

Body, Violence, & Sexuality: Grotesque Aesthetics in Eka Kurniawan's Novels

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Abstract

*This research examines how the aesthetics of the grotesque is represented in Eka Kurniawan's novels. This research aims to re-read the discourse construction of these texts through the approaches of feminist body theory, trauma studies, and the concept of grotesque aesthetics. The type of this research is qualitative, with an approach of interpretative literary analysis within a deconstructive hermeneutic and critical cultural studies framework. The sources of the data are Kurniawan's works: 1) *Cantik Itu Luka* (2015), 2) *Lelaki Harimau* (2004), and 3) *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* (2014). The data are quotations [translated by the researcher] taken from the novels. The used data collection techniques are library study and documentation. The used technique of data analysis is thematic analysis within a deconstructive hermeneutic. The used data validity are semantic validity and expert judgement. The results reveal that grotesque aesthetics in Kurniawan's novels are articulated through the representation of the body, violence, and sexuality as dynamic sites of resistance. The body emerges as a battlefield of power and resistance. Violation emerges trauma which operates as a collective and structural condition. Sexuality presents as a transgressive space deconstructing the normative gender and moral frameworks.*

Keywords: *body; Eka Kurniawan; grotesque aesthetics; sexuality; trauma*

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Introduction

In the landscape of contemporary Indonesian literature, Eka Kurniawan is quite epic in challenging conventional boundaries,

both stylistically and ideologically. Through his novels such as *Cantik Itu Luka* (Beauty is a Wound), *Lelaki Harimau* (The Man Tiger), and *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* (Vengeance is Mine, All Others Pay Cash),

Kurniawan introduces an aesthetic form that breaks *grand* narration of normative beauty through vulgarity, violence, and sexuality. This *aesthetic* style crafts both a form of resistance and a complex artistic statement in grotesque nuance.

The grotesque is seen to expose disturbing, unsettling, or disgusting image (Krzychylkiewicz, 2003), however it presents as a symbolic strategy disrupting the reality normativity; operating with the logic of ambivalence, laughter and horror, the living and the dead, and between the whole body and the mutilated body. In this kind of aesthetic, the boundaries between the human and the inhuman, between eroticism and horror, become fluid and blurred (Lawson et al., 1965; Ospanova et al., 2024; Wright, 1864).

Kurniawan's grotesque aesthetic has deep roots in world literary tradition, from Rabelais and Bakhtin to Marquis de Sade, Gabriel García Márquez, and Toni Morrison. In the Indonesian context, Kurniawan *localises* the grotesque forms, transforming magical realism (Nurrahman & Rosyidi, 2020), post-colonialism (Irmawati & G, 2021; Normalita & Fauzi, 2021), violence (Prasetyo & Haryadi, 2017), sexuality (Agung & Prasastyo, 2017), and local mythology (Fathonah, 2020) into a battlefield narrative where power and resistance exist (Rabinovitz & Sawicki, 1992; Stopenski, 2022; Wardatun, 2006).

The previous studies proposed the representation of violence and trauma as histo- socio-political reflections, particularly in relation to colonial legacy and authoritarian regimes. In a case, some feminist perspectives emphasise the objectification of (female) bodies and patriarchy within Kurniawan's narratives. Others have also underlined the role of sexuality as a site of power negotiation, and often interpreted through moral, cultural, and ideological lenses.

Despite most existing ones tend to treat these aspects (body, violence, and sexuality) as detached analytical domains. The grotesque, when addressed, is often reduced to a stylistic feature or *awful* narrative device, rather than being *inspected* as a complicated aesthetic strategy that integrates body, trauma, and

sexuality into a set of cohesive discourses of resistance. Therefore, this study fills this gap by proposing a more integrative and critical reading of grotesque aesthetics in Kurniawan's novels. This is the contribution to literary discourse by reframing grotesque aesthetics as a mode of resistance exposing hidden structures of power.

