

CHAPTER IX

THE CONSTRUCTION OF INDONESIAN HEROIC FEMALE FIGURES

Introduction

Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another ... There are particularly interesting cases of ideas and theories that move from one culture to another, as when so-called Eastern ideas about transcendence were imported into Europe...Such movement to a new environment is never unimpeded. It necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin. This complicates any account of the transplanted, transference, circulation, and commerce of theories and ideas.¹

In this chapter I want to examine the construction of heroic female characters and the context from which they emerge. Feminist scholars have been attracted to discussing the construction of female action heroes who take up space that is usually occupied by male heroes, since their image contradicts the codes of femininity and poses a challenge to women's conventional social role. Most critics of female action heroes focus on the representation of female bodies and female power. The body in action cinema refers to an active physical body that signifies power in Western culture, whereas the female body is conventionally thought of as a passive object, to be looked at rather than in powerful activity.

However, the body is a social and cultural construction. Both Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault have argued that the body is the "practical,

¹ E. Ann Kaplan, "Reading formations and Chens Kaige's Farewell My Concubine," in *Transnational Chinese cinemas*, ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1997), 265.

direct locus of social control”.² Foucault has also argued that “not chiefly through ideology, but through the organization and regulation of the time, space, and movements of our daily lives, our bodies are trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity”.³ The theorising by Bourdieu and Foucault indicate how the construction of the body is shaped by the culture. The body is, in Anne Balsamo’s words, “a product in that it is a material embodiment of ethnic, racial, and gender identities as well as a performance of personal identity”.⁴ Moreover, as well as a ‘product’ and a ‘performance’, the body may also be considered as “a process in that it is ‘a way of knowing and marking the world, as well as a way of knowing and marking a self’ ”.⁵ Thus, understandably, the social and cultural construction of the body changes over time. As well, the social meanings of bodies vary greatly across cultures. If the female action heroine’s body is a crucial element of her cinematic construction, what happens when this figure is ‘translated’ in a different cultural context? How, then, does *Misteri Gunung Merapi* tell us about Indonesian culture through its construction of active female figures?

Misteri Gunung Merapi to some extent follows the conventions of the epic film genre, especially in including some historical elements (although it is not an accurate representation). However, considering that Indosiar categorises this sinetron as ‘sinetron *kolosal laga*’, the sinetron falls into the action genre. To some extent, this sinetron has followed the tradition of *wuxia* television series, especially in the dominant representation of fighting women. Indeed, the sinetron presents to its audience an imaginary world set in a past time and place where all people were able to fight and all problems were

² Susan Bordo, "The body and the reproduction of femininity," in *Writing on the body: female embodiment and feminist theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 90-1.

³ Ibid., 91.

⁴ Dawn Heineken, *The warrior women of television: a feminist cultural analysis of the new female body in popular media*, Intersections in communications and culture ; vol. 7 (New York Peter Lang, 2003).

⁵ Ibid.

solved through fighting. How does global popular screen culture, especially Hollywood action adventure and Chinese martial arts, influence the way the sinetron constructs this imaginary world? At a time of tumultuous social and cultural change in Indonesia, when every group and level of society has a new freedom to speak, producing a popular sinetron is problematic. PT Genta Buana tends to choose to go along with the dominant morality and produce a sinetron suitable for family viewing. How does the sinetron negotiate the global popular culture patterns to ‘translate’ them for Indonesian audiences? How does the sinetron production team imagine the bodies of female fighters for Indonesian audiences? How do they interpret the dominant morality, considering the present wave of Islamization in Indonesia? The construction of active female figures certainly cannot be separated from the context of which they have emerged because one of the keys to producing successful entertainment is the ability to produce familiar narratives and values for viewers. Like any other entertainment product, this sinetron does not exist in a vacuum. It reflects the social and cultural situation of the time of its production, although as if through a cracked mirror. It can be expected to embody the dominant values of the society, given the producer’s principle of not offending anybody.

To answer these questions I will divide this chapter into three parts. The first part will explore the emergence of female action heroes and discuss the problems that feminist critics have seen in the way they are represented in Hollywood action-adventure. As Tasker has argued that Western action female heroes were inspired by Asian martial arts female heroes⁶, I also discuss feminist comments on representations of warrior women in Asian martial arts film. All of these discussions are significant as a background in understanding the representation of active female heroes in global entertainment.

⁶ Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular bodies : gender, genre, and the action cinema*, Comedia (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993).

In the second section of the chapter, I will offer an overview of Indonesian concepts of gender and the body, including a look at the tradition of female soldiers in Indonesia, in order to understand the cultural context of the construction of heroic female figures in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. With the new wave of Islamization in Indonesia, the idea of woman as the object of male gaze becomes one of the dominant issues. To understand how the sinetron succeeded in not offending anybody, I need to consider the dominant morality and explore how current ideas of media and morality influence the production of this entertainment.

In the third part I will examine the construction of heroic female figures in the sinetron to explore to what extent this shares the same problems as Hollywood action-adventure and Chinese martial arts films in representing fighting women, and to what extent it modifies these representations for its local audiences, considering the complexity of Indonesian society in a situation of rapid social and cultural change. I will divide the discussion in Section 3 into: gender and body in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*; performing the body: gesture and voice; women in male spaces; explicit rape and sex; the male body as spectacle; representing the female body; costume and the female body; and white femininity as idealised beauty.

Part I: Feminist Criticism of Female Action Heroes

Problems in Representing Fighting Women in Western Cinema and TV

Mulvey, in her groundbreaking article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” argued that the narrative structure of Hollywood classical cinema positions the male character as active and powerful while the woman is the object of desire for the male characters. Through the three levels of cinematic gaze - camera, character, and spectator - women are established as ‘to-be-

looked-at'.⁷ However, in relation to action-adventure cinema, Tasker has disagreed with Mulvey's idea of "active/passive division of labour" because both male and female figures are subjects in the narrative as well as objects of spectacle.

The spectacle of the Hollywood action cinema is principally in the presentation of male and female bodies. According to Heinecken, the hero of action cinema is presented as a figure that is able to control his own body and to "overcome all physical suffering".⁸ The spectacle of the male body in terms of his scars and wounds shows that the body is actually vulnerable. The body of the male hero conveys the image of power because of his ability to control his pain. "The hardness of the hero's body works to define him – as man, as master over his environment" while the female body is defined traditionally as passive, soft and weak with a limited capacity for physical activity.⁹

Because impenetrable hard bodies are required of heroes, the representation of the female hero becomes problematic in Western action-adventure cinema and TV series. A question such as "can the ultimate girl be the ultimate warrior?"¹⁰ is often addressed because the woman warrior contradicts the traits and qualities of "softness, curves, passivity, intuition, indecisiveness, and powerlessness" which conventionally belong to women and femininity.¹¹ Haskell has written that "precisely because women have traditionally been more peace-loving than men, it's more ambiguous and more

⁷ Laura Mulvey, ed., *Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema*.

⁸ Heinecken, *The warrior women of television: a feminist cultural analysis of the new female body in popular media*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Sara Buttsworth, "'Bite Me': Buffy and the penetration of the gendered warrior-hero," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2002): 185, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/>.

¹¹ Marc O'Day, "Gender, spectacle, and action babe cinema," in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 203.

of story when they do take up arms or pursue an enemy into dangerous territory”.¹²

To some extent, the emergence of the action heroine, according to Tasker, is a response to the criticism of images of gendered identity raised by feminist scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, Christine Gledhill, Barbara Creed, Tania Modleski, or Mary Ann Doane. However, in her study of Hollywood action cinema from the 1970s to the 1990s, Tasker found that representations of the action heroine were marked by “ambiguities of identities and desires”. In her opinion, “this blurring of categories is crucial to understanding the play of femininity and masculinity over the bodies of male and female characters, a process that has been inflected significantly in the action cinema of recent years”.¹³ The blurring of gender categories emerges as a central concern of feminist critics of action-adventure.

Female Body: Sexualisation and Victimisation

Many scholars criticise the sexualisation and victimisation of the female body.¹⁴ However most of them also stress that action heroes “demonstrate such traditional heroic qualities as determination, self-sacrifice, stamina, and physical strength”.¹⁵ Helford has argued that “they are not traditional pin-up, stripper, or model types”. However, in her perspective, in

¹² Douglass Eby, "Warrior women on screen," Talent Development Resources, <http://talentdevelop.com/wwos.html>, (25 October 2006).

¹³ Tasker, *Spectacular bodies : gender, genre, and the action cinema*.

¹⁴ Elyce Rae Helford, "Postfeminism and the female action-adventure hero: positioning tank girl " Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, <http://www.msu.edu/~dhw/spring2006/eng310d/tankgirl.pdf>, Marlo Edwards, "The blonde with the guns: Barb Wire and the "implausible" female action hero," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32, no. 1 (2004), <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/>, Heinecken, *The warrior women of television: a feminist cultural analysis of the new female body in popular media*, Sherrie A. Inness, *Tough girls: women warriors and wonder women in popular culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), O'Day, "Gender, spectacle, and action babe cinema.", Tasker, *Spectacular bodies : gender, genre, and the action cinema*, Kim Tolley, "Xena, Warrior Princess, or Judith, Sexual Warrior? The search for liberating image of women's power in popular culture," *History of Education Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1999), <http://www.jstor.org>.

¹⁵ Helford, "Postfeminism and the female action-adventure hero: positioning tank girl ".

spite of their “non-conventional feminine sexualization”, these female heroines are still constructed as the object of the male gaze. This suggests that the sexualization of the female body continues to be a central component in the construction of female action heroes.¹⁶ In this view, Mulvey’s theory of women as image, man as bearer of the look is still applicable.

Schubart develops this idea. She argues, like Tasker, that the action heroine “is a figure of ambiguity: She is beautiful and feminine, yet active and lethal.” However, Schubart is not convinced that these heroines transgress conventional gender roles, or that the pleasures of identification with them are equally open to female and male viewers.¹⁷ She disagrees with “naïve” male critics who argue that “male audiences identify with action heroines ‘in the same way’ they identify with male heroes”. In her opinion, “male identification is not ‘being like them’ but rather fantasizing about ‘being with them,’ sexually.¹⁸ In her interpretation, the construction of powerful sexy women is not to inspire female counterparts but rather to fulfil the male fantasy that “women are agents of male pleasure”. This mysterious female figure, she argues, is “neither woman nor man but man’s masochistic fantasy of a woman”.¹⁹

In contrast, Edwards challenges the idea that the objectification of the female body is merely “an erotic spectacle”. In her opinion, with “an unusually powerful and active heroine” like the heroine of the film *Barb Wire* (see Figure IX-1), who is something of a sadistic dominatrix, the male viewer might not desire her so much as identify with her.²⁰ Otherwise his masculinity

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Rikke Schubart, "Woman with a gun does not signify man with a phallus," *Nordicom* 13 (1998), http://www.nordicom.gu.se/common/publ_pdf/38_schubart.pdf#search=%22%22woman%20with%20a%20gun%20does%20not%20signify%20man%20with%20a%20Phallus%22%22, (12 May 2006).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Edwards, "The blonde with the guns: Barb Wire and the "implausible" female action hero," 46.

might be compromised by occupying the position of the masochist in her power. Edwards sees Barb Wire, an ‘excessive’ figure with her big breasts associated with weapons (she has “guns and guns”), as having the potential to undercut patriarchal expectations. She proposes that “the very existence of ‘perverse’ female figures like the dominatrix in traditional representations of femininity points to the inherent instability of binary categories of gender”..²¹



Figure IX-1: Barb Wire

So there is no ready agreement among Western feminist critics about the meanings of the sexy female body in action films and the kinds of identification that are available to male and female viewers.

Female Body: Masculination and Muscularity

In the 1980s, in response to feminist criticism of Hollywood representations of powerful women, Tasker noted “the heroine’s move from her position as a subsidiary character within the action narrative, to the central role of *action heroine*, a figure who commands the narrative”. She also noted that the heroine’s “muscular” appearance responded to “the growth in women’s involvement in bodybuilding as a sport and what this means for the development of shifting ‘masculine’ identities for women”..²² Similarly, O’Day has also noted that “a series of gender transactions, and sometimes,

²¹ Ibid.: 47.

²² Tasker, *Spectacular bodies : gender, genre, and the action cinema*.

gender thefts can be seen to take place ... traded over the bodies of action heroes and heroines”.²³

This new representation, according to Tasker, shows that gender identity was “being inscribed almost exclusively over the tortured figure of the white male body” and that “musculinity” was not limited to the construction on the male body.²⁴ Although in Tasker’s view the emergence of muscular female action heroes signifies a positive response to feminism, indicating the possibility of developed musculature on the female body, she has argued that this female masculinity poses problems for the binary concept of gender identity. The question she has raised is how to read a hard female body.²⁵



Figure IX- 2: muscular female action hero

Brown has also noted the problematic masculinisation of female heroine, which in his view is caused by the binary structure which “situates men as active, women as passive; men as violent, women as having violence done to them”. He agrees with Jeanine Basinger that the representation of

²³ O'Day, "Gender, spectacle, and action babe cinema," 203.

²⁴ Yvonne Tasker, *Working girls : gender and sexuality in popular cinema* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1998).

²⁵ Tasker, *Spectacular bodies : gender, genre, and the action cinema*.

female heroines should be concerned with “changing their psychology” so that it does not mean “really only boys in girl clothing”.²⁶ In Brown’s opinion, the heroine’s possession of guns and muscle, which are considered male icons, shows the “masculinisation of the female body that is equated with the masculinisation of the character’s performed gender role”.²⁷ With this image, he has further asserted, “muscularity is so essentially linked with “natural” superiority of men in power relations that it semiotically overwhelms biological identity. The muscular woman is seen as a gender cross-dresser”.²⁸

Brown has also argued that “masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive identities”.²⁹ The masculine undershirt (see figure IX-2), which the female hero wears, “is reconfigured dress as feminine dress, and the feminine body is equipped with a masculine gun”.³⁰ This image reduces “the apparently conflicting signifiers of feminine and masculine iconography”.³¹ With this image: “(just because) she looks like a woman does not mean she is a one, and just because she acts like a man does not mean she is one”,³² it also suggests “the artificiality of both masculine and feminine roles” and “the manipulation of gender identity” in action cinema.³³

In her later book, *Working Girls*, Tasker argued that the exploitation of the stereotypes of the butch, the tomboy and the feisty heroine for building female characters as fighters proposes “an articulation of gender and sexuality that foregrounds a combination of conventionally masculine and feminine

²⁶ Jeffery A. Brown, "Gender and action heroine: hardbodies and the "Point of No Return", " *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (1996): 53, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

²⁷ Ibid.: 60.

