

Gender, Class, and Customary Oppression: The Virginity Myth as an Intersectional Apparatus in Faris Al Faisal's Short Story "*Gadis Bermahkota Tiga Kembang yang Layu*"

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the intersection of gender, class, and customary oppression operating simultaneously upon the character Karyati in Faris Al Faisal's short story "*Gadis Bermahkota Tiga Kembang yang Layu*." Prior studies have tended to read the oppression of women through a single axis and have therefore not yet revealed how these three forms of oppression interweave within a single character. Using a single short story as its corpus, this study employs an interpretive feminist literary criticism framed by Crenshaw's intersectionality and Collins's matrix of domination. Textual excerpts were selected through close reading, coded against these two frameworks, and interpreted hermeneutically. The data, in the form of textual excerpts, were obtained through close reading and subsequently interpreted using a hermeneutic reading technique. The findings demonstrate that Karyati's suffering arises not from a single cause, but from the convergence of three forms of oppression. As a woman, her body is objectified; as the daughter of impoverished tenant farmers, she is powerless to refuse the authority of the landlord; and as a member of a customary community, she is in fact punished by the *ngarot* ceremony that makes virginity the measure of honor. These three reinforce one another until the narrative leaves Karyati with sex work as a constrained means of survival rather than a free choice. The novelty of this study lies in showing how the story reworks the virginity myth attached to a local ceremony so that it turns against a survivor of sexual violence, thereby enriching intersectional readings of Indonesian literature set within local cultural contexts.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Sexual violence; *Ngarot* custom; Indonesian literature

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is never born in a vacuum. It records the social tensions that surround it while simultaneously serving as an arena in which various power relations are displayed, negotiated, and called into question. Within the corpus of Indonesian literature, female characters are frequently presented not as whole subjects, but as figures bearing the layered burden of a social system that oppresses them. The female body in contemporary Indonesian literature may even be read as a field of symbolic resistance against the moral, legal, and cultural hegemony of patriarchy (Puspitasari & Isnaini, 2026). The problem of gender injustice in literary works, therefore, never stands alone, but always intersects with questions of class, custom, and the economic structures that shape the lives of its characters.

The urgency of examining this issue stems from a troubling social reality in Indonesia. According to the Annual Records of *Komnas Perempuan* (the National

Commission on Violence Against Women), the number of reported cases of violence against women throughout 2024 reached 445,502 cases, an increase of approximately 9.77 per cent compared to 2023, which recorded 401,975 cases (Komnas Perempuan, 2025). Of this total, gender-based violence against women was recorded at 330,097 cases, an increase of 14.17 per cent compared to the previous year, with sexual violence being the most frequently reported form (Komnas Perempuan, 2025). These figures are not merely statistics, but a vivid portrait of the fact that sexual violence remains a structural problem. Feminist scholars affirm that sexual violence is part of the patriarchal power structure that reinforces male dominance over women. In contrast, patriarchal ideology frequently serves as the value foundation that perpetuates gender injustice even within legal structures (Asriani & Muharomah, 2024). This problem is exacerbated by the cultural normalisation of sexual violence as well as by gender bias and myths that blame the victim. Literature, in its position as both a mirror and a critique of society, becomes an important space for dissecting how such victim-blaming mechanisms operate.

One work that presents this issue with sharp intensity is the short story “Gadis Bermahkota Tiga Kembang yang Layu” (2017) by Faris Al Faisal, published in the newspaper *Suara Merdeka* on 3 December 2017. The story recounts the life of Karyati, a fifteen-year-old daughter of tenant farmers in Indramayu, who is deceived and raped by the landlord for whom both her parents work as cultivating farmers. Rather than receiving protection, Karyati is instead humiliated before her community through the customary myth of *ngarot*, a ceremony welcoming the rice-planting season that makes a girl’s virginity the condition of her purity. The *ngarot* custom is itself a genuine tradition of the Lelea Village community and its surroundings in Indramayu Regency. In the myth attached to this ceremony, the flowers adorning the *ngarot* girl’s head are believed to wilt if she is no longer a virgin, interpreted as a symbol urging her to preserve the mark of her honor (Diskominfo Indramayu, 2019). The use of the flower crown in this ceremony indeed serves as a symbol of preserving the dignity and honor of the girl, or *cuwene*, in local tradition (Winoto et al., 2021). Ironically, in Faris Al Faisal’s short story, the story reworks the virginity myth attached to this ceremony so that it turns against a survivor of sexual violence rather than protecting her, ultimately driving Karyati to become a *telembuk* (a local term for sex workers in the northern coastal region of Java), the term for a commercial sex worker in the northern coastal region. Herein lies the core problem of this short story, namely that the narrative constructs Karyati’s oppression not through a single pathway, but through the intersection of gender, class, and custom that interlock and reinforce one another within the fictional world of the text.

