

Indonesian folktales: feminism and the query of femaleness

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Abstract

This paper aims to study about the query of femaleness in Indonesian folktales from the feminism approach. It is taken into account due to women's subordination that allegedly implies the negation of femaleness. In particular, the perpetual story of Malin Kundang represents that owing to her weakness, a woman is a subordinate creature. It happens when Malin Kundang denies the appearance of her mother after a series of successes he makes. Another popular story, Sangkuriang, even depicts that due to her beauty, a woman is an object of sex. It is seen when Sangkuriang proposes Dayang Sumbi to be his wife because of his inability of recognising her as his mother after some year banishment. The subordination eventually drives the two women to struggle against it in order to defend their dignity. The mother of Malin Kundang spells him to be a stone and Dayang Sumbi overtly refuses Sangkuriang's proposal. Their struggles are of course valued of the morality for wider public, too. Despite this, the tales remain a query of women's existence, particularly that of femaleness. The truth that a woman is biologically and socially the mother of man is denied in order to sustain men's superiority. By biologically it means that a woman is the undenied creature for her gifted power of childbirthing. It then socially gives her more power to sustain the generations and the social relationships. Furthermore, it is pivotal to investigate the feminist critical ideas about the essence of femaleness in the Indonesian folktales.

Key words: Indonesian folktales, feminism, femaleness, men's superiority, negation, object of sex, women's subordination, power

Introduction

Indonesia is a country with thousands of islands inhabited by hundreds of tribes whose cultures are incalculably varied, too. Those cultures, by which the tribals have continually been living and establishing civilisations over times and spaces, are the rich sources of invaluable cultural and social history as well as morality for human beings. Of the cultures, folktales are valued of these merits. Boas' anthropological theory convincingly said that folktales have much contributed to the foundation of the ethnographic research of any society (Olarinmoye, 2013, p. 138). This theory is principally essential and inherent to the study of folktales as part of cultures, more than as the verbal, literary, and written expressions. To some extents, this paper will not discuss at length about the theory, but only lays down the background of knowledge in order to comprehend the meaning of folktales in the perspective.

As the verbal art, folktales are particularly very useful for nurturing children about morals, like friendship, heroism, and obedience to parents. Almerico argued (2014) that all good literature, including folktales, functions as transmitting moral lessons essential for character building (Almerico, 2014, p. 3). These morals are even more universal

from which adults may also learn. Therefore, folktales are generally to moralise people. Indonesian folktales, like *Malin Kundang* (abbreviated as MK) and *Sangkuriang* (abbreviated as S), are two good examples for moral teachings, particularly about obedience to parents.

Apart from the morality aspect, studies about folktales are particularly challenging. Starting from the anthropological theory, other theories, like feminism, psychoanalysis, formalism, and so forth, are very possible to use for the studies. As the grand theory of women's struggle for equality, feminism is much considerable to be applied especially for literature with themes of women's victimisation or gender relations. This thesis derives from the depiction of female characters in folktales as mostly minor, weak, witches, traitors, etc. In MK story, for example, the mother is characterised as poor, weak, ugly, and old. Malin Kundang, as a rich and successful merchant, denied her as his mother for the bad trait. On the other hand, in S story, Dayang Sumbi is described as a noble and beautiful woman. She married with a god-cursed-into-a-dog and had got a son whose name was Sangkuriang. Like a tragedy, a hero must do a mistake. It was told that Sangkuriang killed incidentally the dog that made Dayang Sumbi angry and hit his head with a rice

spoon. He was then banished for years. Unfortunately, the banishment brought her into difficulty when she met Sangkuriang again with the proposal to make her as his wife. It happened due to his inability of recognising her as his mother. Indeed, this condition was, for Dayang Sumbi, an irony when her beauty cursed her to accept the proposal of her son. Because folktales are about morals and to moralise people, *MK* and *S* stop the arrogance of the two men fairly. The mother of Malin Kundang spelt Malin Kundang to be a stone in order that children will not do the same mistake as he had done; whilst Dayang Sumbi did a trick in order that Sangkuriang would fail to finish the boat she requested to refuse the proposal.

