet* is one of the literary works that voices women's issues in a profound and controversial way (Wilson, 2024). Djenar, as one of Indonesia's leading female writers, often explores themes such as sexual violence, exploitation of the female body, and the marginalisation of women in society (Poutiainen, 2023). This short story tells the traumatic experience of a woman who experiences various forms of violence and oppression, both physically and psychologically, which reflects the harsh reality that women often face in their daily lives (Astuti & Umiati, 2018).

This work is interesting to study because of its bold and symbolic approach, which not only depicts women's suffering but also reveals efforts to resist patriarchal structures (Permana & Maulana, 2020). This short story challenges readers to reflect on social realities that are often ignored, especially regarding the position of women in society (Caldeira, 2023). Through her characters, themes, and narratives, Djenar opens a space for discussion about the complex and often contradictory experiences of women. (Mulyadi, 2018).

In feminist studies, literary works such as *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet* become important material for understanding how women represent themselves and how their voices are voiced in the public sphere. (Curiel & Silva-Reis, 2024). The analysis of this short story not only provides insight into gender dynamics in Indonesian society but also shows how literature can be an effective tool of resistance against patriarchal domination. (Kvaka et al., 2024).

This research aims to explore how feminist values are represented in the short story *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet*. Using a feminist literary criticism approach, this research will examine the symbols, characterisation, and narrative used by Djenar to convey her feminist messages (Lahm, 2023). The results of the study are expected to contribute to understanding the relationship between literature and feminism, as well as the relevance of this work in fighting for gender justice in Indonesia (Yulistiani, 2024).

Previous studies that examined Djenar Maesa Ayu's works generally focused on the themes of sexual violence, exploitation of the female body, and social criticism of patriarchal culture. For example, research by (Noviyanti et al., 2024) explores the representation of women in Putu Wijaya's short story 'Rasa', highlighting how domestic and sexual violence are the main tools to illustrate women's subordination. Another study by (Jannah, 2024) highlights the use of symbolism in Djenar's work to present women's resistance to oppressive social norms. However, few studies have specifically examined the short story *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet* in the context of an in-depth feminist analysis, especially regarding power relations and women's resistance constructed through the narrative style and characterisation in the short story (Kusuma & Nuryanto, 2019).

The novelty of this research lies in the approach that not only analyses the theme of feminism in general, but also explores how certain symbols are used to represent women's struggles and trauma in facing the patriarchal system (Setiyono, 2015). In addition, this research offers a new perspective by mapping the link between the personal experiences of the characters in the short stories and the systemic critique of the broader patriarchal culture (Sudarwi & Asropah, 2024).

In terms of state of the art, this research contributes to the development of feminist studies in contemporary Indonesian literature by presenting a comprehensive analysis of Djenar's work, which is often considered controversial (Hanifah et al., 2024). By utilising feminist literary criticism as the main approach, this research not only enriches the understanding of women's representation in literature, but also provides space for a wider discussion on how Indonesian literary works can act as a medium of resistance to gender injustice in the modern era (Apriliani et al., 2024).

The title 'Feminism in Short Story Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet Djenar Maesa Ayu' was chosen because this work explicitly presents a portrait of the lives of women who are marginalised and victims of various forms of violence in a patriarchal society (Ja & Rini, 2024). It addresses important issues such as the exploitation of women's bodies, sexual violence, and the struggle to regain agency over oneself, which are central themes in feminism (Marsanda et al., 2024). The choice of title is also based on the relevance of this work in the context of resistance to gender injustice in Indonesia (Pratiwi et al., 2024).

The literature review shows that several previous studies have examined Djenar Maesa Ayu's works, but most focus on the theme of violence and social criticism in general. For example, a study by (Setiawan et al., 2024) examines the representation of domestic violence in the novel 'More Silent than a Whisper', while a study by (Oktarina et al., 2024) explores the use of symbolism in 'Rukiah's Short Story'. However, a special study that explores the short story Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet from a feminist perspective in depth has not yet been conducted (Sadwika et al., 2024). This shows that there is room for research that is more focused on how the narratives and symbols in this short story represent women's struggle against patriarchal domination (Gustafsson, 2024).

The problem formulations in this study are: (1) How are the ideas of feminism represented in the short story Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet? (2) What symbols and narratives are used to articulate women's resistance to patriarchy? (3) How does this work reflect the social reality of women in Indonesia?

