

# Power and Subordination in the Novel “Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang”: An Interdisciplinary Approach of Intersectionality, Neuropsychology, and Social Ecology

Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang" Romanında İktidar ve Boyun Eğme: Kesişimsellik, Nöropsikoloji ve Sosyal Ekoloji Disiplinlerarası Bir Yaklaşım

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## Abstract

Literature serves as a mirror reflecting the social, cultural, and psychological dynamics of humanity. Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang, as one of Indonesia's iconic literary Works, offers a profound narrative to explore these themes. This research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between authority and subordination through the broader lenses of intersectionality, neuropsychology, and social ecology, thereby introducing a more interdisciplinary approach and enriching readers' understanding of social dynamics in classic literature. This study employs a qualitative approach using textual analysis methods. Data collection is conducted through critical reading of the novel, focusing on text segments that reveal authority relations, social inequalities, and the psychological experiences of characters. Additionally, secondary data, including journal articles, theoretical books, and relevant literature reviews, are utilized to reinforce the analysis and establish a robust theoretical foundation. The findings reveal that the lives of the "Nyai" and the character Marsiti epitomize authority imbalances shaped by gender, ethnicity, and class. This subordination subjects indigenous women to layered oppression, stripping them of autonomy in determining their destinies. A neuropsychological approach highlights the effects of trauma, subjugation, and discrimination on the psychological states of the characters. The social pressures they endure trigger chronic stress, a sense of helplessness, and emotional wounds that ripple through their lives and subsequent generations. The perspective of social ecology illustrates how Marsiti's subordination as an indigenous woman is constructed through micro-, meso-, and macro-level interactions within colonial society. Despite her marginalization, the symbol of the magnolia flower represents Marsiti's resilience and emotional contributions, which persist in collective memory as a testament to her resistance against patriarchal norms.

**Keywords:** Power, subordination, intersectionality, neuropsychology, social ecology.

## Özet

Edebiyat, insanlığın sosyal, kültürel ve psikolojik dinamiklerini yansıtan bir ayna işlevi görür. Endonezya'nın ikonik edebi eserlerinden biri olan Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang, bu temaların derinlemesine incelenmesine olanak tanıyan güçlü bir anlatı sunar. Bu araştırma, otorite ve boyun eğme arasındaki etkileşimi kesişimsellik, nöropsikoloji ve sosyal ekoloji çerçevelerinden kapsamlı bir şekilde analiz etmeyi amaçlayarak, daha disiplinlerarası bir yaklaşım sunmakta ve klasik edebiyattaki sosyal dinamiklere dair okuyucunun anlayışını zenginleştirmektedir. Çalışma, nitel bir yaklaşım benimsemekte olup metin analizi yöntemine dayanmaktadır. Veri toplama, romandaki otorite ilişkilerini, sosyal eşitsizlikleri ve karakterlerin psikolojik deneyimlerini ortaya koyan metin bölümlerine odaklanan eleştirel okuma yoluyla gerçekleştirilmiştir. Ayrıca, analizleri desteklemek ve sağlam bir kuramsal zemin oluşturmak amacıyla akademik makaleler, kuramsal kitaplar ve ilgili literatürden oluşan ikincil veriler de kullanılmıştır. Bulgular, "Nyai" figürü ve Marsiti karakterinin yaşamlarının, cinsiyet, etnisite ve sınıf tarafından şekillenen otorite dengesizliklerini temsil ettiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu boyun eğme hali, yerli kadınları çok katmanlı bir baskıya maruz bırakmakta ve kaderlerini belirleme konusunda onları özerklikten yoksun bırakmaktadır. Nöropsikolojik yaklaşım, travma, tahakküm ve ayrımcılığın karakterlerin psikolojik durumları üzerindeki etkilerini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu karakterlerin maruz kaldığı toplumsal baskılar, kronik stres, çaresizlik hissi ve yaşamlarına ve gelecek nesillere yansıyan duygusal yaralar üretmektedir. Sosyal ekoloji perspektifi ise, Marsiti'nin yerli bir kadın olarak marjinalleştirilmesinin, sömürgeci toplumun mikro, mezo ve makro düzeylerindeki etkileşimlerle nasıl inşa edildiğini göstermektedir. Marjinalleştirilmesine rağmen, manolya çiçeği sembolü Marsiti'nin direncini ve duygusal katkılarını temsil eder; bu katkılar ataerkil normlara karşı bir direnişin sembolü olarak kolektif bellekte yaşamaya devam etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İktidar, boyun eğme, kesişimsellik, nöropsikoloji, sosyal ekoloji.

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### Introduction

Literature serves as a reflection of the social, cultural, and psychological dynamics of humanity through its works (Ahmadi & Indraini, 2024; Khoirunnisa & Nugroho, 2023; Minderop, 2010; Sabila, 2024; Wardani et al., 2020). One such literary work that profoundly examines the hierarchy of power and subordination between Chinese ethnic men and Indigenous women is the novel “Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang” by Kwee Tek Hoay. This novel portrays the dynamics of power within a complex social context, where Indigenous women are frequently positioned as objects within a structure dominated by Chinese men (Kwee, 1927). The author invites readers to delve into the realities faced by Indigenous women.

