

PROMISCUITY IN EKA KURNIAWAN'S NOVEL *LELAKI HARIMAU*

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Abstract

Promiscuity, a recurring theme in literature, is examined through various lenses, reflecting the complexities of human relationships, societal norms, and cultural contexts. In Eka Kurniawan's novel *Lelaki Harimau*, promiscuity serves as a thematic lens through which Kurniawan explores the intricate interplay of desire, power, and societal expectations. This paper aims to delve into the portrayal of promiscuity in *Lelaki Harimau*, employing a sociology of literature approach combined with a qualitative descriptive method. Through close textual analysis and thematic exploration, the study seeks to unravel the cultural, social, and psychological dimensions of promiscuity as depicted in the novel. The research findings highlight the destructive consequences of unchecked hedonism, as exemplified by characters like Anwar Sadat and his daughter Laila. Furthermore, the study discusses how Kurniawan's narrative challenges entrenched notions of morality and sexuality, urging readers to confront uncomfortable truths about human nature and societal constructs. Ultimately, *Lelaki Harimau* emerges not only as a compelling work of literature but also as a powerful commentary on the enduring relevance of literature in illuminating social issues and advocating for positive change.

Keywords: human relationship; social issues; thematic exploration

1. Introduction

Promiscuity in literature has long served as a mirror reflecting the intricacies of human interactions and societal norms. From ancient myths to modern novels, the exploration of promiscuity has been a subject of both fascination and critique, offering insights into the complexities of desire, intimacy, and power dynamics. In Eka Kurniawan's novel *Lelaki Harimau*, this theme takes center stage, intertwining with the intricate narratives of desire, passion, and power (Kurniawan, 2014). The characters' entanglements with promiscuity serve as a lens through which Kurniawan scrutinizes not only individual motivations but also the broader cultural and social contexts that shape human behavior.

The examination of promiscuity in *Lelaki Harimau* holds particular significance within the broader context of Indonesian literature and cultural discourse. Kurniawan's narrative challenges entrenched notions of morality and sexuality, compelling readers to

confront uncomfortable truths about human nature and societal constructs (Morgan, 2018). Through vivid imagery, compelling characters, and intricate plotlines, the author navigates the complexities of desire, intimacy, and power dynamics, offering a multifaceted exploration of promiscuity in Indonesian society.

Drawing on relevant literary criticism, cultural studies, and gender theory, this paper endeavors to offer a comprehensive analysis of how promiscuity is depicted and interrogated in *Lelaki Harimau* (Sen, 2016). By engaging with the text at both thematic and narrative levels, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of the novel's socio-cultural significance and its exploration of human sexuality and relationships (Thornber, 2016). Through rigorous analysis and critical reflection, this research aims to contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations surrounding promiscuity in literature and its broader implications for understanding human behavior and societal norms.

Promiscuity, a recurring motif in literature, has been scrutinized through diverse perspectives, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of human relationships, societal conventions, and cultural milieus. In the realm of Indonesian literature, Eka Kurniawan's novel *Lelaki Harimau* emerges as a notable exploration of this theme, prompting scholarly investigation into its depiction and ramifications. This study focuses on analyzing one of its central themes: promiscuity in Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau*, offering a nuanced examination of its portrayal and implications within the context of the novel.

2. Literature Review

Promiscuity, often fraught with moral judgment and societal stigma, refers to engaging in sexual activity with multiple partners without commitment or emotional attachment. Despite variations across cultures and historical contexts, promiscuity remains a subject of significant interest and concern in contemporary society.

Promiscuity can arise from various individual, interpersonal, and societal factors. Psychological theories propose that low self-esteem, impulsivity, or a quest for validation and intimacy may drive individuals to engage in promiscuous behavior (Carvalho et al., 2020). Childhood experiences, such as trauma or inconsistent parental relationships, can also contribute to later promiscuous tendencies. Furthermore, social and cultural influences heavily shape attitudes towards sex and relationships. Societal norms that prioritize sexual freedom may normalize promiscuity, while cultural attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and marriage can influence individuals' sexual behavior and decision-making (Vrangalova & Ong, 2014).

