

Sexuality, morality and the female role : observations on recent Indonesian women's literature

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SEXUALITY, MORALITY AND THE FEMALE ROLE: OBSERVATIONS ON RECENT INDONESIAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

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*Abstract*¹

In public debates on pornography, polygamy, veiling and reproductive health, women's position in Indonesia has become subject to re-definition. These new discourses give evidence of the fact that the traditional role ascribed to women during the New Order is being challenged. In this article we inquire into the question to what extent this development manifests itself in two recent literary movements that emerged when female authors increasingly began to influence public discussions in the climate of liberalization after the fall of Suharto. These two movements, termed as *sastrawangi* (fragrant / perfumed literature) and *sastra / fiksi Islam* (Islamic literature / fiction) or *novel Islami* (Islamic novel), make the female role a subject of discussion, framing it in the contexts of female sexuality and emancipation, on the one hand, and Islamic values and morality, on the other. These two bodies of literary works represent contrasting socio-cultural streams in contemporary Indonesian society: a Western-influenced liberal pluralist one, and a devoutly Islamic one. The aim of this paper is to discuss the qualities and concerns of each of these two bodies of literature, to compare them and to articulate both their shared mission and their differences of approach. Topics of analysis include the background of these literary movements, the socio-cultural factors accounting for their emergence, its representatives, as well as public response to them.

1. Introduction

Morality and sexuality are currently hotly debated topics in Indonesia. Since President Suharto's downfall in 1998, due to the liberalisation of public discussion facilitated by Indonesia's movement towards democracy, discourses on morality, sexuality and the body have gained increased prominence and importance. In these public debates, including such disparaging issues as pornography,

1 We would like to thank Michael Bodden for his suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.

polygamy, veiling and reproductive health, women's position in Indonesia has become subject to re-definition. These new discourses give evidence of the fact that the traditional role ascribed to women during the New Order is being challenged. The role of women as housewives, caring for husband and children, which was emphasized by ideologies such as *kodrat wanita* (natural destiny; women's biologically ordained role) and *Ibuisme Negara* (state ibuism), as Suryakusuma termed it,² is being redefined, as a consequence of new opportunities opening up for women subsequent to the fall of Suharto. Since then an increasing number of female actors emerged who pushed for reform in multiple contexts. One example are female Muslim activists such as Siti Musdah Mulia and Maria Ulfah Anshor, both formerly chairwomen of Nahdlatul Ulama's young women's organisation Fatayat NU, who have become prominent figures in debates on fairer gender relations. Mulia, together with a group of researchers, formulated the Counter Legal Draft on the Islamic Law Compilation in October 2004, in an attempt to introduce a new version of the family law that aims to enhance women's rights. In contrast to established law the counter-draft proposes the abolition of polygamy and the introduction of monogamy as the basis of marriage.³

Musdah Mulia and Maria Ulfah Anshor have also been among those activists who are against the introduction of an anti-pornography bill, as well as Ratna Sarumpaet, a well-known theatre director, actress, and speaker of the NGO alliance Aliansi Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (ABTI, Alliance Unity in Diversity)⁴. According to the latter, the law might be seen as a tool for the introduction of an Islamic state, thus restricting people's rights. The alliance said that it had the potential to "tear at the country's pluralistic foundation and diminish individual rights".⁵ Ratna Batara Munti from the legal aid organization of the Indonesian Women's Association for Justice (LBH Apik) in Jakarta, being also a member of the alliance, stated that the porn bill promoted narrow-minded "moralism" and threatened women's rights: "We are women who object to the conservative ideology, as it will destroy our nation. It is also against the national ideal, Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity)."⁶

2 SURYAKUSUMA, 1996:101–102.

3 NURMILA, 2009:76; "Draft KHI Sebagai Alternatif Wacana".

4 Ethnic and religious minorities, mostly from Bali and Papua, have also protested against the law.

5 "Alliance Fails to Coax PKS on Porn Bill".

6 SUCIATI, 2006.

However, after several years of debate in parliament the controversial bill was finally passed as law on pornography (UU Pornografi), in October 2008, despite continuing protests of liberal Muslims, artists, feminists and religious as well as ethnic minorities. A key argument supporters of the law have brought forward in support of the introduction of this law is the need to enforce morality. Among its proponents are prominent women such as Yoyoh Yusroh, a legislator of the Islamist party PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, Justice and Welfare Party), formerly chairwoman of the party's women's committee. She is pushing for reform, trying to prevent young people from being influenced by pornographic media.⁷

As far as Indonesian fiction is concerned, sexuality, morality and the female role are not new topics of discussion, although writings on these aspects have blossomed after the fall of Suharto. If we look at traditional texts, for instance, we often find narratives that take a male-centered view of women. Referring here to the traditional Javanese manual *Serat Candraning Wanita* as an example, we notice that it is written as a guide for men on how to choose a suitable wife. The text explicitly describes which women are suitable for marriage, judged from such characteristics as their physiognomy and their sexual behavior (responsiveness, obeying men's orders).⁸

This male-centered view of women was common not only in Javanese literature but also in elite society.⁹ As Kayam observed, it was the feudal system that assigned women the role of preserving the values of *halus* (refined, cultured, sensitive) and *adiluhung* (the "classic" as Nancy Florida¹⁰ translates it, or "exalted beauty", as Sumarsam¹¹ puts it) inside the house, behaving virtuously and adhering to behavioural norms associated with women, such as softness, gentleness and faithfulness.¹² Modern Indonesian literature still often supports this understanding of women's role. Tineke Hellwig and Monique Zaini-Lajoubert have emphasized that in modern Indonesian literature, especially during the Suharto regime, the domination of men over women was still a major problem, as evidenced in numerous novels.¹³ The inferior position of women is also

7 SURYANA, 2006.

8 WIERINGA, 2002.

9 These ideals applied chiefly to elite society. Life and gender roles among peasants would usually have been quite different.

10 FLORIDA, 1982; 1990.

11 SUMARSAM, 1992.

12 KAYAM, 1995.

13 HELLWIG, 1994; ZAINI-LAJOUBERT, 1994.

revealed in literature written by women authors since the 1970s, when writers like Marga T. and Mira W. emerged. Their works sold well on the market and were labelled “popular literature”. In narratives by women written in the 1970s and 1980s the female protagonists often expressed their dissatisfaction with their subordinate position and felt suffocated by it, but yet they did not dare to change their situation.¹⁴ They dreamt of an unbridled life beyond unhappy marriage and social control, but still tended to give in to their fate.

From this representation of women’s behaviour in literature we cannot deduce that during the era of president Suharto women were unable to lead a fulfilling and independent life *in realitas*, but nevertheless such a description of female characters corresponds with the expectations of women during the New Order. In that period women were supposed to live in accordance with the ideology of *kodrat wanita*, which confined them to the sphere of the house, the hearth and the children. In addition, women who did not meet the expectation of being *halus*, i.e. sexually pure and behaving in a ladylike manner, were seen as transgressing the boundary of decency. Therefore, many women had difficulties to develop their own ideas, to find an occupation outside the home and, not the least, to determine their own sexuality. *Kodrat wanita* or *ibuisme* reinforced the female repression by the New Order ideology.¹⁵ Working outside the home, especially engaging in ‘white collar work’, was not in line with the state ideology which propagated *ibuisme negara*.

