

The value of women's body signs in Maman Suherman's novels *Re dan Perempuan*: A postmodernist study

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze and discover the value of body signs in Maman Suherman's novels titled "Re dan Perempuan (2021)" through a postmodernism lens. This qualitative research aims to describe the meaning behind the meaning, as a phenomenon regarding the value of women's body signs in Maman Suherman's novels based on Jean Baudrillard's postmodernism theory. The results show the depiction of sexual behavior as a phenomenon in urban society. This behavior is part of the libido system where individuals engage in passive, weak, and powerless activities, even towards their own bodies. Essentially, in the postmodernism era, the value of these body signs is the forms of bodies driven by subjects, whether capitalism or patriarchy, that have rooted in certain societies.

Keywords: *women's body signs, gender consumerism, Indonesian literature, postmodernism*

INTRODUCTION

The system of seduction by Baudrillard is a working system when the commodity process is carried out. Baudrillard (1979) argues that the power of the body, particularly the female body in capitalist society, lies in its seductive power, which is the ability to freely exploit its own signs to produce attraction and allure. The world of seduction is a world of playful challenges, duel strategies, and performances, where the body and the exploitation of its values play a central role. The system of capitalist seduction relies on the appearance of the body. It celebrates the play of signs from the masks of the visual body not only as commodities, but also as meta-commodities used to sell other commodities.

Modernism, feminism, consumption, art, politics, cultures, cultural history, and postmodernism are a series of themes that are critical objects of Jean Baudrillard's study to understand the female body in relation to capitalist society. An intriguing aspect in Baudrillard's stories is when a prostitute woman sells her body and allure to those who are "excluded" and considered incapable of becoming anything but foolish

sheep. Objects of consumption should not be understood as responses to certain needs or issues but as a network of signifiers developing the unlimited ability to arouse desires. In his work *On Seduction*, Baudrillard discusses theories rejecting the surface appearance of everything, emphasizing hidden structures or essences.

The idea of postmodernism first appeared in the Latin world in the 1930s. This was the original generation before postmodernism emerged in England or America. Federico de Onis highlighted the term postmodernism to describe a conservative reflux within modernism. This reflux was seeking an escape from the heavy lyrical challenge, detailed perfectionism, and ironic (and dead) humor. The most original feature of this idea was authentic expressions, which gave opportunities to women. Introduced by De Onis, the concept of the "postmodern" style entered the Latin critical vocabulary. Subsequently, 15 years later, Toynbee's 1954 publication named it the postmodern era (Anderson, 2008: 4).

This term was then widely used in artistic, intellectual, and academic fields. By its users, the term spread on a broader scale nationally and internationally to increase its exchange usage. Postmodernism covers a very wide range of fields. One such field is literary theory. Many literary theorists, particularly fiction theorists, have attempted to construct postmodernism. Names like Lodge, McHale, and Hutcheon are among those mentioned (Pujiharto, 2010: 40).

Pujiharto (2010) continues explaining the states of postmodernisms among those theorists. For McHale, postmodernism in fiction indicates the emergence of a dominant ontological nature as a substitute/reaction to the dominant epistemological nature in modern fiction. With a similar understanding, what occurs is a change, while for Hutcheon, postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, something that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts.

On the other hand, Baudrillard bases his thoughts on the transition from modernity to postmodernism. He writes about a world constructed from models or simulacra, consisting of three stages. The first stage of early modernity is the period from the Renaissance to the beginning of the industrial revolution. The second stage, modernity, is the revival of the industrial revolution, marking the beginning of the second stage of simulacrum, the bourgeois era, the era of industrial production victory. The third stage, postmodernism, is the model stage. In the current system formed after World War II, the theoretical foundation of power systems has shifted from Marxist political economy to structuralist semiology. What Marx viewed as non-essential capital like advertising, media, information, and communication networks became essential parts. Baudrillard's point is that we live in a world where everything we have is a simulation; nothing is real outside that simulation, nothing original can be replicated. Postmodernism is an unreal world, a mimicry world, and the world is merely a simulation (Sarup, 2003: 289-290; Faradita & Kusuma, 2021).

This study examines the critiques of gender consumerism presented in Maman Suherman's novel, *Re dan Perempuan* (2021). The novel is a continuing episode of the previous novel, *Perempuan* (2016). Those two novels have a woman main character named Re. The novel tells the story of a man named Herman who meets Re or Rere. She is the research subject for Herman's bachelor thesis. Re, a woman who was forced to become a lesbian prostitute to survive, meets Herman, which forces him to become more involved in the world of prostitution. Initially, Re was just an object of Herman's research, but she became a part of his life story, and he even witnessed her tragic death.

