

Ambivalent Masculinity as Symbolic Violence: Reconfiguring "Honey and Poison" in Eka Kurniawan's *Mat Pisau*

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Abstract:

This article examines the construction of ambivalent masculinity in Eka Kurniawan's *Mat Pisau*, focusing on the knife as a medium of symbolic violence where power and vulnerability intersect. Studies of masculinity have often emphasized domination and violence, yet tend to overlook the destructive contradictions inherent within it. This article addresses this gap by positioning masculinity not as a stable identity, but as an inherently ambivalent one. The analysis draws on R.W. Connell's theory of masculinity and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, employing a qualitative approach. It focuses on the actions of the male character *Mat Pisau* and the female character *Emi*, their relational dynamics, and the symbolic elements within the text. The findings reveal that the knife functions as both "honey" and "poison"; it not only provides social legitimacy and masculine authority but also produces alienation, emotional repression, and relational destruction. Also, masculinity in the text operates not merely as a dominant force but as a contradictory system that entraps men within cycles of violence against themselves. Theoretically, this study proposes that masculinity can be reinterpreted as an ambivalent construct marked by internal conflict and sustained through symbolic violence.

Keywords: masculinity; symbolic violence; honey and poison; *Mat Pisau*; Eka Kurniawan

Abstrak:

Artikel ini menelaah konstruksi ambivalensi maskulinitas dalam cerpen *Mat Pisau* karya Eka Kurniawan dengan fokus pada fungsi kekerasan simbolik pisau sebagai ruang pertemuan antara kekuasaan dan kerentanan. Kajian maskulinitas cenderung menekankan aspek dominasi dan kekerasan, namun lebih memilih mengabaikan kontradiksi destruktif yang justru melekat di dalamnya. Artikel ini mengisi celah tersebut dengan memosisikan maskulinitas bukan sebagai identitas stabil melainkan sebagai identitas ambivalen. Analisis dalam artikel ini menggunakan teori maskulinitas perspektif R. W. Connell dan konsep performativitas gender perspektif Judith Butler. Tahap analisisnya adalah dengan menganalisis tindakan tokoh laki-laki bernama *Mat Pisau* dan tokoh perempuan bernama *Emi*, bagaimana relasi antartokoh, dan simbol dalam naskah. Hasil analisis memperlihatkan bahwa pisau berfungsi sebagai "madu" sekaligus "racun", yaitu tidak hanya memberikan legitimasi sosial dan otoritas maskulin, tetapi juga menunjukkan keterasingan, represi emosional, dan keretakan relasional. Melalui telaah analisis tersebut, maskulinitas dalam naskah tidak semata-mata bersifat dominan, tetapi sebuah sistem dengan sifat kontradiktifnya mampu menjerat laki-laki dalam siklus kekerasan terhadap dirinya sendiri. Selain itu, secara teoretis, melalui telaah ini diharapkan maskulinitas dapat dibaca ulang sebagai konstruksi ambivalen dan sarat konflik internal.

Kata kunci: maskulinitas; kekerasan simbolik; madu dan racun; *Mat Pisau*; Eka Kurniawan

INTRODUCTION

In the landscape of Indonesian literary works, masculinity is often presented through characters with strong and bold personas (Griffin, 2018). However, when reading the short story *Mat Pisau* by Eka Kurniawan, the issue of masculinity in the man's body named *Mat* is not as simple as just character portrayal (Permata et al., 2016; Putri, 2020; Scheibelhofer, 2017). The short story *Mat Pisau* addresses the issue of masculinity through a male character who is not only shaped and narrated by strength, courage, and authority, but also constructed by wounds, alienation, and vulnerability (Anggriati & Hidayatullah, 2024). The male character named *Mat Pisau* derives his social identity from his closeness to the knife. The knife in the short story is an object that accompanies *Mat* throughout the storyline, but it signifies both courage and a threat. In this case, the knife does not merely appear as a simple property or a mere narrative accessory but as a symbol that dictates how the male character is perceived, respected, and feared. Furthermore, it reveals a male character who can, in fact, become tangled up in his own knife through the masculine image attached to him. Examining *Mat Pisau* through the lens of masculinity as the central issue in this article aims to explore how masculinity is constructed through symbols of violence that appear to hold power.

