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Liberal Feminism in Novel Broken Strings and Its Relevance to Indonesian Language Learning in Madrasah Aliyah

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the representation of liberal feminism in Aurelie Moeremans's novel *Broken Strings* and to examine its relevance to Indonesian language learning among eleventh-grade students at MA ZAHA 3. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed. The primary data source was the novel itself, while secondary data were obtained through interviews with four eleventh-grade students and relevant scholarly literature on liberal feminism. Data were collected through literature review, documentation of textual excerpts, and semi-structured interviews, and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, with source triangulation used to establish trustworthiness. The findings reveal five recurring forms of injustice experienced by the female protagonist—psychological violence, physical violence, domination, forced dependency, and unequal treatment—alongside five corresponding forms of resistance and empowerment: courage in confronting adversity, resistance to oppression, efforts toward recovery, growing independence, and autonomous decision-making. These patterns collectively constitute a representation of liberal feminism centered on individual freedom, equality of rights, and women's pursuit of autonomy. Student interviews further indicate that the novel is considered linguistically accessible and thematically relevant, containing social and moral values pertinent to adolescent readers, supporting its potential use as literary teaching material in Indonesian language instruction at the senior secondary level.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literary consumption has changed markedly in the digital era. Novels are no longer confined to print; they now circulate through digital platforms, social media, and reading applications that make literary works readily accessible to adolescent readers (Turner et al., 2020). This shift aligns with the observation of Bungsu et al. (2023) that technological advancement has drawn novels closer to the lives of younger generations, since digital devices allow reading to occur anytime and anywhere. Despite these

changes, novels remain a favored form of entertainment among adolescents precisely because they present narratives that resonate with readers' everyday experiences.

The proliferation of digital reading platforms such as Fizzo, Wattpad, KBM App, and Gramedia Digital has further expanded readers' access to a wide range of genres, encompassing both classic and newly published works (Hikam, 2024). As a literary form, the novel is typically constructed as an extended narrative that portrays characters' lives through a sequence of interrelated events (Hikam & Banowati, 2023). Beyond its entertainment function, the novel also serves as a medium of social reflection, depicting family conflict, interpersonal relationships, mental health struggles, violence, and individual perseverance in the face of life's pressures, since literary work is fundamentally a product of the imaginative process (Hikam & Banowati, 2023). Adolescents' interest in reading novels is also shaped by the extent to which narrative content resonates with their emotional experiences, positioning the novel as a space for understanding the social and psychological dimensions of life (Currie et al., 2025).

One recurring social issue in contemporary literary works is gender injustice against women. Female characters are frequently represented as figures who endure psychological pressure, violence, subordination, relational domination, and constraints on self-determination (Rahmah et al., 2026). At the same time, they are often portrayed as pursuing freedom, independence, and the right to make decisions about their own lives. Such representation typically emerges through character conflict, social interaction, and the broader inequalities present within society (Hikam & Banowati, 2023).

In much social practice, however, gender differences continue to produce injustice. This condition gave rise to feminism as a movement demanding equal rights, status, and standing between men and women in both domestic and public spheres, with emancipation and parity of rights as its central aims (Rose Taylor, 2020; Sen, 2019). As a theoretical lens, feminism articulates both individual women's dignity and the collective dignity of women as a group, proceeding from the premise that women are subject to a system of oppression that must be actively resisted (Abbas, 2020).

This study narrows its theoretical focus specifically on liberal feminism. Liberal feminism is a strand of gender scholarship that emphasizes equal rights between women and men across domains such as education, law, politics, and social life (Hanifa et al., 2023; Tseden et al., 2026). Concentrating on liberal feminism, rather than feminist theory in general terms, is intended to yield a more focused and in-depth analysis (Maulid, 2022).

Aurelie Moeremans's novel *Broken Strings* foregrounds women's issues through the experience of its protagonist, who confronts emotional pressure, an unhealthy relationship, violence, and an eventual struggle to reclaim personal freedom (Latumeten & Janah, 2026; Rehiraky, 2026; Suryaningrum & Wuwur, 2026). The novel merits scholarly attention because it depicts not only the multiple forms of injustice the female protagonist experiences but also her resistance and gradual movement toward independence (Febrianti & Manoppo, 2026). This study therefore examines the representation of feminism in *Broken Strings* through the lens of liberal feminism, with

particular attention to individual freedom, equality of rights, independence, and women's right to determine the course of their own lives.

