

Conference Paper

Female Liberation in Javanese Legend “Jaka Tarub”

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Abstract

The existence of nymph characters in many myths and folktales has brought fascinating yet complex issues on gender relation in patriarchal society. Most of the nymphs are female who has superhuman power. They are usually represented as having charm that allures men.

Keywords: female liberation, socializing mechanisms, otherness

1. Introduction

Folklore as oral form of literature has served as function as medium of imposing value, norm and social consensus. It has been used to reinforce the dominant ideology. However, it has also served other function as medium to contest the dominant value or to dispute the ideology of the power holder. It has been assumed that the society where folklore develop share the same value and norm. In [7] acknowledge that folklore can be used to express and reinforce acceptance of the dominant norms, concepts and power structures, at which time we can speak of folklore as a tool for consensus. On the other hand, folklore can be used as means of resistance to the power hegemony of the authority, as always highlighted by the Marxist. It may offer an alternative, new insights of the world. Therefore folklore can be considered as “a culture of contestant. The Marxist view Folklore as the culture of the dominated class.

Folklore of contestation can thus be assumed to arise wherever a relationship of dominance prevails: between the class of those who control the political, economic, cultural or religious means of production and those who are controlled, between dominating men and subordinated women, or between a dominant and subaltern race or ethnic group. The relations of dominance between both genders and races are most often based on political and economic conditions, rationalized by culture and religion [7].

In [8] sees the male representation of women in religion and literature in terms of sexual power politics. Woman is “the Other” and her “Otherness” is frightening to man as it shows the alienation of the female from society’s life. Their power is unknown but men think they will pose an unknown power. Therefore that power must

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be controlled. The alienation of woman can take its form in nymph narrative that exist in many cultures

The existence of nymph characters in folklore has brought fascinating yet complex issue concerning gender relation. Readers in all cultures must be familiar with the mythical figures that have superhuman and even non-human power. The nymph characters are represented in various forms, from celestial being to water nymph. Most of the nymphs are female who has superhuman power. They are usually represented as having charm that allures men [6]. In mythologies, they are often depicted as a divine female of extraordinary beauty and power, who are created for the pleasure of the gods. They are associated with the Cult of god and goddesses. Their beauty allures passion among mortal men. The nymph would visit the earth and get engaged in amorous relationship. Auboyer (in [4]) acknowledges that the nymphs are vulnerable to catch. What men can do to capture them is by making them surprised while they were bathing in a river or lake and steal their clothes, which leaves them no choice but beg for the men's mercy.

The Javanese folktale has some stories related to nymph. One of the most popular stories is Jaka Tarub. The story tells a man who fell in love with a nymph who came down to earth to bath in a pool. Knowing that the nymph can't go back to heaven without her wings, Jaka Tarub steals the wing, leaving the nymph dewi Nawang Wulan abandoned by the other nymphs. Since she has no wings, she cannot go home to *Kahyangan*. This leaves her with the only choice, marrying Jaka Tarub under the condition that Jaka Tarub promise her to never open the rice pot while she was cooking. Since the marriage, Jaka Tarub lives in prosperity as Nawang Wulan use her magic power in cooking. She only cook a grain of rice that can turn into a pot full of rice. Therefore the rice supply stored in the family barn lasts forever. One day, out of curiosity Jaka Tarub breaks his promise, he opened the boiling pot. And to his surprise he only found a grain in the pot. This curiosity brings disastrous consequence to the family. Nawang Wulan loses all her power. She no longer has the magic and has to work hard grinding rice using lesung, a hard work she has never done in her home in *Kahyangan*. Now the rice supply for sure in the barn is diminishing day by day. But it is such a blessing in disguise for Nawang Wulan, as one day she finds the wings that was hidden under the pile of rice stalk in the barn. Her chance of leaving her earthly life is open. She put on her wings and fly away, abandoning her husband and children to mourn her leaving. Liberated, Nawang Wulan leaves the earth for good.

Djajadiningrat in his study of mythology suggests that Joko Tarub legend functions as one of the main rice myth (in [1]). In this myth, Nawang Wulan as woman is seen as the symbol of life and fertility, as the source of prosperity in agricultural society. The rice myth is originated from the cult of Dewi Sri, the goddess of rice and agriculture in Javanese Hindu mythology. Nawang Wulan here is seen as the manifestation of Dewi Sri, who brings prosperity to human. The Javanese believes that the descendant of

Jaka Tarub and Nawang Wulan would be the Javanese ruler. This narrative has political significance in the way it serves as a means to legitimize the power of Javanese King. The myth about kings as being half human with power beyond common people justifies the concept of King as the chosen people.

