

Hegemonic Masculinity and Gendered Hierarchies in Javanese Women-Authored Novels

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing scholarship on masculinity in Indonesia, few studies examine it through Javanese fiction written by women, and fewer still separate coercive conduct from authority that a family or community endorses. This article addresses that gap through a qualitative close reading of three Javanese novels by women authors published between 2008 and 2017, namely *Singkar*, *Kinanti*, and *Lamtara-lamtara Pinggir Desa*. Drawing on Connell's relational account of hegemonic masculinity, it analyzes selected scenes through the dialogue, narrative position, and interaction of characters. The analysis identifies three connected mechanisms. Protection and provision are used to regulate women's choices, men are ranked by economic and social standing, and male authority proves vulnerable to age and changing circumstances. Nani's resistance, Pertiwi's thwarted aspirations, and the disparagement of Yulia expose limits to the legitimacy of male authority. The judgments directed at Mardika and Nusa show that patriarchal expectations can also constrain men who lack wealth, secure work, or recognized family status. The study distinguishes coercive behavior from hegemonic masculinity by asking when authority receives familial or communal endorsement. The novels present masculinity as a contested position within gender and class relations and not as a stable property of male characters. The study contributes a relational reading of masculinity in Javanese fiction and limits its claims to the passages examined.

Keywords: Gender Relations, Hegemonic Masculinity, Javanese Novels, Women Author

INTRODUCTION

Javanese society commonly associates men with authority in family, religious, economic, and sexual life, and this association shapes what people accept as proper masculine conduct. Gender, however, is not a natural attribute. It takes form through norms, customs, religious teaching, and political circumstances that circulate within a community. Masculinity in particular is a cultural construction whose content depends on the norms of its surroundings, which explains why ideas about a proper man differ across places and periods (Ulya et al., 2021). Patriarchal cultures also attach fixed character stereotypes to men and women and treat the male position as the default (Widarwati & Purnomo, 2025). Men who cannot meet these expectations may be judged inadequate, so gender injustice is not limited to women, even though women remain the group most visibly constrained.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity remains a central tool for examining such expectations. Recent reviews emphasize that hegemonic masculinity is practised and performed in specific places and periods and that it depends on relations among men and

between men and women (Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025). In Indonesian scholarship, masculinity has been read in song lyrics (Ulya et al., 2021), in novels through a psychological lens (Ahmadi, 2022), and in young adult literature, where masculine norms follow wider social change and cannot be reduced to domination and assertiveness (Wulan, 2022). Research on Javanese fiction has also addressed patriarchal stereotypes that constrain women (Widarwati & Purnomo, 2025), and Indonesian women writers are known to question the cultural attributes through which gender is constructed (Priyatna, 2023). None of these studies applies a relational account of hegemonic masculinity to Javanese novels by women authors, and none separates a coercive act from authority that a family or community endorses.

This study therefore examines three Javanese novels by women authors published between 2008 and 2017, namely *Singkar*, *Kinanti*, and *Lamtara-lamtara Pinggir Desa*. It applies Connell's relational account to ask how masculine authority is claimed, who endorses it, and where it meets resistance in intimate and social relationships. The analysis attends to the regulation of women's choices and also to the ranking of men by wealth, work, and family standing. Because the novels were written by women, they allow the costs of masculine authority to be observed for women and for some men alike. The study contributes a relational reading of masculinity in Javanese fiction and treats masculinity as a contested position rather than a fixed property of male characters.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Connell (1995) conceptualizes masculinities as configurations of gender practice formed in relation to women and other men. Recent reviews still treat these relations as the core of the concept, since hegemonic masculinity is practised and performed through them (Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally authoritative pattern that helps secure men's collective advantage within a particular gender order, and its authority depends on the legitimation of unequal gender relations (Messerschmidt & Bridges, 2024). It does not describe every man, every act of aggression, or a fixed inventory of traits. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) further emphasize that hegemonic configurations are historically variable, relational, and open to contestation, and current scholarship adds that they take specific forms in particular places and periods (Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025). These distinctions matter in fiction because an intimidating gesture may demonstrate coercion, whereas an argument that it is hegemonic also requires attention to the norms, institutions, or other characters that authorize it.

