

CHAPTER VIII

GENDER AND HEROISM

Introduction

In this chapter, I begin my analysis of how women are constructed in the sinetron *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. Although the main character is a male hero, Sembara, there are also many women willing to fight. This chapter explores the construction of hero and heroine in the sinetron and interprets the heroic action of the fighting female figures.

Every culture has its heroes. Over the years, heroes are differently imagined and identified in popular culture. Heroes live in the mythic world of the society's imagination. Heroes represent the society's hope for change. In the context of recent Indonesia, the phrase '*satria piningit*' (hidden knight) was suddenly popular at the fall of the New Order, referring to an embodiment of the Javanese dream of a culture hero who brings about change in a chaotic situation of economic crisis and endless conflict among social groups. If "the image of the hero is central to both culture and narrative",¹ the questions which arise are what kind of hero *Misteri Gunung Merapi* presents, whether its hero embodies the Javanese dream of a culture hero, how the image of hero is reinforced, how it has changed, and whether a woman could be a hero.

To answer these questions, I will examine how female heroism is constructed and narrated, and the meanings accompanying the construction, through contrasting the representation of male heroes. I begin with a discussion of the construction of the male hero. This shows how aspects of the traditional ideal of the Javanese hero are included, together with the qualities of heroes in Westerns and *wuxia* cinema. This discussion is important for analysing how the

¹ Will Wright, "Introduction: The Hero in Popular Stories " *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32, no. 4 (2005): 148.

local culture (especially the concept of Javanese hero) is adapted along with the conventions of global popular entertainment to produce a nationally popular sinetron. I proceed from this discussion to contrast the construction of the Javanese heroine, and the additional qualities attributed to fighting women in the sinetron *Misteri Gunung Merapi*.

Heroes in *Sinetron Kolosal-Laga*

The definition of ‘hero’ according to dictionaries of the nineteenth century is an “illustrious, brave, courageous, noble, valiant, magnanimous, fearless and great warrior”. Ralph Waldo Emerson said that the hero represents “the ideal morals of the community” and heroes are “symbols of the highest aims of mankind”.² Twentieth century scholars defined a hero as “a symbol of his culture...they mirror real life...stand on a pedestal, true, but in our egalitarian society that pedestal must be reachable for everyone”.³ In the tradition of action-adventure narratives hero refers to “virile, strong and valiant figures committed to action and the pursuit of a noble quest”. Being equipped with “courage, sagacity, energy” and “muscular physical power”, the hero provides the image of “peerless and magnificent manhood”.⁴ As the hero’s role in the narrative is to protect the community, throughout his quest “the hero learns to give up his mercenary goals and to recognise his obligations to a society in need of his redemptive skills”.⁵ Looking at these two notions, the concept of heroism, by definition, is gendered masculine and sets a moral standard. Heroism is defined in a context of public space.

² Janice Hume, "Defining the Historic American Heroine: Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Nineteenth-Century Media," *Journal of Popular Culture* 31, no. 1 (1997): 1.

³ *Ibid.*: 2.

⁴ Isabel Santaularia, "He Comes Back Badder and Bigger Than Ever!": Adapting the Masculine and Negotiating the Feminine in Treasure-Hunting Adventure Narratives.," *Links & Letters* 8, (2001), <http://www.bib.uab.es/pub/linksandletters/11337397n8p83.pdf>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Dunbar has argued that Hollywood has made the archetype of the warrior whose adventures end with the conquest of evil into a stereotyped hero. The hero “not only lacks feminine traits, but also demystifies and objectifies women, who have been subject to the male gaze...women serve as property to be controlled, manipulated, and saved”. The feminine archetype, in contrast, was characterised by “self-realization, solace and renewal” of the female protagonists. The female heroes attempt to “‘wake the world’ to male prejudice” and to show that “tolerance and compassion are not only prerequisites to being humane, but also signal our planetary purposes”. Although he has found that “the conventional Hollywood hero now is not necessarily the paragon of pride, masculinity, and aggressiveness that he used to be”, the ideological hero who “represent us against them” is still dominant in Hollywood production.⁶

Interestingly, the characteristics of a hero in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* are different from that archetype of a Hollywood hero. Although the concept of masculinity in Indonesia is now like the Western one, with “virtues of action, heroism, discipline, valour, intelligence and romantic conquest”,⁷ Sembara’s “emotional self restraint”, a model of “the New Order the upper class Javanese priyayi”,⁸ and “Islamic submission and patience”,⁹ is masculine by the definitions of Indonesian moral standards.

As well as Hollywood action-adventure films, the sinetron draws on Chinese *wuxia*. In *wuxia* tradition the knight-errant or Chinese hero is a “glamorized cultural icon, a larger-than-life hero who could right wrongs when the law failed to protect people from injustice and the abuse of power”.¹⁰ He

⁶ Dirk Dunbar, "Hollywood's Transformed Hero: A Countercultural Journey," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 6, (2004), <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art6-hollywoodtrans-print.html>.

⁷ Marshall Clark, "Men, Masculinities and Symbolic Violence in Recent Indonesian Cinema," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 1 (2004): 114.

⁸ Ibid.: 118.

⁹ Vanessa Richardson, "An Analysis of Culture, Gender and Power in the Films Nji Ronggeng and Roro Mendut," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 28, no. 2 (1994): 40.

¹⁰ Rong Cai, "Gender Imaginations in Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon and the Wuxia World," *East Asia cultures critique* 13, no. 2 (2005): 445.

“appears to be a single-minded, desexualised fighting machine”.¹¹ Like the Western hero, the myth of hero in Chinese martial art films is a free-lance knight “pursuing justice across an imaginary landscape of heroic fantasy”.¹² Comparable to Robin Hood, the Western hero, a Chinese hero “may be a natural aristocrat but also countercultural figure”.¹³ In the democratic martial art tradition, “anyone who trains hard enough can achieve mastery”, so the hero in Asian martial story is “typically, a young man who has been humiliatingly pummelled into a hang-dog downtrodden state, leaves his home ground to lick his wounds in the wilderness”.¹⁴ Through his meeting with “an eccentric and/or legendary *sifu*”¹⁵ and his hard training, he transforms into a powerful figure who astonishes his enemy.¹⁶

In some ways *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has adapted this process of becoming a hero from *wuxia* fiction. Young Sembara, Lindu Aji, and Basir are walking home in one night after studying the Qur’an in the village mosque. Suddenly, they hear the horrible laugh of Mak Lampir. They are so frightened that they tremble and freeze. Kyai Jabat and Nyai Bidara, passing along this village street, offer to protect them. Realizing that they are gifted in martial art, Nyai Bidara and Kyai Jabat invite Lindu Aji and Sembara to be their pupils. Every day, when all the children are playing in the yard, Kyai Jabat and Nyai Bidara take them to the valley and teach them martial art skills. The unexpected meeting between Kyai Jabat, Nyai Bidara and Sembara resembles the meeting between the *wuxia* hero and the eccentric *sifu*. As in martial art cinema, Basir considers Kyai Jabat and Nyai Bidara as strange figures and he fears that they are going to kidnap

¹¹ Sheldon H. Lu, "Soap Opera in China: The Transnational Politics of Visuality, Sexuality, and Masculinity," *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 1 (2000): 42.

¹² 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>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ A Chinese term for master or teacher

¹⁶ Chute. "Heroic Grace: The Chinese Martial Art Films."

Lindu Aji and Sembara. As in *wuxia* series, there is no narrative of the process of this training by Sembara and Lindu Aji to become heroes.

