



Women: Body, Sexuality and Power in the Novel *Sang Tandak* by Yit Prayitno

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Abstract. This article will discuss the representation of women in the novel *Sang Tandak* by Yit Prayitno, focusing on the themes of body, sexuality, and power. The novel illustrates the complexity of the relationship between women and society, and how women's bodies become a terrain for expressing and negotiating social and sexual power. Through text analysis, this study reveals how the female characters in the novel interact with cultural norms that regulate their bodies and sexuality, as well as how they navigate and reclaim power over their bodies in a patriarchal social context. The reading as woman model is needed to deconstruct androcentric readings of male and female relations, especially in marriage. Through this approach, readers will find concrete images of women's conditions in accordance with reality. They will read, interpret and understand women's bodies. It uses a critical approach to literary texts to explore how narratives about the body, sexuality, and power in the novel shape and represent women's experiences in Indonesian society. In conclusion, this article will present a picture of how *Sang Tandak* is not only a story about women but also a mirror of power dynamics and resistance in a patriarchal culture.

Keywords: Women. Body, Sexuality, Power

1 Introduction

Themes related to women's issues, including oppression, violence, gender bias, existence, and struggle, are frequently addressed in discussions about human life. The ideology of patriarchy is frequently identified as the primary source of gender injustice, which in turn gives rise to the oppression and violence that women experience. The values espoused by patriarchal ideology inform the mindset and behavior of those who adhere to it. These values situate women as objects rather than subjects in their lives. Patriarchal culture ascribes a higher social position to men than to women, which contributes to the normalization of the abuse of women in the slightest instance. This phenomenon is linked to the unequal relationship between the dominant (masculine/superior) and the dominated (feminine/inferior). In this context, women are subordinated, which results in their relatively low functions, roles, and stereotypical positions.

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The topic of women is a prominent and frequently explored theme in Indonesian literature. The topic of gender is frequently the central focus of literary works, particularly the portrayal of women's roles, their interactions with men, and the dynamics between the two genders. The novel *Sang Tandak* by Yit Prayitno, published in 2023, is a historical literary work. It is based on the historical background of the Kudus Regency, which is the author's home region. It can be argued that literary works are cultural works, and therefore can be considered as cultural texts of a society. The novel *Sang Tandak* represents an articulation of the discourse on women's freedom and liberation that the author seeks to convey to her readers. Prayitno portrays the protagonist as a resilient woman, unafraid of persevering through challenges and striving for her aspirations. The woman depicted in this novel is not self-absorbed in her sadness and suffering. The experience of living life becomes a motivating factor that enables them to maintain a positive outlook.

In order for the female characters in novels whose existence is always shaped by the author's ideology to be adequately and comprehensively examined, it is essential to conduct an analysis that is not influenced by gender bias. In other words, an analysis of women's issues must be conducted from a woman's perspective. This is what Hellwig refers to as "reading as a woman" (Hellwig, 2003, p. 10) in the analysis of women's issues as presented in literary texts or novels. It is the intention of this research to present a picture of the value of women's struggle against the injustices created by society and their own culture.

One of the primary schools of thought within feminist theory is radical feminism. The fundamental premise of this perspective is that the subjugation of women by men is intrinsic to the male gender and its patriarchal ideology. Consequently, men are viewed as both biological and political agents of this oppression. This school of thought posits that the physical control of women by men, such as sexual intercourse, represents a fundamental form of oppression against women (Jaggar in Fakhri, 2001: 84-85).

Radical feminism addresses a number of key issues, including the body and reproductive rights, sexuality (including lesbianism), sexism, power relations between women and men, and the private-public dichotomy. The notion that the personal is political enables the exploration of women's issues within the private domain, a subject often regarded as the most sensitive to be discussed in public. Those with opposing views or who disseminate misinformation are frequently directed at radical feminists.

In alignment with the feminist project of ending male domination, feminist literary criticism assumes the role of a negotiated form of criticism, rather than a confrontational one. The objective of this criticism is to subvert dominant discourses, rather than to compromise with them. Feminist literary criticism is not merely a

perspective; it is a multifaceted and nuanced approach to analyzing and interpreting literature. It exhibits sophistication through the strategic formation of alliances with critical theories.

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing a library research methodology. This research project aims to provide a detailed account of the ways in which radical feminism is represented in the novel *Sang Tandak* by Yit Prayitno, with a particular focus on the issue of gender injustice. The following steps will be undertaken in the course of this research: 1) The identification of data is achieved through the reading and comprehension of the novel; 2) The subsequent classification of data is then undertaken; 3) The data is then subjected to an analysis using a feminist approach; 4) The conclusions drawn from the aforementioned analysis are then presented.

2 Methods

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3 Result and Discussion

According to Foucault, the body is a medium for sensation, taste and pleasure, where the body is one dimension with four variables in it, namely power-knowledge, pleasure, taste, and sensation. Power for the body is not a tool to repress the body but a tool to expand the body's capabilities and improve the quality of the body. Foucault made three forms of analysis of the body, namely force relations. He also explains about the social body where there is a manifestation of power and the body[5].