Regarding this, there are two important things from *MK* and *S* to be delineated further. *First*, the stories are very much concerned with women's discrimination and *the last*, the existence of women, especially relating to the femaleness, is in dilemma. It is assumed that a woman is biologically and socially the mother of man for her gifted power to child birthing and sustain the generations and social relationships. Yet, it is presumably negated in order to sustain men's superiority. These two things should go hand in hand and needs to be discussed in more details using the lens of feminism. The question to be answered is mainly how feminism criticises the essence of femaleness represented in the folktales inherent to women's struggle for dignity.

Feminism across the waves

As a theory expanded by the western philosophical stances, feminism is much appreciated for its concern on serving women with knowledge and struggle against any circumstances around them. The expansion of the theory, though debatable, has marked that women's and gender studies have extremely been developing and so have been the number of theorists. At least, they can be categorised into three great waves with three different centres of attentions. To begin with, the focal point of the first wave feminism, between 1870s and 1920s, lied on the enlightenment doctrine of human rights. It particularly sets the political on focus that voiced women's rights for voting, property ownership, education, inheritance, and business management. In her review towards the wave, Valerie Sanders stated (2001) that the wave was very much concerned with individual women's responses to specific circumstances they faced in realities; therefore some theories were more personal experience-based and tended to campaign

the essence of the movement (Sanders, 2001, as cited in Gamble, 2001, p. 15). The early figure of the wave was Mary Wollstonecraft. As the pioneer of the wave, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), she inclusively declared her ideas of women's right for education addressed to middle-class women to challenge the patriarchal superiority over femininity (Wollstonecraft, 1792, as cited in Sanders, 2001, as cited in Gamble, 2001, p. 15-16).

In line with Wollstonecraft, in *The English Women's Journal*, Barbara Leigh Smith insisted (1858) that middle-class women, married or unmarried, had to be well-prepared with good education and career. She furthermore argued that education was particularly important to equip married women to raise and educate their children, whilst career was necessary to help them financially afford childraising when divorce occurred (Smith, 1858, as cited in Walters, 2005, p. 58-59).

The euphoria of the first wave was then widespread throughout England, especially when John Stuart Mill, through *In the Subjection of Women* (1869), introduced the idea of women's suffragettes which marked the beginning of the period when women obtained the right to vote and become the fully-fledged citizens (Knapp Van Bogaert and Ogunbanjo, 2016, p. 116). As reviewed by Sanders (2001), Mill furthermore challenged the traditional view of society that had unjustly positioned women as inferior and had blocked them from improvement that he expressed in *The Enfranchisement of Women* (1851)—the ideas that he adapted from his wife, Harriet Taylor (Sanders, 2001 as cited in Gamble, 2001, p. 18).

From the discussion, there is one basic thing that, apart from the political stances, the first wave feminism still maintained, that was the essence of femaleness or womanliness—the quality of being a woman. In "Feminism and the Ethics of Care", Knapp Van Bogaert and Ogunbanjo (2016) strongly stated that the wave even maintained the ideas of maternalism, of traditional female values, and of childraising quality by women (Knapp Van Bogaert and Ogunbanjo, 2016, p. 116). So to speak, education and career were, for the first wave, the equipments women needed to do those.

