

Women as Sexual Objects in Eka Kurniawan's *Cantik itu Luka*: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 03 August 2026	This study examines the representation of women as sexual objects in Eka Kurniawan's <i>Cantik Itu Luka</i> (<i>Beauty Is a Wound</i>) through feminist literary criticism and Sara Mills' feminist discourse perspective. The study aims to analyze how linguistic choices, narrative positioning, and power relations construct female characters as sexual objects and position them in relation to male dominance. A descriptive qualitative design was employed using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. The primary data were selected narrative excerpts and dialogues from the novel that represent women's physical appearance, sexuality, objectification, agency, subordination, and gender relations. Data were collected through close and repeated reading, identification, documentation, and categorization of relevant textual excerpts. The analysis focused on subject-object positioning and reader positioning within Sara Mills' framework. The findings identified five representative excerpts demonstrating consistent patterns of female objectification. Women were constructed through descriptions of beauty, sexuality, and bodily characteristics, while men were positioned as active subjects with authority over women's bodies. The analysis further revealed that women's bodies were represented as sexual and economic commodities that could be evaluated, exchanged, purchased, and collectively consumed. Objectification occurred from birth, continued throughout women's lives, and persisted symbolically after death, indicating the pervasive nature of patriarchal power. The narrative also positioned readers to perceive male control over women's bodies as normalized or unavoidable. Thus, <i>Cantik Itu Luka</i> simultaneously exposes and reproduces patriarchal gender relations by limiting female agency and privileging male perspectives. The study highlights the importance of feminist discourse analysis for critically examining gender ideology and women's representation in Indonesian literary texts.
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1. Introduction

Literary works function not only as media of entertainment and self-expression but also as cultural spaces where meanings, identities, and social relations are constructed and negotiated. Through characterization, diction, metaphor, narrative perspective, and representation, literary texts can reproduce or challenge dominant gender ideologies. Gender representation is therefore not neutral, as women are often associated with appearance, sexuality, emotionality, and socially prescribed roles, whereas men are more frequently positioned as agents, competent figures, and authorities (Bye et al., 2022; Santoniccolo et al., 2023). Such stereotypes may also be embedded implicitly in fictional narratives and character construction (Zhang & Wu, 2023).

An important issue in feminist literary studies is the representation of women as sexual objects. Sexual objectification occurs when women are primarily evaluated through their physical appearance, bodies, or sexual attractiveness rather than their individuality, abilities, emotions, and agency (Ruzzante et al., 2022). Research shows that objectifying representations contribute to sociocultural pressures surrounding femininity and may encourage women to evaluate themselves through appearance-related characteristics (Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Carlsson et al., 2024). The concept of the male gaze is therefore relevant because women may be positioned through descriptions of their bodies, physical attractiveness, and sexuality from perspectives that privilege male experiences and limit female agency (Chen et al., 2023; Sun, 2023). In literary texts, such patterns can reproduce the logic of the male gaze through narrative perspective and descriptions of female characters (Wardani & Suherman, 2023; Febrianto & Udasmoro, 2024).

Feminism provides a framework for examining the patriarchal structures through which gender inequality is reproduced. It addresses not only formal equality but also the cultural, linguistic, social, and ideological mechanisms that position women as subordinate, passive, dependent, or valuable primarily in relation to men (You, 2021). Gender stereotypes continue to associate women with culturally constructed characteristics related to competence, appearance, warmth, and social roles (Bye et al., 2022). Within this framework, Sara Mills' feminist stylistics is particularly useful for examining how linguistic and stylistic choices position female characters and readers. Elements such as diction, transitivity, metaphor, naming, description, and sentence structure can construct women as passive recipients of male actions or objects of male evaluation. Recent studies demonstrate that feminist stylistics can reveal both the reproduction and resistance of gender stereotypes (Arkan et al., 2024; Dwitaningsih et al., 2024).

These issues are particularly relevant in Indonesian literature. Studies have identified recurring representations of women through beauty, domesticity, weakness, emotionality, and subordination (Salsabila, 2022). In *Cantik Itu Luka*, researchers have identified gender inequality through marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, violence, and double burdens (Pertiwi & Julkiflin, 2023; Tanjung & Hayati, 2025), as well as discrimination and female resistance from a Marxist feminist perspective (Padmasari et al., 2025). However, the specific construction of women as sexual objects through narrative positioning and male-oriented perspectives remains insufficiently examined.