In the following, we analyze two different literary movements that emerged when female authors increasingly began to influence public discussions in the climate of liberalisation after the fall of Suharto. These two movements, termed as *sastrawangi* (fragrant / perfumed literature) and *sastra / fiksi Islam* (Islamic literature / fiction) or *novel Islami* (Islamic novels), explicitly discuss the female role, framing it in the contexts of female sexuality and emancipation, on the one hand, and Islamic values and morality, on the other. As we intend to show in this article, the two bodies of literary works represent two contrasting socio-cultural streams in contemporary Indonesian society: a Western-influenced liberal pluralist one, and a devoutly Islamic one. The aim of this paper is to discuss the qualities and concerns of each of these two bodies of literature, to compare them and to articulate both their shared mission and their differences of approach. Before analyzing selected works, we discuss the background of these literary

14 HELLWIG, 1994; ZAINI-LAJOUBERT, 1994.

15 HATLEY, 1999.

movements, the socio-cultural factors accounting for their emergence, its representatives, as well as public response to them.

2. Literary Streams since the Fall of Suharto

Sastrawangi is one of two prominent new developments on the Indonesian literary scene that emerged since the late 1990s. It attracted much public attention because the authors who are considered *sastrawangi* writers openly discuss female sexuality and desire in their fiction. During the New Order period such texts could not have been published because they would have become subject to censorship. After Suharto had stepped down, artists, filmmakers, performers and writers started broaching former taboo topics such as sexuality, thus turning against traditional role models. Their activities fuelled public discourse on the boundaries of decency.¹⁶

Most of the writers of this new generation, like Oka Rusmini, Ayu Utami, Fira Basuki, Djenar Maesa Ayu, Dewi Lestari, Dinar Rahayu, and Nova Riyanti Yusuf, choose urban centres of Java as settings for their narratives¹⁷ and are associated with the “new assertiveness they are showing in contemporary Indonesia”,¹⁸ especially since the fall of Suharto. The writers, who are considered as belonging to *sastrawangi*, are criticized for violating the social norm of decency and notions of morality.¹⁹ Several of the above-mentioned authors have often been referred to as “fragrant” and “sexy”, probably a consequence of “celebrity-obsessed Indonesian society”, attaching great importance to life-styles and opinions of “high-profile public persona”.²⁰ But the term does not only refer to the writers’ appearance. It is also derogatory in the sense that it questions the quality of the fictional texts, implying that young women are fragrant and sexy rather than capable of composing high-quality literature.

The term *sastrawangi* is an invention of the mass media. Due to its derogatory connotation the term is viewed critically by both cultural observers and

16 CAMPBELL, 2002; GARCÍA, 2004b; HATLEY, 1999. A well-known example is the dancer and singer of dangdut music Inul Daratista, who provoked controversial discussion due to her *goyang ngebor* (drilling swing) which was criticized as immoral.

17 ARNEZ, 2008:30.

18 WATSON, 2005:69.

19 LOEKITO, 2003.

20 HUA, 2003.

writers. Wahyudi, for instance, comments on this term as follows: “[...] ‘sastrawangi’ is an expression tending to lower rather than praise, not to use the expression ‘cynical’.”²¹ A similar view is given by Budiman, who argues that the term *sastrawangi* backfires on the writers instead of respecting their achievements.²²

In an article published in Media Indonesia in 2004, Amiruddin proposes to abandon the term *sastrawangi*. She argues that the term is a new discriminatory phenomenon in Indonesian literature, conveying the message that the female authors’ sole capital is pretty looks and fragrance rather than intellectual capacity.²³ Many female authors themselves reject the usage of the term *sastrawangi*. For instance, Linda Christanty objects to the term because the concept of ‘fragrant literature’ is unclear to her;²⁴ Nova Riyanti Yusuf thinks that “the label mentioned makes the writers look like a group of idiots”;²⁵ and Nukila Amal refused to contribute one of her stories to the journal *Prosa* because, according to her, this would have validated the label *sastrawangi*.²⁶ Nukila Amal explains that she prefers a neutral expression like *penulis* (writer) instead of terms directly referring to the authors’ gender or even to their “fragrance”.²⁷ Dinar Rahayu argues along the same line, when she says that her being a woman has not much influenced her writing.²⁸

However, the label *sastrawangi* that was spread and discussed in the media obviously has made readers curious to know more about these writers and their books. This turned several *sastrawangi* texts into bestsellers. For instance, the novel *Saman* by Ayu Utami, published in 1998, just ten days before president Suharto stepped down, sold around 100 000 copies. Janssen and Wilson, referring not only to Ayu Utami’s works but also to other *sastrawangi* writers, have observed that the term *sastrawangi* has made “the movement catch on”, explaining that a derogatory term may not seldom incite the readers’ curiosity.²⁹ Yet another reason accounting for the popularity of *sastrawangi* is that these narratives suddenly broke with sexual and political taboos. The readership’s

21 WAHYUDI, 2005: 100.

22 BUDIMAN, 2005:25.

23 AMIRUDDIN, 2004.

24 LAKSMINI, 2004:206.

25 LAKSMINI, 2004:211

26 LAKSMINI, 2004:220.

27 LAKSMINI, 2004:221.

28 LAKSMINI, 2004:187.

29 JANSSEN/WILSON, 2003.

interest in this explicit discussion about sexuality, especially women's desire, can be explained by the fact that they welcomed it as a sign of the liberalization they had been awaiting for so long.

The second stream which emerged around the same time, is the writing of consciously religious, devoutly Islamic literature, represented by writers such as Habiburrahman El Shirazy, Helvy Tiana Rosa and Asma Nadia. Works published in this genre have sold well on the market. The most prominent example is Habiburrahman El Shirazy with his novel *Ayat-ayat cinta* (Verses of Love) that reached its 35th printing in March 2008. It has sold 400'000 copies, excluding an unknown number of pirated ones. This success has led Amrih Widodo to talk about an "*Ayat-ayat cinta* fever".³⁰ The author of this novel is also a member of the Pen Circle Forum (FLP, Forum Lingkar Pena),³¹ founded in 1997 for prospective and young writers of *dakwah* (proselytizing) literature. In the 1980s, the revitalization of Islamic thought, the emergence of Muslim intellectuals and proselytizing, combined with new developments in the Islamic book sector, such as new marketing strategies and the avoidance of overt missionary articles, paved the way for the success of the FLP.³² Furthermore, the Islamic magazine for Muslim teenage girls, *Annida*, was important for the later success of the FLP. This journal which belongs to the Ummi Group was first published in 1991 by PT Kismus Bina Tadzkia. *Annida* sells well on the market because it addresses teenagers in a friendly tone and casual language, spreads optimism and brings up everyday issues that concern Muslim teenagers. It is more successful than *Ummi*, a Muslim magazine which had already drawn readers by speaking in softer tones about Islamic issues rather than injecting doctrines, and which had a section especially designed for a Muslim women readership. Helvy Tiana Rosa served as editor-in-chief for *Annida* for ten years, from 1991 to 2001.