As one of Indonesia's iconic literary works, “Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang” offers a multifaceted depiction of power relations, gender roles, and social conflicts (Nurgiyantoro, 2018). A critical examination of this novel provides an opportunity to explore representations of power and subordination through broader lenses, including intersectionality, neuropsychology, and social ecology. Written by Kwee (1927), the novel illustrates Indigenous women as representatives of the so-called Third World, subjected to the forces of colonial power. Positioned as subalterns, they are rendered voiceless against the constraining patriarchal system.

Referring to Spivak's (1988) theory, women as a subaltern group in various colonial contexts lack the conceptual language to articulate their voices, as neither colonial nor Indigenous men are inclined to listen. Non-Indigenous groups, such as European and Chinese men, dominate and exploit Indigenous women. This exploitation is influenced by factors such as migration and social change within local communities (Irwanda & Firdaus, 2024). Such exploitation is evident in the practice of “pernyai”, wherein Indigenous women were bought and employed for domestic tasks. Furthermore, Indigenous women were often objectified as “bed companions” for non-Indigenous men to satisfy their sexual desires. Many non-Indigenous men residing in the Nusantara during the colonial era were without partners or wives, leading them to take on “nyais” as “unofficial wives” to meet their needs (Khairunisa & Liniani, 2019).

The story revolves around Oh Ay Tjeng, a Chinese administrator at the rubber company “Gunung Mulia”, who lives with Marsiti, an Indigenous woman serving as a “nyai”. Over three years, their relationship evolves from a master-concubine dynamic into genuine love. However, this interaction remains ensnared within an unequal social structure, sparking conflict when Oud Kapitein Oh Pin Lo, Ay Tjeng's father, arranges his marriage to Liok Gwat Nio, the daughter of a wealthy Chinese businessman and the company owner. Identity and loyalty conflicts arise as Ay Tjeng must choose between familial obligations and his true love for Marsiti. Although Gwat Nio is a good wife, Marsiti's presence looms over their relationship (Benedanto, 2000).

The novel explores themes of racial and gender inequality, depicting how existing social structures influence the choices and fates of its characters. Through this journey, readers are confronted with questions of love, sacrifice, and the impact of complex interracial relationships. However, previous studies have tended to confine the exploration of power and subordination in this novel to conventional sociological or feminist framework (Suryadi, 2017). This creates a gap in the literature due to the lack of a more holistic, interdisciplinary approach. Neuropsychological studies in Indonesian literature remain rare, despite their potential to reveal cognitive and emotional aspects of characters related to subordination. Additionally, a social ecology perspective provides insights into how social environments influence power relations in the novel (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The issue of power and subordination in *Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang* holds particular significance, as it reflects enduring social dynamics that resonate across historical periods, particularly within the context of Indonesian society. The novel portrays conflicts between social classes, gender roles, and individual identities, demonstrating how power and subordination intersect to shape human experiences (Nurgiyantoro, 2018). Analyzing the novel through an intersectional lens offers a fresh dimension for understanding power relations, as this approach examines the interplay of various social identities such as gender, class, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989). A neuropsychological perspective enriches the analysis by highlighting how experiences of subordination affect individual psychology, including trauma and emotional responses (Panksepp, 1998). Furthermore, a social ecology perspective underscores how social environments (Firdaus, 2025), and societal structures influence interpersonal interactions, as explained in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979).

The importance of this analysis is amplified by the tendency of previous literature to approach this work from a single

perspective, such as feminism or historical studies (Suryadi, 2017), thereby missing the opportunity to uncover deeper multidimensional aspects. An interdisciplinary perspective not only enriches the understanding of the novel but also provides valuable insights for analyzing contemporary social challenges such as gender inequality, discrimination, and the influence of social environments on human behavior. More broadly, this study contributes to the development of literary theory and opens new discussions on how literature can serve as a medium for understanding and addressing complex social issues.

This research aims to bridge these gaps by integrating the three perspectives mentioned. The objective is to provide a comprehensive analysis of how power and subordination interact in the novel, from social, psychological, and environmental viewpoints. The primary motivation of this study is to introduce a more interdisciplinary approach to the study of Indonesian literature while expanding readers' understanding of social dynamics in classic literary works.

### Literature Review

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, serves as a framework for analyzing interconnected systems of oppression and discrimination, particularly those experienced by women. Crenshaw (2021) emphasizes that an individual's identity cannot be separated into distinct elements but rather represents a confluence of various intersecting factors, such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. Originating from feminist movements seeking to transcend the limitations of gender-centric perspectives, this concept has evolved into an analytical tool utilized across diverse fields to understand the complexity of individual experiences (Saputra & Qarimah, 2022). Intersectionality acknowledges that individuals possess multiple identities that dynamically interact, influencing their experiences of oppression and discrimination. In the Indonesian context, intersectionality is especially relevant for understanding the challenges faced by women within a spectrum of ethnic, religious, and social class diversities. This approach helps identify how women from different backgrounds endure unique forms of discrimination, shaped by the interplay of these factors within broader societal contexts (Anggaunitakiranantika, 2022).

