

FINDING FEMINIST LITERARY READING: PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN IN THE 1920S INDONESIAN LITERARY WRITINGS

Potret Perempuan dalam Sastra Indonesia Tahun 1920-an:
Sebuah Pembacaan Kritik Sastra Feminis

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Abstrak: Sastra Indonesia modern dapat dikatakan lahir sekitar tahun 1920-an dengan publikasi karya sastra Indonesia modern oleh Balai Pustaka. Di antara karya yang diterbitkan oleh Balai Pustaka pada tahun 1920-an, terdapat karya yang paling populer seperti Sitti Nurbaya (1922), Azab dan Sengsara (1927), dan Salah Asuhan (1928) yang mewakili suara produksi sastra tahun 1920-an. Makalah ini bertujuan untuk melihat potret perempuan dalam tiga karya yang ditulis oleh penulis laki-laki dengan menggunakan pendekatan kritik sastra feminis. Melalui teknik pembacaan yang mendalam (close reading technique), penelitian ini menggunakan kritik sastra feminis untuk menelaah potret perempuan dalam tiga karya tersebut. Temuan dalam tulisan ini menunjukkan bahwa di satu sisi perempuan masih terbelenggu oleh patriarkat, tetapi di sisi lain perempuan bukanlah korban patriarkat yang pasif: perempuan tetap berupaya untuk keluar dari belenggu ini dan memutus rantai penindasan patriarkat melalui kebebasan dan otonomi personal.

Kata-Kata Kunci: sastra Indonesia modern, tahun 1920-an, Balai Pustaka, perempuan, kritik sastra feminis

Abstract: Modern Indonesian literature can be said to be born around 1920s with the publication of modern Indonesian literary works by Balai Pustaka. Amongst the works published by Balai Pustaka in the 1920s, there are most popular works namely Sitti Nurbaya (1922), Azab dan Sengsara (1927) and Salah Asuhan (1928) representing the tone of 1920s literary productions. This paper aims to look at images of women in those three works written by male authors, using feminist literary criticism. By means of close reading technique, the study uses feminist literary criticism to examine and (re)examine the images of women portrayed in those three works. The finding shows that on one hand some women are still trapped with the shackle of patriarchy, but on the other hand some women are not simply passive victims of patriarchy: these women still attempt to escape from the patriarchal chain and cut out the patriarchal oppression.

Key Words: modern Indonesian literature, 1920s, Balai Pustaka, women, feminist literary criticism

INTRODUCTION

In the words of Teeuw, a prominent scholar in Indonesian literature, modern Indonesian literature was born around 1920 with the publication of *Tanah Air* (fatherland, 1922) a collection of poems by Muhammad Yamin and *Sitti Nurbaya* (*Sitti Nurbaya*, first published in 1922) a

novel by Marah Rusli, both showed striking difference from the characteristics of previous writings. Teeuw believes that those two works signify the breaking from the past: abandoning traditional Malay forms, replacing with much modern character such as taking political issues into the novel (Teeuw, 1967:1—

13). The 1920s Indonesian literary works deem to be essential for modern Indonesian literary world as these works bear witness the modern construction of a future nation which later in 1945 be called Indonesia.

Leaving features of traditional Malay writings, modern writings in the 1920s, as Teeuw argues, are full with new expressions and ideas that carry out significant politico-social nuance that correlates to the development of nationalism at that time:

It was then for the first time that young Indonesians began to express feelings and ideas which were basically different from those current in the traditional indigenous societies, and to do so in literary forms which deviated fundamentally from those found in the older Malay, Javanese and other literatures, oral, or written ... It is indeed typical of this literature that it develops at least partly parallel to the nationalist movement, reflecting and echoing its problems and its achievements (Teeuw, 1967:1—2).

Although later, Teeuw underlines that not all works in the 1920s contain political aspirations, here, it shows that Indonesian literary writings in the 1920s cannot radically escape from the political nature of writings as proposed by feminist literature criticism that all literary texts are not only literary, but also ideological as texts contain the precise extent that they are traversing with respect to the conscious ideologies that inform them. This is the underlying premise that feminist literary criticism derives from. The politics of ideology that is embodied within a particular literary work is inseparable from the cultural settings it encompasses and the ideologies its author carries.

