Negotiating Female Agency within Gendered Social and Cultural Contexts: A Feminist Reading of *Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang*

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Article Info
Article history:
Received Sep 02, 2026
Accepted Oct 24, 2026
Published Online Nov 01, 2026
Keywords:
Women's Representation
Gender Construction
Gender Performativity
Female Agency
Indonesian Literature

ABSTRACT
Women's representation in literature provides a means of examining how gender norms shape identity, social expectations, and the possibilities for female agency. This study examines the representation of women and the construction of gender in Karima Ifha's novel Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang, focusing on how the main character, Khansa, negotiates her agency within gendered social and cultural contexts. Using a descriptive qualitative design, the study analyzes the novel as its primary data source. Data were collected through repeated reading and documentation of relevant narrative passages, dialogues, and character actions, and then examined through close reading and thematic analysis informed by feminist perspectives and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. The findings reveal four interconnected dimensions of women's representation and gender construction: Khansa's resilience and professional participation, expectations surrounding intimate relationships and physical appearance, the organization of gender within religious spaces, and solidarity among Muslim women. These dimensions indicate that Khansa is portrayed as capable of making decisions and responding to challenges, while her self-understanding and choices remain shaped by social recognition, gendered expectations, and interpersonal relationships. The study's contribution lies in integrating women's representation, gender construction, and agency within a contextual analysis of a contemporary Indonesian novel. It concludes that Khansa's agency is neither wholly autonomous nor entirely constrained but is negotiated through the interaction of personal capacity, social norms, and relational support.
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How to cite: Kinasih, H. R., & Liliani, E. (2026). Negotiating Female Agency within Gendered Social and Cultural Contexts: A Feminist Reading of Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang. *Jurnal Riset Dan Inovasi Pembelajaran*, *6*(3), 1411–1422. https://doi.org/10.51574/jrip.v6i3.5838

Negotiating Female Agency within Gendered Social and Cultural Contexts: A Feminist Reading of Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang

1. Introduction

Gender representation continues to matter in contemporary cultural and literary scholarship because representations of women do not simply reflect existing social relations; they may also reproduce, negotiate, or challenge assumptions about how women should behave, appear, and position themselves in society. Feminist scholars have increasingly treated representation as a site where gendered meanings are produced across cultural forms, including literature, visual media, educational materials, digital platforms, and public discourse. Studies of feminist media education, for example, demonstrate that gender representation is inseparable from broader relations of power and the ways in which identities become visible within cultural texts (Dahya & King, 2020). Similarly, symbolic representation has been identified as significant in how gender issues acquire meaning in social and political contexts (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). Recent studies have shown that gender discourse continues to be negotiated in contemporary digital environments, where women's voices may become forms of resistance while also encountering new forms of vulnerability (Beidollahkhani, 2025; Yalcinoz-Ucan & Eslen-Ziya, 2024). Taken together, these developments make it important to ask not only whether women are represented but also how particular representations construct gendered possibilities and constraints.

Within feminist literary inquiry, representation is closely tied to agency questions. Literary characters need not be cast simply as passive victims of social structures or autonomous subjects who have completely escaped them. Studies on gender in children's literature, for instance, emphasize the relationship between textual representation and the discursive agency available to female characters (Earles, 2017), while research on picture books demonstrates how narrative construction may simultaneously enable and constrain feminist agency (Netz & Kuzar, 2020). Similar concerns appear in research on women's voices and resistance in Nigerian blogs (Nartey, 2024), feminist agency in Iranian digital protests (Beidollahkhani, 2025), and gender discourse within online communities (Melton, 2026). Taken together, these studies point to an understanding of agency as contextual and relational: women's capacity to act is expressed through particular social, cultural, and discursive conditions rather than existing independently. This perspective matters for literary analysis because the actions of female characters acquire meaning through narrative context, interactions with other characters, and the gender norms that surround those actions.

