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The Portrayal of Male Genitalia as a Symbol of Power in Djenar Maesa Ayu's "Menyusu Ayah"

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Abstract

This study explores the short story "Menyusu Ayah" by Djenar Maesa Ayu, investigating the symbolic representation of male genitalia as a source of power within the narrative. The research examines how the story critiques gender power dynamics in a patriarchal society, focusing on the protagonist, Nayla, who experiences sexual abuse by her father. Applying Foucault's concept of power and MacKinnon feminist theory, the study underlines how male dominance is extended through the sexualization and objectification of women, contributing to a significant gender gap. The research employs qualitative and library-based methods to explore how Nayla, in her attempt to claim power, engages with male genitalia, believing it will free her from male oppression. However, this act is framed within the context of a deeply ingrained patriarchal structure, which shapes her understanding of action and self-worth. The study reveals the complexity of Nayla's search for power, demonstrating the ways in which gendered norms and social expectations limit women's autonomy. The findings show how masculinity is associated with power and strength, while femininity is linked with submission. By analyzing Nayla's actions and their symbolic meanings, this study sheds light on the broader implications of gender inequality and the cultural perpetuation of patriarchal control in "Menyusu Ayah".

Keywords: *Foucault*; *feminist theory*; *power abuse; male genitalia as power; gender inequality*

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Introduction

The different statuses of men and women in society lead to oppression toward women. Men are seen as having higher social status because most men lead many domains of society, such as politics, academia, and the economy. On the other hand, women are seen as more submissive, primarily projected to raise children, do house chores, and occupy fewer professional domains. This reflects broader societal norms and inequalities, where male attributes are often valued more highly than female ones. From a young age, man and woman are often socialized into different roles. Man may be encouraged to be assertive, competitive, and independent, while woman may be socialized to be nurturing and cooperative (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). These cultural norms can lead to the reinforcement of

male superiority in various domains. The gender gap between women and men can be recognized to a variety of correlated factors, including social, cultural, economic, and psychological influences. One important aspect is the cultural representation of gender, where opinions of the vagina as inferior to the penis participate to a bias in gender attribution (Wenzlaff et al., 2018).

The penis is a symbol of man, as all men have it as their sexual organ from the moment they are born. The penis is seen as an object of aggression and power, as it is the one that penetrates the vagina. The male genitalia, the penis, is often associated with virility and dominance, particularly in heterosexual contexts (Calasanti & King, 2005). The vagina is seen as a symbol of womanhood, as it is a submissive object that receives the penis during penetration. The vagina, for men, serves primarily as a 'baby factory' to continue their lineage, making women seem like tools for producing more men. The penis symbolizes dominance in society, correlating it with male power. The penis defines a human as a man; only men have a penis, which is an organ that represents a man's power. Throughout history, the male body, especially the penis, has been wrapped in cultural mystique; this has led to the awareness that the penis represents strength and control, reinforcing traditional ideas of masculinity (Spongberg, 1997).

Power by Foucault is not just about domination or control; it actively produces knowledge, identities, and social norms; it forms how individuals recognize themselves and their place in society (Dieter, 1995). Foucault discussed that power shapes and structures the field of possible actions, operating through freedom rather than intimidation or violence, and inherently includes resistance and negotiation. Foucault's insights into power relations provide a critical foundation for understanding mechanisms of social control and the perpetual interplay between authority and resistance (Felluga, 2011). Foucault illustrates power as something that operates through institutions and social groups rather than being exercised by specific individuals (Miller, 1990). This means that power is universal and embedded in social structures, influencing individuals without direct oppression.

Djenar's "Menyusu Ayah" was published in 2004 in the short story anthology *Jangan Main-Main (dengan Kelaminmu)*. Prior to this publication, the short story won the best short story award from Jurnal Perempuan, and was later translated into English by Richard Oh under the title "Suckling Father" (Badan Bahasa Kemdikbud, 2022). This story is about a girl named Nayla who has lost her mother and becomes a sexual object for her father. Nayla is a victim of sexual abuse by her father. She is led to believe she has a better position because she doesn't drink milk from a mother's breast but instead from her father's penis. The story revolves around themes of sexual exploitation and broken families. Richard Oh was impressed by how Nayla is portrayed in this story, particularly how, while she cannot protect her body, she manages to protect her psychology (Ayu, 2007). The story explores sexual exploitation as its genre, and the words used in the story contain many taboo terms. Many readers consider "Menyusu Ayah" to discredit the father-daughter relationship. Djenar, as the author, is well known as a controversial writer (Merdeka, n.d.). Djenar is a differentiating literary figure whose raw and unfiltered writing style has garnered both devoted followers and vicious critics. Her unwavering portrayal of taboo subjects and controversial themes, combined with her distinct personality, has established her reputation as an audacious female author who challenges social conventions through her work (Amiruddin, 2016).

