

EMBODIED EXPERIENCE IN NOVELS WRITTEN BY INDONESIAN BLIND AUTHORS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF PERCEPTION

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan mendeskripsikan pengalaman ketubuhan dihadirkan dalam novel-novel yang ditulis oleh pengarang tunanetra Indonesia. Ruang lingkup penelitian difokuskan pada pengalaman ketubuhan tokoh-tokoh tunanetra dalam novel *Mata Kedua* (2013) dan *Dunia Tanpa Cahaya* (2015) karya Ramaditya Adikara serta novel *Nafas Sang Pekat* (2014) karya Nabel Ghali Azumi. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode analisis tekstual fenomenologis. Analisis dilakukan berdasarkan konsep *lived body*, persepsi, dan *being-in-the-world* dari Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Data penelitian berupa narasi, dialog, dan monolog yang merepresentasikan pengalaman tubuh tokoh tunanetra dalam berinteraksi dengan dunia, ruang, dan dirinya sendiri. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman ketubuhan dalam novel-novel tersebut terartikulasi melalui tiga bentuk utama, yaitu kehadiran dunia dalam persepsi multisensori, orientasi ruang melalui tubuh, dan pemaknaan diri dalam pengalaman ketubuhan. Temuan penelitian memperlihatkan bahwa dunia mereka tetap bisa hadir dan bermakna melalui suara, aroma, sentuhan, dan berbagai pengalaman inderawi lainnya. Selain itu, tubuh berfungsi sebagai pusat orientasi yang memungkinkan subjek menghuni ruang dan membangun relasi dengan lingkungannya. Ketunanetraan digambarkan sebagai cara berbeda dalam mempersepsi, menghidupi, dan memaknai realitas. Temuan ini menawarkan perspektif alternatif terhadap pandangan ableistik yang cenderung mendefinisikan kemampuan manusia berdasarkan kapasitas visualnya saja.

Kata kunci: pengalaman ketubuhan; pengarang tunanetra, fenomenologi persepsi, Merleau-Ponty

Abstract

This study aims to describe how embodied experience is presented in novels written by blind Indonesian authors. The scope of the study is focused on the embodied experiences of blind characters in the novels Mata Kedua (2013) and Dunia Tanpa Cahaya (2015) by Ramaditya Adikara, as well as the novel Nafas Sang Pekat (2014) by Nabel Ghali Azumi. The research employs a qualitative approach using a phenomenological textual analysis method. The analysis is grounded in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the lived body, perception, and being-in-the-world. The data consist of narratives, dialogues, and monologues that represent the bodily experiences of blind characters as they interact with the world, space, and themselves. The findings reveal that embodied experience in these novels is articulated through three main forms: the presence of the world in multisensory perception, spatial orientation through the body, and self-understanding within embodied experience. The findings demonstrate that their world remains present and meaningful through sounds, aromas, touch, and other sensory experiences. Furthermore, the body functions as a center of orientation that enables the subject to inhabit space and establish relations with the environment. Blindness is depicted as a different way of perceiving, living, and making sense of reality. These findings offer an alternative perspective to ableist views that tend to define human ability solely on the basis of visual capacity.

Keywords: embodied experience; blind authors; perception; Merleau-Ponty

INTRODUCTION

Through the body, human beings can experience and understand the world. Through the body, they establish relationships with space, recognize objects around them, interact with others, and

form an understanding of themselves. However, in social life, not all bodies are understood as sources of experience. Certain bodies are often placed in categories of normal and ideal, while bodies that differ from these standards are perceived as imperfect. One such body that is frequently positioned in this way is the blind body. Blindness is generally understood as the loss of the ability to see, resulting in limitations in accessing the world. The experiences of blind people in society are often interpreted through a concept of normality rooted in the medical model (Porkertová, 2020). Consequently, the lived experiences of blind individuals are frequently explained in terms of what their bodies lack, rather than based on how and through what means they experience and make sense of the world. This view is inseparable from the dominance of visual culture, which places sight as the most valuable form of knowledge in social life (Pietrowiak, 2018). This view shapes literary representation, where blind characters are often depicted as dependent, suffering figures or metaphors for ignorance, with modernist extremes reinforcing ocularnormativism (Bolt, 2013, 2024). This frames blindness as a deficiency to be overcome, reducing embodied experience to loss, perpetuating stereotypes of the disabled as pitiable or negatively depicted (Hermeston, 2022). Yet, the blind body retains the capacity to engage the world through non-visual modalities; sound, touch, aroma, and movement.

