

Women, Culture and Postcolonial Feminism in Siti Kartini by L. Suma Tjoe

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Abstract

During the colonial period, bumiputera women were positioned at the lowest social strata viewed as unintelligent, powerless, and lacking value. The culture of oppression that prevailed at the time reduced these women, including those of noble lineage, to objects of service exchange among the socially inferior. This structural subjugation and marginalization are critically represented in L. Suma Tjoe Sing's novel *Siti Kartini*, which serves as the material object of this research. The primary objective of this study is to explore and narrate the forms of resistance shown by bumiputera female characters against colonial oppression within the novel. Utilizing the framework of postcolonial feminism, which examines the intersection of gender and colonial power structures, this study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the text. The findings indicate that colonization inevitably leads to cultural contact and interaction between colonizers and the colonized, often resulting in the systemic oppression of the latter. Within this context, women become doubly marginalized—both as colonized subjects and as females prompting them to engage in various forms of resistance. The novel *Siti Kartini* illustrates that bumiputera women, despite being socially oppressed, possess the agency and determination to challenge colonial and patriarchal domination.

Keywords: Women; Culture; Postcolonial Feminism

Introduction

The pioneer of *peranakan* literature is known as Liem Kim Hok, who historically became the author of Malay-Chinese *peranakan* literature in the years 1853-1912 (Salmon, 2010). *Peranakan* Chinese literature can be viewed as an essential part of the history of the development of modern Indonesian literature. This can happen because *Peranakan* Chinese literature is independent of Balai Pustaka. In addition, the stories presented in Chinese *Peranakan* literature initially told about the lives of Chinese *Peranakan* people. Still, over time, the stories presented developed to reflect the reality of the lives of Indonesian people before Indonesia's independence. Chinese *Peranakan* literature was written in Chinese and translated into Malay (Liang Li Ji, 1987).

Malay-Chinese literature written during the colonial era highlighted the lives of the Bumiputera people, as for the author's interest in constructing Bumiputera women. One of the authors of Malay-Chinese literature who presents stories of the lives of native people and the Dutch is L. Suma Tjoe Sing. L. Suma Tjoe Sing's novel *Siti Kartini* (Sing, 1930) is the result of the Chinese perspective on the native people and the Dutch. The characters in this novel are Javanese and Dutch people who live in Sidoarjo - East

Java. The main character in this novel is R. A. Siti Kartini, who is the daughter of a teacher named Wartokoesoemo, who teaches at the Hollandsch-Inlandsche School, which is a Dutch school for native people. Siti Kartini, the daughter of a teacher, received her education where her father taught. However, R.A. Siti Kartini's father's career at H.I.S had to end because the way he taught his students was considered too harsh and did not comply with school regulations. Losing his job put R.A. Siti Kartini's father in a vicious circle who liked to gamble and get drunk.

The educational interests of private families during the Dutch colonial era are depicted in the novel *Siti Kartini*. The characters in *Siti Kartini* are described as a private family, such as the family of R. Noto Soejitno, a retired starch. Hence, the son of R. Noto Soejitno also attended Hollandsch-Inlandsche School. The figure of R. Noto Soejitno, who has the status of a prayer with a young man to send his son named R. Mardjono to a higher level of education at a Dutch doctoral school. In the novel *Siti Kartini*, it is depicted that the private family, who is of Bumiputera descent, received an education at a Dutch school, causing high self-confidence. This led to a growing sense of interest in the facilities provided by the Dutch. However, the bumiputera's interest in the Dutch was tempered with a sense of rejection. Thus, this is called ambivalence (Robert, 1995). In addition, ambivalence is an ambivalent attitude. The colonizers argue that their culture is the best and should be emulated. However, they refuse to be imitated on the other hand, because it will make the dominant colonial identity displaced (Trie Utami, 2023).

In *Siti Kartini*'s novel, not only is the main character a woman, but the position of women also controls the storyline. The Dutch, who created a social class for the native people, aimed to instill a distance mindset between the colonizers and the colonized. The distance between the colonizer and the colonized creates an oppressor and an oppressed. The position of native women during the colonial period was in a low position or subaltern. Antonio Gramsci used the term subaltern to refer to peasants in Italian villages. In addition, the term subaltern is used interchangeably with the term subordinate to describe low-class groups (Morton, 2008). Later, Spivak developed the concept of the subaltern in postcolonial studies that looked at the inequality of identity relationships that led to social confusion between the dominating and the dominated (Udasmoro, 2010).

