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THE EXISTENCE OF THE CHARACTER ANG SAN MEI IN PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER'S NOVEL *JEJAK LANGKAH*: A STUDY OF EXISTENTIAL FEMINISM

Wildhan Pratama¹⁾, Jendriadi²⁾, Yanti Sariasih³⁾, Evi Desmariani⁴⁾

^{1,2,3}Universitas Tidar

⁴Universitas Islam Sains Malaysia

Jl. Kapten Suparman No. 39, Potrobangsari, Magelang Utara, Jawa Tengah 56116

¹E-mail: wildhan.pratama@students.untidar.ac.id

²E-mail: jendriadi@untidar.ac.id

³E-mail: yantisariasih@untidar.ac.id

⁴Email: evidesmariani@gmail.com

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan eksistensi tokoh Ang San Mei dalam roman *Jejak Langkah* karya Pramoedya Ananta Toer melalui perspektif feminisme eksistensialis Simone de Beauvoir. Ang San Mei merupakan tokoh perempuan Tionghoa yang mengalami subordinasi berlapis sebagai perempuan, etnis minoritas, dan subjek kolonial, tetapi belum dikaji secara khusus menggunakan teori feminisme eksistensialis dengan mempertimbangkan etnisitas dan kolonialisme yang ia alami. Tokoh Ang San Mei dilih untuk dianalisis karena meski sudah digambarkan sedemikian rupa dalam memperjuangkan eksistensi, kajian terhadap dirinya masih sangat terbatas. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan teknik analisis isi. Sumber data berupa narasi, dialog, dan tindakan tokoh Mei dalam roman *Jejak Langkah*. Kerangka analisis didasarkan pada empat strategi transendensi Beauvoir, yaitu perempuan dapat bekerja, perempuan dapat menjadi intelektual, perempuan dapat bekerja untuk mencapai transformasi masyarakat, dan perempuan menolak menginternalisasi keliyanannya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Mei merepresentasikan keempat bentuk transendensi tersebut, yaitu menegaskan kemandirian ekonomi melalui pekerjaannya sebagai guru dan koki; menunjukkan intelektualitas melalui analisis geopolitik dan kesadaran berorganisasi; berkontribusi pada transformasi sosial melalui keterlibatan dalam gerakan Angkatan Muda dan aktivitas propaganda; serta menolak menginternalisasi keliyanannya dengan mendefinisikan dirinya melalui kehendak dan idealismenya sendiri. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa meskipun mengalami subordinasi berlapis, Mei berhasil melampaui batasan sosialnya dan menegaskan dirinya sebagai subjek yang otonom melalui transendensi.

Kata Kunci: Ang San Mei, eksistensi perempuan, feminisme eksistensialis, *Jejak Langkah*, Simone de Beauvoir

Abstract

This study aims to describe the character of Ang San Mei in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *Jejak Langkah* through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. Ang San Mei is a Chinese female character who experiences multiple layers of subordination as a woman, a member of an ethnic minority, and a colonial subject; however, she has not yet been specifically studied using existentialist feminist theory that takes into account the ethnicity and colonialism she experiences. The character of Ang San Mei was chosen for analysis because, although she has been depicted as fighting for her existence, studies on her remain very limited. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with content analysis techniques. The data sources consist of the narratives, dialogues, and actions of the character Mei in the novel *Jejak Langkah*. The analytical framework is based on Beauvoir's four strategies of transcendence: women can work, women can be intellectuals, women can work to achieve social transformation, and women refuse to internalize their subjugation. The results of the study indicate that Mei embodies all four forms of transcendence: asserting economic independence through her work as a teacher and cook; demonstrating intellectualism through geopolitical analysis and organizational awareness; contributing to social transformation through her involvement in Angkatan Muda and propaganda activities; refused to internalize her otherness by defining herself through her own will and idealism. This study concludes that despite experiencing layered subordination, Mei succeeded in transcending her social limitations and asserting herself as an autonomous subject through transcendence.