An understanding of the body as the center of experience finds strong theoretical grounding in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Eriksson, 2025; Merleau-Ponty, 2004). Unlike views that separate body and consciousness, Merleau-Ponty (2004) regards the body as the subject that experiences the world. Ribeiro (2014) explains that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception departs from the idea that perception always takes place through the lived body and that experience is inherently situational. Through the concept of the lived body (*corps propre*), the body enables human beings to perceive, understand, and give meaning to reality. In this view, the body is not understood as a mere biological object. Wehinger (2025) also affirms that the body is the subject of experience, not merely an object to be observed. From this perspective, perception is not exclusively an activity of sight, but a process of the body's total engagement with the world. Therefore, human experience is always embodied, because the world is presented and made meaningful through the body that experiences it. The body is the basis of subjectivity that enables human beings to engage directly with the world before intellectual reflection takes place (Sousa, 2018).

This phenomenological perspective becomes relevant for reading novels written by blind authors. As individuals who experience the world through a body with different perceptual characteristics, blind authors have the possibility of presenting embodied experiences that are not always found in works written by sighted authors. In novels dealing with blindness, such experiences do not merely appear as story settings but become an essential part of the formation of the narrative world. Blind characters recognize their surroundings through sound and aroma, build spatial orientation through touch and bodily movement, and establish relationships with others through experiences rooted in the body they live. These novels provide a space for understanding how the blind body experiences the world from within the subject's own experience. Research by Uboldi et al. (2025) shows that blind individuals construct aesthetic experiences and understanding of objects through touch, which then generates imagery and meaning. Literary works in principle contain their own meaning since they were created (Yuli & Jaeka, 2025).

Much of the existing research on literature and disability has focused on the representation of persons with disabilities, stereotypes, social discrimination, struggles for survival, and the formation of disabled characters' identities. For instance, demonstrate how disability has historically functioned as a "narrative prosthesis", a crutch upon which literary narratives lean to generate characterization and plot, yet one that consistently reduces disabled characters to symbolic functions rather than fully realized subjects. Such studies have made important contributions by revealing the position of persons with disabilities within cultural and social constructions. It must be acknowledged that disability studies emerged as part of the disability rights movement, which primarily contains a materialist critique of the normative status quo (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Nevertheless, attention to embodied experience as lived experience remains relatively limited. As a result, the disabled body is often read as an object of representation, rather than as the center of experience that enables distinctive ways of perceiving and relating to the world. Flynn (2021) proposes the importance of an epistemology of embodiment that positions the body as a source of knowledge and experience. For this reason, although this study uses the terminology of persons with disabilities, it does not intend to focus on limitations, but rather to emphasize their different capacities for perceiving the world. Disability is not a flaw, an individual tragedy nor a whispered recognition of another's embodied failing or a shameful family truth (Goodley et al., 2019).

Based on these issues, this study examines embodied experience in novels written by blind Indonesian authors. The sources of data for this study are the novels *Mata Kedua* (2013) and *Dunia Tanpa Cahaya* (2015) by Ramaditya Adikara, as well as *Nafas Sang Pekat* (2014) by Nabel Ghali Azumi. These novels were selected because their authors make blindness the primary experience that shapes perception, spatial orientation, and the characters' relationships with their surrounding world. Although both authors have written other works, this study only selected novels that explicitly present the experience of blindness as the narrative's central focus. Using Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the lived body, perception, and being-in-the-world, this study addresses the question: how is embodied experience presented in novels by blind Indonesian authors?

The aim of this study is to describe how embodied experience is presented in novels written by blind Indonesian authors. This study is expected to contribute to the development of disability studies within a literary analysis perspective by offering a phenomenological reading of novels by blind Indonesian authors. Unlike research that generally emphasizes representation and the social issues of disability, this study places embodied experience as the focus of analysis. Such a perspective aligns with developments in disability studies that increasingly attend to the embodied experience and lived experience of persons with disabilities (Beudaert, 2020; Singh & Chopra, 2018; Toro et al., 2020).