The characterisation of Sembara draws on that of the hero in both Western and *wuxia* stories: an individual figure, not representing any organization or formal structure in the society, he fights against disorder in the society and spreads goodness among its members. However, unlike the Western hero who becomes mature through his journey, Sembara, in his youth and his mastery of the unseen world, is already mature and wise. He does not fight against evil persons but he opens the eyes of the guilty to make amends and change their way of life. He is a “larger-than-life” hero. Comparing Sembara with the construction of the Western hero in Hollywood cinema, he does not become a hero because circumstances force him to protect the community; rather, he is taught, by Kyai Jabat, how to be a hero. Sembara becomes a hero because he has the quality of a hero. He is gifted to be a hero. The role of Kyai Jabat is only to lead him to express his inherent nature. In this case heroism is culturally specific. Although there are some similarities between Western and Asian concepts of heroism, Sembara’s becoming a hero is not forged by his individual awareness but by his teacher instructing him to spread goodness in the disordered society. Sembara not only fights against evil but also preaches goodness. In every fight, he always reminds his enemies not to aim for power or fame but rather to try to become wiser and happier for the peace of human life. He is like an intermediary between the *kyai* and society. He is a combination of glamourized cultural icon and the moral ideal of the community. He represents the dream of the Javanese of the *satria piningit*, the hidden knight who will some day appear and restore the disordered society.

A characteristic of the action genre is the presentation of fighting and killing. Both Western and Asian martial art cinema present a disordered society in which the fight for justice requires acts of violence. Although this sinetron also presents many scenes of fighting, it rarely shows scenes of killing. Moreover, most killing in the sinetron is not the act of killing humans but killing spirits. Rather than presenting a wounded bloody body, the spirits just disappear to show

their death. However Sembara, especially, in fighting against evil, rarely kills either humans or spirits. He follows the Islamic rule that killing is forbidden in any situation except in open war. Sembara tends to defeat his enemy, either human or spirit and always gives his enemy the chance to make amends for their future life. Through this depiction, Sembara qualifies not only as a Javanese hero but also as an Islamic one.

The other hero in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, Lindu Aji learns martial art skills from Kyai Sukma Jati. In his journey, he incidentally meets with Putri Wandan Sari in the middle of a forest. Putri Wandan Sari and some her soldiers are in trouble fighting against Baka Wulung. Lindu Aji helps her to defeat Baka Wulung. Seeing his skills, Putri Wandan Sari asks him to join Mataram's army. Lindu Aji agrees and follows her to meet Sultan Agung. Sultan Agung is impressed with Lindu Aji's skills but he does not accept the young man completely until he passes several tests. The first test is relatively easy: to tame a wild horse. Because he is successful, Sultan Agung asks him to deliver a message to Kyai Lembah Manah. In delivering this message, Lindu Aji has to fight a group of men who demand that he deliver the Sultan's message to them but he refuses and will only deliver it to Kyai Lembah Manah. Again he is successful. Kyai Lembah Manah then asks him to deliver another message to Ki Bagus Santosa. This time, he is tempted by a group of beautiful women and alcohol. Lindu Aji refuses their offers and prefers to take a rest. After that he has to deliver a message to Ki Dharma. From him, Lindu Aji learns about loving and looking after orphans. Because of his success in delivering the messages, Lindu Aji is then appointed to be *senopati* Mataram, the commander of Mataram with a special duty to spy on Dutch activity in the eastern part of Java. From this account it can be said that the concept of heroism in this sinetron refers to the idea of the hero's ability to control his human desires, not only being powerful and fighting against evil.

Brakel-Papenhuyzen, in her study of Javanese manuscript and oral epics has concluded that the Javanese concept of hero refers to the son of a king and a

nobleman (*satria*) with supernatural powers¹⁷. When Islam had developed in Java, the concept of hero, adjusted into Javanese Islam, referred to “a holy man (*wiku*) practicing ascetism (*tapa*)”. He is also pictured as “a nobleman (*wong*¹⁸ *bagus*) ...[who] comes from an Arabic country, wearing a Middle Eastern cloak (*jubah*) and sandals with a bronze knob”.¹⁹

Considering the characteristics of the Javanese hero explained by Brakel-Papenhuyzen, neither Sembara nor Lindu Aji fulfils that ideal. Neither one is a nobleman nor of a royal descent. Lindu Aji is described as a descendant of Kyai Ageng Prayoga and he is performed by an actor with a face of a ‘*wong bagus*’, a descendant of an Arabic man. In contrast, Sembara is described as the son of a poor widow, and the character is played by an actor of Chinese descent. The choice of actor with a face who is not indigenously Indonesian as a hero can mean that the hero is not constructed as truly Javanese.

The construction of Sembara and Lindu Aji as heroes shows how the concept of hero has been transformed in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* from the traditional Javanese figure of a man of royal descent to an average person. In Javanese traditional performances, the heroes are aristocratic figures with noble genealogies. This could mean that the sinetron elevates the idea that anyone could be a hero by passing successfully through a series of adversities. Sembara and Lindu Aji mirror the current egalitarian expectations of Indonesian society. They could be a reflection of an ideal person for democratic Islam, which is achievable for every man. Sembara and Lindu Aji also symbolize the two ways of becoming a hero, whether formally, by joining an existing organisation of power, like Lindu Aji, or informally, without being tied to any such structure, like Sembara.

¹⁷ “Although this man is a human being, he must be of noble descent, as he can safely enter the great jungle. All ordinary human beings, all men must die, when the goddesses come to bathe, no human being is strong [enough]. This man who has entered the forest, [therefore] in my opinion must be of royal descent...” Clara Brakel-Papenhuyzen, “Jaka Tarub, a Javanese Culture Hero?,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 34, no. 98 (2006): 79.

¹⁸ The literal translation of *wong bagus* is ‘good-looking man’ but Brakel-Papenhuyzen translated it as ‘nobleman’.

¹⁹ Brakel-Papenhuyzen, “Jaka Tarub, a Javanese Culture Hero?,” 87.

Sri Mangkunegara IV, the middle-late 19th century ruler of the Mangkunegaran court (r.1853-81), in his poetic writings, defined a hero as a knight with three qualities: intellectual, tactical, and brave. He also described the three devotions that a knight should have: *guna* (willingness), *kaya* (capacity to success), and *purun* (brave-heartedness). Another quality is *budi luhur* (to consider his task more important than his own personal ambition).²⁰ In the sinetron, the characters of both Sembara and Lindu Aji possess these knightly qualities. However, for romantic reasons (his love for Pitaloka) Lindu Aji chooses to surrender and let himself become the prisoner of the Dutch secret agents, Mayang Sari, Bakawuni, Kalawika and Banuseti, although it would have been easy for him to defeat all of them. In contrast, Sembara's decision to pursue Mak Lampir is not only to protect Farida but also to protect the whole society against Mak Lampir's terror. In his quest to find Farida, he still stops to help other persons or communities solve their problems, putting aside his main plan to free Farida from Mak Lampir's hand. In Farida's eyes, Sembara is not in love with her because he carries out his entire quest not only for the sake of his love but because of his duty as a knight to fight against evil. This heroic motivation is confirmed in later episodes, when Sembara's son, Mahesa, is kidnapped by Mak Lampir and, in his quest to find the boy, Sembara still delays by helping other needy people although he is worried about the fate of his son.