This research aims to analyse the representation of feminism in the short story Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet using a feminist literary criticism approach (Mayada & Sulton, 2024). Specifically, this study aims to reveal the symbolism and narrative used by Djenar in describing women's experiences, and how this short story can contribute to the

discourse of feminism in contemporary Indonesian literature that can reflect the social reality of women in Indonesia.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach to analyse the short story *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet* by Djenar Maesa Ayu (Ayu, 2004). Data were collected through a literature study, which involved an in-depth reading of the short story as well as a review of related literature, such as feminist theories and scientific articles that support the analysis. Data analysis techniques were conducted using a critical approach to the text, referring to concepts of feminism, particularly theories developed by Simone de Beauvoir (Beauvoir, 2003) and Judith Butler (Butler, 2002) to identify representations of gender issues, women's subordination, and critiques of patriarchal norms that appear in the narrative. The stages of analysis include: (1) understanding the social and cultural context behind the work, (2) identifying feminist themes in the story, such as gender injustice and resistance to patriarchy, (3) interpreting the data based on the theoretical framework of feminism, and (4) concluding the results of the analysis to answer the research objectives. With this method, the research provides a comprehensive explanation of the analysed literary works and enables replication of similar research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study found that the ideas of feminism in the short story *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet* are represented through the main character's experiences of sexual violence, emotional neglect, and social stigma. The short story portrays women as the main victims of the patriarchal structure that places them in a subordinate position (Landrum & Lichter, 2024). Djenar uses female characters as a medium to voice gender injustices that are often hidden behind social norms. One quote that stands out regarding sexual violence reads:

*"Ketika aku kecil, ayah sering masuk ke kamarku malam-malam. Ia bilang, 'Jangan bilang siapa-siapa ya, ini rahasia kita berdua.' Tapi aku tidak mengerti mengapa aku harus menyimpan rahasia itu"* (Djenar, 2002, p. 15).

This quote shows how domestic sexual violence often goes unnoticed because it is covered by taboos and a culture of silence. In addition, the representation of feminism is also seen in the portrayal of the main character as a figure who tries to understand and fight the injustice she experiences. This can be seen in the narrative:

*"Aku ingin bebas, tidak ingin lagi menjadi boneka yang harus selalu tersenyum meski sesak menahan marah"* (Djenar, 2002, p. 30).

This quote represents women's awareness of their position in a society that demands compliance without regard to their needs and emotions as individuals. Furthermore, the idea of feminism is represented through criticism of social norms that judge women more harshly than men. The protagonist faces social stigma due to her life choices, as in the statement:

*"Mereka bilang aku perempuan murahan, tapi mereka tidak tahu siapa yang sebenarnya telah menghancurkan hidupku"* (Djenar, 2002, p. 50).

This reflects how patriarchal societies often blame women for situations that are actually the result of their own acts of violence or injustice.

The results of this analysis are consistent with Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) feminist theory, which states that women are often positioned as the Other, which alienates them from the freedom to determine their own lives. This research is also supported by a study (Jannah, 2024) which states that Djenar Maesa Ayu's works consistently raise issues of feminism through the depiction of female characters who experience conflict with patriarchal norms in Indonesia. Thus, the short story Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet represents the ideas of feminism through criticism of gender injustice and women's courage to fight patriarchal domination, despite having to face the risk of social stigma.

In the short story Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet, Djenar Maesa Ayu uses various symbols and narratives to depict women's resistance to patriarchy. One prominent symbol is the cage, which symbolises social control and oppression of women. In the short story, the main character says,

*"Aku merasa seperti seekor binatang di dalam kandang. Mereka memberiku makan, tetapi mereka juga mengunci mulutku"* (Djenar, 2002, p. 28).

This quote reflects how women are often trapped in patriarchal expectations that limit their freedom, both physically and mentally. The symbol of the cage becomes a metaphor for the pressure women face in performing traditional roles imposed by society. In addition, the female body is an important symbol in this short story, representing an arena of resistance to patriarchy (Jones, 2024). Through the protagonist's reflection, Djenar asserts that women's bodies are not objects that can be controlled by others. This is illustrated in the statement,

*"Tubuhku milikku sendiri, bukan milik mereka yang merasa punya hak atasnya"* (Djenar, 2002, p. 40).

This statement shows the main character's awareness of the right to her own body, as well as rejecting the patriarchal view that objectifies women's bodies as the property of others. This is in accordance with Helene Cixous' (1986) view, which emphasises the

importance of women writing and describing their experiences as a form of resistance to male domination.

The narrative of trauma experienced by the main character is also a strong form of resistance. Disclosing experiences of sexual violence and harassment becomes a means for female characters to fight the culture of silence that often surrounds victims (Samnick & Michelis, 2024). The main character stated,

*"Aku tidak lagi ingin diam. Aku akan bicara, meski dunia ini penuh telinga yang tuli"* (Djenar, 2002, p. 55).