The ramifications of promiscuity extend beyond the individual to societal impacts, including emotional and psychological consequences and public health concerns. Individuals engaging in promiscuous behavior may experience feelings of guilt, shame, and regret, alongside increased risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies (Jonason et al., 2015). Moreover, promiscuity can strain interpersonal relationships, undermining trust and intimacy and hindering the formation and maintenance of long-term commitments (Vrangalova & Ong, 2014).

From a societal standpoint, promiscuity contributes to broader social issues, such as the proliferation of STIs and challenges related to sexual health education and reproductive rights. Addressing promiscuity necessitates a holistic approach, considering both individual behaviors and broader societal influences. Societal attitudes towards promiscuity vary, reflecting cultural, religious, and moral values. While some cultures condemn promiscuity as immoral, others may tolerate or even celebrate it as a

symbol of sexual liberation. Religious teachings often shape societal perspectives, advocating for abstinence before marriage and monogamous relationships. Nevertheless, evolving attitudes towards sexuality, coupled with the advent of hookup culture and online dating apps, have reshaped modern dating dynamics, raising debates about the impacts of technology on sexual behavior and intimacy (Montoya et al., 2020).

Promiscuity remains a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, influenced by individual, interpersonal, and societal dynamics. Understanding its underlying causes, impacts, and societal perspectives is crucial for addressing its consequences and fostering healthy attitudes towards sex and relationships. Through open dialogue and education, society can strive towards creating an inclusive and supportive environment for individuals to make informed choices about their sexual behavior.

Nancy Morgan (2018) delves into the intricate dynamics of desire, power, and identity in Kurniawan's work, offering insights into how promiscuity functions as a tool for challenging conventional notions of morality and sexuality. Morgan's analysis provides a foundation for understanding the socio-cultural context in which promiscuity is situated within *Lelaki Harimau*, emphasizing its relevance to broader discussions of Indonesian literature and cultural discourse.

Kurniawan's narrative also intersects with discussions of history and myth-making, as explored by Sen (2016). Sen's examination of Kurniawan's literary techniques and thematic concerns offers a deeper understanding of the author's engagement with Indonesian cultural heritage and its implications for the portrayal of promiscuity. By situating *Lelaki Harimau* within the context of Southeast Asian literature, Sen highlights the novel's contribution to ongoing debates surrounding identity, representation, and narrative form.

Furthermore, Thornber's (2016) analysis of the feminist uncanny in *Lelaki Harimau* provides valuable insights into how promiscuity is portrayed and interrogated through a gendered lens. Thornber's exploration of the novel's treatment of sexuality and haunting sheds light on the complex interplay between desire, agency, and societal expectations. By foregrounding the experiences of female characters, Thornber's work contributes to a more nuanced understanding of promiscuity as a site of contestation and negotiation within Indonesian literature.

Together, these scholarly works offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing the portrayal of promiscuity in *Lelaki Harimau* and its broader implications for understanding human sexuality, societal norms, and cultural identity. By drawing on literary criticism, cultural studies, and gender theory, this literature review sets the stage for a nuanced exploration of the representation of promiscuity in contemporary Indonesian literature. Through close textual analysis and critical engagement with existing scholarship, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations surrounding promiscuity, literature, and cultural discourse in Indonesia and beyond.

The depiction of promiscuity in Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau* reflects real-world scenarios, ripe for further examination through a sociological lens. Wellek and Warren (1990) delineate the sociology of literature into three dimensions: (1) Sociology of the author, probing into the author's profession, background, and social status, treating them as social entities; (2) Sociology of the work, focusing on the literary text itself and its relationship to social issues, often analyzed as a social document; (3) Sociology of readers and the societal impact of literary works, recognizing the

reciprocal influence between authors and society, with literature serving as both a reflection of and a shaper of life.

Given this framework, the researchers opt to apply Laurenceon and Swingewood's (1972) sociological approaches to literature in this study, concentrating on literature as a representation or mirror of societal problems. Additionally, the background of Eka Kurniawan, as an integral member of his community, informs the writing of *Lelaki Harimau*, influenced by the prevailing conditions in his surroundings. Kurniawan's social background and sensitivity to his environment serve as catalysts for crafting the narrative of *Lelaki Harimau*, as he reacts and responds to the societal dynamics unfolding around him.

