

# The Problematic Representation of Women: An Analysis of Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim's Literary Text

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## Abstract

Representation of women in literature develops parallelly with the productivity of literary texts. This representation is inevitably intertwined with a discourse that cannot be separated from power relations. Thus, the position and identity of women are vulnerable to domination and subordination. However, women are constructed as subjects and objects, allowing negotiation and contestation to emerge. This article examines the problematic representation of women in Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim's text, "Tina is Just Silent (*Tina Diam Saja*)," by using Linda Hutcheon's analysis of the female subject in post-modernism discourse. This article reveals that Ibrahim's text produces and reproduces the complicated female subject dealing with power relations. Ibrahim's text provides space for the subject to contest and negotiates her position and identity. "She" offers a silent strategy for the contestation in the text. Therefore, the text allowed female subjects to be problematized by a representation of the consequences of gendered power.

**Keywords:** *Problematic Representation, Female Subject, Gender, Discourse.*

## Introduction

The production of Indonesian literary texts, significantly short stories, has increased tremendously, especially those that narrate women's issues. Women are not only represented by man writers, but women writers also

represent themselves in literary texts. The phenomenon of women writers globally needs to be scrutinized as "the cultural moment belongs to women."<sup>1</sup>

In literary studies, the discourse of women is placed in the power structure and

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<sup>1</sup> Johanna Thomas-Corr, "How Women Conquered the World of Fiction," *The Guardian*, May 16, 2021,

<https://theguardian.com/books/2021/may/16/how-women-conquered-the-world-of-fiction>.



gender personification; men's roles in social construction dominate women's gender roles. In this discourse, the female subject and women's identity constituted and circulated by the text—operated the people's experience of self.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, gender in literary texts tends to narrate the roles and problems of women's life.

Afrizal Malna has seen this phenomenon as a metaphor in spaces dominated by male power.<sup>3</sup> This space is manifested in language, history, culture, and other texts that have entailed the power relations of genderization. Afrizal looks at this relation in poetry texts and how the poet constructs gender in the text. This specific space is called a particular room that already exists. It is used as an institution to legitimize women in domestication. This space creates boundaries between the inside and the outside, between women and men. In addition, the space can also be constructed to legitimize women for genetic reproduction and maintain offspring in the space.<sup>4</sup>

Women in this social and cultural process have internalized the norms and values of patriarchy.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, female desire has been repressed and positioned as subordinate in the public discourse.<sup>6</sup> The role and position of women, apart from being subjects (with limited space), also destroy themselves and

their bodies to gain their identity as wives, mothers, and the like. Women do not play themselves but are played to serve their family life in the house. Here, the concept of ownership is that women have authority in domestic matters even though the ownership is owned by the male power that covers the household space.<sup>7</sup>

Toto Sudarto Bachtiar once wrote the poem, "The World Does not Be His": "This is the passion of a woman. His speech is full of variety and dreams of heaven in his time to grow and develop. Because it is not felt, this world does not belong to him."<sup>8</sup> The concept of ownership presupposes the mechanism of subordination against women in power relations within social construction.

Ida Ayu Galuhpethak also parodied this awareness of ownership. This subordination is observed through presuppositions in the game. She writes, "I laughed when I read a newspaper; my people were playing ball even though I hated the ball because the ball always rolled from the feet of men to the feet of other men." In this case, Afrizal sees it as an author's emancipation strategy to get out of the domestication space and enter the public sphere. Meanwhile, Ayu framed this gender concept in a broader space (public space). When a woman steps out of the house, she is

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<sup>2</sup> Ewa Glapka, "Women as Subjects of Discourse," in *Reading Bridal Magazines from a Critical Discursive Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 32-51. DOI: 10.1057/9781137333582\_3.

<sup>3</sup> Afrizal Malna, *Sesuatu Indonesia: Personifikasi Pembaca-yang-Tak-Bersih* (Yogyakarta: Bentang, 2000), 222-226.

<sup>4</sup> Ratna Megawangi, *Mebiarkan Berbeda: Sudut Pandang Baru Tentang Relasi Gender* (Bandung: Mizan, 1999), 131.

