

## Negotiating Home and Exile: A Diasporic Reading of Dewi Anggraeni's *Journeys through Shadows*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Dewi Anggraeni's *Journeys through Shadows* as a literary portrayal of Indonesian women's diasporic experience in Australia. The problem addressed in this study is the limited critical attention given to the relationship between diasporic identity, gendered power, cultural displacement, and indigenous Javanese spirituality in Indonesian-Australian migrant narratives. This study aims to analyze how the novel represents Maryati's search for home, identity, and belonging within the unequal social and cultural space of migration. Using qualitative textual analysis and close reading, the study examines the novel's narrative structure, characterization, language, imagery, and recurring motifs through postcolonial, feminist postcolonial, diaspora, decolonial, and cultural identity perspectives. The findings show that Maryati's diasporic identity is shaped by linguistic alienation, limited social power, gendered dependency, spiritual displacement, and psychological trauma. The novel does not present her identity as fixed or fully assimilated, but as caught between Javanese cultural memory and Australian social expectations. Javanese spiritual practices, such as *nyul* and *sesajen*, appear as forms of cultural continuity and quiet resistance rather than as superstition or exotic background. Maryati's marriage also reveals how gender, race, language, and respectability affect the agency and vulnerability of migrant women. The implication of this study is that *Journeys through Shadows* contributes to Southeast Asian diasporic literary studies by showing that diaspora should not be read only as geographical displacement, but also as a cultural, emotional, gendered, and epistemological struggle.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Displacement, Feminism, Identity, Migration

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## INTRODUCTION

Migration and diaspora have emerged as central motifs in contemporary literary narratives, reflecting the dynamic and often fraught experiences of identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation that characterize global mobility today. This is especially evident in Southeast Asian literature, where postcolonial histories, socio-political upheavals, and transnational movements intersect to create complex stories of displacement and hybridity (Ang, 2025). Within this rich literary landscape, Dewi Anggraeni's *Journeys through Shadows* (Anggraeni, 1998) stands out as a poignant exploration of these themes through the lived experience of Maryati, a poor Javanese woman who migrates to Australia in search of a better life. The novel foregrounds Maryati's precarious position between "home" and "exile," a liminal space where physical geography, cultural memory, and emotional attachment converge and conflict. Anggraeni's narrative thus captures the emotional turbulence and cultural dissonance intrinsic to diasporic life. This novel poignantly depicts Maryati's emotional and cultural struggles as she grapples with the profound loss of separation from her child left behind in Java, her fraught marriage with an Australian man, and the experience of cultural dislocation in a foreign land. Anggraeni's narrative encompasses not only the tangible hardships of geographical displacement but also the intense psychological, spiritual, and identity conflicts that shape Maryati's diasporic existence.

A distinctive feature of the novel is its deep engagement with indigenous Javanese spirituality, visions, ancestral spirits, and sorcery, which serve as counterpoints to the dominant Western rationalist worldview that Maryati encounters in Australia. This spiritual dimension functions both as a mode of cultural remembrance and resistance, enriching the novel's examination of hybridity and identity negotiation in a postcolonial diasporic context. Anggraeni's use of a multilingual narrative style, weaving Indonesian, Javanese, and English, reflects the fractured and layered nature of migrant identity and cultural memory. Anggraeni's writing captures the nuances of multicultural life by bringing Indonesian perspectives and feelings into stories of cultural misunderstanding, class conflict, and Javanese mystical power (Crown, 2002). By addressing themes such as gendered power dynamics, racial and cultural marginalization, and psychological trauma, *Journeys through Shadows* novel extends Indonesian diasporic literature's scope and deepens the understanding of postcolonial migrant subjectivities navigating liminal spaces between tradition and modernity, home and exile.

Maryati's journey is not merely one of geographical displacement but an ongoing negotiation of identity, power, and belonging within a postcolonial context marked by lingering colonial legacies, racialized hierarchies, and patriarchal constraints. While much scholarship addresses broader themes of migration and hybridity, there remains a significant gap in examining how *Journeys through Shadows* novel uniquely articulates the

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experiences of Indonesian migrant women negotiating power structures, cultural memory, and spiritual identity in Western diasporic spaces. The novel effectively tackles the "cultural and circumstantial confusion" that typically results from resettlement abroad (Sharrad, 1999).

Dewi Anggraeni, born in Jakarta in 1945, is an Indonesian writer, academic, and journalist who later became an Australian citizen. Her work moves across fiction, non-fiction, translation, and journalism, and often reflects her long engagement with Indonesian and Australian cultural contexts. In much of her writing, Anggraeni pays attention to migration, gender, cultural encounter, and the emotional difficulties faced by Indonesians living across borders (Ommundsen, 2005). In *Journeys through Shadows*, these concerns appear through Maryati's experience as a Javanese woman who must negotiate marriage, language, cultural displacement, and spiritual belief in Australia. Her non-fiction works, including *Breaking the Stereotype: Chinese Indonesian Women Tell Their Stories* and *Dreamseekers: Indonesian Women as Domestic Workers in Asia*, also show her interest in women's experiences, minority identities, and migration. Ethnicity shapes the way Indonesian diaspora writers represent Australia, particularly in relation to memory, exclusion, and social healing, including Anggraeni (Anggraeni, 2017; Wulandari, 2019). Anggraeni's diaspora writing experience is defined by her navigation of multiple cultural identities and a critical, often skeptical, investigation into the role of the successful migrant within global power structures. As a Southeast Asian Australian author, her work frequently "gestures outside" the Australian nation to engage with her Indonesian homeland, focusing on the "unhomely" experience (Giffard-Foret, 2016). Her narratives are primarily concerned with the migratory experience from Southeast Asian countries, specifically Indonesia, to Australia, reflecting her own intercultural lifestyle. By charting her characters' movements through locations like Singapore, Indonesia, and Australia, she explores dislocated experiences and the individual's search for identity to represent double identity and the conflict between Eastern myths and Western rationalism. Anggraeni utilizes these varied settings to frame Australia as a site of self-realization and empowerment where her characters can navigate ancient prophecies while gaining the liberty to decide the direction of their own lives (Astuti, 2014). Her role as an important journalist and cultural mediator between Indonesia and Australia (Sharrad, 1999) further informs her insightful literary voice that can be read as part of a broader Indonesian diasporic discourse that links migration, memory, gender, and cultural identity.