In the development of Indonesian literary studies, discussions about violence and sexuality are often represented in a taboo. Taboos surrounding the body, collective trauma, and morality often hinder critical readings of representations of violence and sexuality in fiction (Chesney-Lind, 2013; Gunne & Thompson, 2012; Miller & Miller, 2021; Ritika Kumari, 2023). The body that is tortured, traded, raped, or transformed becomes a metaphor for social oppression (Bustos, 2022; Khaliq et al., 2021; Naidu, 2014; Sheikh et al., 2023). Within this framework, theoretical approaches from feminist body theory, trauma studies, and grotesque aesthetics are used to analyse the construction of the body and subjectivity in Kurniawan's novels.

In feminist body theory, the body is a discursive product. The female characters in Kurniawan's works are reduced to objects of sexual violence or commodities of the body, but they are also figures of resistance who refuse to submit to masculine narratives (Fitria & Asri, 2020; Hilmi et al., 2022; Kamilah, 2021; Ni Luh, 2023; Wardani & Geleuk, 2020). These bodies speak through their wounds which hold the history of oppression and crafts trauma.

Trauma studies enrich the reading of wounded bodies in Kurniawan's novels (Sartika, 2020). Wounds in his narratives transform into the very architecture of the narrative itself. Trauma, in this case, functions as a force that pierces the continuity of time, creating obsessive repetitions and shaping the characters' identities in a set of paradoxical relationship with the past. Through this *setup*, Kurniawan's work revives and bombards the collective trauma of the social structure, colonialism, military violence, repressive state apparatus, through bodies narrated in the narratives.

In the Bakhtinian tradition, it celebrates the uncontrollable body that cannot be controlled by elite rules (Gleeson-White, 2001; Leite, 2023). It refuses to be sanctified, a body that responds with madness (Aulia, 2020; Maulinda & Pratama, 2020), a body that rots yet remains alive in collective memory. The bodies in Kurniawan's works are tied up in the history, colonialism and political repression.

Therefore, this research digests how Kurniawan's works become a grotesque. In Kurniawan's works, reading fiction drives discomfort but portrays truth. Vulgar narrative style provokes ugliness *in the mud*, but aesthetically, it presents an honest way in revealing the complexity of humans and society. This sort of aesthetics demolishes a *harmonic* writing in delivering *tension*, that chooses *blood* over *flowers*, nudity over normativity, wounds over smiles, noise over silence.

Methodology

This study is qualitative with an approach of interpretative literary analysis (Abdulmughni, 2019; Maingueneau, 2018) within a deconstructive hermeneutic (Garcia Landa, 2012; Paling, 2004) and critical cultural studies framework, which allows analysis through the lens of critical theories toward body, violence, and sexuality in Kurniawan's novels. The sources of the data are Kurniawan's novels, they are: 1) *Cantik Itu Luka (CIL)* (2015), 2) *Lelaki Harimau (LH)* (2004), and 3) *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas (SDRHDT)* (2014), thus the data are quotations [translated by researcher] taken from the novels.

Then, the data collection techniques used in this study are library study and documentation. Library study refers to collect data from written sources, both primary and secondary. Primary sources are the novels and secondary sources include relevant theoretical books and scientific articles. Documentation technique refers to record and archive important quotations from the novels through the following process: a) intensive and repeated reading; b) identifying relevant quotations (author, year of the published

book: page); and c) categorising quotations based on the themes.

Subsequently, the data were analysed by a thematic analysis within a deconstructive hermeneutic framework. It operated through the following steps:

1. Textual immersion (repeated readings of the selected novels to reach a deep comprehension);
2. Identification (to identify quotations related to the problems of the research)
3. Thematic categorisation (body, violence, and sexuality);
4. Interpretation (to inspect things behind symbols, narratives, and ideological proposition);
5. Theoretical engagement (to analyse the finding with theoretical lenses); and
6. Critical reflection and deconstruction.

To ensure data validity, this study uses *Semantic Validity* to ensure consistency among the data, issues, and interpretation. Plus, it also uses *Expert Judgement* to seek the second opinions of experts from Indonesia (two literary lecturers, Universitas Udayana and Universitas Jenderal Soedirman).

Results and Discussion

There are three main topics discussed in this study: the representation of body, violence, and sexuality in Kurniawan's novels as a grotesque aesthetic.