Literary works, particularly novels, hold considerable pedagogical value in Indonesian language education, as they help students grasp key literary elements, develop critical thinking, and deepen their comprehension of textual content (Susetya, 2021). Novels containing life values, social issues, and analyzable characters are therefore well suited as instructional material, helping students engage with both the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of narrative as well as the moral messages embedded within them—making this approach particularly appropriate for Indonesian language instruction at the senior secondary level (Rosyida et al., 2021; Supriatin et al., 2023).

Although feminism in literature has been extensively studied, most prior research addresses feminism in general terms without focusing specifically on the representation of liberal feminism in contemporary novels (Célestin, 2018; Hayati, 2018; Tong & Botts, 2024). Furthermore, studies on injustice against women—such as psychological violence, physical violence, domination, forced dependency, and unequal treatment—have tended to remain general in scope and have not been examined specifically within Broken Strings.

Prior studies have also tended to emphasize women's victimhood without closely examining the forms of struggle through which women pursue freedom, independence, voice, and decision-making capacity as constitutive elements of liberal feminist representation (Dewi et al., 2023; Rosita & Hastuti, 2025). This study seeks to address that gap by examining the representation of liberal feminism in Broken Strings through both the forms of injustice endured by the female protagonist and her struggle to reclaim freedom in her life.

Accordingly, this study addresses four research questions: (1) what forms of injustice are represented against the female protagonist in Broken Strings; (2) what forms of struggle does the female protagonist undertake in response; (3) how is liberal feminism represented in the novel as a whole; and (4) to what extent is the novel relevant for use in Indonesian language instruction among eleventh-grade students at Madrasah Aliyah. The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the research method; Section 3 presents the findings; Section 4 discusses these findings in relation to liberal feminist theory and prior scholarship; and Section 5 concludes the study with its implications and limitations

2. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, selected for its capacity to describe the representation of liberal feminism in Aurelie Moeremans's Broken Strings and its relevance to Indonesian language learning among eleventh-grade students at MA ZAHA 3. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for understanding social phenomena and the meanings embedded within the object of study.

Data were drawn from primary and secondary sources. The primary data source was the text of Broken Strings itself, constituting the principal object of analysis. Secondary data were obtained through interviews with eleventh-grade students at MA ZAHA 3,

complemented by books, journal articles, and other scholarly references on liberal feminism and literary pedagogy. Four eleventh-grade students served as informants: Dewi Amaliyah, Zahrotul Musyarrofah, Khairitul Karimah, and Nurissilmi Savira. Informants were selected through purposive sampling, based on criteria such as their demonstrated ability to comprehend the novel's content and to articulate views on its relevance to Indonesian language learning.

Data collection combined literature review, documentation, and interviews. The literature review established the theoretical and referential foundation of the study. Documentation involved compiling textual excerpts from *Broken Strings* that illustrated forms of injustice against the female protagonist, her struggle, and the broader representation of liberal feminism. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit students' perspectives on the novel's relevance to Indonesian language learning.

Data was analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction involved selecting and categorizing information relevant to the study's focus. Data display took the form of descriptive narrative to facilitate interpretation of the findings. Conclusions were then drawn based on the data analyzed. The trustworthiness of the data was established through source triangulation, comparing evidence drawn from the novel with interview data and relevant scholarly literature to strengthen the validity and accountability of the findings. All student informants participated voluntarily and were informed of the purpose of the study prior to the interviews; their responses are reported here in de-identified and aggregated form.

