
Deconstructing the Meaning of Beauty in Short Story “Gubrak!” by Seno Gumira Ajidarma

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the representation of female beauty in Seno Gumira Ajidarma’s short story “Gubrak!” through Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction. The story centers on a woman whose extraordinary beauty triggers mass hysteria, social disorder, and urban collapse. The protagonist bears profound psychological burdens and experiences alienation as a result of society’s obsessive judgment of her physical appearance. The central concern of this research is how the short story dismantles conventional standards of beauty legitimized by patriarchal ideology and visual culture. Employing Derrida’s deconstructive framework, the analysis investigates how the text destabilizes the fixed notion of “beauty” attached to women’s bodies through binary oppositions. The study adopts a qualitative descriptive method and deconstructive reading techniques, identifying linguistic, narrative, and symbolic elements that reveal the instability of meaning. The findings indicate that beauty in “Gubrak!” is portrayed not as a sign of glory or happiness but as a source of suffering and destruction. The meaning of “beautiful” in the text is fluid, contradictory, and non-essential. Excessive beauty leads to alienation, social pressure, and collective chaos, thus challenging patriarchal ideals that equate a woman’s worth with physical appearance. Ultimately, “Gubrak!” serves as a critique of visual culture that objectifies women and demonstrates literature’s power as a space of resistance against dominant and singular meanings.

Keywords: *beauty; deconstruction of meaning; “Gubrak!”; short story; woman*

INTRODUCTION

The short story, though brief and compact, often contains remarkable depth and complexity. Within its limited form, authors not only narrate events but also embed symbols, moral reflections, and subtle social critiques. This aligns with Faruk’s (2012: 22) argument that short stories, as a literary genre, provide space for writers to express ideas symbolically. Through them, authors convey reflections on life that are simultaneously aesthetic and critical. Consequently, short stories often become compelling subjects of literary inquiry, especially for uncovering the hidden meanings that lie beneath their narratives.

One such example is “Gubrak!” by Seno Gumira Ajidarma, a short story that presents a sharp social satire. It portrays how excessive beauty can become a source of ruin—both for the woman who possesses it and for a society enthralled by it. The female protagonist’s beauty in “Gubrak!” is not merely a physical attribute; it carries an almost supernatural power that causes widespread chaos. This depiction exposes how inflated beauty standards in contemporary culture generate unrealistic expectations and ultimately, harmful consequences.

In most discourses, beauty is inseparably linked

to women, as if a woman's normalcy or worth is defined by her attractiveness. Beauty is typically measured by parameters such as body shape, facial features, and outward appearance. These standards are not only shaped by biological or aesthetic factors but also by the social norms, media imagery, and ideological systems that dominate public consciousness. Naomi Wolf argues that beauty functions as a belief system reinforcing male dominance, making it an integral part of the discourse that sustains the binary opposition between men and women (Pangesti et al., 2022: 82). Within this patriarchal framework, beauty is constructed as an aesthetic that "pleases the eye." Yet, such beauty may also act as provocation, inviting objectification, harassment, and even violence.

Beauty in Seno Gumira Ajidarma's short story "Gubrak!" is not confined to the realm of the visual; it is a force that defies rationality, producing such an overwhelming effect that renders people unconscious. A nationwide fainting epidemic strikes the capital because of a woman whose beauty cannot be endured by the human eye (Ajidarma, 2011: 1). In this depiction, beauty—ordinarily regarded as a gift—becomes a catastrophe. What should symbolize grace instead precipitates chaos, culminating in the protagonist's desperate decision to destroy her own beauty. Through this inversion, the story exposes and critiques the very standards of beauty that society reveres. Beauty no longer represents harmony or virtue but becomes a metaphor for social burden, destructive power, and resistance to patriarchal ideals. The narrative thus suggests that beauty, when overvalued and used as a tool of control, transforms from blessing to bondage, restricting women's freedom rather than enhancing it.

