

Political dimensions in four Indonesian women's travel writings: Cultural resistance and ambivalent agency

Dimensi politik empat cerita perjalanan perempuan Indonesia: Resistensi kultural dan agen ambivalen

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Abstract

This study examines four Indonesian women's travel narratives published between 2011 and 2014: *The Naked Traveler One Year Round The World Trip* (Trinity), *The Jilbab Traveler* (Asma Nadia), *Perempuan Merah Putih* (Nungky Irma Nurmala Pratikno), and *London: Angel* (Windry Ramadhina) through the concept of ambivalent agency by Ullah (2025) and Spivak's (1994) notion of the double bind. This study reinterprets these contradictions not as conscious political strategies, but as symptoms of a complex, often complicit, negotiation with hegemonic power. The analysis reveals that agency in these texts is achieved through patterned accommodations to the very structures they critique: Trinity articulates agency through self-orientalizing mimicry that internalizes the tourist gaze; Nadia navigates the commodification of piety, transforming the jilbab into a neoliberal lifestyle brand; Nungky operates within the gendered constraints of State Ibumism, performing empowerment only within state-sanctioned nationalism; and Ramadhina utilizes intimate relationality to manage the anxiety of the unhome. The study concludes that Indonesian women's travel writing is less a site of pure resistance than a space of ambivalence, where the postcolonial subject must inhabit conflicting norms, simultaneously resisting and reproducing patriarchal and capitalist logics to achieve mobility.

Abstrak

Kajian ini menelaah empat narasi perjalanan perempuan Indonesia yang terbit antara 2011 hingga 2014: *The Naked Traveler One Year Round The World Trip* (Trinity), *The Jilbab Traveler* (Asma Nadia), *Perempuan Merah Putih* (Nungky Irma Nurmala Pratikno), dan *London: Angel* (Windry Ramadhina) melalui konsep ambivalent agency yang dikembangkan oleh Ullah (2025) serta gagasan *double bind* dari Spivak (1994). Penelitian ini menafsirkan kontradiksi tersebut bukan sebagai strategi politik yang disadari, melainkan sebagai gejala dari negosiasi yang kompleks dan kerap bersifat kompromistis dengan kekuasaan hegemonik. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa agensi dalam teks-teks ini dicapai melalui pola akomodasi terhadap struktur yang justru mereka kritik: Trinity mengartikulasikan agensi melalui mimikri yang bersifat self-orientalizing dengan menginternalisasi tatapan turis; Nadia menavigasi komodifikasi kesalehan, menjadikan jilbab sebagai merek gaya hidup neoliberal; Nungky beroperasi dalam batasan gender yang ditentukan oleh State Ibumism, menampilkan pemberdayaan hanya dalam kerangka nasionalisme yang dilegitimasi negara; sementara Ramadhina memanfaatkan relasionalitas intim untuk mengelola kecemasan atas ketidakrumahan. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penulisan perjalanan perempuan Indonesia bukan semata-mata ruang perlawanan murni, melainkan ruang ambivalensi, di mana subjek pascakolonial harus menghidupi norma-norma yang saling bertentangan, sekaligus menolak dan mereproduksi logika patriarkal serta kapitalis demi mencapai mobilitas.

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A. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Indonesian women's travel narratives have expanded from a marginal niche into a visible and commercially successful genre (Akmal, 2022), marked by bestselling titles like *The Naked Traveler* and *The Jilbab Traveler* which were subsequently adapted into major films (Kumoratih, 2017; Putri, 2020). This literary proliferation signals not only increased women's mobility, but also shifting gender norms and renegotiations of national identity in a globalized Indonesian public sphere (Jaya & Pratama, 2021). This phenomenon emerges against Indonesia's socio-historical backdrop, where neoliberal globalization intersects with persistent patriarchal structures and the legacy of New Order gender ideology, particularly Julia Suryakusuma's (1996) concept of State Ibuism, which confined women to domesticated, apolitical roles (Hyunanda et al., 2021).

Indonesian women's travel writing develops against colonial travel writing's legacy, where imperial travelogues positioned Western travelers as authoritative observers and non-European societies as primitive Others (Lisle, 2006; Said, 1978), further complicated for women by gendered spatial restrictions (Mills, 1991). Recent scholarship on contemporary Indonesian travel writing has made valuable contributions by analyzing prominent texts like *The Naked Traveler Round The World* by Trinity (2014) and *The Jilbab Traveler* by Asma Nadia (2012). Studies reveal how these narratives contest colonial paradigms through identity reconstruction, expose discursive ambiguities in representations of female agency (Jaya & Pratama, 2021), and explore the jilbab as a site of subjectivity formation (Akmal, 2023). Trinity's work has been examined for its neoliberal consumerist tendencies (Kumoratih, 2017), while Nadia's narratives demonstrate how piety enables transnational Muslim femininities (Jayanti & Wiyatmi, 2022). A related article has examined through the lens of decolonizing mobility, arguing that Indonesian women's travel writing functions as a site of political intervention into global mobility regimes and cosmopolitan hierarchies (Jaya, 2026). However, three critical gaps persist in this evolving field.

