

IN THE BOYS' CLUB: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN THE INDONESIAN CINEMA 1926-MAY 1998

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mendeskripsikan peran perempuan dalam perfilman Indonesia sejak berdirinya pada tahun 1926 hingga masa sebelum lahirnya perfilman Indonesia generasi baru. Melalui sebuah tinjauan historis, peran perempuan dibagi menjadi dua bagian. Pertama adalah peran mereka di balik layar film, baik sebagai sutradara dan produser maupun dalam lembaga-lembaga yang terkait dengan industri dan regulasi perfilman. Kedua, artikel ini memaparkan bagaimana perempuan direpresentasikan di dalam cerita dan plot film-film yang diproduksi sebelum masa reformasi. Peneliti menemukan bahwa peran perempuan dalam perfilman Indonesia di masa ini, secara keseluruhan masih berada di bawah bayang-bayang dominasi tokoh-tokoh laki-laki. Hal tersebut terutama disebabkan karena sedikitnya jumlah perempuan yang memegang posisi pengambilan keputusan baik secara artistik maupun industrial.

Kata kunci: *Indonesian cinema, women and cinema, historical review.*

INTRODUCTION

Women have occupied an ambivalent and often controversial position in Indonesia since the inception of the cinema in the country. One of the most telling aspects surrounding the rise of the New Indonesian Cinema post-New Order Indonesia is the role of women in the cinema. As studies have suggested (e.g. Trimarsanto, 2002; Swestin, 2009), there have been more women film directors in the past ten years compared to the previous seven decades in the history of the Indonesian Cinema. In the previous generations of the Indonesian cinema, very few women were in positions of control in the administrative and artistic spheres of the film industry. Fewer could last long enough in the industry, compared to their male counterparts. Arguably, it was also very rare for these women to obtain the same level of acknowledgement and status in the national cinema that the great (male) names had received over the years.

Other studies have also demonstrated that in its history, the Indonesian cinema is an arena that had been heavily constructed by male figures. Sen (1994), studying the Indonesian Cinema of the New Order era hinted that the visibility of women becomes prominent only as far as acting is concerned. When it comes to decision-making roles behind the screen, male figures still held their dominance. The upshot of this condition is certainly the stories on and representations of women presented on the silver screen.

METHOD

Through a historical review, this article describes the roles that women have played in the Indonesian cinema and how Indonesian women have been viewed and understood on the film screen before the reformation era. The bulk of this article focuses on the positions that women have occupied in film institutions. This was followed by a review on the conventional representations of the female in Indonesian film texts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Women behind the Indonesian Silver Screen Directors

In reality, the determining institutions of the Indonesian cinema—production companies, professional organizations of the film community, film schools, and film festivals—gave little room for women, not to mention in authority positions. Before the New Generation, there were only a total of four women directors, compared to some 250 male directors over the course of the Indonesian cinema history (Trimarsanto, 2002). All of them were also actresses and related to prominent male figures in the Indonesian cinema (Sen, 1994). Before the New Generation, women directed created an average of five to ten works *all throughout their directing career*. This proves extremely meager compared to the average active male directors who could create about one to four films *per year*.

Ratna Asmara, the first ever women director and producer in the Indonesian cinema was the wife of Andjas Asmara, journalist and famous figure in the Indonesian theater from the 1950s who later became a very renowned film director.¹ Asmara was extraordinary pioneer for women in the film industry. Her career soared to an unprecedented level in such a short period of time, but unfortunately did not last. Asmara began her career as the lead actress of *Kartinah* (1940) as a nurse courted by a man with a mentally-ill wife. The following year, she starred in two films *Noesa Penida* (1941), a love story set in Bali, and *Ratna Moetoe Manikam* (1941). In 1948, playing as a lost wife reunited with her husband, she starred as a woman with the same name as hers, Asmara, in *Djauh Dimata* (Far from the Eyes). All of these films were directed by her husband and made in The Teng Chun's New Java Industrial film. She turned from acting to becoming a director when Djameluddin Malik commissioned her to direct *Sedap Malam* (1950), the first production of Persari who Djameludin himself produced. The screenplay was written by her husband, Andjas Asmara. She directed two more films for other production companies, *Musim Bunga di Selabintana* (Flower Season in Selabintana, 1951) and *Dr. Samsi* (1952), both written by her husband and produced by the Chinese owned, Djakarta Film. By 1953, Asmara established her own production company and called it Ratna Film. Her first production was *Nelajan* (The Fisherfolks) which she wrote, produced, and directed by herself. Her next and last film was *Dewi dan Pemilihan Umum* (Dewi and the General Election, 1954) who she also produced and directed under the flag of Asmara Film and released on the occasion of the first Indonesia general election in 1955.