In *Siti Kartini*'s novel, the Bumiputera female characters have high intellect and courage in speaking. This shapes the mindset of female characters in *Siti Kartini*'s novel to provide resistance to Bumiputera characters and Dutch characters who will harm themselves. The resistance carried out by female characters in *Siti Kartini*'s novel is called resistance. The concept of resistance in postcolonial theories is the resistance to the colonizer from the colonized. Resistance occurs in various ways and characteristics that are adjusted to the local community's culture (Salam & Zuliana, 2022). The resistance carried out by female characters in *Siti Kartini* is a form of maintaining the dignity and self-esteem of Javanese women.

The novel *Siti Kartini* tells that in the Dutch colonial era, native women living in East Java became a game for Dutchmen. Western self-confidence assumed that Bumiputera women were materialistic, meaning that they wanted to marry Dutchmen to have a better life. This is not acceptable to the women's shop in *Siti Kartini*. The female characters in *Siti Kartini* provide evidence that marrying a Bumiputera man can also have a decent life, high education, and be respected by others. The selection of topics about women and women's resistance in the novel *Siti Kartini* is an exciting topic of discussion. The position of Javanese women, whom the Dutch considered to be in the lower position, laborers and poor results. However, the female characters in *Siti Kartini* show women's identity from a different perspective. Thus, the results of this research will highlight the resistance of native women during the Dutch colonial period by the culture of Javanese society.

Previous studies that discussed women's resistance were found in several writings, the first of which was the work of (Putri et al., 2023) entitled *Women's Resistance to Domestication in the film Yuni* (2021). The movie *Yuni* is set in the life of teenage girls in modern times the female characters in the film *Yuni* (2021) experience domestication through domestic and reproductive workloads. In addition, female characters in *Yuni* (2021) have been indoctrinated since childhood to be in the domestic sphere instead of

being good wives. Thus, this research found that women's resistance in Yuni (2021) is a form of resistance to the domestication of women. The form of resistance is divided into three levels: the level of reality, the level of representation, and the level of ideology. Then, an explanation of the level of reality and the level of representation found that a patriarchal ideology is very closely related to society. This encourages female characters in Yuni (2021) to make resistance efforts to free themselves from patriarchal culture.

The second article, entitled *Ambivalence in Mochtar Lubis's Novel Jalan Tak Ada Ujung: A Postcolonial Study*, was written by Rahaya et. al. (2019). This paper explains that postcolonial is a study of the consequences caused by colonizers when they are in power or have left their colonized countries. Postcolonial studies discuss essential things, one of which is ambivalence. In this paper, it is found that the novel *Jalan Tak Ada Ujung* by Mochtar Lubis presents a story of the struggle, anxiety, and anxiety of the people during the revolution. However, it also describes the ambivalence related to the sense of nationalism and psychics found in the characters.

The third paper, entitled *Subaltern Natives in Postcolonial Indonesian Novels* (Bahardur, 2017), examines three novels with the titles *Orang Blanti* by Wisran Hadi, *Maya* by Ayu Utami, and *Gadis Pantai* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. This paper found that the female characters Maya, Empon, Bu Yuk, and *Gadis Pantai*, as indigenous women, were marginalized, economically impoverished, stereotyped, and experienced sexual violence committed by the Dutch colonials. Thus, female characters fight back to get out of colonial shackles. The form of resistance of female characters in fighting the subaltern is by remembering the glory of the past to regenerate the spirit of struggle and utilize the modern education that has been obtained. In fighting the subaltern, female characters still maintain traditional and cultural values.

Previous studies discussed women's resistance in the movie *Yuni* (2021), a new work with a background story of young people's lives in modern times. Furthermore, in the novel *Jalan Tak Berujung*, the ambivalence in the form of nationalism and psychic attitudes of the characters during the revolutionary period aimed at independence. Then, the resistance of the subalterns, who are indigenous women, against the Dutch colonials who tormented indigenous women in all aspects, both economic, educational, and social. This research, with previous research, has similarities in the theories used. However, the difference between this and previous research is the literary work used as the material object. In the previous study, the material object was literary works written by Indonesian writers in the Indonesian language. In contrast, this study used *peranakan* Chinese literary works written in 1930 and used Mandarin, which was then translated into Malay.

Method

This research applies a qualitative approach using descriptive methods, with data analysis divided into two main stages: data collection and data analysis. The data collection method is conducted through literature study to obtain narrative facts relevant to the research problem. The primary data source is the novel *Siti Kartini*, supported by secondary sources such as books, journals, dissertations, and theses that relate to the topic. The data collection technique employed is the listening technique, where the researcher reads and examines the data sources carefully, then qualifies and categorizes the data based on the needs of the analysis. The categorized data is then analyzed using postcolonial theory to uncover patterns of meaning and forms of resistance. The analysis focuses on the portrayal of Bumiputera women's resistance, viewed from their social positioning and the strategies they employ. According to Faruk (2020), data analysis methods are techniques used not merely to collect data, but to identify relationships between them. The research steps include: (1) selecting the novel *Siti Kartini* as the

primary data source; (2) determining the theoretical framework (postcolonialism); (3) formulating the research problems; (4) qualifying and categorizing relevant data; (5) analyzing the forms of resistance based on women's social roles and strategies; and (6) concluding the findings based on the analysis conducted.

