

Women's Beauty as an Erotic Spectacle in *The Apothecary Diaries* Novel

Gladys Raissa Daniastuti Santoso^{1*}, Akhmad Zakky², Nina Farlina³, Ida Rosida⁴

^{1,2,3,4} Department of English Literature, Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia.

E-mail: ¹gladys.raissa21@mhs.uinjkt.ac.id, ²akhmad.zakky@uinjkt.ac.id,

³nina.farlina@uinjkt.ac.id, ⁴idarosida@uinjkt.ac.id

*corresponding author

Article History

Submitted: 26/09/2025,

Accepted: 30/09/2025,

Published: 30/09/2025

This work is licensed under

[Creative Commons](#)

[Attribution-](#)

[NonCommercial-](#)

[NoDerivatives 4.0](#)

ABSTRACT: Natsu Hyuuga's novel *The Apothecary Diaries* Volume 1 portrays the lives of harem women confined within the patriarchal structure of the imperial court, where beauty functions as the main determinant of their value and survival. The purpose of this research is to examine how women's beauty is narrated as an object for male characters and how the narration transforms this beauty into an erotic spectacle that exploits and oppresses them. This research, employing qualitative textual analysis and Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze theory, reveals that women's beauty in the novel is consistently constructed through male-centered desire. Female characters are often described solely through their appearances, such as clothing, hair, skin, and body, while their opinions are silenced, reducing them to visual objects. Furthermore, the narration employs aestheticized language, symbols, and metaphors that eroticize women into spectacles of desire. However, this eroticization of women functions as a form of exploitation, as women are valued primarily for their beauty and usefulness, and then discarded once they lose their functions. These mechanisms reduce women to commodities, exchanged and manipulated to maintain patriarchal authority. In conclusion, beauty in the novel operates as a fragile tool that offers temporary recognition but simultaneously exploits women, reinforcing patriarchal power and restricting their autonomy.

Keywords: Female Beauty, Male Gaze, Erotic Spectacle, Patriarchal Control, Women's Oppression

1. Introduction

Beauty is often associated with women, and more specifically, with their physical appearance. Women are often associated with beauty standards, which influence how they are perceived and evaluated within society (Ramadani et al., 2022). Yet, beauty is not a natural or inherent quality; rather, it is socially constructed. As Lazar (2011, as cited in Abid et al., 2021, p. 404) explains, members of society internalize beauty standards and strive to "be beautiful" in accordance with the norms they have learned from their cultural environment. Women's self-image, therefore, is continuously shaped by the definitions, customs, and values that dominate their society, even when these standards shift over time. Because these ideals are deeply embedded within cultural frameworks, they are often taken for granted and accepted as natural.

One of the primary forces influencing the construction of beauty is patriarchy. In patriarchal cultures, women face gendered pressures to meet beauty standards that are largely established and sustained by men. These standards function as evaluative and disciplinary tools: women are not only encouraged but also expected to conform to them (Lazar, 2011, as cited in Abid et al., 2021, p. 404). Naomi Wolf (2013) refers to this phenomenon as the “beauty myth,” in which women are socialized to view their self-worth in terms of their physical appearance. Beauty becomes the dominant measure of value, reducing women’s identities to their bodily image, which is continuously subject to judgment, regulation, and control.

In patriarchal societies, beauty is often viewed as a highly valued attribute. Instead, it is positioned as an object for men, shifting beauty from an inherent quality to a form of commodity. As Izzati and Syamsi (2023, p. 73) observe, beauty is treated as a tradable asset, reinforcing the idea that a woman’s worth lies primarily in her appearance. This system compels women to internalize such standards, measuring their self-value against socially defined ideals. Women who fail to meet these standards are marginalized, while those who seek to conform often feel pressured to sacrifice health, autonomy, or resources to be recognized as “beautiful.” In this way, beauty serves as a mechanism of oppression. It objectifies women, disciplines their bodies, and controls their choices (Ma, 2025). As Wolf (2002) notes, women are expected to embody “beauty,” while men are positioned as those who desire to possess it. Beauty thus becomes both a burden and a disciplinary system that reproduces male dominance (Sayekti & Fitria, 2022).

Within this framework, women’s beauty is simultaneously desired, commodified, and exploited for male purposes. This dynamic is evident in *The Apothecary Diaries*, a Japanese historical mystery novel that portrays the lives of consorts and women in the emperor’s harem. In the novel, the survival and influence of female characters within the court largely depend on their beauty. Their value is narrated primarily through their appearance, pale skin, delicate movements, and luxurious attire, rather than their agency, skills, or intelligence. This reinforces a patriarchal worldview in which women are reduced to visual and erotic objects, subordinated within the imperial hierarchy.

The Apothecary Diaries (*Kusuriya no Hitorigoto* / 薬屋のひとりごと) is written by Natsu Hyuuga and set in a fictionalized version of ancient China. The novel reflects the hierarchical and patriarchal structures inspired by the Tang and late Ming dynasties (Mondal, 2025). During this period, Confucianism played a dominant role in shaping society. Founded by Confucius, the philosophy emphasized moral virtue, loyalty to family, and social harmony. However, Confucian traditions also reinforced gender inequality by portraying women as dependents under male responsibility, limiting their autonomy and decision-making power (Mueller & Whittemore, 2023; Gromkowska-Melosik & Boron, 2023).

