

# Women's Struggle for Existence: A Study Of Women Characters In Indonesian Novels

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## **Women's Struggle for Existence: A Study Of Women Characters In Indonesian Novels**

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### **Introduction**

Women and their surroundings are abundant sources of imagination and inspiration. In many literary writings, women are portrayed to play different roles at different times, in backgrounds/cultures, and with different problems. They are created partly or completely by different authors, men and women. No matter who creates them, the authors try to present the pictures or qualities of women of their imagination. The purpose of the creation can be a more portrayal of women (in reality), an expectation of what women should be or many others.

In Indonesian literary writings, women, too, are portrayed in different roles compared to those of other writings. They are portrayed as housewives, teachers, artists, etc., with certain qualities attached to them. They are close to our life because they reflect the reality, where women are part or members of the society.

This chapter discusses how Indonesian authors, men and women alike, portray women in their writings. Is it true that women are portrayed to be submissive and obedient as it is required in the patriarchal society? How do they struggle to exist in the midst of male domination? Two novels, *Gadis Pantai* (A Girl from the Seashore) by Pramoedya Ananta Toer and *Tarian Bumi* (the Dance of the Earth) by Oka Rusmini have been used for purposes of discussion and illustration. One novel is written by a man and the other by a woman. In addition, several novels will also be mentioned to provide a broader picture of women in their struggle for existence.

Although it is argued that in western setting, as well as in others, women in literary writings are not portrayed properly, nevertheless there are roles that women play which are worth mentioning.

### **Indonesian novels at a glance**

Indonesia is an archipelago where around 400 ethnic groups live together as a nation. With so many ethnic groups (250 small ethnic groups have recently been discovered in Papua), this country is blessed with multicultural societies. This reality is an abundant source of ideas and inspiration for literary writings.

In the male dominated cultures of Indonesia – like other Asian cultures, women are mostly portrayed as submissive and obedient as required by the society. They have no rights over their life and are denied their existence. In modern times, however, women do not always carry traditional roles as mothers or submit to domestication. Their roles have evolved and they are nowadays portrayed in different roles. These developments are also clearly portrayed in Indonesian novels, in various settings.

In general, however, the domestication and submission of women apparently appears in many novels about women. Countless Indonesian novels talk about women, and sometimes, by looking at the title, one can tell if it is about women. For example, *Sitti Nurbaya* (a girl name) by Marah Rusli, *Sukreni*, *Gadis Bali* (Sukreni, a Balinese Girl) by AA.

Panji Tisna, *Anak Perawan di Sarang Penyamun* (A Virgin amongst the Thieves) by Sutan Takdir Alisyahbana, *Raumanen* (a woman name) by Marianne Katoppo, *Olenka* (a woman name) by Budi Darma, and *Gadis Pantai* (a beach girl) by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, etc., are obviously about women. There are many other novels that picture women although the titles are not feminine names.

Although the above mentioned novels are about women, they are in different settings. As a multicultural country, Indonesian writers of different cultural backgrounds bring forward problems or conflicts that women face in their respective cultures. These, according to Mahayana (Mahayana, et al., 1992) are considered important topics in Indonesian novels.

Various themes are brought forward due to Indonesian multiethnicity and heterogeneity. Interethnic or cross-cultural marriages, for example, appear in the theme of Indonesian novels. The conflict which appear in the marriage of Hanafi, a native man and Corrie du Busse (an Indo-French girl) in *Salah Asuhan* (Wrong Upbringing) by Abdul Muis, is a good example.

According to Mahayana (1992) there are about 20 women writers in Indonesia. However, most of the themes that they bring forward are around their problems, narrated and solved by the women characters. Most women are portrayed by male writers in their novels as typical housewives, teachers, and dutiful daughters. According to Teeuw in Mahayana (1992), however, modern women are also portrayed in several novels, struggling for their existence in modern society, for example, in *Layar Terkembang* (Sails Unfurled) by Sutan Takdir Alisyahbana and *Belenggu* (Bondage) by Armijn Pane.

Contemporary Indonesian women writers like Ayu Utami (in *Saman* and *Larung*) happen to be more honest and bold in their language when uncovering the conflict, socially and individually.

