
THE BODY AND VOICE OF CHINESE WOMEN IN YUSIANA BASUKI'S NOVEL *NAGA KUNING*: A POSTMODERN FEMINIST HELENE CIXOUS

Irma Satriani^{1*}

irma.satriani@unm.ac.id

Rizki Herdiani²

rizki.herdiani@unm.ac.id

Anita Candra Dewi³

anitacandradewi@unm.ac.id

Sakinah Fitri⁴

sakinah.fitri@unm.ac.id

Fakultas Bahasa dan Sastra, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Kota Makassar, Indonesia^{1,2,3,4}

Abstract

This study aims to analyse the representation of the body, trauma, and voice of Chinese women in Yusiana Basuki's novel *Naga Kuning* using Helene Cixous' postmodern feminist theory. Set against the backdrop of the May 1998 riots, this novel narrates women's bodies as spaces of historical wounds and sources of symbolic resistance. Through Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine*, the writing of women's bodies is a strategy of resistance against patriarchal language. This study applies qualitative descriptive methods with close reading to analyse symbols, bodily metaphors, and linguistic rhythms that describe women's experiences as subjects who write themselves. The results show that the body in *Naga Kuning* represents the trauma of sexual violence and ethnic Chinese, as well as the local transformation from an object of power to a powerful subject through writing the body. The poetic, fragmentary, and emotional language in this novel reflects the practice of *écriture féminine*, which liberates women's voices from phallogocentric hegemony. This novel presents the female body as an aesthetic and political space for healing, memory, and post-traumatic identity formation.

Keyword : *body, feminine writing, Chinese women, Helene Cixous, postmodern feminism, trauma,*

Introduction

Literary works become a space that represents life and ideology, as well as negotiated human experiences. Through literary works, women are no longer merely objects of narrative, but subjects who interpret and rewrite their own reality. It is in this context that feminist theory emerges as a social critique and an approach to dismantling the structures of language and power that are often present in marginalised conditions, whether patriarchal, political, or socio-cultural. Feminism positions texts as a field of resistance against patriarchy as well as a means for women to express their bodies, desires, and identities autonomously. Feminism exists to read women's writings, writings, and negotiations of their existence through language and representation.

According to Humm (2022), literary feminism is a critical effort to interpret, assess, and rewrite the history and experiences of women that have been erased from the literary canon. Meanwhile, according to Showalter (1985) in *The New Feminist Criticism*, there are three phases of feminist criticism, namely the phase of male literary feminism (gynocritics), the phase of representational criticism, and the phase of women's self-writing. It is this last phase that gave birth to theories such as *écriture féminine*, which emphasises the importance of women writing their own bodies and saying the unspeakable in patriarchal language.

According to Cixous (1975), postmodern feminism plays a role in rejecting biological essentialism and replacing it with the aesthetics of body writing. In her essay entitled *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous calls for women to write themselves (women must write themselves and must write about women and bring women to writing). According to Cixous, language that has been constructed by a phallogentric system must be broken down through the body, rhythm, and sensual experiences of women. She calls this *écriture féminine*, a practice of writing that originates from women's bodies, desires, wounds, and *jouissance*.

In the Indonesian context, Cixous' theory is particularly relevant for reading works that reveal the experiences of women from groups that are doubly marginalised due to

gender and ethnicity. One literary work that narrates this is the novel *Naga Kuning* (2011) by Yusian Basuki. Set against the backdrop of the May 1998 riots, this novel depicts violence against Chinese women in physical, sexual and psychological forms. The main character, Lily Kho, becomes a symbol of women whose bodies are politicised and treated as representations of power. However, through a process of trauma and reflection, she begins to find her own voice and subjectivity.

The bodies of Chinese women as a locus of trauma have been the subject of several studies in Indonesia. For example, Suryakusuma (2011) mentions that the honour of the nation must be protected by men, while the bodies of Chinese women become a symbolic field of violence against others. Within this framework, Yusiana Basuki's novel *Naga Kuning* is an attempt at writing the wound through the body, as proposed by Cixous, who argues that writing the body means writing from the same place of pain and pleasure.

Several studies relevant to this research include Wulandari (2018) in her article 'Trauma Sosial Perempuan Tionghoa dalam Novel *Naga Kuning* Karya Yusiana Basuki' (The Social Trauma of Chinese Women in Yusiana Basuki's Novel *Naga Kuning*), which analyses aspects of trauma but does not highlight the function of body language and self-writing as a space for resistance. Furthermore, Anggaraini (2020) in her research discusses the novel *Naga Kuning* with a sociological approach to literature, but does not delve into postmodernism and the deconstruction of patriarchal language. Meanwhile, Suardana (2021) researched the representation of sexual violence against women in Indonesian literature after 1998, analysing the novel *Naga Kuning* as one of the works studied. However, it is only used as illustrative data without an in-depth analysis of female narrative language. Therefore, there has been no research that specifically discusses Helene Cixous' postmodern feminist theoretical framework, particularly *écriture féminine*, in analysing the novel *Naga Kuning* with a focus on the voices of Chinese women as subjects who write about themselves through their bodies and trauma.