The present reading distinguishes three levels of representation, namely a character's conduct, the response of other characters, and the wider family or community judgment supplied by the narrative. It also separates a locally dominant character from a hegemonic ideal. The former may intimidate another person, whereas the latter gains practical authority through recognition beyond that encounter. This emphasis on recognition follows the treatment of legitimation as the linchpin of the concept (Messerschmidt & Bridges, 2024). Economic resources, education, occupation, age, and family background are examined as resources through which characters claim or lose authority. This approach does not assume that every woman is equally subordinated or that a man's loss of authority automatically reverses the broader gender order.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative close reading of selected episodes in three Javanese novels by women authors, namely *Singkar* (Aminah, 2008), *Kinanti* (Pratiwi, 2014), and *Lamtara-lamtara Pinggir Desa* (Rahayu, 2017). The novels were chosen through purposive sampling, which selects texts because they suit the research question and not because they represent a wider population (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). Three criteria guided the choice. The novels had to be written in Javanese by women authors, to be published between 2008 and 2017, and to contain scenes in which masculine authority over marriage, provision, or work is asserted, challenged, or judged by other characters. The three titles meet all criteria and appeared at intervals across the period, which allows the analysis to compare different household and class settings. The selection does not claim to represent Javanese fiction as a whole, so the findings apply only to the passages examined.

The units of analysis are dialogue, narrated action, and reported social judgment concerning marriage, provision, and work. Passages are organized by the moments in which masculine authority is asserted or challenged rather than by novel alone. Each passage was read for (1) the claim to authority, (2) the source of its apparent legitimacy, (3) its effect on another character's choices, and (4) any resistance or instability registered by the text. Javanese passages are quoted in the original and accompanied by English translations. Interpretations remain specific to the quoted passages. The analysis focuses on the passages discussed here and does not claim to exhaust the thematic or narrative complexity of the novels.

The passages are interpreted comparatively, but comparison does not imply that the three novels depict an identical household or a single historical moment. Dialogue is treated as evidence of what a character asserts, while narration and responses provide evidence of how that assertion is received. A character's accusation is not automatically adopted as the position of the narrator or the author. This distinction is especially important when a woman is described as unworthy, or a man as unable to provide, because those descriptions are themselves objects of analysis and not facts endorsed by the article.

Because one researcher carried out the close reading, the interpretations reflect a single interpretive position. Reflexivity is therefore treated as an ongoing practice of examining how the researcher's position shapes interpretation (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Three steps support the credibility of the reading. Every claim is tied to a quoted passage with its page reference. The same four analytic questions were applied to each passage in the same order. Each line of dialogue was read within its surrounding scene so that it was not judged apart from the narration and the responses that receive it. Alternative readings are acknowledged where a passage supports more than one interpretation, as in the scene between Jarwo and Lik Semi.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Gender differences can become the starting point of gender-based domination, which in turn produces gender injustice. Although discussions of gender inequality often center on women's experiences, men who lack power or fail to meet dominant masculine ideals also face injustice. This issue appears in contemporary Javanese novels by women authors published between 2008 and 2017, which form the corpus of this study.

PROTECTION, PROVISION, AND CONTROL OF WOMEN'S CHOICES

In the novels examined here, claims of protection and material provision can become grounds for men to intervene in women's personal decisions. Such interventions do not derive their force from an individual man's wishes alone. Family approval and expectations about men's

responsibilities may make his claim to authority appear reasonable to others. A relational reading of hegemonic masculinity therefore asks how this authority is asserted, what gives it social support, and whether the woman concerned accepts or contests it. Kurniawan's interaction with Nani in *Singkar* illustrates these questions at the level of dialogue and bodily conduct. Kurniawan questions Nani about her interaction with another man. Nani rejects his interference, and he answers with an unqualified prohibition, as the following exchange shows.

“sakkarepku ta. Arep rangkulan, gandhengan ...” “ora isa!” [“I can hug or hold hands if I want.” “No, you can't!”] (Aminah, 2008, pp. 3–4)

The abrupt “ora isa!” converts Kurniawan's personal displeasure into a command. Nothing in Nani's reply grants him authority over her friendships. His later physical restraint and his instruction that she must not date another person extend this claim from speech into bodily control (Aminah, 2008, p. 5). Nani's irritation and fear register the unequal stakes of the exchange, while her verbal resistance prevents the scene from reading as simple consent. Kurniawan's earlier assistance to her family and her mother's preference for him give his supposed protection a familial basis. This makes his attempted control more than an isolated outburst, since assistance is treated as a claim on Nani's future. His familial access explains how the claim becomes plausible, while Nani's resistance shows that its legitimacy is disputed. The scene therefore supports a claim about coercive control enabled by family preference. The wider hegemonic pattern emerges only when this episode is read beside recurring assumptions about men's entitlement to direct women's intimate choices.