The term “nyai,” often used in Indonesian literature and history (Niekerk, 2023), refers to women who were in relationships with men of higher social status, typically colonial or Chinese men, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Scholten, 1992). The socio-historical implications of the term “nyai” are significant, as these women were often marginalized and positioned at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. They were considered inferior due to their gender and social class, yet they were simultaneously implicated in colonial and ethnic power dynamics. Nyai typically occupied a liminal space within colonial society (Blackwood, 2005), as they were neither fully accepted as part of the Indigenous community nor as part of the colonial elite. This complexity makes them a particularly interesting subject for an intersectional analysis. The experiences of nyai were shaped by overlapping systems of oppression based on gender, class, race, and colonialism, resulting in a unique form of subordination that requires a multifaceted approach to understand their full implications.

Crenshaw (1989) delineates that oppression operates concurrently across three primary dimensions: structural, political, and representational. Structural intersectionality highlights how factors such as race, class, and gender interact simultaneously, creating intricate forms of oppression for women. Politically, it underscores that women are not a homogenous group; women from dominant groups, such as middle-class white women, while facing gender-based injustices, still hold certain privileges. Conversely, women from subordinated groups, such as working-class Black women, are more vulnerable to layered oppressions encompassing gender, class, and race. Representational intersectionality focuses on ensuring visibility for women who endure compounded subordination, such as Black women, who are often overlooked in societal discourse (Sigiro et al., 2020).

In the Indonesian context, intersectionality is crucial for examining the multifaceted subordination of Indigenous women within social hierarchies shaped by colonialism and patriarchy. For instance, Indigenous women serving as nyais in relationships with Chinese men often face marginalization and social stigma, despite playing critical roles in social and economic networks. Through an intersectional perspective, their experiences can be understood as the result of intersecting factors such as gender, race, social class, and culture, which mutually reinforce forms of oppression. This is also evident in cultural and literary studies, such as the *Gadis Kretek* series, where Javanese women are depicted as enduring exploitation, marginalization, and violence exacerbated by ethnic and class inequalities (Fahimatul Yusro, 2024). Similarly, studies on the Tula-Tula Mia folklore from Wakatobi illustrate how aristocratic women are ensnared in patriarchal structures that

perpetuate male dominance through customary laws restricting female autonomy (Sigiro et al., 2020).

While intersectionality has gained widespread acceptance, critics argue that the concept can become overly complex or challenging to apply in research. Nonetheless, it remains an invaluable tool for gaining profound insights into intersecting forms of oppression, particularly in diverse societies like Indonesia. In gender sociology, patriarchy is understood as a system that positions men in dominant roles while relegating women to the margins of social and economic structures (Anggaunitakiranantika, 2022). By employing intersectional analysis, these experiences of subordination can be examined holistically, revealing that social injustices cannot be disentangled from their complex social contexts. Thus, intersectionality enriches the understanding of power dynamics and subordination experienced by women in patriarchal societies.

The neuropsychological approach in literary studies provides profound insights into how the emotional and cognitive experiences of characters can be analyzed through brain functions and affective responses. Neuropsychology connects biological aspects, such as brain mechanisms, with subjective experiences, such as trauma or stress encountered by characters in narratives. For example, Panksepp (1998) in *Affective Neuroscience* explains how fundamental emotions such as fear and anger can be understood through neurobiological mechanisms. In literature, this approach is utilized to comprehend the impact of subordination or power dynamics on the psychological states of characters, including their responses to trauma or social dominance. Recent research also highlights how the narrative experience of literature influences readers' brains and emotional understanding (Oatley, 2012).

The social ecology perspective focuses on the interactions between individuals and their social environments, encompassing social structures, cultural norms, and interpersonal relationships. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory provides a foundational model for understanding how micro-level factors (e.g., family) to macro-level elements (e.g., social policies) shape individual behaviors. In literature, this perspective is valuable for analyzing how the social and cultural settings within novels influence the power dynamics and subordination among characters. Research by Lambert-Peck et al. (2024) demonstrates how power dynamics within socio-ecological contexts can create social-ecological traps, a concept highly relevant in analyzing hierarchical structures in literature.

## Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with textual analysis methods to explore the representation of power and subordination in the novel *Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang*. The choice of this novel is driven by its rich and multifaceted portrayal of social hierarchies, gender dynamics, and psychological trauma, which makes it an ideal case for examining the intersection of power and subordination in a historical and cultural context. The novel is set in a period marked by colonial tensions, which are intricately woven into the social interactions and power structures depicted in the text. Its complex characters, vivid depictions of social inequalities, and nuanced representation of subordination provide a fertile ground for analysis using intersectionality, neuropsychology, and social ecology. These thematic elements make *Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang* relevant and essential for exploring how power dynamics shape individual and collective experiences.

The analysis integrates three primary perspectives: intersectionality, neuropsychology, and social ecology. The primary data for this research consists of the novel's text, which is analyzed in depth to identify patterns of subordination and power dynamics expressed through characters, plot, dialogue, and setting. Textual analysis is conducted by closely reading specific segments where power relations and social inequalities are most prominent. These include scenes where characters experience emotional or physical oppression and moments that reveal the structural inequalities embedded in the narrative's setting. Data collection is conducted through a detailed, critical reading of the novel, focusing on key themes such as gender, class, and ethnicity. Secondary data, including journal articles, theoretical books, and relevant literature reviews, are also utilized to provide a robust theoretical framework that supports and contextualizes the analysis.