Analyses of masculinity issues in Indonesian literature often portray male characters solely from one perspective, that is as dominant figures who exercise power over women and their social environment (Febriyanti & Retnaningdyah, 2021; Rosida et al., 2022). This framework is indeed the primary focus when conducting a comprehensive analysis of masculinity issues, particularly when seeking to understand how patriarchy operates through violence, control, and male authority (Udasmoro, 2022). However, there is a risk if the analysis of masculinity issues focuses solely on one side because it might create contradictions in interpreting masculinity itself. Through the short story titled *Mat Pisau*, masculinity is not positioned as a fixed social identity, but as an ambivalent

construction. Besides, it is also constructed through alienation, emotional pressure, and the trap of the cycle of violence.

Through this framework, the knife in this article is interpreted as a symbol that operates on two different sides. On one side, the knife functions as honey because it grants Mat Pisau an identity, reputation, and social legitimacy as a strong and hegemonic man. This identity puts Mat as a figure who is recognized, feared, and viewed as masculine and authoritative. On the other side, the knife functions as poison because the identity constructed always tied him to violence. The symbolization of the knife attached to Mat also successfully binds Mat Pisau as a male figure with a hard, cold, and repressive masculine image. The presence of these two representations of masculinity attached to him is also evident through his interactions with a female character named Emi, which reveal the tension between desire, power, fear, and emotional wounds.

Several previous studies on masculinity in literary works have demonstrated how men are constructed and positioned through domination, sexual control, and patriarchal power relations. Some earlier studies have also shown that Eka Kurniawan's works frequently talk about body, gender, and violence as the primary arena for the formation of the subject. For example, Putri (2020) analyzed symbolic violence in several of Eka Kurniawan's works by highlighting that patriarchy operates through tradition, stereotypes, forced marriage, marital rape, women's domestic duties, as well as demands for sexual performance and male masculinity. Febriyanti and Retnaningdyah (2021) also examined violence against women in *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*, emphasizing the forms of sexual, physical, verbal, and psychological violence experienced by female characters. Meanwhile, Permata, Priyatna, and Rahayu (2016) discussed the dynamics of masculinity and femininity in Iteung's *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*, particularly how tomboyism serves as a form of negotiation by female characters against patriarchal culture. Beyond Eka Kurniawan's work, Anggriati and Hidayatullah (2024) also discussed that masculinity can be interpreted through trauma and vulnerability, not merely through domination. Research directly addressing *Mat Pisau* has

been conducted by Putra (2026), but that study framed the short story within the frameworks of naturalism and social determinism, rather than within the framework of masculine ambivalence.

Through this understanding, this article tries to explore the gap that has not been extensively examined by previous research. While earlier studies have tended to interpret violence as patriarchal domination, dynamics of masculinity and femininity, or the social determinism of characters, this article interprets *Mat Pisau* as a narrative about ambivalent masculinity. The knife in the short story functions not merely as an object or narrative property, but as a symbol of violence that shapes male identity. The knife becomes honey because it grants the character Mat social legitimacy, reputation, and masculine authority, yet simultaneously becomes poison by trapping him in isolation, emotional repression, and relational ruin. Thus, it can be argued that the novelty of this article lies in its effort to connect masculinity, gender performativity, and symbolic violence to demonstrate that masculinity in *Mat Pisau* is not merely a system of domination but also a symbolic mechanism that harms men.

Based on this explanation, this article aims to analyze the construction of the masculine ambivalence in the short story *Mat Pisau* written by Eka Kurniawan. Furthermore, this article will examine Mat Pisau's actions, his social interactions with a female character named Emi, and the symbolic meaning of the knife that shapes masculinity as a space that blurs the boundaries between power and misfortune or vulnerability. Therefore, this article will focus on demonstrating how masculinity in the short story does not only operate as a system of domination but also as a symbolic mechanism that traps the social construction of men within a cycle of emotional turmoil, alienation, and violence.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach from a gender literary studies perspective to analyze the construction of masculine ambivalence in Eka Kurniawan's

short story *Mat Pisau*. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on the interpretation of meaning, symbolic relations, and the construction of masculine identity as represented through characters, plots, and symbols in literary works. In the context of literary research, qualitative methods allow researchers to read texts not only as narrative structures but also as an arena for the production of ideology, power relations, and cultural practices that operate through language and symbols (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Endraswara, 2013). In addition, data collection techniques were conducted through close reading, data annotation, and the grouping of quotations based on themes related to masculinity, gender performativity, power relations, alienation, and symbolic violence. The close reading technique was used to comprehensively examine how the text constructs meaning through the repetition of symbols, body gestures, patterns of inter-character relationships, and the psychological changes of the male characters throughout the story (Tyson, 2015).

