

**DIALECTICS OF AUTONOMY AND OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN
THE *SING BELING SING NGANTEN* DISCOURSE IN BALI**

Luh Gede Sukardiasih¹, I Nyoman Weda Kusuma², Nanang Sutrisno³,
I Wayan Suardiana⁴

¹Director of the National Population and Family Planning Agency of Bali Province,
^{2,3,4}Faculty of Humanities, Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia

Email: ¹luhdepuja@gmail.com, ²weda_kusuma@unud.ac.id, ³sutrisno@unud.ac.id,
⁴i.suardiana@unud.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Women are autonomous owners of their own bodies, but various ideologies and powers have disciplined women's bodies. The discourse of *sing beling sing nganten* in Bali becomes a channel for ideology and patriarchal power to assess women's bodies in the context of sexuality and reproduction. On this basis, this article aims to critically reveal the dialectic of autonomy and objectification of women's bodies in the *sing beling sing nganten* discourse in Bali through a descriptive-qualitative method based on a critical discourse analysis approach. The results of this study found that the discourse of *sing beling sing nganten* in Bali reduces Balinese women's bodily autonomy to being limited to objects of sexuality and reproduction. The hegemony of patriarchal power by making sexuality and pregnancy the determining factors for the continuity of a committed relationship has weakened the position of women to become autonomous owners of their own bodies. Body objectification occurs when women have to accept premarital sex, pregnancy and birth in accordance with the natural nature of their bodies.

Keywords: dialectics; autonomy; objectification; women's bodies; *sing beling sing nganten* discourse.

PREFACE

Premarital pregnancy as a fundamental cause of the formation of the discourse on *beling sing nganten* begins with premarital sexual relations as part of human biological needs. Sexuality as a biological reality is something natural and necessary for adult humans along with the maturity of their sexual organs and libido. Therefore, sexuality is naturally neutral regarding gender issues because every adult man and woman has the same needs for this matter. Even though the explanation in the previous subchapter shows that patriarchal power dominates the occurrence of premarital sex and pregnancy, it cannot be denied that women also have autonomy over their bodies.

The concept of body autonomy means that every human being can determine for themselves how to treat their body, including in matters of sexuality and pregnancy. However, in practice, various ideologies play a role in regulating and disciplining the human body. Religious and moral ideologies, for example, teach that sexual relations and pregnancy can only occur after a valid marriage ceremony. In contrast to secular ideology which views sex and pregnancy as an individual commitment. Apart from that, there are also other ideologies that are involved in matters of human sexuality, resulting in binary oppositional constructions of the body, such as autonomous-bound, worthy-unworthy, appropriate-inappropriate, ideal-not ideal, and so on (Prabasmoro & Manggong, 2018).

In the context of the *sing beling sing nganten* discourse, a woman's body is the determinant of premarital pregnancy, namely through intercourse which causes the fertilization of the ovum by sperm in the uterus. Therefore, women have autonomous power to determine their sexuality because all the potential for pregnancy is in their bodies. This autonomy of the woman's body emphasizes that premarital sexual relations are only possible with the woman's consent, whether with the intention of fulfilling libidinal desires, expressing love, relationship commitment, or other subjective reasons. The essence of body autonomy is a woman's freedom to make the best decisions for herself, including in matters of sexuality and pregnancy.

Autonomous women, at least have the freedom to decide about their sexuality. However, social construction involving various ideologies is seen to have reduced the autonomy of women's bodies in the discourse on sexuality. This has encouraged feminist movements in various parts of the world which, apart from fighting for women's equal rights in the fields of education, politics, social, law, economics and culture, also position women's bodily autonomy in the discourse on sexuality as an important agenda of their struggle. Feminist activists view that the body is a woman's greatest asset which is often the target of objectification, exploitation, segregation, ideal image formation, and other patriarchal sins. Therefore, full control over the body is a form of freedom that the feminist movement seeks to realize. Nude action (naked women) is the most extreme example of women's resistance to capitalism in the fashion industry, the objectification and commodification of women's bodies, as well as religious norms which are considered to support patriarchal culture (Ayub, 2015, p.16).

The influence of patriarchal culture in assessing women's bodies becomes an interesting dialectical field related to the autonomy and objectification of women's bodies in the *sing beling sing nganten* discourse. This dialectic marks a feminist critique that can

spearhead an emancipatory and participatory movement to realize gender equality for Balinese women in the *sing beling sing nganten* discourse, so that this study can contribute to the scientific development of cultural studies. On this basis, this article aims to critically reveal the dialectic of autonomy and objectification of women's bodies in the *sing beling sing nganten* discourse in Bali by critical discourse analysis approach.