Previous research has largely treated blind characters as objects of representation, judged from the perspective of the sighted. How blind embodiment functions as a subject of experience within narrative has received far less attention. Moreover, novels written by blind authors themselves are rarely considered a distinct corpus, even though these authors write from lived experience. To address this gap, through a phenomenological analysis of perception of three novels by blind Indonesian authors, this study offers three contributions: (1) extending literary disability studies beyond representation to the lived dimensions of blind experience; (2) applying Merleau-Ponty's concepts of perception and the lived body to non-normative embodiment, which remains undertheorized; and (3) offering an alternative to ableist views by demonstrating that blindness gives rise to distinctive perceptual ways of understanding reality, while also framing disability as a form of diversity rather than merely a problem.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a phenomenological textual analysis method to examine embodied experience in novels by blind Indonesian authors. The data sources are three novels: *Mata Kedua* (2013), *Dunia Tanpa Cahaya* (2015), and *Nafas Sang Pekat* (2014). The units of analysis are narrative units: descriptions, dialogues, and character monologues, that explicitly depict the bodily experiences of blind characters. These units were selected purposively based on their relevance to sensory perception, spatial orientation, and self-meaning. Data collection ceased upon reaching data saturation, meaning no significant new patterns of bodily experience emerged. Overall, the units encompass three main domains: perceptual experiences (sound, aroma, touch), spatial experiences (movement, navigation, cane use), and reflective and relational experiences (self-acceptance, responses to stigma, identity negotiation).

Data were collected through intensive reading and systematic note-taking. Each novel was read repeatedly to understand its plot and characters. All passages relevant to the blind characters' bodily experiences were recorded, marked, and grouped according to their type of experience. The analysis was conducted phenomenologically, guided by Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the lived body, perception, and being-in-the-world. The analytical procedure involved three stages. **First**, open coding: each narrative unit was assigned descriptive codes based on the type of bodily experience it represented, such as "sound perception," "cane use," or "stigma rejection." **Second**, axial coding: the initial codes were grouped into thematic categories aligned with Merleau-Ponty's concepts: multisensory perception, spatial orientation, and self-meaning. **Third**, thematic construction: through iterative comparison between data and theory, three main themes were constructed: (1) the presence of the world in multisensory perception; (2) spatial orientation through the body; and (3) self-meaning within embodied experience. These themes emerged from the data rather than being predetermined.

DISCUSSIONS

Embodied experience in novels by blind Indonesian authors is presented through various means that demonstrate the close relationship between the body and the world. In their narratives, the body is positioned as a subject that enables blind characters to understand, live through, and make meaning of the reality around them. The reading of the data shows that embodied experience is

articulated in three main forms. These three aspects demonstrate that the experience of blindness in the novels examined is not an experience of losing the world, but rather an experience of presenting and making meaning of the world through distinctive ways.

A. The Presence of the World in Multisensory Perception

One significant finding in the novels by blind Indonesian authors is the presence of the world through perception that does not necessarily rely on sight. Blind characters recognize their environment, understand situations, identify other people, and even grasp emotional atmospheres through the engagement of senses other than the eyes. Such experiences show that the world can be accessed not only visually but also through sound, aroma, touch, and other bodily sensations. This finding aligns with various studies showing that blind individuals construct knowledge about the environment through the integration of various non-visual sensory modalities and the active engagement of the body in everyday experiences (Cappagli et al., 2017; Schinazi et al., 2016). In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective, perception is the fundamental way human beings relate to the world. It is here that the perceptual experiences of the blind characters in these novels show how the world is presented through the living, experiencing body, not solely through sight (Cappagli et al., 2017; Greyling, 2020; Schinazi et al., 2016; Uboldi et al., 2025). Such descriptions can be observed in the following narrative examples:

Bahkan hanya dengan hidungku ini saja aku bisa menikmati keasrian suasana di sekelilingku, dan ... wow, rasanya ingin sekali bisa memandang keindahan itu dengan mataku ini. (MK/125)

Tanpa melibatnya, aku tahu Rara bahagia. Dari isakannya, dari tarikan napasnya. (MK/299)

Aku tahu itu karena mendengar suara burung berkicau dan mencium aroma tanaman. Ini adalah taman kota yang lokasinya dekat kampus dan sering dipakai untuk tempat belajar mahasiswa. (DTC/124-125)

Perlahan-lahan kuraba pergelangan tangan kanan. Ternyata benda itu masih ada di sana, sebuah pita rambut yang kubawa dari Jakarta. (DTC/173)

