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THE EXISTENCE OF THE FEMALE MAIN CHARACTER IN THE NOVEL *NYI SADIKEM*: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S EXISTENTIALIST FEMINISM

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Abstrak

Novel *Nyi Sadikem* karya Artie Ahmad menampilkan kompleksitas perjalanan hidup tokoh utama perempuan yang tidak terlepas dari pendefinisian oleh kaum patriarki. Melalui pendekatan feminisme eksistensialis Simone de Beauvoir, penelitian ini mengkaji bentuk-bentuk objektifikasi sekaligus subjektivitas perempuan yang hadir dalam novel *Nyi Sadikem*. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif yang menjadikan peneliti sebagai instrumen kunci. Sumber data yang digunakan yakni novel *Nyi Sadikem* karya Artie Ahmad yang diterbitkan oleh Marjin Kiri. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui teknik baca dan catat. Data yang dikumpulkan berupa dialog dan narasi. Prosedur penelitian meliputi, pencatatan data, mengidentifikasi dan mengolah data temuan berdasarkan teori feminisme eksistensialis Simone de Beauvoir, serta menarik kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan temuan bentuk-bentuk objektifikasi terhadap tokoh utama perempuan yang meliputi penempatan perempuan sebagai yang lain (*the other*), subordinasi, diskriminasi, dan stereotip perempuan. Ditemukan juga subjektivitas tokoh utama perempuan sebagai upaya perlawanan terhadap objektifikasi yang membelungunya, adapun bentuk-bentuk subjektivitas tokoh utama perempuan yakni penolakan penempatan perempuan sebagai yang lain (*the other*), perempuan berintelektual, dan perempuan bekerja.

Kata Kunci: feminisme, eksistensialis, perempuan

Abstract

The novel *Nyi Sadikem* by Artie Ahmad presents the complexity of the female main character's life journey, which cannot be separated from how she is defined by patriarchal society. Using Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist approach, this study examines the forms of objectification and subjectivity of women as depicted in the novel *Nyi Sadikem*. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method in which the researcher serves as the key instrument. The data source is the novel *Nyi Sadikem* by Artie Ahmad, published by Marjin Kiri. Data were collected through careful reading and note-taking. The collected data consisted of dialogues and narrative passages. The research procedure included recording data, identifying and analyzing the findings based on Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory, and drawing conclusions. The results show various forms of objectification experienced by the female main character, including her positioning as the Other, discrimination, and gender stereotyping. The study also identifies the subjectivity of the female protagonist as a form of resistance against her objectification, manifested through her rejection of the position as the Other, her intellectual capacity, and her engagement in work.

Keywords: feminism, existentialist, women

1. INTRODUCTION

A newborn baby has no choice over whether they are born with a vagina or a penis. Biological identity simply exists from birth, and every human being is given a particular sex along with equal rights and responsibilities (Abror, 2018:12). However, as an individual grows within a social environment, that biological identity begins to be interpreted by society. Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex*, explains that social definitions of men and women frequently place women in a secondary position after men, so that the two sexes have never shared the world on equal terms. Women are the group that experiences the most gender injustice (Gani & Marizal, 2023:528). In the economic, industrial, and political spheres, men have more opportunities and hold higher positions than women (Beauvoir, 2025). This situation makes it easier for men to dominate important roles in society. Such inequality gave rise to the feminist movement, which fights for the achievement of gender equality.

One of Simone de Beauvoir's most well-known statements is: "Women are not born women; they become women." This defines the idea that female identity is largely shaped by social and cultural constructions. Javanese culture is one space that shows how women are formed through cultural values. Stereotypes in Javanese culture often place women in a subordinate position (Widarwati & Purnomo, 2025:2). This pattern of construction is reflected in social and cultural practices that regulate women's roles.

The gowok tradition is one practice that shows how culture constructs women's roles. A gowok is responsible for educating a young groom-to-be so that he is ready to enter married life. The instruction provided by a gowok covers understanding what it means to be a real man, learning about women, and understanding sexual activity. This role reveals how the female body is used as a medium for teaching masculinity, while

also showing how strongly patriarchal construction governs women's roles and functions. This profession exists in an ambiguous space, where women carry out a culturally constructed function, yet at the same time can use that role to gain a degree of control.