This research is urgent because it offers a new perspective on the narrative of Chinese women's voices and bodies by shifting the focus from mere social representation to the aesthetics

of language and self-writing. Through Cixous' theory, the body is no longer seen as a victim or object of violence, but as a productive symbolic space and a space for women to reclaim their narrative authority. Furthermore, the application of Cixous' postmodern feminist theory in the context of Indonesian literature is still very rare. Generally, feminist studies in Indonesia are centred on the ideas of Beauvoir, Kristeva, or liberal and existential perspectives. Therefore, this research has a contribution in expanding the horizons of Indonesian feminist literary criticism towards a more performative and poststructural deconstruction of language and the body.

Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with the formal object of Cixous' postmodern feminism. The qualitative approach aims to measure and test hypotheses in interpreting symbolic meanings, bodily experiences, and language constructions of women in literary works. The primary data sources in this study are the novel *Naga Kuning* by Yusiana Basuki (2011) and secondary data in the form of books and scientific articles on postmodern feminist theory, particularly Cixous. Data collection techniques were carried out through library research, first by intensive reading of the novel *Naga Kuning* by Yusiana Basuki. Second, recording and classifying data in the form of quotations, dialogues, monologues, body descriptions, and language styles that reflect women's experiences. Third, identifying symbols and metaphors of the body and fourth, compiling secondary data from books, journals, and articles related to Cixous' feminism to strengthen the analytical framework. The data analysis technique was analytical and interpretative, analysing symbolic and narrative meanings using the principles of *écriture féminine*, namely reducing data in the form of discourse relevant to women's voices and bodies; categorising themes in the form of body representation, feminine language and writing style, and the process of discovering women's voices; theoretically analysing *écriture féminine*, writing the body, and the Laugh of the Medusa; contextualising the socio-historical background of the events of May 1998 and the position of Chinese women in the structure of Indonesian literature; and drawing conclusions by formulating key

findings related to the function of the body and language in building women's self-awareness as subjects who write themselves.

Discussion

In Yusiana Basuki's novel *Naga Kuning* (Yellow Dragon), the bodies of Chinese women are narrated not merely as objects of violence, but as ideological battlegrounds where history and power clash. The main character, Lily Kho, experiences sexual violence during the May 1998 riots. Her wounds are not only physical, but also psychological and social. Lily's body becomes a symbol of the collective wounds of Chinese women who have been raped, humiliated, and erased by a patriarchal society.

He pulls Lily into his arms and kisses her forcefully. Lily tries to fight him off, but this only angers him further. He slaps Lily in the face and pushes her to the front of the line. Lily hears Asrul begging them to let her go, but to no avail (Basuki, 2011: 19).

This excerpt describes how Lily's body was taken away from her authority through acts of coercion, ranging from forced hugs and kisses to slaps and being pushed in public. In Cixous' postmodern perspective, this violence shows that women's bodies are constructed as objects of domination because they have no power over themselves. Lily's resistance only provoked the perpetrator's anger and signified that the patriarchal system punishes all forms of resistance and makes silence a result of coercion, not choice. When she was pushed to the front row, her body was displayed as an object of humiliation, showing that patriarchal control is not only physical but also symbolic through humiliation and insecurity. The excerpt also narrates that it was Asrul's voice that pleaded for Lily to be released, but to no avail. This confirms that in a situation of absolute power, even the voice of a man is unable to restore a woman's agency, while Lily herself remains voiceless.

Lily tries to get up, but two men grab her and tear her clothes. The two men tie her hands to the bed with torn cloth. One of the men shoved his penis into Lily's mouth. Two other men held her legs and held her tightly, preventing her from moving. Another man took off his trousers and raped her (Basuki, 2011: 20).

This excerpt shows the peak of extremely brutal sexual violence, Lily's body completely stripped of control and dignity. In line with Cixous' view, this excerpt shows that women's bodies are not only objectified, but also undergo total dehumanisation, meaning that Lily is no longer treated as a subject with a will of her own, but as an object that the perpetrators can treat as they please. Physical restraint and coercion signify the loss of bodily agency, while the large number of perpetrators emphasises that this violence is not merely individual, but reflects a collective power structure that systematically subjugates women. Lily's silence in the quote reinforces the mechanism of silencing and shows that women's voices are silenced not only through fear, but also through the removal of their ability to moving, speaking, and choosing. Within Cixous's framework, this violence produces what is referred to as bodily memory and trauma embedded not only in memory, but in Lily's physical existence and identity.