The data analysis process is divided into three stages. First, the intersectionality approach examines how multiple social identities (such as gender, class, and ethnicity) intersect and influence the experiences of subordination within the narrative. This method, grounded in Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, explores how the characters' overlapping identities contribute to their social position and subjugation. Intersectionality also highlights how power operates differently depending on the confluence of various social factors, enabling a more nuanced understanding of character dynamics.

Second, a neuropsychological perspective is applied to analyze the psychological impacts of subordination on the characters, including their emotional responses, trauma, and coping mechanisms. This approach is informed by Panksepp's (1998) theories of affective neuroscience, which focus on how the experience of social inequalities shapes emotions and psychological processes. Third, the social ecology approach is used to investigate how broader social structures and environmental factors influence the novel's interpersonal relationships and power dynamics. This perspective draws from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and examines how external factors, such as family, community, and societal structures, shape individuals' interactions and ability to navigate power dynamics.

## Results and Discussion

### Synopsis

"Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang" is a drama first published in 1927 and initially staged by Union Dalia Opera. The story revolves around the life of a young man named Oh Ay Tjeng, a successful administrator at the Gunung Mulia rubber company, situated between Mount Salak and Mount Gede. Ay Tjeng resides on the company grounds with Marsiti, an Indigenous woman known as a "nyai". Over three years, their relationship evolves from that of master and concubine to one of genuine love between a man and a woman.

Despite their cohabitation, Ay Tjeng feels bound by familial traditions. When his father, Oud Kapitein Oh Pin Lo, attempts to arrange his marriage to Liok Gwat Nio, the daughter of a wealthy magnate and owner of Gunung Mulia, Ay Tjeng fiercely opposes the plan. However, through persistent pressure, Ay Tjeng eventually agrees to marry Gwat Nio, forcing Marsiti to leave his life. Though deeply in love with Ay Tjeng, Marsiti sacrifices her happiness and departs in deference to her master's wishes. This leaves Ay Tjeng heartbroken and questioning his decision. His grief deepens when he discovers a tear-stained pillow left behind by Marsiti, amplifying his sense of loss. Over time, Ay Tjeng notices striking similarities between Marsiti and Gwat Nio, both in appearance and temperament.

After their marriage, while Gwat Nio proves to be a loving and devoted wife, Ay Tjeng struggles to fully move on from Marsiti. As time passes, Gwat Nio continues her efforts to win her husband's heart, waiting for him late into the night with unwavering devotion. Her gentle and affectionate presence gradually eases Ay Tjeng's longing for Marsiti, particularly after the birth of their daughter, Lily Oh Hoey Eng.

Toward the story's conclusion, a long-hidden truth emerges. Liok Keng Djim, Ay Tjeng's father-in-law, confesses his guilt over Marsiti's suffering after being forcibly separated from Ay Tjeng. He reveals that Marsiti is the daughter of Mina, a woman he once cared for. This disclosure uncovers that Roosminah, a girl who closely resembles Lily, is the daughter of Marsiti and Oh Ay Tjeng, long believed to have perished.

Although Lily, a kind and compassionate young woman, passes away prematurely, her passing leaves her parents and fiancé, Sim Bian Koen, in profound sorrow. Shortly thereafter, Bian Koen encounters Roosminah, whose resemblance to Lily is uncanny. Through the intervention of a healer, it is confirmed that Roosminah is Marsiti's daughter. Ay Tjeng's family embraces Roosminah with love, cherishing her as Lily's successor and granting her a place in their hearts.

Roosminah's presence rekindles cherished memories of Marsiti. Eventually, Ay Tjeng and Gwat Nio return to the Gunung Mulia estate to spend their twilight years. There, they savor the fragrance of cempaka flowers planted by Marsiti, which symbolize the enduring love and sacrifice Marsiti bestowed upon their family.

### Intersectional Perspective

#### Character Analysis

The "nyai" referred to Indigenous women maintained by colonial officials, affluent private Dutch bureaucrats, or Asian merchants. European and Asian migrants arrived in Indonesia without spouses often took local women as unofficial wives, relationships they could abandon at will. The status of the "nyai" or concubine placed Indigenous women in a profoundly degrading position, despite any material benefits it might have conferred (Sungkowati, 2009).



The position of Indigenous “nyai” and Chinese women within Indonesia’s historical context illustrated the intricate dynamics of intersectionality, where gender, race, and class identities interacted to shape their experiences of oppression. The relationship between the “nyai” and their Chinese male employers epitomized the imbalance power between Chinese men and Indigenous women, reflecting broader inequities along both ethnic and gender lines.

Indigenous “nyai” faced multilayered oppression. As women, they were confined by gender norms that restricted their roles and rights, while as Indigenous individuals involved with Chinese men, they also endured social stigma and ethnic discrimination. The discrimination they experienced stemmed from the intersection of their identities as women, Indigenous people, and their subordinate social status. Indigenous “nyai” was often regarded as objects of male gratification, reducing their value and dignity as individuals. This dynamic was vividly depicted in Kwee Tek Hoay’s short story “Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang”, where the portrayal of “nyai” emphasized their objectification and the erosion of their autonomy and self-worth.