Contemporary gender discourse also shows that gendered expectations can persist even when women are represented as active, resilient, or resistant subjects. Gill (2016) discusses changing forms of feminist visibility in postfeminist contexts, drawing attention to the need to examine apparent empowerment alongside the conditions in which it becomes visible. This concern is also evident in research examining the representation of gender and violence. For example, Valtsdttir and Halldrsdttir (2025) investigate how gender-based violence is constructed through prevention discourse, while Yang et al. (2026) examine how official media discourse can frame gender-based violence through structural and de-gendering language. Xu (2026) further demonstrates that feminist meanings may be contested and stigmatized within nationalist online discourse. Together, these studies indicate that gender construction cannot be understood solely from explicit statements about women. It also operates through recurring discursive patterns, representations, omissions, and social expectations. Consequently, examining a female literary character requires attention to both the possibilities for action made available to her and the norms through which those possibilities are organized.

Gender performativity offers a useful framework for examining this complexity. Butler

(1990) conceptualizes gender not as a fixed identity that simply precedes social action but as constituted through repeated acts and practices. From this perspective, clothing, bodily presentation, interpersonal conduct, and other socially recognizable practices may participate in producing and maintaining gendered meanings. Feminist research on representation similarly shows that gender identity is shaped through discourse and cultural forms rather than existing outside of them (Dahya & King, 2020; Earles, 2017). Studies of gender representation in political and media contexts further demonstrate that the meaning of women's visibility depends on the social and discursive structures in which visibility occurs (Lombardo & Meier, 2019; Gill, 2016). Thus, representing women as independent or resilient does not necessarily indicate the disappearance of gender norms. However, agency and constraint may coexist within the same representation. This conceptualization is important for literary analysis because it allows for the examination of a character's choices in relation to the repeated expectations through which femininity is made meaningful.

Researchers have approached these relationships in various ways. Feminist critical discourse analysis has been used to examine women's voices, agency, and resistance in digital texts (Nartey, 2024), while critical discourse analysis has been applied to representations of gender-based violence and anti-feminist discourse (Valtsdttir & Halldrsdttir, 2025; Xu, 2026). Other studies have approached gender representation through feminist analyses of popular culture (Faux, 2024), refugee discourse (Finden, 2018), digital protest (Beidollahkhani, 2025), and online feminist communities (Melton, 2026). These approaches highlight the value of examining the relationship between textual representation and wider gendered structures. However, the diversity of contexts also indicates that gendered meanings are strongly dependent on the particular cultural and narrative environments in which they are produced. Findings concerning digital activism, media discourse, political representation, or educational materials cannot simply be transferred to literary narratives without considering the differences in genre, narrative structure, characterization, and cultural context. Contextual interpretation is especially important in contemporary Indonesian literature.

Although scholarship on gender representation and feminist agency has grown, an important gap remains in understanding how these dimensions operate simultaneously within a single literary narrative. Existing studies have provided valuable accounts of feminist agency, resistance, visibility, and gender discourse across different textual and cultural contexts (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Beidollahkhani, 2025; Nartey, 2024; Yalcinoz-Ucan & Eslen-Ziya, 2024). Other research has shown how representations of gender can reproduce particular identities and expectations through cultural narratives and discursive practices (Faux, 2024; Finden, 2018; Netz & Kuzar, 2020). More recent feminist scholarship has also emphasized the importance of attending to culturally specific understandings of gender equality rather than relying on a single universal framework (Dery, 2026). Nevertheless, these strands of research leave room for a closer examination of how a female literary character negotiates agency while simultaneously encountering expectations concerning relationships, appearance, religious identity, and social belonging. In particular, limited attention has been given to the way such processes are connected across narrative description, dialogue, and character action within an Indonesian contemporary novel. To address this gap, the present study examines an integrated reading of Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang by Karima Ifha, focusing specifically on Khansa. Rather than positioning her simply as either constrained or empowered, the study examines how her representation emerges through the interaction between personal capacity, social expectations, and repeated gendered practices. This approach extends existing scholarship by bringing together women's representation, gender construction, and negotiated agency within the same textual analysis.

This study examines how women are represented and how gender is constructed in Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang, with particular attention to the ways Khansa negotiates her

agency within the social and relational contexts represented in the novel. It addresses three research questions: (1) How are women represented in Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang? (2) How are gender norms constructed through the narrative, dialogue, and actions of the characters? and (3) How does Khansa negotiate her agency in relation to these gendered expectations? By addressing these questions together, this study seeks to contribute a more contextualized understanding of female literary representation, in which agency is examined alongside, rather than separated from, the norms and relationships that shape it. The study consequently treats Khansa not as a universal representation of women, but as a situated literary subject whose experiences provide a specific context for examining the intersection of gender norms, identity, and agency.

