E-ISSN: 3031-8521
P-ISSN: 3032-1867
Halaman 3557-3566
Volume 3 Nomor 4 Tahun 2026

Gender, Negative Affect, and Critique of Positivity in an Indonesian Woman's English Poetry

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Abstract

Instapoetry is frequently described as a "selfie-help" genre that turns pain into healing, self-love and positivity. This study looks at how an Indonesian woman author-illustrator writing in English engages with that template and whether voicing negative feeling is in itself a critique of it. Using feminist critical discourse analysis, systemic functional transitivity and visual grammar, read through postfeminist and feminist affect theory, the study codes all 57 textual and visual units in a partial digital copy of Lala Bohang's *The Book of Forbidden Feelings* (2016) at three levels: poem, clause and visual element. Negative affect is the dominant orientation in the corpus, though it is rarely accompanied by explicit critique. Only a small number of units contain a direct critique of positivity, and these take different forms: rejection via the language of individual choice, a self-implicating account of positivity as a commodity, and a symmetrical claim that positivity is just as hard to master as negativity. The poems that criticise systems and routines never imagine a collective way out. Attempts at self-regulation are shown to fail, and a few poems repeat familiar gender binaries. In the drawings, male lovers become commodities, but only on a handful of pages. Intimate and transgressive material is written in English, while the few Indonesian words left untranslated are mostly the names of foods. Voicing negative feeling, then, is not in itself a form of resistance; whether it becomes critique depends on how a poem frames it, in its grammar and in its images.

Keywords: *gender, negative affect, critique, positivity*

Abstrak

Instapoetry sering digambarkan sebagai genre “selfie-help” yang mengubah penderitaan menjadi proses penyembuhan, cinta terhadap diri sendiri (self-love), dan pemikiran positif. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana seorang penulis sekaligus ilustrator perempuan asal Indonesia yang menulis dalam bahasa Inggris berinteraksi dengan pola tersebut, serta apakah pengungkapan perasaan negatif itu sendiri dapat dianggap sebagai bentuk kritik terhadapnya. Dengan menggunakan analisis wacana kritis feminis (feminist critical discourse analysis), sistem transitivitas linguistik fungsional (systemic functional transitivity), dan tata bahasa visual (visual grammar), yang dianalisis melalui perspektif teori postfeminisme dan teori afek feminis, penelitian ini mengodekan seluruh 57 unit tekstual dan visual dalam salinan digital parsial karya Lala Bohang berjudul The Book of Forbidden Feelings (2016) pada tiga tingkatan, yaitu puisi, klausa, dan elemen visual. Afek negatif menjadi orientasi yang dominan dalam korpus penelitian, meskipun jarang disertai kritik secara eksplisit. Hanya sejumlah kecil unit yang memuat kritik langsung terhadap pemikiran positif, dan kritik tersebut muncul dalam bentuk yang berbeda-beda, yaitu penolakan melalui bahasa pilihan individual, penggambaran pemikiran positif sebagai komoditas yang turut melibatkan diri penulis, serta pernyataan simetris bahwa menguasai pemikiran positif sama sulitnya dengan menguasai pemikiran negatif. Puisi-puisi yang mengkritik sistem dan rutinitas tidak pernah membayangkan adanya jalan keluar secara kolektif. Upaya pengendalian diri digambarkan mengalami

kegagalan, sementara beberapa puisi lainnya justru mengulang kembali dikotomi gender yang sudah lazim. Dalam ilustrasinya, sosok kekasih laki-laki digambarkan sebagai komoditas, tetapi penggambaran tersebut hanya ditemukan pada beberapa halaman. Materi yang bersifat intim dan transgresif (melampaui norma atau batasan sosial) ditulis dalam bahasa Inggris, sedangkan beberapa kata dalam bahasa Indonesia yang tidak diterjemahkan sebagian besar merupakan nama-nama makanan. Dengan demikian, pengungkapan perasaan negatif tidak serta-merta merupakan bentuk perlawanan. Apakah pengungkapan tersebut dapat menjadi sebuah kritik bergantung pada bagaimana puisi membingkainya, baik melalui struktur gramatikal maupun representasi visualnya.

