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The politics of women's subjectivity in the discourse of Indonesia's Kabhantapi costume transformation

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to problematize the position of women as subjects in the discourse of *kabhantapi*, the traditional costume of the Muna ethnic group in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis, the study unpacks the hegemonic processes through which dominant groups have shaped women's subjectivities in the contestation surrounding *kabhantapi*. The findings reveal that women are positioned as consumptive subjects, shaped by the intersection of democratized clothing practices-framed as 'freedom'-and market logics conditioned by fashion capitalism. Thus, the political subject born from dislocation cannot be reduced merely to an emancipatory subject as envisioned by Laclau and Mouffe, particularly in the context of fashion. This article argues that the lack not only creates space for political subjectivation but also operates as an arena of capitalist co-optation, underscoring the need to situate women's subjectivity within the framework of the political economy of discourse.

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Introduction

Kabhantapi, the traditional costume of Muna women in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, has been constructed as a marker of identity reflecting both men's social class (husband or father) and marital status since the 17th century, during the reigns of the 10th King of Muna, La Titakono and Bhonto Bhalano (Royal Council), La Marati. Deeply rooted in identity (Sara et al., 2021), the two sarongs symbolized marital status while the arrangement signified social class (Couvreur, 2001). The construction of *kabhantapi* as well as Muna traditional costumes generally was carried out alongside the establishment of classification system that positioned the children of Sugi Manuru (the King) and his lave concubines as non-nobles (*anangkolaki*), thereby excluding them from noble privileges such as becoming *kino* (village head of noble descent) or attaining higher ranks (Couvreur, 2001: 34-37). As the first king of the second generation, La Titakono's policies of stratification and dress regulation can be read as strategies to preserve power through class and gender boundaries, reinforcing what Gramsci calls hegemony (Kuchler & Hedrén, 2016: 236).

Although Zainal (2016: 90) argues that the Muna Kingdom allowed equal opportunities for women to lead, in practice, they ascended the throne only in the absence of eligible male heirs (Couvreur, 2001: 23). Thus, women remained second-class (Dini, 2017) under patriarchal hegemony (Nilan & Demartoto, 2012). The construction of Muna Traditional costumes reinforces this marginalization; men's costume was categorized according to office and social class, whereas women's dress was only by marital status and the social class of men (Couvreur, 2001; Dinda et al., 2019; Sara et al., 2021). Women were confined to domestic roles, appearing in public primarily to represent male identity, with attire dictated by norms of propriety and patriarchal regulation (Abedinezhad, 2023; Mohamadi & Shirazi, 2023).

The Bureaucratic reform from the monarchy to modern governance (Agista et al., 2019; Koç & Koca, 2016), together with interclass and interethnic marriages, constituted a dislocation that disrupted the hegemonic order (Nabers, 2017; Witkowski, 2012), opened spaces of antagonism (Biglieri & Perelló, 2011; Biglieri & Perello, 2020), and reconfigured socio-political identities beyond traditional structures (Castillo, 2019; Day & Montgomery, 2016). In the context of *kabhantapi*, dislocation generated new actors, including non-Muna women and unmarried women, whose presence increasingly dominated non-traditional public spaces as the institutionalization of traditional attire (Pollock, 2017), promising inclusivity.

Yet this claim of inclusivity is deeply paradoxical. Rather than liberating, women's subjectivity was reproduced through market logic that commodified identity (Atik et al., 2022; Delhaye & Woets, 2015). The focus shifted away from traditional class distinction (*kaomu, walaka, maradika*) toward mechanisms of pricing, modes of payment, and design variations shaped by the dynamics of the fashion industry. Accordingly, this article has three aims to: *first*, to examine the position of women as subjects within the hegemonic construction of *kabhantapi* under the monarchy; *second*, to analyze the transformation of *kabhantapi* and the emergence of women as political subjects through the dislocation of the hegemonic order; and *third*, to discuss the position of women as consumptive subjects at the intersection of the democratizing discourse of 'freedom' and market logic.