The novel *Nyi Sadikem* by Artie Ahmad, published by Marjin Kiri in June 2025, offers a vivid depiction of how cultural construction operates in a woman's life. Elizabeth Van Kirk, also known as Moerni or Nyi Sadikem, is an Indo-Dutch woman born to a concubine. She lived well at first, receiving love and education. However, this did not last long. The arrival of her father's legal wife brought major changes that pulled Sadikem into a far more painful life. Her birth mother chose to end her own life due to pressure and slander; Sadikem was then cast aside by her stepmother and forced to live in difficult economic circumstances. In her teenage years, she faced violence that robbed her of both safety and dignity. These dark experiences led Sadikem into the world of gowok, which allowed her to survive, earn a living, and understand her body and existence in a different way.

The complexity of the female main character's life experiences and the cultural dynamics that shape her existential journey give rise to two main questions: how is the female main character in *Nyi Sadikem* treated as an object by social and cultural structures, and how does she then build her position as a subject with her own awareness, choices, and control over herself? This study aims to reveal the forms of objectification experienced by the female main character from childhood to adulthood, and to explain the process by which her subjectivity develops as she faces social, cultural, and traumatic pressures.

A similar study was previously conducted by Muchlas Abror in 2018, entitled *Subjectivity of Women in the Short Story 'Me Ny Us U Ayah'* by Djenar Maesa Ayu: An Existentialist Feminist Review of Simone de Beauvoir. That study found that to become a subject, a woman must be aware

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of her own existence and continually assert it in society. Women must be true to themselves, independent, not reliant on men, and must keep narrating themselves as beings who have strength and the power capacity, refusing to be trapped by the myths and definitions created by men.

A second study also focused on Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, was conducted by Ridwan et al. (2024:151–157) in an article entitled *The Existence of Women in the Novel Lebih Senyap dari Bisikan* by Andina Dwifatma: Existentialist Feminism of Simone de Beauvoir, published in the journal *Nuance of Indonesian Language*. The results showed that various forms of discrimination against women stem from the stigma of a patriarchal society that strips women of their freedom. The study also found forms of resistance, including the female character's rejection of the position as the Other, and the additional burden of labor placed on women.

Another study focusing on existentialist feminism was conducted by Asia, Ridwan, and Ahmad in 2025, entitled *Resistance in Fighting for Rights and Justice in the Novel Karmila* by Marga Tjoa: Existentialist Feminism of Simone de Beauvoir. That study found that the novel *Karmila* represents women who fight for their rights and justice through work, education, and refusal of gender subordination. Thus, the novel *Karmila* serves as a clear example of how existentialist feminist concepts can be realized in Indonesian literature.

Unlike these previous studies, this research offers novelty by using the novel *Nyi Sadikem* by Artie Ahmad as its primary data source. This study highlights the transformation of the female main character's existence from a position of objectification toward the formation of subjectivity through the gowok culture. In doing so, this research expands the field of existentialist feminist studies in Indonesian literature by incorporating local cultural context as a space for the formation of women's subjectivity.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method. Qualitative research is a method used to investigate the natural condition of an object, in which the researcher serves as the key instrument and the collected data takes the form of words (Sugiyono, 2023:7). This method helps the researcher describe the findings in detail regarding the forms of existence of the female main character in the novel *Nyi Sadikem*. This study employs a feminist approach grounded in Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory. The primary data source is the novel *Nyi Sadikem* by Artie Ahmad, published by Marjin Kiri in June 2025. Data were collected through an in-depth reading of the novel, followed by recording the relevant sections related to the research focus. The data analysis technique focused on the female main character, identifying dialogues and narratives that reflect her actions throughout the novel. The research procedure included careful reading of *Nyi Sadikem*, recording data relevant to the research focus, identifying and processing the findings based on Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory, concluding the analysis, and presenting the research findings descriptively using a qualitative approach.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the research objectives, the findings are organized into two main discussion areas that are closely related to each other. The first discussion focuses on how the female main character in the novel *Nyi Sadikem* experiences various forms of objectification. The second discussion examines the growth of subjectivity in the female main character in *Nyi Sadikem*. Both discussions are analyzed through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism in order to show the transformation of women's existence from a constructed position toward one capable of defining its own meaning.

