

CHAPTER X

GENDER AND POWER

Introduction

Television serials are often valued for their ability to quickly incorporate and respond to popular issues, demonstrating that they are up to date. As I discussed in Chapter II, a significant issue after the fall of the New Order has been gender relations. There continue to be various debates among women activists and scholars especially, both Muslim and secular, about women's rights. These debates involve the questioning and challenging of existing gender stereotypes and ideologies. A television serial, like *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, can be among the media in which we can trace contemporary images of women and look for indications of the debates, questions and challenges. For example, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* was being produced and broadcast at the time of the Indonesian Islamic debate on the acceptability of a woman president in 1999. As entertainment, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* does not accurately reflect contemporary society, but it certainly does respond to the dominant issues of that society. What is the main direction in its responses to contemporary gender issues? What kind of gender ideology does this sinetron represent?

As it is a product of contemporary Indonesia, I need to consider various influences on its construction of gender relations, such as some of the current interpretations of gender and power in Indonesian Islam. From these discussions, I can suggest how the sinetron portrays the considerations of the position of women in society. Because *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is set in Java in the 16th and 17th centuries, and because the concept of power in Indonesian culture cannot be perceived without understanding "how notions of power and politics are

expressed and practiced in Java”,¹ I will begin by discussing the ideology of gender and power in Javanese culture, and the influence of class on gender relations. Many scholars have noted that images of Javanese women have changed over time, like their realities.² What images of powerful women does the sinetron draw from Javanese tradition? And to what extent did New Order gender ideology draw on the ideas and expectations of the Javanese upper class? Are these ideas accepted or contested in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*? What is the position of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* in relation to the gender debate among Muslims?

Part 1: Gender and Power in Indonesian Culture and Society

The Javanese Tradition

Benedict Anderson has explained Javanese concepts of power and authority by contrasting them with modern European concepts. In the European understanding, power is abstract. It is “ascribed to or inferred from certain patterns of behaviour and certain social relationships.” Thus, we understand the existence of power through the fact that “some men appear to obey, willingly or unwillingly, the wishes of others”. Power in this sense is not to be exercised but to be accumulated and absorbed from external resources. The source of power can be from “wealth, social status, formal office, organization, weapons, population, and so forth”. Power is identical in the hands of any individual or group. Because it concerns relationships, in the Western concept power is morally ambiguous, it can be used for good or evil. The Western idea of power often refers to “economic control and coercive force”. It can be identified also with “activity, forcefulness, getting things done, instrumentality, and effectiveness, brought about through

¹ Hans Antlöv, "The Social Construction of Power and Authority in Java," in *The Java That Never Was: Academic Theories and Political Practices*, ed. Hans Antlöv and Jörgen Hellman (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005), 43.

² Sita van Bemmelen, "What Has Become of the Slendang? Changing Images of Women and Java," in *The Java That Never Was: Academic Theories Amd Political Practices*, ed. Hans Antlöv and Jörgen Hellman (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005), 97.

calculation of means, to achieve goals”.³ It can be said that the concept of power in the Western term is largely rational and pragmatic.

In contrast, Anderson notes that “the Javanese have a radically different idea of power”. Power is translated into “*kasekten*”, a concept which refers to “powers, legitimacy and charisma”. Thus power, in the Javanese idea, is an “intangible, mysterious, and divine energy which animates the universe”.⁴ “Power is homogenous” because the cosmos, as the source of power, is always constant. Javanese people tend not to question the legitimacy of power because power is power. Although for the Javanese power is concrete, it can also be “invisible” because Javanese does not differentiate between “organic and inorganic matters”, the seen and unseen, and power can be found in “every aspect of the natural world”.⁵

Since the source of power is in the universe, it is pursued through ascetic disciplines such as “fasting, going without sleep, meditation, sexual abstinence, ritual purification, and sacrifices of various types”.⁶ The purpose of ascetic discipline is “to develop a concentration of inner spiritual strength through the sustained practice of emotional and behavioral self-control”.⁷ Individuals with mystical power and spiritual potency are acknowledged as having high status and cultural superiority. They are recognized through “their constantly calm demeanor, their refined speech styles and comportment, and their ability to elicit deferential behavior from others without apparent coercion or effort”.⁸

In this model women are considered as inferior in moral, spiritual and social position. The ideological framework in Brenner’s notion is that “men have

³ Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Culture in Indonesia* (New York: Cornell University 1990), 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23-4.

⁷ Suzanne Brenner, “Why Women Rule the Roost,” in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men; Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. A Ong and G Peletz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*

greater self-control than women over their emotions, behavior, suggesting that men are naturally stronger than women in a spiritual sense".⁹ The underlying focus is spiritual potency: the ability to control human passions: men are encouraged to undertake various sorts of ascetic exercises.¹⁰ Women are not encouraged to attain spiritual potency because a woman is "bound to her social and material context and consequently less suited for asceticism, which after all means distancing oneself from one's social environment".¹¹ It is feared that a woman would lose her proper womanhood if she pursued spiritual discipline exercise very far.

However, this does not mean that women cannot master spiritual power, because there are a few Javanese female puppeteers, who master refined Javanese language, and female shaman-healers who perform a series of ascetic exercises to understand the unseen world. This suggests women's ability to be a mediator "in the cultural domain, or between the human and the suprahuman world, between the macrocosm and the microcosm".¹² This is consistent with the Javanese idea that "powerful" is not always "large and forceful" but it can be "small and fragile-looking." With spiritual power and effective potency, the small and fragile looking can defeat the large and forceful.¹³ Spiritual power is related to social status.

Status in its Javanese conception is "very complex" since it refers to qualities such as "degree of cultural refinement, mastery of elaborate linguistic etiquette and social skills, and the reputed possession of spiritual potency".¹⁴

⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Madelon Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis, "Ibuisism and Priyayization: Path to Power," in *Indonesian Women in Focus: Past and Present Notion*, ed. Elsbeth Locher-Scholten and Anke Niehof (Dordrecht, Holland ; Providence, USA: Foris Publications, 1987), 47.

¹² S. T. van Bemmelen, *Women and Mediation in Indonesia*, Verhandelingen Van Het Koninklijk Instituut Voor Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1992), 3.

¹³ Shelly Errington, "Recasting Sex, Gender, and Power; a Theoretical and Regional Overview," in *Power and Difference; Gender in Island Southeast Asia*, ed. J Atkinson and S Errington (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 5-6.

¹⁴ Suzanne Brenner, *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 140.

Status in Javanese culture is conceptualized through a complex social hierarchy constructed from combinations of differentiations such as “rank, class, age and seniority, occupation, education and other considerations”. This complex social hierarchy, although it can be somewhat fluid, determines “the broader socio-cultural order and the place of everything in it.”¹⁵ Wealth is “a sign, but *not* the source of authority, of power, of the right to expect deferential behaviour and language”.¹⁶ Brenner has also noted that “certain occupations, such as palace retainer, Muslim religious leader, or petty civil servant, are poorly paid but are still considered prestigious, at least in some circles”.¹⁷ In contrast, merchants were lower in status, as they lacked hereditary nobility; the source of their wealth was from commercial activity; “they were overly concerned with the pursuit of money”; and were considered to be “men who could not control their women”.¹⁸ In contrast, the term *priyayi*¹⁹ (high ranking Javanese person) can refer to “someone who doesn’t want to work²⁰” because working is considered to lower a person’s status.²¹

For many Western anthropologists, most women in Southeast Asia seem to enjoy high status because of “the complementarities of men’s and women’s work and the relative lack of ritual or economic differentiation between men and

¹⁵ Ibid., 58.

¹⁶ ———, “Competing Hierarchies: Javanese Merchants and the *Priyayi* Elite in Solo, Central Java,” *Indonesia* 52, no. Oct. (1991): 76.