Jane Tompkins, in her book *West of Everything: the Inner Life of Westerns*, has argued that the typical hero of Westerns is "enigmatic and silent" because being "silent is a way of keeping the body impenetrable, of policing physical boundaries".²¹ She explained that with silence the heroes reject "all sense of self-consciousness" and try to "become perfect *in themselves* rather than a self-in-relation".²² With silence "the hero displays "his mastery, the control of his

²⁰ Sri Mulyono, *Tripama, Watak Satria Dan Sastra Jendra [Three Main Manners, Knight Character and God Literature]* (Jakarta: Gunung Agung, 1987), 16-7.

²¹ 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), 31.

²² *Ibid.*

mind and spirit over his body”.²³ Although Javanese and Islam also appreciate silence, it is more for mystical reasons. There is a popular belief that a person who is able to achieve the mystical union between God and human is able to master the unseen world. The mystical Javanese teaching which is clearly reflected in Sembara is *cegah dhahar klawan guling* (controlling passion for food and sleep). Sembara is often represented performing meditation and recitation rather than taking his rest. In contrast Basir is always pictured sleeping very soundly. There is also a strong difference between Basir and Sembara in their passion for food. Basir is always hungry and his appetite is big while Sembara only eats when he feels hungry.

In his discussion of the Javanese ideal hero, Sri Mulyono interprets the concept of *cegah dhahar klawan guling* as controlling human passion for food and sex. He also explains that there are seven steps to reach the union between God and human in Javanese Islam: *bertapa* (asceticism), *tobat* (atonement), *teguh jiwa* (adamance), *farq* (benediction), *sabar* (indulgence), *tawakal* (submission to one's fate) and *ridhlo* (sincerity).²⁴ As a Javanese hero, Sembara is also represented as an adamant man. He is not easily seduced by any woman. When Rinata, a beautiful tiger spirit, falls in love with him, he reminds her that humans cannot marry spirits because they have different worlds. He does not objectify any woman and always treats women with respect. He will not hug or kiss any woman unless he is married to her. He represents a good Muslim not only in male-female relationships but also the way he forgives the guilty. In his anger he is still able to control his words. And he rarely questions the difficult life which he has to endure in his journey to free Farida from Mak Lampir's wickedness. This makes Sembara, despite being a son of poor widow, a perfect hero in Javanese culture.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mulyono, *Tripama, Watak Satria Dan Sastra Jendra [Three Main Manners, Knight Character and God Literature]*.

Heroines in the Javanese Puppet Shows

Hume has questioned whether the concept of female hero is the same as the concept of heroine as there are different moral standards for women and men.²⁵ She found that the heroines of Tristram Potter Coffin, a 19th American novelist, “were symbols of sexuality, beauty, virginity, innocence, black magic and seduction, so do not fall into traditional definitions of the heroic person as courageous, noble or brave”.²⁶ The woman who falls into the category of hero, she has discovered, is an unladylike figure and not a heroine as she lives by “the male standards of morality”.²⁷ ‘Heroic’ is a term only applicable to men. Virtuous women will not achieve heroism in the male sense and only do heroic things for their family.²⁸ Similarly, Early has explained that in Western history, the dominant narrative of war always put the male hero in “pride of place” while women are presented as “a figure in need of protection”. The few women warriors who have been permitted as “temporary warrior transgressors” have been depicted as “exceptional armed maidens of righteousness”. These women warriors have been also portrayed as “inherently unsettling to the patriarchal social order”.²⁹ Hume’s study of American texts of 1837 and 1838 discovered seven categories of heroic women, all of them compatible with the ideal of femininity. They are the genius, the victim, the heroine of faith, the self sacrificing heroine, the sensible heroine, the melancholy heroine and the mother/wife. *The Lady’s Book*, the most popular women’s magazine in 19th century America, stressed beauty of mind as “far rarer and more enduring than physical beauty”, and also pointed out that “heroines who suffered became more beautiful and of stronger character”.³⁰

²⁵ Hume, "Defining the Historic American Heroine: Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Nineteenth-Century Media," 1-2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 4.

²⁹ Francis H. Early, "Staking Her Claim: Buffy the Vampire Slayer as Transgressive Woman Warrior," *Journal of Popular Culture* 35, no. 3 (2001): 17.

³⁰ Hume, "Defining the Historic American Heroine: Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Nineteenth-Century Media," 5-6.

Similarly, Javanese puppet shows performed during the New Order era constructed women mostly as the extension of their domestic setting. The ideal women were mostly presented as good wife or mother. However, heroines in these puppet shows are not perfect figures, as so often in Western narrative traditions. All heroines in the Javanese puppet show have some weaknesses but also several strengths, which might show women how they want to be and offer them more choices for identification.

Oetomo has argued that the puppet show, like contemporary media, has subordinated women through its representations. It reconstructs a variety of value systems and ideologies through its narrative and representation. The puppet show for the Javanese is like a religion: it gives lessons, guidance, and cultural order through image and representation of the story and the characters. Javanese people learn about life and living, human relationships, god-human relationships, leadership, heroism, value, and even woman's image, which help the way that people view the meaning and reality of life.³¹ As people learn about life through stories and characters in the puppet show, the representation of women's subordination can be understood as the rule in life. They believe this construction as truth and take it as guidance in their life.

Here are some examples. In the Indian version of the *Mahabharata*, Drupadi was the wife of the five brothers, Pandhawa. As Javanese do not accept the ideology of polyandry, in the Javanese puppet show of *Mahabharata*, Drupadi is presented as the daughter of Drupada, the king of Pancala, the wife of Yudhistira, the king of Amarta. Whereas in the Indian version Drupadi had five children from her five husbands, in the Javanese she only had one son, Pancawala. In the puppet show she is pictured as a model woman, however her fate is miserable. She was staked by her husband in a dice gamble with the Kurawa family. When Yudhistira lost the Kurawa family took her and played with her, humiliating her in front of many people. However, remarkably she didn't blame her husband for the

³¹ Moechtar W. Oetomo, "'Pseudo-Metaphor' Srikandi: Gambaran Perempuan Dalam Wayang Purwa [the Pseudo-Metaphor of Srikandi: Women's Representation in the Puppet Show]," *Gender kesrepro*, <http://situs.kesrepro.info/gendervaw/okt/2002/gendervaw02.htm2002>, (accessed 30 September).

humiliation she suffered. Instead she was angry with Dursasana, one of the Kurawa who tried to undress her, swearing that she would never arrange her hair until she could wash it in Dursasana's blood.³² In contrast, in the Indian version Drupadi is presented as "an articulate and forceful woman". She not only complains about her husbands' treatment but also "she publicly reviles her husbands and kinsmen and swears at them for exposing her to such humiliating treatment".³³ While in the Javanese wayang version, Drupadi is always constructed as an ideal wife, the Indian tradition attributes aggressive behaviour to her. Both Indian and Javanese traditions respect more the woman who is able to handle her aggressions inwardly.

Kunti, another heroine from the Javanese version of the *Mahabharata*, is presented as the wife of Pandu. Before she married Pandu, she had a child with Bathara Surya, the god of the sun. To save her virginity, the god helped her to deliver her baby through her ear and she abandoned the child at the ocean's shore. From Pandu, she did not have any child because Pandu was cursed by the god so that he could not approach his wife anymore. But Kunti still had three children from her affairs with three different gods: from Bathara Darma she has a son, Judistira, from Bathara Bayu she has Bima, and from Bathara Indra she has Arjuna.³⁴ In the Javanese puppet show she is constructed more as a loving mother. She sacrifices her happiness living in the palace to accompany her children and her step-children into the forest to live miserably in poverty and hunger.³⁵ Her affairs with the four different gods are not emphasized and she is constructed as a special woman, a medium for the birth of four heroes.