Principally, the debate about the feminism standpoints had extremely grown in the second wave. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir strictly stated that woman is just the Other for man, or, in other words, she is the object for man to see. It is all because of the feminine traits she has. From this notion, Beauvoir obviously rejected the concept of femininity that traps women to be more

oppressed by men. She then suggested that women need to be more active in constructing the Self (Beauvoir 1949, as cited in Walters, 2005, p. 98-99)

Another similar idea comes from Betty Friedan. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), she mostly commented on the myth of the happiness of happy housewives in white and well-off American families in suburbs. She argued that the home only provided women with traditional gender roles that would withstand them from improvement. Therefore, she suggested that women had to be fully involved in obtaining their equality to men, by exactly getting works outside the home. Her idea then inspired the emergence of liberal feminism (Friedan, 1963 as cited in Walters, 2005, p. 102). Yet, Thornham criticised (2001) that Friedan's thesis was only to "clean" the personal and domestic sphere from feminist criticisms (Thornham, 2001 as cited in Gamble, 2001, p. 30-31).

In *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millet contrastively stated that the more women internalise the ideology of femininity into them, the more men will oppress them, with more forces institutionally, personally, and culturally (Millet, 1970, as cited in Thornham, 2001, as cited in Gamble, 2001, p. 31). Following her idea, Schulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) expanded it through the idea of reproductive technology to help women from oppressions, particularly biologically (Firestone, 2001 as cited in Thornham, 2001, as cited in Gamble, 2001, p. 32). Accordingly, such reproductive technologies, as caesarean and in vitro fertilization, are the instances of Firestone's idea to help women from sexual divisions, especially those who do not want to marry but want to have children. This idea is basically concerned with the idea of maternalism women still need to focus on among the other feminists analyses of the second wave who extremely "protected" it and suggested women to fully empower themselves outside the home.

Indeed, it is the femininity matter that has mostly provoked feminists to do movements. So, the debate about it has seemingly been contested in order for presenting the best theory appropriate for women's and gender studies. All of the three waves have constructively been being discussed by feminists and other philosophers so far that is not known yet when it will come to an end. The contestation has reached the peak when the third wave feminists questioned the aftermath of feminism. Jane Spencer inclusively answered (2004) that there are three different centres of attentions: first wave is the equality, second wave is the difference in sexes, and third wave is the politics of identity (Spencer, 2004

as cited in Gillis et al, 2004, p. 9). The last is of central since women's identity construction is problematic amid the complexiveness of postmodern societies. To be a mother or a woman is possibly optional, especially for young women, after seeing their mothers' past experiences. These groups of young women mostly put their interests more on the generational issues than the gender, out of the influences of the globalisation. As Spencer argued (2004), for them, the femaleness is more or less economically disadvantageous (Spencer, 2004 as cited in Gillis et al, 2004, p. 11). Furthermore, Gamble criticised (2001) the terminology used to define the third wave from postfeminism. Though both are acceptable, she finally revealed that women should be aware of their potentials and risks along the instability of the globalisation (Gamble, 2001, p. 44-45). Finally, the third wavers seemingly agreed that the problems the former two wavers had debated should be answered through the optimisation of women's activism in the politics of identity. They offered an option for women to be what they want best for their lives.

Above all, the discussion sets the theoretical framework to unfold the query of femaleness in the Indonesian folktales represented in MK and S. The query is defined as an attempt at seeking and laying down the feminists analyses from the three waves of the essence of femaleness in the tales.

Feminism and folktales

In studying about folktales or folklore, feminist theory argued that gender in folktales has established the foundation for the analysis of the experience in cultures and the art of creativity (Kousaleos, 1999, p. 20). This notion may be conceived as a long process of the establishment of the theoretical framework feminist theorists have done to present a series of 8 analyses of gender experiences in folktales. These tales are particularly concerned with traditional truth, knowledge and realities in which gender has been culturally problematised. In her review of the essence of folktales studies, Farrer advised (1975) that feminist folklorists had to be concerned more with women's genres since they were very connected to the assumption of femaleness in which women were depicted as custodian, familial, and dwelling in the private realm (Farrer, 1975 as cited in Kousaleos, 1999, p. 23). Hence, the feminist theories and folktales have a strong relationship for working on the study of gender experiences. This framework will be applied hand in hand with the three waves of

feminism formerly discussed to scrutinise the query of femaleness in the Indonesian folktales.

