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The Ambivalence of the Female Body in Ramayda Akmal's *Jatisaba*

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ABSTRACT

Background: This article examines Ramayda Akmal's *Jatisaba*, which portrays the female body as a complex social construct shaped by power relations.

Purpose: The aim of this study is to articulate the ambivalence of the female body.

Method: The study employs close reading within a narratological framework, drawing on theory of focalization and concept of narrative voice to analyze shifts in the position of the protagonist, as both character and narrator. The analysis focuses on narrative moments that depict embodied experiences, particularly the ambivalence of the female body as it emerges through storytelling strategies. More broadly, the discussion of the female body refers to Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, while the specific issue of bodily ambivalence is addressed through the works of Young and Priyatna.

Results and Discussion: The findings indicate that *Jatisaba* depicts the female body as ambivalent, oscillating between an awareness of its position as the Other and its attempts to negotiate a space of subjectivity within constraining social structures. This ambivalence surfaces through internal focalization and the female narrative voice, which reveal Mae's capacity to narrate her emotions while simultaneously reinforcing her position as a body that is controlled, objectified, and disciplined by patriarchal institutions.

Conclusions and Implications: *Jatisaba* demonstrates that the ambivalence of the female body arises from the protagonist's internal conflicts, social pressures, and patriarchal structures. The study's implication is to open further exploration into the ambivalence of women's bodies within the broader landscape of Indonesian literature.

Keywords:

Female Body; Jatisaba; Ambivalence

ABSTRAK

Latar Belakang: Artikel ini membahas novel *Jatisaba* karya Ramayda Akmal, sebuah teks yang menggambarkan tubuh perempuan sebagai konstruksi sosial yang kompleks dan dibentuk oleh relasi kuasa.

Tujuan: Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk memaparkan ambivalensi tubuh perempuan.

Metode: Penelitian ini menerapkan pembacaan dekat dengan kerangka naratologi, merujuk pada teori focalisasi dan konsep suara naratif untuk menelaah pergeseran posisi suara tokoh utama sekaligus narator dalam novel. Analisis difokuskan pada



narasi-narasi yang menampilkan pengalaman tubuh khususnya ambivalensi tubuh perempuan yang muncul melalui strategi penceritaan. Secara umum, pembahasan mengenai isu tentang tubuh perempuan mengacu pada *The Second Sex* karya Beauvoir, sementara isu spesifik mengenai ambivalensi tubuh dianalisis melalui perspektif Young dan Priyatna.

Hasil dan Pembahasan: Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa *Jatisaba* menggambarkan tubuh perempuan yang ambivalen, yakni antara kesadaran akan posisinya sebagai Liyan dan upayanya untuk menegosiasikan ruang subjektivitas di tengah struktur sosial yang membatasinya. Ambivalensi mengemuka melalui fokusasi internal dan suara naratif perempuan yang menunjukkan kemampuan untuk menarasikan perasaannya namun di sisi lain juga mempertegas posisi tubuh perempuan yang dikontrol, diobjektifikasi, dan patuh pada institusi yang patriarkal.

Kesimpulan dan Implikasi: Novel *Jatisaba* menunjukkan ambivalensi tubuh perempuan terjadi melalui konflik internal tokoh utama, tekanan sosial dan struktur yang patriarkal. Implikasi penelitian ini adalah membuka eksplorasi lebih lanjut untuk menyoroti ambivalensi tubuh perempuan dalam karya sastra Indonesia yang lebih luas.

Kata Kunci*Tubuh perempuan; Jatisaba; Ambivalensi***Copyright: © 2026 by the author(s).**

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of classical Western thought, major philosophers such as Plato, Descartes, and Kant positioned the mind as superior to the body. They believed that the most essential aspect of the human being is the mind, for it is through thought that one can apprehend truth and become a rational subject. Conversely, the body was regarded as inferior as it was associated with desire, weakness, and even an obstacle to rationality.[1] As a result, the body came to be perceived as a threat to individual freedom, since its natural characteristics reveal human vulnerability and dependency as biological beings[2] Awareness of this vulnerability has since become a focus of various studies, including feminism. By the late 20th century, the body became a significant issue, especially in feminist theory.[3] This occurred as patriarchal culture regulates and controls women's bodies, prompting feminist scholars to discuss the body in a more critical and in-depth manner.[4]

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir[5] views the body as a crucial aspect of how individuals come to understand themselves and how they are treated by the world around them. Similar to Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is not merely something one possesses; rather, it forms the very ground or background of action and perception. As interpreted by Moi [6], Merleau-Ponty employs the visual metaphor *se détacher*, or detaching oneself, to define the body as an ever-present element in human experience whose meaning is never fixed.