However, if we look closer at how the nymph character is represented throughout the narrative, how the nymph are entrapped and come to live as human and the ordeals she experiences, we can see that there is a kind of mechanism and power relation come into play. In Jaka Tarub narrative, the union between the nymph and human characters does not result from consent like in the epic of Mahabarata, in which one of Pandawa Brother, Arjuna, married a nymph named Suprabha.

This study explores a Javanese well known legend of Jaka Tarub and Nawangwulan. Using feminist theory as a framework, this study addresses the female oppression in a patriarchal society through the portrayal of the heroine Dewi Nawang Wulan, a celestial nymph with supranatural power, who is trapped and deprived of her power by Jaka Tarub. The narrative of Jaka Tarub and Nawang Wulan represents women as the involuntary victims of socializing mechanisms, and the 'otherness' of woman in a male-oriented culture, therefore woman should be liberated and gain their independence.

2. Method

This study is a literary criticism in the form of deconstruction analysis to reveal the feminist discourse inherent in the text. The approach used in the analysis is feminist approach, with the attempt to reveal the gender power relation inherent in the work by focusing on the pattern of patriarchal domination. Feminist criticism is considered as a political act with the aim to challenge and criticize the patriarchal mindset established in culture and literature [3]. In [2] believes that men have the authority to determine and construct the meaning of being male and female. In a patriarchal society, women become the other, whose existence is defined by men. The feminist criticism rejects all the phallocentrism that puts female in inferior position. Women must challenge the long-held patriarchal construct about their sex and gender and attempt to assert and establish their their beliefs and values.

The feminist framework is used to deconstruct the commonly believed concept related to the narrative of Jaka Tarub by examining the power relation that exist in the relationship between Jaka Tarub and Nawangwulan. The analysis focuses on exposing the stereotypical roles of female character Nawangwulan and the attitude of Male character Jaka Tarub toward to reveal the ways how patriarchal discourses put men in superior position while disempowering women and how this discourse is challenged in the narrative.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Female Objectification and Patriarchal Hegemony

It is a commonly held belief that women are sexually vulnerable, therefore conservative men put a lot of restrictions on them and many rituals and taboos are linked to the various biological events in life. Nawang Wulan, with her charm and attire represent the sexuality that must be restricted. Stripping her off from her nymph attire represents the restriction. Stripping her off is the only means to make her vulnerable so that Jaka Tarub can take control of her, assuming his ownership over Nawang Wulan and making her dependent on him. His desire for Nawang Wulan has led him to deceive her.

The stealing of the wings represents men's inability to suppress his desire for the female. The desire and the love make him determined to win the female and making them their property. The female power must be tamed, if not they can rule the male. Stealing the attire of the nymph is a representation of the attempt that men make to suppress the female power. Without the attire the female are powerless. So that men assert the ownership over them.

Jaka Tarub is fully aware that Nawang Wulan is the other, non-human creature that must be tamed. It is impossible to own her if she maintain the power that is her attire, thing that defines her identity. Jaka Tarub strips her off from her identity by stealing and hiding the nymph clothes, leaving Nawang Wulan naked. Her nakedness makes her vulnerable and helpless. She has no other choice than accepting Jaka Tarub's marriage proposal.

The nymphs are trapped in a situation that requires them to seek ways for survival. The marriage offer is seen as the only way to survive in an unknown world. The case is worse to Nawang Wulan, she is not only deceived and deprived of her power but she is also economically exploited. The magic that she possesses brings prosperity in the family. Jaka Tarub does not have to work hard growing crop.

Nawang Wulan is stripped off her skin. She does not own her body any longer. Her part of bodies that define her identity are taken away by men. This represents that female bodies are no longer their own bodies but social bodies. The loss of the wings and seal skin signifies how she is stripped off from her essence, their identity. And they have to assume a new identity as an earthly creature, wife and mother.

By making Nawang Wulan his wife, Jaka Tarub has enforced a new identity for Nawang Wulan. This is in accordance with what Simone de Beauvoir believes that men define what it means to be human and what it means to be female. Here Nawang Wulan becomes what Beauvoir maintains as "other". Nawang Wulan becomes object whose existence is defined and interpreted by the dominant male. She is subordinate to Jaka Tarub and she discovers that she is secondary and non-existence player in social institution.

The “othering” of women is acknowledged by [8] as a way to justify men’s hegemony. Millet sees the male representation of women in religion and literature in terms of sexual power politics. Woman is “the Other” and her “Otherness” is frightening to man. Their power is unknown but men think they will pose an unknown power. Therefore that power must be controlled.

In [8] recognizes that man’s depiction of ideal woman as passive, silent and self-effacing is an indirect way of keeping her subordinated. Chastity, virtue and above all, purity are extolled as great feminine virtues embodying the honour of the family, community and nation. In a sense, women’s body is often no longer their body but has been taken over by the community, of both men and women, to establish and legitimize its image in society. Nawang Wulan is viewed as having alien power that may be dangerous. Not only her divine power, her beauty and charm are dangerous. Therefore they must be controlled by means of constructed gender norm with a set of feminine virtue.