To deconstruct the meaning of beauty, this research uses theory of deconstruction. Deconstruction is an approach to understanding meaning by looking at the connections between words in a language system. Meaning does not originate from reality or from absolute, concrete truths, but rather emerges through the relationships between elements of language that are socially constructed (Fattah, 2019: 117). The theory of deconstruction was developed by Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher who challenged structuralist thinking and binary opposition logic in language and text. Derrida stated that language is never able to present meaning in a complete and stable manner because each linguistic sign derives

its meaning only in relation to other signs, not from a fixed reference to reality (Derrida, 1997: 25). In other words, meaning in texts always undergoes deferral and difference, a concept he refers to as *différance*. *Différance* emphasizes that meaning is never stable and is always deferred or postponed (Sirulhaq et al., 2023: 246). Deconstruction theory emphasizes the instability of meaning, suggesting that language is a temporary and unstable signifier of meaning (Butt & Ghauri, 2022: 161).

Several scholars have analyzed "Gubrak!" from difference perspectives. Fitriyyah and Ramadhani (2024), in *Fonologi*, examined the story through the lens of pragmatics, particularly speech act theory and discourse context. Their findings reveal that the characters employ various forms of speech acts that convey values such as honesty, courage, loyalty, and empathy. This analysis positions "Gubrak!" not only as a work of literary merit but also as a narrative rich in social critique when viewed through a pragmatic framework. Another study by Rizky and Suparti (2023) employed Peirce's semiotic approach to explore the story's iconic elements. They identified five dominant icons: the road (representing the locus of social conflict), television (symbolizing bad news), slums (signifying crime), sewers (death), and candles (despair). Each icon carries symbolic weight that amplifies the story's social criticism, addressing issues such as poverty, information overload, and psychological disarray. Together, these studies expand the interpretive space of "Gubrak!" and underscore Ajidarma's ability to fuse literary artistry with incisive social commentary.

This study is distinctive in its focus on examining the concept of beauty in "Gubrak!" through the lens of Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. The analysis seeks to unravel the meaning of "beauty" as a contradictory and unstable social construct. In "Gubrak!", beauty occupies a central position; it is celebrated yet simultaneously burdensome, transforming into an existential weight for the female protagonist. Through Derrida's deconstructive framework, the story can be read as a critique of the notion that beauty possesses a fixed or universal meaning. Instead, beauty in this text is shown to be saturated with social contradictions, psychological strain, and ideological tension. Moreover, this study foregrounds female beauty as both an existential burden and a form of symbolic violence produced

by patriarchal discourse and the dominance of modern visual culture. In doing so, it contributes to expanding the scope of Indonesian literary studies by applying a deconstructive approach that is contextual, transdisciplinary, and critical of the power structures embedded in meaning-making processes. This research, therefore, broadens the interpretive possibilities for literary works, especially "Gubrak!", by revealing how meaning itself can become a site of resistance.

Building on this foundation, the central problem addressed in this article concerns how "Gubrak!" deconstructs conventional standards of beauty. Using Derrida's theory of deconstruction, the study explores how Ajidarma's story not only reproduces established ideals of beauty but also dismantles and subverts them through irony and contradiction. The deconstructive process within the story exposes the tension between beauty as a cultural construct and beauty as a paradoxical, destabilizing force. Through this analysis, the article demonstrates how literature can serve as a space of critique, challenging beauty myths that perpetuate oppression and constraint, particularly for women.

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method grounded in Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. Deconstruction, as a critical approach, seeks to expose tensions within meaning, uncover internal contradictions, and reveal the instability of signs embedded in a text (Ratna, 2009: 211). According to Faruk (2012: 217–239), the application of deconstruction in literary research proceeds through three principal stages: identifying binary oppositions and hierarchies of meaning, reversing these hierarchies, and neutralizing them to allow new, open-ended meanings to emerge. The first stage involves locating the binary oppositions and hierarchical structures that underpin the text. The second stage, namely reversal, shifts the dominance of these oppositions, granting visibility and interpretive space to meanings previously marginalized. The third stage, neutralization, dissolves the oppositional framework altogether, freeing meaning from fixed dichotomies. Through this process, deconstructive reading reveals the text's concealed ideological tensions and the ironies that lie beneath its surface.

