

GENI JORA BY ABIDAH EL KHALIEQY : A STUDY OF FEMINISM AND THE MALAY-INDONESIAN SOCIETY

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The history of the women novel writers in Indonesia began with the novel *Kalau Ta'Oentong*, written by Selasih in 1933. This was followed by the discovery of a novel *Kehilangan Mestika*, written by a 17-year old writer, Fatimah H. Delais or Hamidah. The 1940s and 1950s saw the advent of more women novelists such as Arti Purbani, S. Rukiah, Suwarsih Djojoesposito, Waluyati Supangat, Nursiah Dahlan, Matiah Madijah and NH Dini. NH Dini became known in the 1960s but it was during the 1970s that her writing gained momentum. The following years welcomed women novelists such as Titie Said, Titis Basino, Marga T, Marianne Kattoppo, and Th Sri Rahayu Prihatmi. The Indonesian literary repertoire was further enhanced by women writers listed in the *Angkatan 2000*. These writers, for instance Ayu Utami, Abidah el-Khalieqy, Oka Rusmini, Djenar Maesa Ayu, Dewi Sartika and Ani Sekarnengsih, made significant contributions to Indonesian literature in the new millenium, with their strong opinions and criticisms.

Women and Feminism

During the early emergence of Indonesian women writers, the issues expressed in their works were mostly domestic, often represented by a wife or mother facing various daily domestic tribulations. However, in the 1960s these domestic issues slowly underwent metamorphosis, adopting a more serious tone and representing issues which were beyond the domestic realm. When feminism became an accepted mode of literary expression and as a theoretical framework for Malay literary criticism, the voices of these women writers became stronger. The literary crusade for equal rights and equal standing in the society had begun.

The theory of feminism carries with it various definitions. According to the Western feminist Toril Moi (in Linda K), "feminism which I see as a political, or indeed revolutionary movement, is subversive and marginal to the dominant order" (1985 : 182). Sandra Harding (in Mary Evans) feels that "feminism is a political movement for the emancipation of women" (1994 : 104). In simple terms, feminism is a form of rebellion against the patriarchal ideology which have placed women in its ruthless clutches for centuries. The Western feminists define a "woman" as an individual who is constantly oppressed by the chauvinistic male authority. Thus, the feminist literary discourse encompasses all literary works associated with the discussion of the inequality between the status of a man and a woman. The feminists challenge

the patriarchy and empathize with the plight of women who they feel are eternally subjected to injustice by men. With this in mind, this study will try to determine the forms of feminism adopted by women writers in Indonesia.

The feminist influence in the works of Malay women writers was initially detected in their attempts to equalize the unjust portrayal of women in novels written by their male counterparts. The women writers feel that the female characters in these novels were voiceless, helpless and utterly dependent on the men for survival. This method of studying female characters developed by male writers is known as the 'feminist critique'. Consequently, the women writers have changed this perspective by making their female protagonists more aware of their own identity as women and have to make their voices heard.

It is undeniable that there are women writers who fail to understand the concept of feminism. Nevertheless, the female characters in their novels embody the spirit of feminism. To this end, there is a need to create images of women as role models for the future generations. Literary works by women writers have to be a creation forged from the depth of their intelligence, emotions, purpose and goals, without neglecting their subtlety in discussing issues related to gender and sexuality. Women have to be portrayed as paragons of patience, strength, diligence and perseverance, martyrs who are ever willing to defend all matters which challenge their femininity and dignity. It is perhaps not presumptuous to say that the Malay feminists strive to eliminate any form of discrimination and deprivation of rights within and outside of their writing. This form of observation is known as 'gynocritics' which focuses on the women as the writers. Thus, it is through the eyes of 'gynocritics' that the texts studied in this paper are scrutinized, specifically in terms of the writers' feminist orientation and the ways in which the writers overcome the various obstacles faced by their female characters.

Background of the author

Abidah El Khaliqey initially gained fame as a poet in Indonesia. She gained recognition as a novelist when her first novel entitled "Wanita Berkalung Sorban" was published in 2001. Abidah Khaliqey came from a religious upbringing in Menturo, Jombang, East Java Indonesia. She received her early education at the Madrasah Ibtidayah and the Pesantren Putri PERSIS for 6 years. During her years at the Pesantren, El Khaliqey had begun writing short stories. She received her degree in Perdana Perdata from the IAIN Faculty of Syariah, Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta. El Khaliqey's poems and short stories were published in co-written anthologies for example Sangkakala (1988), Kafilah Angin (1990), Negeri Bayang-Bayang (1996) and her own anthology entitled Ibuku Laut Berkobar (1997). El Khaliqey ironically chose to become a full time housewife and mother, despite being lauded as

writer of the new generation and included in the Angkatan 2000. The time spent at home was taken as an opportunity to improve and further develop her writing skills and style. El Khaliqey spent much time attending and participating workshops organized by literary organizations and El Khaliqey represented Indonesia at the ASEAN Writer's Poetry Workshop/Conference in Manila as well as attended a workshop organized by MASTERA in 1997.