The success of this magazine inspired Helvy Tiana Rosa, together with her sister Asma Nadia and Mutmainah, to found the FLP at the Ukhuwah Islamiyah mosque of the Universitas Indonesia, on February 22nd, 1997. Around at the same time, the trend of profane literature gave a new impulse to the Indonesian literary scene. Since June 2000, the FLP has associated with the Ummi Group, which publishes the magazines *Annida*, *Ummi* and *Saksi*. With its more than

30 WIDODO, 2008.

31 For a more detailed analysis of this forum and the function of Helvy Tiana Rosa in it see: ARNEZ, 2009.

32 ARNEZ, 2009:45ff.

5'000 members, many of whom actively write Islamic short stories and novels, this group has started to play an important role on the literary scene. The writings of FLP authors were well received by readers, and over the last decade the FLP has become especially attractive for young Muslim (prospective) authors. As Helvy stated in an interview, the FLP is an organization, which aims at “forming new writers”, intending to spread Islamic values through narratives.³³ She said, the FLP gives prospective and young writers the opportunity to gather, share their ideas, and to practice and write literature. Other aims, according to the FLP’s mission statement,³⁴ include improving the quality and productivity of its members’ literary writings, helping to create an objective and responsible media image, and to improve the reading and writing culture, especially for the younger Indonesian generation and to become an organization that constantly produces new writers from regions all over Indonesia.

We now move on to the discussion and comparison of narratives representing these two literary streams, asking how they negotiate topics related to sexuality, morality and the female role. To what extent do they share a common mission, despite their differences of approach? The works analyzed in the main body of this article are *Saman* and *Larung* by Ayu Utami, “Menyusu Ayah” by Djenar Maesa Ayu, “Jaring-jaring Merah” by Helvy Tiana Rosa and *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* by Abidah El Khalieqy.

3. *Saman*: Author and Synopsis

Ayu Utami (b. 1968 in Bogor) is not only known as a writer, but also as a journalist. She worked for the magazines *Matra*, *Forum Keadilan* and *D & R* for several years. A short time after the magazines *Tempo*, *Detik* and *Editor* were stopped in 1994, she co-founded *Aliansi Jurnalis Independen* (Alliance of Independent Journalists) which opposes censorship. She was engaged in the artistic community Utan Kayu in East Jakarta for several years and worked as editor for the magazine *Kalam*. On the occasion of a speech held in November 2006 at the University of Cologne the author stated that she has distanced herself from this community in the meantime and started other activities, such as supporting the Jaringan Islam Liberal (Islamic Liberal Network, JIL). Although Ayu Utami herself is Christian, she has recently started to support JIL, mainly in organiza-

33 Interview with Helvy Tiana Rosa, Sep. 19, 2006.

34 ROSA, 2003:44, 45.

tional matters, arguing that it can act as an important liberal counterpart against conservative Islamic groups.³⁵

Her debut novel *Saman* (1998) which was awarded best novel from DKJ (*Dewan Kesenian Jakarta*; Jakarta Arts Council) in 1998 and won the Prince Claus Award in 2000, heralded the start of a new era of Indonesian women's literature. *Saman* has several plots and themes, similar to *Larung* (2001), where the story of Wis, a young priest,³⁶ is continued.³⁷ Both novels are written in an experimental, episodic style. The main plot of *Saman* describes the efforts of the character Wis to promote the welfare of the people of Lubukrantau, a village in South Sumatra. Similar to the *wayang* figure Wisanggeni he struggles for social justice. Helping the villagers on their rubber plantation and building a more comfortable home for the mentally retarded girl Upi becomes more important for him than his profession as a priest. He soon assumes a role as unofficial village leader and is blamed for obstructing development by supporting the villagers' resistance against an expanding plantation company, which seeks to force the local people to plant oil palms instead of rubber trees. In spite of Wis' efforts, terror hits the village: bulldozers cut down rubber trees, Upi is raped and cattle are stolen. In a final purge houses are burnt down, Upi dies in the flames and Wis is kidnapped. Security forces torture him, declare him a communist and force him to flee the country.

The secondary plot centres on the young female protagonists Yasmin, Cok, Shakuntala and Laila. The sexual behaviour of these protagonists almost exclusively contradicts Indonesian social norms since none of their relations is validated by marriage. Shakuntala is described as a woman revealing bisexual tendencies; Laila falls in love with a man who is already married but finally has sex with Shakuntala; Yasmin commits adultery with the former priest Wis; and Cok is described as a promiscuous woman.

Emancipation Versus Sexual Stereotypes

Since *Saman* was published in 1998, several scholars have written literary critiques of this work. Barbara Hatley asserts that in *Saman* women's equality and autonomy in work, in political activism, in love and sex are simply *assumed*.³⁸ In

35 Speech of Ayu Utami, University of Cologne, Nov. 03, 2006.

36 When he is no longer working as a priest, he changes his name, calling himself Saman.

37 *Saman* and *Larung*, both written in an episodic, experimental style, are part of a longer narrative.

38 HATLEY, 2002b.

Bandel's view, however, although the female characters in this book reject New Order gender constructs and break with sexual taboos on their way towards emancipation, stereotypical gender roles are nevertheless supported.³⁹ We suggest that the way the female characters Laila, Shakuntala, Cok and Yasmin are displayed, reveals a conscious, still ongoing struggle against patriarchal gender roles. It is within this struggle that Shakuntala violates various social norms and confronts the governing ideas about female sexuality. Before marriage she has a relationship with a "giant", a European adventurer, with whom she discusses texts from different centuries, such as a colonial almanac from the 17th century discoursing about "the East", and a *Kompas* article from 1995 which quotes Indonesian official views about "the West". The discussion of these texts serves to subvert some clichés about sexuality in the respective 'other culture'. The almanac discusses "Asian shamelessness", giving the example that men wear penis decorations for their pleasure, while the *Kompas* article conveys the message that in Europe women are morally destructive, reveal too much skin, ignore virginity, and they are shown on television having sex. Here the narrator comments on "the irony of a man and woman debating the propriety of Eastern versus Western cultural systems – while sitting naked".⁴⁰

Shakuntala also breaks the norm that a woman is not allowed to have sex before marriage. She desacralizes virginity when she deliberately removes her hymen with a spoon, feeding it to a dog. This act challenges the notion, deeply rooted in society, that virginity is a precious good that needs to be preserved and is as easily destroyed as chinaware. Shakuntala's act of breaking her hymen herself demonstrates her wish to be self-determined, her unwillingness to accept the traditional role model of women as creatures who passively wait for fulfilment through men.