The object of this study is Seno Gumira Ajidarma's short story "Gubrak!", which articulates a paradoxical and multifaceted conception of beauty.

The research data consist of narrative passages from the story that pertain to representations of beauty. These excerpts are examined through repeated, close readings and interpretive analysis to trace contradictions, ambiguities, and semantic shifts indicative of deconstructive movement. By employing this approach, the study aims to demonstrate how literature can serve as a site of resistance against dominant discourses, opening space for plural, fluid, and subversive interpretations. As Derrida's framework suggests, the meaning of a text—whether immanent or transcendent—is never fixed but remains perpetually unstable and provisional (Butt & Ghauri, 2022: 132).

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

In most societies, beauty is often regarded as a symbol of luck, privilege, or prestige. Within dominant social constructs, beautiful women are seen as having greater access to opportunities and advantages in life. Yet this narrative rarely acknowledges the darker dimension of beauty—the way it can function as a psychosocial burden. Seno Gumira Ajidarma's short story "Gubrak!" presents a counter-reading to this pervasive myth of beauty. In the story, the protagonist's extraordinary beauty becomes a calamity, both for herself and for the people around her. She is not only the center of collective fascination but also the catalyst of social chaos. The concept of "beauty" in "Gubrak!" is thus inverted—what is normally considered a blessing becomes the source of trauma, fear, and destruction. In this text, beauty ceases to be a stable or essential value. It shifts depending on context, embodying the principle of *différance* described by Derrida: meaning is always deferred, never fully present, and continually reshaped through difference. Language, in this sense, is neither fixed nor unified. It is a living system influenced by social, cultural, and historical forces that continually redefine meaning (Kayaalti, 2025: 80).

Binary Opposition and the Hierarchy of Meaning

Every text, according to deconstruction, is built upon binary oppositions in which one element occupies a dominant position while the other is subordinated. These oppositions form the foundation for uncovering

Table 1. Binary Opposition and The Hierarchy of Meaning

Binary Opposition	Dominant Position in Culture/Ideology	Subordinate Position	Implications in the Short Story “Gubrak!”
Beautiful vs. Not Beautiful	Beauty is ideal, positive, and brings happiness	Not beautiful is seen as lack or deficiency	The story reverses this meaning: beauty brings suffering and social chaos.
Beautiful vs. Ugly	Beauty is associated with perfection	Ugliness is viewed as disgrace or flaw	Extreme beauty leads to destruction and fear; beauty loses its conventional value.
Normal vs. Abnormal	Normal aligns with social order	Abnormal deviates from it	The protagonist’s beauty disrupts public order, prompting state intervention to control women’s bodies.

the hierarchy of meaning in “Gubrak!”. The Table 1 identifies the key binaries present in the story, their cultural hierarchies, and their implications for the concept of beauty:

The table demonstrates how “Gubrak!” constructs an ironic tension between cultural ideals and textual reality. What society deems a symbol of perfection becomes, in the story, a source of collective disaster. The opening line—*“Ia sangat cantik, begitu cantik ... tetapi bahkan siapa saja yang memandangnya lantas akan jatuh pingsan”* (She was very beautiful, so beautiful ... but even anyone who looked at her would immediately faint (Ajidarma, 2011: 1)—immediately destabilizes the conventional meaning of beauty. A word typically associated with harmony and admiration is transformed into a marker of imbalance, irony, and dread. The analysis reveals that the structure of meaning in “Gubrak!” rests on fragile oppositions that continually collapse into contradiction. The hierarchy of “beautiful” versus “not beautiful” loses its stability, becoming instead a fluid field of contested meanings—one that invites subversive reinterpretation.

