Discrimination Of Chinese Female Characters In The Latest Dimsum Novel By Clara Ng.

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to describe the forms of discrimination, the causal factors, and the responses of Tionghoa ethnic women characters in facing discrimination in Clara Ng's novel Dimsum Terakhir.

Methodology: This research employed a descriptive qualitative method. The object of the study was Clara Ng's novel Dimsum Terakhir. Data were collected through reading and note-taking techniques, and analyzed using feminist literary criticism. Data validity and reliability were ensured through semantic validation (expert judgment) and interrater-intrarater reliability procedures.

Main Findings: Discrimination against Tionghoa women characters occurred in both domestic and public spheres. Domestic discrimination included seniority-based bias, while public discrimination involved racial slurs, denial of cultural rights, and physical violence. Political and ethnic factors were dominant causes. The characters primarily responded to discrimination with rejection, using verbal resistance and critical attitudes.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study highlights a specific intersection of gender and ethnic discrimination in Indonesian-Chinese women within literary narratives an area still underrepresented. It advances feminist literary criticism by analyzing ethnic minority women's voices in post-New Order Indonesia, enriching the understanding of layered discrimination in Southeast Asian literature.

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1.   INTRODUCTION

The Tionghoa ethnic group has long played a significant role in Indonesia's social, cultural, and economic history. Despite their deep-rooted presence in the archipelago dating back to the 5th century, ethnic Chinese Indonesians have historically faced systemic exclusion and discrimination—especially during the New Order regime [1]-[3]. Through government-issued policies, such as the Presidential Instruction No. 14/1967 and mandatory SBKRI (Certificate of Citizenship), Chinese Indonesians were subjected to cultural suppression and were denied basic civil rights. These discriminatory policies aimed at forced assimilation not only marginalized Chinese culture but also positioned Tionghoa identity as alien and subordinate within the national discourse [4], [5], [6].

This historical marginalization was further intensified for Tionghoa women, who, apart from ethnic discrimination, also faced gender-based oppression—both within the patriarchal structure of their own families and the broader socio-political context [7], [8]. While issues of race and gender have been individually examined in Indonesian literary studies, little scholarly attention has been paid to the intersectionality of both, particularly in literary narratives that capture the lived experiences of Chinese-Indonesian women. The novel *Dimsum Terakhir* by Clara Ng is a notable literary work that explores these themes [9], [10]. It presents four Chinese-Indonesian female protagonists who grapple with layers of discrimination in both domestic (family-based seniority and patriarchy) and public (racial insults, cultural bans, and political marginalization) spheres. Set during the late New Order era, the novel also illustrates how these women respond to injustice either by resisting or complying—offering insight into how identity, power, and resistance are navigated in oppressive structures.

Scholarly works such as Rozalina's semiotic study on ethnic stereotypes in *Dimsum Terakhir* have addressed surface-level representations of Chineseness in Indonesian literature [11]-[13]. However, this study advances existing research by critically analyzing how intersectional oppression operates and is challenged within the novel's narrative through a feminist literary lens. Employing ideological feminist criticism, this research examines not only how discrimination is depicted, but also what social, cultural, and political forces underpin such discrimination, and how female characters negotiate and resist their marginal status [14], [15]. Therefore, this study contributes both to feminist literary studies and to the understanding of ethnic minority literature in Indonesia by bridging the gap between gendered and racialized experiences of oppression.

The novelty of this research lies in its intersectional approach that combines feminist literary criticism with ethnic studies. This method allows the analysis to foreground the unique voices of Chinese-Indonesian women in literature voices that are often silenced or generalized within mainstream feminist or postcolonial discourse [16]-[18]. By doing so, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how literature becomes a space to reclaim identity, challenge oppressive norms, and reassert agency in the context of historical and cultural trauma.