¹⁷ Brenner, “Why Women Rule the Roost,” 25.

¹⁸ ———, *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java*, 59-75.

¹⁹ In my account, Javanese highly valued land, as theirs was an agricultural society. *Priyayi* in the past referred to aristocrats, not only in their title, which showed their relationship with the royal families, but also in the possession of land which was a source of their wealth. As they did not need to work, they had more time to enjoy their life or pursue supernatural power. They considered the merchants as lower in status because their working was the source of their wealth and not their possession of land. It appears that the ideology has continued; most aristocrats (the older generation) whom I met and talked with told me that working is embarrassing. Although they are no longer rich, they still do not want to work. They rely on their wives for their living. Nevertheless, many Indonesians now want to be businessmen. A successful businessman gains a high degree of power to enjoy a luxurious lifestyle.

²⁰ In my conversations with several Javanese aristocratic males in the 1990s, they especially criticised the traders. They said that they personally felt embarrassed to trade. They also accused the silver traders of Kutagedhe Yogyakarta, the Galgendhu, as the offsprings of ‘celeng’ (boars).

²¹ Brenner, “Competing Hierarchies: Javanese Merchants and the *Priyayi* Elite in Solo, Central Java,” 79.

women".²² Yet Brenner, in her study of Javanese women from aristocratic and merchant classes found that aristocratic women are expected to be domestic, and female value is tied to "men's control over women's sexuality, fertility and movement".²³ Meanwhile, in the merchant community, there is appreciation for women's economic productivity: "their ability and willingness to trade in the marketplace".²⁴ Creese's study of *Kakawin* (the literature of the Javanese courts) shows that the cultural ideal for the Javanese woman was her "grace and modesty".²⁵ This is not easily compatible with middle-class women's economic activity.

Women's status tends to be tied to that of their husbands. This means that the way the society regards particular married women depends on their husbands' status in that society. With this idea, considerations of *bobot*, *bebet*, and *bibit*²⁶ are important in marriage arrangements for Javanese people. Although women, especially the aristocratic ones, are known for their dignity of manner, refinement of speech and art and administrative skills, they are still considered inferior to the men of their class. Lacking time for spiritual exercises and learning, they are dependent on their husbands for protection and guidance, because their husbands are considered as the masters of the family. Although aristocratic women are

²² Errington, "Recasting Sex, Gender, and Power; a Theoretical and Regional Overview," 1; A Ong and G Peletz, eds., *Bewitching Women, Pious Men; Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, Bewitching Women, Pious Men; Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1.

²³ Brenner, *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java*, 76.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Helen Creese, "Images of Women and Embodiment in Kakawin Literature," *Intersections*, no. 5 (2001), <http://www.sshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue5/creese.html>.

²⁶ *Bobot* (quality) refers to choosing a person from looking at her family tree. *Bebet* (rank) refers to characteristics of the parents, who should be wealthy and charitable. *Bibit* (breeding) refers to the personality and the appearance of the person.

highly valued in Javanese culture, at the same time they are also criticized²⁷, especially by the women from the merchant community. It can be said that female status and autonomy in Javanese culture depends on their husband's position in the male social class structure.

One reason for women's position being considered inferior is because of their dealing with money. The market for the Javanese is a place for financial competition. To pursue profit in the market all kinds of behaviour, including those considered 'coarse' or 'not refined' by the Javanese, are acceptable. Since some kinds of behaviour such as bargaining are considered 'rude', men prefer not to do it, concerned that it will lower their status. Dealing with, women are considered to lack spiritual discipline, which then makes them lack self-control and be more dominated by impulses and emotions.

Other anthropologists have reported that Javanese women are usually the ones dealing with money but also that they control family finances.²⁸ "Husbands are expected to turn over most or all of their income to their wives, who in turn allocate it as they see fit for household expenditures, sometimes giving their husbands only pocket money with which to buy cigarettes or snacks".²⁹ Most Javanese women think that men are incompetent in managing money and many men seem to agree with this opinion. It is common that instead of being the family breadwinner, Javanese men often receive money from their wife because women are the major providers for their families. Brenner has also noted that the wives of

²⁷ "While many Javanese would have considered it an honor and privilege to be made the wife or concubine of the sunan, Laweyan women were in general agreement that it was preferable to be a common but autonomous trader than to be kept as a royal consort, pampered but confined like a bird in a gilded cage, and forced to compete with other wives and mistresses for the attentions and favors of the men of the court. They found the idea of being dependent on men for everything (their stereotyped image of what it meant to be a woman of the nobility) to be especially unappealing, because most were accustomed to earning and saving their own money with the freedom that provided". Brenner, "Competing Hierarchies: Javanese Merchants and the *Priyayi* Elite in Solo, Central Java," 64.

²⁸ Hildred Geertz, *The Javanese Family: A Study of Kinship and Socialization* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), 125; Ward Keeler, "Speaking of Gender in Java," in *Power and Difference; Gender in Island Southeast Asia*, ed. J Atkinson and S Errington (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 128; Diane L. Wolf, "Javanese Factory Daughters," in *Fantasizing the Feminine*, ed. Laurie Jo Sears (Durham: Duke University, 1996), 66.

²⁹ Brenner, *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java*, 136.

lower- and middle-ranked *priyayi* had to work as batik merchants because their husbands' salary was too small.³⁰ However, women's autonomy³¹ as economic actors, "in fact, signifies an inferior social position".³² Men are considered as the head of the family: as Geertz noted, men frequently receive the deference of their wives and other family members.³³ This confuses observers who tend to associate money with power. The traditional Javanese concepts of authority and power seem ambiguous and contradictory.

Although in women are considered as lower in status and power relations, from the perspective of inheritance and property ownership, women and men are equal. "Javanese custom prescribes that daughters and sons inherit equal shares of property from their parents". Women's property is separated from their husbands', especially when it is "inherited from their parents" or "brought with them before marriage". Husbands cannot make any claim to their wives' property. Similarly, wives cannot claim husbands' property that they've bought before their marriage. When divorce happens property "acquired during marriage" is "usually divided evenly between them".³⁴ However, some Javanese adopt the Islamic rule of dividing inheritance into 2/3 for male and 1/3 for female or, in the Javanese term, '*sapikul sagendhongan*'.³⁵

The ambiguity of gender and power can also be seen through the narratives of traditional performance, such as *kethoprak*. Contrary to the reality of women's inferior status, in the legend of Damarwulan for example, a man could

³⁰ Ibid., 77.

³¹ Female autonomy, according to Stoler, refers to "the extent to which women exercise economic control over their own lives vis-à-vis men" Ann Stoler, "Class Structure and Female Autonomy in Rural Java," *Signs* 3, no. 1 (1977): 74-5..

³² Brenner, *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java*, 134-70; Hotze Lont, "More Money, More Autonomy? Women and Credit in a Javanese Urban Community," *Indonesia* 70, no. October (2000), <http://cip.cornell.edu/Dienst/UI/1.0/Summarize/seap.indo/1106942852>; Wolf, "Javanese Factory Daughters," 66.

³³ Geertz, *The Javanese Family: A Study of Kinship and Socialization*, 46.

³⁴ Brenner, *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java*, 138.

