

FEMINISM AT THE CROSSROADS OF FAITH AND SOCIAL POWER IN DOROTHEA ROSA HERLIANY'S *PEREMPUAN BERDOSA*

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Abstract

This article examines the female body within a feminist framework that operates at the intersection of religion and social space through a reading of Dorothea Rosa Herliany's poem *Perempuan Berdosa*. The poem portrays a woman burdened by accusations of sin and by the symbolic violence imposed upon her body by society. Images of being hunted, pressed down, and judged reveal how religious and social norms often position women as the source of moral wrongdoing. Feminist analysis challenges these patterns by asserting that women possess voices and lived experiences that cannot be reduced to moral stigma. Through this poetic reading, the article argues that the female body can become a site of resistance against patriarchal control and unjust moral scrutiny. Women's awareness of their bodies and experiences opens possibilities for renegotiating identity, spirituality, and their place within everyday social life.

Keywords: Female Body, Feminism, Religion, Social Space

INTRODUCTION

The female body has long occupied a central position within various belief systems and social structures. Across many traditions, it is not merely understood as a biological entity but is also burdened with symbolic meanings of morality, purity, and sin. Judgments directed at women's bodies often emerge through religious prescriptions, familial expectations, and cultural norms that place women in positions vulnerable to surveillance and moral scrutiny. As a result, women frequently carry disproportionate moral burdens, as though their bodies were designated sites for the accumulation of faults they never chose.

Within social spaces, women continue to encounter multiple forms of regulation that restrict their movement and expression. Standards of modesty, purity, and "proper" behavior have historically been imposed more heavily on women than on men, producing an unequal moral load. This imbalance reveals how patriarchal structures operate through language, norms, and cultural practices transmitted across generations. As one of the most influential sources of social values, religion also shapes how communities perceive women's bodies and social roles. In certain contexts, religious interpretations position women as the primary guardians of familial and communal honour. Consequently, the female body becomes a continuous object of



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moral monitoring. Such perceptions do not stem from Islam's ontological principle of human equality but rather from social constructions formed through historical and cultural processes.

Islam does not position women as morally inferior beings. The Qur'an affirms the ontological equality of all humans in Surah Al-Hujurat [49]:13, emphasizing that dignity is not determined by gender but by piety. This verse challenges the assumption that women are inherently "more sinful" and underscores that morality is a spiritual quality rather than a biological one.

This principle of moral equality is also reflected across other major religious traditions. In Judaism and Christianity, Genesis 1:27 states that both men and women are created in the image of the Divine. In Buddhism, moral worth is grounded in intention and action, not gender identity. Hinduism and other Dharmic traditions similarly teach that virtue and karma are universal and accessible to all, regardless of sex.

A cross-tradition reading reveals that narratives portraying women as morally weaker are not rooted in the core teachings of these religions, but rather in social constructions shaped by patriarchal history and culture. Thus, whether viewed from the perspective of Islam or from broader religious frameworks, women are understood as morally equal subjects, and any labeling of women as "more sinful" lacks legitimate theological foundation.

Dorothea Rosa Herliany's poem *Perempuan Berdosa* ("The Sinful Woman") offers a sharp and poetic portrayal of this condition. The woman in the poem "carries sin alone," an image that reflects how society often positions women as the source of wrongdoing. She is depicted running, hunted, pressed down, and judged by a group of men who believe they have the authority to measure and evaluate her body. The violence presented in the poem is not only physical but also symbolic and spiritual. The men who "puff out their hollow chests" and "spill maggots" embody the false morality frequently used to condemn women, while the woman herself builds a "heaven in a pool of tears," signaling a form of strength and resilience born out of suffering.

Perempuan Berdosa presents the female body as a contested site of social meaning. It is not understood as a personal entity but as a symbol of familial, communal, and even national honor. Fakihi (2013) notes that in patriarchal cultures, women's bodies are often subjected to moral and religious regulation. In the Indonesian context, such control manifests through various social mechanisms, including dress codes, judgments surrounding sexual relations, and surveillance of both public and private behavior. The poem also reflects what Bourdieu (2001) terms symbolic violence—a form of domination accepted as natural by society, including by the women who experience it.

From a feminist perspective, the female body becomes a space of negotiation between personal experience and social pressure. The body is not merely an object to be judged but also a subject capable of resisting, reinterpreting, and generating new meanings. Through a close reading of Herliany's poem, this article highlights how the female body exists at the intersection of religious discourse and social structures marked by tension. The poem reveals that women are not merely victims of patriarchal

systems but also agents capable of shaping their own histories, identities, and spiritual lives.

