

## WOMEN AND THE REPRODUCTION OF LITERARY NARRATIVES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATION

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### **Abstract**

This study attempts to explore the positioning of women in literary narratives, particularly in the construction of the space known as "nation". In discussions of nation and nationhood, these two concepts are frequently attributed to men. Questions of nationhood are also considered masculine, as nationhood is itself narrowly defined as nationalism or defense of the state. In such discussions, women are always excluded, as they are constructed quite differently from men. The narrative of nation is a complex one, in which men and women are differently constructed. Narratives of women are frequently and continuously reproduced, both by men and by women. If, in a social context, narratives of women are continuously reproduced, what are they like in literary narratives that construct the nation? What type of narration of women is constructed? Why is such a construction forefronted? This study specifically explains how women can be continuously present in literature.

**Keywords:** women, construction, narration, nation, literature

## WANITA DAN REPRODUKSI NARASI SASTRA DALAM KONSTRUKSI BANGSA

### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini mencoba mengeksplorasi posisi perempuan dalam narasi sastra, terutama dalam konstruksi ruang yang dikenal sebagai "bangsa". Dalam diskusi tentang bangsa dan kebangsaan, kedua konsep ini sering dikaitkan dengan laki-laki. Pertanyaan tentang kebangsaan juga dianggap maskulin, karena kebangsaan itu sendiri secara sempit didefinisikan sebagai nasionalisme atau pertahanan negara. Dalam diskusi semacam itu, perempuan selalu dikecualikan, karena dikonstruksi dengan cara yang berbeda dengan laki-laki. Narasi bangsa adalah hal yang kompleks; di dalamnya pria dan wanita dikonstruksi secara berbeda. Narasi perempuan sering dan terus diproduksi ulang, baik oleh pria maupun wanita. Jika dalam konteks sosial narasi perempuan terus-menerus direproduksi, bagaimana narasi perempuan dalam narasi sastra yang mengkonstruksi bangsa? Jenis narasi perempuan apa yang dikonstruksi? Mengapa konstruksi seperti itu dikedepankan? Penelitian ini secara khusus menjelaskan bagaimana wanita dapat terus hadir dalam sastra.

**Kata kunci:** wanita, konstruksi, bangsa, sastra

### **Introduction**

A nation is an entity constructed around shared memories and experiences. This is reflected in the explanation by

Benedict Anderson (2006) that nations are representations of nationalism, in which persons who have never met agree to work together towards nation building.

The invention of paper allowed the joint construction of nations, as through writing—for example, in newspapers—a shared perspective and understanding could be developed and used as the basis for constructing a nation. Once an agreement was reached, the question became one of which members of diverse society held the greatest bargaining position in determining the course of the nation. Would men and women be given the same space for constructing the nation? Would different social and ethnic groups have equal bargaining power in the construction of the nation?

If the construction of a “nation” is based on shared experiences and memories of colonization and subjugation, is there segregation in the construction process? If a nation is a mosaic of ethnicities, social classes, ages, religions, and diverse social categories working together for a shared goal, can different bargaining positions be expected and accepted? The raising of the Indonesian flag following the proclamation of Indonesian independence on 17 August 1945, for example, is an important and beautiful experience in the narration of Indonesia’s independence, with the flag-raising ceremony being attended by a diverse audience of different ethnicities, genders, and ages. In terms of gender, several women can be seen, including Fatmawati and SK Trimurti. In terms of age, aside from Sukarno and Muhammad Hatta, both senior, there were also younger figures such as Latief Hendraningrat, Suhud Sastro Kusumo, and Ilyas Karim; the last of these was only eighteen years old at the time of the ceremony. Such an experience was not had by other States, where priority in historical moments was given to older men. The following photograph shows the flying of the *Sang Saka Merah Putih*, Indonesia’s first flag, on 17 August 1945. Although the faces of the women are not visible, as they are not the focus of the photograph, they

are still present at the forefront, becoming part of the photographer’s narrative and the history of Indonesia. They have been narrated, soon after the proclamation of the Indonesian state and nation, even as the narrative of their subjectivities is fragmented owing to their positions as chaperones.