¹ Usmar Ismail once Andjas' assistant

Chitra Dewi was the wife of film producer L.J.N Hoffman (Sen, 1994). However, she started her career way before she was associated with L.J.N Hoffman. She was an astoundingly prolific actress who spent the better part of her life, a total of 38 years (1955 to 1993), in acting and a very brief period of 2 years spent behind the camera as producer, writer and director. Dewi started her acting career with Usmar Ismail's *Perfini*, starring in several of the films directed by the legendary filmmaker himself. She ventured behind the screen when she established her own film production company under her name: PT. Chitra Dewi Film Productions (Taylor, 1999). In 1970, she began by producing her first film with her husband L.J.N Hoffman, which was one of a number of adaptations from the Nyai Dasima folktale, entitled *Samiun dan Dasima* (Samiun and Dasima, 1970). The film won an award in the 17th Asian Film Festival in Taiwan. The writer, a prominent cineaste of the time, Misbah Jusa Biran, reportedly requested to withdraw his name from the credit title due to the uninformed alterations made by the producer to the script. His name appeared, nonetheless, in the credits. The following year, PT. Chitra Dewi Productions four films in total. One was produced by Hoffman and directed by her former director, Hasmanan. One of these films, *Bertjinta dalam Gelap* (Making Love in the Dark, 1981), was written, produced and directed by Dewi herself. A legend, *Penunggang Kuda dari Tjimande* (A Horserider from Tjimande, 1971) was produced by Hoffman but written and directed by Chitra. Another film written and directed by Dewi was *Dara-Dara* (Girls, 1971). Her production company's last film was made in the same year, *Ratna* (1971), also directed by Hasmanan and produced by Hoffman. After *Ratna*, Dewi returned to her previous role in the cinema as an actress until her last film in 1993. The production company she established was never heard of ever since she decided to drop her directorial role and become a full time actress in 1973. In her heydays in the latter parts of the 1970s, she would star in 5-8 films annually, often under notable directors of the period such as Teguh Karya and Wim Umboh (Kristanto, 2008).

A more junior women director, Ida Farida was the younger sister of screenplay writer and film director Misbach Yusa Biran. Contrary to the other women directors, Farida worked behind the camera much more than she appeared in films. The greater part of her film career was devoted to directing and writing screenplays. Ida Farida demonstrated a semblance of film authorship since, for the most part, she had a very wide range of control over her works. However, Farida's films are considered to be reasonably commercial in nature. She began writing and directing her first feature in 1979 with *Guruku Cantik Sekali* (My Teacher is So Beautiful), a film on the lives of urban teenagers (*film remaja*) starring a famous actress of the 1970s, Lenny Marlina. PT. Gemini Satria Film and Ronald Lolang produced the film. The following year, with the same producer, she, again, wrote and directed *Busana dalam Mimpi* (An Attire in a Dream, 1980), where her lead actress Maria Hardy was nominated for best actress in the 1981 Indonesian Film Festival (FFI). In the same year, she made two more films. She created the story, wrote the screenplay, as well as directed them. She also wrote and directed her three subsequent feature films completed between 1983 and 1985.