Eka Kurniawan's *Cantik Itu Luka* provides a significant context for such analysis because its female characters are situated within complex relationships involving beauty, sexuality, violence, colonial history, family, and patriarchal power. Although the novel portrays women experiencing oppression, it also presents their negotiation and resistance to social structures. This complexity makes the novel appropriate for examining how women are constructed as objects or subjects through language and narrative perspective. Objectification is particularly relevant because reducing women to their bodies or sexual characteristics may undermine their personhood and agency (Ruzzante et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023).

The relevance of gender representation is further supported by research on young

people's attitudes toward gender equality. Although adolescents and young adults may demonstrate gender-equitable attitudes, persistent stereotypes and unequal expectations remain (Hill et al., 2022). In Indonesia, educational experiences have been associated with more gender-egalitarian attitudes, although patriarchal orientations continue to influence perceptions of women's roles (White et al., 2024). In this study, a preliminary questionnaire involving respondents aged 20–22 indicated generally supportive attitudes toward gender equality, rejection of victim blaming, recognition of violence against women as a serious issue, and positive perceptions of feminism. These findings are contextual rather than representative of young people generally. Importantly, positive attitudes toward gender equality do not necessarily indicate awareness of the ideological mechanisms through which literary texts construct women's sexuality, passivity, and dependence. Literary discourse may communicate gender ideology indirectly through characterization, narrative voice, descriptive language, and agency (Santonnicolo et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study examines the representation of women as sexual objects in Eka Kurniawan's *Cantik Itu Luka* using feminist literary criticism and Sara Mills' feminist stylistic perspective. It specifically analyzes how narrative perspective, linguistic choices, descriptions of the female body, sexuality, characterization, and patterns of agency position female characters as objects or autonomous subjects. By integrating feminist literary criticism and discourse-oriented analysis, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between language, narrative representation, patriarchy, and gender ideology in Indonesian literature, including how literary texts may reproduce, challenge, and renegotiate women's social and cultural positions.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design using a feminist critical discourse analysis approach. This approach is appropriate for examining how language constructs gender, power, and ideological relations within literary texts (Lebold, 2024). The study applies Sara Mills' feminist discourse framework to analyze the representation of women as sexual objects in Eka Kurniawan's 'Cantik Itu Luka', particularly through subject-object positioning and reader positioning. Previous studies have demonstrated that Sara Mills' framework is effective for analyzing gender representation, patriarchal ideology, and the positioning of female characters in literary texts (Amelia et al., 2025; Ramadhani et al., 2023).

The primary data source is Eka Kurniawan's 'Cantik Itu Luka', first published in December 2002. The data consist of selected narrative excerpts and dialogues that represent women's physical appearance, sexuality, objectification, agency, subordination, and gender relations. Data were collected through close and repeated reading of the novel, followed by identifying, selecting, recording, and categorizing relevant textual excerpts. The analysis focused on the subject position, object position, and reader position, as these dimensions enable the researcher to examine who has the authority to speak, who is represented or described by others, and how readers are positioned toward female characters. Similar qualitative studies using Sara Mills have applied reading, note-taking, and documentation techniques to analyze narrative and dialogue in literary works (Ramadhani et al., 2023; Dewi & Hamdani, 2023).

In addition, a preliminary questionnaire was distributed to students aged 20–22 years to provide supporting contextual information about perceptions of gender equality. The questionnaire data were summarized descriptively and were not treated as the primary analytical data. The textual data were analyzed through several stages: identifying relevant excerpts, classifying them according to Sara Mills' subject-object and reader-position categories, interpreting the linguistic and narrative features, and relating the findings to patriarchal ideology and the representation of women as sexual objects. This procedure is

consistent with recent qualitative applications of Sara Mills' CDA, which use textual evidence to examine women's positioning, marginalization, and resistance within discourse (Nafilah, 2023). The interpretation was grounded in the textual context to ensure that conclusions about gender representation were supported by the selected passages.