3. Research Method

This study employs a sociology of literature approach combined with a qualitative descriptive method to explore the portrayal of promiscuity in Eka Kurniawan's novel, *Lelaki Harimau*. The sociology of literature framework allows for an examination of how literary texts reflect and shape societal norms, values, and structures. By situating *Lelaki Harimau* within its cultural and historical context, this approach facilitates an understanding of how promiscuity is represented and interpreted within Indonesian society.

The qualitative descriptive method is chosen to provide a detailed and nuanced analysis of the novel's portrayal of promiscuity. This method involves the systematic collection and analysis of qualitative data, focusing on describing and interpreting the phenomena under study. Through close reading and thematic analysis of the text, this study seeks to uncover the cultural, social, and psychological dimensions of promiscuity as depicted in *Lelaki Harimau*.

Data collection involves the thorough examination of the novel, identifying key passages, characters, and plotlines related to promiscuity. Textual analysis is conducted to identify recurring themes, motifs, and narrative strategies employed by the author to represent promiscuity. Additionally, relevant secondary sources, such as literary criticism and cultural studies, are consulted to provide context and insights into the novel's socio-cultural significance.

The analysis is guided by the research objectives, which include exploring the motivations of characters engaged in promiscuous behavior, examining the societal implications of promiscuity depicted in the novel, and identifying the narrative techniques used by Kurniawan to portray promiscuity. Themes and patterns emerging from the data are documented and interpreted, providing rich insights into the representation of promiscuity in *Lelaki Harimau*.

The findings of this study are presented through a descriptive narrative, supplemented by excerpts from the novel and relevant scholarly literature. The analysis is structured around key themes and sub-themes, highlighting the complexity and nuances of promiscuity as depicted in the text. Additionally, the implications of these findings for understanding human sexuality, societal norms, and cultural identity are discussed.

Overall, the combination of a sociology of literature framework and qualitative descriptive method offers a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the portrayal of promiscuity in *Lelaki Harimau*, contributing to our understanding of the novel's socio-cultural significance and its representation of human relationships and desires.

4. Discussion

Promiscuity entails engaging in sexual activity frequently with different partners or being indiscriminate in the choice of sexual partners (The Free Dictionary, n.d.). In human sexual behavior, it denotes casual involvement with multiple partners, including those outside of marriage, and is often deemed ethically incorrect (Psychology Wiki, n.d.). Thus, promiscuity involves sexual encounters with multiple partners without commitment or exclusivity, ranging from one-night stands to ongoing casual relationships. Motivations for promiscuity may include personal desire, exploration, or seeking pleasure without emotional attachment.

In Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau*, the theme of promiscuity is embodied by characters such as Andwar Sadat and his daughter, Laila, who frequently engage in sexual relationships that challenge societal norms and expectations. Through their actions, Kurniawan delves into issues of power, desire, and liberation.

Andwar Sadat is portrayed as a character who constantly seeks pleasure by pursuing girls, widows, and even married women solely for his own gratification. His relentless pursuit of physical pleasure demonstrates a disregard for the feelings and commitments of others. Anwar Sadat actively seeks out women, regardless of their marital status, purely to satisfy his own desires. This behavior underscores his indifference to societal norms and moral boundaries, prioritizing his selfish pursuit of pleasure over others' emotional well-being. His actions contribute to the novel's exploration of themes surrounding sexuality, power dynamics, and morality, revealing the intricate relationship between individual desires and social expectations.