After a four-year hiatus, she returned as a story writer of a crime action-drama movie, *Menerjang Sarang Naga* (Attacking a Dragon's Den, 1989), an international collaborative project between Ismanusa Film, Malaysia and Citra Umbus Dinamika, Indonesia. That year, she wrote and directed a comedy, and then a melodrama, *Semua*

Sayang Kamu (Everybody Loves You, 1989) which won her a Citra² for best screenplay. It was also nominated for Best Story, Best Director, Best Actor and Best Actress in a leading role. In 1989, she directed and wrote the screenplay of a box office hit *Sabar Dulu dong...!* (Be Patient, Please...!), the only Warkop DKI film directed by a woman. Finally, in 1990 and 1991 she wrote three films, two of which she directed herself.

Sofia Waldy (later Sofia W.D.), most likely the most prominent women director at the New Order era had two successive actor husbands, S. Waldy and W.D. Mochtar. She first used the name Sofia. In 1952, her screen name was Sofia Waldy and when she was divorced from S. Waldy and married a multi-award winning actor W.D. Mochtar in 1964, she changed her screen name into Sofia W.D. Unlike Ratna, Chitra and Ida (Farida), however, she is the only one who added her husbands' names after her own in her professional career. This is an interesting fact since Sofia is an exception to the other three directors for being significantly more prominent within the film community than both her husbands (Sen, 1994). Similar to the previous two directors, she began as an actress, starring in a number of Tan & Wong's productions. She started in Rustan St. Palindih's *Air Mata Mengalir di Tjitarum* (Tears Flowing in Tjitarum River, 1948). As an actress, she was the cast of more than 100 films over 38 years (1948-1985) of her career. When S. Waldy later became a director, she starred in several of his films in the 1950s. She was not only a prolific actress but also one that was critically acclaimed for her numerous nominations in the FFI and a Citra as Best Supporting Actress in 1981. She played in *Merenda Hari Esok* (Weaving Tomorrow, 1981) directed by Ida Farida and worked side by side with Chitra Dewi in a number of films.

Unfortunately, she was far less productive as a director, producer and writer. The first film she directed, working with a senior co-director LK. Hassanuddin, was the black and white *Badai Selatan* (Southern Storm, 1960), starring W.D. Mochtar. She directed a total of five films. Her second film, *Bengawan Solo* (River of Love, 1971), was also co-directed; this time, by her and (male) directors of her own generation, Willy Willianto and Bay Isbahi. In 1971, she directed *Singa Betina dari Marunda* (Lioness from Marunda), again starring her husband W.D. Mochtar. She was involved in a DPFN (the state film production unit) project writing the story of the action movie *Si Djampang* (Jampang, 1968). In 1976, for the first time she performed the double task of being a producer and a director for a government "instructional film" *Tanah Harapan* (The Land of Hope, 1976). Her most well-known movie is *Halimun* (Mist, 1982), the first Indonesian film ever to declare itself as "A film for women, by women, about women's problems" (see the following section for a review of the textual aspect). *Halimun* was also financed by the DPFN. This was her last project as a director before she returned into full-time acting (Kristanto, 2008).

Producers and Officials in Film Institutions

² The Indonesian "Oscar"

Debuting in relatively the same time as Ratna Asmara, Titien Sumarni, a star actress in the 1950s, also had her own production company: Titien Sumarni Motion Pictures Corporation. Unlike Ratna, Titien was a productive actress who starred in almost two dozen films from 1951 to 1956. She had been the lead actress of notable directors of the time such as Moh Said HJ, Hu, and L. Inata and worked under such significant production companies as Persari. Reportedly, it was from her star earnings that she accumulated the capital to set up her own company. However, remaining records show that it only produced five films. Most of the films' credits bear the name of Titien's husband R. Mustari as the producer. In the latter years of the 1950s until 1960, a certain Linda Wee was noted as the producer of two films and the music director of another two films produced by Anom Pictures. Record notes Annie Mambo as a producer of PT. Aries Films in the early 1970s (Kristanto, 2005b). In the two decade of thriving film production in the New Order, there were also two film companies being named after a woman: PT. Tuti Mutia Film and PT. Diah Pitaloka Film. Two women became the producers of these companies' films, respectively, Tuti Mutia and Tuty S.