³² Sri Mulyono, *Wayang Dan Karakter Wanita [the Shadow Puppet Show and Female Characterization]* (Jakarta: CV Haji Masagung, 1989), 101-3; Oetomo, "Pseudo-Metaphor" Srikandi: Gambaran Perempuan Dalam Wayang Purwa [the Pseudo-Metaphor of Srikandi: Women's Representation in the Puppet Show]."

³³ Sally J. Sutherland, "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-Models in the Sankrit Epics," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 1 (1989): 67.

³⁴ Hanne M. de Bruin and Clara Brakel-Papennyzen, "The Death of Karna: Two Sides of a Story," *Asian Theatre Journal* 9, no. 1 (1992): 54.

³⁵ Mulyono, *Tripama, Watak Satria Dan Sastra Jendra [Three Main Manners, Knight Character and God Literature]*, 22.

Subadra, the first wife of Arjuna, is pictured as beautiful, gentle, devoted, and understanding wife. Although her husband often set out on many quests for the glory of the country rather than staying with her, and got married many times without her permission, she always loved him and dedicated her life to him. When Burisrawa kidnapped her and tried to rape her, to defend her loyalty to her husband she committed suicide. She preferred to die rather than her body being touched by someone else. When Arjuna had to leave the palace to learn new powers she followed her husband and left the luxurious life of the palace as her place was with her husband. She even accepted Srikandhi and Larasati as her husband's other wives in the same house.³⁶ She is presented as Arjuna's favourite wife, and symbolises a place for a man to go home after a morally wrong journey.

Banowati was also presented as a good wife, though of yet another different kind to Subadra and Drupadi. She is pictured as a woman who is able to serve her husband well. She is good in terms of her ability to satisfy her husband sexually. Although Suyudana, Banowati's husband, was the king of Astina he did not have any other wife or mistress. However Banowati always waited for the chance to meet Arjuna, her ex-lover to have an affair, without her husband noticing.³⁷

In the puppet show the only woman who was active in the war of Baratayudha was Srikandhi. Although Larasati was taught by Arjuna in self-defence and using an arrow as a weapon, she did not participate directly in the war. Srikandhi and Larasati were given the task of protecting the women and children from being attacked by the enemy. Once Srikandhi went to war she could defeat the main commander of Kurawa, Bisma, although none of Pandawa's soldiers was able to defeat him. Although Srikandhi opened the way for Pandawa to gain the victory in this war she was actually used as a medium of revenge. It is not Srikandhi who actually killed Bisma in the war but the spirit of Amba who

³⁶ ———, *Wayang Dan Karakter Wanita [the Shadow Puppet Show and Female Characterization]*, 135-38; Oetomo, "'Pseudo-Metaphor" Srikandi: Gambaran Perempuan Dalam Wayang Purwa [the Pseudo-Metaphor of Srikandi: Women's Representation in the Puppet Show]."

³⁷ Oetomo, "'Pseudo-Metaphor" Srikandi: Gambaran Perempuan Dalam Wayang Purwa [the Pseudo-Metaphor of Srikandi: Women's Representation in the Puppet Show]."

wanted to take revenge on Bisma because her love had been rejected by Bisma when he was still a young man. Her spirit waited for Bisma's to go together to heaven. When Srikandhi was fighting with Bisma, Amba's spirit came and helped her by aiming Srikandhi's arrow to its fatal blow to Bisma's chest. Since Bisma knew that Amba's spirit helped Srikandhi in fighting with him, he let Srikandhi kill him as his redemption of his past fault to Amba.³⁸

Srikandhi is also not perfect. She is a good wife but is shown as unable to bear a child. Her relationship to Subadra, her husband's other wife, is very good as she often stands to protect her from any danger.



Figure VIII-1 : Srikandi and Subadra

Among the female figures in the puppet show, Srikandhi is often used as a symbol of the Indonesian woman's movement. Female soldiers in Indonesia are often addressed as "Srikandhi Indonesia". She is considered "as intelligent, decisive, assertive, courageous, combative and beautiful".³⁹ However, in Javanese culture, Subadra is considered as the ideal heroine because of her refined, submissive, virtuous character and her modest downward gaze.

Looking at the construction of female heroines in the Javanese shadow puppet show, although it is possible for women to be active in war and fight side-by-side with men, they cannot be a hero. Although Srikandhi can be a *senopati* (commander of troops), her victory is not a total achievement. Bisma is not really

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ "Workshops/Masterclasses/Lectures," <http://www.indonesianshadowplay.com/classes.html>, (accessed 18 January 2007).

defeated by Srikandi, rather he lets himself be killed. It can be said also that Javanese differentiate between hero and heroine. Srikandi, although she can fight, is a heroine because mostly she fights to defend herself or her family from attacks. When she is acclaimed as a hero in the Baratayuda war it is because Kresna considers that with Srikandi as the commander, Bisma can be defeated. The choice to ask her to be the commander is only a strategy to win the war, not because of Srikandi's power. However, as the construction of the characters in the puppet show is based on the puppeteers' interpretation, the portrayals can differ over time.

Although the sinetron takes many elements from traditional performances, in constructing heroines and other powerful female figures, it does not draw on any of the heroines from the Javanese puppet show. There is no construction of a heroine in a domestic setting. There is no depiction of woman's activity in a domestic setting. The mother figure is only shown briefly, in Maryamah, Sembara's mother. Most women are presented as single, or married but without children. Despite many images of ideal women in traditional performances, the sinetron does not draw on this tradition to give many opportunities for women to identify with certain strong female figures. In the next section I will discuss how *Misteri Gunung Merapi* to some extent still continues the tradition of the Javanese puppet show in the construction of female fighters, and I will consider how far the main character female characters would be seen as heroic.

Heroic Female Figures in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*

It is interesting to consider that although Java had a tradition of female soldiers (see the next chapter), the warrior women in the sinetron do not have important positions in the narrative. If the female fighters become prominent in the narrative, it is in the role of the enemy of the heroes. The protagonists on the 'good' side are Nyai Bidara, Wak Bayau, Pitaloka and Rindi Antika while Mak Lampir, Mayang Sari, Nyi Supeni, Nyi Blorong, Gandasuli, Kenting Wulan,

Kenting Sari, and Kenting Jamas are antagonists, on the bad side. When they are prominent and protagonist, such as Rindi Antika and Wak Bayau, they are spirits. The only humans in central roles in the sinetron are Mak Lampir, Farida, Nyai Bidara, Mayang Sari, Pitaloka and Nyi Supeni. This suggests that the ideology of heroism is only for the male. Although women could be powerful, their role is not prominent. But if they want to be prominent, their role is only acceptable as antagonists, against the dominant morality. Although it is an oversimplification to say so, the position of the characters at opposite poles of the binary between good and evil, hero and anti-hero, protagonist and antagonist, human and spirit, can suggest how the sinetron represents gender ideology in Indonesia's cultural transition.