### **Position of "Nyai" in Other Prominent Works**

The subordination of Indigenous women as “nyai” was not unique to Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang but could be seen as part of a broader socio-historical narrative explored in Indonesian literature. In Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s Tetralogi Buru, the role of women, particularly the Indigenous concubine figure, also embodied intersectional subordination (Prasetyaningsih, 2007). For instance, the character of Nyai Ontosoroh in Bumi Manusia was depicted as an Indigenous woman whose identity was deeply shaped by her subordination both as a woman and as a native in a colonial context (Toer, 2002). Nyai Ontosoroh’s experience resonated with Marsiti’s, as both were caught in the webs of gender, race, and colonialism. However, unlike Marsiti, Nyai Ontosoroh challenged her fate by asserting her autonomy, suggesting a more complex resistance within the colonial system. In contrast, Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang portrayed Marsiti’s subordination as passive, focusing on such a position’s psychological and emotional toll. This contrast in portraying the “nyai” figure in both works highlighted the varied ways intersectional oppression manifests and was navigated by women in different contexts.

### **Gender and Ethnic Subordination in the Character of Marsiti**

In the novel “Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang”, the character Marsiti, a “nyai”, embodied dual subordination within the contexts of both gender and ethnicity. Marsiti was depicted as a woman who fulfills the domestic and biological needs of her master, Oh Ay Tjeng. “I never thought you could be so foolish,” said Oud Kapitein Oh Pin Lo to his son, as they sat conversing on the front gallery. “You reject wealth, honor, dignity, and pleasure offered at your feet, merely to cling to a worthless “nyai” something anyone could buy for a guilder in any village corner!” (Hoay, 2001, p. 311).

The phrase “merely to cling to a worthless “nyai” underscored how women like Marsiti were perceived solely through the lens of their body functions. “Nonsense! You know it is customary... for Dutch or Chinese men to keep a “nyai” in the village” (Hoay, 2001, p. 314). As a “nyai”, Marsiti’s role was entirely dictated by the needs of men, particularly Oh Ay Tjeng. This position was further exacerbated by social norms that view Indigenous women merely as servants for wealthy colonial or Chinese men. This reflected the patriarchal colonial structure that objectifies and commodifies Indigenous women as instruments of consumption by men.

Moreover, as an Indigenous woman, Marsiti was consistently regarded as inferior to Chinese women like Gwat Nio. Oh Ay Tjeng was compelled to abandon his beloved Marsiti due to familial and societal pressures to marry Gwat Nio, who was deemed to hold a higher status. “And Miss Gwat Nio not only has a great inheritance but is also a beautiful, educated, and well-mannered young woman. Dozens of young men from wealthy and prominent families across the land have proposed to her, but all of them were rejected by her father, who prefers you as his son-in-law. He has no son and wants you to inherit and manage all his business ventures. And this is an extraordinary fortune, one that any ordinary Chinese Indonesian would celebrate with joy. Yet, you foolishly reject it, merely because of a “nyai”! Ask anyone with sound reasoning, all your friends and acquaintances who in this world would be so mad as you?” (Hoay, 2001, p. 312).

The social and cultural inequalities within colonial society illustrated how ethnic and economic status shaped interpersonal relationships and perceptions of individuals. Marsiti also endured ethnic stigma, as Sundanese women were stereotyped with negative prejudices. “So don’t let your heart be ensnared by women like that, especially since Sundanese women have long been infamous for their cunning sorcery (“kongtauw”) and seduction and are notorious as the most unfaithful women

in all of Indonesia” (Hoay, 2001, p. 313). These ethnic prejudices further compound Marsiti’s subordinate position, reinforcing her perceived inferiority compared to Chinese women like Gwat Nio. The intersection of gender and ethnic subordination amplified the vulnerability of Indigenous women within the colonial societal hierarchy, leaving them disproportionately exposed to marginalization.

### ***Power Dynamics***

Power dynamics often reflect the social structures embedded within a society, such as those shaped by gender, class, and ethnicity. These power relations created a battlefield of subordination and resistance, pitting those in positions of authority against those marginalized. “That’s not an obstacle. If your love for Marsiti remains, you can continue loving her while regarding Gwat Nio as a sister after marriage. One thing I know you won’t do, because that “sicia” is worth ten times more than your “nyai”. But once again, I must emphasize: because this marriage is initiated by the woman’s family, all risks must be borne by Mr. Liok Keng Djim if you do not love his daughter. What is important is that you do not reject this proposal, as it will bring great benefits to our family. Regarding Marsiti, I know she will be happy if you send her back to the village, with a house, complete furnishings, farmland for her livelihood, and a monthly allowance.” (Hoay, 2001, p. 314).

In this analysis, the power dynamics illustrated in the novel were examined in the light of their socio-historical context, particularly how colonial and ethnic hierarchies intersected with gender-based on power structures. This discussion emphasized how the imposed subordination of Marsiti mirrored broader systemic inequalities and how her agency was shaped by the societal norms of her time. The emotional consequences of Marsiti’s forced submission were explored, reflecting not just individual suffering but the societal mechanisms that perpetuated such oppression.