First, while State Ibuism scholarship acknowledges textual ambiguities (Jaya et al., 2021), few examine how state-aligned empowerment narratives like *Perempuan Merah Putih* co-opt feminist rhetoric in travel writing. Second, scholars describe textual contradictions (Jayanti & Wiyatmi, 2022; Putri, 2020) but lack a framework to theorize them as strategic negotiation; Ullah's (2025) concept of "ambivalent agency" remains underutilized. Third, scholarship focuses narrowly on *The Naked Traveler* and *The Jilbab Traveler*, neglecting *London: Angel* which explores postcolonial intimacy through affective relationships in Indonesian novel (Rarastesia, 2020) and ambivalency in popular culture (Mandela & Gitawati, 2024).

These gaps converge in a central research problem: How do Indonesian women's travel writings mediate postcolonial identity and negotiate hegemonic discourses on gender, religion, and nationhood through practices of ambivalent agency? This study develops the framework of 'ambivalent agency' to analyze the specific context of Indonesian women's travel writing. This study argues that the perceived ambiguities in these texts constitute sophisticated strategies of ambivalent agency (Ullah, 2025), pragmatic negotiations essential for navigating intersecting power structures in a globalized landscape.

B. Method

This study employs qualitative close reading to examine how four Indonesian women's travel narratives negotiate postcolonial identity through ambivalent agency. The analysis is grounded in postcolonial feminist critiques of the "Third World woman" as a homogenized victim without agency (Mohanty, 1988, 2003), combined with Spivak (1994) notion of the double bind, which highlights how subaltern subjects must speak through hegemonic discourses even as they seek to contest them. Islamic feminist scholarship provides a second axis, conceptualizing religious subjectivity as a potential site of agency and ethical self-formation rather than mere submission

(Badran, 2009; Barlas, 2002; Mahmood, 2005; Mernissi, 1991; Wadud, 1999). Within this theoretical constellation, Ullah's (2025) notion of ambivalent agency is operationalized not as a sign of ideological confusion, but as a patterned mode of negotiating gendered, religious, and nationalist demands in late-modern postcolonial contexts.

The corpus consists of four Indonesian women's travel narratives published between 2011 and 2014: *The Naked Traveler One Year Round The World Trip/TNT* (Trinity, 2014), *The Jilbab Traveler/TJT* (Nadia, 2012), *Perempuan Merah Putih/PMP* (Pratikno, 2011), and *London: Angel/LA* (Ramadhina, 2013). These texts were chosen purposively because they span distinct genres (memoir, spiritual travelogue, state-commissioned expedition narrative, and popular fiction), religious orientations, and degrees of alignment with state and market institutions, thereby offering analytically rich cases for tracing how ambivalent agency is articulated through different narrative forms and ideological positions.

Data analysis was conducted using a postcolonial textual critique focused on the mechanisms of ambivalence (Bhabha, 1994; Ullah, 2025). The analytic procedure involved: (1) isolating narrative moments where the author expresses simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward the "Other" (e.g., the West, the exoticized foreign); (2) mapping these moments against the theoretical framework of the double bind to identify conflicting imperatives (e.g., the imperative to be modern vs. the imperative to be pious); and (3) interpreting these tensions not as incoherent ideologies, but as the constitution of a "middle voice" of agency that operates within, rather than outside, patriarchal and colonial logics (Spivak, 1994). This approach moves beyond binary categorizations of resistance/submission to uncover the negotiated subjectivities emergent in the text.

C. Results and Discussion

The following analysis examines how four Indonesian women's travel narratives negotiate postcolonial identity through ambivalent agency, understood here as the simultaneous resistance to and accommodation of hegemonic structures in ways that are constrained yet strategically meaningful (Ullah, 2025). Each text employs distinct strategies: Trinity's neoliberal self-Orientalism, Nadia's Islamic piety-based mobility, Nungky's state-aligned nationalist femininity, and Ramadhina's affective cosmopolitanism. Proceeding text-by-text before comparative synthesis, the analysis reveals how these writers navigate intersecting constraints of gender, religion, and nationalism through rhetorical and narrative strategies that challenge and accommodate colonial legacies, patriarchal governance, and neoliberal globalization.

1. *The Naked Traveler One Year Round the World Trip: Self-Orientalism and the Neoliberal Ambivalence*

Trinity's stated motive is to chart a "new" path by exploring regions where "many [Indonesians] have never set foot on," particularly South America (2014, p. xii) replicates imperial epistemologies positioning non-European spaces as terra incognita. Her travel route oscillating between "civilized" Europe and "uncivilized" South America reinforces colonial spatial logics (Lisle, 2006), complicated by transposing racialized hierarchies into developmental paradigms.