LITERATUR REVIEW

This research was conducted by reviewing relevant previous studies. First, the relationship between marriage and the Balinese traditional system is studied through the study of Geertz & Geertz (1975 [2017]); Atmaja (2008); and Monika & Tobing (2018). Second, the relationship between the discourse of *sing beling sing nganten* and premarital sexual behavior of teenagers in Bali was studied through the study of Saraswaty & Tobing (2016); Horii (2020); Pradnyani et al. (2019); Sarwono (2012); and Krismonika et al. (2023). Third, the relationship between gender ideology and the discourse of *sing beling sing nganten* is studied through the study of Chandra et al. (2020); Dewi et al. (2022); and Titisari et al. (2024).

The struggle for gender ideology in this research is the ideological struggle to achieve equality in the position, role and function of men and women in marriage. First, this concept is operationalized in the context of patriarchal cultural hegemony which causes gender relations in marriage culture to not occur fairly and equally in society. Second, the struggle for gender ideology is closely related to the socialization of acceptance of the image, status, character and fate of women who experience premarital pregnancy in the patrilineal system in Bali. Third, the struggle for gender ideology includes all forms of class struggle to overcome gender inequality, such as the domestication of women's roles in the family and social system, as conditions that are considered normal and natural (taken for granted). Women's hegemonic awareness of their position and role in the family is an integral part of this struggle.

The discourse on *sing beling sing nganten* is an expression in Balinese which means '[if] you are not pregnant, you are not married [married]'. This discourse is represented in the Balinese traditional marriage system that the bride is pregnant at the time of the wedding ceremony. This discourse becomes an ideology because society views it as something normal and natural, and is not considered a family disgrace. The form of representation of the discourse of *sing beling sing nganten* includes all forms of marriage starting with premarital pregnancy.

Feminist theory (Brunnell & Burkett, 2019) is used to examine the autonomy and objectification of Balinese women's bodies. The basic assumption is that Balinese women's bodily autonomy cannot be separated from the assessment of patriarchal culture which involves religious, economic, social, cultural, health and so on ideologies. This is in line with the principles of the feminist struggle and movement which aims to dismantle patriarchal hegemonic practices in the discourse on sexuality and reproduction.

METHODS

This research was designed as qualitative research based on a critical discourse analysis approach. The focus of this research is the struggle for gender ideology in the *sing beling sing nganten* discourse which is revealed by analyzing the five principles of discourse, namely action, context, history, power and ideology (Eriyanto, 2006). This research was located in Tabanan Regency and was conducted for approximately three semesters (2023-2024). This type of research data consists of qualitative data supported by quantitative data. Data was obtained from primary and secondary data sources. Informants are determined based on certain criteria (*criterion based selection*) (Muhadjir, in Idrus, 2009, p. 92). The research instruments used include: digital camera, interview guide, voice recording device, and data storage device. Data collection was carried out using observation, interviews and document study techniques. Data analysis was carried out through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verification (Milles & Habermen, 1987, p. 364). Interpretation of data through thinking and reflecting, and thinking of thought (Geertz, 1973).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Women's bodily autonomy in the perspective of liberal feminism and patriarchy

From the perspective of liberal feminism, women who dare to express their bodies freely in public spaces are a reflection of the success of their struggle. This development is like a virus that enters the cells of women's body tissues so that they follow it, without ever feeling afraid or thinking about the values that apply in society (Gumelar & Mukhrohman, 2015, p.72). Liberal feminists also view that women's freedom to express their bodies marks the growing gender awareness so that women are free to have free will, no longer dependent on the judgment and support of men. Women's equality, strength and freedom are also considered as the main solution to eliminating gender boundaries in a patriarchal society (Wolf in Aziz, 2007, p. 69).

Women's awareness of realizing bodily autonomy that is free from colonialism by any party is a true form of resistance to patriarchal culture. Body autonomy emphasizes that women are able to interpret the values of life, as well as the meaning of their existence, so that they have independence and freedom in responding to various realities, including their bodies and sexuality. In and through this bodily autonomy, women are able to become subjects to determine their own ways and goals in representing their individual bodies, as well as their social bodies (Harper in Benedicta, 2011, p.145).