The phrase, “once again, I must emphasize: because this marriage is initiated by the woman’s family,” illustrated the enforcement of patriarchal power by the father, Oh Pin Lo, over his son. Oh Ay Tjeng’s personal desire to remain with Marsiti was overridden by his father’s insistence that he marry a woman of his choosing. As the figure of authority, the father dictated his son’s decisions for what he deemed the greater good maintaining family status and honor. Both Oh Ay Tjeng and Marsiti were deprived of autonomy in determining their futures. Marsiti’s fate was entirely decided by others, with no opportunity to assert her own agency. Even when Oh Pin Lo sent Marsiti to the village, her future was planned without her consent:

“Regarding Marsiti, I know she will be happy if you send her back to the village, with a house, complete furnishings, farmland for her livelihood, and a monthly allowance.” Marsiti’s feelings and desires were entirely disregarded, her happiness assumed from the perspective of others rather than her own.

Moreover, Marsiti became a victim of a system that prioritizes economic gain over emotional relationships. When Oh Ay Tjeng was arranged to marry Gwat Nio, Marsiti was easily cast aside by his father without consultation or consideration. Unlike Marsiti, Gwat Nio despised also facing gender subordination as a wife within a patriarchal society—enjoyed a stronger position due to her ethnicity and social class.

Marsiti occupied the lowest rung of the hierarchy as a woman, an Indigenous person, and someone from a poor background. She was among those whose voices were barely heard within the structure of power. In contrast, Gwat Nio, though also subject to gender subordination, wielded a degree of power due to her Chinese ethnicity, access to education, and family inheritance.

### ***The Hierarchy of Power in Colonial Society and Ethnicity***

Power in colonial society was not solely shaped by patriarchal relationships but also heavily influenced by ethnic status. Marsiti, as an Indigenous woman, was positioned lower in the social hierarchy than Chinese women. Her lack of autonomy was not only enforced by Oh Pin Lo but also by Keng Djim (Gwat Nio’s father), who was, in fact, Marsiti’s biological father.

“By removing Marsiti from your side, I wanted to make my daughter, Gwat Nio, fortunate. But in doing so, I have brought calamity upon my eldest child, Marsiti. Oh, Allah! Oh, Mina, Mina! Forgive me.” (Hoay, 2001, p. 335).

The decision to cast Marsiti aside reflected the ethnic and class hierarchy in colonial society, which relegated Indigenous women to subordinate positions, even within familial relationships. Marsiti, as a “nyai” and an Indigenous woman, was

deemed unworthy of being part of the family compared to Gwat Nio, a wealthy Chinese woman who was considered far more “valuable.” Ironically, Marsiti was the daughter of Keng Djim, father to Gwat Nio, from his relationship with an Indigenous “nyai” named Mina. This fact added layers of complexity to Marsiti’s subordination, as she not only faced discrimination as an Indigenous woman but also as an unacknowledged child of her biological father. Her identity was defined by her mother’s status as a “nyai”, preventing her from being regarded as an equal to the children of Keng Djim’s legitimate wife.

The power structures at play in this case were multi-layered, combining class, ethnic, and gender-based domination while exposing the hypocrisy of patriarchal authority within colonial families. Despite Marsiti’s hard work and loyalty, her identity as an Indigenous woman and an illegitimate child kept her in a position of subjugation. Keng Djim’s decision to remove Marsiti in favor of securing social and economic advantages for Gwat Nio through a strategic marriage to Oh Ay Tjeng demonstrated how patriarchal power and social hierarchies were wielded to maintain the status quo, even at the expense of his own child.

This underscored the inherent injustices within power relations grounded in colonial and patriarchal social stratifications. Gwat Nio, by contrast, directly benefitted from Marsiti’s subordination. Her father’s actions ensured her marriage to Oh Ay Tjeng proceeded without complication, granting her significant social and economic advantages. Yet even Gwat Nio, despite benefiting from the system, was not entirely empowered, as her gender role remained subject to patriarchal control within her family.

### **Neuropsychological Perspective**

The neuropsychological approach offers a framework to understand the emotional and psychological dynamics experienced by characters in “Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang”. By analyzing Marsiti, Ay Tjeng, and other characters, this perspective explored how subordination, trauma, and loss influence their psychological conditions and brain mechanisms. It provided deeper insights into how social pressures and personal experiences shaped cognitive responses, emotions, and behaviors.

### ***Layered Trauma, Stress Mechanisms, Helplessness, and Learned Helplessness***

Marsiti endured dual subordination both as a woman and as an Indigenous individual which resulted in layered trauma. This trauma was triggered by patriarchal treatment and social hierarchies that stripped her from autonomy over her life. From a neuropsychological standpoint, such experiences could be explained through the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which activated in response to chronic stress. Prolonged HPA activation released stress hormones like cortisol, which could have long-term effects on physical and mental health, including anxiety, depression, and cognitive impairments (McEwen, 1998).