3. Results

In the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* (Beauty Is a Wound) this study identifies five main excerpts that present narrative quotations representing and positioning women within power relations dominated by a male perspective. These excerpts illustrate how men construct women as sexual objects through narrative structures and linguistic choices. The narratives reveal recurring patterns of representation in which women are constructed through language, narration, and perspective that emphasize the female body, beauty, and sexual function. As a result, women are placed in passive positions, while men occupy active roles as subjects who hold full control over women's bodies.

Overall, the findings indicate that women in the novel are not only represented as individual sexual objects but also as social commodities that can be evaluated, desired, exchanged, and collectively consumed by men at any time and in any context. The narrative repeatedly directs readers to view women through a male-oriented perspective, whether through bodily descriptions, sexual relations, or the positioning of women within power structures. This pattern creates an image in which women's existence in the story is closely tied to the fulfillment of male sexual desire.

Excerpt 1 (p. 3)

"Empat anak perempuan, semuanya cantik, seharusnya aku punya tempat pelacuran sendiri"

This excerpt illustrates how women are positioned as sexual objects from the moment of birth. The word "cantik" (beautiful) functions not merely as a physical description but as a marker of value attached to the female body. Female children are not viewed as human beings with dignity, but rather as economic assets that can be sexually exploited for profit. Their beauty becomes a form of exchange value within the sexual industry, where women's bodies serve as sources of financial gain through male consumption.

In addition, this excerpt demonstrates how the narrative shapes the perception of female birth not as a biological or human event, but as future sexual and economic potential. The casual and seemingly humorous tone of the statement reinforces the normalization of women's objectification within the story. Readers are guided to accept this perspective as part of an ordinary reality, making the exploitation of women's bodies appear unquestionable and socially acceptable.

Within this context, women are not granted space as subjects with futures, desires, or life choices. The value of their bodies is predetermined even before they reach adulthood. This reflects how patriarchal narratives operate subtly through everyday language that appears light and humorous but carries strong implications of domination over women.

Excerpt 2 (p. 4)

"Tak ada kutukan yang lebih mengerikan daripada mengeluarkan bayi-bayi perempuan cantik di dunia laki-laki yang mesum seperti anjing musim kawin."

In this excerpt, women are once again marked as objects of male desire from birth, as if women are born solely to serve sexual purposes. The phrase "bayi-bayi perempuan cantik" emphasizes that beauty itself becomes a source of threat to women, positioning them as vulnerable and unprotected subjects. Beauty is not presented as an advantage, but as a condition that exposes women to continuous danger. The narrative portrays women as beings

who never truly possess control over their own bodies, as their bodies are already framed as targets of male sexual desire. In this way, readers are directed to understand that women's bodies never fully belong to themselves but remain within the reach of male power and domination.

Furthermore, the metaphor "dunia laki-laki yang mesum seperti anjing musim kawin" reinforces the depiction of a social environment entirely driven by male desire. However, instead of criticizing men as perpetrators, the narrative places the burden of consequence on women. Women are positioned as the source of the problem because of their beauty, rather than as victims of an unsafe and unequal social system.

As a result, women's bodies are presented as constantly monitored and threatened. The narrative strengthens the idea that women must accept this condition as an unavoidable fate. Readers are once again guided to perceive the injustice experienced by women as something inherent from birth and difficult, if not impossible, to resist.

Excerpt 3 (p. 12)

"Terutama hampir semua lelaki yang pernah tidur dengan sang pelacur melepas kepergiannya dengan kecupan ringan di kuncup bunga melati yang mereka lemparkan di sepanjang jalan keranda kematiannya lewat. Dan para istri lelaki-lelaki itu, atau kekasih mereka, juga berje- jalan sepanjang jalan di belakang pantat mereka, memandang dengan kecemburuan yang tersisa, sebab mereka yakin orang-orang sebab mereka yakin orang-orang mesum itu masih akan berebut seandainya diberi kesempatan menidurinya kembali, tak peduli Dewi Ayu telah jadi seongkah mayat."

This excerpt demonstrates how women's bodies continue to be symbolically consumed even after death. Although Dewi Ayu has passed away, the narrative continues to place her body at the center of male attention and desire. The presence of men who "pernah tidur dengan sang pelacur" indicates that sexual relations experienced during her life remain permanently attached to her body, even when she is no longer alive. The woman is not remembered as an individual with personal identity, but as a sexual object that has been consumed.