Kata kunci: *gender, afek negatif, kritik, pemikiran positif.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, Instagram has become a major site of literary production. Instapoetry is a genre in which very short, highly pared-down poems are posted against plain or illustrated backdrops, reaching an audience that print poetry rarely reaches (Knox, 2024; Pâquet, 2019). (Pâquet, 2019) describes the appeal of the genre as "selfie-help", combining the confessional intimacy of the selfie with the consolatory tone of self-help. Later work has seen it as a platform genre in which algorithmic visibility and the influencer economy play a significant role (Knox, 2024; Kovalik & Curwood, 2019; Penke, 2023). The field has been expanded beyond English-speaking poets, with Evans (2023) reading Spanish instapoets as part of contemporary feminist movements, Soelseth (2023) tracing the way in which one Norwegian instapoet's work moves beyond the platform into print and other material forms, and Knox (2024) looking at the move towards video-based Reel poetry. That said, the scholarship is still largely European and North American, and its methodologies are still predominantly literary or cultural, with little systematic analysis of how clauses, participants and images encode claims of empowerment or vulnerability.

The Indonesian case makes these gaps harder to ignore. In October 2026 the country had about 128 million Instagram users (NapoleonCat, 2026), and English is a common resource for self-presentation among educated young users (Sugiarto & Manara, 2026). Some Indonesian women write poetry in English, and Lala Bohang is one of them. Born in Makassar in 1985 and raised in Palu, she is an architecture graduate of Parahyangan University and has exhibited her visual art since 2009. She has been combining English-language poetry with drawing, in print and on Instagram, for around ten years (Bohang, 2016; Thee, 2016). Her first book, The Book of Forbidden Feelings (2016), was republished in 2026 with a new cover (Gramedia, 2026) and adopts the short, illustrated and confessional form of instapoetry in a printed book. Whether such books count as Indonesian literature is not settled either. In 2018 the Jakarta Globe ran a piece, later picked up by Malay Mail, that put exactly this question to its readers (Globe, 2018). Research into the digital self-presentation of Indonesian women has so far focused mainly on religion and commerce (Beta, 2019) and on the construction of multilingual identity (Sugiarto & Manara, 2026), rather than on literary writing.

On Instagram, women are told not only how to look but also how to feel. (Tiusanen, 2023) found that a women's wellness community expects its members to be grateful, kind to themselves and empowered, and Calder-Dawe et al., (2025) show influencers teaching their followers to stay positive and resilient. Despite its promise of liberation, body positivity nevertheless trades in exposure and sales (Suren, 2024). Social media made the young women interviewed by Chowdhury et al. (2026) feel inadequate and guilty, but they also described working on their own emotions to feel better about themselves. These findings resonate with Gill’s (2007) understanding of postfeminism as a sensibility of individual choice, self-surveillance, and the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas, and Banet-Weiser’s (2018) observation

that popular feminism is most widespread when it is marketable and concerned with individual confidence. Fan (2025) provides an insightful detail: women influencers often feel their relationships with brands are personal obligations, and feel bad when they do not deliver. Feminist affect theory helps to make sense of this kind of feeling. Ahmed (2010) argues that happiness is held out as a promise, pointing people towards the "right" objects and life choices, while the feminist killjoy refuses that promise and exposes what it covers up. Berlant (2011) uses the term cruel optimism for attachments to a good life that end up blocking the very flourishing they promise. Ngai (2005) is interested in smaller, "ugly" feelings such as envy and irritation, which signal that something is stuck but offer no release. Cvetkovich (2012), finally, reads everyday despair as a public feeling that can tell us something about political conditions. Following these authors, this study does not assume that negative affect is counter-discursive in itself.

