



The Image of the Main Female Character in Novel *The Most Wanted* by Meitiya: A Feminist Study by Naomi Wolf

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the image of the female main character, Vanya Callista, in the novel *The Most Wanted*, which represents both the engagement and conflict with Naomi Wolf's feminist ideology. The method used in this study is descriptive qualitative with a feminist literary criticism approach. The data source is the novel *The Most Wanted*, focusing the analysis on textual data reflecting the physical, psychological, and social images of the main character. The results show three main findings. First, physically, Vanya experiences visual commodification and is reduced to a "social accessory" due to the unilateral claim of the dominant male character (*Most Wanted*). Second, psychologically, the main character experiences psychological under-nourishment in the form of loss of privacy and social anxiety. Despite initially showing strong self-agency, the character's critical consciousness eventually succumbs to the romanticization of possessive masculine behavior within popular literary narratives. Third, socially, the main character's presence triggers female rivalry (horizontal conflict among women) which deflects criticism away from patriarchal culture and destroys sisterhood. This study concludes that the novel *The Most Wanted* reflects how the beauty myth and modern patriarchal structures operate to restrict women's space and subjugate female agency through popular literature.

Keywords: image, main female character, novel, feminist study

Citra Tokoh Utama Perempuan dalam Novel *The Most Wanted* Karya Meitiya: Kajian Feminisme Naomi Wolf

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan citra tokoh utama perempuan, Vanya Callista, dalam novel *The Most Wanted* yang merepresentasikan keterikatan sekaligus benturan terhadap ideologi feminisme Naomi Wolf. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan pendekatan kritik sastra feminis. Sumber data berupa teks novel *The Most Wanted*, dengan fokus analisis pada data tekstual yang mencerminkan citra fisik, psikologis, dan sosial tokoh utama. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga temuan utama. *Pertama*, secara fisik, tokoh Vanya mengalami komodifikasi visual dan direduksi menjadi sekadar "aksesori sosial" akibat klaim sepihak dari tokoh laki-laki dominan (*Most Wanted*). *Kedua*, secara psikologis, tokoh utama mengalami tekanan mental (*psychological under-nourishment*) berupa hilangnya privasi dan kecemasan sosial. Meskipun sempat menunjukkan agensi diri yang kuat, kesadaran kritis tokoh utama akhirnya tunduk akibat romantisasi perilaku posesif maskulin dalam narasi sastra populer. *Ketiga*, secara sosial, kehadiran tokoh utama memicu *female rivalry* (perseteruan horizontal antarperempuan) yang mengalihkan kritik terhadap budaya patriarki dan menghancurkan solidaritas sesama perempuan (*sisterhood*). Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa novel *The Most Wanted* merefleksikan bagaimana mitos kecantikan dan struktur patriarki modern bekerja dalam membatasi ruang gerak serta menundukkan agensi perempuan melalui medium sastra populer.

Kata kunci: citra, tokoh utama perempuan, novel, kajian feminisme

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesian literary works have existed since the kingdom era and continue to develop to this day. Literature as a reflection of social life does not only present stories, but also contains values, ideologies, and cultural constructions that develop in society. Literary works convey "understanding" of life in their own way (Asia et al., 2025). As a social institution, literary works are often related to ideology, including in representing gender construction. Through literary works, authors not only convey aesthetic values, but also represent social issues, including injustice and inequality that occur in society (Fitriani & Siskai, 2026). One issue often raised in literary works is the issue of women, especially related to their position, role, and image attached to them. This is also conveyed by Suprpto & Setyorini (2023) that the novel is a form of literary work that is classified as new prose and presented in complex life issues. Throughout its development, popular novels, often categorized as entertainment literature, are considered to have a very broad reach in shaping readers' perceptions of how women should ideally behave, think, and appear. Popular literary works are often considered to reflect and reinforce dominant cultural values in society, in this case related to the patriarchal cultural context that has undergone a shift in form in the modern era. Literature becomes a highly dynamic space for negotiating women's identities. Thus, in line with Abdullah et al. (2025), literary works play a role not only as a product of imagination but also as a medium for understanding social phenomena and forms of injustice experienced by humans, especially women.

This concept of differentiation between men and women is manifested in behavioral rules that limit women's participation in public spaces and must be controlled by masculine authority (Gaviota, 2021). Women are viewed as having two opposing sides. On the one hand, women are symbols of beauty whose charm can captivate men. However, on the other hand, women are perceived as weak creatures. According to Sayidina et al.