In the context of the Chinese ethnicity, Lily's body is at a double point of vulnerability as a woman and a minority, so that the violence reflects the intersection of sexism and racial discrimination. Thus, this excerpt only describes suffering, but it becomes an extreme point that reveals how women's bodies are controlled through violence to erase their voices, identities, and humanity.

Ironically, they had to leave their own country in order to survive. Home should be the best place, but not for Chinese citizens. They did not have a country. Even in Indonesia, their homeland, they were still considered second-class citizens and labelled as descendants. The word meaning non-native, or descendants of another nation, remains attached to them even though they were born in Indonesia, as in the case of Lily (Basuki, 2011: 25).

The above quote emphasises the irony of identity experienced by the Indonesian Chinese community, who live in a land that is legally their country, but are never truly accepted socially. The fact that they had to leave their own country in order to survive shows the paradox that the home that should have provided protection instead became a threatening space. In the context of postmodern feminism, Cixous in particular assumes

that this loss of belonging creates a condition of dislocation or loss of identity because the subject lives in a space without certainty of meaning and without a place to say 'I'. Labels such as 'descendant' or 'non-native' function as discursive mechanisms that silence, because language is used not only to name, but also to exclude and mark social positions as 'the other.' For Lily, her status as a second-class citizen is not only a social stigma, but also results in symbolic wounds that affect the way she views her body, voice, and existence. Thus, the quote reveals that Chinese identity is not formed by choice, but by structural rejection that forces them to live in irony, namely being born in Indonesia but considered foreign. It is this situation that shapes the psychological and cultural background of Lily's experience as a woman who is vulnerable not only because of her gender but also her ethnicity.

'She was raped repeatedly. There were bruises on her breasts and vagina. She was traumatised. Since arriving at the hospital, she has refused to speak and screams every time someone approaches her. Some rape victims do react like this,' said Dr Siddarta. (Basuki, 2011: 55).

This quote shows that Lily's body has become an archive of violence through the physical injuries mentioned medically, such as bruises on her breasts and vagina. In Cixous' postmodern feminist perspective, the body is no longer just a biological part, but a text that records trauma since violence is embedded and speaks without words. The doctor's explanation that Lily refuses to speak and screams whenever someone approaches her shows that she is no longer able to connect her experiences with language. This silence is the unspeakable according to Cixous' idea. This is associated with the state of experience being too traumatic to be narrated.

She wrapped her arms around him, hugging Pratomo tightly. Suddenly her eyes sparkled mischievously and she kissed Pratomo intimately on the lips. Pratomo responded, first gently, then passionately, his heart bursting with glory. Then he kissed Lily's eyes, nose and neck. Lily let her mind wander. She felt relaxed and forgot her surroundings. She allowed Pratomo to touch her. Strangely, this time she was no longer afraid, but even felt comfortable (Basuki, 2011: 271).

This excerpt shows an important phase in Lily's journey of trauma recovery because her intimate relationship with Pratomo was no longer coloured by fear, but began

to open up space for the return of a sense of security and control over her body. Unlike her previous experiences of violence, the touch in this excerpt occurs with consent, as it is marked by hugs, returned kisses, and Lily's willingness to let it happen and feel comfortable. From the perspective of Cixous' postmodern feminism, this moment marks the reclaiming of the body, as the body that was previously a site of trauma gradually transforms into a site of pleasure, intimacy, and subjectivity. The touch, which begins gently and then becomes passionate, also shows the transformation of Lily's relationship from a passive object who is forced to participate to a subject who participates in the sexual experience without fear.

In Cixous' framework, the comfort that Basuki narrates in the above excerpt reflects *écriture féminine*, namely women feeling and hearing their own bodies without domination or guilt. Thus, this excerpt does not merely describe intimacy, but rather the experience of the body returning to its owner and opening up the possibility for a new identity that is no longer defined by wounds.

Conclusion

Yusiana Basuki's novel *Naga Kuning* proves that literary works can become a space for women to speak from their deepest wounds and rewrite them as strength. Through the character of Lily Kho, Basuki presents the Chinese female body not merely as a victim of history, but as a subject who processes her trauma into a narrative of resistance. Within the framework of Cixous' postmodern feminism, the body that has been silenced by patriarchy becomes a source of new language, a language that flows from women's experiences, desires, and awareness of themselves. The findings of this study show that *écriture féminine* in the novel *Naga Kuning* is evident in the poetic, rhythmic, and emotional style of language. It is also evident in the fragmentary yet lively narrative structure and in the courage of female characters to write about themselves beyond the boundaries imposed by patriarchal culture. Basuki writes about the body not as a moral burden, but as a spiritual and aesthetic space that marks women's courage to live after trauma. Thus, the novel *Naga Kuning* is not merely a record of ethnic and gender

violence, but also a form of postmodern Indonesian women's literature that refuses to be silent and submissive, choosing instead to write about the body as a language of liberation and resistance. This novel affirms that writing is the highest form of resistance and that the female body is a text that must always be read with empathy, awareness, and justice.

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