Ku cium aroma rokok dari serambi rumah, jadi kira-kira, eyang telah bangun dari tidurnya. (NSP/162-163)

Ruang tidurnya masih tertutup rapat, aku merabanya karena pintu ruangan tidur adik tak jauh dengan ruang tidurnya. (NSP/215)

The data above show that the blind characters in the novels do not experience the world as an empty space due to the absence of sight. On the contrary, the world is present through the engagement

of various senses working in an integrated manner within bodily experience. These narratives show that the environment is understood through sensory experiences that allow the world to appear and be recognized by the subject, even if not through the eyes. Such an experience is the experience of synesthesia, which can help in understanding how subjective experience and direct observation can influence the interpretation of data (Nurhana et al., 2024).

Such experience aligns with Merleau-Ponty's view that perception is the most fundamental way human beings relate to the world. Thus, perception is not a mental process that takes place after the world is observed. Perception works through the total engagement of the body in confronting reality. Therefore, for blind characters, aromas, sounds, and other bodily sensations become the distinctive way the body makes the world present. The world is understood as something directly experienced through the lived body. The presence of the world through multisensory perception is evident both in the recognition of the physical environment and in relationships with others.

Overall, these data show that novels by blind authors present the world through multisensory perception involving sound, aroma, touch, and various other bodily experiences. This finding aligns with various studies showing that blind individuals construct representations of the world through the integration of various non-visual sensory modalities that work coherently in producing meaningful experience (Chan et al., 2018; Pence, 2018; Ruan et al., 2025; Schubert, 2022). Merleau-Ponty states that the body is the subject of perception that enables human beings to relate to the world. The novels by blind authors provide an understanding that the absence of sight gives rise to different perceptual ways of experiencing and understanding reality. The world is never lost; it remains fully present. It is only that their world is presented through pathways of experience that originate from the blind body itself.

B. Spatial Orientation through the Body

In addition to presenting the world through multisensory perception, the novels examined also show how the body becomes the primary means of constructing spatial orientation. For blind characters, space is explored through bodily movement, touch, spatial memory, and the use of assistive devices such as a cane. Through these experiences, the body functions as a moving instrument that enables the subject to recognize their own position and establish relationships with the surrounding

environment. This experience demonstrates that human existence in the world always takes place in an embodied manner, that is, through the direct engagement of the body with the space it inhabits. Various studies have shown that blind individuals are able to construct spatial orientation and navigation through the integration of auditory, proprioceptive, and kinesthetic information, such that spatial understanding does not depend entirely on sight (Job et al., 2022; Rogge et al., 2021).

Through the concept of being-in-the-world, according to Merleau-Ponty, human beings exist in the world as a body that is continuously engaged with its environment. In these novels by blind authors, space is understood and constructed through touch, bodily movement, and the use of assistive devices. The experience of space in this case becomes an embodied experience. Such descriptions can be observed in the following narrative examples

Maka, segera kuraba senjata sakti yang terselip di ping-ganngu. Ini dia tongkatku, alat yang telah membantuku berja-lan selama ini! (MK/ 11)

Aku tak sempat mendengar lanjutannya sebab kaki dan tongkat keburu membawaku berlari keluar gedung. (DTC/ 159)

Pelan tangan ini bergerak meraba contoh huruf yang terletak di atas meja, aku rasakan perbedaan-perbedaan dari tiap-tiap titiknya. (NSP/ 109)

The data above show that embodied experience in novels by blind authors relates not only to how the world is perceived but also to how the body constructs orientation within space. For blind characters, space is present as a bodily experience that is explored through movement, touch, and direct interaction with objects in their surroundings. In Merleau-Ponty's perspective, the body is the center of orientation that enables human beings to know their position, recognize their environment, and direct their actions. Through the body, space acquires practical meaning and becomes part of everyday lived experience.

The character refers to the cane as a "magic weapon" (senjata sakti) that helps him walk and move independently. This designation shows that the cane becomes part of the action system that enables the body to reach out into the environment. The cane becomes an extension of the body's ability to recognize the conditions of the surrounding space. Through the cane, the subject can detect the presence of objects, estimate direction of movement, and build a sense of safety when moving. This experience aligns with Merleau-Ponty's idea that the body always develops practical ways of relating to the world, such that the boundary between the body and the tools it uses becomes blurred

in everyday action. In Merleau-Ponty's view, such experience shows that space is present as something lived through bodily habits and actions.