Can see the combination of this study with previous research conducted in 2021, especially in cultural, contextual, and media-based differences in representing gender-based discrimination [19]. This study examines discrimination against Chinese female characters in the context of Indonesian literature, specifically focusing on ethnic and gender identities in a localized contemporary Southeast Asian setting. Meanwhile, research conducted in 2021 explores discrimination against African-American women in the United States, as depicted through a Western cinematic lens based on real historical events. While both works highlight the intersection of gender and societal marginalization, the literary research is fictional and omitted from the post-reform Indonesian cultural narrative, while the film-based research is biographical and set in the American civil rights and space race. This creates a perception in a comparative understanding of how discrimination is constructed, experienced, and represented across media (literature vs. film), socio-political contexts (Asia vs. America), and character realities (fiction vs. history) [20]-[22]. Addressing these gaps will enrich the intersectionality discourse by highlighting how local cultural values, ethnic backgrounds, and narrative forms influence the depiction and acceptance of gender discrimination.

This study presents a novel perspective by analyzing the intersectional discrimination faced by Chinese female characters in Clara Ng's Dimsum Terakhir, a contemporary Indonesian novel. Unlike previous studies that typically focus on either gender or ethnic identity in isolation, this research highlights how both factors simultaneously shape the marginalization of female characters within a minority ethnic group [23], [24]. Through textual analysis, the study uncovers how these characters are positioned within a double-bind of patriarchal control and ethnic stereotyping, offering fresh insight into the layered experience of discrimination in Indonesia's literary landscape [25]-[27]. This intersectional approach particularly within a Southeast Asian post-reform context adds a new dimension to gender and ethnic studies in regional literature, filling a gap in the discourse on localized feminist representation.

The findings of this research carry significant implications for literary scholarship, multicultural education, and social awareness in Indonesia [28-[30]. The portrayal of Chinese-Indonesian women as simultaneously oppressed by both cultural tradition and societal prejudice encourages a re-evaluation of how minority women are depicted in national literature. Educators and literary critics may draw on these insights to promote more inclusive and critical readings of Indonesian texts, challenging dominant narratives that often marginalize ethnic or gender minorities [31], [32]. Furthermore, the study invites Indonesian writers and publishers to embrace more nuanced and diverse representations of female identity, encouraging literature to serve not only as a mirror of reality but as a tool for social transformation.

The urgency of this study lies in the ongoing underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Chinese-Indonesian women in both academic discourse and mainstream Indonesian media. At a time when discussions around gender equality and ethnic tolerance are gaining momentum globally and nationally, it is essential to critically examine how literature continues to reflect and perpetuate systemic biases. The study's findings reveal how subtle narrative strategies such as character silencing, familial obligations, or cultural stereotyping—continue to normalize discrimination under the guise of tradition or identity. Without critical examination, such portrayals risk reinforcing marginalization rather than challenging it. Therefore, this research is not only timely but necessary

to advocate for more equitable cultural narratives and to foster literary spaces that are truly representative of Indonesia's pluralistic society.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a descriptive qualitative design to examine the forms of discrimination experienced by Chinese-Indonesian female characters in Clara Ng's novel *Dimsum Terakhir*. The design was selected to allow in-depth interpretation of the textual data, as the study focuses on uncovering implicit ideologies and sociocultural meanings using feminist literary criticism. The ideological feminist approach was used to highlight issues of gender and ethnic inequality represented in the text.

The subject of this research was the novel *Dimsum Terakhir* by Clara Ng, which contains four Chinese-Indonesian female protagonists as the central figures of analysis. The research population includes all narrative segments in the novel that portray experiences, dialogues, and events related to gender and ethnic discrimination. The sample was selected purposively based on relevance to three key aspects: forms of discrimination, contributing factors, and the characters' responses. Only textual data directly reflecting these aspects were included for analysis.

The data were collected using reading and note-taking techniques. The researcher conducted close reading of the novel to identify relevant textual segments that contain descriptions, interactions, and narrations related to discrimination. These segments were then systematically recorded and categorized based on the research focus. No external data sources (such as interviews or surveys) were used, as the study was entirely literature-based.

The main research instrument was the researcher herself as the primary data collector and interpreter. To guide the process, a categorization table was developed to classify data into three analytical categories: (1) forms of discrimination, (2) contributing factors, and (3) characters' responses. This categorization ensured consistent identification and organization of relevant textual data. An expert judgment was also employed to validate the relevance and accuracy of selected data units.