(2025), women are viewed as having two opposing sides. On the one hand, she is a symbol of beauty whose charm can captivate and hypnotize men. However, on the other hand, women are often considered weak creatures. Men are depicted as brave, strong, and powerful, while women are depicted as weak, gentle, and easily give up (Wardani & Ratih, 2020). One work that has attracted the attention of researchers and can be linked to gender construction is the novel *The Most Wanted* by Meitiya. Broadly speaking, the essence of this novel is the story of a female main character named Vanya who is obsessed with the student council president at her school, a man named Vanno. Unfortunately, Vanno does not respond to Vanya and instead Vanno often acts cold, indifferent and tends to distance himself from Vanya.

This novel features the female protagonist, Vanya Callista, who is depicted as having a complex relationship with Vanno, the student council president. This makes her a worthy object of feminist analysis. In her feminist power theory, Wolf explains that the choices women make can influence those around them and even change the world (Latifa et al., 2023). *The Most Wanted* is a narrative text that portrays women in the midst of contemporary social demands. Beneath the romance and suspense of the plot, the novel presents a construction of the image of the female protagonist who experiences the intersection between the desire to demonstrate self-autonomy and the pressure to consistently meet environmental expectations.

The setting and characteristics of the female protagonist in Meitiya's *The Most Wanted* can then be linked to Naomi Wolf's work in *The Beauty Myth*. Naomi Wolf is a pioneer of power feminism, loudly championing women's strength and resilience, strongly rejecting women's powerlessness and promoting women's roles in all areas of life (Nisak et al., 2025). In Wolf's view, beauty is not an objective quality, but rather a social construct used as a tool of political control to hinder women's advancement. As the public sphere



began to open to women, patriarchal societies tended to create stricter, unrealistic, and energy-draining beauty standards. According to Maharani and Sugiarti (2022), the myth of beauty cannot be seen as a symbol of beauty as long as women do not question their appearance. These standards function as a disciplinary mechanism that forces women to shift their attention from intellectual and social achievement to physical maintenance. This phenomenon creates a paradox: while women feel they have greater freedom, they are actually shackled by the fear of judgmental physical evaluation.

In Meitiya's novel, *The Most Wanted*, the main female character, Vanya Callista, is portrayed from an interesting perspective, where she is seemingly encouraged to become competent, assertive, and independent. However, the narrative in this novel also frequently emphasizes how the character is perceived through the male gaze and how her self-image is highly dependent on her ability to meet the prevailing aesthetic standards of her environment. This tension is particularly relevant to examine because, in popular literature, the emancipation of female protagonists is often "neutralized" by their success in conquering beauty standards. In other words, beauty is often positioned as the "primary asset" that determines the fate and success of female protagonists in achieving their goals.

Naomi Wolf, in her work entitled "The Beauty Myth," argues that when women successfully dismantle patriarchy in the public and institutional spheres, these patriarchal structures mutate and become new weapons of control related to the myth of beauty. Wolf states that social demands for unrealistic physical beauty standards are deliberately culturally constructed as a form of backlash to re-imprison women's energy, thoughts, and financial capital within physical anxieties. A woman's self-image is no longer defined by intellectual achievement, but rather by the extent to which she approaches the visual standards dictated by the market and patriarchal culture. Furthermore, image can also be defined as a

perception that leads to a person being judged favorably or unfavorably based on visual, emotional, and behavioral features (Aspriyanti et al., 2022).

The Beauty Myth is often strongly represented in the portrayal of the main female characters in the novel "Most Wanted." On the one hand, the main character might be portrayed as independent or empowered in both personal and professional spheres. However, on the other hand, the text's narrative often still ties her existence and self-validation to physical performance, the male gaze, or the need to always appear "perfect" for social recognition. This paradox between self-empowerment and subordination based on physical aesthetics triggers psychological and social tension within the main character.

Several previous studies have examined other novels similar to Meitiya's *The Most Wanted* and linked them to Naomi Wolf's feminist perspective. However, studies specifically examining Meitiya's *The Most Wanted* and Naomi Wolf's beauty myths are still very limited. Therefore, this research is crucial to uncover the extent to which popular literary texts like this novel perpetuate or break through these beauty myths. The importance of this research lies in unraveling the hidden narrative behind the main character's lifestyle. Although many readers enjoy this novel purely for entertainment, ignoring the patterns of beauty myths in the text will allow the ideology of female subordination to continue to be normalized through literature.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the image of the main female character in Meitiya's novel *The Most Wanted* using Naomi Wolf's feminist theory. Therefore, this article will conduct a critical study to describe and analyze how Naomi Wolf's beauty myth is represented in the formation of the image of the main female character in the novel *The Most Wanted*. Through this study, it is hoped that readers can see that behind the surface of the entertaining story, there is a discourse of power that still subtly limits the

space for movement and self-definition of women as whole subjects.

METHOD

This research was conducted using a qualitative descriptive approach with feminist insights. Yulianti (2018:85), Razak (2017:176) describes that qualitative descriptive methods are commonly used in social research such as in the field of linguistics.