³⁵ In van Bemmelen and Grijns term, *sapikul sagendhong*: "men in two baskets on a bamboo shoulder-pole, women in one basket fastened in a *slendang* [wide shawl] on their backs"

reach a higher status after marrying a woman from a higher rank. Damarwulan, with his dignity of manner, refinement of speech, and martial arts skills, can attract a daughter of the *Patih* (Chief Minister) of Majapahit. Having married the *Patih*'s daughter, Damarwulan then can be chosen as *Senapati* Majapahit (Commander-in-Chief of the Majapahit forces) to attack Minakjinggo, the *Adipati* (Regent) of Blambangan. He can win the fight because the two concubines of Minakjinggo help him by stealing Minakjinggo's weapon and giving it to him. He kills Minakjinggo with his own weapon, and then marries the two concubines for their help. Moreover, his success leads him to marry the queen of Majapahit. This legend suggests that Damarwulan's status is gained through his successive marriages with the four women from the higher rank. Related to my earlier analysis of the Javanese hero, the account can be read as Damarwulan's power having been inherent, with the four women only mediums for him to achieve his appropriately high rank. However, there is obviously an ambiguity in the legend – does the hero gain his power through marrying higher-status women, or does his inherent power outrank the otherwise limiting social status?

The Classical Javanese Conduct Books

Contrary to the reality of middle class women, and the traditional performance narratives which were widely consumed by various social classes, classical Javanese didactic texts tend to glorify the ideology of male dominance. These texts were highly valued and females were encouraged to read them to learn how to be ideal women. This ideology was taken up by the New Order as state ideology and is still high valued by some aristocrats. "Women not only had to supplement their income as before, but in addition they had to ensure that the *priyayi* class charisma, no longer self-evident, was maintained".³⁶ Suryakusuma called this a 'State Ibuism'.³⁷

³⁶Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis, "Ibuism and Priyayization: Path to Power," 43.

³⁷ Julia Suryakusuma, "State and Sexuality in New Order Indonesia " in *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 101.

Most of these classical texts stress women's reproductive capacity as the most important role and marriage as the main purpose of woman's life. For example, *Serat Panitisastra*³⁸ suggests that in Javanese culture woman is appreciated for her reproductive capacity. Some verses explain that Javanese society appreciates deeply the existence of children as the key to happiness in a family. Woman's reproductive role is appreciated highly and that is why a woman is valued for her beauty. To complete the value of her reproductive role, a woman is expected to be loyal to her husband. When her husband passes away she should follow him not by committing suicide but by her loyalty. She should not marry again until she dies. Her desire should be to be with him in the after-life. Outside of her reproductive capacity, the role of woman is considered trivial.³⁹

Kartodirdjo in his interviews with a number of female aristocrats in Solo in 1995 found that female aristocrats should glorify their beauty and sexuality to satisfy their husbands, "*Adapun yang terpenting bagi suami ialah memelihara tubuh wanita tetap cantik dan sehat, berbusana rapi, sehingga pelayanan terhadap suami tetap memuaskan*" (The most important thing for a husband is that woman should look after their body to stay beautiful and healthy, dress up nicely so that in her service to her husband, she can satisfy him).⁴⁰ To keep their body stay slim, they have to stay away from various fatty foods, drink herbal tonics, and do some fasting.⁴¹ A conservative male will be proud of a wife who can keep her beauty and appearance, because a wife is a kind of possession for him.⁴² A beautiful wife gives him status in the eyes of other men. It suggests that the tradition of valuing woman for her body is still current.

³⁸ The *Serat Panitisastra* is an old Javanese manuscript written by the Surakarta Susuhunan (ruler) Pakubuwana V (1820-1823) talking about women's matters.

³⁹ A. Sudewa, *Serat Panitisastra: Tradisi, Resepsi Dan Transformasi [the Text Panitisastra: Tradition, Reception, and Transformation]*, Seri Ildep (Yogyakarta: Duta Wacana University Press, 1991).

⁴⁰ Suyatno Kartodirdjo, "Perubahan Sosial and Dominasi Seksualitas Pria Terhadap Wanita Dalam Kebudayaan Priyayi Kasunanan Dan Mangkunegaran Di Surakarta [Social Change and Male Domination of Sexuality in the Aristocrats Culture]" (Surakarta: Fakultas Sastra Universitas Sebelas Maret, 1996), 50.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 51.

Another early nineteenth century Javanese classic text, the *Serat Centhini*, contains some lessons for woman by symbolising the five fingers as points of how a woman should behave. The first lesson says that the thumb symbolises that a woman should obey her husband without any question. She should follow what her husband asks her to do. The second says that the point finger symbolizes that a woman should not object to her husband's word. The third says that the middle finger means that a woman should respect her husband and keep her husband's dignity. The fourth says that the ring finger means that a woman should give a beautiful smile and face in serving her husband. And the last says that the little finger symbolises that a woman should be skilful and canny in all work to serve her husband.⁴³ This ideology was often used during the New Order era to remind a woman of her position as a mother and a wife to support her husband's career and to educate her children as assets of the future.

Similarly to the *Serat Centhini*, in the *Serat Candrarini*⁴⁴ there are nine lessons which teach a woman's total and complete submission to her husband. The perfect wife, according to this *serat*, should be loyal to her husband, accepting polygamy,⁴⁵ loving her husband, skilful in woman's works,⁴⁶ good at taking care of her make-up and dress, not luxurious, good at serving her husband; she should pay attention to her parents in law, and read books of didactic literature in her leisure time.⁴⁷

⁴³ AP Murniati, "Perempuan Indonesia Dan Pola Ketergantungan [Indonesian Women and the Dependence Pattern]," in *Citra Wanita Dan Kekuasaan (Jawa) [Women's Image and Authority (Javanese)]*, ed. SJ Budi Susanto (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1992), 24.

⁴⁴ Composed by Raden Ngabehi Yasadipura I in 1863.

⁴⁵ Although the New Order government took Javanese *priyayi* ideology to regulate women's sexuality, it did not take over the idea of polygamy. The marriage law of 1974 regulates "the legality and registration of marriage, the minimum marrying age (nineteen for men, sixteen for women), the rights of women and men in marriage, annulment, divorce and polygamy" Suryakusuma, "State and Sexuality in New Order Indonesia ", 102-3. Although polygamy is allowed in Islam, the state makes it very difficult to practice polygamy. However, recently the issue of polygamy became a hot topic following the practice of polygamy by a well-known *ulama*, Kyai Abdullah Gymnastiar.

⁴⁶ Writing batik, dancing, and domestic work.

⁴⁷ Murniati, "Perempuan Indonesia Dan Pola Ketergantungan [Indonesian Women and the Dependence Pattern]," 24-25.

In the *Serat Wicara Keras* written by Raden Ngabehi Yasadipura II in 1816, there is a picture of the ideal woman. It describes how a woman should behave towards her husband to create a happy family: she should obey and honour her husband. She should fulfill all her husband's demands and desires. She should not obstruct his will or wish. The carrying out of all her husband's wishes and demands is the realization of a wife's love for her husband. Such love and loyalty are keys to happiness in family life. A woman should not express any negative emotion such as disappointment and anger. She should also keep her husband's secrets or mortification to herself. To get her husband's love and attention a woman should have good skills in make-up and costume to be beautiful and attractive.⁴⁸ This text is written in *ngoko* (the 'low' form of Javanese language) therefore would be read more by non-aristocrat women.⁴⁹

The conduct books can be interpreted as male efforts to control women's morality not for the sake of women's but males' interests. Florida, in her study of 19th century Javanese poetry, suggested that because the literary texts were written by males and expressed male fantasies, women were constructed as and demanded to give complete and total submission to their husband, "willingly surrendering herself body and soul to her husband".⁵⁰ Similarly Taylor, in his study of the European text and the Indonesian film versions of *Nyai Dasima* found that the concept of femininity in both versions was "noble, faithful, long-suffering, and passive – and as a victim".⁵¹ However, although these texts constructed women as passive figures, in reality Sekar Kedhaton, the princess of Kasunanan Palace Surakarta, "rejected both the female reality of polygyny's intrigues and the male

⁴⁸ Sukri Sri Suhandjati and Ridin Sofwan, *Perempuan Dan Seksualitas Dalam Tradisi Jawa [Women and Sexuality in Javanese Tradition]*, Cet. 1. ed. (Yogyakarta: Kerja sama Pusat Studi Wanita (PSW) IAIN Walisongo dengan Gama Media, 2001), 47-8.