Foucault says that the human body is the most essential place for the operation of power. The body is also the place where social practices take place. And here it becomes clear how the body is classified, constituted, and manipulated by power. The discourse on the body begins to widen again when the state and the media take their place in it. There begins a process of normalization and idealization shaped by the state and media."[6]

The problems that occur become wider when the development of media offers various idealizations in it. This makes the body no longer a piece of meat with freedom and power in it, but the body as an item that can be tampered with as desired, anytime and anywhere. The discourse on the body will not escape the discussion of sexuality. The development of sexuality has often experienced repression, which began in the Victorian era. Even today, repression of sexuality still occurs with the formation of idealization and normalization and the state and media ropes. The power that used to expand the body's quality becomes judgmental and restrictive. The existing discourse begins to create a truth value about the body and sexuality. The body is a medium where

all kinds of accessories are attached. Now, the body can be easily shaped, manipulated, and repressed.

Foucault makes a clear distinction between sex and sexuality. The term sex is defined by Foucault as sexual relations, sexual behavior, desire and how one vents sexual desires. Meanwhile, the term sexuality in Foucault's works is always explained in the context of power relations that try to regulate sexual practices. The fundamental difference between sex and sexuality in Foucault's realm of thought is that sex is more of a practice and sexuality is the strategies and power relations that operate to condition sex."[7]

The discourse related to sexuality has become an actual public opinion and has always been discussed in the entire history of human life. This is because sexuality is an important dimension in every person. Human sexuality can be understood as a way for everyone to experience and express themselves as sexual beings. Sexuality includes all aspects related to sex, namely sex, gender, attitudes, sexual orientation, sexual behavior, as well as relationships and reproduction.¹ This fact provides an affirmation, that human sexuality is one of the most essential aspects, as well as being a nature that is closely attached to everyone, so that it can be accepted as a dimension that is considered good."[8]

In later developments, human sexuality experienced a significant degradation in value. This began with the sexual revolution in the mid-20th century, which was characterized by the proliferation of vulgar and erotic sexual images or spectacles. The sexual revolution itself is an act of sexual liberation, characterized by a social movement that opposes or rejects all traditional values related to sexuality.[9] This phenomenon has a major impact in terms of changing people's perspective on their sexuality.

The protagonist of the novel *Sang Tandak* is Adjeng Taroe Resmi, a woman who performs the *tandak*, a traditional dance originating from the *Tayub* tradition. This dance is typically performed at weddings, circumcisions, and other traditional events, such as celebrations marking the victory of a candidate in a village head election or the commencement of a village clean-up initiative. The ensemble comprises, *gamelan* stylists, and dancers, with a particular emphasis on female participation.

The *Tayub* dance is a social dance that serves the purpose of establishing social relations. In the context of *tayub* dance, the female dancer, known as a *tandak*, typically extends an invitation to male audience members to engage in a dance together. This is often done by draping a shawl over the male audience members. Consequently, there is frequently a competitive element present in the audience's response. This competition is manifested through the act of offering monetary compensation to the *tandak*. Such

occurrences frequently result in disputes between spectators. It is therefore unsurprising that the novel examines how women's bodies become subject to control and exploitation within a patriarchal society.

The novel *Sang Tandak*, written by Yit Prayitno, was published in 2023. The novel narrates the tale of Adjeng Taroe Resmi (ATR), a tandak or dancer hailing from Surakarta. Additionally, ATR serves as a clandestine agent for the Dutch East Indies Colonial Government. The narrative of the novel commences with ATR receiving a summons to perform the Tayub dance at the request of the Kudus Regent at the Kudus Regency Hall, in the context of his son's circumcision ceremony. ATR fulfills his obligations as a tandak by performing a dance in Kudus, thereby captivating the audience. However, complications arise when the Kudus Regent, Raden Mas Toemenggoeng Ario Soerio Poesponegoro, develops romantic feelings for ATR.

Following the remarkable performance at the Kudus Regency Hall, there was no further invitation for ATR to perform the Tayub dance. Three years later, a wealthy Chinese merchant in Kudus requested that ATR perform in the Tjioko ritual. Furthermore, ATR proceeded to fulfill the request. The Tayub performance was well-received, although it was subject to close monitoring by the Kudus Regent. Upon ending the performance, ATR was promptly accompanied by the Kudus Regent's security personnel to Surakarta. Hence, the Kudus Regent prohibited ATR from accepting any additional Tayub dance invitations, despite the absence of a formal relationship between them.

The character of Adjeng Taroe Resmi (ATR) is described as a woman of mixed Dutch heritage who was proficient in both dance and nembang (sing). Her mother was a batik maker who married a Dutchman, who was subsequently compelled to separate from her due to the Dutch government's policy of requiring male citizens to return to the Netherlands. As a renowned Tayub dancer, ATR employs the allure of her body to engage and entertain the audience. ATR exemplifies two distinct personas. In addition to her role as a dancer, she served as an intelligence agent for the Dutch East Indies, utilizing her observational skills to monitor and report on the surrounding environment during Tayub performances.