Her negative picture of men is rooted in the troubled relationship with her father, who has rigid views about female sexuality. Because of Shakuntala's relationship with the giant, her father ties her to her bed each night. For him, women who take the active role in a relationship, "hunting men", as he calls it, are "surely whores".⁴¹ According to him, a woman should give her body only to a man who cares for her, and who marries her. For Shakuntala marriage resembles "hypocritical prostitution" because it assures women's protection on

39 BANDEL, 2006.

40 HATLEY, 2002a:135.

41 UTAMI, 1998:120–121.

the condition that they be passive and obedient.⁴² Neither her father nor her mother stimulates the discussion on the redefinition of women's role. While her father is described as harsh and rigid, her mother is displayed as a character that is mute most of the time, and in the few instances she talks, she supports the traditional female role, for instance, when she advises Shakuntala to safeguard her virginity.

For Shakuntala the transgression of role-appropriate behaviour is a first step towards finding one's inner self. She is described as having multiple identities, being both man and woman. These identities are constantly changing their shape, especially when she dances. The male identity is released in her movements:

I suspect that my father and mother told me continuously – you are a girl – since I was unable to speak. And how could I protest if I was not able to speak? But the man inside me came one day. No one informed me and he did not introduce himself, but I knew that he was my male self. He came when I was very young, when I was dancing as a windmill. Spinning around I was imitating the dervishes so that my skirt ballooned up as a datura plant and my genitals as the butterfly pea. The speed lifted my body up until it rested on its toe nail. Light as a mahogany seed. Then I floated and felt that something was released: him. And when after that my body dashed down, I saw him facing me. My male self. He loved me. He kissed my face and stroked my back. And he didn't go. If I turned around faster and faster, other shapes would become free from my self. Two, then three, then four, then many, with their own sexes, not man, not woman, shapes that have never been known to my parents and all fathers and mothers. Like budding, surpassing, cracked, soft, coarse flowers. But I could not spin faster than that. I was not yet able.⁴³

The idea of multiple identities is a concept derived from the French feminists Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. They coined the term *phallogocentrism* that points to the way human thought often operates in binaries such as man/woman, presence/absence or heterosexual/homosexual. Irigaray states that women's *jouissance* is more multiple than men's unitary ("woman has sex organs just about everywhere"), linking women's sexuality with women's language. She explains that women's language "goes off in all directions and [...] he is unable to discern the coherence"⁴⁴. Cixous, observing that women wonder about being

42 UTAMI, 1998:120–121.

43 UTAMI, 2001:133–134.

44 IRIGARAY, 1985:101–103.

several people, highlights that women “derive pleasure from this gift of alterability”.⁴⁵

When looking at the passage about Shakuntala quoted above, we observe that the effort to overcome *phallogocentrism*, as Irigaray and Cixous understand it, is not yet successful. Shakuntala is “not yet able” to release her multiple identities, to find a solution, where the binary category male/female is no longer valid. She is still not capable of producing these shapes that have no connection to her parents and their traditional perspective of women’s role. She produces her ‘male self’, which plays a dominant part in the plot around Shakuntala.

The description of the male self dominates in the description of Shakuntala’s relationship with Laila. The narrative states that Laila is attracted to the male part in Shakuntala. She sees her lover Sihar in Shakuntala’s eyes and means to tempt her with that “masculine cough”.⁴⁶ She realizes that she esteems the same characteristics she likes in Sihar and Saman: “upright posture, dark skin, humour, protective bearing”.⁴⁷ From our point of view the latter description confirms the stereotype of men playing a protective role for women. Another stereotype is that ‘the male part’ has to teach a woman (Laila) in sexual matters. Shakuntala teaching Laila *ballroom tango* before her next encounter with Sihar is a strategy to sexually educate Laila. She is taught how to cope with (male) aggressiveness and violence and the experience of lust and pain, the figurative meanings of *ballroom tango*. When Shakuntala advises Laila not to look at her when dancing, explaining that the interaction is “between the bodies, not the faces”, this can be read as an instruction for Laila how to behave appropriately. Thus, Shakuntala teaching *ballroom tango* is described as a device to prepare Laila for her sexual encounter with Sihar that might involve coping with male aggressiveness. This also shows in the following quotation: “I teach you tango! So that if you meet Sihar and you have reached the limit, you can dance”.⁴⁸ Shakuntala willingly plays the male role, the active part, while Laila readily learns the passive part associated with women. This also explains why it is hard for Laila to distinguish between the different ‘men’ she knows. When the relationship with Shakuntala begins, she does not know if she is facing Tala, Saman or Sihar. This reveals that the relationship between Shakuntala and Laila “becomes a kind of variation of the heterosexual matrix”.⁴⁹

45 CIXOUS, 1976:889.

46 UTAMI, 1998:129.

47 UTAMI, 1998: 130.

48 UTAMI, 2001:130.

49 BANDEL, 2006:109.

Another controversial aspect of the book, as far as the description of sexuality is concerned, is the characterisation of the mentally retarded girl Upi. She is described as a person with primitive sexual instincts. Besides her retarded mind the main reason, why she is unable to establish a friendship with Wis, is that she is only interested in having sex with him. She is displayed as incapable of accepting a non-physical relationship with Wis, who has done much to improve her situation. Wis tries to help Upi because she is an outcast, who lives under unworthy conditions, cooped up in a cage unfit for any human being. Trying to move against this violation of human rights, he builds her a more spacious cage and gives her a statue he calls "totem phallus" to masturbate with. But finally he realizes that Upi cannot reciprocate his feelings, that she rejects his offer, and that her main motivators for action are her primitive sexual instincts. Ayu Utami claimed in November 2006, that Upi is a mixture of two people she herself has met in her life: a beggar and a mentally retarded boy. According to the author, she tried to make friends with this boy, but this was impossible since he was only sexually attracted to her.⁵⁰ One reason, why she created Upi, was to overcome the uneasy feeling she had when she realized that this boy was incapable of having a relationship not based on sexual attraction.

Bandel suggests meanwhile that "Wis' interpretation of Upi's sexuality is narrowing in that it is not in the least questioned, so that I feel it is not far-fetched if we suppose that the writer was not aware of this narrowing".⁵¹ Here she refers to the fact that Upi's sexual desire is described as being focused on a male statue, which according to her suggests that the heterosexual desire is described as the most natural, normal and original.⁵² She criticizes the fact that in this plot the penis is regarded as a symbol of phallus, as a totem that has to be praised, in line with psychoanalysis. Bandel finds fault with the fact that Upi's sexuality is only described from Wis' perspective (who himself, as a former priest, is quite inexperienced in sexual matters and regards heterosexual desire as the most 'normal') and that the writer does not introduce any other voices that take a different point of view.⁵³ While agreeing with Bandel in that the "phallus" appears like an object of praise, our own view is that Utami probably chose the totem phallus as a symbol of sexual obsession, of unbridled sexuality devoid of love, as indicated in her anecdote about the retarded boy.