Di tengah waktu luangnya yang melimpah-limpah, sebab sesungguhnya ia tak punya pekerjaan sejak berhenti menjual lukisan, ia merupakan teman bermain catur Mayor Sadrah, sponsor klub sepak bola kota, dan berburu perempuan. Kelakuannya yang terakhir, dilakukan lebih bergairah daripada melukis, menemukan gadis-gadis dan meniduri mereka, kadang-kadang janda dan istri orang jika mau. (Kurniawan, 2014: 15)

The passage above provides insight into Anwar Sadat's promiscuous behavior, noting his newfound abundance of leisure time since he ceased selling paintings. This surplus of time potentially fuels his promiscuity, granting him the freedom to indulge his desires unrestricted by employment. Despite his involvement in various activities such as playing chess with Mayor Sadrah and sponsoring the city's football club, his relentless pursuit of women stands out as the dominant aspect of his lifestyle, overshadowing all other endeavors. The lines quoted above also suggest that Anwar Sadat's pursuit of women is more passionate than his previous engagement in painting. This implies that his pursuit of sexual encounters is a primary focus and source of fulfillment in his life, surpassing his previous interests or occupations. His promiscuity is underscored by his willingness to engage sexually with a wide range of women, including young girls, widows, and even married women. His lack of discrimination in choosing partners suggests that his pursuit of pleasure is driven solely by his own desires, without consideration for the marital status or social standing of his conquests. His behavior challenges conventional morality and societal norms regarding fidelity and respect for marital bonds. By pursuing married women and widows, he disregards the sanctity of marriage and demonstrates a lack of empathy for the potential consequences of his actions on the lives of others. Overall, the passage above offers a glimpse into

Anwar Sadat's promiscuous lifestyle, characterized by a relentless pursuit of sexual gratification, disregard for societal norms, and a prioritization of pleasure above all else. His behavior serves to explore themes of desire, power, and morality within the novel, shedding light on the complexities of human relationships and the consequences of unchecked hedonism.

Anwar Sadat's habit of sleeping with many women eventually became known by his wife, but his wife chose not to care about her husband's behavior.

Banyak orang percaya seniman kapiran ini mengawininya lebih karena uang yang dimilikinya, dan dengan uang itu Anwar Sadat bisa meniduri banyak perempuan, sebagian besar akhirnya diketahui si istri yang memilih tak peduli, sejauh ia tak bikin anak di tempat lain. (Kurniawan, 2014: 17-18)

The provided lines offer a nuanced portrayal of promiscuity within the context of Anwar Sadat's marriage. The text also suggests that Anwar Sadat's marriage may have been motivated by financial gain rather than genuine affection. It implies that he married his wife because of her wealth, which he uses to indulge in promiscuous behavior. This highlights the transactional nature of their relationship, where financial security may have outweighed considerations of fidelity or emotional connection. Anwar Sadat's financial resources afford him the means to engage in promiscuous behavior. The wealth he possesses grants him access to opportunities and resources that facilitate his pursuit of multiple sexual partners. This underscores the role of socioeconomic privilege in enabling and perpetuating promiscuity, as individuals with means may have greater freedom to indulge their desires without facing significant consequences. Despite Anwar Sadat's infidelity being known to his wife, she chooses to turn a blind eye to his behavior as long as he does not father children outside of their marriage. This suggests that while his promiscuity may strain their relationship, the absence of offspring outside of their union is seen as a boundary that, if respected, allows his behavior to be tolerated. It reflects a pragmatic approach to marriage, where fidelity may be negotiable to some extent as long as certain conditions are met. The text also implies a level of societal acceptance or resignation toward Anwar Sadat's promiscuity, as evidenced by his wife's decision to overlook his behavior. This reflects broader attitudes toward infidelity and marriage within the cultural context of the novel, where extramarital affairs may be tolerated or normalized to some degree, particularly among individuals of higher socioeconomic status. Overall, the lines quoted above provide insight into the interplay between wealth, marriage, and promiscuity within the novel illustrating the complex dynamics that shape human relationships and societal norms regarding fidelity and moral conduct.

Anwar Sadat's promiscuous behavior affects Nuraini, who is married to Komar bin Syueb, making her one of his victims. Despite Nuraini's marital status, Anwar Sadat has impregnated her, indicating a consensual relationship driven by mutual pleasure rather than coercion. This instance underscores the complexities of Anwar Sadat's character, revealing a willingness to engage in intimate relationships regardless of societal norms or the consequences for those involved.

