Deforming Tendencies and the Politics of Desire in the English Translation of Utami's *Saman*

Nadja Jessevin Threaquino Sukma & Harris Hermansyah Setiajid
nadjajessevin34@gmail.com
English Letters Department, Universitas Sanata Dharma

Abstract

Ayu Utami's Saman (1998) is one of Indonesia's most influential novels, published during the final years of the Suharto regime and the Reformasi movement. Renowned for its bold portrayal of female sexuality, the novel presents female desire not merely as sexual expression but as a political act of resistance against a patriarchal state that demanded women remain obedient, silent, and sexually repressed. Through this representation, Utami imagines a future in which Indonesian women can exercise both political agency and bodily autonomy. This study examines how the English translation of Saman may weaken this political vision. Using Antoine Berman's framework of deforming tendencies, it analyzes translation choices in passages depicting female desire to identify shifts that reshape the ideological force of the original text. The findings suggest that certain lexical and stylistic changes reduce the novel's subversive energy, making it more difficult for English-language readers to recognize female desire as a form of resistance to state and patriarchal power. The paper argues that these translation choices limit the transmission of Utami's radical vision to an international readership. Rather than merely transferring meaning across languages, the translation mediates ideology by reshaping the novel's political message. This study highlights how literary translation can either preserve or diminish a text's capacity to challenge oppression, contributing to discussions on the global circulation of Southeast Asian literature and the translation of political struggles embedded in Global South texts.

Keywords: deforming tendencies; politics of desire; passionate elements; *Saman*

Introduction

Translation helps literary works to be understood by readers with linguistic and cultural boundaries from when they were originally created. Translation refers to a process of changing an original written text in the source language into a written text in the target language, explained by Munday (2016, p.8). However, the process of translation itself is not merely transferring the

language, but also delivering the original messages intended by the author (Newmark, 1988, p.5). Literary works contain a lot of contents including expressions and cultural references, where in Newmark (1988), it explained as "the more cultural a text, the less equivalent effect even conceivable unless the reader is imaginative, sensitive and stepped in the SL culture," (p. 49). Consequently, a translator must make an intuitive decision to consider the equivalent words rather than translating informative text that tends to be easier since it barely acknowledges the text's effect on the reader. Therefore, some literary texts containing sensitive language, including taboo or erotic words, appear complex to be translated.

Other than its linguistics and cultural gap challenges, translating sensitive or taboo language also carries political weight. According to Foucault (1978), power and sexuality are deeply connected which is stated by him as "Where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95). The quotation means that if desire is being controlled, it becomes a political issue because expressing sexual desire openly counts as political resistance, specifically for the Indonesian government during the New Order era. Furthermore, Butler (1990) says that the context of sexuality often has strict rules from society. She argues that "regularly punishes those who fail to do their gender right" (p. 178), which results in an understanding that is considered as breaking the traditional rules when women express their sexual desire. In this context, rendering these elements is an important act of carrying political resistance to the target reader.

An Indonesian novel titled *Saman* can be one of subjects to analyze further regarding this phenomenon. It was written by Ayu Utami in 1998 near the end of Suharto's New Order regime. The political situation during that era strictly prohibited Indonesian civilians to openly express themselves. A lot of media outlets were affected by strict censorship as a result of this regulation. Utami is known for her bold choice of words in building her story where she expresses the character's thoughts using sensitive words, such as passionate elements. She mainly used these expressions for her female characters because there was an idea created by Indonesia's state and traditional culture where women's ability to express their desire, specifically their sexual desire, was prohibited and considered taboo. *Saman* was written purposefully to fight the political oppressions and the idea of women cannot fully express themselves in Indonesia.

This research used *Saman* to explain the phenomenon in translating passionate elements and its significance for reclaiming the political desire. This novel had been translated into English by Pamela Allen in 2005. Allen herself noted in her book where she faced difficulties in translating *Saman*, specifically its passionate elements within the Indonesian's cultural references, to suit the target reader. In adjusting the languages and contexts from the original text to the target text, translators often rely on several tendencies which later on may deform the original text. These tendencies are significant in terms of politics because the words chosen by the translators influence the rendered target text, resulting in maintaining or shifting the original ideas.

