

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSION

Popular culture is popular because it resonates with life. At its worst it resonates with the lowest, most vulgar, or most trivial aspects of life, but at its best, it appeals to life's complexity, its nobility, and its wisdom. If we fail to distinguish these different aspects of popular culture we are as guilty of simpleminded prejudice as those who would abandon the classics because they are old. The vitality of the classics is based on their reflection on human experience, an experience continually revealed to us if we are wise enough to look for it.¹

Female Identity in Indonesia's Cultural Transition

The main focus of this thesis has been to examine the sinetron *Misteri Gunung Merapi*'s engagement with contemporary Indonesian issues, in particular gender issues, and its reflection of Indonesian cultural values. What the sinetron offers to its viewers is the ambivalence and ambiguity of gender issues; reflected in characterization, storylines, and camera. It carries a complex blend of progressive and traditional attitudes toward gender and power, a reflection of an era of great cultural transition. This sinetron is like a witness to the society's larger cultural transformation, a transformation which is not yet finished. The thesis has involved three areas of discussion: sinetron as a product of television industry; as an entertainment text; and as a cultural product. Its findings demonstrate that Indonesia is now in a process of constructing its own cultural identity, in which women can be expected to play some new roles.

¹ Mary P. Nichols, "A Defense of Popular Culture," *Academic Questions* 13, no. 1 (2000): 78.

The Indonesian Television Industry in an Era of Socio-cultural Change

Globalization, with a free global flow of information and culture, in some ways could lead to a homogenization of a global culture. However, at the same time, it also can encourage the local to reinvent its traditions as a natural process of the effort of resistance. What might happen, in a national television industry, is the rise of hybrid productions which can satisfy the local taste but still be competitive against the global flow into the national market.

In a free market system, entertainment is a business and the return of the investors' capital basically depends on the popularity of the product. In the case of the weekly television *sinetron* in the newly free Indonesian market, their producers need to learn from other popular entertainments and take account of the trends in the society before and in the process of the making of their *sinetron*. The essential basis of a *sinetron*'s popularity is its ability to bridge across the many different tastes from the many different cultural backgrounds in the complex Indonesian society. Popularity in the terms of the free market leads to being successful in attracting many paid advertisements. Market-oriented indications of a *sinetron*'s popularity are being in the top ten of audience sizes and having a double-digit rating based on the regular AC Nielsen survey. In this way, the change in how the success of a *sinetron* is measured has signified the transformation of television, from being government sponsored and controlled into a free market system. Since the end of the New Order regime Indonesian *sinetron* do not carry the burden of delivering government messages, educating the people about how they should live in Indonesia.

The success of the particular *sinetron* *Misteri Gunung Merapi* in terms of its rating achievements and its continuing production of hundreds of episodes is due to the ability of its production team to combine local and global elements of entertainment. They have learnt from the popularity of martial art cinema and TV series and also taken several entertainment elements from the production of local television films. As with its martial art entertainment, the genre of this *sinetron* is hybrid, including combining various Western film genres to gain as many

segments of the television-viewing audience as possible. This deliberately makes *Misteri Gunung Merapi* suitable for family viewing regardless of the sex, class, and age of the viewers. However, the sinetron also involves strong identifiably local elements. These are not only in terms of its costuming, which makes the sinetron at a glance like *kethoprak*, a traditional Javanese stage performance art, but also in its story-lines, narrative, conflicts and utilisation of popular symbols. Through these readily recognisable and identifiable elements the viewers can enjoy watching this serial because these elements are familiar.