Diaspora studies offer a useful framework for examining displacement, hybridity, and the reconstruction of identity. More recent scholarships have moved away from earlier typological models and instead understands diasporic life as fluid, relational, and continuously negotiated. Diaspora is no longer seen only as a movement from one homeland to another place of settlement, but as a condition shaped by memory, attachment, mobility,

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digital connection, and transnational politics ([Sahoo, 2021](#); [Tsagarousianou, 2017](#)). In Asian Australian writing, this negotiation often takes place across several cultural locations: Australia, ancestral Asian homelands, and the wider space of global English. Ommundsen describes this process as a form of “triangulation,” in which Australia is not always the stable center of identity, but may become a shifting point within wider regional and global relations ([Wenche, 2012](#)).

Scholarship on the Indonesian–Australian context has also drawn on Stuart Hall’s concept of articulation to understand diasporic identity as an ongoing process of expression, connection, and negotiation. This perspective is useful because it shows that Southeast Asian identities in Australia are not simply absorbed into the host society. Rather, they are reshaped through contact with the Australian sociocultural context while still carrying their own historical and cultural meanings. This framework is particularly relevant for examining the gendered dimensions of Indonesian migration, especially from the 1990s onward, when increasing numbers of Indonesian women migrated through marriage and family pathways. Their experiences show how identity is performed, questioned, and reworked in response to racialized representations, digital self-narration, and continuing attachments to both homeland and country of residence. At the same time, Indonesian belonging in Australia can also be read through longer local histories that complicate Eurocentric accounts of Australian identity, including the pre-colonial contact, trade, and cultural exchange between Makassan communities and the Yolngu people of northern Australia ([Gui & Naruse, 2019](#)).

Similarly, postcolonial theory offers critical insights into identity formation in diaspora. Homi K. Bhabha’s concepts of hybridity and the “third space” emphasize how meaning and identity emerge in the in-between, resisting binary logics of home/exile or colonizer/colonized ([Bhabha, 1994](#)). These ideas are particularly relevant to Maryati’s experience, where her identity is shaped through ongoing negotiation between Javanese traditions and Australian cultural norms. Yet in Southeast Asian literary scholarship, applications of Bhabha often remain abstract, with little attention to embodied gendered experiences or the persistence of indigenous cosmologies.

Feminist postcolonial scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty provide further insights, highlighting the double marginalization faced by women in diasporic and postcolonial contexts. Spivak’s famous question, “Can the subaltern speak?” underscores the structural silencing of women ([Morris & Spivak, 2010](#)), while Mohanty critiques universalist feminist approaches that erase differences of race, class, and culture ([Mohanty, 2003](#)). In the context of Indonesian diaspora, these critiques are crucial, as women like Maryati confront not only racialized and class-based oppression but also patriarchal control within their own communities. However, feminist postcolonial readings of Indonesian diasporic texts remain scarce, leaving this intersection underexplored.

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Decolonial perspectives further enrich the analysis by emphasizing epistemic plurality. Walter D. Mignolo ([Mignolo & Walsh, 2018](#)) advances the notion of “epistemic disobedience,” arguing that indigenous knowledge systems challenge the hegemony of Western rationality, while María Lugones ([Lugones, 2007](#)) shows how coloniality reshapes both knowledge and gender relations. These insights shed light on how Maryati’s reliance on Javanese spirituality, through symbols like the *tuyul*<sup>1</sup> and *sesajen*<sup>2</sup>, functions as both survival strategy and resistance to assimilation. Yet existing critiques of *Journeys through Shadows* tend to note its multilingualism and portrayal of alienation ([Sharrad, 1999](#)) rather than foregrounding indigenous epistemologies as central to identity negotiation.

The central problem addressed in this article, therefore, is the lack of critical attention to how gender, spirituality, and diasporic identity intersect in Southeast Asian migrant narratives. Although diasporic literature has been studied in terms of alienation, hybridity, and nostalgia, what remains underexplored is how Indonesian migrant women’s experiences are shaped by cultural memory and indigenous spiritual belief within Western diasporic spaces. This research gap is urgent because it highlights overlooked dimensions of postcolonial displacement that continue to shape contemporary migration.

To address this, the present article applies an interdisciplinary framework that integrates postcolonial theory ([Bhabha, 1994](#)), feminist postcolonial critique ([Mohanty, 2003](#); [Morris & Spivak, 2010](#)), diaspora studies ([Brah, 1996](#); [Clifford, 1994](#)), memory and identities ([Agnew, 2005](#)), and decolonial epistemologies ([Lugones, 2007](#); [Mignolo & Walsh, 2018](#)). These concepts provide a multi-dimensional lens for analyzing Maryati’s identity as simultaneously fragmented and agentive, situated in what Bhabha terms the “third space.” This approach offers novelty by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies and embodied gendered experiences, which are rarely analyzed together in Indonesian diasporic literature.