²⁸ Ibid.: 62.

²⁹ Ibid.: 65.

³⁰ Ibid.: 64.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.: 65.

³³ Ibid.: 67.

elements”.³⁴ With the muscular development in her body and in her ‘masculine’ costumes the heroine represents the well-established images of tomboy and butch; she represents an image of independent women who do not display passive and hysterical femininity. However, she has also argued that the power of the female action hero is undermined when the “motivating factor” that is provided to explain her performing such heroic actions, defining her as exceptional, is that she is acting as “a mother to protect the children”, or as “a lost or loved father to mobilise the stereotype of the tomboy”, or as “a fetishistic figure of fantasy derived from comic books and soft pornography”.³⁵

Action Chicks

In the 1990s, American action movies allowed a space for female characters to take on more central action roles, and “central male/female partnerships are increasingly common although sole female protagonists remain relatively rare”.³⁶ The interesting point about these action heroines is that they are depicted as “beautiful, sexy and tough”. They “command their narratives, invariably driving vehicles, shooting guns, wielding weapons or fighting in hand-to-hand combat better than their (frequently male) adversaries”. However, they are “no longer the masculinised muscular body rather the slim yet strong body, which may be excessively feminised or boyish”.³⁷ Tasker considers this figure as a post-feminist action heroine because of the combination of glamour and action.³⁸ According to O’Day, this portrayal shows how Mulvey’s thesis of feminine qualities linked to passivity, sexual availability and to-be-looked-at-ness is deconstructed and these

³⁴ Tasker, *Working girls : gender and sexuality in popular cinema*.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ ———, *Spectacular bodies : gender, genre, and the action cinema*.

³⁷ O’Day, "Gender, spectacle, and action babe cinema," 201.

³⁸ Yvonne Tasker, "Family/Romance: reading the post-feminist action heroine," in *Media Research Conference* (University of Tampere: 2004).

qualities “can also be seen as a source of active feminine strength”.³⁹ They are sexually attractive but their sexy performance is not linked to weakness or passivity, rather they use their appealing body to get what they desire.

Historically, the 1990s signified the emergence of girl power in America, “the newly aggressive and confident girl cultures”.⁴⁰ To some extent, the emergence of a generation of girls and young women who refuse “the dutiful, gentle, and invariably good” traditional heroine manifests a post-feminist movement. These girls are characterised by the “physical strength and stamina, superiority and dominance, courage and determination” associated with masculinity.⁴¹ However, at the same time they embody “the contradictions of the post-feminist era: she is both radical and conservative, real and unreal, feminist and feminine”.⁴²

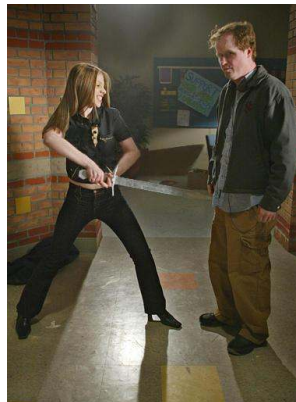


Figure IX-3: Buffy the vampire slayer, an action chick hero

The continuing debates within feminist film criticism stem from the assumption that representations are bound to the logic of a gendered binary opposition between masculinity and femininity. As most accounts are based

³⁹ O'Day, "Gender, spectacle, and action babe cinema," 205.

⁴⁰ Susan Hopkins, *Girl heroes: the new force in popular culture*, Media.culture series (Annandale, N.S.W.: Pluto Press, 2002).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

on the framework of this binary opposition, the representation of female action heroes is often criticised as “phallic, unnatural or figuratively male”.⁴³ Against the traditional binaristic logic, Hills argues that “action heroines represent something of a methodological crisis for feminist film theory and its theorizing of active and aggressive female characters”.⁴⁴ She suggests that because the representation of female action heroes changes over time, following historical changes in the definition of gender, the feminist theorist needs to “transform some of her habitual responses on how to read the active women when confronted with the image of the action heroine”.⁴⁵

Warrior Women in Asian Martial Art Cinema and TV

A similar question in relation to “the compatibility of beauty and power, femininity and violence, and desire and desirability” is also raised by feminist scholars studying the Asian martial art genre, because “the heroine’s martial arts skills are at odds with her yearning to be accepted in her community as a desirable woman”.⁴⁶ Chinese action heroines have been traditionally more prominent than Western female action heroes.⁴⁷ Most warrior women are sword players, with an emphasis on myth and magic. Guikin has argued that the possibility of equal representation between women and men in Asian cinema is caused by the different fighting technique of

⁴³ Elizabeth Hills, "From 'figurative males' to action heroines: further thoughts on active women in the cinema," *Screen* 40, no. 1 (1999): 39.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: 50.

⁴⁶ Wendy Arons, "'If her stunning beauty doesn't bring you to your knees, her deadly drop kick will': violent women in the Hong Kong kung fu film," in *Reel Knockouts: violent women in the movies*, ed. Martha McCaughey and Neal King (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 27.

⁴⁷ Leon Hunt, "The Lady is the Boss? Hidden dragons and 'Deadly China Dolls'," in *Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger*

(London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 119, Tasker, *Spectacular bodies : gender, genre, and the action cinema*.

Asian martial arts, which stresses the speed of movement rather than the Western stress on the weight of the blow.⁴⁸ In line with Guikin, Anderson has asserted that the kinaesthetic movements in martial arts “are not easily divided into masculine and feminine, fight and dance”.⁴⁹ With actions which are not merely physical, but depend on the interaction of body and mind, women have equal capacity to be action heroes, and even to be more powerful than men, in some martial art stories. As Gomes states, “femininity finds a voice of expression in martial arts cinema”.⁵⁰

To produce transnational cinema for audiences in the United States and Asia, Hong Kong cinema exemplifies transnational culture in which “these texts are open enough that even specific film genres allow different audiences to fill in desired and potentially distinct meanings”.⁵¹ Asian martial arts are sometimes perceived as lacking in masculinity, or manifesting a “problematic masculinity”.⁵² The 1970s signified a transition in Hong Kong cinema, breaking away from the image of the Asian ‘soft body’,⁵³ similar to Western action cinema, Hong Kong cinema, as personified by Bruce Lee, objectifies the male hard body as spectacle.

⁴⁸ Lenuta Giukin, "Boy-girls: gender, body, and popular culture in Hong Kong action movie," in *Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls : gender in film at the end of the twentieth century*, ed. Murray Pomerance (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ Aaron Anderson, "Kinesthesia in martial art films," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 42 (1998), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC42folder/anderson2/text.html>, (21 June 2006).

⁵⁰ Catherine Jean Gomes, "Doing it (un)like a lady: rethinking gender in martial arts cinema," *Graduate Journal of Asia-pacific Studies* 2, no. 1 (2004), <http://www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/gjaps>, (23 November 2005).

⁵¹ Anne T. Ciecko, "Transnational action, John Woo, Hong Kong, Hollywood," in *Transnational Chinese cinemas*, ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1997), 222.

⁵² Sheldon H. Lu, "Soap Opera in China: the transnational politics of visibility, sexuality, and masculinity," *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 1 (2000).

⁵³ Yuan Shu, "Reading the Kung Fu Film in an American context: From Bruce Lee to Jackie Chan " *Journal of Popular Film & Television*. 31, no. 2 (2003): 53, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

With the “remasculinisation of Hong Kong cinema”, there have been some shifts in gendering in Asian film-making with the portrayal of vulnerable Chinese heroines.⁵⁴ Previously, although Asian heroes conventionally showed an image of the soft body, “it was only the male physique that could be displayed”.⁵⁵ The woman warriors tend to be represented as “sexless tomboys who stay demurely bundled up”.⁵⁶ It was only in the 1970s that “the female form could be undraped and displayed as a visual attraction”.⁵⁷ This changing production code also introduced a new concept in martial art films, of the beautiful and ambitious woman who uses her attractiveness as a weapon to disturb men’s rationality.⁵⁸



Figure IX-5: The House of Flying Daggers

Figure IX 4: Royal Tramp

The construction of the male hero and the female hero in Chinese cinema is different from Western cinema. While, as Tasker has argued, the masculine quality of the warrior women in Western cinema is made less threatening by feminine traits such as maternal instinct, in Chinese cinema “the

⁵⁴ Hunt, "The Lady is the Boss? Hidden dragons and 'Deadly China Dolls'," 119.

⁵⁵ David Chute. "Heroic Grace: the Chinese martial art films." ed David Chute and Lim Cheng-Sim. (UCLA Film and Television Archive, 2003), <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/newsletter/MartialArtsBrochure.pdf>, (31 October 2006).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

safety valves” are “filial duty (Mulan for example) or the heroine poisoned (and thus rendered ‘unfeminine’) by revenge like Angela Mao Ying in *Lady Whirlwind/ Tiezhang Xuanfeng*”.⁵⁹ Women are also portrayed with a conflict between their “martial art skills and femininity”, under pressure to resolve it: “No matter how strong you are... you still have to settle down ...Go and get married”.⁶⁰ These examples suggest that although powerful women are accepted they are encouraged to embody the values of domesticity as well. In contrast, male heroes in *kung fu* are portrayed as “both patriotic and patrilineal” and “dealing with History”.⁶¹

Cai has argued that the Chinese female warriors “present a unique problematic”. Although female warriors have been part of the Chinese knight-errant tradition since ancient times, considering that the world of *wuxia* or *jianghu* is not a social and ideological vacuum, “martial chivalry induces doubts and anxieties about the female protagonist’s sexual identity”. There needs to be a reason provided for the “complete denial of the woman’s warrior feminine identity” such as that she was a male in a previous life. There is also a gender- related problem in martial art tales because of the direct conflict between the warrior woman and domesticity, “the site of traditional femininity”: “female knight-errants ... are rarely mothers”.⁶² As Cai reads *Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon*:

Killing the man responsible for her father’s death and thereby engaging in activity only men were licensed to do, the female character takes on a male quality. Before the assassination, the woman’s masculine identity is dormant, allowing her to carry out the normative roles of wife and mother. Once it is activated through the violence against the male body, the woman crosses the gender boundary, putting the female body in a dilemma. It cannot be the site of irreconcilable actions: both procreation (of male descendants in particular), the major function assigned the female by the patriarchy,

⁵⁹ Hunt, "The Lady is the Boss? Hidden dragons and 'Deadly China Dolls'," 118.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid..

⁶² Rong Cai, "Gender imaginations in *Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon* and the *wuxia* world," *East Asia cultures critique* 13, no. 2 (2005): 447-8.

and destruction of (male) life. To maintain gender coherence, the woman has to renounce the essence of femininity, motherhood, thus avoiding a dangerous confusion and impasse.⁶³

Arons has noted that “the *kung fu* genre as a whole is rather conservative...it tends to represent violent women in patterned ways”.⁶⁴ The question of the compatibility between femininity and violence is represented through, for example, “the attractiveness of the fighting woman, framing her as a plain but earnest sidekick in contrast to the male hero’s beautiful but helpless love interest”.⁶⁵ However, some “explicitly turn the fighting woman into a sex object and use martial artistry to exploit the female body”.⁶⁶ Some films which are categorised as “fantasy-action subgenre subvert gender norms by positing a mythical world in which gender is fluid and women can accrue supernatural powers”.⁶⁷ Alternatively, the comedy genre performs “reversing stereotypical gender roles or playing with established norms of behaviour between sexes”, such as “a hero who comes to the rescue of a woman he thinks helpless, only to watch as she capably defends herself”.⁶⁸ Arons shows that women in *kung fu* films are portrayed more diversely than in Western action-adventure cinema.

⁶³ Ibid.: 441.

⁶⁴ Arons, “If her stunning beauty doesn't bring you to your knees, her deadly drop kick will”: violent women in the Hong Kong kung fu film,” 27.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.



Figure IX-6: Scene from Heroic Trio



Figure IX-7: Cover of DVD Heroic Trio

Part II: The Indonesian Social and Cultural Context

The idea of body and gender is distinctive in every culture. It also changes over time. One interesting point I have found in the sinetron is the way it portrays male and female equally exercising supernatural power. Male and female have the same access to gain supernatural power and the ability to master and exercise it is determined by their gifted talent not gender. This phenomenon raises a question of what ideas of gender and body exist in Indonesian culture which allow the sinetron to portray powerful men and women equally. It can also recall a tradition of fighting women in Indonesia, especially in Java, the sinetron's traditional setting. How does the sinetron negotiate between such ideas and the New Order gender ideology that has dominated Indonesian film and television in recent decades? And how does it manage to portray powerful female bodies and at the same time avoid offending viewers in the midst of current controversies about pornography?

Ideas of Gender and Body in Indonesia

Feminist scholars argue that “gender, or masculinity and femininity, is expressed and arranged in different ways at different points in time and in different social spaces and there is anthropological evidence of cultural variation in concepts of gender and sex”.⁶⁹ That is, gender is culturally distinctive. But the concept of gender⁷⁰ is not always differentiated from that of sexual difference. Neither Indonesian nor Javanese has a specific word for the translation of ‘gender’, ‘masculine’, and ‘feminine’. However, Indonesian and Javanese strongly differentiate sex difference, male and female as sexed identities. The word ‘gender’ is being absorbed into Indonesian, either as is⁷¹ or as *jenis*, with its original Western meaning, to do with masculine and feminine where these latter terms unproblematically refer to ‘manly’ or ‘like a man’ and ‘womanly’, ‘like a woman’.