2. Methods

Research Design

We used a descriptive qualitative design to examine the representation of women and the construction of gender in Karima Ifha's novel Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang (SARUP). A qualitative approach was suited to this study because it focused on the meanings embedded in textual data rather than on numerical measurements or statistical relationships. The analysis focused on how women, particularly the main character Khansa, are represented through narrative descriptions, dialogue, actions, and interactions with other characters. The design also enabled the researchers to examine gender-related meanings in the contexts in which particular events and statements occurred.

Data Source and Unit of Analysis

The study draws on Karima Ifha's novel Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang. The novel was treated as a single textual corpus and was read in its entirety to ensure that individual passages were interpreted in relation to the broader development of the narrative and the main character. The analysis focused on narrative passages, dialogues, and character actions that were relevant to the representation of women, gender norms, women's agency, and the responses of female characters to gendered expectations. This selection was intended to maintain a direct connection between the research questions and the textual evidence used in the analysis.

Textual passages were selected purposefully. Passages were included when they contained explicit or contextual indications of women's social position, gender expectations, interpersonal relationships, appearance, religious identity or practice, professional participation, or actions through which Khansa responded to the circumstances surrounding her. Rather than treating isolated words or expressions as sufficient evidence, the researchers considered the surrounding scenes and character development when determining the relevance of a passage. This is important because the meaning of a statement in literary discourse may depend on its narrative context and its relationship with other events in the novel.

Data Collection

We collected the data through literature study and documentation. The researchers read the novel several times to develop familiarity with the narrative, characters, and contexts relevant to the research focus. Potentially relevant passages were then identified, recorded, and grouped according to their relationship to women's representation and gender construction. Page numbers were documented for each selected passage to maintain traceability between analytical claims and the original textual source. This process yielded a documented set of textual excerpts that could be examined systematically, rather than relying on general impressions of the novel.

During the initial reading, passages concerning women's social position, gender-related expectations, character agency, and responses to social norms were assigned preliminary codes.

The coding process remained open to revision because the meaning and relevance of passages were reconsidered in relation to the surrounding narrative context. This approach is consistent with the use of thematic analysis as a flexible procedure for identifying patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers also revisited categories during the interpretation process rather than treating them as predetermined and unchangeable classifications, consistent with the reflexive orientation of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2021).

Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in several related stages. First, the researchers conducted close readings of the novel and identified textual segments relevant to their research focus. Second, the selected passages were coded based on their content and contextual significance. Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories representing recurring patterns in the representation of women and the construction of gender roles. Fourth, these categories were examined thematically to identify patterns in narrative passages, dialogues, and character actions. Finally, the resulting patterns were interpreted using feminist perspectives and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, particularly in examining how gendered expectations are represented through repeated actions, language, appearance, relationships and social practices.

The researchers used thematic analysis to organize textual evidence and develop patterns from the coded material (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis did not treat frequency alone as evidence of analytical significance; instead, attention was given to the meaning and contextual function of each passage within the narrative. In interpreting the data, the researchers compared related passages and considered instances that did not conform to dominant patterns. This examination of divergent or less consistent evidence was intended to prevent the interpretation from being based exclusively on passages that confirmed the researchers' expectations.

Analytical Framework and Trustworthiness

The analytical framework comprises three elements: textual evidence, gender-related categories, and interpretation. The analysis considered how particular representations of Khansa were constructed through narrative description, dialogue, and action, and how these representations were related to recurring gender expectations within the novel. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity provided a framework for examining gender as produced and reproduced through repeated practices, while the feminist orientation directed attention to women's positions, constraints, choices, and forms of agency within the narratives. These perspectives were used as interpretive lenses rather than predetermined categories imposed on every textual passage.

Several steps helped establish the credibility and traceability of the analysis. The researchers maintained a data–code–category–interpretation matrix to document the relationship between individual textual excerpts and the analytical claims derived from them. Representative quotations were retained so that readers could evaluate the connection between the interpretation and the original text, following principles of qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngs, 2008). The researchers also acknowledged their interpretive position and the contextual limitations associated with analyzing a single literary work, consistent with Tracy's (2010) emphasis on reflexivity and qualitative research quality.