3.1 Power Relationships between Men and Women

The character ATR engaged in sexual intercourse for the first time without being married. As a Tayub dancer, she elected to relinquish her virginity to a male partner who was not bound by a marital contract. In her view, the release of virginity confers upon women the same degree of power over their sexuality as men possess. In the short story collection, the character ATR elucidates the nuances of sexuality between men and women through her introspective musings. She eschews concern with the concept

of sin, asserting that sexual relations between men and women are invariably embedded in the subconscious. The presence of power relations is contingent upon the subconscious condition of human sexual relations. This relationship leads to the perception of others as objects. It is a fallacy to assume that humans relate to their partners as subjects with subjects; as a result, they are never truly equal.

Furthermore, patriarchal culture views women's virginity as the sole valuable asset. This concept of virginity is, of course, closely related to the idea of women's religiosity. The assumption that women are religious leads to the expectation that they will retain their virginity and offer it to men who are deemed worthy of such a gift. In the radical feminist conceptualization, such a woman is regarded as lacking intrinsic desire due to her adherence to the norms that justify her position.

The character ATR through her attitude of holding free Tayub performances in public places is a form of resistance to patriarchy and emphasizes that women have the right to regulate their own sex without having to be influenced by the existing social environment. She reclaims control over women's sexuality by demanding the right to engage in any sexual practice that provides pleasure and satisfaction. The optimal sexual relationship is that of two equally consenting partners who engage in mutually beneficial sexual activities designed to enhance each other's pleasure and satisfaction [5].

3.2 Sexuality, Body and Power

The female character in the novel *Sang Tandak* has complete control over her own body. The slogan "the private is political" makes it clear that oppression in the private sphere is oppression in the public sphere. This statement unequivocally asserts that "women are the owners of their own bodies." Sex and prostitution are ways in which women represent their bodies—and they have every right to do so.

In his study, sex is not just a matter of sensation and pleasure, or laws and prohibitions, but in sex the issue of right and wrong is at stake. Knowing whether sex is right or dangerous opens up opportunities for dominance in power interactions. The extent to which sex can be considered valuable or scary can shift into a stake in truth within the realm of power. It is in this power system that the discourse on sexuality is formed. Before this system operates, sex still exists independently, living within the subject. Then, when power relations move through discourse strategies, that is where the discourse about sex which is included in the power matrices becomes sexuality. This process is called by Foucault the way in which sex is put into discourse. Thus sex and sexuality are not mutually exclusive. Because if that is the case then the power relations

that shape sexuality will only take the form of laws and prohibitions, everything that is negative and negates sex.[11]

In a patriarchal society, women's sexuality is regulated. Society regulates sexuality, and this includes a feminine sexuality that desires and is dependent on masculine sexuality. Nevertheless, women have the freedom to choose their sexuality, with whom they desire and how they channel their desires, regardless of the sexual forms they may engage in.

ATR is inseparable from Tayub performances. Her body and sexuality become an arena for various interests and changes. Sexuality and prostitution are arenas for contestation of various biological, psychological, economic, cultural, and political interests. Sexual activities that are private become part of social functions when they are related to the survival of oneself and those around you. In the process, when sexuality is intended either as a means of procreation, for economic aspects, satisfaction of desire, psychological satisfaction, or the "demands of society," sexuality requires other people as intermediaries.

In the radical feminist perspective, eroticism or female desire is considered a natural phenomenon, which all women should be aware of. Eroticness is the most profound source of female energy, situated at the core of female power. This power is the capacity of women to understand themselves. Eroticness is not solely concerned with sexual matters; rather, it encompasses women's emotional experiences and intellectual understanding. The patriarchal system has historically excluded women from engagement with eroticness, while simultaneously associating eroticness with pornography. It can be argued that these two concepts are not synonymous, as pornography is primarily focused on eliciting sensations without delving into the emotional aspect.

The novel *Sang Tandak* is about a tayub dancer who demands an answer to her marital status with the Regent. The determination to become a *tandak* is an attempt to interpret self-existence as a woman while showing that being a *tandak* means mastering and subjugating men, not being controlled and subjugated by men as in an institution of marriage. A *tandak* who also wants to represent her sexuality and body for a tayub performance without being constrained by money and power.

However, their efforts are frequently confronted with a multitude of challenges and obstacles. It is imperative that women challenge the norms, rules and power that limit their autonomy and strive to gain a voice and representation in society. The character of Adjeng, for instance, seeks to have her status as the concubine wife of the Kudus Regent legally recognized. Adjeng openly challenges the Kudus Regent by defying the

prohibition against dancing Tayub. In fact, Adjeng performed Tayub openly in the markets and squares of Kudus without charge.

4 Conclusion

The novel *Sang Tandak* portrays a woman who is driven by an indomitable determination to become a tandak, a type of dancer who engages in combat for the sake of survival. The determination to become a tandak represents an effort to interpret one's existence as a woman while demonstrating that being a tandak entails mastering and subjugating men, rather than being controlled and subjugated by them. The novel *Sang Tandak* when examined using the reading as woman model is an activity used by women to realize that "women are the owners of their own bodies". Sexuality and power are ways in which they represent their bodies.

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