Keywords: Ang San Mei, the existence of women, existentialist feminism, *Jejak Langkah*, Simone de Beauvoir

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary works are a reflection of social reality that cannot be separated from the context of society (Haslinda, 2022, p. 4). This reflection of social reality takes many forms. One such reflection of social reality pertains to women. If the time period is the colonial era, a strong patriarchal system relegates women to an inferior status and restricts their freedom in the public sphere (Ponto et al., 2024). Furthermore, in early Indonesian history, and even during the Dutch East Indies period, women were marginalized and confined to the domestic sphere, responsible for the kitchen, the household, and the water well (iniojati & Nurtalia, 2023). The reality of women in society is also adapted in literary works. Female characters in literature are often portrayed as figures bound by the patriarchal system. Female characters in literary works are also frequently portrayed as individuals experiencing injustice (Sayidina et al., 2025). However, the representation of female characters in Indonesian literature also features some female characters capable of transcending conventional or common stereotypes of women; one such example is a character in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Buru Quartet*.

The *Buru Tetralogy* presents diverse characterizations through several female characters whose traits transcend the stereotypes of women during that period, including Nyai Ontosoroh and Ang San Mei. In *Bumi Manusia*, Nyai Ontosoroh possesses the courage to defy social stigma and forge an independent life, serving as a symbol of women's resistance against the colonial system and patriarchy (Taqwim, 2018). Meanwhile, Ang San Mei in *Jejak Langkah* embodies a similar spirit of resistance. She is a Chinese woman who experiences multiple layers of subordination, as a woman, as an ethnic minority, and as a subject of colonial rule. As a woman from a minority group living under colonial rule, she was able to assert

her existence. Whereas, during that era, colonial policies and domination had also indirectly reinforced a patriarchal culture that marginalized women (Indriani & Yustisia, 2023). The character Ang San Mei is not merely a companion to the main character, Minke, but also a figure with a critical awareness of oppression and her own unique ways of fighting for her existence.

The character of Ang San Mei was chosen for analysis because, although her struggle for self-determination has been so vividly portrayed, scholarly studies of her remain very limited. In fact, Ang San Mei's struggles, such as her decision to flee China, her choice to join the national revival movement, her marriage to Minke which defied traditional norms, and her dedication to the nationalist struggle that ultimately led to her death, are compelling subjects for analysis through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism.

Simone de Beauvoir's theory of existentialist feminism was chosen because it aligns with the character of Ang San Mei, who embodies women's struggle to achieve freedom within a structure that positions them as "the Other." This is consistent with Beauvoir's thinking (as cited in Tong, 1998, p. 274), which asserts that not only men but also women can freely seize opportunities for their own benefit. If she succeeds in freeing herself from being an object or what is termed "the Other," then a woman can achieve her existence. The word "existence" itself derives from the Latin "ex," meaning "out," and "sistere," meaning "to stand." Thus, existence can be interpreted as standing outside of oneself (Wahid, 2022). Ang San Mei in *Jejak Langkah* demonstrates her existence through her efforts that represent freedom, enabling her to achieve her existence through transcendence. Transcendence is a strategy that women can use to break free from patriarchal culture, which has robbed them of their freedom (Beauvoir, 2016, p. 68). According to Beauvoir, there are four strategies of transcendence that women can

12 employ: women can work, women can become intellectuals, women can work to achieve social transformation, and women can refuse to internalize their subjugation (Tong, 1998, pp. 274–275). Thus, it can be said that through these four strategies, women can reject their subjugation and assert their existence. For, according to Beauvoir, one is not born a woman (Beauvoir, 2025, p. 3). Therefore, it can be said that there is no inherent difference between men and women. Rather, it is social conditions that make a woman a woman (Amin, 2015, p. 85). Therefore, Beauvoir advises women to embark on a journey toward their true selves, through their own perspective, not through that of men (Suniati & Maliudin, 2019).

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Research relevant to this study has been conducted by several researchers, including studies by Nisya & Komalasari (2020), Setianingsih & Ikhwan (2023), Qadriani & Mustika (2022), Azzahra (2022), and Setiawan et al. (2023). These studies share a fundamental similarity: four of them examine the existence of women in various literary works and films using an existentialist feminist approach, specifically Simone de Beauvoir's theory. Furthermore, the main focus of these studies is women's struggle to confront a patriarchal system that restricts their freedom and identity. The methods employed are generally qualitative descriptive, utilizing content or narrative analysis. The primary focus of these studies is women's struggles in confronting a patriarchal system that restricts their freedom and identity.