The Indonesian literature of 1920s as discussed by Teeuw in *Modern*

Indonesian Literature (1967) is significant as it embodies the discourse of the birth of a nation. Many authors attempted to express their ideological underpinnings in their writings and many of such writing especially novels create authorship centering on the political ideas in correspondence to the political situation when the nationalist movement represented by one of the very first nationalist organization called Budi Utomo (started in 1908) began to rise. One particular early political novel, echoing Teeuw, is *Sitti Nurbaya* (1922) published by Balai Pustaka, a bureau set up by Dutch East Indiescolonial government to publish and disseminate Indonesian popular literature. Not only that *Sitti Nurbaya* marks the birth of political novel, *Sitti Nurbaya* also one of the very few novels that centers the story on a woman with the same name. Other early political novel, like *Hikajat Kadirun* by Samaun, like many other novels published by Balai Pustaka rely their stories with male characters as protagonists. It is then really interesting to see how women are represented in that early political novel. Other significant novels in during the Balai Pustaka period (i.e. published by BalaiPustaka) are *Salah Asuhan* (The Wrong Upbringing, first published in 1928) and *Azab dan Sengsara* (Torment and Misery, first published in 1927). All these novels are, though, dense with romantic stories, especially *Salah Asuhan* (Watson, 1973:179—192, Foulcher, 2005:39—48), the problematic images of women in those novels are yet to focus. One notable reserach conducted on the 1920s novels was by Faruk in his book entitled *Novel-Novel Indonesia Tradisi Balai Pustaka 1920—1942* (2002). In this book, Faruk examines novels of the Balai Pustaka period using structural approach in attempt to scrutinize the novels on the notion of romanticism. Faruk's approach, although also discusses female characters in the

novel *Sitti Nurbaya* and *Azab dan Sengsara*, does not look at upon the portrayals of female characters using feminist literary critics. Therein the difference between Faruk's notable writing and this writing lies on the approaches used. Accordingly, this paper aims to examine images of women in these three (most) popular literary works of the 1920s Balai Pustaka Period: *Sitti Nurbaya*, *Salah Asuhan*, and *Azab dan Sengsara* using feminist literary criticism.

Sitti Nurbaya, *Salah Asuhan*, and *Azab dan Sengsara* were written by male authors whose worlds undeniably are reflection of male culture. As understood then, within a male-dominated culture, literary works are reflexive of male ideologies, which largely ignore female sexual difference. It is then necessary to undo how women are portrayed by male authors in the literary works of 1920s and how such portrayals create powerful images for women or challenge existing portrayals of women are one of many tasks of feminist criticism. Using feminist literary criticism to scrutinize literary texts means finding feminist reading of the texts. Therefore, finding feminist reading here, means to re-examine such texts, questioning the authority that has been established within the works in order to displace the inferiority of female subject positioning in literary tradition.

THEORY

Feminist Literary Criticism

According to Maggie Humm, that among others, feminist literary critics aims to (1) address "the invisibility of women writers," (2) challenge "the problem of the 'feminist reader' by offering readers new methods and a fresh critical practice," (3) "make us *act* as feminist readers by creating new writing and reading collectives" (Humm, 1994:7—8). As one of destabilising theories, feminist literary

criticism is meant to elevate female sexual differences that are undervalued in traditional criticism.

Since its first revolutionizing appearance, feminist literary criticism has occupied a vast space that Elaine Showalter states undeniably that feminist critical revolutions have impacted on academic, literary and cultural institutions (Showalter, 1986:3). The body of feminist literary theory is vast that it is almost impossible to limit within a single entity. The literature's availability for the kind of theory and criticism is indeed insuperable. Often simply described to use feminist standards and techniques in dissecting literary works in attempt to analyse textual constructions of gendered meanings, feminist literary criticism has gone a number of alterations since 1970s. Drawing from a wide range of critical theories, to include psychoanalysis, cultural materialism, Marxism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, postmodernism, post-colonial, sociology, anthropology, philosophy to name a few, feminist literary criticism is becoming a more dynamic and complex area of study. Diversity of such body of literature is added as it is also entrenched with already established theoretical positions such as Freudian, Lacanian, Bourgeois, Liberal, and geographical locations such American feminist theories, British or French. Therefore, the intellectuals writing on this position and their discourse are not necessarily compatible to each other as many of them held opposing positions to each other. Later literary critics even adopt already existing feminist insights, apply them in new ways, thus transforming and creating them into an increasingly diversified field of study. Consequently, there is no single defined theory to talk about. As Elaine Showalter, one leading feminist literary critics in her introduction to *The*

New Feminist Criticism, has written on the diversity of feminist criticism:

Feminist criticism differs from other contemporary schools of critical theory in not deriving its literary principles from a single authority figure or from a body of sacred texts. ... feminist critics do not look to a Mother of Us All or a single system of thought to provide their fundamental ideas. Rather, these have evolved from several sources—from extensive readings in women’s literature; from exchanges with feminist theories in other disciplines, especially history, psychology, and anthropology; and from the revision and reconsideration of literary theory itself. ... Although we are still far from agreement on a theoretical system (a prospect that many, in fact, would find horrifyingly reductive), ... [we] are unified by the faith that feminist concerns can bring a new energy and vitality to literary studies, for men as well as for women (Showalter, 1986:4).

Indeed, feminist literary criticism is diverse in its nature, however as diverse as it is, feminism criticism as a daughter of women’s movement has developed itself to be an intellectual and social movement, as a heuristic tool, as the redefinition of knowledge and power.

