

## Ecological and feminine exploitation in Ahmad Tohari's *Bekisar Merah*: A materialist ecofeminist perspective of Ariel Salleh

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### Abstract

This research examines the novel *Bekisar Merah* Ahmad Tohari's work as a material object using the materialist ecofeminist theory developed by Ariel Salleh as a formal object. This theory highlights the link between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature in a patriarchal capitalist system. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with literary content analysis techniques to interpret the symbolic relationship between the female body, the agrarian environment, and the surrounding socio-economic structures. The results of the study show that *Bekisar Merah* presents the dialectic between the female body (Lasi) and the body of the earth (Karangsoga) as two entities that are both victims of exploitation by capitalism and patriarchy. However, both also function as spaces of moral and spiritual resistance through an ethics of care, loyalty, and ecological empathy. Tohari constructs a critique of modernity that alienates humans from nature, while at the same time offering an ecological ethic grounded in local spiritual values, mutual cooperation, and agrarian morality. Thus, this study confirms that through a materialist ecofeminist perspective, the novel *Bekisar Merah* can be understood as a narrative ecoethical (environmentally friendly) that unites social criticism, environmental ethics, and a distinctive Indonesian spirituality. This finding expands the global ecocritical discourse through a reading based on local Nusantara wisdom.

**Keywords:** Ahmad Tohari; *Bekisar Merah*; Ecological Ethics; Materialist Ecofeminism; Patriarchal capitalism

### 1. Introduction

Ahmad Tohari's novel *Bekisar Merah* [1] presents a complex narrative: village women eroded by socio-ecological changes and the conversion of agricultural land, and the human-nature relationship in rural spaces becoming a field of social struggle. Tohari depicts nature not merely as a backdrop, but as a "living soul that interacts with humans" [2]. Tohari shows human alienation when land and rivers—elements of the village ecosystem—lose control and value.

There have been many studies discussing Ahmad Tohari's novel *Bekisar Merah*. However, for the purpose of this literature review, only six articles were selected. The six studies reveal that *Bekisar Merah* by Ahmad Tohari is a multivocal text that captures the tension between culture, gender, spirituality, and symbolic power. Pramono [3] highlights women's silent resistance against patriarchal hegemony hidden beneath social morality. Uktolseya [4] reveals how the English translation introduces semantic deformation and diminishes the richness of Javanese culture. Mariati [5] interprets the novel as a representation of Javanese cultural values that reinforce harmony and local cosmology amid the pressures of modernization.

Other scholars focus on the text's aesthetic and ideological dimensions. Romala [6] underscores the novel's spiritual dimension through Banyumasan folk songs as a medium of religiosity and local wisdom. In a broader context, Asmarani

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[7] views *The Red Bekisar* as a postcolonial narrative of hybridity, where shifts in spatial settings produce an identity crisis for Javanese women. Meanwhile, Fernanditha [8] provides an ecofeminist critique, illustrating how the relationship between women and nature in *The Red Bekisar* remains trapped within patriarchal discourse that subjugates both as “the Other.” Collectively, these six studies affirm the complexity of *Bekisar Merah* as a cross-valued text—intertwining issues of culture, gender, spirituality, and language within a social narrative that reflects the dynamics of changing times.

In *Bekisar Merah*, Tohari [1] tells and describes the village environment in detail and vividly, complete with portraits of small rivers, splashing water, white foam, shiny black rocks, and various birds with their chirping. Nature becomes a symbol of fertility, connectedness, and a silent witness to human suffering. However, when the characters are swept away by the currents of modernization and urbanization, the harmonious relationship between humans and nature begins to break down.

In this context, *Bekisar Merah* it's not just about the fate of women, but also about the social ecological crisis, that the exploitation of humans, women, and the environment is interconnected. This condition aligns with the theoretical framework of materialist ecofeminism that has been developed. Salleh [9], which states that “Women and nature both carry out the work of producing life, but both are devalued by a profit-oriented economic system.” In *Bekisar Merah*, Salleh's [9] view finds a concrete reflection: Lasi as a lower class woman experiences the same fate as the palm sap tapping community who lost control over their natural resources.

On the other hand, according to the social theoretical framework of Raymond Williams [10], nature cannot be separated from human power relations; nature is a “product of social history” that reflects class and power inequalities. Thus, the exploitation of nature in Tohari's novel also reflects the exploitation of humans by other humans.

The symbolism of the “Bekisar Merah” (the novel's title) itself deepens the ecofeminist reading. The bekisar, a cross between a jungle fowl and a free-range chicken, represents a hybrid, exotic, and tragic identity—much like the female body in a patriarchal system: both desired and subjugated.

Furthermore, the social transformation experienced by the character Lasi shows the mechanism of the patriarchal system that treats women's bodies like land: to be managed, owned, and tamed. From this perspective, *ecofeminist* according to Greta Gaard [11] This kind of representation shows a form of “ecological alienation”, namely the disconnection between humans (especially women) and their living environment due to a system of domination that rejects the values of empathy, care and sustainability.

For Tohari, ecological alienation also means losing moral and spiritual roots. In an interview with *Tempo* [12] he stated that he “wrote from the land, from the suffering of the farmers and from the river that sustains them.” This statement reinforces the view that Tohari's humanitarian vision is rooted in ecological ethics: respect for nature as an integral part of human existence.

