

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF BALINESE WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN THE NOVEL SUKRENI GADIS BALI

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### ABSTRACT

Novel is not just a literary work, but also serves to dismantle various cultural practices in society. The novel *Sukreni Gadis Bali* is one of many novels that represents feminist literary criticism. It can take part as participatory and emancipatory roles for gender equality in Bali. In the sociolinguistic approach, literary works can take on an ideological role for social transformation by criticizing deviations from cultural practices that result in injustice to certain social groups. Having this background, this research intends to explore Balinese women's identity construction in the novel *Sukreni Gadis Bali*. This research applies a qualitative method with a critical discourse analysis approach and note taking technique. The main literature reviewed is the novel entitled *Sukreni Gadis Bali* by Panji Tisna which is analysed using a critical interpretation. This research found that the identity of Balinese women involves the role of structure in the form of a naming system, culture in the form of patriarchal relations, and actors in the form of identity awareness. It also found that the construction of identity can lead to identity fracture in the social world which resulting in various physical impacts. In addition, the construction of Balinese women's identities is under the control of patriarchal ideology. The ideology is naturalized in the patrilineal kinship, religious, and customary system. Sukreni is a symbol of a Balinese woman whose identity has been degraded by culture, so she has to accept various forms of violence and injustice throughout her life's journey.

**Keywords:** Balinese women, construction, identity, novel.

### INTRODUCTION

*Sukreni Gadis Bali* is a work of modern fiction that exists amidst the wilderness of 20<sup>th</sup> century Indonesian literature. This novel is popular among activists and critics of Indonesian literature so that its existence with famous Indonesian novels of its time, such as *Layar Terkembang* by Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, *Kasih Tak Sampai* by Marah Rusli, or *Pada Sebuah Kapal* by N.H. Dini. The popularity of these works lies not only in the story, but also in the cultural discourse contained therein. In this regard, critical discourse

analysis of a novel is an interesting dimension for cultural studies, especially in the context of popular culture in the modern era which is associated with the context of power (During, Eds., 2000; Macey, 2001; Barker, 2022).

According to Williams (1974; 1977), culture is a daily practice and includes all the dynamics of society. Novels, like other works of art, also creates awareness that determines social reality. It is not only a cultural representation, but also has political, social, economic and cultural power to fight various injustices and encourage social transformation. Several studies show that many novels are able to play their role as a medium for social criticism and driving a social change. One of them is *Sukreni Gadis Bali*. A study conducted by Sutrisno, Wiasti, and Jelantik (2023) shows that this novel contains a discourse on violence against Balinese women. It must be acknowledged that a critical discourse analysis of a novel can play an significant role in cultural studies (Storey, 2007). This discourse is stored in a narrative that contains aesthetic value, as well as cultural emancipation. Related to that, Related to this, novels are not just an opiate that can make readers addicted, but also offer enlightenment.

The narrative power of literary works is metaphorical when viewed in the field of cultural studies. Its ability to build ideological discourse in society shows the superiority of a literary works. The literary works seen as a unit of discourse and how the "world" is represented. It is interesting to found the fact that interpreting a literary work is similar to interpreting the 'world'. This is stated by Sugiharto, 1996. He stated that interpreting referred to by the work, the form of arrangement, genre, and writing style. To reveal a literary work, we need to explore the narrative structures and in the same time also analyze the metaphors to be able to construct the meaning of the text. *Sukreni Gadis Bali* represents the complexity of the world life of a Balinese woman in the old days. It is identity of *Sukreni* which becomes the core idea, intriguing to be revealed through this research.

Identity is a very important need for human. Through identity, people can differentiate themselves from others, as well as give a sign of their identity for others. For existentialist philosophy, identity begins to emerge precisely when humans begin to absorb themselves (Dagun, 1993). When humans ask themselves, that's where humans have actually tried to differentiate themselves from others. Through identity people can distinguish "I" and "you", or "we" and "them", differences are important for the life of a pluralistic society. However, identity is something unique, distinctive, and complex seen from cultural perspectives. Cultural identity does not come by itself, but is formed or constructed as a result of dynamic interactions between historical contexts and

constructions. Therefore, identity is situational and can change or structured in relation to a number of others (Manuati, 2004). Having the above background, this article aims at revealing the construction of Balinese women's identities in the novel *Sukreni Gadis Bali*.

