

WHEN WOUNDS BECOME LANGUAGE: THE WOMAN'S BODY AND PERFORMATIVE GENDER IN TWO WOMEN'S LITERARY NARRATIVES

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Abstract: This article examines the representation of the female body and gender performativity in two contemporary Indonesian novels: *Hold On, It Hurts* by Noveni Adelia and *Perempuan yang Tunggu di Lorong Menuju Laut* by Dian Purnama. Using Judith Butler's performative gender theory, this article analyzes how social constructions of femininity are challenged, negotiated, and subverted through the experiences of wounding, trauma, and alienation of female characters. The female body in both narratives becomes not only an object of power but also a site of resistance against heteronormative and patriarchal norms. This research demonstrates that wounding and suffering are not merely personal traumas but also political language that articulates women's collective anxieties over social repression. Thus, the female body presents itself as an open text, demonstrating that gender performance is a practice constantly negotiated.

Keywords: Female Body, Performative Gender, Judith Butler, Trauma, Women's Literature, Wound

1 Introduction

In the modern era, discussions about women remain relevant and even topical. This is because women's issues, along with their various dynamics, have not subsided; in fact, they have increased significantly with the development of digital media, which has contributed to their voices. One frequently discussed issue is the issue of the body, in addition to the patriarchal system that dominates socio-culturally.

The female body and the experience of injury, as central to the narratives of Indonesian women's literature, are a particularly compelling topic because they are timeless. In contemporary Indonesian women's literature, the injured body, both physically and psychologically, becomes a symbol of resistance against patriarchal hegemony. Trauma and injury are not merely personal experiences but also manifestations of social ideologies and power that place women in oppressed positions (Subagya, 2018). This narrative shifts attention from passive representations of femininity, as often described by the "fragrant literature" group, to a

new discourse that recognizes the body as a site of conflict and resistance. The body, as a meeting place between social norms and individual identity, is an issue that makes women's dynamics increasingly compelling to discuss.

Patriarchal norms often regulate women's bodies through moral and social norms, while the body itself becomes a tool for women to manage and assert their identity. In some stories, a wounded body symbolizes an internal conflict between adherence to norms and the desire to survive or speak out (Smith, 2018). Women not only endure suffering but also use wounds as a means to symbolically express resistance.

This study examined two recent Indonesian novels by female authors: "Hold On, It Hurts" by Noveni Adelia, which tells the story of her character, Dr. Anindia, whose repeated falls in a conflicted marriage led to her body and soul becoming the site of injuries that incarnate personal and social trauma. The novel "Perempuan yang Tunggu di Lorong Menuju Laut" (Women Waiting in the Lorong Menuju Laut) also presents "the Lorong" and the sea as symbols of women's vulner-

ability and uncertainty, and her body as a representation of silence and social tension. Both novels depict women experiencing wounds and trauma as reflections of gender injustice and oppression against women. However, how these injuries can be transformed into a symbolic language of resistance remains a topic of discussion.

This study is still rarely conducted by other researchers. The novel titled *Perempuan yang Tunggu di Lorong Menuju Laut*, by Dian Purnomo, has been researched by [Fajri & Zulfadhli \(2024\)](#) regarding the feminist elements in the depiction of women in it, which shows that female characters are depicted progressively and challenge patriarchal stereotypes. Furthermore, [Hayah \(2025\)](#) applies an ecofeminist approach, exploring the environmental impact and forms of women's resistance to the mining industry. [Salsabila \(2024\)](#) utilizes Gramsci's theory of hegemony to examine economic domination and acts of resistance carried out by the Sangihe community. [Safitri et al. \(2024\)](#) examine the novel using Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism approach and language teaching methods in high school. In contrast, to date, there has been no academic research or thesis that reviews the novel *Hold On, It Hurts* by Noveni Adelia. Since there has been no analysis of these two novels using Judith Butler's theory, these two novels can be analyzed using that theory.

Both novels are analyzed using Judith Butler's critical concept of gender performativity, which examines how gender is not essential but rather contextually recreated within power. This theory attempts to reveal that injury is not merely a personal experience but also a manifestation of resistance to systems that oppress women's bodies and identities. Both novels demonstrate how gender expression in situations of injury actually reveals resistance and subversion to oppressive normative power.