Thus, this research starts from the idea that *Bekisar Merah* not only the story of women suffering within a patriarchal social system, but also an ecological narrative about the crisis of civilization. Salleh's [9] materialist ecofeminist approach is used to explore the dialectical relationship between women's bodies, the environment, and the political-economic system. This analysis is expected to enrich the ecological discourse of Indonesian literature, particularly by highlighting how ecological awareness in literature can grow from local cultural roots and a uniquely Indonesian spirituality.

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## 2. Literature review

This literature review explains five things, namely ecocriticism and the context of its birth, feminist ecocriticism and the idea of ecofeminism, Salleh and materialist ecofeminism, materialist ecofeminism in the context of Indonesian literature, and the relevance of the theoretical framework for analysis *Bekisar Merah*. *These five things are described as follows.*

Ecological study of literature (*ecocriticism*) departs from the awareness that literary texts are not only social mirrors, but also ecological mirrors—namely a reflection of the relationship between humans and their environment [13]. Ecocriticism focuses on the issue of literature representing nature, resource exploitation, and the social impact of environmental damage [14]. In this context, nature is no longer positioned as a static background, but rather as *active entity* which has a dialectical relationship with human culture and power.

According to Lawrence Buell [14], first generation ecocriticism focused on works *nature writing* depicting the beauty and spirituality of nature. However, the second generation expanded the analytical scope to include issues of urban environment, ecological colonialism, and social justice. This second direction provided the basis for the emergence of *ecofeminism* and *social ecology* who views the environmental crisis as part of the crisis of civilization. Williams [10] states that the relationship between “village and city” is not merely geographical, but ideological: the city represents economic domination and industrialization, while the village symbolizes a threatened ecological-moral space.

Based on its history, the term *ecofeminism* first used by Françoise d'Eaubonne (1974) to explain the link between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. This concept developed along two main lines: *spiritual ecofeminism* and *materialist ecofeminism* [11]. The spiritual approach emphasizes the sacred unity between women and nature, while the materialist approach shows that the mechanisms of capitalism and patriarchy produce a double form of oppression—against women's bodies and against the earth [9].

Gaard [11] emphasizes that ecofeminism is not just moral criticism, but also *systemic criticism*, because it highlights the link between the global economy, patriarchal ideology, and environmental degradation. Thus, literary analysis based on ecofeminism not only explores the image of women and nature, but also examines *political-economic structure* that underlies it.

Salleh is a central figure in materialist ecofeminism, which combines Marxist, feminist, and ecological theories. Salleh [9] introduced the idea of embodied materialism, namely the understanding that the human body (especially the female body) and the earth's body are both biological and social working media that sustain life, but are not valued by capitalism.

According to Salleh [9], women and nature carry out a form of “meta-industrial work” (*meta-industrial labor*), namely the work of caring for, nurturing, and reproducing life, which is the foundation of the formal economy but is not counted in the production system. This is the basis of “the politics of embodied labor.”

Salleh's concept [9] has four main pillars, namely: embodied materialism (the human body and the earth as productive entities that are ignored by capitalism), meta-industrial labor (care work and the continuation of life that are not recognized for their economic value), capitalist patriarchy (a system that unites patriarchal domination and capitalism in exploitation), and dialectic of gender and nature (the relationship between women and nature is dialectical: both victims and sources of resistance).

Salleh's approach [9] invites literary readers to see that every narrative about nature and women is actually a narrative about *production and reproduction of life* distorted by the market economy. With this perspective, *Bekisar Merah* can be read as a text that reveals the connection between ecological crisis, structural poverty, and feminine suffering.

In the Indonesian context, the ideas of materialist ecofeminism can be linked to the social realities of agrarian societies and local traditions that respect the balance of nature. Several Indonesian researchers have begun pursuing similar research. Candraningrum [15] emphasizes that “ecofeminism in the archipelago finds its unique form because women in rural areas often become the pillars of traditional ecological systems.”

The study conducted by Suryani [16] shows that Indonesian agrarian novels such as Tohari's represent “environmental damage as a metaphor for the moral decay of modern society.” Thus, a materialist ecofeminist approach offers a powerful framework for understanding the role of women as both guardians of ecological sustainability and victims of unequal economic structures.

Besides that, Buell [14] reminds us that ecological awareness in literature is always historically local. By integrating the local context of Banyumas (part of Javanese culture) into the reading *Bekisar Merah*, this research not only applies global theory, but also confirms the position of Indonesian literature in the world ecocritical discourse.

Based on the theory above, analysis of *Bekisar Merah* directed to: explore the relationship between women and nature shaped by the patriarchal capitalist system [9], reveal the forms *meta-industrial work* carried out by village women in supporting social life, interpreting ecological symbols (rivers, coconuts, bekisar, villages) as representations of crisis and resistance, discovering Tohari's ecological ethics which are based on *embodied ethics*—the awareness that the sustainability of human life depends on empathy for others and the environment.

This theoretical framework is expected to provide a solid foundation for a materialist ecofeminist reading of *Bekisar Merah*, shows that the women's crisis and the ecological crisis in the novel are not separate events, but rather structural symptoms of a capitalist civilization that has lost its moral balance.