## **METHODS**

This research applies a qualitative method with a critical discourse analysis approach. Critical discourse analysis emphasizes the active role of discourse in constructing the social world so that discourse is part of social practice (Fairclough, 1995). The most important aspect that becomes the focus of critical analysis discourse is reviewing ideology related to various social practices and their transformation through intertextuality (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2007). Eriyanto (2003) states that critical discourse analysis views discourse which established based on five elements. The elements includes:

- (1) *The element of action* which concerns how a discourse is created based on its objectives, created consciously by its creator, whether to influence, invite, persuade or something else.
- (2) *The element of context* which usually includes setting, tenor and mode.
- (3) *The historical element*, which concerns a specific historical or time context.
- (4) *The element of power* is constructed as a means of controlling discourse power in the society.
- (5) *The ideological element* which views discourse as a practice or representation of ideology to raise public awareness of everything that was previously considered normal and appropriate.

The main text studied in this research is the novel entitled *Sukreni Gadis Bali*, which was published by Balai Pustaka in collaboration with the Language Center of the Ministry of National Education in 2010. The data were analyzed using the critical interpretation method through three integral steps, namely content analysis, discursive praxis, and socio-cultural practices (discourse dimensions). According to Fairclough (1995), content analysis reveals how the discourse on women's identity is presented in the text of the novel as part of the storytelling. Discourse praxis is an interpretive mechanism to reveal how discourses on Balinese women's identities are produced in texts. Sociocultural practices or discursive dimensions reveal how society, institutions, and culture interpret the discourse. Referring to the three methodological steps, it can be comprehensively disclosed the construction of Balinese women's identity discourse in the novel *Sukreni Gadis Bali*.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **a. The synopsis of *Sukreni Gadis Bali***

This novel presents a picture of the life of a Balinese girl named Sukreni and various challenges in her life which caused by her false identity. It features a quite complicated story about Men Negara, Ni Widi (Sukreni), Gusti Made Tusan and Gustam; how these characters entangled in some similar scenes of life yet they don't realize. The story tells about a widow named Men Negara with her two children from her affairs named I Negara and Ni Negari who becomes the key figure of this story. She had a daughter named Ni Widi from her previous marriage.

The story introduces reader about a working woman, an entrepreneurship which is something is not common during the time. She owns a food stall in an area of Bingin Banyah, a coconut plantation area in Singaraja which visited by many, and mostly men from surrounded area. The beauty of Ni Negari has attracted many visitors to come and buy food and drink in the food stall, including Gusti Made Tusan who is a police chief who has crushed with Ni Negari. Having close relation with a police chief enable Men Negara to commit law-breaking practices to improve her economic standard and also cultivate her materialistic character.

Sukreni's arrival at Bingin Banyah Village begins the tragedy in this novel. Even though Sukreni is Ni Widi, Ni Negara's daughter from her first husband, they don't know each other because Ni Widi was abandoned when she was eight years old. Ni Negara did not know that her first husband had changed the name Ni Widi to Ni Luh Sukreni. The essence of the story begins when Sukreni's presence at the Men Negara stall actually becomes the beginning of the destruction of the poor girl's life. The materialistic character of Men Negara makes her think that Sukreni's beautiful face hat Sukreni's beautiful face can be used as bait to attract customers. It turns out it wasn't wrong, because Sukreni has indeed succeeded in attracting many men to come to her stall.

Likewise, Gusti Made Tusan, police chief in Bingin Banyah, was very attracted to Sukreni's beauty. Sukreni aroused his sexual desire. By the help of Men Negara, he had the opportunity to taste and rape her. After that incident, Sukreni left the Men Negara stall without anyone knowing. Some time later, I Negara, Men Negara's first child from her second husband, said that Sukreni was Ni Widi. This news made Men Negara regret her actions in handing over Sukreni's honor to a depraved man just for the sake of money. She continued to mourn his mistakes until he experienced mental disorders until the end of his life.

Meanwhile, Sukreni, who was suffering from the sadness of being raped by Gusti Made Tusan, went somewhere and changed her name to Ni Made Sari. The rape also caused Sukreni to become pregnant and eventually gave birth to a boy named I Gustam. Long story short, Gustam grew into a grown man with bad character. He became the leader of a feared gang of robbers in the Singaraja area. One day, he robbed the Men Negara stall, but at the same time Gusti Made Tusan was on duty there. Until in the end, the two of them were involved in an exciting fight. They didn't know that they were actually father and son. Both of them died in the fight.

Based on the synopsis above, the discourse on Balinese women's identity is an interesting part of the novel *Sukreni Gadis Bali*. Balinese women's identity appears and submerges in the entire narrative which is created through the interaction between the text and the reader. In fact, the discourse seems so vague, sometimes it appears in the narrative, but sometimes outside the narrative. What Derrida symbolizes is "the spotlight", then the main structure of the narrative is the spotlight (Al-Fayyadl, 2005). He provides clarity of the story from beginning to end. On the other hand, the discourse on Balinese women's identity is another side that is sometimes highlighted, but not infrequently occupies the dark side beside it. This discourse seems to exist when it is not. It will appear, if and only if, the reader is able to uncover and discover the whereabouts.