The analysis on this study draws on Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Connell & Messerschmidt (2020) viewed masculinity not as a fixed biological identity, rather as a social construction shaped through practices of male domination, control, and social legitimation. Meanwhile, Butler explained that gender operates performatively, which means it is shaped through repeated actions until it appears natural (Butler, 1990). These two perspectives are used to analyze how Mat constructs his masculine identity through the act of playing with a knife, displaying bravery, and demonstrating control over his body and social environment. Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is applied to understand how the symbol of the knife functions as both a tool of legitimation and an instrument that traps male characters within the destructive demands of masculinity (Bourdieu, 2001).

The data analysis was conducted in several steps. Firstly, the researcher identified the text that illustrated the performance of Mat's masculinity, his relationship with Emi, and the symbolism of the knife in the story. Second, the data were classified

based on patterns of masculine ambivalence, such as power and vulnerability, domination and alienation, as well as social legitimacy and emotional turmoil. Third, the data was analyzed using the perspectives of hegemonic masculinity, gender performativity, and symbolic violence to examine how masculine identity is both constructed and maintained through violence. Fourth, the results of the analysis were interpreted to demonstrate that masculinity in *Mat Pisau* functions not only as a system of patriarchal domination but also as a symbolic mechanism that creates contradictions and harms the male subject himself.

This study methodologically also takes into account the developments in contemporary masculinity studies, which view men not merely as dominant subjects but also as subjects vulnerable to the pressures of gender norms and patriarchal culture (Griffin, 2018; Rosida et al., 2022; Anggriati & Hidayatullah, 2024). Therefore, this study does not only focus on interpreting masculinity as a form of power, but it also seeks to demonstrate the existence of ambivalence and internal conflict in the construction of male identity within literary works.

FINDING & DISCUSSION

In this section, the article will explore how ambivalent masculinity in the short story *Mat Pisau* by Eka Kurniawan is constructed through the symbol of the knife, gender performance, and the emotional relationship between the two characters, Mat and Emi. In this story, the knife is not merely a sharp object or a narrative property, but a symbolic medium that shapes male identity. On one hand, the knife grants Mat social recognition, a sense of power, and legitimacy as a man perceived as strong. On the other hand, the knife also becomes a source of alienation, emotional repression, and relational breakdown. Furthermore, it will be shown that masculinity in this short story operates in an ambivalent manner. Masculinity is like honey because it provides identity and power, but at the same time, it is like poison because it wounds the male subjects who embody it.

1. Mat's Symbol of Masculinity: The Knife as Honey and Poison

In *Mat Pisau*, the knife is not merely interpreted as a sharp object. The knife serves

as a symbol of power, identity, and violence inherent in the body of a man named Mat. For Mat, the knife becomes a sort of extension of his body. It means that he does not only possess but also shapes how others perceive him. Mat's identity as a man is not built through emotional language, gentleness, or the ability to negotiate, but rather through his closeness to an object associated with courage, threat, and physical strength, like his knife. This evidence can be seen when the narrator explains, "He found a rusty pocket knife there, once belonging to a Boy Scout. He brought the knife home, cleaned, sharpened, and then began to play with it between his fingers."

Mat's emotional closeness to the knife becomes even more apparent in the story: "It's okay not to have friends; he can now be friends with a dagger. The knife accompanied him almost all the time. He took it to bed. He took it when he had to help his mother carry water from the well. He also took it to school." In fact, the knife became a source of identity transformation for him, when the story stated "that knife truly changed Mat's life, and he knew his life was now radiant."

The narrative surrounding the knife revealed that it functions as a symbol of masculinity. The knife granted Mat a specific social position within his community. Within Raewyn Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity, recognition as a man depended not only on biological sex but on the subject's ability to display social codes associated with masculinity, courage, control, and dominance. In this case, the knife served as a medium that enabled Mat to meet these demands.

The knife became his honey, a source of strength, because it gives Mat a sense of confidence, a sense of ownership, and social recognition as a man who is not easily weakened. This evidence is shown when the social environment began to change the way they viewed Mat, as seen in the text: "Now Mat is no longer the hunchbacked boy, nor the smelly boy, the stupid boy, or the poor boy." It was further emphasized through, "Hey, poor guy. Turns out you're pretty cool, too," as well as his interactions with other characters, "Mat the Knife, show me how you handle that knife."

