

Representation of Gender Inequality in Eka Kurniawan's *Cantik Itu Luka*: A Feminist Review

Tia Wulandari Tanjung¹

Yenni Hayati²

¹²Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia

¹wulandaritanjungtia@gmail.com

²yennihayati@fbs.unp.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines the representation of gender injustice in Eka Kurniawan's novel *Cantik Itu Luka* through a qualitative content analysis approach. The research focuses on five dominant forms of gender-based oppression: stereotyping, violence, double burden, marginalization, and subordination. These categories were applied to classify and interpret the narrative elements such as character, plot, and thematic structure that reflect unequal gender relations within the text. Data were collected through a thorough textual reading, supported by keyword identification and classification based on feminist theory, particularly radical and postcolonial feminism. The results reveal that stereotyping is the most frequently occurring form of injustice, where female characters are often labeled as immoral, dishonorable, or inherently inferior. Acts of violence against women, both physical and symbolic, are portrayed as normalized responses within patriarchal and militaristic structures. The novel also depicts how female characters experience a double burden working in both domestic and economic spheres without recognition or compensation. Furthermore, women's access to education, agency, and public space is repeatedly denied, reinforcing their marginalization. While subordination appears less frequently, it is ideologically significant in shaping the female characters' roles as submissive, obedient, and sacrificial figures. Despite focusing on a single literary work, this study contributes to the development of feminist literary criticism in Indonesia by demonstrating how narrative fiction can reflect, reinforce, and challenge prevailing gender ideologies. The study also offers insights for further interdisciplinary research and critical literacy practices centered on gender equity.

Keywords: *gender injustice, feminist literary criticism, Indonesian literature*

Introduction

Gender inequality is a social issue that continues to be a hot topic in both academic discussions and everyday life (Levine et al., 2020; Nicolás-Martínez et al., 2023). This inequality encompasses various forms of disparity and oppression against women, whether symbolic, structural, or cultural. In patriarchal societies, women often experience subordination, role stereotypes, the double burden, marginalization in the public sphere, and violence in various forms, both physical and psychological (Altay, 2019; Amani et al., 2024; Hasan & Simon, 2025). These forms of inequality are not only present in daily social practices but are also reflected in various cultural products, including literary works.

Literature holds a strategic position in reflecting and shaping society's perspective on social issues, including gender problems. As Chamalah et al. (2023) assert, literary works not only serve as a mirror of reality but also as tools for constructing ideological discourse. Therefore, an analysis of the representation of women in literary texts can open up a space for deeper understanding of how gender inequality is constructed,

normalized, or even critiqued in society. This aligns with Opacic (2017) view that feminism in literary criticism serves to dismantle the representation of women, which has long been dominated by a masculine perspective.

In the context of Indonesian literature, many works address complex social themes, including issues related to women (Asri et al., 2020; Gassmann et al., 2010; Wajiran et al., 2020). One notable work in this regard is the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* by Eka Kurniawan. This novel is regarded as a monumental work that blends elements of magical realism, colonial history, political violence, and the exploration of women's identity within a patriarchal society. With its complex social and historical background, the novel presents a narrative rich in symbolic meaning and social critique. The main character in *Cantik Itu Luka*, Dewi Ayu, represents a woman who faces various forms of gender injustice. From sexual exploitation, domestic violence, beauty stereotypes, to traditional roles that limit women's agency, the narrative in this novel not only highlights the individual experiences of its characters but also portrays the social structures that perpetuate the oppression of women. As Shofa & Istiani (2025); Thoyyibah & Milal (2023) have stated, *Cantik Itu Luka* is a critique of the patriarchal system that objectifies women through their bodies and sexuality.

Several previous studies have analyzed the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* from various perspectives. Feminist analyses highlight how the novel depicts gender injustice, sexual violence, subordination, marginalization, and the objectification of women, particularly through the character Dewi Ayu, who struggles against patriarchal oppression in the post-colonial era (Fhadila et al., 2024; Kurniawati et al., 2024; Rifai et al., 2023; Shofa & Istiani, 2025). Additionally, Fatonah et al. (2025) examine the magical realism aspect of the novel and emphasize the colonial history embedded within the narrative. However, studies that explicitly and deeply discuss the representation of the five main forms of gender inequality using feminist theory are still limited. This approach has the potential to uncover the ideological meanings hidden behind the construction of characters and conflicts in the novel. In this study, the five forms of gender injustice subordination (placing women in inferior positions), gender role stereotypes (narrowing the roles of women), double burden (the dual domestic and public burdens), marginalization (excluding women from strategic spheres), and violence (physical, verbal, or sexual) are the primary focus of analysis. These categories refer to the feminist framework developed by Fakih (2001); Walby (1990), which views gender injustice as a complex and multidimensional system.

The representation of these five forms in the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* will be analyzed using a feminist approach, particularly radical and postcolonial feminism. Radical feminism emphasizes how the patriarchal structure dominates all aspects of women's social lives, while postcolonial feminism provides a framework for understanding how women in postcolonial societies experience double oppression: as colonial subjects and as subordinates within the local patriarchal system (Minto, 2021). The character of Dewi Ayu and her descendants serve as concrete representations of this experience within the context of Indonesian history. For instance, Dewi Ayu's choice to become a sex worker is not a free choice but a form of resistance within a social system that offers her no other options. This aligns with the concept of "agency in oppression" proposed by Mahmood, which suggests that women can still negotiate their agency, even within a system that restricts it (Mukherjee, 2016; Suleymani, 2025; Velji, 2024). On the other hand, characters such as Alamanda, Maya Dewi, and Cantik also demonstrate how women are forced to bear social and cultural burdens disproportionate to the expectations placed on them due to societal stereotypes and labeling.