Courtesy: [sejarawanmuda.wordpress.com](http://sejarawanmuda.wordpress.com)

As part of national struggles in society, literature contributes greatly to discussions of nation and nationhood. It significantly informs how the nation is constructed, fought for, criticized, and even deconstructed. If we were to ask who first gathered the courage to question Presidents Sukarno and Suharto, literature and its authors would hold the answer. Pramudya Ananta Toer and Sena Gumira Ajidarma are examples of such authors. In constructing the nation, literature is also based on the memories of its authors. As subjects, authors are an important part of literature throughout the globe and its contributions to nation building. The next question is, if women’s narratives also emerge in a social context, how do women’s narratives become part of the construction of the nation? What type of women’s narratives are produced? Why do such narratives emerge?

This paper will specifically explore how nation can be presented in literature, with a focus on how women are constructed through literary narratives of nation. The concept of nation does not merely focus on questions of military struggle or nationalism, but also on how women

are narrated as part of authors' and social constructions of the nation. Nation is defined expansively here to allow other perspectives on women and their contributions to nation building. To be recognized as playing a role in the construction of the nation, women need not participate in war. Participation in other methods of nation building, including the national Family Planning Plan—a state agenda since the 1970s—also offer women space for constructing the nation. However, such methods are not considered to contribute to the construction of nationhood (Yuval-Davis, 202).

## METHOD

This research focuses on how narratives regarding women's position and role in nation building are presented through literature. Here, these narratives are not understood as nationalism *per se*, but how women are constructed within authors' imaginations to explore women's roles in general. As such, data for this research is not the plot or narrative of the literary works, but rather analytical units consisting of sentences and paragraphs that narrate a construction of women.

This paper will focus predominantly on two works written since *Reformasi* began in 1998. One of these works was written by a man, while the other was written by a woman. The works examined herein are the short story "Clara atawa Wanita yang Diperkosa" ("Clara, or the Woman who was Raped", 1999) by Sena Gumira Ajidarma and the novel *Kinanti* by Margareth Widhy Pratiwi (2001). Both works depict women's involvement in the construction of nation. The former has been selected to explore how women are narrated by men, while the latter has been selected to examine how men's narration of women is reproduced by women writers. This allows an understanding of how the structures narrating women are

reproduced, even by women, through an unchanging system of thinking.

Data from the analytical units (sentences) will be examined through a feminist perspective and connected to the question of the narration of women.

## DISCUSSION

### The Feminist Conceptualization of the Narration of Women

Over time, both men and women have been narrated in different manners. Although both have been narrated, generally only men have narrated themselves or narrated women. According to Betty Friedan (1979), in her book *Feminine Mystique*, women have historically been disassociated with their own narration. They have been limited to the domestic sphere, their voices muffled in public discourse despite public space offering them the greatest potential to narrate and express themselves (Lanser, 2013). The most strategic way of limiting women has been framing them in a nearly unchanging concept, one frequently known in Indonesia as *kodrat* ('nature'). This *kodrat* weakens the position of women, who are incapable of escaping from the essentialist narration of their bodies and roles. They are "obliged" to follow this *kodrat*, which is commonly reproduced (by both men and women) to preserve men's power. This *kodrat*, thus, has been produced by men to secure their power and authority (Walby, 1980)

In literature, men are most frequently positioned as narrative subjects, while women are mostly positioned as narrative objects (Friedan, 1979). This phenomenon is exacerbated by the legitimization of literary groups, which are frequently dominated by men. In a French context, for instance, the Academie Francaise played a telling role in this legitimization. The language promoted by the Academie has preserved masculinity and gendering, thus limiting the space available for women

and femininity. In the French language, gendering grants greater legitimacy to the language of men, while feminine language is given little space or accommodation (Smith, 2008–2009). Feminist attempts to transform the language of male power through feminization have faced objections from those who argue that language, as a historical heirloom, should not be changed.

Gaye Tuchman (1978) argues that women are present in narratives around the world. However, when women are narrated, they are positioned differently from men (McGregor, 2000). Meanwhile, according to Laura Mulvey, women are present in narration, but only seen through the perspective of men (Mulvey, 1973). This male gaze is defined as the manner through which the visual and literary arts depict women from a male perspective and present women as mere objects for men's pleasure. Through the male gaze, women undergo a process of sexual objectification, in which they are viewed not as people but as sexual objects. This male gaze is continuously reproduced in the social structure through what Butler terms performativity (Butler, 1997; Boucher, 2006). Women are also part of the reproduction of the male gaze. They consume the male gaze structure and use it in their own narratives.

Tuchman (1978) identifies three types of masculine perspectives, all of which explain what she terms symbolic annihilation, a concept she uses to explain the lack of representation of women. These types are omission, trivialization, and condemnation.

Omission (Tuchman, 1978) is the removal or elimination of women's narration because the space is occupied by men. For example, in many global histories, the roles of women have been ignored. Only rarely are they presented as heroes, particularly in Western cultures. In literature, many women have had to

write under male pseudonyms owing to contemporary society's unwillingness to accept the writing of women in national histories. Frequently, women's names are not recorded in lists of persons who have fought for the State. The names of a thousand heroes are etched into the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Not one woman is recorded on this list, despite women having taken important, albeit different, roles in ensuring French victory during the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars.

The second concept is trivialization (Tuchman, 1978) which refers to the positioning of women in minimal or insignificant roles. The photograph of the raising of the Indonesian flag presented above is one example. Another example will give a clearer understanding. A woman (A) meets her female friend, B, and says, "I called you the other day, but nobody was home." B answers, "What time? My servant, Anik, was there." A responds: "Yes, she answered the phone." This conversation may not appear to have any odd elements. However, there is clear trivialization of Anik, the domestic servant, when A states that nobody was at home despite Anik having answered the phone. Anik is considered unimportant and thus non-existent. Often, women are sociologically and culturally underrepresented (Klein & Shiffman, 2009) or event unrepresented, as their views are considered unimportant.

The third concept is condemnation (Tuchman, 1978) which means that, when women are narrated or presented, they are positioned as objects, as being punished, as peripheral. Examples include women becoming the evil stepmother, the witch, the raped, etc. (Udasmoro, 2014).

The narration of women is a struggle, one that was central to second-wave feminism. Helene Cixous (1976) explained the importance of self-narration in women's explorations and understandings of their selves. Likewise, Theresa de Lauretis

(1987) opined that women had to fight to become the subjects of narratives and thus explain who they are. Women are hoped to pioneer a space where they can narrate themselves, their sexuality, and even their bodies. However, in many contexts, when women narrate themselves and their bodies, it is viewed with derision. Men mock these efforts at self-narration. For instance, the Indonesian women authors who began narrating themselves as subjects writing of their own bodies and selves in the late 1990s and early 2000s were frequently identified as *Sastrawangi* (fragrant literature) or mocked as *sastra selangkangan* (literature of the crotch). As such, a complex situation exists in which women who desire to narrate themselves are marginalized by men who consider themselves to have greater power and authority for narrating them.

### Represented Narration

Lack of faith in women's narratives is frequently realized through the granting of narrative legitimacy to men. Women are frequently considered lacking in strength, and thus requiring the support of male voices (Tuchman, 1978). In a social context, meetings at the neighborhood level frequently include women. However, in these meetings women tend to remain silent and only agree with the comments of men. Men determine the narrative, even when the narrative is one involving and agreed upon by women. Simone de Beauvoir (1957) gives a similar example in her book *Le Deuxieme Sexe*, in which she identifies similar tendencies in religious practices. She writes that, in morning prayers, Jewish men express their gratitude that God did not create them as women. Meanwhile, women sit behind them and say "Amen", expressing their gratitude for God creating them as they are.

Contemporary literary works frequently indicate the presence of women through male characters. One example can

be found in a short story by Sena Gumira Ajidarma, "Clara atawa Wanita yang Diperkosa" (1999).

Kata-kata bertebaran tak terangkai sehingga aku harus menyambung-nyambung sendiri. Beban penderitaan macam apakah yang bisa dialami manusia sehingga membuatnya tak mampu berkata-kata?

Maka cerita yang akan kau dengar ini bukanlah kalimatnya melainkan kalimatku. Sudah bertahun-tahun aku bertugas sebagai pembuat laporan dan hampir semua laporan itu tidak pernah sama dengan kenyataan. Aku sudah menjadi sangat ahli menyulap kenyataan yang pahit menjadi menyenangkan, dan sebaliknya perbuatan yang sebetulnya patriotik menjadi subversif — pokoknya selalu disesuaikan dengan kebutuhan.

Words fly about, unchained, and so I must tie them together myself. What kind of suffering can humans bear that leave them unable to speak?

And so the story you will hear is not in her sentences, but in mine. For years, I've written reports for a living, and almost none of these reports have been the same as reality. I've become an expert in conjuring a happy reality from bitterness, and conversely transforming patriotism into subversion—always as needed.

Reality, in this quotation, is the reality of men, which is viewed as being forever true. He is capable of formulating the narrative structure as he pleases. The "need" to which he refers is one related to the truth of his perspective. Problematically, when he has the right to reverse or rewrite sentences in a manner that deviates from the woman's experiences, then that woman experience trivialization. The actual words of the female character are considered unimportant, and the male

narrator feels it necessary to reformulate her words himself.

Culturally and religiously, this male “reality” has been present throughout human history. In a historical Islamic context, lack of belief and trust in women led to them losing their individual rights when testifying and required them to be corroborated by other women (Syafe’i, 2016). Meanwhile, men’s testimony was automatically believed, and as such individual voices were accepted. The woman in Sena Gumira Ajidarma’s short story is not believed, and so her testimony must be conveyed through a man. Even though his testimony involves the reformulation and even inversion of reality, it is believed.

### **Women’s Narration as Reproductive Machines**

In narratives of nation, women are constructed in different ways by different regimes. Together with the State, authors have an important role in narrating women’s roles in the nation. As explained above, men are positioned as producers of knowledge and power (Yuval-Davis, 2002). If we agree that men use their knowledge and power to frame women when constructing the nation, what form does this narration take?

Women’s bodies being used to ensure the continued survival of the nation is common in literature. Women were positioned as reproductive machines in a narrative continuously reproduced in the Suharto era. Women were viewed as machines for reproduction who were expected to follow State policies by limiting the number of their children. Likewise, women were expected to marry to fulfill the State’s expectations. Women were under social duress to find a partner, marry, become pregnant, have children, and educate their children; these were considered their duties as women. After they married, women were not allowed to

divorce. By doing so, they would become divorcees and thus go against the ideal construction of the nation and community. The punishment for this was social ostracism. Although this situation began to change in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has continued to be reproduced in literature, particularly by male authors—though many women authors have been trapped in the same narrative. Around the world, women continue to be depicted as obliged to marry and have children. Such “doing gender” is practiced by emphasizing existing or mature narratives, as these narratives are best understood by the public.

The positioning of women in the domestic sphere is frequently reproduced, not only by male writers but also by female ones. The positioning of women as the responsibility of men is continually reproduced. The novel *Kinanti* by Margareth Widhy Pratiwi provides one example.

“Lho, Jeng Yulia ki saiki wis dadi nyonya Sujarwo. Wus ora bisa bebas kaya biyen meneh, sing dolan ijen saba diskotek”. (Pratiwi, 2001:94)

“Lho, Jeng Yulia has become Sujarwo’s wife now. She can’t be like she was, going on her own to the disco”. (Pratiwi, 2001:94)

The problem here is that the justification for positioning women is taken to extremes by mentioning the disco, or nightclub. This type of narrative is used to indicate whether or not a woman is “well-behaved”. As the female character has become a mother, her husband’s control over her has become more legitimate.

### **Women’s Narration as Beautiful Victims**

Women are narrated as beautiful victims in children’s stories found around

the world. The narration of humanity in literature was marked by the presence of beautiful princesses who were kidnapped by dragons (Propp, 1968). Such folktales have frequently been reproduced by the authors of children's stories.

In modern literature, such tendency can still be found. Although it has mutated, the basic idea remains the same. An example can be found in the short story "Clara atawa Wanita yang Diperkosa", which was written as an exploration of the barbarous treatment of ethnic Chinese women in 1998. When this work was written in 1999, it emerged as a courageous challenge to the State's narrative, which denied the truth of ethnic Chinese women being raped in large numbers during the May 1998 riots. The narrative written by Sena Gumira Ajidarma (1999) is thus important because it attempts to narrate the experiences of the ethnic Chinese women, whose rapes by unknown parties were omitted in the official narrative. However, when examined in more detail, the narration and positioning of women in this story deserves criticism. The following excerpt is from the story:

"Periksa! Masih perawan atau tidak dia!" Tangan saya secara refleks bergerak memegang rok span saya, tapi tangan saya tidak bisa bergerak. Ternyata sudah ada dua orang yang masing-masing memegang tangan kanan dan tangan kiri saya. Terasa rok saya ditarik. Saya menyepak-nyepak. Lagi-lagi dua pasang tangan menangkap kedua kaki saya.

"Aaaahhh! Tolongngng!" Saya menjerit. Mulut saya dibungkam telapak kaki berdaki. Wajah orang yang menginjak mulut saya itu nampak dingin sekali. Berpuluh-puluh tangan mengge-rayangi dan meremas-remas tubuh saya (Ajidarma, 1999).

"Check! Is she still a virgin?" My hand reflexively grasped for my mini-skirt,

but my hand couldn't move. Two people were firmly gripping my left and right arm. My skirt was being yanked. I was being pummeled. Again, two hands grasped my legs. "Aaaahhh! Heeeeelp!" I screamed. My mouth was muffled with a booted sole. The face of the man stepping on my face seemed so cold. Dozens of hands swarmed my body, groping me.

In the above excerpt, the female character is made to speak as if reporting her rape to a State official. However, it is important to remember that, in the story, the narrator is a man who has taken the form of a State official. Most importantly, the author is a writer shaped by his male gaze, which is rooted in his experiences as a man.

In a sociological context, many women do not report being raped. One reason for this is the investigation necessitated by such a report, similar to that State officials. In this case, these State officials are those tasked with drafting the investigation notes and with trying the rape case. It is not uncommon for sexual intimidation to be used by these officials in the public space for this very personal issue. The below excerpt from Sena Gumira Ajidarma's story shows how this is often practiced by officials and, by extension, by the author through his work.

"Setelah celana dalam kamu dicopot, apa yang terjadi?"

Dia menangis lagi. Tapi masih bercerita dengan terputus-putus. Ternyata susah sekali menyambung-nyambung cerita wanita ini. Bukan hanya menangis. Kadang-kadang dia pingsan. Apa boleh buat, aku harus terus bertanya.

"Saya harus tahu apa yang terjadi setelah celana dalam dicopot, kalau kamu tidak bilang, apa yang harus saya tulis dalam laporan?"

"After your panties were removed, what happened?"

She cries again. But still she tells between tears. It is so difficult to string together her story. She is not only crying, but sometimes fainting. What could I do? I had to continue my questions.

"I need to know what happened after your underwear was removed. If you don't tell me, what can I write in my report?"

In this context, the male gaze indicates that women's emotions require no consideration over the course of the police investigation. The police must continue the investigation, even as the raped woman cries or faints.

This victimization is reinforced at the end of the story, when the author's male gaze is brought to the center. A story's conclusion frequently conveys the author's ideology, the narrative's intended message.

Kulihat dia melangkah ke sana. Dalam cahaya lampu, lekuk tubuhnya nampak menerawang. Dia sungguh-sungguh cantik dan menarik, meskipun rambutnya dicat warna merah. Rasanya aku juga ingin memperkosanya. Sudah kubilang tadi, barangkali aku seorang anjing, barangkali aku seorang babi — tapi aku mengenakan seragam. Kau tidak akan pernah tahu siapa diriku sebenarnya. Masalahnya: menurut ilmu hewan, katanya binatang pun tidak pernah memperkosa.

Tentu saja tentang yang satu ini tidak perlu kulaporkan kepada pimpinan. Hanya kepadamu aku bisa bercerita dengan jujur, tapi dengan catatan — semua ini rahasia. Jadi, jangan bilang-bilang (Ajidarma, 1999).

I see her walking there. Under the lamplight, her figure is striking. She truly is beautiful, even with her hair dyed red. I feel the desire to rape her too. As I said, maybe I'm a dog, or

maybe swine—but I'm in uniform. You'll never know the real me. The problem? Biology says that animals are never rapists.

Of course, this one, I can't report to the leadership. Only to you can I tell it honestly, but keep in mind—it's a secret. No telling (Ajidarma, 1999).

Although the story's goal is to indicate irony or sarcasm through its positioning of the State official, its conclusion indicates an ultimately defeat of the female character, who becomes the target of the narrator's male gaze. Here, the male gaze expands reveals the imaginary conquest of the woman's body. The female character experiences rape twice. First, when she is targeted for being of Chinese heritage during the riots and raped by some unknown youths. Second, she is raped in the author's imagination through the State official, the narrator.

## CONCLUSION

Nations are constructed through imagery, and women are identified as simply reproducing mature narratives that were historically shaped and narrated by men. Nation building means narration building, both for men and for women. Men occupy a "legitimate" position within the national narrative, as they are the ones narrated as establishing the State. Conversely, women are narrated as not being central or important to the national narrative, as their narration—both in society and in literature—has continuously positioned them as the targets of male gaze and men's understandings. When men convey their own understandings, their imagination—particularly as related to sexuality—is continuously reproduced within the literary narrative structure and thus always present. Ultimately, women are solely narrated within nation building as targets for narration, as objects incapable of becoming subjects—even in

stories intended to subjectify them. More problematic, the construction of narratives using a male perspective continues to trap women in the male gaze and patriarchal structure. This male gaze marginalizes women through omission, trivialization, and condemnation, and other forms that must be understood when exploring the construction of the nation through literary narratives.

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