1. Body as Resistance

The body is the dimension supporting the discussion of the critical discourse about gender, masculinity, and femininity. Within the body there are narratives and constructions of domination and resistance. *CIL* illustrates this narrative quite clearly:

"She was more beautiful than Rengganis, the princess who married a dog ... than Helena, who caused the Trojan War to break out ... than Diah Pitaloka who caused the Majapahit and Pajajaran wars ... than Juliet who made Romeo desperate enough to kill himself" (Kurniawan, 2015: 165).

Alamanda is the subject in this quote. This is not merely allegory or hyperbole, but how her body and beauty are represented; having a mother who is a famous prostitute, perfect features, two sisters who are also prostitutes, "... inheriting her mother's beauty, with hair flowing over the pillow, with breasts protruding brightly in the dim light" (Kurniawan, 2015: 344).

In contrast, Alamanda's youngest sister has a poorly represented body, "She was an ugly girl with nostrils resembling electrical sockets and skin as black as soot" (Kurniawan, 2015: 464). Ugliness, nose plugs, and skin as black as soot are the bodies narrated in this novel. Kurniawan does not discuss prostitutes, but oppression. It is an aesthetic strategy that interrupts *colossal* norms of beauty. The *extravagant* imagery alters the body into a site of abjection.

Nevertheless, this marginalisation of the *ugly* body also produces a paradox. Amanda, with an ideal body, becomes vulnerable to objectification and sexual abuse. In this sense, ugliness presents as both signifier of exclusion and a form of fortification from patriarchal consumption. Therefore, Kurniawan portrays women as an oppressed victim and explosively exposes how oppression operates through aesthetic hierarchies imposed on the female body. The contrast between beauty and ugliness reveals that violence is distributed structurally on the bodies conforming to dominance of desirability. By manufacturing the grotesque body, Kurniawan destabilises the cultural logic that equates beauty with value, and instead repositions marginalised bodies as sites of implicit resistance against normative power.

In another novel, *LH*, Kurniawan wrote a story of a *thug* with the magical power of a *White Tiger*, "The tiger was white like a swan, fierce as a wolf ..." (Kurniawan, 2004: 141), who killed his master in a brutal and savage manner, like a tiger pouncing on its prey and almost severing its neck. However, in the context of the body, Kurniawan exposes Nuraeni and her presence explains how body is presented vulgarly and libidinally,

"... there, the two palms, covering Nuraeni's breasts, the right hand gripping the left breast, and the left hand gripping the right mound, not squeezing them, but caressing them gently. Those breasts were no longer as firm as in her youth, though now they had regained some firmness from the warm air, slightly sagging from the sucking of Margio and Mameh when they were still children, and especially from Komar's hands that had devoured them" (Kurniawan, 2004: 147).

This quotation describes Nuraeni's body with sensual detail and erotic nuances; mounds, squeezing, mouth sucking, and hands that crush, representing grotesque aesthetics. The body becomes a space to explicitly express the fight between desire and power. This fight is manifested through the dynamics of control embedded in the act of touch itself. While the gestures appear intimate, it simultaneously divulges a domination inscribed on the body. Nuraeni's breasts are not neutral, unbiased, or purely erotic objects; they are signified by traces shaped by both maternal function and male desire. The reference to the children's sucking and Komar's "devouring" hands situates the body within overlapping regimes of obligation and possession, where desire and power collapse into one.

In this point, desire does not operate as a private or mutual machine, but as a form of power that seizes the female body, reducing it into a site of repeated consumption. At the same time, the grotesque detailing of the aging and altered body disrupts the erotic gaze itself, revealing the illusion of idealised femininity. Therefore, the body becomes a contested terrain where desire hunts to dominate, yet is instantaneously disrupted by the material reality of the body's vulnerability, narration, and resistance.

In *SDRHDT*, the body is narrated in a bizarre plot twist; it is not about prostitutes and beauty myth, nor is it about revenge and violence in tiger metaphors, but rather about tragic masculinity, defeat, and transformation. The following quotations illustrate how this is solidified:

“A man who cannot fuck a woman is like a rusty knife. He cannot be used to cut anything” (Kurniawan, 2014: 62), “The penis can move people in a barbaric way. The penis is the second brain of humans, often controlling us more than the head can” (Kurniawan, 2015: 126), “Human life is nothing but the dream of our penises. Humans merely go through it” (Kurniawan, 2015: 126), “The conditions for marriage are only five... I have never heard of marriage requiring a standing penis” (Kurniawan, 2014: 91).