Women's femaleness: power of existence

In this section, the query of femaleness in Indonesian folktales represented in *MK* and *S* is discussed in the feminist theoretical framework of the prevailing domination over women and of the struggles women do to secure their dignity. Amid the discussion, it will be also discussed how the feminist theory criticises the essence of femaleness in the tales.

The story of *MK* begins when Malin Kundang lived in poverty with his mother until he went to town to earn a living. The mother lived alone in the village and waited for his return. Along the days, she was waiting for him in the port until one day Malin Kundang really arrived at the port with his wife and all of his wealth. She was very happy to see his arrival and success. Yet, it turned to be a tragedy when he denied to recognise her as his mother because of her ugliness, poverty, and weakness. This condition certainly made her sad and disappointed. She then cursed him to be a stone, though regret came as the aftermath.

On the other hand, the tale of *S* mostly focuses on the innocent Sangkuriang who incidentally killed the guardian dog that was actually a cursed-god and the husband of Dayang Sumbi, his mother. So, he was fortunately his father. Due to the guilt, Dayang Sumbi was much uncontrolled, hit his head with a rice spoon, and banished him. Years later, Sangkuriang came as a young man and met Dayang Sumbi. Ironically, Sangkuriang could not recognise her as his mother. What he saw was such a beautiful woman that he fell in love with and wanted to marry. Yet, Dayang Sumbi could not recognise him as her son and tried to stop his proposal. She then requested that a marriage would only possibly happen when he could finish to make a full-sized boat in one night. In the same time, Dayang Sumbi was doing a strategy to stop it by making nuisances as the sign of the daylight. Seeing that the dawn was coming, Sangkuriang was terrified and furiously hit the ship until it was turned upside down.

For morality aims, these tales are considerably an alarm for all children about the obedience to parents, and for all parents, about the act of forgiveness to children. Despite this, the tales at first presents the powerlessness of women to convince the patriarchal ideology about the importance of women's existence. It happens on account of the overwhelming domination in forms of subordination, marginalisation, and violence. These

can be explained from the stigmatisation of women as weak, ugly, poor, witches, custodians, and or even as beautiful but to only give men pleasures. It is in line with the assumption of femininity inferiority feminist theorists have claimed. Residing in the domestic sphere has been argued to block women from improvement that will only undermine women's position. As the instances, the mother of Malin Kundang was disgraced for her inferior trait, whilst Dayang Sumbi for her ironical beauty. These two traits are not absolutely civilised to appreciate women's roles in the private sphere.

Continuously, both mothers, apart from the inferiority assumption, demonstrate the female power at the anticlimaxes of the tales. In particular, the curse presumably sounds very severe and imprudent. The trick to stop the proposal is perhaps deceiving and severe, too. Yet, the circumstances were increasingly jeopardising and provoking women's dignity. Therefore, the curse and the trick should be considered as empowering women to cope with and free from any circumstances. As it is always claimed by feminist theorists, circumstances or discriminations are not the end of women's struggles to fight for more equalities. However, equality might cautiously and appropriately be defined as not a mere condition where women are really equal to men, but rather, that where women are absolutely accepted as independent entities with full potentials and roles. So to speak, the struggle the two women of the tales do should be grasped inclusively inherent to the reasons it is taken.

To argue further, the circumstances of the tales allow the two women to strongly insist on defending their absolute roles as the respective mothers. It is definitely relevant to the morality aims and the feminists' analysis. However, the essence of the struggle does not stop only on the pursuit of equality, in terms of the authority in the domestic sphere, but more on the essence of femaleness by which women are respectively described as naturally having gifted power for childbirthing and fostering. These potentials and roles are furthermore biologically and socially operating hand in hand, in particular to sustain the social relationships. When they are discredited, it will arouse such imbalance to the sustainability of the relationships as well as to women's privileges as human beings. Lessing strongly stated (2007) that childbirthing or reproduction is a power woman possess (Lessing, 2007, p.16, as cited in Lalbakhsh, 2014, p. 23). However, it becomes a matter of envy and assault for men (Lalbakhsh, 2014, p. 23). Such notion is

more or less neglected by feminist theorists, or the last is the main focus they are mostly concerned on.

To some extents, the essence of femaleness has given the two mothers power to fight for their dignity when it is negated by the patriarchal ideology in the same time. It undoubtedly appears and enhances its essence. It is somewhat contradictory to what feminist theorists have claimed as the femaleness disadvantages. To be clearer, feminist theorists have protested that the femininity assumption has trapped women in more oppression. Yet, this claim sounds absurd when it is juxtaposed to the case of the tales. The mothers do not considerably use the femaleness as a hindrance, but as a power to boost the dignity up. It is arguable along with the self-realisation they persist in controlling the impacts of the oppressions. The curse and the refusal for the proposal are particularly a mother's prerogative to end worst subordinations, like neglect of parents and incestuous marriage. It is a struggle against the oppressions as well as for the enforcement of self-esteem. So to speak, it is not a matter of the femininity inferiority, but rather an exposure of the femininity superiority.

Regarding this, feminist theorists should have reconsidered the contribution of the femaleness potentials to the sustainability of women's dignity, in terms of maternal principles. Women are not only destined with childbirthing power by means of they are nurturing, caring, and doing the housework. Through the principles, women are the source of fertility for the sustainability of social relationships, thus, for that of generations. It precisely highlights women's existence for the life continuation. If it might then be considered to have sustained the patriarchal ideology, it was merely out of men's resistance to it.

Accordingly, the tales are very much concerned with the traditional truth, knowledge, and reality about gender problems. For Melayu people to whom *MK* belongs, women are "*amban puruak*", by whom and in whom legacy is entrusted to protect; while men are responsible for managing it. On the other hand, for Sundanese people, women are positioned based on the classes. As written by Tatang Sumarsono (2014), for feudalistic classes, women were for complimentary and for sexual pleasures. They were not respectably positioned, especially when they were married as concubines by noble families. In contrast, for traditional classes, women and men performed the harmony of life. They did households and agricultural works together (Sumarsono, 2014, p. 1-2). This reality shows that gender problems might be defined as

specific, cannot be generalised, thus, dependent on the grand truth people hold.

Hence, the struggle the mother of Malin Kundang did should be argued in terms of the truth Melayu people hold, that, women are well-appreciated as the "protector" of legacy. This legacy might also be closed to the life continuation of generations, even, and not only be defined as the protection of wealth. So to speak, women's existence and roles are pivotal, yet, in the tales, it is negated. Meanwhile, the oppression Dayang Sumbi experienced may represent the condition of women within the patriarchal Sundanese societies. Her nobility could not give warrant to the appreciation of the femaleness advantages. Therefore, the negation to the femaleness is ended by optimizing its power.

Above all, the query of femaleness in the tales more or less presents the inclusionary idea to particularly respond to the inconsistency of feminist theories about the femaleness advantages. It is true that the patriarchal ideology has manipulated it to maintain men's superiority. However, it should be fairly scrutinised that the femaleness has also contributed to empower women to struggle for and sustain their existence. Therefore, it is no longer as inferior to, but superior to the ideology of patriarchy.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a study about the query of femaleness in Indonesian folktales from the feminism approach. In the context of folktales analysis, feminist theories have more or less neglected the essence of femaleness. Apart from its position to be the central issue of feminism, it might be appropriately considered in terms of its contribution to the empowerment of women, in particular to the exposure and sustainability of its superiority over the ideology of patriarchy. As exemplified by the tales, cursing and preventing generations from abusing the familial relationships are a mother's privileges to end worst discriminations. It is inferred that women are the creatures with the power of childbirthing, fostering, and maintaining the households. Hence, they are superior to men, albeit men's resistance to them.

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