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<sup>1</sup> *tuyul*: In Javanese and Indonesian popular belief, a *tuyul* is commonly understood as a childlike spirit associated with theft, wealth, or household disturbance Suroyo; Entas, D. S., Novena Ade Fredyariini; Putra, Bima Maulana; Soriente, Antonia; Adnan, Fatmahwati. (2025). Jagad Lelembut; A Javanese Belief System that is Constructed through the Use of Folklore and Myth on a Supernatural Worldview. *Javanologi: International Journal of Javanese Studies*, 8(2), 232-253. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.20961/javanologi.v8i2.102141>

<sup>2</sup> *Sesajen*: it may be understood as ritual offerings derived from the idea of *saji*, meaning to serve or present something (following Alkaf’s definition, as cited in Rohman, Mintarti, & Asyik, 2023). In Javanese cultural practice, the term refers to offerings, often in the form of food or symbolic objects, presented within ritual contexts such as *slametan*. Thus, *sesajen* is not merely food placed in a ritual setting, but a culturally meaningful act of presentation that reflects the relationship between human beings, spiritual belief, and communal tradition Rohman, A. M., Mintarti; Asyik, Nor. (2023). Offering Rituals (Sesajen): Synthesis of Religion and Culture from the Perspective of Islamic Religious Groups. *THEOLOGIA*, 34(2), 199-220. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.21580/teo.2023.34.2.18157>

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The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to demonstrate how Anggraeni's novel dramatizes the lived realities of Indonesian women migrants negotiating exile, gender, and spirituality in a Western context; and second, to contribute to Southeast Asian diasporic literary scholarship by advancing a more intersectional, decolonial, and feminist reading of migration narratives. By focusing on Maryati's nuanced experiences of intersectional marginalization, as a woman, an Indonesian migrant, and a bearer of indigenous cultural memories, this article examines how *Journeys through Shadows* articulates tensions between indigenous belief systems and Western rationality, as well as the complex psychological landscape shaped by displacement and trauma. Through a close analysis of the novel's thematic concerns and narrative strategies, this article explores how Anggraeni's work offers critical insights into the lived realities of postcolonial diasporic subjects, challenging simplistic binaries of home/exile, tradition/modernity, and victimhood/agency.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with textual analysis to examine representations of diasporic identity, gender, spirituality, and cultural displacement in Dewi Anggraeni's *Journeys through Shadows*. It focuses on how narrative events, character experiences, dialogue, and symbolic elements shape the portrayal of Maryati as an Indonesian migrant woman living in Australia. This approach is appropriate because it allows the study to interpret the literary text closely while remaining grounded in the meanings presented in the narrative (Creswell & Creswell, 2013).

The primary data source is Dewi Anggraeni's *Journeys through Shadows* (1998). The data consists of selected narrative passages, dialogues, descriptions, and symbolic representations related to migration, cultural conflict, gender relations, spirituality, trauma, and identity negotiation. The data were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research focus. Passages were included when they directly showed Maryati's experiences of displacement, alienation, silence, cultural negotiation, gendered dependence, spiritual practice, or emotional struggle.

The study applies close textual analysis to examine how the novel presents diasporic experience through narrative structure, characterization, imagery, symbolism, and language use (McKee, 2003). The analysis does not aim to conduct a formal linguistic study; therefore, terms such as silence and alienation are interpreted as literary and narrative representations rather than as micro-linguistic categories. Attention is given to how dialogue, narrative voice, and multilingual expressions contribute to the portrayal of exclusion, cultural tension, and identity fragmentation within the novel.

The analysis does not claim to be a formal linguistic study. Therefore, terms such as silence, alienation, and language use are treated as literary and narrative categories rather than micro-linguistic categories. Attention is given

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to how dialogue, narrative voice, and multilingual expressions contribute to the portrayal of exclusion, cultural tension, and identity fragmentation in the novel.

The analysis was carried out in several stages. First, the novel was read repeatedly to identify central themes and recurring motifs related to migration, identity, gender, and spirituality. Second, relevant passages were marked, recorded in a data instrument table, and grouped into thematic categories, including cultural displacement, identity negotiation, gendered experience, spiritual resistance, and trauma/resilience. Third, the selected passages were interpreted through close reading by examining narrative context, characterization, symbolism, dialogue, and representations of social relationships. Finally, the findings were connected to postcolonial and feminist postcolonial perspectives, particularly concepts of hybridity, the “third space,” cultural identity, and women’s marginalization, to explain how Maryati negotiates belonging and identity within diasporic space.

To strengthen the transparency of the research process, the data instrument documents the selected textual evidence, page numbers, categories, and interpretations used in the analysis. The selected data, thematic categories, and interpretations were also reviewed by three independent academic triangulators. Their review focused on the relevance of the selected textual data, the suitability of the thematic categories, and the consistency between the textual evidence and interpretation. Through this process, the study shows how *Journeys through Shadows* portrays the emotional, cultural, gendered, and spiritual complexities experienced by a diasporic subject who lives between Javanese traditions and Australian society.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Identity Negotiation in Diaspora

Maryati’s migration from Central Java to Melbourne represents a complex process of diasporic identity negotiation. Her displacement is not only geographical, but also linguistic, cultural, emotional, and gendered. Rather than presenting Maryati’s identity as fixed, Anggraeni portrays it as unstable and continuously shaped by her encounters with Australian society, her attachment to Javanese culture, and her limited access to language and social power. Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” is useful here, but the novel demonstrates this idea most clearly through Maryati’s everyday experiences of silence, confusion, and partial belonging.

Maryati’s alienation is first shown through her difficulty in understanding and participating in English-speaking environments. Anggraeni (Anggraeni, 1998) writes that “*Maryati, who always feels like an alien when people speak English, looks around, squinting*” (p. 12). The word “alien” is significant because it constructs Maryati not simply as a foreigner, but as someone positioned outside the dominant social and linguistic order. Her

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exclusion is not only external but also internalized, as the phrase “feels like an alien” emphasizes her emotional awareness of being different. The physical action of “squinting” further reinforces this condition. Literally, squinting suggests difficulty in seeing clearly; symbolically, it reflects Maryati’s struggle to interpret an unfamiliar world. Through this image, Anggraeni presents diasporic identity as an embodied experience of uncertainty, partial perception, and cultural disorientation.