⁴⁹ Certainly, all of these texts emphasise women's subordination to men. But a slightly different idea was developed by Mangkunegara I, in his work *Babad Tutur*.⁴⁹ which was written in 1790. In this book which is a kind of political notes on his rule, he wrote that a woman could do the same job which is usually done by a man with the same quality. A woman should not be only in the domestic area but she could learn martial arts to be a woman soldier, religion, and some male skills to work on a farm. *Ibid.*, 27-8.

⁵⁰ Nancy K. Florida, "Sex Wars: Writing Gender Relations in Nineteenth-Century Java," in *Fantasizing the Feminine*, ed. Laurie Jo Sears (Durham: Duke University, 1996), 210.

⁵¹ Jean Gelman Taylor, "Nyai Dasima: Portrait of a Mistress in Literature and Film," in *Fantasizing the Feminine*, ed. Laurie Jo Sears (Durham: Duke University, 1996), 227.

fantasy of virtuous wifedom. Instead, she became a noted intellectual, writer, and mystical traveler”.⁵² Looking at these various books of conduct for women, I agree with Florida and Taylor that not only were all the texts written by males, but they represent male perspectives.

Contemporary Interpretations of Gender and Power in Indonesian Islam

Since the 1990s, there have been many debates related to “ideologies of nation, gender, and recourse to Islam as an alternative paradigm” among Indonesian Muslim activists. For them, the term ‘gender’ “highlights the relational aspect of discrimination against women as something that constituted and was constitutive of both men and women”. They propose to deconstruct “presumed categories of gender roles” and they consider that “men should take equal interest in thinking about women’s rights issues and equality as something that benefits both men and women more generally”.⁵³

Adamson, in her study of Muslim women activists, has found that they disagreed about the meaning of gender in an Islamic perspective. Some of them believe that the Qur’an and Hadith’s definition of male superiority is based on a classical interpretation which they consider as culturally biased. They agree with the contemporary scholars such as Arkoun, Engineer, Hassan, Mernissi and Subhan to re-read the classical *tafsir* (interpretation of a religious text) as “historically biased and contingent”.⁵⁴

Discussion of the position of women in Islam relies on the fourth Sura (chapter) of the Quran, a collection of verses titled *An Nisa* (Arabic, ‘The Women’) which emphasizes “mostly topics related to women’s rights, obligations

⁵² Florida, "Sex Wars: Writing Gender Relations in Nineteenth-Century Java," 215-6.

⁵³ Clarisa Adamson, "Gendered Anxieties: Islam, Women's Rights, and Moral Hierarchy in Java," *Anthropological Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2007): 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*: 16.

and the legal regulations pertaining to them”.⁵⁵ Verse 34 of this ‘Sura An Nisa’ asserts man’s superiority in the statement that “Men are leaders for women, because God has made some of the (men) excel over others (women), and because they (men) spend from their (own) means”.⁵⁶ Muslim feminists have argued that this verse should only be read within the specific context of reciprocal husband and wife relationships, not in relationships of domination and subordination between male and female in society.

Engineer, Hassan, and Subhan have argued “for a natural – or God-sanctioned – hierarchy of men over women...If women care for men’s children, men are obliged to compensate them. So long as they are being compensated, women are in relationship of reciprocal obligation to the men. It is on the basis of the violation of the contract that men are permitted to admonish women, just as women are permitted to demand proceeding for a divorce if men do not fulfil their obligations under the Islamic marriage contract.”⁵⁷

Verse 1 of the same sura, “O mankind! Reverence your Guardian Lord, Who created you from a single Person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; ...”, as the source of the interpretation of the origin of human kind, has also had two different interpretations. This verse can be interpreted that Islam acknowledges the equal position between male and female. They are created from the same living entity (*nafs wahida*) in which the one has no superiority against the other.⁵⁸ Based on

⁵⁵ Syafiq Hasyim, *Understanding Women in Islam: An Indonesian Perspective* (Jakarta: Solstice, 2006), 25.

⁵⁶ Adamson, "Gendered Anxieties: Islam, Women's Rights, and Moral Hierarchy in Java," 14; Hasyim, *Understanding Women in Islam: An Indonesian Perspective*, 106-7.

⁵⁷ Adamson, "Gendered Anxieties: Islam, Women's Rights, and Moral Hierarchy in Java," 15.

⁵⁸ Mansour Fakhri, *Membincang Feminisme: Diskursus Gender Perspektif Islam [Talking About Feminism: Gender Discourse in Islamic Perspective]*, Cet. 2. ed. (Surabaya: Risalah Gusti, 2000), 129-30; Hasyim, *Understanding Women in Islam: An Indonesian Perspective*, 28-9.

this principle, woman and man can have the same rights, so a wife has the same right as her husband.⁵⁹

There is also a verse in the Hadith⁶⁰ which considers the possibility of women becoming social leaders. One day Muhammad's friend named Saad bin Rabi hit his wife Habibah bin Zaid. Habibah did not accept his treatment. She told the incident to his father who told it to Muhammad. Muhammad's decision was to ask Habibah to avenge herself. From the incident, it could be concluded that Islam forbids domestic violence and does not support the male's domination of the female. So, if we use this story to interpret the Qur'an, there is no definite reason to forbid a woman to be a leader. In another example from the Hadith, in the so-called Camel War, Aisyah, one of Muhammad's wives, became a leader of a troop. This means that Islam does not require a woman to be confined to the domestic area.⁶¹

In contrast, another group of activists insists on male superiority by reciting from the verse 34 of Sura An Nisa that men are the leaders of women and "social equality with men was inherently contradictory to women's natural roles". Adamson sees this interpretation influenced by the New Order.⁶² The opposition to emancipation argues that "restraints kept women from assuming inappropriate social positions and exercising sexual power or decision making".⁶³ Adamson has claimed that those opposed to emancipation are also threatened by women's careers and social leadership as endangering "the integrity of family and society" because the career woman "represents a new social type who embodies a contradiction between a notion of an ideally domesticated woman and a symbol of

⁵⁹ Fakhri, *Membincang Feminisme: Diskursus Gender Perspektif Islam [Talking About Feminism: Gender Discourse in Islamic Perspective]*, 129-30.

⁶⁰ The *Hadith* is the second source of Islamic jurisprudence. It is a narration about the life of the Prophet and what he approved.

⁶¹ Fakhri, *Membincang Feminisme: Diskursus Gender Perspektif Islam [Talking About Feminism: Gender Discourse in Islamic Perspective]*, 133-34.

⁶² Adamson, "Gendered Anxieties: Islam, Women's Rights, and Moral Hierarchy in Java," 22.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

modernity”.⁶⁴ She concluded that this version of gender has been worked out in response to the threat of the degradation of Indonesian morality, “in a developing consumer world, with women leaving their homes to work, they were also potentially abandoning the moral education of their children and the sanctity of the family”.⁶⁵

As I have mentioned previously, a current concern of most Indonesian Muslims is a believed an apparent degradation of morality. The new Islamization in Indonesia is one effort to control this, which they consider as the impact of Western modernization and globalization in Indonesia.