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### 3. Methods

This research method explains the approach and type of research, data sources (primary and secondary), data collection techniques, data analysis techniques, validity and legitimacy of data, as well as text analysis plans.

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with a theoretical basis of materialist ecofeminism developed by Salleh [9]. This approach emphasizes the interpretation of meaning and symbolic relations contained in literary texts, rather than quantitative measurements. In line with the concept Denzin and Lincoln [17], qualitative research seeks to understand social phenomena through the meanings that individuals or groups attach to their experiences.

This type of research is included in the category of literary content analysis, namely an in-depth analysis of narrative structure, characters, and symbols to discover the ideological and ecological representations behind the text. The goal is not simply to find environmental themes, but to interpret the social and economic systems at work through literary symbols [14].

The materialist ecofeminist approach was chosen because it allows for analysis of the dialectical relationship between women, nature, and the patriarchal capitalist structure—as emphasized by Salleh [9], that the ecological crisis and the oppression of women originate from the same political-economic system.

The primary data of this research is a novel *Bekisar Merah* by Ahmad Tohari (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1997). This novel was chosen because: it has a main character (Lasi) who represents the connection between women–nature–agrarian society, it displays a strong socio-ecological conflict between village and city, poverty and power, and it contains ecological symbols (rivers, coconuts, bekisar, villages) that are full of ideological and spiritual meaning.

Secondary data in the form of: books and scientific articles discussing the theory of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and Tohari's work; previous studies on *Bekisar Merah* in scientific journals, such as *Humaniora* [3], *Humanika* [7], *Kata* [4], *Kata Kita* [8], *Semiotika* [5], *Sintesis* [6], and *Ethics & the Environment* [11]; Conceptual sources such as Buell [14], Salleh [9], and Williams [10] which strengthens the theoretical framework.

The data collection technique is carried out through the following stages: intensive reading of the primary text, namely rereading *Bekisar Merah* with a focus on narrative elements that reflect the relationship between women and nature; recording textual excerpts containing ecological and gender symbols, such as descriptions of rivers, trees, women's bodies, and social spaces; thematic classification to group data according to ecofeminist theory categories: *embodied materialism*, *meta-industrial labor*, *capitalist patriarchy*, and *the dialectic of gender–nature* [9]; as well as triangulation of secondary sources, namely comparing the results of the reading with previous studies from journals and books to ensure the validity of the interpretation.

The analysis was conducted using a descriptive-interpretive analysis model. This model positions text as a sign system that conveys social and ecological ideology [18]. The stages include the following steps. Identification of ecological representation, namely identifying parts of the text that show the relationship between humans and nature. Analysis of gender and ecological relations, namely examining the issue of women (especially the character Lasi) experiencing alienation, exploitation, or resistance in the social context depicted. The analysis is directed at looking at the dimensions of the experiences of female characters related to the concept of the body and ecological work [9]. Ideological and symbolic interpretation, namely using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to interpret ecological symbols and women's bodies in the novel, for example the symbol of the bekisar (hybridity), coconut (source of life), and river (flow of change). Synthesis of materialist ecofeminism, namely synthesizing the findings with the concept *capitalist patriarchy* and *meta-industrial labor* to understand the text showing the relationship between the economic system, morality, and the environment [11].

Data validity was ensured through the following three steps: Theoretical triangulation, which involved the use of multiple references (Salleh, Gaard, Buell, Williams) to strengthen the analysis. Interpretive consistency, which involved maintaining alignment between text citations and the theoretical framework. Audit trail, which involved documenting the entire process of recording text data and references for retrieval.

To ensure a systematic analysis, this study employed the following design: Identifying ecological descriptions, with the aim of identifying natural symbols in the text (water, soil, rivers, trees). Identifying socio-gender relations, to examine the power relations between men and women, particularly in the economic and spatial contexts. Interpreting symbols of the body and nature, aiming to connect women's bodies with the earth's bodies as equally exploited entities. Determining theoretical categories, to link findings to concepts *embodied materialism* and *capitalist patriarchy*. The moral-ecological conclusions drawn aim to construct an interpretation of Tohari's ecological ethics as a critique of modernity. This model allows for a multi-layered analysis—from the narrative to the ideological level—and aligns with Buell's [14] principle of contextual literary interpretation.

This research is limited to textual reading of the novel *Bekisar Merah* (Gramedia, 1997). The focus is not on the author's biography or reader reception, but rather on the symbolic construction of women and nature within the text. The research orientation is analytical-critical, aiming to uncover the relationship between ecological exploitation and social exploitation in Indonesian literature and to demonstrate the relevance of materialist ecofeminist theory to the agrarian-religious context typical of Banyumas (Central Java) culture.

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## 4. Results and discussion

Results and discussion in This study reveals findings about the relation of the female body and the body of the earth: the duality of exploitation; Village nature and the rhythms of agrarian life; the social and economic labor of the body: the ecology of poverty; the bekisar symbol: hybridity, exoticism, and alienation; nature as a mirror of spirituality and resistance; and synthesis: a critique of patriarchal capitalism and Tohari's ecological ethics. The following is a complete description.