Although the relationship between women and clothing has long been studied, from Simmel (1957: 551) emphasizing dress as a potential site of resistance to male domination, to later scholarship that sees clothing as a medium of gender

externalization and identity expression (Coo, 2020; Entwistle, 2000; Koca & Kirkincioğlu, 2021; Liang & Qin, 2014; Rubinstein, 2018), specific studies addressing women's subjectivity through the dislocation of traditional costume remain scarce, particularly in relation to *kabhantapi*. This article seeks to fill this gap by employing the theoretical framework of Laclau & Mouffe's (1987) political subjectivity.

Laclau and Mouffe's theory of the political subject begins with a rejection of identity essentialism (Drousioti, 2019: 181) and an attempt to transcend the agency-structure dichotomy (Fair, 2021: 141) by positing the subject as a contingent discursive construction (Drousioti, 2022; Laclau & Mouffe, 1987). In its early phase, the subject was conceived as a position within the discursive structure following Foucauldian premises (Castillo, 2019), but it later shifted toward the notion of the *subject of lack* (*Laclau, 1990, 2005*), a subject emerging from structural dislocation that reveals the impossibility of a full identity. It is precisely this lack that opens the space for new hegemonic articulation through decision, myth, and fantasy as temporary mechanisms of representation (Retamozo, 2014; Thomassen, 2016). Thus, the subject is neither transcendental nor final, but always open, vulnerable, and produced within antagonistic conditions that enable plural articulations of collective identity. This shift, as emphasized by Castillo (2019) and Fair (2021), indicates that for Laclau, the subject is not merely constituted by structure or discourse but also constitutes itself through decision and identity articulations within the contingent space of dislocation.

In the context of *kabhantapi*, the disruption of dress regulation inherited from the monarchical era not only created space for women to identify themselves beyond normative frameworks but also carried the potential for new forms of subordination (Wallenberg, 2023: 185). Accordingly, this article extends the application of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of the political subject to the field of fashion, while highlighting the paradox of *lack*, which not only enables subjectivity but is also vulnerable to capitalist co-optation, where anxieties around customary boundaries may paradoxically serve as a source of innovation within the logic of fashion (Venäläinen, 2014: 235).

Method

This study employed an interpretative qualitative approach using ethnographic methods (Madison, 2005; Thomas, 1993), not only to describe cultural practices but also to interpret the dynamics of power, ideology, and subjectivity embedded in the discourse of traditional costume. While this approach enables an in-depth understanding of women's subjectivity in relation to the symbolic dislocation of *kabhantapi*, it does not claim generalizability. Instead, it offers a contextualized understanding of how individuals construct interpretations of their social realities (Lok Lam et al., 2021; Ritch, 2022).

The research was conducted in Muna Regency, Southeast Sulawesi, which serves as the center of production and the hegemonic arena of *kabhantapi*. Fieldwork was carried out over eight months (April-December 2024) to capture processes of the transformation and the simultaneous evolution of discursive dynamics.

Data was collected through three methods. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten purposively selected informants based on three criteria: (a) women users of *kabhantapi*, both traditional practitioners and non-practitioners; (b) actors involved in policy-making regarding *kabhantapi*; and (c) actors contributing to production and distribution. The final informant included six women,

Table 1. List of informants

Informant Category	Initials	Number
Traditional women practitioners	W1, W2, W3	3
Women non-practitioners	W4, W5, W6	3
Department of Tourism and Creative Economy	G1	1
Department of Education and Culture	G2	1
Traditional market trader	I1	1
Weaver and gallery owner	I2	1
Total		10

Source: Author, 2024

two government officials, and two industry actors. All identities were anonymized to avoid socio-political repercussions related to differences in opinion or traditional positions.

Second, participatory and non-participatory observations focused on *kabhantapi* use in both traditional and digital spaces, using the keywords '*kabhantapi*' and '*kabantapi*'. Third, a literature review was conducted, encompassing historical sources and academic literature on traditional costumes.