<sup>5</sup> Surapeepan Chatraporn, "The Defiance of Patriarchy and the Creation of a Female Literary Tradition in Contemporary World Popular Fiction," *Manusya:*

*Journal of Humanities* 9, no. 2, Special Issue 3 (2006): 35-53, DOI: 10.1163/26659077-00903002.

<sup>6</sup> Changxue Xue, "Critically Evaluate the Understanding of Gender as Discourse," *International Education Studies* 1, no. 2 (May 2008): 54-57, DOI: 10.5539/ies.v1n2p54.

<sup>7</sup> Javier Cerrato and Eva Cifre, "Gender Inequality in Household Chores and Work-Family Conflict," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (August 2018): 1-11. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01330.

<sup>8</sup> Linus Suryadi AG (ed.), *Tonggak: Antologi Puisi Indonesia Modern 2* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1987).

considered a stranger, not by men, but by women themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The construction of "it is not my world" is a woman's self-identification towards herself that has been constructed in gender discourse. Thus, women's construction is no longer a problem outside of women but has penetrated women's internal problems. The issue of women and construction as a political area here is different. Clearly, women are subordinated, oppressed, and so on, but specific representations always present ambiguity, a contradiction in him. Thus, the concept of representation from the perspective of post-modernism does not ignore historical-political issues.<sup>10</sup> With this perspective, the space of consciousness becomes liminal, limited by the subject himself and the spaces surrounding him.

The speed of industry supports conditions and operates of discourse; paradigms and ideologies infiltrate all spaces; power authority spreads everywhere; consciousness, desire, and dream become sublime, all things seen as a spectrum biased in complexity. Life becomes reluctant to talk about except in chaos: identity confusion, representational confusion, and perspective chaos, making things problematic.

This article describes the problematic side of women in families who have constructed gender in Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim's literary text, "Tina is Just Silent (*Tina Hanya Diam*).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the issue is

discussed using Linda Hutcheon's analysis of women's representation of the subject in postmodernism discourse.

## Method

According to Linda Hutcheon, literary text involved sociality and subjectivity as consequence in the production reproduction of meaning, value, and ideology. This process constructs the positions of the subject constantly engaged and represented in discourse, be it a male or female subject.<sup>11</sup>

Hutcheon underlines "the gendered subject is where meanings are formed, even though meanings are what constitute the subject." Women are socially influenced by cultural concepts of femininity.<sup>12</sup> It suggests the representation of a female subject, although a victim whose voice is "borrowed" by the narrator. Furthermore, women are no longer absent from the cultural process. In short, the female subject is the product of readings.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Hutcheon tried to relocate the problematic of the subject within language, to articulate the effect of this act of self-identification through language in subjectivity within discourse—a field of discourse and its specific discursive formations (the system of norms or rules that govern a certain way of thinking and writing at a certain time and place). In short, subjectivity is a fundamental property of language.<sup>14</sup> So,

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<sup>9</sup> Malna, *Sesuatu Indonesia*, 222- 226.

<sup>10</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 98.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), 168-170.

<sup>12</sup> Hutcheon, 166.

<sup>13</sup> Hutcheon, 161.

<sup>14</sup> Hutcheon, 168-170.

the paper focus on the subject *in process* and its relation to ideological formations.

Discourse leads to power and knowledge. It will modify its form and significance depending on the speaker, her/his position of power, and the institutional context. Discourse, then, is a tool and an effect of power.<sup>15</sup>

Hutcheon's method attempt to reveal the entanglement of discourse and power by re-emphasizing the text. This act of saying is inherently political.<sup>16</sup> The act can be the field of productive relations, of the engagement of subjectivity in meaning and values. So the problems of identification, of the relation of subjectivity to the representation of sexual difference, and the positions available to women construct the conditions of meaning production, as socially constituted as women and men, not just in the sense of being simply female or male but also in personal and social, a sequence of previous identifications of the subject that have been en-gendered.<sup>17</sup>

Hutcheon's postmodernist poetic view of literary texts cannot be separated from aesthetic and political aspects as a political act. Postmodernism politics, for Hutcheon, works more in the ideological field, questioning something (power) that is considered established so that it becomes a shaky, indisputable cultural force, is on the periphery, and others, including suing the patriarchal system.