The virginity myth that ensnares Karyati is not an isolated phenomenon within a broader context. Virginity has long served as a marker of purity used to control female sexuality, and such practices reflect patriarchal norms that create an intimidating environment for women in societies that uphold a culture of honor (Christianson & Eriksson, 2025). Within the local context of Indramayu, this issue intersects directly with the reality of prostitution that has become an object of academic inquiry. Research on the setting of prostitution in Indramayu demonstrates that poverty, low levels of education, and the absence of parental and community roles constitute factors that drive women into the world of prostitution, and that commercial sex workers are oppressed not only by men but also by the system that surrounds them (Liliani et al., 2019). It is precisely this intersection of custom, poverty, and gender that makes Faris Al Faisal’s short story worthy of more careful reading.

To read the complexity of this kind, an approach that focuses solely on a single axis of oppression becomes inadequate. The intersectionality framework introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw offers a way out of this limitation. Crenshaw formulated this framework systematically (Crenshaw, 1991). She explicitly rejected the assumption that

gender, class, and race constitute separate categories of oppression, and affirmed that the violence experienced by many women is frequently shaped by other dimensions of identity, such as race and class, operating simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1991).

Patricia Hill Collins subsequently enriched this idea through the concept of the matrix of domination. The matrix of domination is a theoretical approach that examines the interlocking systems of oppression along gender, class, and other social categories, and maps power into four domains: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal (Collins, 2000). Within the context of this short story, Karyati's body becomes the meeting point where the three axes of oppression operate simultaneously, ranging from the structural poverty of a tenant-farming family to the surveillance of sexuality through custom to the stigmatization that forecloses every path in her life.

Several prior studies have positioned feminist literary criticism and intersectionality as analytical tools in Indonesian literary studies, thereby forming a scholarly map relevant to this research. In the domain of women's representation and bodily power, research on the novel *Korpus Uterus* combines Beauvoir's existentialist feminism with Toril Moi's anti-essentialist approach to demonstrate that the female body in contemporary Indonesian literature constitutes a field of symbolic resistance against the moral, legal, and cultural hegemony of patriarchy (Puspitasari & Isnaini, 2026). In the domain of women's subordination, research on the short story collection *Bukan Permaisuri* by Ni Komang Ariani identifies three types of subordination, namely physical, psychological, and social subordination, which occur because the family and community environment positions women as figures deemed inferior and less deserving of a central role in the public sphere (Kusumaningrum et al., 2023). In a domain closer to the intersectional framework, a study of the character Nyai Ontosoroh in Pramoedya's novel *Bumi Manusia* employs the postcolonial feminist perspectives of Spivak, Mohanty, and Crenshaw to analyze the intersectionality of gender, race, and class while deconstructing the image of the Nyai as a symbol of subordination within the colonial and feudal system of the Dutch East Indies (Fairuz, 2025). As for the local context closest to the object of this study, research on the novel *Telembuk* by Kedung Darma reveals that poverty, low levels of education, despair in life, and conflict with partners are factors that drive Indramayu women into the world of prostitution (Liliani et al., 2019). These studies demonstrate that the issue of women's oppression in Indonesian literature is a valid and continually developing field of inquiry.

Nevertheless, there remains an unanswered gap within this scholarly map. Prior studies have tended to read women's subordination through a single axis, whether gender alone, class alone, or custom alone, and have not specifically examined how these three axes operate simultaneously and interlock within a single female character. The study of subordination in Ni Komang Ariani's work, for instance, stops at a typology of subordination without unpacking the intersection between axes of oppression (Kusumaningrum et al., 2023), while the *telembuk* study emphasizes the sociological factors of prostitution rather than its intersectional mechanisms within the text (Liliani et al., 2019). Moreover, the short story "Gadis Bermahkota Tiga Kembang yang Layu," which reimagines the virginity myth of a local Indramayu ceremony as a narrative mechanism that turns against a survivor of sexual violence, has never been examined through an intersectionality framework. However, the distinctiveness of this short story lies in how the *ngarot* ceremony, portrayed as a space of celebration and a marker of honor, is reimagined as a mechanism of judgment that reinforces gender-based and class-based oppression at once. It is this gap that the present study seeks to fill. Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aims to analyze the intersection of gender, class, and customary oppression operating simultaneously upon the character Karyati in Faris Al Faisal's short story "Gadis Bermahkota Tiga Kembang yang Layu" through

Crenshaw's intersectionality framework and Collins's matrix of domination. Three research questions guide this analysis. First, how does the text represent each axis of oppression, namely gender, class, and custom, in its portrayal of Karyati? Second, how do these axes intersect and reinforce one another within the narrative? Third, how are Collins's four domains of power, the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal, realized in the story?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs an interpretive qualitative design in the form of feminist literary criticism that integrates Crenshaw's intersectionality and hermeneutic interpretation. This design was selected because the objective is not to test hypotheses or measure variables statistically, but to interpret the layered meanings a literary text constructs around its characters. Because the study analyses a single literary work rather than human participants, the corpus itself, not a population or sample, constitutes the site of analysis. Given the understanding that humanities data are fundamentally textual, qualitative methods develop interpretive procedures through the content analysis of verbal data (Nugraha & Suyitno, 2022). The feminist literary criticism approach, framed by intersectionality, is used to position women's experiences at the center of the analysis by examining how gender, class, and customary practices operate simultaneously in shaping oppression, as conceptualized in Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality and Collins's (2000) matrix of domination.