All data were then categorized and analyzed using Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis (Walton & Boon, 2014: 360-362), which emphasizes identification points of dislocation, chains of equivalence, and logics of articulation that construct the subject. We began by organizing interviews, observations, and documented screenshots, based on the framework. Dislocation captures shifts in design, use, and context of *kabhantapi*. Chains of equivalence linked symbolic elements such as identity, modernity, and the state's narrative on traditional costume. Finally, the logic of articulation of the *subject of lack* highlighted how women negotiate and construct their identities through gaps created by dislocation, including redesigning and wearing *kabhantapi* beyond the normative framework. The analysis focused on how *kabhantapi* has been fixed as a marker of identity, articulated through the discourse of fashion modernization, and how these processes have generated new configurations of women's political subjectivity.

Results and Discussion

Historical context: Women in the discourse of kabhantapi

This section discusses the position of women as subjects within the customary discourse of *kabhantapi* as a cultural basis that defined Muna women in the early 17th century (1600-1625). At that time, kabhnantapi was constructed as the traditional costume of married women by the 10th King of Muna, La Titakono, and the Bhonto Bhalano, La Marati (Couvreur, 2001; Fajarningsi et al., 2020). Within this discourse, women were positioned as subordinated class subjects, while their attire was politicized by male-dominated elites.

As doubly subordinated subjects, women's *kabhantapi* symbolize men's identities (husbands or fathers) and marital status while disciplining their bodies through customary regulations, foreclosing space for articulation. Thus, *kabhantapi* functioned as a political instrument, reinforcing class distinctions and gender subordination while legitimizing royal authority.

The construction of the *kabhantapi* in the early 17th century coincided with the establishment of a social stratification system within the Muna ethnic community, based on lineage. Direct descendants of the King,

bearing the title *La Ode*, were the highest class, known as *kaomu*, holding the exclusive right to be chosen as King. Descendants of the Bhonto Bhalano constituted the second-highest class, *walaka*, who, despite being recognized as nobility, were prohibited from ascending to kingship. The third class, *maradika*, consisted of three subcategories: *anangkolaki*, *papara*, and *poinokontu lakonosasu* (Couvreur, 2001: 34).

The classification system established by the 10th King of Muna and Bhonto Bhalano produced a layered logic of power, based on class, lineage, and gender. While the 6th King of Muna, Sugi Manuru, categorized society according to the abilities of royal offspring and the authority of the eight *kamokula* (Zainal, 2016: 88), La Titakono's reformulation reinforced class boundaries more exclusively. Royal children born to eslaved women, who had previously been recognized as nobles (*anangkolaki*), were demoted to *maradika*, designated as non-noble, stripped of the right to hold strategic positions such as Kino and compelled to leave the political center in Muna City (Couvreur, 2001: 34-35). This policy was not merely a social reorganization but a political strategy to consolidate the monarchy's power monopoly through class regulation, which was also reflected in clothing rules. Men's traditional costume explicitly marked class and position, while women were confined to garments devoid of political signifiers, foreclosing possibilities for articulation women's power in the public sphere.

In the broader state power, women could only ascend to the throne in the absence of eligible male heirs (Couvreur, 2001: 23). Although Zainal (2016: 90) highlights instances of gender equality in the Muna kingdom, such as Waode Wakelu's rule as the 12th Queen of Muna, Wa Daga as *Ghoerano* Lawa, and Wa Opa as *Ghoerano* Katobu, their authority was conditional. Waode Wakelu, for instance, assumed the throne not by direct hereditary right but as a replacement for her exiled husband under Dutch colonial rule. Similarly, while Wa Daga and Wa Opa led their respective Ghoera, they lacked the right to stand for higher office, such as the Bhonto Bhalano. That position was reserved for male heirs of their elder brother, who served as *Ghoerano Tongkuno*. Only after Wa Daga's prolonged resistance were her descendants permitted to be nominated as Bhonto Bhalano, and even then, only after the position had been occupied twice consecutively by candidates from Tongkuno (Couvreur, 2001: 55). These dynamics illustrate how women's political authority in the Muna monarchy was contingent upon male absence and their own resistance, granting them access to political roles but always within boundaries that ensured the preservation of male dominance.