Previous studies on Djenar Maesa Ayu's work have primarily focused on her novel *Nayla*. For example, Astrianti & Jayanti (2018) applied a liberal feminist lens to Nayla, while Herawati & Jumaji (2018) explored feminist, moral, and social values within the same novel. Kusumaningrum et al., 2019) examined the narrative structure, the role of the female protagonist, and her struggles in Nayla. Although all these studies offer important feminist readings, they are centered exclusively on that particular work by Djenar. In comparison, "Menyusu Ayah", which features a different character named Nyala, has received less attention. Research that does

address “Menyusu Ayah” has approached it from other angles: Hodijah (2018) used a mimetic approach to discuss sexuality and gender inequality, while (Septia, 2016) analyzed the use of erotic language. This study aims to offer a new perspective by using a feminist framework by Catharine A. MacKinnon, who argues that sexual abuse is rooted in systemic male dominance. Through this lens, the research will analyze the male genitalia as a symbol and source of power in “Menyusu Ayah”, focusing on Nyala’s desire to claim that power for herself. This study highlights the gendered dynamics of power, sexuality, and resistance in Ayu’s narrative.

This research is directed to explore the symbolic representation of the penis as a source of power in Djenar Maesa Ayu's “Menyusu Ayah”. The study pursues to examine how Djenar utilizes this symbol to highlight the dynamics of gender and power in a patriarchal society. Precisely, it aims to uncover how the author uses the penis as a metaphorical tool to depict male dominance and authority, which is often used to oppress and marginalize women within societal structures. By examining the narrative, this research study the ways in which the text critiques and challenges traditional power hierarchies, discuss on the broader effects of gender inequality and the general subjugation of women.

Methodology

This study used qualitative and library research. The qualitative method is employed because this research focuses on descriptive and analysis. Qualitative more focuses on description rather than quantitative calculation (Wahyuni, 2024). Library research help to find the resources and leading to pleasurable conclusions (Connaway & Radford, 2021). This study engages Foucault's perspective on power to investigate the portrayal of the penis in “Menyusu Ayah”. It implements a feminist approach, emphasizing a critical analysis of literature through the lens of gender, power dynamics, and women's experiences (O’Connor, 2012).

The feminist approach defined by MacKinnon centers on the argument that sexuality is the essential of gender inequality. This theory is rooted in radical feminism and posits that sexuality is not a neutral or private realm, but a fundamental structure through which male dominance is maintained and women are subordinated. MacKinnon (1989, p. 114-115) argues that women and men are socially constructed into their gender roles—female submission and male dominance—through sexuality itself, which is institutionalized in social practices and cultural norms. She critiques liberal feminism for treating gender inequality as a problem of arbitrary distinctions, while radical feminism, her own framework, sees it as a systematic hierarchy of power. The state, in her view, is not neutral but aggressively enforces male dominance by inserting the male point of view into law and legal institutions (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 131). Thus, her feminist approach aims to reveal and challenge the normalization of this power dynamic across all areas of social life

Results and Discussion

Djenar Maesa Ayu is feminist writer born in Jakarta, 1973. She also has career as an actor and director. Her first short story “Lintah” was publihsed by Kompas in 2002. Almost every work of hers that gets published is met with controversy, gaining both praise and harsh criticism (Merdeka, n.d.). She is a feminist who challenges taboos through works. Many literary critics view her works as explorations of sexuality and the female experience. She won Khatulistiwa Literary Award for the book title *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* (2003).