As we have seen, the ‘problem’ presented by the female action heroine concerns the lack of fit between gender and body, when body and gendered behaviour do not correspond as they should – the masculinised female body, the feminised male body. This problem in both Western and Asian action

⁶⁹ Alexandra Howson, *The body in society : an introduction* (Cambridge, U.K. ; Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, in association with Blackwell Pub., 2004).

⁷⁰ Traditionally, *gender* has been used primarily to refer to the grammatical categories of “masculine,” “feminine,” and “neuter,” but in recent years the word has become well established in its use to refer to sex-based categories, as in phrases such as *gender gap* and *the politics of gender*. This usage is supported by the practice of many anthropologists, who reserve *sex* for reference to biological categories, while using *gender* to refer to social or cultural categories. This distinction is useful in principle, but it is by no means widely observed, and considerable variation in usage occurs at all levels. "Dictionary.Com."

⁷¹ There was a joke spread among the people of Solo about the word ‘gender’. One day there was a seminar for introducing gender to high school teachers. Most schools sent their teacher of *karawitan* (Javanese pentatonic music) to this seminar. When they listened to the speakers, they were confused because the topic was not about Javanese music, rather it was about male-female relationship. They misunderstood the word gender [jɛn'dər] as being gender [gən'dər], the Javanese and Balinese bronze xylophone.

cinema has usually been discussed in terms of a binary understanding of gender, whereby one gender is understood as the polar opposite of the other. Western epistemology is developed from the “philosophical dualism between mind and body, between an isolated, rational self and a world external to that self”.⁷² This dualism forms the understanding that the mind is “the source of both of rationality and of the self” and the body is associated with “nature, with the non-rational and with emotion”. This idea, which is based on “the Cartesian dualism bequeathed by the Enlightenment,” is currently problematised by feminist scholars because of “its association between femininity and the body” and the way this association has been used to construct women “as threat to the moral order and to social stability”.⁷³

Javanese culture also differentiates between mind and body, but the relationship between the two is understood differently. Mulyono has explained that the human being has one physical body which is visible and equipped with the five sense organs; however there is also an invisible element: the mind and the soul, which do not have physical form but lead to three capabilities: thinking, feeling, and will. The physical body and the insubstantial mind and soul cannot be separated. Organically they are two in one body: “They are two, but one. They are one, but two”.⁷⁴ Thus, like the idea of the complementarity between “the obvious dualities of the Universe”, the unity between body and mind demonstrates the Javanese cosmology.⁷⁵

Blackwood in her study of gender transgression in Indonesia noted that traditionally gender was fluid in Indonesia because “the ideal of cosmic unity in which two opposing or complementary genders can be fused or

⁷² Howson, *The body in society : an introduction*.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Sri Mulyono, *Human characters in wayang (trans.)* (Jakarta: Pustaka Wayang, 1977).

⁷⁵ Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Mythology and the tolerance of the Javanese*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1996).

combined produces and articulates a sacred gender".⁷⁶ She agrees with Errington that gender differences are not always strongly marked, that "male and female are viewed as complementary or even identical beings in many respects".⁷⁷ In her study of female transgressive ritual practices⁷⁸ in Indonesia, she has found that

Gender switching mythological figures reflect a worldview in which the two sexes have distinct physical and behavioural characteristics, but spiritually potent beings could nevertheless transgress these sex/gender boundaries to achieve supernatural tasks and fulfil erotic desires. This transformation is consistent with a sex/gender binary in which desire is always heterosexual, that is between man and a woman; one is only able to desire and have sex with the other sex, thus necessitating a gender switch.⁷⁹

In other words the sign of power is characterised by the fusion of masculine and feminine attributes: androgyny in Bugis cosmology, a sacred union of male and female in Balinese cosmology, or complementarity of masculine and feminine in Javanese cosmology.⁸⁰

Blackwood also argued that in the 1600s there was a tremendous shift of gender discourse, which especially affected women's lives, where these traditional concepts of 'sacred gender' were displaced by the "antithetical, opposing force" of both Dutch and Islamic influences. She argued that:

Although existing cosmologies generally were folded into Islamic beliefs, the force of Islamic ideological formulations of gender in association with Dutch masculinised culture and religion

⁷⁶ Evelyn Blackwood, "Gender transgression in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 4 (2005): 871, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

⁷⁷ 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), 39.

⁷⁸ The female *bissu* of the Buginese of South Sulawesi who provide assistance in military conflict, the female *balian* of the Ngaju Dayak of Kalimantan who act as a mediator between the community and the spirit world, and the female *manek* of Bali, shamans and healers, show that the combination between masculine and feminine elements symbolizes power. Blackwood, "Gender transgression in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia."

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*: 857.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*: 857-8.

compromised and delegitimated women's leadership and power in state and religious contexts. These constrictions led to different trajectories for transgressive male and female ritual practitioners. During this period, the mythologies of sacred gender were subsumed or replaced by a mythology of 'innate' gender reduced to human form and divested to a large extent of its magical powers to unite the cosmos. Confined to limited, mortal, and eternally sex-dichotomized bodies, women and men, although somewhat later and with somewhat different effect for men, would no longer be able to bridge masculine and feminine elements legitimately.⁸¹

She found that Islamic gender discourse was more enforced on women in the royal courts, resulting in segregation between men and women and the marginalisation of elite women from all domains. They were no longer permitted to access power and to rule.⁸² The role of women was limited to being wives and mothers.⁸³ Women's voices were muted.⁸⁴ The reforming Islamic discourse, Blackwood argued, naturalised the gender hierarchy which considers that the female body because of its "reproductive, not generative, capacities, fit them to be wives and mothers, a sacred duty that reflected their god-given nature".⁸⁵ Also, "man and woman were rationalized as objects of God's creation and were therefore bound to the form that God gave them".⁸⁶ Meanwhile, Dutch colonisers introduced and encouraged their patriarchal worldview with the idea of proper gendered roles.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Ibid.: 859.

⁸² In Aceh, which had been well-known for having a succession of four queens starting in the mid-17th century, and female soldiers, "clerics were successful in obtaining a fatwa (authoritative religious ruling), decreeing that women should no longer be permitted to rule" Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.: 861.

⁸⁴ Laurie Jo Sears, "Introduction: fragile identities," in *Fantasizing the feminine in Indonesia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 3.

⁸⁵ Blackwood, "Gender transgression in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia," 862.

⁸⁶ Ibid.: 863.

⁸⁷ Raden Ajeng Kartini wrote to one of her Dutch friends: "but where would I end if I were to tell you about the suffering of Native women? ...Tear the hearts from our bodies, and the brains from our heads if you wish to change us." Kartini and Joost J. P. Cote, *Letters from Kartini : an Indonesian feminist, 1900-1904 (trans.)* (Clayton, Vic.: Monash Asia Institute, Monash University in association with Hyland House, 1992).

This discourse of naturalised gender continued in the postcolonial state and it was reinforced during the New Order era. Men are masters because they exercise authority in public while women are the managers of the private-domestic world.⁸⁸ Although the New Order era encouraged women to gain a good education and enter the professions, there was ambivalence about this because at the same time the regime also held to the ideology of motherhood and wifedom as women's primary roles. This ideology, as Wolf found in her study of rural-based factories, has impacted on the gender inequality between male and female factory workers.⁸⁹

Evidence of this 'naturalised or 'innate' view of gender difference can be seen in Parker's ethnographic research on Balinese children during the New Order era. She noted that there are clearly gendered social roles at school. Sex segregation can be seen in the sexual division of labour, sports, and handicraft activities. Boys, in trousers and shorts are "noisier and more active". They are more "active, bold, self-projecting and individualistic".⁹⁰ In contrast, girls, in skirts are "quiet and well-behaved". They are expected to be "passive, soft, fragile, calm and contained".⁹¹ The ideal of femininity is "shy, modest, quiet, unassuming and receptive". When a girl talks, she should not "open her mouth too much" but her silence is more expected. It can be said that the expectation is the muteness of girls.⁹² Parker has also noted that morality is also gendered. Girls who "talk to anyone or to talk loudly trespasses upon the boy's domain" imply that they are "sexually available". "Boys and men have more freedom to be naughty and loud" while "women run a very great risk of appearing as mad, as sexually promiscuous, or as

⁸⁸ 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).

⁸⁹ Diane L. Wolf, "Javanese factory daughters," in *Fantasizing the feminine*, ed. Laurie Jo Sears (Durham: Duke University, 1996), 142.

⁹⁰ Lynette Parker, "Engendering school children in Bali," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3, no. 3 (1997): 504, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*: 506.

⁹² *Ibid.*: 508.

witches when they appear as unfeminine – that is, loud, brash, independent or naughty”.⁹³ This idea of gender difference is very similar to that of the modern West.

However, Blackwood argues that there are still faint traces in today's Indonesia - despite the efforts of New Order gender ideology to obliterate them - of that earlier idea of 'sacred' gender difference, where it could be of benefit to society for both male-bodied and female-bodied 'gender transgressors' to perform rituals. Are any such traces discernible in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*? Before turning back to the sinetron, I will consider the tradition of female soldiers in Indonesia as a possible historical precedent for the construction of heroic female figures in the sinetron.

Female Soldiers

Female soldiers have been part of Indonesian tradition. In the early eighteenth-century a visitor to the Mataram court, François Valentijn, observed that all the guardians of the ruler's private apartments were female soldiers. The officer in command of the female soldiers was also a female with “the rank of *tumenggung*⁹⁴ and a sizeable apantage grant from the court”.⁹⁵ He also described the ruler's female bodyguards as “armed with shields, bows and arrows, pikes and muskets”.⁹⁶ In 1788, one of European officials in attendance at the Yogya court remarked “the sharpshooting ability

⁹³ Ibid.: 510.

⁹⁴ A kind of minister of the crown and also high-ranking military commander

⁹⁵ P Carey and V Houben, eds., *Spirited Srikandhis and sly Sumbadras; the social political and economic role of women at the Central Javanese courts in 18th and early 29th centuries*, Indonesian women in focus : past and present notion (Dordrecht, Holland ; Providence, USA: Foris Publications, 1987), 18.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

of the mounted female dragoons who were able to handle their cavalry carbines with great dexterity”.⁹⁷

A French estate owner who visited the Surakarta court in 1821 also reported the tradition of female soldiers there. He described the appearance of the female soldier corps: “Forty women were seated in a row immediately below the throne and were literally armed to the teeth: besides a belt with *kris* attached, each one held a sabre or a musket in her hand”.⁹⁸ Similarly, Admiral Wybrandt van Warwijk, in the years before the Java war (1825-1830), “saw a large royal guard formed of women armed with blow-pipes, lances, swords, and shields, and a picture of these women is to be found in the journal of the voyage”.⁹⁹ Van Goens reported that the armed women were not only trained “in the exercise of traditional and modern weaponry but also in dancing, singing, and playing musical instruments”.¹⁰⁰ They were also trained in archery and rode horses so that they displayed achievements in many disciplines. When they were in armed combat, they wore gold male clothing but when they were in archery training, they wore plain white female clothes. Although most “lady soldiers” were chosen from among the most beautiful girls, the ruler rarely took one of them as a concubine. However he might sometimes arrange their marriage with one of the great nobles of the land. Kumar has noted that “in modern Javanese literature the representation of women in armed combat and on the battlefield occurs much more frequently than one might expect”.¹⁰¹

In his published translation the *Babad Bedhah Ngayogyakarta* (a contemporary Javanese account of the British 1811-1816 interregnum in the

⁹⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ann Kumar, "Javanese court society and politics in the late eighteenth century: the record of a lady soldier part I," *Indonesia* 29 (1980), <http://cip.cornell.edu/DPubS/UI/1.0/JourNav?authority=seap.indo&type=past>, (3 September 2006).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Dutch East Indies by a prince of the Yogyakarta court), Carey explained that there was mention of the name of Ratu Kencana, the principal wife of Sultan Hamengkubuwana III, who behaved in “a more manly fashion than the Javanese males themselves”. It was said that after the third sultan passed away, she “manfully tried to control her grief, having taken the necessary action to ensure the security of the inner kraton”.¹⁰² Another example of a heroic woman is Raden Ayu Yudakusuma, a daughter of the sultan of Yogyakarta. She was said to be “a lady of ‘shrewd intelligence, outstanding ability and manly ingenuity’ ...(who) masterminded the massacre of the Chinese community at Ngawi on 17 September 1828 and became one of Dipanegara’s most feared cavalry commanders”.¹⁰³

Indonesian history also acknowledges Raden Ayu Serang as a lady “who played an active military role against the Dutch” during the 1830s.¹⁰⁴ She was well-known as a woman with unusual spiritual power “who led a cavalry squadron in the Serang-Demak area in the first months of the war”.¹⁰⁵ After Independence the Indonesian government awarded two other ‘warrior women’, Cut Nyak Din and Cut Mutia from Aceh, the title of Indonesian National Hero for fighting alongside their husbands in the late 19th century Aceh War against the Dutch colonisers.¹⁰⁶

After the Indonesian declaration of independence, the state acknowledged historical women figures as national hero because of their roles in fighting “for equal opportunities in education” and “against the colonial

¹⁰² Carey and Houben, eds., *Spirited Srikandhis and sly Sumbadras; the social political and economic role of women at the Central Javanese courts in 18th and early 29th centuries*, 20.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Jennifer Dudley, "Of warrior women, emancipist princesses, "Hidden Queens" and managerial mothers," (2005), wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~jududley/Malahayati.pdf, (27 January 2007).

power during the struggle for independence”.¹⁰⁷ However, Sunindyo has argued, “images of contemporary military women in Indonesia are contradictory”: although women are acknowledged as heroes, “women’s ideal primary social role is an adornment – woman as beautiful as flower, as pride of the village precisely because of her physical appearance”.¹⁰⁸ In the New Order military government, although women and men were treated equally in military institutions, the concept of equality still involves an “extremely gendered division of labour”. Women can join the military but they still have to remember their female biological destiny.¹⁰⁹

It can be concluded that although there are anthropological accounts of the tradition of female soldiers in Indonesia and historical accounts of the role of women in the struggle for independence, these images do not carry enough weight to counteract New Order gender ideology. Now I will turn to discussion of media and morality in Indonesia. These provide the most immediate context for understanding the representation of heroic female figures in the sinetron *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, especially in the screening of the female body.