3. Results and Discussion

Two related patterns emerged from the analysis in the novel *Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang*: the representation of Khansa as a woman with personal capacity and social agency, and the construction of gender through expectations concerning relationships, appearance, religious space, and women's interactions. Textual evidence was identified through narrative passages

and dialogues involving Khansa and other characters. The analysis shows that Khansa is represented not only through her personal characteristics but also through the social contexts in which she acts and makes decisions. These patterns are presented in four thematic areas: resilience and professional participation, relationship expectations and appearance, religious space, and female solidarity.

Representation of Women through Resilience and Professional Participation

Khansa is represented as a woman who is able to endure difficult experiences and continue rebuilding her life. This representation is explicitly expressed through Doctor Lina's assessment of Khansa's psychological condition. Doctor Lina states, *"Kamu punya mental yang kuat dan sekarang kamu membawa seseorang yang istimewa" (SARUP/72).* The statement directly characterizes Khansa as having strong mental resilience and provides textual evidence for her representation as a woman who is able to continue her life after experiencing difficult circumstances.

The narrative also links Khansa's resilience with her ability to move beyond difficult experiences and continue her life. Her previous experiences are presented as part of a difficult period; however, the narrative does not portray these experiences as determining her entire identity. Instead, Khansa is shown as gradually improving her circumstances and continuing to make decisions about her life. The representation emphasizes her capacity to endure difficulties and pursue changes in her personal circumstances.

Khansa is also represented through her participation in professional work. After leaving her previous employment in a nightclub, she obtains a position as a Bar & Restaurant Supervisor in the food and beverage department of a hotel. She states, *"Aku diposisikan sebagai Bar & Restaurant Supervisor di F&B Department sebuah hotel berbintang" (SARUP/77).* This passage places Khansa in a professional position involving responsibility within a hotel environment and demonstrates that her representation includes participation in formal employment and professional development.

The narrative also indicates that Khansa acknowledges her limited previous experience as a supervisor but continues to perform her responsibilities and learn from people with greater experience. Her professional position is therefore presented alongside an ongoing process of adaptation and learning. The evidence does not portray her professional role as effortless but rather as a position that requires her to develop her capabilities. In this respect, the novel represents Khansa as a woman who participates in the workplace while continuing to develop her professional capacity.

Gender Construction through Relationship Expectations and Appearance

Gender construction is evident in Khansa's perception of herself in relation to a potential male partner. She questions whether she is the kind of woman whom the man would choose as a life partner, stating, *"Benarkah wanita sepertiku yang dia cari sebagai pendamping hidupnya? Aku tak mau terlalu berharap padanya, takdir terkadang berubah dalam sekejap" (SARUP/75).* This statement presents uncertainty about acceptance as a female partner and connects Khansa's self-evaluation with expectations surrounding intimate relationships. This passage provides evidence that her perception of herself is partly articulated through the possibility of being accepted as a partner.

The passage does not establish a biological definition of womanhood. Rather, textual evidence shows Khansa evaluating her position in relation to partnership and acceptance. Her use of the expression *"wanita sepertiku"* places her self-perception in a particular relational context. Thus, the evidence demonstrates that gendered expectations in the novel are represented through questions concerning women's position and their acceptability within intimate relationships.

Gender construction is also represented through clothing and physical appearance.

Khansa considers whether changing from revealing clothing to more covered clothing will affect how Ezra perceives and loves her. She asks, *"Akankah Ezra tetap melihatku dan mencintaiku jika kutinggalkan pakaian-pakaian terbuka dan seksi itu, kemudian kuganti dengan baju yang lebih tertutup?" (SARUP/80)*. This question demonstrates that clothing is connected to Khansa's perception of herself and her anticipation of how another person may respond to changes in her appearance.

The passage also suggests that Khansa associates changes in clothing with changes in her circumstances. Her consideration of more covered clothing indicates that appearance is not presented as an isolated personal choice but as something considered in relation to another person's perception of her. Simultaneously, the passage shows that Khansa actively considers whether she wants to change her appearance. This passage presents clothing as one of the contexts through which expectations concerning women's appearance are represented.