Saya menganga. Beginilah hidup di negara maju! Orang Eropa bisa tahu persis berapa lama mereka akan menghabiskan waktu untuk berjalan kaki, naik kendaraan umum, atau bahkan naik mobil pribadi. Sebagai orang Indonesia, saya selalu terkagum-kagum dengan ketepatan waktu di negara maju.[...]. Mungkin Anda pikir ini hanya terjadi di negara kulit putih. Anda salah besar. Di Jepang yang orangnya memiliki ras yang sama dengan kita juga tepat waktu. Atau, Anda lupa dengan Singapura negara tetangga kita? (Trinity, 2014, p. 22).

[I was astonished. This is how life works in developed countries! Europeans know precisely how long they will spend walking, taking public transportation, or even driving their own cars. As an

Indonesian, I am always amazed by the punctuality in developed nations. [...] You might think this only happens in white countries. You're completely wrong. In Japan, where people have the same race as us, they are also punctual. Or have you forgotten about Singapore, our neighboring country?].

Trinity's admiration reflects internalized neoliberal criteria, yet she complicates this by valorizing non-Western nations (Japan, Singapore), reflecting neoliberal multiculturalism's selective embrace of modernity, epitomizing Spivak's (1994) double bind where postcolonial subjects negotiate belonging by simultaneously critiquing and internalizing hegemonic logics. This self-orientalism, where non-Western subjects adopt Western frameworks to assert global relevance (Kobayashi et al., 2019), risks reinforcing the "Third World woman" trope (Mohanty, 1988). However, Trinity's critique is nuanced: while admiring American multiculturalism, she excoriates Indonesian bureaucratic incompetence and global obscurity, framing these as systemic rather than cultural failures. Her sharp critiques of Western hypocrisy destabilize this self-orientalism.

The text's gendered representations illuminate political dimensions through exoticization:

"Cowok-cowoknya ganteng, cewek-ceweknya cantik-plus SEKSI! [...] semua yang berjenis kelamin laki-laki itu ganteng! [...] mereka nggak suka pakai baju!" (Trinity, 2014, p. 59).

"Cewek Brasil pakai bikini dengan celana bermodel G-string! [...] nggak boleh ada sehelai rambut pun yang nongol" (Trinity, 2014, p. 61).

[The guys are handsome, the girls are beautiful—plus SEXY! [...] every single male is handsome! [...] they don't like wearing clothes!

Brazilian girls wear bikinis with G-string bottoms! [...] there can't be even a single hair showing].

Trinity's representation of Brazilian beach culture exemplifies the ambivalence of the postcolonial tourist who adopts the "imperial eye" (Pratt, 1992) to assert her own modernity. By describing the Brazilian bodies with the same exoticizing gaze historically turned upon Indonesian women. Trinity engages in a form of mimicry (Bhabha, 1994). She becomes the observer rather than the observed, effectively "white-washing" her own gaze to align with global tourism standards. This is not merely a reproduction of colonial tropes but a strategic performance of neoliberal subjectivity (Atia, 2012), where her ability to consume the "Other" validates her status as a cosmopolitan agent. She escapes the double bind of the marginalized "Third World woman" by momentarily occupying the position of the First World consumer, revealing that her agency is predicated on re-enacting the very hierarchies she elsewhere critiques.

Ultimately, TNT mediates postcolonial identity through a dialectic of aspirational modernity and critical nostalgia. Trinity's valorization of developed nations mirrors Indonesia's neoliberal trajectory, while her romanticization of Latin America's authenticity and critiques of Indonesia diplomatic incompetence evoke a counter-nostalgia for Third World solidarity. This duality embodies the instability of postcolonial narratives, which remain vulnerable to reinscribing the hierarchies they seek to dismantle. The text's engagement with hegemony is thus fundamentally ambivalent: it reinforces developmental binaries and racialized exoticization while simultaneously subverting Western moral superiority and critiquing structural inequities.

2. *The Jilbab Traveler*: The Commodification of Piety, Brand Islam, and Neoliberal Ambivalence

The Jilbab Traveler (TJT) articulates postcolonial identity not through political radicalism, but through the commodification of piety (Jones, 2010), engaging with what Arjana (2018) terms "Brand Islam." Rather than merely subverting Western secularism, Nadia negotiates the double bind of modernity and religion by packaging Islamic identity as a consumable lifestyle. The narrative reframes travel not just as devotion, but as a form of "spiritual capital" (Rudnycky, 2009). The jilbab functions as a mobile brand logo, a marker of the "safe" and "modern" Muslim woman

who can navigate global capitalism without losing her soul. This transformation of the jilbab exemplifies what Mahmood (2005) terms the “neoliberal pious subject”, one who cultivates religious virtue through entrepreneurial self-management and market-based distinction. Historically marked as a symbol of “backwardness” in colonial discourse (Arimbi, 2009), the jilbab is reimagined as a symbol of cosmopolitan sophistication that fits neatly into neoliberal consumer markets. However, this is not pure resistance to Western secularism, but a pragmatic negotiation enacted through “faith-based” consumption, where piety validates the Muslim subject's entry into global modernity (Atia, 2012). This is evident in how the text markets the travel experience:

Miris membaca buku-buku traveling yang menyebarkan paham kebebasan, padahal seharusnya setiap perjalanan mendekatkan kita kepada Allah (2012, p. vii).