Reversal of the Hierarchy of Meaning

After identifying the binary oppositions, the next stage of deconstruction involves reversing the hierarchy of meaning—that is, shifting the dominant position within those oppositions that have long been considered stable. Deconstruction does not seek to dismantle a text destructively, but to reinterpret it, uncovering hidden tensions and alternative meanings within its structure. As Fattah (2019: 120) explains, deconstruction exposes the concealed forces that shape and sustain a text. Within patriarchal culture,

“beauty” is typically idealized as a positive value—a symbol of perfection, happiness, and prosperity. In “Gubrak!”, however, this meaning is inverted. Beauty becomes a source of suffering, torment, and alienation. The once-exalted ideal is transformed into a paradox that unsettles rather than delights. The female protagonist is no longer portrayed as an idealized figure, but as a victim of a social system that objectifies and disciplines her body. This reversal manifests through three interconnected dimensions of meaning: beauty as a burden, beauty as torture, and beauty as suffering.

Beauty as a Burden

The female protagonist in “Gubrak!” possesses extraordinary beauty, yet it is portrayed not as a gift but as a curse. This depiction subverts the conventional belief that beauty is an advantageous asset. The “burden” depicted in the story is not material—it does not emerge from poverty, labor, or physical violence—but from the protagonist’s existential and psychological condition as a woman deemed excessively beautiful. Her beauty becomes a threat to others; she cannot take pleasure in it because it harms everyone who sees her (Asmawati & Khoiriyah, 2023: 29). In Derrida’s view, meaning is never fixed or fully present; it is always deferred and subject to reinterpretation (1997: 62). The word “beautiful,” which ordinarily carries positive connotations, thus shifts into its opposite—burden, constraint, and peril. This transformation is established from the story’s opening line:

Ia sangat cantik, begitu cantik, bagaikan tiada lagi yang lebih cantik ... tetapi bahkan siapa saja

yang memandangnya lantas akan jatuh pingsan.

(Ajidarma, 2011: 1)

She was very beautiful, so beautiful, as if there was no one more beautiful... but even anyone who looked at her would immediately faint.

This sentence instantly destabilizes the reader's expectation of beauty. What usually invites admiration instead triggers catastrophe. The concept of beauty as burden is reinforced by the portrayal of the protagonist's social existence: she lives in isolation, under constant vigilance, as those around her develop intricate methods to avoid her face.

... suatu usaha terlatih agar jangan sampai melihat kecantikannya telah diusahakan dengan penuh kemahiran... karena memang harus tepat saatnya. Melengos terlalu cepat sehingga tetap melihat wajahnya lagi atau terlalu lambat melengos sama dengan bencana.

(Ajidarma, 2011: 2)

...a trained effort not to look at her beauty had been made with great skill... because the timing had to be just right. Looking away too quickly and seeing her face again, or looking away too slowly, would be disastrous.

The protagonist becomes a target of collective discipline. Her daily life is dictated by fear—each movement carefully orchestrated to prevent panic or fainting among bystanders. Her beauty functions as a structural burden, rendering her not a person but a social hazard, an object to be managed. Beauty, once associated with freedom and admiration, here becomes the very cause of her confinement. This portrayal echoes Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991: 18), which argues that beauty operates as a cultural mechanism of control, imposing psychological and social pressure on women. Rather than liberating them, beauty restricts their autonomy, subjecting their bodies to constant surveillance. Ajidarma's protagonist embodies this dynamic in its most extreme form: her beauty is not metaphorically oppressive but literally catastrophic. Her mere presence disrupts public order, exposing how the myth of beauty—when taken to its extreme—collapses under its own violence.

Social pressure on women stemming from beauty standards is reinforced by psychosocial research. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) introduced

the concept of objectification theory, which argues that when women's bodies are treated as objects evaluated primarily on appearance, women internalize this gaze, leading to self-objectification that manifests as anxiety, depression, and social dysfunction. This condition is mirrored in the protagonist's continual self-isolation:

Keluar hanya untuk berangkat ke kantor, pulang hanya untuk masuk kamar dan tidak keluar.