The short story “Menyusu Ayah” begins when Nayla’s mother died because of gave birth. Nayla narrated how the situation was inside her mother's womb. She remembers when her mother touched her belly after fighting with her husband. Nayla grew up without a mother figure, she felt that being a boy was better than being a girl. She felt like a boy because she not drinks milk from her mother breast but drink milk from her father penis. Nayla never cared about her appearance; she thought of her body only for herself and never meant to be enjoyed by a man. Her father begins not to let Nayla drink milk from him anymore. Nayla began to drink

milk from her male friend. She is not satisfied drinking from her male friends because they do not produce the same milk as an adult. Nayla began drinking milk from her father's male friends. While drink milk from her father's friend penis, the man touched her breast and start rape her. Nayla felt shocked and ashamed. She grabbed the statue and then hit him on the head. Nayla recognized that his not her father's friend but he is her real father who raped her—the story end with Nayla pregnant waiting her labor day.

Sexuality itself is shaped by male dominance, meaning that power and control define what is socially accepted as sexual desire and behavior. In this context, acts like rape, incest, and pornography are not anomalies but are woven into the fabric of socially accepted sexuality. MacKinnon emphasizes how abuse eroticizes domination and submission, making coercion and inequality appear natural or even pleasurable (1989, p. 128). This leads to a disturbing internalization among victims—when a woman's body responds physically during abuse, such as experiencing orgasm during rape or feeling comfort during incest, society interprets this as consent or desire, reinforcing the myth that women secretly want to be violated (MacKinnon, 1989).

Nayla views her father as a dominant power, seeking his power by milking her father. In the first phase, she enjoys the milking because she doesn't understand that the activity is sexual abuse. She only understands that the milking activity is to show she is strong like a man. She accepted that milking in enjoy able not sexual abuse but she considers that a man touching her private are like breast and vagina is sexual abused. She thinks if a man touches her private area, it means the man is enjoying her as women like her mother do. The unconscious thought of milking a man is an enjoyable and a form of gained power because of male dominant power in society.

1. Gender Gap

Traditional gender roles have historically apportioned men to positions of power and authority while downgrading women to domestic roles; this separation has been reinforced through cultural models and social expectations (Ferree & Hall, 1996). In the story, Nayla is the narrator, and she tells her story from her own point of view. She describes how she remembers what happened outside while she was still inside the womb. She recalls how her father and mother had a fight, how the doctor pulled her foot, and how she bit her mother's birth canal. It is really strange how a baby can recount the details of being born, but Nayla has her reasons for sharing this story.

> *Saya perempuan, tapi saya tidak lebih lemah daripada laki-laki. Sayalah yang membantu Ibu melahirkan, bukan dokter kandungan. Ketika Ibu kehabisan napas dan sudah tidak dapat lagi mengejan, saya menggigiti dinding vagina Ibu dengan gusi supaya jalan keluar bagi saya lebih mudah.* (Ayu, 2007, p. 51).
>
> I am a woman, but I am not weaker than a man. I am the one who helps you give birth, not the obstetrician. When you are out of breath and can no longer push, I bite your vaginal wall with my gums to make it easier for me to get out. (Translated by Google Translate)

Nayla wants to prove that she is strong like a boy or a man. She claims that the one who helped during her birth was not the doctor, but herself. She wants to show that she is not a weak woman who needs a man's intervention. Djenar portrays women in their weakest state, during childbirth. Nayla's mother is depicted as powerless, as giving birth is a dangerous situation between life and death. The mother needs help from others to survive labor. Nayla, however, wants to demonstrate that she has the power to help her mother and show that she can be as strong as a man. It is clear that Nayla perceives women as having less power than men, viewing them as inherently weak individuals. Nayla perspective reflects a heavy influence of patriarchal models on how she views women.

> *Saya juga masih ingat pertengkaran antara Ibu dengan Ayah. Ayah menuduh bahwa janin dalam kandungan Ibu bukan miliknya. Ibu menangis sambil*

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mengusap-usap kulit perutnya demi menenteramkan perasaan saya. Ibu mengatakan agar saya memaafkan kekhilafan Ayah. (Ayu, 2007, p. 51).

