

**MANIFESTATION OF NATURALISM IN THE SHORT STORY MAT PISAU  
BY EKA KURNIAWAN**

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**Abstract**

*Literature is the only thing capable of depicting a social reality. Through literature, feelings can be conveyed in their entirety, including the depiction of oppression that cannot be resisted. The marginalized class is a class that is oppressed and determined. This study aims to examine determination in the short story Mat Pisau by Eka Kurniawan. This study will use the theory of The Trinity of Forces by Émile Zola. The main focus of this study is to explore how the child character, Mat Pisau, is depicted as a subject determined by internal and external factors so that he is unable to escape the shackles of oppression. The method used is descriptive qualitative with an objective approach to the text. The results of the study show that Mat Pisau's oppression is absolute and systematic, which is influenced by three main variables. First, heredity in the form of inherited poverty and negative social labels from the family. Second, the toxic social milieu (environment) at school and home that perpetuates the practice of bullying. Third, the moment (context) in the form of a violent tragedy that destroys Mat Pisau's false identity. The research findings reveal that Mat Pisau's attempt to gain existence through knife skills is merely a temporary anomaly that ultimately fails to defy the laws of naturalism. Mat Pisau represents the "subject of eternal determination" in contemporary Indonesian literature, where free will is negated by the mechanical forces of the environment. This study concludes that Kurniawan's narrative in this short story radically confirms Zolaian's view that individuals from the lowest social classes are trapped in a cycle of determinism with no escape.*

**Keywords:** *Naturalism, Émile Zola, Eka Kurniawan, The Trinity of Forces, Determinism*

**Abstrak**

Sastra adalah satu-satunya hal yang mampu menggambarkan sebuah kerealitasan sosial. Melalui sastra rasa mampu disampaikan secara utuh, termasuk gambaran tentang ketertindasan yang tidak bisa dilawan. Kelas marginal adalah kelas yang tertindas dan terdeterminasi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk melihat determinasi dalam cerpen Mat Pisau karya Eka Kurniawan. Penelitian ini akan menggunakan teori The Trinity of Forces dari Émile Zola. Fokus utama penelitian ini adalah mengeksplorasi bagaimana tokoh anak, Mat Pisau, digambarkan sebagai subjek yang terdeterminasi oleh faktor internal dan eksternal sehingga tidak mampu keluar dari kungkungan penindasan. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan objektif terhadap teks. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ketertindasan Mat Pisau bersifat mutlak dan sistematis, yang dipengaruhi oleh tiga variabel utama. Pertama, heredity (keturunan) berupa warisan kemiskinan dan label sosial negatif dari keluarga. Kedua, milieu (lingkungan) sosial yang toksik di sekolah dan rumah



yang melanggengkan praktik perundungan. Ketiga, moment (konteks) berupa tragedi kekerasan yang menghancurkan identitas semu Mat Pisau. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa upaya Mat Pisau untuk mendapatkan eksistensi melalui kemahiran bermain pisau hanyalah sebuah anomali sementara yang pada akhirnya gagal melawan hukum alam naturalisme. Mat Pisau merepresentasikan "subjek determinasi kekal" dalam sastra Indonesia kontemporer, di mana kehendak bebas (free will) ditiadakan oleh kekuatan mekanis lingkungan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa narasi Kurniawan dalam cerpen ini secara radikal mengukuhkan pandangan Zolaian bahwa individu dari kelas sosial terbawah terjebak dalam lingkaran determinisme yang tanpa celah pelarian.

**Kata Kunci:** Naturalisme, Émile Zola, Eka Kurniawan, The Trinity of Forces, Determinisme

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Literature is often described as imaginative rather than realistic. This assumption leads this research to the realistic nature of literary works. The realistic nature of a literary work can be traced back to a popular quote: "Literature is a reflection of society." This quote originated with Plato and Aristotle in the 18th and 20th centuries. It later emerged in Abrams (1971) in four approaches, which later emerged in his mimetic concept. Welles & Warren (2016) also touched on the extent to which literature truly reflects society, noting that mirrors can be "curved" or even "broken." Finally, Damono (1997) argued in his book that literature is not something that falls from the sky; rather, it is a manifestation of social and cultural conditions. It is through these opinions that this research finds its roots. This research seeks to examine this reality more specifically, namely through a character in a literary work, namely a child character. This research will examine literary objects that discuss social conditions and appear from a child's perspective.