The Image of Body and Gender in Popular Media

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Sen’s study of New Order Indonesian cinema led her to the conclusion that the dominant gender ideology of women as wives and mothers strongly determined the limited ways women were portrayed.

¹⁰⁷ Saraswati Sunindyo, "When earth is female and the nation is mother: gender, the armed forces, and nationalism in Indonesia," *Feminist Review* 58, no. 1 (1998): 4.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*: 7.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*: 13.

The portrayals of masculinity in Indonesian media varied between positive and negative images. Men in TV advertising are constructed in a positive manner when they are in the public sphere.¹¹⁰ However in Indonesian films of the 1970s, Heider has observed that “the men are passive, or, if active, create the disorder which must be salvaged in the end by the women”¹¹¹ This ideology still continues in some post New Order films where men are portrayed as weak characters such as “the absent father” (*Pasir Berbisik*), the ups-and downs of contemporary father-son relationships (*Eliana Eliana* and *Ada Apa dengan Cinta*), domestic violence (*Ada Apa dengan Cinta*) and the sense of aimlessness and alienation of the emerging post-New Order generation of Indonesian men (*Jelangkung*).¹¹² These suggest that the construction of masculinity in Indonesian media is not single. Like the possibility of the representation of powerful women, men can be portrayed as weak.

The New Order Indonesian films differentiated strongly between the concepts of public and domestic. Public areas were depicted as dangerous for women. When a woman went outside the house, she was in danger of being seduced, raped and left: she became the helpless victim. Sen wrote that New Order cinema glorified female reproduction as women’s chief characteristic and consistently described the danger of its denial. Women were only portrayed as a mother or a wife, or if the film exploited woman’s body, she was represented as a prostitute. When woman was served as a prostitute, the end of the story was always the death of this woman. However, some films of 1980s showed new representations outside women’s usual role. It was a rare but there was a representation of woman’s autonomy and she was presented

¹¹⁰ Marshall Clark, "Indonesian masculinities: Images of men in Indonesian TV advertising," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2004): 14, <http://www.informit.com.au/>.

¹¹¹ Karl G. Heider, *Indonesian cinema : national culture on screen* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991).

¹¹² Marshall Clark, "Men, masculinities and symbolic violence in Recent Indonesian Cinema," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 1 (2004): 124, <http://www.journals.cambridge.org/>.

as unmarried but the story did not end with her death.¹¹³ It shows that New Order ideology of the difference between public and domestic has been challenged in film production since the 1980s.

JB Kristanto analysed the most popular Indonesian films from 1974 until 1993 and took the 5 most popular films every year as his data. He reached a conclusion that most Indonesian films were made with the assumption that woman is weak. Her weaknesses may create sympathy among the viewers that leads them to become absorbed in the story and shed tears. If there was a film about a powerful woman, she was only powerful because the men who lived around her were weak men. In his article *Wajah Perempuan dalam Film Indonesia* Kristanto did not discuss comedy films because in this genre a woman was usually only a sexual object. He did not look at action films either because the role of woman in this genre was usually secondary and unimportant.¹¹⁴ In relation to action films, both Sen and Purnami have argued that they are targeted at male viewers and tend to make women into sex objects.¹¹⁵ In these films “women are not absent, but indeed they are emphatically presented to see”.¹¹⁶ However, although this “plays on the desire of seeing and the promise of showing” these films “remain, by and large, outside the discourse of sexuality”.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Krishna Sen, *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order* (London ; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Zed Books, 1994).

¹¹⁴ J.B. Kristanto, "Wajah perempuan dalam film Indonesia [woman's face in Indonesian film]," in *Wanita dan media: konstruksi ideologi gender dalam ruang publik orde baru [women and media: gender ideology construction in the New Order public sphere]*, ed. Idi Subandy Ibrahim and Hanif Suranto (Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya, 1998), 230-4.

¹¹⁵ Sita Aripurnami, "Whiny, finicky, bitchy, stupid and 'revealing': the image of women in Indonesian films," in *Indonesian Women: The Journey Continues*, ed. Mayling Oey-Gardiner and Carla Bianpoen (Canberra: The Australian National University Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies 2000), 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).

¹¹⁶ Sen, *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order*.

¹¹⁷ ———, "Interpretations of the Feminine in Cinema," 129.

Although, as Sen noted, many ethnic cultures in Indonesia acknowledge more than two distinct genders, these variations and transgressions are rarely presented in films. When a film screened a transvestite, he was presented as only a “figure of fun”, while a tomboy was presented as needing to have her feminine identity to be restored by the agency of a man.¹¹⁸

Looking at scholarly discussions of gender portrayal in New Order cinema and television films, it can be concluded that during this period films were produced to conform with the state gender ideology, which differentiated very strongly between male and female, masculine and feminine, public and domestic, just as in Western action-adventure cinema and television. As *Misteri Gunung Merapi* was first produced shortly after the fall of the New Order, are there any traces of New Order ideology in the gender construction in this sinetron? Does the sinetron to some extent continue, and to some extent contest, this gender ideology?

Screening Female Body and Eroticism in New Order Films

Heider argued that the West and India were the major sources of the visual inspiration for Indonesian cinema. However, a major difference was in the way the Indonesian cinema negotiated the female body as an object of beauty and eroticism. In New Order cinema a woman’s body was “fully draped in shapeless clothing”. The screening focused “on the face, not the body”. The only exception was in “the sadistic/erotic displays of bodies in Japanese (Occupation) Period and Horror genre films”.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, Sen noted that a woman’s body could be displayed in films about prostitutes. As she wrote, “the most frequent construction of the adult female protagonist

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 119-20.

¹¹⁹ Heider, *Indonesian cinema : national culture on screen*.

outside the scope of monogamy and motherhood, however, is as prostitute” and “the prostitution films, more than any other, directly use the female body to sell the product (the film) while at the same time condemning that body”.¹²⁰ In this case, the screening of prostitutes was the way the New Order cinema negotiated the taboo against screening the female body as an object of spectacle.

Sen also argued that she could not avoid the ‘parallels’ between Mulvey’s criticism of Hollywood cinema and her own notion of Indonesian cinema, that “the camera acts as an extension of the male gaze” and that “both visually and psychologically, the women here are constructed from the hero’s perspective, judged from his point of view”.¹²¹ She gave as an example an Indonesian action film called *7 Wanita dalam Tugas Rahasia* (Seven Women on a Secret Mission), which she considered to be a soft-core porn film, in which the female characters were screened as unaware of being seen, for example a shot of women “lying on the ground, most probably asleep, in postures of a total abandonment, with legs apart”. Sen criticised this film for “a sado-masochistic edge to the film’s revelation of the women’s bodies”.¹²²

The same thing happened with screening sexual intercourse. Scenes of sexual explicitness were mostly found in foreign films rather than in Indonesian films. Scenes which showed explicit sexuality were cut by the Board of Censorship. Sexuality was presented as “downplayed or presented as sadism” in Indonesian movies. Sex scenes could be visually explicit in rape, such as Japanese soldiers raping Indonesian women in the film *Kadarwati*. But when sex was an expression of love and tenderness, it had to take place “far offscreen”.¹²³ Kissing was also considered as taboo in New Order cinema. The convention of screening kissing was “to cut the shot at the last

¹²⁰ Sen, *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order*.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Heider, *Indonesian cinema : national culture on screen*.

frame before that actual lip contact was made”. Viewers rarely watched a scene of kissing, except in the film *Cintaku di Kampus Biru* of the late 1980s, in which there was a full lip kiss.¹²⁴

However, with the popularity of High School¹²⁵ genre films in the 1980s, Western-style eroticism was screened more explicitly with, for example, more frequent scenes where “the girls wear tight and scanty clothing”.¹²⁶ With the end of the New Order era and the regime’s control of entertainment production, the media industry got more freedom in screening the female body and sexual explicitness. However, screening the female body is still problematic. Considering the debates concerning the female body and sexuality and the statement of the production manager about ‘not offending anybody’, I am going to discuss how the production team has modified the global cinematic conventions on this matter by comparing *Misteri Gunung Merapi* with Western action-adventure, Asian martial art, and traditional performance.

Media and Morality since the Fall of the New Order in 1998

Margaret Atwood has said that the female body is “a hot topic” since there are an extraordinary number of uses of it to sell many items from “cars, beer, shaving lotion, cigarettes, hard liquor... to diet plans and diamonds, and desire in tiny crystal bottles”.¹²⁷ Not only because it is used so intensively and extensively to sell commodities, but also because of its uses in other patriarchal discourses, the female body is also a hot topic in recent feminist

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ High School genre refers to romantic love theme between two high school students, with a dominant setting of high school and relationships between students-teacher in the class. The most popular theme is forbidden love, inspired by Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

¹²⁶ Heider, *Indonesian cinema : national culture on screen*.

¹²⁷ Margaret Atwood, "The female body," in *The female body: figures, styles, speculations*, ed. Laurence Goldstein (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1991), 1-3.

theory. Goldstein emphasises the amount of “research in the last two decades in order to situate the female body in a diversity of historical and theoretical contexts”.¹²⁸

For different reasons again, the female body is a hot topic in Indonesia. It has been used as a symbol of national identity: in order to differentiate the Indonesian from the Western, the state has tried to control sexuality and women’s bodies. In the name of the nation’s morality, the government regulates how women should wear clothes and cover their bodies. To build a distinctive national image of Indonesia, sexual restraint is emphasised and sexual freedom is propagandised as a Western value.¹²⁹ Although the idea to apply *sharia*¹³⁰ law in some regions in Indonesia is recent, as it has been reported by various Indonesian newspapers, the discourse on covering *aurat*¹³¹ (private parts of the body) has been around for several decades.

During the New Order era, no commercial cinema was free from ideological control. All production needed approval from the Board of Film Censorship (as discussed in Chapter 3). There were two kinds of film

¹²⁸ Laurence Goldstein, *The Female body : figures, styles, speculations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

¹²⁹ Tjen Marching Soe, "Anti Pornography Bill and Indonesian Identity" (paper presented at the Konferenz "Neue Willkür gegen Frauen in Indonesien: Frauenrechte zwischen Islamisierung und Demokratie", Amsterdam, 15 July 2006), www.asienhaus.de/public/archiv/soe_tjen.pdf, (1 December 2006).

¹³⁰ Sharia (syariah) law, as Bowen cautions, refers to “the path or way determined by God”. “Syariah law therefore refers to a form of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) which involves complex interpretations of the law based on readings of the Qur’an and hadith. Restrictive laws arise as a result of a combination of interpretations that may be culturally or historically biased”. Clarisa Adamson, "Gendered anxieties: Islam, women's rights, and moral hierarchy in Java," *Anthropological Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2007): 29, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

¹³¹ Since late 1984 (when I was in the third year of my high school) there have been many campaigns to cover *aurat* and to consider that women’s hair is *aurat*. Emha read his poem “*Lautan Jilbab*” (The Ocean of Veils) in many high schools and universities in 1970s and also many *ulama* preached about the requirements to wear veil to cover *aurat*.

ensorship: institutional (through regulation)¹³² and cultural (exercised through public protest).¹³³ Although the New Order government had not interfered in the process of making sinetron, there was a tendency for it to be tyrannical in its insistence that “cinema is simultaneously entertaining and educative work” (*sinema adalah karya tontonan sekaligus tuntunan*).¹³⁴

Since the fall of the New Order, media scrutiny comes from independent organizations, reflecting the rise of civil society in Indonesia. These independent organizations, such as “TV Watch”, were established as social controls over television, especially to protect the young from negative influences.¹³⁵ They were considered necessary to replace the older forms of state censorship, and also because of the ‘unprecedented influx of pornography’ that happened in Indonesia after 1998, affecting ‘markets across the archipelago’.¹³⁶ The affordability of colour television and video players imported from China and the boom in video rental meant that all segments of society could easily get access to any movie, including pornographic ones. Porn film consumption is widely considered to threaten moral degradation, especially for the youth, who are regarded as morally vulnerable.

A new anti-pornography bill was initially drafted in 1999, which according to Ade Armando, a member of the KPI (*Komisi Penyiaran*

¹³² “The censorship regulations contain a number of restrictions on the representation of sex. No sexual act can be clearly or even indistinctly filmed, and neither humans nor animals can be shown in the act of sexual intercourse. There can be no close-up of kissing mouths, nor any use of obvious sexual symbols. An example of sexual symbolism cited in Censorship Codes of 1980 is ‘a mouth sucking on an ambon banana (pisang ambon) resembling the male genitals’.” Sen, “Interpretations of the Feminine in Cinema.”

¹³³ “The unwillingness of influential sections of the audience, represented by the censors, to accept the translation of private acts of intimacy into the public domain of the silver queen”. Ibid.

¹³⁴ Veven Sp Wardhana, *Televisi dan prasangka budaya massa* (Jakarta: Diterbitkan [oleh] Media Lintas Inti Nusantara untuk Institut Studi Arus Informasi, 2001).

¹³⁵ “Kritisi Televisi [television criticism],” *Pikiran Rakyat* 2005, <http://www.pikiran-rakyat.com/cetak/2005/0805/21/0107.htm>, (26 July 2007).

¹³⁶ Laura J. Bellows, “Indonesia's politics of porn: Is debate about the media or about social and religious practices,” *American sexuality* 2006, http://nsrc.sfsu.edu/MagArticle.cfm?SID=E1517F509C1F0FD5EA703B7B759C90CF&DSN=nsrc_dsn&Mode=EDIT&Article=655&ReturnURL=1, (23 July 2007).

Indonesia, Indonesian Broadcasting Committee), was “very important not only to stop real (hardcore) porn reaching the public, but also to enable regulation of elements of porn in the common media”.¹³⁷ However, “for decades Indonesia has had its own anti-pornography legislation, which nonetheless, as many complain, hardly ever has been enforced”.¹³⁸ There was not very much public debate about this proposed legislation until 2004 or 2005, when additional regulation of “pornographic action” was added to it. This term refers to “a broad range of modes of dress, movements, sounds, and social behaviour deemed immoral or arousing to the (male) public”.¹³⁹ These proposals have created a great deal of tension between the pros and contras.