Moreover, the phrase "masih akan berebut seandainya diberi kesempatan menidurinya kembali" emphasizes that women's bodies are never fully released from their sexual function within the narrative. Even death does not end the objectification of women's bodies; instead, it intensifies it. Women are positioned as permanent sexual objects whose value continues to be measured by male desire rather than by their humanity. This narrative also reveals how a space that should be sacred, such as a funeral procession, is reduced to a site of symbolic sexual consumption. The presence of wives and lovers of the men during the funeral illustrates how the objectification of women is socially legitimized. Women are not only consumed by men but also become objects of jealousy among women, indirectly reinforcing male dominance within power relations. Thus, this excerpt confirms that women in the novel are not only sexually exploited during their lives but continue to be constructed as objects of male desire after death, highlighting the strength of patriarchal dominance within the narrative structure.

Excerpt 4 (p. 85)

"Tentara-tentara itu membayarnya untuk telanjang menganggang di depan kemaluan mereka."

In this excerpt, women are presented as objects of collective consumption for men. Women's bodies are positioned as spectacles and sexual instruments that can be accessed by multiple men at any time and in any place. The word "membayarnya" emphasizes a transactional relationship in which money functions as a tool for men to control and exploit

women's bodies. This narrative clearly exposes an imbalance of power in which women possess no bargaining position and are entirely under male control. Women are not only reduced to individual sexual objects but also to mass-consumed commodities accessed sequentially by groups of men. In this context, women have no control over their own bodies and are fully subjected to a power system that determines who has access to them.

Additionally, this excerpt highlights how military institutions contribute to the perpetuation of sexual objectification. The presence of soldiers as the primary actors reflects not only individual male dominance but also structural domination legitimized by authority and power. Women's bodies become part of an entertainment mechanism within a system that disregards women's humanity.

Excerpt 5 (p. 110)

"Ia adalah pelacur paling favorit di kota itu. Hampir semua lelaki yang pernah ke tempat pelacuran, menyempatkan tidur paling tidak sekali bersamanya, tak peduli berapa pun uang yang harus mereka bayarkan."

This excerpt presents women as sexual objects whose value is determined by their popularity among men. The phrase "pelacur paling favorit di kota itu" indicates that women's worth is measured by the extent to which they are desired by men and by how many men have accessed their bodies. Women's bodies become symbols of sexual prestige for men who succeed in possessing them.

The excerpt positions women as sexual objects that men feel obligated to experience, reinforcing an economic power relationship in which money becomes the primary means through which men control access to women's bodies. Meanwhile, men occupy the position of active subjects who are free to choose, pay, and leave without social consequences.

Taken together, the five excerpts reveal a consistent pattern of women's representation in *Cantik Itu Luka*. Women are not only depicted as sexual objects within individual relationships but are also positioned within a broader social system that allows women's bodies to be evaluated, exchanged, and collectively consumed by men. The narrative repeatedly places women in passive roles, while men appear as active subjects with freedom, control, and authority over women's bodies.

This pattern is evident through language that emphasizes beauty, sexual function, and the economic value of women's bodies, resulting in women's existence being reduced primarily to physical and sexual aspects. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that the objectification of women extends beyond life itself, continuing even after death. Women's bodies remain objects of desire, memory, and symbolic consumption, indicating that women never fully attain autonomy over their own bodies.

Such representations direct readers to perceive women through a male-oriented perspective and normalize unequal power relations within the narrative. Consequently, women in the novel are positioned as permanent objects within the story's structure, while men maintain their dominant role as subjects who define meaning, value, and the function of women's bodies.

4. Discussion

a. Positioning Women as Sexual Objects from the Beginning of the Narrative

The findings of this study reveal that women in the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* are consistently positioned as sexual objects within asymmetrical power relations, while men are situated as the central perspective through both the narrator and male characters dominating the storyline. Analysis of five key excerpts indicates that women are portrayed not only as objects of individual desire but also as social commodities that can be evaluated, exchanged, and collectively consumed by men. This pattern of representation demonstrates how language

and narrative structures actively shape the positions of women and men within the literary text.