Mak Lampir

Mak Lampir is portrayed as an old woman with a walking stick. At a glance, she looks like a powerless old lady and people in the sinetron's stories often underestimate her capability from her looks. However, she is respected by her students, human and spirit, for her ability to create new skills of supernatural power. She masters the supernatural power of *Pancasona*⁴⁰ which makes her immortal. With this special power, although her body is cut out into pieces, as long as it still touches the ground, the pieces will reunite by themselves and she lives again. She also masters supernatural power which makes her able to see events a thousand kilometres away through the medium of a bowl of water. She masters telepathy which enables her to communicate with her students from different places. Flying is another supernatural power she masters, so that distance is not a problem for her, as she can travel anywhere she wants in a short time.

With a skull, a symbol of evil, in her stick Mak Lampir cannot be a hero in any culture. Rather she is as a witch, a black magician. As discussed in the previous chapter, she cannot be a hero in Javanese culture because she worships

⁴⁰ *Pancasona* is the *ajian* (supernatural skill) to make someone who masters it immortal. When he/she get wounds, these will soon disappear without leaving any mark. "Forum: Seputar Paranormal Indonesia [Forum: About Indonesian Paranormal]," <http://www.paranormal.or.id/reply.php?topic=17&forum=2&post=101"e=1&mod=3>, (accessed 18 July 2007).

Bathari Durga and Bathara Kala, the god and goddess of evil. Worshipping the statue of Bathari Durga is also against Islam. She is positioned as the enemy of the kingdom because she teaches her students how to gain supernatural power through making a 'pact with the devil'. As well, she appears in the form of a servant in a Dutch household who often gives advice to her master about how to defeat the Javanese – she is traitor. She also asks her students to work as Dutch secret agents and spy on the Mataram plan to attack Batavia. Unlike Sembara who never kills any creature, Mak Lampir kills anyone who dissatisfies her.

However, she is not totally evil. In the Episode "Prahara Nyai Kembang"⁴¹ (The Tragedy of Nyai Kembang), Mak Lampir becomes the mediator between Dara Suta and her husband, Alan Kibar when they quarrel. Her advice to Dara Suta shows that she cares about this woman's relationship with her husband. However, when Alan Kibar passes away and Peter proposes to make Dara Suta his concubine, Mak Lampir, reasoning that Dara Suta will be happy living with a man who is deeply in love with her, decides to help Peter to marry Dara Suta. With Mak Lampir's magic charm, Dara Suta, in her sadness about her husband's death, obeys this request and marries Peter. Mak Lampir marries them and Dara Suta becomes Nyai Kembang. As Peter really loves her and wants to live with her eternally, Mak Lampir changes Nyai Kembang into a beautiful zombie. With her supernatural ability, she preserves Nyai Kembang's body and traps her soul in her body, so that Nyai Kembang becomes immortal. Again, through her deed, she opposes nature's rule that every creature will die and she goes against Islamic religion by making Nyai Kembang's soul suffer by being trapped in her immortal body.

The confusing personality of Mak Lampir as a witch is demonstrated not only in her behaviour to Nyai Kembang but also in her action to save Farida from rape. Every time Farida is in danger of being raped, Mak Lampir comes up to save her. She also saves any woman from rape attempts and kills the men who try to do that. However, it does not mean that she hates the man who tries to rape a woman.

⁴¹ The title Nyai refers to a concubine of a Dutchman.

She helps the man to seduce the woman by changing him into a handsome figure or into the man the woman is in love with, so that the woman makes love with the man voluntarily. Also, although Pitaloka is her enemy, Mak Lampir does not kill her, because she is not a descendant of Kyai Ageng Prayoga and thus not one of those she has vowed to wipe out. Pitaloka and Lindu Aji are both on Mataram's side while Mak Lampir and her pupils are on the Dutch side. Mak Lampir defeats and injures Pitaloka only to free Captain de Vorce who had been confined by Pitaloka and Lindu Aji. Mak Lampir also lures Sarkali out of his habit of stealing other people's valuable belongings. She gives Sarkali a very big amount of gold money, which makes him rich without working, to commit his final theft for her. She asks him to steal the whip Amal Rasuli from Sembara's hand. It can be said although she is an evil witch, she always tries to stop raping and stealing. However, she becomes demonic when she faces her enemy or anyone who disturbs or disappoints her. With all her confusing actions between good and evil, she personifies the figure of Bathari Durga in the Javanese puppet show. I will discuss this later in the chapter on gender and power.

Farida

In the first few episodes of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, Farida was presented as a powerless girl. She is pictured as the most common stereotype of girl and woman, as Aripurnami has argued; "stupid, quick to cry, bitchy, fussy, and objects to be enjoyed for their beauty and their bodies".⁴² However, in the sinetron there is a reason for her manner: she is a daddy's girl, the only daughter of a rich widower businessman. She has grown up as a spoiled and very demanding girl.

It was common in Indonesia for parents to arrange the marriage for their daughters. For economic and prestige considerations, Farida's aunt Rosminah chooses Mardian, a Batavian-educated man and a son of a successful businessman for Farida's future husband. In such a situation, her father does not show any

⁴² 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), 63.

initiative either to agree or disagree with the marriage arrangement. He just keeps silent and lets his sister arrange the marriage. He is passive in the face of Farida's efforts to protest this arrangement. Traditional Javanese believed that a marriage arrangement was the proper way to enter marriage and the child should obey these arrangements unquestioningly.⁴³ As a reflection of modern Indonesia, Farida refuses this proposal and chooses her own prospective husband based on love. In the past love was not the basic foundation of marriage since Javanese believed that love could grow little by little in the husband-wife relationship. Her refusal, which reflects her desire to determine her own happiness, forces her to escape from her father's house and to wander without any special purpose. Luckily, her male best friend Basir accompanies her journey to ensure her safety.

Farida is portrayed as an emotional and instinctive woman, taking action without thinking about the impact. She goes to Sembara for protection without considering the norm of the society at the time, that it is taboo for a woman to visit a man's house without a companion. When Sembara refuses her she misinterprets his refusal as not his being in love with her anymore. She refuses to accept Sembara's explanation that she is now the legal wife of Mardian and that she should get a divorce first before staying with Sembara. However, she is also portrayed as an individual, not wanting to be oppressed by her aunt and her father. In such a desperate situation, feeling angry and embarrassed with Sembara's refusal of her, Farida wanders without purpose in the forest.

From the beginning she is not interested in learning martial art. Her dream is only to be Sembara's wife. As a beautiful woman without any martial art skills, Farida experiences many troubles on her journey. She always needs protection for her safety and guidance to keep her away from dangerous situations. However, because she is basically a good woman, every time she is in danger there is always someone who saves her. The construction of an innocent persecuted heroine who is banished into the wilderness but then miraculously saved is typical of the

⁴³ Hildred Geertz, *The Javanese Family: A Study of Kinship and Socialization* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), 55.

heroines found in numerous manuscripts in Malay, Javanese, and Acehnese.⁴⁴ A good woman who always gets a lot of help, protection, and guidance from her surroundings is also a dominant feature in Indonesian television cinema. It seems that this character-type functions as a kind of education for Indonesian women to remain well behaved, because by maintaining good deeds there will be always someone to help her out of the dilemma she faces.

It is interesting that although Farida often gets into trouble because of her beauty - Mak Lampir wants her life, some men try to rape her, and a spirit forces her to be his bride - she does not think of learning martial art skills for her own self-defence. These difficult situations are repeated in many episodes of the story and it is only in the 20th episode that she begins to learn martial art skills. Furthermore, the idea of learning the martial arts does not come from Farida herself but from a spirit who feels sympathetic with Farida's sufferings and decides to teach her some self-defence skills. The creation of Farida as the main female character also reflects the tendency of glorifying women's position in the domestic area. When Farida becomes powerful after mastering martial art skills her role in the story becomes less and less. She is dominant in the story only when she is passive. The construction of Farida and her role in the narrative suggest that the ideology of heroine in the sinetron is still conventional. She is the type of heroine who is fought rather than fights for, and this position in narrative is important for the construction of the hero. She is typical of Mulvey's criticism of Hollywood's classic (1940s) representation of female figures as passive in the film narrative.