Contemporary Indonesian literature often features children as the driving characters in literary works, such as Ziggy Zezsyazeoviennazabrizkie, or the more popular Andrea Hirata, or Ahman Fuadi. However, this paper will focus on another author, Eka Kurniawan. Eka Kurniawan was chosen because of his unusual style of writing with child characters. He is best known for his magical realism novels, such as "Beauty is a Wound" or "Man Harimau" (Human Tiger). Ultimately, the short story "Mat Pisau" was chosen as the research object. Eka Kurniawan, who often writes about the realities of society through various symbolisms and his adult characters, now tries to write from the perspective of a child character. This is the main reason for choosing this research object. Through these two factors, it is hoped that this research will be able to see something different from the perspective of a child.

Mat Pisau is an oppressed high school student, teased and bullied by friends and even by circumstances. This research will examine Mat Pisau as a lower-class character. Through what is perceived as reality, the process of oppression is then observed, which in reality is almost absolute. This absoluteness then brings a context far beyond realism, namely naturalism. Humans, even adults in lower social classes, are vulnerable individuals, let alone children. Ultimately, oppression resembles a never-ending cycle. Mat Pisau is depicted in this way. Ultimately, Mat Pisau falls within the scope of this naturalism. The character developed by Eka Kurniawan is very Zolaian. The naturalist view was initiated by Emile Zola. In his view, humans are seen as products of heredity and a milieu (environment) that cannot be resisted. This short story radically demonstrates that for children in certain social classes, the future is not a choice, but rather a predetermined path determined by the harshness of their surroundings.

The use of this naturalist theory is quite rare in Indonesian literary works, especially contemporary works. This is one of the reasons for this research. One of the studies that uses the theory of naturalism and uses Indonesian literary works entitled "elements of naturalism in the novel *Terusir* by Buya Hamka, the study aims to analyze the elements in the novel and found five elements, namely 1.) Determinism experienced by Mariah in the form of a sense of injustice, inequality, uncertainty, sacrifice, and disappointment. 2.) Objectivity in this novel is seen when Hamka as the author does not provide an explicit moral judgment on Mariah's decision to become a prostitute. 3.) Pessimism is depicted by Mariah's character when all her decisions only end in emptiness. 4) The setting of the story tends to describe the situation of women who experience oppression and discrimination. 5.) The plot twist that occurs is that Mariah's departure really hits Azhar's soul because he kicked her out without prior tabayyun (Humaira & Surur, 2025). This study has a weakness that does not show the main variable from Zola, namely The Trinity of Forces. This study will focus on establishing these three main structures.

Other studies tend to focus on non-Indonesian literature, often even the work of Émile Zola himself. The study, entitled "Analysis of Naturalist Elements in Émile Zola's Novel *L'Inondation* Through a Genetic Structuralism Approach," aims to explain the naturalist elements present in the novel using the theory of genetic structuralism. This study differs slightly, viewing naturalism as a theme, then examining it within another theory, genetic

structuralism. This study concluded that the novel was created to illustrate the tragedy and determinism that are the main characteristics of naturalism, as viewed by Émile Zola (Aulia, 2014).

This previous research reveals a clear research gap. Studies of Eka Kurniawan's works have been numerous, often exploring his magical realism or sexual violence (Pradotokusumo, 2014). As another example, research by (Sari, 2020) discusses social issues in Kurniawan's short stories in general, while the study of child representation in Kurniawan's work is briefly touched upon in an analysis of masculinity in his novels. However, no research has specifically analyzed the short story *Mat Pisau* through Émile Zola's theory of naturalism, focusing on the child character's inability to escape environmental determinism. This is where the novelty of this research lies: it will focus on the short story *Mat Pisau*, a contemporary literary work, and will focus on the form of determination in literary works through the variable of The Trinity of Forces.