Data Source

The primary data source of this study is the short story "Gadis Bermahkota Tiga Kembang yang Layu" by Faris Al Faisal, published in the newspaper *Suara Merdeka* on December 3, 2017 (Faisal, 2017). The research data consist of selected sentences, dialogues, and narrative excerpts that represent gender, class, or customary oppression experienced by the character Karyati. An excerpt was included when it depicted at least one of these axes through a character's action, speech, or the narrator's framing. Applying this criterion to a repeated reading of the whole text yielded the set of excerpts analyzed in the findings, spanning the landlord's gaze and speech, the rape scene, the family's tenant status, the *ngarot* accusation, and Karyati's own utterances after her exile. In addition, the study utilizes secondary data sources, including books, journal articles, and other documents relevant to the theoretical framework and the cultural context of the *ngarot* tradition in Indramayu. These sources serve to strengthen the interpretation of the primary data.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a library research method employing reading and note-taking techniques. The reading technique was implemented through close reading, a practice of slow and repeated reading accompanied by annotation, highlighting, and marginal notes on the text (Nugraha & Suyitno, 2022). This repeated reading process also contributed to data consistency, enabling the researcher to identify recurring meanings related to the research problem. Subsequently, the note-taking technique was used to identify, categorize, and classify textual excerpts into three axes of oppression: gender, class, and customary tradition. Each excerpt was then coded against an analytical matrix derived from the two frameworks. The coding categories comprised gendered objectification, class dependency, customary surveillance of virginity, victim blaming, and economic exclusion, together with Collins's four domains of power, namely the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. Because the primary text is in Indonesian, each cited excerpt was translated into English by the researcher and

then rechecked against the source to confirm that its semantic and connotative force was preserved, with key culture-bound terms such as *upah*, *telembuk*, *tugas*, *cuwene*, and *bidadari* retained in the original and glossed rather than replaced.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a hermeneutic reading technique, an interpretive approach aimed at uncovering the deepest meanings embedded within a text. Hermeneutics was selected because it is particularly suitable for literary texts, which are symbolic in nature and open to multiple meanings, thereby requiring careful interpretation to reveal their various layers of significance (Simega, 2013). The interpretive process followed the hermeneutic circle, in which understanding moves continuously between the parts and the whole. To comprehend individual textual elements, the researcher must situate them within the broader context of the text, while understanding of the text as a whole is constructed through the interpretation of its constituent parts (Simega, 2013).

Operationally, the analysis proceeded through several stages. First, textual excerpts were read with seriousness and *sympathetic imagination* in order to grasp Karyati's experiences as represented in the text (Hadi WM, 2014). Second, each excerpt was interpreted by relating it to the cultural context of the *ngarot* tradition in Indramayu and to the broader social conditions surrounding the character, ensuring that textual meanings were not detached from the realities that shaped them. Third, the interpretive findings were situated within Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality and Collins's matrix of domination to reveal how gender, class, and customary tradition operate not as separate forces but as interconnected and mutually reinforcing structures of oppression affecting Karyati. Through this continuous process of interpretation, the credibility of the analysis was supported by repeated and careful engagement with the primary data source and by an audit trail of coding notes and interpretive memos that documented how each reading of the excerpts was reached, allowing the movement from textual evidence to intersectional interpretation to be traced and revisited.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis of Faris Al Faisal's short story "Gadis Bermahkota Tiga Kembang yang Layu" (2017) demonstrates that the oppression of the character Karyati never operates through a single axis. In accordance with Crenshaw's intersectionality framework and Collins's matrix of domination, this discussion is divided into four subsections. The first three subsections examine each axis of oppression in sequence, namely gender, class, and custom. In contrast, the fourth subsection demonstrates how these three axes intersect and interlock to shape the character's fate.

Before the axis-by-axis analysis, the central pattern can be stated in brief. Across the story, gender, class, and custom do not act on Karyati in turn but together: the landlord's class power enables a gendered assault, the virginity myth staged through the *ngarot* ceremony converts her into a culpable figure, and her family's poverty removes any exit, so that the three axes converge to narrow her choices. The following subsections first trace each axis for clarity of evidence and then read them together, and Table 1 maps the key excerpts to the axis each foreground, the form of oppression, its narrative effect, and the corresponding domain in Collins's matrix of domination.