The qualitative approach was chosen because it focuses on understanding social and humanitarian phenomena through textual interpretation, rather than statistical figures. Qualitative research is a research method that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from individuals and observable behavior. The data in this study are not bound by variables but are understood holistically within a narrative context. Meanwhile, feminist insights are used as an analytical tool to unpack gender, subordination, and the representation of women within literary texts.

This research is based on the objective of obtaining an objective picture of the image of the main female character in Meitiya's novel, "The Most Wanted." The primary data source for this study is Meitiya's novel, *The Most Wanted*, which has 208 pages. The data collected is textual, including narrative units such as dialogue excerpts, inner monologues, narrative descriptions, and the main female character's actions that indicate the influence, pressure, or internalization of the Beauty Myth. Secondary data sources were obtained from Naomi Wolf's book, "The Beauty Myth," previous scholarly journals, and critical articles as supporting material.

Data collection techniques are the methods used to gather data related to the research. The data collection techniques used in this study were reading and note-taking.

RESULTS

Three forms of imagery were found in the main female character, Vanya Callista, which

demonstrate both the connection and clash of Naomi Wolf's feminist ideology. The data are categorized into three main findings, as follows:

1. Physical Image and Visual Identity of the Main Character

According to Rizaldi & Israhayu (2023), women are individual figures formed through a long biological process. The following excerpt from the novel "The Most Wanted" shows the character Vanya having a physical image and visual identity.

Data 1

Vanya Callista, a beautiful girl who has just turned sixteen, is entering high school for the first time. (Meitiya, 2017:1)

Data 2

"Wow, you're blushing," teased Vanno, poking Vanya's cheek. (Meitiya, 2017:73)

Research data shows that the character Vanya Callista is portrayed as a representative of a high school student who lives under the shadow of the visual standardization of the urban environment. Vanya's physical characteristics are not emphasized much in this novel. The "Most Wanted" status attached to the main male character (Vanno) indirectly creates a magnetic field that forces Vanya into the radar of visual assessment by other female students and the school environment in general.

2. Psychological Image

From a psychological perspective, data revealed Vanya's inner turmoil due to one-sided objectification. The psychological manifestations that emerged include:

2.1 A sense of Pressure Due to the Loss of Privacy

Data 3

"Eh, is that Vanno's girlfriend?" (Meitiya, 2017:46)

Data 4

"That girl is always pretending!" (Meitiya, 2017:74)



Data 5

"She's so pretty! Would Nata be taken too?"
(Meitiya, 2017:135)

Vanya, who was initially just a quiet, ordinary student, suddenly became the center of attention at school. Her privacy was disturbed because wherever she went around the school grounds (corridors, cafeteria, gates), the eyes of other students were always on her. She felt constrained and uncomfortable because her movements were constantly being watched and discussed by others curious about "Vanno's new girlfriend."

2.2 Social anxiety due to being labeled as the "girlfriend" of a popular figure at school.

Data 6

"I'm pretty too!" (Meitiya, 2017:46)

Data 7

"Hey, have you heard the rumor that Vanno is dating a 10th-grader?"

"Yeah, of course. Vanno probably only dated that girl as an escape!" (Meitiya, 2017:57)

Once she became "Vanno's girlfriend," Vanya faced social pressure in the form of gossip, snide whispers, and even hidden intimidation from other students (especially die-hard fans or Vanno's social circle). Social anxiety emerged, including fear of judgment, insecurity due to comparisons, and fear of interpersonal conflict with those who dislike her being around Vanno.

2.3 A strong desire to maintain control over her body and personal choices (self-agency).

Data 8

"If I appoint you as my girlfriend, then from now on, you're my girlfriend!" Vanno said no less sharply.

"Uh, I-I can't," Vanya said. (page (Meitiya, 2017:42)

Vanya consistently rejects Vanno's dominance and coercion. She feels that her relationship status, who she interacts with, and her decisions are her own prerogative (self-agency). Vanya's strong rejection at the beginning of the story demonstrates

her psychological state of refusing to be an "object" of ownership and striving to maintain full control over her personal choices.

3. Social Image: Conflict of Power Relations and Female Rivalry

This conflict arises from the birth of the beauty myth in society, which limits women's space. This limitation of women's movement is caused by a misunderstanding of the image of beauty, which leads to a conflict over the meaning of the beauty myth itself.

