

Representation of Beauty in Ayu Utami's Novels: Wolfian's Beauty Myth Perspective

Yasnur Asri^{1,*}, Yenni Hayati¹, Nesa Riska Pangesti¹

¹Indonesian Education and Literature Department, FBS Universitas Negeri Padang, Padang, Sumatra Barat 25131, Indonesia

*Corresponding author. Email: yasnurasri5@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper aimed to uncover the myths of beauty that are portrayed by female writers in her works. The novel that was used as the object of this research is Ayu Utami's *Maya* and *Lalita*. The method applied to analyze these novels is descriptive-qualitative method. The qualitative data used in this study came from the novel *Lalita* and *Maya* by Ayu Utami. Texts containing the issue of beauty myths are exposed using the view of beauty myths developed by Naomi Wolf. The results obtained from this study include: First, the beauty standards represented in the novel *Lalita* and *Maya* are the standards of beauty for women in Indonesia such as slim body, dark hair and soft, and olive skin color typical of Indonesian women. In addition, there is a contestation between the physical beauty and behavior of the female characters in each novel. Second, there are two factors that construct the myth of female beauty in *Lalita* and *Maya* novels namely, capitalist industry and patriarchal institutions. In the two novels analyzed, it shows the influence of capitalist industry and patriarchal institutions in shaping the myth of female beauty.

Keywords: Beauty myth, standard of beauty, contestation between women, Ayu Utami

1. INTRODUCTION

Beauty appears to be matter that is commonly discussed as a problem in contemporary literary works. Regardless of whether the issue becomes the main issue or a minor issue. In various Indonesian novels, beauty often represents the mainstream of beauty standards that apply in society. The presence of this beauty issue shows there is a contestation between women in literary works of literature. In addition, in gender discourse, beauty is continually associated with the capitalist industry and patriarchal institutions that also construct the myth of beauty^[1].

The Wolfian view from first world women pointing out the myth of beauty induces women afraid to look old, and women are afraid of increasing age which is natural for every human being. This is inseparable from the influence of a patriarchal culture that always wants women as a young, durable and fresh commodity. As for the capitalist industry which dictates beauty so it is directed to certain standards as discussed by Wolf about women in the West^[2].

Quite a number of literary works written by Indonesian women also represent beauty issues. For example, Ayu Utami's novel *Lalita* and *Maya* raises beauty as one of the issues discussed. Lalita tells of the journey of a young woman named Marja who was entrusted by her lover, Sandi Yudha, to her friend named Parang Jati. In Lalita novel, Marja travels to temples in the East Java area, while Sandi Yudha completes his work in Jakarta. Then Sandi

Yudha met a woman who always looked neat and was equipped with thick makeup named Lalita.

Meanwhile, *Maya* novel tells the journey of a woman named Yasmin in search of answers to the whereabouts of her past lover named Saman or Wisanggeni. Yasmin comes to a hermitage owned by a spiritual teacher, Suhubudi, who controls ugly creatures to find out where is his lover. In this novel, the character Yasmin is described as a woman with a perfect physical form such as long legs, thick black hair, and so forth.

Since publishing *Saman*, Ayu Utami has always been associated with feminist issues. In addition to Ayu Utami being very interesting to read, her novels are always predicted to raise physical issues and women's freedom. *Lalita* and *Maya* do tell a lot about Indonesian history, but they also raise other issues that are considered important enough to be studied further, such as beauty. These two novels both investigate the issue of female beauty and represents women's beauty with Indonesian standards. The definition of beauty is not inherently rigid, static, and immutable. In fact, beauty and beautyiness are dynamic, always changing from time to time, and differ from one place to another and do not have a strict standard^[3]. However, there are things that make beauty something that must follow certain standards, such as the mass media, capitalist industry, do not miss patriarchal institutions. In Indonesia, the stereotype for a (woman) beautiful is that of long black hair, fair skin, tall and slender body, and a symmetrical face^{[3][4]}.

However, it should also be remembered that basically the physical characteristics of Indonesian women are ‘sawo matang’ (brown skin) with a body that is not too tall. So, the beauty standards mentioned above do not match the prototypes of most women in Indonesia. The root of the view on beauty above comes from the capitalist-patriarchal society [5]. Here, the patriarchal ideology and the economic system of capitalism seem to unite to oppress at the same time using women as a marginalized object. This kind of mechanism is what makes the myth of beauty always shackle women through such a systematic way that dominates every corner of women's life. In the end, this situation forces women that to result in the myth of beauty according to society is an absolute thing [2].