Gender Construction through Religious Space and Female Solidarity

The novel presents gender through the organization of religious space. Khansa's participation in Muslim women's prayer is described in the statement, *"Kami sudah selesai berwudu dan masuk ke masjid, menaiki tangga menuju lantai dua, tempat khusus para muslimah melakukan salat" (SARUP/82)*. The passage identifies Khansa within a Muslim female community while describing a space specifically designated for Muslim women. This passage connects female identity with a gender-specific spatial arrangement within religious practice.

The description of the prayer space provides evidence of how gender is represented through the organization of social and religious activities in the mosque. The distinction between general mosque space and areas designated for Muslim women is explicitly stated in the narrative. This evidence does not, by itself, demonstrate that religious practice restricts Khansa's agency, but it does show that her identity as a woman is represented within a gendered religious setting. Accordingly, religious space constitutes one of the contexts in which gender identity is explored in the novel.

Another passage represents the interaction and support among women. A female character states, *"Sebagai sesama muslimah, kita adalah saudara dan sudah semestinya saling membantu" (SARUP/84).* This statement explicitly frames the relationship among Muslim women as one based on kinship, mutual assistance, and solidarity. The passage also makes clear that the representation of women in the novel includes not only individual characteristics but also relationships among women.

The solidarity expressed in the passage is further associated with women's emotional and moral support. Emphasis is placed on helping one another as members of the same female religious community. Consequently, the passage provides textual evidence of women's mutual support as part of the social relationships represented in the novel. This finding complements the representation of Khansa as an individual by showing that female identity is constructed through interactions and relationships with other women.

Discussion

The analysis suggests that *Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang* constructs femininity through a simultaneous movement between personal capacity and social expectations. Khansa is represented as resilient, professionally active, and capable of making decisions; however, these capacities do not place her outside gendered structures. Instead, her choices acquire meaning through relationships, appearance, religious belonging, and interactions with other women. The analysis identified four interconnected areas—resilience and professional participation, relationship expectations and appearance, religious space, and female solidarity—which together demonstrate that the novel does not construct female identity as a stable or singular position. This matters because it shifts the interpretation of representation

away from a simple opposition between "empowered" and "oppressed" women. Such an interpretation is consistent with feminist scholarship that treats agency as situated within discursive and cultural relations rather than as an entirely autonomous individual capacity (Earles, 2017; Netz & Kuzar, 2020; Nartey, 2024).

The representation of Khansa as resilient and professionally active is particularly important because it complicates conventional representations of women as dependent or defined primarily through private relationships. Her ability to recover from difficult experiences and assume a supervisory position in a hotel demonstrates that the narrative gives her access to forms of competence and responsibility that extend beyond domestic or relational roles. However, the textual evidence does not construct this professional participation as uncomplicated emancipation. Khansa enters the supervisory position while acknowledging limited previous experience and learning from others, suggesting that agency is represented as an ongoing process of developing capacity rather than as a completed state. This pattern resonates with findings from feminist studies in which women's active positioning does not necessarily eliminate the structures within which their identities are interpreted. Finden (2018), for example, demonstrates the importance of examining how apparently active female subjects are simultaneously positioned through particular gendered and social discourses. Similarly, Gill (2016) cautions against treating visibility, confidence, or apparent empowerment as straightforward evidence that gendered constraints have disappeared. Khansa's professional participation can therefore be understood as an expansion of her available forms of action while still remaining embedded within broader expectations about femininity.

The relationship between agency and constraint becomes more explicit in the findings on intimate relationships and appearance. Khansa's question about whether she is the kind of woman who would be accepted as a life partner reveals that self-evaluation is partly mediated by men's anticipated recognition. Importantly, the analysis does not suggest that the passage establishes an essential or biological definition of womanhood; rather, it shows that Khansa understands herself through a relational question of desirability and acceptance. This distinction is important. Butler's (1990) account of gender performativity directs attention toward the repeated social practices through which gender becomes recognizable, while the present finding illustrates how recognition may operate through such intimate relationships. The question "what kind of woman am I in relation to the expectations of a potential partner?" becomes a part of the process through which femininity is experienced and evaluated. This finding extends the discussion of agency by showing that agency may operate through negotiation with relational expectations rather than through complete independence from them.