However, the knife is also a poison. Through the knife, the identity he constructed had never been free from violence. The more Mat relied on the knife as a source of power, the more he lost the possibility of building a masculine identity outside of violence. The knife made Mat respected, but also feared. It made him appear strong, but also distanced him from emotional intimacy. Thus, it can be said that the knife is an ambivalent symbol. The knife can confer masculine legitimacy, but it also traps Mat within the image of a hard, cold, and dangerous man. This ambivalence is evident in the text: "No child wanted to approach him. They were afraid of those knives," and when his peers began to perceive Mat's body as a source of threat: "They sensed something different, emanating from that gaunt body. Something they thought was nameless, but then they knew immediately. Anger." The dangerous effect of the knife is also evident through the tragedy experienced by one of his friends: "The dagger pierced his skin, embedding itself. His neck was torn open, blood spurting, gushing like a fountain."

2. The Performative Masculinity of Mat

Mat became a masculine man because he constantly performed actions that were interpreted as masculine by those around him, such as carrying a knife, demonstrating courage, suppressing fear, and presenting himself as someone capable of controlling both his own body and the bodies of others. The script depicted how Mat trains himself relentlessly.

"It took Mat nearly a month to be able to spin the knife as fast as he wanted. Blood spurted out. He wasn't deterred. He wrapped his little finger in a used bandage... After that, he practiced his knife tricks again. Now *Mat Pisau* shows the other children how he flings a falling knife back into the air using his elbow, his shoulder, and his knee."

Several sentences in the text can be interpreted as Mat Pisau's performative practice. Mat did not merely use the knife as a tool but also presented himself through it. Ultimately, masculinity became a social spectacle. Mat Pisau seemed to require recognition from others to be considered a legitimate masculine figure. This point is reinforced in the text: "Now he finds that he can make people smile, clap, widen their eyes,

and even scream when he nearly drops his knife." From this excerpt of the short story, it is clear that Mat must constantly demonstrate that he is strong, fearless, and capable of controlling the situation. *Mat Pisau's* gender performance created the illusion that masculinity is a stable identity, when in fact it is fragile because it must constantly be proven.

The fragility of Mat Pisau's masculine performativity becomes apparent when Mat faced emotional failure, particularly in his relationship with Emi. The violence that has long been a source of his power proved incapable of sustaining his relationship with Emi. Instead, the violence revealed Mat's failure to manage his emotional dependence. The breakdown in the relationship between *Mat Pisau* and Emi can be shown when Emi warns Mat, "You're crazy and starting to think you're on top of the world. You'll create even more dangerous games, just to please people."

From several pieces of evidence in the script, it can be seen that *Mat Pisau* did not always successfully demonstrate masculine gender performativity. Mat tried to present himself as a dominant figure, but that dominance did not save him from the breakdown of his relationship with the opposite sex. *Mat Pisau* failed to realize that his ambition to always appear masculine actually made Emi the victim. *Mat Pisau* seemed to have lost other ways of expressing his feelings and emotions to Emi, feelings that should have been expressed through other means except violence. Through this discussion of masculine gender performativity in *Mat Pisau*, we can see that there is a paradox within masculinity.

3. Power and Dependency in the Relationship Between Mat Pisau and Emi

The relationship between Mat and Emi demonstrated that Mat's masculinity could not stand alone, as *Mat Pisau* still required the presence of others as witnesses and objects of validation. Emi, as the female character closely intertwined with *Mat Pisau* in the story, occupied a crucial position as a means for *Mat Pisau* to prove his masculinity. The relationship between these two characters began with a small acknowledgement Emi gave to Mat: "Come on, Mat, do it again."

Amid Mat's life filled with insults, Emi became a figure who offered him protection,

"When the boys mocked his hunched back... one would often hear Emi or another girl say, 'Leave that boy alone.'"

Their relationship seemed good at first but turned tense when Emi began to realize the destructive effects on Mat's masculinity. This proof is evident in the short story excerpt: "Please, Mat," said Emi. She said it sincerely, as if Mat was the only person who truly mattered in her life. It shows that Emi was not merely a female character positioned as a passive figure. One example is when Emi was represented as a mirror reflecting the failure of Mat's masculinity. This part indicates how Emi rejected Mat's violent behavior, specifically the ways he played with a knife. It also becomes clear at that very moment that Mat's masculine identity was shaken. Thus, it can be said that Emi's character in the story did not merely add a romantic element, but also served as a source of emotional validation for Mat within his social circle.