Within this context, the imperial harem was not merely a private space for the emperor’s pleasure but a structured institution of competition and power. Led by the empress, the harem was a political arena where women competed for status, influence, and the chance to bear heirs (Khoa, 2024). Beauty was a central requirement for this competition, as classical Chinese culture upheld aesthetic ideals that treated women as both objects of admiration and instruments of legitimizing political authority. The female characters in *The Apothecary Diaries* exemplify this position, navigating a world where beauty both defines and constrains opportunity. The narrative demonstrates how beauty operates as a double-edged sword: while it offers women limited access to influence, it also functions as a source of oppression. Women in the emperor’s harem must embody ideals of attractiveness to gain favor, but in doing so, they are reduced to objects of desire for the emperor and other male figures. This reduction reflects patriarchal systems that treat women’s bodies as sites of regulation and as instruments for

maintaining social order. The novel highlights how women's beauty becomes a spectacle for male consumption, reinforcing the structures of domination that silence women's subjectivity.

Thus, this research focuses on the erotic narration of women's beauty within *The Apothecary Diaries*, particularly how beauty is narrated as an object for male characters. Female characters such as Consort Fuyou, Consort Gyokuyou, Consort Lihua, Maomao, and unnamed concubines are consistently described in ways that emphasize their appearance as sources of value. Their beauty is transformed into an erotic spectacle that objectifies, exploits, and regulates women within the palace. This raises crucial questions about how literature perpetuates patriarchal systems by portraying beauty as both a spectacle and an instrument of oppression.

To analyze these dynamics, this research employs Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze theory as its primary analytical lens. First articulated in her seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), Mulvey argues that women in media are often presented as passive objects of male desire, constructed through voyeuristic and narcissistic mechanisms that serve patriarchal pleasure. The male gaze operates by portraying women as erotic images through narrative techniques such as metaphor, simile, and aesthetic description. By comparing women to fragile objects like flowers or jewels, texts reinforce the notion of female fragility, desirability, and ornamental value. Such portrayals silence women's voices and reinforce their objectification. In *Reading the Male Gaze in Literature and Culture*, Bloom (2017) shows how Mulvey's male gaze theory, first developed for cinema, can also apply to literature. Mulvey argued that film positions women as passive objects of visual pleasure while men are active spectators. Bloom demonstrates that novels create similar "scenes of looking" through narration, description, and point of view, which reproduce the same dynamics of power and desire (Bloom, 2017). The male gaze in literature is evident in how female characters are described, since the author controls their portrayal, and in how narrators shape readers' views, often privileging a male perspective (Wardani & Suherman, 2023, p. 129). For instance, when a male narrator emphasizes a woman's physical appearance, readers participate in the male gaze. Bloom further argues that narrative itself can function like a camera, framing bodies through language. Descriptive focus on appearance, rather than agency, reveals how the male gaze operates in texts (Bloom, 2017).

Additionally, focalization is crucial. Unlike cinema's camera, literature shapes the gaze through perspective. Genette (1990, p. 186) distinguishes zero, internal, and external focalization. When a story uses a male viewpoint, women are often described in terms of attractiveness, positioning readers to see them through male eyes. Thus, focalization in literature functions like the cinematic gaze, guiding how readers perceive women's bodies and desire. By incorporating narrative analysis and the concept of focalization, the research demonstrates how the novel's portrayal of beauty both reflects and critiques patriarchal gender relations. External focalization presents women as spectacles for male observation, while internal focalization reveals the internalization of beauty standards by female characters themselves.

Furthermore, analyzing several similar context studies, some previous research indicates that beauty serves as a form of cultural and social capital, as well as an instrument of oppression, shaping power relations across various contexts. Pandian (2020) examines the concept of beauty in India, revealing its intricate ties to patriarchy, caste, and family honor, which often disciplines women and limits their autonomy. Tu, Gilbert, and Bono (2021) demonstrate that attractiveness influences workplace success by enhancing confidence and perceived competence, reproducing privilege and marginalization. Berry (2016) situates beauty within systems of stratification, showing how appearance grants access to resources while excluding those who deviate from dominant ideals. Collectively, these studies highlight beauty as socially constructed, operating simultaneously as both an empowerment and an oppression.

However, these works focus on real-world cultural and professional contexts rather than literature. This research fills that gap by analyzing Natsu Hyuuga's *The Apothecary Diaries*, which dramatizes how women in an imperial court construct and wield beauty within a patriarchal context. By applying Mulvey's Male Gaze theory, this research aims to examine how the novel narrates women's beauty as an erotic spectacle within a patriarchal society. It seeks to reveal how beauty becomes a site of objectification and exploitation, ultimately functioning as a disciplinary mechanism that upholds male dominance. Through an analysis of the characters, this study explores how the novel constructs beauty as both a source of power and a form of oppression. By situating this analysis within Mulvey's Male Gaze theory and narrative focalization, the research demonstrates how literary representations of beauty can reproduce patriarchal ideologies and limit women's subjectivity.

Accordingly, this study addresses two main questions: (1) How is women's beauty narrated as an object for male characters in the novel? and (2) How does erotic spectacle in the narration function as a form of exploitation toward women?