Appearance provides a second, closely related mechanism through which negotiation occurs. Khansa's consideration of replacing revealing clothing with more covered clothing is framed through a question about whether Ezra would continue to see and love her the same way. The significance of this passage lies less in the clothing itself than in the relational meaning attached to it: appearance becomes a site where personal preference, social recognition, intimacy, and gender expectations intersect. This finding supports Butler's (1990) proposition that gender is reproduced through recognizable practices while also illustrating why gender performativity should not be reduced to the idea that individuals simply "perform" gender voluntarily. Khansa considers changing her appearance, but the meaning of this change is shaped by her anticipation of another person's response. In this respect, the novel represents agency as reflexive and relational. This interpretation also corresponds with Dahya and King's (2020) argument that representation is inseparable from the relationship between power and visibility. The novel consequently presents appearance as neither a mere personal expression nor a straightforward social coercion; it is a negotiated practice through which Khansa evaluates her possible versions.

This coexistence of agency and normative pressure is also consistent with research

showing that gender representation frequently involves contradictory forms of visibility. Gill (2016) argues that contemporary feminist visibility can coexist with persistent gendered expectations, while Lombardo and Meier (2019) emphasize the significance of symbolic representation in shaping how gendered positions become socially meaningful. The present findings provide a literary illustration of this tension. Khansa is visible as a resilient worker who makes decisions, but her self-understanding remains influenced by whether she is acceptable within a heterosexual relationship and by how her body and clothing may be interpreted. Rather than presenting these dimensions as mutually exclusive, the novel connects them. The present study 's contribution lies in demonstrating that female agency can become most analytically visible precisely where personal choice encounters the expectation of recognition by others.

The analysis of religious spaces requires a more cautious interpretation. This novel places Khansa within a specifically designated space for Muslim women during prayer, thereby representing female identity through the organization of religious practices. The evidence supports the claim that gender is spatially and socially organized within the religious setting, but it does not establish that religion itself functions as a constraint on Khansa's agency in this regard. This distinction is important because the meaning of religious identity cannot be reduced to restrictions without considering the cultural context in which it operates. Dery (2026) emphasizes the importance of culturally situated approaches to gender equality, while the present findings similarly suggest that gender should be interpreted through the specific cultural and symbolic resources available to the character. The Muslim female space may simultaneously mark gender differences, provide a sense of belonging, and structure the social interactions. Thus, the novel's treatment of religion is better understood as a context in which gender identity is organized and experienced than as evidence of a simple opposition between religion and female agency.

The representation of solidarity among Muslim women further complicates this interpretation. The statement that Muslim women are "sisters" who should help one another frames female interaction through kinship, mutual assistance, and moral support. This finding is particularly relevant to the study's conceptualization of relational agency because Khansa's position is not constructed solely through individual decisions. Instead, women's relationships with one another become part of the social environment through which identity and agency are sustained. This corresponds with research on feminist collective agency, showing that women's capacity to act can emerge through collective forms of voice, support, and resistance (Nartey, 2024; Beidollahkhani, 2025; Yalcinoz-Ucan & Eslen-Ziya, 2024). At the same time, the present study should avoid equating every form of female solidarity with feminism. The evidence demonstrates mutual support among Muslim women; its significance for agency arises from the way such support creates relational resources for Khansa rather than from an assumption that solidarity is inherently feminist.

Taken together, these findings contribute to scholarship on gender representation by demonstrating that gender construction in the novel operates across different textual levels rather than through explicit statements alone. Narrative description, dialogue, character action, interpersonal relationships, clothing, spatial organization, and religious interaction collectively establish a pattern through which femininity becomes recognizable. This finding is compatible with research showing that gender meanings are produced through discourse and representation across diverse cultural forms (Dahya & King, 2020; Faux, 2024; Valtsdttir & Halldrsdttir, 2025). It also responds to studies demonstrating that feminist meanings may be contested, reconstructed, or constrained through discourse (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Xu, 2026; Yang et al., 2026). What distinguishes the present study is its integration of these dimensions within a single literary character. Rather than analyzing resistance, representation, or gender discourse as separate phenomena, the study shows how they intersect in the everyday

construction of Khansa's identity.