Objectification of the Female Main Character in the Novel *Nyi Sadikem*

Women as the Other

Beauvoir's thinking in *The Second Sex* positions men as the absolute subject, while women are defined as the Other. Being placed as the Other means that a woman's existence is not fully recognized as a complete subject; instead, she is treated as an object across various areas of social and cultural life. This can also be understood as a strategy by men to maintain their own subjectivity by positioning women as passive objects (Meivitasari & Widyatwati, 2023:1076). The positioning of women as the Other creates an unequal power relationship and serves as the foundation for many forms of gender injustice that women experience.

Mesti ketika aku tumbuh, aku berada di kelas dua, mereka para manusia kulit putih seutuhnya seperti Isaak van Kirk, ayahku itu...mereka selalu berada di kelas satu. (Artie Ahmad, 2025:5)

This quotation illustrates how social hierarchy places the female main character in a marginal position. Although physically she resembles those in the first class, she remains in the second class after the white men. Her status as the child of a concubine further reinforces her secondary standing. This aligns with Beauvoir's framework, which holds that women are always placed in the second position while men occupy the first.

Amben kemudian bergerak seiring tubuh Bondan berayun di atas tubuhku. Nyeri menjalar dari bagian bawah tubuhku. aku ingin menjerit, tapi tak mampu. Sampai di satu puncaknya, aku benar-benar lemas. Bondan berhenti. Dia melihatku lekat-lekat. "Kalau saja kau mau denganku. Aku tak perlu melakukan ini," bisiknya dengan keringat membanjiri di wajah dan seluruh tubuhnya. (Artie Ahmad, 2025:19)

In this second quotation, the woman's body is entirely under the man's control, clearly positioning her as the Other as a passive object. According to Beauvoir, the female body is treated by men as prey, through which men seek to obtain whatever quality they desire, as with any other object (Beauvoir, 2025:152). Beauvoir also notes that a young woman has almost nothing but her body; it is her most valuable possession, and a man who enters it is essentially taking it from her. The statement "Kalau saja kau mau denganku. Aku tak perlu melakukan ini" positions the man as the absolute subject and the woman as someone who must submit. This quotation also reveals a transfer of blame from the perpetrator to the victim, where the perpetrator's action is justified as a consequence of the woman's failure to comply.

Mereka mulai mengamati dari ujung kepala sampai ujung kaki. Aku tak ubahnya budak belian yang sedang dinilai calon tuanku yang baru. (Artie Ahmad, 2025:37)

The third quotation shows the female character's positioning as the Other through the practice of objectification, which erases her subjectivity. The female main character is at work as a companion and is therefore expected to appear attractive. Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* also states that women are required by society to make themselves into erotic objects. The gaze that evaluates the woman's body illustrates how women are viewed as assessable objects. The metaphor of the woman as a "slave being evaluated" reinforces this objectification, in which women are treated as objects that can be selected and purchased.

"Sayang sejak dulu pun aku tak dipersiapkan Papa menjadi perempuan yang pintar mencari uang. Sama seperti Mama, aku dilatih menerima pemberiannya." (Artie Ahmad, 2025:39)

This quotation shows that women are constructed to occupy a lower position than men through education and the shaping of roles from an early age. The female main character reveals that she was not prepared to become financially independent, but was instead conditioned to depend on men as providers. This pattern aligns with Beauvoir's statement in *The Second Sex* that women only receive what men give them; they take nothing themselves; they only accept. Thus, the economic dependency experienced by women is a patriarchal social construction that places women as the Other, with their existence determined by men.

Discrimination

Discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of individuals based on gender, race, religion, age, or other characteristics. Beauvoir also highlights that inequality leads to extreme discrimination. Differences in roles and status between men and women, whether expressed directly through treatment and attitudes, or indirectly through the impact of laws and policies, have produced various forms of injustice (Setyorini, 2017:293). The following is an example of discrimination against the female main character found in the novel *Nyi Sadikem*.