The gap between the aforementioned studies and this research is that, although studies on female characters in the Buru Tetralogy have been conducted and existential feminism has been used to analyze various works of Indonesian literature, no study has specifically analyzed the existence of the character of Ang San Mei by considering factors of ethnicity, minority status, and the structure of colonialism through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism. In

fact, the character Ang San Mei, as a member of an ethnic minority facing multiple layers of subordination, can represent freedom and assert her existence, as highlighted by Simone de Beauvoir. The studies mentioned above analyze women's subordination solely on the basis of gender, without taking into account factors such as ethnicity, minority status and colonial structures. In light of this, this study aims to address this gap by analyzing the subjectivity of women from ethnic minorities through the lens of existentialist feminism, which considers the intersections of gender and ethnicity in the construction of Ang San Mei's subjectivity. Based on the aforementioned background, the research question formulated for this study is: What forms does Ang San Mei's struggle take to assert her existence? Meanwhile, the objective of this study is to describe Ang San Mei's struggle to assert her existence.

2. METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method. Qualitative research is research that does not involve calculations or numerical data (Moleong, 2014, p. 3). This study employs Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory as its analytical framework, thus focusing on the aspect of transcendence as a means for women to assert their existence. Specifically, that women can work, women can become intellectuals, women can work toward societal transformation, and women refuse to internalize their subjugation. The data sources used are the narratives, dialogues, and actions of the character Ang San Mei in the novel *Jejak Langkah* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. The research data consists of the narratives, dialogues, and actions of the character Ang San Mei that represent existence in accordance with the values of existentialist feminism. Data collection was conducted using the read-and-note technique, which involves reading the entire text and noting the narratives, dialogues, and actions of Ang San

Mei identified as expressions of existence in accordance with Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory in the novel *Jejak Langkah*. The data analysis technique uses content analysis, which allows conclusions to be drawn through the relationship between text and context (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 24). Data analyzed was carried out in the following stages (1) Data reduction to select data obtained in the form of narratives, dialogues, and actions of the character Ang San Mei that are relevant to de Beauvoir's four strategies of transcendence. (2) Data classification to categorize the data based on Simone de Beauvoir's four strategies of transcendence in existentialist feminism. (3) Content analysis and presentation of findings in the form of a descriptive narrative.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on an analysis of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *Jejak Langkah*, this study identifies women's transcendence defined as the way women become subjects or assert their existence in accordance with Simone de Beauvoir's theory of existential feminism. This includes women's ability to work, to become intellectuals, to work toward societal transformation, and to refuse to internalize their subjugation.

Women Can Work

The ability of women to work is one way for them to achieve their existence. By working, women affirm their status as subjects, or as individuals who actively determine their own fate in a concrete way (Beauvoir, 2025, p. 603). This can be seen in the following excerpt, where Ang San Mei demonstrates that women can work to affirm their existence.

Nama para guru juga disebutkan. Dan Guru bahasa Inggris: Ang San Mei. (Toer, 2025, p. 92).

The teachers' names were also mentioned. And the English teacher: Ang San Mei. (Toer, 2025, p. 92).

Pada hari-hari tertentu di pagihari ia memberikan pelajaran privat bahasa Mandarin dan Inggris pada anak-anak Tionghoa dari keluarga kaya di sekitar Kramat. (Toer, 2025, pp. 160-161).

On certain days in the morning, she gave private Mandarin and English lessons to Chinese children from wealthy families in the Kramat area. (Toer, 2025, pp. 160-161).

Based on the two quotations above, Ang San Mei demonstrates that she works as an English teacher and a private tutor of Mandarin and English, meaning she no longer relies on the dominant group for her economic livelihood. Therefore, she is able to assert her existence because she is not economically dependent on men. Furthermore, Ang San Mei can also give meaning to her own existence because she is able to work to support herself. This aligns with the view of Kusuma & Sudaryani (2019) that work is one tangible way for women to prove themselves as autonomous subjects that is, individuals capable of determining and directing their lives independently. In addition to working to support herself, Mei who had been evicted from her previous residence also strives to determine her own life choices. As a free woman capable of choosing the direction of her destiny, she chooses to work as a chef to secure housing, as evidenced by the following quote.