Meanwhile, in the domestic sphere, women's identities were constructed based on their biological and sexual relationships with men, as daughters and wives. Women's marriages were strictly regulated. Women from the upper classes (nobility) were prohibited from marrying men from lower social strata (Couvreur, 2001: 27). If such a union occurred, the woman would be domestically and socially alienated. Thus, in the domestic domain, women were 'made'; their bodies were controlled through dress codes, and their sexual desires were regulated according to social class. This reinforced women's position as subordinated subjects, second-class and 'othered' (Bergoffen, 2018; Shabliy, 2020), embedded within the social order as a consequence of the patriarchal system influenced by Western colonial legacies (Salsabila, 2023: 46). Gender roles were also institutionalized; men occupied the public sphere and political power, while women were confined to the domestic realm.

The classification system and the regulations of *kabhantapi* illustrate not only the practice of class and gender stratification

but also, within the framework of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of the subject, reveal how women were produced within a hegemonic logic. Women, excluded from the possibility of political representation through traditional costume, were positioned as "structural effects" that foreclosed political articulation. Yet, because no structure is ever fully complete (Laclau, 1990), the absence of political insignia in women's clothing simultaneously contained the potential for dislocation, a fissure through which new identifications could emerge.

The regulation of women's dress is not unique to the local context; across many societies, dress codes have long functioned as instruments of control over women's bodies and identities. The banning of the hijab or niqab in several European countries, for example, can be read as a form of state discipline over women's bodies and a reproduction of discourse of identity control (Ramírez,2015: 671), though it has consistently generated resistance through the emergence of 'alternative clothing' (Abdmolaei, 2015: 38). In the case of *kabhantapi*, expression of alternative dress appears in transformation of design, actors, and contexts of use, opening new spaces of identification for women. However, this study resists interpreting such transformation merely as acts of resistance but rather as a consequence of dislocatory events that unsettled the symbolic order of custom. It is precisely these ruptures that make possible the emergence of women's political subjectivity as subjects of lack (Laclau, 1990, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1987), a subject born of structural incompleteness and continuously through the non-finality of identity.

Women in the discourse on kabhantapi transformation

This section focuses on the discourse of *kabhantapi* transformation as the outcome of dislocatory events that unsettled the hegemonic order of custom and stimulated the emergence of new political subjects, drawing on Laclau's (1990, 2005) theory of dislocation. Although the transformation of *kabhantapi* can be traced across three discursive arenas, production, distribution, and consumption, this discussion concentrates on consumption as the political space where new actors outside the traditional discursive fixation of custom have emerged. Nonetheless, the sphere of production and distribution is still considered, where necessary, to reinforce the analysis and highlight the interwoven interests behind women's subjectivity.

Interviews with women who wear *kabhantapi* revealed that they could not identify precisely when its transformation began; rather, they consistently associated change with the advent of modern times and the rise of a new middle class that does not originate from the noble elite. Such shifts in traditional costume are, in fact, a broader phenomenon linked to modernity (Botiková, 2025: 121), which often fuses older cultural element with contemporary designs, particularly in women's fashion in Indonesia (Lopez y Royo, 2019: 1). However, for Laclau and Mouffe, whose approach resists determinism, modernity and the emergence of a new middle class are not read merely as linear progress but as logics of plural demands arising from dislocations that destabilize the hegemonic order of *kabhantapi*, thereby creating the conditions for new political subjects (Schneider, 2024: 3).