Results and Discussion

The data found will be analyzed based on theory. The analysis results are divided into two parts: (1) the ambivalence of the characters in the novel *Siti Kartini*. (2) the resistance of the female characters in *Siti Kartini*.

1. Characters who Imitate and Reject at the Same Time

The novel *Siti Kartini* is set in Sidoarjo, East Java. During the colonial period, the province of East Java, especially the city of Surabaya, had been controlled by the VOC since 1743. The VOC's power was shown by the construction of city walls, canals, and fortresses designed like city buildings in Europe (Samidi, 2017). In addition, the VOC also made special schools for Bumiputera by using Dutch to communicate at school. In the novel *Siti Kartini*, it is depicted that education made by the Dutch was very influential for the future of Bumiputera children. However, the importance of Western education can only be enjoyed by *priyayi*'s children. This can be seen in the following quote:

Mardjono, last night I got information from the directeur of NIAS that the midrasa cannot accept any more students for this time, because the place is already too full, R. Noto-Soejitno told the boy. But he can help you if you want to continue your studies at the Stovia (Siti Kartini, 197).

The quote above shows that Mardjono's father, R. Noto Soejitno, is a retired starch in Sidoarjo. A starch was considered a privileged person by the local community because he had a good family economy, good relations with the Dutch, and had access to good education for his children. R. Noto Soejitno wholeheartedly supported his son's wish to continue medical education at a Dutch school. R. Noto Soejitno, a *priyayi* figure, had relations with the Dutch, so it was easy for him to send Mardjono to the Stovia. Continuing his higher education at a Dutch school was an extraordinary opportunity to have a promising career and raise the status of R. Noto-soejitno's family.

R.A. Siti Kartini was the only child of Raden Wartokoesoemo, who worked as a teacher at H.I.S. Surabaya. The figure of R.A. Siti Kartini has access to education in Western schools, so that the figure of R.A. Siti Kartini can speak Dutch well. This made R.A. Siti Kartini get the attention of Mv: Capella, a Dutch woman who owns a Wonokromo bakery. The character of R.A. Siti Kartini, a Bumiputera woman who can speak Dutch and works in a bakery owned by the Dutch, is not complacent enough to forget her origin. R.A. Siti Kartini strongly rejects if someone considers Bumiputera women as women who are materialistic about Dutch power in their homeland. This is in line with the opinion (Dewojati, 2017) explains that ambivalence occurs because love and hatred for something co-occur. Thus, R.A. Siti Kartini's shop, which benefited from the Dutch school to get a job because it could speak in Dutch, also defended her pride against the insults of Dutch women who considered R.A. Kartini's shop the same as women who were considered cheap by the Dutch. This can be seen in the following quote.

Nyonya, with an unhappy look in her eyes Kartini snapped, You're talking to R.A. Siti Kartini, not to those street women! (Siti Kartini, 237)

Raden Wartokoesoemo, a teacher at H.I.S., has a good relationship with the Dutch, one of which is Vlinderman. Raden Wartokoesoemo's relationship with Vlinderman is perfect. Raden Wartokoesoemo's house, which became a gathering place to play gambling, was often visited by Vlinderman with the aim of not only playing gambling but

also wanting to see R.A. Kartini. In addition, Vlinderman often helped Raden Wartokoesoemo's family economically. The friendship between Raden Wartokoesoemo and Vlinderman is inseparable from the relationship between colonizers and colonized. During the colonial period, the relationship between colonizers and inhabited was between superior and inferior (Laksmy, 2016).

Vlinderman's character did good things to Raden Wartokoesoemo, not for nothing; there was something else that Vlinderman wanted from Raden Wartokoesoemo, namely his daughter R.A. Siti Kartini. A good friendship between the native people and the Dutch is not always good when the white man is violent and degrades his daughter. Raden Wartokoesoemo's character did not accept and fought against Vlinderman, causing Vlinderman to die. This can be seen in the following quote.

When R. Warto was placing his son on land, he suddenly saw Vlinderman who was trying to pull over the edge and trying to get up. Seeing that, even though he was already exhausted because he had swallowed too much water, R. Warto then came close to him and gave him a proper chastisement until after struggling for a while both of them rolled over in the river (Siti Kartini, 244).