Indonesian literary writings have many things to offer to their readers. However, the fact that they are written in Bahasa Indonesia, the national language, has limited their readership. Translating the text into foreign languages could be one solution to create wider readership of Indonesian literature.

### **Women in Indonesian novels**

The portrait of women characters in Indonesian literature is similar than that of Western literature, they have traditional roles and are sometimes characterized as weak and submissive.

Toer's woman character in *A Girl from the Seashore* was a naive young girl who was brought to the city to meet her aristocratic husband whom she had never seen before in her entire life:

*Ia dibawa ke kota. Tubuhnya dibalut kain dan kebaya yang tak pernah diimpikannya bakal punya. Selebar kalung tipis sekarang menghias lehernya.*

*Kemarin malam ia telah dinikahkan. Dinikahkan dengan sebilah keris. Detik itu ia tahu: kini ia bukan anak bapaknya lagi. Ia bukan anak emaknya lagi. Kini ia istri sebilah keris, wakil seseorang yang tak pernah dilihatnya seumur hidup.*

(She was brought to the city. She was wrapped in the clothes which she had never dreamed before. She had a small gold chain around her neck.

The night before, she had been married. Married to a *keris*. That moment she realized: she no longer belonged to her father. She no longer belonged to her mother. She was the wife of a *keris*, a symbolic representation of someone she had never seen in her life.) (Toer, 2002: 2)

Against her will, the girl was married to an aristocratic man who made her or his concubine. She dared not disappoint her parents since it would bring disgrace to the family. And besides, she was separated from the family to save them from poverty because the man not only paid some money to the parents, but they had one less mouth to feed. As a girl, she was brought up to be submissive without asking any questions, she had to obey her parents' wishes (including an arranged marriage), hoping to bring honour to the family.

In Javanese wedding, it is considered legitimate for a man not to be present on his own wedding due to certain constraints that he faces. As a replacement, a *keris* (traditional blade), will act as a representative. *Keris*, a kind of traditional knife, is not a mere traditional tool or weapon. In Javanese culture, a *keris* symbolises man's dignity and power. For the reasons of dignity and power, a *keris* is often inherited, hoping that the one who inherits it will also achieve the previous owner's dignity and power. Some even believe that *keris* has supernatural power. Therefore, a marriage is considered legal even where the bridegroom is not present. His dignity and power, represented by the *keris*, are there for his bride.

*Mas Nganten*, as the girl from the seashore was then called, lived in her husband's house, took care of her husband's children from many women who were once married to him but were since then divorced, bore him a daughter, and always tried to please her husband who came home only once in a while. No matter how hard she tried to please him, she ended up just like his other wives in that house.

*"Ingin sekali wanita tua itu memperingatkan Gadis Pantai, tapi ia tak berani. Ia takut. Ia tahu benar, dalam sehari wanita utama bisa berganti 25 kali tanpa sedikit pun mengurangi perbawa Bendoro. Ia tahu besok atau lusa paling lama setelah Gadis Pantai melahirkan anaknya yang pertama, wanita muda tak berdosa ini pun mungkin akan dilangkahi dan lalui jalan hidupnya sendiri tanpa ragu-ragu lagi: jalan hidup sebagai sahaya."*

(How the old woman wished to warn the girl but she dared not. She was afraid. She knew it well that in one day, the mistress of the house may change 25 times without anyone questioning the Master's dignity. She knew that tomorrow or the day after giving birth to her first child, her poor mistress might be dismissed and should undoubtedly walk her own pathway, as an ordinary girl) (Toer, 2000: 78)

Being an ordinary girl, she did not fit the position of an aristocrat's wife although she had married and bore him a daughter. She should leave her infant daughter, whose status was

higher than her mother, to be taken care of by a woman who would be more appropriate for her husband.

In Indonesian tradition (as other Eastern cultures), it is appropriate for a woman to submit herself all her life to certain rules created by the community. The “don’ts” surround them all their life, as child, wife or even mother. Faithfully they obey the rules. It is actually a reflection of Asian women, too, and one of the major themes in Asian literature mentioned by Flanigan (2000), “one of the preferred themes in Indian literature is arranged marriage, a practice which is still used for the following reasons: (1) *helps maintain the social satisfaction system in the society*; (2) *gives parents control over family members*; (3) *enhances the chances to preserve and continue the ancestral liniage*; (4) *provides an opportunity to strengthen the kinship group*; (5) *allows the consolidation and extension of family property*; (6) *enables the elders to preserve the principle of endogamy*.”

