

Towards a New Literary and Cultural Paradigm: *Saman* in Indonesian Writing

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Abstract: *The Dutch colonization of the Islands has played a major role in shaping the present Indonesian literary scenario, for it bears the pangs of political pressures. Women writers were the first to write the novel in the colonial times, as early as the period between 1860 and 1890s. The literary scene can be traced as belonging to various 'generations' or 'ankgatans' which caters to different sensibilities. The stereotypical images of women in fiction were shaken by the writers of 'Generation 2000' who took the literary sensibility to a new phase. Ayu Utami's *Saman* (2000) challenges the repressive Indonesian society through its descriptions of female sexuality. In Indonesia, the State tries to impose control over the lives of people even after the Dutch colonial rule which imposed heavy censorship of the freedom of expression. The essentialized notion of ideal womanhood propagated by the New Order regime is rewritten through women who are outgoing, working, promiscuous, independent and mostly despising motherhood. This paper reads *Saman* as a work that charted a new sensibility in Indonesian literary scenario and how the mainstream literature neglects its due recognition.*

Keywords: *Female Sexuality, Generation 2000, Ibuism, Kodrat Wanita, Resistance.*

I. Introduction

Tracing the trajectory of literary scene in Indonesia is a difficult task as the turbulent political situation of the country has tremendous influence upon the same. Perhaps it is one of the reasons why the archipelago of Indonesia which consists of hundreds of diverse linguistic and native ethnic groups has still not made a distinct position in the map of world literature. Critics like H.B.Jassin, as early as 1975 emphasised the need for translations from Asia and the West to unravel Indonesian literature to the world (Day 173). The dawn of twenty first century witnessed a dramatic turn in the Indonesian literary scene with a number of women writers coming up with their fictional works. The democratic reforms of Indonesia paved the way for such a burgeoning. But the lack of availability of translated works pulls back Indonesian literature from gaining recognition when compared to the literatures from other developing nations. The paper looks at how the socio-cultural ambience in the country has favoured the growth of a new form of writing which overhauls the traditional notions of women and how they re-write those models.

II. The Indonesian Literary Scenario

Regarding the translations in Indonesian literature Michael Garcia notes in his article titled "Indonesian Publishing: New Freedoms, Old Worries and Unfinished Democratic Reforms", "Better known for its volcanoes, island paradises, shadow puppets and world's largest population of Muslims, Indonesia's books remain largely untranslated, a secret library ringed by fire and water"(184). Indonesian literature which ". . . is home to some of the world's oldest literary traditions"(Day 174) is seldom part of the contemporary mainstream world literature to the excess governmental control and the literary culture that was developed during the reign of General Suharto's New Order government.

The Dutch colonized the country from the 17th century till the Second World War. They promoted education but imposed strict control over printing, translation and publishing of books and used it effectively as a strategy for colonial domination. The State owned publishing house named "Balai Pustaka" regulated the printing and publishing of works. Any kind of native uprising was checked by controlling the dissemination of knowledge through literature. What was circulated among the natives strictly emphasized selected traits that supported colonial domination. Watson states the novel *Salah Asuhan* (*A Wrong Upbringing*) published in 1928 by Abdoel Moeis as an example. It escaped the strict censorship of Balai Pustaka for it had a subtext of the Dutch views on education which wanted to keep the natives away from realms of higher education (Watson 190). The country was under Japanese occupation after the Second World War and it was then that Bahasa Indonesia, a derivation of Malay was made the official language. Following the war, Sukarno proclaimed an independent Indonesia on the 17th of August, 1945. In 1949 Indonesian independence was formally recognised with the support of the United Nations. Sukarno became the first President of the newly formed Republic of Indonesia and continued to govern until 1966.