I also still remember the argument between Mother and Father. Father accused that the fetus in Mother's womb was not his. Mother cried while rubbing her stomach to calm my feelings. Mother told me to forgive Father's mistake. (Translated by Google Translate)

Djenar essentially critiques how ignorant a patriarchal society can be toward pregnant women. Pregnancy is a state in which women are most fragile and need both physical and emotional support. Nayla's father easily oppressed her mother during pregnancy in a harsh and abusive manner. Women who are victims of domestic violence may experience heightened stress and health risks during pregnancy, making them more vulnerable (Lognos et al., 2024). Nayla remembers how her mother asked her to forgive him, even though he physically abused her. Nayla's mother was aware of how little power women have to fight back. This highlights how dominant men are in society, making it difficult for women to resist oppression.

Saya berteriak memohon Ibu. Dokter menutup tubuh Ibu dengan kain putih (Ayu, 2007, p. 52).

I screamed for Mom. The doctor covered Mom's body with a white cloth. (Translated by Google Translate)

Later, Nayla's mother died during childbirth, illustrating how the mistreatment of pregnant women by men can lead to fatal consequences. Nayla's mother became a victim of how men treat women, suffering mental and physical oppression, and ultimately paying the ultimate price (her life) due to the dominance of men in society.

Saya mengenakan celana pendek atau celana panjang. Saya bermain kelereng dan mobil-mobilan. Saya memanjat pohon dan berkelahi. Saya kencing berdiri. Saya melakukan segala hal yang dilakukan anak laki-laki. Potongan rambut saya pendek. Kulit saya hitam. Wajah saya tidak cantik. Tubuh saya kurus kering tak menarik. Payudara saya rata. Namun saya tidak terlalu peduli dengan payudara (Ayu, 2007, p. 52).

I wear shorts or pants. I play marbles and cars. I climb trees and fight. I pee standing up. I do everything boys do. I have a short haircut. I have dark skin. I am not pretty. I am skinny and unattractive. I have flat breasts. But I don't really care about breasts. (Translated by Google Translate)

Nayla understands the differences between men and women in terms of appearances. Although she is a girl, she chooses to adopt the appearance of a boy. She pretends to be a boy by wearing shorts instead of long pants, having a short haircut, playing with toy cars instead of dolls, and not caring about having a flat chest. This demonstrates how male dominance influences Nayla, making her perceive girls as weak subjects in society.

Payudara tidak untuk menyusui tapi hanya untuk dinikmati lelaki, begitu kata Ayah. Saya tidak ingin dinikmati lelaki (Ayu, 2007, p. 52-53).

Breasts are not for breastfeeding but only for men to enjoy, Dad said. I don't want to be enjoyed by men. (Translated by Google Translate)

Nayla seeks power and defends herself by adopting a boyish appearance. She believes that by living like a boy or a man, she will not be seen as a weak woman in society. She wants to show society that she is not weak like an ordinary woman because she dresses like a boy. Nayla understands the power dynamics between men and women in society. She recognizes that women are viewed as the weaker group, while men are seen as the strong ones.

Tapi tangan Ayah masih menggenggam sabuk. Matanya masih berkilat-kilat seperti siap membenturkan kepala saya kapan saja. Niat saya urung (Ayu, 2007, p. 53).

> But Dad's hand was still holding the belt. His eyes were still gleaming as if he was ready to bang my head at any moment. My intention was canceled. (Translated by Google Translate)

Nayla is afraid of men, particularly in terms of physical strength. She fears her father's abuse with a belt and recognizes that men are physically stronger. She knows she cannot fight back; staying silent is her only choice. This reflects how men in society often use physical strength to oppress women. Physical power is the source of male dominance, often abused to control women.

> *ia malah menghajar saya dengan sabuknya dan membenturkan kepala saya ke dinding supaya pikiran kotor saya hilang* (Ayu, 2007, p. 53).

> He even hit me with his belt and banged my head against the wall to make my dirty thoughts go away. (Translated by Google Translate)

Nayla's father uses his physical strength to keep her and her mother silent and fearful, ensuring they cannot fight back. He controls Nayla through his strength. The physical abuse from her father reinforces Nayla's belief that being born a woman is inherently wrong.

> *Padahal sekarang, saya mirip sekali dengan Ayah* (Ayu, 2007, p. 53).