Table 1. Mapping of key excerpts to axis, form of oppression, and Collins's domains

Key excerpt (gloss)	Textual evidence	Axis foregrounded	Form of oppression	Collins domain
"wage" handed over	Landlord calls the assault her <i>upah</i> , the term for her	Gender × Class	Objectification; body as	Structural / Interpersonal

Key excerpt (gloss)	Textual evidence	Axis foregrounded	Form of oppression	Collins domain
after the rape “the great house muffled every cry”	parents’ field pay Her cries are voiced but absorbed by the house	Gender	purchasable Silenced refusal, not compliance	Interpersonal
“tenant farmers ... the landlord who owns much land”	Family depends on the landlord’s land for wages	Class	Economic dependency enabling exploitation	Structural
wilted crown at the <i>ngarot</i>	Community reads the wilted flowers as proof of lost virginity	Custom × Gender	Surveillance and public judgment of the victim	Disciplinary / Hegemonic
“it is the duty of every woman here”	Karyati names sex work a tugas, a shared lot	Gender × Class × Custom	Constrained agency under converging pressure	All four domains

The Objectification of the Female Body and Gender-Based Vulnerability

The gender axis operates most conspicuously through the landlord’s regard for and treatment of Karyati’s body. Before the rape occurs, the text already displays a gaze that reduces the female body to a mere object of desire. It is depicted when the landlord invites Karyati under the pretext of collecting her wages.

“Datanglah sore nanti, kau boleh mengambil upah di rumah,” ucap tuanmu dengan mata selalu tertuju pada bagian dadamu yang mengkal dan pinggulmu yang padat dengan nafsu memburu (Faisal, 2017). [“Come this afternoon, you may collect your wages at the house,” your master said, his eyes forever fixed upon your firm young breasts and your full hips with predatory lust.”]

This excerpt reveals the process of objectification, namely when the female body is regarded not as part of a whole subject but is fragmented into desired body parts. In recent Indonesian literary studies, the female body is indeed frequently positioned not as an autonomous biological entity, but as a body negotiated and controlled through patriarchal power relations (Puspitasari & Isnaini, 2026). Such representation affirms that women in the text are often constructed from a patriarchal perspective that positions them as lower, passive, and dependent on men (Nadila et al., 2025).

This objectification culminates in the rape scene, narrated explicitly as an act of power.

Tak perlu satu jam, lelaki itu telah memperdayamu. Dengan bujuk rayu dan sedikit ancaman, begitu leluasa tangan dan kaki tuanmu menganggangimu sampai puas. Merenggut kegadisanmu. Rumah besar itu pun meredam tiap kali kau berteriak (Faisal, 2017). [It took less than an hour for that man to deceive you. With cajolery and a measure of threat, your master’s hands and feet so freely pinned you down until he was satisfied. Seizing your maidenhood. And the great house muffled every cry you made.]

The phrases ‘*cajolery and a measure of threat*’ as well as ‘*so freely*’ indicate that this violence is not an impulsive act, but an expression of dominance carried out with full command of power. The scene stages what scholarship describes as the logic of sexual violence, an exercise of power and control over a person the surrounding structure has already made weaker (Talan et al., 2025). The great house that muffles her cries silences a refusal she does voice, so the narrative frames her not as compliant but as a girl whose resistance the surrounding structure absorbs and hides, both literally and symbolically.

Karyati’s vulnerability is deepened by two other gender markers, namely her young age and her naivety. It is affirmed in the following narration.

Kau masih terlalu polos untuk memahami sifat-sifat tengik lelaki sekalipun setua itu. Pulang dari sawah kau bergegas menuju rumah besar itu. Lagi-lagi hatimu terlalu lugu untuk mengerti keadaan rumah yang tak satu pun orang berada di dalamnya, kecuali tuanmu itu (Faisal, 2017). [You were still far too innocent to comprehend the rancid nature of men, even one so old. Returning from the rice fields, you hurried toward that great house. Once again, your heart was too naive to grasp the state of a house in which not a single soul was present, except for that master of yours.]

This naivety must not be read as a personal weakness, but as a condition produced by gender relations that position a young girl as a party possessing neither the knowledge nor the power to discern danger. Within the context of unequal power relations, the perpetrator actually exploits the victim's lack of awareness as an opportunity to carry out exploitation (Talan et al., 2025). Thus, the gender axis in this short story operates through the objectification of the body, the silencing of voice, and the exploitation of the powerlessness inherent in the construction of young womanhood. These mechanisms belong to the world the story constructs around Karyati, and the analysis reads them as the text's representation of gendered vulnerability rather than as a general claim about young women in Indramayu.

Structural Poverty as a Condition Enabling Exploitation

The class axis operates through the unequal economic relationship between Karyati's family and the landlord. The text clearly positions this family's class location.

Ayah dan ibumu yang hanya petani penggarap itu, saban hari bekerja di sawah milik tuannya yang memiliki banyak tanah. Sehingga kau, sekalipun anak perempuan satu-satunya, membantu keduanya (Faisal, 2017). [Your father and mother, who were merely tenant farmers, labored each day in the rice fields belonging to their master, a man who owned a great deal of land. And so you, even though you were the only daughter, helped them both.]