"Saya tahu begitu pelik masalah ini. Perebutan anak memang selalu rumit. Tapi melihat hukum yang berlaku dan latar belakang kalian berdua, tetaplah Tuan Martomo yang lebih berhak. Kalau Nyonya Moerni menolak, hukum akan berlaku!" (Artie Ahmad, 2025:67)

This quotation illustrates discrimination against women in the legal sphere, visible in a unilateral decision that grants the man greater rights to child custody. The female character is not treated as an equal legal subject. This is comparable to Roman law, which restricted women's rights because women are foolish and unstable (Beauvoir, 2025). The threat, "kalau Nyonya Moerni menolak, hukum akan berlaku,"

reveals the unequal power relationship that silences women's voices. The discrimination becomes even clearer given that the female main character was never legally married to the male character.

Stereotype

Stereotyping is a form of negative social labeling that often serves as the basis for gender injustice against particular groups. In line with this, Wicaksono et al. (2022:184) state that stereotypes are labels attached to specific sexes. Stereotypes that portray women as weak beings are frequently used to justify unfair treatment, arbitrary decisions, and even violence against women (Riangtobi et al., 2025:470). The following are examples of female stereotyping found in the novel *Nyi Sadikem*.

Theodora memintaku mengenakan pakaian Mama. Kulepas gaun rumah yang masih kukenakan, kuganti pakaianku dengan kebaya dan kain jarik. Melihatku berpenampilan seperti itu, Theodora menoleh kepada anak perempuannya, Beatrice. "Kau lihat? Dia mirip sekali dengan gundik itu! Suara Theodora terdengar melecehkan. Mereka berdua tertawa. (Artie Ahmad, 2025:8)

This quotation shows stereotyping based on the woman's appearance and family background. According to Beauvoir, one function of clothing is to identify social status, such as living standards, prosperity, and social environment. When the female main character wears a kebaya and batik cloth, her appearance immediately becomes the basis for labeling her a "concubine" or "gundik." This label is also connected to her mother's status as a concubine, so the social stigma is directed not only at the individual but also inherited through family lineage.

"Moer, sudahlah. Jangan kau pikirkan lagi yang lain. Urus saja Den Mas Martomo dan

kandunganmu. Duh, Moer. Anakmu pasti cakep sepertimu.” (Artie Ahmad, 2025:50)

The second quotation shows a stereotype that limits women's roles to serving men and reproducing. Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* also states that the husband is the productive worker, while women are destined to continue the species and manage household labor. The female character in this quotation is directed to dedicate herself to interests beyond her own, focusing on meeting the needs of men and fulfilling her reproductive function.

Subjectivity of the Female Main Character in the Novel *Nyi Sadikem*

Women Rejecting the Position of the Other

Beauvoir's concept of the Other refers to women's position in the patriarchal social order, as the party whose existence is defined, limited, and given meaning through their difference from men (Rondiati et al., 2025:94). Women reject the position of the Other when they can recognize and define themselves as subjects with their own will and control over their own lives. The following are forms of this rejection.

“Aku tak ingin diikat pernikahan. Aku bebas seperti burung tanpa sangkar, tak ada ikatan” (Artie Ahmad, 2025:101)

This quotation shows that the female main character does not want to be bound by marriage and desires the freedom of a bird without a cage. She boldly determines her own choices in life, refusing to be tied to marriage. According to Beauvoir, women in marriage become increasingly passive and dependent on men, taking their husband's name, adopting his religion, adapting to his class and environment, and merging with his family (Beauvoir, 2025:238). Therefore, the female character's decision to remain outside of marriage represents a clear rejection of the position of the Other.

Aku tak menginginkan kaum perempuan selalu menjadi tempat salah. Kaum lelaki jugalah yang harus menanggung segala kerusakan. Mereka tak bisa cuci tangan seolah tak ada dosa yang mereka sebabkan. Kesalahan dua belah pihak haruslah ditanggung kedua belah pihak, bukan hanya kaum perempuan yang dipersalahkan. Terlebih ketika derajat diri disangkutpautkan. Dalam dunia sepertiku ataupun dunia di rumah hiburan Mahong, derajat sama saja. Tak ada artinya derajat ketika mereka bertemu di gelanggang seperti itu! (Artie Ahmad, 2025:201)

In this second quotation, the female main character discusses justice, responsibility, and the power dynamic between men and women. She rejects the logic that places women as the sole party to be blamed, and demands an equal sharing of responsibility. This quotation shows that women, as subjects, are capable of rejecting the definitions imposed by the patriarchal system. This is consistent with Beauvoir (in Tong, 2017:273), who states that women do not have to become what men have defined and desired them to be.