It meticulously skins out the novel with its *offensiveness*. The fragmented quotations crystalise how Kurniawan slaps readers in the face with the portrayal of fighting, masculinity, and dominance but *impotent*. The impotent masculine body is a chaotic space and it is exacerbated by conflicts of falling in love with a masculine woman, then marrying her, and being betrayed. This *setup* is an absolute *conspiracy* of Kurniawan’s aesthetics in depicting a body as resistance. The vulgar and obscene paradoxes and stylistics become a *shortcut* for readers to reckon that beauty can emerge from a filthy world shrouded in chaos.

Furthermore, the body as resistance exists in a paradoxical form; the bodies that become objects of domination are the same bodies that disrupt that domination. This is actually the logic of deconstruction; resistance with contradictions, instabilities, and excesses. Kurniawan’s works do not craft clichéd heroic with emancipatory parade, but deconstructive dynamics, ambivalences, and paradoxes. His works have strongly embodied a narration of resistance with *nauseating* language as writing aesthetics: prostitution world that confronts ugly beauty, masculinity with animalistic lust for brutal murder and Oedipal complexity, and impotent masculine man who is destroyed by dominant women. Tragic.

2. Traumatic Violence

Besides body as resistance, Kurniawan in *CIL* also reflects traumatic psychological legacies, violence distributed through taboo,

vulgarity, and *hyperbolic* language. Here is evidence in the scene of sexual violence against Dewi Ayu in a Japanese prison, “Let us hope that our soldiers can capture the Japanese,” said Dewi Ayu, “... we will be traded like rice and sugar” (Kurniawan, 2015: 58). This quote reflects Dewi Ayu’s suffering while imprisoned by Japanese soldiers, where she and other women were treated as commodities, starved, and sexually abused. Additionally, Alamanda’s rape by her own husband,

“Alamanda did not want to marry the General. As a form of refusal ... Alamanda once locked her genital area to prevent herself from being raped by the General. However, in the end, she was still raped by the man who was her husband” (Kurniawan, 2015: 247).

This demonstrates the domestic sexual violence; rape committed by a husband against his wife. Both quotes highlight how *CIL* depicts the trauma and violence experienced by women in the context of colonialism and personal lives.

The story is different with *LH*, where the trauma and experiences of male violence have a different focal point. If Dewi Ayu and her children suffer violence due to male dominance, Kurniawan here subverts the nature of masculinity through paradoxical and ironic conflicts: a brutal husband who is eventually cheated on by his wife and a traumatised man who slashes his employer’s throat. Violence is scattered throughout several plots, such as in the household of Komar bin Syueb (Margio’s father),

“For Komar bin Syueb himself, there was nothing more painful than what was displayed before him, a wife showing off her womb containing the seed of a stranger, more painful than thinking about the fact that he had never been able to make them happy” (Kurniawan, 2004: 145).

This quote illustrates the emotional violence experienced by Komar, which he later vents through physical violence against his family. Later, Komar’s violence causes trauma

to Margio, his son, “Margio harbours deep resentment towards his father and feels immense grief over the death of his sister Maria, whom he believes his father neglected until she became ill and died” (Kurniawan, 2004: 248). This quote reflects how childhood trauma and domestic violence shaped Margio’s personality, which eventually culminated in acts of violence, until the emergence of *the Tiger* within Margio. It is a manifestation of his traumatic experience of his father’s violence, “He said there was a side within his body, something more than just intestines, that slithers out and moves his entire body, controlling him and urging him to kill Anwar Sadat” (Kurniawan, 2004: 32).

Not only that, this narrative framework is also mentioned at the beginning, “He almost beheaded him, sawing through his neck until Anwar Sadat’s windpipe was visible, briefly ivory-coloured before being flooded with red ...” (Kurniawan, 2004: 33). This quote depicts the *brutal* violence inflicted on Anwar Sadat’s body, parading how the *unnatural* physical violence becomes an integral part of the novel’s narrative. The trauma and violence experienced by Margio manifest in the form of a *tiger*, which symbolises the destructive power within his body and reflects social criticism on systemic patriarchal violence. Obviously, Kurniawan does not *shy* away from conflict, he exploits a series of eccentric terms to *immerse* readers into the fabula and *sjuzet* of this novel.