A range of perspectives and approaches has therefore emerged to make sense of the female body, from biological interpretations to analyses of how the body is constructed and regulated by social and cultural norms. Butler and Haraway, as discussed in Moi, contend that there is no inherent relationship between female identity and the biological female body. Both view the concepts of "woman" and "the female body" not as fixed entities but as contingent and socially constructed.[7] These theories of the body open up space for questioning how women's bodies are represented within literary works.

This study examines the issue of the female body in *Jatisaba* (2024), a novel by Ramayda Akmal. The work was first published in 2009 and received recognition as an award-winning finalist in the Jakarta Arts Council Novel Competition in 2010. The 2024 edition is used in this study. *Jatisaba* narrates the arrival of the protagonist, Mae, in the village of Jatisaba to fulfill the request of

the Old Major, the head of an institution involved in human trafficking. Jatisaba is a modest rural community whose people continue to uphold the tradition of *nini cowong*, a ritual believed to be the incarnation of Dewi Sri and performed to pray for rain. The community's belief in the *nini cowong* ritual illustrates the strong role of tradition in shaping the social life of Jatisaba. This traditional orientation is evident not only in the village's spiritual practices but also in its social division of roles. Women are largely portrayed as being confined to domestic responsibilities, while the male characters function as symbols of authority who lead, provide, and dominate.

Culturally, male dominance over women, particularly regarding women's roles and social positions, from everyday interactions to bodily experiences, continues to be considered normative. In *Jatisaba*, the female body is not only depicted in biological terms but is also positioned as an economic instrument, a sexual object, and a site of social stigma. The novel presents Mae as both the central female character and the narrator, navigating a series of life challenges that are deeply intertwined with how her body is perceived and treated. Scott and Morgan[8] note that, historically, women have been constructed in relation to their biological functions, especially their reproductive capacity. This framing renders the meaning of "woman" problematic when it is based solely on the biological body.

This view, which anchors women's identities solely in biological terms, reinforces a range of stereotypes. Conventionally, women are often perceived as inherently weak, a perception that then justifies the regulation and control of women through social and cultural norms that restrict their mobility and autonomy.[9] In *Jatisaba*, the female characters are shaped by patriarchal culture in ways that obscure their essence and deny their existence as whole, autonomous individuals.

Walby defines patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices through which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women.[10] The term social structure needs to be emphasized because this practice is not caused by biological differences and cannot be reduced to a synonym for "men"[11], but rather arises from cultural practices embedded within society. Patriarchy results in men enjoying greater privileges than women in both public and private spheres of life[12]. According to Demir, patriarchal systems encourage women to be obedient and to accept male domination as something natural.[13]

This condition produces a contradiction in women's position, as they are often caught between being subjects—conscious, free, and autonomous human beings—and being the Other, or objects.[5] Priyatna notes that this contradiction generates a state of ambivalence in the context of women's existence.[7] Building on this, the present article discusses the ambivalence of the female body in Ramayda Akmal's *Jatisaba*. According to Coccia et al., the concept of ambivalence within feminist analysis offers a more comprehensive framework than the simple dichotomy of "oppression" and "equality." [14]

Previous studies on *Jatisaba*, conducted by Sari and Rusliawati [15], Sa'diyah et al. [16], Abror[17], Zamzuri [18], and Eka Putri Alda [19], have examined issues such as women's experiences as migrant workers, human trafficking practices, migration discourses, and traces of trauma within the narrative. However, none of these studies have focused specifically on the female body. This indicates a research gap that warrants further investigation.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on examining the ambivalence of the female body in *Jatisaba* through the lens of existentialist feminism and the narratological frameworks of Fludernik [20] and Lanser.[21] This approach enables a deeper analysis of the female body which is an aspect that has not been explored in earlier studies. By integrating narratological analysis with feminist theory, this study not only interrogates the representation of the body within the text but also examines how narrative perspective, storytelling structure, and women's voices are articulated through its female characters.