[It is distressing to read travel books that spread the ideology of freedom, when in fact every journey should bring us closer to Allah].

Nadia's positioning of travel as sacred devotion rejects Western individualism, asserting piety as agency challenging colonial epistemologies rooted in secular modernity (Mahmood, 2005). By positioning her book as the “halal” alternative to Western “freedom,” Nadia effectively carves out a niche market.

Cross-cultural representations within *The Jilbab Traveler* demonstrate how Islamic identity functions as a transnational solidarity mechanism, yet simultaneously risks religious essentialism. Elina Soraya's narrative illustrates this through her account of kinship with Muslim women in Russia (2012, p. 245), where shared faith transcends Western travel writing's conventional emphasis on cultural difference and Otherness, challenging the fixation on incommensurable difference that has historically characterized colonial travel narratives. Tria Barmawi's Caribbean encounters, however, reveal the complications embedded in this transnational strategy. Her jilbab becomes the primary lens through which encounters are mediated (2012, p. 12), functioning as a visual marker that frames cross-cultural exchange within a religious framework even when shared Islamic faith is absent. This dynamic reveals a paradox in TJT's articulation of transnational solidarity: while positioning Islamic identity as grounds for horizontal, “sister-to-sister” connection that transcends geopolitical hierarchies, the narrative simultaneously elevates the jilbab as the preeminent signifier of connection, potentially reducing the complexity of these encounters to religious sameness. The text thus simultaneously challenges Western travel writing's exoticizing gaze while risking its own form of religious essentialism—substituting one form of reductionism (Orientalist Otherness) for another (religious universalism).

Beyond cross-cultural representation, *The Jilbab Traveler* constructs a specific performance of “good Muslim femininity” as a deliberate commodification strategy within the neoliberal pious subject's self-fashioning. The narrative authors, positioning themselves as visible, mobile, and globally aspirant, yet morally bounded and religiously devoted, construct a figure designed to reassure readers of the fundamental compatibility between Islamic devotion and cosmopolitan modernity. This performance operates through what might be termed “pedagogy of belonging,” inviting readers (particularly Muslim women seeking validation of their own aspirations for mobility and education) into an imagined community united by shared piety and cosmopolitan aspiration. The neoliberal pious subject, as operationalized through TJT's rhetorical strategies, enacts this belonging through self-deprecating humor and assertions of religious authority that establish simultaneous approachability and expertise. However, this construction risks flattening contradictions within Islamic feminist thought: the text does not adequately interrogate how Islamic ethics' emphasis on collective welfare and material asceticism might critique, rather than complement, the neoliberal individualism and consumer-based identity formation embedded within market-friendly “good Muslim femininity.” The veil becomes both piety marker and commodified symbol of cosmopolitan Muslim femininity, reflecting dual pressures of religious devotion and neoliberal self-fashioning that the text manages but does not fully resolve.

TJT's articulation of ambivalent agency extends beyond the commodification of piety and the performance of "good Muslim femininity" to encompass a distinctive vision of gendered relationality that fundamentally complicates Western feminist assumptions about autonomous, individual mobility. While contemporary Islamic jurisprudence permits women's independent travel if safety is ensured (Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Nurlaelawati, 2010), TJT's narratives deliberately retain male familial accompaniment reframing guardianship not as patriarchal constraint but as relational enablement (Mahmood, 2005; Sani, 2023). This framework exemplifies Badran's (2009) concept of "pluralistic feminisms," wherein women articulate feminist aspirations (mobility, education, global presence, public visibility) through religious frameworks rather than rejecting them as incompatible with liberation. The narrative's rhetorical strategies reinforce and enact this relational model: self-deprecating humor deconstructs the colonial traveler's authoritative authority and establishes vulnerability and approachability (Pratt, 1992), while simultaneous assertions of religious expertise position the narrators as cultural guides capable of teaching authentic Islamic practice. This rhetorical duality itself enacts the neoliberal pious subject's navigation of conflicting demands, demonstrating competence and authority while maintaining feminine approachability, asserting modern global aspirations while honoring familial obligation. The ambivalence here operates specifically within the realm of gender relationality: mahram ethics enables Nadia's mobility and public presence while potentially naturalizing women's structural dependence on male kin, advancing feminist goals of global agency while inadvertently reinforcing the very patriarchal logics such agency seeks to dismantle. Gender relationality thus emerges as the constitutive ambivalence of TJT's project: women achieve mobility through relational bonds that both enable and constrain.

