

# Construction of Women's Roles in Patriarchal Culture

(Feminist study towards modern Indonesian novels)

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**Abstract**—Until this time, most women's roles have been constructed by the community and subsequently socialized through literary works. In a patriarchal society, the roles of women are constructed only according to the patriarchal point of view. This study described how the roles of women were constructed in patriarchal culture contained in Indonesian novels such as *Sitti Nurbaya* by Marah Rusli, *Azab dan Senggsara* by Merari Siregar, *Kehilangan Mestika* by Hamidah, and *Manusia Bebas* by Suwarsih Djojopuspito. Based on the results of analysis on the four novels, it was found that in general women were constructed to fulfill the roles in the domestic world as wife, child, and mother, also play a role in the public who participate in the world of education and social organizations. The constructed role of women benefits men and corresponds to patriarchal ideology.

**Keywords**— construction of women's role; patriarchal culture; feminist study; Indonesian novels

## I. INTRODUCTION

The position of women in the society has been constructed for a long time. This construction predominantly places women as creatures behind men where their life activities only dwell on mere domestic matters [1]. This kind of construction is inseparable from ideology which favors men in every aspect: patriarchy. Women are still considered *the Others*, which are often referred to as "second-class citizens" whose existence is not taken into account. The implications of this concept and common sense about unbalanced positioning has become a force in the context of the "domestic" and the "community" sector, where women are considered as players of the domestic sector while men contribute in the public sector. This ideology is openly justified by various social institutions and regulation, until finally it becomes a social fact about the status and role played by women [2-5].

Patriarchal ideology limits women's opportunities to play a role in the public sphere. The existence of women is only limited to complementing and supporting the lasting success of men, because their rights have been traded and the position of women is no longer elemental. Patriarchal culture in Indonesia has been going on for a long time and has a strong influence. This is evident in some indigenous traditions such as seclusion

and gender constructions which put women in general as domestic implementers or housewives. Wiyatmi states that seclusion is a tradition that exists in some cultural communities in Indonesia where a girl (age before adolescence) is required to stay in a house or a small room, until she gets her future husband [6].

Literary works from Balai Pustaka era such as *Sitti Nurbaya*, *Azab dan Senggsara*, *Kehilangan Mestika* and *Manusia Bebas* describe a portrait a critic toward patriarchal culture which limits the role of women in the field of education through providing space for the women characters to work in the public sphere. This is contrary to the habits of society with a patriarchal system where women are only considered as domestic people, who must stay at home and do inconsequential jobs. In some pioneering novels, women's education still aims to prepare women to master their domestic duties, as housewives (*Azab dan Senggsara*, *Sitti Nurbaya*).

In following novels such as *Layar Terkembang*, *Kehilangan Mestika*, *Widyawati*, dan *Manusia Bebas*, the aim of education for women has shifted: to prepare themselves for work in the public sector, especially as a teacher. Subsequent novels are more progressive. The educated woman began to be involved in women's organizations to fight for women's emancipation and contribute to Indonesia's struggle for independence (in *Layar Terkembang*, *Manusia Bebas*, dan *Burung-burung Manyar*). Phenomena about seclusion tradition and gender construction that place women as domestic beings, who act as housewives, has begun to be criticized by some Indonesian authors of the Balai Pustaka era like Marah Rusli in the novel *Sitti Nurbaya* and Merari Siregar in *Azab and Senggsara*.

A prominent problem which is discussed in this paper is how women's roles are constructed in these modern Indonesian novels. To explain the issue in detail, several theoretical collaborations were used, especially those relating to patriarchy, liberal feminism, and the construction of gender roles.

Walby describes patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices that place men in a dominant position, oppressor of the women, and exploiting women. Walby then

differentiated patriarchy into two; **private** and **public** patriarchy [7]. According to Walby, there was an expansion of patriarchy from private spaces such as family and religion to a wider area such as the country. This expansion further strengthens the grip and domination of men towards women [7].

