Michelle Kadarusman's Views on Slum Areas and Spatial Justice in *Girl of the Southern Sea*

Sulasih Nurhayati[1], Mahendra Wijaya[2], Sri Kusumo Habsari[3], Zita Rarastesa[4], Dwi Susanto[5], Bani Sudardi[6]

[1-6]Doctoral Program in Culture Studies, Sebelas Maret University, Surakarta, Indonesia
Corresponding Author: sulasihnurhayati@student.uns.ac.id

ABSTRACT:
This study examines Michelle Kadarusman's Girl of the Southern Sea as a literary reimagining of spatial injustice and gendered marginality within Jakarta's slum environments. Drawing upon Soja's spatial theory and Spivak's postcolonial feminism, the analysis explores how the novel constructs female agency through the intersections of physical space, imagination, and social resistance. By integrating qualitative textual analysis and thematic coding, the study identifies the ways Kadarusman redefines the slum from a site of deprivation into one of resilience and transformation. The findings demonstrate how literary narratives can expose urban inequality and generate ethical awareness regarding the lived experiences of marginalized women in postcolonial contexts. As an interdisciplinary dialogue on gender, spatial justice, and literary urbanism, this study advances the role of literature in cultivating inclusive imaginaries and gender sensitive-policymaking.

Keywords: Kadarusman; spatial justice; postcolonial feminism; Jakarta; gendered space

1. INTRODUCTION

Urban slums in developing nations expose the intersection of poverty, informality, and inequality. In Jakarta, one of the densely populated and rapidly urbanizing cities in the Global South, inadequate housing and insecure tenure generate spatial injustice that mostly affects women [1]. These disadvantaged and vulnerable environments not only contribute to long-term socioeconomic disparities but also limit access to education and cultural agency, reinforcing patriarchal dependency [2]. The complex spatial inequities have hence challenged any power that controls them for survival strategies and social resilience, for example, through literary representations [3].

In *Girl of the Southern Sea* (2019), Kadarusman presents Nia, a teenage girl living beside Jakarta's railway tracks who aspires to education and authorship. The novel's literary representation extends beyond social realism—it visualizes slum life as a moral and imaginative struggle [4]. By examining how Kadarusman narrates space, gender, and resistance in the novel, this study bridges literary inquiry with spatial theory and postcolonial feminism. Hence, it aims to: 1) examine the representation of slum environments and spatial injustice; 2) investigate the portrayal of gendered agency; and 3) explore the novel's functions as a site of resistance, challenging spatial and gendered hierarchies in postcolonial urban contexts.

Soja's spatial framework and Spivak's postcolonial feminism provide the theoretical basis for analyzing the slum as both material and ideological terrain [5], [6]. Through the eyes of a young female protagonist, the study aims to reveal how literature can reflect and challenge dominant urban discourses by investigating the material, imagined, and lived aspects of Jakarta's informal settlements.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

a) Soja's Spaciality

Soja reconceptualizes the socio-dynamics of space as a triadic process: First space (physical), Second space (representational), and Third space (lived) [5]. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's seminal work *The Production of Space*, this model reveals how material deprivation and symbolic perception interact [7]. First space refers to the material and observable aspects of space—such as slums— as tangible, built environments. Second space encompasses the representations and ideologies associated with these spaces, such as societal perceptions or policy discourses that often marginalize slum dwellers. Third space, the most dynamic of the three, captures the lived experiences, social practices, and contestations that occur within these spaces, highlighting how residents actively negotiate and redefine their spatial realities [5]. In literary studies, this theoretical framework shifts analysis from "space as setting" to "space as process," enabling interpretation of how narrative transforms-built environments into experiences of justice [5], [9]. It offers a powerful lens for examining the layered realities of slum environments in Kadarusman's literary narrative—that slums are not only constructed and perceived but also emotionally and imaginatively inhabited. It may facilitate the articulation of gendered agency of spatial justice.

b) Spivak's Postcolonial Feminism

While Soja's spatial theory provides a lens to scrutinize how urban space is socially produced and unequally distributed [5], Spivak's postcolonial feminism offers critical tools to interrogate how marginalized voices, especially those of women, are silenced or distorted within dominant discourses, positioning them in the gendered subalternity. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's hegemonic structures of power, Spivak's disseminated theory, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* questions how marginalized women can articulate agency within colonial and patriarchal discourse. She further asserts that silencing subalterns is not only ideological but also spatial, emphasizing the absence of discursive and spatial platforms for authentic female expression [6].