Background of Geni Jora

Thematically, Geni Jora represents the dreams of a woman called Kejora, who strives to place women in a respectable position in the society, specifically in the eyes of men. The tale of Geni Jora evolves around Kejora's efforts to survive in a patriarchal world from childhood to adulthood. As a novel written by a female writer, it is only logical that Geni Jora portrays a female protagonist to personify the feminist ideals of women's equality and contempt of patriarchy. Abidah El Khaliqey's technique is conventional, relying heavily on the tapestry of Indonesia as a backdrop, specifically the Yogyakarta province, with a clever interweaving of Middle Eastern, Spanish and Moroccan landscapes, using locations such as the cities of Damascus, Tangier, Casablanca and Madina in her novel. This choice of "Islamic worlds" is perhaps a deliberate attempt to further support Khaliqey's Muslim female protagonist and her holy crusade.

The Image and Aspirations of the Female Characters –

The Kejora women come from a life which practices strong patriarchal values, values which contradict those of the feminists. Kejora's father practices polygamy and is able to enjoy this privilege quite peacefully due to the fact that he is blessed with obedient and God-fearing wives. Kejora, Lola (her sister), Samodra (her brother) and Prahara (her brother) are children of the younger wife (Zakiyyah), while the older wife, Fatmah, is childless. While Kejora's mother is portrayed as a typical Moslem wife who is eternally obedient and performs household chores without question, Fatmah on the other hand is a woman of liberal mind and actions. Kejora's unbending love towards her mother causes her to question her father's unjust treatment of her mother. The more liberal

Fatmah is often taken along on trips to the city by Kejora's father while Zakiyyah is left to perform household duties. The reason given is that Fatmah does not have children to care for. Kejora's dissatisfaction is expressed in this conversation;

"Rasa syukur ada. Tetapi rasa keadilan juga harus ditegakkan."

(It is good to be thankful. But justice must prevail)

"Rasa keadilan? Keadilan yang mana?"

(Justice? Which justice?)

“Ibu hanya pura-pura tidak melihatnya?”

(Do you pretend not to see it, Mother?)

“Kau terlalu jauh anakku. Sudahlah. Ibu mau istirahat.”

(You have gone too far my child. That’s enough. I have to rest)

Tetapi aku tahu, ibuku tidak pernah istirahat. Seluruh waktunya habis untuk kami, anak-anaknya, untuk ayah dan tamu-tamu organisasinya, untuk mengurus semua tetek bengek urusan keluarga...(hlm.80)

(But I know that my mother could never rest. All her time is spent on us, her children, on Father and his business associates, and on all possible family matters...(pg.80)

Kejora sees her mother’s silent obedience and unbending respect for the traditional values and practices as a constraint which holds women in its evil clutches. Zakiyyah’s obedience gives a legitimate excuse for Kejora to retaliate in order to express her dissatisfactions. Kejora sympathizes with her mother who appears to have no time for rest, but at the same time she also detests what she sees as her mother’s weakness. In order to support the feminist ideal that women should never be each other’s enemy, Kejora is drawn to her stepmother, who she sees as the quintessential modern woman. Fatmah often relates tales of successful and powerful women in the history the Islam such as Queen Balqis, Queen Tadmur and Queen Qurtuba, and eventually these women became Kejora’s inspiration. Although Kejora is not able to change her mother’s life fully, her mother’s restricted life inspired Kejora to change her own life and destiny as a woman.

The life led by Kejora is a traditional one which is marked by a male dominated system. As the head of the family, Kejora’s father does not allow his daughters to socialize freely compared to his sons who enjoy boundless freedom. This ‘imprisonment’ is symbolized by the building of a wall which surrounds the house and which Kejora feels is a prison.

Jarang sekali terjadi komunikasi atau silaturahmi antartetangga. Dinding yang tinggi membuat kami terpisah dari dunia lain di sekeliling kami.

Tetangga mengintip kami dan kami mengintip para tetangga (GJ, hlm.78).

(We seldom communicated with our neighbours. The high wall separated us from the rest of the world. The neighbors spied on us and we spied on them (GJ, pg.78))

This imprisonment saddens Kejora further when the situation becomes a popular joke among the men in her neighborhood.