From Walby's perspective, it can be seen that private patriarchy ends in the household area [7]. This household area is the main initial area of male power over women; whereas public patriarchy occupies public areas such as employment and the state. This expansion of patriarchal forms changes both the holder of the "power structure" and the conditions in each section (public or private). In private areas such as households, power is in the hands of individuals (men), but in the public domain, the key to power is in the collective hands. Ideology related to patriarchy is also represented in literary works, especially novels. In studying patriarchal ideology in literary works, the author also uses the theory of liberal feminism.

Liberal feminism is a view that puts women as free and full-minded beings. This school of thought states that freedom and equality rooted in rationality and separation between the private and public world. Every human being has the capacity to think and act rationally, especially for women. The root of oppression and backwardness in women is caused by the mistakes of the women themselves. Women must set up themselves so that they can compete in the world in the framework of free competition and equality in position with men.

This opinion is in accordance with Tong's statement that the general goal of liberal feminism is to create a society that is fair and caring for the place of freedom [8]. In such situations, women and men can develop themselves perfectly. Liberal feminism views that women must prepare themselves to equalize with men by taking various profitable opportunities such as education, remembering that women are rational beings and can think like men.

Liberal feminism wants freedom for women from oppression, patriarchy and gender. This school also includes two forms of political thought, namely *Classical Liberalism* and *Welfare Liberalism*. Classical Liberalism believes that ideally, the state must protect the freedom of its people, and also gives individuals the opportunity to determine their ownership. On the other hand, Welfare Liberalism, believes that the State must focus on economic justice rather than facilities for civil liberties. They consider government programs such as social security and free-education as a way to reduce inequality in society. Both Classical and Welfare Liberalism believe that government intervention in their personal lives is not needed.

In the construction of the role of women, liberal feminism perceives that women have the same freedom and opportunity as men in all lines of life, both in domestic and public spaces. However, culturally, women are constructed by patriarchal, where women are always put as a subordinate party. The dichotomy of roles between men and women forces women to only have a place and role in the domestic domain [9].

## II. METHOD

The study of the construction of the role of women in selected Indonesian novels used content analysis methods (content analysis) that focused on the contents of the message. The data was taken from the novel *Siti Nurbaya* by Marah Rusli, (48<sup>th</sup> edition) published by Balai Pustaka in 2016 consisting of 364 pages. Next novel is *Azab dan Sengsara* by Merari Siregar (23<sup>rd</sup> edition) published by Balai Pustaka in 2001 consisting of 261 pages. Next is Hamidah's *Kehilangan Mestika* (8<sup>th</sup> edition) published by Balai Pustaka, in 2011 with 100 pages. The last novel is *Manusia Bebas* by Suwarsih Djojopuspito. The novel is second edition published by Djambatan, in 2000 with 292 pages. The data were found through narrator/character speeches, thoughts, statements, and character behaviors that identify problems related to the construction of women's roles in the literary work.

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Construction of the Role of Women in Indonesian Modern Novels

Construction of the role of women in modern Indonesian novels contained in *Siti Nurbaya* by Marah Rusli, *Azab dan Sengsara* by Merari Siregar, *Kehilangan Mestika* by Hamidah, and *Manusia Bebas* by Suwarsih Djojopuspito is a construction found in patriarchal culture. The construction of women's roles is divided into two; construction of the role of women in the domestic sphere and construction of the role of women in the public area.

1) *Construction of the role of women in the domestic sphere*: In the domestic world, the role of women represented in these novels is as mother, wife and child. This is reflected in the characterization of women in the novel.