For instance, in Utami's *Saman* there is a sentence *orang yang sudah kawin tidak bisa begitu* (A married person cannot do that) translated into "Once you're married it's hard to forego sex". This is a brief example of deformation happening in translating passionate elements to another language. The deformation takes place in translating *begitu* (like that) into "sex" where it clarifies

the implicit context given by the author on the source text. It is significant for the political resistance because the result of the translation deletes the original text's nuances in political oppressions. In the source text, Utami wrote this expression implicitly where she did not explicitly choose "sex" as it was considered very taboo, representing the Indonesian government's strict political views in expressing one's desire openly. The rendered source text later clarified this vague word that purposefully portrays the impact of the oppression into a word which reveals its true meaning. In consequence, the English reader would not understand the political weight presented in *Saman*, and rather read the text as a common romance situation.

To understand this phenomenon further, several previous studies had done the analysis regarding translation shifts in literary works using various frameworks. For instance, Uktolseya (2023) examined the deforming tendencies in the English translation of *The Red Bekisar* using Berman's framework, where the result showed how the translator altered the cultural nuances of the original text. In relation to sensitive language, Fitriansyah (2023) analyzed the translation techniques of taboo words in the movie *Gran Torino*, which showed that translators often use softening strategies to reduce the vulgarity of the target text. Furthermore, Ma'shumah et al. (2022) examined how Indonesian taboo words are transformed into English in literary works, where it highlights the tendency to tone down sexual references to avoid shocking the target readers. On the other hand, Saktiningrum and Udasmoro (2022) investigated the representation of women's sexuality in Indonesian literature from the New Order to Reformasi eras, showing how state ideology shapes the discourse of female desire.

Although these previous studies had provided significant insights into translation shifts, taboo language, and feminist literature, there is rarely a discussion regarding the combination of Berman's deforming tendencies with the lens of political desire in analyzing a specific novel. Most studies focus either purely on linguistic techniques or only on cultural shifts, without deeply examining how these translation choices affect the political resistance embedded in the text. Consequently, this research mainly concerns the employment of Berman's twelve deforming tendencies on the passionate elements in Utami's Saman and how these translation choices reshape the political desire of the female characters. Therefore, this research aims to identify the types of deforming tendencies used by the translator and to understand the impact of deformations found on the rebellious act on political force of the original text.

Methodology

To examine the deformation applied by the translators to translate passionate elements in *Saman*, this research used qualitative design where it thoroughly analyzes and examines the translation phenomenon related to the object of the research. Qualitative design can be defined as an approach where the outcome of the research is presented through words, images, or nonnumeric symbols according to George (2008, p. 7). This further explains that this research is suitable to employ this design due to the design's characteristics, focusing on analyzing various types of text, especially text that contains a vast number of meanings and contexts. Two research methods are employed in order to support this research design. First, this research took library

research methods as it was used for collecting information including theories and the data. Second, explicatory research methods used to analyze across three chapters of *Saman* thoroughly to find its passionate elements.

This research used two primary data sources. The source text (ST) is taken from the 41st printing of Utami's *Saman* (2025) published by KPG and followed by the target text (TT) which is taken from *Saman*'s English translation by Allen (2005) published by Lontar Foundation. The 41st printing of Utami's *Saman* consists of 200 pages, containing three chapters of the novel. Moreover, its English translated version has fewer pages than the original version, which is 180 pages. From the data sources, this research mainly focuses on examining the narrative utterances in a form of phrases or sentences containing passionate elements in all across three chapters of *Saman* as the object of the research.

Based on the objective of this research, the data collection applied falls under the objective data. The objective data collection started from reading both the original and translated version of Saman line by line, noting any phrases or sentences that referred to sexual acts, sexual desire, or physical intimacy. To help identify the passionate elements, Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love, mainly in the category of passionate elements, is essential to be examined. For each identified passionate element in the source text, the corresponding translation in the English version was located and recorded to make the data coding, which was later presented in a form of table. This process was done manually because passionate elements often depend on context, tone, and cultural nuance. Later on, the deformations presented were being examined and categorized by the researcher using Berman's twelve deforming tendencies (in Venuti, 2000). Lastly, the researcher interpreted the result of the overall data using the political desire lens.