Kasia sering datang membawakannya pisang dan susu, sebab itu baik untuk perempuan hamil, katanya. Atas kebaikan bidan ini, Nuraeni sering merasa jengah, menyadari Kasia tak pernah tahu bahwa bayi

yang ikut diperhatikannya tak lain hasil perampokan atas lakinya demi kesenangan perempuan lain.
(Kurniawan, 2014: 149)

The lines quoted above offer further insight into the consequences of Anwar Sadat's promiscuity, particularly in relation to Nuraini's pregnancy. The text reinforces that Nuraini's pregnancy is a direct result of her involvement with Anwar Sadat, highlighting the impact of his promiscuity on her life and marital relationship with Komar bin Syueb. This emphasizes the tangible consequences of extramarital affairs and the complexities they introduce into individuals' lives. Kasia, Anwar Sadat's wife, frequently brings Nuraini bananas and milk, ostensibly to support her during her pregnancy. This demonstrates acts of kindness and compassion on Kasia's part, suggesting that she cares for Nuraini's well-being despite potentially being unaware of the circumstances surrounding her pregnancy. Despite Kasia's gestures of kindness, Nuraini feels discomfort and unease, as she is reminded of the true origins of her pregnancy. She is acutely aware that Kasia is unaware of the true nature of her situation, which adds to her sense of shame and guilt over her involvement with Anwar Sadat. The passage also metaphorically describes Anwar Sadat's actions as a "robbery" of Nuraini's husband's seed for the pleasure of other women. This imagery underscores the violation of marital trust and fidelity inherent in Anwar Sadat's promiscuity, portraying it as a form of theft or betrayal that has profound implications for Nuraini and her husband. Overall, the lines quoted above deepen our understanding of the emotional and psychological impact of Anwar Sadat's promiscuity on Nuraini, as well as the complex dynamics between the characters involved.

The promiscuous nature of Anwar Sadat, unfortunately, is inherited by his beautiful eldest daughter named Laila, where Laila becomes pregnant out of wedlock.

Si sulung Laila mewarisi kenakalan semacam ini sepenuhnya. Cantik dengan dada yang menyerobot menggoda, kulit selembut potongan keju, dengan wajah lembab dan sedikit keangkuhan pura-pura. Pada umur enam belas tahun, ia sudah terlalu montok sebagai anak sekolah, dada dan pahanya jadi sasaran jahil teman lelaki dan gurunya, hingga suatu hari ayahnya menemukan gadis itu telah bunting.
(Kurniawan, 2014: 18)

The description of Laila inheriting this mischief entirely indicates that such behavior has become an integral part of her character. This may be influenced by the environment in which she was raised, including her family and school surroundings. Laila's physical description, particularly the part highlighting her beauty and alluring figure, depicts how her appearance can impact her social interactions. Her attractiveness might make her more vulnerable to inappropriate treatment and unwanted attention from others. Laila's pregnancy reveals her promiscuous behavior, suggesting that she engages in sexual relationships without the appropriate social norms.

The revelation of Laila's pregnancy to her father underscores the profound influence of her adolescent choices on the family dynamic. This is anticipated to precipitate both internal strife and external discord within the familial framework, prompting a pivotal reassessment of parental obligations in guiding their children. This scrutiny illuminates Laila's character as a poignant embodiment of the intricate nexus between adolescent transgressions, promiscuity, and their far-reaching ramifications,

encapsulating the complex interplay between personal consequences and familial repercussions.

Segera setelah ia keluar dari sekolah, Anwar Sadar segera menggiringnya ke hadapan penghulu, disandingkan dengan teman sekelas yang konon menanam benih, namun dua hari setelah perkawinannya, teman sekelas itu memergoki Laila di tempat tidur bersama lelaki lain.

(Kurniawan, 2014: 18)

Laila, a high school student, has engaged in free association with her friends, which leads her to become rebellious. Without much thought, she has dared to sleep with a male classmate during school. Anwar Sadat, her embarrassed parent, is forced to marry her off to a man suspected of impregnating Laila. However, a few weeks after the wedding, Laila is found sleeping with another man. It turns out that Laila does not limit herself to just one man.