The ability to construct spatial orientation through active exploration and bodily experience has also been demonstrated in various studies on navigation and cognitive mapping in blind individuals (Lahav, 2022; Paré et al., 2021). Spatial orientation in the novels by blind authors is constructed through the active engagement of the body with the environment. The cane, hands, fingers, and bodily movements become means that enable the subject to recognize position, direction, and various possible actions within the space they inhabit. Human existence is always embodied and takes place in an inseparable relation with the world (being-in-the-world).

C. Self-Meaning within Embodied Experience

Embodied experience in the novels by blind authors does not stop at issues of perception and spatial orientation. The body also serves as the basis for the formation of self-awareness and the way characters make meaning of their existence as blind individuals. Through various life experiences, the characters in the novels confront self-acceptance, social labeling, self-confidence, and the views of others regarding the condition of their bodies. Various studies have shown that the identity of persons with disabilities is shaped through the interaction between bodily experience, social relations, stigma, and the ongoing process of self-acceptance (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017). These experiences demonstrate that the body is part of an ongoing process of meaning-making and self-adjustment that takes place in everyday life. Embodiment becomes the site where identity and self-understanding are formed, adjusted, and made meaningful by the subject who experiences it (Bogart, 2014; Bogart et al., 2018). Such descriptions can be observed in the following narrative examples.

Sebenarnya aku sudah terbiasa menerima kalimat hinaan atau makian bahkan yang lebih kasar daripada ini. Tapi berhubung aku sedang buru-buru dan butuh informasi, mendengarnya bikin aku lumayan kesal juga. Meski begitu, aku berusaha tetap menyahut dengan ramah. (MK/12)
Sebab, suka atau tidak, aku ini tunanetra...Tak ada yang dapat ku perbuat untuk memutarbalikkan kondisi itu. Maka, pilihan satu-satunya, ya, jalani dan syukuri. (DTC/36)
Ia kembali memanggilkku dengan sebutan anak buta. Sebutan yang sangat-sangat tidak kusukai. (NSP/239)

The data above show that the embodied experience of blindness becomes the basis for the formation of how the subject understands herself or himself. Blindness as lived experience is continuously made meaningful in relation both to oneself and to others. In Merleau-Ponty's perspective, the body is the center of experience that enables a person to experience their existence in the world. Through the lived body, human beings experience the world directly and give meaning to the reality they confront (Halák, 2018; Heinamaa, 2021; Mohajel et al., 2021; Wehrle, 2020). Therefore, the way blind characters make meaning of their blindness is an essential part of the embodied experience they undergo.

This data shows that embodied experience is not identical to a single identity determined by disability. The character recognizes his blindness as part of himself, but he also demands recognition of other aspects of his existence as a human being. In a phenomenological perspective, this experience demonstrates that the lived body always means more than the social categories attached to it. Identity and self-awareness are formed through the lived bodily experience, not merely through medical or social categories (Shildrick, 2015). Through experiences of confronting stigma, accepting the condition of the body, constructing life values, and negotiating social identity, the blind characters form an understanding of who they are. Blindness in these novels is presented as part of lived experience that gives rise to distinctive and meaningful forms of self-understanding.

CONCLUSIONS

Applying Merleau-Ponty to non-sighted embodiment reveals blindness as paradigmatic: perception is always multisensory, and the lived body always presents the world beyond visual norms. In terms of its implications, this study offers a new direction for literary disability studies. Whereas such studies have thus far largely focused on representation, stereotypes, and ideological critiques of texts, this study shows that a phenomenological approach can open up a different layer of reading: one centered on the characters' lived experience, rather than solely on the social meanings attached to their bodies. This study invites literary disability studies to move from representation toward the bodily experience of disability. With this perspective, this study is expected to enrich the methodological toolkit and deepen our understanding of the relationship among literature, the body, and reality.

This study is confined to three novels by two authors, so the findings cannot be generalized; further research with a broader corpus is needed to test the validity of these findings. Moreover, as this study relies solely on textual analysis, future researchers are encouraged to complement it with empirical approaches, such as interviews with authors, to enrich the understanding of the subjective lived experiences underlying their works.

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