The political reforms marked by the end of the monarchical era, the fall of Suharto (Agista et al., 2019: 84), and the massive inter-class and inter-ethnic marriages constituted a dislocation point. These reforms-initiated democratization and decentralization (Nugroho, 2020; Yazid & K. Pakpahan, 2020), shifting authority from aristocratic elites to modern political institutions (Hildebrand

& Séville, 2015; 27). At the same time, the weakening of marriage as a marker of class boundaries further disrupted the symbolic order of *adat*. This dislocation reshaped the meaning of *kabhantapi*: women gained agency to redesign their attire, the state expanded its domains of use, and the fashion industry modified it according to market logic.

> *"...I ordered directly from the seller; for the blouse, it had to cover the wrists, the necklines, and it couldn't be too tight since I wear a hijab. So I just sent my measurements to the seller at my request. For the sarong, I asked for a simple one because in the past, when I wore the two-piece sarong, I couldn't put it on by myself and needed help from parents who understood kabhantapi. So, I ordered a sarong that looked like two pieces but was actually sewn together, making it easier to wear, just tie it, and it's done..." (W4, 2024).*

> *"…For regional celebrations such as anniversaries, wearing kabhantapi is mandatory for married women. On other national days, such as Pancasila Sanctity Day, Independence Day, and National Education Day, wearing kabhantapi is required. It is not a matter of choice but an obligation" (G1, 2024).*

> *"…The design of kabhantapi follows current trends. For instance, nowadays people prefer a luxurious style with many sequins, so we also make fully sequined items using expensive lace. We also provide a mermaid-style called 'kabhantapi pengantin', usually rented for weddings or cultural parades. In the past, we also made the 'kabhantapi sambung', but it is no longer used because it restricted movement. Then it was replaced with the 'kabhantapi jahit', some fastened with straps, velcro, and zippers. ". (I2, 2024).*

Through these shifts, *kabhantapi* has emerged as a site where competing logics-religiosity (WA), nationalism (G1), and modernity (I2)-intersect within a chain of equivalence. While distinct, these converge in an agenda of inclusivity, enabling women to negotiate identities beyond the normative boundaries of customary and class. Inclusivity thus operates as a discursive space of fashion democratization, generating new forms of women's subjectivity that continuously interact with state regulation and market commodification.

Fashion democratization by the government is manifested through the institutionalization of traditional attire (Pollock, 2017), particularly by mandating the use of *kabhantapi* for married women. These newly expanded discursive spaces are not limited to ceremonial events for regional and national commemoration, but also include cultural parades, carnivals, and fashion shows themed around *kabhantapi*. The figure below illustrates the use of *kabhantapi* in these expanded discursive spaces:

The use of '*kabhantapi pengantin*' during the Independence Day ceremony (left) and fashion show (right) at the Ministry of Religious Affairs illustrates the subtle interaction between the state and industry. Through policies mandating the use of *kabhantapi* in ceremonial events, the state provides public legitimacy, while the industry negotiates modifications that challenge the normative design of *kabhantapi* without confrontation. Meanwhile, its use in leading ceremonial positions, *kabhantapi* as women's official attire in public office, fills the *lack* created by the absence of rank-specific attire for women in the royal era. In *fashion shows*, *kabhantapi* is transformed into a fashion object displayed in its best, yet never final versions. Within these spaces, *kabhantapi* offers inclusivity and is embraced by the creative industry to meet new emerging demands generated by such discursive expansions.

In the industrial sphere, democratization has developed within the discourse of creativity through collaborative production and consumption. Production collaboration materializes in co-creation *value* (Mursalzade, 2024; Syah & Olivia, 2022), providing



Figure 1. The use of kabhantapi in public spaces

Source: Left, Instagram @lestary_bitu_13, Right, Youtube @MAN 1 Muna, accessed November 2024

dialogical space for *kabhantapi* users to shape their garments and assign meaning to them, as one informant noted:

> *"...in making kabhantapi, we collaborate with tailors, weavers, and breadworkers. Some specialize in sewing, others in breadwork or weaving (through suppliers), and then we just decide on the motif and color combination to be made... The payment system can be cash or credit, without fixed monthly installments, it's up to the buyer how much to pay each time..." (I1, 2024).*