With its people's many different ethnic backgrounds, Indonesia is rich in cultural tradition but there are also political sensitivities and potential resentments and conflicts when one ethnic background appears to be presented as more special than the others. With all this cultural complexity, producing sinetron with a certain ethnicity as the background to its story-line is tricky. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has proved that Indonesia's complex culture can be handled by negotiating between 'authenticity' and imagination. Rather than focusing on cultural accuracy, the sinetron is made more widely attractive by presenting the currently dominant beliefs. In this way all traditional cultural aspects are evoked only as cultural memory. Moreover, this is not only for nostalgia but also at the same time could function as a satisfying recovery from cultural trauma in the past. There are many small sub-narratives which only could be understood by someone who had grown up in the New Order era. The expression of "*saya mohon petunjuk*" (may I have your suggestion)² which is used mostly in the early episodes is one of the examples of the dominant discourses in the New Order era. The relationship between soldiers, and some officials, and the people in the society can be read as a reflection of the relationship between government officials and the people during the three decades of the New Order. In these ways the sinetron has contested the New Order ideology and authority which had fallen away just as the production of the sinetron started. Although *Misteri Gunung*

² During Suharto era, ministers or military generals rarely forgot to say "*Menurut petunjuk Bapak Presiden*" (according to president's directive). The former minister of information, Harmoko especially often said publicly that *minta petunjuk bapak presiden* (asking for president's directive or *menurut petunjuk bapak presiden* (according to president's directive), a sentence which became his style.

Merapi is a product of popular culture, hiding behind its purported setting of the 17th century, it is successful in presenting the spirit of the New Order regime in a critical way.

Representation of Heroic Women in this Sinetron

As with common responses to the emergence of heroic women in action-adventure cinema and TV series, the first impression of watching the heroic women in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is a feeling of awe at their extraordinary ability in martial art and exercising of supernatural power. However, given its need to succeed in a profit-oriented consumer marketplace, the sinetron also offers a rather limited and pessimistic view of gender equity. At first glance, it is progressive in its gender representation. Gender in the sinetron can be fluid, as males and females can change roles and positions. There is also the possibility of sex transformation through supernatural power. As in Islam males and females should be able to be visually differentiated, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* does not follow either the Chinese martial art or Hollywood action-adventure conventions of entertainment in presenting its heroic female characters. They do not have to appear disguised in male clothing to be active in the world of fighting, which is normally considered as a male world. They are beautiful, stylish and feminine in appearance. This makes *Misteri Gunung Merapi* distinctive when compared to other fighting entertainment. Moreover, it should be read in the context not only of Islamic but also of traditional Indonesian culture. Indonesia has a long tradition of female soldiers. Unlike the reality of soldier women as recorded by many Westerner (that is being in male clothing when they were performing a role as soldiers) this was not the case in Indonesia. It is certainly not the case in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. The sinetron modifies the male costumes into clearly feminine styles, and adds such items as flowing *selendang* (scarves) to make the fighting women look like women.

In this regard, the politics of the sinetron are marked by ambiguity, which seems to me to be in perfect keeping with the current era of tremendous social and cultural change. Like the unsure feelings of the Indonesians about the future of the

country when considering the conflict between secularism and Islamization, the sinetron is also ambivalent in presenting the power of its heroic female characters. I suggest that this can be attributed to the fact that the sinetron is, after all, a mass media product, produced for and marketed to the general demographic of Indonesia while deliberately attempting to not offend anyone, and so needs to cater to prevailing ideology.

Misteri Gunung Merapi has been produced during a time of turmoil, when people are learning to be democratic. They were suddenly given freedom to express their opinions after decades of being muted, allegedly for reasons of national stability. Since the provision of this freedom there has been a rise in concerns about a perceived degradation of Indonesian morality. People express these concerns and blame the newly free mass media, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has been produced amid such debates on public morality. It chose to go along with more conservative currents in public morality, adapting the performance styles of the fighting women and confining the heroic figures in Balinese body binding. This makes the sinetron *kolosal laga* appear as a reincarnation of traditional performance.

