



Subaltern in the Novel *Buku Merah Kirayu* by Budhi Kurniawan: A Postcolonial Study of Spivak

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Abstrak

*This study aims to describe the forms of domination by hegemonic groups over the subaltern and how the subaltern is narrated in the novel *Buku Merah Kirayu*. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the author's perspective from a sociological standpoint. The object of analysis in this research is the novel *Buku Merah Kirayu*. Primary data sources are derived from the text of the novel, while secondary data sources include scholarly articles and news articles relevant to the research topic. The data is analyzed using Spivak's theory of subalternity. According to Spivak, the subaltern is defined as a group that is not only marginalized but also lacks a voice in dominant power structures. The analysis is conducted in two stages: textual analysis and an examination of the sociological aspects of the author. The results show that the narrative about the subaltern in the novel *Buku Merah Kirayu* is constructed in the prologue, which contains the author's critique of a political system that fails to serve the interests of the people, particularly marginalized groups whose voices are not heard. Furthermore, subalternity is also depicted through the character Ilena, who represents the victim (subaltern), and the character Daruna, who exercises dominance and oppression (hegemon). From a sociological perspective, the author's stance shows solidarity with the subaltern, aligns with progressive social groups, and positions themselves as an advocate against the oppression of subaltern groups.*

Keywords: Novel, Subaltern, Post-colonial

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary literary works often serve as a platform where authors explore and respond to the legacy of colonialism and its implications in contemporary life and culture. Postcolonial literature, as part of this category, not only delves into the impacts of colonial history but also highlights efforts to reconstruct identity, revive marginalized languages and cultures, and address the challenges of modern globalization.

Postcolonial authors frequently employ complex and varied narrative techniques to depict personal and collective experiences from perspectives that are often excluded from dominant narratives. They amplify voices from the margins, explore identity conflicts, and respond to injustices and inequalities rooted in colonial history. Thus, contemporary and postcolonial literature functions not only as a reflective mirror of the past but also as a stage for articulating struggles and aspirations to create a more inclusive and just future.

The concept of the subaltern, introduced by Spivak, plays a significant role in the dynamics of power and representation. Originally coined by Antonio Gramsci and later expanded by Spivak, the term refers to groups that are not only marginalized but also voiceless within dominant power structures. In the postcolonial context, Spivak defines the subaltern as encompassing those restricted in access to power (Setiawan, 2018), including women, the impoverished, and marginalized minorities.

In her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Spivak, 2010), Spivak emphasizes that while efforts to understand and listen to subaltern voices exist, their representation is often reduced or politicized by dominant forces. She highlights the complexities of representing or advocating for subaltern interests, as narratives about them are frequently appropriated or debated by those outside their own group. Spivak critiques how postcolonial and feminist studies sometimes co-opt or reduce subaltern experiences into broader intellectual agendas, failing to provide adequate space for their authentic voices. This critique calls for profound reflection on power, representation, and ethics in research and activism concerning marginalized groups.

Research conducted by Lestari, Suwandi, & Rohmadi (2018) applied subaltern studies to novels written by Soeratman Sastradihardja. This study focused on forms of oppression experienced by subaltern groups, particularly women, including marginalization, labeling, socio-economic disenfranchisement, and subjugation to prevailing customary laws. Subaltern women were positioned as secondary to men and ranked lower than Dutch or Javanese women with access to education.

Another study by Bahardur (2017) examined *Orang-orang Blanti* by Wisran Hadi (2000), *Maya* by Ayu Utami (2014), and *Gadis Pantai* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (2003). This research explored how indigenous women, classified as subaltern, experienced oppression and resisted colonial ideologies. Findings revealed that these characters, especially women, endured marginalization, economic deprivation, labeling, and sexual harassment as part of their subaltern condition.

Research on *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022) has been conducted by Putri (2023) using Lucien Goldmann's structuralism to examine the novel's text structure. This study, however, uses the same novel with a different approach. It focuses on the narrative of subalternity within the text of *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022) and the author's perspective. Accordingly, this research aims to describe the forms of domination exerted by hegemonic groups over the subaltern and how the subaltern is narrated in the novel *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022). Additionally, it seeks to identify the author's viewpoint from a sociological perspective.

METHOD

This study is qualitative in nature. The material object of this research is the text of the novel *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022) by Budhi Kurniawan. Qualitative research prioritizes the quality of data (Moeloeng, 2007). The formal object of this research is the narrative concerning dominant groups and subaltern groups. The primary data source is the text of the novel *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022), while the secondary data sources consist of scholarly articles and news articles related to the research topic. The primary data in this study include the content and ideas presented in the novel *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022). The secondary data include the author's biography. The data are analyzed using Spivak's theory of the subaltern. The analysis is conducted in two stages: textual analysis and analysis of the sociological aspects of the author.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section is divided into two subsections. The first discusses the narrative of the subaltern constructed in the text of the novel *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022). The second examines the author's perspective on subaltern groups.

