

STUDY OF THE NOVEL *GENI JORA* BY ABIDAH EL-KHALIEQY FROM A LIBERAL FEMINISM PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. Liberal feminism, as one of the streams of feminism, has significantly influenced the development of literary works in Indonesia. However, within the dynamics of liberal feminism, there are still many literary works that remain underappreciated. Addressing this issue, this study aimed to reveal the influence of liberal feminism in Indonesian literature, particularly in the novel *Geni Jora* by Abidah El-Khalieqy. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a literature study method. Data collection techniques included reading and note-taking. The validity of the data was tested using theory triangulation. The data analysis techniques involved data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The findings indicated that the novel *Geni Jora* symbolizes resistance against oppressive masculinity. The romantic story unfolds a dichotomous gender split between feminism and masculinity. This novel portrays ideological hegemony and is presented contextually through the romantic intrigues between the characters.

Keywords: liberal feminism, *geni jora*, masculinity.

INTRODUCTION

When discussing liberal feminism, it is inseparable from the critiques of its pioneers. Feminism emerged during the Enlightenment era in Europe as a renewal of thought, perspective, and actions addressing gender inequality, which had long been perpetuated by rigid and masculine social structures. The study of feminism encompasses numerous subcultures shaped by interactions with other cultures, interests, and ideologies. A notable example of feminism's development is the emergence of liberal feminism. It emphasizes egalitarianism and freedom for women and men in perceiving their societal roles (Sujarwa, 2019).

Liberal feminism was pioneered by several figures, including Alison Jagger with her work *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Jegar, 2017) and Mary Wollstonecraft with her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Sottosanti, 2023). Other notable figures include Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Marquis de Condorcet. This movement was later carried forward by figures such as Hannah Arendt and continues to evolve to this day. In Indonesia, feminism has developed significantly through female literary figures like Okky Madasari and Abidah El-Khalieqy, whose works often contain social critiques. The issues raised by liberal feminism often intersect with other ideas such as socialism, liberalism, Marxism, and others. Feminism evolved from being an antithesis to pre-existing thoughts into a new, more conceptualized, and focused idea addressing real needs (Horbury, 2014).

Liberal feminism in America and Indonesia exhibits distinct characteristics. American feminism leans more toward addressing racial issues, such as "black and white" dynamics, liberalization, and similar topics. Meanwhile, Indonesian feminism generally focuses on broader struggles, such as equality of rights, legal protection, welfare, and equality in theological contexts (Sardenberg, 2016). In the realm of literature, liberal feminism is closely tied to works, along with their backgrounds and ideologies (Purnomo, 2017), enabling autonomous works to be interpreted within the framework of liberal feminist principles.

A second perspective posits that feminism concentrates on the interpretation and impact of literary works on readers. This view focuses analytical efforts on the impressions or messages captured by readers from literary works. In this sense, the interpretation of a work stands independent of the work itself. It is autonomous and not directly tied to the original work. Although feminist criticism analysis focuses on these two perspectives, feminist views of literature extend far beyond the agenda of women's struggles in the appreciation of literature.

Liberal feminism sees literature as an effort to explore the equality of opportunities presented in a discourse (Afiah & Muslim, 2021). Discourse serves as a means to document various phenomena and civilizations within society. Literature also acts as a tool for education and for imparting values to society (Irma, 2017). The utilization of literature to convey feminist ideas occurs in various patterns, depending on the needs and background of the work. In this regard, liberal feminist studies in literature tend to focus on critiquing disparities in aspects of egalitarianism and access to resources such as economics, appreciation, and gender relations (Afiah & Muslim, 2022). In Indonesia, the development of liberal feminism, as reflected in literary works, was initially driven by the spirit of equal opportunities and roles in the social environment, as exemplified in the case of R.A. Kartini. Although indirectly, Kartini initiated a form of liberal feminist struggle, particularly regarding educational equality, which later culminated in her writings being published as the book "*Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang*" ("*Out of Darkness Comes Light*").

Kartini observed limited access to education for women, particularly in Java, which adhered strictly to traditional customs. Women were not afforded significant access to education, and even when such access was granted, it was highly restricted and primarily intended as a means of self-adornment to prepare them for submission to the feudal and masculine structures, typically through marriage to nobility. Numerous works containing liberal feminist elements include *Sitti Nurbaya* (Rusli, 1922), *Kehilangan Mestika* (Hamidah, 1935), *Layar Terkembang* (Alisyabana, 1936), *Belenggu* (Pane, 1940), *Manusia Bebas* (Djojo-puspito, 1944), *Widyawati* (Purbani, 1948), *Burung-burung Manyar* (Mangunwijaya, 1981), *Saman* (Utami, 1999), *Geni Jora* (El-Khalieqy, 2004), and *Putri* (Putu Wijaya, 2004).