In those novels, the role of women in domestic sphere is reflected in the role of mother, wife and child. This was portrayed from the characterization of women in the novel. Here are some descriptions that are in line with patriarchal culture:

*Di sana kelihatan olehnya seorang anak gadis berumur kira-kira 15 tahun, sedang duduk menjahit di atas tikar pandan dekat sebuah pelita.*

*There she was, a fifteen year-old girl, sitting and sewing on a mat by a candle [10].*

*Setelah Mariamin menuangkan obat maknya ke dalam cangkir dan cangkir itu diletakkannya dekat si sakit, ia pun pergilah ke dapur akan bertanak.*

*After Mariamin poured the medicine into the cup, she put it by the sick, then she headed to the kitchen [11].*

In the quotations above, female characters are identical with cooking, sewing and serving skills. In a patriarchal society, girls should have ability in cooking because it was a reliable benchmark for womanhood. The cooking skill is the main requirement for being an ideal housewife. Even though, this skill is no paid or a free-job that is always done by women.

This can be seen from the opinion of Tseelon which reveals that the concept of femininity is “in essential social construction” [12], which means that femininity is socially constructed which related to the concept that men represent perfection, whereas women occupy inferior positions. Femininity is also considered as an insignificant stuff that is aligned with elements that are indecent, dishonest, evil, and impure.

The role of women as children also appears in the form of complying with homework such as serve family members by putting food dishes.

*Dengan muka yang ramah ia mempersilahkan jamu itu duduk di atas tikar yang dianyamnya itu sendiri, untuk tempat duduk ayah Aminuddin dua laki-istri. Serbuk kopi, juadah yang tersimpan itu pun dikehuarkannya, lalu diletakkannya dihadapan tamu yang bersua itu.*

*With a friendly face, she politely told the guests, Aminuddin's father and two couples to sit on the mats which she crafted herself. She took the ground coffee and the sweet sticky rice cakes and place them in front of them. [11].*

In the above quote, Mariamin welcome her guests warmly and kindly invite the guests to sit on mats and prepare them a cup of coffee. Mariamin does everything with the ideal female politeness and tenderness. Mariamin's hospitality is a set of example of attitude that must be owned by women in their role in the domestic sphere. It is a nurturing habit which is constructed in such a way by patriarchal society, so that women naturally put themselves 'only' as friendly servants and assistants for the male world.

In addition to portraying the role of women as children, women also fill tasks as wives behind their husbands. In a patriarchal society, a wife must be prepared to obey her husband and always be ready to supply her husband. The husband must take precedence in any case and prioritize his opinion than the wife. The wife is not entitled to make decisions in the household. A wife must be able to show her affection to her husband through endless service. The role of women as wives appears in the form of her love for the husband. This is evident in novel *Manusia Bebas* through quotation below.

*Hari-hari selanjutnya ia tak sempat ngomong lama-lama. Karena dia harus mencuci sendiri pakaiannya, masak dan melakukan semua yang dibutuhkan rumah tangga, sehingga ia dengan lelah pada malam harinya, berbaring di tempat tidur dan pada hari esoknya mulai pekerjaannya lagi dengan cepat-cepat.*

*In the next days she didn't have the long time to chat. She had to wash her clothes, cook, and did all the chores so she felt exhausted in the evening, laying on the bed and start again the next day [13].*

The role of women as wives also appears in the form of constant support to husbands in all circumstances. The quote below clearly illustrates that idea:

*Bantahnya selalu: "bukankah Sudarmo bekerja bagi kepentingan nasional? Aku akan merasa malu, jika aku tak mendampinginya dalam pekerjaannya" [13].*

In the above quote, the women character Sulastri seems to support her husband in his work as a teacher although many people do not like her husband, Sudarmo. Sulastri did not object to other's complaints because for her, it is far more embarrassing if she cannot accompany her husband. As a wife, she must be able to support the husband's decision. This idea was evidenced by character Hamidah by allowing her husband to marry other woman under the excuse that Hamidah cannot give her husband a child. Hamidah then gave her husband the condition that after getting a child then the child must be handed over to her. Hamidah alone will take care of the child.