This relationship between cultivating farmer and landowner is the material foundation that explains why Karyati was so easily deceived. She came to her master's house not of her own free will, but because of her family's economic dependency. Poverty and low levels of education are indeed primary factors that place women in a position vulnerable to exploitation (Liliani et al., 2019).

The class power of the landlord is most evident in the systematic, rather than spontaneous, planning of his crime.

Dua jam sebelum kau datang, lelaki tua itu sudah menyuruh anak dan istrinya pergi menginap di rumah saudara di Parean Girang. Pembantu-pembantu di rumah itu diberi tugas lain ke luar desa untuk waktu cukup lama. ... "Sudahlah, ini upahmu," ucap tuanmu sambil mengisap rokok dari cangklongnya (Faisal, 2017). [Two hours before your arrival, the old man had already instructed his wife and children to spend the night at a relative's house in Parean Girang. The servants in the household had been assigned other duties outside the village for a considerable period of time. ... "That is enough, here is your payment," said your master as he puffed on his pipe.]

The ability to direct family members and servants, as well as to take full control of private space, is made possible solely by the class power he possesses. Within relations of this kind, a perpetrator occupying a higher social position can frequently exploit his authority to control and exploit a structurally weak victim (Talan et al., 2025). This class logic becomes still more naked when the landlord reduces the rape to an economic transaction through his utterance, "Sudahlah, ini upahmu" ('Enough now, this is your wage'). The naming of his act as a wage lays bare a worldview that treats the body of a poor woman as a commodity that can be purchased with money.

Within the story, the class axis narrows Karyati's options until the narrative leaves her with little beyond becoming a *telembuk*. When her lover asks, she answers bitterly, naming her own situation rather than having the narrator name it for her.

Gadis yang bukan perawan karena diperkosa mau kerja apa, Kang? Tak bunuh diri saja sudah bagus. Sekarang aku menjadi telembuk untuk memuaskan hasrat lelaki yang datang kemari (Faisal, 2017). [What work can a girl do who is no longer a virgin because she was raped, Kang? Not killing myself is already good enough. Now I have become a telembuk to satisfy the desires of the men who come here.]

The rhetorical question “what work can a girl do” exposes the absence of economic alternatives for a poor woman who has been stigmatized. Scholarship on prostitution in similar settings reports that limited employment, poverty, and low levels of education can push women toward sex work as a constrained means of survival once other options close, a pattern the narrative dramatizes rather than proves (Maulida & Syaifi, 2025). Read this way, class is not only the condition that enables the initial exploitation but also the pressure that narrows the choices the story allows Karyati, so that her turn to sex work reads as constrained agency rather than free choice or sheer inevitability.

The Story’s Reworking of Ngarot into a Mechanism of Surveillance and Punishment

The customary axis operates through the myth of the wilting flower in the *ngarot* ceremony, which makes virginity the condition of a girl’s purity. In the actual tradition of Indramayu, the flower crown worn by the *ngarot* girl symbolizes the preservation of the dignity and honor of the *cuwene* (Winoto et al., 2021). In the short story, however, the narrative reworks this honor symbol into an instrument of public punishment, a move that belongs to the fictional text rather than to any documented practice of the ceremony.

Tiga kembang—bunga kenanga, melati dan bunga bugenvil yang dirangkai menyerupai mahkota—yang kaugunakan untuk memahkotai rambutmu tiba-tiba layu. Macam bunga yang dipetik lebih dari seminggu. Ngarot yang mulanya berlinang senyum penuh madu, berubah menjadi hitam kelabu (Faisal, 2017). [The three blossoms—the cananga flower, the jasmine, and the bougainvillea arranged to resemble a crown—that you wore to crown your hair suddenly wilted. Like flowers picked more than a week ago. The ngarot, which had begun brimming with honey-sweet smiles, turned a dark and ashen gray.]

The wilting of the flowers functions as a sign read by the community as proof of the loss of virginity, such that Karyati’s body instantly becomes an object of collective surveillance. This surveillance immediately turns into a mass judgment that blames the victim.

“Kau sudah tak perawan, Karyati!” tuduh jejak-jejak yang hadir. Gadis-gadis yang juga mengenakan sanggul dari rangkaian mahkota bunga mencibir. Bibir mereka ceriwi. “Betul, kau bukan gadis lagi!” imbuh Esih yang selalu merasa tersaingi Karyati. Kejadian itu dia angkat untuk mencari perhatian jejak-jejak (Faisal, 2017). [“You are no longer a virgin, Karyati!” accused the young men present. The girls who also wore hair buns made of flower-crown arrangements sneered. Their lips were full of gossip. “True, you are no longer a maiden!” added Esih, who had always felt herself rivaled by Karyati. She seized upon the incident to draw the young men’s attention.]

This successive accusation displays a phenomenon known in feminist scholarship as victim blaming, namely when the community centers its attention on the body of the victim rather than on the act of the perpetrator. The scene stages a pattern feminist scholarship names victim blaming, in which a patriarchal community treats the survivor as tarnishing the family’s good name and as a bearer of disgrace (Talan et al., 2025). This burden of disgrace even spreads to the family, as depicted when Karyati’s parents “returned home with faces bowed in shame.” The parents’ shame affirms that custom places moral responsibility on the victim and her family, not on the perpetrator.