The study also contributes methodologically to qualitative literary research. The analysis connects textual evidence, gender-related categories, and interpretation through close reading and thematic analysis, while retaining representative quotations and considering evidence that does not conform to the dominant pattern. This approach is consistent with the flexible and reflexive character of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), in which patterns are developed through engagement with the data rather than being treated as mechanically predetermined categories. In literary research, this is especially useful because the significance of a passage depends on its narrative context and relationship to other passages. The study therefore demonstrates the value of combining systematic coding with contextual close reading instead of treating literary interpretation as either wholly impressionistic or mechanically categorical. The explicit acknowledgment of the single-novel context also strengthens the interpretive position of the study, consistent with Tracy's (2010) emphasis on reflexivity and qualitative research quality.

At a broader theoretical level, female agency in literary representation can be conceptualized as a negotiated agency. Khansa is neither represented as a passive subject who simply reproduces gender norms nor as an autonomous subject who has escaped them. Her resilience, employment, choices, consideration of appearance, relational concerns, religious participation, and connections with other women demonstrate that agency develops within the social conditions that shape women. This interpretation advances the use of gender performativity by connecting repeated gendered practices with the relational processes through which a literary character interprets and responds to them in the text. It also complements feminist scholarship that challenges universalized understandings of women's empowerment by emphasizing cultural and contextual specificity (Dery, 2026). Consequently, the originality of this study lies not in claiming that Khansa represents all women but in showing how one situated female character makes meaning of herself through the simultaneous presence of capacity, expectation, recognition, and social support in her life.

The findings should also be read in light of the study's design. Because the study examines a single novel and concentrates particularly on Khansa, its contribution is interpretive rather than statistically generalizable. The analysis establishes how gender and agency are constructed within this narrative, not how Indonesian women generally experience gender relations. This limitation is acknowledged in the research design, which explicitly recognizes the contextual boundaries of analyzing a single literary work. Future research could therefore examine other contemporary Indonesian novels, compare female characters across different cultural or religious contexts, or investigate how similar configurations of agency and gender norms change across genres and periods. However, within its stated boundaries, the present study demonstrates that *Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang* offers a representation of womanhood in which resilience and constraint coexist, and in which agency emerges not from the complete absence of gender norms but through continuous negotiation with relationships, appearance, religious identity, and women's solidarity.

4. Conclusion

The analysis shows that Selalu Ada Ruang untuk Pulang represents Khansa as a woman with resilience, professional capacity, and the ability to make decisions and reshape her circumstances. At the same time, her identity and agency remain situated within gendered expectations concerning intimate relationships, physical appearance, religious identity, social belonging, and interactions with other women. Gender construction in the novel operates not only through explicit descriptions of femininity but also through recurring practices, expectations, and social relations represented in narrative passages, dialogue, and character actions. The findings further show that Khansa's agency is best understood as negotiated and

relational: she is neither simply constrained by gender norms nor completely detached from them. Instead, her capacity to act develops through continuous negotiation between personal choices, social recognition, cultural expectations, and support from other women. The study consequently contributes a contextualized understanding of female literary representation by demonstrating how resilience and constraint can coexist within the same character and how gendered norms may simultaneously shape and provide the conditions through which agency is exercised.

Because this study focuses on a single contemporary Indonesian novel and, more specifically, on Khansa as the central female character, the findings should be understood as a contextual literary interpretation rather than a general account of women's experiences. Future research could extend this analysis by examining multiple contemporary Indonesian novels, comparing female characters across different cultural or religious contexts, and tracing how representations of gender and negotiated agency vary across literary genres and historical periods. Within these boundaries, this study contributes theoretically by connecting gender performativity with a relational understanding of female agency, methodologically by integrating close reading with systematic thematic analysis, and empirically by providing an integrated account of women's representation, gender construction, and agency within a contemporary Indonesian literary text. The contribution is therefore not to generalize Khansa's experience to women as a whole but to demonstrate how a situated literary character negotiates identity and agency within the simultaneous presence of personal capacity, gendered expectations, recognition, and social support.

5. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

6. Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the research process, including data collection, analysis, and manuscript writing. All the authors approved the final manuscript.

7. Data Availability Statement

The authors declare that data sharing is not applicable because no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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