2. Women, Love, and Self-Worth Fought for

The character of R.A. Siti Kartini as a Bumiputera woman who was educated even though she attended the Dutch H.I.S. Passing through her teenage years only with the guidance of a father who gave freedom of thought did not make the character R.A. Kartini only silent if she saw oppression or felt oppressed. The difficult economic situation of the family did not make the R.A. Siti Kartini complacent about the kindness of native figures and Dutch figures. The dismissal of R.A. Siti Kartini's father from H.I.S caused her father to despair and begin to hang out with gamblers. The new hobby practiced by R.A. Siti Kartini's father made R.A. Siti Kartini's family worse because of debt.

Thus, one of the Bumiputera figures named Hardjo, who is a friend of R.A. Kartini's father, collected a debt from R.A. Siti Kartini's father because he did not have the money to pay. Hardjo's character asked for the money to be replaced with R.A. Siti Kartini. Toko Hardjo, a middle-aged man and a widower, confidently wanted to marry R.A. Kartini's character; this made R.A. Siti Kartini feel humiliated if her self-esteem was equated with the amount of money her father borrowed amounting to F 1500. In the end, R.A. Siti Kartini resisted the verbal harassment by Hardjo's character. This can be seen in the following quote.

If you're a good person, a budiman, don't want to bully like you often do, just make trouble, it's a matter of jail, of course, higher than you have low intelligence!

Despicable mind.?!

Yes, that's the sense of scratching people who have money in a sincere way!

Get out of here, mas Hardjo! Kartini has reached the peak of misery (Siti Kartini, 225)

Another female character who fights against the oppression of fellow women is the character 'di-ajeng, who is the mother of the character Mardjono. The mother of Mardjono's character has known that the relationship between R.A. Siti Kartini and Mardjono's character has long been established. The mother of Mardjono's character is interested in R.A. Siti Kartini despite the destruction of Kartini's father's career, who has been fired from H.I.S and likes to gamble. The character of R.A. Siti Kartini, who is beautiful, intelligent, and brave, makes the mother of Mardjono's character fall in love. The destruction of Raden Wartokoesoemo's career made people look down on the family, including the father of Mardjono, who did not want to have a big gambler. Raden Noto felt that his social status was higher than Raden Wartokoesoemo's family and rejected his son's desire to marry R.A. Siti Kartini. This can be seen in the following letter excerpt.

I show you, because of some important reasons, I inform you that the contract between the raden and his son has been broken from this day forward (Siti Kartini, 205).

Raden Noto, who considers R.A. Siti Kartini's shop as a descendant of a bad family, gets a rebuttal from his wife, who does not accept that R.A. Siti Kartini is insulted. This can be seen in the following quote:

But, I think you went too far, 'kang-mas, by measuring her as a girl with her father. I know, Kartini has those delicate traits that hardly any other ugly tabe'at can affect her mind. Especially she has spirit, so it is fitting that she becomes the flower of socialization (Siti Kartini, 193)

The quote above shows that Raden Noto's wife dares to argue in defense of fellow women. Raden Noto's wife explains that a child is not the same as his father. Looking back at the family background of R.A. Siti Kartini, a well-educated teacher, does not necessarily mean that she can be judged as an evil family just because the family's economy is down. The wife of Raden Noto's character defended R.A. Siti Kartini when Raden Noto dropped her self-esteem.

The character of R.A. Siti Kartini struggles to maintain her dignity against the oppression carried out by the characters Hardjo, Vlinderman, and Merv. Capella ends with happiness. Toko Mardjono, the lover of R.A. Siti Kartini, was sent by her father to Stovia to continue her medical education. Raden Noto's shop sent Mardjono to Stovia, hoping that Mardjono could forget the character Siti Kartini. However, the love that Mardjono has for R.A. Kartini is irreplaceable. In the end, Siti Kartini and Mardjono got married in Surabaya.

Conclusion

Siti Kartini's novel presents a story of the social life of native and Dutch society that is inseparable from the relationship between superiority and inferiority. This causes ambivalence and resistance from the characters in Siti Kartini's novel. The ambivalence shown by the characters in Siti Kartini is an act of ambivalence that shows a fluctuating attitude between accepting and rejecting the colonizers' culture. Receiving an education in a Dutch school, being able to speak Dutch, and working in a Dutch school but refusing to be humiliated by the Dutch is an ambivalent attitude carried out by Bumiputera characters. The Bumiputera female characters in Siti Kartini are portrayed as women who dare to speak out. The character R. A. Siti Kartini is a Bumiputera woman who received an education and was allowed to think freely by her father, making her brave to fight against things that harmed and degraded her by fellow Bumiputera figures and Dutch figures. In addition, another female character who defended humiliated women was 'di Ajeng, the wife of Raden Noto. Thus, the form of resistance carried out by female characters in the novel Siti Kartini is a form of informal resistance.

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