This study aims to uncover how the five forms of gender injustice are represented narratively, symbolically, and structurally in the novel *Cantik Itu Luka*. Thus, this research not only highlights the experiences of women within the text but also opens a space for reflection on how literary works contribute to either reproducing or critiquing unequal social structures. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of feminist literary criticism in Indonesia, which still needs to be expanded both methodologically and thematically. Practically, this study can serve as a reference in literary education, gender literacy, and the development of critical awareness of gender-based social role constructions. This research also demonstrates that literary works such as *Cantik Itu Luka* are not only important from an aesthetic perspective but also from the discourse and ideology they embody.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with content analysis methods to examine the representation of gender injustice in the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* by Eka Kurniawan. This approach was chosen because it is well-suited for exploring the meanings, symbols, and social constructions presented in literary texts. The research focuses on the five forms of gender injustice as developed in feminist theory: marginalization, subordination, stereotypes, double burden, and violence against women. Data collection was carried out through a comprehensive reading of the novel, marking parts of the text that contain representations of these five forms of gender injustice. Each quotation was analyzed and classified according to predetermined thematic categories. To support data validity, a keyword-based coding technique was used with both manual analysis and digital exploration of the PDF text. The collected data were then analyzed interpretively using radical and postcolonial feminist perspectives to uncover the patriarchal power relations underlying the narrative structure. The analysis results are presented in the form of frequency tables for each aspect, along with a detailed qualitative description.

Results

The presentation of the research results focuses on the representation of gender injustice in the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* by Eka Kurniawan. This study employs content analysis based on feminist theory, identifying five main aspects of gender injustice: marginalization, subordination, stereotypes, double burden, and violence against women. These five aspects form the basis for thematic categorization to interpret the forms of gender inequality as constructed in the narrative and characters of the novel. The analysis process involves a thorough reading of the text and the marking of relevant keywords associated with each category. To provide an initial quantitative overview of the intensity of the representation of each aspect, frequency tables are presented as a summary of the occurrences of data throughout the entire novel. Subsequently, these results are explained in more detail through qualitative analysis that discusses the context and meaning of the representation of each category of gender injustice.

Table 1. The Frequency of Gender Inequality in the Novel *Cantik Itu Luka*

Aspect	Total	Description
Marginalisasi	11	Women are marginalized from access to social, educational, and decision-making opportunities.
Subordinasi	9	Women are placed in inferior positions or are subjugated to men.
Stereotype	81	Negative labeling of women, such as prostitute, immoral, or disgraceful.

Double Burden	14	Women bear both domestic and economic roles simultaneously.
Violence	17	Physical, sexual, and symbolic violence against women's bodies and dignity.

Marginalisasi

Excerpt 1. *"Tentara-tentara Jepang itu kembali berteriak-teriak dalam bahasa yang tak dimengerti begitu kapal berlabuh, namun perempuan-perempuan itu berlompatan sesegera mungkin seolah mereka tahu orang-orang itu menuntut gerak yang cepat"* (Kurniawan, 2015 p.65) (1/CIL/M)

The quote "Tentara-tentara Jepang itu kembali berteriak-teriak dalam bahasa yang tak dimengerti..." (Kurniawan, 2015 p.65) illustrates the form of marginalization of women within the context of military colonialism. The women in this scene are positioned as passive objects who lose their agency, unable to comprehend the language used, yet are forced to comply with orders implicit in symbolic violence. This condition reflects structural and linguistic marginalization, where women are not given space to voice their will but instead become part of a larger system of domination. According to Saradar (2024); Suryawati et al. (2021), subaltern groups, politically and epistemically marginalized, cannot speak not because they are mute, but because there is no space for their voices to be heard. In this context, women become subalterns who are not only displaced physically but also erased from the discourse of power. This marginalization also demonstrates how patriarchy and colonialism work together in eliminating women's agency, as emphasized by Fakih (2013) who states that women are often excluded from access to power, communication, and social spaces.

Excerpt 2. *"Satu-satunya hal yang tampaknya sedikit menguntungkan adalah, orang-orang Jepang itu tak bermaksud segera mengembalikan mereka ke Bloedenkamp, dan sebaliknya, tetap menahan mereka di sana. Memang bukan sebagai pelacur, namun sebagai tahanan perang semula"* (Kurniawan, 2015 p.97) (5/CIL/M)

The quote "Satu-satunya hal yang tampaknya sedikit menguntungkan adalah, orang-orang Jepang itu tak bermaksud segera mengembalikan mereka ke Bloedenkamp..." (Kurniawan, 2015 p.97) highlights the form of marginalization of women within the military colonial power system, where women are treated not as dignified subjects, but as entities whose status can shift from prostitute to war prisoner without consent or agency. This change in status is not a form of liberation but a continuation of the marginalization process, where women's bodies and existence are entirely controlled by external powers. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, this illustrates how women become objects of colonial power manipulation, deprived of any active role in determining their own fate (Nasir, 2021). The status of "war prisoner" does not elevate their dignity, but instead places them within the framework of military power, further excluding women from meaningful social and political spaces. As Fakih (2013) emphasizes, the marginalization of women often occurs through labeling that closes access to autonomy and agency.