Table 1. Example of Data Collection

No. of Data	Source Text	No. of Data	Target Text	Passionate Elements Category
2/SM/B1/H3	Kawin begitu mengenal birahi	2/SMT/C1/P12	Mate when they feel the desire	Sexual desire

The example of the data collection is presented on the table above. This method of collecting data helps to track and as well as categorize the data easier during the process of examining the deformations applied by the translator in rendering passionate elements of Utami's Saman. Therefore, in reading, recording, and coding of data from each source must be done carefully to avoid data collection errors.

For the process of data analysis, all identified passionate elements across three chapters of *Saman* were examined to determine which of the twelve types of deformation applied by the translator using Berman's (in Venuti, 2000) twelve deforming tendencies framework and later were being interpreted along with connected the result of the deformation to the politic of desire using Foucault (1978) and Butler's (1990) political lenses. Thus, this research did not use any sampling as Utami's *Saman* features all passionate elements found in three chapters for each data source using a total population approach. To deepen the understanding of the data analysis,

the example of the analysis is provided by a table below.

Table 2. Example of Data Analysis

No. of Data	Source Text	No. of Data	Target Text	Passionate Elements Category	Types of Deformations
2/SM/ B1/H3	Kawin begitu mengenal birahi	2/SMT/ C1/P12	Mate when they feel the desire	Sexual desire	Qualitative Impoverishment

Based on the table above, it can be examined that the translated passionate elements tried to be softened by the translator. In the result of translated passionate elements, the word *birahi* (lust) is changed into "desire" which implies that the blunt wording from the original text is deformed into something softer for the target reader. *Birahi* in Indonesian dictionary means the feeling of blatant infatuation for the opposite sex, where it is specifically intended for biological needs, unlike "desire" that is too general to describe a specific expression. The rebellious nuances from which the source text tried to express failed to be conveyed to the target text as the result of the deformation. Therefore, the translator has a tendency to reduce the literary quality of this line and is categorized as Qualitative Impoverishment.

This deformation weakens the text's political power where softening *birahi* into "desire" can make the character's resistance against the New Order regime seem neutralized. Butler (1990) argues that "neither grammar nor style are politically neutral" (p. 19) meaning that whenever the text fails to conform to the actual intentions, it can be the loss of intelligibility itself. The translator uses safer words, "desire", to avoid shocking the target reader, which forces the female characters to follow the idea of polite social norms and changing the act of resistance into a normal feeling.

Results and Discussion

According to the process of examining the deformations applied by the translator in rendering passionate elements across three chapters of *Saman*, there were 40 data collected containing passionate elements that had been deformed. The result of the data is presented through a pie chart below.

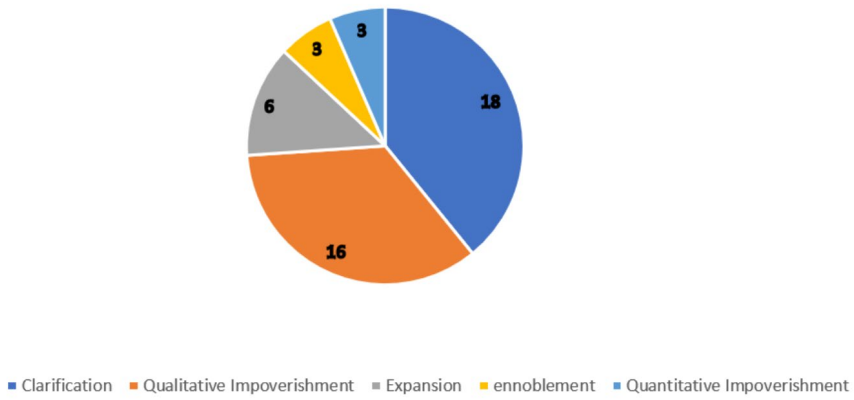


Figure 1. Data Presentation

Based on the chart above , there are forty-six (46) data of the deformation used by the translator. These data were being identified and examined using Berman's (in Venuti, 2000) framework on deforming tendencies. Several tendencies that are used are clarification, qualitative impoverishment, expansion, ennoblements and quantitative impoverishment, with clarification as the most frequently used tendencies and followed by both ennoblement and quantitative impoverishment as the least frequently used tendencies. From the presented data results, it can be inferred that the translator tends to make the implicit meanings become more explicit to suit the target reader while also soften the raw expressions and reduce the original nuances by using qualitative impoverishment and ennoblement. Therefore, the translated passionate elements appear more readable and polite, but they lose the original rebellious nuances and political weight of the source text.