Émile Zola was not only a novelist, but also someone who invented a method that later became the basis for systematic social analysis. He stated that human behavior is not determined by free will (Oppy, 2020). Humans are essentially born without that freedom. Humans are governed by many things, many forces more powerful than themselves. Émile Zola called this determination. To see the structure of this, he divided it into 3 interrelated things, namely Heredity (heredity) which is an internal factor that is inherited and influences human life; Milieu (Environment) is an external thing that determines human development in their lives, such as economic or social factors; Moment (moment/context) is a historical variable, which will provide an overview and of course influence humans as individuals, which can be exemplified by government regimes, political situations, culture, customs, and things that are contextual (Zola, 1964)

## **II. RESEARCH METHODS**

The method used in this study is descriptive qualitative, which takes into account causal relationships. The material object of this study is Eka Kurniawan's short story entitled *Mat Pisau*, and the material object is the oppressed subject in the short story *Mat Pisau*. This study will only focus on an objective approach to the text. The primary data source is Eka Kurniawan's short story *Mat Pisau*. Secondary data sources are all writings containing information about the research theme. The primary data used are words, phrases, sentences,

and paragraphs contained in the research object. In presenting the data, the researcher conducted textual descriptions, contextual descriptions, and synthesis (Faruk, 2012).

### **III. RESEARCH RESULTS**

This article will focus on the character Mat, who will later be known as Mat Pisau. This name change will mark the formation of Mat's identity. The first phase will examine heredity as the first element of The Trinity of Forces, followed by the Environment, and the Moment.

Heredity is a factor innate. It's not just a physical issue but also involves social factors from parents and family. When discussing naturalism, this first element, heredity, forms the basis for the formation of a person and their class. The tendency is that inherited conditions will determine their position. Simply put, heredity will determine a significant part of a person's life.

Mat was born into a poor family. It is explained that he lived with only his mother, who worked as a washer and ironer. This was a casual job or laborer, meaning he came from the lower class. This is evident in the words of Emi, Mat's friend.

*"Listen, Mat," said Emi, "I understand. You don't want to hear people call you stupid, poor, or smelly anymore. You don't want to hear people call you the bastard child, the hunchback, the ironing maid's son. People won't see you the way they see Agus, the smart kid. You're stupid, everyone knows, and no one can fix you (Kurniawan, 2024, p. 14).*

This quote also provides a glimpse into Mat's condition. Stupid, poor, and smelly are close to his life, so those words stuck with his name. Through other terms like "bastard child" which defines Mat as an unknown descendant. And the term "hunchback" is closely associated with things that smell of neglect due to poverty.

That's how Mat is described; he comes from a similar lineage to his own. When his family is poor, he will also be poor. Being born into an uncertain family situation will also impact his life. A stable life tends not to produce poor children. Ignorant, and with no clear origins. In this section, Mat inherited from his mother everything that classifies him as lower class.

His mother was a poor laborer. This poverty educated and raised Mat. From a naturalistic perspective, poverty creates new poverty. It is difficult for humans to escape from this pit of poverty. Poverty limits many aspects of life, such as education, health, and a decent

standard of living. This is what Mat experienced: he was ignorant, sickly, and lived with all sorts of limitations, even below the limits of normality.

The environment is an external factor. This condition involves many factors, including social, economic, and physical factors, even the place where a person lives. Mat's environment is not clearly depicted, assuming he lives in social conditions similar to current or past realities in Indonesia. Images of school, scouting, and jobs are likely similar to existing realities. This ultimately defines Mat as living in a state of poverty similar to the reality of Indonesia. These images then appear in various symbols.

Mat's social condition can be identified by his being called poor. This image of poverty is evident in Mat's daily habits.

*"He rarely bathes with soap. If he has it, he brushes his teeth with toothpaste, but more often he just rubs them with his index finger" (Kurniawan, 2024, p. 4).*

This quote reflects Mat's limitations, habits that illustrate his poverty. Mat's poverty is also evident in his emaciated body. "His body was emaciated, a sign of undernourishment. He was a bit bloated, and that also made him hunchbacked" (Kurniawan, 2024, p. 4). This depiction of Mat's body symbolizes deep-rooted poverty. Emaciation, bloating, and hunchback are all ailments that afflict the poor.