### 4.1. The relationship between the female body and the earth's body: the duality of exploitation

Tohari opens *Bekisar Merah* with depictions of body and nature reflecting each other: Lasi's body as a young female tapper, and the body of the Karangsoa earth as a land for tapping palm sap. In this intimate description full of the sensuality of nature, Darsa looks at his wife as if he were looking at the life-giving nature [1].

The metaphor that identifies the female body with nature reveals a pattern of relations typical of agrarian societies: the female body is understood as a source of production, reproduction, and desire—just as nature is tapped, harvested, and exploited. In Salleh's [9] framework, this relationship emphasizes *embodied materialism*—an awareness that the human body and the body of the earth are both biological and social instruments that sustain living systems, but are reduced to tools by patriarchal capitalism.

Lasi and Darsa not only live in a marital relationship, but also in an ecological relationship: the sap dripping from the coconut is parallel to Lasi's sacrifice that drips energy and love [1]. Tohari presents the issue of women's bodies, even in domestic-ecological work, remaining under the male gaze (*male gaze*). In a patriarchal society, women's work to maintain the continuity of life—cooking, processing palm sap, maintaining the home—is not only not valued economically, but is also reduced to a visual object. Salleh [9] calls it *meta-industrial labor*: care and reproductive work that sustains capitalist life without recognition of value.

Darsa himself viewed his wife's body as a symbol of productivity and loyalty. He projected the entire spirit of a tapper onto the body of the woman he loved, depicting it as a matter of love and work [1]. The issues of love and work operate within oppressive economic and gender structures. Lasi's body becomes *symbol of agrarian work* which he never fully owned. He bore the burden of physical labor (processing palm sap, selling sugar), emotional burden (caring for the sick Darsa), and moral burden (maintaining honor amidst social scrutiny).

Tohari then reveals the dimensions of Lasi's inner suffering when society begins to judge her beauty as an "excess" that invites disaster [1]. In context Williams [10], the body and the land both become arenas of social hegemony; both bear the imprint of class and power that regulates those who have the right to manage and those who are merely "guardians." Lasi experiences not only physical exploitation, but also symbolic violence. When she moves to the city, her body becomes a new commodity for the capitalist patriarchal system. The scene of Mrs. Lanting preparing Lasi to be "introduced" to Handarbeni shows the transformation of an agrarian body into a consumer body [1]. This section describes the mechanisms of urban patriarchy continuing to subjugate women's bodies in different styles. In perspective Gaard [11], this situation reflects *ecological alienation*—the uprooting of humans (especially women) from their own social and natural ecosystems because they are replaced by market values.

Tohari himself implies a spiritual irony: the body that once worked in harmony with nature has now become a passive body under the control of power and money [1]. This sensory memory is the turning point of Lasi's ecological awareness. In Salleh's [9] theory, this kind of moment is called *reflexive embodiment*—when the oppressed body begins to realize its connection to nature and refuses to become a mere object [9]. Thus, Lasi's body becomes a double metaphor: both a victim and an agent of resistance.

#### 4.2. Village nature and the rhythm of agrarian life

Tohari builds the world of Karangsoga with a keen ecological sensibility. Nature is not merely a backdrop, but rather *living organisms* that breathes, stores memories, and determines the social rhythms of its people. From the very first page, Tohari writes in a pastoral tone that is realistic yet full of ecological awareness:

"Karangsoga adalah sebuah desa di kaki pegunungan vulkanik. Dari ketinggian tampak rumah-rumah bambu berjejer di lereng yang miring. Tanahnya yang hitam dan berhumus tebal ...." [1].

["Karangsoga is a village at the foot of volcanic mountains. From above, bamboo houses can be seen lining the sloping slopes. The soil is black and rich in humus ...."].

This description is not merely a landscape, but rather *ecological metaphor* which visualizes the harmony between humans and nature. Nature's continued "sprinkling throughout the year" signifies the continuity of stable life, a harmony rooted in an agrarian system. In Buell's view [14], this depiction reflects the "environmental imagination," in which nature appears as an ethical subject that both gives life and records human social values.

However, Tohari immediately shifted the idealistic nuance into social irony, namely revealing that nature is fertile but its people are poor [1]. This issue demonstrates Williams's [10] characteristic dialectic: the relationship between the "productive village" and the "city that reaps its benefits." Williams asserts that in a capitalist system, rural nature loses its autonomy. For Tohari, Karangsoga is *miniature agrarian economic system* Indonesia—fertile but oppressed by unequal distribution mechanisms.

The contrast between ecological fertility and social poverty forms *dual theme* in this novel: a fragile ecological balance and eroding social morality. In one scene, Tohari [1] describes a morning in Karangsoga with humid morning air, thin smoke from the kitchen stove, and the clink of iron hitting coconut fiber. In this context, every element of nature functions as an agrarian symphony that frames human work routines. In the context of materialist ecofeminism, as explained by Salleh [9], this scene shows human work blending with the rhythm of nature. However, behind this daily routine lies an ideological tension: the male body works to extract palm sap, the female body maintains the stove, and both are equally dependent on the system that oppresses them.