In Marsiti’s case, this prolonged stress was linked to her forced separation from Ay Tjeng, reflecting how prolonged social and emotional strain led to deep psychological damage. This insight was pivotal in understanding how her passive acceptance of her fate was not just a character trait but a manifestation of the psychological toll of sustained oppression. Her diminished sense of agency, coupled with constant societal and emotional stress, exemplified the detrimental effects of learned helplessness.

Marsiti faced societal discrimination, being dismissed as a “worthless “nyai”” (Hoay, 2001, p. 311). This discrimination not only damaged her dignity but also reinforced a sense of helplessness. According to the theory of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972), such conditions negatively affected brain function, particularly in the amygdala and prefrontal cortex.

The neural mechanisms behind Marsiti’s psychological state indicated that the emotional impact of being constantly marginalized and objectified led to a reduction in the brain’s ability to process and manage stress (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Her inability to assert control over her life was reflected in altered brain function, highlighting the physiological consequences of systemic oppression. The link between external oppression and internal psychological processes here demonstrated how deeply intertwined societal structures are with individual mental health. Apart from that, gender also influences mental health (Firdaus et al., 2025).

Marsiti’s submission to her fate was a key finding in this analysis. It underscores how long-term exposure to oppression could lead to cognitive patterns where individuals feel trapped in their circumstances. Her emotional and psychological conflict,



while influenced by love, ultimately reflected the effects of the colonial and patriarchal systems on her ability to think beyond her subjugated position.

Marsiti's inability to control her life, exemplified by her forced departure from Ay Tjeng, reflected the phenomenon of learned helplessness. This theory posits that individuals exposed to uncontrollable circumstances often succumb to psychological resignation, leading to clinical depression (Maier & Seligman, 2016). In the novel, Marsiti's acceptance of her fate, despite her enduring love for Ay Tjeng, epitomized this state of learned helplessness. Her decision signified the absence of perceived alternatives, a hallmark of the condition.

### ***Loss, Emotional Memory Mechanisms, Emotional Recovery, and Neuroplasticity***

Ay Tjeng experienced profound emotional conflict following Marsiti's departure. This loss activates emotional memory processes governed by the amygdala and hippocampus. When Ay Tjeng discovered Marsiti's tear-soaked pillow, vivid memories of their time together resurface, evoking intense guilt and sorrow (LeDoux, 2000). In neuropsychology, this phenomenon is known as "flashbulb memories", where significant emotional events remain vividly imprinted in an individual's mind.

This emotional upheaval in Ay Tjeng emphasized the neuropsychological impact of loss, which triggered vivid recollections that affect his emotional state. The "flashbulb memory" effect underscored the intense psychological effect of Marsiti's departure, showing how traumatic experiences could alter memory processing and emotional regulation in individuals. This novel deepened Ay Tjeng's grief and reflected the broader theme of trauma within the narrative.

Although Ay Tjeng continued to grapple with his sense of loss, his interactions with Gwat Nio and the birth of their daughter, Lily, began to alleviate his grief. This demonstrated the brain's capacity to adapt and recover from emotional trauma through mechanisms of neuroplasticity (Davidson & McEwen, 2012). Positive interactions with Gwat Nio enabled Ay Tjeng to rebuild stable emotional networks, facilitating his gradual recovery from the trauma of losing Marsiti.

The neuroplasticity concept was crucial in understanding Ay Tjeng's emotional recovery. His interaction with Gwat Nio and the birth of his daughter contributed to rebuilding his emotional stability, illustrating how the brain could reorganize itself in response to new, positive emotional experiences. This finding highlights how emotional healing occurred not just through time but through meaningful social connections that facilitated recovery. Furthermore, the intergenerational transmission of trauma through Roosminah demonstrated the profound long-term effects of discrimination. This finding highlighted how the psychological scars of oppression were not only carried by the individuals who directly experienced it but were also passed down, influencing the next generation's identity and emotional health.

### ***Social Discrimination and Psychological Impact in Power Dynamics***

The trauma Marsiti experiences also impacted subsequent generations, particularly Roosminah. In neuropsychological theory, trauma could be transmitted intergenerationally through epigenetic processes, where parental experiences of trauma alter gene expression, which was then passed on to offspring (Yehuda & Bierer, 2009). Roosminah, growing up under the shadow of Marsiti's story, inherited the internalized emotional trauma of her mother's sacrifices.

As an Indigenous woman, Marsiti faced relentless discrimination based on both ethnicity and gender. This discrimination led to social marginalization, impacting her self-perception and self-esteem. Neuropsychological research showed that social discrimination affects brain activity, particularly in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), which was associated with the emotional pain of social rejection (Eisenberger et al., 2003). In Marsiti's case, the subordination she endured leaves deep psychological scars and entrenched her inferior position within colonial society.

The emotional dynamics between Marsiti, Ay Tjeng, and Gwat Nio illustrated how patriarchal power governs their lives. While Ay Tjeng felt guilt over Marsiti's sacrifice, he remained entangled in a system that prioritizes social and economic status. Marsiti, on the other hand, became the epitome of total subordination, while Gwat Nio, though benefiting from this system, was not entirely free from patriarchal control.