This poverty then becomes a nickname for him, "poor." This term even sticks in the phrase intended to compliment him, "Hey, poor. Turns out you're cool too!" (Kurniawan, 2024, p. 4). This means that Mat will always be identified as poor in various contexts. His social environment supports Mat's continued existence in this position.

This situation ultimately concludes that the gap that arises between Mat and other humans in established reality is not special, but that doesn't mean it can be ignored. The gap in social status will still be a source of conflict. This paper attempts to examine the conflict and focus on its causes, which will then provide evidence for the concept of naturalism that emerges in the symbolism of Mat, who later becomes Mat Pisau.

A moment is defined as a historical space, which can be related to a specific political situation or era. Essentially, the story doesn't feature aspects that represent the era. The short story is limited to depicting events within the real world of Indonesia. Therefore, this analysis will be rooted in Indonesian cultures and will further examine the moment more specifically within the context of the Mat Pisau incident. This moment will focus on the events Mat Pisau

experienced directly in the short story. Ultimately, the moment will be divided into three parts: before popularity, after popularity, and after popularity.

Mat, as Mat, is a target of bullying by other students. As explained in the previous variable, his ancestry and environmental aspects, especially his social status, are the focus of the bullying. Poverty and Mat's physical reality are closely intertwined and inseparable. Ultimately, both become Mat's main weaknesses. A combination of the smelly and the poor, ultimately becoming the stupid. It's a very familiar nickname that appears and sounds familiar to Mat.

In the first paragraph, even in the first sentence, the curse is the first to appear: "Get out of the way, you stinker" (p. 4). This means that this will be the basis of the story: bullying by the lower classes. It's also said that Mat lacks the ability to fight back. He simply walks away, avoids it, and lets it happen.

*"...Mat would retreat and stay away. He had heard it often. His body probably smelled, especially to some of his friends. He rarely bathed with soap. If he did, he brushed his teeth with toothpaste, but more often he just rubbed them with his index finger" (Kurniawan, 2024, p. 4).*

Two main things that can be concluded: Mat smelled and Mat was poor. These two things would start all the bullying. Not only were they nicknamed or insulted, Mat also experienced various forms of physical bullying. From cigarette butts thrown at him to balls kicked at him.

*"If they were upset, one kid would force him to leave and push him. Sometimes with his hands, sometimes with his feet. Mat never considered resisting their pranks. His body was emaciated, a sign of undernourishment. He was a bit bloated, and that was also said to be what made him hunched over. It was better to leave immediately, rather than have a lit cigarette butt fly at him" (Kurniawan, 2024, p. 4).*

This quote depicts the physical abuse Mat experienced. In this situation, Mat had no power or ability to fight back. This was because Mat lacked the resources to fight back; he was limited both physically and intellectually. Poverty and ignorance were a perfect combination for absolute oppression.

*There was also a time when a boy kicked a ball, deliberately aiming at Mat. The ball hurtled toward Mat's head. He knew it, but couldn't dodge. The ball struck his*

*temple, leaving a laceration. He was thrown and fell backward. While the boys laughed at his misfortune in the small field, the girls screamed.*

...

*Emi stood before him and offered him a handkerchief to wipe the flowing blood. He didn't take it, because the other kids would have made fun of him. "Mat doesn't need anyone's help" (Kurniawan, 2024, p. 6).*

Mat is initially portrayed as anti-resistant; he doesn't fight back against the bullying or even the torture he experiences. This further reinforces Emile Zola's concept of naturalism, that humans cannot escape the shackles of oppression—this is naturalism.

Mat as Mat the Knife. Mat begins to transform, changing form, even changing his attitude and character, thanks to a scout dagger. It begins with the discovery of a dagger in the warehouse, and Mat begins to "befriend" it.

*"He found a rusty, used scout dagger there. He took the knife home, cleaned it, sharpened it, and then began playing with it between his fingers" (Kurniawan, 2024, pp. 4–5).*

This quote introduces Mat as a new person, Mat Pisau. Mat Pisau is Mat, experiencing the attention and popularity of his community. This is a defining moment for Mat Pisau. This moment has a significant impact on Mat Pisau's identity. Mat Pisau begins to have a purpose, or even a passion for life. The bullying he experienced fades with the attention and even validation from his friends. Mat Pisau is intoxicated by this validation. He is no longer the poor, smelly, or stupid Mat. Instead, he is the poor, smelly, stupid, but cool Mat Pisau.

