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## The Story of Contemporary Indonesian Literature by Women: The Sweet and Bitter Conflict Between Javanese Traditional Culture, Religious Interpretation and Feminist Awareness

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### ABSTRACT

Through a reading of three men's novels Bumi Manusia (This Earth of Mankind) by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Nyai Gowok by Budi Sardjono, and Re: dan Perempuan (Re: and Women) by Maman Suherman—the research engages with our understanding of the role played modern Indonesian literature in shaping how women are represented. Conducting a close reading using a literary feminist theoretical approach, this study assesses how stories of abuse are told by male authors through the overlapping webs of Javanese cultural practices and religious interpretations that are mediated by the claim to Islamic feminism. Female oppression is a recurring theme in the findings, whereby women are consistently painted as subjects of patriarchy, trapped within oppressive social constraints. In addition, the analysis demonstrates that these texts show an ambivalence on part of male authors about understanding

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women's suffering alongside the potential for critical insights leading to radical challenges to androphilic structures. Through this lens, the study is argued to be a valuable contribution to a wider debate on the representation of Indonesian women in literature and academic discussion and analysis of gender relations, as they relate to the Indonesian socio-cultural landscape.

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## INTRODUCTION

An essential site where discourses are being crafted on women and the feminine ways Indonesian society, modern Indonesian literary texts have emerged accordingly. In this aesthetic space, male authors are overwhelmingly the producers of texts specifically imbued with female characters and processes (Hellwig, 2011). Ultimately, this Orders of Reality paradox brings to the fore the struggle fiction by male authors has in capturing and explaining women's lived experiences – which have always involved violence and subjugation.

This writing performs reading on three important male-authored modern Indonesian novels, i.e., Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Bumi Manusia*, Budi Sardjono's *Nyai Gowok* and Maman Suherman's *Re: dan Perempuan*. These are explicitly works that take issue with the position of women in Indonesian society, though also (the male) writers wrestling with what these female experiences actually mean at key inflection points for the nation. Through close readings, the research seeks to analyze how women's narrations are deployed within the overlapping spaces of traditional Javanese cultural norms, religious teachings and contemporary feminist consciousness in Indonesia today (Muhsyanur, 2019 and Muhsyanur et al., 2022).

Although it has been studied before, the contribution made by this research to our understanding of gender dynamics in Indonesian literature is that for the first time we have data on how women are portrayed as being exploited written by male authors. Literature has long served as a mirror to the society and hence these representations have a hand in making or breaking public perceptions of gender relations. Hence, studying the image of women in literary works is important to understand how femininity and masculinity are socially constructed within Indonesian societies (Wieringa 2015). In conjunction with this, the research contributes to an emerging area of gender studies and feminism in Indonesia which is becoming increasingly visible in scholarly and public conversations.

This research has scholarly contributions on various aspects. One: It provides a new outlet to analyze how male authors in Indonesian literature frame women and gendered exploitation as narrative material. Secondly the analysis of three novels through this comparatively approach provides an overview over changes in how women are portrayed by modern Indonesian literature. Further, the study strengthens theoretical elaboration of Indonesian literary feminism still misunderstood. Lastly, the results contribute to further development of Indonesian feminist literary criticism that is contextually rooted and sensitive to the mix of socio cultural values in the nation.

Since recent decades, research on representation of women in Indonesian literature has strikingly increased. Modern Indonesian literary works are widely marked as portraying women's experience with a characteristic individualization within the larger picture of social transformation and modernization (Blackburn, 2014). Men and Male Texts in a Development has been central to constructing narrative about an expert-leadership/ruler role for women, and their status in Indonesian society.

In literature, the focus on women's image shift from one corner to another, pushing Pramoedya Ananta Toer who is considered as one of the most influential figures within Indonesian literature discourse. For instance, Goodfellow (2016) conducted a study of Pramoedya's presentation of female characters in the *Buru Tetralogy*, which includes *Bumi Manusia*, and found that despite the dearth of formative examples from which to draw, the author expressed a relatively robust understanding of women's gender issues and exploitation. Still, Lane (2018) suggests that even with this empathetic attitude, Pramoedya's view is tempered by the fact that he was a male author whose conception of the socio-cultural sphere in which he lived could not help but be circumscribed (Muhsyanur, 2023).

Turning to Javanese cultural tradition, Brenner (2019) observes the diversity of interpretive grey areas regarding women's roles and status in society. On the one hand the concepts *wanita* (woman) and *putri* (princess) are infused with reverence, on the other they resound with danger – women remain ensnared in all manner of treachery. This kind of cultural tensions is commonly manifest in contemporary Javanese literary texts, including both novels being studied in this brief conversation.