Excerpt 3. *"Mereka tak mau menerima perempuan bersuami duduk di bangku sekolah, sebab mereka khawatir itu berpengaruh buruk pada anak-anak lain."* (Kurniawan, 2015 p.256) (7/CIL/M)

The quote "Mereka tak mau menerima perempuan bersuami duduk di bangku sekolah, sebab mereka khawatir itu berpengaruh buruk pada anak-anak lain."

(Kurniawan, 2015 p.256) represents the form of marginalization of women in access to education due to discriminatory social norms. In this context, the status of being a "married woman" is used as an excuse to exclude women from intellectual spaces and formal institutions. Women are positioned as moral threats, rather than individuals with equal rights to education. This illustrates how patriarchal-based social control is used to limit women's mobility and structurally reproduce gender inequality (Ahmad et al., 2025; Dulhanty, 2023). From a structural feminism perspective, as described by Fakih (2013), marginalization occurs when women are excluded from access to essential resources such as education, economics, and power. This systemic rejection also reflects that women's bodies and identities are constantly negotiated by dominant norms that place them as "unworthy" of participating in public spaces, particularly when they no longer fit the ideal construction of young, single, and "non-corrupting" women in social environments.

Subordinasi

Excerpt 1. *"Berharaplah tentara kita bisa menangkap orang-orang Jepang, Kita akan ditukar seperti beras dan gula."* (Kurniawan, 2015 p.62) (9/CIL/Sub)

The quote "Berharaplah tentara kita bisa menangkap orang-orang Jepang, Kita akan ditukar seperti beras dan gula." (Kurniawan, 2015 p.62) clearly demonstrates the form of subordination of women, where women are positioned as commodities whose value is equivalent to basic necessities. In this sentence, women's existence is reduced to a bargaining object in the power relations between men, both in the context of war and military politics. This reflects the patriarchal logic that does not see women as autonomous subjects, but as part of a property that can be negotiated and exchanged. According to Walby (1990), women's subordination in patriarchal societies is often expressed through social relations that place women in unequal symbolic and material positions. The reduction of women to barter objects reinforces the discourse that women do not own their bodies but are part of a masculine value system that determines their worth and function. Such subordination not only weakens agency but also solidifies male dominance within the existing social and military order in the novel's narrative.

Excerpt 2. *"Kemudian tentara-tentara itu mulai mengambil gadis-gadis tersebut satu per satu..."* (Kurniawan, 2015 p.85) (10/CIL/Sub)

The quote "Kemudian tentara-tentara itu mulai mengambil gadis-gadis tersebut satu per satu..." (Kurniawan, 2015 p.85) directly reflects the subordination of women through the act of forcible taking, which removes a woman's right to her own body. The phrase "taking" suggests that women are treated like objects or property that can be owned, selected, and controlled by men in positions of authority, in this case, the soldiers. In this unequal power relation, women lose their agency and are constructed as passive objects who are subjected to the dominant masculine will. The concept of subordination explained by Fakih (2013) emphasizes that women are often placed in positions where they lack the power to reject or determine their own fate, while men are given social legitimacy to control women's bodies and choices. In this context, subordination is also layered with symbolic and structural violence that perpetuates gender inequality in social and narrative spaces (Dahal et al., 2022; Rashid et al., 2022; Reyes-Reinoso et al., 2024).

Excerpt 3. *“Kenapa kau mau jadi gundik?” “Sebab jika tidak, Bapak dan Ibu akan jadi sarapan pagi ajak-ajak.” (Kurniawan, 2015 p.31) (13/CIL/Sub)*

The quote “Kenapa kau mau jadi gundik?” “Sebab jika tidak, Bapak dan Ibu akan jadi sarapan pagi ajak-ajak.” (Kurniawan, 2015 p.31) illustrates the subordination of women through emotional coercion and threats of violence against their family. In this quote, the choice to become a mistress is not a result of free will, but rather a form of compromise in an extremely imbalanced power relationship. Women are forced to sacrifice themselves to save others, placing them in a subordinate position that must yield to the brutal masculine system. This shows how subordination can work not only through direct domination but also through structural pressures that leave women with no fair alternative choices. In line with Walby (1990), thinking, women’s subordination is often legitimized through social institutions in this case, militarism and family which make acts of submission appear as forms of devotion or moral obligation. As a result, women lose control over their own bodies and futures, weakened by external demands originating from patriarchal power relations.