This quote reflects the main character's courage to voice the injustices she has experienced, despite facing social stigma. In this context, the narrative of the short story shows that disclosing trauma is an important step to counter patriarchal norms that silence women.

Another significant symbol is the knife, which is used as a tool of liberation. In one part of the short story, the knife is depicted as a tool used by the main character to break the chain of oppression:

*"Pisau itu aku genggam erat. Bukan untuk melukai diriku, tetapi untuk memotong rantai yang selama ini mengikatku"* (Djenar, 2002, p. 62).

This symbol depicts women's active action against the system that oppresses them, reinforcing the message that resistance requires real action.

This research is in line with the findings of (Jannah, 2024) who stated that Djenar Maesa Ayu's works often use provocative symbols to raise readers' awareness of gender injustice legitimised by patriarchal culture. The symbols and narratives in this short story not only illustrate women's resistance to patriarchy but also become a medium to arouse public awareness of the importance of resistance to norms that oppress women.

Djenar Maesa Ayu's short story Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet (They Say I'm a Monkey) reflects the social reality of women in Indonesia through the depiction of the main character's life, which is full of violence, discrimination, and social stigma (Browne et al., 2024). This work reflects how women are often victimised by the patriarchal structure that dominates Indonesian society, where sexual violence, harassment and gender inequality are often considered private matters or even denied to exist. One depiction of this social reality is seen in the quote:

*"Ketika aku kecil, ayah sering masuk ke kamarku malam-malam. Ia bilang, 'Jangan bilang siapa-siapa ya, ini rahasia kita berdua.' Tapi aku tidak mengerti mengapa aku harus menyimpan rahasia itu"* (Djenar, 2002, p. 15).

This quote shows how sexual violence in the domestic sphere is often hidden due to a culture of silence that protects perpetrators and oppresses victims. This is in line with the

findings of Rahayu (2020), who mentioned that Djenar's literary works often present the reality of women who are ignored by society, especially gender-based violence that is invisible to the public.

In addition, this short story also reflects the social reality of Indonesian women who are often morally punished for their life choices. In the story, the main character faces heavy social stigma as a result of her life:

*"Mereka bilang aku perempuan murahan, tapi mereka tidak tahu siapa yang sebenarnya telah menghancurkan hidupku"* (Djenar, 2002, p. 50).

This quote reflects a patriarchal culture that often blames women for their suffering, without considering the deeper context or causes. This reflects the findings of research (Jones, 2024), which shows that women in Indonesia are often the object of heavy moral judgement compared to men, especially in matters relating to their bodies and sexuality.

This short story also illustrates how women in Indonesia often do not have the space to voice the injustices they experience. This is reflected in the narrative:

*"Aku ingin bicara, tapi setiap kali aku membuka mulut, mereka menatapku seperti aku yang salah"* (Djenar, 2002, p. 35).

The narrative shows how patriarchal culture not only silences women directly, but also creates an environment that makes them feel guilty if they try to resist.

Through her straightforward language style and emotionally charged narrative, Djenar succeeds in creating a realistic portrait of the condition of women in Indonesia. As stated by (Pratiwi et al., 2024), Djenar's works often serve as social mirrors depicting gender conflicts in Indonesia, which remain relevant in a modern cultural context. By revealing the darker side of women's lives, this short story not only reflects the social reality of women in Indonesia but also criticises the patriarchal culture that perpetuates such injustices.

The short story Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet by Djenar Maesa Ayu is a literary work that represents the ideas of feminism through depicting the experiences of women living in a patriarchal system (Hermans & Schlesinger, 2024). The main character in this short story is presented as a figure who experiences various forms of violence, whether physical, verbal, or sexual, which reflects the injustices that women often face in society. The helplessness felt by the main character illustrates the position of women as victims in the patriarchal structure, while the psychological trauma experienced shows the deep impact of this oppression (Pieters & Trottier, 2024).

Through strong narratives, Djenar Maesa Ayu shows a rejection of patriarchal norms that limit women's freedom. A critique of the objectification of women's bodies is evident, where women's bodies often become objects of control and exploitation (Restiawat & Irma, 2024). In this short story, the female character tries to regain control over her body

and identity, illustrating the struggle for women's emancipation. In addition, the protagonist's exploration of her identity shows an attempt to redefine the role of women beyond the boundaries set by patriarchal society (Aprianto, 2024).