As a democratic nation, Indonesia, albeit not explicitly, demonstrates that the development of literary works embracing feminist themes commonly adopts the principles of liberal feminism (Purnomo, 2017). This creates significant opportunities for research on liberal feminism. Previous studies examining the novel *Geni Jora*, such as those by Amat (2015), Puspita (2018), and Windasari et al. (2023), have primarily focused on general feminism, women's concerns, and the dynamics of patriarchal culture, leaving the specific discussion of liberal feminism unexplored. To address this gap, further research is necessary to analyze the liberal feminist elements in the novel *Geni Jora* by Abidah El-Khalieqy specifically. In the present study, the novel was chosen as it is one of the most influential works in developing feminism in Indonesia. Correspondingly, this study aimed to analyze the novel *Geni Jora* by Abidah El-Khalieqy from the perspective of liberal feminism.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research approach. This approach involves describing a phenomenon by prioritizing the quality and depth of discussion as the primary aspect of analyzing emerging facts (Barlian, 2016). The researcher utilized a literature study method. Consequently, this study relied on a review of the literature to gather and analyze data and theories (Manab, 2015). The data collection techniques involved reading and note-taking. The collected data were subsequently condensed, displayed, and concluded. Data validity in this study was ensured through theoretical triangulation. The data analysis techniques consisted of data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The issues related to liberal feminist critique in the novel *Geni Jora* by Abidah El-Khalieqy are significant to explore. It is essential to understand that her works often elaborate on and blend egalitarian and Islamic theological perspectives. Growing up in a strongly theological environment and pursuing an Islamic education, Abidah El-Khalieqy is actively involved in theological discourse. Her background deeply influences her works, which address feminist issues intertwined with theological inequalities. It is well known that theological hegemony often restricts aspects of equality and justice in gender issues. This has become a sensitive topic, as it concerns the equal freedom of women and men. Abidah El-Khalieqy integrates this context into her novels, combining Islamic life with feminist ideas.

The novel *Geni Jora* by Abidah El-Khalieqy is a progressive work that addresses feminism within a strong theological context framework. It seeks to highlight the problem of gender inequality that persists and is perpetuated by restrictive structures in the name of religion and culture. This is crucial, as one of the key concerns of the liberal feminist movement is the influence of theological power in limiting egalitarianism and opportunities (Skwire, 2015). As a novel set in the context of Islamic culture, it boldly presents various conflicts and ideological tensions. The novel succeeds in deconstructing gender notions and reconstructing perspectives on equality and social opportunities. Its ability to redefine gender roles is also reflected in the findings of Puspita (2018), which highlight the struggles of gender in positioning itself within society.

The novel *Geni Jora* is steeped in Islamic cultural settings, with much of the story also taking place in Middle Eastern locations. It tells the story of Jora, a young Muslim woman pursuing her studies in the Middle East. Women and the Middle East serve as clear symbols of the struggle for gender equality. Women are often perceived as representatives of a gender frequently subjected to opportunity disparities (Fotaki, 2013). In the novel, Jora is depicted as experiencing gender discrimination from a young age. She is repeatedly exposed to the notion that men are superior to women, necessitating women's submission to patriarchally constructed power doctrines. This imbalance is also evident during her time studying at the Islamic boarding school, where she suffers verbal and physical harassment by a man, which is then justified by her peers.

Jora's attempts to seek justice are encountered with inadequate support, as her environment views such injustices as a norm. The novel also portrays similar injustices suffered by Lola, Jora's older sister, and Elsy, her friend. One notable excerpt depicts a conversation between Jora and her grandmother after she experiences an immoral act:

*"Siapakah perempuan? Barisan kedua yang menyimpan
aroma melati kelas satu? Semesta alam terpesona ingin
meraihnya, memiliki dan mencium wanginya. Tetapi kelas dua?
Siapakah yang menentukan kelas-kelas? Sehingga laki-laki
adalah kelas pertama? Se men tara Rabi'ah al Adawiyya laksana
roket melesat mengatasi ranking dan kelas...
Nilai ranking pertama tetapi (sekali lagi tetapi), jenis
kelaminku adalah perempuan. Bagaimana bisa perempuan
ranking per tama?..."*

("Who are women? The second tier,
carrying the scent of first-class jasmine?
The universe is mesmerized, yearning to reach them, to possess and inhale their
fragrance. But the second tier?
Who defines these tiers, placing men in the first tier?
Meanwhile, Rabi'ah al-Adawiyya soars like a rocket,
transcending ranks and classes...
My grades rank first, but (once again, but)

my gender is female. How can a woman rank first? ...")

The above excerpt depicts that the author attempts to convey the concept of an unjust class system. Regardless of one's achievements and qualities, they remain in a second-tier position regarding stratification and recognition. This pattern represents a classic feminist issue: that even in philosophical discourses, women are discriminated against. Aristotle, for instance, described women as physically mature children, which exemplifies the legitimization of viewing women as only half-human. The subsequent dialogue further emphasizes that the novel seeks to portray women as beings who are defeated and mentally oppressed:

Dari atas kursinya, nenekku mulai ceramah. Bahwa perempuan harus selalu mengalah. Jika perempuan tidak mau mengalah, dunia ini akan jungkir balik berantakan seperti pecahan kaca. Sebab tidak ada laki-laki yang mau mengalah. Laki-laki selalu ingin menang dan menguasai kemenangan. Sebab itu perempuan harus siap me-nga-lah (pakai awalan 'me').
"Jadi selama ini Nenek selalu mengalah?"
"Itulah yang harus Nenek lakukan, Cucu."
"Pantas Nenek tidak pernah diperhitungkan."
"Diperhitungkan?" Nenek melonjak.
(Khalieqy, 2003: 61).