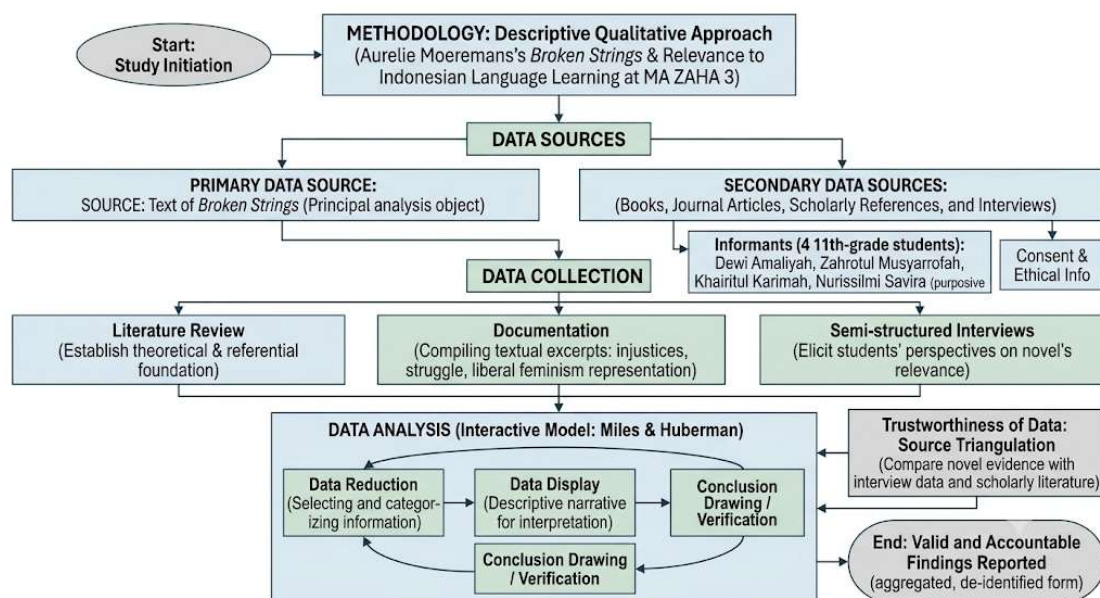


Figure 1. Research Flowchart

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Forms of Injustice against the Female Protagonist

Analysis of *Broken Strings* identified five recurring forms of injustice experienced by the female protagonist, Aurelie: psychological (non-physical) violence, physical violence, domination, forced dependency, and unequal treatment. Each is presented below with textual evidence.

Psychological (Non-Physical) Violence

Psychological violence encompasses threats, humiliation, emotional manipulation, behavioral control, and intimidation that leave victims fearful, diminished in self-confidence, and under sustained mental strain.

"If Papa finds out you're using drugs, something frightening will happen to you..."
(p. 21)

This excerpt illustrates emotional pressure and intimidation directed at the female protagonist. From a liberal feminist perspective, such coercion constrains her individual freedom, situating her within a power relation that places her in a subordinate position, unable to freely express her own will.

Physical Violence

Coercion-based violence theory holds that women are frequently subjected to bodily objectification, such that their autonomy over their own bodies is disregarded; sexual coercion within a relationship constitutes a form of physical violence insofar as it involves control over, and violation of, a woman's body.

"You make me feel like a chauffeur!... You should be massaging me, kissing me, thanking me..." (p. 29)

This episode reflects control and domination exercised by the male partner within the relationship. Liberal feminism holds that women possess a right to bodily autonomy and to determine their own lives free from coercion or violence; the excerpt therefore signals a violation of the protagonist's individual freedom.

Domination

Patriarchal theory explains that unequal gender relations position men as the dominant party and women as subject to control, a dynamic that can manifest through surveillance, restriction of freedom, or unilateral decision-making.

"You're not bleeding? Hmm, strange... Don't worry, you'll be my wife." (p. 41)

These statements reflect male domination exercised through emotional control and the restriction of the protagonist's freedom, mirroring a patriarchal relation that positions women as the weaker party. Liberal feminism holds that women should possess equal rights to determine the course of their own lives, free from external pressure.

Forced Dependency

Forced dependency describes a condition in which a woman is no longer free to determine her own choices, owing to emotional domination that produces fear, guilt, and psychological dependence on another party.

"Somehow, it's always my fault." (documentation of narrative excerpt)

This statement illustrates the restriction of the protagonist's personal agency, leaving her unable to make independent decisions. Liberal feminism holds that women possess the right to independence and self-determination, free from domination or forced dependency.

Unequal Treatment

Unequal treatment refers to a form of gender injustice in which women are denied equal opportunity, rights, or respect within social relations and everyday life.

"I've already told you I don't want sex before marriage. Isn't that basically the same thing? — Why do you have to make this so complicated. I've been doing this since junior high..." (p. 39)

This exchange illustrates unequal treatment that restricts the protagonist's freedom and rights. Within liberal feminism, women hold a standing equal to men and should not experience discrimination or restriction within social relations.

Forms of the Female Protagonist's Struggle

Alongside these forms of injustice, the analysis identified five corresponding forms of resistance and empowerment enacted by the female protagonist: courage in confronting adversity, resistance to pressure or oppression, efforts toward recovery, a gradual process of becoming independent, and independent decision-making.

Courage in Confronting Adversity

For women, resilience—the capacity to recover and to voice one's views—often manifests through the courage to confront life's pressures and to sustain oneself under unfavorable conditions.