50 Speech of Ayu Utami, University of Cologne, Nov. 03, 2006.

51 BANDEL, 2006:115.

52 BANDEL, 2006:115.

53 BANDEL, 2006:115.

Despite the sexual stereotypes that persist in *Saman* and *Larung*, it can be claimed that in modern Indonesian literature such an open discussion of sexuality and female desire has not taken place before, especially not in such an outspoken language.⁵⁴ Following Ayu Utami's success, several young women authors entered the literary stage with even more provocative fictional texts, using offensive, partly vulgar language, with an emphasis on sexuality.⁵⁵ A prominent example is the short story collection *Jangan Main-main dengan Kelaminmu* (Don't Play with your Sex/Gender/Genitals) written by Djenar Maesa Ayu in 2004, especially the story "Menyusu Ayah" (Nursing from Daddy).

4. "Menyusu Ayah": Author and Synopsis

Djenar Maesa Ayu (b. 1973 in Jakarta) has a strong personal link to the TV scene, with her father, Syuman Jaya, being a famous filmmaker and her mother, Tuti Kirana, a formerly well-known actress. Djenar has already been a co-host of a celebrity gossip show on Indonesian television, and she has adapted her short story collection *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet* (They Say I'm a Monkey, 2002) to film.⁵⁶ In 2006 and 2007 she acted in the movies *Koper* (The Lost Suitcase), produced by Richard Oh, and *Anak-Anak Borobudur* (Children of Borobudur), directed by Arswendo Atmowiloto.

"Menyusu Ayah", a short story in Djenar Maesa Ayu's second short story anthology *Jangan Main-main dengan Kelaminmu*, was chosen as best short story by the women's magazine *Jurnal Perempuan* in 2002. Due to its provocative content other magazines and newspapers such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Lampung Post*, *Kompas* and *Republika*, where Djenar usually publishes her works, rejected it. The daily newspaper *Kompas* selected "Waktu Nayla" (Nayla's Time), published in her first collection *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet*, as best short story.

In "Menyusu Ayah", in which a bleak atmosphere prevails, violence against women is raised as a key topic. The short story opens with Nayla's fight to be born. When she realizes that her mother starts losing her strength giving birth to her, Nayla struggles to get out of her mother's womb, "biting Mother's

54 In fact, it was Oka Rusmini, who has opened the discourse about the female body and sexuality before the so-called pioneer of *sastrawangi*, Ayu Utami.

55 Some others, e.g. Dewi Sartika, directly admitted to have been inspired by Utami's novels (KURNIA, 2004).

56 Djenar Maesa Ayu was director of this movie that came out in 2008.

wall of the vagina with her gums".⁵⁷ A helpless baby, she is torn away from her mother, the medical staff not paying any attention to her crying. When she is still a baby, her father starts an incestuous relation with her, making her suck his penis. In her memory, she has suckled her father's penis instead of her mother's nipples, which gave her pleasure and made her feel that she is "not weaker than men".⁵⁸ As she gets older, her father refuses to "suckle her" any more, denies ever having done such a thing, beats her with a belt and hits her on the head when she recalls her memories. When she tries to suckle from her male friends, she is disappointed because it feels different. Moreover, they tease her and even get scared of her afterwards. As the story continues, her father's friends begin to sexually abuse her. When one of these friends penetrates her vagina with his penis, she begins to wonder whether her mother felt this pain when she gave birth to her, and whether this was the reason why her mother died.⁵⁹ These thoughts make her feel disgusted with all penises, including her father's. In a sudden impulse Nayla kills with the statue of a horse the man who rapes her. The story ends with the words: "My name is Nayla. [...] Now I am also becoming mother, of a foetus that in the future will become a strong child, with or without a father figure".⁶⁰

Incest, Paedophilia and Shattered Identity

"Menyusu Ayah" creates the image of a girl, who tries to adapt to her male environment and starts to copy male behaviour since she has no female model and must survive in a male world. She becomes a tomboy, cuts her hair short, starts wearing boy's clothes, plays with marbles and pees upright. Using a mixture of vulgar language and the language of the urban middle class, Djenar Maesa Ayu reveals that the harmonious family propagated by New Order ideology in fact did not exist. As Michael Bodden pointed out, the public was eager for such works that transgressed the New Order boundaries of propriety, critically explored the seamy side of Indonesian middle-class life, and spoke with a vibrant directness.⁶¹ In this story the mask of harmony, ever-present during the New Order, is torn down, revealing the dark side of patriarchy for women.

57 AYU, 2004:36.

58 AYU, 2004:36.

59 AYU, 2004:42.

60 AYU, 2004:43.

61 BODDEN, 2007:95.

The story uses several stereotypes, especially as far as men are concerned. The patriarchal world is accused of cruelty, violence, incest and hypocrisy. As a part of the wider male world around Nayla, her father is exposed as a hypocrite and paedophile.⁶² The male world, as it is described in the story, is dominated by the desire for sexual satisfaction and sexual power over women. Men appear as monsters, which destroy women by abusing them, bereaving them of any perspective for the future. Women's identity is shattered since it depends on the male world, the story indicates. The tomboy Nayla, who tries hard to belong to the men's world and to play a male part but is excluded and abused at the same time, is an example of this shattered identity. Nayla feels like a boy in a girl's body and thus neither belongs to the men's nor the women's world.

The exaggerated negative picture the short story draws of men serves to criticize male domination in Indonesian society, both on the personal and the governmental level. The critique is that men set the rules in society, and since women depend on them, they are only subordinate players in the game. They serve to satisfy men's needs and do not have any chance to influence decisions. In this narrative women must obey men's rules and pleasure is reserved for men, who at the same time demand that women stick to moral decency. This becomes especially clear, when Nayla's father accuses her mother of being a whore and having "dirty thoughts". When he discovers these thoughts also in Nayla, he tries to beat them out of her, slapping her with a belt and hitting her head against a wall.

Both Nayla and her mother try to contest men's superior power, but the only way to confront it is to destroy it, as the ending of the story indicates. The story is constructed as a vicious circle. Although killing the rapist may seem like a liberating stroke, at a first glance, the narrative suggests that Nayla's fate is going to repeat itself with the unborn child she carries in her womb. In the end the patriarchal system will oppress her, and it can be assumed that she will suffer the same fate of violence and sexual trauma Nayla and her mother have endured. The narrator creates this impression at the end of the story, using the stylistic device of repetition. She repeats the same phrase for the future of the unborn child as he did for Nayla's future prospects at the beginning of the story: both of them will become "strong [...], with or without a father figure".⁶³

In both *Saman* and "Menyusu Ayah", a dominant theme is the struggle for female emancipation, which during the New Order was obstructed by the

62 DANEREK, 2006:37.

63 AYU, 2004:43.

patriarchal ideology. Both texts show that women are no longer willing to play the passive role allocated to them. First, women no longer endure violence such as sexual abuse, as is clearly indicated by “Menyusu Ayah”. Secondly, the increasing sexual liberation depicted in *Saman* is a reaction to the double moral standard, demanding chastity and moral decency only from women, not from men. By depicting aggressive sexual behavior by women the writers aim to criticize the fact that such behavior is only accepted for men but not for women. The traditional women's role as caretakers of the family is substituted by revolt against patriarchal society and by a role reversal. In *Saman* both Shakuntala and Yasmin play a male role, whereas in “Menyusu Ayah” Nayla at least tries to play such a role, but fails.