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This research is significant because it investigates the female body not merely as a biological entity but as part of broader social dynamics. By aiming to cast light upon the ambivalence of the female body, the study seeks to expand discussions of bodily representation in Indonesian literary scholarship, particularly in relation to *Jatisaba*. Furthermore, it strives to reveal how social constructions of the female body shape women's positions and experiences in society as problematized within the literary work. Through critical reading, this study aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to challenge and transform dominant narratives that frequently position the female body in subordinate roles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

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Research on the body has become a central concern in literary studies, particularly within gender-focused scholarship. The body is not merely a biological phenomenon, but also a product of the social norms and power relations that regulate, monitor, and control human beings.[22] Feminist scholars in particular highlight how women are oppressed through their bodies.[23] In the context of Indonesian literature, representations of the female body are far from uniform.[24] The female body frequently appears through narratives that record experiences of domestic life, migration, and exploitation, making it a representational space that reveals how women are negotiated within social and cultural structures.

The Female Body

Sithole argues that perspectives on the body are shaped by sociocultural contexts. Societies exercise control in defining how bodies are treated and perceived.[25]-[25] On this basis, the body can be categorized in ways that produce gendered distinctions. As Pilcher and Whelehan note, the body is a social construction, shaped and given meaning by society.[26] Women are associated with the body and its biological aspects, whereas men are linked to intellectual achievement. Beauvoir critiques patriarchal modes of thought that position the male body as the normative standard while defining women primarily through their sexuality.[5] Women are viewed solely through the lens of their biological bodies like ovaries, wombs, and hormones, as if these fully determine the course of their lives. In contrast, men regard their own bodies as neutral and unmarked (unconstrained by biological characteristics), even though men also possess hormones and testes.

Beauvoir highlights that women tend to question their identities more often than men. It is rare for men to ask, "What is a man?" because men are positioned as the Subject within society.[5] Women, however, must continually interrogate and define themselves, as they are persistently associated with their bodies and gender roles. Furthermore, women are frequently portrayed as "changeable, restless, incomprehensible, or contradictory".[27] Within a societal framework that remains deeply patriarchal, Beauvoir asserts that a woman is not a fixed or static entity but is always in the process of becoming.[5]

Narratology

The novel *Jatisaba* employs a female character as its narrator to recount the events that unfold in *Jatisaba*. This narrative choice simultaneously foregrounds issues surrounding the female body, which constitute the central focus of this study. Accordingly, this research applies narratological concepts, namely Fludernik's focalization and Lanser's framework of women's narrative voice, to analyze the novel's narrative construction. As Wake explains, narratology is the study of how narrative works, with particular attention to the ways in which narratives function and operate.[28]

Fludernik's[20] narratology is used to identify the position of the narrator, who is also the protagonist in *Jatisaba*. A first-person narrator is an embodied narrator who simultaneously occupies two levels: the external and the internal. This position indicates that the first-person narrator is present both as the storyteller (extradiegetic) and as a character within the story

(intradiegetic).[20] Moreover, a first-person narrator has access only to their own thoughts, meaning they cannot fully know the interior states of other characters. Meanwhile, Lanser's[21] narratology is employed to examine the female voice in *Jatisaba*. Through this lens, the analysis not only focuses on narrative structure and storytelling techniques but also traces how narrative voice is shaped and influenced by perspectives that reflect patriarchal cultural norms.

Previous Studies

As a contemporary literary work, Ramayda Akmal's *Jatisaba* presents a range of issues, including the experiences of women working as undocumented migrant workers, practices of exploitation, and the psychological consequences that follow. These themes demonstrate the novel's capacity to attract scholarly attention, leading researchers to examine it through various perspectives and methodological approaches. Studies on *Jatisaba* have been conducted by Sari and Rusliawati [15], Abror,[17] Sa'diyah et al. [16], and Zamzuri.[18]

Research focusing on the issue of migrant labor in *Jatisaba* has been carried out by Sari and Rusliawati [15] as well as Abror.[17] Sari and Rusliawati argue that the women depicted as migrant workers in the novel face severe problems such as exploitation and sexual violence[15]. Meanwhile, Abror centers his analysis on the discourse of undocumented migrant laborers. Drawing on Michel Foucault's discourse theory, Abror contends that the novel offers a distinctive portrayal of issues surrounding Indonesian migrant workers by presenting Mae, a university graduate, who becomes captured in the network of illegal migrant labor. [17]

The migrant labor issues discussed by Sari and Rusliawati and Abror intersect with the problem of human trafficking, as analyzed by Sa'diyah et al. In their study, Sa'diyah et al. identify two recurring patterns that facilitate the trafficking network: recruitment strategies and the abuse of power. Through the recruitment process, prospective migrant workers are promised high wages and respectable employment.[29] According to Abror, the presence of characters who have achieved success as migrant laborers reinforces these promises and strengthens the recruitment system.[17]