Furthermore, the objectification of women in the narrative is not neutral; it emerges through discursive mechanisms that position men as dominant subjects and women as controlled objects. The narrative consistently guides readers to accept this perspective as natural through the use of casual language, minimally resistant plotlines, and repeated depictions of power relations. As Mills (1995) argues, texts are not neutral representations but sites where gendered power relations are constructed through language and narrative positioning. Discussing women's positioning as objects is essential to understanding how readers are guided to perceive such perspectives as legitimate.

The excerpt “Empat anak perempuan, semuanya cantik, seharusnya aku punya tempat pelacuran sendiri” (p. 3) illustrates that women from birth are denied autonomous rights over their own lives; they are positioned solely as sexual objects even before they acquire identity, voice, or agency as subjects. The narrative provides no space for women to exist fully as human beings, immediately associating them with economic value and sexual potential. This representation frames women not as part of humanity but as sources of value for men's interests alone.

The choice of the word ‘cantik’ clearly emphasizes the sexualized role and function of women in this world from birth. Women are represented as objects to be consumed, rather than as children or complete individuals, which inherently violates the right to life. Fundamentally, every human being is endowed by their Creator with inherent rights to life, freedom, and property, which belong to them personally and cannot be transferred or revoked by the state (Zulfa, 2005, p. 11).

The term “pelacuran” tends to diminish women's status and dignity. From the perspective of the second principle of Pancasila ‘Kemanusiaan yang Adil dan Beradab’ prostitution can be equated with the enslavement of women. In this sense, the term slave denotes a person who can be bought and used as labor or for payment. Barry (1979) and Bullough, Shelton, and Slavin (1998) similarly argue that prostitution diminishes women's status and individual dignity (Koentjoro & Sugihastuti, 1999). Accordingly, when the character Dewi Ayu establishes a brothel using her four beautiful daughters, she gains income from men who pay to engage with her daughters, positioning men as economically dominant subjects and granting them social legitimacy with broader ideological implications. Narratives like this reinforce the notion that gender inequality is natural and inherent, rather than socially constructed. By presenting

b. Male perspective dominance in the narrative

Power asymmetries between men and women in *Cantik Itu Luka* are not only visible in the events experienced by female characters but are also embedded in how the narrative positions who becomes the subject and who becomes the object. Within the framework of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Mills (1995) emphasizes that texts are never neutral because they always involve subject-object positioning that determines who holds the voice and who remains the target of narration.

The statement “Tak ada kutukan yang lebih mengerikan daripada mengeluarkan bayi-bayi perempuan cantik di dunia laki-laki yang mesum seperti anjing musim kawin.” (p. 4) illustrates that from the beginning of life, women are positioned as vulnerable and problematic entities, not due to their own existence but because of the patriarchal social structures dominating their lived spaces. The birth of female infants is framed not as a humanizing event but as a curse. In this context, the term “kutukan” functions as a discursive marker linking female birth to suffering and misfortune, thus shifting the issue of gender inequality from the structural realm to one perceived as natural and unavoidable. Consequently, the curse operates not merely as a metaphor but as a discursive mechanism

concealing patriarchal power relations under the logic of destiny.

Moreover, the use of the word “mengeluarkan” in the narrative carries dehumanizing connotations, as it is more commonly applied to objects, waste, or things of no value. This lexical choice indirectly shifts female infants from human subjects to objects whose existence is considered problematic and unwanted, implying rejection. The narrative also represents women’s bodies not as biological subjects giving life but as passive vessels producing something from within. In Mills’ (1995) framework, such representations demonstrate how women are positioned as narrative objects whose bodies and experiences are defined externally, while the subject position maintaining authority remains outside the female characters.

The phrase “bayi-bayi perempuan cantik” indicates that women’s existence is already interpreted through bodily and aesthetic value from birth, even before they acquire social identity, as if physical beauty is to be venerated. Additionally, the metaphor “dunia laki-laki yang mesum seperti anjing musim kawin” though seemingly a sharp critique of men, subtly normalizes male dominance and behavior. Consequently, men’s moral and social responsibility becomes obscured. Sexual violence and exploitation are no longer understood as outcomes of choices or power relations but as natural male traits. Within this framework, women are again positioned as the ones who must adapt or bear the consequences.