Asian women characterized by Asian literary works are mostly those explained by Moyer (1997), as matriarchs, as mothers, and as wives as they are preferred by the society. Que (1994) also finds similar roles of Chinese women in literature. Furthermore, in her essay on “Rushdie’s women characters” (1977), Moyer explains that (Salman) Rushdie, too, provides portraits of the reality of Indian women as matriarch, mother and wife. Feminists, however, think that those are stereotypes of women which conform to traditional values. They contribute to the inferiority of women and are degrading. Those values restrain women from becoming independent persons, financially and socially.

History also plays a significant role in shaping the roles of women. Dutch colonisation for about 350 years created another role for native women. Nyai Ontosoroh, another (Indonesian) woman character in Toer’s *This Earth of Mankind* submits herself to the domination of her husband, a Dutchman, who owned a plantation in western Java. As a (contract) wife, Nyai had no right over her children (who obtained their father’s nationality, giving them higher status than their mother), her property or the plantation (because of her status as a concubine), or even her body. Nyai Ontosoroh is a portrait of women who suffer from another form of oppression – a wife by contract – in the Dutch colonial era.

*Nyai* is the title of a contract wife in West Java during the colonial era. At that particular time, the existence of *nyais* was a fearful reality for women of marrying age. As a child, a girl could not object being surrendered by her parents to the ‘master’ as their act of gratitude or a payment of debt. Once the title was attached, a woman would never be fully accepted as a native (because she was married to a Dutchman) but, at the same time, she was not accepted among the Dutch colonial society because she was only a concubine, not a legal wife.

Although no longer colonised by the Dutch, women in Indonesia are still under oppression in a different form. They are victims of social reconstruction, shaped by others.

Women characters in *Tarian Bumi* (Dance of the Earth), a novel by Oka Rusmini (2000), and in a collection of short stories entitled *Sagra* (a woman’s name – also the title of one of her short stories) (2001) – add to the wealth of Indonesian literature. The two books are worth mentioning because Rusmini, a Balinese writer, brilliantly raises the conflicts that women face due to the cultural values in certain areas. The setting of the stories is Bali, an island where most of the people practice Hinduism. The island also practices the caste system.



Women characters in the stories experience unfair treatment from the society. Their disobedience or wrong conduct mostly causes their unfortunate destiny. They do not obey the society. Marrying men of different caste is also a mistake, both for the brahmins (highest caste) or the sudras (lowest caste). The (patriarchal) caste system apparently does not take women's existence into account, therefore, disgrace in the family is mostly attributed the women's misbehaviour or misfortune (*Tarian Bumi*—Dance of the Earth).

Women characters portrayed above cannot change their destiny. The different settings provide different problems but they share the same consequences imposed on them by society and the code they believe in.

According to Humm (2002: 50), caste is a term described as “*sistem organisasi sosial Hindu yang berdasarkan pada praktik perkawinan endogamus dan aturan-aturan kontak sosial, pekerjaan dan ritual yang ditentukan secara seksama.*” (A Hinduism social organisation systems, which are based on endogamous marriage practices and social conduct, work and rituals that are carefully determined). The problem of the caste system is when there is discrimination against women because in *Tarian Bumi* or *Sagra* it is women who suffer. Men do not suffer as much as the women. It can be stated that it was women who are expected to guard the rules or conduct. The same practice is observed in India. Humm (2002: 51) further explains “*Aturan dan ideology tersebut merupakan praktik-praktik yang tidak setara yang muncul dari dalam masyarakat India itu sendiri.*” (such ideology and rules are unequal practices emerged within the Indian community).

In Asian communities where myths and reality blend, the existence of women in society will be ignored due to the long tradition of male domination in the community.

Entering the twenty-first century, where women are given equal positions in education, industries, politics, and many other sectors, the roles of a mother and domestic workers are no longer valid representatives of Asian women in general, especially for those that have achieved higher status in society. Stateswomen have emerged in Asia, a place where women are not taken into account in the society. The present day women leaders, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo or Megawati Soekarnoputri and many women ministers in Asian countries, are good examples of this trend. Even in majority of muslim countries like Bangladesh, the leadership of women is acknowledged.