To break down the analysis, there are two discussions which started from discussing the deformations applied by the translator and continue to the discussions of the relation between the overall deformation used with the political desire. This research presents one example for each deformations applied in translating passionate elements of Saman, where five types of deformations are collected throughout the data collection.

1. Deforming Tendencies in Translating Passionate Elements of Utami's *Saman*

This research presents one example for each deformations applied in translating passionate elements of Saman, where five types of deformations are collected throughout the data collection. Each example provided the analysis and explanation regarding the phenomenon that happened in the process of translating passionate elements in Saman.

a. Clarification Used in Translating Passionate Elements of Utami's Saman

Table 3. Example of Clarification

No. of Data	Source Text	No. of Data	Target Text	Passionate Elements Category	Types of Deformations
7/SM/ B1/H4	"Orang yang sudah kawin tidak bisa begitu."	7/SMT/ C1/P14	"Once you're married it's hard to forego sex."	Sexual consummation	Clarification & Expansion

In this example, the clarification technique is found in the result of the translation. This happened through the replacement of the vague word *begitu* (like that) into the explicit word "sex." There is a shift and change of meaning done by the translator that enables the English reader to immediately understand the implicit context. Hence, the clarification here is significant to be done because the translator wants to avoid ambiguity. In the source text, Utami wrote *begitu* implicitly because she had to avoid the strict censorship of the New Order regime where the vagueness was a form of political resistance, while "sex" appears more direct and blunt for target readers. Consequently, this replacement also impacted the whole phrase of *tidak bisa begitu* (cannot do that), because the translator changed it into "it's hard to forego sex," which turns a strict moral rule into a biological excuse. Accordingly, the target reader may not feel the political weight of the original text. Instead of reading a critique of patriarchal hypocrisy as

written by Utami, the English reader rather reads it as a common male biological excuse. This neutralizes the female character's resistance and supports the patriarchal norms, which aligns with Butler's (1990) theory that societal rules are often maintained through language.

b. Qualitative Impoverishment in Translating Passionate Elements of Utami's Saman

Table 4. Example of Qualitative Impoverishment

No. of Data	Source Text	No. of Data	Target Text	Passionate Elements Category	Types of Deformations
2/SM/ B1/H3	Kawin begitu mengenal birahi	2/SMT/ C1/P12	Mate when they feel the desire	Sexual desire	Qualitative Impoverishment

Based on the table above, the qualitative impoverishment technique is found in the result of the translation. This happened through the replacement of the word *birahi* (lust) into "desire." There is a shift and change of intensity done by the translator that enables the English reader to relate with a softer and safer language. Hence, the softening here is significant to be done to avoid shocking the target culture. *Birahi* has been a specifically raw, biological, and physical sexual need for Indonesian people, while "desire" appears more general and emotional for target readers. Consequently, this replacement also impacted the whole phrase of mengenal *birahi* (recognizing lust), because the word "desire" loses the dangerous and rebellious nuance of the original text. Thus, the target reader may not feel the radical resistance presented in Saman, and rather read it as a normal romantic feeling. From Foucault's (1978) perspective, raw desire is a form of power and resistance. By softening *birahi* to "desire," the translator makes the character's resistance fragile, stripping away the political power of the female character's rebellion against the state.

c. Expansion in Translating Passionate Elements of Utami's Saman

Table 5. Example of Expansion

No. of Data	Source Text	No. of Data	Target Text	Passionate Elements Category	Types of Deformations
23/SM/ B2/H 131	Aku dan Cok bertaruh melawan Yasmin bahwa pria ini tak akan tahan hanya ciuman terus-terusan	23/SM T/C2/P 122	Cok and I made a bet with Yasmin that there was no way he would be content with hugging and kissing	Physical affection	Expansion