The Indonesian literature has witnessed the birth of many movements or 'angkatan's through which it has matured into its contemporary status (Garcia, "Introduction" x). The Angkatan '45 or "Generation of '45" writers, amongst whom the popular Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer (His major works such as *Keluarga Gerilaya*, (*Guerilla Family*; 1989), *Peruburan* (*The Fugitive*), and *Buru Quartet* (1991-94), wrote about revolution in multiple linguistic styles ranging from "a formal Sumatran type of language through a Javanese-tinted Indonesian to the colloquial language of present day Djakarta" (Stevens 491). A new phase of Indonesian writing sets off from the year 1965 with the Generation '66 writers (Barrett 437). But this short lived movement subsided with rise of Suharto's New Order government, which put excessive control over the political, economical, cultural and creative freedom of the people in Indonesia. Many writers were imprisoned and prevented from their creative activities and thus resulted in the literary as well as cultural decline. The literary scene in Indonesia during Suharto's rule is succinctly described as "Suharto and his administrative apparatus have castrated a generation of writers, robbing them of their generative power, the power of being historical witnesses who could tell others about what is happening before their very eyes" (quoted in Aveling: 6). The country was in a sort of Dark Age that prevented any form of discourse against the State to be communicated to the reading public. Such intellectual conditioning has had tremendous effect upon the literature and culture of Indonesia.

III. The New Order regime and the Ideal Womanhood

Images of ideal woman were propagated by the Suharto regime through its women's organization Dharma Wanita (Women's Duty) and the ideals of 'kodrat wanita', that a woman's most important contribution to the State was to be a wife and mother. This ideal was also known as State Ibuism, a term coined by Julia Suryakusuma (1996). Women writers such as Nh. Dini who wrote in the 1970s could be seen as forerunner of contemporary women's voices from Indonesia. Through her novel she "paints disturbing picture of women who are capable to put their need first, but who, in the process, virtually ignore their children" (Smith-Hefner 625). But the women authors were denied their due recognition and were marginalized as romance writers by the mainstream literature. On analyzing the popular women's magazines of the New Order Suharto regime, Suzanne Brenner in her article entitled "On the Public Intimacy of the New Order: Images of Women in Popular Indonesian Print Media" (1999) points out some prevalent themes in the popular magazines. She notes, "Far from urging women to engage in political struggle, the popular women's magazines of the New Order period reinforced the Suharto regime's unceasing efforts to create an image of stable, harmonious, prosperous society built on a foundation of moral, apolitical, middle class families" (14). The middle class women are considered as the icons of ideal womanhood, who is always in the shadow of her husband and children. According to Brenner the deliberate apolitical tone of these magazines "disguises the extent to which the state relied on the ideological control of women and family . . . as one of the keys of implementing its social, economic and ultimately political agendas" (14). The women writers of the present era disagree with such deliberate imposition of stereotypes and the hidden control of State over the lives of people.

IV. The Generation '98 Writers

After the fall of the New Order government, the Generation '98 writers started writing. They initiated a new mode of writing that began to establish a resistant stance. There was a boom in the Indonesian book publishing with a number of titles and newer topics of writings. This was the result of a new literary sensibility born after the democratization of government and liberalization of the press. Ayu Utami, Dewi Lestari, Fira Basuki, Nova Riyanti Yusuf and Djenar Ayu are the contemporary Indonesian women writers who belong to Generation '98. About their writing style Michael Garcia says that sex becomes a metaphor for individual freedom (Introduction x), which is a deliberate attempt to flout the culture that was moulded by media repression and governmental control. Critics remark that the emergences of literary works that subvert socio-cultural values are inevitable in a country like Indonesia. Meghan Downes opines,

To understand why the notion of female authors writing about female desire and non-normative sexualities (as well as issues of politics and social justice, which were previously only deemed appropriate for male writers), it is important to recall the New Order regime's strict control over public expression and also its hegemonic representations of women. Under Suharto's 30-year authoritarian rule (1966-1998), media makers were obliged to conform to state ideologies. Only a handful of television and radio stations, the majority of which were government-controlled or owned by Suharto's associates. The film industry was tightly controlled by state interests, and produced mainly historical or developmental propaganda films. In the literature scene, novelists tended to shroud any potentially controversial or critical messages in layers of absurdist playfulness and indirect wordplay. Women's bodies in particular often served as a site of social control and an emblem of national identity. (369-70)