However, empirical facts show that women, in their subjectivity, never escape society's assessment. The female body, which is represented autonomously, is constantly evaluated by the values and social norms constructed by society. Patriarchal ideology also channels its power behind this construction. This is in line with the opinion of Jackson & Sorensen (2005, p.336) that patriarchal ideology existed before capitalism and will continue to exist after capitalism collapses. This means that patriarchal ideology is always present and involved in all discourses on the autonomy of women's bodies. Patriarchal ideology exists to evaluate and judge every representation of the female body according to the male perspective.

One of the fashion styles for teenage girls in Tabanan Regency which tends to be open and shows certain body parts, such as the thighs, back and cleavage. This kind of fashion is nothing new, in fact it is commonly found in various activities of teenage girls in public spaces. In the context of the autonomy of the female body, this kind of fashion certainly does not need to be questioned because the subject has the power and freedom to express herself. However, this becomes a problem when their presence in a patriarchal society makes it impossible to avoid the evaluation and assessment process of men.

Related to this, Bourdieu (2010, p. 93) states that the way women maintain and present their bodies in front of other people shows the distance between 'practically permitted bodies' and 'legitimate bodies'. Appropriateness Refers to the representation of the body that is practically permissible, not the legal or autonomous body. This means that although women can autonomously represent their bodies in whatever way they like, this representation is not always deemed appropriate by other subjects. The differences in the subject's perspective greatly determine the results of their evaluation and assessment of the representation of the female body. On the other hand, women do not have the power to direct the subject's assessment of their body representation, so that gender relations continue to struggle within them.

In patriarchal culture, discourse on sexuality almost always accompanies evaluations and assessments of women's body representation. In this regard, Morris (in Caturwati, 2003, p. 48) states that men's assessment of women's bodies is often and almost always associated with everything related to sexuality. Women's breasts, thighs, hips, buttocks and stomach often fill men's sexual imagination and have the opportunity to arouse their libidinal desires. "*Mih jaene!*" ['Oh, that's delicious'], is a spontaneous expression that is often heard from men's lips when they see a woman's body that looks sexy. Therefore, the autonomy of women's bodies, one of which is represented by revealing fashion that displays certain body parts, has the potential to arouse men's sexual libido, thus directing their judgment by positioning women's bodies as objects of desire consumption.

Open fashion and teenage dating styles that tend to be risky, such as being alone in a quiet place and having body contact, such as kissing, also increase the chances of premarital sex occurring. Although this fashion style reflects bodily autonomy which is recognized as the right of every individual so that he is free to treat his body in a certain way and for any purpose. However, the problem is that women's body exhibitions, which show certain body parts, also have the potential to trigger men's sexual arousal. This representation of the autonomy of the female body in a clothing style that tends to be open has a big chance of becoming an object consumed by men to fulfill their sexual libido. Moreover, with the risky boyfriend style that many teenagers practice nowadays, of course the opportunities for premarital sex are increasingly wide open.

4.2 The Objectification of Women's Bodies and the Politics of Desire

The objectification of women's bodies can be further examined in the context of the politics of desire. According to Piliang (2003, p. 108), the politics of desire is closely related to the liberation and repression of human sexual libido as a normal psychological phenomenon. For men who are sexually normal, the woman's body is a means of liberation from the pressure of desire and sexual intercourse is the peak of release. This opinion shows that there is a correlation between teenage girls' fashions and risky dating styles, with the opportunity for premarital sex among teenagers.

A woman's body has the potential to arouse men's sexual desire, which opens up opportunities for premarital sex. This fact confirms that women's courage to express themselves by dressing openly – as an expression of bodily autonomy – actually gets a different response from men who actually see them as objects of sexuality to satisfy their libidinal desires. This shift in the meaning of bodily autonomy to the objectification of

women's bodies is in line with Fakhri's (2007:81) criticism of liberal feminism that women's efforts to gain freedom often end up denying their nature, even going against social, moral and religious institutions, thereby destroying the institutions of marriage and family. Instead of freedom of expression, they actually objectify their own bodies.

A woman's courage to display parts of her body that have the potential to arouse the desires of the opposite sex is limited to claiming to be the legal owner of her own body, but does not demonstrate her complete autonomy. It has been proven that when the body is used as a sexual object for men, not many women are able to maintain control over their own bodies. The results of a questionnaire in the form of a *Google form* which researchers distributed via the WhatsApp application to 50 teenagers (age range 17-21 years) in Tabanan Regency showed that there were 5 (five) female respondents who admitted to having had sex up to the stage of intercourse. All five said that they didn't actually want the relationship and felt very regretful after doing so. They do this in stressful situations, such as being threatened with a breakup or repeated 'sexual attacks' from their partner. However, they do not deny that the style of dating they have been doing tends to be risky, such as kissing and touching sexually sensitive organs.