Hutcheon also offers a deconstruction to subvert patriarchal traditions. In postmodern writing of feminism, this can be seen several

literary forms. She underlines the feminist postmodern related to the private and public in modes of political representation that reveal the problematic relation of the private to the public as *pea personal* (narrator or someone else) feature.<sup>18</sup> Such practices also remind us all that every representation in the text always has its politics.<sup>19</sup>

This research analyzes Ibrahim's literary text, *Tina is Just Silent (Tina Hanya Diam)*—in this sense, as that which stresses process, context, and the situation is significant to postmodernist discourses.<sup>20</sup> The text produces a woman as the speechless or silent female subject, of woman as reproduced in the inscriptions of her subjectivity by herself and by others. The text tells about how narrative works to engender the subject in the movement of its discourse; how it defines positions of meaning, identification, and desire; and how to produce meaning and sexual identity are fixed through and by representation in fiction and are therefore inherently unstable.

## Discussion

### Constructing Women's Position in Postmodern Discourse

An Indonesian feminist, Julia Suryakusuma, in the *Journal of Susastra*, measures the development of society through women's roles and status.<sup>21</sup> For her, a person who claims to be a feminist, all problems are political; *the personal is political!* From a theoretical perspective, gender discourse manifests the construction of particular interests. Thus, the

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<sup>15</sup> Hutcheon, 185.

<sup>16</sup> Hutcheon, 185.

<sup>17</sup> Hutcheon, 161.

<sup>18</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, 156-157.

<sup>19</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, 163.

<sup>20</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Julia Suryakusuma, "Fragmentasi Konstruksi Gender dan Kebangsaan dalam Sastra Indonesia Era Reformasi," *Jurnal Susastra* 4, (2006): 16-19.

personal side of women becomes a space for contestation or a struggle for a particular identity. Meanwhile, postmodernism has proclaimed conditions of chaos and fragmentation of identity. Identity in this context can be seen through representation. Here the concept of meaning finds its relevance, that re-presentation departs from the authority that dominates it. Although in the view of post-modernism, domination is not the only determining factor. "Representational authorities constrain us, forcing themselves on our mindsets through an entire history that is dense, confusing, and highly structured. The authorities programmed and preceded us." Thus, authority operates from within. The problem of women's structuration becomes complicated.

Thus, women are faced with at least two problems. *First*, women are seen in the concept of ownership. It means that women are assumed to be subjects with the potential to possess but are alienated because they do not have power over their ownership. Men have the power, not women. *Second*, women are assumed in the concept of parody. The women can fight and emancipate through awareness and parody strategies. So that women can cross the boundaries of space, domestication, and mystification of the role and status of women.

### **Representation of Female Subject's Postmodernism Discourse in the Literary Text**

Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim's text tells of a psychiatrist (Dita) dealing with a girl who cannot speak (Tina). Previously, Tina was considered to have no abnormalities or diseases by a neurologist. Dita is interested in Tina's case because it has similarities with her as a woman. In her family, the psychiatrist has a problem with her husband that impacts her child. Here, a female psychiatrist tries to understand (and solve) her client's problems, who is also a girl. It should be emphasized that the relationship here is no longer a question of parents and their children or a professional issue between consultants and their clients but women's issues that are viewed from a woman's perspective. Dita as a psychiatrist is a representation of women who are aware of themselves, both as a female psychiatrist who treats women and as a married woman who has problems with her husband.

Tina represents a young woman who has problems with her mother. Tina was disappointed (hate and angry) with her mother because she found that her mother had an affair with her uncle (father's sister). This made Tina feel disgusted for having been born. He felt like the son of a prostitute.