Through the industry, women are free to choose colors, fabrics, and designs beyond those available in the mass market, according to their preferences, needs, and financial capacities (see also W4 and I2 Excerpts). Within the logic of capitalism, this marks a shift in *kabhantapi* from a closed cultural symbol to a fashion commodity, on one hand sustaining local culture through the continued presence of traditional attire amid modern fashion flows, while on the other hand sparking concerns among customary guardians about the loss of 'authenticity' and the erosion of hegemonic class boundaries. At the same time, collaborative consumption (Sörum & Gianneschi, 2023: 61) takes shape in rental or borrowing services for traditional attire to fulfill women's performativity desires, alongside purchases at premium prices.

The convergence of two forces, government and industry, in the discourse of fashion democratization, constructs women as consumptive subjects through narratives of 'freedom' reinforced by the weakening of customary authority. This freedom is manifested in the accessibility and inclusivity of actors, transcending the traditional boundaries of class, marital status, and ethnicity as the normative identities of *kabhantapi*. The use of *kabhantapi* is no longer the exclusive domain of customary practitioners and married women but has become more plural with the participation of non-customary women, unmarried, and even non-Muna women. These new actors fill the *lack* of customary discourse that had fixed *kabhantapi* as the 'property' of married Muna women.



Figure 2. Use of kabhantapi by students of Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) during a Community Service Program (KKN) in Muna Regency

Source: Instagram @munamerona, accessed August 2024

Women wearing *kabhantapi*, as shown in Figure 1, articulate it in relation to ceremonial and spatial contexts. This marks another dimension of *kabhantapi* democratization, where the emergence of new actors coincides with the expansion of its functions and spaces of articulation. This expansion refers to the use of *kabhantapi* beyond traditional customary purposes, extending to ceremonies, cultural parades, carnivals, and other events mandated by government authorities in non-customary public spaces. Although these actors demonstrate accessibility and inclusivity of identity, they are still adorned in accordance with government standards. This involves aligning elements with its underlying philosophy, for instance, the two-piece sarong, Muna blouse, and shawl, even as its users now include unmarried and non-Muna individuals.

Furthermore, women also participate in designing *kabhantapi* in collaboration with industry actors. In this context, *kabhantapi* is radicalized beyond monotonous standards of modesty into fashion in the logic of continuous change, following trends and personal tastes. Women are democratically given opportunities to determine their *kabhantapi* in terms of both materials and design.

Here, *kabhantapi* design becomes a site of dialectics where women negotiate their identity. In this excerpt, for instance, we see how the user identifies both religious piety and practicality as a part of their representation, transcending class. In identifying as a religious woman, they demand a Muna blouse that covers the body, challenging the normative design that includes V-shaped sleeves rolled up to the elbows and a round neckline with a chest slit for nobles and a standing Shanghai-style collar for non-nobles. Meanwhile, practicality emerges from the demands of women working in the public sector, where institutions mandate the wearing of traditional attire on certain days.

This description illustrates three points. First, authority. Women have begun to demonstrate authority over their bodies and identities, while still domestically bound by class identities through customary relations. In public spaces, these identities are negotiated or even suspended. In this position, women are no longer merely passive recipients of customary rules but actively participate in the production of identity through *kabhantapi*. Second, value. Women are demonstrating the plurality of *kabhantapi's* values as fashion, fashionable, practical, and in some contexts more religious, while simultaneously challenging the stable customary values tied to class-based rules.

Amid these discursive shifts, women are granted a space of "freedom" as a result of