2. Method

This research employed a qualitative approach to analyze how *The Apothecary Diaries* novel narrates women's beauty as an erotic spectacle within a patriarchal society. A qualitative method was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of cultural, social, and ideological meanings embedded in literary texts. The primary method employed was a close reading of the novel, with a particular focus on narrative strategies, character descriptions, and focalization that reveal how beauty is represented, objectified, and regulated.

The primary source of data was *The Apothecary Diaries*, Volume 1, by Natsu Hyuuga, which served as the unit of analysis. Supporting materials such as scholarly works, journal articles, and books were used as secondary data to provide additional perspectives on the concepts of beauty, patriarchy, oppression, and gendered power relations. The researcher acted as the main instrument of the study, engaging in repeated and careful readings of the novel. Relevant passages were identified, categorized into themes, and analyzed in relation to their connection to beauty and power dynamics. Data analysis was conducted in three stages: extracting textual evidence, interpreting the findings through the lens of male gaze theory and focalization, and synthesizing the results to answer the research questions.

3. Findings and Discussion

This part analyzes the novel *The Apothecary Diaries* through Mulvey's Male Gaze theory to address the research questions. The analysis focuses on two aspects: the narration of women's beauty as an object of the male gaze and the construction of erotic spectacle as exploitation. Narrative excerpts and dialogues serve as textual evidence, beginning with an examination of how consorts' beauty is represented within the novel's patriarchal context.

3.1. The Descriptions of Harem Women's Beauty as an Object of Male Gaze in the novel *The Apothecary Diaries*

In Natsu Hyuuga's *The Apothecary Diaries Volume 1*, women's beauty is consistently narrated as an object of male-centered desire rather than as an expression of individuality. Set in an imperial harem inspired by the Tang Dynasty, the novel depicts an environment where concubines, consorts, and even palace maids live under the emperor's authority, competing for favor, security, and influence. Within this patriarchal structure, beauty operates as a form of social currency that determines women's survival. It is a resource that women must possess and maintain, yet it is fragile and conditional, entirely dependent on whether it aligns with male preferences, particularly those of the emperor. The descriptions of female characters linger on

their physical features, clothing, and movements, presenting them as ornamental images to be consumed by the male gaze. Their inner lives, emotions, and subjectivities are largely overshadowed by the visual spectacle of their bodies.

The construction of beauty as an object of male preference is particularly evident in the explicit descriptions of the emperor's sexual tastes. At one point, the narrative states:

“...the current ruler was only aroused if a woman had enough meat on her bones. Every consort he visited, not least Gyokuyou and Lihua, possessed a certain voluptuousness.”

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 169)

From the narratives, the emperor's attraction to voluptuous bodies sets the standard of beauty within the palace. Women who match this ideal are favored, while others are implicitly excluded from his attention and, consequently, from power and protection. Their worth is not evaluated according to intelligence, skill, or virtue, but solely in conformity to the emperor's bodily preference. This demonstrates what Catherine MacKinnon (as cited in Sartwell, 2022) identifies as the male-centered construction of sexuality, where female sexuality and desirability are defined externally by men, portraying women as submissive and inferior. Moreover, because the emperor represents the apex of patriarchal authority, his personal tastes extend beyond the inner palace, shaping broader societal notions of female attractiveness. Thus, beauty in the novel is never neutral but is framed as a male-imposed standard that structures women's identities both within and outside the harem.

The ornamental descriptions of consorts further reveal how beauty is narrated as a spectacle for male-centered admiration. Consort Fuyou, for instance, is introduced as:

“The figure of a pale woman almost floating through the air. Her long dress trailed behind her... Her long black hair shimmered in the dark.”

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 50)

This description from the narrative fragments her body into surfaces, pale skin, trailing dress, shimmering hair, rendering her a delicate and ethereal image. She is not introduced through her thoughts, speech, or actions, but through aestheticized features arranged for visual consumption. Such ornamental narration reflects patriarchal aesthetics, where fragility, grace, and purity are emphasized as markers of ideal femininity (Abid et al., 2021). The narrative transforms Fuyou into a spectacle of refinement, positioning her not as a subject with agency but as an object whose beauty communicates her worth within the harem.

A similar pattern of descriptions appears in the depiction of Consort Gyokuyou, one of the emperor's favored women:

“Gyokuyou dressed in a crimson skirt and a robe of a lighter red color... Her hair was gathered into two large rings... adorned with red tassels and jade stones...”

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 78)

The focus here falls almost entirely on her clothing, hairstyle, and ornaments. The use of crimson fabric and jade accessories signals sensuality and prestige, yet the description reduces Gyokuyou to a decorative display. Rather than presenting her thoughts or subjectivity, the narrative lingers on her external features, inviting admiration. As Jeffreys (2005) argues, beauty in patriarchal systems functions as a cultural practice that diminishes women's social value by rendering them ornamental objects, whose worth lies in their ability to embody male fantasies. In this sense, Gyokuyou's identity is constructed externally, her role reduced to fulfilling

aesthetic ideals that allow her to maintain her rank and influence within the competitive harem hierarchy.

The narration of beauty is therefore doubly complicit in objectification. On one hand, it reflects the emperor's preferences, which dictate the standards of desirability. On the other hand, it aestheticizes women into spectacles through descriptive language, reducing them to ornamental images arranged for the gaze. This aligns with Mulvey's (1975) theory of spectacle, where female figures are displayed as surfaces of visual pleasure designed for male-centered spectatorship. The female characters in *The Apothecary Diaries* novel are consistently presented not as autonomous individuals, but as images constructed to satisfy patriarchal ideals.