The role of women as a wife also appears in the form of partner helping her husband while working. The message also found in the novel *Manusia Bebas* in the following quote:

*Sulastri sebetulnya merasa senang. Maka itu ia menolong suaminya dengan berkali-kali mengulurkan tempat cat itu.*

*Sulastri was actually thrilled. She repeatedly helped out her husband with the paint containers [13].*

*"Memang tugas perempuan tiada mudah," jawab Nurbaya, "harus pandai menarik dan melipur hati suaminya, bukan dengan wajah yang cantik saja, tetapi juga dengan kelakuan yang baik, peraturan yang sempurna dan kepandaian yang cukup.*

*"Women's roles are not easy," answered Nurbaya, "she should cheer up her husband, not with pretty face alone, but also with good manner, great management and intelligence [10].*

As a wife, Sulastri and Nurbaya must understand about their duties and responsibilities. Therefore a wife must be good at attracting and encouraging her husband's heart. It is not only enough through beautiful face, but also pleasant behavior and satisfying intelligence.

In the domestic field, the role of women is also constructed through the characterization of motherhood. The role of women as mothers appears in the form of maternal love for her child. It was reflected through the mother figure in *Kehilangan Mestika*:

*Ketika aku sakit itu barulah aku merasa betul apa artinya ibu. Perempuan! Perempuan yang berhati, berpikiran dan berkelakuan secara perempuan! yang menghendaki lemah lembut! yang pandai menanam kasih sayang! jauh berbeda dengan laki-laki.*

*When I was sick, I learned what a mother means. A woman!. A woman with a big heart, think and behave like a woman! With gentleness caring and loving nature. A world apart with men! [14].*

Similar idea also occurs in *Manusia Bebas* [13]. According to Arivia [15], the closeness between women through familial bond cause solid joint. This is seen through the relationship of mothers and daughters, mothers and other mothers, and mothers of daughters from other mothers. It is feared that it

could disrupt male supremacy, so that women were forbidden to gather with other women to break that connection. Then, women are isolated from the public sphere and may only roam in the domestic space so they can be crowned by the title of 'housewife' or queen of 'household.' Furthermore, housewives play a role in providing the best care for their children, and of course most of the time spent with her children, so that the mother's figure is the most attached and known by the children.

Cultural images of women who must remain a mother in Indonesia is ingrained because people assume that being a mother with all their works like deal with and caring for children is the nature that must be experienced by every woman. This is not only reflected in several literary works but has also been instituted into a state regulation (GBHN). For example Law no. 1 year 1974 which contains New Order policies that fully supports the concept of an ideal family. It describes husband as head of the family and wife as a housewife. The role of women as supporters of their husbands is also included in various documents of the State Policy Guidelines ("GBHN") (Hadiz ed. 2004: xiv-xv). Until now, literary works as well as other informational media such as television and newspapers still voiced the same thing: women must fill domestic roles such as housewives, staying at home, taking care for and educating their children including supporting their husband's career.

2) *Construction of the role of women in the public area:* Construction of the role of women in the public area in the novel is found in the world of education and organization. The role of women in education relates to society. This is seen in the form of educating and empowering the community as reflected in *Kehilangan Mestika* novel through the quote below:

*Karena di negriku akulah pertama sekali membuka pintu pinggitan bagi gadis-gadis, maka bermacam-macamlah cacian yang sampai ketelingga kaum keluargaku. Orang negeriku pada masa itu masih terlalu bodoh dan kuno. Tak tahu mereka membedakan yang mana dikatakan adat dan yang mana pula yang agama.*

*In my country, I was the first to open the door of cloister, for that I received curses even my family heard. The people of my country are backwards and illiterate. Not knowing what's culture and religion [14].*

Sulastris plays an active role in the school. Sulastris aspires to educate the community, especially women. The only way is through education. This is in line with feminist ideals that require women to demonstrate the ability to think, act and do things that are equivalent to men. It also relates to one of the feminist ideas that question why do women experience so many failures in pursuing and achieving higher education. This feminist theory also attempts to provide services for children and young women who are underprivileged.