As we have seen, screening kissing and sex is problematic in Indonesia. One of the sections in the draft anti-pornography and anti-pornographic action bill specifies that kissing on the lips in public is prohibited with “up to five years imprisonment and a fine of up to Rp. 500 million (approx. A\$72,000).¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, pornography itself, in Rachmat Hidayat’s words is “a cultural rather than a legal issue” in Indonesia.¹⁴¹ The exposure of the female body in any way that could arouse male desire is also forbidden in the proposed law.

From 1999 to 2005, there were many social and cultural phenomena in Indonesia which signify the society’s anxiety about moral degradation. In

¹³⁷ Kalinga Seneviratne, "Indonesia: Debate on pornography bill steers clear of religion," Asia Media Forum, <http://www.asiamediaforum.org/node/412>, (15 July 2007).

¹³⁸ Bart Barendregt, "Between m-governance and mobile anarchies: Pornoaksi and the fear of new media in present day Indonesia," *media anthropology - working papers* (2006), www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/barendregt_mgovernance.pdf (19 June 2007), Pam Allen, "Challenging diversity?: Indonesia's anti-pornography bill," *Asian Studies Review* 31, no. 2 (2007): 103, www.informaworld.com/.

¹³⁹ Bellows, "Indonesia's politics of porn: Is debate about the media or about social and religious practices."

¹⁴⁰ Allen, "Challenging diversity?: Indonesia's anti-pornography bill," 102.

¹⁴¹ Thomas Barker, "VCD Pornography of Indonesia" (paper presented at the Asia Reconstructed: Proceedings of the 16th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, the University of Wollongong, 2006), <http://coombs.anu.edu.au/SpecialProj/ASAA/biennial-conference/2006/proceedings.html>, (1 December 2006).

2003 Indonesia was in an uproar with Rhoma Irama's criticism of Inul Daratista's "gyrating hips and scanty attire".¹⁴² In 2004, there were protests against the film *Buruan Cium Gue* (Kiss Me Quick) by various individuals and groups: *ulama*, leaders of Christian, Catholic, and Buddhist and Islamic organizations, actresses, and education personnel. They attended the office of the *Lembaga Sensor Film* (Board of Film Censorship) to stop the screening of this film and demanded its withdrawal from the cinemas.¹⁴³ Soe, in her study of a number of newspaper articles written by Westerners about the draft of the anti pornography and anti pornographic-action legislation, also noted that President Bambang Susilo Yudoyono stated his uncomfortable feeling and worry "about the programs on television which showed female navels".¹⁴⁴

Pornography should be differentiated from erotica. Wieringa has argued that there is an ancient Javanese tradition of erotica,¹⁴⁵ which "differs from pornography as it has been known in the modern West ...[it] has nothing to do with private fantasy and was not designed for auto-eroticism".¹⁴⁶ However this tradition is not part of contemporary popular culture, and many Indonesians consider that any dancing or movement with erotic elements is pornography because their concept of pornography is not related to sexual offensiveness, rather it is about the indecency of exposing parts of the body

¹⁴² Allen, "Challenging diversity?: Indonesia's anti-pornography bill," 103.

¹⁴³ "Pemutaran film "BCG" bakal dihentikan [Screening film BCG will be stopped]," *Pikiran Rakyat*, 20 August 2004, <http://www.pikiran-rakyat.com/cetak/0804/20/0103.htm>, (26 July 2007).

¹⁴⁴ Soe, "Anti Pornography Bill and Indonesian Identity".

¹⁴⁵ Nuruddin ar-Raniri, the writer of *Bustan as-salation* (Garden of Kings) wrote: "the things which rouse sexual desire are watching copulating people or copulating animals, looking at the pudenda of animals, and reading the books which have been written by the 'ulama' about erotology, listening to stories about lustful people, and listening to the melodious voice of a woman..." Edwin P. Wieringa, "A Javanese handbook for would-be husbands: the *Sĕrat Candraning Wanita*," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 3 (2002): 433, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/>.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

which should be covered, or the sexual relationship which should not be in represented in public.¹⁴⁷

There are two categories of manifest pornography in Indonesian film. The first is commercial porn films, although there only allegations but no clear evidence that these are being produced in Indonesia. Porn films such as *Bandung Lautan Asmara*¹⁴⁸ (The Love Ocean of Bandung) and *Belum Ada Judul* (Still Untitled) have apparently been produced originally for private use but subsequently have been pirated and sold in a more public commercial market. The second category of pornography applies to films which include 'manifested sexuality' as defined by the *Lembaga Sensor Film*¹⁴⁹ (Board of Film Censorship) Regulations of 1994. The Regulations' criteria of manifested sexuality are (a) more than 50% of the story and scenes contain sex, (b) full-frontal nudity or the impression of this from any viewing position, (c) close-up of naked breast, thigh, or bottom, (d) stimulative kissing, (e) either suggestive or vulgar action or sound of sexual activity by either human or animal, (f) activity of masturbation, lesbian, homosexual, or oral sex, (g) the screening of the delivering of a baby either human or animal which could create sexual arousal, (h) presenting contraception not in the right social place, (i) unethical scenes.¹⁵⁰ Scenes containing one or more of (b)

¹⁴⁷ Santi Indra Astuti, "Persepsi masyarakat terhadap tayangan pornografi di televisi realitas pornografi televisi di tengah masyarakat [Society's perception toward screening pornography on television, televisial pornography reality among society " in *Persepsi masyarakat terhadap tayangan pornografi, kekerasan & mistik di televisi*, ed. Masayu S. Hanim (Jakarta: LIPI Press, 2005), 59-60.

¹⁴⁸ *Bandung Lautan Asmara* or *Balada Adi dan Nanda*

¹⁴⁹ Although the law was produced in 1994, it has been revised, and it is still applicable.

¹⁵⁰ There is no explanation about unethical scenes in the 1994 regulation. In 1981 at a seminar on *kode etik* (ethical codes) of Indonesian film production, code of ethics referred to (*tata susila dan budaya Indonesia*) morality regulation. It was mentioned that the scenes should respect marriage and family, did not confirm sex relationships outside the marriage institution, except if it is for dramatic construction, did not show any passionate kissing or hug, explicit rape could be screened to stress that this action was against religion and could create bad impact, and it was forbidden to perform the body action which could suggest to the viewers' imagination sexual activity and the scenes of a naked body either explicit or suggestive. "Perfilman Indonesia antara harapan, tantangan dan kenyataan [Indonesian filmography between hope, challenge and reality]," Lembaga Sensor Film Republik Indonesia, <http://www.lsf.go.id>.

to (i) will be cut by the Censorship Board, and films considered to infringe the '50% rule', criterion (a), will be banned.¹⁵¹

However, the problem for the media industry is not whether the Censorship Board will pass or ban a film, but is more about how the public reacts to its release. Titi Said, the Head of the Film Censorship Board, has explained publicly that the members of the Board need to be aggressive in censoring in order to protect "certain elements of society" because those who attack the Board are getting more aggressive as well. This makes the tasks of the Film Censorship Board increasingly difficult. As an example, Tedjasukmana reported that a kiss between two men in the film *Arisan* passed the censors while a heterosexual kiss in the film *Gie* was cut by the censor. Titi Said explains that there are 12 categories of kisses in Indonesia but only "pecks on the cheek and forehead" are permissible because they do not arouse passion. As the scene of the kiss of the two men in *Arisan* "was shot from far away", it could pass the censor.¹⁵² From my exploration of the New Order film and television, I have found that historically Indonesian entertainments have been never free from Board of Censorship. There have been many restrictions in screening the female body and sexuality.

In such a complex and subtle situation of public debate about the media's impact on the degradation of morality, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* was produced. The producer had several options, including whether to challenge the taboos to produce a sensational sinetron or to go along with the dominant morality. The Production Manager of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* told me that they prefer to not offend anybody. What does he mean by this in practice? To explore this we turn again to the sinetron itself.

¹⁵¹ Eric Sasono, "Pornografi dalam konteks kebijakan sensor film di Indonesia [Pornography in the contexts of film censorship policy in Indonesia]," *Jurnal Perempuan*, no. 38 (2004).

¹⁵² Jason Tedjasukmana, "Indonesia's 12 Categories of Kisses," *Time*, July, 20 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1645630,00.html>, (24 July 2007).

Part III: The Construction of Heroic Female Characters

In analysing the construction of heroic female figures in the sinetron, I divide my discussion into two parts: first, analysing gender construction, or how the body portrayal of active female heroes is constructed to support the dominant gender ideology; and second, analysing the screening of the bodies of female fighters, or how the sinetron constructs them in line with the dominant Indonesian morality.

As I have discussed previously, in Hollywood action-adventure the construction of the body still follows the binary oppositions of male-female/masculine-feminine/public private. In analysing this sinetron, I needed to consider this oppositional gender ideology to understand whether the sinetron endorses this gender ideology or develops from the earlier Indonesian/Javanese tradition. Thus my analysis of the screening of the body in this sinetron includes gesture and voice, as they are specific to Indonesian performance tradition, as well as the meanings of differences in costume and racial appearance.

Gender and Body in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*

The New Order regime applied the concept of proper manhood and womanhood through state programs and Islamic discourses pronounced through sermons.¹⁵³ Both religion and the state attacked women's involvement in body building on the grounds that it was against female biological nature. Tomboys were criticised for denying their femaleness.¹⁵⁴ But *Misteri Gunung Merapi* does not risk criticism for presenting masculine-

¹⁵³ Laurie Jo Sears, *Fantasizing the feminine in Indonesia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), Julia Suryakusuma, "State and sexuality in New Order Indonesia " in *Fantasizing the feminine in Indonesia*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹⁵⁴ Evelyn Blackwood, "Tomboys in West Sumatra: constructing masculinity and erotic desire," *Cultural Anthropology* 13, no. 4 (1998), <http://www.jstor.org/>.

appearing women. None of the various heroic female figures are portrayed as physically masculinised. They exercise their martial arts skills as woman, not as men in disguise. Martial arts exercises do not develop muscle tone, so the female body does not become muscular. As well, conflict in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is more between supernatural powers rather than body contact, although it is also possible to use a sword as a weapon. So these female fighters do not present the ‘problem’ of the female warrior whose masculine characteristics have to be explained (as with the Chinese female fighter who was a man in a previous life). In a culture with a tradition of female soldiers, they are not presented as exceptional. Their motivation to fight does not need to be explained in terms of protecting their children, as noted by both Tasker and Inness in relation to Western action heroines.¹⁵⁵

Fighting women have also had a long tradition in Javanese traditional theatre. A well-known episode in the Javanese *wayang* is the war between Srikandhi and Mustokoweni fighting for the sacred weapon of Jamus Kalimasada, which is created in the Javanese dance, ‘Srikandhi-Mustokoweni’. Srikandhi is defeated in battle by Mustokoweni, the female antagonist, not by the male antagonist. But to end the story and to restore order, Mustokoweni is defeated by Bambang Priyambodo, not in a fight but when he caresses her and proposes marriage. Compared with this *wayang* story, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* follows the precedent of having women warriors fighting each other (Pitaloka is defeated when Mayang Sari poisons her) but not being won over by the caresses of a former enemy (Pitaloka is not touched by Banuseta’s caresses: she has given her heart to Lindu Aji and he returns her love).

Pitaloka’s story suggests that the sinetron is influenced by the contemporary love story as well as tales of heroism in traditional theatre. In relation to love, the young women characters, although they may be heroic and powerful, are conventional: they still consider that the main purpose of

¹⁵⁵ See Inness, 1999, p. 5 and Tasker 1998, p. 169

their life is to get married. Except for Mayang Sari (discussed in the previous chapter), most of the heroic female figures in the sinetron do not realize that their capacity for exercising supernatural power fully defines them. Rather, they think that their identity will come from the man they marry. Here we can see traces of New Order expectations of proper female behaviour.

In drawing on traditional theatre conventions, the sinetron can portray female figures behaving in ways that are not freely available to women in contemporary Indonesian society. As I have discussed previously, cross-gender disguise (*malih* or *alihan*) is often used in the sinetron. As in *wayang*, *alih* or *alihan* is used as a tactic to defeat the enemy. Mustakaweni, in the *wayang* story, is successful in stealing the sacred weapon because she disguises herself as Gatotkaca, a male hero. Pausacker has found other stories in *wayang* about the transformation of women into men. When they are male, they want to abduct women: the transformation of sex is followed by a change in erotic desire.¹⁵⁶ In *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, transformation of sexual identity requires supernatural power: Mak Lampir transforms herself into Datuk Larang Tapa, a male spirit, to defeat Rindi Antika, a female spirit. In an unusual disguise from male to female, Kala Gondhang transforms himself into Farida to deceive Mardian. That male and female could transform into one another suggests that sexual identity in this sinetron is fluid. However, in those scenes where Kala Gondhang becomes Farida, she/he runs away from Mardian's attempt at seduction, suggesting that he/she is uncomfortable in this situation of being pursued by a man. In this case, the sinetron does not follow the pattern of *alihan* from *wayang*, rather it is modified. When Kala Gondhang disguises as Farida, Kala Gondhang is still male in spirit, although the body is female.

Another example of fluid gender in the sinetron is that domestic tasks, such as looking after a child, are not always in women's hands. For example, Mak Lampir gives the task of looking after her adopted child, Grandong, from

¹⁵⁶ Blackwood, "Gender transgression in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia," 856-57.

when a baby until a toddler, to Jatmika, a male, although she has many female pupils. And Jatmika shows the qualities of a good nanny and a loving caregiver. He carries Grandong on his back on one journey after another, even when he has to defend himself from attack. He is blinded by his love for Grandong and cannot accept the fact that inside the child's body there are many bad spirits.