In the same essay, Showalter also sums up the history of feminist literary criticism from its earlier emergence into three phases. According to Showalter, the earliest phase of feminist criticism was focused on exposing the images of women in literary practice, images that themselves are misogynist, stereotyping women as either angels or devils, literary abuse of women in textual representations, and women’s exclusion from literary history. This, in Showalter’s view contributes as literary misogyny which feminist critics attacked and “reinforced the importance of their enterprise by emphasizing the connections between

the literary and the social mistreatment of women” (Showalter, 1986:5). The publication of this first phase in before and early 1970s included among others, *Images of Women in Fiction Feminist Perspectives* (1972) edited by Susan Copperman Cornillon functioned to investigate “the real meaning of fiction and the role of women in and out of it are being undertaken” (Cornillon, 1973:x). The second phase was the discovery of women’s own literary tradition. This phase was signified by the growing awareness that “women writers had a literature of their own, whose historical and thematic coherence as well as artistic importance, had been obscured by the patriarchal values that dominate our culture” (Showalter, 1986:6). The second phase in late 1970s was marked by the publication of a number of literary criticism that demanded women’s literary tradition in feminist terms such as Patricia Meyer Spacks’s *The Female Imagination* (1975), Ellen Moers’s *Literary Women*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Women Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979), and Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1977). This led to the rereading and redefining women’s literature across nations, cultures and historical periods. Since then, in particular after late 1970s and in 1980s women’s literature had been coloured by significant adjectives such as black women literary criticism and lesbian criticism and so forth. The second phase was interestingly important in the history of feminist literary criticism as in this period the insights of Anglo-American and heterosexual feminisms was firstly challenged by non-white feminism such as Black feminism and lesbian identities. Anglo American feminism was criticised for being exclusive to White women’s writing and not taking racial, cultural and sexual

differences into account. Lesbian poet Adrienne Rich and Black American feminist bell hooks shook the Anglo-American criticism with their harsh criticism on the exclusion of non-heterosexual white women's struggle against double dominations of sexual and racial differences. Rich's *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences* (1979), hook's *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1982), and Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) were widely perceived as the champions of the writings of coloured women. The third phase was according to Showalter was the demand of feminist criticism to recognize not only women's writings that had been lost in the writing history but also "a radical rethinking of the conceptual grounds of literary study, a revision of the accepted theoretical assumptions about reading and writing that have been based entirely on male literary experiences" (Showalter, 1986:8).

Although women have started celebrating their literary heritage in 1970s, this does not entirely mean that no writing exists prior to that age. The major texts of Virginia Woolf in 1920s *A Room of One's Own*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949:1953, English translation), Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (1968) or even Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) were considered classic in the field of women's studies as such writings have begun to question the socio, cultural, and literary construction of women. However, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) was still highly perceived as the ground breaking critic of the politization of sexual construction of women. Millet traces oppression of women in the literary writings of four male authors, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet. Using feminist approach

to literature, Millet claims that "social and cultural contexts must be studied if literature was to be properly understood" (Moi, 1985:24). As Millet herself argues that relationship between the sexes is and has always been political as it "shall refers to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (Millet, 1970:23). Dissecting how patriarchal biases work in socio-cultural levels and reflected in literature, Millet shares a view with later feminist critics on looking at the politics of literary production regardless their differing interests, agendas or affiliations.

Political Role of Feminist Criticism

Belsey and Moore further remark on the political role of feminist readers:

A feminist does not necessarily read in order to praise or to blame, to judge or to censor. More commonly she sets out to assess how the text invites its readers, as members of specific culture, to understand what it means to be a woman or man, and so encourages them to reaffirm or to challenge existing cultural norms (Belsey and Moore, 1989:1).

Belsey and Moore have also added that feminist criticism has a pivotal role in destructing the radicalisation of timeless meanings that literature carries within the norms of traditional literary criticism. Feminist critique sees literature as no longer a special category simply depicting reality, embodying timeless truths and neutral agendas.

Fiction becomes a manifestation in which its various forms are subjective to the ways societies comprehend and identify themselves and the world they live in or imagine. Therein lies the importance of history for feminist criticism as literature has in this term turned to be exceptionally historical. Re-visioning—to borrow Adrienne Rich's term—serves

as a new way of looking at construction of women in any art forms to be severely crucial as it views the changes of such construction throughout the historical periods. Rich explains it thoroughly:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal to self-destructiveness of male dominated-society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh (quoted in Fetterley, 1978:586—589).

Perhaps, Rich's claim of re-visioning an old text should be extended to *all texts*, old, and new. Any given text should be re-looked and re-examined with new critical eyes in the manner of any given feminist critique, in order to awake new consciousness as proposed by Fetterley so that women's readings serve as a powerful naming that free women to produce their own readings, appropriating different meanings, recounting different gleanings, at different times—even from the same text—according to changed assumptions, conditions and requisitions.