Besides the world of education, women are also portrayed as being able to play a role in community organizations and associations. The role of women in organizations is related to associations in society. This is evident in the form of educating

the wider community contained in *Kehilangan Mestika* through the quote below.

*Hal inilah yang mendorongku mendirikan sebuah perkumpulan bagi kaum ibu. Pendapatku ini ku kemukakan. Kawan-kawanku setuju semua. Dengan demikian bersusah payah bukan sedikit dapatlah kami dirikan sebuah perkumpulan yang mempunyai anggota tak lebih tak kurang dari sepuluh orang.*

*This encouraged me to establish an organization for women. I put forth this idea and everyone agreed. It took a lot but with this organization we had ten members [14].*

One of the goals of the organization is to change the mindset, to move forward and to eliminate ignorance because of traditions that have been passed down through generations. Stupidity is a complicated problem that has always been a plague for women. Unfortunately, many women are not aware of this lacking. This is what made Hamidah set up a league for mothers who attracts only ten members.

*Pada waktu inilah bintangku bersinar seterang-terangnya. Aku boleh dikatakan dikenal oleh tiap-tiap orang di negeriku. Aku dihormati oleh sekaliannya. Dimana saja ada orang mengadakan keramaian aku tetap dipanggil orang.*

*This time my star shined. It can be said that everyone in the country knew me. I was respected. Whenever they have gatherings, they would invite me [14].*

In the above quotation, it appears that Hamidah becomes a pioneer and an agent of change in society that makes Hamidah known and respected in her village. Hamidah later became a figure who could be relied upon her voice and existence.

A similar idea also appears in the novel *Manusia Bebas* through the conversation below.

*"sst, diam, kita sudah jadi nyonya rumah yang tua dan bagaimanakah dengan pergerakan anti poligami-poligami mu Ju?" Juhariah tertawa, akan tetapi menahan diri, waktu Zus Karno memandangnya dengan agak mengecam. Juhariah mulai dengan suara sungguh-sungguh. "kita mempunyai banyak anggota sekarang. Sebetulnya kaulah harus menjadi ketuanya. Kita betul-betul membutuhkan kau"*

*Sst, be quiet. We've become the host and how the anti-poligamy movement, Ju?*

*Juhariah laughed but restrained herself when Zus Karno looked sharply at her. Juhariah spoke with serious tone. "We have many members now. You should be the leader. We really need you" [13].*

One form of Lurni's contribution in the organization is as the founder of the women act and women's awareness movement. Lurni is preoccupied with thoughts about the difficulties she faces in women's awareness movement.

Although the novels above have described some of the roles of women in the public area, but those depictions show that women are not completely able to contribute in the public space. Some obstacles and limitations seem to complicate and

detain their efforts. This is in agreement with what was explained by Arivia which stated that isolating women from the public domain by placing them in domestic space is one of the deadliest ways of a society that adheres to a patriarchal ideology [15]. As a result, the concentration and direction of women's struggles become divided [15]. Furthermore, women will lose interest and desire to show their abilities in the public space. Women simply assume that (domestic) home is the perfect place for them. Until finally, they no longer need to bother to work in the public space.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In *Siti Nurbaya* and *Azab dan Sengsara* which is both written by male authors, female figures are really formed in accordance with the description desired by patriarchal ideology. Both novels construct the behavior and role of women in form submissive children, weak personality who cannot fight old tradition, hypocritical creature who pretends to love their husband, rebellious wife, until it finally became a display doll inside the house.

In the other two novels, *Manusia Bebas* by Soewarsih Djojopuspito and *Kehilangan Mestika* by Hamidah, women are portrayed as having an important role in the public world. Women take on the position of activating social organizations and also as an agent of change in thought regarding marriage. However, in the domestic world, the role of women is constructed in accordance to patriarchal society such as like a wife who nurtures and serves the husband, mother who serves and loves the family, and a daughter who is obedient and skilled at doing household chores.

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