Part 2: Gender and Power in the Sinetron

Javanese Legends of Female Power

The lure of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, in my opinion, is in its complex portrayal of women. Contrary to Sen’s argument about Indonesian cinema, women in this sinetron are not portrayed in the domestic area.⁶⁶ Although there are some scenes of motherhood, especially in the early episodes, it does not strengthen the motherhood ideology promoted by the New Order era.⁶⁷

Contrary to the reality of the relative powerlessness of Javanese aristocratic women, there are many depictions of the existence of powerful female spirits in Javanese legends such as Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, Nyai Blorong, Kanjeng Ratu Sekar Kedaton (tutelary spirit of Mount Merapi), and Bathari Durga. I will discuss three powerful spirits as they are represented in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*.

⁶⁴ Ibid.: 23.

⁶⁵ Ibid.: 31.

⁶⁶ Krishna Sen, "Interpretations of the Feminine in Cinema," in *Culture and Society in New Order Indonesia*, ed. Virginia Matheson Hooker (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁶⁷ Saraswati Sunindyo, "Gender Discourse on Television," in *Culture and Society in New Order Indonesia*, ed. Virginia Matheson Hooker (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Kanjeng Ratu Kidul

Kanjeng Ratu Kidul or Nyai Rara Kidul lives as a myth in Javanese society. She is believed to be the Queen of the South Sea or the Goddess of the Southern or Indian Sea who lives in an underwater palace and commands spirits, nymphs, and the creatures of the sea and especially the snakes. Her palace is at the bottom of the ocean directly off the south coast of Central Java. People believe that her excursions ashore are accompanied by incidences of unusual natural phenomena such as heavy tides (see Figure X-1). Nyai Rara Kidul is considered as the most prominent spirit ruler, more than Sunan Lawu, the ruler of the spirits of Mount Lawu (an inactive volcano), Kanjeng Ratu Sekar Kedaton, the guardian spirit of Mount Merapi, or Bathari Durga, resident in the Krendawahana forest north of the city of Surakarta.

One version of her legend is that once she was a very beautiful woman. When the king married her, his other wives were so jealous that they took revenge by hiring an old witch to make her ugly. Being cast out and in despair she walked to the edge of ocean and jumped into the water and became Nyai Rara Kidul, Queen of the South Sea. In another version, she refused to marry, which made her father so angry that he sent her away from the palace and into the forest.⁶⁸

Although she is invisible to human beings people imagine that she is a charming young woman. As the Queen of the Southern Sea people think that she is responsible for the disappearance and death of human beings near or in the ocean. People believe that the missing people had infringed her rule against wearing green clothing near the ocean as green is her favourite colour. She is both venerated and feared because of her unpredictability and the dangers of disobeying her orders.⁶⁹

The area eventually ruled by Mataram firstly was a big forest. Because of the great service of a nobleman Sutawijaya to the king of Pajang, the land was

⁶⁸ Robert Wessing, "A Princess from Sunda: Some Aspects of Nyai Roro Kidul," *Asian Folklore Studies* Volume 56 (1997): 319.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*: 320-21.

given to him. He civilized the forest and became the first king of Mataram. In transforming the wild forest, Sutawijaya meditated on the shore of the South Sea to get help from the spirits. Nyai Rara Kidul as the Spirit Queen of the South Sea came and helped him but then, as a repayment, asked him to marry her. As well, she required that all of his descendants who were to rule Mataram should marry her also. Sutawijaya agreed with this requirement. Since then Nyai Rara Kidul has become the wife of all Mataram kings. She dissolves into each successive queen's body, so that there are two spirits inside the queens of Mataram.⁷⁰

The story of Sutawijaya transforming the wild forest into a civilized area, in my opinion is similar to the story of the well-known *wayang* show of the five Pandawa brothers⁷¹ transforming the wild forest Amarta. To be successful in transforming the forest Sutawijaya was helped by a female spirit while the Pandawa were helped by the five spirits⁷² who lived in the Amarta forest⁷³. Then the five spirits dissolved themselves into the Pandawa's bodies. The unity of Pandawa with the five spirits, and of Sutawijaya with Nyai Rara Kidul gives them supernatural power. Woman is often considered the carrier of power, as can be seen from some episodes of Javanese *wayang* puppet shows and stories of Javanese mythology. Specifically, in these cases is the power to transform wilderness into civilization. There is an interesting parallel in American history, where the role of woman in transforming the West is often indispensable. When we read diaries or narratives of some immigrants who moved to American West in nineteenth century, women's role is very significant. The wilderness created

⁷⁰ Ann Kumar, "Imagining Women in Javanese Religion," in *Other Pasts : Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. Barbara Watson Andaya (Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2000), 92; Wessing, "A Princess from Sunda: Some Aspects of Nyai Roro Kidul," 322.

⁷¹ Puntadewa, Bimasena, Arjuna, Pinten and Tansen

⁷² Yudistira, Dadunwacana, Dananjaya, Nakula and Sadewa

⁷³ I recall the story from Javanese puppet show, episode Babad Alas Wanamarta.

psychological problems for the first immigrants. When most of men gave up, women tried to handle the difficult situation by developing new techniques.⁷⁴



Figure X-1: Nyai Rara Kidul and her attendants



Figure X-2: Nyai Rara Kidul and Sultan Agung

Thus in different cultures, woman has a significant role in transforming the wilderness into civilization and in ruling a kingdom. In the second episode of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, there is a scene of a conversation in his bedroom between Sultan Agung, the king of Mataram, with Nyai Rara Kidul, his spirit wife (see Figure X-2). He asks her advice about how to solve the problem of Mataram in controlling Mak Lampir's evil. In a wise tone, she explains to him who Mak Lampir was and how to defeat her. In other words, when Sultan Agung was in a difficult situation, his wife could give him a way to solve this problem. The existence of Nyai Rara Kidul who dissolves into the body of the wife of successive Mataram kings could be read as a sign of the power of woman as 'the power behind the throne'. However, because man wants to be considered at more powerful than woman, the myth of Nyai Rara Kidul as a powerful female spirit is created.

Nyai Blorong

Nyai Blorong is represented in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* both as a legendary and a fictive figure. As a legendary figure, she is represented as a

⁷⁴ Sri Kusumo Habsari, "Women's Role in Transforming the West as Reflected in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*" (Master, Gajah Mada University, 1996).

mermaid, a beautiful female with the lower part of the body of a snake (see Figure X-3). She is believed to be the strongest commander of the spirit realm of the South Sea. She is believed also to have very extraordinary power, the power to satisfy all human desire. She is also believed to have strong sexual desire. “She grants wealth to those who marry her, appearing to her husband, who has to prepare a special room for her, as beautiful woman with a long snake tail”.⁷⁵ Having intercourse with her, means that a man gives his life to her because she sucks his life energy. “In the end he pays for the wealth and pleasure by literally becoming part of her house”.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, to women who want to make a pact with her, she demands they sacrifice their children to be her maids. Their children will die one by one every year when it is the time to give her ‘*sesaji*’ (a special offering). To make a pact with her, a person should fast and meditate on the South Sea coast for forty days and nights. When someone makes a pact with her, each time she comes she leaves some gold for that person. This ritual will determine the success or failure of the partnership. If the ritual is successful Nyai Blorong will come up from the sea and grant special requests.



Figure X-3: Nyai Blorong as a mermaid

As a fictive figure, she is narrated as Mak Lampir’s ally. She falls in love with Sembara but Sembara refuses her love because they came from different worlds. She charms Sembara, makes him an idiot and brings him to bed in her

⁷⁵ Robert Wessing, "Spirits of the Earth and Spirits of the Water: Chthonic Forces in the Mountains of West Java," *Asian Folklore Studies* 47 (1988): 56.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

snake spirit world (see Figures X-4 and 5). However, Farida's desperate cry for help in the human world when she is threatened with rape wakes him from Nyai Blorong's charm. He fights against her and keeps telling her that marriage between them is impossible. In a supernatural fight, Nyai Blorong is defeated and Sembara leaves her to find Farida. Her disappointed outrage leads her to join Mak Lampir and try to take revenge on Sembara.