The traumatic experiences endured by the characters in *Jatisaba* affect them not only socially and structurally but also psychologically, with Mae's narrative revealing deep and persistent trauma. Zamzuri [18] highlights Mae's traumatic experiences and examines the relationship between the author and the narrative. Noting several parallels between the author's life and events portrayed in the novel, Zamzuri argues that *Jatisaba* functions as a vivid manifestation of the author's own memories. Their study concludes that Mae represents a melancholic subject, as her narrative is shaped by recurring traumatic recollections. Although these four studies have analyzed Ramayda Akmal's *Jatisaba*, this research diverges by focusing specifically on how the ambivalence of the female body is represented in the novel.

METHOD

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine Ramayda Akmal's novel *Jatisaba*. The selection of this novel was made as it thematically presents a complex representation of women's bodies, making it relevant to the aim of this research, which is to reveal the ambivalence of the female body. The narrative contains scenes and dialogues that articulate bodily experiences, both physical and symbolic, encountered by the female characters. To analyze these representations, the study employs several theoretical frameworks, particularly those related to the female body and narratology.

This research uses narratological theories developed by Monika Fludernik in *An Introduction to Narratology* and Susan S. Lanser in *Toward a Feminist Narratology*. Fludernik's [20] framework is used to examine the position of the narrator, who also functions as the main character. Fludernik offers a narratological model that pays specific attention to the narrator's role on the extradiegetic

level as well as their presence as an actor within the story world (internal-diegetic). This framework is chosen because it enables an analysis of how narrative perspective is shaped through the narrator's embodied experience. Meanwhile, Lanser's (1986) theory is employed to explore the articulation of women's voices in *Jatisaba*. Lanser argues that a text may contain two contrasting or even contradictory narrative voices. Accordingly, the narratological concepts of Fludernik and Lanser in this study are specifically focused on techniques of focalization and narrative voice.[21]

The first stage of this research involves collecting data in the form of narrative excerpts that depict women's bodies in various situations reflecting contradictory meanings. The study then proceeds to the second step, analysing the data with a focus on techniques of focalization to examine how the female body is presented from both the characters' and the narrator's points of view. This study's discussion also applies the concept of narrative voice to explore whether the narration grants the female characters a sense of agency or, on the contrary, silences them.

The broader discussion of women's bodies draws on the ideas of Beauvoir, Young, [30] and Priyatna.[7] Simone de Beauvoir's theory in *The Second Sex* (2009) is highly relevant to this study, as it conceptualizes the female body as more than a biological fact, rather, it is a lived situation. To specifically highlight the ambivalence of the female body, this research employs the frameworks of Young [30] and Priyatna.[7]

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses how the ambivalence of the female body is depicted through the first-person narrative in *Jatisaba*. The novel presents a female protagonist who also serves as the narrator, Mae (Mainah), who works as a broker for Indonesian migrant workers at the agency B.A.N (Bidadari Antar Nusa). B.A.N is introduced as an institution that provides and deploys legal migrant workers, but in practice, it also recruits and sends workers abroad without official authorization, placing Mae within an illegal migrant-worker trafficking network. Mae is described as returning to her hometown, Jatisaba, to offer migrant working job opportunities to the local community. The line *"I returned home, though I have no home."* (Akmal, 2024, p. 6).[31] opens the story and simultaneously affirms the narrator's position as the central character. The novel's narrative is delivered through a first-person point of view, marked by the use of "I," allowing readers direct access to the protagonist's inner experiences.

From the very beginning, Mae reveals her internal struggle between the desire to stop and the obligation to continue her work. *"I am going to start something that has long been my dream. Not because it is pleasant, but because this is a final task. I want to put an end to everything."* (Akmal, 2024, p. 6).[31] The focalization in this quotation exposes a drive to fulfill a long-held wish, yet at the same time, it expresses a sense of despair, revealing her ambivalence.

In the context of narrative voice, Lanser [21] describes this as double-voiced discourse, a moment when a woman's voice speaks in two states at once, between compliance and resistance. Furthermore, Lanser (1986) notes that a woman's narrative voice does not always appear through assertive or masculine language, but also through softer, even fragile forms. In this excerpt, the choice of words such as *"a final task"* and *"to end everything"* conveys exhaustion, suggesting that her body and mind can no longer endure the weight of her struggle.