2 Result and Discussion

The analysis of these two novels will be conducted using the theories of Judith Butler, an American philosopher and gender theorist who has been highly influential in the evolution of feminist theory, queer theory, and gender studies since the late 20th century. She is known for her views on gender performativity, which shifts the way we view gender identity as something shaped by social and cultural action, rather than fixed biological factors. She teaches philosophy and comparative literature at the University of California,

Berkeley. Butler's theories are influenced by Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jacques Derrida. Gender identity is a conceptual process of labeling an individual as male or female, or neither, as perceived and interpreted by the individual. This gender identity is manifested by a person in the form of behavior and personality that will direct the individual's actions in accordance with the meaning attached to themselves as male or female ([Rokhmansyah, 2016](#)). The discussion will focus solely on describing the main characters of the two aforementioned novels.

2.1 Representation of the Wounded Female Body

1. Novel *Hold On, It Hurts*

Dr. Anindia's marriage to her husband, Jeandra, was not smooth faced numerous obstacles. The novel depicts Anindia's attempts to conceal emotional pain and social pressures during the wedding:

"I smiled. But my heart was struggling. To fulfil my father's last wish... I had to endure." ([Adelia, 2023](#))

Here, her body, her "struggling" chest, is clearly visible, symbolizing the invisible yet palpable wounds. The smile she displays while her body endures the pain demonstrates a performative gender practice: she "pretends to be strong" to meet social and patriarchal expectations.

"I don't even know who will be sitting at the altar with me. But everyone says this is for the best." ([Adelia, 2023](#)).

The quote above demonstrates Anindia's subjective disconnection from her own life decisions. She is not a choosing subject, but an object of the social system. The act of marriage becomes a "performance" to fulfil family and societal norms, not a personal choice. Likewise, the following quote further reinforces Anindia's claim of "woundedness."

"They say I'm happy. But what does happiness mean if my voice isn't heard?" ([Adelia, 2023](#)).

This statement further emphasizes how collective narratives drown out women's voices. In Butler's framework, women's identities are

shaped through symbolic and social repetition, such as a woman's happiness in marriage. However, Anindia exposes the weaknesses in these structures by poignantly questioning the meaning of happiness. Anindia is a symbol of a woman suffering in silence and forced to demonstrate resilience. Her body (specifically her breasts, face, and voice) serve as the primary means of gender performance. By suppressing emotional turmoil and remaining "okay," she engages in performative gender practices within a patriarchal cultural context that mandates obedience.

2. Novel Perempuan yang Menunggu di Lorong Menuju Laut

One of Shalom's inner monologues suggests a sense of alienation between body and space:

"I stood in that dark hallway, my chest tight, waiting for the waves... but my body remained frozen." (Purnomo, 2024).

The descriptions of a "tight chest" and a "frozen" body not only depict psychological wounds but also demonstrate the body as an arena of conflict between women's needs and external pressures.

"There was no sound in that hallway. Only my footsteps touched the cold tiles, as if I wasn't allowed to make a sound." (Purnomo, 2024).

The statement "not allowed to make a sound" illustrates the repression of women's expression, silenced by circumstances. The hallway symbolizes the patriarchal social structure that confines women's voices. Shalom doesn't scream, but her presence in the hallway is a silent political presence, a meaningful performative act.

"The sea at the end of the hallway is too far away. I'm not sure I'll reach it, but I keep waiting." (Purnomo, 2024).

The sea, as a metaphor for freedom or salvation, seems distant and nearly impossible, yet Shalom chooses to wait as a survival strategy. In Butler's view, the act of waiting itself is a subversive practice; she does not surrender, but postpones the system's compulsion to determine its course.

Shalom's body in this novel is not explicitly presented as a site of active rebellion, but as a silent and wounded body that becomes another form of resistance. She was "frozen," "still," and "waited" as a reversal of social norms that require women to move according to social constructs. Butler (1990) states that the body is a social construction formed through repeated performative acts. Anindia and Shalom's bodies, though seemingly passive, bear wounds as a form of resistance to patriarchal social norms that express themselves through marriage and silence in public and private spaces. Butler also emphasizes that gender performativity can involve subversion of norms, and here the act of enduring wounds and pain becomes a subversive practice, against the expectation of a "strong woman without pain."

2.2 Gender Performativity as a Response to Wounds

Judith Butler argues that gender is not an inherent identity at birth, but rather the result of a series of repeated actions controlled by social norms. Every action, whether verbal, gestural, or ritual, maintains and reinforces the illusion of gender as a 'substance.' "Gender is brought into being by a person unconsciously acting in ways that are accepted to be 'masculine.'" However, Butler also emphasizes that performativity can be subversive when someone repeats norms but in a way that disrupts or changes social expectations.