To ground the discussion in textual evidence, the study draws on feminist critical discourse analysis, which examines how gendered assumptions are both reproduced and contested in discourse (Lazar, 2007), systemic functional transitivity (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), van Leeuwen's (2008) framework of social actor representation and the grammar of visual design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). Transitivity has long been used in feminist stylistics to show how women's agency and lack of agency are constructed at the level of the clause (Burton, 1982; Mills, 1995; Simpson, 1993; Wareing, 1994). Why might a poet choose English at all? Studies of bilingual speakers suggest that a language learned later in life can feel less raw, which makes it easier to write about taboo or painful things (Dewaele, 2016; Pavlenko, 2005), and translingual writers often describe it as freeing (Kellman, 2000). The choice also carries weight in Indonesia, which (Kachru, 1985) places in the Expanding Circle: English has no official role there, so a poet who writes in it is opting in. Writers who work this way seldom keep their languages apart, however; as (Canagarajah, 2013) and (Dovchin et al., 2025) point out, they tend to blend them.

These strands have rarely been brought together to examine how negative affect is linguistically and visually constructed in English-language literary work by women from the Global South. Little has been done to consider whether the very act of expressing negative feeling is necessarily a critique of the discourses of positivity and self-improvement that underpin contemporary digital femininity. This article therefore explores how the speaker and others are constructed through transitivity and modality, how the illustrations, page design and paratext relate to those constructions, how negative affect is positioned in relation to discourses of positivity and self-improvement, and where Indonesian lexis appears in an otherwise English text. It proposes negative-affect feminism as an analytical proposition to be tested rather than as an established category: negative affect becomes feminist critique only when it is grammatically and visually framed as a response to identifiable norms.

METHOD

This is a qualitative single-text case study (Stake, 1995) of The Book of Forbidden Feelings (Bohang, 2016), an illustrated collection of short poems and prose poems in English published by Gramedia Pustaka Utama. The book was selected as a purposive case because it is the debut poetry collection of an established Indonesian woman poet-illustrator writing in English and because it adopts the form associated with instapoetry. The analysis is based on the digital copy available to the researcher, a set of 73 photographed page images. The front and back matter (five images) and three duplicate photographs have been excluded, and two images that each show two printed pages have been counted twice. The remainder of the copy comprises 67 distinct printed pages between pp. 11 and 147, of which 66 contain the coded units and one is an illustration facing a coded unit (p. 139). Seventy pages in that range are missing and could not be obtained. The corpus is therefore partial, and the findings concern only the units that

have been analysed. Page references are to the printed page numbers; where no page number is visible, the inferred page is given in square brackets.

Units were defined by an explicit rule. All fragments on a single page formed one unit, together with any accompanying illustration. Text spanning pages formed one unit only if it was grammatically dependent (a non-finite continuation, an ellipsis or a linking conjunction) or if a reference could be resolved only on the previous page. Pages that were merely pictures were classified as units, because the meaning in the book relies on the relationship between text and image. All 57 identifiable units on the available pages were coded, and none was excluded; the frequencies provided below are based on these 57 units. Purposive selection was only used at the reporting stage. Focal units were selected for in-depth discussion if they displayed negative affect or ambivalence, constructed gender relations or power, showed a significant verbal–visual relationship, contained a critique of norms or of the culture of positivity, or reproduced gender norms or otherwise contradicted the emerging argument. The last criterion was applied intentionally so that contradictory material would be discussed rather than excluded. Of the 26 units discussed in depth, 9 were read as supporting a reading of negative affect as critique, 12 as complicating that reading and 5 as contradicting it; these are the researcher's interpretive judgements, with the rationale for each recorded.

Coding was done at three levels. At the poem level, each unit was assigned a single dominant discursive strategy, a theme, a language-choice code and an analytical memo. At the clause level, each textual unit was divided into ranking clauses, which were coded for process type, participant roles, speaker role, mood, modality and the realisation of other participants. The basis of any gender attribution was recorded as stated, implied by the text, suggested by the image or paratext, or unstated, and first- and second-person pronouns were not assumed to be gendered. Verbless fragments were recorded but not included in the transitivity counts. At the visual level, the illustrations and page design were coded separately for depicted participants, gaze, salience, labels and image–text relations, so that the visual evidence could confirm, extend or contradict the verbal reading. The strategies were then grouped into six families, and each claim was checked against the clause-level evidence, the visual evidence and the negative cases in a findings matrix.