TJT's political significance resides in articulating Indonesian Muslim women's agency within a globalized genre—specifically, through what might be termed "pious cosmopolitanism," which asserts religious identity as compatible with, rather than opposed to, global modernity and international mobility. By foregrounding religious subjectivity and relational gender bonds, TJT critiques neoliberal individualism and its demand for atomized, self-sufficient agents while strategically resisting Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women as passive, oppressed, or confined to private domestic spheres. Yet this very strategic resistance reveals enduring decolonization challenges. The commodification of piety, transforming Islamic ethics into "spiritual capital" cultivated within market logics, creates subjects who practice religious devotion through entrepreneurial self-fashioning (Atia, 2012; de Ara ujo, 2021). This demonstrates that pious cosmopolitanism, while enabling unprecedented global mobility, voice, and presence for Muslim women, remains vulnerable to the very market logics that Islamic ethics fundamentally critiques.

Ultimately, *The Jilbab Traveler* articulates postcolonial Indonesian Muslim women's agency through a mode of mobility that asserts religious identity as compatible with cosmopolitan aspiration—termed "pious cosmopolitanism". This represents a deliberate epistemological intervention in postcolonial feminism: rather than accepting Western secular modernity as the inevitable or sole framework for women's liberation, Nadia positions Islamic subjectivity itself as a source of feminist critique and emancipatory possibility. Her strategic reframing of the jilbab and piety as "spiritual capital" enables concrete and unprecedented forms of empowerment: border crossing, international publication, global readership, and entry into consumer markets previously closed to devout Muslim women who maintained religious observance. By channeling Islamic ethics into entrepreneurial self-fashioning and market-based distinction, TJT risks reducing the complex genealogy of Islamic thought into a reproducible, consumption-friendly aesthetic compatible with capitalism. *The Jilbab Traveler* thus exemplifies the constitutive ambivalence of postcolonial women's travel writing: it enables agency precisely through accommodations to hegemonic logics, whether market-based, patriarchal, or religious that it elsewhere seeks to dismantle.

Having examined how Trinity and Nadia each articulate ambivalent agency through distinct epistemological frameworks, secular developmental comparison versus Islamic feminist critique, both their divergences and their shared structural vulnerabilities within postcolonial women's travel

writing. TNT and TJT share fundamental structural ambivalence: Trinity's sharp critique of Western hypocrisy and bureaucratic incompetence coexists with internalized developmental logics that ultimately reinforce the hierarchies; Nadia's assertion of Islamic feminist possibility and pious cosmopolitanism remains vulnerable to commodification within neoliberal consumer logics that reduce complex religious ethics to marketable aesthetic. Both strategies enable unprecedented global mobility for their respective authors while remaining vulnerable to reinscribing hegemonic binaries whether developmental, neoliberal, or patriarchal that they simultaneously seek to dismantle.

3. *Perempuan Merah Putih*: From "Patriotic Resistance" to "State Ibuism"

Perempuan Merah Putih (PMP) reconfigures postcolonial femininity through state-aligned gender empowerment and nationalist symbolism. The text's ideological core lies in alignment with Indonesia's Millennium Development Goals, positioning gender equality as nationalist project (Pratikno, 2011, p. viii). The poem "Perempuan Pilihan" (Chosen Women) complicates this dynamic. While ostensibly celebrating female achievement, "chosen" inadvertently privileges state-aligned elites conforming to nationalist ideals over grassroots activists or marginalized voices:

*Wahai Perempuan-Perempuan pilihan,
Hembuskanlah semangat ini
torehkanlah pada birunya hati
lalu pancangkan Merah Putih
dan kibarkan di seluruh negeri
Wahai Perempuan-Perempuan pilihan,
berdirilah dengan tegar
gapailah puncak-puncak harapan,
lalu tebarlah harumnya nama bangsa
dan ukirlah citra negeri tercinta (2011, p. 3)*

[O Chosen Women,
Breathe this spirit
inscribe it upon the blue of hearts
then plant the Red and White
and raise it across the land
O Chosen Women,
stand firm
reach the peaks of hope,
then spread the fragrance of the nation's name
and carve the image of the beloved country]

The poem *Perempuan Pilihan* serves as a prime artifact of how State Ibuism (Suryakusuma, 1996) is rearticulated in the post-Reformasi era. By framing the expedition as a duty to "plant the Red and White" (Pratikno, 2011, p. 3), the text demonstrates how female agency is derivative, granted only insofar as Nungky performs the role of the "loyal daughter" of the nation. This is not resistance; it is what Ullah (2025) describes as the oscillation between indigenous affirmation and hegemonic accommodation, specifically the complex ambivalence where women are physically powerful mountaineers, yet their narrative voice remains fundamentally subservient to the patriarchal state apparatus. Their public achievements become legible only through contribution to national honor, effectively obscuring the structural inequalities that necessitate such performative patriotism and rendering female agency conditional upon state sanction.