Spivak's idea of strategic essentialism describes a temporary collective identity used to claim voice. It provides a valuable concept for understanding how marginalized groups may mobilize simplified identities to challenge dominant narratives [10]. In literary contexts, strategic essentialism can help perceive how authors represent marginalized communities to foreground their struggles and resilience, without reducing them to stereotypes. This theoretical framework thus enables a critical reading of how Kadarusman's novel can reflect and resist spatial injustice and gendered marginalization. It provides the foundation for analyzing how narratives engage with the lived realities of urban poverty, the silencing of subaltern voices, and the potential of storytelling that redefines womanhood and place [5], [6], [10].

c) Biographical Criticism

This study integrates biographical criticism as a complementary lens alongside the spatiality theory and postcolonial feminism. This approach posits that an author's life experiences inform thematic and ideological choices, enabling a nuanced interpretation of Kadarusman's *Girl of the Southern Sea* [12]. Her Indonesian background and prolonged exposure to Jakarta's urban poverty provide a critical context for perceiving her narrative construction of slum environments and gendered agency [11]. Furthermore, biographical criticism does not degrade literature to autobiography but situates textual meaning within the author's socio-cultural and experiential framework [12]. Thus, this approach illuminates how Kadarusman's feminist consciousness and transnational identity shape the novel's engagement with spatial injustice and female resilience, advocating Soja's spatial triad and Spivak's critique of subalternity [5], [6].

Combining these three theories proposes an interdisciplinary framework of material space and symbolic agency, revealing how a literary narrative represents gendered spatial injustice and agency [5], [6]. It also creates a research gap and novelty that contribute to broader scholarly discussions on gendered spaces, resistance, and literary activism in postcolonial literature [6].

3. METHOD

a. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the representation of spatial injustice and gender inequality in Michelle Kadarusman's *Girl of the Southern Sea* within the socio-spatial context of Jakarta's informal settlements [4]. This approach enables a comprehensive interpretation of literary texts, focusing on symbolic representations, thematic structures, and the construction of identity and agency within marginalized urban environments [13], [14].

b. Data Collection

The data collection technique applies document analysis to examine systematically both primary and secondary data [13]. The primary data consist of the novel's key narrative structure, character development, and spatial representations. The secondary data include publicly available interviews and journalistic profiles of Michelle Kadarusman [11]. These materials were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the study's thematic concerns and their potential to illuminate the author's biographical background, cultural influences, and feminist orientation [12].

c. Analytical Framework

The analysis draws on three interrelated theoretical frameworks. First, Edward Soja's spatiality theory—specifically the concepts of Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace—is utilized to analyze how physical, imagined, and lived spaces shape the protagonist's experiences and agency [5]. Second, Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial feminism offers a critical lens for interrogating the novel's engagement with gendered subjectivities and its critique of intersecting systems of oppression within postcolonial urban contexts [6]. Finally, biographical criticism is applied to situate the author's lived experiences and their influence on the narrative's construction of space, identity, and resistance [12].

d. Data Analysis Procedure

The analytical process integrates close reading and thematic coding [14]. Close reading is employed to identify recurring motifs, spatial metaphors, and representations of gendered experience [12]. Thematic coding traces the protagonist's evolving agency across various spatial domains—domestic, educational, public, and imaginative—that sequentially and analytically produce recurring themes [14]. Through iterative coding, these themes are further conceptualized in relation to Soja's theory of spatiality and Spivak's postcolonial feminism: (1) gendered Firstspace, representing the material constraints of slum environments; (2) imaginative Secondspace, capturing symbolic and narrative resistance; and (3) transformative Thirdspace, reflecting the convergence of lived experience and imaginative agency [5], [6]. A contextual triangulation strategy synthesizes textual analysis with biographical insights and secondary interview materials to enhance interpretive depth. This approach does not seek to empirically verify the narrative but rather to elucidate how Kadarusman's feminist consciousness and cultural perspective inform her literary construction of slum environments and spatial justice [12], [13].

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Recent literary scholarship increasingly engages with representations of slums as complex socio-spatial constructs shaped by global capitalism, urban planning paradigms, and entrenched social stigmas [15], [16]. Contemporary works even tend to reframe these spaces as sites of resistance, agency, and alternative urban

epistemologies [17]. Scholars employ spatial, postcolonial, and feminist frameworks to interrogate how narratives from the Global South transform informal settlements from passive settings into active agents within urban discourse [18], [19].