Later in the story, twenty-six years after Re's death, Herman is no longer dealing with Re but with Menur, Re's child, who was entrusted to a married couple. Re died when Menur was only five years old, and Menur always knew Re as a kind aunt. It was usually Herman who delivered the items to Menur, so it's no wonder Menur was also close to Herman. Now, the now-adult Menur starts asking Herman about Re. She wants to know if Re, whom she knew as her aunt, is actually her biological mother. Moreover, Menur wants to know the real cause of Re's death because she never believed the explanation Herman gave her when she was little.

Maman Suherman's novels are characterized by his vivid portrayal of contemporary urban life and the complex social issues that accompany it. His works often delve into the struggles and resilience of his characters, particularly women, in a patriarchal society. By exploring multifaceted issues of identity, exploitation, and empowerment, Suherman's novels become an interesting object to explore gender consumerism of postmodernity in current Indonesian literature.

METHOD

This study is qualitative, explaining phenomena and presenting qualitative data. The research design used is descriptive. The research data is obtained by reading and quoting parts that describe women's bodies in capitalist society in Maman Suherman's novel based on Jean Baudrillard's postmodernism theory. Baudrillard's postmodernism theory becomes central in this study. Exploring gender consumerism through the system of seduction grounds the analysis of this study. This includes several main points: (1) seduction as a system; (2) commodification of body; (3) exploitation of gendered signs; (4) capitalist strategy; and (5) simulation and hyperreality. In the end, this study aims to provide a perspective of gender consumerism as stated by Baudrillard in Indonesian contemporary novels, in two Maman Suherman's novel: *Re dan Perempuan* (2021).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the postmodernism era, the value of body signs is the utility value of the body in humans, often becoming a selling value or commodity, according to Baudrillard (Piliang 2004:69-88). This can be seen through the three aspects encompassing (1) body appearance, (2) manner, and (3) body sign. These three aspects emphasize the value of women's bodies exploited within the capitalist system, both by themselves and by society. According to Jean Baudrillard, the female body, with all its potential libido and symbolic value, is used as currency in a process of capitalist exchange, through the value of the signs it can offer. The signs represented by those three aspects can portray how an exchange occurs in the capitalism of women's bodies.

Body Appearance

Body appearance is the significant aspect which signifies an exchange in women's bodies as well as the relationship of women's body signs. This aspect is usually portrayed in women aged between 18-35 years, who visually have relatively high sexual value. Although there is a growing tendency to also portray older women with the concept of 'old is sexual.' Sex appeal is another element often used as a strength of attractiveness in appearance. Additionally, a sexy, slim, tall body shape is capital in creating the meaning of sexuality. The following are quotes on body appearance from female characters in the novels:

1. "Rere tidak lahir dari rahim seorang pelaku kejahatan. Tak diwariskan gen criminal. **Paras wajahnya, pun mirip dengan sejumlah artis peraih piala Citra atau Panasonic Global Awards, yang dengan anggunnya, bak merak yang memamerkan bulu-bulu indahnyanya, berjalan tegak** menuju panggung untuk meraih puji-puji sekelilingnya, serbuan blitz pewarta foto, juga hujan Cahaya yang membuat panggung begitu mempesona." (Suherman, 2021:236).

Translation: "Rere was not born from the womb of a criminal. She did not inherit criminal genes. **Her face resembled several actresses who won Citra or Panasonic Globe Awards, gracefully like a peacock showing off its beautiful feathers, walking tall** towards the stage to receive the surrounding praises, the blitz of photographers and the rain of lights making the stage so captivating."

2. "Re mengeluarkan dompet dari tasnya yang dipenuhi **peralatan make up, parfum, obat kumur**. Ia kemudian menghitung tip yang didapatnya. "Wah, gede banget. Lima ratus ribu," ujar Re,

“ini untuk kamu yah,” lanjut Re sambil memasukkan beberapa lembar ke saku bajuku.” (Suherman, 2021:81).

Translation: "Re took out her wallet from her bag **filled with makeup tools, perfume, and mouthwash**. She then counted the tips she received. 'Wow, it's a lot. Five hundred thousand,' said Re. 'This is for you,' continued Re, putting some bills into my shirt pocket."

3. “Tapi, Rere mengalami nasib yang terpuruk karena jebakan mafia prostitusi **bertopeng wajah malaikat**, sehingga diberi stigma, cap hitam sebagai sampah Masyarakat layaknya para bromocorah. Dan, Rere yang di keningnya yang begitu mulus dan ditimpa alis yang begitu rapi alami, diberi tujuh huruf membentuk kata: P.E.L.A.C.U.R.” (Suherman, 2021: 98).