Stereotype

Excerpt 1. *“Sang imam masjid memandang gadis bisu itu dengan kebencian, dan berkata bahwa ia tak sudi salat bagi sebongkah mayat pelacur dan apalagi menguburkannya.” (Kurniawan, 2015 p.11) (17/CIL/Ste)*

The quote “Sang imam masjid memandang gadis bisu itu dengan kebencian, dan berkata bahwa ia tak sudi salat bagi sebongkah mayat pelacur dan apalagi menguburkannya.” (Kurniawan, 2015 p.11) depicts a negative moral stereotype against women who have been involved in prostitution, while also showing how this stigma persists even after death. Women are permanently labeled as “prostitutes” and are considered unworthy of religious respect, as if their humanity is erased because of a life choice that may not have been theirs. This demonstrates how patriarchal societies often use moral constructs to judge and exclude women who are seen as “inconsistent” with the ideal feminine norms. According to Heilman et al. (2023); Song (2025), stereotypes against women not only create negative images but also obscure the structural contexts that lead women into stigmatized situations. In this case, stereotypes function as a symbolic force that perpetuates inequality, as only women are held morally accountable, while the system that oppresses them is ignored.

Excerpt 2. *“Seorang pelacur bercinta karena uang, apa yang akan kita sebut pada seorang perempuan yang kawin juga karena uang dan status sosial? Ia lebih dari seorang pelacur.” (Kurniawan, 2015 p.294) (18/CIL/Ste)*

The quote “Seorang pelacur bercinta karena uang, apa yang akan kita sebut pada seorang perempuan yang kawin juga karena uang dan status sosial? Ia lebih dari seorang pelacur.” (Kurniawan, 2015 p.294) presents a degrading stereotype against women who marry for economic reasons or status, cynically comparing them to, and even surpassing, the stigma placed on sex workers. This statement constructs women as materialistic, manipulative, and immoral, while simultaneously asserting that a woman's choices in relationships and marriage are only valid if they are based on love— a moral standard that is not equally applied to men. In the context of feminist theory, such stereotypes function to maintain patriarchal dominance by controlling the narrative around the morality and values of women (Glick et al., 2018). Women who survive by using marriage as a strategy are seen as more contemptible than sex workers, demonstrating how the patriarchal system condemns women for any choice that

deviates from the ideal feminine norm, whether it be sexually active or socially opportunistic. These stereotypes not only tarnish the image of women but also deny recognition of the complexities of the choices they make within an unequal social structure.

Excerpt 3. *"Segala hal telah kulakukan untuk mencoba membunuhnya. Seharusnya ku telan sebutir granat dan meledakkannya didalam perut. Si kecil yang malang, seperti para penjahat, orang-orang malang juga susah mati."* (Kurniawan, 2015 p.4) (19/CIL/Ste)

The quote "Segala hal telah kulakukan untuk mencoba membunuhnya. Seharusnya ku telan sebutir granat dan meledakkannya di dalam perut. Si kecil yang malang, seperti para penjahat, orang-orang malang juga susah mati." (Kurniawan, 2015 p.4) demonstrates how stereotypes against women are constructed even from within the womb, when a mother internalizes shame, resentment, and rejection towards an unborn child due to its social condition. This statement carries a narrative that a female child, especially one born from an unideal relationship, is already considered a symbol of disgrace, burden, or curse from the outset. In the context of feminism, this reflects how women are not only stigmatized by society but also by the value system that is internalized into their own bodies and minds (Glick et al., 2018). The view of the child as a "criminal" reflects how women born from violence, poverty, or prostitution are framed through negative stereotypes that perpetuate social legacies as destiny. These stereotypes work not only as social labels but also as symbolic violence passed down through generations, reinforcing gender inequality from one generation to the next.

Double Burden

Excerpt 1. *"Ia disuruh bekerja dari pukul lima dini hari sampai jam sebelas malam hanya untuk memperoleh jatah makan dua kali sehari."* (Kurniawan, 2015 p.85) (22/CIL/BKG)

The quote "Ia disuruh bekerja dari pukul lima dini hari sampai jam sebelas malam hanya untuk memperoleh jatah makan dua kali sehari." (Kurniawan, 2015 p.85) represents the double burden experienced by women in an exploitative and gender-imbalanced work system. The woman in this quote has to endure extreme working hours from morning until night, yet is only compensated with basic necessities, with no recognition of her labor as a human or as a woman. This burden illustrates that women are not only required to perform hard work in the public sphere (forced or productive labor), but also remain in a low and oppressed social position. Within the framework of Marxist and radical feminist theory, this condition reflects dual exploitation: women are exploited economically while still being positioned within a social structure that does not offer them space for control or mobility (Armstrong, 2020; Giménez, 2019; Laudini, 2024). The double burden here shows that women must work hard to survive but still do not receive recognition or liberation from the social oppression that surrounds them.

Excerpt 2. *"Ia tak hanya menyediakan pakaian-pakaian yang rapi tersetrika dan bahkan wangi untuk ia kenakan, ia bahkan memasak semua masakan yang mereka makan dan ia rasakan begitu nikmat di lidah."* (Kurniawan, 2015 p.280) (23/CIL/BKG)

The quote "Ia tak hanya menyediakan pakaian-pakaian yang rapi tersetrika dan bahkan wangi untuk ia kenakan, ia bahkan memasak semua masakan yang mereka makan dan ia rasakan begitu nikmat di lidah." (Kurniawan, 2015 p.280) illustrates the

double burden that women face in the domestic sphere, where all household chores from caring for clothes to preparing meals are entirely carried out by women without any equitable division of roles or recognition. This domestic workload is carried out alongside other roles that demand time and energy, showing that women are positioned as the main supporters of household comfort, often in conditions of unequal power and affection. From a feminist perspective, particularly as discussed by Armstrong (2020), this double burden is a form of structural oppression that places women in dual subordination, both in the private and public realms. The domestic role, often seen as an act of devotion or love, becomes a way for the patriarchal system to perpetuate inequality by obscuring the reality of unpaid and socially unrecognized labor performed by women.