In *Lamtara-lamtara Pinggir Desa*, Pertiwi expresses her desire to choose Mardika rather than accept the marriage arranged for her. The response, “You must trust your parents' decision,” shifts the basis of the decision away from her preference and toward parental authority (Rahayu, 2017, pp. 15–16). The imperative matters because it presents obedience as the appropriate response to a disagreement over her own marriage. After marrying Daruslan, Pertiwi is also denied the opportunity to take courses. His reasoning that her material needs have already been met turns provision into a justification for limiting her education. The narrative thus connects authority across family and marriage. First the choice of spouse is constrained, and then the scope of self-development is narrowed. Pertiwi's dissatisfaction shows that material security and agency are not equivalent.

The scene between employer and domestic worker in *Kinanti* adds a class dimension. Lik Semi kneels and massages Jarwo's feet while he remains seated (Pratiwi, 2014, p. 2). The contrasting bodily positions render service and status visible. The scene, however, cannot by itself establish that Jarwo has used violence or that Lik Semi has no capacity to refuse. Its stronger evidentiary value lies in depicting how domestic labor is organized around the comfort of a socially advantaged man. Elsewhere, Imam dismisses Yulia as an unsuitable partner on the basis of her occupation (Pratiwi, 2014, pp. 2, 8). Such judgment indicates that masculine authority can also operate through the power to define a woman's respectability. Read together, the scenes link gender to class and occupational stigma without making these distinct forms of inequality identical.

The exchange between Kurniawan and Nani is significant not simply because he speaks forcefully. The sequence of turns stages a dispute over who has the right to define the relationship. His question, “Kanca apa kok rangkulan barang?” [“Is he a friend if you even hug him?”], challenges Nani's description of the other man as a friend by making physical closeness appear to require his approval (Aminah, 2008, pp. 3–4). Nani's reply locates the matter in her

own decision. Kurniawan answers neither her reasoning nor her question about his interference. He issues a prohibition. This remains evidence of a coercive act and not independent proof that all the other characters endorse his behavior. The shift from a request for explanation to “Ora isa!” is the point at which possessiveness is enacted as purported authority. The social relationship that makes this claim possible therefore needs to be read alongside the grammar of the exchange. Familial support can grant Kurniawan access and credibility, but the text does not require the reader to regard his claim as legitimate merely because the family does.

Nani's resistance likewise deserves more than a passing description as disobedience. She names the interference and voices an alternative account of her friendships before the scene escalates to physical restraint. The contrast between her articulated choice and his imperative prevents her from disappearing into the category of a passive victim. At the same time, her shrinking back after he grabs her shoulder shows that speech alone does not remove the asymmetry in their encounter. The novel thus places an assertion of agency and the risk of intimidation in the same episode. Reading both elements avoids interpreting every expression of resistance as evidence that an unequal power relation has already been overcome.

Pertiwi's situation develops the relation between provision and authority over a longer sequence. The imperative to trust her parents presents marriage as a family decision that she ought to accept, even though she states a different wish. Later, Daruslan's rhetorical questions about courses frame learning as unnecessary because the household is materially secure. In both episodes, someone else defines what should count as a sufficient future for her. Daruslan's argument gains force from an ideal of male provision that makes economic security appear to authorize a husband's judgment about his wife's development. The object of control changes from a spouse to education, but the underlying logic is continuous, since decisions about Pertiwi's life are displaced by judgments presented as being in her best interests. Her dissatisfaction is therefore analytically relevant and not merely an emotional detail. It exposes the distance between being provided for and being permitted to develop ambitions beyond the role of wife.

Kinanti presents a different configuration that should not be collapsed into arranged marriage. Jarwo's bodily ease and Lik Semi's service make inequality legible through labor and posture rather than a spoken ban. The passage describes an established routine, in which her hands are “already” massaging his feet and the narrator marks this as usual (Pratiwi, 2014, p. 2). Routine matters because it represents hierarchy as part of everyday domestic organization. Nonetheless, the passage offers limited access to Lik Semi's thoughts, and an interpretation of her motives would require further evidence. The scene supports a narrower and stronger claim. Class position and gendered service allow Jarwo's needs to be prioritized without an explicit command in that moment.

The evaluation of Yulia makes language itself the instrument of exclusion. Imam's warning to Jarwo asks what kind of woman she is, and a later statement dismisses her as “a worthless woman” (Pratiwi, 2014, pp. 2, 8). The wording does more than express concern about a marriage. It reduces Yulia to a moral category and places Imam in the position of judging which woman is fit to enter Jarwo's respectable social world. The analysis need not endorse either his assessment or a presumption that her occupation determines her character. Instead, his speech illustrates how reputational boundaries can be policed by men who claim to speak for another man's welfare. Across the three novels, authority over women therefore takes different forms, namely direct prohibition, family decision, economic provision, habitual service, and moral classification.