Translation: "But Rere experienced a downfall due to the traps of a prostitution mafia **disguised as an angel**, giving her the black stigma as societal trash like criminals. And Rere, with her smooth forehead and naturally neat eyebrows, was labeled with seven letters forming the word: P.R.O.S.T.I.T.U.T.E."

These quotes explain the character Re as a prostitute with a beautiful appearance like an actress: "Her face resembled several actresses who won Citra Awards." Re is a young woman with charm, attracting attention whenever she walks. She has a smooth forehead and naturally neat eyebrows, as described in: "Rere, with her smooth forehead and naturally neat eyebrows." The quote "Re took out her wallet from her bag filled with makeup tools, perfume, and mouthwash" also indicates that Re uses and always carries makeup tools, perfume, and mouthwash to enhance her body appearance to remain beautiful and captivating.

Manner

Manner is another aspect that determines the relation of body signs (body sign), seen from body expressions with various styles and tendencies; from poses with various variations such as challenging, showing off, seducing, inviting, ecstatic, showing passion, etc.; from clothing with various styles, sizes, and meanings that can show the social position of the body in society. The following are quotes that show the tendency of manner as a women's body signs depicted in the novel:

1. “**Paling tidak malam ini aku mendapat istilah baru: “suami-suamian”, Dalam bahasa Re yang berdarah Sunda, “Awet rajet.” Dari luar terlihat awet rukun.** Di dalam, compang-camping. Istilah yang kelak makin sering kutemui Ketika melihat perempuan kaya bersenda gurau, berciuman di *coffee shop* mewah,

dengan lelaki yang bukan suaminya, lalu masuk ke kamar hotel berdua.” (Suherman, 2021: 107).

Translation: “**At least tonight I got a new term: 'suami-suamian (pretending husband).'** In Re's Sundanese language, '*Awet rajet*.' **Outwardly it looks harmonious.** Inside it's shabby. A term I would encounter more often when I saw rich women joking and kissing in luxury coffee shops with men who were not their husbands, then entering hotel rooms together.”

2. “Mungkin karena sudah berada dalam pengaruh minuman keras atau dorongan syahwat tak tertahan, Pak dosen tidak mengenalku. Perempuan yang digandengnya malah sempat menyapaku, “naik dulu ya, Bang. “*Maksudnya jelas, mereka mau 'ngamar'. Di lantai atas diskotik itu memang tersedia kamar hotel-hotel yang bisa disewa.*” (Suherman, 2021: 25).

Translation: "Maybe because he was already under the influence of alcohol or uncontrollable lust, the lecturer did not recognize me. The woman he was holding even greeted me, 'Going up first, bro.' **The meaning was clear, they wanted to 'book a room.'** Upstairs, the clubs had hotel rooms that could be rented.”

3. “Tapi jangan salah, meski bertarif lumayan tinggi, kamar di sana hampir selalu penuh, bahkan harus antri. **Para lelaki yang sedang nafsu tinggi itu biasanya menunggu dengan tidak sabar di coffee shop. Begitu pelayan hotel muncul, nyaris serentak mereka melongokkan** kepala berharap Namanya dipanggil. Mereka pun naik satu-persatu tanpa malu-malu.” (Suherman, 2021: 25).

Translation: "But don't get it wrong, even though the rates are quite high, the rooms there are almost always full, even having a queue. **The men with high lust usually wait impatiently in the coffee shop. When the hotel staff appeared, they almost simultaneously craned their heads** hoping their names were called. They went up one by one without shame.”

Body signs can be observed from various body expressions with various styles and tendencies. In the quote: “At least tonight I got a new term: 'suami-suamian (pretending husband).' In Re's Sundanese language, '*Awet rajet*,'” shows sexual expressions and tendencies. This is also shown in the quote: “The meaning was clear, they wanted to 'book a room'. Upstairs, the clubs had hotel rooms that could be rented.” Those portray how men express their sexual desires to women's bodies as a commodities exchange which becomes a manner in an urban society. This manner is part of the libido system as described in the quote: "The men with high lust usually wait impatiently in the coffee shop" which drives the capitalism of women's bodies.