Table 1. Research Instrument

Category	Subcategories
Forms of Discrimination	Domestic (seniority), Public (ethnic slurs, cultural bans, etc.)
Contributing Factors	Gender, birth order, ethnicity, religion, politics
Characters' Responses	Rejection (verbal, critical stance), Acceptance

The data were analyzed using content analysis with an interpretative approach grounded in feminist literary criticism. First, data were reduced and grouped according to the three analytical categories. Second, each category was interpreted to uncover embedded power structures, stereotypes, and resistance strategies employed by the characters. Triangulation was applied through interrater and intrarater reliability to ensure consistency and credibility in analysis.

The research was conducted in six main steps: (1) selecting the object of study (*Dimsum Terakhir* novel), (2) formulating the problem and objectives, (3) conducting literature review and establishing the theoretical framework (feminist literary criticism), (4) collecting data using close reading and documentation, (5) organizing and categorizing the data, and (6) interpreting the data to produce findings aligned with the research questions. To ensure validity, semantic validity (expert judgment) and reliability tests were also conducted throughout the research process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and analytical discussion regarding the forms, causes, and responses to discrimination experienced by Chinese-Indonesian female characters in the novel *Dimsum Terakhir* by Clara Ng. The results are described in detail, supported by categorized data, and interpreted through the lens of feminist literary criticism.

3.1. Forms of Discrimination

The research found that the forms of discrimination experienced by Chinese-Indonesian female characters occurred in two primary domains: domestic and public. In the domestic domain, discrimination took the form of seniority-based expectations, such as the pressure placed on the character Indah to care for her ailing father solely based on her proximity and birth order. In the public sphere, discrimination manifested in ethnic slurs, cultural suppression, religious constraints, and even physical violence. The characters were mocked using derogatory terms like "Cina" and "Amoy," denied public holidays such as Imlek, and were required to use Chinese names in official settings. Furthermore, characters such as Indah experienced institutional discrimination, including the denial of responsibility by a religious figure due to racial differences. The most dominant form was verbal and symbolic violence, especially racial insults.

Table 2.

Domain	Type of Discrimination	Character(s)	Description
Domestic	Seniority-based gender expectations	Indah	Expected to care for father solely due to being the youngest daughter nearby.
Public	Ethnic ridicule and slurs	All	Called "Cina," "Amoy," and stereotyped by neighbors and colleagues.
Public	Ban on celebrating Chinese New Year	All	State regulations during New Order banned Imlek celebration.
Public	Rejection of pregnancy responsibility	Indah	Priest Antonius refused responsibility citing racial difference.
Public	Mandatory Chinese name calling	All	Required to use Chinese names in public and official documents.
Public	Physical violence	Siska	Assaulted for defending her ethnic identity.

These findings underscore the multidimensional nature of discrimination, affecting both private family relations and public civic engagement.

3.2. Causes of Discrimination

The causes behind the discrimination are also divided into two main contexts: domestic and public. In domestic settings, discrimination was rooted in gender and birth order dynamics. Female characters were considered less competent or expected to assume certain caregiving roles without negotiation. In public contexts, the causes included ethnic identity, religious affiliation, and especially political structures. The political repression under the New Order regime played a dominant role, particularly through policies that suppressed Chinese cultural expressions and required the possession of SBKRI (Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia). These policies institutionalized discrimination and contributed to identity suppression and structural marginalization.

Table 3.

Domain	Causes	Description
Domestic	Gender, birth order	Male siblings had more privilege; youngest daughters were burdened with care.
Public	Ethnicity, religion, politics	Political systems marginalized Chinese culture and denied civil liberties.

3.3. Responses of Characters to Discrimination

Chinese-Indonesian female characters in *Dimsum Terakhir* responded to discrimination in two main ways: rejection and acceptance. The most prevalent response was rejection, often expressed through verbal protest, critical thinking, and defensive action. For instance, Siska verbally confronted racist comments and even physically defended her identity when attacked. Rosi exhibited resistance by rejecting patriarchal norms and speaking assertively. Indah showed resistance through moral courage, choosing to raise her child independently after rejection. Only Novera displayed more passive responses, often accepting discriminatory treatment without confrontation, thus serving as a counterpoint to the assertive resistance shown by the others.