"Fear drove me to open Google. In the middle of the night, I searched for anything that came to mind: steps before a Catholic wedding, whether someone could be married off without consent..." (p. 91)

This courage in confronting mounting pressure reflects an effort at self-preservation under difficult circumstances; within liberal feminism, such courage reflects the protagonist's agency in pursuing her rights and freedom.

Resistance to Pressure or Oppression

Women possess the capacity to resist injustice through refusal, the courage to voice objection, and efforts to maintain personal boundaries within oppressive relationships. In one episode, Aurelie's partner instructs her to look inside the refrigerator and orders her to insert its contents into her body.

"I was horrified. Of course, I didn't do it." (documentation of narrative excerpt)

This act of resistance reflects the protagonist's growing awareness of her rights as an individual. Liberal feminism holds that women possess the right to refuse unjust treatment and to pursue freedom in their lives.

Efforts toward Recovery

Recovery describes the process through which an individual works to restore emotional and psychological well-being following pressure or trauma. Within a feminist perspective, women's efforts to recover are understood as an act of courage in breaking free from constraining circumstances.

"Shame, guilt, fear—none of it belonged to me. It was only a tool he used to make me small. The moment I saw the strings; I began to let them go." (p. 174)

This passage marks a turning point at which the protagonist recognizes that her fear and guilt were instruments of manipulation, initiating her release from the emotional pressure that had constrained her—evidence of a reconstruction of selfhood toward a healthier and freer life.

The Process of Becoming Independent

Women's autonomy refers to the capacity of women to determine their own choices, manage their lives, and act without external pressure or control. In one episode, Aurelie's partner feigns distress by sleeping on the floor to elicit her sympathy.

"I didn't do it. I let him stay there." (documentation of narrative excerpt)

This moment reflects growing independence as the protagonist begins to resist her partner's emotional manipulation; whereas she had previously felt guilty and readily yielded, she now begins to sustain her own decision-evidence of psychological development toward emotional independence.

Independent Decision-Making

Self-determination denotes an individual's capacity to determine life choices according to personal will, free from external pressure that constrains individual freedom.

"I cried... I wanted to go home... I couldn't live like this anymore." (documentation of narrative excerpt)

This statement reflects the protagonist's capacity for autonomous decision-making in choosing to leave a relationship marked by sustained pressure, signaling her transformation from passivity toward a self-determined direction in life.

Representation of Liberal Feminism

Beyond these individual forms of injustice and struggle, the analysis identified five interrelated dimensions through which liberal feminism is represented across the narrative arc of Broken Strings: individual freedom, independence, equality of rights, freedom of expression, and decision-making.

Individual Freedom

Liberal feminism, as articulated by Rosemarie Tong, centers on women's individual freedom to fully develop themselves through choices unconstrained by oppression. Across the novel (pp. 90–100), the protagonist gradually begins to question the relationship she is in, seeks information independently, and comes to recognize that she does not deserve to be treated roughly or controlled. This growing awareness reflects liberal feminism's emphasis on individual freedom: the protagonist recognizes her right, as an individual, to determine her own life, demonstrating that women possess the right to be free from pressure and to make life choices without external interference.

Independence

Liberal feminism holds that women must possess agency—the capacity to control their own lives rather than depend on the domination of others. The protagonist's growing independence becomes apparent (pp. 130–150) as she ceases to comply with her partner's emotional manipulation and begins to stand on her own emotionally. Where she had previously been fearful, dependent, and prone to guilt, she now begins to build the courage to think independently and to uphold her own development that marks her progression toward a more autonomous selfhood.

Equality of Rights

Liberal feminism holds that women and men occupy an equal standing, such that domination should have no place in either social or personal relations; Mary Wollstonecraft, affirms that women are entitled to equal treatment and should not be positioned as inferior to men. In the novel (pp. 150–180), the protagonist comes to recognize that control, violence, and coercion do not constitute love. This recognition reflects liberal feminism's emphasis on equality of rights: the protagonist begins to understand that she is entitled to respect, safety, and the right to set boundaries within a relationship, and that women should not be relegated to a subordinate position requiring constant deference to men.

Freedom of Expression

Liberal feminism advocates for women's right to voice their opinions and determine their choices free from social or patriarchal pressure. In the novel (pp. 120–160), the protagonist ceases to remain entirely silent when treated unjustly. Where she had previously tended toward silence out of fear of emotional consequence, she begins, at this stage, to voice her feelings and to assert her boundaries—an expression of her struggle to reclaim voice within a relationship that had previously been dominated by her partner.