(I) *“Sebab rumah kalian juga seperti pesantren, kan? Tembok tinggi. (GJ, hlm 82)*

(That’s because your house is also a monastery, isn’t it? With that high wall. (GJ, pg 82)

(II) *“Bagaimana kau tahu dia orang baik-baik sementara hidup dalam sangkar tembok persegi empat seperti ini, Nona Manis?” (GJ, hlm 85)*

(How could you possibly say that they are decent people, if they live in this square prison, my sweet lady?)” (GJ, pg 85)

The writer sees the wall built by Kejora’s father as a symbol of his own chauvinistic stupidity. Kejora’s father imprisons his daughters within the wall but at the same time allows his male friends to enter freely into the house. As a result of his absolute trust in his friends, he almost sacrificed his daughters’ chastity. Not only was Lola almost raped by one of his friends, Paman Hassan, but he also sexually harassed Kejora. Paman Hassan’s actions greatly depressed Lola, who could only find comfort in Kejora. Lola’s fears are further worsened by her grandmother, a typical woman of the older generation, who has become immune to the injustice of the patriarchal system. The grandmother controls her granddaughters’ every movement. She often disagrees with Kejora’s and Lola’s freedom protests and threatens to report their activities to their father, whom she sees as the sole authority in the house.

“Dengar, cucuku! Kini kebandelanmu sudah di luar batas. Aku tahu kau telah mengerjai mereka semua. Trenggiling itu hanya khayalanmu, khayalan dari pikiran liarmu. Awas kau, Cucu! Jika sampai ayahmu tahu, mengertilah kau...(GJ, hlm 73).

(Listen my dear granddaughters! Your mischief has gone too far. I know what you have done. All these are just the works of your wild imaginations. Beware! If this reaches your father, it’ll be the end of you...(GJ, pg 73)

The grandmother also warns Kejora that it is wrong to challenge male authority and a woman must always preserve her womanly virtues. The grandmother expresses her views after witnessing a quarrel between Kejora and her brother,

“bahwa perempuan harus selalu mengalah. Jika perempuan tidak mahu mengalah, dunia ini akan jungkir-balik berantakan seperti pecahan kaca. Sebab tidak ada laki-laki yang mahu mengalah. Laki-laki selalu ingin Menang dan menguasai kemenangan. Sebab itu perempuan harus siap Me-nga-lah” (pakai awalan ‘me’) (GJ hlm 61)

(A woman must always give in. If a woman refuses to give in, then the world will be in a chaos and break like shattered glass. Because men will never give in. Men will always desire to win and possess victory. That is why women have to give in) (GJ pg 61)

Although Kejora has proven that she is academically more successful than her brother, her grandmother refuses to acknowledge this. According to the grandmother;

Berapapun nilai Prahara di sekolahan, sebagai laki-laki, ia tetap Ranking pertama di dunia kenyataan. Berapa pun rankingmu, Kau adalah perempuan dan akan tetap sebagai perempuan” (GJ hlm 62)

(No matter what Prahara’s grade is at school, as a man, he will always be number one in the real world. As for you, no matter how high a grade you obtain, you are a woman and will always be ranked as a woman.”(GJ pg 62)

Kejora's life at the pesantren (religious school) also restricts her life and freedom. The pesantren rules and regulations are rigid and restricting. Consequently, many of the young people studying at the pesantren suffers isolation from the society, and eventually become anti-social and beyond control. This is further complicated by the fact that many parents send their children to the pesantren in order to avoid having to discipline the children on their own. Kejora sees this as unreasonable and unfair for the educational development of young girls such as herself.

The author's creative portrayal of her protagonist is highly favored by the feminists. The women are portrayed as highly intelligent women, who do not merely give in to fate and is always fighting for a better life for fellow women. The experiences of their mothers and their own lives in the novel have strong influences on their actions and decisions. Social constraints, injustice and discrimination they suffered in the hands of men gave them the impetus to fight all forms of patriarchal injustice. The type of feminism found in this novel is 'Mitra Sejajar' (tak sure BI dia pe. I think better u check dgn kakak Sim). It is a concept through which the author encourages men and women to work together, to complement each other and to have equal rights as members of the society. Kejora has shown her contempt towards injustice since her childhood. She and Lola protest against her father's decision not to allow his daughters to be outside the house compound at night. They climb the wall which surrounds their house in order to catch sight of whatever is going on outside and to spy on their neighbors. This symbolizes the women's desire to experience the beauty of life outside the boundaries of their traditionally constrained one.

Similarly, at the Pesantren, Kejora finds comfort in staying up all night and watching the stars, when the constrained life during the day can no longer be tolerated.

