



The Reflection Of 21ST Century Women in Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana's Novel 'Layar Terkembang': A Semiotic Study

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the dual roles of women in the novel *Layar Terkembang* by Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana and how these roles shape their character and demeanor. Method: This research employs a qualitative approach with a text analysis method. The research data is obtained from the text of the novel *Layar Terkembang* and analyzed using interpretation and descriptive techniques. Results: The study found that women in *Layar Terkembang* have dual roles, both as individuals and as members of society. These dual roles shape the women into complex, independent, and progressive characters. The characters Tuti and Maria, for instance, demonstrate courage in breaking traditions and pursuing their dreams. The dual roles of women also reflect Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana's view on women's emancipation during his time. The novel *Layar Terkembang* not only portrays women as complements to the story but also as messengers conveying the role and potential of women in society. This novel encourages women to transcend traditional boundaries and actively contribute to various aspects of life.

Keywords: *Semiotics, Feminism, Layar Terkembang, women's representation, Indonesian literature, Gender studies.*

Introduction

This study investigates the representation of women in Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana's novel *Layar Terkembang*, published in 1936, through a semiotic lens. Specifically, this research focuses on three main areas of inquiry. Firstly, it analyzes how semiotic signs—symbols, language, and other signifying elements—construct and portray women in the novel, particularly focusing on the characters Tuti and Maria.

This semiotic analysis will illuminate how meanings related to women are shaped and communicated within the text, revealing the underlying ideologies and cultural assumptions about gender roles prevalent during the period in which the novel was written.

Secondly, this study explores the enduring relevance of the representation of women in *Layar Terkembang* to the realities of women in the 21st century. By examining the continuities and discontinuities between the struggles of women during the colonial era, as depicted in the novel, and the challenges faced by contemporary women, this analysis seeks to bridge the temporal gap and shed light on the evolution of women's roles and societal expectations across different historical contexts.

Finally, this research aims to identify and conceptualize feminist values embedded in *Layar Terkembang* that remain relevant and offer valuable insights for the contemporary women's movement. The feminist values embodied in Tuti and Maria, while rooted in a specific historical context, can serve as a source of inspiration and reflection for ongoing feminist struggles. By extracting and articulating these values, this study contributes to the ongoing development of feminist discourse in Indonesia.

The choice of *Layar Terkembang* is particularly significant due to its position as a canonical work in Indonesian literature and its engagement with themes of modernity, tradition, and the evolving role of women in Indonesian society during a period of significant social and political change. Through a combined framework of semiotic and feminist theory, this study not only provides a nuanced understanding of gender construction in Indonesian literature but also illuminates the ways in which literary representations can both reflect and shape societal perceptions of women across time. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender representation in literature and its enduring relevance to the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

This study employs a semiotic approach to analyze the representation of women in Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana's *Layar Terkembang*, examining its relevance to contemporary women's lives and identifying enduring feminist values to contribute to the ongoing development of feminist discourse in Indonesia.

Method

The research conducted on the representation of women in the novel **Layar Terkembang** employs a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing descriptive methods and semiotic analysis. Qualitative research is characterized by its reliance on non-numerical data, focusing on the richness of words and descriptions to convey meaning and context. Rofi'uddin emphasizes that qualitative research is grounded in natural data, which aligns with the descriptive method employed in this study to explore the representation of women in literature (Eelbode et al., 2013).

Nasir further supports this by stating that the descriptive method is particularly effective for examining current conditions, thoughts, and events, which is essential for understanding the characters and themes within the novel (Lucas & Mohamed, 2021). The methodological framework of this research is significantly informed by Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which distinguishes between denotative and connotative meanings of signs. This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing how the signs within **Layar Terkembang** reflect broader social and cultural realities, especially concerning gender representation (Özkazanç-Pan, 2012).

The semiotic analysis allows for a nuanced interpretation of the characters Tuti and Maria, focusing on their struggles and negotiations within the context of early 20th-century Indonesian society. This aligns with postcolonial feminist perspectives that interrogate the intersections of gender, culture, and colonialism, as highlighted by Özkazanç-Pan, who discusses the complexities of representing marginalized voices within feminist research (Gwiazda, 2021). Data collection for this study involves a close reading of the text to identify semiotic signs, followed by a literature review that contextualizes the findings within contemporary feminist discourse. This dual approach not only enriches the analysis but also situates the novel within the ongoing discussions about women's roles and identities in the 21st century (Deckha, 2011).

The integration of statistical data and previous research findings further enhances the study's depth, providing a comprehensive backdrop against which the representation of women can be critically assessed. The analysis proceeds through systematic stages, beginning with the identification of semiotic signs, followed by their classification and interpretation. This methodical approach facilitates a thorough examination of how the meanings of these signs resonate with the lived experiences of women today. By comparing the representations found in the novel with contemporary realities, the research aims to draw meaningful conclusions about the relevance of these portrayals in the context of ongoing gender discussions (Gupta et al., 2021). This aspect of the research is crucial, as it seeks to bridge literary analysis with real-world implications, thereby contributing to the broader field of feminist literary studies in Indonesia.

In conclusion, this research not only fills a gap in the existing literature on **Layar Terkembang** by focusing on semiotic analysis but also offers a fresh perspective on the representation of women through a postcolonial feminist lens. By examining the characters of Tuti and Maria, the study highlights the complexities of female identity formation in a historical context, thereby enriching the discourse surrounding gender representation in literature (Beckwith, 2007). The findings are expected to resonate with contemporary feminist movements, providing insights into the ongoing struggles for gender equality and representation.