After Mae's resolve to *"end everything"* (Akmal, 2024, p. 6)[31], she is described arriving in Jatisaba and staying at the house of Sitas, her former neighbor. Her return should have evoked a sense of warmth, as Jatisaba is her hometown filled with memories from the past. However, instead of nostalgia, what emerges is a profound emptiness and an overwhelming sense of loss. This is conveyed in the quotation, *"Perhaps my deep sadness and great loss have drowned out any sense of tenderness and left my body as a lump of flesh without emotion"* (Akmal, 2024, p. 11).[31]

The depiction of Mae's body as "*a lump of flesh without emotion*" illustrates a form of ambivalence in the female body. On one hand, the body signifies physical presence; on the other, it becomes a burden that continually reminds her of pain and loss. As Young argues, the female body is socially lived under constraints that shape its movement, intentionality, and self-perception. In Young's [30] view, women exist in a condition she calls inhibited intentionality, a mode of consciousness marked by hesitation, caught between the desire to act and the impulse to hold back.

The portrayal of the body as "*a lump of flesh without emotion*" marks Mae's estrangement from her own self. She no longer experiences her body as part of an integrated subject. This condition becomes even more visible in the violent events she later endures, in which her body is treated entirely as an object.

"On the mattress, I whimpered. There was pain and soreness between my thighs. Someone knocked on the door. I couldn't get up. The knocking grew harder and repeated. I began to tremble. Mr. Kim opened the door from the outside. A man followed him in. Then, Mr. Kim locked the two of us inside. I don't know how long the man was on top of me. I just kept counting the ceiling's plasterboard squares, trying to endure the pain that intensified with each of his movements." (Akmal, 2024, p. 17) [31]

In this excerpt, Mae's traumatic experience is conveyed through internal-diegetic focalization, meaning the narrative is told through the consciousness of the character who directly undergoes the event. The narrator does not recount the incident with verbal emotional outbursts, but instead through physical descriptions such as "pain," "soreness," and "trembling," which indicate that the body becomes the only medium capable of speaking.

Descriptions such as "*the pain and soreness between my thighs*" and "*I kept counting the ceiling tiles*" illustrate how the body becomes both the center of suffering and a space of silence. Mae does not scream or resist explicitly; instead, she moans and counts. From Lanser's perspective, the "I" voice reveals a form of repressed voice, one in which violence is narrated without overt verbal expression. The short, pause-filled sentences show how the "I" speaks in fragments. She does not describe her emotions explicitly; she recounts small actions that, in fact, reflect profound trauma and unspoken pain. This illustrates the phenomenon of silent narration, which Lanser argues often appears in women's texts due to the dominance of masculine discourse that restricts women's bodily and emotional expression. As Beauvoir asserts, women's bodies are regulated and controlled through male power, even within the private realm (their own bodies). Ambivalence is depicted when the "I" body is objectified yet simultaneously retains an awareness of its own suffering.

The body, previously depicted as ambivalent, reappears in a different situation but still within the same structure of power relations. The following excerpt illustrates how the "I" consciousness negotiates its position amid the pressure of work that cannot be fully controlled: "*I exhaled again and began to think, the Old Major's requests were becoming more difficult and strange. But the years-long vacation makes me excited. A sense of hope emerged that I could finish the job sooner.*" (Akmal, 2024, p. 17). [31] Although the "I" recognizes that the request is "*increasingly difficult*," she simultaneously voices an opposing sentiment that suggests excitement and hope. Here, the "I" feels enthusiastic because the prospect of a "*years-long vacation*" creates the illusion of freedom and the possibility of "*finishing the job sooner*." Through this excerpt, ambivalence is demonstrated as the "I" focalization neither fully submits nor fully possesses agency.

Young explains that the ambivalence of the female body arises because the body always exists between subjectivity and objectivity. It is subjective because women are subjects with agency, yet it is also objective because women are positioned as objects within social systems and patriarchal structures. Mae's work as a recruiter of migrant workers places her directly in this dual position. She becomes part of a system that exploits women's bodies while simultaneously being a victim of that very system. This is reflected in the excerpt: "*There is only one path for me, to continue all of this and hope it ends someday. I don't know how, but what matters is that it's finished. This is my struggle so that I won't*

have to dance on tables every night in some foreign land like the other girls." (Akmal, 2024, p. 23).^[31] The "I" focalization reveals a sense of coercion; she knows her situation is far from ideal, yet she continues to struggle so she does not fall into an even more painful position, like the other women who must "dance on tables."