The nymph wife signifies the alienation of female from the society’s life. They are constructed as non human, which means that they are ‘other’. Her otherness creates fear in Jaka Tarub. Their power is unknown but men think they will pose a threat to their power. Therefore that power must be controlled. Stealing the attire of the nymph creature represent the attempt that the male made to tame or control the non human power and make them as ‘normal’. Normalization here is done by incorporating the nymph into human life. They are introduced to daily chores that are supposed to be done by women and made as “ normal wife.” As a normal wife, Nawang Wulan is promised to be the queen of the household and offered abundant love.

A wife is then, defined in terms of love. Firestone acknowledges love as “the pivot of woman’s oppression” (2003: 113). In fairytales, love keeps the women passive and subordinate. It is doubted that Nawang Wulan loves Jaka Tarub. It is quite common to find stories in which the women will achieve the ultimate happiness through marriage, which comes with men’s protection. The “happily ever after” ending, popularize the concept that the ultimate happiness of a woman comes with the intervention of a male protector. The story even suggests that a woman is unsafe in the absence of a male as her protector. Women internaliz[e the patriarchal philosophy that marriage is the ultimate goal in life. A woman’s life depends on how good she is in winning over a handsome husband.

3.2. Liberation

In Fairytales like “Cinderella,” the women will achieve the ultimate happiness through marriage, which comes with men’s protection. However, the protection that Jaka Tarub does not provide any comfort and peace in Nawang Wulan. Despite the protection that her husband offers, she always longs for her home in *Kahyangan*. She is confined to

a world in which she is a stranger. Before her marriage to Jaka Tarub, Nawang Wulan has requested him to take a vow never to open or peep into rice steamer while she is cooking rice. She has a magical power that enable her to feed her family from a single stem of rice, which make the stock of rice in the shed stay in abundance. This is the only power that is left on her that enables her to cope with the burdensome earthly life. However, the spell is broken after Jaka Tarub curiously peeps into the rice steamer, resulting in Nawang Wulan in total loss of her own authority. She has to accept her being normal human. Jaka Tarub's curiosity represents the masculine anxiety of the potential feminine power. The spell is beyond his control as the superior and is considered as potential threat to his authority. This act embodies a vision of masculine absolute power.

The breaking of the spell signifies the assertion of patriarchal power and reinforces the absolute control of men over women. As the magic gone, Nawang Wulan suffers more as she becomes more vulnerable. She is in total loss of herself with all the heavy burden of providing meals for the family as her workload increases. Being helpless, all she can do is to accept the physical as well as emotional torture, which can create dissociative disorder. Such condition is experienced by a lot of woman who are trapped in a marriage against their will. The burden of domestic work is viewed as the duty that women must take for granted and accept without protest. Men rarely care about what their wife experience. Jaka Tarub, being unaware of her wife's suffering due to the hard work goes on enjoying his leisure life, as he still thinks that the rice in the barn would last forever. This epitomizes the ignorance of husbands of the physical and emotional burden experienced by their wives. They are ignorant about what the wives do as long as they are well-fed and taken care, never realizing that the wives are reduced to domesticity. However, they are silenced in their obedience. But, their silence finally ends.

This male ignorance opens the women eyes and ignites awareness of women of their rights and motivates them to liberate themselves from the bondage of patriarchal domination. Having no support, the only way Nawang Wulan can be free is to get her attire back, which represents her true self. Finding her nymph attire in the barn for Nawang Wulan means finding the true self, her natural being. She has to make choices whether to stay with the family or going back home to *Kahyangan*. The society norm requires that once married, a woman must be committed entirely to the husband and the family, sacrificing her freedom for the family's happiness and wellbeing. However, Nawang Wulan chooses to liberate herself, resuming her true self as a nymph and leaving all her earthly responsibility. She finally achieves her freedom, released from the shackle of forced marriage.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

The nymph narrative in Jaka Tarub legend represents complex issues that patriarchal society has inflicted on women, including forced marriage, objectification, sexual exploitation, and identity. Its disruptive ending particularly violates from the idealized ending of "live happily ever after". The nymph character liberates herself from the shackle of patriarchy by returning to her origin despite the responsibility prescribed to her as a wife and a mother. This disruption presents a challenge to the established Javanese patriarchal norm and assumption that men define women as relative and dependent to him, not as themselves. Nawang Wulan, by her own free will by no means escapes from the reduction to the reproductive and domestic function. Her finding the true self and her own free represent the awareness of women to see themselves as what [2] refers to as autonomous subject, who must reject the cultural construct that men have absolute control as the subject and women are the other that must be tamed and controlled.

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