The coding was undertaken by one researcher, and no intercoder agreement is claimed. Rigour was pursued through the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020): controlled coding labels, cross-layer checking (in which a reading that was not supported was either amended or dropped), negative case analysis and an audit trail of all coding decisions. The coding workbook, findings matrix, image map and audit trail are available as supplementary material. Quotations from the book are used only to the extent necessary for scholarly analysis, and illustrations are described rather than reproduced, in accordance with the research exception in Indonesian copyright law (Law No. 28 of 2014 on Copyright, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All 57 units fall into six families of dominant strategy (Table 1). As each unit has only one dominant code, the table shows where the corpus places its emphasis rather than whether a particular feature is present.

Table 1. Distribution of the 57 units across families of dominant strategy

Strategy family	Units (n)	Share (%)
A. Agency and gender representation	8	14
B. Critique (explicit, structural, parodic or visual)	12	21
C. Negative affect and ambivalence	26	46
D. Self-regulation	6	11
E. Reproduction of norms	2	4

F. Humour and deflation	3	5
Total	57	100*

** Percentages do not sum to 100 because of rounding.*

The speaker's gender is explicitly stated in only two units. Elsewhere, a female speaker is inferred from the recurring female figure and the paratext, and that inference is treated as such. At the clause level, the speaker is a Senser (21 clauses in 9 units) about as often as an Actor (17 clauses in 8 units) and is fairly frequently a Carrier of attributes (17 clauses in 6 units). The difference lies less in how often she acts than in what her actions concern. In the poem about the kind of love she avoids (p. 13), all five perceptive clauses carry the ability modal *can*, so that she foresees the partner's departure, while her material processes are acts of touch that in turn trigger perception. In the sequence on the smell of former lovers (pp. 19–[21]), the men are collectivised and reduced to bodies and smells, and the speaker's agency is that of a hostess; the pun "bed and breakfast" frames the home as a guesthouse for transient men. In the cleaning-day poem (p. 33), the addressee looks for work, decides and goes, whereas the speaker is the Actor in four domestic clauses, two of which are ergative and background her further. Others act predominantly by leaving: the speaker is the Goal of *leave* in the poems of abandonment (pp. 19–[21], 45–47, 56) and a displaced Phenomenon in the comparisons in which she is loved less than work, travel, the internet and an iPhone (pp. 23, 25). The pattern has limits: she also names and defines (p. 27), the addressee's gender is not stated in most units, and in the poem on negotiated intimacy (p. 68) agency is shared.

These results both confirm and qualify feminist-stylistic work on transitivity. Burton's (1982) analysis of the electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) passage in Plath's *The Bell Jar* shows how the nurse, the doctor and electricity dominate the material processes that affect the protagonist, while her own actions are largely limited, ineffective or self-directed; it also shows that simply counting Actors is not sufficient. Wareing (1994) provides a related example, in which the assertive heroine is returned to a position of passivity in the romantic encounter. In the present corpus, the asymmetry is one of kind rather than frequency. The speaker's material processes cluster around touch, care and domestic work, whereas those of others cluster around departure and mobility. Perception with *can* also affords her epistemic agency, construing her as the one who anticipates the partner's departure. In Burton's account, by contrast, the protagonist's mental processes chiefly establish her perspective on actions performed by others.

The images partly extend and partly reverse the verbal patterns. On p. 18, male heads in profile are mounted on perfume bottles whose labels satirise sex and romance as product features ("hit & run", "one night tester"). The arrangement turns the men into interchangeable commodities and reverses, on this page and in the following sequence, the commodifying gaze usually directed at women. Elsewhere, however, female figures are depicted undressed or turned away, and the recurring figure with a bob haircut appears from behind or in private spaces. Before a mirror framed by watching eyes (p. 26), she can be read as engaging in the self-surveillance that Gill (2007)associates with the postfeminist subject, although a suitcase in the image supports an alternative reading of a relationship's aftermath. The visual salience of the images also carries evaluation independently of the text: on p. [28], the emotions are potted plants, envy is in one of the largest pots, love and joy are small cacti, and a label ironises authenticity. On p. 42, happiness is a packaged product, an image that resonates with Ahmed’s (2010) happy objects. The author page, with its mirror selfie, bob haircut and Instagram handle, is the clearest paratextual basis for linking the recurring figure to the author persona.