However, objectification in the novel does not operate solely from the male side. The female characters themselves internalize patriarchal standards and learn to evaluate their worth according to the gaze of men. This process of self-surveillance is especially clear in Maomao's inner reflections. Early in the novel, she muses:

"If she had perhaps possessed a body as shapely as a peony, or skin as pale as the full moon, she might at least have aspired to the status of one of the lower concubines, but Maomao possessed only ruddy, freckled skin and limbs with all the elegance of withered branches."

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 2)

Despite her rational and skeptical personality, Maomao accepts the palace's beauty standards as natural truth. She compares her body to metaphors of ideal beauty, "peony," "full moon", and concludes that she is unqualified to rise in the palace hierarchy. This demonstrates what Sayekti and Fitria (2022) identify as internalized sexism, where women adopt patriarchal standards as their own and measure themselves against ideals defined by men. Maomao's reflection reveals how deeply these values permeate consciousness: even when she does not seek the emperor's favor, she nevertheless accepts the logic that beauty determines worth.

Her sense of inadequacy is reinforced when she reflects on the palace-wide preference for voluptuous bodies:

"A certain voluptuousness was the standard of beauty here, which unfortunately meant Maomao's natural shape was somewhat wanting."

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 76)

The use of the word "unfortunately" conveys an internal judgment, showing how Maomao herself feels lacking because her body does not meet patriarchal ideals. As Sharma (2020) explains, women subjected to the male gaze often learn to see themselves as objects for others, forming a self-image rooted in external validation. In this way, the novel illustrates how the male gaze operates not only through external descriptions but also through internalized self-discipline, where women evaluate and regulate their own bodies in line with oppressive standards.

The most tragic consequence of this internalization appears in the descriptions of women who risk their lives for beauty. Maomao observes the use of poisonous cosmetics in the palace:

"The women would cover themselves in it from their faces down to their necks, and it would eat away at their bodies. Some of them died from it.... They had weighed their lives against their beauty, and in the end had lost them both."

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 15).

This passage demonstrates the destructive extremes to which women are pushed by patriarchal expectations. The use of toxic powders to whiten skin reflects a willingness to

sacrifice health and even life in exchange for being deemed “beautiful” within the court. Here, beauty ceases to be an expression of individuality and becomes an oppressive demand, a disciplinary mechanism that compels women to conform at any cost. As Foucault’s concept of discipline suggests, power functions not merely through direct force but through the internalization of norms that regulate the body. The women’s willingness to harm themselves for beauty reveals the depth of patriarchal control; their bodies become sites of self-discipline, shaped by the demand to embody an ideal of desirability that serves male power (Hyndman, 2006).

Across these examples, *The Apothecary Diaries* novel reveals that beauty is narrated as fragile, conditional, and externally defined. The emperor’s preference for voluptuous women, the ornamental descriptions of consorts, Maomao’s internalization of inadequacy, and the fatal use of cosmetics all point to the same conclusion: women are valued only because they fulfill male-centered standards of attractiveness. Their identities are not constructed from within but imposed upon them through narration and patriarchal expectations. As Sayekti and Fitria (2022) argue, beauty becomes an instrument of male domination, trapping women in an endless cycle of self-monitoring and regulation.

The result is that beauty functions simultaneously as a source of power and as a tool of oppression. Within the harem, beauty offers women temporary influence and status, yet only at the cost of reducing them to ornamental objects. Their agency is overshadowed by their transformation into objects, whose worth lies in how they are seen. Even Maomao, who resists involvement in palace politics, cannot escape the logic of beauty as the defining measure of female value. In this sense, the novel dramatizes the entrapment of women within patriarchal systems where beauty is both their only capital and their greatest vulnerability.

Ultimately, the novel demonstrates how patriarchal structures turn women’s bodies into surfaces of display, narrated in aestheticized detail to satisfy male desire. The emperor’s personal tastes dictate the standards of desirability, while narrative descriptions reinforce these ideals by fragmenting women into ornamental images. Women themselves internalize these standards, disciplining their bodies and identities to conform to ideals that diminish their autonomy. Beauty, therefore, emerges not as self-expression but as a fragile and conditional marker of value that sustains patriarchal power. By portraying beauty in this way, *The Apothecary Diaries* novel highlights how women are positioned as objects, as their identities are constrained within the gaze of male authority.

3.2 The Reflection of Erotic Spectacle towards Women’s Beauty

The narration of women’s beauty in *The Apothecary Diaries* illustrates how beauty is constructed less as an expression of individuality than as an object designed for male pleasure and control. Drawing on Mulvey’s (1975) concept of the male gaze, the novel transforms women into ornamental figures whose primary function is to be admired. Their representation relies heavily on descriptive excess, metaphorical associations, and symbolic imagery, all of which elevate them as visual objects while simultaneously erasing their subjectivity.