Studies of African and Asian urban fiction illustrate a critical shift in slum representations, depicting these areas as sites of subaltern urbanism where informal economies and cultural practices foster resilience and mobility [20], [21]. Such analyses employ spatial theory, postcolonial critique, and feminist perspectives to contest binary hierarchies such as formal/informal and center/periphery, revealing slums as spaces of negotiation and innovation rather than static zones of deprivation [22].

Building on these scholarly perspectives, the present study applies Soja's theory of spatiality, Spivak's postcolonial feminism, and biographical criticism to examine Michelle Kadarusman's *Girl of the Southern Sea*. This integrated framework enables a nuanced reading of Jakarta's slums as multidimensional spaces—physical, symbolic, and transformative—and provides the foundation for analyzing how the narrative constructs gendered resistance and agency, illuminating intersections between spatial marginality, identity formation, and socio-political empowerment [5], [6], [12], [13].

4.1. Slums as Gendered Firstspace

Soja's concept of Firstspace provides a lens for analyzing physical spaces as materially constructed environments that shape social interaction [5]. In slum contexts, spatial arrangements facilitate daily survival while reinforcing gendered divisions of labor [23]. Women often bear dual responsibilities as caregivers and economic providers under conditions of spatial and social marginality [3]. Scholars argue that slums are not only sites of material deprivation but also spaces where patriarchal norms persist, extending from domestic spheres into informal economies [8]. In *Girl of the Southern Sea*, Nia's "shantytown home along the railroad tracks" becomes a metaphor for spatial fragility, illustrating how physical precarity intersects with gendered marginality. Her domestic confinement, coupled with economic insecurity, forces her to assume adult responsibilities—caring for her brother and managing the family's food cart—while her aspiration to continue schooling remains unattainable [4]. This restricted access to education, exacerbated by gendered expectations, perpetuates intergenerational cycles of socio-economic exclusion [3]. These conditions illustrate how Firstspace operates as a mechanism of spatial injustice: inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding, and lack of public services disproportionately affect women, limiting their autonomy and participation in public life [5], [8]. Thus, Soja's framework reveals slum geographies as gendered architectures of dependence and active agents in reproducing inequality, underscoring the need for spatially conscious urban policy to address gendered marginalization [5], [23].

4.2. Secondspace: Imagining Resistance

The physicality of spatial injustice in Michelle Kadarusman's Girl of the Southern Sea poses a significant challenge to female agency and confidence. Women in slum environments, as depicted in the novel, confront not only material constraints such as poverty and inadequate infrastructure but also structural hierarchies embedded within space itself. These spatial configurations actively reproduce patriarchal norms and social exclusion, rendering women physically constrained and symbolically silenced [4], [6]. Drawing on Spivak's subaltern theory, such spaces position women as doubly marginalized—materially through socio-economic deprivation and symbolically through epistemic erasure. In this context, the subaltern woman is not merely unheard but structurally prevented from speaking within dominant discourses [6]. Kadarusman's narrative illustrates how spatial injustice operates as both a physical and ideological force, reinforcing invisibility and powerlessness in marginalized urban settings [4].

Yet marginalization does not always result in dependency; it often catalyzes self-determination and resilience [6]. These attributes enable women to challenge patriarchal structures and assert autonomy across social domains. In *Girl of the Southern Sea*, Nia exemplifies this resistance through imaginative storytelling, particularly her reinterpretation of the Javanese legend of Dewi Kadita. Her narrative voice becomes a discursive space for reconfiguring identity and envisioning alternatives to socio-economic constraints [4].

This form of resistance aligns with Soja's concept of Secondspace, the representational and imaginative dimension of spatial experience. Nia's storytelling constructs symbolic alternatives to her lived reality, though these remain confined to Secondspace, as they do not yet produce material transformation—what Soja identifies as Thirdspace, where imagination and lived experience converge to generate new social configurations [5]. From Spivak's postcolonial feminist lens, Nia embodies the subaltern subject whose voice emerges through culturally embedded narrative. While empowering, her storytelling remains largely unacknowledged by dominant systems, situating her resistance within the symbolic rather than structural realm. Her narrative can be read as strategic essentialism—a temporary unification of cultural identity to

assert agency and resist domination [6], [10].