### **Social Ecology Perspective**

The social ecology perspective provided a rich analytical framework for understanding the interplay between individuals and their environments in “Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang”. Individual identities were shaped by interacting social contexts (Firdaus et al., 2025). This approach integrated layers of interaction between individuals, communities, and broader social structures, as outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1979), who emphasized the importance of micro, meso, and macro systems in shaping human experiences. In this novel, the dynamics of subordination and power experienced by characters such as Marsiti, Oh Ay Tjeng, and Gwat Nio reflect the complex social ecosystems of colonial society.

### ***Micro, Meso, and Macro Environments***

At the micro level, Marsiti’s relationship with Oh Ay Tjeng exemplified gender-based subordination institutionalized through the practice of keeping a “nyai”. As a “nyai”, Marsiti was not only responsible for domestic duties but also objectified as a sexual servant to her master. This role, as noted by Sungkowati (2009), highlights how Indigenous women were often seen as subservient figures devoid of autonomy or dignity. The imbalance of power in Marsiti’s relationship with Oh Ay Tjeng was evident in her forced removal from his household, a decision made without considering her desires (Hoay, 2001). The environmental influences on Marsiti’s role as a “nyai” were significant, as her position within the micro, meso, and macro environments continually reinforced her marginalization. Her inability to escape these constraints highlights how societal norms and power structures dictated individual behavior and autonomy.

At the meso level, the local community played a significant role in reinforcing Marsiti’s subordination. As an Indigenous woman, Marsiti faced intense social stigma, particularly due to negative stereotypes surrounding Sundanese women. In the novel, this prejudice was conveyed through statements like, “Sundanese women have always been known for their sorcery and infidelity” (Hoay, 2001, p. 313). Such views not only perpetuated Marsiti’s marginalized position but also created social barriers that prevented her from achieving equal recognition within her community.

On the macro level, the colonial social structure depicted in the novel reveals how stratification based on ethnicity, gender, and class shapes power relations. Marsiti, as an Indigenous woman, occupied the lowest rung of the hierarchy compared to Chinese women like Gwat Nio, who benefit from their economic and social status (Sungkowati, 2009). This reflected a colonial social order that not only oppressed Indigenous women but also reinforced patriarchy through the dominance of Chinese and colonial men.

Marsiti’s life was dictated by colonial norms that institutionalize the role of the “nyai” within patriarchal culture. As argued by Said (1993), colonialism not only shapes relationships between colonizers and the colonized but also deepens internal subordination through social norms that restricted women. In the novel, this subordination is exacerbated by the fact that Marsiti was not even acknowledged by her biological father, Keng Djim, due to her status as the child of an Indigenous “nyai”.

### ***Social Ecosystem Interactions: Power and Resistance***

The novel also portrays how familial power relations often mirror broader social hierarchies. Oh Ay Tjeng, despite his love for Marsiti, was unable to defy his father, Oh Pin Lo, who compelled him to marry Gwat Nio to preserve family honor. This illustrated that even male characters, such as Oh Ay Tjeng, lack full autonomy in the face of societal pressures governed by patriarchal norms (Hoay, 2001). However, the novel also highlighted resistance in the way Marsiti endures despite her subordination. The lingering fragrance of the cempaka flowers she plants symbolizes Marsiti’s emotional legacy and significant contribution to Oh Ay Tjeng’s family life, even after her displacement (Hoay, 2001).

Social norms, beliefs, power structures, and systems deeply influence individuals’ interactions with their environments. The cempaka flowers symbolize Marsiti’s lasting love and sacrifice, which continue to resonate in the memories of Oh Ay Tjeng’s family. This symbolism also highlights that women’s contributions were not completely erased by subordination within patriarchal systems (Firdaus et al., 2022). The ecological symbolism in the novel, such as the cempaka flowers planted by Marsiti, aligned with the concept of social ecology, illustrating how human relationships with their environments reflected identity and emotional legacies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The cempaka flowers symbolized Marsiti’s lasting love and sacrifice, which continued to resonate in the memories of Oh Ay Tjeng’s family. This symbolism also highlighted that women’s contributions were not completely erased by subordination within patriarchal systems.

## Conclusion

The perspectives of intersectionality, neuropsychology, and social ecology collectively highlight the complex and multifaceted injustices faced by Indigenous women, such as Marsiti in the novel 'Bunga Roos dari Tjikembang,' within the colonial social structure. Through an intersectional lens, we see the compounded oppression stemming from gender, ethnicity, and class. The neuropsychological perspective deepens our understanding of the emotional and psychological toll of subordination and intergenerational trauma. Meanwhile, the social ecology approach reveals the powerful influence of social norms, community environments, and broader power structures in perpetuating this subjugation. Integrating these perspectives not only uncovers the systemic nature of these injustices but also witnesses the resilience of Indigenous women, who, despite the immense challenges they face, continue to contribute emotionally and symbolically within patriarchal systems. This resilience is a survival mechanism and a powerful act of defiance against a structure designed to oppress them.

**Yazar Katkıları:** Konsept- RJ; Tasarım- RJ; Denetim- TF; Kaynaklar- TF; Veri Toplama ve/veya İşleme- RJ; Analiz ve/veya Yorum- TF; Literatür Taraması- TF; Yazma- RJ; Eleştirel İnceleme- TF; Diğer- RJ.

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