Feminist literary critics have long been dealing with various issues in the last decades concerning their politicisation of sexual writings or readings. How is women's literary subjectivity constructed stereotypically, positively or banally, how can representations be

constructed, deconstructed or reconstructed are questions primarily dealing with feminist sexual politics of 're-vision' what it means to read, and how reading may relate to critical understanding.

METHOD

This paper is firmly grounded on textual research based on library studies purposing to scrutinize images of women in three literary works of the 1920s, all published by Balai Pustaka namely *Sitti Nurbaja* by Marah Rusli first published in 1922, *Azab dan Sengsara* by Merari Siregar in 1927, and *Salah Asuhan* by Abdoel Moeis in 1928. Using close reading technique that relies heavily on the hermeneutic attempts to understand the meanings of literary works chosen, the study then uses feminist literary criticism to examine and re-examine the images of women portrayed in those three works. In attempt to gain in-depth insights into the various examinations to the images of women in literature, feminist literary criticism requires to ground examinations of literary works based on the working concepts of such criticism such as the existing notion of women's issues, the political positioning of women's characters in the works and what issues become crucial in scrutinizing writings by women and about women (and men).

The discussion will explore the connection between the literary production and the socio-historical realities such production is foregrounding. In the case of feminist literary criticism, such critic becomes a necessary entity as the nature of feminist inquiry is always contextually grounded undertaking, by not only studying a text in its pristine isolation (Boetcher and Mittman, 1973:17). Inquiring about its roots, its surrounding, and its consequences are becoming crucial in heeding the power of the words and the ways in which those words

present and are presented, who present them and in turn how those words impinge on the readers (whether or not such influence exist). The politization of the writing have taken into shape where the readings are not only conducted in isolation, instead such readings, especially the feminist readings are executed in broader political deals, such as the politics of construction, subjectivity politics, problems dealing with author/authority, identity politics portrayed, and so forth. Disengagement of literature and literary production from wide range of historical realities from where and of who the texts appear will certainly neglect the fact that literary production is itself a body growing from certain spatial and temporal circumstances.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Images of Women in the 1920s Literary Productions

Women as a Construct

In 1908 the Dutch colonial government established *Commissievoor de Inlandsche School en Volkslectuur* (Commission for Indigenous School and Folk Readings); this bureau became *Balai Pustaka* in 1917. The former was designed to advise the Department of Education on the kinds of literary materials suitable for the reading public, and the latter was in correlation with colonial policy effected by the Ethical Policy: to educate and develop natives to clerical and related positions to assist the work of the colonial administration. When it became *Balai Pustaka* its role was extended:

Firstly it was intended to set a competition between a private publisher against the other or to prevent books published by general public, particularly from the Chinese that published cheap romance books. Secondly—which may be the primary—it aimed to instil colonialism in the soul of Indonesians. True, there were also old

manuscripts and writings by Indonesians published by *Balai Pustaka* nonetheless there were many books amongst its publication portraying the prowess of the Dutch and the kindness of its government (Usman, 1957:25, Teeuw, 1967:14).

In this book, the character, Datuk Maringgih, was presented as a villain as he resisted the colonial government imposition of tax on all colonial subjects. Despite its benefit to colonial sustainability, the institution played a significant role in the development of modern Indonesian literary tradition, as the use of Malay for books published by *Balai Pustaka* stimulated the development of Bahasa Indonesia. Notwithstanding *Balai Pustaka*'s censoring role of restricting political ideas or views contrary to the government policies, several political novels published by private publishers did appear during this time. *Hikayat Kadirun* (Story of Kadirun, 1920) by Semaun, *Student Hidjo*, and *Rasa Merdeka* (the Feeling of Freedom) also known as *Hikayat Sudjanno* (The Story of Sudjanno, 1924) by Mas Marco Kartodikromo, were published despite their strong criticism to the Dutch. In all of these novels a colonised individual had to choose between serving the colonial power and the nationalist movement. In all, the individual chose the nationalist movement.

The 1920s brought tremendous change in Indonesian cultural and social life. People, especially youth, were fascinated with the new ideas on Indonesian identity. Among those ideals was to break from the past, from the traditional engagement with cultural and social settings. Merari Siregar's *Azab dan Sengsara* (Torment and Misery, 1921), and Marah Rusli's *Sitti Nurbaya* (1922) are considered the icons of modern Indonesian novels of the 1920s. In Teeuw's periodization, the 1920s writings and

books largely published by Balai Pustaka are labelled Angkatan Balai Pustaka (Balai Pustaka Generation). Both Siregar's and Rusli's stories involve young people's revolt against *adat*: in both stories revolt against forced marriage. Aminuddin and Mariamin in *Azab dan Sengsara*, Samsul Bahri and Sitti Nurbaya in *Sitti Nurbaya* are young couples ordered to end their relationship because their families had already arranged marriages for them. Each of them was compelled to marry the one their parents had chosen. In the stories, violating *adat* (local custom) meant chaos and the collapse of their lives. Men and women were confined in their *adat*, and not allowed to defy the roles that *adat* and Islamic laws had prescribed for them. Although the writers of these stories were men, their portrayal of the social constraints on women in 1920s Indonesia was vivid. Woodcroft-Lee observation on the female characterization of the early Malay (Indonesian) novels suggests:

The women of the early Malay [Indonesian] novels ... are either too good to be true, or else very bad indeed. Some ... minor characters ... are successful as 'flat' characters who provide the density of social relationships necessary to convey the impression of characters acting within a community, and they also occasionally add comic relief. It is the portrayal of major female characters that the reader feels the lack of a convincing "inner" life (Lee, 1975: 119—120, quoted in Isla Winarto, *Women Writers in Post-War Indonesia An Analysis of the Works of Five Prominent Women Writers*, University of Sydney, M.A. Qualifying Thesis, 1976).

The lack of "inner life" as suggested by Woodcroft-Lee, embodies an implicit message that since women are determined status inferior to men, they are comparable to "puppets" whose life,

action and voices are very much controlled by a world outside than their own. Furthermore, female characters are seen to be unable to "feel": to see the world from their own perspective, let alone executing their own ideas. Both Mariamin and Sitti Nurbaya are victimized by their own societies, by their own *adat*. Their forced marriages proved degrading for them; in the end Sitti Nurbaya chose death as a way out of her situation, whilst Mariamin, after asking for divorce, went back to her village, but she was ashamed because she was a divorcee. The tragic ending for both Sitti Nurbaya and Mariamin indeed marks the secondary position of women in the early 1920s setting.

In *Sitti Nurbaya*, Sitti Nurbaya herself admitted that as a woman, her life is never at her own will. Her life is merely set up to cater man's needs and desires, and to follow what society demands her to be. A woman's life is never for her own but always for others:

Dari Tuhan, kita [perempuan] telah mendapat alangan, yaitu dalam hal mengandung dan menjaga anak, sehingga tiada dapat melawan laki-laki, tentang apapun; oleh agama tiada pula disamakan dengan laki-laki, sebab laki-laki diijinkan beristri sampai empat, tetapi perempuan, keluar rumah pun tak boleh; oleh suami dihina dan disia-siakan dan oleh ibu-bapa, dipaksa menurut kehendak hati mereka. Bangsa dan negeri pun tiada hendak menolong. ... Sudah demikian, talak diserahkan pula pada si laki-laki. Mengapakah begitu? Mengapa laki-laki saja yang boleh menceraikan dan mengawini perempuan sesuka hatinya? Apakah sebabnya maka perempuan tiada boleh berbuat begitu pula? Perempuan sajakah yang boleh berbuat kesalahan dan menerima hukuman dari laki-laki? Tiadakah laki-laki itu boleh berbuat kesalahan kepada istrinya? (Rusli, 2000:205).

The long quote above shows how Sitti Nurbaya laments her situation as woman whose place is, according to Simon de Beauvoir, as a second sex. Not only that men are prior to women, but Sitti Nurbaya also observes that in her society, relationship between man and woman parallels to master-slave relation where man is the master and woman is the slave, as she said “Bukankah laki-laki itu tuan perempuan dan perempuan itu hamba laki-laki? Tentu saja mereka boleh berbuat sekehendak hatinya kepada kita [perempuan]; disiksa, dipukul, didera ... Kalau berani melawan, tentulah akan diusir seperti anjing” (Rusli, 2000:206). In the eyes of Sitti Nurbaya, woman’s position in her society is degraded to a point that it equals to the position of an animal (here, in the quote above, woman’s position is similar to a dog’s position). In the light of feminist reading, what Sitti Nurbaya did when she lamented her position in society marks her attempt to voice her experience as the second sex. She refuses to be silent of her condition. Sitti Nurbaya articulates the circumstances that devalue women. In so doing, she turns silence to speech while voicing up her condition.

In *Azab dan Sengsara*, Mariamin, too, experiences her life as a woman as Sitti Nurbaya does. Her life is no different than Nurbaya’s. She was beaten, and tortured by her violent husband of a forced marriage. She was a victim by an old *adat* that discriminates and victimizes women by simply regarding women as minor to men: a property to be bought by men (Siregar, 2005:157—158).

