

GENDER AND CULTURAL TRANSITION
IN THE SINETRON, MISTERI GUNUNG MERAPI



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Candidate's Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Sri Kusumo Habsari

Date:

Supervisor's Declaration

I believe that this thesis is properly presented, conforms to the specifications for thesis, and is of sufficient standard to be, *prima facie*, worthy of examination.

Prof. Susan Sheridan

Date :

ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a feminist cultural analysis of the popular Indonesian television serial (sinetron) *Misteri Gunung Merapi* (Mysteries of Mount Merapi). It investigates the television text in relation to its various contexts within the social and cultural transformations of contemporary Indonesia. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has been produced since 1998, shortly after the financial crisis and the fall of the New Order regime. Since it was first broadcast by the Indosiar television station, it has ranked among the top-rating television programs in Indonesia, and I am interested in its success in this era of social transformation. The purpose of my study is to examine the significance of this success, including exploring the possibility that it is due to the serial's engagement with recent issues in contemporary Indonesian culture, in particular the changing roles of women.

The discussion falls into three main parts: a consideration of the contexts of socio-cultural change and the globalisation of the television industry within which the sinetron is produced; an examination of the way the sinetron draws on traditional theatrical performance, popular memory and supernatural belief; and a study of its representation of women and gender issues within the action-adventure genre to which it belongs.

In the context of the television industry, this sinetron's production signals the changing character of the industry, from state control to free market. In the socio-cultural context, as state control grew weaker and civil society flourished, the flow of globalization became more visible, foregrounding conflicts between Islamic and secular groups, often over the roles and representations of women.

As a *sinetron kolosal-laga* or epic, the series tells historical and legendary stories in such a way that they speak to contemporary Indonesia as it is in the process of reinventing itself. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* draws on the narrative and dramatic conventions of both traditional theatrical performance and

internationally popular genres of action cinema; it constructs popular memory to raise issues about the present; and it employs popular fascination with the supernatural to invoke the mixture of spiritual traditions that has always characterised Javanese culture, in particular.

Focussing on the emergence of warrior women in film and television in both the Hollywood action-adventure and Kung Fu/wuxia genres, the thesis investigates the construction of female fighters on screen. I suggest that the sinetron does not share the same problems of gender representation that feminist criticism has identified in either of these genres. Four areas of analysis - heroism, body, power, and the camera - demonstrate that there is a different concept of gender in Indonesia which is illuminated in this sinetron's representations of women and gender issues.

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One thing at a time and that done well
Is very good rule as many can tell

I begin my thesis feeling unsure about I was doing. Being trained as literature scholar, researching sinetron was problematic for me. I always believed that literature is a representation of culture and the author presents his/her individual comment on this culture, showing his/her worldview. However, I could not bring all of these beliefs into researching sinetron. First, sinetron is a collective production. Secondly, it does not reflect but rather constructs the culture. These two contrasting definitions of a cultural text started me on a series of intellectual journeys to understand and research sinetron.

I have accumulated many intellectual and personal debts in the course of writing this thesis. And it is with a mixture of relief and regret, I submit this thesis. To those who have helped me along the way, I offer my deepest thanks.

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PROVERB

The prophet said that women totally dominate men of intellect and possessors of hearts. But ignorant men dominant women, for they are shackled by an animal ferocity. They have no kindness, gentleness or love, since animality dominates their nature. Love and kindness are human attributes; anger and sensuality belong to the animals. She is the radiance of God, she is not your beloved. She is a creator – you could say that she is created.

Jalal al-Din Rumi

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