#### **b. The Naming System and Construction of Gender Identity**

The naming system in Balinese culture has its own characteristics, both in the context of locality, sociocultural, ideology and power. The dimensions of ideology, gender, and power are generally described in 'first names', while locality and sociocultural dimensions are represented in "last names". How these relations are constructed through a naming system can be observed with a binary opposition model, such as "I" (*for male*) and "Ni" (*for female*), or between "I Made" (*jabawangsa*) and "Ida Made", "I Gusti Made" or "Ida Bagus Made" (*triwangsa*) (Triguna, 1997). Balinese last names also show language contestation which is important enough to be examined in a socio-linguistic context, especially the influence of Old Balinese, Old Javanese and Sanskrit.

In the novel *Sukreni Gadis Bali*, gender construction through the naming system is also carried out by the author. Ni Luh Sukreni as the main character of this novel is a woman because the word "Ni" is attached to her first name. The construction of this gender identity also determines the character, functions and social roles that Sukreni must accept in her life. In this regard, Piliang (2006) states that states that women and womanhood are constructed by culture. Culture is the system that drives the game and forces everyone

in it to play until their role ends. This construction confirms that Sukreni is 'problematic' in the context of patriarchal culture in Bali. Because, from the beginning she had to accept herself as a woman whose life was controlled by patriarchal culture.

Rokhmansyah (2016) said that patriarchy derivated from 'patriarchate', which is a structure that places the role of men as the sole, central, and main ruler. So, patriarchal culture is established on the basis of a hierarchy of domination and subordination. In this case, men are positioned higher and their views become the dominant norm, whereas women are subordinate. From generation to generation, patriarchal culture has formed differences in behavior, status, and authority which later became a gender hierarchy. The perpetuation of patriarchal culture in sociocultural life cannot be separated from the performance of knowledge, such as philosophy, religion, law, social, politics, and so on which tend to be built on the foundation of male hegemony over woman (Capra, 2004). Gender construction in patriarchal culture is the cause of injustice in Sukreni's life which is described in a number of segments in the novel.

### **c. The Identity Fracture**

The construction of gender identity in patriarchal culture creates various identity fracture that Sukreni experiences in her life. She failed to realize herself and her family, because patriarchal culture hindered the emergence of this awareness. This problem started when her initial identity was fooled with the egoism of a man. Sukreni has experienced the change of identity from "Ni Widi" to "Ni Luh Sukreni". This identity fracture was done by her father to hide his daughter identity and to make sure that Sukreni's mother will not be able to find and recognize her daughter since she left Sukreni and her father with her affair. Sukreni has grown without a mother and she also does not have a chance to know her mother due to his father ego.

The identity fracture was also experienced by "Men Widi" who had changed his identity to "Men Negara" because from her marriage she gave birth to her first child named "I Negara". In the Balinese social system, it is common to call the name of a man or woman who has had children, it is enough to attach the first child's nickname behind the word "Pan" (father), or "Men" (mother). Even though Men Negara already has the first child from her first husband, she no longer uses that identity. This confirms that identity is something fluid, built through historical accumulation and various social constructions. Sukreni was not aware her identity as 'Ni Widi', and 'Men Negara' also no longer aware her identity as 'Men Widi'. If Sukreni loses her identity because of the others (her own father), then the Men Negara constructs her own identity by ignoring her old identity.

Both of them experienced an identity fracture by not becoming a complete person due to various identity constructions in space, time, and their respective social actions. This becomes problematic because the fractured identity means that Sukreni and her mother do not know each other. They realize their own identities too late so they have to accept bad events. Sukreni was raped and Men Negara became the cause. However, Men Negara, who realized her mistake, experienced such deep regret that he went mad until the end of her life. In order to remove the shame of the rape incident that happened to her, Sukreni builds a new identity as "Ni Made Sari" which is free from any moral predicate. This case shows that identity fractures lead to psychic instability such as fractured self-image, loss of the central position of the Ego, a sense of self that is scattered, a sense of isolation, confusion, fear, and even self-dissolution (Erikson, 1989).