Salah Asuhan by Abdoel Moeis, is probably the next most celebrated novel of the 1920s. The story of Hanafi, a Minang, Corrie, his European mistress, and Rapih, (Hanafi’s Minang wife), is entangled with complex social and cultural forces of both the Minangkabau and Dutch worlds. Hanafi was Western

oriented because of his Dutch education, and he then left Rapih and married Corrie. Hanafi’s decision to violate his *adat* results in tragic circumstances: Corrie died of cholera and he could not win back Rapih because she had moved to another city with her family. In despair, Hanafi committed suicide. The story of Hanafi’s life reflects the ambivalence in the lives of Indonesian youth in the 1920s. “Traditional” *adat* laws still had a strong hold on youth, while new “modern” values associated with the west were yet to be fully accepted. Hanafi’s Western orientation is seen to be the cause of his despair and, ultimately, his death. The story can be read as an admonishment to young Indonesians from the older generation that Western culture, represented by Corrie, is indeed incomparable to Eastern culture, embodied in Rapih. East is not to meet West. Hanafi is not to move away from his *adat* and mingle with the Dutch, since his effort to become a “Dutchman” is rejected by the Dutch society he so cherishes. As a member of first generation of Indonesian nationalists, Abdul Moeis presents his nationalism in the tragic story of Hanafi and Corrie, depicting “straightforwardly ... the problem of racial and social discrimination” (Teeuw, 1967:63). In so doing, he highlights the conflicts between *kaum tua*, those of the older generation believing in *adat*, and *kaum muda*, those of a younger generation ready to break away from the confinement of *adat*.

In line with the previously mentioned novels by Siregar and Rusli, the depiction of female characters in Moeis’ story is similar. Rapih is submissive, she does not even show any resentment when Hanafi treats her like a slave, scolding and insulting her. She just cries silently (Moeis, 2009:86). Rapih’s image in the story is in opposition with Corrie du Bussee, Hanafi’s European wife. Corrie is

portrayed as a liberal and spirited young European girl who often disobeys the laws of her society. When Hanafi left Rapih, his Minang wife to marry Corrie, Rapih did not show any objection to Hanafi's betrayal of their marriage. Hanafi's neglect of her and their son did not produce resentment as she patiently awaited Hanafi to return to her. Only when Hanafi dies does Rapih learn that Hanafi's failure to cope with his situation is due to his inability to negotiate between the East and the West. Because Rapih does not want her son, Syafei, to live the same life as his father, she is obliged to nurture him in a "correct" way so Hanafi's tragic life will not be repeated.

The story ends when Syafei, after his return from study in Holland, promises to cultivate his grandmother's rice fields (Moeis, 2009:273). Syafei's choice of returning back to the East clearly shows the author's strong message of the difficult negotiation between tradition and modernity. Syafei's study in the land of the colonial may well be perceived as the ability of the younger generation to adopt the life of the West, and thus modernity, however his return to his grandmother's ricefields symbolizes that one cannot radically escape from one's roots. In postcolonial discourse, Hanafi is an excellent example of Homi Bhabha's notion of "mimicry", which signifies the inability of a colonial subject to resemble his master, for he is "not quite/not white". He is almost the same but not quite white. Therefore, it is necessary for him to fail (Bhabha, 1994:84—92).

Balai Pustaka's publication of *Salah Asuhan* can be considered as its support against racial mixture between the colonial as subject, and the colonized as object. While Moeis' story is an admonishment about leaving *adat*, it also underlines racial category policy of the colonial

era: the Dutch (white) as the superior class, foreign orientals, including the Chinese and the Arabs, as the second class, and the indigenous (*Bumiputra*) as the lowest class. Though such categories were not necessarily rigid, they generally applied. *Bumiputra* like Hanafi were not to be accepted into the colonial class because of race. Although there were interracial relationships in colonial Indonesia, such relationships were generally not well accepted, and Hanafi's tragic end in the story might be read as a warning about mixed marriages. On the other end, Moeis' story can also be read as indigenous resistance of the West; particularly in the character of Syafei. Although having experience living in the Netherlands, Syafei's Minangkabau heritage wins through. This emphasizes the construction of self that becomes viable when it chooses the side of the indigenous after coming to the crossroads of East and West. Syafei has embraced colonial education, yet his true self lies in his ethnic/racial identity. Within such readings *Salah Asuhan* provides many twist and turn, thus enriching the complexity of its meanings.

The canon of Indonesian literature the 1920s reflects the strong contribution of Malay writers of Minangkabau and other Sumatran background. Studies have shown that early Indonesian literature "is largely a product of the many Sumatran-born writers who have contributed their talent and leadership to every phase of its development" (Freidus, 1977:ix). It is therefore not surprising that such writers have played a conspicuous role in the building of Indonesia into a modern nation through the play of literary writings and imaginations. The characters of Hanafi, Rapih, Samsul Bahri, Sitti Nurbaya, Mariamin and Aminuddin are laden with Sumatran *adat* background, and the most striking similarity of all is forced marriage of

young people that results in tragic death. More importantly, Siregar's, Rusli's and Moeis' depiction of their romance stories are imbued with the conflicts of the age: between *kaum muda* (modernist youth) and *kaum tua* (*adat* and Islamic traditionalists—most Sumatrans of Minangkabau background were Muslims implementing the Muslim law in the area).