> Even now, I look very much like my Dad. (Translated by Google Translate)

With a boyish appearance, she wishes to become a boy or a man in order to free herself from the oppression of a patriarchal society. Nayla even compares herself to her father, feeling more like him when she presents herself as a boy rather than as a girl. Djenar uses the father as a symbol of society, representing how men take power and abuse it to oppress women. It is a harsh reality that a father, who should protect his daughter, becomes the source of chaos, abusing both his wife and daughter.

2. Penis is Source of Power

Djenar positions Nayla as the narrator of her past experiences dealing with sexual harassment. From the beginning of the story, Nayla expresses no regret about drinking milk from a penis or engaging in oral sex. She mentions how she enjoyed sucking a penis and drinking semen not realizing that a sexual abuse activity.

> *Saya ingin menikmati lelaki, seperti ketika menyusu penis Ayah waktu bayi Saya tidak ingin mencicipi lagi susu teman-teman laki saya yang sebaya. Saya senang cara mereka mengarahkan kepala saya perlahan ke bawah dan membiarkan saya berlama-lama menyusu di san sedang asyik menyusu salah satu teman Ayah.*

Some individuals pursue power to enact change, challenge injustices, or promote specific ideologies; they may believe that holding power is necessary to achieve their goals (Power, 2011). Nayla expresses no regret or hesitation regarding her experiences with oral sex, particularly in relation to her interactions with male genitalia. Nayla seems to derive a sense of enjoyment or empowerment from these acts. She approaches men, either of her age or older, with the intent of engaging in sexual acts focused on receiving semen, which she associates with pleasure.

Nayla appears to have developed an obsession with performing oral sex, specifically with the belief that engaging in such acts makes her stronger, similar to the perceived strength of men.

> *Nama saya Nayla. Saya perempuan, tapi saya tidak lebih lemah dari laki-laki. Karena, Saya tidak mengisap puting payudara Ibu. Saya mengisap penis Ayah. Dan saya tidak menyedot air susu Ibu. Saya menyedot air mani Ayah* (Ayu, 2007, p. 53).

> My name is Nayla. I am a girl, but I am not weaker than a boy. Because, I do not suck Mom's nipples. I suck Dad's penis. And I do

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not suck Mom's milk. I suck Dad's semen. (Translated by Google Translate)

She holds the perspective that receiving nourishment from a male figure, symbolized by semen, somehow differentiates her from women who nourish through breastfeeding, which she associates with weakness. Nayla seems to view the act of breastfeeding as a form of female submission, contrasting it with her belief that male semen is a source of strength or power.

Nayla never views sucking a penis as a wrong action. She believes that drinking semen will empower her and make her stronger, similar to the perceived strength of a man.

> *"Ibumu itu pelacur! Untung ia lekas pergi. Kalatidak, aura mesum ibumu bisa mempengaruhimu."* (Ayu, 2007, p. 53).
>
> "Your mother is a whore! It's a good thing she left quickly. Otherwise, your mother's lewd aura might affect you." (Translated by Google Translate)

She perceives her mother as a sexual object of her father, viewing her as a woman in a position parallel to that of a prostitute. Nayla also has another reason for engaging in acts like drinking semen: she seeks to view men as sexual objects. Her desire is to reverse the traditional dynamic where men sexualize women, instead positioning herself as a woman who sexualizes men. In this way, she finds pleasure in sucking a penis and drinking semen, seeing these acts as a form of self-revenge, where she becomes the one who transforms the man into her sexual object.

Specifically, Nayla expresses the belief that women hold a lesser position than men because the penis symbolizes power. Nayla's mother serves as an allegory for how women are sexualized by men.

> *Saya sudah tidak perlu lagi mendengar kalimat sundal dari mulut mereka seperti yang dikatakan Ayah tentang Ibu* (Ayu, 2007, p. 53).
>
> I no longer need to hear bitch sentences from their mouths like what my father said about my mother. (Translated by Google Translate)

Nayla's father abuses her mother, treating her as an object, particularly when he physically abuses both her and Nayla, a dynamic where they cannot resist due to their lack of power, symbolized by the absence of a penis. A key aspect is the cultural portrayal of gender, where the perception of the vagina as inferior to the penis reinforces gender bias.