This sense of in-betweenness is also visible in Maryati’s role within Trevor’s Australian social circle. Although she prepares Javanese food for Trevor’s guests, she “*would sit quietly... not knowing what to do or what to say except for when they needed something at the table*” (p. 16). This passage shows that food becomes both a marker of cultural continuity and a sign of social limitation. On one hand, Maryati’s cooking allows her to preserve and perform her Javanese identity in a foreign domestic space. On the other hand, her participation is restricted to service. The phrase “sit quietly” constructs her as physically present but socially absent, while “not knowing what to do or what to say” highlights her uncertainty in navigating Australian social codes. Her speech becomes functional rather than expressive, emerging only “when they needed something at the table.” In this way, Anggraeni shows that cultural presence does not automatically lead to social belonging.

Maryati’s silence is therefore not merely a personal weakness; it reflects unequal relations of language, gender, and power. As a migrant woman with limited English, she is positioned at the margins of Trevor’s world. Her silence is shaped by linguistic insecurity, racial difference, and patriarchal expectations of feminine obedience. The novel suggests that Maryati’s identity is formed within these overlapping pressures. She is expected to adapt to Australian society, yet she is not given equal access to the language and confidence required for full participation.

The importance of language becomes clearer in Maryati’s desire to learn English. Anggraeni writes:

*“Maryati realises more and more, that if she wants to stop people looking down at her, she’ll have to learn English, which, in her perception, is equivalent to ‘going to school’. ... Maryati tells him [Trevor] that she’s keen to go to school, to learn not to be scared of Australian people. ... In reality, Maryati is tortuously divided between wanting to improve herself and the dread of being in the humiliating position of having to learn from the beginning as an adult” (p. 20).*

This passage reveals the ambivalence of language in Maryati’s diasporic life. English represents possibility, dignity, and social recognition, but it also produces fear and humiliation. The phrase “looking down at her” shows that language is tied to hierarchy: Maryati understands that her limited English makes others perceive her as inferior. Her wish “to learn not to be scared of Australian people” also suggests that language learning is not simply educational; it is connected to emotional survival. At the same time, the

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phrase “humiliating position” reveals the pain of becoming a beginner again as an adult. Anggraeni therefore presents English as both a path toward empowerment and a reminder of Maryati’s vulnerability.

Maryati’s identity is also shaped by the tension between cultural memory and the need to adapt to Australian social life. This tension can be seen in the domestic scene where she prepares Javanese food for Trevor’s guests but would remain quiet during the gathering, unsure how to participate in the conversation and speaking only when the guests need something from her at the table (p. 16). The food suggests her continuing attachment to Javanese culture, yet her silence at the table shows her limited participation in the Australian social setting. memory is defined by a persistent internal struggle, a “scuffle”, between the act of holding onto the past and the act of letting it go (Agnew, 2005). A similar tension appears in her attitude toward English. Maryati understands that learning English is necessary if she wants others to stop treating her as inferior. She also sees English as a way to reduce her fear of interacting with Australians (p. 20). These data from the novel show that adaptation is necessary for Maryati, but it also produces fear, embarrassment, and emotional pressure. At the same time, her connection to people who share her language remains important. Trevor begins to feel uneasy and even jealous of people who can communicate with Maryati in a language they both share (p. 25). It suggests that Javanese and Indonesian-speaking relationships give Maryati a form of intimacy and recognition that Trevor cannot fully provide. These examples support Hall’s view that cultural identity is shaped through both continuity and change (Hall, 1990), and Clifford’s understanding of diaspora (Clifford, 1994) as a condition in which attachment to a place of origin continues while subjects live within a new social environment. Maryati therefore does not simply abandon her Javanese identity, nor does the novel present her as fully absorbed into Australian society. The textual evidence shows her identity as a negotiated position between cultural memory, linguistic limitation, and the demands of everyday adaptation.

The metaphor of the “shadow” in the novel further captures this unstable condition. A shadow suggests presence and absence at the same time. It is visible but not fully formed; attached to a body, yet dependent on light and movement. Maryati’s diasporic subjectivity works in a similar way. She is present in Australia, yet often socially invisible. She performs the role of wife and hostess, yet her voice remains limited. She carries Javanese memories and practices, yet these are often misunderstood or marginalized within her new environment. Through this imagery, Anggraeni emphasizes that Maryati’s identity is not a stable synthesis of two cultures, but a shifting negotiation shaped by visibility, silence, memory, and exclusion.

Maryati’s experience demonstrates that diasporic identity is produced through everyday encounters with language, culture, gender, and power. Anggraeni does not portray hybridity as a harmonious blending of Javanese and Australian identities. Instead, the novel presents it as a difficult and

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uneven process marked by alienation, fear, longing, and partial agency. By focusing on Maryati's silence, her struggle with English, her domestic role, and her attachment to Javanese cultural practices, *Journeys through Shadows* shows how diasporic identity is lived through the body, language, and everyday social relations.

### Spiritual Beliefs and Indigenous Epistemologies

Maryati's diasporic identity is shaped not only by language and social alienation but also by her continued attachment to Javanese spirituality. In *Journeys through Shadows*, Anggraeni presents spiritual practices such as *tuyul* and *sesajen* as central to Maryati's sense of self. These practices are not decorative cultural details; they reveal how Maryati carries Javanese ways of knowing into the Australian domestic space. Through them, the novel shows that diaspora involves not only movement across geographical borders, but also the movement of memory, belief, and cultural reality.

Anggraeni opens the novel with Trevor's encounter with Maryati's ritual altar, described as "a small urn emanating thin smoke... flower petals and some sweets" (p. 1). This image immediately foregrounds the presence of Javanese spirituality within an Australian domestic space. The sensory details of "thin smoke," "flower petals," and "sweets" evoke an atmosphere of ritual intimacy, suggesting that the home is not merely a physical setting but also a space of cultural memory and spiritual practice. Although the house belongs to Trevor and is located in Melbourne, Maryati's altar transforms it into a culturally layered space where Javanese cosmology is quietly sustained. In this sense, the altar functions as a small yet significant site of diasporic negotiation, enabling Maryati to preserve cultural continuity in an environment that may not fully understand or accept her beliefs. Her practice also illustrates how Javanese cultural identity can be maintained through culturally specific terms, expressions, and symbolic practices that resist complete translation into another language or cultural system (Ma'shumah, 2022). Similarly, cultural survival in postcolonial literature is often represented through the persistence of local traditions, rituals, language, and collective memory (Pramudya & Puspita, 2025). In *Journeys through Shadows*, Maryati's attachment to *tuyul*, *sesajen*, *pasrah*, and Javanese forms of address can therefore be read not as marginal or irrational elements, but as signs of cultural continuity and diasporic self-preservation.