Rusli and Moeis were university graduates: Rusli was a veterinarian and Moeis a medical doctor; their Western education background played a great part in questioning of *adat*:

With newly developed social consciousness, these men and women viewed their world in a new light, and much of what they had formerly accepted as a matter of tradition and obligation they now found senseless and oppressive. Moved to write, they were not mere observers, because the themes that are so typical of the so-called problems novels of this period were at the same time immediate to the authors' personal experiences, if not actually a statement of them (Teeuw, 1967:22).

Rusli, the author of *Sitti Nurbaja* was indeed retelling his own story; he was married in Java to a girl of his own choice, but had to submit to his parental will and *adat* by cancelling his first marriage and marrying the girl his parents had chosen. Moeis' disillusionment with government service is also highlighted in *Salah Asuhan*. Perhaps, it was his experience that inspired him to write of racial discrimination in his novel. Moeis left government service to become a journalist and his political career reached its peak when he led *Sarekat Islam*.

In all three works discussed above, it can be inferred that all female protagonist in the stories are confined with their *adat*: what society force them to become. As de Beauvoir said one is not born a woman but one becomes a woman rings

true in these stories. Sitti Nurbaya, Mariamin, and Rapih simply do not have freedom of choice in creating their own identity. The 1920s *adat* was so strong that not only women but also men could not escape from the shackles of *adat*.

Although women in the 1920s in these novels are often portrayed as submissive, fragile and victimized by their own society, but not all women fall into the same categories. Feminist literary reading always requires us to assess that not all women are passive victims; not all women are the same: diversities of women need to be acknowledged. This goes well with the portrayals of women in those three novels. The following discussion will center on the ways women in those novels reacts and survive against all odds that their reactions and survivals manage to signify them as feminist who rebel against identification set up by patriarchy and society.

Women as Feminists

Although Nurbaya, Mariamin, and Rapih are narrated as women who are described as if their significance in their societies is no more than a symbol of weak femininity, some women in those narratives manage to react against patriarchy and *adat* by allowing themselves to choose their own identification. Alimah, Nurbaya's cousin, in *Sitti Nurbaya* exemplifies herself as a feminist who is not afraid to follow her impulse of freedom coming from herself as an answer and strategy for liberation. Alimah, unlike Rapih, knowing her husband took a second wife, immediately decided to end her marriage as she cannot stand in a polygamous marriage:

... dikawinkanlah suamiku dengan perempuan hartawan. Ketika aku mendengar kabar ini, tak dapatlah kurencanakan, bagaimana rasa hatiku; marah, sedih, benci bercampur baur tak tentu. ...

Berapa kali aku minta bercerai, tetapi tiada dikabulkannya. Apa dayaku? Karena talak ada di tangannya. Jika aku yang memegang talak tentulah tak sampai kulihat lagi mukanya, kujatuhkan talak tiga kali.

Pada suatu hari tatkala aku berjalan-jalan dengan makku, pada malam hari di pasar Kampung Jawa, kelihatanlah olehku suamiku itu, sedang berjalan-jalan bersuka-sukaan, membeli apa-apa dengan maduku itu. Ketika kulihat mereka itu, gelaplah mataku, tak tahu lagi, apa yang kuperbuat. Kata ibuku, aku terus memburu perempuan itu, lalu menghela rambut dan bajunya sambil memaki-makinya, sehingga berkelahilah kami di tengah orang banyak, bergumul dan bertarik-tarikan rambut. Setelah kami dipisahkan orang, kuberi malulah suamiku itu dengan perkataan yang keji-keji, serta kukatakan ia bukan laki-laki, kalau tiada berani menceraikan daku. Itulah sebabnya maka di pasar itu juga dijatuhkannya talak kepadaku (Rusli, 2000:207).

What Alimah does in the above long quote has shown that a woman like Alimah has the ability to choose her own destiny. Although she seems to be violent when she sees the co-wife—the two wives involved in a physical fight which she started—her action is justified. This is not to say that there should be violent treatment amongst wives in a polygamous marriage, but what Alimah has done, has proven that women are capable to carry out physical action like men. She even dares to ask what she has a right for: a right for a divorce. Her husband, because of the incident in the market, finally grants her demand: he divorces her right at the spot. Alimah challenges the patriarchy with her violent action. In the same time, she indicates that women are no longer inferior; she is no longer inferior as she can challenge patriarchy by causing troubles. Alimah finally finds her own self-worth, her sense

of self as a free individual who has the ability to threaten the principles of patriarchy in which men rule. Alimah is the opposite of most women depicted in the 1920s Indonesian literature. She reacts against women's subordinate position, she fights for her own rights and she even defies the confinement of *adat* with her refusal toward marriage. She even swears to Nurbaya that she will never marry again. Alimah is a liberal feminist in a sense that she chooses freedom over anything else, she said, "lebih baik randa sebagai ini; bebas sebagai burung di udara, tiada siapa dapat menghalangi barang sesuatu maksudku" (Rusli, 2000:208).