This process is not natural. As Jeffreys (2005) and Young (2022) argue, beauty under patriarchy often becomes a form of conditioning that subordinates women by attaching their worth to fragile, external standards. In the context of the palace, women are celebrated only as long as their beauty aligns with the emperor’s desires or fulfills the political function of reproduction. Once their allure fades or their utility diminishes, they risk being forgotten or replaced. Thus, the very narrative techniques that glorify female beauty also underscore its precarious and exploitative nature.

The following subsections examine two central strategies through which erotic spectacle operates in the novel: the use of aestheticized language and the reliance on symbolism and metaphor.

3.2.1. The Use of Aestheticized Language towards Women

One of the most prominent ways the narrative turns women into erotic spectacles is through aestheticized language. As Bolus (2019) explains, aesthetics extends beyond notions of beauty to encompass cultural expressions of how beauty is represented and consumed. In *The Apothecary Diaries* novel, this takes shape through diction marked by hyperbole, poetic cadence, and elaborate imagery, which work to eroticize women and present their bodies as consumable spectacles.

The description of Consort Fuyou exemplifies this strategy:

“Her feet was moving gracefully atop the wall as if in a dance. She shivered, and her clothing rippled as if it were alive. Her long black hair shimmered in the dark, lending her a sort of faint halo. She was so beautiful she seemed almost unreal.”

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 50).

This passage transforms ordinary movement into performance through the simile “as if in a dance,” while the imagery of rippling fabric and shimmering hair constructs her as a luminous spectacle. The assertion that she appeared “almost unreal” completes her transition into fantasy. Such diction frames Fuyou not as a subject with depth but as a tableau for admiration, aligning with Mulvey’s (1975) notion of “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Although the focalization is filtered through Maomao, the language itself reproduces entrenched patriarchal codes, revealing how deeply ingrained the logic of objectification is within the imperial system.

Consort Gyokuyou is presented in a similar fashion:

“Gyokuyou exuded an exotic beauty. The consort with the flame-red hair was said to look better in scarlet than anyone in the country. The way her eyes, green as jade themselves, shone from within all that red only added to her mystique”

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 78).

Her appearance is fragmented into discrete parts, hair, clothing, eyes, that are amplified through ornamental exaggeration. The phrase “better in scarlet than anyone in the country” places her in direct competition with other women, while the metaphor of jade eyes emphasizes her rarity and value. Such aestheticization transforms her into a carefully staged vision, a mosaic of sensual fragments rather than a holistic character. As Stilwell (2024) observes, poetic embellishment often intensifies hierarchical valuations, and here, the heightened diction transforms Gyokuyou’s beauty into symbolic capital within the palace’s competitive hierarchy.

Through these examples, it becomes evident that aestheticized language does more than beautify; it eroticizes. Female characters are stripped of individuality and stylized into spectacles that gratify the gaze. Their presence in the text becomes conditional, bound to their visual appeal and the patriarchal logic of desirability.

3.2.2. The Use of Symbolism and Metaphor

Alongside descriptive embellishment, the narrative frequently employs symbolism and metaphor to reinforce the erotic spectacle of women. These devices cloak objectification under culturally resonant imagery, making women appear not as autonomous individuals but as signs within a symbolic order of beauty and desire. As Whiteley (2024) points out, the recurring use

of floral and ornamental metaphors in literary traditions often equates women with fragility, purity, or temporality, reinforcing their status as consumable figures.

The metaphor of the hibiscus attached to Consort Fuyou demonstrates this point:

“It was like something out of a fantasy... like a hibiscus under the stars.”

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 50).

In this narrative, Fuyou is likened to a hibiscus, a flower admired for its beauty but known for its short lifespan. The association naturalizes the ephemerality of her value: like a blossom destined to wither, her worth is temporary. The addition of “under the stars” elevates her beauty into a celestial register, amplifying her erotic allure while distancing her from individuality. What emerges is not a portrait of a woman but a symbolic figure of fragile sensuality, designed for contemplation rather than engagement.

A parallel use of symbolism also shapes Gyokuyou’s representation.

“Gyokuyou exuded an exotic beauty. The consort with the flame-red hair was said to look better in scarlet than anyone in the country. The way her eyes, green as jade themselves, shone from within all that red only added to her mystique.”

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 78).

Her flame-red hair and scarlet attire evoke associations of fire and passion, while the metaphor of jade eyes casts her as a precious, refined object (Crystalline, n.d.). The symbolic layering of red and green produces a striking tableau, intensifying her role as a spectacle. Yet as Bocci (2011) argues, the label of “exotic beauty” simultaneously elevates and marginalizes: it presents difference as desirable but also marks it as other, situating Gyokuyou within a discourse of both fascination and instability.

These symbolic framings illustrate how metaphors expand the scope of the male gaze. Women are detached from individuality and reconstituted as cultural signs, flowers, jewels, celestial visions, whose meaning lies in their capacity to signify beauty, passion, or fragility. As Mitchell (2021) suggests, such figurative devices heighten aesthetic effect, but in the patriarchal context of the novel, they also reinforce objectification.

Through the interplay of floral, jewel, and color symbolism, the narrative amplifies women’s allure while simultaneously erasing their voices. Their subjectivity is displaced by metaphor, and their identity becomes inseparable from the signs they are made to embody. Symbolism thus deepens the exploitative dynamic already evident in aestheticized language: women are not only described as beautiful but transformed into enduring images of beauty designed for male admiration.