dislocation (Laclau, 1990: 39), allowing them to choose and determine their attire, making *kabhantapi* more accessible. Accessibility is no longer based on class standards but instead on financial capacity. While financial means appear to form new hierarchies, the industry bridges this gap through rental services, instalment and rotating saving systems, as well as offline and online marketing. Accessibility thus not only refers to conveniences offered by industry but also to the reconfiguration of design from top-down (from elites to lower classes) into a dispersed form. Authority over design no longer belongs exclusively to a single center of power but is shared among all women, as idealized by Laclau & Mouffe (1987), albeit within certain limits. The authority of 'modern' *kabhantapi*, for instance, is constructed by the fashion industry and legitimized by the state through cultural events such as parades, carnivals, and fashion shows, securing its place in non-customary public arenas. Yet its use remains restricted in customary spaces by customary actors as custodians of authority. 'Modern' *kabhantapi* refers to forms perceived as different from the "authentic" structure, both philosophically and in certain values, for example, two sarongs that were traditionally separate now sewn or layered, as well as blouses and shawls heavily decorated with sequins (Interviews with informants W1, W4, I1, I2, 2024).

In this sense, the lack of exclusivity within the hegemonic order of *kabhantapi* is filled by various demands for inclusivity through fashion democratization that promises 'freedom'. The new women's subject emerges from this freedom, shaped by market logic and state power as an agentive consumptive subject. However, this position must be critically examined: is the subject truly free, or subordinated once again by other forces? Thus, the women subject cannot be understood solely in terms of how women are constituted within lack, but also how lack reshapes the subject, and who ultimately benefits from the emergence of this new women's subjectivity.

Women as consumptive subjects

This section discusses the position of women as consumptive subjects within the discourse of fashion democratization that emerged from the dislocation of customary hegemonic order. Women's identities are not essential (Drousioti, 2019, 2022) but rather produced and transformed through different discursive articulations in cultural, social, and political spheres.

In the cultural sphere, women are subjected to customary rules rooted in patriarchal relations, where their bodies and identities are objectified as instruments of customary legitimacy and guardians of tradition. In the social sphere, however, women find possibilities to emerge as relatively free political subjects through the expansion of discursive spaces and collaborative production and consumption, enabling identification beyond class-based identity. Meanwhile, in the political sphere, the transformation of *kabhantapi* unsettled symbolic orders, positioning women as political subjects in the sense articulated by Laclau (1990, 2005) dan Laclau & Mouffe (1987), negotiating new positions within reconfigured relations of power. Yet the freedom promised by *kabhantapi's* transformation is paradoxical; instead of producing radical emancipation, women are co-opted into market logics, so that the subject born of dislocation slips into the politics of consumption, raising the question of who truly benefits from such women's representation.

In the context of *kabhantapi* transformation, women as consumptive subjects can be examined through four dimensions articulated by Laclau (1990)

and reinterpreted by Retamozo (2014: 235); antagonism, decision, myth, and fantasy. Antagonism reveals the incompleteness of women's identities, always constrained by the presence of the 'other', whether customary rules born of patriarchy or market logic shaped by modernity and political reform. Decision emerges when dislocation opens space for women to position themselves through new identifications (Castillo, 2019: 167) in design and consumption, which appear autonomous but remain framed by market logics. Narratives of freedom, emancipation, and fashion democratization function as myths, concealing identity fissures while legitimizing change. Fantasy operates by promising satisfaction through freedom to choose accessibility through credit or rental, and the fashionable self-image, yet in reality, it sustains endless cycles of consumption. At this point, the consumptive subject gains its hegemony; an "egalitarian imagination" (Fiorespino, 2022: 173) that opens space for women's emancipation but is ultimately framed by a capitalist system driven by profit (Powell, 2013: 23).

The consequences are clear; women's identities are no longer positioned within customary logics but are reproduced by cultural industries offering paradoxical freedoms. First, the freedom of choice, which seems to grant autonomy, is limited by market offerings and financial capability. Second, emancipation, which appears to preserve culture and enable self-expression, is enacted as commodification; mass-produced, modified according to global trends, and valued through profit logic. Third, the democratization of fashion, while seemingly inclusive, is propelled by market strategies to expand consumer bases rather than transform power relations. In this position, women's identities are not only politicized but also marketed, such that the consumptive subject is shaped by dislocation in conditioned by market demand and the creative industry.