The expansion technique is found in the result of the translation where this happened through the addition of the word "hugging" into the phrase hanya *ciuman* (only kissing) into "hugging and kissing." There is a shift and change of physical intimacy done by the translator that enables the English reader to imagine the scene more explicitly and physically. Hence, the addition here is significant to be done to make the text feel more alive. *Ciuman* is a simple affectionate act, while "hugging and kissing" appears more descriptive and intimate for target readers. This replacement also impacted the whole sentence, because the translator adds a physical touch that implies a more intense sexual tension. Moreover, the target reader may feel the physical intimacy more openly, but the original implicit nuances of the characters' hesitation

and the political weight of their boundaries are reduced. The addition of explicit physical acts changes the oppressed tone of the original text, which make it seem more like a standard romance scene rather than a political statement of bodily autonomy.

d. Ennoblement in Translating Passionate Elements of Utami's Saman

Table 6. Example of Ennoblement

No. of Data	Source Text	No. of Data	Target Text	Passionate Elements Category	Types of Deformations
3/SM/ B1/H3	Kuinginkan mulut yang haus	3/SMT/ C1/P12	I yearn for the hungry mouth	Sexual desire	Ennoblement

From the example that is presented above, the ennoblement technique is found in the result of the translation. This happened through the replacement of the word *kuinginkan* (I want) into "I yearn." There is a shift and change of style done by the translator that enables the English reader to feel a more poetic and romantic tone, resulting in the elevation that is significant to be done to make the text sound more elegant. *Kuinginkan* has been a direct, active, and bold female desire, different from "yearn" that appears more passive, melancholic, and poetic for target readers. Consequently, this replacement also impacted the whole phrase of *mulut yang haus* (thirsty mouth), because the word "yearn" cannot express the raw physical urge of the original text, where the translator adjusted it into a romantic longing. Therefore, the target reader may not feel the rebellious act of the female character, and rather read it as a safe romantic poem. By turning an active demand into a passive longing, the translator removes the female character's agency (Butler, 1990) and weakens the political force of her desire, making the radical act of claiming her own sexuality disappear.

e. Quantitative Impoverishment in Translating Passionate Elements of Utami's Saman

Table 7. Example of Quantitative Impoverishment

No. of Data	Source Text	No. of Data	Target Text	Passionate Elements Category	Types of Deformations
14/SM/ B1/H31	Setelah itu, mengulanginya di kamar hotel tanpa berlekas-lekas, di mana kulit saya bisa menikmati kulitnya, dan kulitnya menikmati kulit saya, sebab kami telah menanggalkan semua pakaian	14/SM T/C1/P 35	After that we'll do it again in the hotel room, slowly, slowly, where without our clothes, skin can touch skin	Physical affection	Quantitative Impoverishment

In this example, the quantitative impoverishment technique is found in the result of the translation. This happened through the deletion of the repetition kulit saya bisa menikmati kulitnya, dan *kulitnya menikmati kulit saya* (my skin can enjoy his skin, and his skin enjoys my skin) into a much shorter phrase, "skin can touch skin." There is a shift and change of active

agency done by the translator that enables the English reader to read a simpler and more concise sentence. Hence, the reduction here is significant to be done to make the text less stiff. The repetition emphasizes mutual female pleasure and active participation, where it makes "skin can touch skin" appear more neutral and passive for target readers. Consequently, this replacement also impacted the whole sentence, because the translator deleted the active verb *menikmati* (enjoy) that represents female autonomy and agency which makes the target reader to not feel the radical autonomy of the female body, and read it as a simple yet emotionless physical contact. As Foucault (1978) argues, claiming sexual pleasure is a form of power. By deleting the woman's active role, the translator turns a radical, mutual enjoyment into a passive act, which significantly weakens the political resistance of the character.

2. Politic of Desire in the Translation of Passionate Elements in Utami's *Saman*

From the findings, it is clear that the translator tends to make the passionate elements in Saman softer and more polite. This happened through five deforming tendencies: clarification, qualitative impoverishment, expansion, ennoblement, and quantitative impoverishment. All of these changes have a similar pattern. They make the text easier to read, but they also weaken the political power and the rebellious side of the female characters. Hence, this is very important to analyze using the Politics of Desire.

When the findings are analyzed using Foucault's (1978) idea, it shows that the translator removes the characters' resistance. Foucault says, "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95). This means that showing raw sexual desire in the text is a way to fight against the New Order government. However, the findings show that the translator changes raw lust, *birahi*, into a safe feeling "desire". The translator also changes active female pleasure (*menikmati*) into a passive touch "skin can touch skin". Consequently, these translation choices make the resistance weak. As Foucault (1978) says, discourse can "undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile" (p. 101). Therefore, by making the language clean and polite, the translator accidentally removes the characters' rebellion. The characters are no longer dangerous against the state's control over their bodies.

