

SITI RAYATI: A Portrayal of an Indo-woman in the Dutch Colonial Era

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ABSTRACT:

This study aims to investigate the descriptions of an *Indo* character in Moh. Sanoesi's *Siti Rayati* and what alternative meanings can be found from the descriptions. *Indo* character was chosen because it is interesting to study, considering hybrid is the results of borderline engagements of cultural differences (Bhabha, 1994). To answer the questions, the data were gathered through textual analysis with close-reading approach. It was revealed that the *Indo* character is described in the sense of being superior, humble, in between and well-exposed by Dutch culture. From the categories, it may be inferred that there could have been an attempt by the writer to change the perception towards *Indo*-people's stereotypes at that time.

Keywords: *Alternate-Meaning, Dutch Culture, Hybrid, Indo-People, Indo-People's Stereotype, Sundanese Society,*

INTRODUCTION

Literary works can be used as a means of expression. They can be used as channels for voices to be heard when other channels are blocked. This is proven by how some writers during the colonial era fought back the colonizers by their writings. This kind of fighting back became a trend during the Dutch colonial in East-Indies (Indonesia now), especially in the beginning of the twentieth century. This could be possible, thanks to the colonial government's ethical policy that allowed the people of East-Indies to get an education and literacy. Through education and literacy, the people could fight back and raise other people's consciousness to be free. One of the examples of this kind of writing is *Siti Rayati* by Moh. Sanoesi. This novel was published in the time when there were many uprisings happening in some places in Dutch colonial government's territory in East-Indies. The character it has and its realistic setting could be interpreted as a fight against the Dutch government. This journal has been written with the

intention to elaborate how the novel could have this quality or capacity as a means of uprising by focusing on how the main character is described in the novel.

There are reasons why this novel is an interesting subject for the research in this journal. First, its publication was right in time of uprisings against the colonial. Second, the novel was said to shake Sundanese life to its core by Rosidi. And the last one is because it was published not by Dutch-driven publisher, Balai-Pustaka so it can be categorized as feral readings which often times were filled with political pamphlets or ideological campaign by the writers.

Siti Rayati, which was published for the first time by Dahlan-Bekti printing house in three volumes from 1923 to 1927, makes an interesting research object as the publication of the novel "coincided with a traumatic moment in the nationalist period, the years 1926-27, when a number of Communist-inspired uprisings against colonial authority took place in (among other places) the

countryside of West Java” (Mukherjee: 2004). This novel was originally written in Sundanese and its English version was published in 2009 by Kiblat Buku Utama publishing company.

The fact that the story is written in Sundanese (regional-language spoken in West Java) and takes place in West Java territory, this novel is said to “shake Sundanese life to its core” (Rosidi, as taken from Mukherjee: 2009) that means the novel gives a significant political impact that makes the novel famous, especially for those people living in West Java at that time.

Historically speaking, *Siti Rayati* was also one of those “feral readings” or *bacaan liar* as it was not published by the Dutch-owned-publisher Balai Pustaka. As taken from Mukherjee (2004), *Siti Rayati* belonged to the ‘other’ group which often times used novels as their own presses and political pamphlets (Mukherjee: 2004).

METHODOLOGY

Siti Rayati makes an interesting object of research as its story, settings, publication and characterization have at least a message that could mean something for people at that time especially Sundanese people, a message that, what Rosidi called, shook Sundanese life to its core.

To reveal that message, the researcher conducted a close reading to the novel and found that the main character in the novel, *Siti Rayati*, is depicted in ways that could mean something and an impact to Sundanese society at that time.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

From the reading, the researcher could make four categories of how *Siti Rayati* is described in the novel. The first category covers the textual evidence pointing at how *Siti Rayati* is described in a more superior nature. The second category covers all the descriptions of *Siti Rayati* in the manner of being neutral or equal with anyone. The third category is for the

way Siti Rayati is described in the sense of being in between. The fourth or the last category is for how Siti Rayati is described to be influenced well by Dutch culture.

Siti Rayati's superiority could be found in her appearance, intelligence and good manner. It is found that she was described as a *plump, fair and well-formed, and beautiful* baby (p.55). She was also described to outstrip many Dutch children at school and came out the second best (p.60). Her good manner can be seen by how she treated other people well without seeing their race or social class. The fact that she had a Dutch look but a good heart could also be a sign of being superior.