The selection of *Perempuan Berdosa* is grounded in its strong relevance to contemporary social dynamics. A poem of this kind functions not only as an aesthetic work but also as a critical medium that captures the tension between individual experience and the social structures that constrain it. In modern society, issues such as the regulation of women's bodies, symbolic violence, and gender-based moral constructions remain pressing concerns. For this reason, a poem that articulates these experiences provides an important space for reflection within literary studies and gender scholarship.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The poem *Perempuan Berdosa* opens with the following lines:

*Perempuan itu memikul dosa sendirian, seringan jeritannya
yang rahasia: berlari di antara sekelebatan rusa yang diburu segerombolan
serigala.
kautulis igaunya yang hitam, mengendap di bayang dinding
tak memantulkan cahaya.*

These opening lines immediately position the woman as someone forced to carry a moral burden she never chose. The poem depicts her as bearing "sin" alone, as though the weight of the world's wrongdoing has been placed upon her body. The burden is described as "as light as her secret scream," an ironic image that reveals how her suffering remains invisible. Her scream never becomes an audible voice; it exists only as an echo she keeps within herself.

The image of the woman running "among flashes of deer hunted by a pack of wolves" illustrates the constant threat surrounding her. The deer evoke gentleness and vulnerability, while the wolves represent relentless power and predatory force. Through this contrast, the poem shows that the woman is not only a victim but also a witness to the violence that shadows her every step. She moves through a world that offers no safe space, and each movement becomes an act of survival.

Still within the first stanza, the poem introduces the image of a "black delirium" settling on a wall that "does not reflect light." This metaphor suggests that the woman's experiences are trapped in a space that offers no reflection, no recognition, and no possibility of being seen. A wall that refuses to reflect light symbolizes a society unwilling to acknowledge women's suffering. The wounds she carries simply sink into silence, never entering public discourse. Here, Rosa Herliany reveals how women are often forced to store their trauma in quiet, unsupported spaces, without the opportunity to voice or validate their experiences.

The poem continues with the following lines:

*Perempuan itu melukis dosa yang tak terjemahkan
ia tulis rahasia puisi yang perih dendam dalam gesekan rebab.*

lalu ia hentakkan tumit penari indian yang gelap dan mistis.

The second stanza portrays a woman who “paints an untranslatable sin.” This suggests that the accusations placed upon her have no coherent language or meaning, and that society attaches labels to her body without ever truly understanding what she has endured. She “writes a secret poem of painful resentment in the stroke of the rebab,” linking her body to an artistic expression born from suffering. The sound of the rebab evokes a somber, melancholic atmosphere, as though each note carries a complaint that can never fully resolve itself.

In this stanza, the woman is no longer merely an object of pain; she becomes a creator. She writes, she paints, she transforms her wounds into language. When she strikes her heel like a dark, mystical Native dancer, the poem suggests that her body possesses a rhythmic force that cannot be extinguished. This gesture becomes a form of resistance, a movement that refuses silence. Through this imagery, the stanza presents the woman as someone who turns suffering into expression, and expression into courage.

*Segerombolan lelaki melata di atas perutnya.
mengukur berapa leleh keringat pendakian itu.
sebelum mereka mengepalkan tinjunya
ke langit. dan membusungkan dadanya yang kosong:
mulutnya yang busuk menumpahkan ribuan belatung dan ulat-ulat.*

The third stanza is the poem’s most forceful and confrontational moment. A group of men is described as crawling across the woman’s stomach, an image that exposes the blatant exploitation of her body. These men “measure the sweat of the climb,” treating her body as a terrain to be conquered rather than as a human being. She becomes a surface to be explored, assessed, and dominated.

Their gesture of raising their fists to the sky and puffing out their “empty chests” reveals a hollow moral arrogance. They assume the authority to judge and condemn, even though they themselves embody no real virtue. The image of their mouths spilling “maggots and worms” exposes the moral decay hidden beneath their confident posture. Through this imagery, Rosa Herliany lays bare the workings of patriarchy, a system that readily blames women while refusing to confront its own corruption.

In this stanza, the men are not only perpetrators of violence but also symbols of a broader structure that judges without introspection. The poem exposes how patriarchal power masks its own rot behind gestures of authority, while the woman’s body becomes the site upon which this hypocrisy is enacted.

The poem closes with the following lines:

*Perempuan itu membangun surga dalam genangan air mata.
menciptakan sungai sejarah: sepanjang abad!*

The final stanza introduces a crucial shift in tone. After enduring violence and judgment, the woman “builds a heaven in a pool of tears.” Tears, often associated with fragility, become the foundation for something sacred and hopeful. She “creates a river

of history across the centuries,” suggesting that women’s experiences are not marginal footnotes but powerful currents that shape the world. This river of history is born from suffering, yet it also flows with resilience. The woman in the poem does not remain confined to the role of victim. She emerges as a creator of history, a builder of worlds, and a source of life that cannot be erased by any form of violence.

Across its four stanzas, Rosa Herliany traces a journey from imposed moral burden to the creation of meaning. The poem does more than depict suffering; it reveals how women transform wounds into strength. Each stanza presents a different layer of experience, including fear, trauma, expression, exploitation, and ultimately the forging of history. The female body in this poem is not merely an object subjected to domination; it is a site of enduring vitality. In this way, *Perempuan Berdosa* becomes a work that not only critiques the social and religious structures that oppress women but also celebrates women’s resilience and creativity in confronting an unjust world.