Such lexical choices align with Mills’ (1995) assertion that language in texts is never neutral but crucial in constructing subject-object positioning, wherein women are often represented as passive agents stripped of agency through narrative structures and linguistic choices. Women are fully present as objects of discourse: discussed, evaluated, and assigned meaning, yet never granted space to speak or define themselves. Meanwhile, men remain in the implicit subject position, dominating the narrative world even when depicted negatively.

Through these representations, readers are directed to feel horror and sympathy for the fate of baby girls, while simultaneously being led to accept the logic that the world is indeed dominated by masculine traits, harsh and dangerous for women, implying that being born a beautiful girl is a fault of the female. The belief that men are stronger, more capable, and more entitled to occupy positions of power has constructed a cultural order favoring men over women. This cultural construction persists across centuries and generations, making it difficult for society to distinguish between ‘nature’ and ‘cultural construct’ as products of human creation (Susanto, N. H., 2015, p. 121).

c. Positioning of Readers and the Normalization of Female Objectification

Excerpts regarding the death of the character Dewi Ayu demonstrate that the objectification of women does not cease upon their death; rather, it persists beyond life. What should have been a sacred moment is instead desecrated by men who continue to view the female body through sexual desire, rather than with respect for her humanity. Dewi Ayu’s body remains tied to sexual function during her life and is continually constructed as an object of male fantasy memory. Moreover, the presence of men’s wives and mistresses throughout the funeral adds a further problematic layer of meaning. Women are not present as grieving humans but as spectators trapped in jealousy, powerless over their husbands due to a patriarchal culture that positions men as rulers and women as second-class citizens obliged to submit to male authority (Halizah & Faralita, 2023). In this way, the narrative shifts tension from male-female relations to inter-female relations, while men’s position as the center of desire remains untouched. Female objectification is not only legitimized but also socially reproduced through women’s own emotional responses.

The act of “kecupan ringan di kuncup bunga melati” is not merely a symbol of farewell but an ironic sexual tribute. In Indonesian culture, jasmine flowers are often associated with sincerity, humility, and beauty, attributes traditionally ascribed to women (Annisa, Yulimarni, & Akbar, 2023). The symbolic use of jasmine, which should be soft and pure,

instead reinforces masculine dominance, represented as the kiss bestowed upon Dewi Ayu's body through the flower. Furthermore, the belief among the wives that if their husbands are given the opportunity to sleep with Dewi Ayu again, they would compete for it regardless of the fact that she is now a corpse, illustrates a normalized behavior where men are presumed to have full access to women's bodies, even post-mortem. This statement highlights how the narrative normalizes male behavior through sexual violence and continuous sexual desire directed at women.

The use of the word "berebut" in the narrative reflects the number of men desiring Dewi Ayu's body and emphasizes the male competition over her, where men's value and status are measured by access to women's bodies. Within the framework of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Mills, 1995), the term "berebut" reflects a patriarchal discursive construct: women are continuously objectified, while men remain the subjects holding authoritative meaning.

d. Commodification of Women's Bodies in Sexual and Economic Relations

Within these asymmetrical power relations, women's bodies are positioned not only as passive subjects but also as sexual instruments accessible at any time and place. Economic factors are a significant driver of the violence frequently observed in society. It is not only economic deprivation that triggers power imbalances, but also economic surplus generated by men that reinforces their dominance, leaving women further marginalized and dependent on men (Farid, 2019). This condition demonstrates how patriarchal discourse shapes social relations, structurally positioning women as weak.

The narrative's use of the word "membayarnya" highlights how women's bodies are framed as objects for collective consumption. In this context, the narrative emphasizes patriarchal logic: men symbolically, economically, and socially control women. Money functions as a tool of power, enabling men to control and exploit women's bodies solely for their own interests. In other words, women are no longer subjects with rights, autonomy, or agency over their own bodies; they become commodities that can be bought, sold, and consumed according to men's desires. The collective actions of Dutch soldiers during the colonial period further highlight the structural dimension of patriarchy. Male dominance is not merely individual but is institutionalized through the military, legitimizing authority and stripping women of control over themselves.