If the political subject for Laclau arises from the moment of lack (*subject of lack*) that allows new identification, then within fashion capitalism, this lack is redirected towards consumption. Women's symbolic incompleteness is sublimated into the desire to display, own, and purchase alternative *kabhantapi*. This demonstrates that women's apparent freedom is mediated by market mechanisms. Politics of the subject here, therefore, is not merely about women's identity formation but about who profits from the commodification of identity.

At this point, Laclau's notion of lack of help reveals how incompleteness opens spaces for freedom but simultaneously produces new forms of subordination. In other words, lack not only discloses the possibility of emancipation but also enables other forms of power to penetrate and constrain that freedom. Here lies the significance of the politics of subjectivity.

The democratization of *kabhantapi* cannot be celebrated as an emancipation within a plural-radical democratic framework envisioned by Laclau and Mouffe, but must instead be critiqued as a site where capitalism, patriarchy, and other cultural interests fill the void left by customary dislocation. The consumptive subject born from *kabhantapi* transformation is thus paradoxical; it appears as an agent of freedom while simultaneously being reproduced as an object of commodification. The intersection of cultural, economic, and gender interests positions women's consumptive subjectivityas ambivalent; women appear to gain new space for expression, yet these are controlled by a capitalist logic that converts identity into commodity. Women's freedom in the discourse of *kabhantapi* transformation cannot be understood merely as emancipatory, as Laclau & Mouffe (1987) envisioned, since emancipation itself becomes the outcome of

capitalist hegemonic strategies that absorb social demands into market mechanisms. At this point, the promise of democratization embedded in cultural transformation proves paradoxical, because as Madra & Özselçuk (2015: 32) argue, consumerism as ideology risks undermining the very horizon of radical politics. Žižek's critique further sharpens this paradox by demonstrating that enjoyment and consumption under capitalism are not merely economic acts but profoundly ideological, shaping the symbolic background of hegemonic struggle. This means capitalist democracy not only provides spaces for participation but also subjects women to market logic that reconstitutes the desire for freedom. Thus, women are positioned as both agents and objects in the production of identity, an ambivalence that must be read critically to avoid the illusion of emancipation that ultimately reinforces capitalist domination.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the transformation of *kabhantapi* reveals women's subjectivity as conditional and ambiguous—historically subordinated within customary structures yet today rearticulated as consumptive subjects within market logic. The main contribution of this research lies in extending the analysis of traditional fashion beyond aesthetics and symbolic dimensions to encompass politics, gender, and the market, while emphasizing the politics of subjectivity. By showing how subjects emerging from dislocation and democratization are simultaneously co-opted and commodified by fashion capitalism, the study highlights the paradox of emancipation within the cultural industries.

Theoretically, this study extends the operationalization of Laclau and Mouffe's subject theory into fashion studies while simultaneously highlighting the paradox of emancipatory subjects emerging from the lack of order idealized by Laclau and Mouffe. The transformations of *kabhantapi*, interpreted as the result of dislocation, also create a space for women's subjectivity that is continuously negotiated. At this point, lack not only helps reveal possibilities for emancipation but also opens the way for the penetration of other forms of power that constrain such freedom.

Herein lies the politics of subjectivity. The democratization of *kabhantapi* cannot be celebrated as a form of emancipation within a plural-radical democracy as envisioned by Laclau and Mouffe; rather, it must be critiqued as an arena where the logic of capitalism, patriarchy, and other cultural interests fill the void left by the dislocation of tradition. The consumptive subject emerging from transformation is inherently paradoxical; appearing as an agent of freedom but also reproduced as an object of commodification.

Methodologically, this study has limitations due to a small informant sample and an interpretive of discourse analysis, which restricts the generalizability of its findings. Further studies should employ multi-site ethnography to explore the experiences of *kabhantapi* users' regions, map state-market interactions, and trace the negotiation between tradition and religion, as well as the political economy of fashion. For policymakers and cultural practitioners, these findings underscore the importance of critically balancing cultural preservation with economic innovation, ensuring that women are not reduced to consumptive roles but empowered as political subjects with genuine agency.

Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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