This paper is the result of research that discusses the myths of beauty in the works of Indonesian female writers, which in this manuscript is limited to two novels by Ayu Utami, namely *Lalita* and *Maya*. The problems that discussed in this paper include, first, the beauty standards used in these novels. Second, seeing the contribution of external factors as determinants of the beauty myth, in this case the beauty industry and patriarchal institutions. Third, a shift in the myth of beauty which refers to the behavior of the characters in *Lalita* and *Maya* novels..

2. METHOD

This research was a descriptive-qualitative study combined with an analytical method approach to written texts related to the myth of female beauty. The qualitative content analysis method was used in this study because it was considered the most comprehensive in revealing literary texts to understand the symbolic and hidden messages contained in the text [6]. These symbolic messages can be identified in the speech of the characters, attitudes, and depictions of characters and narrative in both novels.

The main data source of this research were narrative texts related to beauty and women in two novels written by female writers. These data appear in the form of words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs that contain myths of beauty and resistance to patriarchal culture. The data were analyzed by using feminist theory with a beauty myth approach to see how beauty is explored by Indonesian female writers. The unveiling of the image of beauty in women is conducted by collecting data in the form of words, sentences, paragraph and narrative texts in *Lalita* and *Maya* novels.

The research steps were as follows. First, the data that has been collected is then separated between data that reveals issues of beauty myths. Second, the data were analyzed using feminist theory and Naomi Wolf's perspective about beauty myth. Thus it will be seen how the female writer described women and beauty in her works. In addition, these findings will discover what kind of beauty myths are which is still perpetuated by writers from the point of view of female characters.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

After transcending the second wave of the feminism movement, women have succeeded in obtaining rights that have been fought for before, including the right to politics, to get education, and to leave the domestic area. However, some feminist argue that they have not fully got the freedom they deserve. In fact, modern women still question their prerogative rights, especially focusing their attention on matters related to body and its beauty [2]. This is because women are actually still in the shadow of patriarchy. Walby said that patriarchy has changed and experienced an evolution and migration from the private sphere to the public sphere [7]. One of them is the beauty myth.

In an article, Julian [8] stated that the myth of beauty as a quality of beauty really exists objectively and universally. This matter then creates internal conflict in women. Women start to argue about imperfect appearance, awful makeup, flawed body, matted hair, dull nails, and other trivial matters. Beauvoir calls this phenomenon as narcissism that can drain women's productive time [9] [10]. This objective and universal beauty myth then influences the majority of women to look beautiful. In addition, almost all men dream a beautiful woman as their companion. This pressure ‘to be beautiful’ is only felt by women, because they feel that they want to be owned by men. This is something that is considered natural because it has become a habit and is biological, sexual, and evolutionary in nature [11].

1.3. *The Myth of Women's Beauty Standards*

Beauty myths require certain standards in order to be applied universally. This standard provides boundaries and classifications whether a woman is called beautiful or not. This standard generally refers to the physical appearance of women [12]. Later, beauty is measured by how capable these women are to meet the agreed standards of beauty. In *Lalita* and *Maya* novels, the standard used is the beauty of native Indonesian women.

“She has never sat so close and intimate, together, with a human with long legs. It was strange to see beauty so and so real. The skin was really olive and smooth. Her hair was as thick as palm fiber but soft as satin, so inviting to touch. Her nose is on point. All her teeth are neatly tucked away in her lips; nothing goes off track. Her arms, now learning to hock a hen, and legs to hold them back were slim and perfect. The legs are so long, that even when folded, they are longer than the legs of a dwarf. Like a pandopo pole which is so finely woven and oiled so that your palms must be happy to rub it and your nose will want to sniff. How could a human be created so beautiful?” (Utami, 2013: 69)

The above quote is an inner statement made by Maya towards Yasmin. The focus in this speech is the character Yasmin who is described as tall figure, and equipped with

other fine features such as having thick and soft hair, neat teeth, and beautiful arms. Yasmin is considered to meet all the beauty standards of Indonesian women in general. These standards include smooth and bright-brown skinned, long dense and soft black hair, and slim and tall stature [13]. This beautiful perfection makes other women feel jealous of her beauty. This is evidenced by Maya's admiration for the character Yasmin. This has indirectly led to a beautiful contestation of female characters in Maya novels.