Performing the body: gesture and voice

Looking at the representation of the body in traditional Javanese performance, we can see its influence on the gendered body as presented in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. In Javanese traditional performances, there are three types of women: *branyak* (energetic), *kenes* (charming) and *ruruh* (refined). All are performed as feminine, whether the woman is powerful or not. The male body can be performed either as *alus* ("refined male") or *gagah* ("robust"). The refined male body gives an impression of the feminine body, whose movements are "slow and evolving, accompanied by smooth neck movement and lowered gaze", while the robust male body gives a masculine impression, with gestures that are "expansive and forceful" and "the limbs are held at right angles to the body or parallel to the ground".¹⁵⁷ However, the ideal male body is the refined male. Often the refined male character is performed by a woman. As Figure IX-9 shows, the appearance of the male performer is beautiful rather than handsome.

¹⁵⁷ Garrett Kam, "Wayang wong in the court of Yogyakarta: the enduring significance of Javanese dance drama," *Asian Theatre Journal* 4, no. 1 (1987): 37-8, <http://www.jstor.org/>.



Figure IX- 8: Male and female fighting in Javanese court performance



Figure IX-9: Male and female court dancers

It is not surprising that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* does not share the problematic representation of female body that Western feminist critics have identified, as this sinetron develops its representations of male and female bodies from Javanese traditional performance, where the masculine and feminine body style or appearance does not correlate simply with a clear gender division between male and female. However, the sinetron does not construct the body of male heroes either as the soft body, like the construction of the heroes of the earlier *kung fu* cinema, or as continuation of the ideal of male body in Javanese traditional performance. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the heroes in the sinetron are performed by actors with muscular bodies, which represents the contemporary ideal Indonesian male body: “*bentuk bahu lebar, pinggang ramping, bahu tegap tidak bungkuk, dan betis yang bagus ... otot yang menonjol melekat di tubuh*” (wide shoulder, slim waist, straight back, good leg...and muscular body).¹⁵⁸ These features of body construction and gender fluidity suggest that the sinetron is ambiguous in representing the gender and the body of both male and female figures. The body performance should show the sex identity but the gender characteristics can be fluid. This makes the sinetron distinctive compared to Hollywood

¹⁵⁸ Nuraini Juliastuti, "Majalah Hai dan boyish culture [Hai magazine and boyish culture]," *Newsletter Kunci*, no. 8 (2000), <http://www.kunci.or.id/esai/nws/08/hai.htm>, (10 August 2006).

action-adventure and Chinese martial art representation as discussed by feminist scholars.

One element of the presentation of body is the voice. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* creates complex voice characterization which helps viewers to imagine the characterization of the figures in the sinetron. In traditional performance, especially Javanese *wayang* and *kethoprak*, voice is very important in character construction. Female figures, as we have seen above, are divided into three personalities: *branyak*, *kenes* and *ruruh*. The voice accompanying the personality of *branyak* and *kenes* is high pitched and fast paced. When we hear the high pitched tone, we get the impression of the body of an energetic woman. In contrast, for *ruruh* the voice is slow and low pitched. Similarly, in the sinetron the voice can give a strong impression of the personality of the character. Farida is dubbed with a voice which gives the impression of a ‘daddy’s girl’, as is Pitaloka. Mayang Sari has a combination of seductive and authoritative voices. Mak Lampir, with her high tone, authoritative voice, vocal tremor and increased breathiness, gives an impression of an old and mean woman. Sembara’s voice is that of a refined male character, with his soft rhythm and low pitch. Listening to Sembara’s voice, we get an impression of a good, patient, and wise person, although he is still young. However, listening to Mardian’s voice gives an impression of a playboy: his voice has a seductive tone. It is interesting to note that an authoritative voice is only found in Mak Lampir, a female and an evil figure. Among the male characters, only Sultan Patah and Sultan Agung have authoritative voices. This shows that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* associates authority only with the possession of great power.

Women in the Uncivilised World

One of the focuses of feminist criticism of the representation of female heroes in action-adventure is how they are portrayed in the public space.

Public and domestic are still considered as separate worlds, and when a female is active in the public world, it produces problems, as I mentioned above. However, Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis has argued that traditionally the borderline between public and private is vague in Indonesia. Women have played important roles in the public sector and have access to various activities both in social networks and economic sectors. She has noted that the husbands respect these activities and do not condemn them as “women’s affairs” because all of these activities are important “for the family’s status and prosperity”.¹⁵⁹ In this section, I limit my discussion on how the sinetron constructs women in the kind of public spaces featured in *sinetron kolosal laga* – the uncivilised world of the forest.

Films which were produced during the New Order era constructed public areas as dangerous places for woman. When a woman went outside the house, she was in danger of being seduced, raped and left a helpless victim. But in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, because of its historical and legendary setting, few scenes take place in domestic internal settings such as the kitchen, living room or bedroom. The dominant settings are the forest, when characters travel from place to place, and the market, where people are buying, selling, and eating out.

The forest setting dominates. It is still wild and not touched by civilization. It has similarities with both the ‘Wild West’ frontier in Hollywood Westerns, and *Jianghu*, in Chinese martial art films (the term is literally translated as ‘river-lake’).¹⁶⁰ *Jianghu* is a kind of “community governed by moral principle and decorum rather than legislation”, rather like the Western frontier, although good and evil there do not correspond to the

¹⁵⁹ Madelon Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis, "Ibuisim 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).

¹⁶⁰ Shuo Li, "Jianghu: world of martial arts," spcnet, http://www.spcnet.tv/article_jianghu.shtml, (10 July 2006).

“sheriff/outlaw” pair.¹⁶¹ Even though in *jianghu* law does not exist, the people of there hold codes of conduct such as chivalry, gallantry, virtue, righteousness, and loyalty.¹⁶² The forest in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is like the symbolic territory in *jianghu* with “no physical, professional, or class boundaries”.¹⁶³ The only boundary is between the seen world and the unseen world, because not everyone, however powerful, can successfully access the unseen world. The setting in this sinetron also recalls the setting of Javanese martial art stories which differentiate between the ‘civilised’ village or town, with the courts of law and jurisdiction, and the ‘uncivilised’ forest inhabited by thieves and robbers. As the courts of law or jurisdiction do not work in the forest, this creates a chaotic situation. The forest is not a safe place for people without martial art skills, regardless of gender.

It can be said that the concept of the uncivilised world as a dangerous place specifically for women does not operate in this sinetron. The forest¹⁶⁴ is dangerous for men as well as women. Moreover the market was not considered as male space because women were usually the stall-holders. Although in the past in Java it was mostly men who came to *jajan* (eat out) in *warung* (simple cafés), women may be present as the manager of the business with female workers as waitresses. *Warung* cannot be compared to the bar room as an exclusively male space in Westerns. However, *warung* can be considered as a public sphere because in them men often meet to talk about

¹⁶¹ Felicia Chan, "Reading ambiguity and ambivalence: the asymmetric structure of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*," *Scope: an outline journal of film studies* (2003), <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/articles/reading-ambiguity.htm>, (25 May 2006).

¹⁶² Qian Sima, "Jianghu," *Heroic Cinema*, <http://www.heroic-cinema.com/eric/xia.html>, (3 March 2006).

¹⁶³ Cai, "Gender imaginations in *Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon* and the wuxia world," 445.

¹⁶⁴ I watched two Chinese martial art television series which were broadcast in Indosiar network but I watched the VCD version, *The Monkey King* and *Legend of the Condor Heroes* to compare the concept of *Jianghu* in the Chinese martial art and forest in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. Forest in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, in my opinion, alludes to big cities in Indonesia in which people feel unsafe to travel alone carrying luxurious things or wearing jewellery because of the danger of pickpockets and robbers. Women are not safe travelling alone at night through dark and lonely roads as the danger of being raped is high.

politics, and although women are around in *warung*, they are not active in these discussions.

A frequently used setting in *wuxia* stories or films is the restaurant. In *wuxia* stories, the demonstration of the hero's and heroine's martial art skill and the beginning of conflict between the protagonist and antagonist is often set up in a restaurant. The sinetron also sets many scenes in *warung* as the place where Sembara and Basir listen to various people talking about the society's problems while eating out. However, the sinetron rarely uses *warung* as an arena of conflict. An exception is in only one scene in episode 6, *Alap-alap Laut Kidul* (The Heroic Story of the Warrior of the South Ocean), which is set in a *warung*, when the female fighter is assumed by her male opponents to be able to fight.¹⁶⁵ Although sometimes a *jagoan* (a maverick or 'tough guy') might sexually harass her, she will fight him. And if other men join him she will defeat them too.

Explicit Rape and Sex

As I have stated previously, although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is categorised by the Indosiar network as *sinetron kolosal laga* (colossal-action) the main theme which moves the plot and generates the conflicts is the love story or romance between Sembara and Farida. In Western action-adventure cinema and television series, romance, love and sex are often shown as detached from the context because they are considered as "personal or private parts of our lives".¹⁶⁶ We often find the scenes of kissing and sexual intercourse in Western action-adventure cinema and television series, where they function for the construction of heterosexuality. Wilson has argued that "heterosexuality is a patriarchal narrative told about bodies and desires which

¹⁶⁵ Tasker, *Spectacular bodies : gender, genre, and the action cinema*.

¹⁶⁶ Lorna Jowett, "The problem of romance and the representation of gender in *Buffy* and *Angel*," in *The Slayage Conference on Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Nashville Tennessee: 2004).

polices women's and men's adherence to proper gender and erotic behaviours".¹⁶⁷ Although there is an element of romance in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, this sinetron has constructed heterosexual love without the screening of kissing and sexual intercourse. There are some scenes of intimacy between Sembara and Farida but these are limited to holding hands and hugging. The sexual intimacy between Farida and Mardian, as husband and wife in the bedroom is also cut out with Mardian's transformation into a tiger spirit (see Figures IX-10 and 11). However in the construction of Farida, her feminine personality and costume shows how the narrative endorses proper female behaviour in heterosexual male eyes, while still following the traditional pattern of not screening sexual intimacy.



Figure IX-10: Mardian and Farida in wedding costume



Figure IX-11: Mardian and Farida in their bedroom

Misteri Gunung Merapi also shows that public space is not safe for woman. In the forest women are vulnerable to being robbed and raped. However, although there are many scenes of robbery and suggestions of the danger of rape for higher class and middle class women travelling alone in the forest, there is not any explicitly screening of violent sex. Although scenes of rape were explicit in some New Order films to promote the ideology that public spaces are dangerous for women, there is no scene of explicit or implicit rape in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. There is no portrayal of a “dirty,

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

bruised, bloody body” as an “erotic spectacle” as found in Western cinema.¹⁶⁸ To avoid the screening of rape, helpless victims are always saved by either a male or female hero or antihero. Comparing scenes of rape in Western cinema and *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, although the sinetron has tried to visualize the threat of sexual abuse shadowing women in the unknown world, it lacks the overwhelming fear and anxiety often found in Western cinema. The worst portrayal of an assaulted female body is only the disarrayed hair; the body is still fully covered. The scenes are also shot from a distance to reduce impact on the audience (see Figures IX-12 and 13). Without close ups of the victim and her expressions of fear, the audiences’ involvement in the attempted rape scenes is minimalised. The usual failure of any rape attempt keeps away the exposure of a female body and at the same time allows the maintenance of a sweet and beautiful appearance.



Figure IX-12: Farida is attacked and in danger being raped



Figure IX-13: Farida is unconscious after getting slapped and hit

Male Body as Spectacle

In *kung fu* cinema, “masculinity and femininity become concepts that can exist outside the female and male body and be possessed by anybody in

¹⁶⁸ Peter Lehman, “Don't blame on this girl': female rape revenge film,” in *Screening the male: exploring masculinities in Hollywood cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), 104.

any body".¹⁶⁹ However, unlike *kung fu* cinema and the relative lack of exposure of the Asian hero's body, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* considers both the male and female body as the object of spectacle, although the body is not the only locus of power. As I have mentioned in a previous chapter, the filming of the male heroes focuses on their shoulders and arms, showing how the masculine and healthy body are constructed. Certainly, the discourse of healthy body and healthy mind has played in the New Order cinema as it was one principle of the New Order ideology of state development.¹⁷⁰

Dyer has argued that there is a difference between screening male and female body as spectacle. Both the beautiful female body and the muscular male body are an achievement, in that the body has experienced a process of transformation. However, in screening the female body nothing shows how this appearance has been achieved. Most people believe, although it is not shown on the screen, that the beautiful female body is achieved through a set of dieting, exercising and cosmetics. In contrast, the screening of the hard male body as something which has been importantly changed for some purpose, thereby itself being a locus of change, creates spectacle as it involves the hard work of the character to achieve the physical strength.¹⁷¹

Although combat in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is mainly between supernatural powers, the male body fighting is a spectacle. The choice of costumes of the male characters, which traditionally were only for clowns, reveals the healthy muscular body as the object of the camera. Although the final achievement is due to supernatural power, the sinetron screens the hard work of the male character's body training (see Figure IX-14). Also, the scene of meditation with bare chest and shoulders shows off his muscular body (see

¹⁶⁹ Jane Gaines, "Costume and narrative," in *Fabrications : costume and the female body*, ed. Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (New York: Routledge, 1990), 68.

¹⁷⁰ Krishna Sen, "An Indonesian film called Primitif," *Anthropology Today* 10, no. 4 (1994): 21, <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/>.

¹⁷¹ Linda Ruth Williams, "Ready for action: G.I. Jane, Demi Moore's body and the female combat movie " in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 174.

Figure IX-15). This screening also indicates the cultural transformation of the ideal male body, from soft into hard.



Figure IX-14: Mak Lampir training Mardiiian to master supernatural power Figure IX-15: Mardian practicing asceticism

The similarity of costume between *satria* (knight) and clown (*abdi*) shows how the concept of difference between upper class and lower class has been challenged in the sinetron. Sembara is a son of a poor widow, however his friendship with a tiger spirit leads him to earn a title ‘*Pangeran*’ (prince). This challenge is also strengthened by Basir and Sembara’s relationship. In their characterisation, Sembara and Basir represent *satria* and *abdi* but their relationship is egalitarian, more like buddies than men from two different classes. Their relationship is more a representation of the ideal of cosmic unity. Basir and Sembara complete each other. Basir is rarely active in fighting; often hiding behind a tree and watching Sembara fighting. He often distracts Sembara by asking for a meal and a rest. However, Basir is a true friend for Sembara, who is always patient with Basir’s demands. He also listens to Basir’s advice. However, the representation of the lean and muscular body of Sembara in contrast to the plump and soft body of Basir can also be interpreted as showing the ideal hero’s body as the hard body. In contrast to this ideal masculinity, Basir’s big-bellied body confirms his position in the narrative as a figure of fun (See Figure IX-16).