Negative affect is the most prevalent orientation: 26 of the 57 units (46%) are dominated by negative or ambivalent feeling. In most of these units, however, affect and critique are separate. Envy, craving, overwhelm, mistakes and solitude are expressed without any evaluation of the norms that might have produced them (pp. [39], 43, 45–47, 56, 125). Some units even contain the judgement that a critical reading would expect

them to resist: the poem about eating in private (p. 43) voices appetite but calls it "disgusting", so that transgression and shame are both present. The interior on p. 34 is full of labelled negative objects and presents negative affect as the furniture of everyday life rather than as a stance against something.

Explicit critique of positivity is rare and takes different forms. On p. 66, an existential clause denies that there is anything good about strength and positivity, but the critique is delivered through eleven repetitions of "we choose" and the imperative to "choose void", the language of individual choice that Gill (2007) identifies as postfeminist. On p. 138, the most forceful critique ties perfection and positivity to the belief that they are the keys to success and happiness, and to an economy in which "they" keep selling and "you" keep buying. The sellers are never named, and positivity is located in every word read and every work created, so that the critique implicates the reader, the text itself and the artist's own field. On p. 126, two parallel sentences state that conquering negativity and conquering positivity both "take forever", a symmetry that does not privilege the negative. Envy is treated inconsistently: it is ironically cultivated on p. [28], presented as a harm of positivity on p. 66 and listed among the negativities to be conquered on p. 126. Some critiques are directed at structures. On pp. 50–51, body parts act without any "I" and are followed by a passive in which set-ups, destiny and systems are the Agent; on pp. 54–55, systems are conative Actors "trying to help" whose makers are suppressed; and other units criticise zero-sum reciprocity (p. 73) and routine (p. 109). None of these critiques envisages a collective alternative. The resolutions are individual, through choosing void (p. 66) or valuing nothingness as a project that requires courage and planning (pp. 136–137), and the logic of achievement remains: work and achievement are presented as objects of gratitude (p. [132]).

It would be easy to read a collection so full of bad feeling as the mirror image of instapoetry's self-help mode (Pâquet, 2019; Mackay & Knox, 2024), but the poems do not bear that reading out. Many of them sit closer to what Ngai (2005) calls ugly feelings: they register that something is stuck, and then stay there. When a poem does push back, it recalls Ahmed's (2010) feminist killjoy or Berlant's (2011) cruel optimism, yet it never turns that bad feeling into a shared, public grievance of the kind Cvetkovich (2012) has in mind. If gratitude and positivity are rules that Instagram teaches women to follow (Tiusanen, 2023; Calder-Dawe et al., 2025), a poem expressing envy or emptiness breaks those rules without necessarily questioning them. The young women interviewed by Chowdhury et al., (2026) show a similar mix: they feel bad about themselves, and they keep working on themselves. Unlike the Spanish instapoets studied by Evans (2023), whose poems are part of collective feminist action, the critique here is predominantly individual, implicit and self-implicating. Negative-affect feminism is thus useful not as a category for labelling poems but as a way of asking when and through what resources negative feeling becomes critical: an evaluative clause that names the norm (p. 66), an economy named as the source of that norm (p. 138) or a parallel structure that refuses to rank feelings (p. 126). In this corpus, the proposition holds for a few units and fails for many more, and this unevenness is itself the finding.