Intellectual Women

Women's existence can be demonstrated when a woman engages in intellectual activities, such as thinking and defining. Intellectual capacity can be seen in everyday life, whether through a career or through problem-solving (Fadiyah & Nawawi, 2023:98). The act of thinking enables women to make decisions, solve problems, and determine the direction of their own lives. The following quotation from the novel *Nyi Sadikem* illustrates the intellectual activity of the female main character.

*“Kau tak berkeberatan bekerja sepertiku?”
 “Tidak, Nyonya. Saya ingin menjadi cantrik, Nonya.”
 Aku tersenyum mendengarnya. Aku memperhatikan Doemilah dengan cermat. Hal pertama yang aku lakukan adalah*

mengubah penampilannya. Badan Doemilah terlalu kurus, dia harus menambah berat badan. Tubuhnya yang layu harus disegarkan. "Baiklah. Aku akan mengajarmu. Kau cantrik pertamaku." (Artie Ahmad, 2025:161)

This quotation shows that the female main character demonstrates her intellectualism through the act of teaching. This aligns with Beauvoir (in Pratiwi, 2016:21), who states that an intellectual woman can build change for other women. Through teaching, the female main character demonstrates her capacity to think, plan instructional strategies, and assert herself as a subject capable of empowering others and making an impact in her social environment.

Working Women

Women become empowered when they take an active role in the world of work in order to achieve economic independence. Beauvoir (in Adella et al., 2025:623) explains that economic independence is the main pillar for women to free themselves from the position of the Other. In line with this, Fadiyah & Nawawi (2023:97), quoting Damayanti, state that working women have the ability to be independent and thus are not reliant on men. The following quotation from the novel *Nyi Sadikem* shows how working enables the female main character to achieve a position of subjectivity.

Gowok. Satu kata itu memang masih asing untukku, tapi setelah kerap bertemu dengan Mbok Emprit, aku mulai mengerti pekerjaan macam itu. Pelajaran untuk mengajari seorang pemuda bagaimana melakukan peran sebagai suami. (Artie Ahmad, 2025:77)

This quotation shows that the female main character works as a "gowok. This occupation enables her to build financial independence and assert her existence as an individual who has control over her own skills and knowledge. According to Beauvoir (in Briantingsih &

Sumartini, 2025:727), financial independence gained through work represents a form of liberation from the grip of the patriarchal system. Although the role of gowok also reveals how the female body is often used as a medium for teaching masculinity, the female character simultaneously uses that role to teach, guide, and shape men's understanding of gender equality.

In the practice of gowok, the woman's position as the Other is not entirely passive, because she plays an active role in shaping the experience and perspective of men. This shows that the gowok practice can be seen as a space where power does not rest entirely with men, and where women are able to influence how men understand and treat women with an awareness of gender equality.

4. CONSLUSION

Based on the analysis of the novel *Nyi Sadikem* by Artie Ahmad, it can be concluded that the novel represents several forms of objectification of women. This objectification is visible through the positioning of women as the Other, discrimination that limits women's rights in the legal sphere, and the stereotypes of serving and reproducing that are attached to women. However, the study also identifies forms of female subjectivity as acts of resistance against the objectification that constrains them. This subjectivity is expressed through rejection of the positioning of women as the Other, through thinking and action that give rise to intellectual activity, and through financial independence and self-awareness as an autonomous subject.

Through the framework of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, the female main character in *Nyi Sadikem* undergoes an existential journey that begins with her definition as the Other and the restriction of her role to the domestic sphere. Through self-awareness, intellectual capacity, and her decision to work as a gowok, the female main character demonstrates her subjectivity, her ability to transcend the limits placed on her and move toward freedom and

independence as a woman. Through *Nyi Sadikem*, the novel depicts that women who are initially bound by the patriarchal order are also capable of standing powerfully on their own feet.

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