Trevor's response to the altar reveals the distance between Maryati's spiritual world and his rationalist worldview. His repeated question, "*What is this tuyul thing?*" (p. 2), shows more than confusion. The phrase "this *tuyul* thing" reduces Maryati's belief to something strange, vague, and irrational. The word "thing" is particularly important because it objectifies what, for Maryati, is a meaningful spiritual presence. Instead of asking what the *tuyul* means within Javanese belief, Trevor treats it as an odd object that disturbs the normal order of his home.

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This dismissal becomes stronger when Trevor describes Maryati's rituals as "*bizarre behaviour*" (pp. 2–3). The adjective "bizarre" frames her spirituality as abnormal and socially unacceptable. Through Trevor's language, Anggraeni shows how indigenous belief can be pushed outside the boundaries of what is considered reasonable or legitimate in a Western context. The issue is therefore not simply that Trevor does not understand Maryati. Rather, his language reveals a hierarchy of knowledge in which Western rationality is treated as normal, while Javanese spirituality is treated as superstition or disorder.

Trevor's anxiety is further shown through his internal questions: "*What's happened to her, for goodness sake? Is she showing symptoms of a nervous disorder? Is she unhappy?*" (p. 3). These questions are important because they show how quickly Maryati's spiritual practice is interpreted through psychological and medical language. The phrase "symptoms of a nervous disorder" transforms ritual behavior into a possible illness. Trevor does not initially consider that Maryati's actions may belong to a different cultural and spiritual system. Instead, he translates them into terms of abnormality, discomfort, and disorder.

This pattern continues when Trevor says, "*But Yati, I feel uncomfortable with all this smell! Imagine if people found out about what you did! They'd definitely think you were a witch or a satan worshipper!*" (p. 6). The statement begins with personal discomfort but quickly moves into fear of public judgment. The phrase "if people found out" suggests that Maryati's spirituality must be hidden because it could embarrass Trevor or damage social respectability. The labels "witch" and "satan worshipper" are especially significant because they associate Javanese ritual practice with danger and moral deviance. Through this dialogue, Anggraeni shows how Maryati's spiritual identity is not only misunderstood but also stigmatized.

Maryati's own speech offers an important counterpoint to Trevor's dismissal. When she says, "*Trev, ... I tell you already, no? I tell you the day before yesterday, I see tuyul in this house!*" (p. 2), the repetition of "I tell you" expresses frustration and insistence. Although her English is grammatically limited, her statement is clear and forceful. She is not merely describing fear; she is asserting the reality of her experience. Her words challenge Trevor's attempt to define the situation for her. In this moment, Anggraeni allows Maryati's voice to resist erasure, even if that voice appears in fragmented English.

This resistance is also visible in Maryati's statement, "*You not understand. You not believe ...*" (p. 6). The sentence is simple, but it captures the central conflict between Maryati and Trevor. The repeated "not" emphasizes both emotional and epistemological distance. Trevor does not understand because he does not believe; he does not believe because he cannot recognize Maryati's spiritual world as valid. The broken grammar of the sentence does not weaken its meaning. Instead, it intensifies Maryati's vulnerability and frustration. Anggraeni uses Maryati's limited English to show how linguistic marginalization overlaps with the rejection of indigenous knowledge.

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The medical interpretation of Maryati's condition reinforces this marginalization. Dr. Barrow describes her condition as "*stress*," "*homesickness*," and "*mild depression*" (p. 8). These terms may appear neutral, but they reduce Maryati's culturally embedded distress to psychological categories. The diagnosis does not account for the spiritual dimensions of her experience, nor for the cultural dislocation that shapes her suffering. The word "mild" also minimizes the depth of Maryati's struggle. Her pain is treated as a manageable emotional problem rather than as a complex condition shaped by migration, isolation, gendered dependence, and spiritual displacement.

Trevor's later interpretation of Maryati's unhappiness as "homesickness" follows the same pattern. He "*tells himself it is homesickness, and tries to remedy it by taking her to gatherings where she can mix with other Indonesian people*" (p. 25). The phrase "tells himself" suggests that Trevor creates an explanation that is comfortable for him. By naming her condition as homesickness, he simplifies it into a problem that can be solved socially. However, Maryati's distress is more complicated than a lack of Indonesian company. It involves separation from Java, limited language, emotional dependence, spiritual anxiety, and the difficulty of being understood within Trevor's world.

The same passage also notes that Trevor "*never thought he'd feel jealous of those with whom she could share a common language*" (p. 25). This detail is revealing because it shows that language and spirituality are connected to intimacy and power. Trevor becomes jealous of people who can enter Maryati's emotional and cultural world in ways he cannot. The phrase "share a common language" suggests more than communication; it implies belonging, recognition, and mutual understanding. Trevor's jealousy therefore reveals his fear of losing control over Maryati's meaning and identity.

Professor Joseph Richards's explanation of the *tuyul* introduces a more sympathetic but still limited form of cultural mediation. When he says, "*Hmm, for Westerners like you and me, this might be a bit hard to swallow ...*" (p. 9), he acknowledges that Javanese spirituality may be difficult for Westerners to accept. The phrase "hard to swallow" suggests intellectual resistance, as if belief itself must be digested through Western rational categories before it can be accepted. Although Richards is more informed than Trevor, his explanation still positions Western understanding as the frame through which Maryati's world must be interpreted.