In different universe, similarly, *SDRHDT* exposes traumatic violence, especially sexual violence which is experienced by Rona Merah—a mad woman who was raped by rogue government officials,

“..... that’s how it was, with her body shaking violently, this time out of fear, her face pale and lips trembling, unable to utter a sound, Ajo Kawir was forced to watch the two police officers rape Rona Merah one after the other... then he lifted Rona Merah’s body. Rona Merah wanted to sit down again, but the Man with the Wound forced her to stand up, then pushed her toward the table, laying her down... not long after that, people found Rona

Merah dead in the backyard of her house. Beside her husband’s grave]” (Kurniawan, 2014: 25—30)

Government represents power and this provides an access to dominate society, particularly, women. There was also a similar *performance* performed by Pak Lebe, a rich man in the village.

“She lay on the bed and cried. Pak Lebe had already taken off his clothes. She hoped she wouldn’t have to see Pak Lebe, but the man touched her face, forcing her to look at his face. She began crying again, and Pak Lebe smiled... he spread her legs apart, Pak Lebe entered her, she closed her eyes, but tears still flowed from the corners of her eyelids, she felt pain. Not only inside her genitalia, but especially inside her chest” (Kurniawan, 2014: 46).

This quotation illustrates how sexual violence is perpetrated by Pak Lebe against a poor widow who cannot pay her rent: sexual exploitation. Ajo Kawir witnesses the *rape*, then it manufactures permanently in his immanent trauma, and bringing him the curse of impotence. After witnessing a madwoman being raped, “The genitals can move people in barbaric ways. The penis is the second brain of humans, often controlling us more than the head can. That’s what I’ve learned from mine over the years” (Kurniawan, 2015: 126). This is merely Ajo Kawir’s validation and reflection on the trauma he experienced due to the sexual violence he witnessed, which led to sexual dysfunction and a crisis of masculine identity.

3. Sexuality

CIL exposes sexuality in its absolute form; this novel is not merely drenched in the narrative of the world of prostitution, which inherently and inevitably carries sexual undertones. There is a quote about sexuality as a bargaining tool in power relations, “I’ll replace the girl who was here earlier, Commander. You can sleep with me, but give her mother medicine and a doctor. And a doctor!” (Kurniawan, 2015: 67). Here, Dewi

Ayu offers her body to the camp commander in exchange for medical treatment for her friend's mother.

Additionally, sexuality is used as a form of criticism against social norms, "... all women are prostitutes, because even a good wife sells her body for a dowry and household money, or for love if it exists" (Kurniawan, 2015: 134). This reflects a critical view of the social construction of women's roles and sexuality. This statement challenges the norms that distinguish between good women and prostitutes, and highlights how sexuality is often linked to transactions and economic interests.

Then, there is sexuality as an expression of rebellion and female agency, "Rape me before you go" (Kurniawan, 2015: 199). Here, Alamanda actively asks her lover to have sex before their separation. This request shows how the female characters in this novel take initiative over their sexuality and challenges the norms. *CIL* explores the theme of sexuality in a complex and often provocative manner, highlighting the dynamics of power, social norms, and individual agency within the context of sexuality.

"I gave birth to girls who hunt men's penises" (Kurniawan, 2015: 249), "All women are prostitutes, for even a good wife sells her body for a dowry and household expenses, or for love if it exists" (Kurniawan, 2015: 305), "No one treated her harshly as they usually did with other prostitutes ... Not a single night went by without her having a client, even though she strictly limited herself to sleeping with only one man per night" (Kurniawan, 2015: 201).