Excerpt 3. *"aku akan kembali padamu jadi pelacur, untuk bayar utangku."* (Kurniawan, 2015 p.106-107) (25/CIL/BKG)

The quote "aku akan kembali padamu jadi pelacur, untuk bayar utangku." (Kurniawan, 2015 p.106-107) illustrates an extreme form of double burden, where a woman is forced to take on a high-risk, stigmatized economic role to fulfill the financial obligations imposed on her. The role of a sex worker is not chosen freely but rather as a form of responsibility to repay a debt—a condition that places women under both economic pressure and moral and social burdens. From a Marxist feminist perspective, this reflects how capitalist and patriarchal systems intertwine to exploit women in a dual manner: they are compelled to sacrifice their bodies in the public sphere to preserve the stability of the family or domestic relations that simultaneously constrain them (Armstrong, 2020; Giménez, 2019). In this case, the double burden involves not only physical labor but also emotional and social labor, positioning women between sacrifice, debt, and the social stigma that constantly haunts them.

Violence

Excerpt 1. *"...si tentara gempal akhirnya mencabik-cabik pakaian perempuan di depannya, melemparkannya ke lantai, kini perempuan itu telanjang."* (Kurniawan, 2015 p.91) (29/CIL/K)

The quote "...si tentara gempal akhirnya mencabik-cabik pakaian perempuan di depannya, melemparkannya ke lantai, kini perempuan itu telanjang." (Kurniawan, 2015 p.91) illustrates a very explicit form of sexual violence, where a woman's body becomes the object of military power without consent and devoid of humanity. The act of tearing off clothes and forcing nudity is a form of dehumanization, which not only physically diminishes the woman's dignity but also symbolically erases her identity and autonomy over her body. From a radical feminist perspective, as articulated by Andrea Dworkin, sexual violence is the most direct expression of patriarchal domination, where women's bodies are controlled and owned by men as a way to assert power (Nurnaningsih, 2023). This violence also underscores that in situations of war or colonization, women often become symbolic "battlefields," where control over a woman's body signifies control over honor and social power. This narrative highlights that violence against women is not just an individual incident but a part of a systematic, brutal, and patriarchal system.

Excerpt 2. *"Kau memperkosaku, Shondaco!" jerit Alamanda saat mencoba berguling ke samping menghindari. Tetapi Sang Shondaco terus memburunya, menghimpitnya dan menjelajahi setiap wilayah tubuhnya."* (Kurniawan, 2015 p.91) (34/CIL/K)

The quote “Kau memperkosaku, Shondaco!” jerit Alamanda saat mencoba berguling ke samping menghindari. Tetapi Sang Shondaco terus memburunya, menghimpitnya dan menjelajahi setiap wilayah tubuhnya.” (Kurniawan, 2015 p.91) explicitly depicts rape as a brutal form of sexual violence committed by a man against a woman without consent. This act represents the most extreme form of physical and sexual domination, where a woman's body is completely violated and controlled by the perpetrator. Within the framework of radical feminism, as articulated by Aissa & Mkinsi (2024); Hadi (2017), rape is not only a criminal act against an individual but also a part of the patriarchal power structure that systematically uses sexual violence to control, intimidate, and discipline women. Alamanda's futile screams and the failure of her body to be protected by any system reflect how powerless women are in the face of masculine power institutionalized in social and domestic relations. The violence in this quote shows that the woman's body is presented not as a subject but as a realm of power that can be entered, controlled, and torn apart by men who feel entitled to it.

Excerpt 3. *Prajurit-prajurit itu tak suka membayar di tempat pelacuran, padahal para preman ada di sana untuk menghadang siapa saja yang meniduri pelacur tanpa membayar (Kurniawan, 2015 p.273) (37/CIL/K)*

The quote “Prajurit-prajurit itu tak suka membayar di tempat pelacuran, padahal para preman ada di sana untuk menghadang siapa saja yang meniduri pelacur tanpa membayar.” (Kurniawan, 2015 p.273) reflects the structural and sexual violence against women working in the prostitution industry, where women's bodies are turned into objects of exploitation without legal or social protection. In this context, soldiers, as a representation of state or military power, feel entitled to treat women as sexual objects without responsibility, demonstrating how patriarchal power allows sexual violence to be legitimized by social status and the strength of weaponry. The prostitutes in this novel not only endure physical and sexual violence but also economic violence, as their right to wages is not even guaranteed. From a Marxist and radical feminist perspective, as discussed by Azhar & Ali (2024); Fawole (2008), violence against women cannot be separated from the power relations between class, gender, and capital, where women in the lowest positions often experience double exploitation. The violence in this quote is not only individual but also reflects structural inequality that institutionalizes male dominance over women's bodies and rights.