The sfofeminist discussion in literature in Indonesia has also changed dramatically. Aveling (2017) traces the different waves of feminist involvement, from early gender consciousness to more radical forms of feminism. Across this spectrum, male authors like Pramoedya are frequently depicted as writing more or less a "proto-feminism" in Indonesian literature their works still marked by systemic limitationsatedRoute within this spectrum, the works of some male authors, such as those of Pramoedya Ananta Toer are often seen to mobilize an (incipient) feminism.

Comparative work in the field has also contributed and pointed out how male and female authors have represented women differently. For example, Hatley (2015) shows that male writers frequently portray women as passive victims who need to be saved, while female authors tend to emphasize the agency and dignity of their female characters.

Lastly also in terms of theoretical engagement with Indonesia, Foulcher (2020) employs Western feminist frameworks to an analysis of Indonesian literature and resigns himself to the necessity for a significant adjustment of these theories – their indigenisation if you will. This indicates the need for a context-sensitive framework in literary feminism, one that is closely associated with Indonesia socio-cultural setting.

## **METHOD**

Three modern Indonesian novels are included in the study, *Bumi Manusia* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1980), *Nyai Gowok* by Budi Sardjono (1995) and *Re: dan Perempuan* by Maman Suherman (2004). These texts have been purposefully chosen for three reasons: because all are written by men, all contain substantial female characters and all deal explicitly with women's exploitation, as they depict various stages in the development of modern Indonesian literature.

The data was collected through several close and repeated readings of the novels focusing on isolating a variety of woman-specific narratives or stories based on exploiting men for their gender-male privilege. Content collected ranged from dialogue, character depiction, plot and story devices to symbols tied to the theme of womanhood across the tri-text.

Analysis process was executed in multiple stages. This began by identifying the way in which women are represented in each book, and then categorising these representations. The second step of the study was a formal comparative approach, which helped identify commonalities observed in representations of female characters. Following the data coding, a feminist literary theory juvenated by Indonesian socio-cultural behaviors from the phenomenological findings in this final phase. The last phase integrated these insights into a more comprehensive understanding of women's narratives in Indonesian modern literature.

We therefore used data triangulation by combining textual analysis with secondary literature on the three authors and their sociocultural context, to bolster the validity of our study. In addition, a reflexive stance was taken to recognize the positionality of the researcher and prevent bias from interfering with data interpretation.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Representation of Women in Human Earth**

In scrutinising *Bumi Manusia* it seemed to us that Pramoedya did in fact depict some aspects of women subtly and beautifully through his narrative. Toer et al, through *Nyai Ontosoroh*, portrays a character of resilience and independence but still place her within the exploitative structure of colonial patriarchy. Even when it is visually represented that she is a tough woman whose business acumen she runs pretty well but the shame of her identity as a *jalon* or *nyai* holded them on legal and social precarity.

In interpreting Javanese culture, the performance of *Nyai Ontosoroh* highlights the ambiguity inherent in traditional social attitudes towards women. Despite acknowledging women's ability to manage domestic and economic tasks, Javanese society also contains a broader hierarchical gender order which keeps women on a lower level than men (Keeler, 2017). Pramoedya encapsulates this cultural paradox by creating *Nyai Ontosoroh*: a resolute matriarch who inevitably remains in all of the patriarchal nets.

This cultural mentality of female marginalization in Bumi Manusia is also presented through the relationship between Nyai Ontosoroh with his (male lover) named Herman Mellema as a Dutch owner that uses the women who live in. This situation shows how colonizers exploited indigenous women by making them sexual and economic commodities for European males (Stoler, 2016). Pramoedya delineates this aspect with particular care, emphasizing the pain of Nyai Ontosoroh but also how she can adapt to unjust conditions.

### **Gender Construction in Nyai Gowok**

Nyai Gowok does represent a different image of women as portrayed by Budi Sardjono; however the outcome also repeats a cycle of abuse. Although presented as a female descendant with supernatural capabilities, the central figure Gowok is still under male domination in traditional Javanese society (Sardjono, 1995). Elements of Javanese mysticism, which for Sardjono emphasizes female strength; but irony of ironies: this very strength makes Gowok weaker to be exploited.

Gowok's character in a religious interpretation can be viewed as representing the tension between the continuous existence of local Javanese spiritual traditions and the increasing influence of Islamic values among layers of Javanese society. Women mediate between spiritual and material worlds in the plot, however, this is often abused by men for their own benefits (Mulder, 2018). Sardjono points to the commodification and exploitation of holy women throughout patriarchy by which women with distinct spiritual gifts are reduced into instruments for male dominion.