Decision-Making

Liberal feminism holds that women possess full authority over decisions concerning their bodies, relationships, and futures. In the novel (pp. 135–180), the protagonist decides to return home and to no longer endure a relationship marked by violence. This

capacity for autonomous decision-making reflects the protagonist's transformation from a passive figure into an individual capable of determining her own direction in life; her decision to leave an oppressive relationship stands as a symbol of women's freedom to determine their future independent of male domination.

Student Interview Findings

Interviews with the four eleventh-grade informants—Dewi Amaliyah, Zahrotul Musyarrofah, Khairitul Karimah, and Nurissilmi Savira—indicate that the novel's protagonist, Aurelie, is perceived as outwardly strong yet burdened by considerable internal pressure, emotional wounds, and difficulty expressing her feelings and opinions. According to the informants, Aurelie confronts a range of challenges, including family conflict, an unhealthy relationship with her partner, past trauma, emotional pressure, fear, and self-doubt.

Interview with Dewi Amaliyah

P: "In your opinion, how is Aurelie portrayed in the novel Broken Strings?"

I (Dewi): "In my opinion, Aurelie is the type of girl who appears very tough on the outside, Sis. But she's harboring a lot of internal pressure and old wounds that she finds difficult to share with others. Her life problems seem to come one after another, from internal conflicts with her family, past trauma, to being trapped in an unhealthy relationship with her boyfriend. It's very clear that she often feels doubtful and afraid of herself."

Interview with Zahrotul Musyarrofah

P: "How do you see Aurelie's life journey in this novel?"

I (Zahrotul): "I like that Aurelie's journey to recovery wasn't instantaneous or instantly successful, Sis. She went through ups and downs, was confused, and failed many times before finally having the courage to face reality. The difference is very visible from before she was with Bobby. She used to be very free to determine her own education and career. But when she started dating Bobby, that freedom slowly disappeared because their relationship became very controlling, and she was constantly being bossed around."

Interview with Khairitul Karimah

P: "Do you think Aurelie is an independent character? How does she solve her problems?"

I (Khairitul): "For me, Aurelie is a very independent woman, Sis. She can earn her own money, work, and even help support her family without relying on others. Her most impressive struggle was when she began to reclaim her freedom by confronting her fears and trauma. She slowly rose, took control of her life again, and began to dare to decide what was best for herself."

Interview with Nurissilmi Savira

P: "Overall, what values can be taken from this novel, and is it suitable for school-age children to read?"

I (Nurissilmi): "The novel Broken Strings teaches many lessons about courage in facing problems, how to rise above adversity, and the attitude of never giving up. I think this novel is very relevant and suitable for high school students like us. The language is easy

to understand, the storyline is clear, and the themes it addresses—such as teenage issues and the search for identity—are very close to what we often experience in our daily lives."

The informants further noted that Aurelie's journey unfolds gradually rather than instantaneously, involving repeated setbacks and confusion before she gradually finds the courage to confront reality and to learn from her experiences. Prior to her relationship with Bobby, Aurelie is portrayed as having had considerable freedom in determining her education and career, a freedom that diminishes as the relationship's controlling dynamics intensify.

Informants also characterized Aurelie as an independent woman, capable of sustaining herself, working, supporting her family, and gradually recovering from hardship without depending on others. Her struggle to reclaim freedom is evident in her courage to confront fear, face trauma, regain control over her life, and begin making decisions for herself. According to the informants, *Broken Strings* imparts lessons about courage in facing adversity, recovering from hardship, and persistence. The novel was also regarded as relevant reading for senior secondary students owing to its accessible language, clear plot, and themes closely tied to adolescent experience.

Discussion

Taken together, the findings indicate that the female protagonist in *Broken Strings* undergoes a discernible transformation from a position of subordination—marked by psychological violence, physical violence, domination, forced dependency, and unequal treatment—toward a position of growing autonomy, characterized by courage, resistance, recovery, independence, and self-determined decision-making. This trajectory closely mirrors the core tenets of liberal feminism as articulated by [Cipriano et al. \(2023\)](#): that women are entitled to individual freedom, equal standing with men, and the capacity to determine the direction of their own lives without external coercion.