It is clear then that repression when continued for a long time results in subversive movements which demand change in the socio-cultural milieu. Due to the increased mention of sex and related topics in the

writings by these women, some critics dismiss their writing as 'sastra wangi' (fragrant literature). Ayu Utami's *Saman*, which was published in May 1998, published some weeks before the fall of Soharito's regime is regarded as the predecessor of this inclination of women writers to talk explicitly about taboo subjects (Marching 134). It is a critique of the Indonesian society and its law and order system. Indonesia is described by title character, Saman as, "... swirling with unpredictability, a place where the law oscillates like a pendulum" (154). Their works carve out a niche of their own, by creating a new literary/historical tradition. The four women characters in *Saman* redefine the state imposed notions of womanhood in different ways. Laila, Shakuntala, Cok and Yasmin revamp the traditional notion of womanhood in the Indonesian society. The novel unfolds as a collage of the day-to-day activities of the characters with an undertone of sexual politics and social critique. The State imposed image of 'kodrat wanita' is repeatedly redefined through the narrative.

Ayu do not limit her canvass to women's freedom in society but also brings forth the issue of transmigration in the narrative. Transmigrasi is defined in clause 1 of the Basic Transmigration Act of 1972 as: "...the removal and/or transfer of population from one area to settle in another area determined upon within the territory of the Republic of Indonesia, in the interests of the country's development, or for other reasons considered necessary by the government." (Eagling 22). It was started by the Dutch colonizers in 1902 and was continued by Sukarno government in 1952 in order to alleviate poverty and unemployment problems. But a lot of problems were associated with transmigration such as corruption, human-rights abuse and ecological disasters were ignored by the government. Saman, the protagonist, begins his life in one of the islands as a Catholic priest Father Wisaggeni. When he is sent by the Church to a parish in Perabumulih, he becomes involved in the rehabilitation of rubber plantation workers. He rescues a mentally retarded girl Upi in the village from sexual abuse and therefore becomes an active member of the community. The villagers are threatened by the government machinery to forcefully migrate to some other place as part of transmigration policy, Father Wis fights along with them to save their plantations. The government files a number of cases against Father Wis, and ultimately to save himself from the trials, he takes up the name Saman, and migrates to the U.S as a human rights activist. The issues discussed by Ayu in the first part of the narrative focuses on the undemocratic reforms that are carried out by the government which ruins the peaceful existence of the villagers. Moreover, she touches upon the harmful effects of transmigration upon the environment. The crops fail due to unscientific agriculture and the village economy is shattered. Upi, the mentally retarded ugly girl dominates the narrative as a symbol of distortion in the socio-economic and cultural spheres of the country. The issues of human rights violations are also highlighted through the detailed account of the powerful officials torturing Saman in various ways when he tries to ruin their transmigration plans.

Saman was a commercial success but its literary style created discontent among many leading critics in Indonesia because of the explicit mention of female sexuality. Soe Marching in her article "Description of Female Sexuality in Ayu Utami's *Saman*" (2007) discusses the multiple reception of the novel in Indonesia in detail. She quotes the leading male critic Rosihan Anwar who described the innovative style in women's writing as "sastra mesum" (pornographic literature). Leading writers of the country such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Taufiq Ismail have also criticized the writing style of the young female writers. One of the renowned Indonesian poets Rendra went to the extent of doubting the originality of the novel. Female critics are also hostile to the Generation '98 women. Medy Loekito, a leading female critic accused *Saman* of representing a form of sexual freedom that would harm Indonesian morals and principles. Marching points out certain positive responses from female critics as well. She quotes Barbara Hately and some other critics who argue that the novel challenges the patriarchal order by the sexual transgressions of the female characters (Marching 134-5). Some describe the new trend in the literary scene as "... Emancipation Literature (Sastra Emansipasi) or Liberation Literature (Sastra Pembebasan), in which women authors such as Ayu Utami, Dewi Lestari, and Djenar Ayu, break with expected norms, ... claiming to write for themselves first and not for an imagined ideal reader, who represents the accepted social mores of the society" (Garcia, "The Indonesian Free Book Press", 129). The open declaration of the writers that they write for themselves and not for the readers who would like to maintain the status quo in the society is in itself a challenge. With criticisms shot from every critic in the literary world *Saman* shocked the custodians of morality by selling 100,000 copies in Indonesian language itself.