It is not easy to label the fighting women in the sinetron as simply either powerful or powerless. They are powerful in terms of their amazing abilities in exercising supernatural power. However, although the culture portrayed does not question the women's accumulation of power, there is an issue about whether the power is controlled wisely or not. The apparent contrast between the way powerful male and female characters exercise their powers shows the way the culture gives males a higher status than females. None of the powerful male figures, whether they are good or evil, ever exercise their supernatural ability to abuse a female, but a powerful female character will often misuse her power for her own interests. As in the increasing debates over gender roles in Indonesia, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* plays around with values within and against patriarchy.

New Female Identity?

Globalization also leads people to identity crises from the floods of global cultural products, forms, and practices. In this context, there is a continual process of assembling and re-assembling cultural identity. As part of reconstructing and restructuring identities, people may assert who they are - as individuals, communities, or nations - through a wide range of media, including television, and draw from a vast range of traditional, national, and transnational cultural sources. However, the public performance of identity is rarely uncontested. Potentially countervailing forces such as the state, the market, and social movements may constrain or enable expression with varying levels of intensity and effectiveness. Thus, we can view media, performance, and identity as important sites of social, political, and cultural struggles over the local meanings and significance of mediated images and texts.

The local and traditional setting in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has made the sinetron more flexible in presenting female identity. Comparing the representation of the sinetron and of the recorded tradition of Javanese culture, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* constructs women in the modern spirit of Indonesia. Its representation of the female middle class is not typical of the *priyayi* women in traditional Java. The sinetron does not construct the female *priyayi* as women who glorify their sexuality. They are still represented as beautiful, as in the myth of female *priyayi*, however, they are free to choose their own way of life. In contrast, in reality, female *priyayi* were taught to prepare themselves to be wives as the main purpose in life. They were prepared also to accept their husbands' other wives or concubines. In contrast, in the sinetron, all women have an adventurous feminist's spirit. They refuse arranged marriages, and deconstruct the social and cultural values through studying martial art and going on a journey before they get married. However, in presenting female lower class characters, the sinetron constructs these women as closer to social reality. They have more autonomy in everyday life and more freedom in public space; yet they have nothing to say, and remain in the background of the story.

Reading the contrast between the powerful and the powerless women, the stylish performance of the active women can be read as their becoming victims of capitalism. Like the global media construction of powerful cute girls, they are active but at the same time they glorify their appearance. Thus, they still continue to accept the patriarchal ideology of the female as object of the male gaze. In contrast, the powerless are active in the economic sector but are muted in other public sectors. They contribute to economic development but they are invisible, which is the reality of many poor women in Indonesia. They work hard as labourers in various economic sectors but their existence is rarely counted.

Traditionally most Indonesian women had a degree of freedom in the economy and in cultural mediation, although in term of status and authority women were still considered as lower than men. Cultural mobility in some ways has encouraged some women to challenge their former identity and redefine it in line with social and cultural change. Although gender awareness is increasing and women get more access to various public sectors, the new wave of Islamization in Indonesia and the enormous growth of late capitalism with its impact on all aspects of life in fact may create potential new oppression for women. Much Indonesian Islamic discourse, which regards woman and man as equal but different, reinforces gendered roles which marginalises women's participation in the public sphere. With the statement that Islam appreciates women's domestic roles, as a wife and a mother, this discourse reinforces the New Order gendered ideology which has been challenged by women activists. At the same time, capitalism which brings with it a consumerist lifestyle, encourages women to be consumers and with a female identity which is not determined by her individual achievements but rather what the capitalist system dictates to women.