(Ajidarma, 2011: 3)

Going out only to head to the office, coming home only to enter the room and not go out again.

This behavior signifies deep existential alienation. The protagonist's physical appearance strips her of basic human freedom, confining her existence within the boundaries of societal judgment. Within Derrida's deconstructive framework, this represents how the notion of "beauty" collapses under its own contradiction: what is conventionally idealized as positive becomes a mechanism of oppression. In mass media, women's worth is frequently tethered to beauty as a precondition for visibility and acceptance, an association that imposes psychological strain. Engeln (2017), in *Beauty Sick: How the Cultural Obsession with Appearance Hurts Girls and Women*, demonstrates that constant exposure to appearance-based pressure restricts women's capacity to develop their potential, pursue education and careers, and maintain healthy social relationships. Ajidarma's depiction of a woman who cannot lead a normal life because her very presence incites "mass unrest" serves as a hyperbolic, yet incisive, reflection of this cultural reality.

Through a deconstructionist lens, "Gubrak!" offers a sharp critique of beauty as a social construct. Ajidarma dismantles the mythologized image of the "beautiful woman," exposing the hidden layers of social pressure, exclusion, and existential pain beneath its glorified surface. This reading reveals that the meaning of "beauty," once regarded as sacred and stable, is in fact fragile, contradictory, and deeply paradoxical. As Mathiasen (2018: 778) observes, language functions not as a transparent medium for truth but as a network of interrelated signs—reflections of what the mind perceives rather than direct representations of reality.

Beauty as Torture

The second dimension of “beauty” in Seno Gumira Ajidarma’s “Gubrak!” is that of torment. The protagonist’s beauty offers no reward; instead, it becomes a source of trauma, isolation, and an experience akin to systemic violence. Ajidarma portrays beauty not as a privilege but as an enduring affliction. The torment manifests through psychological pressure, emotional guilt, and an ever-present fear of the consequences that might follow the mere act of showing her face, as described in the following passage:

“Saya tidak bisa memaafkan diri saya sendiri jika saya membuat bapak dan ibu... jatuh pingsan taksadarkan diri.”

(Ajidarma, 2011: 4)

“I won’t be able to forgive myself if I ever cause the man and woman ... to fall unconscious.”

The confession captures the protagonist’s deep guilt, a feeling that transcends emotion, embodying the psychological pain of knowing her body itself poses a threat to others. The body, ordinarily a space of self-expression and identity, is transformed into a field of danger. Her suffering thus extends beyond physical beauty into moral and emotional dimensions. Bordo (1993: 45) argues that women’s bodies often function as arenas where social and moral control is exercised. Within such a framework, the female body ceases to belong fully to the individual and instead becomes politicized, continually defined and disciplined by societal norms. This dynamic is precisely what the protagonist experiences: her body no longer represents personal identity but becomes a socially charged instrument capable of producing both desire and disaster. Every gesture she makes carries the potential for stigma, fear, and suffering.

Her pain escalates when she attempts to reclaim agency by taking a new course of action, which inadvertently unleashes mass chaos. This act demonstrates how, within patriarchal and cultural ideology, the female body can operate as both a catalyst for social disruption and a site of destruction. The intersection of personal guilt and collective panic turns her body into a symbol of the conflict between individual autonomy and the social order that seeks to contain it.

Bagaikan peraga terindah di dunia ia berjalan di atas jalur pemisah... membuat di mana-mana orang bertumbangan di jalanan, di dalam mobil, maupun sedang di atas sepeda motor karena langsung pingsan.

(Ajidarma, 2011: 5)

Like the most beautiful model in the world, she walked along the dividing line ... causing people everywhere to collapse on the streets, in cars, or on motorcycles because they fainted instantly.