Sexuality is exposed in a vulgar manner, yet Kurniawan also offers transgression and subversion. Kurniawan gives the ugliest of Dewi Ayu's children the name Cantik (in Indonesian meaning, it is beautiful or pretty). Due to her ugly look, she is reckoned not to be a prostitute. Thus, she does not have to bear, suffer, and endure the sexual domination experienced by her sisters and even her mother, who became the object of soldiers'

lust. In other words, Cantik, through her *non-pretty* body, is definitely resistance; not by engaging in negativity, but by disrupting boundaries. If beauty becomes an access of the objectification of every woman, then ugliness can liberate them, "... they [ugly women] can be fucked just like beautiful women" (Kurniawan, 2015: 477). By deploying vulgar lexicalities without any *euphemisms*, Kurniawan not only exposes women's bodies as erotic objects through symbols of beauty, but also as a battlefield of wounds, violence, and social suffering.

The bodies of prostitutes, hyperbolically serve as an aesthetic strategy to dismantle norms of decency, social moral hypocrisy, and, the paradox, "There is nothing more terrifying than giving birth to beautiful baby girls in a world of men as lustful as dogs in mating season" (Kurniawan, 2015: 8). Beauty that wounds, dogs that mount. In such an atmosphere, Kurniawan offers an effective aesthetic to express the body in polished vulgarity in the cruel conflicts experienced by the characters, which also intersects with the issues raised in the novel *LH*.

LH mobilises the narratives of sexuality, albeit in a different way. It raises the issue of sexuality as a tool of power and violence in the household, "There, Nuraeni was on all fours, like a horse, and Komar bin Syueb thrust into her from behind" (Kurniawan, 2004: 70), this quote illustrates how Komar treats his wife, Nuraeni harsh sexually reflecting dominance and violence. There is sexuality as an escape from violence and a release of sexual desire,

"Nuraeni herself was still amazed by the boldness of her own body, yet she was so happy ... Until, without hesitation, the woman turned and pressed her thighs against Anwar Sadat's body, closing her eyes" (Kurniawan, 2004: 141).

Nuraeni found joy in sexual relationship with Anwar Sadat, which is different from the harsh treatment she receives from her husband, Komar. Sexuality comes as a form of betrayal and moral conflict, "For Komar bin Syueb himself, there was nothing more painful than what was displayed before him, a wife

showing off her womb containing the seed of a stranger" (Kurniawan, 2004: 145). It exposes Komar's feelings towards Nuraeni's affair with Anwar Sadat, which resulted in pregnancy. It also illustrates how *LH* explores sexuality in a complex and provocation.

Furthermore, in *SDRHDT*, sexuality comes in a more complicated way: tragic masculinity, "The penis can move people in a barbaric way. The penis is the second brain of humans, often controlling us more than our heads can" (Kurniawan, 2014: 126). Sexuality in masculinity reflects control. Ajo Kawir depicts the protagonist's struggle with his sexual *dysfunction*, "He stared at his crotch, at his penis that seemed to be in a deep sleep, so lazy. He whispered to it, *Wake up, Bird. Wake up, Bastard. You can't sleep forever. You have to wake up*" (Kurniawan, 2014: 1). This is the turbulence of masculinity and it exacerbates when he falls in love, "Iteung always hoped for a miracle that would awaken her husband's penis. She would try to wake him up, and would give up, letting her husband's hand slip into her wet crotch. She would close her eyes, and for some reason she began to imagine Pak Toto's black bird. Next time she thought about Budi's penis ..." (Kurniawan, 2014: 179), followed by this plot,

"They kissed ... His middle finger entered slowly and explored... The girl felt like she was floating, growling, before screaming a short sentence and collapsing on Ajo Kawir's shoulder" (Kurniawan, 2015: 85), "They married even though Iteung knew she could never enjoy her husband's *bird*. The problem was that the trauma from her teacher's sexual abuse made Iteung unable to escape the image of the *lingga* (phallus), the erect penis" (Kurniawan, 2015: 110), "She said her bird had taken the path of those seeking peace, a quiet path like the Sufis" (Kurniawan, 2015: 123), "Iteung, feeling guilty towards Ajo Kawir, beat the man until he ended up in prison" (Kurniawan, 2014: 130).