However, after Farida undertakes a journey into the spirit world, she experiences a transformation from a weak and dependent woman into a powerful and independent woman. She moves from the domestic into the public sphere, from her ambition simply to be Sembara's wife into a woman who is active in society and she becomes one of the team who has to destroy evil in the world. However, although she is powerful and her power is now not far different from

⁴⁴ Edwin P. Wieringa, "In Praise of a Virtuous Woman," *IAS Newsletter* 6, (1995), <http://www.ias.nl/iiasn/iiasn6/southeas/wiering.html>.

Sembara, Nyai Bidara and any other kyais, she prefers not to be active in discussing how to fight against Mak Lampir, a woman who only wants her to die. She joins the group to destroy Mak Lampir's power, but she does not show either a feeling for revenge or any initiative about how to defeat Mak Lampir. She fights because she is in a situation which forces her to fight. She remains more typical of the heroine who is saved by the hero.

The construction of Farida and her position as the main female character in the narrative show that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* also differentiates between hero and heroine. The sinetron acknowledges that a heroine can be powerful but she still needs to be saved by a hero. As the cultural requirement of woman's silence in the public sphere (which I will discuss later in the chapter on gender and power), powerful Farida is not active in discussion of how to defeat Mak Lampir, although she is active in fighting against Mak Lampir's pupils, as if she knows nothing about the problem. She does not even speak to tell about her experiences of being kidnapped and imprisoned by Mak Lampir. Thus, the representation of Farida embodies the ideal type of Indonesian heroine popular during the New Order era. She is silent, as is the cultural expectation for women. However, unlike the prototype of the New Order heroines, who usually transform from independent and articulate into silent housewife and mother,⁴⁵ Farida moves into becoming an heroic and independent figure. However, she is still silent.

Pitaloka

In the 11th episode another beautiful girl is introduced in the story. Pitaloka runs away from her parents for the same reason as Farida, she refuses to marry her parents' prospective husband for her. While Farida refuses her father's prospective husband because she wants to marry Sembara, Pitaloka refuses the arrangement not only because she does not like her prospective husband but also because she feels she is not yet ready to get married. This phenomenon is a reflection of modern Indonesia, as noted by Holzner and Oetomo, where "the

⁴⁵ David Hanan, "Nji Ronggeng: Another Paradigm for Erotic Spectacle in the Cinema," in *Culture and Society in New Order Indonesia*, ed. Virginia Matheson Hooker (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993), 109-11.

median age of first marriage has been rising since 1994” with “20 in urban areas and 18 years rurally”.⁴⁶ Although the marriage arrangement and the effort to refuse it was a dominant theme in New Order cinema, the theme of women delaying marriage for higher education was not a common one. However, with her higher education in martial arts skills Pitaloka can protect herself from any disturbance during her travel to see her uncle. She comes to him and asks him to explain to her parents why she was disobedient.

In her journey she meets Lindu Aji and they fall in love. Lindu Aji decides to accompany her on the journey to see her uncle and they experience many difficult situations and try to solve all their problems together. From their journey they learn about mutual help and companionate relationships. These scenes suggest some current practices of dating and mating, which were uncommon in the past in Indonesia. Just a few decades ago any meeting between a woman and a man should be accompanied by a third person otherwise the society would accuse the woman, especially, of improper behaviour.

There is no explanation why Pitaloka learns martial art skills in the story, but these skills enable her to make a journey and join the military corps to be a female soldier in Mataram. She is not presented as an exceptional figure, although in the beginning of the story, Pitaloka is introduced as a powerful girl who helps her uncle to defeat his two enemies. However, she is then presented as powerless after being defeated by Mayang Sari and poisoned. In her powerlessness, she becomes an obstacle for her boyfriend, Lindu Aji, in carrying out his duties as a Mataram spy and commander. Unlike Mayang Sari or Nyi Blorong, Pitaloka does not have any idea of using her beauty and femininity to defeat her enemy. She becomes helpless and in need of a hero to rescue her.

If we consider martial art to be a form of education, Pitaloka and her decision to learn martial art skills represents many young women in the recent past. Certainly, Indonesian women were free to gain higher education, however,

⁴⁶ Brigitte M. Holzner and Dede Oetomo, "Youth, Sexuality and Sex Education Messages in Indonesia: Issues of Desire and Control," *Reproductive Health Matters* 12, no. 23 (2004), www.rmhjournal.org.uk.

the purpose was not in the value of the education itself but rather its value in terms of promoting better health and child-rearing practices. However, like Pitaloka who uses her martial art skills for wider advantage, many young women who move to urban areas have begun to see the importance of education from different perspectives.

The creation of Pitaloka could be interpreted as the sinetron being constructed within patriarchal discourse. Her helplessness and her need to be rescued by the hero show the cultural expectation of woman. The concept of male heroism and male superiority is constructed through the representation of the helplessness of the heroine. With Pitaloka's powerlessness, Lindu Aji becomes a hero who has to save her. The construction of Pitaloka's loss to Mayang Sari but not in her fight with the male antagonists could be read as saying that a woman could be more powerful than a man (see Figure VIII-2). In her quest, she can save other people's lives but cannot save her own. She has lost and is helpless, so that Lindu Aji can be constructed as being a hero for her (see Figure VIII-3). Through this representation, male heroism can be maintained. The construction of Pitaloka is a reflection of many recent Indonesian girls' ambition to be smart, highly educated and successful but with a husband who should more successful than them.



Figure VIII-2: Heroic Pitaloka



Figure VIII-3: Helpless Pitaloka

In some way, Pitaloka embodies the popularity of a new stereotype of ideal femininity emerging in global popular entertainment, such as (the American) Buffy, the Vampire Slayer. She represents a cute but powerful girl who is hungry

to be heroic. She wants to be somebody, not just an ordinary girl. Further, heroism has replaced marriage. She thrives on risk, rebellion, adventure and danger. However, her heroic action is devalued by her defeat in fighting with Mayang Sari and need to be looked after by Lindu Aji, her loving boyfriend. It could also mean that although she is powerful, she is “unthreatening”.⁴⁷

Mayang Sari

Mayang Sari is introduced in episode 6. From the beginning she is constructed as “a special woman”. She goes to a *warung* (roadside stall) alone, and challenges any man to defeat her and take a flower from her hair. His reward will be to sleep with her for a whole night. However, the men who eat in this *warung* and try cannot defeat her until, being disturbed by her arrogance, Lindu Aji does so but then leaves without claiming his prize. She is fascinated by his good looks and follows his trail into a forest. Because she fails to attract Lindu Aji with her beauty, she then sends a magic charm and he is hypnotized. However, Sembara, passing through this forest, removes this charm and Lindu Aji gets his awareness back.