Furthermore, she feels hypocrisy in her female body: I know my body has been a beauty. But if I tell the truth about my family's disgrace, it is as if I have given off such a stench that they have to cover their noses (*aku tabu di dalam tubuhku ada sebuah keindahan. Tapi kalau aku menceritakan hal yang sebenar-benarnya dari aib keluargaku, aku seperti sudah menebarkan bau busuk, sehingga mereka harus menutup hidungnya*).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim, "Tina Diam Saja," *Kompas*, February 19, 2006.

Tina's case is compounded by Dita's attitude toward having an affair with her sister-in-law, Bram. The author represents Dita's attitude through the narrator. "Perhaps their affection comes from here. One evening, after meeting her sister-in-law several times, Dita felt comfortable chatting with Bram. Then, does she dislike her husband? I don't think so! She still respects her husband as the head of the family, who loves her (*Barangkali perasaan sayang mereka muncul dari sini. Pada suatu senja, setelah sekian kali bertemu dengan adik iparnya itu, Dita merasa nyaman ngobrol dengan Bram. Kemudian, apakah dia tidak menyukai suaminya? Rasanya tidak! Dia tetap menghormati suami sebagai kepala keluarga, yang menyayangnya*)."<sup>23</sup>

In this case, Dita and Bram are not considered an affair but an affectionate relationship. Here is slightly different from the practice of desire in the concept of post-modernism, which departs from the body. However, there are similarities in the aspect of sexuality: men and women. Cultural representations continuously reproduce this difference in sexuality, so it is considered a normal or natural problem. Thus, this cultural re-production forms awareness of self-understanding as a woman and indirectly cannot be separated from socio-political issues and women's discourses. Julia Suryakusuma's opinion above that the personal is political in the context of feminism becomes relevant here. On the other hand, this understanding becomes problematic when it is transformed into the representation of women in literary works that talk about women and are written by a woman. Therefore, in this issue of feminism in the postmodernism discourse,

women's talk is not only about the body, or women's bodies, but also about body desires as something that is constructed through a representation of women.

In *Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon<sup>24</sup> states that there are two efforts to radicalize the feminist movement: the separation between public-private and personal-political spheres. Thus, the question of the desire for the female body is placed in these two tensions. Desire is conceptualized as gratification that is always postponed, i.e., as an anticipatory activity in the future; desire as something that is ignited by the inaccessibility of objects and dissatisfaction with reality as pornography is presupposed as a neglected desire. The question is whether desire resides in the subject or extends and operates in culture, or is it a desiring subject that orients that the position of the subject is determined by the ideology that has preceded it and legitimizes the dominant structure?<sup>25</sup>

The story in Ibrahim's text provides an image of the subject as a problematic woman of desire. Dita's position as a husband is positioned by her culture, so her position has a broad reach. Thus, his thoughts, knowledge, and consciousness are influenced by the discourse that frames them: the conditions of the times. The existence of Dita as a subject and condition of the industrial era and the world of work contains discourse and intimate power relations.

Meanwhile, tensions in the public-private space and personal-political tensions become intersections that tend to be ignored by Dita's consciousness, except for her profession as a psychiatrist, which refers to the space between private and public. Professional

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<sup>23</sup> Ibrahim.

<sup>24</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> Jhon B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 56.



construction is framed by public space and work space in private space. Here the author does not focus on the subject of female eroticism or exoticism. These two things are manifestations of the encouragement of affection for the characters, both Dita and Tina; even Bram admits his relationship with Dita because of the affection. Is it true that the subject has that desire, or is it just the framing of the discourse? Or, as Suminto A. Sayuti said, the women in the characters only pretend to be polite like a fire smoldering in the rice husks—there is a passion inside, but it cannot be seen.