Ajo Kawir is can fight people which represents physical masculinity, but not in his

way to satisfy. Iteung even imagines another man during having sex with Ajo Kawir. To get over the line, in his *efforts* [to erect his penis], Ajo Kawir uses a photo of an artist,

"He only likes her face, especially her body. The actress is wearing a low-cut bikini. Her breasts are protruding, as if trying to escape and free themselves from her body. The most enjoyable part is the hair under her armpits, black and thick. He imagines what her armpits smell like ... Glancing at the cleavage of the woman, also at the dark, thick armpit hair. He held his penis ... He took the soap and rubbed it on his palms ... He grabbed his penis again. Get up, he whispered. Get up, you bastard ... this is how you usually wake up" (Kurniawan, 2014: 9).

The fantasies are compensatory *ritual* and *escape*. The female body is presented vulgarly with intense descriptions (breasts, armpits, and smell). This scene also depicts how the body is a *noiseless* psychological battlefield: the penis that *fails* to erect becomes a symbol of masculine failure. This *soliloquy* dialogue becomes a melancholic and tragic performative act: tragic masculinity.

Eka develops sexuality into a terrain of transgression where desire, fury, and fear collapse in a masculine body. Besides vulgar style, grotesque emerges from the existential chaos of the character and biological issue to a discursive arena of resistance and subversion. Sexuality here bombards the rigid cultural boundaries of masculinity and femininity, of what is permissible and *taboo*, and of the disciplined and the rebellious body.

The findings of this study reveal a profound manifestation of the body, trauma, violence, and sexuality in Kurniawan's works, which sharply break through conventional boundaries and explore the complexity of humanity in darker and grotesque forms. In *CIL*, *LH*, and *SDRHDT*, Kurniawan does not merely present the body as a physical entity but as an arena where identity is formed, destroyed, and controlled.

The body, in these novels, becomes an inseparable object and subject of the suffocating narrative of trauma and violence, a process that leaves deep scars that cannot be healed by time. Every physical flaw is not merely a blemish on the surface but a symbol of resistance, suffering, and acceptance. When trauma destroys an individual, it also shatters the social norms underpinning existence, giving rise to violence which are invisible and terrifying in grotesque aesthetic Kurniawan offers. Sexuality, in Kurniawan's narrative, is a brutal arena of power and control, where bodies and souls are traded in desire, lust, and revenge.

4. Grotesque Aesthetic in Kurniawan's Works

In exploring the construction of the body and subjectivity in Kurniawan's works, this study is based on three main theoretical pillars that reinforce and negate each other in their tension: feminist body theory, trauma studies, and grotesque aesthetics.

Judith Butler, in her book *Bodies That Matter* (1993), sees that the body is not a pre-linguistic entity, but a consequence of construction through constant performativity of gender in the formation of social norms (Butler, 2011; Costera Meijer & Prins, 1998; Lloyd, 1999). In Kurniawan's work, women's bodies are not presented as something whole, pure, or spiritual. Instead, these bodies are fragmented, wounded, raped, and sometimes even contain subversive power from their own destruction. In Butlerian logic, the destruction of the body is not only the result of repression (He, 2017), but also a potential space for reinterpreting female subjectivity outside the masculine-fascist glorifying physical strength and oppressing all forms of weakness or difference to uphold superiority in patriarchal social order (Johri, 2023; Turner, 2009).

This can be seen in how Japanese soldiers moan as they vent their lust on beautiful prostitutes in the novel *CIL*, but cannot oppress the ugly ones; how Komar and Anwar Sadat wield power in their households, oppressing and crushing those around them in the novel *LH*, yet are wounded by betrayal (Komar) and slaughtered by the anger of his subordinates

(Anwar Sadat), and how Ajo Kawir is dominant in his environment but weak towards women.

In line with this, Elizabeth Grosz rejects the Cartesian understanding of the body as a passive object (Karmakar & Sarkar, 2021). In *Volatile Bodies* (1994), Grosz invited us to imagine the metaphor of the body as a fluid, flexible, dynamic, impermanent entity that is always in the process of becoming, not a stable, absolute body (Flavis & Grosz, 1995). This is also illustrated through the bodies in Kurniawan's fiction, with all their vulnerability and transformations; the body becomes a manifestation of volatile nature: a body that cannot be stabilised, a body that is always negotiating with power, history and culture, and desire.