The term "menganggang" underscores that women's bodies are interpreted purely as sexual instruments. Men, in this case soldiers, act as implicit subjects with complete control, despite their actions harming women and treating women's bodies solely for sexual purposes.

Ideologically, these excerpts demonstrate how violence and sexual exploitation of women are normalized. The narrative not only positions women as objects but also guides readers to accept patriarchal logic and male control over women's bodies as natural. In this way, the narrative reinforces a social construction that continuously maintains gender hierarchies, where women lose agency and subject position in discourse, while men retain the dominant role that defines the value and meaning of women's existence (Mills, 1995).

e. Popularity and the Economic Value of Women's Bodies as Instruments of Power Relations

Women's bodies in the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* are not evaluated solely based on physical appearance or beauty but also according to the extent to which they are accessed and desired by men. In this context, Dewi Ayu, depicted as the city's most favored prostitute, becomes the focal point of male attention, underscoring that a woman's value is determined by her popularity and her body's capacity to satisfy masculine desire. This label attaches to her as a result of the cumulative access men have over her body, thereby shifting her existence from a human subject to a social commodity, akin to an object or a symbol.

The phrase "hampir semua lelaki yang pernah ke tempat pelacuran, menyempatkan tidur

paling tidak sekali bersamanya” illustrates that Dewi Ayu’s body is positioned as an experience that men must try, as if it were an extreme and pleasurable challenge, producing euphoria and satisfaction once attempted. Over time, however, the female body transforms into a sort of public sexual space, accessible to anyone, without ethical boundaries accorded to human dignity. Within this framework, women are no longer understood as individuals with their own agency, but rather as sexual objects available for multiple men’s use.

The statement “tak peduli berapa pun uang yang harus mereka bayarkan” emphasizes the role of money in power relations between men and women. Money becomes a transactional tool to purchase a woman’s body, compounded by the fact that high-ranking positions are dominated by men, thereby consolidating male authority while women remain economically dependent. This relationship demonstrates that women’s bodies are treated as commodities to be bought and used according to men’s desires. From the perspective of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Mills, 1995), such patterns illustrate how language in the text constructs women’s positions as objects, while men are represented as active, dominant subjects. Dewi Ayu’s popularity does not confer power upon her; rather, it reinforces her position as an object continuously desired and consumed.

This depiction demonstrates that women in narrative texts, including novels, are not granted space to assert self-determination because the narrative directs readers to accept that women’s bodies are legitimate objects of evaluation, purchase, and use by men. By framing women’s bodies as entities that can be assessed and consumed, the text indirectly reproduces patriarchal power relations, positioning men as the central authority.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that in the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* by Eka Kurniawan, women are consistently portrayed as sexual objects to satisfy male desire. Based on Sara Mills's analysis, it is clear that women in this story are not given the chance to be subjects or to have control over their own lives. Instead, they are treated like commodities whose value is only judged by their physical beauty and how well they can satisfy men. A sad finding is that this unfair treatment starts from the moment they are born, continues throughout their lives, and even lasts after they have passed away. The way the story is told often makes readers feel that men’s power over women’s bodies is normal or just an unavoidable fate. This happens because the narrative focuses on the male point of view, while the voices and feelings of the women themselves are often ignored or considered unimportant.

Based on these results, there are some practical suggestions. First, for students and general readers, it is very important to learn how to read a book critically so we do not simply accept representations that look down on women’s dignity. Second, for teachers or lecturers of literature and gender studies, this article can be used as a discussion topic to raise awareness among students about the dangers of treating women only as objects. Third, for future researchers, it is suggested to look for other sides of this novel, such as finding out if there are any parts where female characters try to fight back against the men who dominate them. Through these steps, it is hoped that society’s understanding of gender equality will improve so that no one is treated only as an object in real life or in works of art.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to this research.

Authors’ Contribution

Asti Rahmaaulia: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation,

Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing-original draft, Writing-review & editing.

Statement of the Use of AI

AI tools were used only for language editing and improving the linguistic quality of the manuscript. AI tools were not used for data analysis, data interpretation, methodological decisions, or the formulation of research findings and conclusions. All analytical processes, interpretations, and academic judgments were conducted by the author.

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