Thus, it can be said that Emi plays a critical role in shaping Mat's masculinity. Behind Mat's ambition to dominate lies a need to be recognized, loved, and accepted. However, because Mat expresses his masculinity solely through violence, these other emotional needs manifest as dangerous and destructive actions. The relationship between *Mat Pisau* and Emi demonstrates that one indicator of the ambivalence of masculinity in this short story is the fact that Mat's power is inseparable from fear and dependence.

4. Patterns of Masculinity in *Mat Pisau*

The short story follows a specific pattern of masculinity, moving from violence toward others to a struggle against oneself. At the beginning of the story, *Mat Pisau* constructed his masculine identity through the knife as a tool of control. However, the plot unfolded to reveal that the knife was not merely directed at others to gain validation or recognition, but had the potential to become a boomerang which struck him back. This proof can be found in the narrator's statement: "Without the knife, he is not *Mat Pisau*."

If *Mat Pisau* is separated from his knife, it is as if he has lost himself. This part can be proven by the line: "Now they have taken his knives, his life, his light. Something warm fills his chest... Rage." In the final plot, Mat declared, "Mat admits defeat against the world;

he doesn't mind disappearing, living in darkness. But he wants the world to continue remembering him as *Mat Pisau*." He even tells Emi, "You're a good girl, Emi. I won't hurt you. I just want you to tell them that Mat was really great at throwing sixteen knives."

In the final plot, it becomes clear how *Mat Pisau's* pattern of masculinity can also be interpreted as a symbolic turning point. The final plot also revealed that Mat's greatest conflict actually lies within himself. Mat's struggle with masculinity turned out to be not merely against others, but against the masculine image that has both shaped and destroyed him.

Through the pattern of *Mat Pisau's* masculinity presented in the plot, it is clear that this short story can serve as an alternative approach to studying how to conduct a more complex analysis of male characters' masculinity. Men are not merely portrayed as strong, rough, and dominant figures, but also as fragile and dependent beings who experienced feelings of vulnerability. Within Mat's masculinity laid a wound that had a crack, a failure, and a desire to be accepted. Thus, the symbolism of the knife as both honey and poison cannot be separated into two distinct patterns. It is rather a single construct of masculinity. The knife succeeds in giving Mat a masculine identity, but through that very identity, it also makes Mat increasingly an alienated figure within his social sphere.

Through an examination of the ambivalence of masculinity in Eka Kurniawan's short story *Mat Pisau*, it is also revealed that the system which oppresses women and simultaneously confines men within the demands to always be strong, tough, and unharmed constitutes a pattern of hegemonic masculinity. Mat serves as an example of a masculine man who gains recognition through violence but loses his empathy or his humanity when it comes to expressing other emotions.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that masculinity in the short story *Mat Pisau* by Eka Kurniawan is not a fixed or solid entity, but rather an identity marked by contradictions that is continually maintained through symbolic violence. As the story's central symbol,

the knife serves as both honey and poison. On one hand, it grants Mat Pisau recognition, social status, and power as a man. On the other hand, it traps him in emotional repression, alienation, and the breakdown of his relationships with others. By applying R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this analysis reveals that Mat Pisau's identity does not emerge naturally but is continuously shaped and validated through acts of domination and violence. This constantly performed masculinity creates an impression of strength and power, yet it actually conceals vulnerability and inner conflict. The relationship between Mat Pisau and Emi also highlights this contradiction. The qualities that earn Mat Pisau respect are the ones that destroy his humanity and emotional side.

Furthermore, the analysis in this article also shows that masculinity is not merely understood as a form of domination, but also as an identity fraught with conflict and as a boomerang ready to strike back. Unlike some previous studies that tended to view male characters in Eka Kurniawan's works as agents of patriarchal power, this analysis indicates that it is the pattern of hegemonic masculinity that possibly disrupts or destroys the male subject. In this case, the character Mat Pisau reveals that a male identity constructed solely through violence can ultimately have destructive effects. Through the analysis in this article, it becomes clear that literary studies on masculinity do not merely focus on the aspect of domination but also reveal the contradictions, failures, and emotional consequences it entails.

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