Kebetulan Mei menempati kamar di luar rumah utama, kamar dapur, karena ia pun bekerja sebagai koki. (Toer, 2025, p. 122).

As it happens, Mei stays in a room off the main house, the kitchen, since she also works as a cook. (Toer, 2025, p. 122).

The quotation above indicates that in addition to being a teacher, Mei also works as a cook. To

provide context, Ang San Mei worked as a cook in the home of the family that provided her with lodging, because in her previous home, Mei had been evicted by the residents for hosting Minke as a guest too frequently. Although the work did not generate income, Mei continued to work in exchange for her lodging, suggesting that she was self-reliant. She refused to be a passive object who merely depended on the dominant group. Mei's unpaid work was one of the survival strategies she employed to remain in the Dutch East Indies and carry out her propaganda. This aligns with Beauvoir's (as cited in Pranowo, 2016) view that through work, even if the work is menial, women have the opportunity to develop themselves and experience themselves as subjects.

Based on the quotations and discussion above, Mei falls into the category of women who can work. This is because, as a woman, she can assert her status as a subject and actively determine the course of her own destiny through the various jobs she undertakes. This finding is consistent with the results of a study by Nisya & Komalasari (2020), which also showed that economic independence is one of the primary forms of transcendence for female characters.

Women Can Become Intellectuals

A woman can become an intellectual when she becomes a member of a group that works to bring about change for women. The intellectual activity in question refers to actions in which an individual thinks, observes, and defines not the inactivity that occurs when someone becomes the object of thought, observation, and definition (Tong, 1998, pp. 274–275). Ang San Mei demonstrates that she is an intellectual woman who can assert her existence through her acuity in thinking, observing, and defining; this can be seen in the following quote.

“Jangan salah-artikan kebebasan dalam semboyan Revolusi Prancis itu. Orang Prancis sendiri juga banyak menyalah-tafsirkan jadi bebas merampok dan bebas tak berkewajiban pada siapa pun, walhasil jadi sewenang-wenang tanpa batas. Kebesaran hanya untuk diri sendiri di negeri sendiri! Semua terpelajar Pribumi Asia dalam kebebasannya mempunyai kewajiban-kewajiban tak terbatas buat kebangkitan bangsanya masing-masing. Kalau tidak, Eropa akan merajalela. Kau sependapat?” (Toer, 2025, p. 102).

“Do not misinterpret the concept of freedom in the motto of the French Revolution. The French themselves often misinterpreted it to mean the freedom to plunder and the freedom from any obligations to anyone, resulting in boundless arbitrariness. Greatness is only for oneself in one's own country! All educated Asian natives, in their freedom, have unlimited obligations toward the rise of their respective nations. Otherwise, Europe will run rampant. Do you agree?” (Toer, 2025, p. 102).

“Seluruh dunia telah diacak oleh Inggris, juga negeriku. Kaisarina Ye Si tak mampu mendadahnya, malah bekerjasama dengannya. Mulai awal abad ini, kita akan hitung umur kekuasaan Eropa atas bangsa-bangsa berwarna.” (Toer, 2025, p. 159).

“The entire world has been thrown into turmoil by Britain, including my own country. Empress Ye Si was unable to resist, and instead collaborated with them. From the beginning of this century, we will count the days of European rule over people of color.” (Toer, 2025, p. 159).

Based on the two quotations above, Ang San Mei can be categorized as an intellectual woman,

2 because despite the limited access to information at that time, she still possessed extensive knowledge. Furthermore, she was able to define a movement and was skilled at analyzing and keenly observing events taking place in the world. Mei's activities can be categorized as intellectual activities, as they meet the criteria of someone who actively functions as an agent who thinks, observes, and defines things, rather than being the subject of thought, observation, and definition by others (Hasibuan et al., 2024). Additionally, Mei is a graduate of a teacher training program in Shanghai, China, as evidenced by the following quote.

2 *Dari surat itu juga dapat diketahui, gadis yang duduk seambin denganku ini lulusan Sekolah Guru di Syanghai, mahir dalam dua bahasa Eropa: Inggris dan Prancis.* (Toer, 2025, p. 105).

The letter also reveals that the girl sitting next to me is a graduate of the Teachers' College in Shanghai and is fluent in two European languages: English and French. (Toer, 2025, p. 105).