The narrative is given in the voices of Laila, Shakuntala, Cokorda, Saman and the email exchanges between Yasmin and Saman. Laila represents the women in the society who conforms to the tradition and culture. She is educated, employed and financially sound but she does not want to take a different path from what is normally taken by others in the society. She runs a small production company with her partner Tony. The novel unravels Laila's character as an innocent woman, who gets into relationships with men without demanding anything. The novel criticizes the sexual restraints in Indonesia by discussing the diverse perspectives of the characters. Laila tries to conform to the rules by great pain, but her friends Yasmin, Shakuntala and Cok try to discover their sexualities in a different way. Yasmin defies the rules of marriage and principles of fidelity by having affair with Saman without divorcing her husband. Cok and Shakuntala despise marriage as institutions. All of them represent the attitudes of women in the present Indonesia that is greatly

influenced by its repressive colonial past. The defining construct of these women is their sexuality, the female body and its desire. These aspects becomes an essential element of self-definition. Explicit descriptions of female sexuality combined with the revisionist mythmaking are used to rewrite the prejudices about female sexuality. Ayu tries to reinvent the story of Adam and Eve from the female perspective. Yasmin, in one of her letters to Saman describes how man interpellates the parts of the woman's body and uses sexual power to punish woman. Later he penetrates her and comments after sexual intercourse, "Delicious is sin. But the woman has tasted the punishment"(178). Yasmin's re-writing of Adam- Eve story is an open challenge to the constraints imposed by the Indonesian society in which there is greater objectification of women. The skillful use of reworking of the myth challenging the control of female sexuality is a tricky approach in a society like Indonesia. Utami says, "For a patriarchal society, the taboo is making women the subjects in sexual matters. So far, people exploit sex, but by objectifying women . . . But I want to make women become the subjects. That is considered taboo" (The Jakarta Post, Nov 13, 2005). The marginalized self of woman is brought to the centre by liberating it from the clutches of objectification.

The greater freedom for publication with the neutral attitudes of government has resulted in the publication boom in Indonesia. The publishers' eye on the marketable item makes *Saman* their favourite with the discussion of taboo subjects and the excessive presence of sex. The writers use the narrative strategy of excessive sex and taboo subjects to re-write the image of the ideal woman in the Indonesian society. The essentialized notion of ideal womanhood propagated by the New Order regime is removed with the picture of women who are outgoing, promiscuous, independent and mostly despising motherhood. But their style of writing, with excessive mention of taboo subjects, has made them the publishers' favourites. The speed in which these women writers get translated into different languages is incredible when the history of translation of Indonesian literature is considered. The writing strategy used by the Indonesian women writers, against the commodification and stereotyping of women, is an encouragement to the writers from other developing countries as well. Though translation of the works by women authors helps the growth of Indonesian literature by taking it to many countries and cultures, the excessive commercialization of the books by publishers makes the situation problematic. The use of sexuality of women in the writings is to make women the subject and not the object of discussion. On the publication industry in Indonesia Michael Garcia notes in "The Indonesian Free Book Press" that, "The topic of sex now dominates book sales-- or at least book promotions -- in offerings that range from Moammar Emka's daring Jakarta Undercover laundry list of high-priced sex services in the capital to the fiction of the women authors of Generation '98 and Islamic books on sex suci (pure, holy)" (134). The cover page of the translation of Djenar Maesa Ayu's *They Say I'm a Monkey* corroborates Garcia's comment. It shows the back view of the naked torso of a woman. A part of her face is also visible. The cover page explicitly gives some idea to the consumers about the content of book without even browsing through the pages. Such kind of marketing strategies undermines the intentions of the writers who dare to speak against the multifaceted problems faced by their societies.

V. Conclusion

Contemporary women writers take up various problems faced by the budding democratic Indonesia in their writings. The socio-political commitment and the intensity with which they stand up for the struggles of women are remarkable. Ayu represents the struggles of the present age and leaves many questions on religion and female sexuality questions in the limbo without offering any solutions. The spirit of rebellion in such writers surely calls for a change in the attitudes of the society that still harbours the fake moral values that were imposed by the New Order regime. Ayu along with her contemporaries have created a new literary and cultural paradigm in Indonesian literature which has revolutionised the literary scenario and their works deserves to be acknowledged as part of mainstream literature from Indonesia.

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