A similar standard of beauty can also be found in Lalita novel. In this novel, there are two female characters who are also contested in terms of appearance. Both women are measured by beauty standards such as beautiful faces and long hair.

"... Her body is very slender, if not skinny... wearing a purple tank top that contrasts with her yellow skin.... Her nails are dyed, blood red at night... her fingers are long and curved... her hair is like silk threads that are ironed and rolled at the ends" (Utami, 2012: 8)

Based on the quote above, women are categorized as a beautiful one when they manage to display a slim, slender, and lean body. This is based on what was first thought of and expressed by the male character (Sandi Yuda) was the shape of the body. This implies that the most important standard for beautiful women is their body shape. Not only that, but this body shape is then followed by a more detailed and specific depiction of the body.

The next depiction of beauty standards in Lalita refers to skin color. The skin color that is said to be beautiful in Lalita novel is 'kuning langsat' or light brown. This standard is different from the beauty standard in the West. The consumer culture in the West constructs beautiful skin as sunburned skin, that is, dark brown skin [1] [2] [3]. This refers to dark skin, sunburn, indicating that these women have the financial stability to take a vacation to a tropical country. According to Western culture as well, pale white skin indicates alienation and an inability to take vacations and leisure activities. The admiration toward the beauty of 'kuning langsat' skin color also appears in Maya novel through the statement "The skin is really olive and smooth". The two novels both agree that the skin that meets the beauty standards of native Indonesian women is 'kuning langsat' or light brown.

Apart from skin color and body shape, the hair issue is also one of the standards of beauty in women [14]. In both novels, women are classified as beautiful when they have thick and soft hair. In Maya novel, this matter is expressed in "*Her hair is as thick as palm fiber but soft as satin*" and in Lalita, it is uttered as "*Her hair is like silk threads that are ironed and rolled at the ends*". These two statements refer to female characters who represent beautiful women. This emphasis on the hair aspect is also reinforced by the paradigm in Indonesian society which considers hair as the crown of women.

Another standard of beauty is something that is actually invisible but can be felt with the sense of smell. In both novels, beautiful women are synonymous with fragrant

and seductive scents. Women's beauty will also increase if the woman uses fragrances. This is recorded in the following quote: "*The woman is now standing in front of him. Her body gave off an expensive soft fragrance.*" This excerpt shows that beautiful women should be able to emit fragrant body scents, both natural and artificial.

In these two novels, not only one female character is highlighted, but there are also two female characters. Both figures seem to be contested directly based on the beauty side by the author. In Lalita novel, Lalita character is compared with a character named Marja, whereas in the Maya novel, Yasmin is contested with Maya. Between Lalita-Marja and Yasmin-Mayta is framed in different criteria of beauty. In general, Lalita and Yasmin are categorized as beautiful which comes from the physical aspect; while the beauty of Marja and Maya comes from their attitudes. This contrast is listed in the following quotations:

"Marja, who was easily attracted, now bites the arm of Parang Jati ... But no one knows if Marja knows: the small pain also raises tension in the young man ..." it is done ... dear ""

"Parangjati looked at the girl, who is always innocent about what she is thinking or feeling. That is one side of Marja which he really likes. There are childish traits in Marja: light, no pretense, no complicated thinking-everything as opposed to Lalita, women whose attractiveness is built up from things that are heavy, sophisticated, planned, prestigious. As heavy and as planned as her make-up." (Utami, 2012: 192).

Based on the quote above, Marja's spoiled and childish attitude actually makes her look attractive and likable. Marja's limited physical depictions such as body shape, skin color and aroma also reinforce this view. Details such as Marja's spoiled, cheerful and innocent attitude, in the end shows a beautiful side of Marja that is different from a physical beauty like Lalita.

3.2. The Contributing Factor of Beauty Myth

The myth of beauty in the world of women does not actually occur naturally, but there are external factors contributing to this construction. The researchers argue that these external factors include industrial capitalism and patriarchal institutions [15]. This is in line with Naomi Wolf's view of the beauty myth that beauty standards are also being built by beauty-related industries such as cosmetic companies, facial surgery service providers, fashion companies, sports and others [2]. In Lalita, the beauty myth that is supported by the capitalism industry can legitimize the status of a woman's beauty.

"This new player drives a maroon colored BMW, wears a tight purple tank top, tiptoes on a 12cm Christian Louboutin stylet, also purple, has a Louis Vuitton bag and covers with extravagant make-up" (Utami, 2012: 24).