These findings extend prior scholarship on feminism in Indonesian literary fiction. Whereas [Musrifah \(2018\)](#) examined the representation of liberal feminism in *Sepenggal Bulan Untukmu*, and [Sari and Rengganis \(2023\)](#) analyzed women's struggle in the short-story collection *Kitab Kawin* through the lens of Naomi Wolf's feminism, most existing studies address feminist themes in literature in relatively general terms, without differentiating specific categories of injustice or systematically linking these to corresponding forms of resistance. By explicitly mapping five categories of injustice onto five corresponding categories of struggle within a single contemporary, digitally circulated novel, this study offers a more granular account of how liberal feminist ideals are textually constructed—moving beyond women's victimization to foreground their agency, consistent with the call by [Ningrum \(2024\)](#) for feminist criticism to attend more closely to women's capacity for self-determination.

The data further suggests that the protagonist's transition toward autonomy is not linear but incremental, unfolding across successive turning points—the recognition that manipulation is not identical to genuine affection, the gradual withdrawal of emotional compliance, and finally the decisive act of leaving the relationship. This pattern corresponds with [Evans and Chamberlain's \(2015\)](#) and [Lestari et al., \(2019\)](#) account of

recovery as an emotional and psychological process rather than a discrete event and with Mamahit and Situmorang (2017) conception of self-determination as an incremental exercise of personal will against external constraint.

The novel's relevance to Indonesian language learning, as corroborated by student interviews, aligns with the pedagogical rationale advanced by Nikmah (2020): literary texts that are linguistically accessible and thematically proximate to students lived experience are more readily internalized as meaningful learning material. Beyond its narrative accessibility, *Broken Strings* offers a concrete case through which eleventh-grade students can analyze intrinsic elements—character, plot, setting, conflict, and theme—alongside the social and moral dimensions of gender relations, thereby supporting the development of literary appreciation, critical thinking about social issues, and character formation, consistent with Susetya (2021) on the pedagogical value of literary fiction in secondary Indonesian language instruction.

These findings should nevertheless be interpreted considering several limitations. First, the analysis is confined to a single novel and a small purposive sample of four student informants, which limits the generalizability of the pedagogical findings beyond the specific classroom context of MA ZAHA 3. Second, as a qualitative, interpretive study, the categorization of textual excerpts into forms of injustice and struggle reflects the researchers' analytic judgment and theoretical framework rather than a fully replicable coding procedure; future studies could strengthen inter-rater reliability using multiple independent coders. Third, the study did not incorporate a comparative dimension—for instance, contrasting *Broken Strings* with other contemporary Indonesian or translated novels addressing similar themes—which would help clarify whether the patterns identified here are specific to this text or characteristic of a broader genre of youth-oriented fiction addressing gender and relationship trauma.

Future research might extend this analysis through classroom-based intervention studies that measure actual learning outcomes—such as gains in critical thinking or gender awareness—associated with using *Broken Strings* as instructional material, or through comparative textual analyses across multiple novels to assess the consistency of liberal feminist representation within contemporary Indonesian youth literature more broadly.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the representation of liberal feminism in Aurelie Moeremans's *Broken Strings* and its relevance to Indonesian language learning among eleventh-grade students. The findings show that the novel's female protagonist experiences five interrelated forms of gender injustice—psychological violence, physical violence, domination, forced dependency, and unequal treatment—that collectively illustrate an unequal relational structure between men and women and a corresponding constraint on women's freedom and rights within personal relationships.

At the same time, the protagonist enacts five corresponding forms of struggle toward freedom and independence: courage in confronting adversity, resistance to pressure and oppression, efforts toward recovery, a gradual process of becoming independent, and

independent decision-making. Together, these patterns depict a transformation from a passive, pressured individual into a self-aware agent conscious of her rights and personal worth.

The representation of liberal feminism in *Broken Strings* is thus expressed through the values of individual freedom, independence, equality of rights, freedom of expression, and autonomous decision-making—affirming that women are entitled to determine the course of their own lives, to receive equal treatment, and to be free from domination and oppression within both social and personal relationships. Finally, student interview data indicate that *Broken Strings* is relevant for use in Indonesian language learning among eleventh-grade students at MA ZAHA 3, particularly within literary instruction. The novel's accessible language, clear narrative structure, and proximity to adolescent moral and social experience support its potential to enhance students' literary appreciation, critical thinking, and understanding of gender relations and women's struggle—suggesting its viability as supplementary literary teaching material at the senior secondary level, while future classroom-based research is needed to substantiate its actual pedagogical impact.

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