3.2.3. The Use of Symbolism and Metaphor

While aestheticized language and symbolism construct women as spectacles of beauty, these strategies culminate in a more severe dynamic: eroticization as exploitation. Eroticization, in this sense, does not simply embellish female beauty but actively reduces women to objects whose value lies in their capacity to gratify male desire and serve patriarchal structures. As Mulvey (1975) explains, the male gaze transforms women into “to-be-looked-at” objects, but within the palace system of *The Apothecary Diaries*, this gaze extends further, converting women into commodities defined by their aesthetic and reproductive functions.

Within patriarchal societies, beauty and fertility often operate as twin pillars determining women’s social value. Buggio et al. (2012, p. 756) note that women’s physical attractiveness and reproductive ability shape their status and opportunities, a dynamic evident in the palace where consorts are judged by their beauty and their capacity to bear heirs. Lakoff and Scherr (2022)

emphasize that such judgments are not neutral but deeply political: women become instruments within a system where power is distributed and legitimized through their appearance and fertility. This structure ensures that women are treated less as individuals than as political assets, their bodies serving as tools of dynastic continuity and male authority.

Beauty standards serve as a potent mechanism of control here. As Farlina and Zahara (2023, p. 63) argue, emphasis on physical attractiveness fosters a culture where women are easily reduced to objects, granted visibility and influence only while they conform to prevailing ideals. This conditional power is fragile: age, illness, or deviation from aesthetic norms quickly diminishes a woman's worth. Fertility compounds this system of evaluation. Research has shown that men often assess female attractiveness in relation to perceived reproductive capacity (Bovet, 2018, p. 345). Thus, in the palace context, beauty without fertility is incomplete. Women must not only captivate visually but also demonstrate their ability to bear children, especially male heirs, to secure lasting favor. As Zheng (2021, p. 6) observes, male preferences for physically attractive women often originate from evolutionary associations between beauty, health, and fertility. This logic positions women's bodies as dual instruments, ornamental and reproductive, further embedding them within patriarchal exploitation.

The novel makes this explicit in its portrayal of the emperor's treatment of concubines:

"The Emperor might have been Jinshi's master, but he was also, in Jinshi's estimation, terrible. He set up concubines purely based on their usefulness to him and the country, got them pregnant, and then, when the children showed no aptitudes, he would cut them loose."

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 34)

Through Jinshi's focalization, the narration conveys both the emperor's utilitarian logic and his cruelty. Concubines are valued for their beauty and reproductive capacity, but once their children are deemed unworthy, they are discarded. This demonstrates the culmination of eroticization: women's bodies function as instruments of political reproduction, their aesthetic and biological capital appropriated and then abandoned. As Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, cited in Dewi & Oktafiyani, 2023, p. 245) argue, sexual objectification occurs when women's bodies or functions are treated as detachable from their personhood. Here, concubines are not depicted as subjects but as interchangeable resources, confirming how deeply objectification is institutionalized within the palace system.

This exploitative framework is further illustrated in the treatment of Consort Gyokuyou:

"Princess Lingli, the half-sister of the deceased prince, soon recovered from her indisposition, and she and her mother became a great comfort to the bereaved emperor. Indeed, it seemed likely Consort Gyokuyou might soon bear another child, given how often His Majesty visited."

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 11)

The emperor's repeated visits, as observed by Maomao, directly link Gyokuyou's value to her fertility. Her beauty initially secures her access to the emperor, but her continued status depends on her ability to produce heirs. The passage illustrates how eroticization and reproduction intersect: sexual relations are not portrayed as acts of intimacy but as instruments for dynastic continuity. Gyokuyou's body thus becomes doubly exploited, serving as an erotic spectacle for the emperor and a biological resource for the state. As Mapped et al. (2023) note, beauty standards often reinforce the belief that a woman's worth derives from appearance and fertility, a dynamic clearly mirrored in Gyokuyou's conditional elevation.

The logic of disposability is further emphasized in the narration of women who fail to capture or retain the emperor's attention:

“As for those who ultimately never excited the Emperor’s interest, after a certain age, a consort (assuming her family didn’t wield particular influence) could expect to see herself demoted, or even granted as a wife to some member of the bureaucracy.”

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 3)

Here, beauty is revealed as a form of capital that determines a woman’s fate. Those who cannot “excite” the emperor are rendered invisible, demoted, or transferred. The language of being “granted” underscores their commodification, as if women were gifts or rewards distributed at will. As Morris et al. (2018, cited in Farlina & Zahara, 2023, p. 64) observe, sexual objectification can lead to forms of dehumanization: women are treated either as animals driven by reproductive function or as machines valued solely for productivity. Within this context, concubines are neither companions nor partners; they are objects of exchange, circulated to consolidate patriarchal power.

The extremity of this system is illustrated in the fate of Consort Fuyou:

“The woman’s name was Fuyou, ‘hibiscus,’ and she was a middle-ranked consort. And the next month, she was to be given in marriage to a certain official, as a reward for his fine work.”

(Hyuuga, 2021, p. 50)

Fuyou’s body is transformed into a political gift, exchanged not out of affection but as a reward for male service. Her beauty once granted her entry into the palace, but when she failed to bear a child or secure lasting influence, she was reassigned. This demonstrates what Mulvey (1975) identifies as the extreme form of the male gaze: women are not only looked at but owned, transferred, and exchanged to reinforce patriarchal authority. Fuyou’s commodification reveals how eroticization ultimately collapses into exploitation, transforming women into tokens of political negotiation.