Unlike Pitaloka who learns martial art skills in a school near her house, Mayang Sari goes to the school of Mak Lampir who requires her students to stay with her during their learning. Mak Lampir teaches her students not only to be powerful people but also ambitious ones. With the higher skills of martial arts as well as magic spells to gain supernatural powers with the help of devils, being a housewife and mother is not Mayang Sari’s ambition; rather she wants to be active in the public arena. She is representative of a small number of Indonesian women who want to participate actively in general organizations in which most members are male. She is also pictured as a woman with good leadership skills. In a war she can read the situation, determine when it is the right time to attack the enemy and command the soldiers. Because they lack experience, most women usually lack confidence to participate in meetings and political discussions;

⁴⁷ Angela Waldrop, "The Portrayal of the Highkicking Action Heroine: Across Space, Format, and Theories," *Latent Image*, (2001), http://pages.emerson.edu/organizations/fas/latent_image/issues/2001-05/heroine.htm.

however Mayang Sari is pictured as an active woman in important political decisions. Reading Mayang Sari in the context of Post-New Order Indonesia may indicate how many young Indonesians have developed new definitions of gender difference, that women and men are equal in their relations but that such changes are neither simply complete nor uncontested. Through the representation of Mayang Sari, the importance of women's role in decision-making and the equality of rights, duties, and responsibilities of men and women as citizens are admitted but, importantly, not appreciated.⁴⁸ Moreover, it shows that there is ambivalence on the way this sinetron has responded to the new public policy of equal partnerships between men and women, as it still positions Mayang Sari as an antagonist, on the bad or wrong side, in the story. The representation suggests that while these changes are evidence of the recent policy reforms, they are not yet occurring smoothly nor have been naturalized in everyday life.

Like Farida and Pitaloka, Mayang Sari represents modern Indonesian girls, however she is more progressive. Her freedom in sexual relationships shows how she views her sexuality as her own personal freedom, not within the context of family and motherhood. She also represents a small group of Indonesian women who hold the opinion that sex is not for procreation, rather it is for pleasure. As this story is narrated in episodes that were produced shortly after the end of the New Order era, Mayang Sari is positioned as the antagonist of the story because she works as a spy for the Dutch, applying the skills she learned from Mak Lampir. Among the people who are considered bad in society she feels she gets more freedom for expressing her own choices. With a combination of beauty, intelligence, and power, Mayang Sari becomes a special woman. However, with all her special ability she is portrayed in the sinetron as having a duty to obstruct Sultan Agung's plan to attack Batavia. As an antagonist she is pictured as a cruel woman as well as a traitor, for to reach her purpose she will demonically kill the

⁴⁸ As commercial entertainment, the sinetron is a very different form of cultural expression from feminist literary texts and performances, however the ambiguous representation of supernaturally powerful female characters can be interpreted as the ongoing male fear of female power as female autonomy increases as it has been suggested by Allen in her interpretation of the figure of Calon Arang (see Pam Allen, "Challenging Diversity? Indonesia's Anti-Pornography Bill," *Asian Studies Review* 31, no. 2 (2007): 109.

innocent. Her beauty combined with the power to charm is a powerful asset to influence any man to betray his duty as a soldier of Sultan Agung.

There is a strong belief that the ordinary woman or good woman should be empty of sexuality. However, Mayang Sari is portrayed as a woman with high sexual desire. She is easily attracted to a good-looking man who has great skill in the martial arts. When she is fascinated with a man she clearly directs her desiring gaze at him. However, she will avert the would-be controlling gaze of any man she is not attracted to. Such representation of female desire was uncommon in the New Order cinema. The New Order cinema glorified reproduction as women's vocation and consistently described the danger of its denial. As described previously, women were only portrayed as mothers or a wife, or if the film exploited a woman's body, she was represented as a prostitute.⁴⁹

The representation of Mayang Sari shows how the production team looked at sexuality. Another example is from the way the sinetron has exploited and constructed the legendary figure of Nyi Blorong as an unexpected example of female sexuality. Because in Javanese myth she is believed to possess strong sexual desire, in this sinetron she is shown having more sex consciousness and autonomy. It is taboo in Javanese custom for a woman to initiate sexual intercourse. However, as a spirit Nyi Blorong is constructed against the dominant morality. She actively seduces the men she desires such as Basir and Sembara. And as is usual in Western films, Nyi Blorong's sexuality brings death and destruction to the males.⁵⁰ When Sembara refuses her love, her personality becomes demonic and she attacks him. She charms Basir into being an idiot who obeys all of her instructions. Then she orders him to attack Sembara and she just laughs as she watches them fighting. Just as Smith stated that "women expressing

⁴⁹ Krishna Sen, "Menafsirkan Feminisme Dalam Sinema Orde Baru: Represi Dan Resistensi. [Interpreting Feminism in the New Order Cinema: Repression and Resistance]," 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: PT Remaja Rosdakarya, 1998), 297-9.

⁵⁰ Sharon Smith, "The Image of Women in Film: Some Suggestions for Future Research," in *Feminist Film Theory; a Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 1999), 16.

interest in sex was, for some men, a bother”, it does so for Sembara.⁵¹ Although Nyi Blorong is very beautiful and appealing, her appeal does not arouse him. Woman should be passive and must be stimulated by man. For a man a sexually active woman could create a fear of castration.

In the New Order, marriage was still considered as a crucial social institution. People, women especially, choose to suffer in unhappy marriages rather than getting divorced. Single people, especially single women, also tend to suffer socially. Since the traditional role of women is to bear kinship relations and family honour into the next generation, women are dishonoured by being divorced or single. Mayang Sari’s choice to remain single and adopt the free-sex lifestyle was revolutionary in the New Order era although it is more common today. However, a child - the symbol of domesticity - forces her to reconsider her preference and decide to reverse her previous course of action. Mayang Sari’s decision shows that although she is liberal in her sexual attitudes and behaviour she still desires to marry and have children, which reflects the universal opinion of Indonesians. It is still rare in Indonesia to choose to “never marry and look for fulfilment through pursuing a career”.⁵²

Nevertheless, although in some ways *Misteri Gunung Merapi* appears to be reluctant to deal with progressive ideas of female identity, there is no glorifying of domestic women. Instead, all its central female characters actively pursue their careers, or adventures outside the home. This suggests that the New Order ideology in some ways has been contested and it will be possible for progress in the future.

Tasker has noted the opposition between the hero and domesticity. In her notion, “family bonds tie the hero down, making him vulnerable”.⁵³ Certainly, it is characteristic of popular commercial culture to make such opposition problematic

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Kathryn Robinson and Iwu Dwisetyani Utomo, "Introduction," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2003): 9.

⁵³ Yvonne Tasker, "The Family in Action," in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 261.

as it can create more spectacles. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has exploited this opposition to create more tensions in the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist. Lindu Aji is pictured as a very powerful hero and it is difficult to defeat him in fighting. The strategy used by Mayang Sari is through attacking his fiancée, Pitaloka, and imprisoning her. Through this strategy, Lindu Aji is brought down and surrenders.

In the opposite case, Mayang Sari arouses wonder because she is powerful in ways that women are not commonly supposed to be. She knows how to use her beauty and femininity to attract her enemy and thus could easily defeat him. There are many scenes of how Mayang Sari pretends to be powerless and need help. Once this man is under her control, she becomes a mean woman. However, because of her monstrosity and her sexual aggressiveness, her power and potency do not evoke any respect. Mayang Sari, with her leadership and discernment may be able to do things that ordinary women cannot, but she is a potent failure at the one achievement that many women who possess no special power can manage: she cannot make a man fall in love with her.