We now investigate how the issues of women's sexuality and morality are discussed in religious literature, being the second major literary trend, and to what extent an alternative female role model is offered. We explore how morality and sexuality are represented and woven into selected narratives written by Helvy Tiana Rosa and Abidah El Khalieqy, two prominent Muslim women writers, who mainly choose topics that are related to Islam.

5. “Jaring-jaring Merah”: Author and Synopsis

Helvy Tiana Rosa (b. 1970 in Medan) started writing poetry as a child. She is a very productive writer, having published more than thirty books, especially short stories, poetry and essays.⁶⁴ Her latest short story collection appeared in 2008 with the title *Bukavu*. In addition to writing literature she was among the founders of Teater Bening, a women's theatre at the Faculty of Literature at the Indonesian University, Jakarta, in 1990. For the last few years she has been teaching Indonesian literature at the National University Jakarta (UNJ).

Her interest in the Aceh region, where “Jaring-jaring Merah” (The Red Net, 2002)⁶⁵ is set, is partly motivated by the fact that her father was born in Aceh. Furthermore, she was interested in writing about the consequences of the military operation for its victims, mainly women, since according to her nobody

64 Helvy Tiana Rosa said that the reason why she does not like to write novels is that she is too impatient to finish them. Interview with Helvy Tiana Rosa, Sep. 19, 2006.

65 “Jaring-Jaring Merah” was first published in 1999, but our interpretation is based on the version included in the collection *Bukavu*.

has written honestly about this topic in Indonesian literature before. She collected data from the human rights organization *Kontras* before she started to write the short story.⁶⁶ “Jaring-jaring Merah” was selected as one of the best narratives of the literary magazine *Horison* (1990-2000). The anthology *Lelaki Kabut dan Boneka* (Dolls and the Man of Mist, 2002), where it appeared, won the Pena Award in 2002.

“Jaring-jaring Merah” deals with the struggle and inner turmoil of the female protagonist Inong, who has been traumatized by violence. She was raped and her whole family killed in the military operation because they were accused of being members of the separatist organization GPK (Gerakan Pengacau Keamanan [Security Destruction Movement]).⁶⁷ Inong is mentally disturbed as a consequence of the violence she suffered. Over and over again she tries to find the human remains of her dead family in the mass grave Bukit Tengkorak (Hill of Skulls). Since Inong is no longer able to care for herself, Cut Dini, a deeply devout NGO activist, now lives with her, tries to help her through her crisis. She not only cooks for her and cares for her clothing but also regularly reads from the Qur'an to soothe her agitated feelings. The presence of Cut Dini gives Inong a feeling of lightness. She suddenly feels that she is a bird with wings and thus has found a way to escape from the fate that has hit her. But when one day men in uniforms enter her house, try to bribe Cut Dini for keeping silence over the crimes they committed and call Inong a “mad girl”, she fiercely attacks them with a frying pan.

After this incident Inong recedes into the world of painful memories and imagination. She imagines herself as a bird that is caught in a red net, which is being swayed back and forth by giant hands. At the end of the story it becomes clear that she will not be able to escape this trap. Her struggle to become free is not successful. Helpless and bleeding, she is left behind in the red net.

Women's Role

Women's role is illustrated by the example of the two women: Inong and Cut Dini. The red net is the metaphor that serves to emphasize Inong's role as a victim. This metaphor shows that especially women were the victims of the crimes committed by the *Operasi Jaring Merah* (Operation Red Net), which was started by the Suharto government in 1990 to eliminate the new liberation

66 Interview with Helvy Tiana Rosa, Sep. 19, 2006.

67 The rebels called themselves Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh Movement), but the New Order government chose the derogatory term GPK.

movement Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM), and lasted until 1998.⁶⁸ This government-backed operation failed to solve any of Aceh's problems; instead thousands of innocent civilians became victims of atrocities, including rape, killing and vandalism. The red net symbolizes violence, since the colour red suggests bloodshed.⁶⁹ It shows that the victims were helplessly exposed to the soldiers, who deeply hurt their dignity. It demonstrates that the victims have no opportunity to escape their mental derangement and psychosis, which are the consequences of the traumatization they have developed due to the violence suffered. The protagonist is unable to bear that she was raped and forced to witness how her family was killed. Metaphorically speaking, she is doomed to hang in a red net of bloody and painful memories. The metaphor of the red net illustrates that during the New Order government women suffered violence because the military, supported by Suharto, abused their power. Therefore, it can be argued that by revealing Inong's degradation and abuse, the military's abuse of human rights is illustrated. This woman becomes a victim of men's superior power. She is sexually abused because she cannot defend herself against the soldiers.

Cut Dini is Inong's counterpart. Her role is closely related to the safeguarding of human rights. She is described as a person who possesses characteristics associated with the traditional female role, such as benevolence, compassion, softness and purity. At the same time, though, Cut Dini is an example of an emancipated, independent and determined woman. She is courageous and committed to the idea of charity and *taushiyah* (giving advice to other brothers and sisters). In the figure of Cut Dini some traits of traditional Suharto ideology, the Islamic and the liberal role model are combined since she is *halus* (dedicated and devout). Cut Dini's dress supports her ideal character traits. The narrator repeats several times in the short story that she is wearing a white veil, a symbol of purity and devoutness to God. Cut Dini is a model of charity. The Muslim activist has come back to Aceh after she has finished her studies in Jakarta because she feels that she can only support the victims of violence with all her commitment if she works in the field. She criticizes the military for their brutality, crudeness and corruption and accuses them of irresponsibility. Instead of trying to amend their crimes, they only offer her a small sum as hush money. Here the narrator contrasts the soldiers' inhumanity with Cut Dini's socially ideal behaviour as a critique of the morally corrupt military and government.

68 ARNEZ, 2002.

69 ARNEZ, 2009.

The concept of morality presented in this short story is closely linked with responsibility, of which Cut Dini is a model. The author, whose persona is arguably embodied in the figure of Cut Dini, suggests that the role of Islam is to oppose injustice, to care for the victims of violence and to protect them. The example of Cut Dini shows that courage and commitment are needed to confront the military. This character shows no signs of fear, when she lists the atrocities the military committed against helpless victims. She is outraged because the soldiers demand that she keep quiet about their crimes. She absolutely refuses to accept the money they offer her and directly accuses them of violating human rights:

“No! How about the rapes and torture all along, the murders in the main building, the bodies that are scattered all over Buket Tengkorak, Yellow Bridge, river Tamiang, Cot Panglima, Hutan Krueng Campi ... and everywhere!” Cut Dini’s voice grows louder. “And then the villages with three thousand widows, neglected orphans ... *very* despicable! No!”⁷⁰

The figure of Cut Dini serves to give Inong justice, to make life more bearable for her. But the unhappy ending of the short story indicates at the same time that individual commitment is not sufficient to help the Acehnese to overcome their trauma. The message is that the *umma* needs to be strengthened, and more devout Muslims be encouraged to confront the military and to devote their time to supporting people in crisis regions such as Aceh, and to healing the wounds of war.