1. Dominance of the Dominant Group and Subaltern Resistance

The novel *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022) tells the story of Kirayu, an activist opposing a controversial policy, the *RUU Ayam Mati* (Dead Chicken Bill). Kirayu's resistance is strongly supported by Daruna Riwayanto, a politician from a party called *Partai Bola Api* (Fireball Party). The proposed bill sparked both support and opposition, leading to widespread debates and demonstrations. Kirayu and Daruna were vocal opponents of the policy, with Daruna actively voicing his opinions through protests and mass media.

However, amid the heated debates over the *RUU Ayam Mati*, Daruna became a suspect in a corruption case. This development forced Daruna to defend himself and attempt to negotiate with Kirayu for his support. Kirayu remained cautious toward Daruna's intentions. Meanwhile, Kirayu grew close to Ilena, a friend and employee at *Partai Bola Api*. Their relationship developed after Ilena found Kirayu's red book. Since Kirayu was already married, he had to be careful in navigating this closeness.

Eventually, the truth came to light. It was revealed that Daruna had coerced Ilena into influencing Kirayu. Ilena, powerless as a subordinate, was under Daruna's authority. In the end, Daruna was convicted of corruption and sentenced to prison.

The novel *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022) primarily focuses on socio-political themes in Indonesia, highlighting various social phenomena within the context of political dynamics and the schemes of politicians, represented here by the hegemonic group holding power in the story. Although the novel touches on the concept of subalternity, it does not position it as the central focus of the narrative.

politik sejatinya adalah dunia yang jungkir balik. ia bisa jadi seperti roller coaster yang meluncur di antara besi-besi penyangga yang membetot ketakutan dan kesenangan, rel-rel yang bergerak di antara kesadaran dan emosi, amarah dan sedih, kecemasan sekaligus harapan, serta sandiwara yang kerap dipertontonkan petinggi-petinggi partai politik. politik sejatinya adalah permainan di pasar malam, yang hanya menari jika menimbulkan ketegangan dan kengerian. tanpa itu, politik ibarat pasar boneka yang hanya lucu dipigura, dinikmati sesaat sebagai sebuah pemandangan, tapi setelah itu dibiarkan seperti barang antik yang hanya dipajang. (page: 1-2).

The excerpt is part of the prologue in the novel *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022). This section portrays political instability and uncertainty as a roller coaster oscillating between awareness and emotion, reflecting the experience of subaltern groups who are marginalized and lack control over their own narratives. The depiction of politics as "a game at a night market, dancing with tension and horror" illustrates how subaltern individuals often become victims in power plays manipulated by the elite. The characterization of politics as "a spectacle staged by political party leaders" highlights how subaltern narratives are frequently manipulated to maintain the status quo, leaving the subaltern as spectators with neither control nor full understanding.

Through this prologue, it becomes clear that the narrative serves as the author's critique of a political system that fails to serve the people, especially marginalized groups whose voices are silenced. The author conveys a sense of being trapped and deceived by the political system, where supporters may believe they are championing good causes but, in reality, are merely tools for those in power.

Kirayu tersentak. Ia tatap Ilena, perempuan yang selama lima hari ini menghabiskan waktu bersamanya. Tiba-tiba ia tersadar, jangan-jangan Ilena sengaja diutus Daruna untuk menjebaknya agar menuruti permintaannya, mempertemukan ia dengan Irta Swadesi. Ilena tak sungguh-sungguh dengan perasaannya. Selama ini, gadis itu ternyata berdusta kalau ia menyukai Kirayu. Semua yang ia ucapkan, semua perhatian yang ia berikan, ternyata bohong belaka. Ilena sekadar menjalankan tugasnya dari Daruna. (Page: 120)

The excerpt refers to a part of the story where Ilena is found to be approaching Kirayu only because of an order from Daruna to influence him into helping with his defense in the corruption case involving Daruna.

The narrative of subalternity is also constructed through the characters in the story. In the novel *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022), this narrative is built through the character of Ilena. As an employee of the Bola Api Party and a subordinate of Daruna Riwayanto, her position within the political hierarchy places her in a vulnerable position, with limited access to control her own fate. Ilena is coerced by Daruna to use her relationship with Kirayu, highlighting her dependence on higher power. Although she may have different views or desires, her economic and social limitations trap her in the power dynamics that govern her life. As a subaltern, Ilena lacks the power or authority to oppose or change the situation she faces, reflecting the condition where the voices and experiences of subalterns are often marginalized or ignored within a dominant power structure.