Aside from that, the chair of the Film Censorship Board (BSF) from 1950 to 1965 was held by two women. From 1950 to 1963, the chair of the board was a woman, Maria Ulfa, who was a sympathizer of the Socialist Party PSI. She was reportedly known for her leniency in censoring Western films. In the height of Sukarno's alliance with the PKI, Ulfa was replaced by Utami Suryadarma, another woman, who was close to Sukarno. Both she and her husband, Air Marshal S. Suryadarma was a sympathizer of PKI. In Suryadarma's time, the BSF was in favor of the movement against American films. The BSF had even prohibited or postponed the showing of American films before the government decided to ban them. In May 1965, however, Suryadarma and all the members of the BSF were suddenly replaced by another group who, as later became evident, were close to the regime that came to power after Sukarno was deposed. This happened even before the coup attempt. Martono, the new chair (a former army officer), was gradually appointed to higher positions during New Order's reign. This is the only notable position women ever held in the Board, which was then significantly altered during the New Order (Sen, 1994). In the BSF, since the New Order came to power, all chairpersons were men. On the whole Board, women rarely hold more than two or three positions reserved for women's organization. Even in the Film Council, the representative of the State Ministry of Women's Affairs (*Menteri Negara Urusan Peranan Wanita*)—later named the State Ministry of Women Empowerment (*Menteri Negara Pemberdayaan Perempuan*), at one time was an army man (Sen, 1994).

Not only was there a shortage of women directors, there had been a terrible lack of women photographers and music directors as well. Other significant institutions related to film also saw an acute scarcity in women holding decision-making positions.

Conventional representations of women on screen

It is true that women have now become a substantial part of the Indonesian cinema, not as woman actresses per se but more as film professionals. The plain and simple reality remains that the current role they play is a newfound phenomenon in the Indonesian film industry. Too often the working women directors of the previous

time were enclosed by male film professionals, either equal in or higher power – scriptwriters, producers, especially that the production modes were seldom director centered. It is thus questionable that women had a great extent of authority over their creative works. It has just been quite recently that essential decisions regarding what occurs on and off the screen are largely in the hands of women. In this difficult and often challenging world of women and film, it is still pertinent therefore to address the representation of women themselves: how women “construct” women, frame them and tell their stories.

The representation of women in the Indonesian artistic sphere was a bleak picture, even in the works of women themselves. In women’s writing of the New Order, for example, the pervading theme was love and domesticity. The female protagonists were often educated and come from a middle class background, but they always remained demure and apolitical (Robinson & Bessell, 2002; Hellwig, 1994). In the New Order cinema, women were still placed as mothers, wives, and prostitutes. The films’ diegesis predominantly wound women up in their “natural” position as, again, mothers and wives. Even when there were scenes suggesting that women could have careers and be single parents, the common narrative brought women back to those conventional roles. Silence was identified with femininity. When women *were* portrayed as a strong or vocal character, it was when they were mothers (Sen, 1994). The New Order’s popular films, which represented women as autonomous and sexually assertive, classified them as seductively alluring and “lethally dangerous” (Hatley, 2002). In film, women’s stereotype was idealized as such that they become “the bearer of moral values of simplicity, fidelity, honesty, dignity, loyalty and piety” (Widodo, 2002).

Generally, scholars who researched on the portrayal of women in the Indonesian cinema agree that women were predominantly placed in a weak position on screen. When they are portrayed as having power, it would either be in the position of a mother or some sort of unrealistic mystical being. Even Heider (1991) who insisted that Indonesian films do give space for strong women, cited *Ibunda* (Mother, 1986), about a widowed mother who always takes her children’s problems into her own hand as his reference of a “strong mother”.