The narrative clearly illustrates that for Helvy Tiana Rosa writing literature involves the responsibility to the reader and to God to write from the depths of one’s heart, to promote justice, to discuss socially relevant topics, and to move people to action.⁷¹

6. *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*: Author and Synopsis

Abidah El Khalieqy (b. 1965 in Menturo, Jombang) now lives in Yogyakarta and has published narratives about Indonesian women and identity in the contexts of Islam, family and society. She is not a member of the FLP, but as a

70 ROSA, 2008:210.

71 Helvy Tiana Rosa also mentioned these aspects in an interview conducted on September 19, 2006.

writer of Islamic fiction she has probably profited from its large readership. Abidah El Khalieqy has graduated from the Syari'ah faculty from IAIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta. Her novel *Geni Jora* won the second prize in the DKJ novel contest in 2003.⁷² Her novel *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (Women Wearing the Turban [literally, Woman with a Turban Necklace], 2001) promotes the goal of the Muslim organization YKF (*Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat*; Fatayat Welfare Foundation) to publicize ideas about reproductive rights through fiction. YKF regarded Abidah El Khalieqy as the ideal collaborator for spreading these ideas because she "offered the rare combination of being *pesantren*-educated and a woman poet".⁷³

This novel is a *bildungsroman*, in the sense that it traces important stages in the life of Nisa (Arab.: woman), the protagonist, from childhood to adult age. Nisa is the daughter of a leader of a large *pesantren* and grows up in an environment which firmly clings to traditional role models. Both her father and mother enforce traditional gender roles. Her father does not allow Nisa to study or to learn any skills such as horse riding, whereas he grants her brothers this kind of freedom. According to her mother, women represent seduction; she compares them with delicious fruit in the middle of the desert. She believes that, as soon as a woman leaves her house, seventy devils follow her. A woman can only avert attention from herself by covering her body completely. In that case the devils do not know if the walking creature is a human being or a bolster.⁷⁴

In contrast to the other girls in the *pesantren* Nisa does not silently accept her *kodrat* and the fixed gender roles. She rejects the ideas that men play the dominant part in the community, that women are not supposed to enter men's discussions, and that they have to stay behind the hearth, while men go out to work at the same time.⁷⁵ She repeatedly asks her mother and her Qur'an teacher *ustadz* Ali questions about the role of women in society, but does not get any satisfying answers. In several religious texts she reads in the *pesantren* women are described as having imperfect (*kurang sempurna*) brains and religion.⁷⁶ *Ustadz* Ali supports this statement by listing men's achievements. He emphasizes the fact that more men have become political and religious leaders than women. Furthermore, he proves women's imperfect religion, giving examples from the Shari'ah and Fiqih, which only allow half the share of the inheritance to

72 The winners were only announced in 2004 in a DKJ press release.

73 VAN DOORN-HARDER, 2006:251.

74 EL KHALIEQY, 2001:45.

75 EL KHALIEQY, 2001:9, 10.

76 EL KHALIEQY, 2001:70.

women, do not grant them the rights to divorce, to remarry, to practice polygamy etc.⁷⁷

The only person who takes Nisa's questions seriously, is her young half-uncle Lek Khudori, who studies in the progressive *pesantren* of Gontor. He is consistently described as pious, soft-spoken, bright, open-minded and as a poet; therefore he has been characterized as the internally persuasive "ideologue of the novel".⁷⁸ He provides a counterpart to the other people Nisa knows. He is to her a partner for discussion about the conflicting views of women that she finds in the Tradition and the Fiqh.

When Lek has left to pursue his graduate studies in Egypt, Nisa starts to study the religious books of the tradition, which are taken from books about the Qur'an, the Hadith or even the Fiqh, and confirm the inequality of gender roles. She meets with disapproval and incomprehension, when she asks her Qur'an teacher questions which confront traditional role models, such as the notion that women have to wait for a man to propose to them. In addition, *ustadz* Ali warns her against consuming products from Western "infidels", such as films, comics, novels etc, and confirms the role of women as patient and subordinate creatures.

When Lek is still abroad, Nisa is married off, under age, to Samsudin, the son of a respected *kiai*. Samsudin is shown as a villain in the novel. It turns out that he is a brute who curses, beats and even rapes her. He is unemployed and hangs around the house, and soon he gets bored with Nisa and takes a second wife, but does not care for Nisa, as prescribed by Islamic law. As with many women suffering violence from their husbands, Nisa does not dare to tell her parents about her experience. The first person she confides in is Lek Khudhori. When he comes back from Egypt, she tells him everything, and with his support they inform her parents about the violence Nisa endures. After the obligatory waiting period (*'idda*) has passed, her parents demand a divorce, and Nisa can finally marry Lek Khudhori. He is construed as the opposite of Samsudin in all aspects. In him Nisa finally finds a true, loving and understanding husband. They lead a relationship based on equality and mutual support, they have shared responsibilities in sexual behaviour, and Lek Khudhori supports Nisa's efforts to continue her studies.

77 EL KHALIEQY, 2001:72.

78 DANEREK, 2006:256.

A Guide for Equal Gender Relations

The novel *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* is written as a guide or handbook for equal gender relations in marriage. It informs its readers about the rights and duties men and women have in marriage according to Islam, and encourages women not silently to endure violence by their husbands. Mutual respect and responsibility are a prerequisite for appropriate sexual behaviour and morality. The narrative at first confirms all kinds of stereotypes as far as Islamic conservative gender roles are concerned, in order to reveal the manifold problems women are confronted with in environments such as the traditional *pesantren*. Ultimately, however, the novel rejects sexuality based on domination and violence, as well as the irresponsible handling of reproductive health problems and the lack of access to education for women, among other issues. After the turning point of the story, marked by Nisa's marriage with Lek Khudhori, an exemplary marital relationship is presented to demonstrate to the readers, what an ideal relationship could be like. The author discusses issues of birth control and "how to have good sex that pleases the woman".⁷⁹ The behaviour of Lek, who speaks prayers when he has sex with Nisa, is contrasted with Udin's rapist behaviour.⁸⁰

In accordance with the line of thought of Muslim women's organizations, such as Fatayat NU or YKF,⁸¹ the novel supports the notion that the Qur'an grants equality between the sexes but argues that gender-biased texts like the *Kitab 'Uqud*, do not mention women's rights, but only their duties. It criticizes that these texts are still used too frequently in *pesantren*, whereas progressive texts that highlight equal gender relations are often rejected by *kiai*. Thus, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* affirms the idea of women's emancipation within the context of progressive Islam. The efforts of Muslim women's organizations to encourage women to study, to learn more about reproductive health and to lead an appropriate sexual life in accordance with the Qur'an clearly shine through in this novel.⁸²

79 VAN DOORN-HARDER, 2006:253.

80 DANEREK, 2006:259.

81 Fatayat NU founded YKF in 1991.

82 The intention of YKF to popularize the content of the book can also be seen from the fact that the novel has even been turned into a radio show. YKF took this step to reach the rural segment of the population, where books are not a part of everyday life, but oral culture is still dominant.

