





Cultural Expectations of the Ideal Western and Indonesian Manliness in Romantic and Family Relationships through Literary Works

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Abstract. This study explores differences in the construction of masculinity between Western and Indonesian cultures as reflected in literary works. This study aims to analyze the comparative representation of male characters within the dynamics of romantic and family relationships in three selected novels: *Best of Me*, which represents Western values (modern Western), and *Nyai Gowok* and *Zakar Celeng*, which represent local patriarchal culture (Javanese/Indonesian). Using a descriptive qualitative research method with a comparative literary approach, the focus of this study is on comparing cross-cultural constructions of masculinity within romantic and family relationships. The research findings reveal sharp cultural differences across the three novels. First, as protectors, Western masculinity is demonstrated through an egalitarian and non-dominating affective presence, whereas Indonesian masculinity is strongly tied to material provision (*sandang, pangan, papan*) and hierarchical authority as expressions of care. Second, regarding relationships with partners, Western male characters prioritize emotional labor—specifically the ability to listen and empathize—in contrast to local culture, which often glorifies stoicism (silence) as a sign of authority or uses emotional subjugation to control women. Third, in the realm of masculinity and inner fulfilment, Western literature places male strength in dedication and affective loyalty without an obsession with physical dominance, while Indonesian literature positions physical strength as the primary expectations that determine a man’s self-worth in private spaces. This study concludes that the portrayal of the modern Western man has shifted significantly toward the paradigm of caring masculinities, which facilitates relational equality, whereas the portrayal of the Indonesian man still grapples with the complexities of demands for hierarchical authority and the burden of proving traditional hegemony.

Keywords: Comparative Literature, Indonesia, Masculinity, Western.

1 Introduction

Discourse on masculinity in the field of literary studies consistently demonstrates that masculinity is not simply an innate biological attribute, but rather a social, cultural, and

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historical construct that is constantly evolving. Literary works serve as a representational medium that critically captures and challenges gender relations and the position of men in society. Nursari et al. [1] explain that the representation of masculinity within narrative texts is no longer measured solely by physical strength, but rather functions as a role and character identity confronted with the pressures of moral responsibility, mental resilience, and psychological endurance. This makes literary texts an ideal space to explore how discourses of masculinity are produced, internalized, and questioned by the subjects within them.

Generally, depictions of masculinity are often still limited by the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which demands that men appear dominant, competitive, and suppress their emotional vulnerability. This patriarchal construct frequently measures a man's success by his ability to hold full authority in both public and private spheres. However, recent studies suggest that this hegemony is potentially destructive. Fokt [2] emphasizes that the myth of hegemonic masculinity frequently normalizes control and legitimizes the subordination of women within a rigid social system. Therefore, deconstructing this myth is essential to challenging the illusion of patriarchal strength, which is, in reality, often fragile and does not produce harmony.

Over time, the ideal image of men has shifted significantly, particularly when viewed through the lens of shifting values in modern Western culture. Contemporary studies are moving away from the glorification of aggression and shifting toward the paradigm of *caring masculinities*. Some research noted that the politics of modern masculinity representation now places greater value on integrating care-oriented values, such as emotional sensitivity, caregiving, empathy, and equality in relationships [2] [3] [4] [5]. In this context, the ideal male figure is no longer defined by his ability to dominate or conquer, but rather by his emotional capacity, willingness to listen, and self-sacrifice for the well-being of his partner.

On the other hand, the construction of the ideal man in Indonesia, specifically within Javanese philosophy and culture, has its own deep-rooted ethical foundations [6] [7] [8]. In Javanese tradition, the ideal man is conceptualized through the values of *satriya* or the figure of *lelananging jagad*. Wijaya and Karkono [6] explain that the relationship between men and women in the Javanese construction of masculinity does not rely on physical aggression, but encompasses functional, emotional, and intellectual dimensions. A man is respected for his ability to provide protection [6] [8], to offer a balanced fulfillment of both physical and emotional needs [7], and for his skill in controlling his desires [9]. A man's true strength lies in his calmness in maintaining relational harmony without degrading the dignity of others.

Discussions regarding what constitutes this ideal man remain an academic priority to this day due to the emergence of the phenomenon of the "crisis of masculinity" in the contemporary era [2] [6]. Men today are often trapped in the ambivalence of expectations; on one hand, they are pressured by social structures to become dominant, hegemonic figures, yet on the other, they face demands for emotional intimacy and role equality within the household [2]. Confusion in navigating these two poles often leads to communication deadlocks, dysfunction in private intimacy, and excessive ego com-

pensation. Re-examining this ideal definition means we are striving to dismantle outdated expectations that psychologically harm men while simultaneously burdening the family institution.