Broader scrutiny reveals that the wielding of power over women by Nyai Gowok transcends physical and economic territory into both spiritual and emotional plains. Gowok is depicted slowly eroding any concept of herself and her personal autonomy with men constantly seizing her power for their gain. This kind of exploitation is far subtler, just as vicious and violent, denuding women not only of their flesh and effort, but also hollowing them out from the core, dispossessing them of an inner life.

### **Modernity and Exploitation in Re: and Women**

Re: dan Perempuan by Maman Suherman Representing Women within the Landscape(s) of Indonesian Modernity in Early 21st Century The women in this novel are suggested as an individual who has camouflage awareness of her rights, but she is dealing with more exploitation covered by new form that less direct but real complicated some year ahead (Suherman 2004). Suherman shows how women's oppression in modern society is more nuanced and disguised, hiding behind overt confinement to a traditional role that one must conform.

This novel is perhaps a remarkable improvement in terms of feminist consciousness versus the other two writings. × In Re: dan Perempuan, the women show a better understanding of their position within society and try to push back against exploitation in its various forms (Butler, 2020). Yet, Suherman exposes the starkness and stubbornness of patriarchal structures in Indonesian society that not only limit women's resistances particularly but also undermine their efforts at all.

Collectively, the three novels show how Indonesian male authors often depict female characters, echoing a similar pattern. Most commonly, women are cast as damsels in distress or enigmatic creatures cloaked in mystique. While there is some shift towards showing women/ characters as actors of their own modernity such portrayals are rooted in the same patriarchy and patriarchal frame that has been hidden by changes over time.

### **Comparative Analysis and Key Findings**

Comparison reveals multiple aspects common to all three works. One, the path of women in contemporary Indonesian literature has been long but full of turning points. Starting from *Bumi Manusia* first by placing women under the framework of colonialism, moving forward to *Nyai Gowok* and emphasizing on Javanese culture, and lastly lead to *Re: dan Perempuan* about modernity, you can see that male authors developing a actually absorbed of women's acquaintance.

This was, however, compounded by a second set of thematic parallels: while the three texts all depict some form of exploitation, as suggested above these forms differ in nature across them (by content), yet all appear to be rooted in patriarchal structures. While in *Bumi Manusia* it is that of colonialism and racial hierarchy, the subjugation of women are not far off similarly 'stitched' within-previously torn-ply lines. In *Nyai Gowok*, the exploitation is entwined with Javanese mysticism and cultural traditions. In *Re: dan Perempuan*, on the other hand, it manifests in more modern and more nuanced ways namely commodifying the woman body and sexuality.

A third common thread is that all three authors are ambivalent about the characterization of women. Though their arcs are usually shot through with an understanding of and empathy for what women go through, the portrayals themselves remain enslaved to the vantage point of men. Therefore the characters of women are often written idealized, or in terms that reflect the authors not fully understanding womens experiences..

**Table. Comparison of Women's Representation in the Three Novels**

Aspects	<i>Bumi Manusia</i>	<i>Nyai Gowok</i>	<i>Re: dan Perempuan</i>
Social Context	Colonialism	Tradisi Jawa	Modernitas
Main Characters	<i>Nyai Ontosoroh</i>	<i>Gowok</i>	Various figures
Forms of Exploitation	Sexual, economic	Spiritual, physical	Psychological, economic
Feminist Consciousness	Low	Very low	Medium
Women's Agency	Limited	Very limited	Develop

### **CONCLUSION**

Using the cases of three novels by male authors across different periods, this study explores the complexity of woman characters in modern Indonesian literature.

Results: While representations of women seemed to have changed along the years, patriarchal systems emerge as omnipresent in male-authored narratives. The exploitation of women has different kind and up to recent socio-cultural changes started from formal servitude in Bumi Manusia, spiritual subjugation in Nyai Gowok, then transformed into the present-day objectification in commodity with Re: dan Perempuan.

Within the texts, Indonesian male authors variously reflect an awareness of gender issues and women's subordination in Indonesia. If Pramoedya Ananta Toer displays a relatively sophisticated awareness of the complications faced by women in colonial society, Budi Sardjono and Maman Suherman take up other aspects of women's social lives in theirs. Still, all of the writers are men and it very much shows in how they build female characters and plot structures.

At its heart, this research provides a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms driving gender relations in Indonesian literature, upon which feminist literary criticism might be extended that is as rooted in contextual history as it is to current social realities within Indonesian society.

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