Mae takes various measures to complete her work mission. One of them involves collaborating with Jompro, a prospective village head. They meet by chance, and Jompro appears to gaze at Mae: "*He kept looking at me. And it became a powerful force that pulled me toward him.*" (Akmal, 2024, p. 27).^[31] In Fludernik's focalization framework, this moment is internally focalized through Mae, allowing the reader to experience the scene from within the consciousness of the female character. Mae does not describe the man's gaze in a detailed, external manner; instead, she conveys its emotional impact—"it became a powerful force"—showing how her body and feelings intertwine. Here, focalization plays a key role in presenting an intimate and subjective perspective, illustrating how Mae's consciousness interprets the gaze as something that draws her closer.

That moment prompts Mae to reminisce: "*Ah, not much nostalgia with you, Jom. Except that you once squeezed my breast and wrapped your fingers into the shape of a heart while saying I love you*" (Akmal, 2024, p. 29).^[31] This quotation appears in italics in the novel. According to Lanser, italicized passages indicate private narration which is a form of female voice that typically remains hidden from public discourse. Lanser argues that although private narration appears deeply personal and intimate, it nonetheless contains a layer of textual construction that mediates the relationship between the character's private experience and the reader. From Young's perspective, a woman's breasts within a patriarchal culture function not merely as biological body parts but as symbols of femininity and as objects of the male gaze. Young contends that the female body is socially constructed to be looked at, rather than to be lived in or experienced fully by the woman herself.^[30]

The excerpt illustrates the ambivalence expressed through Mae's awareness that Jom's act of staring at her and squeezing her chest is a form of objectification, one that positions her as a body to be seen and touched, rather than a whole subject. Yet instead of rejecting the event or framing it as something negative, Mae closes this memory with "*later it will become easier for me*" (Akmal, 2024, p. 29).^[31] Even in a letter she sends to the Old Major, she still attempts to fulfill his requests: "*I'll try to make sure all your orders are fulfilled*" (Akmal, 2024, p. 31). The statement appears simple, but it in fact exposes Mae's position as a subject trapped in contradiction. She recognizes that she is no longer the person she once was—"I also feel that I am not like the old me" (Akmal, 2024, p. 58) ^[31]—yet continues the work that strips her of control over her own life.

Through the first-person voice, readers see how obedience to men's commands is not merely a form of resignation but also the product of the character's internal thinking and negotiation. When Mae writes to the Old Major to reaffirm her determination to complete the task, it appears as a form of agency; yet that agency is built upon a situation that confines her. Beauvoir argues that women attain a kind of "freedom" precisely when they surrender themselves to the roles that constrain them. In other words, women are never truly free because their freedom is always constructed by a patriarchal system that positions them as the Other. In line with Beauvoir, Young asserts that this unfreedom operates through the body, when women become physically limited, constrained, and objectified. Young further explains that because of this, women cannot live with full freedom to determine and realize their own lives.^[30]

This visualization becomes visible when Jompro offers a collaboration to Mae ahead of the village head election. He promises to ease the administrative process for the prospective migrant workers Mae is handling, in exchange for her directing those workers to vote for him in the upcoming election. However, the collaboration that initially appears mutually beneficial gradually reveals another motive behind it, namely, how women's bodies are repeatedly used as bargaining tools: "*But my ideas are not for free either*" (p. 36). This line is immediately followed by a physical action

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that illustrates how women's bodies and voices are symbolically controlled by men: "Jompro rose from his seat and approached me. He sat beside me and suddenly kissed me. His mouth, smelling of a mixture of tobacco and alcohol, plugged my mouth so that I could not utter a word." (Akmal, 2024, p. 36).[31]

In this position, Mae not only loses control over her body but also loses the space to voice her own will. Lanser explains that women are indeed permitted to speak or write, but often only within the boundaries of the private sphere, an emotional or domestic realm that lacks full access to the public space where voice gains legitimacy. In the context of this scene, Mae's body becomes the site through which patriarchal power operates: the narrative "I" speaks, but the events of the story reveal that her voice is silenced by Jompro's actions. He looks at Mae with satisfaction: "That's a pleasant exchange for an idea, isn't it?" (Akmal, 2024, p. 37).[31] Jompro's line demonstrates how male dominance within patriarchal relations often operates in subtle yet coercive ways.

On the other hand, after becoming the object of Jompro's actions, Mae responds with a seemingly calm line: "Of course, this is a satisfying compensation, Jom" (Akmal, 2024, p. 37).[31] Mae then points to the gold necklace she takes from Jompro's neck, a gesture that subtly reverses the power dynamic: "I replied while pointing at the gold chain necklace hanging from my left hand. I took it from Jom's neck when he orgasmed." (Akmal, 2024, p. 37).[31] Ambivalence is shown here as Mae is positioned as an object, yet at the same time, she uses the very situation to further her own goals. Internal focalization plays a crucial role in this novel, as the narrative experience feels vivid enough for the reader to grasp Mae's double consciousness.

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After her meeting with Jompro, Mae carried out her mission by spreading information about the job to the women in Jatisaba using a persuasive approach: "My company is legal. We handle all the paperwork. We have representatives. And we always monitor the workers we deploy" (Akmal, 2024, p. 54). In this moment, the narrative shifts from a private sphere to a public one (the labor recruitment company). Lanser (1986) refers to this as public narration, a mode in which readers are presented with an institutional voice that asserts public authority and patriarchal power. This shift illustrates how Mae's private voice becomes overtaken by a public voice: "I spoke like a noble counselor. Believe me, humans have a natural talent for lying. I felt it myself." (Akmal, 2024, p. 54). This passage shows the narrative moving back into the private voice that admits her deceit. As Lanser (1986) explains, the private voice is one that can only be spoken within a more personal narrative space, not before the public.

In this scene, ambivalence is depicted through Mae's position as a woman who is simultaneously involved in and co-opted by patriarchal structures. On one hand, through internal focalization, Mae often presents herself as a subject who fully understands the manipulation and pressure she experiences. Yet on the other hand, her admission of the lies she tells in public shows how she also participates in the very system that oppresses her. The ambivalence that emerges in this narrative, as explained by Young (2005), is produced by patriarchal institutions that strengthen male power by ensuring that women's desires and actions align with male needs. Through her narrative voice, Mae reveals how structural pressure can redirect a woman's desires, making her appear comfortable with tasks that are in fact, driven by power relations.

This internal contradiction is further shown in the following quote: "I'm starting to hate the Old Mayor. I've always hated him, actually. And I want to end all of this quickly." (Akmal, 2024, p. 72). The quote highlights the tension between Mae's internal rejection of him and the involvement of her body, which continues carrying out the tasks he assigns. In speaking to Malim, Mae does not describe the Old Mayor using bureaucratic terms, but through metaphor, "a smiling devil", as seen in the line: "You know more about the Old Mayor. He's a devil who always smiles. No matter how sweet that smile is, he is a devil." (Akmal, 2024, p. 72). The phrase "a smiling devil" reflects her lived experience confronting patriarchal authority.

Fludernik emphasizes that narrative not only conveys events but also communicates inner states, enabling readers to understand the character as a subject. In the phrase “*You know more about the Old Mayor*,” Mae appears to position Malim as someone who knows better. According to Lanser, this narrative move illustrates how Mae’s voice operates within patriarchal structures: although she possesses direct experience with the Old Mayor’s power, she still frames Malim as the figure more authorized to know.

Although Mae and Malim are colleagues, their relationship frequently crosses professional boundaries, slipping into a grey area that allows their interactions to become more intimate. This is evident in the following passage:

“My thoughts weren’t baseless. Malim has taken advantage of moments and my solitude several times. When I sobbed after finishing my first assignment, Malim embraced my body from behind, intending to comfort me with repeated kisses, until my sobs drowned in the press of his lips, turning into small moans.” (Akmal, 2024, p. 72).

In this passage, Malim is described as “*taking advantage of the moment and my solitude*,” signaling that every intimate interaction between them occurs when Mae is in a vulnerable position. The phrase “*sobbing after finishing my first assignment*” underlines Mae’s emotional fragility, and it is precisely in this moment of vulnerability that Malim approaches her in an invasive way. The narration’s use of expressions such as “*embraced me from behind*” and “*repeated kisses*” reinforces the sense that Mae is not positioned as an active or equal participant in the encounter. Her body becomes the site on which actions are performed, rather than a subject with agency. Beauvoir argues that society often positions the female body as passive, making it easily treated as an object rather than a subject. This dynamic is clearly visible in the scene, where Malim’s actions override Mae’s emotional state and bodily autonomy.

The next excerpt illustrates how Mae’s body continues to be positioned as the object of the male gaze.