The description above shows one model of Balinese women's identity construction that occurs in Balinese society. This construction process is relatively complex because it involves the role of individuals, both as actors and themselves, as well as social systems. Changing the name "Ni Widi" to "Sukreni" by his father, shows that actors play the role of authority and domination in building a legitimate identity (Castells, in Sutrisno and Putranto, 2004). In this case the authority of a father to determine the legal identity of his child is something that can be accepted by Balinese social norms and institutions.

Furthermore, the identity attached to "Men Negara" can be seen as a model of identity construction in the Balinese social system. The identity of a Men Negara is a form of social fact that must be accepted when she becomes the mother of "I Negara", and there is no room for her to become anything else. Unlike the two above models, Sukreni, who changed her name to Ni Made Sari, is proof of how individuals can construct their own identities. This is in line with the opinion of Giddens (1991) that individuals try to construct a coherent narrative of identity, in which "self" forms a trajectory of self-development from the past to a predictable future. In this case, Sukreni is aware that society will not accept her dark past, both morally and socially, even though she is only a victim. Traces of Sukreni's narrative as a rape victim are removed by constructing a new narrative about Ni Made Sari, a pregnant woman without a husband.

#### **d. The Commodification of Women's Body**

The novel *Sukreni Gadis Bali* also shows how patriarchal culture plays a role in constructing "others" identity of Balinese women. Patriarchal ideology positions men as superior to women, and therefore women must be controlled and belong to men (Bashin, 1994). On the other hand, Adian (2006) stated that patriarchal ideology places men in a

dominant position and women in a subordinate position, especially in relation to gender relations and sexuality. Within and through this ideology, the commodification of Balinese women's bodies becomes part of the way men control and evaluate women's bodies in the discourse on sexuality.

This can be seen from the positioning of Ni Negari and Ni Luh Sukreni at the Men Negara stall. Men Negara do not consider the two of them as 'daughters' whose honor should be protected, but are used as commodities to attract customers. This story shows how women's identity is constructed in the context of body commodification and sexuality, in two ways (1) the operation of patriarchal ideology in the construction of women's identities; and (2) how men's assessment of the identity construction. This problems can be explained within the perspective of patriarchal ideological hegemony.

*First*, Patriarchal ideology shows the dominance of men over women in the social, cultural and economic fields. This is shown in the story that the majority of visitors to the Men Negara stall are men. Socioculturally, the habit of eating and drinking in food stalls is normal for men, while women play more of a role in the domestic sphere. This fairness is also strengthened by the division of economic roles that men have greater freedom to spend family money. Moral stigma also tends to judge that women who hang out in stalls are considered to have bad character. Related to that, Bashin (1994) stated that religion, morality and public law play an important role in creating differences between men and women in the social world..

*Second*, Men Negara is a symbol of "the other" women who are different from common women. She is a woman who takes a role in the public sector by making a living through her food stall. She has even commodified women's bodies for men to enjoy. This effort proved to be successful, marked by the many men who were interested in coming to her stall because of the beauty of Ni Negari and Ni Luh Sukreni. This cannot be separated from patriarchal culture where men tend to value women's bodies as sensual and sexual objects. Related to this, Piliang (2004) states that women's bodies produce use value, exchange value and sign value so that they become a central part of the body politic in capitalism. This means that the construction of women's identities as objects of men's evaluation in the context of sexuality cannot be separated from the strength of patriarchal culture. The commodification of Balinese women's bodies in the above identity construction process is interesting to observe in the context of feminism. Feminism has built its own historical trajectory in both social and intellectual movements. It fights for equal right in various fields.

Although the feminist movement tends to be directed at fighting for equal rights for women in the fields of education, politics, social, law, economics and culture, women's bodies have also become an important discourse in the development of feminism throughout the world. For feminists, the body is a woman's biggest asset which is always the target of objectification, exploitation, segregation, the formation of an ideal image, and a series of other patriarchal sins. The act of *nudes* (fully naked women) can be used as the most extreme example showing women's resistance to capitalism (the fashion industry), the objectification and commodification of bodies, and religious norms that are seen as supporting the dominance of patriarchal culture (Ayub, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the above description, it can be concluded that there are three important things related to the construction of Balinese identity in the novel *Sukreni Gadis Bali*. The things are as follow: *First*, the construction of Balinese women's identity involves the role of structure in the form of a naming system, culture in the form of patriarchal relations, and actors in the form of identity awareness. *Second*, this construction of identity can lead to identity fractures in the social world which result in various psychical impacts. Sukreni represents a Balinese woman who has experienced a fractured identity that has had a negative impact on her life. *Third*, the construction of Balinese women's identities is under the control of patriarchal ideology, both in gender and sexuality discourses. This research confirms identity theories that identity is fluid and influenced by various aspects of 'the others'.

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