This objectification of women's bodies generally continues after premarital sex first occurs. Some teenage girls say their biggest fear after having a relationship is being abandoned or dumped by their boyfriend. The consequence is the tendency for women to accept invitations to have sex again, because they are afraid of being left by their partner when they refuse. This is closely related to their psychological condition after accepting the reality that they are no longer virgins, so they try hard to maintain their relationship with their lover, even though they have to lose the power to refuse every invitation to have sex. The struggle with gender ideology in the discourse on virginity has also become an interesting debate theme, especially among Indonesian society which tends to still position it as a moral issue.

The results of Damanhuri's (2020) study show that the virginity discourse in Indonesia divides society into two contradictory polarizations of views. First, virginity is no longer seen as something sacred so it doesn't need to be questioned. Second, virginity is still considered sacred and is a moral measure for a woman, so it is worthy of being questioned. This polarization of views has an impact on the psychological burden on women who have lost their virginity.

The psychological burden on non-virgin women who live in a society that adheres to the first view is relatively lighter, compared to those who live in the second environment. In a society that upholds the value of virginity, women who have lost their virginity will carry a very heavy psychological burden, and one way to lighten this burden is, "You have to marry the person who took your virginity." If this does not happen, the psychological burden will become heavier, even leading to suicide. Another form of venting was found in Pradewi's (2020) study, that several women who claimed to have left their partners after losing their virginity chose to vent it by engaging in deviant social behavior, such as becoming alcoholics, consuming drugs, having casual sex with multiple partners, and even selling themselves.

This struggle for autonomy and objectification of women's bodies does not only occur among school-aged teenagers, but also among couples who are ready to get married. They do this on purpose as a way to ensure the woman gets pregnant before marriage. Autonomously, women who choose this path are certainly better prepared to bear all the risks because their goal of having premarital sex is to get pregnant and get married immediately after that occurs. They have sex not just for pleasure (sex for recreation), but to have offspring (sex for procreation) so that they can express their sexuality more freely, like a legal husband and wife. Some premarital couples do not even hesitate to visit medical experts to consult regarding the expected pregnancy process.

However, this phenomenon can also be interpreted as a form of women's willingness to accept that their bodies are objectified by men. This is closely related to the biological reality that the female body is the place where fertilization, pregnancy and birth take place. She volunteers herself to be the object of satisfying a man's sexual libido so that fertilization can occur. If the fertilization is successful, then she must conceive a child who will later be recorded in the man's genealogy. She also has to accept the changes in her body during pregnancy, and all the pain until giving birth. After giving birth, she is still burdened with the responsibility of caring for children, serving her husband, and carrying out domestic and public roles. However, when the pregnancy does not materialize, she is also the one who suffers the most psychological burden, and is even threatened with abandonment by her partner.

A form of objectification of women's bodies that also often appears in society is the 'obligation' of women to give birth to male offspring. Couples who do not yet have

sons tend to want to increase the number of children until this goal is realized. In several cases that researchers found in Tabanan Regency, husbands [and their families] who wanted sons forbade their wives from using contraception, even though they already had several daughters. According to Lestari (in Sahal, 6 July 2024), this phenomenon is a serious deviation from patriarchal culture in that reproductive responsibility is always placed on women, as if they were machines for producing children. Men often don't care about women's health, without even asking about their readiness.

This is in line with Piliang's (2006, p. 140) view that women and femininity are completely shaped by culture. Religion, traditions, social systems and other institutions dominated by male views also legitimize this culture, forcing women to fulfill their role until the end, namely death. Remembering that only after death, a woman's body is truly free from the obligation to bear, give birth, care for children, and other burdens (Wiasti & Suarsana, 2022). In the context of the *sing beling sing nganten* discourse, this gender ideology struggle has been going on since women's pregnancy was constructed as a condition for marriage.

CONCLUSIONS

This study finds that autonomy and objectification of women's bodies mark a form of gender struggle in the *sing beling sing nganten* discourse in Tabanan Regency. Basically, every human being is the autonomous owner of his or her own body. However, in practice, women's bodily autonomy is always evaluated and judged by men, especially in relationships surrounding sexuality. The objectification of women's autonomous bodies is inevitable in the *sing linging sing nganten* discourse which fundamentally boils down to premarital pregnancy. The struggle for gender ideology in this context is related to the natural nature that fertilization, pregnancy and birth only occur in a woman's body, thus ideologically positioning her as an object of sexuality and reproduction.

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