A pivotal moment occurs when Nia writes: "My Dewi Kadita does not calm the seas—she revels in the power of her ocean" [4]. This line reflects her imaginative reworking of myth to articulate feminine strength and autonomy. Through this act of writing, Nia constructs a symbolic extension of her aspirations, reinforcing Secondspace as a site for subaltern expression and psychological empowerment [5], [6].

In sum, Nia's imaginative agency within Secondspace and her emerging subaltern voice represent a significant, though incomplete, form of resistance. While her narrative does not yet disrupt material structures of oppression, it initiates a discursive process through which the subaltern begins to articulate her voice [6].

4.3. Thirdspace: Transforming Through Action

Achieving independence and resisting spatial injustice in slum environments requires more than symbolic defiance; it demands the emergence of what Soja conceptualizes as Thirdspace—a transformative realm where material conditions (Firstspace) and symbolic representations (Secondspace) converge. This hybrid space empowers marginalized individuals to effect change through their lived experiences and imaginative agency, thereby reconfiguring oppressive spatial and social structures [5].

In *Girl of the Southern Sea*, Thirdspace materializes when imagination becomes praxis. Nia's refusal of an arranged marriage— "I will not marry when my pen can feed me better"—illustrates this convergence, transforming symbolic resistance into material action. Her imagined self, shaped through storytelling and myth, informs her decision to assert educational and personal autonomy. Invoking Dewi Kadita, a powerful figure from Javanese folklore, functions as a discursive strategy to reclaim agency and reconfigure identity beyond patriarchal constraints [4]. Through this act, Thirdspace emerges as a site of resistance and transformation, where symbolic and material dimensions coalesce to produce new social possibilities [5].

From Spivak's postcolonial feminist lens, Nia's defiance signifies the emergence of a subaltern voice. While Spivak argues that the subaltern is often denied discursive agency, Nia disrupts this paradigm through corporeal enactment of autonomy. Her resistance reflects strategic essentialism—a conscious mobilization of cultural identity to challenge hegemonic structures [6]. Her rejection of arranged marriage—a practice rooted in patriarchal and colonial legacies—becomes a site of empowerment, illustrating female agency cultivated from within. It emphasizes that postcolonial feminist narratives often depict women navigating complex socio-political terrains where symbolic power operates as a tool of resistance [19].

4.4. Spatial Agency and Literary Reimagination of Urban Marginality

Living in slum environments presents layered challenges shaped by structural hierarchies that regulate gender roles and restrict empowerment. Within these constrained geographies, spatial injustice limits both physical mobility and symbolic agency. Soja's spatial triad—Firstspace (material), Secondspace (representational), and Thirdspace (transformative)—offers a critical lens for understanding how these dimensions interact to produce or inhibit agency.

Through Nia's life in Jakarta's impoverished neighborhoods, Kadarusman illustrates the interplay of Soja's spatial dimensions. Firstspace—marked by inadequate infrastructure and limited educational access—constrains the realization of Secondspace, the imaginative realm where identity and aspirations emerge. Yet through storytelling and resistance to patriarchal norms, Nia moves toward Thirdspace, where material and symbolic resistance converge to generate transformative agency. Her rejection of an arranged marriage constitutes a pivotal moment of spatial agency, challenging patriarchal control and reclaiming her right to education and autonomy [4], [5].

Kadarusman's decade-long residence in Indonesia lends authenticity to this portrayal. Her witness over the extreme poverty in Jakarta's slums provides a nuanced understanding of the intersection between poverty and gender in postcolonial urban spaces. Nia's struggle and resilience serve as a metaphor for the silenced voices within these environments, particularly women whose agency is suppressed by spatial and cultural constraints [4], [11].

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, Nia's resistance can be read as a subaltern assertion of voice and visibility. Drawing on Spivak's critique of the subaltern's inability to speak, her narrative and actions disrupt silencing mechanisms [6]. Through stories, Kadarusman presents an enunciative space for women to speak for their freedom. It starts with self-determination and self-sufficiency to attain self-empowerment

and contribute more to global societies.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Girl of the Southern Sea* demonstrates how literary narratives can expose and reconfigure social and spatial hierarchies, redefining urban marginality as a space of gendered resistance, agency, and ethical renewal. Hence, literary representations play a crucial role in shaping inclusive urban imaginaries and informing gender sensitive-policymaking.

6. REFERENCES

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