1. Hold On, It Hurts: "Pretending to be strong" as gender performance

In the novel, Anindia displays a smile that hides inner pain. The following quote captures a moment where she adjusts her behaviour to meet expectations:

"I smile. Even though my chest is struggling. Fulfilling my father's last wish... I have to endure." (Adelia, 2023).

Here, Anindia "acts" as a strong and obedient wife, not because that is her essential identity, but because social norms dictate it. She "performs" gender according to patriarchal formats, perpetuating social expectations. However, the pain in her chest indicates that this performance is not natural, but rather forced.

The smile is not an expression of joy, but rather part of a social performance, a repetitive act she must undergo to fulfill expectations as a daughter and future wife. Anindia acts "as strong and obedient, not because that is her essential identity, but because social norms and patriarchal constructs dictate it.

Thus, gender is not a fixed identity, but rather "a stylized repetition of acts", a repetition of actions governed by norms. Anindia performs the role of a "good girl" through false obedience and resilience. However, her struggling chest is an indicator of her body's resistance; she bears the scars as evidence that this performance is not natural, but rather the result of repression.

"They think I'm happy. But what's the point of being happy if you can't even let your own voice come out?" (Adelia, 2023).

This statement makes it clear that Anindia's body and voice are repressed to conform to the imposed narrative of happiness. She not only strives to conform to social norms but also resists internally, albeit silently and not openly.

2. The Woman Waiting in the Hallway to the Sea: A Subversive Silence

The character Shalom uses silence as a form of passive resistance. Although she doesn't physically or vocally resist, her body remains present as a symbol of resistance. She doesn't submit to the "passive woman" scenario of unquestioning obedience, but instead chooses silence and freezing as another form of agency.

"I stood in that dark hallway, my chest tight, waiting for the wave... but my body remained frozen." (Purnomo, 2024)

This quote shows that Shalom's immobility is not due to weakness, but rather a form of resistance to the pressure she doesn't accept. A frozen body is not a sign of powerlessness, but a subversive gesture; she refuses to conform to patriarchal structures. According to Butler (1990), gender performativity doesn't always manifest in loud or overt forms. In fact, small, unconventional actions, such as silence, delay,

or refusal to follow dominant narratives, can be forms of subversion of social constructs.

"There was no sound in that hallway. Only my footsteps touched the cold tiles, as if they weren't allowed to make a sound." (Purnomo, 2024).

This quote reinforces that the erasure of women's voices is not due to their lack of expression, but rather because the social space (the hallway) is designed to silence them. However, Shalom continues, a minimal performance that demonstrates her determination and intention to survive, even within a restrictive structure.

"I'm no longer the woman they expected. But I'm also not the shadow of that hallway. I just stay here." (Purnomo, 2024).

This statement demonstrates that Shalom is aware of her position as a woman rejected by the system, yet she does not succumb to the role of "total victim." Her silence is a form of denial of the normative narrative of women, a liminal position that carries interpretive power. According to Butler in *Gender Trouble* Butler (1990), gender is formed through the repetition of actions that conform to norms, but in certain spaces, this repetition can be disrupted and subverted. Shalom does not speak, does not rebel, but she does not submit either, and therein lies the performative and subversive nature of gender action.

3. Performative Analysis of Gender in Two Novels See Table 1

2.3 Wounds, Trauma, and the Body as a Medium of Resistance

Judith Butler, in "Gender Trouble", Butler (1990), argues that gender is not an essential identity, but rather a series of repeated actions governed by social norms. She calls this action gender performativity, that is, we become women or men through a series of learned and repeated social acts. "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."

However, according to Butler, this repetition can be disrupted, distorted, and even used as a tool to reject norms. This is where the concept of gender parody emerges. For example, the practice of drag, men per-

forming hyperbolic female roles, not only satirizes but also exposes femininity itself as an unnatural performative form. “Parody reveals that the original identity is itself an imitation... drag fully exposes the imitative structure of gender itself.” (Niedda, 2020)

This parody does not always have to be comical, but can take the form of everyday performances that disrupt dominant constructions. For example, a woman who consistently refuses to marry in a patriarchal society can be seen as a deviant repetition of the norm that actually dismantles the system. Butler cites drag performance as a prime example. A drag queen does not create a new gender, but rather repeats the feminine form so exaggeratedly that we realize that all gender is an imitation of imitation (Salih, 2002).

When Anindia hides her tears behind a smile, she is repeating the image of a “strong woman”, even though she knows it is merely a performance:

“I smile. But my chest is struggling. To fulfill my father’s last wish... I must endure.” (Adelia, 2023)

Her struggling body and forced smile are a parody of gender; she appears “strong,” but the wounds in her body and soul indicate that the norm is performed incongruously, creating an opening for critique of social expectations.