13 As a graduate of a teacher training college in Shanghai, Mei is undoubtedly an intellectual. This is because she was able to complete her formal education. Formal education is one of the ways that can shape a person's intellectual capacity. In line with Geleuk et al. (2017), who noted that being an intellectual serves as a foundation for navigating a patriarchal society that tends to undermine women's capabilities. Furthermore, this formal education also serves as evidence that Mei consciously asserts her existence as a subject seeking personal growth. In addition to her formal education, Mei is also sensitive and aware of the importance of organizing. As context, in the Dutch East Indies at that time, modern organizations were not yet common, but Mei already knew about them and persuaded Minke to establish a modern

organization to defend her oppressed compatriots, as evidenced by the following quote.

Selama kehidupan perkawinan kami sudah beberapa kali ia membujuk-bujuk agar mendirikan sebuah organisasi, dan aku tetap tidak mengetahui bagaimana harus memulai. (Toer, 2025, p. 193).

Throughout our marriage, he has tried to persuade me several times to start an organization, and I still don't know how to go about it. (Toer, 2025, p. 193).

This quote is one example of how Mei, as a woman, possesses the ability to analyze situations, because without modern organizations, people would have had no power during the colonial era. This also affirms Mei's agency, as she is capable of thinking critically, boldly taking the lead, and influencing Minke—a man—with her opinions. Mei's profound intellectual capacity and high awareness of the importance of organization align with the views of (Hastuti & Maulinda, 2023), who state that women must possess high intellectual capacity to develop the awareness needed to free themselves from subordinate roles. Thus, it can be concluded that intellectuality is not exclusive to dominant groups; women, too, can be intellectuals.

Based on the quotes and discussion above, Mei falls into the category of women who can be intellectuals. This is because, as a woman, she is capable of thinking, observing, and defining various matters and situations. These findings both reinforce and expand upon the research by Setianingsih & Ikhwan (2023), which found that intellectuality is an important form of transcendence in a literary work. Furthermore, the intellectuality demonstrated by female characters in Indonesian literature is diverse. While in this study Mei successfully demonstrates intellectuality in ways that transcend cultural boundaries, the research by

Setianingsih & Ikhwan (2023) identifies female intellectuality within local contexts.

Women Can Work to Bring About Social Transformation

7 Women can work toward societal transformation as one way to assert their existence. Beauvoir emphasizes that economic power is a key to women's liberation, a point she underscores in discussions about independent women. Furthermore, women must have an ideal social environment to help define themselves, namely by creating a society that provides support to transcend the limitations that bind them (Ratu et al., 2025). Ang San Mei is an activist who bravely left her country to realize her aspirations for her homeland, as evidenced by the following quote.

2 *Cantik, kelihatan rapuh, namun berani meninggalkan negerinya mengembara di negeri orang untuk cita-citanya.* (Toer, 2025, p. 103).

Beautiful, seemingly fragile, yet brave enough to leave her homeland and travel to a foreign land in pursuit of her dreams. (Toer, 2025, p. 103).

2 The quotation above shows that Mei is someone who refuses to be bound by the stigma that women are passive. Her courage to leave China in order to fight for the ideals of her movement, so that it might bring about social transformation is a form of transcendence, namely by successfully becoming an autonomous subject. An autonomous subject—in this case, a woman—can become a dominant subject, a subject of morality or existence, and can make her own decisions, thus not merely being a passive object but a subject (Maritdza & Martini, 2024). Furthermore, Mei also demonstrated that she was a woman actively engaged in the movement for social transformation and capable of transcending social boundaries to realize her ideals and those

of her nation, as evidenced by the following quote.

“Angkatan Muda kami bekerja demi dan untuk Angkatan Muda melawan kekuasaan Kaisarina Ye Si yang ditunjang para penjajah Barat.” (Toer, 2025, p. 106).

“Our Youth Movement works for and on behalf of the youth against the rule of Empress Ye Si, which is supported by Western colonizers.” (Toer, 2025, p. 106).