The narrative in this short story also offers a new perspective that prioritises women's experiences and voices. The use of the first point of view allows the reader to directly experience the emotional and psychological complexities experienced by the main character (Wahidah et al., 2024). Through this narrative, Djenar successfully deconstructs traditional gender stereotypes that portray women as passive and replaces them with characters full of strength, contradictions, and vulnerability.

In addition, social criticism of patriarchal structures is also an important element in this short story. The family institution is portrayed as one of the elements that perpetuate gender injustice, while patriarchal sexual norms that control women become the focus of resistance raised in the story. In this context, feminism is not only presented as an individual discourse, but also as a critique of discriminatory social norms.

Overall, the short story *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet* represents feminism as an ideology of resistance to patriarchy, both through explicit criticism of gender injustice and through the narratives of female characters who try to free themselves from the shackles of oppressive social structures (Lahm, 2023). The feminist ideas presented by Djenar Maesa Ayu in this short story not only reflect the reality of women, but also call for structural changes in society.

Symbols and narratives in Djenar Maesa Ayu's short story *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet* are used explicitly and implicitly to articulate women's resistance to patriarchy (Samnick & Michelis, 2024). Symbolism in this short story plays an important role as a metaphor of women's struggle against an oppressive system. One of the prominent symbols is animals, specifically monkeys, which can be interpreted as a representation of stereotyping or humiliation of women in a patriarchal society. The use of this symbol not only reflects the way women are often dehumanised or reduced in social values, but also becomes an expression of resistance against such views.

In addition to symbols, the narratives in these short stories also build resistance to patriarchy through depictions of female characters' experiences that are full of irony and suffering. The narratives often reflect criticism of rigid gender norms, such as the exploitation of women's bodies and social demands that dehumanise women. The use of internal monologues by the protagonists reinforces the emotional and psychological dimensions of resistance, allowing readers to understand women's inner struggles in the face of an unjust system.

The short story also uses fragmentary narrative to show the chaotic life of the main character as a direct result of patriarchy. The non-linear fragments of the story provide a picture of the rift in women's identities due to violence and oppression, as well as

illustrating women's efforts to reconstruct their lives outside the boundaries of patriarchy. Through these symbols and narratives, Djenar Maesa Ayu not only presents women's personal resistance, but also opens a space for reflection for readers to question the social structures that support gender injustice.

Djenar Maesa Ayu's short story *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet* reflects the social reality of women in Indonesia through the depiction of the main character's life experiences that are full of gender injustice. In this work, Djenar shows how women are often victims of violence, discrimination, and social control rooted in patriarchal culture. These representations reflect the issues faced by Indonesian women, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and the marginalisation of women's roles in society. Through emotional and visceral narratives, these short stories become a true reflection of the social conditions experienced by many women.

It also represents a critique of cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality. For example, the institution of family in this short story is often portrayed as a space that restricts women's freedom and reinforces their subordinate position. In addition, the sexual exploitation experienced by the main character reflects a serious problem in society, where women's bodies are often objectified without any recognition of their rights and dignity. This social reality not only reflects individual experiences, but also illustrates the systemic dynamics that oppress women.

Through this short story, Djenar Maesa Ayu highlights the importance of social awareness of gender issues. The protagonist's experience of suffering and trauma is not only a critique of patriarchy, but also a call for social change that is more inclusive and just for women. As such, this short story successfully connects the protagonist's personal experience with broader social realities, making it a relevant work in discussing women's struggles in Indonesia.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the short story *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet* by Djenar Maesa Ayu represents the ideas of feminism through the depiction of women's experiences trapped in oppressive patriarchal structures. The short story presents the social reality of women in Indonesia by highlighting sexual violence, social stigma, and subordination experienced by the main character as a reflection of the gender inequality that occurs in society. Through symbols such as cages, bodies, and knives, as well as emotional and fragmentary narratives, this work provides a sharp critique of cultural norms that silence women and perpetuate patriarchal domination. Women's resistance to oppression is also expressed through the protagonist's awareness of the right to her body and identity, and her courage to resist the culture of silence that often surrounds victims of violence.

The contribution of this research to the discipline lies in enriching the study of feminism in literature, especially in the context of Indonesian culture, by showing how literary works can be an effective medium of social criticism. This research also expands the understanding of the dynamics of gender relations in a patriarchal society through a literary perspective, and provides important implications for interdisciplinary studies between literature, gender and sociology. As such, the findings not only strengthen the position of literature as a tool of cultural resistance but also encourage further discussion on the importance of social transformation in favour of gender equality.

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(Received 02 January 2025; revision received 14 July 2025;  
accepted 16 July 2025; final revision received 24 July 2025)