*"His efforts were not in vain. When he played with him in the school hallway, the boys actually approached and surrounded him. One of them then said, "Hey, poor. "It turns out you're cool too" (Kurniawan, 2024, p. 7).*

This quote is evidence that Mat's identity has changed. He feels as if he's become human and has something that needs and is worth preserving in life: cool. This coolness is a validation that Mat Pisau has never received. Ultimately, Mat Pisau lives with this. He believes that he ultimately functions in life. He no longer questions the purpose or function of his life. Mat Pisau's passion and desire arise from a knife that symbolically resembles him. Abandoned, rusty, and neglected knife is then found, sharpened, and becomes sharp and then meaningful. Likewise, Mat Pisau, who is marginalized, finds a knife and the knife saves his

existence. At this stage, it seems as if the concept of naturalism can be broken. Mat Pisau can rise without any external push, which means the concept of determinism, which believes that human behavior is not determined by free will, but by mechanical forces beyond the individual's control, can be broken at this stage. However, in fact, this is the moment when a conflict arises.

### **Post-Mat Pisau Moment.**

This section will examine the main conflict, which tells the story of Mat Pisau losing his existence, marked by the loss of his knives. This conflict begins with Mat Pisau's fear. He fears that his existence as Mat Pisau will disappear or fade, he fears that his friends will become bored, and even fears that his friends will surpass him.

*"Then one night he woke up shivering. He was terrified. The question pounded in his head. What if some of those kids could play with knives as skillfully as he did, or even faster? What if Emi and the girls grew bored with the spinning knives? He knew the answer: he would return like a stone and chicken droppings" (Kurniawan, 2024, p. 9).*

This fear drove Mat Pisau to extreme measures, as he began to try to use his knives in a more expressive way. He hoped this would maintain his existence as Mat Pisau, and that validation about being cool, great, and similar things would continue to emerge from the mouths of his friends. However, this was what led to the loss of Mat Pisau's knives.

Mat Pisau chose to throw knives to cope with the crisis he felt. He tried throwing three knives like a clown throwing a ball alternately between his two hands. He tried to find two more knives to complete his collection, seeking various ways to survive his poverty. Eventually, he found a cat, which he then sold to get money to buy two more knives.

*"Mat Knife no longer holds three knives together in the usual way. He has become too adept at catching the handle of a knife and throwing it, so that several times he no longer needs to win, but just bounces it. He considers this method too shallow, just a child's game, old-fashioned. Now Mat Knife shows the other children how he bounces a falling knife so that it bounces back with his elbow, his shoulder, and also kicks his knee. That's not enough. Occasionally he headbutts it with his back, then with his skull, and what made the other children hold their breath was that he held the knife with his neck" (Kurniawan, 2024, pp. 15–16).*

This then created a problem for Mat Pisau. Misfortune does not come directly to him, but to other people. A child tried to imitate him, but the knife was right on target for his neck.

*“But the tragedy still happened, though not to him. A child tried to imitate his skill. He held up three knives and tried to deflect them with his elbow, then with his shoulder. He saw an opportunity and wanted to prove that he too could be like Mat Pisau. He saw a knife soaring while spinning, and at one point, it came back down in a semicircle. The opportunity was before his eyes. He was sure he could do it. The child tilted his head, preparing his neck to receive the knife's handle. He watched the knife spin, jump slightly, and his neck received the knife with a slight jerk. The countdown was to the ke-luu. The neck didn't hit the dagger's handle, but its sharp tip. The dagger pierced his skin, stuck. His neck was torn, blood spurting, gushing like a fountain” (Kurniawan, 2024, p. 16).*

The incident became a problem and resulted in the students' knives being confiscated by the school, as were Mat Pisau's. This was the worst part of Mat Pisau's fate; without his knives, he was no longer Mat Pisau.