Discussion

This discussion shows that Eka Kurniawan's *Cantik Itu Luka* not only presents a story of history and violence but also serves as a medium for critique of the patriarchal system and institutionalized gender injustice. The representation of women in the novel does not stand as a neutral entity but is framed within five complex dimensions of oppression: stereotypes, violence, double burden, marginalization, and subordination. The analysis of these aspects reveals how fiction narratives can serve as both a reflection and a reproduction of social structures that oppress. These findings reinforce contemporary research by Asthereni (2020) which demonstrates that the representation of women in literary works is still heavily influenced by patriarchal ideological patterns that operate across various layers of text and context.

One of the dominant tendencies in the novel is how stereotypes about women are formed and perpetuated through language and social morality. Labels such as "prostitute," "immoral woman," or "bring shame" do not appear merely as personal

narratives, but are framed within a patriarchal social and religious system. This mirrors the findings of Tuchman (2000), which show that in global media representations, stereotypes about women often reinforce subordinate roles through symbolic labeling. In the context of *Cantik Itu Luka*, stereotypes become a form of symbolic violence that paralyzes women's agency, reducing their bodies and identities to mere reflections of masculine social constructs.

In addition to stereotypes, violence against women becomes a prominent and explicit narrative dimension in the novel. Rape, forced nudity, and verbal and psychological violence are not only presented as illustrations of brutality but also as a critique of the structures that allow such actions to occur. Violence against women in fictional media is often depicted explicitly but with minimal contextualization, whereas Eka Kurniawan presents it with strong historical and social weight (Harahap & Asnani, 2023; Tuchman, 2000). In this novel, women's bodies become a battleground and a symbol of social wounds, in line with Hadi (2017) view that sexual violence is an instrument of control in the patriarchal system. Another significant form of oppression that emerges is the double burden, where female characters are depicted as figures who work tirelessly in both domestic and economic spheres. In many sections, they perform the roles of caregivers, providers, and servants without recognition or compensation. Fiction often immortalizes traditional roles for women in a seemingly realistic way, but in reality, it locks them into a framework of double roles (Baga, 2023; Latupeirissa et al., 2025; Qayyum et al., 2024). In the novel, this burden is portrayed not just as a physical condition but as a form of structural exploitation that places women in an invisible cycle of labor.

The marginalization of women in the novel also appears as a systemic pattern that strips women of access to education, public participation, and representation spaces. Female characters are denied entry to schools, excluded from decision-making processes, and even pushed out of historical and heroic narratives. This condition echoes the findings of Baga (2023); Latupeirissa et al. (2025); Qayyum et al. (2024) who noted how literary texts and history often neglect the presence of women in the formation of collective identity. *Cantik Itu Luka* narratively reverses this tendency by placing women at the center of pain and memory, but still within a social framework that systematically marginalizes them. Although subordination appears less frequently than other aspects, its ideological impact is significant. Female characters in the novel are often depicted as submissive, obedient, or sacrificing for the sake of family or relationships. They are not only trapped in limited choices but are also constructed to accept subordinate positions as a form of devotion. This phenomenon is linked to the normalization of patriarchal structures that position women as passive subjects in social relations. Farid (2021); Otto (2020) in their analysis of women's narratives in postcolonial fiction, note that subordination does not always appear as direct violence, but is institutionalized within narratives of sacrifice and loyalty.

Thus, the reading of *Cantik Itu Luka* reveals that the novel carries a sharp social critique of the imbalanced gender structure, not only reflecting social realities but also challenging them through its narrative. Eka Kurniawan's success lies not only in the aesthetic strength of his literature but also in his ability to deconstruct social illusions and present women as subjects who endure, resist, and represent collective wounds. The representation of gender injustice in this novel affirms that literary texts can serve as an important source in the structural reading of social inequalities, while also contributing to the expansion of contemporary feminist discourse.

Conclusion

This study shows that Eka Kurniawan's novel *Cantik Itu Luka* complexly and multilayeredly represents five forms of gender injustice: stereotypes, violence, double burden, marginalization, and subordination. The findings reveal that literary narratives can construct power relations that place women in oppressed positions, both through explicit representations such as sexual violence and domestic exploitation, as well as through symbolic violence such as moral labeling and the erasure of agency. Stereotypes emerge as the most dominant form in the narrative, while other forms like subordination appear subtly but ideologically. While these findings are relevant to contemporary feminist theory, generalizing them should be done with caution given the research's limitation to a single literary work. The representations in the novel are fictional and are not meant to fully represent social conditions as a whole. Therefore, reading the text must still take into account the aesthetic elements and the creative context of the author. Additionally, the focus of the analysis, which is limited to five aspects of gender injustice, also serves as a limitation, as other aspects such as women's resistance, body representation, or interclass relations were not the main focus.

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, it is recommended that future research expand the scope of analysis to other literary works, both from different genres and socio-cultural backgrounds, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of gender construction in Indonesian literature. Further studies could also integrate interdisciplinary approaches, such as critical linguistics, feminist psychoanalysis, or postcolonial studies, to explore the deeper layers of meaning in the gender narratives hidden within the texts.