The author has created her female characters as women who hold no prejudice towards men. Although the villains in the novel are the male characters, they are still given credit for certain things in novels by women writers. This is shown by Kejora's realization that not all men are as evil and conniving as Paman Hassan and Paman Khalil. Not all men are like Prahara, who belittles the abilities of women, and not all women are too fossilized in their ways to allow change, like her grandmother. As a woman, it is her obligation to continue to fight the feminist cause and free women from patriarchal bondage '*tong sampah kekalahan, ketertindasan, kelemahan, kebodohan, ketidakberdayaan*' (hlm 214)(**the dumpster of defeat, oppression, frailty**)

Therefore, it is the contention of the author that education is the best weapon in order to achieve victory in the feminist cause. Education and knowledge are amulets that can save women from any danger or tribulations. To prove the statement that men and women are

equally important, Kejora strives to become a successful woman, not only academically but also spiritually. This confidence bears fruit when Kejora and Lola become lawyers. Women who do not make full use of their intelligence will forever be carried away by the current of ignorance, and become eternal slaves to men. This is the fate suffered by Sonya and Kejora's other friends, those who never cared much for education.

The relationship between a man and a woman as represented by the relationship of Kejora's parents becomes the essence of the protest against gender related injustice in this novel. This is elaborated by the portrayal of love and affection between Kejora and Zakky. Their relationship is not a typical one and able to break male dominance and authority. Kejora has no compromise for her fiancé's behavior who is portrayed as a stereotypical playboy, heavy drinker and is often looking for the opportunity to kiss Kejora. As an independent woman, Kejora demands that Zakky respects her rights and privacy as a woman. Kejora's patience was ultimately challenged when Zakky tries to arrange a meeting with her sister, Lola, and is planning to be unfaithful, but the plan does not materialize. The hurt and disappointment, as well as the suppressed anger of her youth, caused by years of patriarchal injustice resurface. The anger in Kejora resulted in her own act of infidelity, which can be regarded as a 'payback' for Zakky's planned but unfulfilled infidelity. In order to release her anger, Kejora retaliated with what she deems as an act of equalization, making herself equal to Zakky. She throws herself into the arms of Zakky's friend, Asaav Muscovich. Kejora's actions have a great impact on Zakky and arouses his jealousy. His male ego is clearly wounded, but he tries to understand Kejora's actions and apologizes repeatedly. But for Kejora, apologies no longer carry any significance in this modern and challenging world. An apology invites frustration.

Kejora's Machiavellian belief, that the end satisfies the means, brings about many questions, particularly with regard to her public show of affections with a man not related by blood or marriage (muhrim). The choice of a Jewish man as the 'tool' of Kejora's vengeance is also deemed outrageous. The equality that El Khaliqey wants to bring forth is too bold and aggressive, so much so that Kejora loses her more commendable attributes, that of a woman who adheres to her religion and eastern values. This shows that the feminism ideals held by Kejora has driven her to the depths of immorality and has carried her away from the path of a Moslem woman. El Khaliqey's feminism is too aggressive and is more similar to western feminism. From a certain perspective, the portrayal of Kejora as a woman of 'modest features' but with strong opinions shows the commendable ability of women to challenge men's ego and to degrade men to a level below them. On the other hand, El Khaliqey's image of Kejora has missed its target and is self-degrading owing to the fact that Kejora allows herself to be victimized by her own foolish and reckless need for vengeance. Some radical Western

feminists believe that women can survive without men. As mentioned previously, the relationship between men and women is symbiotic. Thus, 'gynocritics' demands that men support and assist women in their daily struggles and tribulations. It is hoped that men will learn to understand that women like Kejora needs a man who is understanding and fair in his judgements as well as actions.

Conclusion

For Indonesian women writers, issues related to gender and sexuality are no longer taboo and merely discussed in secret whispers among women. Personal domestic experiences have enabled them to empathize with the plights of their sisters. The mission of women writers in the Malay Archipelago is not merely based on women's egocentricity. For women novelists in the South East Asian region, the goal is to place women in their worthy positions, far from discrimination or oppression. Nevertheless, the social and political developments in Indonesia are more complex and complicated which explains the more aggressive and bold tones in the works of Indonesian women writers. As seen in the works of N.H. Dini who openly and blatantly discuss infidelity, as well as the bold words of Ayu Utami and Djenas Maesa Ayu, Indonesian women writers are not looking back. They have taken a stronger and more aggressive stride in demanding equal rights for women. This is perhaps possible for them due to the fact that the cultural situation in Indonesia welcomes such aggressiveness. The Indonesian community is able to accept such strong opinions from these writers because they simply understand that literary works are reflections of reality and the society. These works portray the absolute truth which comes from the society itself, with all its diversities and complexities.

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