The Burden of Sin Placed Upon the Female Body

From the very first stanza, the poem portrays the woman as someone forced to carry guilt for actions she never committed. This “sin” has no clear form, yet it clings to her as something society has passed down through generations. The image of a woman running while being hunted illustrates how moral stigma operates like a constant threat shadowing her every step. This theme highlights how society frequently positions women as the source of problems, while the social structures that oppress them remain unquestioned.

Women are not only accused of bearing sin but are also socialized to accept this stigma as part of their identity. In this context, the female body becomes a surface onto which various moral labels are attached without her consent. As long as society continues to reproduce narratives that cast women as sources of temptation, disorder, or moral decline, women are forced to live under the shadow of guilt they never chose. This process reveals that the burden of sin is not merely symbolic; it is a mechanism of social control that sustains gender inequality through internalized shame.

Symbolic Violence

The image of a “black delirium that reflects no light” illustrates how women’s experiences are often left unacknowledged. They carry traumas that are never given space to be spoken. When the woman writes a secret poem filled with pain and resentment, she is attempting to give language to wounds that have long gone unheard. This theme reveals how women strive to transform suffering into expression, even as society continues to avert its gaze from their voices.

Another crucial layer of symbolic violence in the poem lies in the way women are compelled to internalize the moral judgments imposed upon them. When society positions women as the source of sin or moral decay, they gradually learn to see themselves through the same lens. This internalization makes domination appear natural, even invisible. In the context of the poem, the “black delirium that reflects no light” can be read as a metaphor for an identity reduced by stigma, leaving women with little room to imagine themselves beyond the boundaries set by patriarchy. Thus, the

poem not only depicts wounds but also exposes the subtle mechanisms that lead women to accept those wounds as part of who they are.

Patriarchal Domination Over the Female Body

The stanza depicting men crawling across the woman's stomach illustrates how the female body is often treated as a territory to be conquered. The men in the poem do not appear merely as individuals but as symbols of a system that believes it has the authority to measure, judge, and evaluate women's bodies. When their mouths spill maggots, the poem exposes the moral decay hidden beneath their confident posture. This theme underscores that patriarchal power not only harms women's bodies but also corrodes the very foundations of human dignity.

The female body becomes a stage on which male superiority is displayed, while women are positioned as passive objects expected to accept such treatment. Within this framework, patriarchy operates not only as an external force but also as a structure that permeates ways of thinking, shaping values, and defining bodily meaning. The poem reveals that when the female body is reduced to a space to be dominated, what is threatened is not only women's freedom but also the moral integrity of a society that allows such domination to persist unchallenged.

Women's Resilience in Creating Meaning from Suffering

Despite enduring violence and judgment, the woman in the poem continues to build a heaven out of her tears. Tears—often seen as signs of weakness—become a source of strength that gives rise to a river of history. This theme underscores women's capacity to transform wounds into something meaningful. They do not merely survive; they create histories that flow beyond the social boundaries that seek to confine them. The poem closes by asserting that women are not merely victims but creators of worlds—figures whose presence cannot be erased by any form of violence.

When the social world closes its doors to women's voices, they find ways to speak through symbols, memory, and imagination. The transformation of tears into a "river of history" suggests that women's personal experiences do not remain confined to the private sphere but hold the potential to shape collective narratives. In this sense, women's resilience is not only a form of resistance to violence but also a creative process that reaffirms their existence and agency. The poem shows that even from the quietest, most marginalized spaces, women are capable of generating meanings that challenge the structures determined to silence them.

CONCLUSION

The poem *Perempuan Berdosa* by Dorothea Rosa Herliany illustrates how the female body is caught between the demands of religion and the pressures of social space. Through stark and symbolic imagery, the poem exposes the ways society attaches sin to women's bodies without acknowledging their experiences or voices. The woman is portrayed as someone constantly hunted, judged, and exploited, yet still capable of transforming her wounds into strength. This depiction reveals that the moral burden placed on women does not stem from personal wrongdoing but from social structures that dictate how the female body should be understood.

A feminist reading of the poem shows that women are not merely objects of judgment but subjects capable of reinterpreting themselves. When the woman in the poem writes, stamps her feet, and creates history, she is reclaiming spaces long dominated by patriarchy. These acts demonstrate women's capacity to transform suffering into meaningful knowledge and lived experience. Thus, the poem not only critiques the symbolic and moral violence inflicted upon women but also celebrates their resilience and creativity.

In a broader context, the poem reminds us that the female body is always engaged in an ongoing negotiation between identity, spirituality, and social pressure. Religion and society often construct narratives that constrain women, yet women possess the ability to challenge and rewrite those narratives. *Perempuan Berdosa* shows that women can build worlds out of their own tears, and that their experiences carry historical significance that cannot be erased. This article affirms that understanding the female body requires understanding the power dynamics that shape it, while also recognizing women's strength in creating their own meaning and history.

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