Figure X-4: Nyai Blorong charms Sembara until he is under her control



Figure X-5: Nyai Blorong attempts to seduce Sembara

Bathari Durga

The goddess *Sang Hyang Bathari Durga*, is considered to be a powerful female spirit who rules the spirit world and is still often associated with the former pre-Mataram East Javanese kingdom of Majapahit, dwelling in the woods or in cremation grounds in the wild. Bathari Durga “has in the past been depicted in much Hindu-Javanese statuary and temple relief as a beautiful young woman slaying the buffalo demon Maesasura”.⁷⁷ As a wife of the Hindu-Javanese deity Bathara Guru, she is addressed with the honorific title ‘*Sang Hyang Bathari*’. Once she was a beautiful goddess, Uma, but was changed into a fearsome demon because of Bathara Guru's anger at her unwillingness to have sexual intercourse with him. His sperm fell on the ground and became Bathara Kala, which is why Bathari Durga is often also associated with Bathara Kala. In India, she has several personifications, as Durgā (anger) or Pārvatī (calmness) or Kālī (fierceness).

⁷⁷ Clara Brakel, “Sandhang-Pangan” For the Goddess: Offerings to Sang Hyang Bathari Durga and Nyai Lara Kidul,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 56, no. 2 (1997): 254.

Javanese *wayang* shows present her as dwelling in the *Alas Sétra Gandamayit*⁷⁸, “a spooky place in the wild filled with stinking corpses and haunted by blood-thirsty spirits, which are portrayed as malformed, naked creatures of weird appearances”.⁷⁹ Desperate people who are incapable of achieving their goal in the ordinary way appeal to her for help.

In *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, Bathari Durga is represented as the goddess who Mak Lampir and her pupils worship. In legends, her position is ambiguous, however in this sinetron she is constructed as an evil goddess, not through her action but through the human sacrifices Mak Lampir offers to gain her blessing. Yet, she is still portrayed as the goddess in Javanese puppet shows who could grant extraordinary requests, such as Mak Lampir’s requests to be the most powerful woman in the world. It can be said that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* takes the image of Bathari Durga from the image in *wayang*, as the cause of disorder.

The Construction of Powerful Women in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*

Moving from the legendary female figures to look at the human characters in the sinetron, we can see some examples of how Westerners understand the concept of power. In Episode 12, *Mata-mata Mak Lampir* (Mak Lampir’s Spy), Lindu Aji surrenders to Mayang Sari because she strikes his beloved Pitaloka with a *pukulan beracun* (poisonous blow). Mayang Sari has an antidote but she will not give it to Pitaloka unless Lindu Aji follows her orders. Mayang Sari brings Lindu Aji and Pitaloka to the Dutch Captain de Vorce because she believes that Lindu Aji is a valuable prisoner for him because Lindu Aji is a spy for Mataram who has a lot of information about Sultan Agung’s plan to attack Batavia. Captain de Vorce considers his position as captain as embodying power. The soldiers listen to him and obey his orders because of his position. The Captain also considers that

⁷⁸ *Alas* means jungle, *setra* means a funerary custom that does not use a burial ground or cremation fields, *ganda mayit* means an aroma of a dead body.

⁷⁹ Hariani Santiko, "The Goddess Durga in the East-Javanese Period," *Asian Folklore Studies* 56, no. 2 (1997): 212.

guns and his soldiers are his power because he believes that with them he can defeat any person who attempts to disobey him. However, his belief is contested by Lindu Aji. Lindu Aji's power is in his martial art skills and his bright mind. When Captain de Vorce demands he give the information immediately, Lindu Aji refuses and says that he prefers to give the information the next day. De Vorce threatens to shoot him but Lindu Aji contests his power with the statement that the Captain can kill him now but will thereby not get any information (see Figure X-6). De Vorce perforce accepts this and put his gun back into his pocket. Again, the Captain wants to contest his power against that of Lindu Aji. He challenges Lindu Aji to fight with his fighter, a big and strong man who he believes can defeat him easily (see Figure X-7). If Lindu Aji can win the fight, he can give the information tomorrow but if he is defeated he has to give the information now. Lindu Aji accepts this challenge and, again, Captain de Vorce must perforce acknowledge Lindu Aji's *kasekten*, because Lindu Aji easily defeats his strong and big fighter. It can be said that this sinetron endorses the Javanese concept of power.



Figure X-6: Captain de Vorce threatens to shoot Lindu Aji



Figure X-7: The big and strong fighter against small Lindu Aji

As Javanese do not question women's ability to gain spiritual power through a series of ascetic exercises, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* also constructs two women with special abilities in accumulating supernatural power. Both are portrayed as figures who able to understand the human and spirit worlds and travel easily between these. Mak Lampir and Nyai Bidara are the examples of women in the sinetron who can master spiritual power through ascetic discipline even though they sometimes abuse their power. However, they are pictured as old

women who dedicate their whole life to learning to be powerful. However, there is no scene which shows that Mak Lampir and Nyai Bidara are married. Looking at these women from a traditional Javanese perspective, they suffer socially and sacrifice the happiness of being a wife and mother in order to be powerful and to gain prestige in the patriarchal society. They are a reflection of several rare Javanese women, such as Sekar Kedhaton of the Surakarta *keraton* (palace) who refused to get married and dedicated her life to be “a noted intellectual writer and mystical traveler”⁸⁰.

In the sinetron there are a number of powerful women, either humans or spirits, and their abilities are beyond the average. However, the powerful men are not astonished by these women’s abilities, which suggest that it is usual for women to gain such high supernatural power. Powerful males also respect these women’s abilities either in decision making or in exercising spiritual power without considering that these power or decisions are coming from women. It can be said that the sinetron does not problematise women’s ability in power accumulation, however it questions women’s sensibility in exercising the power.

Mak Lampir is a human who gains supernatural power which makes her immortal. She becomes half human and half spirit. She is also constructed like a goddess⁸¹ in the Javanese *wayang*, not in terms of people worshipping her but in her capability to mediate people to achieve their goals, especially mastering supernatural power. She is not similar to a Western fairy godmother⁸² who protects girls especially from any danger, yet she helps any people without considering whether the purpose of this person is good or bad. Mak Lampir helps without considering the impact of her help in the future. She is helpful but she is not wise. This personality is often tied to motherly love. Javanese believe that women’s personality is defined as “*welas tanpa alis*” (blind love). Women tend to

⁸⁰ Florida, "Sex Wars: Writing Gender Relations in Nineteenth-Century Java," 216.

⁸¹ The concept of goddess in Javanese puppet show refers to two different qualities; she can be like Bathari Durga who can grant people’s ambition or be a *widadari*, one of the goddesses who tempt the knights when they perform asceticism.

⁸² “Fairy godmother - a female character in some fairy stories who has magical powers and can bring unexpected good fortune to the hero or heroine”. "Dictionary.Com," <http://dictionary.reference.com/>, (accessed 14 December 2006).

give anything that their children want without thinking about the impact because women do not want to disappoint their children. Mak Lampir is a witch in terms of her evil in punishing people who cannot carry out the tasks as she orders. She is powerful and ambitious. Everything she wants should be granted. She is a goddess to her pupils who can win in any fights. She is also an embodiment of a Javanese myth of a female leader, in that, as Djajaningrat-Nieuwenhuis has noted, Javanese women consider their employees as their family.⁸³

Because people are familiar with narratives and legends of female power, *sinetron*, as popular culture, can unproblematically present a story that depicts powerful female characters, such as Mak Lampir and Nyai Bidara. Reading the Javanese legends of Nyai Rara Kidul and Nyai Blorong, it seems that the existence of these spirits is an admission of the idea of powerful women. Nyai Blorong, in my opinion, symbolizes the power of women in economic and sexual affairs, while Nyai Rara Kidul symbolizes women's competence in problem solving and wise advisory support. In reality women's power in economic self-sufficiency, exerting effective authority in the household and participating in social affairs, is denied by their lack of spiritual discipline and capacity for knowledge. Most human female characters in the *sinetron*, such as Mak Lampir and Nyai Bidara lack emotional and behavioural control. They use a lot of outbursts of coarse expression and their emotion easily blows up. In contrast, the male characters are very controlled in their words and actions. With this portrayal, related to Javanese gender ideology, the female characters in the *sinetron*, regardless of their power, are lower in status.