Nevertheless I agree with Budianta³ that in the post New Order era women have begun to reformulate their own identity, and I suggest that this can be seen in

³ Melani Budianta, "Plural Identities: Indonesian Women's Redefinition of Democracy in the Post-Reformasi Era," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2002): 115-6, <http://www.informit.com.au/>

the sinetron *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. Although the setting is a fictionalised version of Java in the seventeenth century, the values presented through the depiction of the three central female characters: Mayang Sari, Farida, and Pitaloka are modern. This shows how global cultural flows have been impacting upon new cultural forms. In some ways this sinetron has already portrayed some mobility in women's identity. As is the case in Indonesia today, most female characters in the sinetron want to pursue their self-defined career. In the portrayal of these three characters, reading symbolically their journey between the world of humans and the world of spirits, or, in the context of modern Indonesia, from rural to urban areas, all of them are more aware of their individuality with the impact of modernization. The most visible notion is their freedom to express their own choices. The meaning of education is translated differently; from something just for a woman's own improvement to something that enables her to participate in the state and community. It shows also some progressive views in its portrayal of how women become more aware of their membership as citizens of the polity and want to participate in it. With this awareness, they begin to articulate new definitions of gender differences and adopt the concept of men and women as equal partners. These redefinitions can also be related to how young Indonesian people are developing new definitions of sexuality, where it is freed from ties to the family and its reproduction.

In its early episodes *Misteri Gunung Merapi* represents many features of the cultural mobility that accompanies modernization and globalization and gradually transforms women's identity. Nevertheless, it does not promote these changes as desirable and admirable. The New Order ideology of women's inherent nature, ruled by their reproductive responsibilities and child bearing, is still dominant and influences the way the sinetron creates the characterization of female protagonists and antagonists. Therefore, I would support Robinson and Sen's notion that Indonesian women's transformation is still more in rhetoric rather than in practice, and publicly it is nearly invisible. In my reading, *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, with its representation of the transformation limited to only few characters and largely still at the stage of awareness rather than active participation, indicates that women's citizenship is still problematic in Indonesia.

Further, with the ambivalence of the way the serial represents gender equity, it appears that in some ways the sinetron acknowledges the importance of women's economic role but refuses to appreciate women's ability in decision making. This suggests that there will still need to be a long process for Indonesian women to be actively participating in the Indonesian polity.

Researching Sinetron

A current weakness of feminist literary criticism is its failure in understanding the contemporary image of the heroic female characters in action-adventure films and TV series. Most critics are still based in opposing the logic of a gendered binary opposition of masculinity and femininity, while gender issues have always been challenged over time. In the case of the sinetron *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, the problems for feminist analyses arise not only from the historical context but also the cultural context from which the heroic female characters emerge. As a result of researching this sinetron I agree with Hills' idea of the need to reconceptualise the modes of appreciating heroic female characters, as well as with Kaplan's argument about the different traditions of thought between Western and Asian cultures which influences the construction of the active female characters.

As cultural texts, sinetron are modern. Issues overtly or covertly presented and responded to in these Indonesian productions can be explored as a representation of what is being enacted in Indonesia in an era of transformation. However, as an entertainment text, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is also traditional, with many elements of traditional performances being reinvented and reconstructed for more diverse and more modern audiences. Looking at the potentially contrasting difference between these forms of text, sinetron, especially the genre of *sinetron kolosal laga*, large-scale historical action dramas, such as *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, provide opportunities for important and complex research. Traditional approaches, such as those common in television studies, are

not enough to look at representation in sinetron, especially the hybrid forms like *sinetron kolosal laga*.

Looking at how the supernatural is constructed in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* shows that there is close relationship between text and the world view of the author. The influence of the *pesantren* and his Islamic world view are clearly evident in the construction of the supernatural, demonstrating that the study of sinetron opens to the study of their authorship, especially of that by their script writers, to explore the writer's world view in the sinetron's culture.

The broadcast programs of the public mass media are open for free interpretation. Analyses of them can produce various and contesting results: there may be many different interpretations as the result of different people looking at the same source. The background and the ideology of the analysts may influence the result of interpretation. This makes the ethnographic study of media challenging. What do their audiences think about the different programs? Does every audience member have a similar impression? If not, why, and how have they constructed their own interpretations? Who is the audience? What are their backgrounds and ideologies? All these general questions apply to the further study of these widely pervasive mass media cultural products, the sinetron in Indonesia.