Likewise, the character Shalom remains silent in the hallway, rejecting the passive role imagined by society. This act becomes a form of parody:

“I stood in that dark hallway, my chest tight, waiting for the wave... but my body remained frozen.” (Purnomo, 2024)

The silence and the “frozen” body are a repetition of gender performance. Still, in this silence, she performs something unusual: a firm silence, one that rejects the expectation of a “soft-spoken woman”, or rather, it is a way of subverting norms through meaningful silence. Thus, the character Shalom does not resist head-on, but rather doubles the roles of “silence” and “passivity” to the extreme until the silence itself becomes a performative denial of the patriarchal system. Meanwhile, the character Anindia plays the role of wife with a “forced smile”; she appears as the “ideal woman,” but internally she is experiencing a breakdown, demonstrating the failure of this social script.

Wounds as a political language are expressed by these two women through the act of enduring pain through a smile or remaining silent, which is a form of subversive performative, where wounds are not just a condition, but a method of critique: See Table 2

Butler argues that gender parody can reveal that supposedly authentic gender identities are actually unre-

alistic simulacrum. Thus, the wounds on the female characters’ bodies are used as a language to destabilize gender norms, including the ideal feminine image.

2.4 Comparison of Narrative Strategy and Gender as Subversion

In comparing the two novels, it is clear that narrative strategies, gender performativity, and subversion of patriarchy are revealed in different ways, but both create a space of resistance to norms that restrict women.

1. Narrative Strategy: Inner vs. External Space

Hold On, It Hurts utilizes the technique of a profound internal monologue. Readers enter Anindia’s mind, witnessing firsthand how inner wounds operate through her narrative:

”I smile. Yet my chest struggles...” (Adelia, 2023).

This monologue positions wounds as an “inner language,” a full-bodied emotion hidden behind a calm exterior, inviting empathy and understanding of the character’s internal conflict. Meanwhile, the woman waiting in the corridor leading to the sea emphasizes descriptions of physical space: the dark corridor, the sea, and silence as narrative mediums:

”I stood in that dark corridor, my chest tight, waiting for the waves... but my body remained frozen.” (Purnomo, 2024)

Space and body merge in the narrative until silence becomes a tangible wound, not just a personal feeling, but a symptom of social structures that marginalize women.

2. Performativity Gender: Role and Rejection

Anindia’s “pretending to be strong” role in Hold On, It Hurts is a manifestation of gender as a learned performance and a repressed, not inherent, value:

”I have to endure.”

What happens is not purely an expression of identity, but rather an implementation of heteronormative norms: a wife must be strong. Meanwhile, in Dian Purnomo’s novel, Shalom refuses to behave “gracefully” or “gently”; she

chooses to remain silent and endure her wounds in the alley:

"My body remains frozen."

This silent steadfastness is not empty; it is a ritual of rejecting normative gender, a silent act that symbolically defies the roles expected by society.

3. Subversion of Patriarchy

Subversion means actions that shake up, undermine, or challenge dominant structures. In this context, patriarchy, as a social system that places men at the centre of power, is presented subtly yet critically through the performances of the two main characters:

In *Hold On, It Hurts*, subversion occurs through the performativity of wounds. Anindia presents herself according to societal expectations: calm, feminine, and seemingly fine. But beneath that, she feels deep trauma from toxic relationships and violence. She doesn't explicitly "fight back," but her inner wounds reveal the tension between reality and the demands of women's roles.

In other words, she continues to perform the "normative" social role of women. Still, within this performance, she inserts a subversive meaning: women can be wounded and fragile, and that doesn't make them weak, but rather strong because they endure.

"I don't even know if I can still believe in love. I love him, but why do I have to be hurt like this?" (Adelia, 2023).

"She comes home, cooks, smiles at her mother, then cries silently that night." (Adelia, 2023).

Anindia maintains the social performance of a "good girl," but it is through her inner wounds and determination to stand her ground that she challenges the patriarchal dogma that demands women always be strong, steadfast, and uncomplaining.

In the novel "Women Who Wait in the Hallway to the Sea," subversion occurs through Resistant Silence. Unlike Anindia, Shalom is physically present in public spaces as an actor of resistance,

but with a different strategy: she chooses resolute silence. In a patriarchal cultural context, women who don't speak much are considered ideal. However, Shalom reverses the meaning of silence, turning it into an act that shakes the system. In her silence, Shalom does not submit, but she asserts her rights and existence as a woman with sovereignty over her land, body, and voice.