Furthermore, using Butler's (1990) idea, the findings show that the translator forces the female characters back into traditional social rules. Butler says society "regularly punishes those who fail to do their gender right" (p. 178). This means that women who show their sexual desire too openly are seen as breaking the rules. The findings show that the translator tries to avoid this "punishment" by making the women sound more polite and passive. For example, the translator changes the active word *kuinginkan* (I want) into a passive and romantic "I yearn." The translator also changes a strict moral rule into a biological excuse for men, "it's hard to forego sex". As Butler (1990) also says, "neither grammar nor style are politically neutral" (p. 19). These word choices show that the translation is not neutral. The translator uses safer words to make the text acceptable for Western readers. However, this choice pushes the female characters back into old stereotypes and removes their freedom.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the translation of Saman changes the political desire of

the original text. The translator focuses more on making the text easy to read rather than keeping the political resistance. The passionate elements are translated, but the politics behind them are made safe. The English reader may understand the romance and the intimacy, but the reader may not fully feel the dangerous and rebellious political power that Utami wrote to fight against the government in Indonesia.

Conclusion

This research had examined the types of Berman's deforming tendencies applied by the translator in rendering passionate elements of Utami's Saman and how these translation choices reshape the political desire of the original text. According to the result of the analysis of 46 data from all three chapters of Saman, there are two main conclusions.

The first one is where the translator dominantly used Clarification, followed by Qualitative Impoverishment, Expansion, Ennoblement, and Quantitative Impoverishment. This implies that there is a consistent effort to make the implicit meanings more explicit and the raw expressions softer in order to suit the target reader. The translator focuses heavily on adjusting the language to make the text more readable and polite.

Secondly, the translation weakens the characters' rebellion and neutralizes the author's criticism. Using Foucault's (1978) lens, the translator removes the resistance by changing raw lust, *birahi*, into a safe expressive feeling "desire" and active female pleasure into a passive touch. Using Butler's (1990) lens, the translator forces the female characters back into traditional social rules. The translator turns dangerous political acts into a normal romance. In consequence, the English reader may not fully feel the radical political power that Utami originally wrote to fight against the New Order government.

This research contributes to literary translation studies, particularly in understanding how deforming tendencies affect the political weight of sensitive language. To conclude, this research affirms that in translating literary texts containing passionate elements, translators must be careful not to erase the author's political message just to make it suit the target readers.

References

Allen, P. (2005). *Saman* (English translation). Lontar Foundation.

Berman, A. (2000). *Translation and the trials of the foreign.* In L. Venuti (Ed.), The translation studies reader (pp. 284–297). Routledge.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity.* Routledge.

Fitriansyah, F. (2023). *An analysis of translation techniques and quality of taboo words in the Gran Torino movie*. Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, dan Studi Amerika, 29(1), 13–26. https://doi.org/10.20961/jbssa.v29i1.62489

Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality, volume 1: An introduction*. Pantheon Books.

George, M. W. (2008). *The elements of library research: What every student needs to know*. Princeton University Press.

Ma'shumah, N. K., Syamsi, A. N., Sianipar, I. F., & Nur, M. R. O. (2022). *"Why you gotta be so rude?": The transformation of Indonesian's taboo words into English*. Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics, 7(1), 139–156. https://doi.org/10.21462/jeltl.v7i1.741

Munday, J. (2016). *Introducing translation studies: Theories and applications* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Newmark, P. (1988). *A textbook of translation*. Prentice Hall.

Saktiningrum, N., & Udasmoro, W. (2022). *The transformation of the social imaginary on women's sexuality in Indonesian literature from the New Order to Reformasi eras.* Journal of International Women's Studies, 24(1), Article 11. https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss1/11

Sternberg, R. J. (1986). *A triangular theory of love.* Psychological Review, 93(2), 119–135. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.93.2.119

Uktolseya, S. (2023). *Destruction of Bekisar Merah: Antoine Berman's deforming tendencies in The Red Bekisar.* Kata Petra.

Utami, A. (1998). *Saman*. Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia.

Utami, A. (2025). *Saman* (41st printing). Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia.