

# The Existence of Women in the Pre- and Post-Reformation Period in The *Novel Laut Bercerita*: A Review of Feminism

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**Abstract:** Women are faced with various stereotypes of being second-class beings. The female must accept being a being who must be under the position of the male. However, in contrast to such stereotypes, literary works are able to show a deconstruction of the conditions and situations of women as empowered beings. This is illustrated through one of Indonesia's novels entitled *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S. Chudori. Women are described as figures who have a role to be able to show their existence even though at that time there was political turmoil before 1998. One of the important things that deconstructs stereotypes is the existence of strong women who are able to heal male characters through their efforts. Women who are usually used as *second sex* in patriarchal confines seek to be undermined in the narrative of the novel. Based on this, the purpose of this study is to dismantle the existence of women in the time of turmoil before and after the reformation in the novel *Laut Bercerita*. This research is a qualitative descriptive study with the approach of Simon de Beauvoir existentialist feminism. The results of this study show that women managed to get out of the notion of *second sex* by showing existence in the public domain by getting a proper education and job in the public domain, being able to struggle to find their brother's character and her brother's colleague who were victims of student disappearance in 1998, being able to cure men due to kidnapping and torture in 1998, and the struggle to get information on the development of cases of losing older siblings and his brother's partner in the period before 1998.

**Keywords:** Beauvoir, existentialist feminism, *Laut Bercerita*, reform, enforced disappearances

## 1. Introduction

Women are the second sex to have no choice in their lives [1]. Women only focus on wells, mattresses, and kitchens. Women don't seem to have the opportunity to be in the public sphere. Moreover, with the existence before the reform, the role of women in the public sphere was so limited that women seemed to have no existence in their lives. However, through a literary work, women are described as figures capable of demonstrating their existence. This image of a woman is reflected in the novel *Laut Bercerita* through the character of Asmara. This figure is Laut's younger brother. The female character in the novel is described as a character who is able to fight before and after the reform so that this character can choose and decide anything in her life.

Through the figure of Asmara, this research reveals the role of women in society in the period before and after the reformation (as an important time setting in the story).

Research using the novel *Laut Bercerita* has been conducted previously by Jannah (2022) [2], Nabila (2022) [3], Nadia et al. (2022) [4], and Safitri et al. (2022) [5]. Research focusing on women was conducted by Jannah (2022). Although with the same corpus, this study focuses on the author's view of the image and sexuality of women contained in the language of the novel *Laut Bercerita* (2017) and the subjectivity of women formed through the language of women in the novel *Laut Bercerita*. This study uses the representation of women and the position of women in looking at female sexuality to determine the presence of author subjectivity. Third, identify feminine language and the influence of masculinity to see the formation of the subjectivity of the author through language. The results showed that the author had absorbed the thought of feminism early so that his novels tended to have the spirit of feminism. In *Laut Bercerita* (2017), Leila presents many images of strong women as a form of resistance to stereotypes about women. Through the use of female language in her novels, Leila managed to achieve her subjectivity as a woman.

The other four studies from Nabilah (2022), Nadia, et al. (2022) and Safitri, et al. (2022) use different approaches and focuses. Nabilah (2022) in his thesis examined reform as an experiential moment in leila S. Chudori's Novel *Laut Bercerita*. Secondly how *homo sacer* responds as a community achieves a happy life post-New Order in the novel *Laut Bercerita*. The results of this study show that the government as the highest power holder has carried out the practice of excreting citizens as an effort to maintain and maintain state sovereignty. The government dominates and restricts the movements of citizens who have the potential to interfere with and threaten sovereignty. Citizens try to carry out resistance by harnessing the potential. This potential is represented in the form of *the coming community* or *the coming* as an effort to achieve a happy life carried out by citizens.

In addition, another research was conducted by Nadia, et al. (2022) which focused on describing the values of the struggle of characters in the novel *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S Chudori [6]. This type of research is qualitative by using descriptive qualitative research methods, which are methods that talk about several possibilities to solve an actual problem by using the stages of collecting data, compiling, and classifying all the data that has been analyzed. Because the research data that the author got was data in the form of narratives and character dialogues. The source of this research data is the novel *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S Chudori published by The Popular Literature of Gramedia Jakarta. The results of the research on the value of struggle in the novel *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S Chudori there are as many as 56 data with the value of being willing to sacrifice, there are 9 data, the value of unity is 4 data, the value of price-respect is 10 data, the value of patience is 10, the value of unyielding spirit is 13 data, and the value of cooperation is 10 data.

Another research was conducted by Safitri, et al. (2022) which focused on the study of literary sociology. This research reveals that it is related to describing the forms of

movement that exist in social reality in the novel *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S. Chudori. From this discussion, the researcher concluded that aspects of Gramsci's hegemony in the novel *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S. Chudori in the point of study of literary sociology there are several aspects, namely culture, ideology, the intelligentsia, the state, the economy. Based on these studies, research related to the existence of women in the period before and after the reformation has not been found so that this research can fill the scope of literary research, especially by using the corpus of the novel *Laut Bercerita*.

## 2. Research Methods

This research is a qualitative research and uses a semiotic approach to disassemble various signs through the words contained in the narrative at the stage of peeling structural elements in both works. Man is always looking for the meaning of various things that are around him. Semiotics is the process of impregnating something with our senses which is then processed by our cognition (Peirce in Hoed, 2014). The next process when a person thinks, that is, managing in the mind according to his experiences more complexly related to the thing he is sensing is referred to as representation. In addition, representation can also be interpreted as a process of sign-tapping that occurs repeatedly and then acquires a more stable meaning from its cognition (Hoed, 2014).

Afterwards, researchers will dismantle the existence or role of female figures through Simon de Beauvoir's feminist approach. "But the other consciousness has an opposing reciprocal claim: traveling, a local is shocked to realize that in neighboring countries locals view her as a foreigner; between villages, clans, nations, and classes there are wars, potlatches, agreements, treaties, and struggles that remove the absolute meaning from the idea of the *Other* and bring out its relativity; whether one likes it or not, individuals and groups have no choice but to recognize the reciprocity of their relation." [1]. She also added that the existence of on the other hand, the affirmation of the subject is not sufficient to explain ownership: in individual challenges, struggles, and battles, any consciousness can try to ascend to sovereignty. Whereas on the one hand, the source is in the experience. It is thus true that women are other than men, and these changes are concretely felt in desire, embrace, and love; but the real relationship is one of reciprocity; thus, it gives rise to authentic drama: through their eroticism, love, friendship and alternative disappointment, hatred and rivalry, the relationship is the struggle of consciousness, each of which wants to be important, it is the recognition of mutually confirming freedom, it is an undetermined part of hostility to involvement.

In addition, Beauvoir also posits woman means to bring up another absolute, without reciprocity, rejecting, resisting experience, that she can be a subject, peer [1]. In reality, the struggle between them is impenetrable, since the existence of women is opacity; she does not stand before man as a subject but as an object paradoxically endowed with subjectivity; she regards herself as herself and others, which is a contradiction with confusing consequences.

Women are still restricted in their freedom to get what they want and when women seek to pursue their desires, women will be given a negative point of view. This is certainly unfair to women. Women must be intelligent and ambitious in creating a way

to act for themselves. To the extent that a woman wants to be a woman, her independent status generates an inferiority complex; rather, her femininity made her doubt her professional opportunities. This is the most important point.

### 3. Result and Discussion

In women in the Narrative of *Laut Bercerita* are divided into two time periods, namely before the reform and after the reform to show the existence of women's positions or existences at both times. The division of these two time settings based on before the reform refers to the state of the Sea and other students who have not conducted demonstrations and kidnappings. Then, the division of the background after the reform is the condition when there is a return of students who are forcibly arrested and the condition of other students who do not return even with various efforts made by other figures of brothers and fellow students.

#### 3.1. *Women before the reform*

In this study, the figure who represents the existence of women is Asmara. This character is able to be himself and freely choose her future through education. Women are able to get higher education, especially in getting an education as doctors.

It's a cliché, but it is what it is. I'm a pragmatic person and more pursuing all the definite improvements: patients, patients, and patients. The success of curing patients from mild to severe is a pleasant achievement. Alex, just like *Mas Laut*, believes in the repair of intangible money, which is invisible: like the moral of society to care more about those who are oppressed; building the consciousness of the middle class (which was then very ignorant) to move and think and demand a democracy that will somehow be achieved. **If I'm obviously going to be a doctor, and maybe I'm going to continue the surgical residency, then Alex and *Mas Laut* both don't yet know what they're going to do with the bachelor's diploma in English Literature that they'll probably get.** (Chudori, p. 280—281).

The quote shows that there is an effort made by the female character in the affirmation of her desires and purpose in life who is completing her doctor's process and wants to pass on to the surgical residency. However, it is different from his brother and his brother's friend (Alex) who is a man who does not yet know what his life will become. Although in the quote, it can be seen that there is a comparison related to the majors taken by Asmara figure and the male character, namely the doctor and English Literature.

However, the important thing that can be underlined is the interrelationship of Asmara who has awareness and freedom in choosing what to become in her life. Of course, this is a very important thing as the existence of women in the public sphere. As revealed by Beauvoir that women must be intelligent and ambitious to create a way to act for themselves. To the extent that a woman wants to be a woman, her independent status generates an inferiority complex; rather, her femininity made her doubt her professional opportunities. This is the most important point [1]. Through the status of a doctor that will be achieved by a female character, Asmara is able to produce her independent status.

In addition, in the presence of this independent status, Asmara is able to generate a complex of his inferiority that does not doubt her professionalism. This is shown by the comparison made through herself and the status of the two other male characters. In contrast to patriarchal views, women can only accept anything in their lives, especially things that smell sexist, narratives through Romance figures try to show the differences from the patriarchal system. This figure is able to show his existence in the choice of his life goals. In addition, through the first person point of view singular (I or me) used by the Asmara character, it can also be interpreted that this storytelling can be trusted because the character himself seems to be speaking directly to the speaker.

### 3.2. *After the reformation*

Asmara also admits that she is a fan of science, relying on everything logical and certain. Of course, this is different from the view that women use the heart rather than men. This can be seen through the following excerpt.

**But I'm a fan of science, leaning on everything logical and definite.** I couldn't and didn't want to pretend. I confess that there is a contradiction in my remarks, *Mas* (p.349)

Although the expression of the character Asmara regarding himself has contradictions in his speech, this is a natural attitude in terms of a person's humanity when losing a loved one. However, with the recognition of the amorous character with a single first-person point of view (I or me) related to her logical self and is definitely an awareness of the female self that is different from the situation and biological condition of the male.

Beauvoir revealed that the existence of different biological aspects between women and men will be a very important differentiator to corner women from equality [1]. In the end, the female must accept herself who is below the male. However, women can get out of this presumption through their consciousness. This is what the character as Asmara did. She admits consciously that she has logical and definite thinking, the opposite of the biological aspects of women who are rational and emotional.

The release of Alex, a friend from Laut, became a point that showed the presence of women. Alex, who is narrated as having trauma related to the kidnapping and arrest of himself, is trying to be healed by Asmara. Although previously, Asmara was narrated as having a special relationship with Alex. However, Asmara can position herself firmly as a doctor and someone who loves her. The position as a doctor is a clear professional existence in the public sphere and Asmara's position as a lover is her conscious choice through her right to freely like or love anyone.

Women are able to heal male characters from their trauma so that the man is able to express what bad experiences he has experienced. This trauma is characterized by the presence of the quote **"I closed all these depressive tendencies for many years"** in the quote below. The existence of depressive diction according to the Cambridge Dictionary a mental illness in which a person is very unhappy and anxious (= worried and nervous) for long periods and cannot have a normal life during these periods. The fear and anxiety felt by Alex's character gave birth to the trauma he had so that he has not been able to tell anyone about the experiences he went through during his abduction and arrest. However,

with her position as a doctor, the figure of Asmara was able to show that the independence of her doctor profession gave her an existence in the public sphere.

He grabbed the bottle and drank it a few sips until it was almost gone. I sat down beside him and took his hand. I told Alex, it's not important why they took Alex, Daniel, and the friends who actually held the others back and maybe killed him. The important thing is: their abominations must be punished legally, it is not enough to be fired from the military. It's a matter of life.

"Never have you been burdened with guilt or sin because you are here," I held her cheeks that were now densely furrowed by hair.

"It's kind of hard to wonder why they didn't just kill me". **Alex answered me with still wet eyes, "I shut down all these depressive tendencies over the years.** And it wasn't until later that I realized that Daniel and Naratama were going through the same thing."

I cleaned her tears, she laughed and demanded that I keep her whimsy a secret. I reciprocated that this is not a whiny, but a healthy way to share. "*Trust me, I'm talking as a doctor.*" (p. 344)

At the beginning, the character of Asmara spoke in her related to her views on Alex. Alex considers himself to be a man who should have masculinity so he should not cry. However, this is attempted to be broken by the character Asmara who reveals that Alex should not think of himself as such. Alex must not be burdened by taste or sin because Alex's character is freed, while the rest of his friend's character is not and has not been found. The words given by Asmara **Never have you been burdened with a sense of guilt or sin because you are here** showing himself trying to help the trauma experienced by Alex. This shows that women are able to become good listening companions through the advice given by themselves. In addition, the *I or me*-point of view used by the narrator shows that the words of this character are believable.