The quotation above demonstrates that Mei was actively involved in the Angkatan Muda movement, which fought against the rule of Empress Ye Si's dynasty. In line with Beauvoir's perspective, women's existence cannot be achieved solely on an individual level; women must also create an ideal social environment so that other women can similarly free themselves from the grip of oppression. One way to create an ideal environment for women is through organizing, as Mei did by joining the Angkatan Muda. Through organizing and expressing their views, women can change the deeply entrenched perspectives and norms within society, as well as challenge the oppressive power structures that subjugate them (Maritdza & Martini, 2024). Mei, who fought alongside Angkatan Muda against colonialism and feudal power, was directly driving the creation of social conditions that enable real societal transformation—an absolute prerequisite for women's liberation. In addition to being an organizational member, Mei was also a propagandist, as evidenced by the following quote.

Pergi mengikuti tunangannya ia beralih pekerjaan jadi propagandis dan barangkali organisator rendahan, mungkin juga tidak berhasil. (Toer, 2025, p. 135).

Following her fiancé, she changed careers to become a propagandist and perhaps a

low-level organizer, though she may not have been very successful. (Toer, 2025, p. 135).

Although the quote above highlights a contradiction in Mei's existence regarding women's independence—which requires her to act of her own volition rather than follow the will of others—it also demonstrates that a woman can contribute to social transformation through various means, one of which is by expressing her thoughts. Women can assert their existence by expressing constructive ideas and thoughts (Azzahra, 2022). Mei, who became a propagandist for a movement, conveyed her ideas to her own organization as well as to the general public. Ang San Mei also conveyed her ideas through written media, as evidenced by the following quote.

“Lihat tulisan ini: limapuluh lembar! Sebentar lagi akan sampai di limapuluh alamat, membiak jadi limapuluh kali lima pada besok hari.” (Toer, 2025, p. 212).

“Look at this post: fifty shares! It'll soon reach fifty addresses, multiplying to fifty times five by tomorrow.” (Toer, 2025, p. 212).

The quotation above illustrates that Mei, as a woman, can serve as an agent for spreading ideas. She uses writing as a tool for her struggle. This is a concrete example of women working to create an ideal social environment by raising public awareness through written propaganda. The writings she believes will proliferate also illustrate that she possesses the power for women to work toward societal transformation. This also reflects how women can contribute to social transformation through intellectualism and ideological work. Furthermore, intellectual activities such as writing can lead women to a higher plane of existence and free them from feelings of inferiority (Kastanya et al., 2020)

Based on the quotations and discussion above, Mei falls into the category of women who can work to achieve social transformation. This is because, as a woman, she can help create an ideal social environment to encourage women to define themselves, specifically by fostering a society that provides support to transcend the constraints binding them. This finding aligns with the findings of Qadriani & Mustika (2022) study, namely that female figures can embody transcendence by working to achieve social transformation through various means. One such means is through raising public awareness. While in the study by Qadriani & Mustika (2022), Nawung raised public awareness by independently establishing a library, Mei raised public awareness through collective advocacy.

Women Refuse to Internalize Their Otherness

Women refuse to internalize their otherness, this means that women must be able to reclaim their position as subjects standing in freedom, capable of defining themselves, setting their own life goals, and acting in the world not as a mirror for the dominant group, but as autonomous human beings. For accepting the role of the other means accepting the status of an object—that is, women are portrayed solely as objects for men (Ginting & Yuhdi, 2023). Ang San Mei, the character in the story, came from China to the Dutch East Indies of her own volition, as evidenced by the following quote.

“Jangan kau heran kalau aku berani mengembara seorang diri di negeri orang. Kau pun akan seperti aku bila jadi gadis Tionghoa.” (Toer, 2025, pp. 110-111).

“Don't be surprised that I dare to wander alone in a foreign land. You'd be just like me if you were a Chinese girl.” (Toer, 2025, pp. 110-111).

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The quotation above illustrates Mei, in this novel, is able to position herself as an autonomous subject. She made the decision to come to the Dutch East Indies to pursue her own aspirations and those of her people, which she had set for herself and carried out independently. This is a concrete manifestation of her rejection of the internalization of her femininity—that is, a woman who no longer defines herself through her relationship with the dominant group, but rather through her own free actions (Tong, 1998, p. 275). In addition to freedom of action, Mei also possesses freedom of thought, as evidenced by the following quote.

“Kebebasan ini, sahabat, tidak lain dari hasil suatu usaha, juga pergulatan batin yang cukup menegangkan.” (Toer, 2025, p. 145).