Siti Rayati is also described in the novel in the manner of being equal or in a neutral position of the Dutch and the native. In the novel, she is described as a person who did not see or treat anyone differently because of their race or social classes. However, she was described to fight against the Priyayi class people because they had

done bad things to other people by using their power.

Siti Rayati is also depicted in the sense of being in between. This in-between-ness could be seen in the way how she was described to have an appearance of a Dutch girl and education like one too but she never felt that she belonged to that race. She also was described to live a Dutch culture by seeing how she had servants, how she supported herself and her hobby of reading. Those indications led to a conclusion that Siti Rayati is in between. However, there was not any evidence showing that Siti Rayati experience any identity crisis even she lived in between different cultures. This is against the theory that *prolonged colonization may have caused a colonized country, nation, or individual suffer from contaminated identity* (Hamid, 2006).

Siti Rayati is a girl that had a Dutch influence and it is shown by how the character is described. She went to a Dutch school and got mingled with the Dutch students and sent to live with the Dutch teachers

constitute some evidence. The way she lived, how she had servants and the way she was educated in schools for Dutch were some evidence pointing to that. Her reading hobby she had was also the evidence.

DISCUSSION

The *Indo* character in Moh. Sanoesi's *Siti Rayati* is a hybrid to a certain degree. It can be seen by how she is described in the sense of being in between. This in-between-ness is that of Bhabha's concept of "the third space" (1994). The character is also described to experience "intercultural transfer" (Hiepko, as cited from Nyman: 2007) when she is exposed by Dutch culture through her education and her time living with Dutch families. Her hybridity is also shown when she is described with more superior manners but then she chose to stay humble and even stand for the people against Priyayi class people's misdeeds.

This kind of plot and characterization might be the ones that "raised the consciousness of the

Sundanese people...(and) also the colonial government" (Rosidi, as taken from Mukherjee: 2004). It probably gave "voice to socialist, nationalist aspirations at the very centre of the whirlwind of political change in the Indies during the 1920's" (2004: 204).

On the other hand, the alternative meaning can be drawn from this novel's *Indo* character's portrayal. The *Indo* character presented in the text and her characterization can possibly an invitation to the readers especially Sundanese people to think that *Indo* people could be seen equally as they also could do good things too.

This is possible because at the time when the novel was firstly published, some of *Indo* people were marginalized by the people because at that time the Native women "were procured as concubines" and "Such procurement subsequently caused their rejection by their own sexist society, as well as their disenfranchisement by the same racist colonizers that abused them." (Kwa: 2005, 1). In other words, the *Indo* people were seen as inferior by both Dutch and native society.

While the Dutch saw their inferiority because of their idea of “purity” of white race, the native people saw them as inferior because they “considers that being a mistress as licentious and an immoral status of a woman.” (Rosyidah: 2007)

In this novel the *Indo* character is described as a person who is superior in terms of looks, manner and education, but chose not to be arrogant with those good things she possessed. She even did well for the people by standing against the *Priyayi* class people who often did bad things to the people who were below their class.

In conclusion, *Siti Rayati* is a Sundanese woman character that is described as a hybrid to a certain degree that it may derive alternative meanings of changing the Sundanese readers’ perception on *Indo* people’s stereotype at that time.

However, this text also cannot escape from being biased by Dutch superiority. As the text repeatedly suggests that if one wanted to be successful at that time, they needed to be exposed by Dutch culture whether it

is their education system or racial feature.

CONCLUSION

This journal article has been written to discover an alternative meaning behind the description of the *Indo* character of *Siti Rayati* novel by Moh. Sanoesi. Four categories then were derived from the findings. The first category covers the textual evidence pointing at how *Siti Rayati* is described in more a superior nature than any other women. The second category covers all the descriptions of *Siti Rayati* in the manner of being neutral or equal with anyone. The third category is for the way *Siti Rayati* is described in the sense of being in between. The fourth or the last category is for how *Siti Rayati* is described to be influenced heavily by Dutch culture.

After learning the ways of how *Siti Rayati* is described from those categories, then the researcher managed to see that *Siti Rayati* in the novel could be meant for giving a different point of view towards the

stereotype of marginalized *Indo* people at that time.

This could draw another meaning that Moh. Sanoesi's *Siti Rayati* was published to invite its targeted readers, Sundanese people, for seeing people from other race and social classes equally even if they came from the darkest past because they might have a bright future or good use for many people such as the character in the novel. Although, there is also evidence showing that the text still could not escape the admission of Dutch superiority in doing so.

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