*“If a person lives in darkness all his life, he becomes accustomed to it and accepts it as his own world. If it's painful, he accepts that suffering. But when he finds light, through his own efforts, lives in it for a while, breathes its scent, sees its various colors, and the world feels more spacious, he begins to see darkness differently. He begins to question why that dark world exists, and why he's been trapped there for so long. Then, when he's forced to return to the darkness, he begins to experience true darkness. A quieter silence, a deeper darkness.*

*His simple mind can see even small truths, though he struggles to grasp them. Don't let a sick person taste health, for he'll be sicker than before. Don't let an ignorant person taste a little knowledge, for he'll be even more tormented. Don't let a poor person grasp a little wealth, for he'll be consumed by unbearable hunger.*

*But for Mat, the situation was already predetermined. The knife had given him light, opened a window to a different world for him.*

*Now they had "Took away his knives, his life, his light" (Kurniawan, 2024, p. 18).*

This lengthy quote is quoted in its entirety due to its significance. It emphasizes that misery will be far more painful if one has experienced its alleviation. That's Mat Pisau; he

felt a darker darkness. This moment is a moment where the determinism of naturalism is real. One cannot escape their genetic makeup because it will determine their life. Mat Pisau comes from a lower-class background; he is miserable, bullied, and even ignored by his mother. Zola likens humans to machines whose operation is influenced by their components (genetics) and the fuel/environment in which they operate. Mat Pisau's happiness and efforts are superficial, something that will not last.

### **Mat Pisau's identity structure.**

This section will explain the relationship between the variables of "The Trinity of Forces" proposed by Emile Zola. Heredity, identified as Mat's birthplace, is characterized by his mother's labor. His mother showed little concern for Mat Pisau. This is considered a genetic trait that will be passed down throughout Mat Pisau's life. He will inherit that poverty and underclass. The second aspect that will support him is the Milieu/Environment. Mat Pisau's environment is one that does not support someone like him. He lives in a social environment that does not support him. He is ignored at home and bullied at school. These two primary environments that shape a child's personality are not in Mat Pisau's favor. He is increasingly oppressed, without any means of resistance, or even the desire to fight back. Eventually, these two factors give rise to a moment of bullying, where Mat Pisau is bullied because of these two inherited traits. Mat Pisau does have a moment to feel his existence as someone who is recognized and even popular, but this is a false image. Mat Pisau's existence was lost because his knives were taken from his hands. Knives were his identity, without them he would not be Mat Pisau. This then became something that further confirmed that The Trinity Of Forces conveyed by Emile Zola was absolute. Mat Pisau could not fight his genetics. He was trapped in a condition that made it impossible to grow and escape the confines of the lower class. Until finally, with a desperate Mat Pisau tried to regain his existence with other knives. However, the moment of Mat Pisau's popularity was gone. The tragedy of being stuck in the neck of his friend that he experienced at school erased all his existence. Mat Pisau will be able to regain his identity because his identity has changed due to the tragic moment he experienced. Knives are no longer a symbol of coolness or extraordinaryness, knives are now a bloody symbol that no one wants to remember..

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The Trinity of Forces is an absolute variable formulated by Zola. He saw that oppression, or what he called "determination," is deeply rooted in history and human environment. Heredity will pass on traits to humans, not as materialistic things, but rather genetic. The environment is like a mold; it shapes each individual based on their internal factors, namely heredity. Finally, context or moment is very specific and has fatal effects. Like political circumstances, regimes will naturally influence every individual living there.

Mat Pisau is a determined subject; he is oppressed, unable to escape, and even makes no attempt to escape. Mat Pisau was born into a family consisting of a poor, neglected mother. He lived in a toxic environment, one that did not at all support his escape from oppression. He was poor, sickly, smelly, and bullied. Mat Pisau represents the reality of contemporary Indonesia. Bullying often arises from economic factors. Mat Pisau lived through the moment, being insulted, bullied, both verbally and physically. He remained silent and accepted it. This is a form of Zolaian naturalism: oppressed and unable to escape.

This is confirmed by Mat Pisau's efforts to escape this determination. He wanted to escape with his knife skills, but that was impossible. In naturalism, it is a genetic trait that cannot be resisted by any means. Mat Pisau is subject to eternal determination. The more he tries to escape, the more tightly and deeply he becomes entangled.

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