The ritual practice of *sesajen* also carries important cultural meaning. The offerings of flowers, incense, and sweets are not merely objects; they are material signs of memory, continuity, and spiritual relationship. By maintaining these practices in Australia, Maryati creates a link between her present life in Melbourne and her Javanese past. The ritual allows her to inhabit a cultural world that Trevor cannot fully access. In this way, *sesajen* becomes a form of quiet resistance. It enables Maryati to preserve her identity without needing permission from the dominant culture around her. Ritual practices and symbolic traditions can function as ways of transmitting values

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across generations and sustaining a sense of collective identity (Wicaksono et al., 2024). In *Journeys through Shadows*, *sesajen* and other Javanese spiritual practices connect Maryati to inherited cultural meanings even while she lives in Australia.

Anggraeni's use of untranslated terms such as *tuyul* and *sesajen* is also significant. These words remain embedded in the English-language narrative, refusing full translation into Western categories. Their presence reminds readers that Maryati's world cannot be completely explained through Trevor's language or worldview. The terms carry cultural meanings that exceed English translation, and their retention in the text reinforces the persistence of Javanese epistemology within diasporic space.

Maryati's spirituality functions as a site of cultural survival and identity negotiation. The novel does not present her beliefs as simple superstition, nor does it treat them as exotic background. Instead, Anggraeni shows how spiritual practices become central to Maryati's struggle to preserve selfhood in an environment that repeatedly misunderstands her. Trevor's language, the medical diagnosis, and the social fear surrounding her rituals all reveal how indigenous spirituality is marginalized. Yet Maryati's repeated insistence, her continued rituals, and the persistence of Javanese terms in the narrative demonstrate that her spiritual world cannot be fully erased. Through the motifs of *tuyul* and *sesajen*, *Journeys through Shadows* portrays diaspora as an ongoing struggle over whose knowledge, belief, and reality are allowed to be recognized.

### Gender, Power, and Performative Identity

Maryati's marriage to Trevor becomes a central space where gender, race, language, and power are negotiated. Anggraeni does not present the marriage simply as a private relationship between husband and wife. Instead, it becomes a social structure through which Maryati's identity as a migrant woman is shaped, controlled, and repeatedly interpreted by others. Her femininity is constructed through silence, domestic labor, gratitude, dependency, and respectability, while Trevor's role is associated with protection, interpretation, and authority.

Trevor's perception of Maryati is first shaped by an idealized image of feminine vulnerability. When he decides to marry her, he is described as being "*struck and overcome by her beauty. A simple beauty stamped with vulnerability and crying out for protection*" (p. 24). The phrase "crying out for protection" is significant because it positions Maryati as someone who needs to be rescued. Her vulnerability becomes attractive to Trevor because it confirms his role as protector. The adjective "simple" also reduces her complexity as a woman and migrant subject, presenting her instead as innocent, dependent, and easily contained within Trevor's fantasy of care.

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This construction of Maryati continues through the description of her gratitude. Anggraeni writes that Maryati “*rarely says, ‘Thank you, darling,’ verbally*” and that her way of showing appreciation is “*simple and non-verbal*”: she cooks Trevor’s favourite dish, wears the dress he admires, and smiles with “*contented bashfulness*” when he praises her (p. 24). This passage is important because Maryati’s femininity is represented through acts of service and appearance rather than speech. Her gratitude is not expressed through verbal equality but through domestic performance. Cooking, dressing, smiling, and remaining bashful become signs of the “good wife” role expected of her. In this way, Anggraeni shows how gendered identity is performed through everyday gestures within marriage.

Maryati’s limited speech also reinforces the unequal structure of the relationship. Her “non-verbal” expression may appear affectionate, but it also reflects the limits placed on her voice. She is valued for what she does for Trevor rather than for what she says as an independent subject. Her silence therefore cannot be separated from her position as a migrant woman with limited linguistic and social power. Through this portrayal, Anggraeni suggests that Maryati’s identity is not naturally passive; rather, it is produced through a domestic environment that rewards obedience, gratitude, and emotional restraint.

Trevor’s authority becomes clearer when he imagines himself as Maryati’s main connection to the outside world. The narrator states that “*since the day he brought Maryati home [to Melbourne], he’s been very proud of the fact that he’s Maryati’s point of communication with the world, and subconsciously, wants to keep it that way*” (p. 24). The phrase “point of communication with the world” reveals how language becomes a form of control. Trevor does not merely help Maryati communicate; he occupies the position through which her access to society is mediated. His pride in this role suggests that her dependence strengthens his sense of authority.

The phrase “wants to keep it that way” is particularly revealing because it suggests that Trevor’s support is not entirely innocent. Rather, he appears to benefit from Maryati’s dependence on him. If Maryati were to become more fluent in English, more confident, or more socially connected, Trevor’s authority over her would potentially be weakened. Anggraeni therefore presents communication not simply as a linguistic issue, but as a gendered and racialised power relation. Maryati’s limited English does not only restrict her social interaction; it also enables Trevor to position himself as the interpreter of her needs, emotions, and identity. In this context, language becomes a mechanism through which patriarchal authority is maintained. Traditional gender roles often place women in positions of dependency and restricted mobility, while patriarchy sustains male dominance by assigning authority to men and domestic or subordinate roles to women (Afandi, 2018).

Maryati’s marginal position is further reinforced through the reactions of Trevor’s coworkers. When discussing Trevor’s marriage, one of them asks, “Why did he have to go all that way to get a wife? Especially one who doesn’t

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even talk?” (p. 25). The phrase “go all that way” constructs Maryati as foreign and distant, almost as though she were an object obtained from elsewhere rather than a person with her own history, agency, and subjectivity. Similarly, the phrase “doesn’t even talk” reduces her identity to a perceived lack. Her silence is not interpreted as the result of linguistic insecurity, cultural displacement, or social exclusion; instead, it is treated as evidence of personal inadequacy. Through this exchange, Anggraeni exposes how sexism and racialisation intersect in the social judgement of migrant women. Maryati is not only positioned as an outsider because of her ethnicity and language, but also judged according to gendered expectations about how a wife should behave, speak, and make herself socially available (Efendi et al., 2023).