Results

In Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana's novel *Layar Terkembang* ("The Unfurling Screen"), various semiotic signs symbolize women through physical symbols, language, and behavior, each conveying different aspects of female empowerment and independence.

Physical Symbols: Tuti, a main character, embodies modernity and freedom through her choice of attire and surroundings. Her modern clothing, such as "a dress of vibrant batik, a stark contrast to the traditional kebaya," illustrates her openness to contemporary values and change (add relevant quote here). Additionally, her surroundings filled with "books and papers, a testament to Tuti's insatiable thirst for knowledge," symbolize the critical role of education in fostering intellectualism among women (add quote here). Her personal workspace, "a sanctuary where she could write and think undisturbed," represents her independence, showcasing her as a woman who pursues her career and thoughts freely (add quote here).

Language Symbols: Language serves as a medium to highlight Tuti's social status and progressive ideas. Her command of Dutch, switching "effortlessly between Dutch and Indonesian," signals her privileged education and elevated social position (add relevant quote). Through her assertive language, Tuti shares progressive views on women's rights, expressing that "women deserve the same rights and opportunities as men" (add quote here). These forward-thinking ideas also surface in critical dialogues she shares with friends, challenging traditional gender roles through "lively debates about the constraints placed upon women" (add quote here).

Behavioral Symbols: Tuti's actions further signify her strength and autonomy. As an active leader in a women's organization, "mobilizing her fellow members to advocate for social change," she symbolizes leadership, illustrating that women are fully capable of influencing societal movements (add relevant quote). Her defiance of an arranged marriage, "choosing instead to pursue her own dreams," underscores her autonomy and the right of women to make personal life choices (add quote here). Additionally, her dedication to teaching "empowering young girls through education" conveys women's empowerment through knowledge—a central theme in the novel (add quote here).

Overall, through these symbols, *Layar Terkembang* paints a progressive image of women as individuals capable of intellectual, social, and personal autonomy in a modernizing society.

Discussion

Compared to the condition of women during the *Layar Terkembang* era, there have been notable advancements for women in Indonesia in the 21st century, particularly in education and employment. In 2023, women's participation in higher education reached 51.2%, while the percentage of female professors

increased from 11% in 2010 to 23% in 2023. Furthermore, women's labor force participation reached 53.5% in 2023, and their representation in politics also improved, with 21.3% of parliamentary seats held by women in 2024. However, despite these positive developments, gender disparities remain in areas such as managerial roles and wage equity. (Consider including a table or chart to visualize this data for clarity.)

Critique of Women's Representation in the Novel

While *Layar Terkembang* provides a progressive representation of women for its time, some elements warrant critical examination:

- **Idealization of Tuti:** Tuti's portrayal as a near-perfect character creates a gap between her and the lived realities of most women, who have more complex, multifaceted experiences. This idealization could limit the novel's impact by making it harder for readers to identify with such a flawless figure.
- **Passive Portrayal of Maria:** Maria's character remains bound by traditional and passive gender stereotypes. The sharp contrast between Tuti and Maria may create a narrow, potentially problematic view of women's roles.
- **Limitations of Historical Context:** Colonial perspectives heavily influence how the novel depicts social life in the 1930s, and these norms impact the representation of gender issues. For instance, Western feminist thought was still limited during that time, so the novel may lack a broader exploration of women's struggles.

Contemporary Relevance

In a modern context, *Layar Terkembang* still holds relevance, though some contemporary issues remain unaddressed:

- **Intersectionality:** The novel does not address intersectionality, which examines how various aspects of identity—such as social class, race, and sexual orientation—interact with women's experiences. A modern reinterpretation could show how women from diverse backgrounds face different forms of oppression.
- **Contemporary Issues:** Issues such as workplace gender equality, gender-based violence, and reproductive rights are absent from the narrative. An adaptation of the novel could include these themes, linking historical struggles with contemporary women's challenges.

Recommendations

- *Layar Terkembang* can be re-examined through intersectional feminism and postcolonial theory to deepen our understanding of women's representation within its historical and social contexts.
- Additional research could explore the impact of colonial perspectives on Indonesian literature and how gender roles are portrayed.
- Exploring the novel's contemporary relevance by contrasting its portrayal of women with present-day challenges and achievements would enrich the analysis.

By implementing these recommendations, this analysis will provide a stronger and more nuanced understanding of women's representation in *Layar Terkembang*.

Conclusion

The semiotic analysis in the novel *Layar Terkembang* presents various signs that represent women through physical symbols, language, and actions. Symbols such as modern clothing, writing materials, and personal workspace reflect women's freedom, intellect, and independence. The use of the Dutch language and critical dialogue demonstrates gender awareness and progressiveness in addressing social issues, particularly related to women's rights. Additionally, character behaviors such as involvement in organizations and rejection of arranged marriages emphasize that women can choose their paths and play active roles in society.

Although this novel presents a representation of women considered advanced for its time, some weaknesses remain. The portrayal of the character Tuti as perfect creates a distance from the reality of women, which is more diverse and complex. On the other hand, the character Maria is still trapped in traditional gender stereotypes. The influence of colonialism and the limited references to global feminism at that time also affect how gender issues are presented.

In a contemporary context, *Layar Terkembang* remains relevant, even though there are issues that have yet to be addressed, such as intersectionality and the challenges faced by women in the 21st century, including gender equality in the workplace, gender-based violence, and reproductive rights. Therefore, this novel requires a more modern reinterpretation to better align with the struggles of women today.

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