"Shalom lay in the middle of the road. Silent, but her eyes were burning. She said nothing as she was forcibly pulled away." (Purnomo, 2024).

"In the interrogation room, she only said one sentence: 'This land belongs to my mother.' Then she was silent all night." (Purnomo, 2024).

Shalom uses her body as a tool of resistance. She stiffens her body in silence to challenge the patriarchal power that demands obedience, meekness, and submission. Within Judith Butler's framework, both Anindia and Shalom demonstrate that gender is not a fixed identity, but rather an act repeated within specific social conditions. Butler states that "gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences", meaning that anyone who deviates from what is considered "normal" will be punished. However, within this deviation lies the space for subversion.

Anindia remains in "normative performance," but her wounds reveal the illusion of stability in the role of women. Shalom deviates from expectations of soft-spokenness and submission, choosing silence as a form of resistance. Both characters challenge patriarchy not with weapons or shouts, but with performances that shake up social meanings of women: Anindia displays fragility as strength, while Shalom displays silence as resistance. Both show that subversion of patriarchy can come from within women's bodies and everyday lives, a subtle, yet shocking, feminist strategy.

3 Conclusion

The wounds on the bodies of the female characters in both novels not only reflect trauma but also form a language of resistance against patriarchal norms. Through gender parodies such as forced smiles or courageous silences, they demonstrate that gender

Table 1. Performative Analysis of Gender in Two Novels

No	Novel	Gender Performance	Subversion through Wounds
1	Hold On, It Hurts	Anindia “pretends to be strong” to meet social expectations	Emotional wounds reveal pressure and ambivalence.
2	Perempuan yang Menunggu di Lorong Menuju Laut	Shalom endures wounds with silence, rejecting conventional female roles.	Silence as a form of resistance against social domination.

Table 2. Wounds, Trauma, and the Body as a Medium of Resistance

No	Novel	Gender Parody	Subversion Mechanism
1	Hold On, It Hurts	Smiling while struggling	Showing the opposite experience: strong but fragile
2	Perempuan yang Menunggu di Lorong Menuju Laut	Scripting silence in a dark room	Refusing the role of voice, but instead speaking through the body

identity is not inherent, but rather shaped by social norms and can be reclaimed through wounds and symbolic resistance.

The female body in both novels is depicted not simply as a biological entity, but as a site of social and psychological wounds shaped by cultural pressures and patriarchal norms. In *Hold On, It Hurts*, Anindia’s body bears the emotional wounds of a forced marriage, while in *Perempuan yang Tunggu di Lorong Menuju Laut* (Woman Waiting in the Hallway to the Sea), Shalom’s body symbolizes the collective wounds of social injustice, particularly in the context of exploitation and the suppression of women’s voices.

Both female characters demonstrate how their actions constitute gender performatives. Anindia feigns strength, displaying resilience as a form of adherence to the ideal wife’s norms. Meanwhile, Shalom chooses silence and persists, making her silence a performative act that rejects the passive and submissive feminine role. These two forms of action demonstrate how gender norms are repeated, negotiated, and can even be resisted from within.

The wounds in the characters’ bodies and minds do not remain personal experiences but instead become a language of resistance against oppressive systems. Both Anindia’s forced smile and Shalom’s frozen body represent forms of subversive repetition, the repetition of gender norms in a way that creates critical distance and opens up the possibility of deconstructing the essential idea of female identity.

Both novels employ different yet mutually reinforcing narrative strategies to present critiques of patriarchy. *Hold On, It Hurts* uses internal monologue to explore wounds as an inner language, while *Perempuan yang Tunggu di Lorong Menuju Laut* uses the metaphor of a silent space to emphasize social and structural

wounds. Both feature female characters who use gender performance as a tool to question and reject hegemonic norms.

Both novels explore wounding and gender as a field of conflict, but using different media: internal narrative versus spatial narrative, inner hiding versus healing through external resilience, and resistance through role adjustment versus resistance through norm deferral. This emphasizes that gender performativity is not simply a reflection of patriarchy, but has the potential to destroy and reshape norms through parody and wounding.

Thus, both Anindia and Shalom are not merely victims, but also active subjects negotiating their identities through their bodies and experiences of wounding. They make gender performativity not merely a repetition of roles, but a strategy of resistance to oppressive systems, a concrete manifestation of what Judith Butler calls the possibility of subversion in the body that performs, resists, and ultimately resists.

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