This chaos in “Gubrak!” is not merely an element of absurd fiction; it operates as an allegory for how women deemed “too beautiful” become subjects of surveillance, regulation, and symbolic violence. Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991: 23) concept of invisible yet deeply destructive domination elucidates this condition. Symbolic violence occurs when women are confined within systems of judgment based on bodily appearance, transforming them into objects of control and scrutiny. Those who exceed socially sanctioned limits of “normal” beauty become threats to public order—targets of discipline rather than admiration. This dynamic is dramatized in “Gubrak!”, where the protagonist’s very presence is declared disruptive enough to warrant state intervention through an almost militaristic decree:

“Pemilik wajah cantik yang kami hormati, wajah cantik Saudara telah membuat banyak orang pingsan dan sangat mengganggu ketertiban!”

(Ajidarma, 2011: 8)

“To the esteemed owner of the beautiful face: your appearance has caused numerous citizens to faint and has severely disrupted public order!”

This command encapsulates the ultimate form of institutional surveillance over women’s bodies. The state, instead of protecting its citizens, functions as an apparatus of control, subjugating female existence through regulation and discipline. Within this logic, the individual ceases to be a human being endowed with autonomy and becomes a potential threat requiring containment. Bartky (2015: 79) similarly observes that in patriarchal societies, women’s bodies are continuously monitored, disciplined, and regulated to ensure they conform to socially acceptable limits. Their bodies become objects of socio-political

management, every gesture scrutinized to maintain the illusion of order.

The protagonist's suffering extends into the existential realm. Her powerlessness is not only social but ontological: she loses the capacity to direct her own life, as every movement is dictated by external perception. Even the act of walking to work must be meticulously planned, governed by routines designed to prevent public panic. Her body thus becomes both a psychological and social prison—a site of alienation that erases her autonomy.

Langkahnya telah diatur dan jadwal diubah sedemikian rupa supaya orang-orang tak saling bertemu, agar tak ada yang melihat wajahnya secara langsung.

(Ajidarma, 2011: 3)

Her steps were carefully planned and schedules altered so that people wouldn't meet each other, so that no one would see her face directly.

This passage marks the total collapse of self-agency. The protagonist becomes a prisoner of the label "beautiful," unable to escape the meaning imposed upon her body. In Derrida's deconstructive framework (1976: 62), the once-positive signifier "beauty" disintegrates, its meaning fragmented, deferred, and contaminated by contradiction. Beauty ceases to be purely aesthetic and instead becomes entangled with power, domination, and violence. The American Psychological Association's (2007) report on the sexualization of women in media reinforces this reading, revealing how cultural obsession with appearance produces stress, anxiety, and isolation. Ajidarma's depiction, while hyperbolic, mirrors this lived reality, laying bare the psychological cost of a culture that deifies beauty yet punishes those who embody it.

Ultimately, "Gubrak!" is not simply a work of dark absurdism but a profound critique of the beauty myth and the ideological systems that sustain it. The female protagonist embodies the tragedy of women entrapped by their own bodies, by the image imposed upon them, and by a culture that treats beauty as an absolute ideal divorced from human subjectivity. From a deconstructive perspective, Ajidarma transforms "beauty" itself into irony: a symbol once associated with admiration becomes an instrument of suffering, revealing the instability and violence embedded in patriarchal definitions of the beautiful.

Beauty as Suffering

The tragic climax of "Gubrak!" pushes the meaning of "beauty" to its most extreme and devastating point: from beauty to suffering. Within Derrida's framework of deconstruction, this suffering embodies *différance*, the endless deferral and decay of meaning, culminating in the protagonist's existential collapse. Ajidarma shows how the very beauty that society idolizes ultimately turns inward, consuming and destroying the woman who bears it. Realizing there is no escape from the torment her beauty brings, the protagonist hides in the city's sewers, where she descends into psychological disintegration. As Lestifiani and Heryana (2024: 161) note, the story illustrates humanity's inability to accept excessive beauty. In the dim solitude of the sewers, she confronts her reflection and chooses to end her suffering.