This conditional, state-sanctioned femininity is not merely ideological but materially embedded in the text's very production: *Perempuan Merah Putih* was commissioned as state project, making institutional co-optation of female agency literal rather than metaphorical. The

narrative's socio-historical context amplifies these political dimensions as state-sponsored soft-power instrument. Commissioned by Indonesia's Ministry of Women's Empowerment, Perempuan Merah Putih functions as diplomatic tool, countering Orientalist stereotypes by showcasing women's mountaineering prowess. Yet this celebratory narrative exemplifies how Indonesian state feminism instrumentalizes elite women's achievements, yet this celebratory narrative exemplifies how Indonesian state feminism instrumentalizes elite women's achievements while concealing persistent structural inequities: only 6 percent of rural women attain higher education compared to 14 percent of urban women (Moerdijat cited in antaranews.com, 2025).

The material conditions of this state-sponsored expedition—producing elite narratives while rural women lack educational access—become embodied in the guides themselves, whose labor enables Nungky's narrated triumph while remaining instrumental to her nationalist mission rather than constituting genuine solidarity. The text's representation of other Russian guides Sergey, Daniil, and Victor illustrates ambivalent engagement with colonial discourse. Initially depicted as emotionally distant (conforming to Eurocentric tropes), Sergey's professionalism during Nungky's near-fatal slip complicates this reductive portrayal:

"Irma! Are you OK?"

Yes Sergey, now I'm OK... I was scared.. "suaraku seperti masih lirih dan gemetar.

"Irma .. It's OK... It's OK .. It's a hundred meters, Irma!" Sergey menggambarkan betapa aku meluncur sejauh itu. "... you're OK, Irma .. you're OK.." Seperti ingin meyakinkan dirinya sendiri, Sergey berulang kali meyakinkanku juga bahwa tidak sesuatu yang fatal terjadi pada diriku.

[...] Situasi ini memberi pelajaran pada tim, khususnya bagiku, yang juga dirasakan oleh pemandu.

Tidak terjadinya hal-hal fatal yang tidak diinginkan pada seluruh anggota tim yang menjadi tanggung jawab para pemandu selama perjalanan pendakian selalu menjadi harapan mereka (2011, pp. 82–83).

["Irma! Are you OK?"

"Yes Sergey, now I'm OK... I was scared..." my voice still sounded weak and trembling.

"Irma... It's OK... It's OK... It's a hundred meters, Irma!" Sergey described how far I had slid.

"...you're OK, Irma...you're OK..." As if trying to convince himself, Sergey repeatedly reassured me that nothing fatal had happened to me.

[...] This situation taught a lesson to the team, especially to me, which the guides also felt. The guides always hope that nothing fatal happens to any team members under their responsibility during the climbing journey].

This reveals shared vulnerability and ethical cross-cultural solidarity, destabilizing monolithic binaries. Yet guides remain instrumental to Nungky's nationalist mission, circumscribed as facilitators of her triumph, reflecting neoliberal commodification where the "Other" is valued only insofar as they advance the protagonist's agenda. The hybrid narrative structure interweaving prose with poetry mirrors this tension: poetic interludes disrupt Eurocentric conventions by blending aestheticized patriotism with personal reflection, yet ultimately reinforce state narratives of postcolonial progress.

Perempuan Merah Putih articulates postcolonial Indonesian women's agency through what might be termed "nationalist ambivalence"—a mode of empowerment explicitly aligned with and dependent upon state sanction. By commissioning an elite woman's mountaineering triumph, the Indonesian state transforms female mobility into nationalist symbol, enabling Nungky's unprecedented access to global platforms while simultaneously constraining her voice to serve state agendas. Yet this accomplishment remains fundamentally ambivalent: the narrative obscures rather than addresses the structural inequalities that render such elite mobility possible for only a privileged few while most Indonesian women. The "loyal daughter" performance required for state sanction means agency is granted conditionally, borrowed from patriarchal apparatuses rather than independently claimed. PMP thus exemplifies how ambivalent agency can operate not against state power but through alignment with it, a mode of negotiation distinct from both Trinity's neoliberal consumer subjectivity and Nadia's Islamic feminist repositioning.