Picture IX-16: Sembara and Basir



Picture IX-17: Traditional male Javanese clothes

It is interesting to note that there is no distinction in male clothing between the powerful and the common people (Figure IX-17), while this is not the case in the sinetron's representation of the female body, as discussed in the next section.

Representing the Female Body

Most Hollywood action-adventure cinema of the 1970s, in response to the women's movement, provide more images of independent and sexually free heroines, Tasker notes. However, these active and independent heroines are also presented as "fashion plates" with "glamorous sexuality" and thus, she argues, the image of active heroines "does emerge from existing traditions of representation". The interplay between masculinity and femininity emerges in the form of already-existing types and conventions such as "the leather-clad dominatrix" which is "drawn from a stylised cartoon or comic strip tradition". The image of "the active heroine by emphasising her sexuality" and "her availability within traditional feminine terms" is produced as a compensation for "the sexual presentation of the hero's body through emphasising his

activity”. In Tasker’s opinion, looking at the sexualization of the figure and the comedic aspects to “explain away” her heroic actions and “to reassert her femininity”, were exploitative, and were directed at male rather than female audiences.¹⁷² Some Indonesian action films produced during the New Order era did use this convention for constructing female fighters in ways which Sen characterises as soft pornography.¹⁷³

However, the heroic female figures in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* do not emerge from any 1970s leather-clad dominatrix as an extension of male fantasy. Nor are they portrayed as the ‘new female heroes of the 1990s’ described by O’Day as slim, beautiful, sexy and tough. Certainly, some of them are beautiful; however, they are neither slim nor sexy.

Screening the female body is problematic in Indonesia. Films with a lot of exposure of female body are rarely screened in first class cinemas¹⁷⁴; in fact, action films showing the male and female body as spectacle are mainly targeted at lower class audiences. Actresses in such films who perform actions that expose their breasts and thighs are considered as *artis panas* (hot artists) and rarely respected in general society. In dealing with such a situation, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* changes the object of the camera from the female body into the beautiful face. There are many close-ups which screen the beautiful faces of the actresses.

Doane has asserted that the cinematic close-up has a different function in each country. In Soviet cinema it “was not so much to show or to present as to signify, the close-up was the support of an intellectual, critical cinema”. In Russian and French, the terms for ‘close up’ “denote largeness or large skill”, while in English the term invokes “two different binary oppositions –

¹⁷² Tasker, *Spectacular bodies : gender, genre, and the action cinema*.

¹⁷³ Sen, "Interpretations of the Feminine in Cinema."

¹⁷⁴ First class cinema refers to cinemas which screen box office such as Theatre 21. The second class cinemas screen old films. The lower-middle class people generally wait for the films screened in the second class cinema few months after it is screened in the first class, as the price is cheaper.

proximity vs. distance and the large vs. the small". In the American context, it establishes "the relation between spectator and image".¹⁷⁵ Looking at the number of close-ups of the beautiful faces of female characters in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, we see that the function of the close-up in the sinetron is to be the object of the camera. As the face is the focus of the camera and the spectacle is the beautiful face, the major requirement to be an actress is her beauty.

The body as spectacle is a convention in the action genre. In this sinetron that convention requires that the body is shown in an extravagant fashion as spectacle, although shots of the female body are taken from a distance. The spectacle moves from the (possibly sexualised) body as the object of the camera into the movement of the body, as if it is a courtly dancing performance (compare Figures IX-18 and 19). The screening of the movement of the hands, with the waving of the long scarf at the waist and the shoulder of female fighters, is comparable to traditional dance performance. Instead of being a spectacle of sexual objectification the spectacle is of movement and costume – the sinetron successfully negotiates with the convention of body as spectacle to produce an acceptable Indonesian translation.

¹⁷⁵ Mary Ann Doane, "The Close up: scale and detail in cinema," *Differences: a Journal of feminist cultural studies* 14, no. 3 (2005): 92.



Figure IX-18: fighting women



Figure IX-19: Traditional Javanese dancing

Fighting is one of the attractions in traditional theatre and puppet shows. However, it is a stylised version of fighting. In the puppet show which takes a whole night of performance, people do not come to watch this show from the beginning, rather they attend in the middle of the performance when it is time for showing the scene of “*perang kembang*”¹⁷⁶, a fight between the “*satria*”, the hero, and the “*buto*”, the ogre. This is also the case in the human theatre forms of *wayang wong* and *kethoprak* performance. The extras, the “*Bala dupakan*”¹⁷⁷ are required to have at least minimum martial art skills so that they can fight on the stage. They somersault, jump, kick and strike without any technical assistance or special effects. Significantly in terms of this thesis about fighting women in sinetron, the roles of the more refined male heroes are often taken by women. Viewers applaud when the female dancer who performs as the *satria* in fighting against the *buto* conventionally but very skilfully climbs up onto the knee of the giant *buto* to hit his head.

¹⁷⁶ Literally translated as ‘flower war’, it refers to the difficulties of the hero in achieving his goal, in which he has to fight against the ogres who try to disturb his journey.

¹⁷⁷ *Bala dupakan* refers to the group of minor characters in the traditional performance whose performance is limited only to fighting scenes.



Figure IX-20: Nyi Blorong and Kenting fighting



Figure IX-21: Pendekar Perak and Kenting fighting

The filming in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* of fighting women, when the camera jumps from a close-up of the beautiful face to the moving body from a distance, shows the cultural construction of woman. Unlike fighting women in Western cinema where physical combat is accompanied by the masculine image of sweating and dirt, fighting women in this sinetron keep the image of women as sweet and beautiful with their feminine dress. Expressions of anger, which accompany combat, are also rarely shown in close up. The position of the camera which shoots from a lower angle produces an image of beautiful feminine bodies in movement (see Figures IX-20 and 21). With this filming technique, the patriarchal tradition of gender division that woman is to be looked at is maintained, but not explicitly sexually.



Figure IX-22: Beautiful and sweet face with sword, no anger expression



Figure IX-23: Sweat and dirty face in “Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon”

Misteri Gunung Merapi also has some scenes of a woman with a sword (see Figure IX-22). However the image produced by this scene is of a beautiful and sweet girl with sword. The sword does not look dangerous in her hand, as her facial expression does not express anger. To some extent, then, such scenes produce an image of woman as spectacle, for although she holds a sword, she is not shown as a dangerous woman. Although the text may show that the female heroes are powerful and in control,¹⁷⁸ they are still the object of the camera. In contrast, the sweaty face and angry look of the unarmed fighting woman surrounded by armed males in a Chinese *wuxia* film (see Figure IX-23) suggests a more dangerous woman.

Some scenes illustrating Mulvey’s term for women, “to-be-looked-at-ness,” can be seen in the American film *Alien*, for example when the female heroine “emerges from her sleeping capsule in sweaty tank top and underwear” but she “does not see viewers as we stare at her body through the barred window”.¹⁷⁹ *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has followed this tradition but in a noticeably different way. There is no scene like this one. Rather, the female character is portrayed as always aware that she is under other people’s gaze. No scene shows a completely naked or suggestively semi-naked female body.

¹⁷⁸see Edwards, "The blonde with the guns: Barb Wire and the "implausible" female action hero."

¹⁷⁹ Helford, "Postfeminism and the female action-adventure hero: positioning tank girl".

In sleeping scenes female characters remain completely clothed (see Figure IX-24). When there is a sound of danger, they just jump up and are ready for action. Even in bathing scenes, which in Western cinema are often used to exploit the naked female body, the female body is screened as beautiful but not directly exposed. An example of this is shown in Figure IX-25, where the leaves of a tree are used to block the camera lenses from taking a full picture of her body. The focus of the camera is more on her beautiful face. However, this shot could still encourage a male viewer to imagine her naked body although it is screened by the leaves and her bathing cloth.



Figure IX-24: Sleeping



Figure IX- 25: Bathing

Costume and the Female Body

The dress code in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* differentiates between the central characters and the extras. Most of the central characters, both protagonist and antagonist, wear extravagant costumes, while the extras, as village people wear *jarik*, *kemben* and *kebaya* (see Figure IX-17 for a courtly male version of these). The extras in the sinetron function to build the image of traditional Java. The key differentiation between the central characters and the extras in this sinetron, which is expressed by these visual reminders, is in the mobility of the characters between the seen and the unseen world. The clothing of the travelling female figures (Mayang Sari and Pitaloka) in the

sinetron is quite similar to the costume of the female spirits (Keting Wulan, Keting Sari, and Keting Jamas). Possibly this is to intended to suggest that travelling between the human and spirit world has influenced the way the powerful female figures dress, to be like the spirits as the more powerful creatures.



Figure IX- 26: Mak Lampir with her stick Figure IX- 27: Mak Lampir's grey toga

Colour is important. The witch antagonist wears grey rather than black, suggesting that she still has an element of goodness. Although in this sinetron Mak Lampir is positioned as the anti-heroine, an evil character, there are some elements of goodness in her personality. Her grey toga-like dress indicates that she is not totally a witch. She cares for her students. Her relationship with Nyai Kembang is like a mother-daughter relationship. She always saves women from rape, even when the threatened woman is Farida whom she wants to kill. Her beggar-like robe with patches shows that she is a powerful woman, in a culture where clever people do not care about their appearance. Indonesian culture is flexible. Good and evil are in balance and every person has both good and bad. As conflict in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is more about order versus disorder, good and evil are not represented as black and white.

Nyai Bidara is an old Muslim woman. She dresses in a long white shirt with long white pants. White signifies that she represents good. She ties her hair up to form a small bun on her head. As a representation of a good

Muslim, her dress always looks clean although the white colour looks bleak (Figures IX-27 and 28). This relates to the Muslim concept that cleanness is a sign of faith.



Figure IX- 28: Nyai Bidara



Figure IX- 29: Nyai Bidara in her white clothing

The other old woman in the story is Wak Bayau. As she is a *ratu jin* (a spirit queen) of the kingdom of *Atas Angin* (Summit of the Sky), she is pictured as a beautiful lady with a white long toga-like dress covering all her body (Figures IX-29 and 30). She also ties her hair up to form a small bun. But her beauty is ageless. A conventional sign of her age is her mature and wise voice and, besides, she is the mother of a grown-up girl. When she fights, she looks as if she is dancing in the sky. The sign that symbolises her as Muslim *jin* is her white dress. Although Wak Bayau wears make-up, the colour of her make-up is not bright. The colour of her lipstick and her eye-shadow is between brown and black. This colour could mean that she does not want to attract the male gaze, but she has to appear as respectably good looking for her position as the queen in the kingdom of Atas Angin.



Figure IX- 30: Wak Bayau, Jin Muslim



Figure IX-31: Wak Bayau in her white and loose clothing

Another *ratu jin* who only appears in Episode 17 *Ilmu Kembang Bangkai Sepasang* (The Power of a Pair of Bangkai Flowers) is *Ratu Siluman Serigala* (The Wolf Spirit Queen). She wears a black kimono and is made up with black lipstick and eye-shadow, so she is not presented as a white-clad Muslim *jin* (Figures IX-31 and 32).



Figure IX-32: Ratu Siluman Serigala, the evil siluman



Figure IX-33: Ratu Siluman Serigala in her black loose clothing

As described previously, Mayang Sari, positioned as an antagonist in the story, is shown as a young attractive woman with strong sexual desires, but she is not pictured simply as a sexy woman. Her kimono-like long red dress with short sleeves over red pants makes her look exotic (Figures IX-33 and 34). The brightness of her red costume and her red scarf on her arranged

hair signals her desire to be looked at. However, it is not easy for a man to play with her. She is the one who determines the man she wants to sleep with, and can easily defeat a group of men who try to force their desires on her. It could also be said there is a contrast between Mayang Sari's outward appearance and her willingness to kill.



Figure IX-34: Mayang Sari is fascinated by Lindu Aji



Figure IX-35: Mayang Sari, a sexy woman but with full covered body.

Being pictured as an innocent girl making a journey for the first time, Pitaloka is portrayed as a beautiful girl with a pink or yellow *kemben*, a loose cloth which is wrapped several times around her upper torso covering her hips and breasts. One *selendang* (scarf) is put decoratively around her waist covering her long pants and another is draped loosely on her shoulder like the Indian sari. She has her long hair pulled back in barrettes. Her pink costume, a popular colour among teens, signals her innocence and youth (Figures IX-35 and 36).



Figure IX-36: Pitaloka under arrest, still looks sweet and beautiful in her pink costume.

Figure IX-37: Pitaloka in action

The other girls, Rindi Antika, Gandasuli, Dewi Lanjar, Nyi Damar, Kenting Wulan, Kenting Sari, and Kenting Jamas are portrayed as beautiful girls with long pants and *kemben* showing off their breasts and slim waist (Figures IX-37 and 38). The long *selendang* on their waists and shoulders also gives them the Indian sari look. With this costume they look very feminine but not sensual. All of them have their long hair pulled back in a bun, arranged beautifully with ornaments. It can be said that most important figures in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* do not wear traditional Javanese costume but rather a combination suggestive of many ethnic cultures, (except Nyi Blorong who wears the traditional Javanese costume, the Yogyakarta court style). As mobility or a journey could change identity, their costumes could be intended show that they have a lot of contact with other ethnic cultures.



Figure IX-38: Nyai Blorong in Kebaya, Dewi Lanjar and Nyi Damar in modified of Balinese and Indian Sari costume



Figure IX-39: Kenting Wulan, Kenting Sari, and Kenting Jamas in modified costume of Balinese and Indian Sari with Batik motif.