In many passages, Tohari writes about nature in an almost anthropomorphic style, as if it were participating in human suffering. For example, when the rainy season comes, he refers to it as "gemuruh air seperti tangis panjang yang tak putus" ["the roar of the water was like a long, unceasing cry"] [1]. The phrase "long cry" here evokes an emotional image: nature mourns alongside its people. Nature is no longer a neutral entity, but rather a moral subject that shares in the voice of suffering. In Buell's [14] terminology, Tohari brings to life the concept *ethical landscape*—namely nature that speaks ethically, not just aesthetically.

At the social level, Karangsoga's ecological harmony began to be disrupted when modernity entered the village. The arrival of sugar traders from the city brought changes to the way people work and their perspectives. This phenomenon is described as *capitalist patriarchy* [9], namely a system that shifts control over resources from local communities (often spearheaded by women and family labor) to global market mechanisms.

This transformation not only altered the economic structure but also the value system. Under market pressure, agrarian labor lost its spiritual meaning. Tohari hints at this through the change in the tappers' unhappy attitudes [1]. The loss of the tapper's song is a symbol of the loss of the "rhythm of agrarian life." In the context of Greg Garrard [19], this is a sign *environmental amnesia*—when humans forget their ecological memory due to industrialization. For Tohari, the lost humming of the song signifies the disappearance of collective ecological consciousness, the awareness that working in nature is part of worshipping the Creator.

Interestingly, Tohari does not position nature romantically, but realistically. Nature is not a static paradise, but rather *field of moral struggle*. This context demonstrates the novel's socio-ecological thesis *Bekisar Merah*. He asserts that the

roots of ecological poverty stem from unequal social relations—an idea that aligns with Murray Bookchin's [20] social ecology: environmental crises are rooted in hierarchical social structures, not simply in erroneous ecological actions.

Amidst this situation, women emerged as guardians of agrarian balance. The tappers' wives, including Lasi, were tasked with collecting the sap, boiling the sugar, and ensuring the kitchen kept smoking. These roles demonstrate a form of meta-industrial labor that Salleh [9] describes: care work that underpins the economic system but is not formally recognized.

Tohari closes the village section with a symbolic shift: the change in the color of nature marks a moral shift, calling it “Karangsoga tampak suram, gula warnanya semakin pekat.” [*“Karangsoga looks gloomy, the color of the sugar becomes darker.”*] The “dark” color symbol signifies both social darkness and the power of endurance. In the interpretation Kate Rigby [21], this reflects the “poetics of dwelling”—humanity’s persistence in its ecological home even as the outside world becomes increasingly foreign. Thus, Tohari shows that village nature is not merely a backdrop, but *epistemological space* which gives birth to ethical awareness.

#### 4.3. Social work and the body economy: the ecology of poverty

Tohari presents Karangsoga's agrarian economy as a fragile socio-ecological system: a community of tappers living amid fertile land, yet mired in structural poverty. Kanjat—a young scholar from the village—became both a witness and a researcher of this tragic paradox [1]. The issue represents *ecology of poverty*: a social order that shows that the work of the human body supports economic sustainability without obtaining commensurate value. Salleh [9] calls this condition *meta-industrial labor*—work of life (*life-sustaining labor*) which supports the capitalist economy but is removed from formal economic recognition.

Tohari presents a realistic portrait of this suffering through Kanjat's empathetic gaze, which emphasizes “gambaran beban dalam sorot mata istri-istri penyadap nira” [*“the image of the burden in the eyes of the wives of the palm wine tappers”*] [1]. On the other hand, the sugar scales become a concrete symbol of oppression. In the hands of Pak Tir—Kanjat's own father—the measuring instrument manipulates the villagers' labor [1]. Both issues reveal the mechanisms of patriarchal economics. Williams [10] calls this kind of rural-urban relationship a form of “subtle cultural and economic plunder.”

Tohari shows that the sugar price mechanism is regulated by an invisible market network: “Bila mereka menaikkan harga, aku ikut. Bila turun, aku juga ikut” [*“If they raise prices, I'll go with them. If they lower them, I'll go with them”*] [1]. The female tappers could only “mengangguk bukan karena mengerti, tetapi karena ketidakberdayaan” [*“nodding not because of understanding, but because of helplessness”*] [1]. This scene represents the loss of village economic sovereignty. In Garrard's framework [19], this is a form of *eco-colonialism*—ecological conquest that shows local resources being sucked up by a non-transparent global distribution system.

Kanjat found empirical evidence that the coconut sugar economic chain is exploitative, which is more determined by middlemen or large traders [1]. This condition shows the reproduction of patriarchal capitalism as explained by Salleh [9]: wealth is accumulated by the masculine bourgeois class, while agrarian labor is made a passive subject of the market.

Tohari writes with ecological acumen when linking poverty to environmental degradation, that disproportionate revenues result in tappers burdening the fuel factor with the resilience of pine forests [1]. This demonstrates that forest destruction is not due to people's ignorance, but rather a structural consequence of poverty. This is what Bookchin [20] calls an “ecological hierarchy”: unequal social relations create ecological inequality. Tohari describes a subtle yet powerful socio-ecological causal chain: forests are destroyed because humans are forced to survive.