The relative equality of husband and wife in discussions of family problems is also presented in the *sinetron*. In Episode 6, for example, there is a small scene of a general meeting between Sultan Agung and all his *adipati* and military commanders. Sultan Agung's wife sits beside him in this general meeting, however, the position of her seat is lower than his (see Figure X-9). Although mostly she is quiet, she sometimes gives some comments. However,

⁸³ Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis, "Ibuisism and Priyayization: Path to Power," 43.

when the narrative screens an *adipati* with his wife, they sit in the same seat and talk about the problems equally (Figure X-8).



Figure X-8: An Adipati and his wife



Figure X-9: Sultan Agung and his wife

Sullivan in her study of gender roles in a Javanese kampong found that women and men are separate but equal - although “men’s domination of the public sphere ensures their overarching domination of the private-domestic sphere, regardless of how influential women are within it”.⁸⁴ Unlike Sullivan’s finding, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* presents many dominant women in both public and domestic relations. Rosminah, for example is represented not only as a decision maker in her brother’s family, determining who will be Farida’s future husband and helping her brother in business negotiation but also as a respected figure in the society. She leads the people to demonstrate to the head of the village accusing Sembara of being a tiger spirit and encouraging the people to punish him. However, her action does not invoke any respect as the language she uses to the head of the village is rude. Rosminah is an embodiment of woman’s lower status than man’s because of her “deliberately, imperiously, and self-importantly” speaking.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, Raisman is portrayed as a passive figure who is unable to control either his daughter or his sister and as an unsuccessful businessman, thus as typical of Javanese *priyayi* as described by Brenner.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Norma Sullivan, *Masters and Managers: A Study of Gender Relations in Urban Java*, Women in Asia Publication Series (St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 174.

⁸⁵ Keeler, "Speaking of Gender in Java," 148.

⁸⁶ Brenner, *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java*.

It is a common belief that some wives could be dominant in Javanese society. This is reflected in the sinetron. In Episode 15 for example, Nyai Supeni, one of Mak Lampir's pupils, is not portrayed as submissive and decorous, but as taking more initiatives than her husband. Although Nyai Supeni undertakes an ascetic discipline to master supernatural power, she does not control her tone and behaviour to keep her status. She displays a strong public presence and lets her husband, Sasongko, stand behind her. She states her opinion loudly and crassly to the head of the village in front of many people. Although Nyai Supeni is powerful the society could not respect her. Her status is not determined by her power in material or martial arts skills, rather by the way she could control herself in her emotions and behaviour. People are afraid of Nyai Supeni but they do not respect her. Through the way the society thinks of her, the sinetron leads the audience to not respect her and to feel sorry about her husband's helplessness. With these scenes, the sinetron still continues to glorify the dominant ideology of woman's lower status in the society.

Woman's lack of decision making in the family is also depicted in this sinetron. In Episode 11, there is a small scene of a quarrel between a husband and wife. They are debating whether or not they will leave this village in an evacuation. There is a monster attacking the people. The husband is unwilling to leave all of their wealth because it had been difficult to accumulate it. In contrast, the wife thinks that wealth has no meaning if they are not safe. Although they are engaged in this debate, the woman does not take any initiative to leave her husband and evacuate. Rather, she repeatedly asks that they leave the village together. Although it is a choice between life and death, the woman still waits for the man's decision before taking any action. She lacks autonomy when it concerns the family.

Javanese women are used to being active socially as they have been traditionally active mediators in the arranging of many rituals, such as marriage, celebrating the birth of baby or the Javanese ceremony of seven-months of a pregnancy. Although it is only as background to the main story, women's relative economic freedom is portrayed in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* through scenes of

market activity and young girls working as domestic workers. Traditionally, the market is a public space for women. Both buyers and sellers are women and it is not common for men to be in a market. Until today this belief is still strong, especially in Central Java. Traditional markets are dominated by women as buyers and sellers and it is embarrassing for many men, especially for middle and upper class men, to go to a traditional market. If they want to buy some fresh products they will go to a modern supermarket. If they have to drive their wives to traditional market, they prefer to stay in the car while waiting for their wives to finish the shopping. There is a widely-held belief also among men, that women could spend many hours in the traditional market and come back with only a small bag of shopping.

Interestingly, economic activity is commonly not considered to be part of the public sphere, rather as ‘domestic’ because such activities can be defined as part of a woman’s duty to her family’s welfare. The *sinetron* portrays many women active in economic activity, as a Dutch maid, a seller in a market, a manager of a *warung*, and as a waitress. However, most of these roles are muted. In *warung*, for example, although both the manager and waitress are women, the customers are men. Men dominate the room with their talk about society’s current issues and there is no any sign of women’s voices. When Sembara and Basir want to know about the situation in the village, they go to a *warung* to get the information. They rarely ask a woman; rather they go to a man for the information. This suggests that women are invisible in the public sphere, although they contribute to the economy. It also suggests that the story is more a representation of New Order ideology rather than the actual picture of Indonesian women earlier in the twentieth century, when Indonesian women were active in organizations based on their membership of their different classes, regions, ethnic and religious groupings.⁸⁷ However, after “the onslaught of war and civil strife, women gave priority to their families” to provide basic requirements such as “shelter, food, clothing and basic health and education” and “were engaged in

⁸⁷ Susan Blackburn, "Gender Interests and Indonesian Democracy. [Revised Version of Paper Presented to Indonesian Democracy, 1950s/ 1990s (1992: Monash University)]," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 29, no. 3 (1994): 560.

social welfare work, trying to meet these needs”.⁸⁸ The women’s relative muteness suggests a different idea to what Budianta has argued, that women are again becoming active in grass-root community organizations.⁸⁹

Rape is generally understood as males’ power over females or males’ violence against females. In Western interpretations, rape refers to the power of the male body which is “hard, penetrative, and aggressive” over the female body which is “soft, vulnerable, and violable feminine sexuality and psyche”.⁹⁰ The view of men as superior to women is not translated into “a conception of that potency as attached to and manifest through the penis – of men’s genitals as able to brutalize women’s genitals”.⁹¹ In Indonesia, rape is not interpreted as abusing a woman's body and her personal integrity. In a culture where the highest value is placed on female virginity and chastity, rape is understood more as damaging a woman's value.⁹² The failure of rape attempts by males on females suggests that the sinetron still carries the ideology that a “female have only one sexual relationship with the man to whom they are married legally”⁹³.

Misteri Gunung Merapi also constructs rape attempts of a female on a male through the exercising of supernatural power. Again, this attempt is also foiled by a male figure who distracts her use of supernatural power to make her victim an idiot who follows her desire. It can be said that in the sinetron rape can be through a female’s power or a female’s violence against a male through the medium of a supernatural distortion. Mayang Sari attempted to rape Lindu Aji through hypnotizing him and charming him. Lindu Aji becomes a fool and loses control of his self-control, individuality and awareness. Although his eyes show a

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ 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).

⁹⁰ Christine Helliweel, "'It's Only a Penis': Rape, Feminisim, and Difference," *Signs* 25, no. 3 (2000): 797.

⁹¹ Ibid.: 799.