The most devastating impact of the customary axis is the foreclosure of the victim’s possibility of remaining within her community. Karyati’s own internalization of the virginity norm is evident in the following narration.

Kau tak mengerti apa yang terjadi. Namun kau memahami apa arti tidak perawan. Gadis yang tidak dapat menjaga kehormatan akan membuat malu keluarga, bahkan warga sedesa, dijaui dan dianggap pembuat cemar (Faisal, 2017). [You did not understand what had happened. Yet you understood the meaning of not being a virgin. A girl who cannot preserve her honor will disgrace her family, even upon the whole village, will be shunned and regarded as a bringer of defilement.]

This awareness drives her to leave without ever returning. It is here that custom functions as the hegemonic domain within Collins's (2000) matrix of domination, namely the domain in which the ideology of oppression is internalized and legitimized through cultural myths and beliefs. The myth of the wilting flower makes the surveillance of female sexuality appear natural and collectively accepted, such that the female body, which ought to be a field of symbolic resistance, instead submits to the moral and cultural hegemony of patriarchy (Puspitasari & Isnaini, 2026).

The Convergence of Gender, Class, and Custom within Karyati

The strength of intersectional analysis lies in its capacity to demonstrate that the three axes discussed above do not operate in isolation but intersect and reinforce one another. Various forms of oppression do not act independently; they are interrelated and layered, such that gender and class interact differently across cultural contexts in shaping the experience of oppression (Weißflog et al., 2026). Karyati's suffering can only be fully understood when gender, class, and custom are read as a single unity working simultaneously, rather than as separate variables that can be isolated from one another.

The first intersection becomes evident in the rape, where the axes of gender and class operate together. Karyati is violated not merely because she is a woman, but because her womanhood intersects with her position as the daughter of impoverished tenant farmers. This position strips her of any power to refuse the landlord's authority. It is made explicit in the way the perpetrator frames his act, dismissively reducing a violent crime to an economic transaction by handing over money and calling it her wage (*upah*). The choice of that word is significant. It is the same term used for the payment owed to her parents for their labor in the fields, and by transferring that vocabulary onto her body, the landlord collapses the distinction between hired labor and the woman's very person. Her body is treated as another form of agricultural produce to be compensated for. The transactional logic only becomes intelligible within an intersectional frame, in which the body of a poor woman is regarded as something exchangeable for money. It is precisely the core of Crenshaw's (1991) critique that single-axis analysis cannot capture the complexity of oppression experienced by women situated at the intersection of multiple identities. Without class inequality, the landlord's gendered power would not have been so unrestrained; conversely, without the gendered construction that objectifies the female body, class power alone would not have translated into sexual violence.

The second intersection occurs when the axes of gender and custom operate together to punish the victim rather than the offender. The gender-based myth of virginity is institutionalized through the custom-based *ngarot* ceremony, so that the rape victim is judged as an impure woman while the rapist remains untouched. Custom here is not neutral; it becomes an extension of the patriarchal ideology that polices the female body. As long as a society continues to link a victim's perceived conduct to the cause of the violence, the patriarchal system is reproduced in everyday life (Nadila et al., 2025). What sharpens this irony is that the only figure who refuses to join the collective condemnation is her lover, whose memory of her stands in stark opposition to the crowd's verdict.

Lelaki itu bahkan melihatmu, hari itu adalah hari tercantikmu. "Karyati, kau seperti bidadari," gumamnya. Namun tak satu pun percaya jika hari itu menjadi luka yang membuatmu tak pernah lagi kembali ke Indramayu (Faisal, 2017). [That man even looked at you; that day was the most beautiful day of

your life. “Karyati, you are like an angel,” he murmured. Yet no one believed that this very day would become the wound that kept you from ever returning to Indramayu.]

The contrast embedded in this passage is deliberate and revealing. At the very moment the community reads the wilted flowers as proof of disgrace, the lover reads the same girl as a celestial being, a *bidadari* (a celestial maiden or angel). Two opposed judgments are issued on the same day regarding one body, demonstrating that the meaning attached to Karyati is not an inherent quality of her person, but a construction imposed from outside. The phrase “no one believed” further underscores that individual sympathy is powerless against a collective verdict. The lover’s tenderness cannot save her, because oppression here does not originate in the cruelty of particular individuals but in a system that overrides personal feeling. It is why intersectional analysis insists on locating oppression at the structural level rather than reducing it to individual malice.

The third intersection, the most devastating, occurs when all three axes act in concert to drive Karyati into becoming a *telembuk*. Customary exclusion seals off her access to the village community, poverty closes every economic alternative, and her status as a non-virgin woman forecloses any possibility of an honorable marriage. Hemmed in by the three axes at once, Karyati turns to sex work as the means of survival the narrative leaves open to her, a constrained choice rather than a free one. Women within prostitution networks are indeed frequently identifiable as victims of structural pressure, particularly when they have previously experienced sexual violence (Fajrin & Triwijaya, 2019). Karyati’s resignation surfaces in her own words.