The bodies that speak through wounds and the bodies that resist being shrouded in sanctity, these are not merely technical and practical biases in narrative, but a critical discourse on how the body is an arena for the articulation of politics that harbours trauma. Caruth explained that trauma is not merely a psychological wound, but an event that disrupts the continuity of time and identity (Sadoff et al., 1997). Trauma cannot be narrated directly; it is present in repetition, in illusory shadows, in narratives riddled with cracks.

In Kurniawan's novel, trauma is not only experienced by Dewi Ayu and her children, Komar's family, and Ajo Kawir individually, but also becomes a collective trauma (Hirth, 2018); their trauma is the logical consequence of colonialism, militarism, and state repression implemented through physical, cultural, and mental violence. Bodies that carry trauma are sites of memory that can cause seismic effects, as seen in the brutal Margio or Ajo Kawir who *repented*. Rape, mutilation, and intercourse are events and symptoms of memories continuing to fail and to be forgotten; the love among the prostitutes' crotch, or Komar and Margio, who are agonised by Nuraeni's affair with Anwar Sadat, or Ajo Kawir's pain caused by Iteung's sexual fantasy with another man.

Here, fictional narratives become a place where psychological, cultural, and historical wounds can be *read* again—not to be healed,

but to be remembered. In Caruth's angle, traumatic repetition in texts is a form of resistance against cultural amnesia (Caruth, 1991). Wounds, in this case, turns to be both aesthetic and political; aesthetic politics with grotesque nuances.

Grotesque aesthetics, here, envelops the body and trauma in representations that disrupt and disturb as authentic reflection; a deconstruction. The concept of grotesque realism as a form of folk aesthetics *mocks* the government and power through explosive and vulgar bodies, such as eating and then vomiting and becoming faeces or having sex and then giving birth and dying (Bakhtin & Iswolsky, 2020). Morality regulates language; diction is refined to be acceptable and this *manipulation* is a form of deception, which makes the grotesque as the most natural art of honest expression (Leite, 2023). Conceivably, the grotesque body is the body of the people, a body that cannot be controlled by elite and religious norms.

In Kurniawan's work, these kinds of bodies present in a massive, aggressive, and ambitious way: the bodies of women who give birth to prostitutes, the bodies of men who explode with Oedipal and incestuous hatred, or the bodies of impotent masculine male. Kurniawan's grotesque stylistics work within a folkloric framework involving vulgarity that draws its energy from social reality. These bodies, within it, are not merely repulsive or challenging to conventional morality—they are a form of resistance against normative constructions of the body. Kurniawan utilises vulgarity as violence and complexity. The body, ultimately, is an aesthetical *minefield* where history, trauma, and ideology lie. This is where Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject becomes relevant.

Kristeva (1982) stated that the abject is distant from aesthetics that challenges the boundaries between the self and the non-self (Harrington, 1998; Linderman et al., 1984). The vulgarity of menstrual blood, armpits, crotches, breasts, genitals, and various rashes of sexual violence become forms of inevitably abjection because they are at the core of the human experience. Even at the level of fantasy

and ideas, the narrative would not exist without experience.

Conclusion

This study is limited to three selected novels by Eka Kurniawan: *Cantik Itu Luka (CIL)* (2015), *Lelaki Harimau (LH)* (2004), and *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas (SDRHDT)* (2014). This research focuses on an aesthetic analysis of the grotesque, exploring issues of the body as resistance, traumatic violence, and sexuality.

Kurniawan's novels offer a grotesque narrative where the body, trauma, and sexuality are presented boldly, vulgarly, and often repulsively as a form of liberation from aesthetics and dominant morality. The body is presented as a battlefield between power and rebellion, where colonial traces, patriarchy, and violence are organically embedded. Trauma in these novels is a collective legacy passed down from generation to generation, shaping the behaviour, identity, and contacts among characters. Meanwhile, sexuality is explored in a brutality, dysfunctional desire, and a form of transgression against oppressive gender orders and social norms.

Reflexively, future research could expand the scope of this study by incorporating a wider range of literary texts to examine the grotesque aesthetic as a strategy. Also, further research could adopt a more critical approach to explore the body, violence and sexuality. Another promising direction is to investigate the role of grotesque aesthetics in digital or contemporary media, where representations of the body and sexuality are increasingly mediated by technology and global discourse.

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