Dita assumes that her choice to become a psychiatrist is to understand human life. This also became an excuse when Dita was interested in Tina's case. Dita generalizes the assumption of these reasons to Tina's case as a humanitarian case, that family problem and their relationship with women. That is, if families face psychological conflicts, then they will be involved or have an impact on children in their lives and social regeneration. Divorce is one of the concrete practices of the effect of "fire" that appears on the surface—due to the fire smoldering in the rice husks—and can be analyzed in sociological studies.<sup>26</sup>

However, concerning feminism, this issue is not just a psychological conflict. Namely, the mental disputes that arise within the subjects of female characters whose bodies and desires have been constructed. Unfortunately, in the text of Ibrahim's short story, there is not much discourse about what and how the construction is done. Therefore, the representation of women seems to be

frag-mented by the spaces within them. The identity formed is like celebrating her being the subject of a woman's body and desire.

The Mama character told by Tina and Dita seems to be the basis of Dita's subject's desire. This character understands awareness of objective truth or the power of discourse. However, on the other hand, there is an acknowledgment of his powerlessness against this power. This powerlessness is a manifestation of the subordination faced by women.<sup>27</sup>

*Dita memegang tangan Tina dan berkata, "Ini masalah mereka, karena tidak mungkin bisa diperbaiki lagi, yang penting belajarlah dari masalah ini.*

*Dengarlah, sayang, di zaman ini akan sangat sulit mencari ibu yang seperti malaikat, apalagi Mamamu punya pergaulan yang luas dan kita tidak tahu pasti apakah dia bahagia dalam perkawinannya, sekalipun Papa menurut kamu orang yang baik sekali? Seharusnya yang kamu lakukan terapi agar bisa ngomong lagi dan jadilah perempuan muda yang bahagia dan penuh cita-cita."<sup>28</sup>*

In addition, there are problematic, even biased, conceptions of life and happiness. In the view of power relations, women are positioned as subordinated by male power. This view becomes problematic in this text. Characters who act as mothers or parents (such as Dita and Mama) in the domestic space have power even though, on a broader space, the domestic space is a construction; women portray themselves as if they are in power—legitimized by the domestic space. In

<sup>26</sup> Anik Farida, et.al., *Perempuan dalam Sistem Perkawinan dan Perceraian di Berbagai Komunitas dan Adat* (Jakarta: Balai Penelitian dan Pengembangan Agama Departemen Agama RI, 2007), 56-59.

<sup>27</sup> Mansour Fakih, *Analisis Gender & Transformasi Sosial* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 1996), 12-13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibrahim.

this text, Dita and Mama are influential in the name of the desire to have an affair and ignore the mental feelings of their children.

It is represented when Dita interacts with Tina. Tina tells why she became silent; she chose not to speak to anyone.

*Tiga bulan yang lampau, orangtuaku merayakan ulang tahunku yang ke tujuh belas dengan sangat istimewa, aku seperti Cinderella yang tanpa kehilangan sepatu kaca (sekalipun kadang-kadang kubayangkan enak juga kalau sepatuku ketinggalan dan ditemukan oleh seorang Pangeran). Setelah pesta yang luar biasa itu, aku tertidur dengan nyenyak! Aku terbangun dari tidur nyenyakku dan kulihat Mama mencium Om!*

*Kukatakan kepadanya, Mama, apakah ini kasih sayang antara kakak dan adik?"*

*Mama melihatku dengan tatapan kebencian di matanya, aku merasa dia memang tidak pernah menyayangiku. Bisa jadi karena aku dianggap lancang.<sup>29</sup>*

The same thing with a different form can also be seen in that women as subjects desire and have power only if Dita had an affair with Bram, her sister-in-law. Even though she has an affair, Dita still respects her husband.

The man still has power over his wife's body and desires. The affair in this text is understood as ancient, classic, and no longer relevant today as the dialogue between Bram and Dita follows. "You know a classic case, the affair between his parents (*Kau tahu kasus yang sangat klasik, perselingkuhan di antara orang tua-nya*)," said Dita. Then, Bram replied, "We need each other. I don't know if it's love. Your husband, who is my brother, surely will not be able to define the meaning of love (*Kita saling membutuhkan, aku tidak tahu, apakah itu cinta,*

*suamimu yang kakak-ku itu, pasti tidak akan bisa mendefinisikan arti cinta itu).*"<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the truth discourse about family, loyalty, life, and happiness, in general, is no longer a matter of old norms or conventions. The husband-wife relationship in this text is no longer a traditional tradition, religion, or the like, but an understanding that goes beyond it, namely a different culture. Perhaps this is the current practice.