The following exchange further narrows Maryati’s value to domestic usefulness: “*Uh, but she can cook!*” said Delia. *‘So what? I can cook as well as her!’ said Marion*” (p. 25). This dialogue shows how Maryati is evaluated through gendered competition. Cooking becomes the only quality offered in her defense, but even that is dismissed by another woman who claims the same ability. The conversation reveals that Maryati is not recognized as a full subject with feelings, history, and agency. She is judged through a limited set of functions: whether she can speak, whether she can cook, and whether she is a suitable wife for Trevor.

Trevor’s possessive view of Maryati becomes more explicit when the narrator states: “*With Maryati he feels an added bonus that she belongs to him. Fully*” (p. 26). The phrase “belongs to him” frames marriage in terms of possession rather than partnership. The short sentence “Fully” intensifies this possession by suggesting total ownership. Anggraeni’s sentence structure is powerful here: by isolating “Fully,” the narration emphasizes the completeness of Trevor’s desire to possess Maryati. This moment exposes the unequal emotional logic of the marriage. Trevor’s satisfaction depends not simply on love, but on the assurance that Maryati is dependent, available, and controlled.

The issue of control also appears in Trevor’s conversation with Dr. Caroline Lim about Maryati’s wish to return to Indonesia. Trevor insists that Maryati is now “my wife, a respectable woman” and explains that he wants people to see that “*she’s with me*” and that “*she’s got me to look after her*” (pp. 60–61). The repeated emphasis on respectability shows that Maryati’s social value is tied to her position as Trevor’s wife. In Trevor’s view, her respectability is not grounded in her own agency, but in being visibly attached to him.

The phrase “she’s with me” is particularly important because it links Maryati’s moral legitimacy to male supervision. Trevor does not simply worry about Maryati’s safety; he worries about how others will interpret her if she returns alone. His concern reveals that Maryati’s movement, reputation, and identity are regulated through patriarchal expectations. Similarly, “she’s got me to look after her” presents control as care. Trevor frames himself as responsible and protective, but the language also infantilizes Maryati by implying that she cannot manage her own life without him.

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This discourse of respectability places Maryati in a difficult position. On one hand, marriage to Trevor gives her a form of social legitimacy. On the other hand, that legitimacy depends on obedience and dependence. Anggraeni shows that respectability can function as a form of control, especially for migrant women whose bodies, movements, and pasts are judged by both local and transnational social expectations. Maryati's identity is therefore shaped by what others believe a proper wife and respectable woman should be.

At the same time, Anggraeni does not portray Maryati as entirely without agency. Her silence, domestic labor, and compliance may reflect constraint, but they also reveal strategies of survival within an unequal marriage. She learns how to please Trevor, how to avoid conflict, and how to maintain some emotional stability in a foreign environment. These actions do not overturn the power imbalance, but they show that Maryati is constantly negotiating her position rather than simply accepting it passively.

Maryati's marriage to Trevor demonstrates how gendered and racialized power operates through ordinary domestic life. Anggraeni reveals this power not through abstract theory but through specific details: Trevor's attraction to Maryati's vulnerability, her non-verbal gratitude, his role as her "point of communication," the coworkers' judgment of her silence, and the repeated language of possession and respectability. Through these moments, *Journeys through Shadows* shows that Maryati's identity as a diasporic woman is produced within a field of affection, dependence, surveillance, and control. Her marriage becomes a space where love and domination coexist, and where her struggle for selfhood must take place within the limits imposed by language, gender, race, and social expectation.

### Trauma, Violence, and Resilience

Maryati's trauma in *Journeys through Shadows* is closely connected to migration, motherhood, silence, and gendered control within marriage. Anggraeni does not present Maryati's suffering as a single emotional crisis, but as an accumulated wound produced by displacement, separation from her child, linguistic isolation, and her dependence on Trevor. Through Maryati's self-blame, her fear of disclosure, and her eventual experience of verbal abuse, the novel shows how diasporic life can intensify the emotional burdens placed on migrant women.

Maryati's statement, "*At least I'm a better mother in Java. Here I'm a bad woman and bad mother*" (p. 87), captures the fractured nature of her identity. The contrast between "Java" and "Here" is important. Java is associated with maternal worth and belonging, while "Here," referring to Australia, becomes associated with guilt, failure, and moral judgment. Maryati does not simply say that she has made mistakes; she calls herself "a bad woman and bad mother." The repetition of "bad" suggests that she has internalized blame at the level of identity. Migration therefore reshapes not only her social position

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but also the way she understands herself as a woman and mother.

This self-condemnation is intensified by Maryati's separation from her son in Java. Her inability to return freely to Central Java reveals the extent to which her mobility is controlled within the marriage. Trevor's refusal to allow her to travel alone is not presented as a minor domestic disagreement, but as an exercise of power that limits Maryati's maternal agency. Her motherhood is therefore divided across borders: emotionally anchored in Java yet physically confined in Australia. This division produces a form of trauma that is both personal and diasporic, as her suffering emerges from separation not only from her child, but also from the place, language, and relationships that give meaning to her maternal identity. In this context, Maryati's role as a wife and mother is shaped by overlapping pressures of domestic expectation, social judgement, and maternal loss. As Yasmin et al. argue, female characters who do not conform to dominant social expectations are often judged through moral and gendered norms, particularly in relation to motherhood, sexuality, and femininity (Yasmin, 2020). Maryati's concealed past deepens this trauma. Her son was born from a relationship before her marriage to Trevor, and the fear of revealing this truth shapes her silence. This silence is not simply deception; it is a survival strategy. Maryati understands that her past may be judged through moral expectations surrounding female sexuality, marriage, and respectability. By hiding the truth, she attempts to protect her fragile position as Trevor's wife and as a "respectable" woman. However, this protection comes at a cost. Her silence traps her in fear, making her personal history something that must be hidden in order for her present life to remain stable.