(From her chair, my grandmother began to lecture, that women must always yield. If women refuse to yield, this world will turn upside down and fall apart like broken glass. Because no man will ever yield. Men always want to win and dominate victory. Therefore, women must be ready to yield.
"So, all this time, you have always yielded?"
"That's what I had to do, my dear."
"No wonder you are never considered."
"Considered?" Grandma jumped.)
(Khalieqy, 2003: 61).

The narrative found in this novel seems to suggest that detrimental culture and theological rules have intertwined, causing normative boundaries to become blurred. The theological realm does not necessitate discriminatory attitudes or oppression by patriarchal forces. However, the oppressive mindset does not arise solely from divine nature; rather, such a mindset stems from theological interpretations and is nurtured by an oppressive and patriarchal mental attitude.

This mental attitude is sustained by the environment and passed down over generations due to the acceptance of both oppressors and the oppressed. Referring to Freire's perspective in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the oppression tends to perpetuate itself, as the oppressed may also contribute to the continuation of their own subjugation as a manifestation of an oppressed mentality. This notion seems to be illustrated by the justification given by Jora's family for the oppression perpetrated by patriarchal forces.

The novel also presents the intrigue between Jora and Zakky as the central characters who predominantly drive the narrative. Jora has a lover named Zakky, who is portrayed as a young man highly skilled in wordplay. Zakky is depicted as desiring to possess all the women he admires, including his lover's sister. Taking advantage of his charm, Zakky often engages in romantic affairs with many women, adding layers of intrigue to the story. The love story between Jora and Zakky is fraught with jealousy, love, anger, affection, and fiery passion characteristic of young lovers. Zakky's character clearly represents patriarchal attitudes. His worldview, characterized by his desire to dominate multiple women, reflects an assertion of control over women. Women are portrayed as

objects within a struggle of desire and emotion, seemingly allowed to be dominated by patriarchal symbols but denied the right to reciprocate. The interaction between these two opposing characters illustrates the novel's effort to depict an ideological struggle between patriarchy and feminism.

From the perspective of the intrinsic elements of *Geni Jora*, the novel carries both minor and major themes. The minor theme revolves around the intrigue in the love story between Jora and Zakky, a couple with differing ideological views wrapped in the commitment of a romantic relationship. The story presents conflict arising from their fundamental differences in principles. The major theme, on the other hand, addresses feminism or gender conflict. This is evident from the causal relationships that construct the story, which consistently uphold these values.

The storyline of this novel portrays various forms of discrimination, beginning with the orientation phase that introduces the setting, main characters, and other elements. It progresses to the emergence of conflict, where Zakky's attitude begins to differ from Jora's principles. The intensity escalates as Jora opposes Zakky's actions, culminating in a strong confrontation over the fundamental principles and perspectives on gender inequality. The novel's climax occurs during the profound conflict of principles concerning gender perspectives and the roles of Jora and Zakky. This confrontation is marked by various interests and conflicts laden with ideological narratives, focusing heavily on the struggle for hegemonic influence.

The proposed resolution does not seem to sacrifice the fundamental forms that have previously existed. This resolution can occur when both the oppressors and the oppressed soften their perspectives on the existing conflict. It signifies that the feminist movement has successfully shifted the paradigm of thought represented by Zakky, who begins to relent and compromise for their collective continuity. The strong message conveyed by this novel is that all forms of domination and oppression, under any pretext, cannot be justified. Every act of oppression and injustice must be fought against. In addressing conflicts, humans must always be adaptive and able to find the most appropriate solutions.

Based on the analysis results, it can be concluded that the novel *Geni Jora* portrays the realities of gender inequality in life. The novel successfully establishes its movement from the beginning by using the symbol of "*Geni*" as the title, which can be interpreted as a symbol of movement, resistance, and hope for rejecting injustice. The novel vividly presents a masculine structure that can bind an individual's freedom in life. It boldly depicts the dual sinister faces of patriarchy: the old face represented by explicit sexual harassment by a colleague and the new form of masculinity embodied by the character Zakky, who views women as objects of superficial love. This novel also succeeds in building a sense of rationality, emphasizing that there are still unresolved issues within this civilization. The theological domain remains a favored refuge for certain groups to protect their interests.

CONCLUSION

The novel *Geni Jora* presents a symbol of resistance against oppressive masculinity. This romance story explores the dichotomous split between feminist and masculine gender perspectives. The novel integrates ideological hegemony and contextualizes it within the romantic intrigue between the characters Jora and Zakky. Through this narrative structure, readers are encouraged to better understand and absorb the story's message in a more accessible way. The novel also offers a fresh perspective on the attitudes humans should adopt in unequal situations while still finding meaning and wisdom within them. Readers of this novel are also encouraged not to become trapped in a one-sided understanding of certain theological or traditional views. Instead, they should maintain an open mind to fully appreciate and enjoy the novel.

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