*Di zaman ini akan sangat sulit mencari ibu yang seperti malaikat, apalagi Mamamu punya pergaulan yang luas dan kita tidak tahu pasti apakah dia bahagia dalam perkawinannya (In this day and age, it won't be easy to find a mother who is like an angel, especially since your mother has a wide range of relationships, and we don't know for sure if she is happy in her marriage).<sup>31</sup>*

This truth and understanding apply to Ibrahim's text. Women are positioned in the frame of discourse that surrounds them even though the female subject is aware of her existence. Even though she also knows that it will cause a fire in her family and burn the social life and mental future of her children.

### Silence as the Female Subject's Strategy

*Kau tanyakan, apakah aku tidak punya problem? (If you ask, do I not have a problem?)*

*Tentu saja aku punya. "Sungguh, aku tidak pernah mencintai suamiku!" kata Dita telak (Of course, I have. "Really, I never loved my husband!" said Dita firmly).*

*Tina melihat, tetap dalam diamnya (Tina watched, remaining silent).<sup>32</sup>*

<sup>29</sup> Ibrahim.

<sup>30</sup> Ibrahim.

<sup>31</sup> Ibrahim.

<sup>32</sup> Ibrahim.



Another issue raised in this text is the recognition and strategy of silence. It might be interesting to discuss. At the end of the story, Dita admits that she loves Bram, her husband's sister, and does not love her husband. The above mentioned about the construction of truth on marriage or husband-wife relationship in a conventional family. The author implicitly represents that that is the conventional family concept, while what is happening now (in this context) is that husbands are respected enough; husbands do not have to be loved. The husband does not have to share, share complaints, or everything. Compassion becomes broad in his understanding, even to the point of bias. Affection or love can mean anything, including being framed in discourse relations and the shadows of power. Of course, such a relationship creates a position of subordination. And children are positioned as subordinates who are repressed and objectified.

However, in such conditions, women are also indirectly alienated by the role of their subject in their domestic space. Perhaps this is a critique of feminism that has faced fragmentation within the movement and its views that differentiate or, at the same time, generalize the subject of women in terms of age, social class, race, and others. Nevertheless, domination over women takes place in various forms.

Tina's silence represents the pessimism of the female subject herself. She is a woman who is oppressed and who also has desires and her body. The attitude of Dita's character as a woman becomes naive as a woman. Tina understands the issue of truth that surrounds her, both in the broad discourse that develops and in the practice of domestication space. Is

the silence of a woman a strategy to fight against oppression? Or, otherwise, a stagnation that presupposes powerful legitimacy and objectification of women?

Until the end of the story, Tina still decided to remain silent. Tina has experienced the contextualization of women in a discursive frame and under the shadow of domestic space. The discursive frame of truth that applies within and binds social structures and the shadows of the domestic space is created by male discourse. Thus, Tina's position is problematic and faces multiple repressions. The mother's role as a woman, which is constructed by domestic space, and is shifted from her role to genetic reproduction becomes a trap for the subject's desires. Even though this position has alienated her from others, Tina's silence can also be interpreted as ignoring the gender issues surrounding her, which puts her in a complex alienation: from her family, her society, and an alienated condition from herself. Tina allowed the complexity and fragmentation of the women's identity. She preferred to remain silent. This is a parody of women that alienated and oppressed.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim's text shows the complicated subject of domestication and subordination. The female subject (Tina) in this text chooses to remain silent. In addition, the silent strategy emphasizes pessimism and, at the same time, parodies the representation of women from the perspective of postmodernism. Representing women in literary texts in mass culture requires criticism and is no longer mere identification and objectification. Here

Ibrahim parodies the subject and the fragmentation of women's representation and then destroys it by dis-mantling its problematic aspects and contra-dictions constructed by power through literary texts.

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