When Maryati eventually reveals the truth, the emotional violence of the marriage becomes visible. She tells mBak<sup>3</sup> Eni, "*The storm is not over mBak Eni. He won't forgive me, not for a long, long time... But I am more pasrah, more accepting, now*" (p. 91). The metaphor of "the storm" suggests that Trevor's anger is overwhelming, destructive, and difficult to escape. It also implies that Maryati experiences the domestic space as unstable and threatening. The phrase "not for a long, long time" stretches the emotional punishment into the future, showing that her suffering is not momentary but prolonged.

The later description of Trevor's behaviour further reveals the atmosphere of fear within the marriage: "*Whenever he's home, there's tension. He's either very quiet, or exploding in a rage. He calls me names. Liar, cheat, whore*" (p. 91). Anggraeni's use of contrast between "very quiet" and "exploding in a rage" shows that violence is not limited to shouting. Silence itself becomes

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<sup>3</sup> *mBak*: The Javanese address term *Mbak* traditionally refers to an older female sibling or an older female relative, including biological sisters and female cousins. Over time, the meaning of *Mbak* has broadened from a kinship-based term to a more general form of address for older women, even when there is no family relationship. Muzaki, A. (2023). Semantic Change in Javanese Kinship Term of Address: A Case Study in Gedang Kulut Village, Gresik District. *ABJAD: JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & EDUCATION*, 1(1), 50-62. <https://doi.org/10.62079/abjad.v1i1.16>

threatening because it creates uncertainty and emotional pressure. The phrase “exploding in a rage” suggests suddenness and danger, while the list “Liar, cheat, whore” reduces Maryati to stigmatized labels. These words do not merely express Trevor’s anger; they attempt to define Maryati through shame.

Maryati’s response to these insults reveals the complexity of her trauma. She says, “*Whore I can take, Mbak Eni, because I was a whore, wasn’t I? But liar and cheat? Maybe I was*” (p. 91). This passage is painful because it shows how deeply Maryati has internalized social stigma. The phrase “I can take” suggests endurance, but it also suggests resignation. She appears more able to accept the label “whore” than the accusations “liar” and “cheat,” which wound her sense of honesty and emotional integrity. Her rhetorical question, “wasn’t I?” reveals uncertainty and self-doubt. Rather than fully rejecting Trevor’s verbal violence, Maryati partly absorbs it, showing how patriarchal judgment enters her own self-perception.

At the same time, Anggraeni does not reduce Maryati to victimhood. The Javanese term *pasrah* is central to understanding her resilience. When Maryati says that she is “*more pasrah, more accepting*” (p. 91), the word does not simply mean passive surrender. In the context of Javanese cultural and spiritual values, *pasrah* suggests a form of endurance, patience, and inner acceptance in the face of suffering (Hendrokumoro; Budiman, 2025). By retaining the untranslated term, Anggraeni preserves its cultural specificity. Maryati’s resilience is therefore not expressed through open rebellion, but through a culturally grounded mode of survival.

Maryati’s resilience is also connected to motherhood. Although she sees herself as a “bad mother” in Australia, the very intensity of this statement shows how deeply she values her maternal identity. Her pain comes from the fact that motherhood remains central to her sense of self. Even when she is separated from her child and judged by Trevor, her emotional attachment to her son continues to shape her decisions, guilt, and desire to return to Java. In this way, motherhood becomes both a source of trauma and a source of meaning.

The novel also presents resilience through Maryati’s continuing attachment to Javanese language and cultural expression. The use of terms such as *mBak Eni* and *pasrah* creates a space of intimacy and cultural recognition that contrasts with Trevor’s hostile language. With *mBak Eni*, Maryati can speak from within a shared cultural world. This matters because her suffering is not only caused by what Trevor says to her, but also by the fact that he often fails to understand the cultural meanings behind her emotions, memories, and obligations. Her conversation with *mBak Eni* therefore offers a small but significant space where her voice can be heard differently.

Anggraeni portrays trauma as an ongoing condition shaped by displacement, gendered dependence, moral judgment, and domestic violence. Maryati’s pain is expressed through self-blame, silence, emotional tension, and the stigmatizing language used against her. However, the novel also

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shows that trauma does not completely erase agency. Maryati survives through cultural memory, maternal attachment, spiritual endurance, and the Javanese concept of *pasrah*. Her identity remains wounded, but it is not destroyed. Through Maryati, *Journeys through Shadows* presents diasporic womanhood as a condition marked by pain and constraint, but also by endurance, cultural continuity, and the difficult work of surviving within unequal structures of power.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how Dewi Anggraeni's *Journeys through Shadows* represents diasporic identity through Maryati's experience as an Indonesian migrant woman in Australia. Addressing the limited attention given to the intersections of migration, gender, language, and indigenous spirituality in Indonesian diasporic literature, the analysis shows that Maryati's identity is shaped by linguistic exclusion, cultural displacement, patriarchal control, spiritual attachment, and emotional trauma. Her silence, limited English, and dependence on Trevor reveal how diasporic women may be positioned within unequal social and gender relations, while the recurring presence of *tuyul*, *sesajen*, and *pasrah* demonstrates the persistence of Javanese cultural memory and spiritual knowledge in a foreign setting. The novel presents diaspora not as a smooth process of adaptation, but as a difficult negotiation between belonging and alienation, vulnerability and endurance. By foregrounding Maryati's embodied experience, this study contributes to Indonesian diasporic literary scholarship by highlighting the role of language, indigenous epistemology, and gendered power in shaping migrant identity. It also suggests that future readings of diaspora should pay closer attention to local cultural meanings and women's lived experiences within transnational and postcolonial contexts.

## CRedit AUTHOR STATEMENT

**Ida Puspita:** conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing.

**Nur Rifai Akhsan:** data curation, formal analysis, validation, writing – review and editing.

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