> *Saya tidak mengisap puting payudara Ibu. Saya mengisap penis Ayah. Dan saya tidak menyedot air susu Ibu. Saya menyedot air mani Ayah* (Ayu, 2007, p. 53).
>
> I suck Dad's penis. And I do not suck Mom's milk. I suck Dad's semen. (Translated by Google Translate)

Djenar uses the term "penis" to emphasize the social power men hold, as it is consistently linked to notions of sexual dominance. The penis is always depicted as active and strong, while the vagina is consistently portrayed as submissive (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001). By shifting from the position of a woman with a lower social status to that of a man, Nayla desires to escape being a sexual object and instead achieve an equal status to that of men.

Djenar also positions Nayla to reject the idea that her vagina and her mother's vagina are for men. Nayla believes that her body is hers alone, and she becomes angry when a man touches her, particularly her private areas. She feels ashamed when a man touches her breasts or vagina, as it makes her feel like a sexual object. By drinking semen from a penis, Nayla aims to make herself the sexual subject, rather than the object.

> *Payudara tidak untuk menyusui tapi hanya untuk dinikmati lelaki, begitu kata Ayah.* (Ayu, 2007, p. 52-53).
>
> Breasts are not for breastfeeding but only for men to enjoy, Dad said. (Translated by Google Translate)

Djenar explicitly suggests that breasts and vaginas are sexualized objects for men. In creating Nayla, Djenar symbolizes resistance against the social construction of male power that oppresses women through sexualization. However, Djenar also presents Nayla as a victim of sexual abuse, in the form of rape, to demonstrate how women continue to be sexualized and objectified, even when they do not wish to be. Nayla represents a woman in society who is continually subjected to being seen as a sexual object, regardless of her personal desires or resistance.

3. Engaging the Power

Djenar engages metaphors such as "Menyusu Ayah" (milking dad) and "menyusu ibu" (milking mother) presenting these actions as parallel. The word *menyusu* refers to the act of breastfeeding; drinking milk directly from a mother's breast (KBBI Daring, n.d.). Breastfeeding is a natural process where a woman provides milk to a baby, which not only nourishes the child but also strengthens their immune system. By equating these actions metaphorically, Djenar provokes thought about the roles and expectations placed on women within a patriarchal society. The interactions during breastfeeding are expressed as a "symphony," where myriad elements come together to support the child's development (Modak et al., 2023).

In the story, Djenar portrays breastfeeding from a mother as a symbol of weakness for Nayla. Breastfeeding from a mother is associated with weakness because it aligns Nayla with societal views of women as a lesser group. Drinking milk from her mother is depicted as leading Nayla to develop feminine traits that make her sexualized by men.

On the other hand, Djenar uses the metaphor of "Menyusu Ayah" to represent gaining power and strength from a man. Nayla feels empowered because she "drinks milk" from her father rather than her mother. In this context, the father or men, symbolize strength and power, while women symbolize weakness. Djenar uses the term "Menyusu Ayah" to subvert traditional gender dynamics and sexualize men. In competitive environments, seeking power can be a strategy for survival; individuals or groups may chase power to protect themselves from threats or oppositions (Power, 2011). She creates a scenario where Nayla, as a woman, can also sexualize men, challenging the traditional concept that only men can objectify women.

Nayla feels stronger because metaphorically "drinking milk" from a man allows her to harvest his power, enabling her to assert herself in society. Through this narrative, Djenar critiques gender inequality and explores the dynamics of power and sexuality from a feminist perspective.

Conclusion

In "Menyusu Ayah", Djenar Maesa Ayu critiques deeply rooted patriarchal structures that shape gender roles, power dynamics, and sexuality, using the protagonist Nayla's experiences to expose the psychological and cultural consequences of these norms. Through symbolic representations of the penis, vagina, and breast, the story highlights how male power is associated with dominance and control, while female bodies are reduced to passive, sexualized objects.

Nayla's attempts to reclaim agency, particularly through her sexualized engagement with male genitalia, reflect her internalized belief that male traits represent strength and authority, whereas femininity is linked to weakness and submission. Nayla's rejection of traditional femininity and her adoption of a more boyish appearance reveal the profound effects of gender inequality on women's self-perception and identity. In conclusion, Djenar critiques the near impossibility of genuine resistance within a patriarchal system that sustains itself through the sexualization and subjugation of women.

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