A woman completes her appearance with various branded knick-knacks to show an economic class that is different from other women. This means that woman's beauty in this situation is also determined by how expensive the items she wear. All brands of goods from cars, shoes, bags, to the make-up that decorate Lalita's face which explicitly explained by Ayu Utami presumably to emphasize Lalita's beauty and greatness as a perfect woman. This refers to the habit of the capitalist industry (cosmetic companies, fashion companies, etc.) who routinely display perfectly beautiful models when showing off their company's goods. So, it is made a convention that beautiful women are women who wear or buy the products they offer like models in their advertisements^[16].

Brands such as BMW, Christian Louboutin, Louis Vuitton are manufacturers of luxury goods that only those who are financially strong can afford. Established financial women also easily change their faces to be as beautiful and beautiful as they want. These branded goods can also boost a woman's social status, and can even change how people perceive her. Average women will automatically look more beautiful when wearing these expensive items.

"Perhaps the woman is restless and wants to hurry away because she realizes that her lip line has disappeared, revealing pale skin that is no longer wet and shiny so that her face looks changed ... she doesn't want to take off the make-up: plastic eyelashes, contact lenses, lipstick, everything. powder and blush." (Utami, 2012: 34-35)

The capitalist industry also influences women to compete in wearing the latest branded goods and a wide variety of cosmetics. The logic offered is that women are considered more beautiful than others when various kinds of make-up adorn their faces thoroughly^[17] [18]. In the novel, In order to look beautiful, Lalita not only wears powder and blush on her face, but also uses lipstick that covers her original lip line, wears dye and fake lashes on her eyes to make her eyes glower, and wears contact lenses to emphasize her eyes even more. Without makeup, Lalita does not want her face to be seen by others. This means that Lalita does not think she is pretty enough without makeup.

In fact, to buy make-up and facial care items requires a great deal of resources. But most women, like Lalita, never mind that for the sake of her looking beautiful, charming, and can attract the attention of men^[19]. The final goal which is to reach out men's attention then explains that the

construction of beauty myths is indeed heavily influenced by the patriarchal perspective^[20].

"What is a real woman look like?"

Tuyul laughed. "Yeah, a woman with long legs. Not a dwarf like you." (Utami, 2013: 45)

The quote above is a conversation between a Maya character and a character named Tuyul. Both are described as having short stature, or tiny. However, there is a slight paradox in the dialogue. Tuyul constructs the myth of beauty in Maya's mind that real women are long-legged like Yasmin. In fact, he himself is a creature who is also a tiny-size. This means that a woman is no longer considered a woman if she has short legs (midget). However, this criteria does not apply to male figure like Tuyul.

"She is a prima donna. La femme fatale. She really does not like to share. She likes to give, as long as it guarantees her status. However, she must be uncomfortable if people don't look at her. She is very unhappy if the man she likes does not pay full attention to her" (Utami, 2012: 24).

In the next novel, Lalita character is described as a woman who always wants to be the center of men's attention. Therefore, it is also known as la femme fatale which is defined as "deadly woman". Furthermore, this type of woman tends to have an attraction that makes her victim (male) become complacent, attracted, tempted to focus on herself. However, this term tends to have a negative connotation because in some literary works this type of woman is represented in the form of a witch, devil, or vampire who has a sexy body^[21]. This is in line with the description of Lalita character in the novel.

Lalita is described as an ambitious woman who wants to get attention from all parties whether in the form of male admiration or women's jealousy. However, Lalita had to try every way to reach that point, including following the tendency of the patriarchal view of beauty myth. Lalita is like an vicious witch who is willing to do whatever conditions or sacrifices are made for the sake of achieving her personal desires. In this case, the institution of patriarchy has completely controlled and dictated the minds of women (Lalita) even in deciding what is best for themselves.

4. CONCLUSION

In general, two novels written by Ayu Utami, Lalita and Maya, provide lively discussion about the beauty myth. The myth of beauty is an issue that is quite urgent considering that this is a fairly universal and complex issue. In the two novels, the beauty standard shown is the conventional Indonesian beauty. This is reflected in

features such as a slim and tall stature, smooth and bright skin, thick and flowing hair, and a fragrant aroma. The beauty standards shown in these two novels are constructed by factors outside the female body, which in this case is the capitalist industry represented by cosmetic companies and fashion companies. These two industries form an image that a beautiful woman is one who wears heavy make-up, wears bags, shoes and cars from prestigious brands. In addition, patriarchal institutions also shape beauty standards for women in the both novels. Male characters act as appraisers or judges for women's efforts to achieve the beauty standard that they search for. The standard of beauty is only applied to women but never to the situation of male characters.