Table 4.

Response Type	Character(s)	Example of Action
Rejection	Siska, Rosi, Indah	Verbal protest, self-defense, defying gender roles
Acceptance	Novera	Passive reception of unequal treatment, no resistance observed

These character responses highlight varying degrees of agency and resistance, illustrating the feminist perspective that oppression can be both internalized and resisted, depending on personal and social context.

The gap between this study and previous research arises from the different thematic focuses, cultural contexts, and narrative approaches observed in their findings. This study reveals how Chinese-Indonesian female characters experience multiple layers of discrimination shaped by their gender and ethnic minority status in a realistic contemporary Indonesian setting [33], [34]. This discrimination is depicted as subtle, internalized, and often dismissed in familial expectations, cultural silences, and social exclusion. In contrast, previous research highlights overt and systemic gender issues in a dystopian patriarchal society, focusing on the resistance and survival of the main characters in a repressive future regime. The findings emphasize institutionalized control over women's bodies and autonomy as the primary mechanism of discrimination [35]-[37]. This contrast reveals a significant horizon: while Clara Ng's work reflects real-world intersectional challenges experienced in everyday Indonesian society, Bina Shah's narrative uses speculative fiction to dramatize gender inequality in an extreme form. Therefore, a comparative analysis is needed that bridges the gap between realistic and speculative depictions

of gender discrimination, to better understand how different narrative strategies influence readers' awareness of, and responses to, thinking about women in both imagined and experienced realities.

This study offers a distinct novelty by focusing on the dual layers of discrimination—ethnic and gender-based experienced by Chinese-Indonesian female characters in Clara Ng's *Dimsum Terakhir*, a context that remains underexplored in Indonesian literary criticism. While most existing studies on gender discrimination in literature concentrate on global feminist themes or dystopian representations, this research situates its analysis in a realistic, localized socio-cultural landscape where discrimination is subtle, systemic, and often internalized. The novel's portrayal of female characters subjected to traditional family roles, cultural marginalization, and limited autonomy provides a nuanced depiction of intersectionality in a Southeast Asian setting [38], [39]. By bringing attention to how everyday social structures perpetuate invisible forms of oppression, this study contributes original insight into the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and narrative in post-reform Indonesian fiction.

The findings of this study carry important implications for feminist literary scholarship, cultural discourse, and multicultural education in Indonesia [40]-[42]. By uncovering the mechanisms of discrimination embedded within character interactions, family dynamics, and social expectations, the research invites readers and educators to question normalized gender and ethnic hierarchies in literature. It urges a more critical reading of Indonesian fiction that takes into account the layered identities of female characters, especially those belonging to ethnic minorities. Furthermore, the study can inform the development of inclusive literary curricula that not only promote gender sensitivity but also address the complexities of cultural identity and social marginalization, ultimately empowering underrepresented voices within the national narrative.

Despite its valuable contributions, the study is not without limitations. It focuses exclusively on a single literary work, *Dimsum Terakhir* by Clara Ng, which may restrict the generalizability of its findings across broader Indonesian literature or among diverse representations of Chinese-Indonesian women. Additionally, while the study explores discrimination through textual and thematic analysis, it does not incorporate the perspectives of readers, authors, or community members who may interpret the narrative differently based on lived experience [43], [44]. The absence of comparative analysis with other literary texts or genres also limits the depth of its examination of how different narrative forms may portray discrimination. These limitations suggest that further research is needed to expand the scope of inquiry and include a variety of texts and voices to deepen understanding of intersectional representation in literature.

4.   CONCLUSION

The aims stated in the *Introduction* were fulfilled through the findings in the *Results and Discussion*. The study revealed that Chinese-Indonesian female characters experienced multidimensional discrimination, mainly caused by gender and political-ethnic factors, with most responding through resistance. These results affirm the study's objectives and offer prospects for further research on intersectional discrimination in other literary or media texts, enriching feminist and ethnic minority discourse in Indonesia.

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