Across these examples, eroticization emerges as both elevation and dehumanization. On one hand, women are aestheticized, described as flowers, jewels, or celestial figures, and temporarily elevated within the palace hierarchy. On the other hand, this very process strips them of agency, binding their worth to fragile standards of beauty and fertility. Once those standards are no longer met, women are discarded, demoted, or exchanged. Eroticization, therefore, is inseparable from exploitation: it glorifies women as spectacles only to remind them of their disposability when their utility fades.

In conclusion, the eroticization of women in *The Apothecary Diaries* novel represents the culmination of patriarchal exploitation. Women’s bodies are appropriated as erotic capital, valued for their beauty and fertility but never as autonomous selves. Their social worth is conditional, contingent on sustaining the gaze and meeting reproductive expectations. As Mulvey (1975) argues, the male gaze denies women subjectivity, and within the palace system, this denial becomes institutionalized, transforming concubines into political and reproductive instruments. Eroticization thus operates not merely as a narrative aesthetic but as a mechanism of power, one that secures women’s subordination while masking exploitation under the guise of beauty.

4. Conclusion

Natsu Hyuuga’s *The Apothecary Diaries* Volume 1 novel illustrates how women’s beauty is constructed and exploited within a patriarchal court society. Using Laura Mulvey’s Male Gaze theory, focusing on how beauty functions as an erotic spectacle that objectifies women while limiting their autonomy. It is revealed that beauty in the novel is primarily portrayed through external focalization, emphasizing women’s physical features, such as clothing, skin, body shape, and hair, while minimizing their inner subjectivity. This transforms female characters into



aesthetic objects designed for male admiration. Descriptions comparing palace women to flowers or jewels, such as the ornamental presentation of Consort Gyokuyou, demonstrate how narration eroticizes women, turning them into spectacles of desire. At the same time, women internalize these ideals, as shown in Maomao's self-reflections, highlighting how patriarchal standards are absorbed as measures of self-worth.

The use of symbolic and aestheticized language further reduces women to ornamental figures, elevating beauty while erasing individuality. Yet, this glorification of beauty proves to be conditional and unstable. Concubines who lose favor or fail to bear heirs are easily discarded, exposing how women's value depends entirely on their ability to meet patriarchal demands. Beauty is thus celebrated only when it reinforces male authority, making women replaceable once their function is exhausted. Beauty in the novel, therefore, operates as a fragile form of capital: it may provide temporary recognition, survival, or influence within the harem, but it simultaneously exposes women to exploitation, disposability, and erasure. What appears as empowerment is ultimately contained within the structures of patriarchy that dictate women's worth.

This novel portrays women's beauty not as genuine agency but as an erotic spectacle that sustains male dominance. Beauty is both externally imposed and internally absorbed, functioning as a mechanism of control that reduces women to objects of vision and possession. The novel underscores how patriarchal ideals of beauty restrict women's subjectivity, rendering their value conditional and reinforcing systems of power that confine them.

References

- Abid, S., Liaquat, N., & Malik, A. A. (2021). On Being and Becoming Beautiful: The Social Construction of Feminine Beauty. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 403–413. doi:10.35484/pssr.2021(5-ii)33
- Berry, B. (2016). *The Power of Looks*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company. doi:10.4324/9781315554082
- Bloom, J. D. (2017). *Reading The Male Gaze in Literature and Culture*. Allentown: Springer Nature. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-59945-8
- Bocci, G. S. (2011, April 11). What Is "Exotic" Beauty? Part I. Retrieved from Psychology Today: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/millennial-media/201104/what-is-exotic-beauty-part-i?msockid=050fdd5963c665080ffec88562a3643b>
- Bolus, M. P. (2019). *Aesthetics and the Cinematic Narrative*. London: Anthem Press. doi:https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvkwnnfm
- Bovet, J. (2018). The evolution of feminine beauty. *Exploring Transdisciplinarity in Art and Sciences*. *Exploring Transdisciplinarity in Art and Sciences*, 327–357. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-76054-4_17
- Buggio, L., Vercellini, P., Viganò, P., Frattaruolo, M. P., & Fedele, L. (2012). "You are so beautiful": Behind women's attractiveness towards the biology of reproduction: a narrative review. *Gynecological Endocrinology*, 28(10), 753–757. doi:10.3109/09513590.2012.662545
- Crystalline, C. (n.d.). The Intrinsic Value of Jade: An In-Depth Analysis. Retrieved from Jewelerloom: <https://jewelerloom.com/articles/intrinsic-value-of-jade-analysis/>
- Dewi, A. A., & Oktafiyani, E. (2023). Teenagers' Resistance to Patriarchy in School: A Feminist Movement Representation in the Moxie Film. *Buletin Al-Turas*, 29(2), 241–256. doi:10.15408/bat.v29i2.27500
- Genette, G. (1990). *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Gromkowska-Melosik, A., & Boron, A. (2023). Chinese women in society: Confucian past, ambiguous emancipation, and access to higher education. *International Journal of Chinese Education*, 1–9. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/2212585X231181703