4. *London: Angel: From "Narrative Fragmentation" to "Intimate Relationality"*

London: Angel (LA) innovates the postcolonial travel narrative through what Simoni (2018) terms "intimate relationality", a mode of postcolonial engagement that prioritizes affective connection and emotional reciprocity over territorial conquest or spiritual mission. Rather than the developmental hierarchies of Trinity's route, the religious commodification of Nadia's piety, or the nationalist conquest of Nungky's mountaineering, LA foregrounds the quotidian reciprocities of cross-cultural domestic life. The narrative explores how postcolonial agency operates not through mastery or transformation but through the acceptance of emotional vulnerability and the cultivation of modest affective gestures that acknowledge the impossibility of complete belonging.

The narrative centers on Windry's fictive relationship with Madam, a widowed English landlady, revealing how intimate cross-cultural exchange can destabilize colonial hierarchies. This destabilization emerges through ostensibly ordinary domestic rituals. The following exchange between the narrator and Madam, a widowed English landlady, illustrates how intimate cross-cultural encounters operate outside nationalist or commercial frameworks, producing unexpected points of recognition and care that complicate hierarchical distance:

Seorang perempuan Inggris berambut abu-abu yang seusia dengan ibuku keluar dari rumah krem di sebelah rumah indekos Ning. [...] Dia mengenakan celemek. Tubuhnya agak gemuk dan berbau sup krim. Gaya rambut dan bentuk wajahnya mengingatkan aku kepada Ratu Inggris, Elizabeth II (2013, p. 52). [...] mempersilakan aku duduk di sudut dapurnya [...] Perempuan itu bergabung denganku di meja. Dia membawa dua cangkir teh panas dan sepiring roti lapis."Silakan, Nak. Minum tehmu (2013, p. 112).

[An English woman with gray hair, about my mother's age, came out of the cream-colored house next to Ning's boarding house. [...] She was wearing an apron. Her body was somewhat plump and she smelled of cream soup. Her hairstyle and facial features reminded me of the Queen of England, Elizabeth II. [...] invited me to sit in the corner of her kitchen[...] The woman joined me at the table. She brought two cups of hot tea and a plate of sandwiches. "Please, dear. Drink your tea].

This initial portrait: Madam as physical specimen, identified through comparison to Queen Elizabeth, saturated in sensory markers of Englishness ("cream soup," "apron"), reproduces the exoticizing gaze of imperial travel writing. The description threatens to reduce Madam to an ethnographic object, observable and categorizable. Yet what follows complicates this reduction entirely. In this domestic exchange—tea, sandwiches, familiar address as "dear," inquiry about family—the hierarchical distance established in the first description collapses. Madam becomes not an object of observation but an agent of welcome, initiating intimacy across the colonial distance the narrative initially inscribed. However, the relationship between the protagonist and Madam does not resolve colonial tension but rather suspends it within a domestic sphere that Bhabha (1994) identifies as "unhomely", neither fully familiar nor entirely foreign, yet intimate. This domestic suspension operates as the text's primary mechanism of ambivalent agency: not transcending colonial hierarchies but learning to inhabit them affectively, through tea, conversation, and maternal care.

Yet domesticity alone cannot contain the text's political complexity. The depiction of other marginalized figures, particularly Ed, reveals how solidarity across difference operates within and against the same colonial structures that the Madam-protagonist relationship merely suspends. Ed, the Indian immigrant servant, embodies this doubled structure. Initially framed through colonial physiognomic tropes; "dark skin," "thick lips" (Ramadhina, 2013, p. 59), his characterization risks reproducing the racialized gaze critiqued by Fanon (1986). Yet his role as Gilang's confidant complicates this reduction: their camaraderie, forged through shared marginality, gestures toward solidarity among postcolonial subjects. Ed's interstitial identity embodies the fragmented belonging of transnational migrants, reflecting Indonesia's liminal negotiation with Western-dominated

structures. This duality exemplifies Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, wherein colonial binaries destabilize through performative resistance even as systemic inequities endure. Such ambivalent subjectivity, marked by displacement, produces flexible yet marginalized forms of agency (Yovela et al., 2024).

Ramadhina's refusal to resolve these contradictions constitutes the text's political core, foregrounding ethical ambiguities in cross-cultural representation. The narrative resists the trope of the "triumphant return," leaving the protagonist in emotional suspension, reliant on precarious ties with other marginalized figures. This refusal suggests that postcolonial agency lies not in mastering the metropolis (as in Trinity) or sacralizing it (as in Nadia), but in acknowledging the impossibility of full belonging. The text enacts agency through modest affective gestures of care that negotiate the profound loneliness of the globalized subject, offering accommodation rather than liberation.

The narrative's gendered reconfiguration to reveal the self further illuminates its postcolonial critique. By adopting a male protagonist, Ramadhina disrupts the genre's historical masculinism while interrogating contemporary Indonesian femininities. Gilang's emotional transparency, anxious monologues about unrequited love, self-deprecation "snotty, stupid, thoughtless" (2013, p. 247), subverts colonial travel writing's stoic hypermasculine narrator, aligning with Islamic feminist critiques of neoliberal self-fashioning (Mahmood, 2005). His vulnerability becomes resistance, challenging Western-centric rational authority paradigms. Yet this coexists with cosmopolitan aspirations: intertextual invocations (Dickens, Shakespeare) assert intellectual parity with Western canons while risking complicity in cultural hegemony. The tension between defiance and assimilation mirrors Indonesia's neoliberal trajectory, where elite mobility is celebrated yet remains contingent on global hierarchies.