References

- Ahmad, S., Din, F. U., Khan, S., & Rahman, H. U. (2025). The Impact of Joint Family System on Women Autonomy: A Phenomenological Exploration. *Indus Journal of Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.59075/ijss.v3i1.728>
- Aissa, L., & Mkinsi, M. (2024). Sexual Violence as True Weapon of Male Dominance and Control: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.32996/jhsss.2024.6.4.8>
- Altay, S. (2019). Patriarchy and Women's Subordination: A Theoretical Analysis. *E-Şarkiyat İlmi Araştırmaları Dergisi/Journal of Oriental Scientific Research (JOSR)*. <https://doi.org/10.26791/SARKIAT.541704>
- Amani, Z., Samar, R., & Salumahale, F. E. (2024). Woman as Second-Class Citizens: The Impact of Patriarchy on Afghan Women in Hashimi's *One Half from The East*. *Cultural Narratives*. <https://doi.org/10.59066/cn.v1i3.850>
- Armstrong, E. (2020). *Marxist and Socialist Feminisms*. 35–52. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119314967.CH3>
- Asri, Y., Hayati, Y., & Adek, M. (2020). *Women's Perspective on Love, Loyalty, and the Other Woman in Indonesian literature*. 181–186. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200325.078>
- Asthereni, P. V. S. Y. (2020). The Representation of Women in Li Young-Lee's Poems. *OKARA: Jurnal Bahasa Dan Sastra*. <https://doi.org/10.19105/ojbs.v14i1.3137>
- Azhar, S., & Ali, A. (2024). Global Accumulation & Gendered Class Exploitation: Theory and Evidence from the Garment Industry During the Covid Pandemic. *Forum for Social Economics*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07360932.2024.2350496>
- Baga, M. (2023). Digital Novels: A Recycled Advertisement about the Old Social

- Construction of Women's Identity. *TRANS-KATA: Journal of Language, Literature, Culture and Education*. <https://doi.org/10.54923/jllce.v3i2.46>
- Chamalah, E., Nuryyati, R., & Azizah, A. (2023). Critical discourse analysis of Fajriatun Nurhidayati's Nyadran-Belajar Toleransi pada Tradisi. *EduLite: Journal of English Education, Literature and Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.30659/e.8.2.374-383>
- Dahal, P., Joshi, S., & Swahnberg, K. (2022). A qualitative study on gender inequality and gender-based violence in Nepal. *BMC Public Health*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14389-x>
- Dulhunty, A. (2023). Disciplinary mobility and women's empowerment: a complicated connection. *Mobilities*, 18, 282–296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2022.2088298>
- Fakih, M. (2001). *Analisis Gender dan Transformasi Sosial*. Pustaka Pelajar.
- Fakih, M. (2013). *Analisis Gender & Transformasi Sosial*. Pustaka Pelajar.
- Farid, F. (2021). Dying to serve: militarism, affect and the politics of sacrifice in the Pakistan army. *International Affairs*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab125>
- Fatonah, S. D., Zulfetriyani, Z., & Septia, E. (2025). Permasalahan Perempuan Subaltern dalam Novel Cantik Itu Luka Karya Eka Kurniawan Tinjauan: Poskolonial. *AKSARA: Jurnal Bahasa Dan Sastra*. <https://doi.org/10.23960/aksara/v26i1.pp102-113>
- Fawole, O. (2008). Economic Violence To Women and Girls. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 9, 167–177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838008319255>
- Fhadila, R., Manugeran, M., & Purwarno, P. (2024). Violence Against Woman In Eka Kurniawan's Novel Cantik Itu Luka. *JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE*. <https://doi.org/10.30743/jol.v6i2.9608>
- Gassmann, R., Lang, P., Dewojati, C., Christmann, T., Sanni, O., Falk, H., Saliba, G., & Hinüber, O. (2010). *Recent Indonesian Women's Literature*. <https://consensus.app/papers/recent-indonesian-women-s-literature-christmann-dewojati/a90145afa9df5d699244cbd28dede4db/>
- Giménez, M. (2019). *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction*. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004291560>
- Glick, P., Kahalon, R., Shnabel, N., & Bareket, O. (2018). The Madonna-Whore Dichotomy: Men Who Perceive Women's Nurturance and Sexuality as Mutually Exclusive Endorse Patriarchy and Show Lower Relationship Satisfaction. *Sex Roles*, 79, 519–532. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S11199-018-0895-7>
- Hadi, A. (2017). Patriarchy and Gender-Based Violence in Pakistan. *European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research*, 10, 297. <https://doi.org/10.26417/EJSER.V10I2.P297-304>
- Harahap, F., & Asnani, A. (2023). Injustice In Eka Kurniawan's Novel Beauty Is A Wound. *JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE*. <https://doi.org/10.30743/jol.v5i2.8038>
- Hasan, S., & Simon, R. (2025). Patriarchy and Gender Inequality: A Comprehensive Analysis of Women's Empowerment in Contemporary India. *Gender Issues*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-025-09351-1>
- Heilman, M., Caleo, S., & Manzi, F. (2023). Women at Work: Pathways from Gender Stereotypes to Gender Bias and Discrimination. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-110721-034105>
- Kurniawan, E. (2015). *Cantik itu luka*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
- Kurniawati, A., Liana, L., Asharina, N. P., Permana, I., & Siliwangi, I. (2024). Kajian Feminisme dalam Novel "Cantik Itu Luka" Karya Eka Kurniawan. *Pragmatik : Jurnal Rumpun Ilmu Bahasa Dan Pendidikan*.