THE RANKING OF MEN THROUGH WORK, WEALTH AND FAMILY STATUS

The novels also represent men as unequally positioned within expectations of masculine adequacy. Their disadvantage is a position within a gendered hierarchy and is not sufficient evidence to assign them a fixed category of subordinated masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In *Lamtara-lamtara Pinggir Desa*, villagers question whether Mardika's salary as a teacher can support a wife and children, as the following remark shows.

“apa kurang ta pemudha desa kene, kok milih guru saka kutha? *Gek apa cukup bayarane kanggo nguripi bojo durung maneh yen wis anak-anak.*” [“Why choose a teacher from the city? Can his salary support a wife, let alone children?”] (Rahayu, 2017).

These rhetorical questions make income and local belonging tests of a man's suitability. Mardika recognizes the disparity between his family's resources and those of the Hadimartono family. The questions enact a social test in which he is judged less as a person than as a prospective provider. Their force lies in communal scrutiny and not only in Daruslan's individual hostility. Wealth and educational prestige make Daruslan a more socially credible candidate, while Mardika's limited resources weaken his claim to a relationship with Pertiwi. The passage supports an argument about the classing of masculinity. It does not show that teaching is inherently dishonorable or that every villager shares one view.

A related judgment appears in *Singkar* when Nusa is dismissed for lacking completed schooling, stable employment, and a clearly recognized family background (Aminah, 2008, pp. 1–2). The accumulation of these criteria turns social insecurity into an assessment of his worth as a partner. Here masculine standing depends not solely on what Nusa does but on how another character evaluates the resources and lineage attached to him. The comparison between Nusa and Mardika suggests that a socially valued provider ideal operates through ordinary assessments of suitability, even when the men being judged do not exercise authority over anyone else. Their economic insecurity alone should not be equated with the specific category of subordinated masculinity.

These cases require a precise distinction. Mardika and Nusa face disadvantage, but their experience should not be equated without qualification with the constraints imposed on Nani or Pertiwi. Instead, the texts represent a gender order in which some men enjoy authority while others are measured against the same ideal and found wanting. Men may be disadvantaged within a patriarchal hierarchy even as that hierarchy continues to privilege masculinity over femininity.

The repeated questions about Mardika also turn private affection into a matter of public evaluation. The question of whether his pay can sustain a household makes the anticipated roles of husband and father the standard by which he is measured. The reference to a teacher “from the city” introduces belonging as another criterion, since he is assessed in relation to local men and to a family with substantially greater wealth. These judgments do not demonstrate that all men enjoy the same patriarchal advantage. Mardika is marked as less eligible under a provider ideal, but the passage does not establish that he has lost every gendered advantage relative to women. The judgments instead illustrate a ranked field in which a man's eligibility can depend on resources he does not control, including the wealth of his parents and the standing of the other family. Mardika's inward distress matters because the narrative presents the scrutiny from the position of the person required to live under it.

Daruslan's position combines several resources that the novel treats as socially consequential, namely family wealth, a prestigious education, and the prospect of acting as a provider. His threat to Mardika is coercive, but the communal doubts about Mardika's suitability operate even without that threat. The distinction identifies two related sources of disadvantage. A dominant rival may act directly against a man, while people around the relationship may reproduce a standard that favors the wealthier candidate. Hegemony is more convincingly located in this apparently reasonable standard of worth than in violence alone. The comparison does not imply that Daruslan's access to resources makes all his actions socially approved, because endorsement of his eligibility and approval of intimidation remain separate claims.

The treatment of Nusa follows a similar pattern through a different list of deficiencies. In the reported speech, incomplete schooling, uncertain work, and unclear family origins appear together, which produces an impression that he fails on every measure of suitability. Their accumulation is important because one concern about income becomes a broad judgment about the person. Because the criteria are spoken by another character, the passage also directs attention to the evaluator's position and interests. The insult shows how Nusa is classified within a relationship and does not show that the classification is objectively true. Compared with Mardika, the passage shows how masculine worth can be narrated through qualifications external to affection or ethical conduct.

The comparative finding is therefore more precise than the statement that men are also oppressed. The texts show that a normative expectation of provision establishes a hierarchy among men, while the same expectation can be invoked to regulate women's choices. These effects are connected but not equivalent. A man criticized for insufficient income and a woman prevented from choosing a spouse face different constraints, and both are implicated in a system that ties authority to a particular image of the adequate male provider. This connection explains why economic and family judgments are central to the article's account of masculinity and not a secondary issue beside gender.