Although Mayang Sari is portrayed as mean woman she is not a *femme fatale*.⁵⁴ In some ways, she is a villainous or a deadly woman because she deceptively misleads the hero with her charm, beauty and femininity to achieve her end. However, she does not hate any man and has no desire to take revenge. She does not enslave her partners for her own enjoyment. She does not use her body to defeat her enemy. She is not an evil witch. She is more an individual who does not want to be tied by any social norms because her choice is in conflict with woman's traditional roles. She prefers to be single because she gets more freedom for what she wants.

Although Mayang Sari is very powerful she does not have the quality of a hero. Her martial art and leadership skills are undermined because she cannot control her sexual desire. She does not evoke respect because of her sexual

⁵⁴ Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1-2.

freedom. Greek tradition divides women into “two typical extremes – innocent virgin and evil whore”.⁵⁵ In similar way, this sinetron may show women in non-traditional roles, but good women are equated with ‘morality’ and bad women with ‘immorality’ in terms of controlling sexual desire. Mayang Sari invites and sleeps with the men she desires, which puts her in the position of the Greek type of “evil whore”. Although Banuseta is happy to sleep with her, he never respects her. Kalawika has to remind her to control her desire and asks her to focus on their main plan of destroying Sultan Agung’s plan to attack Batavia.

Looking at the narrative of Mayang Sari, I agree with Inness’s argument that although the tough women personify women’s imagination of empowerment, “the toughness in women has a highly ambiguous place in our society. We are fascinated by it, yet we are horrified by it. We admire it, yet we fear it”.⁵⁶

In episode 27, Mayang Sari’s personality has changed. She is defeated in fighting and badly wounded. Being touched by a question about how many children she has, she has begun a self-reflection about the goal of her journey as Dutch spy. This question forces her to see the world from a different perspective, and then to completely change her direction in life. She chooses to keep her martial art skill and uses her power to fight against evil. She changes her dresses from red into white colour and puts a scarf on her head. Every time she is in a fighting arena, she also covers her face with the white scarf so that her identity is covered. She changes her name into *Pendekar Perak*, the Silver Knight. She also totally changes her behaviour. Her voice is softer to everyone and she does not try to attract any man. She becomes a new woman and even her old friends could not identify her series of action. Again, the sinetron undermines the construction of female hero by making her identity covert. People could not identify whether this hero is male or female.

⁵⁵ Mary Magaulick, "Frustrating Female Heroism: Mixed Messages in Xena, Nikita and Buffy," *Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 5 (2006): 730.

⁵⁶ Sherrie A. Inness, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

Nyai Bidara

From the beginning of the story, Nyai Bidara is presented fighting against evil as a solitary woman rather than through a structural organization. She always tries to hide her action from people's eyes. Her worry about Mak Lampir's evil forces her to take Sembara as her pupil. Although the idea of teaching him to protect society from Mak Lampir comes from her, when she talks to Kyai Jabat about this idea she offers it to him as a suggestion rather than as a request or an order. She defers to him, representing her social position as being lower than his.

When Sembara's mastery of martial art surpasses hers, she becomes his comradely assistant among the other *kyai* to help him to destroy evil. Her power is still less than Kyai Jabat's as, unlike him, she does not master the unseen world, so can be only middle-ranked in her supernatural ability. When she loses in her fight with Mak Lampir, she runs to Kyai Jabat and asks his advice. With her position as an assistant in the story, she could not be a hero.

The construction of Nyai Bidara embodies the position of woman as the weaker figure in the society. She can be powerful, she can master supernatural power, but she does not excel. In conversations between Nyai Bidara and Kyai Jabat, she is positioned as lower in power and capability. Gradually, through the development of the story, her position in its narrative becomes less and less prominent and she is represented a just a member of a group of powerful people who does not give any ideas in forum discussions.

Most feminists, such as King and McCaughey argue against violence as it is considered to be a patriarchal exercise of power. According to them, the female meaning of heroic power should not include violence although it has "the face of violence".⁵⁷ In the construction of powerful female characters, the female ideal of "remaining non-violent even in the face of violence",⁵⁸ becomes the key to

⁵⁷ Neal King and Martha McCaughey, "What a Mean Woman Like You Doing in a Movie Like This?" in *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*, ed. Neal King and Martha McCaughey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

differentiating between protagonist and antagonist. Quite similarly, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* constructs the female protagonists not in the position of attacking but in the place of defending from the attack of the antagonist. The vital action Nyai Bidara performs, to prevent Mak Lampir's effort to kill all Kyai Ageng Prayoga's descendants, is by writing a *rajab* or a holy sentence on the palms of his descendants. In this way, she fights against violence in a non-violent way. The holy sentence on their palms protects these people by deflecting any attack as if there were an invisible shield covering their bodies. The construction of Nyai Bidara suggests that the sinetron shares a similar concept to feminists such as King and McCaughey about the construction of female characters.

Supeni

The character Supeni has been seen in only one episode of those screened and recorded so far, however, she is positioned as the central antagonist character in that episode. Presented as one of Mak Lampir's students, after finishing her study and marrying Sasongko, also Mak Lampir's student, she and Sasongko run a business. She is also constructed as a special figure: her power is beyond the average. However, from the beginning of the story, the audience is positioned not to identify with her. She is represented as a 'dangerous woman'. When a woman should be passive, she is active in approaching Sasongko. There are many scenes, where she behaves in ways which are considered uncommon for male-female relationships in Indonesian culture (see Figures VIII-4 and VIII-5). Looking at their close relationship, Mak Lampir decides to marry them. In that way, Mak Lampir, despite her position as antagonist and queen of black magic, is still conservative in male-female relationships. Supeni's marriage could not keep her from being dominant over her husband. She becomes the decision-maker in the family and Sasongko, although he does not like being dominated by his wife, acknowledges her superior capability and lets her take to take the dominant role. In fighting against their enemy, for example, he often only watches his wife fighting and believes in her ability to control the situation. He also lets her be the figure who gives orders to their group. However, this does not mean that Sasongko is less powerful than his wife. He is constructed as a wise man who

always reminds her to act carefully, and that invokes more respect from the audience. As often, the sinetron stresses the danger of a powerful woman. Her power does not make her husband happy, she even puts him in difficult situations. The construction of Supeni is a reflection of a common belief among the Javanese that it is not wise to marry a smart woman because she will rule the roost and this could lead to unhappiness in marriage.



Figure VIII-4 : Supeni woos Sasongko



Figure VIII-5 : Supeni challenges her enemies and Sasongko just sits down on the carriage

Conclusion

Although most female figures in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* are not constructed as helpless victims, the sinetron still commonly constructs its heroes and heroines in binary positions as male/female and powerful/powerless. To avoid the problematic representation of a powerful woman within patriarchal expectations, her partner is hardly ever placed in a subordinate position. The powerful women in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* are often shown as single women; or positioned as an anti-hero to show that she does not conform to the normal cultural expectation. In other words, a ‘proper’ woman could not be a hero and the sinetron builds the story to maintain the impossibility of a powerful female figure being an action hero. Most of the powerful women’s power is undermined by a defeat which makes them helpless. When one is special, like Mayang Sari, she changes to performing her heroic actions undercover and so no one acknowledges

her identity. The problematic representation of the female hero in the sinetron is not about the different capacity of male and female to exercise power but more about the cultural construction of power. Men are still expected to be more powerful, and their power is demonstrated not by their ability to defeat their enemy, but by their ability to control their inner power and exercise it wisely. This is the central concept of male heroism. I will discuss further the relative powerlessness of female figures in the society in the chapter on gender and power.