Data 9

"Hey, listen, you shameless girl! I'm warning you to stay away from Vanno! If possible, break up with him! Because Vanno still has a girlfriend he's waiting for. If you don't want to get hurt, you'd better listen to what I say. STAY AWAY FROM VANNO!" Dita, the woman, pulled Vanya's hair roughly, making her cry out in pain. (Meitiya, 2017:102)

Data 10

The hair pulling became tighter, causing Vanya to groan in pain. "Just do what I want! And you won't be hurt if you find out Vann will choose someone old! Instead of someone new like you! You're just being used as a scapegoat!" ((Meitiya, 2017:103)

Data 11

"WOW, YOU'RE SO CONFIDENT!" A slap flew freely across Vanya's cheek. The girl's tears could no longer be held back. (Meitiya, 2017:103)

Data 12

"Stay away from Vanno! Because your competition isn't just Kinan! But me too!" she sarcastically said, and then she pushed Vanya hard on the shoulder. (Meitiya, 2017:103)

Data 13

"You've become such a flirt! Vanno left you, and Nata left you! You're such a cheap woman!" Dita firmly grabbed Vanya's hair, causing strands of it to become disheveled. (Meitiya, 2017:138)

Data 14

"Girls, do it quickly!" Dita ordered her two maids. Without warning, the two girls doused Vanya with

a bucket of water, after which the three of them left, leaving Vanya lying on the ground in a miserable state. (Meitiya, 2017:139)

The results of this study socially indicate that Vanya's presence in the main circle of the school triggered polarization of relations between women (female rivalry). Textual data demonstrates rejection, verbal intimidation, and cynicism from other female characters who feel their social privileges are threatened by Vanya's presence.

DISCUSSION

The Beauty Myth and the Commodification of Vanya's Physical Image

The primary purpose of the beauty myth is to deceive and oppose women's advancement in various spheres of life (Muayyanah et al., 2022). Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth*, states that beauty is not a purely aesthetic value, but rather a political currency used to control women. Beauty is not only viewed objectively by individuals but is also perceived as something that women worldwide must attain, regardless of the diversity of their body shapes or personal desires (Rahmadita et al., 2025). In the novel, *The Most Wanted*, Vanya Callista's body and physical image undergo a process of social commodification after Vanno unilaterally claims her, when he makes a dominant statement.

Vanya is no longer seen as a complete human being with intellectual or emotional capacities, but rather becomes merely a "social accessory" to complement Vanno's *Most Wanted* status. The school environment acts as a special place that assesses whether Vanya's physique is "worthy" of standing alongside the school idol. In accordance with Wolf's view, when legal or economic systems begin to grant women freedom, in this case Vanya's freedom as a new student, modern patriarchal structures shift to using the constraints of physical image to restrict her freedom of movement.

Psychological Undernourishment and Mental Pressure

Wolf explains that the most devastating impact of beauty myths and social standardization is the

destruction of women's psychological well-being. This is also conveyed by Hutabalian et al. (2022), who argue that the depiction of women's psychological image can be examined in terms of how they manage their inner emotions. They are forced to experience constant anxiety to appear obedient and attractive. In the analysis of Vanya's character, this psychological pressure emerges in the form of internal resistance to Vanno's ego control. When forced into an unwanted romantic scenario, Vanya experiences psychological injustice. The main character expresses her deep irritation through internal monologues and verbal rejection.

However, the structure of popular literature often traps female characters in terms of acceptance in the name of "romanticism." Wolf strongly criticized this phenomenon, noting that popular culture has a strong tendency to frame possessive, coercive, and dominant male behavior as a special form of affection. When Vanya slowly begins to accept Vanno's treatment, this is where the hegemony of this myth successfully subverts women's critical consciousness. Vanya's character, initially portrayed as assertive, independent, and possessing complete control over herself, is forced to give in and become weak.

Female Rivalry as a Strategy to Break Down Women's Solidarity

One of Naomi Wolf's important writings is that the beauty myth is deliberately maintained to destroy solidarity between women (sisterhood). The turmoil of conflicting images of beauty over the years has led to demands for women to appear more attractive in various ways (Hajjah and Rengganis, 2022). This statement also aligns with the thoughts of Triani and Tjahjono (2023) that facial beauty is paramount to meeting female beauty standards. Women are encouraged to view each other with suspicion and competition, vying for validation from male subjects. This dynamic is clearly visible in Vanya's social interactions with other students at her school. Vanya's presence near Vanno immediately sparks negative sentiment and verbal bullying from Vanno's circle of admirers.



CONCLUSION

Based on the research and discussion, it can be concluded that Naomi Wolf's feminist study of Meitiya's novel, *The Most Wanted*, relates to Wolf's theory regarding the image of the main female character, Vanya Callista, which then yields three main conclusions. First, the reduction of value through physical image. The "Most Wanted" label attached to the dominant male character functions as a patriarchal instrument that undermines Vanya's independence, as she must meet the visual standards of appropriateness in the school environment. Second, Vanya's internal conflict and social anxiety indicate psychological pressure resulting from a loss of self-confidence. Third, the destruction of solidarity through female rivalry, namely the feud between Vanya and other female students, reinforces Wolf's belief in the breakdown of sisterhood. The patriarchal environment in the novel successfully shifts criticism of the male character's arrogance into a competition between female females for existential validation.

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