Self-regulation is mostly staged and shown to be limited. In the body–soul poem (p. [35]), the soul is a Sayer who alternates between motivational slogans and the judgement that the speaker is not good enough, and it is also the Actor that kills the speaker's confidence. On the first date of p. 96, the contrast between what the speaker wanted to say and what she actually said shows curiosity being replaced by a compliment on appearance, and the memories that haunt her defeat her effort to forget (p. 106). Body and soul are again presented as separate voices (pp. [35], 63, 110), and the inner division is left unresolved, which can be read alongside Gill's (2007) account of postfeminist self-monitoring. A healing script proper is very rare, with only one unit reframing a fall as a flight (p. [64]). Some units also reproduce gender norms. The poem on female friendship (pp. 40–41) makes a categorical claim about women and pairs each positive term with a negative one, with no irony marker. The three-column poem on p.

74 sets out a binary in which women want safety and polite sex and men want experiment and wild sex, although the conclusion is placed in quotation marks. An earlier reading of the purity sequence (pp. 80–87) as an echo of gendered or religious purity norms is not tenable: purity is located at birth, and attachment and desire are the Actors that destroy it.

Humour is a distinct strategy. A nursery-rhyme quatrain (p. [116]) departs from its model from the second line and ends with a speaker alone in her room who describes herself as "overly negative"; a single question on a black page asks the addressee to stop being "so basic" (p. [140]); and on p. 147 the highest form of love is identified with letting one's partner choose where to eat. The target of the humour is often left implicit, which keeps it open-ended. Instagram itself turns up inside the poems. On a first date the speaker holds back from talking about likes, followers and perfect selfies (p. 96); elsewhere she openly enjoys watching other people on Instagram and envying them (p. 99), suggests posting quote images to get back at an ex (p. [101]), and asks a lover how many hours a day they spend on social media (p. [130]). In its short formats, its subjects and its author page, the text is part of the culture that made instapoetry popular. Influencer studies link status and intimacy to emotional labour online (Bainotti, 2024; Fan, 2025; Glatt, 2024). Read with these studies in mind, the critique on p. 138, which implicates the reader and the text itself, looks like an admission of complicity, although it tells us nothing about Bohang's own working life. Nadegger et al., (2024) make a similar point about poetic satire on Instagram, which can expose platform norms that usually go unnoticed.

The units are almost entirely in English. Untranslated Indonesian is sparse and consists mainly of food: Teh Botol and siomay (pp. 42–43), mantau (p. [37]) and Lontong Cap Gomeh (p. 68). Other food items are translated or anglicised (chicken porridge, meatballs, chicken noodles, coconut ice, satay). Topics that are sensitive in Indonesian public discourse, such as irreverent talk about God and the Prophet (pp. 45–47), implied sex (p. 68) and self-destructive desire (p. [101]), are all voiced in English. This pattern is consistent with the view that a later-learned language provides emotional distance and creative freedom (Dewaele, 2016; Kellman, 2000; Pavlenko, 2005). It is also in keeping with the notion of translingual meshing (Canagarajah, 2013), in which a few Indonesian words ground an English voice in the everyday world, and it extends to literary writing the observation that Indonesian users treat language choice as a resource for self-presentation (Sugiarto & Manara, 2026). With no interview or reception data available, these patterns can be interpreted only as effects of the text rather than as evidence of the author's intention or of the profile of her readers.

The study has its limitations. It is based on a single collection and a partial corpus, so its contribution lies in the depth of analysis and in a proposition that can be tested on other texts, rather than in any generalisation to the whole book or to Indonesian women's writing in English. The coding was done by one researcher, several page numbers are inferred, and reader reception is not examined. Future work could examine the full edition, compare it with the author's later collections and with Indonesian-language poetry by women, and investigate reader response.

CONCLUSION

In the 57 available units of *The Book of Forbidden Feelings*, the speaker senses about as often as she acts, but her actions concern touch, care and domestic work, while others act chiefly by leaving. Negative affect is pervasive, yet explicit critique of positivity is rare and divergent, structural critiques end in individual resolutions, and some gender norms are reproduced. Negative affect is not inherently counter-discursive: its critical force depends on its grammatical and visual framing. Researchers and teachers of English literature in Indonesia can use this three-layer procedure to read digital-era poetry critically rather than as self-expression alone.

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