Another concurring argument is that there was no difference in the representation of women in films directed by men or women. Both characterize women in the same light³. In the glory days of Indonesian filmmaking, a lot of films about women were adapted from popular novels written by women (e.g. Marga T., Ike Supomo, Mira W.), and they also show the same pattern. Sen’s (1994) analysis on Sofia’s *Halimoen* discovered that women are “constructed from the hero’s perspective, judged from his point of view”. The film which “advertising touts as woman’s film sees with the man’s eyes and speaks with a male voice”. Further, she continues that with regard to the general depiction of women in the films of the New Order, “[women] are

³ See, for example, Kristanto (1997), *Wajah Perempuan dalam Film Indonesia [The Face of Women in Indonesian Films]*, an analysis of women’s representation in Indonesian box office films from 1970 to 1993. Kristanto arrives at a similar conclusion as the other studies cited in this section that, except for a notable few, women’s roles involve only two extremes: either good or bad without any character development. There is no position for strong women in these films unless they are larger-than-life supernatural figures.

presented to be seen so that the films are seen (sold)... [they are] not about the women seeing or speaking" (p. 134). Kristanto's (1997 in Kristanto, 2004) observation confirms that the films of Sofia W.D. and Ida Farida also approach women from the two extremes.

CONCLUSION

Archetypal portrayals of good wives/mothers vis-à-vis widow/witches were also prevalent in television drama series, commonly referred to as *Sinetron* (*Sinema elektronik*, literally meaning electronic cinema), as well (Aripurnami, 1996). One of the interesting responses that would in all probability shared by many of Indonesians (considering the popularity of the films with such portrayal of women) came about in Krishna Sen's interview with a renowned New Order cineaste, Misbach Yusa Biran. He pointed out that "the weakness of the fictional female [was] a reflection of the real one" (Sen, 1994, p. 135).

Such line of reasoning is actually somewhat conflicting when viewed against historical facts. Indonesia has had women in decision-making positions in other fields for a considerably long time. In fact, the country had had a woman appointed as a Justice of the Supreme Court roughly fifteen years before Sandra Day O'Connor was appointed in the U.S (Anderson, 1999). A considerable number of women have also sat in the parliament, even during the New Order—interestingly enough, post New Order, the percentage decreased. Although in reality many of those women were relatives of prominent political male figures and were there for mere formality, the mere fact that they were allowed to sit and secure a status in one of the most central branches of government showed that Indonesian women are not universally placed in the kind of patriarchal society that strictly confines women to domesticity nor in weak positions. So, to attribute the exclusion of women from important positions outside family-bound obligations as "cultural specificity" and the essentialist view of 'nature' (*kodrat*, whose closest meaning is 'nature') seems to be a gross oversimplification.

Drawing from the fact that there were very few women in the position of control in the artistic as well as industrial control, the explanation of such representations of women by women directors might be brought about as a byproduct of women's "minority voice" being drowned out by male dominance in the medium. The women who do manage to enter, in other capacities besides acting, cannot do much but going with the flow and emulate the work of the men, for the mere purpose of attaining acceptance. This researcher cannot ascertain whether or not previous Indonesian women directors initially had gender issues or women's struggle in their agenda but it would be reasonable to assume how difficult it was for women to survive, let alone take an opposing position on issues of women when they were grossly outnumbered, as well as outweighed by men in terms of experience and training. Similar explanations can be discovered in, for example, Elaine Showalter (1971), *Women's Liberation and Literature*, about Anglo-American women writers in the 19th century when the literary world was overwhelmingly dominated by men who had strained relationship with feminists, as well as *Women Who Run the Show* Gregory (2002), that reveals the overt and covert pressures women in decision-making positions had to face while working in the male-dominated movie industry of the 1970s and 1980s Hollywood.

Embarking from the historical review that this article has provided, further studies can explore the roles that women play in the current generation of Indonesian cinema as well as the changes of on screen portrayals that have been brought about by the increasingly prominent positions held by female cineastes. It would also be interesting to delve into the institutional roles of women in other Southeast Asian cinemas as points of comparison as well as the textual manifestation of female-directed or female-produced motion pictures.

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