Kedua lelaki itu, yang meniduri Laila dua hari setelah perkawinan dan si teman sekelas, kemudian hengkang meninggalkan dirinya. Sejak itu orang menyebutnya sebagai Si Janda dengan bisikan tambahan, "ia bisa dipakai."

(Kurniawan, 2014: 18)

The excerpt vividly illustrates Laila's promiscuous behavior, evident in her engaging in an affair with another man mere days after marrying her classmate, who is suspected of impregnating her. Over time, both men, her husband and the one with whom she is having the extramarital affair, abandon her. This series of events results in Laila being branded with the derogatory label of "The Widow," accompanied by the insidious implication that she is "usable." This designation reflects a dehumanizing perspective that reduces Laila to a mere commodity, devoid of agency and stripped of her inherent dignity and rights as an individual.

After becoming a widow, Laila becomes even wilder, often hanging out in dimly lit cafes where she always seeks pleasure to satisfy herself.

Laila Si Janda sering di sana, menjadi sasaran bocah-bocah liar yang meraba tubuhnya di pojok warung dan ia hanya cekikikan, lain waktu jika ia sedang berbaik hati, Laila mau diajak pergi ke tempat tidur dengan cuma-cuma.

(Kurniawan, 2014: 25)

The lines quoted above shows that amidst the bustling town, amidst narrow streets and vibrant market stalls, stands a modest café, a sanctuary for many seeking solace. Here, Laila, known simply as "The Widow" to the townsfolk, often seeks refuge from the chaos of daily life. As she steps into the café, enveloped in the familiar aroma of coffee and the buzz of conversation, she finds a fleeting moment of peace away from the outside world. Yet, Laila's presence does not go unnoticed. She becomes the unwitting target of the local boys' playful antics, who view her as an easy mark for their games. With mischief gleaming in their eyes, they gather around her, their small hands reaching out to test the boundaries of her patience and tolerance. Despite their teasing, Laila responds with a gentle laugh, her voice blending with the café's ambience. Aware that these encounters are inevitable, she faces them with grace and resilience, refusing

to let them diminish her spirit. However, beneath her composed exterior lies a deeper vulnerability. In moments of loneliness or longing, Laila may find herself yielding to the advances of others, seeking fleeting moments of intimacy and companionship. Despite this vulnerability, she remains steadfast, finding strength in her resilience and offering kindness amidst the chaos of daily life.

5. Conclusion

Promiscuity serves as a thematic lens through which Kurniawan delves into the intricate interplay of desire, power, and societal expectations. Characters like Anwar Sadat and his daughter Laila become conduits for exploring the complexities of sexual liberation amidst a backdrop of social stigma and personal turmoil. Anwar Sadat's relentless pursuit of sexual gratification, regardless of societal norms or ethical considerations, challenges conventional morality and underscores the consequences of unchecked hedonism. His behavior reflects a disregard for the emotional well-being of others and the sanctity of marital bonds, illustrating the destructive power of promiscuity. Furthermore, Laila's promiscuous nature, inherited from her father, exposes the vulnerability and turmoil that accompany such behavior, particularly for women within patriarchal societies. Her experiences highlight the intersection of sexuality, power dynamics, and societal expectations, offering a poignant commentary on the complexities of human relationships.

Through the intertwining narratives of *Lelaki Harimau*, Kurniawan invites readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the human condition and the systems of oppression that perpetuate social inequality. By shining a spotlight on these social problems, Kurniawan challenges readers to question their own complicity in perpetuating injustice and to strive for a more equitable and compassionate society. *Lelaki Harimau* stands not only as a compelling work of literature but also as a powerful testament to the enduring relevance of literature in illuminating the social issues that shape our world. Through its rich tapestry of characters and themes, the novel urges readers to confront the complexities of poverty, crime, and promiscuity with empathy, understanding, and a commitment to positive change.

Overall, Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau* offers a poignant exploration of social problems, including poverty, crime, and promiscuity, illuminating the complexities of human nature and societal dynamics in a vivid and evocative narrative.

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