“This freedom, my friend, is nothing less than the result of an effort, as well as a rather intense inner struggle.” (Toer, 2025, p. 145).

“Berorganisasi, sahabat, berserikat, banyak orang puluhan, ratusan, malah puluhan ribu, menjadi satu raksasa gaib, dengan kekuatan lebih besar dan lebih banyak anggota di dalamnya...” (Toer, 2025, p. 150).

“Organize, my friends; unite; bring together tens, hundreds, even tens of thousands of people to form a single, invisible giant—one with greater strength and more members within it...” (Toer, 2025, p. 150).

The two quotations above demonstrate that Mei is capable of independent thought and can set her own life goals. In the first quote, Mei directly rejects the notion that women’s freedom is something natural or easy. To provide context: earlier in that conversation, a girl from Jepara had

referred to Mei as a *“Wanita muda yang bebas.”* Mei did not simply accept this compliment; instead, she honestly corrected it. This stance is significant because freedom is not a condition one happens to possess, but rather something that must be actively seized through continuous resistance against social pressures that force women to accept the role of the Other. For, according to Beauvoir (in Azzahra, 2022), men label themselves as *“The One”* or *“The Self,”* while women are positioned merely as objects and reduced to *“The Other.”* In the second quote, Mei demonstrates that she views liberation from all forms of oppression not merely as an individual struggle, but as a collective project. This proves that Mei can be a free subject in the context of thought and is capable of defining herself. In the following quote, Mei affirms that she can refuse to internalize her otherness by being able to define herself.

“Bukan keras, sahabat, hanya setia pada kemestian semua benda harus takluk pada keinginan kita yang kongkrit dan yang abstrak sekaligus.” (Toer, 2025, p. 152).

“It’s not about being harsh, my friend, but about being faithful to the inevitability that all things must submit to our desires, both concrete and abstract.” (Toer, 2025, p. 152).

The quotation above demonstrates that Mei refuses to be defined or labeled as a strong-willed woman—a label often applied to women who refuse to submit. She is able to clarify that what she does is not violence, but rather loyalty to her own will. Thus, Mei is able to become a woman who no longer allows herself to be defined by others, but can stand by her own definition of who she is and what she wants. This aligns with Beauvoir’s view (in Natalia et al., 2024) that women must break free from their gender roles and become active subjects responsible for their own lives. Mei also refuses to internalize her

2 subjugation by acting as a subject capable of challenging the dominant group, as evidenced by the following quote.

2 *Dia sudah sejak mula telah mengoreksi kekeliruanku. Sebaliknya aku lihat dia seorang gadis sederhana dengan kepala penuh idealisme.* (Toer, 2025, p. 155).

9 *From the very beginning, she has been correcting my mistakes. On the contrary, I see her as a simple girl with a head full of idealism.* (Toer, 2025, p. 155).

The quotation above demonstrates that Mei does not see herself as a passive object, but rather as an active subject capable of correcting others. Mei's ability to correct others is a sign that she can transcend the role of the other or has achieved transcendence, as she does not merely seek to please the dominant group. This aligns with the view of Iktisah & Supratno (2025) that women can challenge patriarchy in life beyond mere gender constructs. Furthermore, the descriptions "gadis sederhana" and "kepala penuh idealisme" also serve as evidence that Mei cannot be defined solely by her outward appearance, as she has successfully demonstrated that she defines herself through the ideas she holds, not through the image she presents to the world. Furthermore, Mei also demonstrates that she refuses to be a passive object who submits to Minke, as evidenced by the following quote.

2 *"Aku tahu, kau takkan ingin tahu ke mana aku pergi sekali ini dan untuk waktu-waktu selanjutnya. Kau tahu betul apa yang aku kerjakan dan lakukan selanjutnya."* (Toer, 2025, p. 207).

"I know you won't want to know where I'm going this time or in the future. You know exactly what I'm up to and what I'll be doing next." (Toer, 2025, p. 207).

Ia memasukkan kertas-kertas itu ke dalam tas yang selama ini jadi tas pakaian, berdiri di depan cermin lemari pakaian, berbedak dan bersisir. "Aku ingin bersama denganmu sepanjang malam ini," kataku (Minke). "Akan kuusahakan," dan ia pergi (Mei). (Toer, 2025, p. 212).