Kanjat became a reflective figure who marked the transition from social to ecological awareness. He not only wrote a thesis on tappers, but also recognized his moral debt to his community [1]. In his conversation with Dr. Jirem, Kanjat was reminded that moral complicity is not a scientific weakness [1]. The narrative shows Tohari articulating *ethics of engagement*—an idea close to Salleh [9] about *reflexive embodiment*: the awareness that the social body living in poverty is also an ecological body that requires solidarity.

In its entire narrative structure, Karangsoga's economy revolves around bodies: the bodies of tapped coconut trees, the bodies of working women, the bodies of Kanjats who bear guilt, and the bodies of the earth depleted by felling trees. All these bodies form a condition that Buell [14] calls the “ecosocial body”—the collective body of society that records ecological wounds and economic exploitation.

#### 4.4. Bekisar symbols: hybridity, exoticism, and alienation

In the novel's symbolic structure, "bekisar" is not simply the name of a hybrid bird resulting from the cross between a male jungle fowl and a female native chicken, but a symbol of Lasi's social and biological position—a girl of Japanese and Javanese descent living in a patriarchal social system. Lasi, like the bekisar, is both beautiful and alien: the product of two worlds that have never truly accepted her presence.

Tohari wrote that "Bekisar adalah keindahan ... tapi keindahan itu tak pernah tenang" [*"Bekisar is beauty ... but that beauty is never calm"*] [1]. This statement marks hybridity as defined by Homi K. Bhabha [22] as "the third space of enunciation," an ambivalent space that gives birth to both mixed identities and alienation. In the context of materialist ecofeminism [9], the bekisar symbol becomes a bridge between the female body and the body of nature: both *hybrid* because it is constructed by patriarchal and capitalist power which rejects singularity and autonomy.

Lasi's hybridity marks *displacement* social and ecological. Like the bekisar kept for the entertainment of the urban middle class, Lasi is transported from the organic landscape of Karangsoga to an artificial urban space. The process of Lasi's transformation from village woman to exotic city object is captured through the perspectives of Mrs. Lanting and Handarbeni. In one scene, Mrs. Lanting explicitly refers to Lasi as a bekisar: "Bekisarku sudah jinak dan betah di kota" [*"My Bekisar is tame and happy in the city"*] [1]. The symbol "tamed" signifies the colonization of Lasi's body. She is tamed not through violence, but through consumption and aesthetics: clothes, cosmetics, watches, shoes. This process aligns with the concept of *disciplinary body* [23] and in an ecofeminist perspective it becomes a form *domestication of the feminine and the natural* [11]. Nature and women are both arranged to be beautiful to look at, but lose their original function.

Handarbeni views Lasi not as a human being, but as a commodity to be bought. In Tohari's narrative: "Tetapi Handarbeni malah senang ... memandang bekisar yang akan dibelinya" [*"But Handarbeni was actually happy ... looking at the bekisar he was going to buy"*] [1]. The words "will buy" turn Lasi into property—a commodified feminine exoticism. This exoticism is rooted in *gender orientalism*, namely the body of an Eastern woman (in this case "Japanese rambon") becomes an erotic fantasy for Indonesian men of high economic status.

Tohari even displays moments of visual exploitation in Handarbeni's domestic space: "Ada sebuah potret besar berbingkai ... potret itu adalah foto Lasi sendiri dalam kimono merah" [*"There was a large framed portrait ... it was a photo of Lasi herself in a red kimono"*] [1]. The red of the kimono—a color that symbolizes passion and power—reinforces the symbolism of the female body as a representation of aesthetic capital. The portrait signifies "visual foreclosure," where the female body becomes a static image, *image to be possessed*.

In Mrs. Lanting and Handarbeni's conversation, Lasi's body is literally treated as merchandise: "Segala biaya untuk pemeliharaan bekisar saya bebaskan kepada Anda" [*"I will charge you all the costs for maintaining the bekisar"*] [1]. This dialogue depicts the reproduction of patriarchal capitalism as explained by Salleh [9]: women's work and nature are controlled through economic relations, while their bodies are made into objects *means of exchange* between the bourgeois classes.

In Williams's [10] observation, this kind of relationship shows *reification*—the reduction of humans to economic objects. Tohari doesn't depict this polemically, but through narrative irony: Lasi, who once processed palm sap by hand, is now a "product" processed by social hands.

When Lasi started living in the city, Tohari described *ecological alienation* softly but piercingly: "Keterasingan juga sangat menggelisahkan Lasi. Dia merasa terdampar ke suatu dunia lain" [*"The isolation was also very disturbing for Lasi. She felt stranded in another world"*] [1]. This description depicts a situation that Gaard [11] calls *ecological alienation*—the disconnection of humans from the ecological landscape that gives meaning to their bodies and identities.

Tohari then closes this section with a powerful psycho-ecological image: "Lasi termenung. Tiba-tiba teringat pada rumahnya di Karangsoga. Telinganya mendengargelegak nira mendidih" [*"Lasi was pensive. Suddenly he remembered his house in Karangsoga. His ears heard the bubbling of boiling sap"*] [1]. This sensory memory is *resistance through memory*. Lasi completely rejects the urban image by reviving its ecological memory. In line with the concept *reflexive embodiment* [9], bodily awareness becomes a medium of resistance: it can still "hear" and "smell" its native land. More broadly, the bekisar symbol reflects the hybridity of a postcolonial nation that oscillates between tradition and modernity.