This tension between aspiration and constraint operates not only in the protagonist's psychology but throughout the text's spatial and characterological register. Western Others, particularly Goldilocks, the mysterious English woman who attracts and eludes Gilang's desire, embody this tension in concentrated form. Her representation reveals how postcolonial anxiety about Western modernity shapes textual meaning-making at every level. Spatial metaphors amplify the text's political unconscious. Goldilocks, likened to a "Renaissance painting" (2013, p. 63), revives Orientalist fantasies of the inscrutable Western Other, critiquing Western modernity's inaccessibility to postcolonial subjects. She embodies what Huggan (2009) terms the "postcolonial exotic," where difference is commodified for transnational audiences. Her liminal presence in London's foggy landscapes mirrors Indonesia's ambivalent positioning within neoliberal globalization.

London: Angel articulates postcolonial ambivalent agency through what might be termed "affective inhabitation"—a mode of belonging that refuses mastery, transcendence, or triumphant return, instead embracing the emotional complexity of persistent liminality. Where Trinity achieves mobility through developmental consumption and self-exoticization, Nadia achieves mobility through Islamic commodification and spiritual authority, and Nungky achieves mobility through nationalist alignment and state co-optation, Ramadhina achieves mobility through acceptance of non-belonging and cultivation of modest affective gestures toward other marginalized subjects. This distinctive articulation does not represent liberation but rather "accommodation", a pragmatic negotiation that acknowledges both the necessity and the impossibility of home-finding in the metropolis. The text's refusal to resolve contradictions constituted its political significance. This refusal suggests that postcolonial agency, for the globally mobile yet structurally marginalized subject, lies in inhabiting contradiction affectively rather than resolving it politically. LA thus completes the analytical arc of these four texts, revealing that ambivalent agency operates across distinct hegemonic registers yet shares a common structural condition: the requirement that postcolonial subjects accommodate themselves within the very systems they simultaneously critique in order to achieve any mobility at all.

D. Conclusion

As the comparative analysis reveals, these divergent strategies demonstrate that ambivalent agency is not ideologically uniform but contextually specific, which has broader implications for how we theorize postcolonial feminist resistance. The perceived contradictions within these texts—Trinity's oscillation between critique and consumerism, Nadia's blending of piety and marketability, Nungky's fusion of physical power and state subservience, and Ramadhina's emotional suspension—should be understood as the defining feature of their agency. This study concludes that in the context of persistent patriarchal norms and neoliberal globalization, agency is rarely articulated as pure resistance. Instead, these authors demonstrate a pragmatic capacity to inhabit hegemonic structures, using the languages of capitalism, religion, and nationalism to authorize their own movement. While this results in narratives that are often complicit with the systems they navigate, it also allows for the survival and visibility of the female subject in spaces previously closed to her. Ultimately, these travel writings reveal that for the contemporary Indonesian woman, the act of traveling is a complex performance of accommodation and subversion, where the ability to move across borders depends upon the ability to skillfully manage the contradictory demands placed upon her identity.

What distinguishes these texts is not whether they achieve “authentic” resistance, a false standard, but rather how explicitly they grapple with this contradiction. Trinity and Ramadhina acknowledge their complicity through explicit self-awareness and irony; Nadia through religious/ethical self-reflection and critique of Western individualism, though with less ironic distancing; Nungky least explicitly so. Yet all four demonstrate that Indonesian women cannot simply step outside the global systems constraining them. Instead, they navigate within those systems strategically, mobilizing whatever resources available, neoliberal aspiration, religious identity, nationalist pride, emotional intimacy, to carve out space for mobility and voice. This is what ambivalent agency actually means in practice: not a failure of resistance, but a pragmatic negotiation of constraints that cannot be simply rejected.

These narratives challenge the assumption that postcolonial feminist resistance requires ideological purity. They show that women constrained by patriarchy, neoliberalism, religious regulation, and global inequalities simultaneously operate under conditions where perfect liberation is impossible. This reveals how agency actually works in postcolonial contexts—not through wholesale rejection of hegemonic frameworks, but through pragmatic navigation within them. The texts expose limits of Western feminist theory, which privileges individual autonomy over the relational, faith-based, and embedded negotiations these writers practice. Finally, they acknowledge that Indonesia's educated, middle-class women are not representative, their global mobility obscures systematic exclusion of rural women, religious minorities, and working-class communities. Yet their narratives matter as testimony to how some women navigate constrained circumstances through ambivalent agency.

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