Ia tidak lagi mengagumi kecantikan wajahnya. Tangan kanannya memegang pisau setajam silet yang sedang bergerak, untuk menyayat-nyayat wajahnya sendiri.

(Ajidarma, 2011: 9)

She no longer admired the beauty of her face. Her right hand held a razor-sharp knife that moved to repeatedly slash her own face.

This act is both literal and symbolic—a violent, corporeal deconstruction of meaning. The protagonist erases the cultural and physical sign of beauty from her own body, dismantling its significance entirely. In Derridean terms, this is the *eventualité* of *différance*: meaning postponed for so long that it must be annihilated to end its suffering. The act also mirrors the violence that patriarchal societies enact upon women's bodies through rigid aesthetic control. As Naomi Wolf (1991: 91) observes, the beauty myth keeps women's bodies in a constant state of external evaluation and regulation, producing psychological strain and eroding personal freedom. The female figure in "Gubrak!" cannot live as an individual; her face, admired and feared, has become public property—monitored, controlled, and finally condemned.

In patriarchal systems, women's bodies rarely belong to themselves; they are owned by the society that watches and defines them. Ajidarma's protagonist embodies this loss of autonomy. Her beauty is no longer hers; it belongs to the public, which feels entitled to govern and, if necessary, destroy it in the

name of social stability. Her suffering thus becomes an allegory for the collective pain of women living under the tyranny of absolute beauty ideals. Denied the right to be “ordinary,” she becomes the victim of epistemic and existential violence, forms of harm that operate not only on the body but at the level of meaning, identity, and being. Fricker (2007: 1) defines epistemic violence as a form of injustice within systems of knowledge, where individuals are diminished because of who they are.

The protagonist’s mental deterioration, leading her to take refuge underground, creates an eerie parallel between social and psychological exile. Expelled from the public sphere, she is also displaced from human reality. She inhabits a world of isolation and silence—a landscape of alienation.

Dalam gorong-gorong, hanya ada suara air yang menetes dan gemuruh dari atas tanah. Tidak ada yang memandangnya. Tidak ada yang tahu ia ada di situ.

(Ajidarma, 2011: 8)

In the sewer, there was only the sound of dripping water and the rumbling from above. No one looked at her. No one knew she was there.

Here, the absence of sight signifies the erasure of existence. The woman who was once incessantly gazed upon now chooses invisibility, removing herself from the oppressive system of vision that defined her. By retreating into darkness, she symbolically withdraws from the social construction of beauty itself. Her disappearance is both annihilation and liberation—the ultimate rejection of the meaning imposed upon her. In injuring her own face, she transforms the body into the very site of deconstruction, where the idea of beauty finally collapses under the weight of its contradictions.

This phenomenon corresponds with the findings of the American Psychological Association (2007), which note that societal pressure to conform to beauty standards can lead to eating disorders, depression, and even self-harm, particularly among young women. The actions of the protagonist in Ajidarma’s story echo this psychosocial reality, though rendered in a heightened, allegorical form. Thus, “Gubrak!” transcends the boundaries of fiction to function as a social critique, exposing the dark

underside of beauty when used as an instrument of control over women.

By reversing the hierarchy of meaning, Seno Gumira Ajidarma reveals that the beauty exalted by patriarchal culture conceals its own violence and contradictions. In “Gubrak!”, beauty shifts from a symbol of perfection to one of suffering. This inversion underscores Derrida’s assertion that meaning is never fixed or singular; it is always produced within systems of power, ideology, and discourse. Through his use of irony and absurdity, Ajidarma dismantles the myth of beauty, transforming it from an unquestioned ideal into a site of tension and critique. In doing so, he opens a space for reimagining the female body, not as an object of judgment, but as a locus of resistance to the oppressive logic of aesthetic norms.