- <https://doi.org/10.61132/pragmatik.v3i1.1263>
- Latupeirissa, K. I. M., Zebua, G. A., Barus, C. C. A. B., Sijabat, L. R. R., & Girsang, M. (2025). The Duty of Women to Preserve Family Found in Fay Weldon's Weekend. *JiIP - Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Pendidikan*. <https://doi.org/10.54371/jiip.v8i3.7162>
- Laudini, A. (2024). Punjabi "housewives" in central Italy: navigating patriarchy, labor exploitation, and welfare exclusion. *Dialectical Anthropology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-024-09735-x>
- Levine, A., England, P., & Mishel, E. (2020). Progress toward gender equality in the United States has slowed or stalled. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 117, 6990–6997. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1918891117>
- Milto, A. (2021). Key Issues and Trends of Postcolonial Feminism. *Vestnik Yaroslavskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta Im. P. G. Demidova. Seriya Gumanitarnye Nauki*. <https://doi.org/10.18255/1996-5648-2021-4-516-525>
- Mukherjee, P. (2016). *Committing Suicide for a Headscarf: Agency and the Feminist Subject in Orhan Pamuk's Snow*. 1, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.1318796>
- Nasir, S. (2021). An Exploration of Postcolonial-Feminist Elements in William Dalrymple's White Mughals. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*. [https://doi.org/10.35484/PSSR.2021\(5-II\)09](https://doi.org/10.35484/PSSR.2021(5-II)09)
- Nicolás-Martínez, C., López-Martínez, M., & Riquelme-Perea, P. J. (2023). Gender and work in Europe: towards the end of inequality? *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 32, 741–757. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2288244>
- Nurnaningsih, N. (2023). Patriarchal Culture, Sexual Violence, and Legal Protection for Women in Indonesia. *Veteran Law Review*. <https://doi.org/10.35586/velrev.v6ispecialissues.5758>
- Opacic, Z. (2017). *The aspects of ideological discourse in the literature for children and the young*. 30, 117–128. <https://doi.org/10.5937/INOVACIJE17031170>
- Otto, N. (2020). 'I Did What I Had to Do': Loyalty and Sacrifice in Girls' Narratives of Homicide in Southern Brazil. *British Journal of Criminology*, 60, 703–721. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azz079>
- Qayyum, A., Khan, M. B., & Ullah, I. (2024). The Insiders and the Outsiders in Short Fiction: Is the Behaviour of Women and Men Determined by Living in and Living Out? *Global Sociological Review*. [https://doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2024\(ix-iii\).03](https://doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2024(ix-iii).03)
- Rashid, M. A. U. H., Ghazi, F., & Manzoor, M. M. (2022). Symbolic violence and social adjustment of transgender(s) in Pakistan. *Quality & Quantity*, 57, 121–135. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-022-01344-6>
- Reyes-Reinoso, J. R., Vázquez, A. F. Z., Aguirre, M. C. U., Leon-Prieto, M. E., Basso, L. S., & Ordoñez-Gavilanez, M. E. (2024). Overview of Symbolic Violence: A Review of the Literature. *Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental*. <https://doi.org/10.24857/rgsa.v18n6-140>
- Rifai, R. U., Idawati, I., & Faisal, F. (2023). Representasi Feminisme Dalam Novel Cantik Itu Luka Karya Eka Kurniawan (Kajian Semiotika Roland Barthes). *Titik Dua: Jurnal Pembelajaran Bahasa Dan Sastra Indonesia*. <https://doi.org/10.59562/titikdua.v3i2.47102>
- Saradar, S. N. (2024). Subaltern Voice and the Politics of Representation. *Journal of Kathmandu BernHardt College*. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jkbc.v6i1.72977>
- Shofa, G. Z., & Istiani, I. (2025). The Resistance of Subaltern Class against Patriarchal Hegemony in Cantik Itu Luka by Eka Kurniawan. *Journal of Language and*

- Literature*. <https://doi.org/10.24071/joll.v25i1.9598>
- Song, B. (2025). The Impact of Female Stereotypes on Career Development. *Advances in Economics, Management and Political Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2754-1169/2025.21941>
- Suleymani, S. (2025). Navigating Marginality: Agency and Empowerment of Turk Women in Azerbaijan. *Critical Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205251319216>
- Suryawati, I., Seran, A., & Sigit, R. R. (2021). *Perempuan Subaltern Dunia Ketiga Dalam Tinjauan Teori Feminisme Poskolonial Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. 2, 88–96. <https://doi.org/10.37010/FCS.V2I2.336>
- Thoyyibah, A., & Milal, D. F. El. (2023). Perception of “Beautiful” Indonesian Women in The Eka Kurniawan’s Novel “Beauty is a Wound.” *International Journal of English Learning and Applied Linguistics (IJELAL)*. <https://doi.org/10.21111/ijelal.v3i2.10100>
- Tuchman, G. (2000). *The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media*. 150–174. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-62397-6_9
- Velji, M. (2024). From Opposition to Creativity: Saba Mahmood’s Decolonial Critique of Teleological Feminist Futures. *Hypatia*, 39, 773–794. <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2023.119>
- Wajiran, W., Fadillah, D., Dahlan, A., Wajiran, W., Fadillah, D., & Sastra, K. (2020). *Women’s Socio-Political Dynamics in Indonesian Literature*. 28, 249–266. <https://doi.org/10.21580/WS.28.2.6534>
- Walby, S. (1990). *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Blackwell.