“I draped the bath cloth over my body and stripped off my clothes quickly. The well was only fenced by cakla-cikli trees and had no roof. It created a powerful panoptic effect. I always felt there were eyes behind the sharp leaves of the cakla-cikli. Even back then, I once caught a palm-sap tapper perched on a coconut tree, completely absorbed in watching me clean my crotch.” (Akmal, 2024, p. 75).

In this excerpt, Mae bathes in a hurried manner because she constantly feels watched, even when no one is physically present. This experience does not arise merely from her imagination, but from the repeated behavior of the palm-sap tappers she once caught spying on her body from behind the trees. From Lanser’s perspective on narrative voice, Mae reveals that the surveillance of her body is not vague or abstract; it is a concrete experience she knows and feels firsthand. The phrases “*draped the bath cloth over my body*” and “*stripped off my clothes quickly*” signal that even a simple activity like bathing is never truly safe for her. This sense of danger is reinforced by the presence of “eyes” lurking behind the cakla-cikli leaves, showing that her fear is not a sudden, isolated reaction but something persistent and recurring.

In the order of phallocracy as described by Young, “looking” is never a neutral act.^[30] Men occupy the position of subjects who enjoy the privilege of observing, while women are placed as objects to be viewed and sources of visual pleasure. In this context, Mae’s body becomes an object through the male gaze of the tappers. However, the sentence that follows marks a sharp shift in how Mae understands her own body. This ambivalence is shown in the excerpt that comes after this.

“When I looked into the palm-sap tapper’s eyes, my fear shifted. Why shouldn’t I let them look at me? Perhaps there is something appealing about me? Maybe they become aroused again at home? Making love to their wives while imagining me. Isn’t that a good deed?” (Akmal, 2024, p. 75)^[31]

Focalization in this scene shows an emotional shift in Mae, from fear to a willingness to “allow” the gaze, and this shift clearly comes from her own internal consciousness rather than from any external narrative explanation. The passage demonstrates how Mae begins to justify the act of being watched, using a logic that positions her body as something that provides “benefit” for others. Lines such as “*Perhaps there is something appealing about me?*” and “*Isn't that a good deed?*” reveal how Mae rationalizes the objectification she experiences, as if her body is naturally meant to serve men's desires.

The ambivalence of the female body becomes evident: in earlier lines, Mae feels threatened by the watchers, yet suddenly she attempts to find a positive meaning within a situation that actually harms her. She understands that she is being seen as an object, but at the same time, she gradually steps into that role and interprets herself through the perspective of the men who spy on her.

Thus, the overall findings show that Mae's body occupies an ambivalent position, treated as an object under patriarchal surveillance, yet also acting as a subject with its own awareness and interpretation. Through narrative voice, Mae reveals a bodily experience that is constantly negotiated between patriarchal institutional demands, the male gaze, and her own internal struggles. Internal focalization allows readers to follow her emotional shifts directly, from feeling watched, trapped, and vulnerable, to occasionally justifying the objectification she endures. These events underscore that ambivalence is not merely a psychological condition, but a process shaped by social structures and by the ways women are taught to perceive and evaluate their own bodies.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The novel *Jatisaba* demonstrates that the female body never appears as something whole or stable, but rather as an ambivalent and ever-shifting space. Through Mae's narrative voice and internal focalization, the novel reveals how the female body is negotiated through fear, refusal, acceptance, and even rationalization in situations that position it as an object. This ambivalence raises not only from Mae's internal conflicts but also from social pressures and patriarchal structures that shape how she senses and understands her own body.

Furthermore, the novel portrays the female body as a site upon which actions are imposed, often overriding Mae's emotional state and sense of bodily autonomy, particularly in moments where her body becomes subject to observation and control. This persistent exposure creates a sense of vulnerability, even in ordinary situations, showing that her body is never entirely free from scrutiny. At the same time, Mae's responses to these experiences are not fixed; while she initially expresses fear and discomfort, she also attempts to reinterpret and rationalize these situations, at times seeing herself through the perspective that objectifies her. These shifting responses highlight how ambivalence emerges as an ongoing process, shaped by both internal conflict and external pressures that influence how she senses and understand her own body. These findings indicate that *Jatisaba* does not portray the female body merely as a victim, but also as a subject continuously attempting to reinterpret these experiences, even when the outcomes are often contradictory.

This study is limited by its focus on a single character in a single work. Future research may compare the representation of bodily ambivalence in other novels or integrate interdisciplinary approaches to further understand how women's voices are shaped through embodied experiences within the broader landscape of Indonesian literature.

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