Gaines has explained that costume signifies cultural and social identifiers. Appearance and conventional behaviour can be coded to define and classify the protagonists in terms of gender and/or social function.¹⁸⁰ As the traditional narrative is often focused on the fight of good against evil, the physical strength of the male body as the protagonist can be associated with his ability to “protect positive social values” as the “place of truth”.¹⁸¹ Similarly, although it is not focused on the physical strength of the male body, the hero’s supernatural power can be correlated to his victory in restoring the order of the universe.

In Western cinema, clothing is important in signifying power. Feminine clothing signifies its distance from toughness. Innes has argued that “a pair of khakis has a higher tough quotient than a pink tutu” and “a plain white t-shirt ranks higher on the scale of toughness than a bright orange or angora sweater”.¹⁸² In Western action cinema (see Figure IX-39) the female hero often wears pants and masculine undershirt.¹⁸³ Similarly, in the Asian

¹⁸⁰ Gaines, "Costume and narrative," 159.

¹⁸¹ Giukin, "Boy-girls: gender, body, and popular culture in Hong Kong action movie," 58.

¹⁸² Inness, *Tough girls: women warriors and wonder women in popular culture*.

¹⁸³ Brown, "Gender and action heroine: hardbodies and the "Point of No Return"."

action cinema tradition, the action heroine wears masculine clothing and not “rich dresses in vivid purple and pink” which signify vulnerability and weakness. This is to show that she does not ask to be the object of the male gaze but rather has the quality of a strong and aggressive mind.¹⁸⁴ It may happen in *wuxia* films that a woman dresses in male costume as a disguise, such as in the films *Come Drink With Me* (see Figure IX-40) and *Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon*.



Figure IX-40: Female heroes in male clothing in “Thelma and Louise”.



Figure IX-41: Warrior woman in Chinese male clothing in *wuxia* film “Come Drink with Me”.

The similarity between Guikin’s and Brown’s interpretation of the costume the female heroes choose suggests that both Asian and Western cinema share the idea that the action movie is centred on a male hero, and so the action heroine should follow masculine cultural behaviour, or she should be in disguise, to be active in a male dominated world. However, these codes are not applied in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. In this sinetron, feminine clothing and the display of the body do not signify her helplessness. It does signify her womanliness but also that she can be powerful. This can be seen from the bright coloured dresses of the active female figures in the sinetron. Pants, as

¹⁸⁴ Giukin, “Boy-girls: gender, body, and popular culture in Hong Kong action movie,” 58.

male clothing, are covered with a lot of scarfs so that it still looks feminine but the body still can easily move for fighting.

I agree with Bartky's declaration that the function of the female body has moved from "its duties and obligations or even its capacity to bear children" to a new "normative femininity" in which "women are taught to view themselves as objects of dual gaze – their own and others ... to culturally defined standards of ideal female beauty".¹⁸⁵ The ideal of Asian female beauty, which is more related to the face, hair and skin¹⁸⁶, influences the way the female body and femininity is constructed. The choice of costume and the hair arrangement for the powerful women in this sinetron shows how the spectacle of femininity is gained through attractive costuming. This conveys the image of a fashionable body rather than one made mainly for fighting. The female costume of this sinetron is reminiscent of the Balinese dance costume of body binding. The hair arrangements and the make-up could be read as undermining the woman's power as they evoke traditional femininity. Nevertheless, with this choice of costume, the hair arrangements and the make-up but also their actions, women become objects of spectacle, feminine but not passive in the sense used by Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. In this way, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has negotiated a local version of the Hollywood representation of powerful and sexy women. The concept of sexy is moved from the idea of glamorous and sexually appealing into a more Asian idea of being graceful and elegant.

¹⁸⁵ Sarah Projansky and Leah R. Vande Berg, "Sabrina, the Teenage...? Girls, witches, mortals, and the limitations of prime-time feminism," in *Fantasy Girls: gender in the new universe of science fiction and fantasy television*, ed. Elyce Rae Helford (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000).

¹⁸⁶ Katherine Frith, Phing Shaw, and Hong Cheng, "The construction of beauty: a cross-cultural analysis of women's magazine advertising," *Journal of Communication* 55, no. 1 (2005): 66, <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/>.



Figure IX-42: Balinese dancer



Figure IX-43: Costume of the heroic women: body binding with long scarf on shoulder.

Like the traditional Balinese dancing costume (see Figure IX-41) which consists of a *kamen*, “a long strip of woven or batik cloth wound around the waist, hanging almost to the ground” and a *sabuk*, “wide sash several metres length” which is “wound up so tightly that the breasts are pinned into a generalised mound”¹⁸⁷, the usual costume of the powerful women includes pants¹⁸⁸ which are covered by *selendang*, *kemben*, and *sabuk*. To display the beauty of the female body, different colours and patterns of *kemben* and *sabuk* are used in which *kemben* is wound up to cover the breast and *sabuk* is twisted around the waist to emphasise the breast (Figure IX-41).

The choice of winding the *sabuk* tightly around the female body, in some ways is to achieve the slim, slender and feminine look. However, the strong binding of the *sabuk*, actually, can constrain the body movement. A body-binding costume is not a realistic representation of fighting women in the sinetron. Fighting is a struggle between life and death which needs freedom of movement of all parts of the body. To fight easily, the costume

¹⁸⁷ Megan Jennaway, "Body-binding in Bali," *Inside Indonesia*, 26 Nopember 2006 2003, <http://insideindonesia.org/edit75/p.21-22jenna.html>, (26 Nopember 2006).

¹⁸⁸ In my conversation with the production manager in 2003, he said that to differentiate between male and female, the pants (the male costume) is covered with *selendang* in order to hide them.

should support the movement of the body and also should not cover the sensitivity¹⁸⁹ of the skin to feel the hiss of any attack. In contrast, in traditional performance of fighting, the movement is focused more on the elegant movement of the hands and shoulders. With body binding, the movement of more of the body can be noticed by the spectator and provides that movement with more allure. However, the body binding in the sinetron, which is to achieve the spectacle effect of traditional performance but confines and restrains, shows the problematic screening of female body that is specific to the Indonesian context. The powerful female heroes performed their fighting while wearing costumes which have been contrived to provide for the fighting movements but without losing the desired effect of beauty and femininity.

White Femininity as Idealised Beauty

A separable strand in how *Misteri Gunung Merapi* 'depicts' and screens its central female characters as beautiful women is their apparent racial characteristics. Salim Said, an Indonesian film critic, stated in relation to film production during the New Order period that the producers chose to use women who had Eurasian features for commercial reasons. This decision created a question about whether there was a connection between commercial success and dominant social norms of beauty and glamour.¹⁹⁰ The focus of the camera in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, as we have seen, involves many a close-up on the beauty of the female actresses, showing their relatively white-skinned look and pointed noses. This suggests that the sinetron still maintains the ideology that true beauty requires a Eurasian look. Considering the number of

¹⁸⁹ In martial art skills, one of the exercises is meditation. The purpose of this exercise is to train the skin to be sensitive to any hiss of movement. Although the movement is behind us, because the skin is trained to be sensitive, we can feel the hiss of movement and the body will react to defend.

¹⁹⁰ Saraswati Sunindyo, "Gender discourse on television," in *Culture and society in New Order Indonesia*, ed. Virginia Matheson Hooker (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993), 137.

whitening cosmetics products advertised in Indonesian media and the winners of *Putri Indonesia* (Miss Indonesia) being dominated by Eurasian looks, it can be said that the contemporary Indonesian ideal of beauty for women is to have Eurasian features. However, the construction of powerful women with Eurasian looks in this sinetron creates problematic interpretations, especially when the Eurasian-appearing women perform as traditional Javanese legendary figures, such as Nyi Rara Kidul and Nyi Blorong.

Similarly, the actors chosen for the sinetron, although not Eurasian looking are not indigenous Indonesian either, like the actors who perform Sembara and Lindu Aji. Because they perform as the central heroes in the sinetron, this can be interpreted to mean that the ideal of the handsome male is not an indigenous Indonesian look, but a mixed race appearance, Indo-Chinese for Sembara, Indo-Arabian for Lindu Aji (see Figures IX-43 and 44).



Figure IX-44: Marcelino as Sembara, An Indo-Chinese Look for the hero



Figure IX-45: Rizal Djibrán as Lindu Aji, An Indo-Arabian Look for the hero

‘Eurasian’ here refers to images suggesting combined European and Asian racial and cultural iconography. Reading Eurasian looks in the Western context, Jiwani has argued that Eurasian heroines reflect television’s

responses to “the larger forces of globalization”.¹⁹¹ However, in the specifically post-colonial Indonesian context, Sunindyo argues that the Eurasian women’s body in Indonesian films was “to flatter the male spectator, to make him feel he ‘owns’ and can ‘consume’ the image of a feminine body – the body of a woman from the former colonial race”.¹⁹² She suggested that the construction shows “the male’s self-concept of power and sexuality” and “it is not just an Occidentalism”. The Eurasian woman’s body, in her opinion, conveys the image of “a specific kind of glamorous beauty (a beauty that is envied for its image of happiness) ...a beauty that cannot be achieved by those who do not have the right skin colour, and body and facial features”.¹⁹³

Matthews has argued that Eurasian looks in advertisements in Australian magazines convey an image of “economic independence, personal freedom, and sexual liberation alongside more problematic sexualised images of youthful femininity”.¹⁹⁴ Quite similarly, in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, Eurasian looks mostly signify powerful women with personal freedom and economic well-being as well as glamorous looks. As Goon and Craves have argued in relation to the emergence of a global entertainment industry and its impact on consumerism and the idea of international beauty, whiteness and paleness “could be an instruction telling young women to be white”.¹⁹⁵ It can also be argued, as Sunindyo did in relation to Eurasian women in New Order Indonesian films, that the Eurasian conveys an image which “makes the majority of Indonesian female spectators feel powerless, precisely because

¹⁹¹ Yasmin Jiwani, "The Eurasian female hero[ine]: Sydney Fox as Relic Hunter," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32, no. 4 (2005), <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/>.

¹⁹² Sunindyo, "Gender discourse on television," 137.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Julie Matthews, "Deconstructing the visual: the diasporic hybridity of Asian and Eurasian female images," *Intersections*, no. 8 (2002), <http://www.sshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue8/matthews.html>, (10 October 2006).

¹⁹⁵ Patricia Goon and Allison Craven, "Whose debt?: Globalisation and whitefacing in Asia," *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in Asia*, no. 9 (2003), <http://www.sshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue9/gooncraven.html>, (16 January 2006).

they are not Eurasian, or at least of that type".¹⁹⁶ The construction of the images of the powerful women in this sinetron, with their fashions and their Eurasian looks which are different from the extras who play the 'common people', could be interpreted as portraying class difference. Amir, in his study of skin whitening products in Malaysia, has argued that "in Asia, light skin has a heritage in the social caste systems that privilege fair Asians".¹⁹⁷ In the Indonesian context, Prabasmoro has argued that the idea of whiteness refers to modern, civilized and middle class women. The representation of whiteness signifies not only white skin as a racial characteristic but also as class distinction. Working under the sun makes the body become dark. And being dark is understood as belonging to the working class or the lower class. Whiteness not only underlines the gap between white and non-white 'races', but also between middle class and working or lower class.¹⁹⁸ Using Prabasmoro's argument, it could be said that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* constructs powerful women with Eurasian looks and glamorous costumes to signify modern, civilized, and middle class femininity.

Conclusion

Looking at the way *Misteri Gunung Merapi* represents the body of female fighters, the sinetron still continues the tradition of the idea of female body as object of spectacle. To some extent, this sinetron also takes the Western construction of powerful cute girl to argue that being feminine could be powerful. However, a closer look at the sinetron suggests that the representation of powerful beautiful girls is a reincarnation of traditional performances. The screening of the body of the female fighters is modified and negotiated by the use of either distance shots of the females fighting,

¹⁹⁶ Sunindyo, "Gender discourse on television," 137.

¹⁹⁷ Goon and Craven, "Whose debt?: Globalisation and whitefacing in Asia."

¹⁹⁸ Aquarini Priyatna Prabasmoro, *Becoming white: representasi ras, kelas, femininitas dan globalitas dalam iklan sabun* (Yogyakarta: Jalasutra, 2003).

which resemble dancing, or close-ups of the beautiful looks of the Eurasian face. In this way, the sinetron maintains the idea of women as the object of male gaze, but within Indonesian norms.

Considering the construction of powerful action women in the sinetron, we can see that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* does not share the problems of the Hollywood action genre in showing the capacity of the female/feminine/soft body to perform the male/masculine/hard body role, because martial art in the sinetron is not about body conflict but about the exercising of supernatural power. It does not even share the Asian martial art genre's need to construct their heroic female figures disguised in male clothing. The exotic portrayal of heroic female figures in the sinetron, to some extent shows that these figures resemble Western action chicks of 1990s. However, in the Indonesian socio-cultural context, the difference between male and female should be clearly identified.

In this sinetron, when women are in action, they are not exceptional in being women. The sinetron can combine the powerful and the feminine harmoniously because of the different concept of gender in Indonesian culture, where femininity does not imply weakness. I agree with Carson's argument that because women are "the gender conventionally aligned with the body", "feminism is crucially concerned with the ways in which women's bodies are controlled within patriarchal system." For instance, "idealised forms of their bodies are objectified".¹⁹⁹ However, if there are distinctive cultural concepts of gender in different cultures they may create different representations of gender and body.

The representation of gender and body in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* shows that gender is always contested and changes over time. The sinetron does not perpetuate the New Order ideology that the only proper role of women is as wives and mothers, as scholars have found in their research on a

¹⁹⁹ Fiona Carson, "Feminism and the body," in *The Routledge companion to feminism and postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (London ; New York: Routledge, 2001), 117.

number of films and sinetron produced during the New Order era. The sinetron shows both women and men as powerful, with the same capacity and capability in combat, but keeping their sex identity different. Its representations of gender and body suggest that the sexes are equal but different, although not in the patriarchal sense of female difference as inferiority. It can be suggested that gender in the sinetron represents modern Indonesian Muslim women's expectation of equality in accessing all aspects of life, but acceptance of difference in terms of biological identity (see my discussion in Chapter II).