“Jangan cemburu, Kang. Itu tugas semua perempuan di sini” (Faisal, 2017). [“Don’t be jealous, Kang. It is the duty of every woman here.”]

This brief utterance carries a weight that rewards close reading. By calling sex work a *tugas* ('a duty' or 'an assigned task'), Karyati reframes coerced survival as an ordinary obligation, which signals how thoroughly she has internalized her circumstances as something beyond appeal. The generalizing phrase “every woman here” extends her individual fate to a collective condition, suggesting that she no longer perceives her situation as a personal misfortune but as the shared lot of women in that place. Even her plea, “don’t be jealous,” is telling, for it shows her managing her lover’s feelings while suppressing any expression of her own pain. What appears on the surface as acceptance is in fact the voice of someone who has run out of alternatives. This condition reflects what may be termed the feminization of survival, in which women are pushed into sexual labor as a means of endurance amid structural pressures that leave no other choice (Sari et al., 2026).

The four domains of power in Collins’s (2000) matrix of domination can be traced in their entirety within Karyati’s experience. In the structural domain, the feudal agrarian system positions her family as landless laborers. In the disciplinary domain, the *ngarot* ceremony functions as a mechanism for surveilling female sexuality. In the hegemonic domain, the myth of wilting flowers legitimizes surveillance, rendering it acceptable as natural and beyond question. In the interpersonal domain, oppression reaches Karyati directly through rape, public humiliation, and the stigma that follows her. These four domains do not operate separately but work simultaneously, so that Karyati never confronts a single form of oppression but an entire, integrated system of oppressions. Within this single narrative, the reading supports the intersectional argument that a woman positioned at the crossroads of gender, class, and custom cannot be understood through any single factor. The claim holds for the world the story builds and is offered as a literary reading, not as evidence that the same mechanism operates in every community that practices the ceremony.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Karyati's oppression in Faris Al Faisal's "Gadis Bermahkota Tiga Kembang yang Layu" cannot be adequately explained through gender, class, or custom as independent categories. Instead, her vulnerability emerges from the simultaneous operation of these three forces. The landlord's economic authority enables sexual exploitation, the cultural regulation of virginity transforms the survivor into the object of communal judgment, and poverty restricts her ability to escape the consequences of both. This pattern supports Crenshaw's (1991) central argument that oppression is produced through intersecting social positions rather than through isolated identity categories. It also corresponds closely with Collins's (2000) matrix of domination, because Karyati's experience moves across structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power. In the manuscript, these domains are visible in landlessness and economic dependency, customary surveillance of sexuality, the normalization of virginity ideology, and direct experiences of rape and public humiliation. The importance of this finding lies in showing that Karyati's suffering is not merely cumulative; rather, the effects of gender, class, and custom are mutually constitutive.

The representation of Karyati's body confirms earlier feminist literary studies showing that women's bodies frequently become sites on which patriarchal authority is exercised. Puspitasari and Isnaini (2026), for example, argue that the female body in contemporary Indonesian literature is not simply a biological entity but a contested space shaped by moral, social, and patriarchal authority. Similarly, Nadila et al. (2025) show that women are often represented within unequal gender structures that position them as subordinate to male-defined norms. The present study confirms these observations, particularly through the landlord's gaze, which fragments Karyati's body into sexually desirable parts before the assault occurs. The narrative therefore shows that sexual violence is preceded by symbolic objectification. This finding is consistent with Talan et al. (2025), who conceptualize sexual violence as embedded in unequal power relations rather than as an isolated individual act. In Karyati's case, however, the study extends this argument by showing that gendered violence becomes possible not only because she is a young woman but also because she occupies an economically dependent position as the daughter of tenant farmers. Thus, the text links bodily objectification to material hierarchy more explicitly than studies that focus primarily on patriarchal representation.

The class dimension also confirms previous research on women's vulnerability in contexts of poverty and limited social mobility. Liliani et al. (2019), in their study of prostitution represented in *Telembuk*, identify poverty, low education, despair, and restrictive socioeconomic conditions as factors that can push women toward prostitution. Likewise, Maulida and Syaafi (2025) discuss how limited employment opportunities and economic marginalization can constrain women's choices in relation to sex work. Karyati's trajectory is consistent with these findings, but the short story adds an important intersectional dimension. Poverty does not function merely as a background condition; it directly enables the landlord's authority over her family and later narrows Karyati's alternatives after she has been stigmatized. The landlord's use of the word *upah* ("wage") after the rape is especially significant because it converts sexual violence into the language of economic exchange. The manuscript itself notes that this collapses the distinction between paid agricultural labor and Karyati's body, treating both as objects that can be compensated financially. This finding extends Liliani et al. (2019) because it demonstrates not merely that poverty may be associated with prostitution, but that class hierarchy can participate in the production of sexual vulnerability before sex work even begins.