She put the papers into the bag that had been serving as a laundry bag, stood in front of the wardrobe mirror, and applied powder and combed her hair. "I want to be with you all night long," I said (Minke). "I'll try," and she left (Mei). (Toer, 2025, p. 212).

The two quotations above demonstrate that Mei does not need to justify herself and does not feel the need to account for her life's journey to the dominant group. Mei does not place herself in a position where she must be monitored, approved of, or explained to by men, because she has her own ideas and is capable of setting her own life goals. These actions portray a woman who is in control of herself. This aligns with the view of Natalia et al. (2024) that a woman should be defined by what she determines for herself, not by others. She is aware of what she will do, and this demonstrates that Mei is a woman capable of setting her own life goals and acting in the world based on choices she makes consciously. The character of Ang San Mei, an activist from China, also refuses to let marriage define the boundaries of her existence; she is aware of her original purpose, which is to carry out her propaganda. This is evidenced by the following quote.

Pagi itu aku bangun tanpa melihat Mei. Dia ternyata tidak pulang untuk pertama kali sejak perkawinan kami. (Toer, 2025, p. 218).

That morning I woke up and didn't see Mei. It turned out she hadn't come home for the

first time since our marriage. (Toer, 2025, p. 218).

The quotation above demonstrates that Mei prioritizes her commitment to her activism over societal pressures regarding her domestic role as a wife. If gender is a construct, then it can be changed: women have the right to define themselves beyond the boundaries imposed by society (Adella et al., 2025). Mei's decision to stay out all night to carry out her task of spreading propaganda is a socially risky act, yet it simultaneously demonstrates that she is capable of rejecting the notion of a woman defined solely by her domestic role.

Based on the quotations and discussion above, Mei falls into the category of women who refuse to internalize their femininity. This is because, as a woman, she can be a subject standing in freedom, capable of defining herself, capable of setting her own life goals, and acting in the world not as a mirror for the dominant group, but as an autonomous human being. These findings complement those of studies by Azzahra (2022) and Setiawan et al., (2022), albeit within different artistic and cultural contexts. This study offers a new perspective on the rejection of the internalization of Ang San Mei's otherness, which occurs within conditions of layered subordination, not only based on gender but also on ethnicity.

4. CONCLUSION

This study successfully uncovers the struggles of the character of Ang San Mei in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *Jejak Langkah* to assert her existence through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. Based on the analysis conducted, it was found that Ang San Mei embodies the four forms of female transcendence to assert her existence.

First, Ang San Mei asserts her existence by working as an English teacher, a private tutor, and a cook, positioning her as an economically independent subject who does not depend on the

dominant group. Second, Ang San Mei asserts her existence through her intellectuality. This is manifested through her ability to analyze global geopolitical conditions, her awareness of the importance of modern organizations, and her formal educational background as a graduate of the Teachers' College in Shanghai, which proves that women can be subjects of thought, not merely objects of thought. Third, Ang San Mei affirms her existence through her active involvement in the Youth Movement, propaganda activities, and the dissemination of ideas through writing. This proves that Ang San Mei was able to make a tangible contribution to creating the social transformation that is an absolute prerequisite for women's liberation. Fourth, Ang San Mei was able to assert her existence through her refusal to internalize her femininity. This is evidenced by her defining her own agency through her will and idealism, not through her relationships with men or the domestic roles imposed upon her.

In light of this, the character of Ang San Mei demonstrates that the layered subordination she faces, as a woman, a member of an ethnic minority, and a colonial subject does not reduce her to a mere passive object. Rather, she successfully transcends these limitations and asserts herself as a subject whose existence is grounded in transcendence. However, this study has limitations in that its analysis is confined to a single character in a single novel. Furthermore, this study does not fully capture the colonial and ethnic elements experienced by the character. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that female characters from ethnic minorities can achieve transcendence despite being bound by multiple layers of subordination. It is hoped that this will contribute to the understanding of feminist literary criticism, particularly in the context of existentialist feminism. Furthermore, this study simultaneously opens the door for future researchers to integrate postcolonial perspectives

to examine dimensions of coloniality that cannot be fully addressed within Beauvoir's framework.

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