7. Conclusion

This paper has pointed out that both profane and Islamic literature written by women since the late 1990s do not only question fixed role models, passed down from generation to generation, but also revolt against them. The majority of the female characters presented in the narratives actively challenge their subordination and maltreatment and adopt alternative role models. Both literary streams confront conventional notions of gender roles, while they also attack the patriarchal systems of domination, though in different ways and with a different focus. The examples taken from profane literature confront Javanese and modern nationalist patriarchy, whereas the Islamic narratives criticize Islamic notions of patriarchy.

The profane texts represent women who live their sexuality and tend to transgress social conventions. In several cases the female characters reverse the traditional role models and adopt male roles, struggling for liberation. This is especially true for Shakuntala in *Saman*, but also for Nayla in “Menyusu Ayah”. Both characters reject the female role due to the constraints inflicted by society, and try to free themselves by playing a male part, more or less successfully and for slightly different reasons. Shakuntala wants to play a male role because she is outraged by the way her parents, especially her father, restrict her freedom. She has already taken an important step towards liberation for she is self-determined and also sexually independent. The consequent reversal of roles, however, as stated above, sometimes runs the risk of confirming stereotypes. Furthermore, it reveals that Shakuntala has not yet succeeded in overcoming the binary category of male/female and the ideas connected to it, especially the idea that men are strong and active, whereas women are weak and passive.

Nayla, in “Menyusu Ayah”, crosses to the male sphere because she has no female role model she can adopt since her mother died at her birth. Unlike Shakuntala she has hardly any other choice than adopting a male role since she has to spend all her time with men, who even abuse her. Her effort to play a male part is unsuccessful because in contrast to Shakuntala she mentally and physically depends on men, especially on her father. In both texts the discussions of long-standing taboos (bisexuality and incest) highlight the violent struggle of women in contemporary Indonesian society to redefine their role in nationalist patriarchy.

The Islamic narratives also transgress social boundaries and reveal women’s struggle against patriarchal domination. Both *Jaring-jaring Merah* and *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* criticize the way the government, the military or

the Islamic establishment oppress or abuse women. While the former text highlights human rights abuses, the latter criticizes Islamic institutions such as *pesantren* for using gender-biased Islamic sources in teaching instead of texts that support gender equality. In addition, the novel argues that *pesantren* and some scholarly Islamic texts interpret the sacred texts wrongly.

As far as the motif of morality is concerned, we can also observe a similarity between the two literary streams: Ayu Utami, Djenar Maesa Ayu and Abidah El Khalieqy reveal that patriarchal society uses morality as a weapon to oppress women, and to keep them mediocre. In their narratives morality is generally associated with hypocrisy, the norm of moral behaviour being applied to women only, not to men. To emphasize the female characters' revolt against the patriarchal social system, marked by hypocrisy and brutality, the narrators tend to caricature men as monstrous creatures.

The two streams clearly differ in relation to the depiction of sexuality and sexual themes. In contrast to the female characters in the profane texts, those in Islamic prose generally do not use their sexuality as a symbol of liberation. Moreover, the texts are more didactic in tone and rarely use colloquial language, but tend to use Islamic expressions and Islamic symbolism, such as reciting the Koran and Hadith, veiling, and giving advice (*taushiyah*) to brothers and sisters. Especially in *Jaring-jaring Merah*, Islamic symbolism is used to strengthen the feeling of solidarity within the Muslim community, and in both Islamic narratives Islam is represented as an important part of the female characters' identity, even though the women sometimes disagree with the respective interpretations of the sacred texts. In profane prose the sexuality theme is an important tool to criticize the patriarchal structures and its consequences. The Islamic narratives, in contrast, prefer metaphors (such as the red net) and Islamic symbolism to convey their message or put forward their views of equality between the sexes in the form of a guide or handbook, as in El Khalieqy's novel.

One reason for the discrepancies between the two streams are the different notions and interpretations of feminism and sexuality. Acting out sexuality as a feminist political strategy, as Ayu Utami and Djenar Maesa Ayu do, is unacceptable for the Islamic writers because, according to them, such a behaviour contradicts the Islamic teachings. Out of respect for the Islamic norms they would not choose to describe such taboos as having sexual affairs or free sex. These writers attempt to achieve a rethinking of the female role *within* Islam, based on Islamic sources, whereas the secular women writers break up with all kinds of taboos, including religious ones. It is probably not too far-fetched to say that the Islamic writers have a concept of feminism based on Islam, whereas the

secular women writers share an understanding of feminism derived from Western thought.

Because of their different approaches and topics, the writers of the two streams view each others' works critically. Helvy Tiana Rosa, for instance, takes a critical stance towards the so-called *sastrawangi* texts, asserting that sexual mores and decency are more desirable for women than the female quest for emancipation expressed through descriptions of sexuality. Presenting a counter-model to *sastrawangi*, Helvy explains that, as one of the characteristics of Islamic narratives, they avoid to raise as a topic sexual relationships, physical sensuality or immorality.⁸³ In this context, Monika Arnez has argued that Helvy Tiana Rosa's criticism of *sastrawangi* texts is based on her assumption that women should maintain sexual morality and decency, rather than seek for emancipation expressed through provocative descriptions of sexuality.⁸⁴ She represents the community of Muslim writers who aim to challenge what they regard as "the materialism, hedonism and immorality in Indonesian literature", as Widodo puts it.⁸⁵ Ayu Utami, on the other hand, criticizes the writers of Islamic literature for easily falling into dogmatizing. She quotes the example of the bestseller *Ayat-ayat cinta* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy, saying that its strongest weakness is its "desire for the truth". She continues: "But as far as I am concerned, it is not interesting if a writer desires to convey the truth. Literature does not serve to proselytize but to struggle with values. That kind of literature always strives for opening up problems, not ending with the word amen as if we were in the mosque or in church."⁸⁶ According to her, it is necessary for women to be more outspoken about their bodies, thus resisting the value system of a society that is unfavourable to women, as it disallows them to control their own bodies.⁸⁷

However, despite the critical attitudes taken towards each other's literary movements and their respective differences in topic, presentation and style, both streams have one thing in common: they break with traditional role models and deal with women's struggle for empowerment, liberation and future prospects.

83 ROSA, 2003:6.

84 ARNEZ, 2009:47.

85 WIDODO, 2008.

86 YUMIYANTI, 2008.

87 TANJUNG, 2009.

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