Tohari uses exoticism not to emphasize beauty, but rather to critique capitalism, which uses “beauty” as a mechanism of power. In this context, Rigby [21], the *bekisar* symbol combines *poetics of place* and *ethics of care*: he reminds the reader that any form of aesthetics that is detached from ecology leads to spiritual alienation. Thus, *bekisar* is a total symbol: body, nature, and nation that have lost their moral center.

#### 4.5. Nature as a mirror of spirituality and resistance

The most contemplative part in *Bekisar Merah* It emerged when Darsa withdrew from the social hustle and bustle and sought silence on the banks of the Kalirong. Tohari's narrative showcases ecological beauty with exquisite biological detail—a prose that treats nature as a spiritual text.

“Pada sebuah kelokan Kalirong, sebatang beringin yang amat besar tumbuh di tepiannya .... Seekor burung merah yang sangat mungil terbang-hinggap pada ranting beringin yang menjulur .... Ada daun kering ikut luruh menerpa permukaan air.” [1].

[“At a bend in the Kalirong, a very large banyan tree grew on its edge.... A very tiny red bird flew and perched on a branch of the banyan tree that was hanging down.... There were dry leaves falling and hitting the surface of the water.”.]

This description functions like a visual meditation: Tohari writes in a style *eco-phenomenological*, presenting nature as a sensory experience as well as inner awareness. Buell [14] calls this kind of style *environmental epiphany*—the moment when humans feel a spiritual connection with the environment.

The symbols of the banyan, water, and red bird form a triadic ecological spirituality. These three create a harmonious unity between body, nature, and consciousness, in accordance with the concept of *embodied materialism* Salleh [9]—that true spiritual life can only emerge when the body (and nature) are treated as living and powerful entities.

In the next scene, Darsa performs self-purification in the river. “Dengan melompat-lompat ke atas batu .... Darsa sujud demi pertemuan dengan Sang Kesadaran Tertinggi” [“By jumping on the rocks .... Darsa prostrated himself for the sake of meeting the Supreme Consciousness”] [1]. Prostrating on the Kalirong stone is a form of *ecological ritual*—spirituality rooted in direct experience with nature. Water, rocks, and banyan trees become witnesses and mediators between humans and the transcendent. In this perspective, Rigby [21], practices like this mark *topographies of the sacred*—a geographical space that is the meeting point between the profane and the sacred.

Tohari depicts nature as a spiritual participant, not merely a backdrop. This rejects the Cartesian dualism between subject and object, replacing it with a dialogical ecological awareness, as emphasized. Gaard [11]: true spirituality is born of ecological empathy, not domination. The silence of Kalirong also serves as a space of resistance to a corrupt social world. “Sepi, kecuali gemericik air atau cicit burung madu merah .... Sepi makin sepi .... Angin pun mati” [“It's quiet, except for the sound of splashing water or the chirping of red sunbirds .... It's getting quieter .... Even the wind dies”] [1]. The symbolism of color and sound here creates *theology of silence*. Silence is not absence, but presence—an “ecological prostration” that gives birth to moral awareness. In Salleh's terminology [9], this moment indicates *reflexive embodiment*: the human body finds its spiritual meaning through ecological awareness.

Darsa's attitude reflects *resistance through reconnection*. Amidst social decline, he refused to fall victim to fatalism by seeking balance in nature. Bookchin [20] calls this “liberatory ecology,” the realization that human freedom depends on liberating nature from exploitation.

The connection between spirituality and nature reaches its peak in the figure of Eyang Mus, an old figure who plays the gambang near Kalirong. “Eyang Mus mahir memainkan gambang tunggal untuk mengiringi bait-bait suluk .... adalah tangis rindu seorang kawula akan Gustinya ... sangkan paraning dumadi” [“Eyang Mus is skilled at playing a single xylophone to accompany the suluk verses .... it is the cry of a young man's longing for his Gusti ... the origin of the event”] [1]. The spirituality that Eyang Mus lived emphasized *unity of existence* between humans and nature. In Buell's perspective [14], this is “ecological cosmology,” a worldview that rejects the dichotomy between faith and earth.

Eyang Mus became the archetype of the Javanese man who achieved *mystical ecological awareness*: a religiosity that does not separate itself from the land, trees and rivers, but instead unites with them. In Salleh's framework [9], both carry out *meta-industrial labor* on a spiritual level: caring for life not with power, but with prayer, awareness, and ecological care. Tohari thus writes about an ethical form of spirituality—not ascetic, but ecological.

#### 4.6. Synthesis: critique of patriarchal capitalism and Tohari's ecological ethics

In narrative structure *Bekisar Merah* Tohari demonstrates how the mechanisms of capitalism and patriarchy operate not only on an economic level, but also in the moral and ecological realms. Kanjat, a young graduate from a family of middlemen, represents an intellectual consciousness belatedly coming to terms with his family's social sins. In his confession to Doctor Jirem, he bitterly stated: "Kepahitan hidup mereka adalah keprihatinan dan beban jiwa saya juga, beban yang tak ringan" ["*The bitterness of their lives is a concern and burden on my soul too, a burden that is not light*"] [1]. This quote reflects structural guilt that is passed down from generation to generation. Salleh [9] refers to this phenomenon as *capitalist patriarchy*: a system that simultaneously oppresses the human body and the earth in order to maintain the logic of profit accumulation.