⁹² Ariel Heryanto, "Rape, Race and Reporting," in *Reformasi: Crisis and Change in Indonesia*, ed. Arief Budiman, Barbara Hatley, and Damien Kingsbury (Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 1999), 301.

⁹³ Ibid.

disagreement he could not refuse (see Figures X-10 and 11). This scene has constructed a powerful female as a witch. When a woman is powerful, she could do harmful action just as men are used to doing it. Again, through this scene the woman is lower in status because she does not exercise the power wisely.



Figure X-8: Mayang Sari meditates to charm Lindu Aji



Figure X-9: Mayang Sari attempts to rape Lindu Aji

Warung, small tented food stalls, in the past were male space. It was not common for a woman to eat out without her husband accompanying her. However, the manager was often female. Woman's autonomy and power in running *warung* can be seen in the way women try to attract males to eat in their *warung* by sending nice smiles or seductive eyes to passers-by. If there are two *warung* close each other, it is common belief that men will choose the one run by a beautiful woman with a seductive smile and eyes. However, this does not mean that it will be easy for any of these attracted customers to follow up this seductive display and actually seduce the women. A manager or waitress will have used these strategies only to attract the consumers so that she gains the best profit. It is common belief among these women that males are stupid. They are easily exploited with some small seductive actions. Most males know also about this, however, they still attempt to seduce her, just for kidding. The women involved will be smart enough in playing along their power over the men (see Figure X-12). In the sinetron, Basir, for example, chooses to eat in a *warung* in which the food is served by a beautiful woman. He argues that eating accompanied by a beautiful woman will be more enjoyable. Although Sembara does not agree with his idea, he does not object to Basir's opinion. The sinetron

also shows the ways Basir attempts to seduce the manager and the way she plays along with his seduction.



Figure X-10: Women serving food to the men Figure X-11: Sending seductive glances

Cooper in her study of *waranggana* (glamorous women singers) has found that they present “the personae as contemporary angel-temptress-goddesses (*widadari* in Javanese literature)”.⁹⁴ She has argued that the power and charisma which Anderson associated more with males, can also be found in *waranggana* figures. *Waranggana* shows that a woman’s sexuality can be power but at the same is dangerous because her success in causing heroes to succumb shows the weaknesses of the heroes⁹⁵. However, contemporary images of *waranggana* tend to marginalize them as “objects of sexual speculation”, which is why the Indonesian government attempted to promote an alternative image as “skilled and respectable women who enrich their own and others’ lives with singing”.⁹⁶ This is also similar to the case of *ronggeng* or *ledhek* (female dancers) in *tayuban*.

⁹⁴ Nancy I Cooper, "Singing and Silences: Transformations of Power through Javanese Seduction Scenarios," *American Ethnologist* 27, no. 3 (2000): 610.

⁹⁵ A well-known example in Javanese *wayang*, in *lakon pethilan* (one episode only) is in Arjuna Wiwaha/Begawan Ciptaning, when Arjuna is shown doing ascetic exercises to gain a special weapon to win the war of Barathayuda. In his ascetic exercise, seven fairies come and attempt to seduce him but they fail. Then, a wild boar attacks him. He wakes up from his ascetic exercise to kill the wild boar. Because of his success in controlling his passion, he gets Pasopati, a special arrow to win the war.

⁹⁶ Cooper, "Singing and Silences: Transformations of Power through Javanese Seduction Scenarios," 626-7.

A *tayuban* is an arena for men gathering and social dancing, where hired female dancers perform for celebrations of different kinds, such as weddings or circumcisions. In Javanese culture, a *tayuban* is considered to be an exclusively male space. As it is considered as male space, this performance arena is not morally appropriate for women. Only the dancer and prostitutes enter it. Hefner noted that in the past the female dancer sometimes might sit on a man's lap and kiss him⁹⁷. It is considered immoral now because of the drinking and prostitution accompanying this tradition. However, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* deconstructs this myth and presents the female dancer as a woman with respect and dignity who struggles to avoid the sexual harassment from the male dancing partner who hires her (see Figures X-14 and X-15), which it is more representative of modern Indonesia. Although she is in position of being hired, she still has autonomy to refuse the man who tries to sexually assault her. Through its representation, the sinetron gives a space for a woman to exercise her autonomy in a public area. She does not lose her power to the man who hires her for dancing. Such representation was previously portrayed in an Indonesian film of the 1970s, *Nyi Ronggeng*. This film, set in the 1930s, told a story about an independent and articulate female dancer who resists many attempts at sexual harassment from the male customers who hired her to dance with them. Quite similar to the story in the sinetron, she survives through her martial art skills. Like Nyi Ronggeng, who stopped dancing to be a housewife, the female dancer in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* also dreams of getting married, but has not yet found her true love. She demonstrates that she has the authority to refuse the many proposals from the men who hire her. She dreams of marrying a man who is not easily attracted to female beauty, such as Lindu Aji. It can be said that dancing in the sinetron is presented as more like a profession, and is presented as one that should be respected. It also suggests that although there is some evidence of the new moralistic Islamization, mostly women are not punished in the sinetron for acting autonomously or even flirting with men.

⁹⁷ Robert W. Hefner, "The Politics of Popular Art: Tayuban Dance and Culture Change in East Java" *Indonesia* 43, (1987), <http://cip.cornell.edu/Dienst/UI/1.0/Summarize/seap.indo/1107009313>.



Figure X- 12: Female dancer in a tayuban



Figure X- 13: The dancer refusing sexual harassment

In *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, the dominant construction of women is as beautiful, stylish, and powerful. In a previous chapter, I have raised the question of why most powerful women in the sinetron are represented differently from the powerless. There are many possible interpretations in understanding such construction. However, I argue that such construction could be a continuation of Javanese classical texts. Although not many people have access to read these texts, the ideology of them has been well-circulated in the culture. Three requirements⁹⁸ of ideal Javanese women which have been didactically passed from mother to daughter are *macak* (to make herself beautiful), *manak* (to deliver a baby), and *masak* (to cook delicious food). The sinetron not only chooses beautiful actresses to play the powerful women but also includes dialogues about the importance of being beautiful to attract a male, such as “*pria mana yang tidak tertarik dengan gadis secantik kamu*” (what kind of male is not attracted to a beautiful girl like you). *Misteri Gunung Merapi* also mentions the pride of a woman in delivering a baby from her husband, “*Aku akan melahirkan anak dari kakang Sembara*” (I will give birth to a baby of Sembara). Rinata, a tiger spirit, is married to Mardian by Mak Lampir, as is Mardian’s wish. However, Rinata falls in love with Sembara and she does not want marry anyone but him. Mak Lampir then transforms Mardian’s face into Sembara’s so Rinata thinks she is getting married to him. When she is pregnant, she is very happy because she will give birth to his baby. This construction is a continuation of the Javanese ideology of

⁹⁸ This is now contested by many young modern women.

female *priyayi*, that her pride is in her reproduction, as a medium for the birth of a *priyayi* son.

Conclusion

In some ways, the sinetron *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, like any other martial arts story or film, presents a relative equality of women and men especially in the portrayal of their ability to accumulate supernatural power and to learn the skills of martial art. The way it has constructed its powerful women characters shows that the sinetron has both conservative and progressive elements. It is progressive because it acknowledges the women's ability in accumulating spiritual potency, however at the same time it is conservative in its apparent questioning of their capacity to exercise their power wisely. In contrast, all powerful male figures, either the heroes or anti-heroes rarely misuse their power. This suggests that this sinetron still elevates the ideology of women's subordination in the society and glorifies the continuation of patriarchal society. It appears that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* acknowledges the capability of women in social affairs but at the same time it refuses to accept women's fully equal role, especially in the public male world.