THE INSTABILITY OF MASCULINE AUTHORITY

Masculine authority depends not only on the status a man has acquired but also on the continued recognition of that status by others. Occupational prestige, age, and position within the household may strengthen a man's claim to authority, yet these resources do not ensure that his wishes will always be followed. A change in his capacity to influence a particular relationship should therefore be distinguished from a change in the wider gender order.

Jarwo's experience in *Kinanti* makes this distinction visible. His circumstances complicate a view of masculine status as permanent. He is described as a retired official in declining health whose objection to gambling in his home goes unheeded (Pratiwi, 2014, p. 3). The episode suggests that the authority once associated with his office, age, or household position no longer guarantees compliance. Yet Yulia's refusal to defer to him does not, on its own, establish that women have gained structural dominance. It shows that Jarwo's authority can diminish within a particular household relationship and at a particular point in his life. This is a change in the effectiveness of his commands. It does not by itself establish a new structural gender order or classify him as a subordinated masculinity.

The Jarwo episode also clarifies the limits of the provider model. A senior official's earlier prestige is not a permanent possession that automatically governs a later domestic interaction. Retirement and illness alter his practical capacity to enforce a household preference, even if earlier status remains part of his self-understanding. The novel's

representation of Yulia should likewise be read across time. The woman disparaged as unfit to marry Jarwo later occupies a position from which his objection has little effect. This reversal does not cancel the earlier stigma or prove a general transfer of power from men to women. It exposes the contingency of particular relations and shows why gender hierarchy cannot be inferred from one moment of compliance or refusal alone.

Taken together, the three thematic strands specify how hegemonic ideals travel between scenes. The provider ideal gives Daruslan a socially credible position and supplies a standard against which Mardika and Nusa are judged. Kurniawan invokes a related entitlement to intervene in Nani's choices, but her resistance prevents his particular command from appearing unambiguously legitimate. Jarwo's later difficulty shows that even a once authoritative position requires continuing recognition to have practical force. The novels do not offer a single model of male power. Instead, their different situations reveal the social work required to keep authority credible. Relatives must support a choice, wealth must be recognized as evidence of suitability, and household members must continue to comply. When these conditions fail or are disputed, the apparent naturalness of masculine command becomes visible as a negotiated arrangement.

Across these episodes, masculine authority is reproduced where family preference, material provision, and communal standards give a man's claim practical force. It is exposed as contingent where Nani objects, Pertiwi articulates ambitions beyond domestic provision, Mardika suffers under provider expectations, or Jarwo cannot command the household. The novels thus make the gender order visible through its disputes and failures as much as through acts of domination. This reading agrees with Wulan (2022), who argues that masculine norms in Indonesian literature cannot be reduced to domination and assertiveness alone, and it adds that in these novels the norm of provision also ranks men against one another. The endorsement of male authority by family and community also resembles the treatment of the male position as the default in Javanese patriarchal culture (Widarwati & Purnomo, 2025). Since the present evidence consists of selected passages, claims about a unified political intention shared by all three authors would go beyond what the analysis establishes.

CONCLUSION

The selected Javanese novels portray a socially valued provider ideal through which masculine authority is produced and negotiated by family endorsement, economic resources, social reputation, and household relations. The strongest evidence for hegemony lies in the recurring standards that make some men eligible to decide and others apparently unsuitable, rather than in aggression considered in isolation. Kurniawan's attempt to regulate Nani's relationships and Daruslan's restriction of Pertiwi's education show how protection and provision can be mobilized to curtail women's choices. The judgments directed at Yulia and the service performed by Lik Semi reveal further intersections of gender with occupational stigma and class. These findings identify specific mechanisms in the narratives rather than treating all unequal encounters as interchangeable instances of patriarchy.

The same ideal distributes standing unequally among men. Mardika and Nusa are evaluated through income, employment, education, and family standing, while Jarwo's reduced authority in one household relationship suggests that the effectiveness of male authority can change with age and circumstance. The men who fall short of an approved ideal face scrutiny, yet their disadvantage does not erase the gendered constraints experienced by women. Read relationally, the novels show how an authoritative masculine ideal depends both on the

subordination of others and on communal recognition that can be withheld or challenged. This supports the view that hegemonic masculinity is specific to place and period and is sustained through relations (Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025), since the provider ideal in these novels' rests on family endorsement and local standing. The article contributes to Javanese literary gender studies by separating coercive conduct, the social legitimation of a provider ideal, and the contingent effectiveness of household authority, and by tracing the links between intimate control and the social ranking of men. Its interpretation is limited to the passages examined here. Future work could extend the corpus, compare narrative voice with characters' speech, and examine how different novels and historical settings alter the relation among class, age, gender, and resistance.

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