- Hyndman, A. (2006). Female Body Modification Throughout Time. Retrieved from Ecclectica: <https://ecclectica.brandonu.ca/issues/2006/1/Article-23.html>
- Hyuuga, N. (2021). *The Apothecary Diaries*. (S. McGlynn, Ed., & K. Steinbach, Trans.) Tokyo: J-Novel Club LLC.
- Izzati, N. A., & Syamsi, K. (2023). The Commodification of Women's Bodies in the Novel Maysuri by Nadjib Kartapati Z.: Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 73–84. doi:10.32996/ijllt
- Khoa, D. (2024, December 16). Power Struggles in the Imperial Harem: Politics, Betrayal, and Intrigue in Ancient China. Retrieved from [teamelements.com](https://teamelements.com/index.php/2024/12/16/power-struggles-in-the-imperial-harem-politics-betrayal-and-intrigue-in-ancient-china/): <https://teamelements.com/index.php/2024/12/16/power-struggles-in-the-imperial-harem-politics-betrayal-and-intrigue-in-ancient-china/>
- Lakoff, R. T., & Scherr, R. (2022). *Face Value: The Politics of Beauty*. New York: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781003346180
- Ma, H. (2025). Negotiating beauty: exploring beauty narratives of Chinese. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 263-280. doi:10.1080/09589236.2024.2360488
- Mappe, U. U., Sunaniah, & Salwia. (2023). Analisis Mitos Kecantikan Perempuan Dalam Iklan Kosmetik Lokal Dengan Brand Ambassador Idol Korea Selatan. *Aksiologi : Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Ilmu Sosial*, 4(1), 116-128. Retrieved from <https://aksiologi.pubmedia.id/index.php/aksiologi/article/download/202/77>
- Mitchell, G. (2021). Aesthetics and the philosophy of language. *Routledge Encyc. of Philosophy*, 1–15. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780415249126-M065-1>
- Mondal, D. (2025, April 29). Fandomwire. Retrieved from No One Talks Enough About 'The Apothecary Diaries' as a Historical Anime: <https://fandomwire.com/no-one-talks-enough-about-the-apothecary-diaries-as-a-historical-anime/>
- Mueller, H., & Whittemore, J. (2023, November 11). Confucianism & Women | Overview, Role & Sexism. Retrieved from [Study.com](https://study.com/academy/lesson/confucianism-and-women.html): <https://study.com/academy/lesson/confucianism-and-women.html>
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. 6-18. doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6
- Sartwell, C. (2022, March 22). Stanford University. Retrieved from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/beauty/#ArisCapi>
- Sayekti, H. O., & Fitria, S. (2022). Beauty standard as a construction of woman objectification in Trisha R. Thomas's *Nappily Ever After*. *Suluk: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, dan Budaya*, 157-168. doi:10.15642/suluk.2022.4.2.157-168
- Sharma, N. (2020). Deconstructing the Male Gaze: The Shifting Representation of Female Identity in Literature from Classical Texts to Contemporary Feminist Reinterpretations. *International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES)*, 2(2), 19–30. Retrieved from <https://www.ijoes.in/papers/v2i2/Dr%20Neha%20Sharma-19-30%20IJOES%20-FEB-2020.pdf>
- Stilwell, P. (2024, May 31). Functional/Aesthetic Languages. Retrieved from [Byteseismic Philosophy](https://byteseismic.com/2024/05/31/functional-aesthetic-languages/#functional-vs-aesthetic-languages): <https://byteseismic.com/2024/05/31/functional-aesthetic-languages/#functional-vs-aesthetic-languages>
- Pandian, L. (2020). Patriarchy and Beauty: The Power Over Indian Women. *Journal of the Anthropological Survey of India*, 117–123. doi:10.1177/2277436X20928441
- Ramadani, D. A., Jupriono, & Hakim, L. (2022). Analisis Wacana Standar Kecantikan Pada Kolom Tajuk "Pesanku kepada Adik-adik Perempuan" di Situs Berita [Magdalene.co](https://www.magdalene.co). *Seminar Nasional 2022*, 1-5.
- Tu, M.-H., Gilbert, E., & Bono, J. (2020). Is beauty more than skin deep? Attractiveness, power, and nonverbal presence in evaluations of hirability. *Personnel Psychology*, 1–28. doi:10.1111/peps.12469



- Wardani, W. D., & Suherman, E. (2023). Objektivasi Perempuan dan Praktik Male Gaze dalam Kumpulan Cerpen Zou no Shoumetsu Karya Murakami Haruki. *Japanology*, 126-141. doi:10.20473/jjs.v10i2.54735
- Whiteley, T. J. (2024, March 26). Why Is the Symbol of Flowers Associated with Femininity? Retrieved from The Collector: <https://www.thecollector.com/symbol-flowers-femininity/>
- Wolf, N. (2013). *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against*. London: Vintage Digital.
- Zahara, D. M., & Farlina, N. (2023). Challenging Objectification Through Alternative Beauty Concepts In The Film *I Feel Pretty* (2018). *Celtic: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching, Literature and Linguistics*, 10(1), 63-80. doi:10.22219/celtic.v10i1.27028
- Zheng, M. (2021). Beauty Premium or Penalty Revisited: Gender Differences in Social Perception of Female Cosmetic Surgery Recipients. *Harvard Library*, 1-67. Retrieved from <https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37367675>