In an intense dialogue between Kanjat and Doctor Jirem, Tohari shows the moral dimension of capitalist oppression [1]. Tohari not only criticized the economic structure, but also *modern epistemology* which positions science as a sterile and value-free entity. In Buell's [14] view, this constitutes a form of "moral disconnection"—the loss of the ethical connection between knowledge and the ecological life that sustains society.

Tohari's ecological ethics is built on three consciousnesses: interconnectedness, partisanship, and moral awareness. Through Kanjat's narrative, he demonstrates that "scientific knowledge" that is not in favor of life is merely a replication of the dominant, exploitative system [1]. This marks a critical awareness of *hegemony of the market economy*. In Bookchin's [20] framework, this situation is a manifestation of the "hierarchy of domination," namely that social inequality creates ecological inequality.

Doctor Jirem asserts a moral position that is in line with Salleh's ecofeminist thinking about *reflexive embodiment*—awareness born of a sense of indebtedness to life. "Keterpihakanmu merupakan manifestasi rasa terima kasih kepada mereka yang telah sekian lama memberikan subsidi kepadamu" ["*Your support is a manifestation of gratitude to those who have provided subsidies to you for so long*"] [1]. The phrase "subsidize you" is very significant theoretically. It reverses capitalist logic: the poor actually subsidize the rich, the oppressed support the powerful. This is a form of *eco-Marxist inversion*, reminding us that the foundations of the modern economy rest on unpaid life force—from women, nature, and the common people [9].

Kanjat realized that social relationships could not be restored without restoring empathy for the bodies that sustain life. Reflecting on his childhood, Tohari wrote: "Sejak kecil Kanjat tahu .... Ia tak bisa melupakan tangis mereka ketika ayah mereka meninggal jatuh dari pohon kelapa" ["*Since childhood, Kanjat knew .... He could not forget their cries when their father died falling from a coconut tree*"] [1]. This quote demonstrates that social work in agrarian societies is bodily labor, ecological labor. In Salleh's view [9], these bodies constitute the "living infrastructure of society" that supports all life systems, yet their value is not recognized politically or economically.

From this experience, Kanjat developed *moral ecological awareness*—an empathy that does not stop at pity, but becomes a reflective energy for social change. This awareness flows in the same direction as Buell's [14] concept of *ecological humanism*, namely the awareness that true humanity is only possible if humans acknowledge their connection to the network of other lives.

Novel *Bekisar Merah* structurally positions modernity as a destructive force that separates humans from nature. In the final conversation between Kanjat and Doctor Jirem, the teaching of moral elegance emerges [1]. This criticism is in line with *ecological ethics* Rigby [21]: the environmental crisis is a crisis of modern spirituality that has lost its sense of gratitude to the earth.

Tohari's ecological ethics are not abstract, but practical. They are realized through work, love, and loyalty in everyday life: Darsa, who returns to tapping coconuts despite his poverty; Lasi, who rejects a life of luxury for the sake of self-respect; Kanjat, who returns to his community. All of these actions contain values. *ecoethical resilience*—moral resilience based on ecological awareness.

Through his characters, Tohari unites social, ecological, and spiritual dimensions within a single humanistic ethical framework. In Salleh's view [9], this action reflects "the politics of care," a politics of concern rooted in the values of sustainability. *Bekisar Merah* shows that healing the world must begin with a recognition of humanity's debt to life.

## 5. Conclusion

Novel *Bekisar Merah* represents the complexity of the relationship between women, nature, and patriarchal capitalism in the Indonesian social context. Lasi's body becomes an allegory for the body of the earth: both *touched, used, and tamed* by patriarchal power structures. Through her transformation from village woman to "city bekisar," Tohari demonstrates the cycle of capitalist exploitation that turns labor into a commodity, beauty into an object, and nature into a market.

From a materialist ecofeminist perspective, the novel demonstrates four main principles: embodied materialism (the awareness that the human body and the earth are both marginalized productive entities); *meta-industrial labor* (women's work and nature support the formal economy without recognition of value); capitalist patriarchy (a system of domination that links control over nature and women in a single logic of power); dialectical resistance (forms of ecological resistance through body awareness, spirituality, and ethics of care (*care ethics*)).

This study confirms that a materialist ecofeminist approach can uncover the socio-ecological dimensions of Indonesian literature, often overlooked by formalistic analyses. These findings broaden the horizons of Southeast Asian ecocriticism, which has so far been dominated by Western paradigms. *Bekisar Merah* opening up a space for reflection for modern Indonesian readers about the social costs of modernity.

The practical implications can be applied to humanities education and cultural policy—that literary studies need to instill both ecological and social awareness. This study opens up opportunities for the development of local ecocriticism based on Indonesian spirituality, which combines global theory with local values (Islam, Javanese, and agrarian). Ultimately, Tohari, through *Bekisar Merah* successfully put forward a model of ecological ethics that rejects the logic of exploitation and replaces it with the logic of love: the only way home is the awareness that we are all born and will return to the same earth body.

## Compliance with ethical standards

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest for this article.

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