This effort made by Asmara shows her position as a woman who does not always have to be under the position of men. The quote presents that even men can feel sadness or cry with their emotional presence. This is shown by the quote "**Alex answered me with his eyes still wet**". This quote suggests that men have emotions that are not usually attached to men. Men who are stereotyped as beings who use logic are fully refuted through the quote. Despite the efforts of Alex's character who tried to resist that he was crying because of the assumption in society that men should not cry and would be considered crybaby.

Through the quote "**he laughed and demanded that I keep his whimsicalness a secret.** I reciprocate that **this is not a crybaby**", the character of Asmara seeks to calm Alex's character. With the existence of a *secret* word that according to the Cambridge Dictionary is a fact about a subject that is not known. Something this undisclosed seeks to close that there is an attempt made by the male to maintain his position as a being who is in the first sex. However, the female character (Asmara) gives an explanation not to be afraid of being considered a crybaby. It is the same as stated by Beauvoir [1] that A man of goodwill will be more torn by the situation than the woman herself: in one sense, one is always better off being on the side of the defeated; but if she is also of goodwill, unable to be self-sufficient, unwilling to crush the man with the weight of her destiny, she struggles with herself in an inextricable confusion.

Women in this position are described as having a very dominant role to be able to heal traumatized men with her very logical statement, which is *that I reciprocated that **this is not a whiny, but a healthy way to share. "Believe me, I'm talking as a doctor.*** This quote shows that the female logicity is able to show her professionalism as a doctor. Romance seeks to be a tranquilizer and healer for the male character. As revealed by Beauvoir [1] that struggles that remove the absolute meaning from the idea of the *Other* and bring out its relativity; whether one likes it or not, individuals and groups have no choice but to recognize the reciprocity of their relation. Through the omission of other meanings despite the efforts made by the character Alex not to want to look crybaby, but with the existence of a reciprocal relationship and although there is no direct recognition of Alex's character related to Asmara's hard work that has helped him, the character Asmara has been shown as a figure who is able to heal through his professional position as a doctor.

In addition, male masculinity is also described as seemingly collapsed by the quote below.

When Alex had calmed down, I took him out of that dark room and I sat him in a lounge. He covered his face and rubbed his rough face. I've always been understandable. Just like *Mas Laut, **these men always don't want to see a single tear on their faces, as if tears will reduce masculinity.*** But you often forget: suppressing depression and sadness is very dangerous. I opened the tiny fridge in the corner of the room and took open a small bottle of mineral water (p. 343).

The quote shows the existence of masculinity that seems to collapse *with the tears* released by men. Tears are always associated with a whiny emotional feeling, which as in the previous section explains that Alex's character wants the Character of Asmara to keep it a secret when Alex cries. This is also reaffirmed by the focalization of Asmara related to the opinion of Laut, her brother who revealed that ***these men always did not want to see a single tear on their faces.*** The quote expressly suggests that men want to always be in the first sex through the meaning of the word *unstoppable*. Furthermore, the presence of the word *there is also a grain of tears on their faces (men)* further emphasizes men who do not want to look weak and emotional.

This is as revealed by Beauvoir that the position of men above women is a destiny that must be accepted by anyone [1]. However, in fact, this is just a construction on a patriarchal society. In light of this, Beauvoir argued that women should be able to have an extension to get out of those conservative views. Beauvoir also added though in a way, its source is in experience. It is thus true that woman is other than man, and this alterity is concretely felt in desire, embrace, and love; but the real relation is one of reciprocity; as such, it gives rise to authentic dramas: through eroticism, love, friendship, and their alternatives of disappointment, hatred, and rivalry, the relation is a struggle of consciousnesses, each of which wants to be essential, it is the recognition of freedoms that confirm each other, it is the undefined passage from enmity to complicity. To posit the woman is to posit the absolute *other*, without reciprocity, refusing, against experience, that she could be a subject, a peer (2011). Through the character of Asmara, women are described as being able to break these conservative views.

Although female characters are said to be able to choose what to become in their lives in the future and women are able to become healers as professional professions (doctors) and people who have intimate or personal relationships, the female characters in the narrative are also portrayed as emotional characters. However, this is as a release or everything faced by the Romance character. After a long time, this character tried to be a rational one after the events that had been faced, especially when he lost the Sea, his brother.