Meanwhile, the symbolism of the hegemonic group, as narrated in the novel, can be seen through the character of Daruna Riwayanto. Daruna's position as the head of the Bola Api Party places him in a position of power or at the highest level of the hierarchy. Daruna holds authority in the dominant narrative. His abuse of power is evident in how he uses Ilena to influence Kirayu, trying to get his help in defending himself against the corruption charges. Meanwhile, Kirayu rejects his request, even though they are supposed to be on the same side.

Mula-mula Ilena senang, karena Daruna menjadi sangat royal kepadanya, ia suka makan-makan enak, dibelikan baju baru, dan suka diberi bonus tambahan. Tapi Daruna, yang sering mengaku masih kerabat dengan ayahnya itu, ternyata bukan sekedar memberi kepadanya. Di balik berbagai pemberiannya itu, tersimpan Hasrat ingin memiliki Ilena. Daruna bukan hanya suka merangkul dan memeluknya, ia bahkan pernah hamper memerkosanya. Berkali-kali lelaki itu mencoba memerkosanya, namun selalu gagal karena Ilena selalu melawan. (p. 136).

Based on the excerpt, we can see that Daruna, who holds a dominant position and has more power than Ilena, abuses his position to exploit and sexually pressure Ilena. Although Ilena initially enjoyed the attention and gifts from Daruna, it turns out that Daruna had deeper and unethical motives. He uses his power to sexually coerce Ilena, attempting to rape her even though Ilena continuously resists.

This reflects a form of oppression carried out by those in power (Daruna) against the subaltern (Ilena). Daruna not only exploits his economic and material power to influence Ilena but also abuses her trust and his authoritative position for immoral purposes, violating Ilena's rights as an individual. Meanwhile, Ilena is the victim of the hegemonic group's domination. This illustrates how imbalanced power relations can lead to serious abuses against those in weaker or subaltern positions.

2. Author's Perspective

The analysis of subalternity in the novel *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022) cannot be limited to studying the text alone. This is because the text in *Buku Merah Kirayu* (Kurniawan, 2022) is merely a fiction or creation of the author. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the

author's perspective on subalternity. The author's views can be analyzed by identifying the sociological aspects of the author. These aspects include the author's social background and their role as a representative of a particular social group.

Budhi Kurniawan is an activist and journalist who has dedicated his life to fighting for justice for all people. Since his high school years, he has demonstrated his commitment to social issues by joining the *Pusat Informasi Jaringan Aksi untuk Reformasi (PIJAR)*, an organization that criticized the New Order regime and rallied support for resistance. His involvement in this organization shows his alignment with the marginalized, those who lack access to basic needs (Muhadam, n.d.). Additionally, he actively participated in discussions and demonstrations against tyranny and was involved in *Pelajar Islam Indonesia (PII)*, an organization that cares not only about education but also about national issues (Mustakim, 2022).

As a journalist, Budhi Kurniawan continues to play a role in advocating for the rights of minorities, who are often ignored or treated unjustly. An example of this is his action in 2012 with the *Aksi Pengumpulan 1000 Sandal (Collection of 1000 Sandals Action)*, which was a form of criticism against the police's policy regarding a case where a child was suspected of stealing sandals from a member of the *Brimob Polda Sulteng*. Budhi Kurniawan fought for justice to be upheld impartially.

Based on Budhi Kurniawan's social background, it is clear that the author is a representative of a progressive social group focused on social justice, human rights, and the empowerment of subaltern groups. This group focuses on significant and profound social change. They advocate for reforms in various aspects of life, including politics, economics, and social matters, to achieve social justice, equality, and human rights. In the context of subalternity, the author positions himself as an opponent of the oppression of subaltern groups by highlighting issues often ignored by dominant narratives and giving a voice to those on the margins of society.

The author is aware of the existence of subaltern groups. In relation to the textual analysis and the author's sociological aspects, the author's ideas about subalternity suggest that the subaltern is a group that is oppressed and marginalized, unable to access a platform to voice themselves in dominant narratives. The hegemonic group that holds power in the dominant narrative manipulates intrigue and uses politics as a tool, leaving subaltern groups without space for themselves. Based on his social background, Budhi Kurniawan becomes an agent who gives a voice to the subaltern groups regarding their oppression caused by the hegemonic groups.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis that has been conducted, the narrative related to subalternity built in the text is found in the prologue of the novel. Additionally, further depictions are found in several characters. The character Ilena represents the subaltern group. Ilena becomes a victim of the oppression carried out by the hegemonic group. Meanwhile, the hegemonic group is represented by the character Daruna. This character holds dominance in the hierarchy with the highest position and carries out forms of oppression against the subaltern character (Ilena).

The author's perspective is examined from a sociological aspect. Based on his social background, Budhi Kurniawan shows a clear alignment with the subaltern group, as reflected in his actions and social influence around him. Budhi Kurniawan represents a progressive social group that focuses on social justice, human rights, and the empowerment of subaltern groups.

His position in the context of subalternity is one of resistance and opposition to the oppression of subaltern groups.

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