Thus, the myth of beauty and the factors that construct it are inseparable from one another. Women who do not meet certain standards of beauty myths cannot be categorized as beautiful. However, there are times when this beauty myth can later become a weapon for women. One thing that needs to be considered is whether this beauty myth will become a weapon that kills opponents or actually backfires on fellow women.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was funded by a competitive grant distributed by RISTEK/BRIN and fully supported by LP2M Universitas Negeri Padang.

REFERENCES

- [1]Amin, O. L. G. (2015). Representasi Kecantikan Perempuan pada Iklan Dove Versi "Real Beauty Sketches" di Situs Youtube. Universitas Airlangga: Jurnal, 73.
- [2]Wolf, N. (2013). The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women. Random House.
- [3]Bordo, S. (2004). Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body. Univ of California Press.
- [4]Deliovsky, K. (2008). Normative white femininity: Race, gender and the politics of beauty. Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice, 33(1).
- [5]Saguni, S. S., & Baharman, B. (2016). Narasi tentang mitos kecantikan dan tubuh perempuan dalam sastra Indonesia mutakhir: Studi atas karya-karya cerpenis Indonesia. RETORIKA: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, dan Pengajarannya, 9(2).
- [6]Sugihastuti, S. (1998). Penelitian Kualitatif Sastra Berperspektif Feminis. Jurnal Humaniora, (8).
- [7]Candraningrum, D. (2014). Karier Patriarki. Artikel Online, edisi, 30.
- [8]Julian, R. (2016). Mitos Kecantikan dalam Cerpen-cerpen Dwi Ratih Ramadhany. Jurnal Poetika, 4(1), 52-60.
- [9]Tong, R. P. (1988). Feminist Thought a more comprehensive introduction(sec. ditition).
- [10]De Beauvoir, S. (2010). The second sex. Knopf.
- [11]Butler, J. (1986). Sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex. Yale French Studies, (72), 35-49.
- [12]Melliana, A. (2006). Menjelajah tubuh perempuan dan mitos kecantikan. Yogyakarta: lkis.
- [13]Rahardjo, S., Hagijanto, A. D., & Maer, B. D. A. (2016). Mitos Kecantikan Wanita Indonesia Dalam Iklan Televisi Produk Citra Era Tahun 1980-an, 1990-an Dan 2010-an. Jurnal DKV Adiwarna, 1(8), 14.
- [14]Pratiwi, R. Z. B. (2018). Perempuan dan Kontes Kecantikan. An-Nida: Jurnal Komunikasi Islam, 10(2).
- [15]Yulianto, V. I. (2007). Pesona'barat': analisis kritis-historis tentang kesadaran warna kulit di Indonesia. Jalasutra.
- [16]Saguni, S. S., & Baharman, B. (2016). Narasi tentang mitos kecantikan dan tubuh perempuan dalam sastra Indonesia mutakhir: Studi atas karya-karya cerpenis Indonesia. RETORIKA: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, dan Pengajarannya, 9(2).
- [17]ANUGRAH, A. A. A. (2017). Mitos Kecantikan dalam Cerpen Barbitch dan Lipstik Merah Tua Karya Sagita Suryoputri (Telaah Kritik Sastra Feminisme). Jurnal Humanika, 3(15).
- [18]Rosida, I. (2018). Tubuh Perempuan dalam Budaya Konsumen: Antara Kesenangan Diri, Status Sosial, dan Nilai Patriarki. Jurnal Antropologi: Isu-Isu Sosial Budaya, 20(1), 85-101.
- [19]Juditha, C. (2015). Gender dan seksualitas dalam konstruksi media massa. JURNAL SIMBOLIKA: Research and Learning in Communication Study, 1(1).
- [20]Wardani, E. H. (2009). Belenggu-belenggu patriarki: Sebuah pemikiran feminism psikoanalisis toni morrison dalam the bluest eye (Doctoral dissertation, University of Diponegoro).
- [21]Logan, C. (2011). La femme fatale: the female psychopath in fiction and clinical practice. The Mental Health Review, 16(3), 118.