According to Djajanegara (2000), a survey conducted in the US towards the end of 1960, it was found that, with only a few exceptions, the canon of the country's literature is written by men. Elaine Showalter criticises male dominance in the US literature. It is, indeed, a fact that in the past, literary critics were mostly men, not only in the US but also in other parts of the world. It was by men that the quality of a literary piece was valued. Is it also possible that Asian women's significant roles are also covered under the same suppression which resulted in male-dominant US literature?

### **Studying women characters: A different perspective**

“*Saya setuju dengan sebutan bahwa negeri kita ini adalah negeri yang maskulin. Saya dapat melihat dan merasakan maskulinitas itu dari “teks-teks” sosial kita yang sarat dengan pelecehan seksual terhadap perempuan. Dan saya kira itu semua akibat hegemoni patriarki yang telah tumbuh cukup lama dalam negeri ini. Untuk itu, saya sangat tertantang untuk menulis cerpen sebagai saksi atas ketidakadilan.* (I agree with

a statement that our country (Indonesia) is a masculine country. I can see and feel it from the social “texts which are full of sexual harassment toward women. And I think that is owed to a long practice of patriarchal hegemony in this country. Therefore, I am challenged to write short stories as a witness of the injustice.” (Rama Indraswari as quoted by Subiantoro, 2002: 103)

Short stories are Ratna’s tool to voice the injustice and oppression around us. They are stories of a true life, a reality. She hopes that her readers will identify with the oppression as oppressors or victims of the same (Subiantoro, 2002).

There are messages that writers convey through their writings. If Ratna feels impelled to voice her concerns, others may have different purposes. Sutan Takdir Alisyahbana in *Anak Perawan di Sarang Penyamun* (Virgin amongst the Thieves) portrays Sayu – kidnapped and held hostage by a group of thieves – a brave woman who eventually changed the head of the gang into a good and respected member of the society. It is the quality of a woman that the writer expected, a woman of dignity who would help her man to find the right way of living.

The expected quality clearly described in Alisyahbana’s novel may not be found in other novels. In *Gadis Pantai* (A Girl from the Seashore) or *Tarian Bumi* (Dance of the Earth), readers find different endings. The women characters fail to realise their dream. Women’s conduct is restricted by the male dominated culture or the structured society, which does not give any space to their struggle for existence.

In *This Earth of Mankind* by Toer, Nyai Ontosoroh led a more difficult life due to her status as a contract wife. However, her role as a mother who raised the children and her strong will and capacity to run the plantation, deserve acknowledgment. Nyai Ontosoroh is a picture of the real situation of the colonial era where so many Indonesian women were forced to marry the Dutchmen for temporary marriages. As a nation, Indonesia was colonised whereas the women suffered from another kind of oppression. They are indeed part of the history of Indonesia.

As a mother and wife, Nyai’s submission to her husband, and the situation she could not change, did not dim her spirit in her struggle to win her children or her right as a wife. She failed but her struggle deserves acknowledgment. The legal system in those days did not favour the natives; otherwise the end would be different.

The three women characters in *Tarian Bumi* (Dance of the Earth) (Rusmini, 2000), being part of the caste system of society, suffer from the curse and unfortunate situation because of their misbehaviour and conduct. Their great suffering seemed unbearable but they had the courage to choose their destiny. Life goes on. Love does not count when it concerns rules of society, therefore, they should be banished forever from their caste and be part of their husbands’ castes.

The girl from the seashore or *Mas Nangen*, struggled to get the custody of her child by force. She pleaded with her husband to let her take care of her child. This proves that she existed and that the child existed because of her. She had the right to take care of her child. Her unfortunate condition was caused solely by poverty. However, it was she who saved the family from humility. She had to marry a man who she never knew before to elevate her family’s life.

**Conclusion**

Women in Indonesian novels are portraits of Indonesian women in general. They are portrayed in different settings, in different abundant cultures of Indonesia. Women face conflicts caused by the male-dominated culture and structured society and their existence is denied.

In order to acknowledge their existence, it is indeed important to study the cultures which they belong to, the cultures which do not side with them. It is only by understanding their unfortunate situation, i.e. restrictions, culture, society, that readers can acknowledge their achievement no matter how small it may be.



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