Comparative literary studies that bring together texts rooted in Western and Indonesian cultures offer a rich analytical framework for comprehensively examining the construction of masculinity. The significance of this research lies in its effort to move beyond a singular reading of gender, by positioning masculinity not as a static biological identity, but as a cultural performance shaped by intersecting social expectations. Through this cross-cultural analysis, it is possible to highlight how patriarchal hegemony operates, is reproduced, or is deconstructed within private spheres and family institutions across cultures. This is crucial given that contemporary discourses on gender relations demand a more detailed understanding of the evolution of male roles, which are often caught between the demands of tradition and modernity.

Previous research has mapped the polarization of idealized images of men within the landscape of modern Western culture. Current discourse in the West has shifted massively toward the concept of *caring masculinities*. As examined by Elliott [10] and reinforced by Wojnicka's research [11], Western constructions of masculinity are gradually undoing the walls of patriarchal stoicism, shifting toward male figures who proactively embrace emotional vulnerability, demand equality in caregiving roles, and prioritize affective care. This aligns perfectly with the portrayal of Dawson's character in *Best of Me* [12], who demonstrates strength through empathy without losing his gender authority. Furthermore, the study by Roberts and Prattes [13] confirms that the shifting social landscape in the West has given rise to literary narratives that celebrate men's emotional intelligence as the antithesis of outdated toxic masculinity.

On the other hand, studies on masculinity in Indonesian culture reveal a different philosophical foundation yet bear an equally heavy hierarchical burden. In studies of Javanese patriarchal culture emphasize that male idealism centers on the concept of *lelanang jagad*—a sociocultural construct demanding that men appear physically resilient while simultaneously being fully capable of providing for their families both materially and emotionally [14][15]. However, this cultural hegemony often fails psychologically. In line with the findings of Parker [8], which was also permitted by Clark [9] and Noorrizki *et al* [16], that expectations of absolute authority and physical dominance within Indonesia's patriarchal culture frequently alienate men from their ability to communicate their vulnerability. This phenomenon is satirically and tragically depicted through the dysfunction of the character Tobor in *Mustika Zakar Celeng* [17], while also facing sharp criticism through the exploration of the ethics of desire control in *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa* [18].

Although these five comparative texts have analyzed the dynamics of masculinity specifically within their respective cultural contexts, a significant research gap remains in examining the intersections of men's relational intimacy across cultures. The novelty of this study lies in the juxtaposition of three literary texts, *Best of Me*, *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa*, and *Mustika Zakar Celeng*, which represent contrasting cultural spheres, to be analyzed together within a single central thematic framework: male emotional agency in the private sphere. This study distinguishes itself from previous research trends that tend to repeat the dichotomy between Western and Eastern

values. Instead, this study innovatively examines the common thread that, despite their differing cultural manifestations, men at both extremes struggle with ego denial, the burden of the illusion of masculinity, and the demand to be protectors—a role that often leads to self-sacrifice.

Furthermore, the novelty of this study is reinforced by a theoretical approach that dialectically juxtaposes texts promoting the romantic Western *gentleman* ideal with texts exploring physical repression resulting from local doctrines of masculinity. This clash of representations brings a fresh perspective to the realm of literary criticism, demonstrating that the crisis of physical masculinity and the rise of caring masculinity are not geographically isolated phenomena. Literary works within this analytical framework function not simply as a passive mirror of civilization, but as active discursive sites that capture the universality of male vulnerability behind the mask of patriarchy they wear.

Building on this conceptual significance and novelty, this study is formulated with structured analytical objectives. Generally, this study aims to analyze the comparison of masculinity representations within the dynamics of romantic and family relationships depicted in the three selected novels. Building on this sociocultural foundation, this study aims to explore in greater depth how the three novels under examination, *Best of Me*, *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa*, and *Mustika Zakar Celeng*, offer comparative representations of masculinity within relationships and the family. Through critical analysis, this study will examine the dynamics of male characters striving to redefine their strength ranging from emotionally sensitive protective figures to an ironic deconstruction of physical superiority that fails to fulfill inner satisfaction. An analysis of these three literary texts will not only contribute to the discourse of gender-related literary criticism but also provide important insights into the evolution of male roles across cultures, a topic that remains relevant as social paradigms shift.

2 Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology focused on in-depth interpretation of literary texts. The approach combines literary sociology with feminist literary criticism, specifically applying Connell and Messerschmidt's theory of *Hegemonic Masculinity* [19] and the concept of *Caring Masculinities* [10] to analyze the construction of the ideal man. Through this theoretical lens, the study seeks to examine how patriarchal values, gender role expectations, and the dynamics of intimacy are represented, reproduced, and deconstructed by authors within their works. A comparative approach is also employed to examine the ideological intersections and clashes between modern Western culture and local patriarchal values (Javanese/Indonesian) as depicted in the narratives.

The primary data sources in this study are three novels representing distinct cultural landscapes: *The Best of Me* by Nicholas Sparks, *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa* by Budi Sardjono, and *Mustika Zakar Celeng* by Adia Puja. Data collection was conducted through *library research* using the *close reading* method, in which the researcher identified, marked, and categorized quotations, dialogues, and actions of male

characters in the private/family sphere. Data analysis was then conducted using a descriptive-analytical approach, following these steps: reducing the data relevant to the focus on masculinity, classifying it into thematic subchapters (protector, emotional communication, and physical strength), analyzing the findings using the established theoretical framework, and finally drawing comparative conclusions from the three literary works.

3 Results

3.1 Men as Provider and Protector

The concept of the *provider and protector* is the most archaic yet persistent foundation in the discourse on masculinity across the globe. Men have historically been constructed as central figures holding authority, where the legitimacy of their existence is measured by their ability to provide material security (livelihood) and physical protection for their families. An analysis of the three novels in this study—*Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa*, *Best of Me*, and *Mustika Zakar Celeng*—reveals how social expectations regarding this protective role are internalized by male characters, practiced within relationships, and, at certain points, sharply deconstructed through irony.

In the novel *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa*, the manifestation of men as protectors is closely tied to Javanese cosmic and socio-cultural order through the idealization of the *"lelananging jagad."* A man's status and pride do not stand alone but are definitively measured by his ability to fully provide for his partner. This is clearly evident in the following quote, *"Namun, seorang lelaki disebut lelananging jagad apabila ia tidak hanya bisa mengawini, namun juga pintar mengayomi... Arti mengayomi ialah, mampu melindungi, mencintai, membuat bahagia, dan menyejahterakan hidup wanita yang diperistri"* *"However, a man is called the 'lelananging jagad' if he is not only able to marry but also skilled at providing for... The meaning of providing for is: being able to protect, love, bring happiness, and ensure the well-being of the woman he marries"* [18, p.43]. This is further reinforced by the emphasis on material prerequisites: *"...bisa membahagiakan istrinya lahir batin. Bahagia lahir karena dicukupi sandang, pangan, dan papan"* [18, p.19]. *"...he can make his wife happy both physically and emotionally. Physical happiness comes from having sufficient clothing, food, and shelter"* [18, p.19]. From that quotes reveal that male authority here is hierarchical and contractual. Connell and Messerschmidt's [19] state that men are required to control economic resources to maintain their dominant position. The protection provided by the figure of the *"lelananging jagad"* is indeed tangible and reassuring, yet it demands women's compliance as his subordinates. Material provisions and physical protection are employed as cultural bargaining tools that legitimize men's position as "kings" within their own domains.

Meanwhile, in the novel *Mustika Zakar Celeng*, the concepts of protector and provider are initially represented through visual expectations and social propriety. Society automatically associates a large physique with a husband's ability to protect and provide. This is clearly captured in the description of Tobor's physique, as captured in this

quotation “*Meski tidak bisa dikatakan tampan, Tobor memiliki tubuh yang tegap dan besar, belum lagi kulitnya matang kecokelatan*” [17,p.7]. “*Though he couldn’t exactly be called handsome, Tobor had a sturdy and large build, not to mention his sun-kissed, tanned skin*” [17,p.7]. This visible appearance promises solid protection, complemented by his social character, where Tobor is described as “*pemuda yang baik hati, juga santun*” [17,p.16] “*a kind-hearted and polite young man*” [17,p.16]. Furthermore, this combination of masculine physicality and a nurturing social demeanor validates Nurlela’s hope for a perfect protector. The narrative in *Mustika Zakar Celeng* notes, “*Ketika bersama Tobor, hidup Nurlela berjumpa kesempurnaan. Lelaki yang selama ini diidamkan menjadi miliknya... Tobor hangat dan peduli terhadapnya*” [17,p.16]. “*When with Tobor, Nurlela’s life meets perfection. The man she had long desired is now hers... Tobor is warm and caring toward her*” [17,p.16]. However, referring to Nayak’s perspectives [4], this text is actually constructing a tragic irony on how that large body and protective demeanour are just a “project” of artificial masculinity, because that visible strength crumbles to pieces when he fails to protect his wife emotionally in the private sphere.

In contrast to this hierarchy, the novel *Best of Me* presents a redefinition of the protective role through the lens of modern Western culture, which is shifting toward equality. The character Dawson is portrayed as a protector who does not need to display patriarchal aggression or financial superiority to make his partner feel safe. The protection he offers is more affective and empathetic. This is directly acknowledged by Amanda through the quote, “I knew you wouldn’t let anything happen to me. I always felt safe when you were around” [12, p. 101]. Here, a sense of safety arises from the belief in the presence of a man as a protector who can be relied upon at all times. Dawson’s characterization in *The Best of Me* aligns closely with the framework of *Caring Masculinities* proposed by Karla Elliott [10]. This theory emphasizes that masculinity need not be expressed exclusively through control and domination, but rather through care. Dawson demonstrates that a true protector acts as an “anchor” that supports without imprisoning. His protective authority is relational, he protects his partner not as a weak object, but as an expression of deep, committed love, thereby breaking the traditional protector’s egoism that often demands to be served.

When viewed from a broader perspective, the common thread uniting these three novels is the absolute consensus that a “sense of security” is the ultimate benchmark for a man’s worth. Whether within the framework of Javanese philosophical patronage (*Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa*), a romance grounded in egalitarian consciousness (*Best of Me*), or the physical expectations of rural society (*Mustika Zakar Celeng*), men are bound by their social nature to act as a shield. All three demonstrate that a man’s failure to provide a sense of security and well-being—whether material, protective, or emotional—will lead to the collapse of his masculine identity in the eyes of women and society.

The sharp distinction among these three works lies in how that authority is attained and the consequences of its failure. *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa* positions protection as a power structure where material wealth is an absolute prerequisite for a man to be respected. In contrast, *Best of Me* separates protection from the ego of power, making a sense of security stem from emotional closeness without rigidly considering

financial status. Meanwhile, *Mustika Zakar Celeng* offers the darkest critique that masculinity rooted in large physical attributes and the illusion of social protection proves hollow if the man experiences dysfunction in providing inner satisfaction and justice.

The conclusion that the discourse of protection and caregiving must transcend the boundaries of material superiority and physical dominance aligns with contemporary discourse on the deconstruction of gender hegemony. Traditional expectations that position men as the sole economic and physical shields are no longer sufficient to address the complexities of contemporary relational intimacy. This is reinforced by Connell and Messerschmidt's [19] elaboration on *hegemonic masculinity*, which asserts that when patriarchal ideals, such as absolute dominance and unmatched virility, fail to be met, men experience an identity crisis that is self-destructive and harmful to their partners. Within the context of the analyzed narrative, the demand to be a "perfect" protector proves to be a double-edged sword; it provides social legitimacy on one hand, yet imposes destructive psychological pressure on the other. Tobor's tragic failure in *Mustika Zakar Celeng* empirically demonstrates that when protection is defined solely through the performance of a masculine body, the collapse of inner functions will shatter the entire edifice of masculine identity.

Furthermore, the argument that wealth and authority are no guarantee of psychological protection is strongly supported by sociocritical studies on patriarchal culture in Indonesia. Wijaya and Karkono [6] and Pratiwi *et. al.* [14] found in their study that the idealization of men through the concept of *lelananging jagad*, as exalted as an absolute requirement in *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa* often creates an illusion of security that subtly normalizes relational inequality. When protection is understood merely as the fulfilment of "clothing, food, and shelter" and control over the household, women are reduced to mere objects to be cared for, not subjects to be understood. The failure of traditional masculinity demonstrates that protection without inner justice and empathy is, in essence, a form of veiled repression. The absolute authority claimed as a form of "protection" ultimately serves only the man's ego to maintain a sense of power, rather than creating an authentic safe space for the family.

Therefore, the redefinition of masculinity offered through the synthesis of these three works underscores the urgency of adopting the paradigm of *caring masculinities*. Elliott [10], Nayak [4], and Roberts and Prattes [13] consistently argue in their research that the most ideal protective figure in the modern era is one who can equally balance the responsibility of protection with *emotional labor*. The character of Dawson in *The Best of Me* validates this theoretical thesis; he demonstrates that a true protector does not feel his masculinity is threatened when he acts gently, yields, and serves as an emotional anchor for his partner. In the end, this analysis leads to one argumentative conclusion, that the ideal man is not a muscular shield or a rigid breadwinner, but rather a figure with egalitarian awareness whose primary strength lies in his capacity for empathy to nurture and protect his partner's inner peace.

3.2 Men as Gentlemen in Relationship

Discussions of masculinity can no longer be reduced only to physical strength or economic superiority; it has been critically expanded into the realm of emotional intelligence. In the landscape of contemporary gender relations, a man's ability to communicate, listen, and respond to his partner's psychological state has become the primary arena determining the quality of a relationship. This shift in values highlights a transition from traditional expectations where men were required to appear rigid, rational, and stoic into a construction of the ideal man who embraces vulnerability and affective sensitivity. The three novels examined in this study present a contrasting spectrum of how this emotional sensitivity is practiced, concealed, or even manipulated within the private sphere.

Viewed through the lens of modern Western sociology, this shift toward emotional sensitivity is conceptualized through the theory of "*caring masculinities*" proposed by scholars such as Elliott [10] and Wojnicka [11]. This theory asserts that male power in the modern era is no longer measured by the ability to dominate, but rather by the capacity to perform emotional *labor*. This emotional labor encompasses the ability to empathize, validate a partner's feelings, and create an equal space for communication free from patriarchal tendencies. It is this paradigm that serves as the primary foundation for the construction of the ideal male character in contemporary Western romance narratives.

The novel *Best of Me* serves as the most perfect representation of this manifestation of *caring masculinities*. The character Dawson is portrayed as the ideal *gentleman*, whose primary strength lies precisely in his tenderness and deep affection. He shatters the stereotype of men who are indifferent or insensitive to women's psychological nuances. This is evidenced by a quote reflecting Amanda's feelings: "*With Dawson, she was reminded of what it was like to have her thoughts divined before she uttered them*" [12, p. 109]. Dawson's ability to "read" and anticipate Amanda's needs before they are spoken is not a form of control, but rather a manifestation of profound care that fosters emotional security. More than mere intuition, emotional sensitivity in an egalitarian Western culture also demands active communication that validates women's existence. In *The Best of Me*, Dawson demonstrates that listening is an active act requiring the subjugation of male ego. The novel's narrative notes: "*He would stop what he was doing every now and then, reminding her that he was listening intently to everything she said*" [12, p. 121]. By halting his activities to give her his full attention, Dawson symbolically take down the gender hierarchy; he positions his partner's voice, complaints, and narrative as equally important, or even more important, than his own interests.

However, this highly egalitarian emotional landscape clashes sharply when compared to the construction of gentlemen in Indonesian culture, particularly in Javanese and rural traditions, as depicted in *Mustika Zakar Celeng* and *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa*. Within traditional patriarchal structures, a man's authority is often constructed through silence, calmness, and reticence (stoicism). Openly expressing emotions, or engaging in too much dialogue with women, is frequently seen as an act

that diminishes masculine authority. This stoic attitude was initially viewed as a moral virtue and a mark of high social refinement.

This is depicted very clearly in the opening of the novel *Mustika Zakar Celeng*. The character Tobor is portrayed as fulfilling societal expectations of an authoritative man through his silence. The narrative notes: "*Di mata Nurlela, Tobor berbeda dengan pemuda kebanyakan yang kerap iseng dan melontar kata-kata cabul... Tobor cenderung tak banyak bicara. Kepada Nurlela pun, ia hanya melontar sapa dengan anggukan kepala*" [17, p. 8]. "*In Nurlela's eyes, Tobor was different from most young men who were often mischievous and threw around lewd remarks... Tobor tended not to speak much. Even to Nurlela, he merely offered a greeting with a nod of his head*" [17, p. 8]. At this stage, emotional silence and passivity are regarded by society—and even by the female character herself—as a reflection of firmness, maturity, and captivating politeness. *Mustika Zakar Celeng* sharply deconstructs the glorification of this stoic demeanour. Drawing on Parker et.al [8] and Clark [9] study on the crisis of masculinity in Indonesia, Tobor's silence turns out not to be a sign of maturity, but rather a form of repression and a destructive self-defense mechanism. Tobor uses his silence to hide his fatal vulnerability as his sexual dysfunction. The silence that was initially seen as authority has now turned into a wall of patriarchy that isolates his wife from her right to communicate.

In addition, the tragic impact of this gender-based communication deadlock directly erodes the female character's agency. Nurlela is trapped in a void where she has no right to voice her dissatisfaction. This despair is captured in her inner protest, "*Jika istri tidak boleh meminta atau menolak, apa bedanya dengan jongos?*" [17, p. 28]. "*If a wife isn't allowed to ask or refuse, what's the difference between her and a servant*" [17, p. 28] and culminates in her existential question, "*Menuntut tidak boleh. Menolak tidak boleh. Protes tidak boleh... Di mana posisi seorang perempuan di dalam rumah tangga?*" [17, p. 29]. "*Demanding is forbidden. Refusing is forbidden. Protesting is forbidden... Where does a woman stand within the household?*" [17, p. 29]. The men's silence here acts as a silencing weapon that eliminates any emotional space for negotiation for women.

On the other hand, the Javanese cultural narrative captured in *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa* presents a far darker and more manipulative dimension of emotional sensitivity. If *Best of Me* uses emotional sensitivity to validate (equality), and *Mustika Zakar Celeng* suppresses emotions to mask weakness (repression), then *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa* portrays a man who is highly standardized to a woman's psychological state, yet uses this to subjugate her and maintain full control. Emotional intelligence here is twisted into a tool of hegemony. This emotional manipulation is reflected very clearly through the arrogance of the male character (Lurah Jupri), who consciously plays on his partner's psychological desires. The text states: "*Apa yang kamu rasakan sekarang, Nyai Lindri? Terbayang-bayang wajahku, ingin ketemu aku... Silakan besok menyembah aku dulu, baru kupenuhi hasratmu yang sudah menggebu-gebu*" [18, p. 226]. "*What are you feeling right now, Nyai Lindri? My face is haunting your thoughts, you want to see me... Come worship me first tomorrow, then I'll fulfill your burning desires*" [18, p. 226]. The man accurately "reads" the woman's emotions and longing, not to comfort her, but to force her to submit "worship" before

giving her what she needs. This is a highly toxic form of cross-gender communication, steeped in class and gender superiority.

Then, these three novels universally agree that the space for communication and men's emotional responses is the absolute key determining the power dynamics within a relationship. However, their differences reflect a wide cultural divide. In Western representations *Best of Me*, cross-gender communication is depicted as a path toward healing and an equal partnership. On the contrary, in local/Javanese representations *Mustika Zakar Celeng* and *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa*, the space for communication remains highly hierarchical; it serves as an arena where men can hide behind silence to escape problems, or conversely, as a stage for men to manipulate women's emotional vulnerabilities to maintain their absolute power.

To conclude this discussion, the emotional sensitivity demonstrates that material and physical protection alone will never be sufficient to build an ideal relationship. This study underscores that as long as men remain trapped in the myth of stoic authority, or use their knowledge of emotions to dominate, the crisis of cross-gender communication will continue to entangle women in subordinate positions. The ideal man of the future—as promised by the shift in values in Western texts and criticized for its absence in local texts—is one who dares to set aside his ego to truly listen to and embrace his partner as a whole human being.

3.3 Men as Their Partners' Emotional Fulfilment

In the novel **Mustika Zakar Celeng**, the illusion of physical virility is dismantled in the most ironic and dark manner. From the outset, the text builds the reader's and the female character's expectations through descriptions of Tobor's "sturdy and large" physique. This masculine bodily façade is automatically interpreted by the rural community as a guarantee of reproductive strength and his ability to dominate the bed. Tobor's body is represented as a monument to the integrity of patriarchal virility, believed to be capable of providing flawless emotional fulfillment for his wife. However, this irony reaches its peak on their wedding night and in the subsequent years of their marriage, when that physical facade crumbles completely. The narrative sharply critiques this through the following quote: "*Dikatakannya bahwa Tobor adalah sosok yang perkasa tiada tanding... Namun, pertahanannya tidak lebih lama dari dua putaran jarum detik. Entah apa yang salah dari kemaluan suaminya itu*" [17, p. 2-3]. "*It is said that Tobor is a figure of unmatched might... Yet, his endurance lasted no longer than two ticks of the second hand. I wonder what was wrong with her husband's penis*" [17, p. 2-3]. This inner failure gives rise to deep frustration for the female protagonist, further strengthened by another quote: "*Tidak bisakah kau bertahan sedikit lebih lama, Kang? Setidaknya sekali dalam hidup, aku ingin merasa dipuaskan*" [17, p.1]. "*Can't you last a little longer, Kang? At least once in my life, I want to feel satisfied*" [17, p.1]. Tobor's massive body turns out to be nothing more than an empty shell that fails to fulfill the promise of his masculinity.

From a sociological perspective, the dysfunction experienced by Tobor can be analyzed using theory of *Hegemonic Masculinity*. Connell and Messerschmidt [19] explain that men internalize cultural demands to be unmatched in every aspect, including sexual

performance. When men fail to meet these standards, as Tobor does, they experience a severe “masculinity crisis.” Parker et.al [8] and Clark [9] in their study on the masculinity in Indonesia’s private sphere, also emphasize that the physical hegemony glorified by patriarchal culture often backfires; it traps men in the illusion of performance, and when they fail, it directly shatters their partner’s emotional well-being.

Turning to the novel *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa*, this text offers a different approach to deconstructing physical virility. While *Mustika Zakar Celeng* portrays such physical failure tragically, *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa* philosophically and educationally rejects the view that virility stems purely from muscles and biological impulses alone. This novel conveys the message that true masculinity lies in the ability to control one’s ego, not in yielding to animalistic instincts. A woman’s inner satisfaction does not rest on physical size or mechanical endurance, but rather on respect for the woman’s own body and soul. This rejection is emphasized through a key passage in the text: “*Keperkasaan seorang lelaki pertama-tama bukan dilihat dari tubuhnya yang gagah perkasa... Namun yang penting, ia bisa membuat istrinya merasa senang dan puas*” [18, p. 162]. “*A man’s strength is not first and foremost seen in his powerful, imposing physique... But what matters is that he can make his wife feel happy and satisfied*” [18, p. 162]. The text further challenges the objectification of women through the quote: “*Hargailah wanita, jangan sekali-kali memandang bahwa mereka hanya sekadar objek pemuas nafsu. Lelaki kalau memandang wanita hanya sebagai alat pemuas nafsu, maka lelaki seperti itu sejatinya derajatnya hanya setara dengan hewan*” [18, p. 323]. “*Respect women; never view them merely as objects to satisfy lust. If a man views a woman only as a tool for satisfying lust, then such a man is, in truth, no better than an animal*” [18, p. 323]. Here, masculinity is redefined as ethical consciousness.

Furthermore, *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa* also harshly criticizes society’s, particularly men’s, obsession with instant efforts to pursue sexual virility through physical stimulants. This is clearly reflected in society’s cynicism toward the male characters in the novel, “*Sepertinya benar bahwa anak itu simpanannya. Buktinya ia disuruh makan torpedo. Biar tambah ganas,*” [18, p. 285]. “*It seems true that the boy is her kept man. The proof is that he was told to eat ‘torpedo.’ To make him even more ferocious,*” [18, p. 285]. This text satirizes men who believe that by consuming “torpedoes” (aphrodisiacs/symbols of physical virility), they automatically become masculine, whereas without the ethics of intimacy, such behavior is an empty, animalistic performance.

On the other hand, a reading of *Best of Me* reveals an intriguing anomaly, narratives of the deconstruction of physical masculinity and sexual dysfunction are entirely absent from this text. In *Best of Me*, the demonstration of masculinity is never centered on the realm of sexual intimacy or proving virility in the bedroom. The absence of this theme does not mean the novel ignores emotional fulfillment; rather, it stems from the fact that modern Western cultural constructs within the romance genre have a definition of “emotional fulfillment” that is entirely different from local texts steeped in agrarian culture. The absence of this physical proof issue arises because Dawson’s masculinity is measured by emotional resilience and lifelong loyalty, not by sexual conquest. Amanda’s inner satisfaction is not derived from Dawson’s physical prowess, but from

his absolute dedication to love. This is evidenced by Amanda's quote: "I knew you loved me and that you'd do anything for me... how rare that kind of love is" [12, p. 102]. For Amanda, the highest form of "inner satisfaction" is knowing that she is loved unconditionally—an emotional validation that transcends all forms of physical contact.

A sociological explanation for the absence of this issue can be traced through Wojnicka and De Boise's theory of *Caring Masculinities* [11]. They argue that in modern Western societies that have undergone the sexual revolution, sexuality is no longer the sole arena for demonstrating the power hierarchy between men and women. Intimacy has transformed into *confluent love* (equal love). Therefore, the conflict of masculinity in *Best of Me* does not focus on "whether this man is sexually potent," but rather on "whether this man is willing to sacrifice his future for the woman he loves."

In conclusion, this subsection successfully dichotomizes the diversity of perspectives on masculinity across cultures. *Mustika Zakar Celeng* shatters the myth that a large body equates to inner strength; *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa* offers the lesson that inner strength stems from ethics and respect, not from animalistic biological urges; while *Best of Me* transcends this physical discourse by grounding inner fulfillment in loyalty and emotional attachment. All three converge on the same universal critique that masculinity based solely on physical ego is a fragile masculinity that fails to provide justice for women.

4 Discussion

The main conclusion of this study is that representations of masculinity in family relationships within these three cross-cultural novels are undergoing a critical shift, in which physical strength and patriarchal dominance are revealed as fragile illusions, while the idealization of men now centers on emotional sensitivity, equal communication, and the ability to suppress one's ego. This finding confirms that a man's validation is no longer measured solely by his ability as a physical shield or material provider, but is determined by his affective capacity to provide inner justice in the private sphere.

The results of this study directly contribute to answering the central question posed in the Introduction regarding how the dynamics of patriarchal hegemony operate, are reproduced, and are culturally deconstructed. Through a convergent analysis of *Best of Me*, *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa*, and *Mustika Zakar Celeng*, this study demonstrates that despite the differences in Western and Eastern cultural manifestations, the discourse on the ideal man continues to evolve because contemporary men universally grapple with the burden of the illusion of masculinity. This study fills a research gap by demonstrating that emotional agency and the relinquishment of ego superiority are resolute pathways for men to redefine their power, moving beyond the traditional protective figure that normalizes subordination.

Findings regarding the shift in male values toward a more emotionally sensitive and empathetic figure align closely with the results of a systematic review by Connor *et al.* [20] on masculinity in Western culture. The character of Dawson in *The Best of Me*, who prioritizes empathy, validates Connor *et al.*'s argument that men are beginning to challenge orthodox stereotypes by adopting elements of *Inclusive Masculinity*, such as

emotional intimacy. Furthermore, the finding regarding the importance of equal communication shares a fundamental similarity with the study by Firdaus *et al.* [5]. Although Firdaus *et al.* [5] focused on social movements in Pakistan, the concept of the emergence of the 'New Father' or *male allies* is highly relevant to the narrative deconstruction in this study, where the ideal man gradually rejects patriarchal traditions and transforms into a figure who takes responsibility for promoting equality within the household.

On the other hand, this study also confirms and enriches findings regarding the dangers and complexities of hegemonic masculinity in the Asian and Indonesian contexts. The tragedy of dysfunction in Zakar Celeng strongly resonates with the views of Ma *et al.* [21] in East Asia, who affirm that hierarchies in which men are forced into superdominant positions would ultimately harm the men themselves and their partners. Furthermore, these findings align with the research by Noorrizki *et al.* [16] and Ahmadi [7]. Noorrizki *et al.* [16] found that the values of responsibility and leadership are deeply embedded in Indonesian families, a reality manifested absolutely in the demand to become a *lelananging jagad* in the text of Nyai Gowok. When these cultural leadership expectations fail or are used to manipulate women, this study validates Ahmadi's [7] classification regarding the existence of "toxic masculinity" in Indonesian literature, which tends to harm others and disrupt intimate spaces.

In the context of cross-national literary comparison, this study validates and expands upon Hidayatullah's [22] perspective, which claims that masculinity in Indonesian fiction exhibits resistance, often appearing more progressive and diverse compared to established American values. This aligns with how *Nyai Gowok: Novel Kamasutra dari Jawa* challenges biological hegemony and promotes the restraint of sexual desire as the highest form of virility. Nevertheless, this study also strongly endorses the methodological caution raised by Sherr and Adedoyin [3], who emphasize that cultural variability makes masculinity nearly impossible to define in a fixed manner. Therefore, the deconstruction of the ego in these three novels—while revealing a universal thread regarding vulnerability—remains firmly bound to the boundaries of their respective cultural contexts, which cannot be generalized arbitrarily.

Finally, although this study successfully uncovers the dynamics of male emotional agency and repression through literary text analysis, the limitations of this study still leave several major unanswered questions. First, this research approach focuses purely on narrative text analysis, so it cannot explain how the concept of "*caring masculinities*" or such cultural masculinity is actually cognitively internalized by literary readers in the real world. Second, as reiterated by Sherr and Adedoyin's [3] caution regarding the limits of data representation, the sample of three novels used here specifically captures the dynamics of masculinity only within the framework of mainstream heterosexual romantic relationships and marriage. This limitation leaves unanswered the question of how the "ideal man" operates outside conventional family institutions.

5 Conclusion

This study concludes that the representation of masculinity in these three novels indicates a paradigm shift from physical dominance and material authority toward emotional agency as the new standard for the ideal man. Through a deconstruction of the character Tobor in *Zakar Celeng* and a critique of the philosophy of *lelananging jagad* in *Nyai Gowok*, it is revealed that physical strength and material fulfillment are nothing more than a fragile and often illusory outer layer if not accompanied by inner justice and the ethics of intimacy. On the other hand, the character of Dawson in *Best of Me* validates the emergence of caring masculinities, which place emotional sensitivity, the ability to listen, and the suppression of the ego as forms of true strength capable of providing a genuine sense of security within private spaces.

Theoretically, this study affirms that masculinity is not a static biological identity, but rather a cultural performance that is continually negotiated and deconstructed through literary narratives. The failure of traditional protective roles, which rely solely on hierarchical superiority, demonstrates that the burden of patriarchal expectations—such as the imperative to always appear strong and stoic—actually creates an identity crisis that undermines the emotional well-being of both men and their partners. Therefore, this study concludes that the redefinition of the ideal man in the future must be grounded in egalitarian values and emotional intelligence; where a man's strength is no longer measured by his ability to dominate, but by his courage to embrace vulnerability and respect his partner's dignity as an equal partner.

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