Alimah refusal toward marriage signifies more than her choice for freedom, it also marks her struggle to end oppression in the form of marriage. Marriage, for liberal feminists, "represents as relations of power, of domination and control. ... women surrender themselves entirely in the marriage relation" (Madsen, 2000:40). It is no surprise, that as a liberal feminist, Alimah will choose freedom over marriage as according to Stanton & Blatch, "personal freedom is the first right to be proclaimed, and that does not and cannot now belong to the relation of wife, to the mistress of the isolated home, to the financial dependent" (quoted in Madsen, 2000:40). As Moeis wrote this novel in the 1920s when women were the second sex enslaved by the husband who functioned as the master, Alimah's exercise of personal freedom indicates that even in the 1920s Indonesia, women had already voiced their struggle by becoming liberal feminist like Alimah. Perhaps, Moeis's Western education has something to do with this as feminism, especially liberal one, is often seen as a Western product and feminism in the 1920s Indonesia definitely seems foreign. Alimah's seek for personal autonomy marks the birth of women's liberation in the novel.

In *Salah Asuhan*, Corrie, Hanafi, and Rapih are involved in a polygamous marriage. Hanafi married Rapih in Padang, and two years after the marriage, Hanafi went to Batavia for a treatment and there he married Corrie. As Corrie was a European and Hanafi was a Malay, their marriage shocked the society as at that time interracial marriage was downplayed. As a result, the couple was not well received by the Dutch/European and indigenous society, in particular Corrie was ostracized by her Dutch peers for marrying a Malay, an indigenous. Corrie is victimized for following her love to Hanafi. Unfortunately, the marriage did not stay for long; Hanafi often accused Corrie for betrayal, which of course Corrie did not do. Unable to stand for Hanafi's accusation and rough behaviour to her, Corrie left Hanafi and soon they were divorced. In this narrative, like Alimah, Corrie, a European descendent, exercises her own will by leaving Hanafi in search for freedom. Although in the end, she died of cholera, Corrie's choice of leaving a bad marriage resonances the similar choice Alimah has made.

Mariamin in *Azab dan Sengsara* too chose divorce over a bad marriage. Like Alimah and Corrie, she also experienced domestic violence in her marriage to Kasibun. Mariamin was a smart woman, knowing that her husband has sexually transmitted disease she refused to have sex with him and because of her refusal she was often beaten and tortured. The story ends with her asking for a divorce as Kasibun became more and more violent toward her. As a *janda* (divorcee) Mariamin will certainly be discriminated because of her status but that will not stop her to escape from being victimized. Her decision, although brings her shame and a bad name, will at last free her. The story ends with her death, but the narrator concludes that it is a beautiful death as her death will release her from

torment and torture of this profane world (Siregar, 2005:163). Again, freedom becomes the most sought entity in this story just like other two stories.

Search for personal freedom and personal autonomy appears strongly in these narratives. All women characters in the novels struggle against bad marriages they are forced into and in result they also long for freedom. As these three works lie within the nationalist movement for freeing Indonesia from colonization, strive for freedom undergone by the female characters seems to be in parallel with the nationalist movement at that time, as previously discussed in the introduction.

CONCLUSION

Where women are victimized, not necessarily that they become passive victims, some of them will fight against oppression in search for freedom. Three novels belong to 1920s Indonesian literary tradition demonstrate as examples. Although written by male authors, *Sitti Nurbaya*, *Azab dan Sengsara*, and *Salah Asuhan* have shown strong portrayals of female characters that are worth to notice. Such portrayals create women as victims of *adat* and society and also as fighters for their own personal freedom and autonomy thus making them feminists, liberal feminists in exact. The three novels exemplify texts examined using feminist literary criticism yields a fresh reading of female characters such as Sitti Nurbaya and Alimah in *Sitti Nurbaya*, Mariamin in *Azab dan Sengsara* and Rapih and Corrie in *Salah Asuhan*. These women, aware that they are just some constructs (be it *adat* and society), voice strong reaction through their struggle for freedom. They have become subjects in their own identity constructions. They have created female identity in literary representations.

In all three novels, the female protagonists are caught up in bad marriages in which their husbands position themselves as the master while their wives as slaves. Yet, at the end of the stories, some of these women manage to escape to the entrapment of bad marriages through death and divorce. Although death and divorce strengthens women's victimization by patriarch, in this case, death and divorce could also be perceived as women's strategy to gain personal freedom and autonomy, creating what Virginia Woolf says as "a room of their own." With death women will be left free out of the patriarchal chain while divorce builds a space for women to be agent of themselves in creating identity formation. In bottom line, where women are entrapped and oppressed by patriarchy, they will struggle to end such oppression in order to break the silence imposed upon them. They eventually transform silence to speech that enables them to project their very own freedom.

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