The customary dimension produces perhaps the clearest extension of earlier research. Winoto et al. (2021) describe the flower crown in the ngarot tradition as a cultural symbol associated with dignity and honor. In the literary text, however, this symbolism is deliberately reworked. The wilting flowers become a narrative mechanism through which Karyati is publicly classified as impure. Importantly, the manuscript distinguishes between the documented cultural meaning of ngarot and the fictional transformation of that symbol into an instrument of punishment. This distinction is essential because the literary representation should not be treated as evidence that the actual ceremony necessarily operates in the same oppressive manner. Rather, Faisal's story appropriates a familiar cultural symbol to expose the dangers of virginity ideology when female honor is tied to bodily purity.

This interpretation strongly resonates with Christianson and Eriksson's (2025) analysis of virginity control, which shows how virginity can become a mechanism for regulating women's sexuality within honor-oriented gender systems. The present findings confirm that virginity is not represented as a neutral personal status but as a socially enforced moral category. Yet the short story takes this dynamic further by dramatizing a particularly severe contradiction: Karyati is stigmatized for the loss of virginity even though that loss results from rape. In this sense, the narrative exposes the logic of victim blaming. Talan et al. (2025) similarly discuss how patriarchal power structures can redirect attention from perpetrators toward the conduct or morality of survivors. Here, communal accusation transforms a victim of violence into the bearer of shame, while the perpetrator remains largely outside the sphere of public accountability. The finding therefore confirms existing scholarship on victim blaming but extends it by demonstrating how customary symbolism can give such blaming an apparently legitimate cultural form.

The analysis also advances previous literary studies of women's subordination. Kusumaningrum et al. (2023) identify physical, psychological, and social forms of subordination in women's literary representation, while Fairuz (2025), through an intersectional reading of Nyai Ontosoroh, demonstrates how gender, class, race, colonialism, and feudal structures combine in constructing female marginalization. The current study is closer conceptually to Fairuz (2025) because both reject single-axis explanations. However, it extends this body of scholarship by foregrounding local custom as an active axis of domination. Rather than treating culture merely as background setting, the present analysis shows how a culturally meaningful symbol can be narratively transformed into a disciplinary and hegemonic mechanism.

Finally, Karyati's entry into sex work should be interpreted as constrained agency rather than autonomous choice. Fajrin and Triwijaya (2019) describe women in prostitution as frequently positioned within broader structures of victimization, while Sari et al. (2026) emphasize the relationship between female agency and structural pressure in sex work. Karyati's statement that sex work is "the duty of every woman here" reflects this tension between action and constraint. Her decision is an act of survival, yet it is taken within conditions where customary exclusion, economic poverty, and gender stigma have already removed more socially acceptable alternatives. The finding therefore complicates binary interpretations of women as either passive victims or fully autonomous agents.

CONCLUSION

The intersectional reading of Faris Al Faisal's short story "Gadis Bermahkota Tiga Kembang yang Layu" demonstrates that the suffering experienced by the character Karyati arises not from a single cause but from the convergence of three forms of oppression operating simultaneously. As a woman, her body is objectified and her voice

silenced. As the daughter of impoverished tenant farmers, she is powerless to refuse the authority of the landlord, who regards her body as something that can be purchased. As a member of a customary community, she is, in fact, punished by the *ngarot* ceremony that makes virginity the measure of honor. At the same time, the actual perpetrator remains free of accountability. These three forces reinforce one another and ultimately narrow her options until the narrative leaves her with sex work as a constrained means of survival rather than a free choice. Drawing on Collins's matrix of domination, the oppression of Karyati can be understood as a system operating simultaneously across the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains.

Within this single text, the reading shows that the fate of the woman it portrays cannot be explained through a single lens alone, whether gender, class, or custom in isolation. The novelty of this study lies in showing how the story reworks the virginity myth attached to a local ceremony so that it turns against a survivor of sexual violence. This aspect has been little addressed by prior studies, which have tended to read the oppression of women through a single axis. In this way, the short story does not merely record the suffering of a woman, but also critiques the workings of a social system that perpetuates such oppression. Future research is recommended to extend intersectional readings to other works of Indonesian literature set within local cultural contexts, so that the map of women's oppression across various customary settings may be understood more comprehensively.

DECLARATION ON THE USE OF AI

In accordance with the principles of research transparency and integrity, the author discloses the use of artificial intelligence tools during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, DeepL (web version) was used to assist with the translation of selected passages from Indonesian into English, and Grammarly (web version) was used to check grammatical accuracy, refine sentence structure, and enhance the overall readability of the English text. These tools were employed strictly for language assistance purposes and were not used to generate research ideas, conduct analysis, produce interpretations, or draft substantive scholarly content. All conceptual work, analytical decisions, interpretations, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author. The author has carefully reviewed and verified all AI-assisted translations and language edits to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the final text.

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