"My words got stuck in the way of a lump of emotion in my throat. And suddenly just like that my tears quietly flowed down. I have been suppressing emotions for too long because I have to play the most rational role at home, so I've forgotten how to be sad. Alex took me to sit on a chair in front of a long table.

In this context, Asmara's character tries to be a *rational* character because of Laut's problem that has not been found since the kidnapping case that happened to him. However, Asmara eventually has to admit that she is also an emotional figure. This shows that in fact, as a human being who has feelings, this character feels the loss of the older sibling he loves. Although with the words of emotional existence used, this emotional arises from situations and conditions that will indeed occur both women and men (look for concepts related to the existence of feelings of a person who will be emotional when there is a missing sibling).

In addition, women are also present in the public sphere as women who struggle to find missing students, one of whom is her brother. Women are able to fight for justice for the men who dominate as the victims lost in the story.

"But, mom, it's over in a while. Aswin will explain our plan to move forward either to the House or directly to the President ..., ma'am, our president is a man who cares deeply about human rights, this is the right time. We will also forward our letters to Komnas HAM for them to conduct an investigation. We are going to Commission III of the House for them to form a Committee ... Mom, sir... don't go home yet..."

"Nope. I have to understand, why, Mom? Sir? It is important to sue the government, so that they do not forget because they are run over by daily tasks. They must remember that there is still this task... find out what happened to *Mas Laut*. Why do you always don't want to come? Why?" (p. 333)

The quote shows Asmara's attempt to explain her follow-up plans regarding the search for her undiscovered brother. However, Asmara's mother and father and other victims' families were already willing to go home and seemed to be desperate about the condition and condition of their children or relatives who were students who were not found. The presence of Asmara is described as a figure full of hope and able to fight to get what he wants. This is supported by Beauvoir's opinion that as human beings, women in challenges, struggles, and individual combat, every consciousness can try to rise to sovereignty (2011). This is in line with what Asmara figures did in fighting for government assistance to find missing students.

In addition, the loss of Asmara and others related to students who were kidnapped and missing and have not had time to be found also led to an initiative from Asmara and his colleagues to create a missing persons commission and Asmara actively voiced his loss



through an international agenda. Women are able to exist in the public sphere to uphold justice. Amorous figures who followed the agenda in the plenary of the UN Social, Cultural and Human Rights Commission.

Actually, Aswin could only send two people to be plenary participants of the UN Social, Cultural and Human Rights Commission. But I happened to be assigned to attend an international forensic medicine seminar, so Aswin also asked me to attend a meeting with the Argentine madres if they were indeed willing to spend time with us (p. 353)

Not only working as a doctor, Asmara is able to enter the wider public domain to voice the loss of her loved ones. Through these quotes, women are even able to have a double burden professionally, namely as a doctor and a person who fights for justice for her brother. Not only that, the existence of women in other public spheres is portrayed through Asmara's efforts to always participate in Kamisan events to remind and ask for government justice in solving cases of missing students.

On that fourth Thursday, at the beginning of 2007, under the eyes of dusk, before the State Palace, we stood in black shirts shaded by hundreds of black paying. We didn't scream or soar, but spoke silently.

It referred to the real world, the Kamisan event is They demand state responsibility in solving severe human rights cases in Indonesia, such as the Semanggi I tragedy, Semanggi II, Trisakti, tragedy of May 13-15, 1998, Talangsari, Tanjung Priok and the Tragedy of 1965 [7]. Through this activity, Asmara shows her actions as a woman who is capable of being a subject for herself and not being made an object by others. The activities carried out by Asmara are her personal awareness to determine the actions and aspirations she wants to do. This freedom, according to Beauvoir, is the realization that women are capable of being subjects who assume that they are human beings, not second sex who do not have freedom in making choices and aspirations.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The women in the novel *Laut Bercerita* are narrated as being able to have an existence both before and after the reformation. The marker of the reform in this narrative is the condition of his brother named Laut who is still with Asmara and his family until the case of kidnapping, confinement, and disappearance of Laut and fellow students who are not found until the novel narrative is over. Women have an important role in the narrative as subjects. In the pre-reformation, the woman depicted through the figure of Asmara was able to show awareness of her future choices as a doctor. This also shows that women are able to show their existence as professionals in the public sphere. In the aftermath of the reformation, there were efforts made by female figures as women healers for victims of kidnapping and confinement, fighters to voice the loss of undiscovered kidnapping victims through efforts in the international and local spheres. As revealed by Beauvoir, women are able to show their existence as subjects in making choices and doing things both professionally and individually. Women are able to enter the public sphere to voice injustice for their families and other victims' families.

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