Neutralization of Meaning

The neutralization of meaning marks the stage in which a text is freed from the binary structures that have constrained it. After the dominant meaning is reversed, deconstruction does not end with inversion; it proceeds toward the dissolution of absolute categories altogether. In the context of “Gubrak!”, this process is realized through the literal erasure of the protagonist’s beauty, an act that symbolizes her rejection of the very concept of “beauty” itself.

“Ia tidak lagi mengagumi kecantikan wajahnya. Tangan kanannya memegang pisau setajam silet yang sedang bergerak, untuk menyayat-nyayat wajahnya sendiri.”

(Ajidarma, 2011: 9)

She no longer admired the beauty of her face. Her right hand held a razor-sharp knife that moved to repeatedly slash her own face.

This moment represents more than the climax of psychological tragedy; it constitutes a deconstructive gesture that disrupts the logic of meaning itself. The protagonist liberates her body from the social constructs that have turned it into an instrument of aesthetic and moral representation. She no longer participates in the dichotomies of beautiful versus ugly, good versus bad, but rejects the entire symbolic system that defines and confines her. In Derridean terms, this is the point at which *différance* reaches its fullest expression—meaning is no longer present but endlessly deferred, slipping away from final

definition (Derrida, 1997: 25). The act of cutting her face, therefore, is not merely physical but profoundly symbolic: it represents the destruction of the sign that anchors social power over women's bodies. When the face—society's visual locus of beauty—is annihilated, the entire ideological structure that sustains the concept collapses. "Gubrak!" thus ceases to be a story about beauty or its absence; it becomes a meditation on the absurdity and instability of meaning itself.

Within Derrida's framework, this stage of neutralization exposes how every seemingly coherent system of meaning harbors its own fractures and contradictions. By destroying her face, the protagonist asserts that the meaning of "beauty" cannot persist without perpetuating violence against the subject who embodies it. She refuses to serve as any kind of representation, whether as an aesthetic ideal, a moral symbol, or a patriarchal fantasy. The release of meaning enacted in "Gubrak!" therefore operates as a fundamental critique of the linguistic and ideological structures that normalize women as objects of scrutiny. In Derrida's logic, this act constitutes resistance to logocentrism—the belief in a fixed, central truth or meaning. By obliterating her face, the protagonist dismantles that center, allowing meaning to become fluid, multiple, and indeterminate.

CONCLUSION

Seno Gumira Ajidarma's short story "Gubrak!" deliberately destabilizes the established meaning of female beauty. Through Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, this study demonstrates that the notion of "beauty" in the text is neither singular nor final; it constantly shifts, contradicts itself, and resists closure. What is traditionally viewed as a positive ideal or symbol of perfection is instead transformed into a source of suffering, social burden, and existential despair.

The deconstructive reading reveals that the structure of meaning in "Gubrak!" is sustained by tension and paradox in three stages. First, uncovers oppositional pairs such as beautiful-ugly, woman-society, and normal-abnormal, which underpin patriarchal ideology in defining women's bodies. Second, exposes the reversal of hierarchy, in which "beauty," once celebrated, becomes a sign of torment and alienation. Third, culminates in the neutralization of meaning, embodied in the protagonist's destruction

of her own face—a radical rejection of all systems of signification that attempt to define and contain her.

Through this process of deconstruction, "Gubrak!" not only critiques the myth of beauty as an oppressive social construct but also exposes how language and discourse function as instruments of power over women's bodies. Ajidarma presents beauty as an unstable, ambiguous, and self-contradictory concept, compelling readers to confront the cultural narratives that equate a woman's worth with her physical form. The story thus rejects the notion of absolute beauty and situates it within an endless play of meaning, echoing Derrida's assertion that meaning in any text is always deferred, perpetually shifting, and never fully present.

STATEMENTS OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors hereby declare that this article is entirely free from any conflict of interest related to the processes of data collection, analysis, editorial handling, and publication with *Poetika: Jurnal Ilmu Sastra*. None of the authors were involved at any stage in the editorial review or decision-making process concerning this manuscript.

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