Body Activities

Body activities can become markers for its social position in the media and literature. Among these activities is “touch”. According to Baudrillard, “touch” can signify whether a body is passive, active, weak, powerful, and other signifiers. In Baudrillard’s view, touch is not just a physical act but a deeply symbolic one. The act of touching and being touched carries layers of meaning that go beyond the immediate physical sensation. It is a form of communication that can signify intimacy, power, vulnerability, or control. For example, woman's hand covering her chest shows shame constructed in the society, or a woman stroking her own body indicates narcissism. Specifically, in Indonesian social contexts, the context of the novel discussed in this study, women’s touch is very limited according to the society’s norms. Therefore, if a woman showcasing her body’s sexuality, it shows a tendency towards vulgarity and exhibitionism. Body activities can signify for its social position in the media and literature. Here are the quotes which portray women’s touch which signifies an exchange in women’s bodies as well as the relationship of women’s body signs:

1. “Selain dengan Pak Guru, Re juga menjalin cinta monyet dengan teman sekelasnya, anak bupati di kampung halamannya. Tak cuma berkirim surat dan nonton bioskop Bersama, Re dan teman sekelasnya ini juga berciuman dan melakukan petting. **“Grepe-grepean seperti film bokep yang kami tonton bersama teman-teman di kamar dia, usai belajar bersama,” Re mengaku.**” (Suherman, 2021: 69)

Translation: "Besides with the teacher, Re also had a puppy love with a classmate, the son of the village head. Not only exchanging letters and watching movies together, but Re and this classmate also kissed and petted. **'Groping like the porn films we watched together in the room after studying together,' admitted Re.**"

2. “Hingga akhirnya Re hamil, ia tak pernah mau bercerita siapa di antara keduanya, mantan guru les atau si anak bupati, yang merenggut keperawanan dan membuatnya hamil, **“pokoknya, dua-duanya pernah main sama gue” jawab Re dengan nada sebal saat aku menanyakannya.**” (Suherman, 2021: 89)

Translation: "Until finally Re got pregnant, she never wanted to tell who between the former tutor or the village head's son deflowered her and made her pregnant. **'Anyway, both played with me,' answered Re angrily when I asked.**"

3. “Sinta pernah bilang sama gue, kalau terus-terusan cuma jadi lonte, sampai mati pun akan jadi lonte. Kita harus berhenti. Tapi mau kerja apa? kerja jadi orang baik-baik? Emangnya bisa? Kalaupun bisa, emangnya orang lain mau terima lonte? Bekas lonte? Lirih Re dengan mata berkaca-kaca.” (Suherman, 2021: 34).

Translation: "Sinta once told me if you keep being a prostitute, you'll always be a prostitute until you die. We have to stop. But what job? Working as a decent person? Can we? Even if we can, would others accept a prostitute? A former prostitute?" whispered Re with teary eyes."

Re's activities initially involved touch, showing her body as more active in her youth. As described in the quotes: "Re and this classmate also kissed and petted. 'Groping like the porn films we watched together in the room after studying together'," and "'Anyway, both played with me,' answered Re angrily when I asked." Due to these active activities, Re got pregnant and left her hometown. Eventually, she met Lani who trapped her into prostitution as described in "Sinta once told me if you keep being a prostitute, you'll always be a prostitute until you die. We have to stop. But what job?" These Re's touches show a relation of gender consumerism as a sexual servant. She engaged in passive, weak, and powerless activities, even towards her own body, allowing herself to become a sexual servant, deceived by patriarchal lust.

CONCLUSION

In the era of postmodernism, the value of body signs is the utility value of the human body, which often becomes a selling point or commodity. The body is crafted and polished to appear attractive and suitable for commodification. Women, as depicted in the novels, are portrayed as objects that are manipulated and treated like luxury goods. The aspects including (1) body appearance, (2) manner, and (3) body activities, are key elements that create various body signs exploited by commodities in various capitalistic media. The body is polished to look more attractive, through makeup and similar enhancements, making it "sellable." Methods of exposing the body as a dominant public spectacle involve intruding and colonizing what has traditionally been considered the private domain within a culture.

The novel illustrates how women's bodies, in particular, are subjected to this commodification. They are portrayed in ways that highlight their sexual appeal and physical attractiveness, aligning with societal expectations and commercial interests. For example, Re puts effort into showcasing the sexual parts of her body to attract men who can pay for her services. Even Re's friends, who are also women, influence her to commodify her body to earn money. This portrayal underscores the idea that in a postmodern capitalist society, the body is not just a personal entity but a public spectacle. Women also encourage other women to become exhibitionists to attract money, as seen in how Re is introduced to prostitution by her female friends, and how her female friends lend her makeup and perfume. This portrayal of gender consumerism can also be driven by women and directed at women. Through the women characters in Maman Suherman's novels, it highlights the pervasive influence

of commercial interests in shaping societal norms and personal identities. It reveals the complex interplay between body, commodification, and cultural dynamics in postmodern capitalist society.

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