

# Gusti Ayu Murniasihasih's Naked Body Biography

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**Abstract**— This article is a part of the research entitled "An Effort to Compile the Biographies of Contemporary Balinese Women Artists". The purpose of this article is to discuss Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasihasih's naked body biography from the perspective of cultural studies. This article is based on the view of cultural studies and its relevance to the issues of power and politics, especially for those who were needed for social and cultural change. This article concludes that Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasihasih's naked body biography is strongly influenced by the power of men in a patriarchal culture in Bali. This biography can be read from a series of representations of naked bodies in hundreds of her paintings.

**Keywords**—biography; Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasihasih; patriarchal culture.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary art cannot be understood fully without placing it in the whole framework of society and culture [1, 6]. Nowadays, Indonesia's contemporary visual art is present to speak the current era with its human problem complexity. It includes increasingly more flagrant physical and ideological wars, acute problems of sex and power, split human personality, ongoing outstanding women and gender problems. These problems are presented in front of Indonesia's contemporary visual painters. However, the very special one is the problem faced by Balinese contemporary visual painters. Apart from social problems, they also face their own problems as visual painters amidst the patriarchal cultural constructions. Balinese contemporary visual women painters, as other Indonesia's contemporary visual women painters face social problems and their own problems as women, as also faced by I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasihasih can be read from the theme of her painting of gender problem motivated by her biographical reality in which she experienced sexual social violence. Hence, as stated by [2], although art is a personal expression, it always has a social function that expresses various social situations in human life. Art, as also stated by [3] is also seen as a basic element in all human activities, an inherent part of all human performances. It is their art social function position that Murniasihasih's works should be viewed.

So far, the analyses in the previous studies on Murniasihasih's works often used the modern aesthetical approach. For instance, reference [4] mentioned that Murniasihasih's paintings fall into modern paintings. What is exposed is the problem of the visual art structure, both the visual and aesthetic aspects. Other aspects such as social, political, gender and sexual phenomena are not

covered in the analysis. On the contrary, this article focuses on an investigation into the subject of patriarchal ideology that operates behind Murniasihasih's creative process. Therefore, this article uses cultural studies theories, which are concerned with semiotics, ideology, and psychoanalysis to reveal the hidden meanings. It is expected that this article can contribute to the enrichment of reading of works of visual art from their social aspect.

## II. METHOD AND THEORY

This article was prepared by organizing some steps that cover the design of the writing, determining the types and sources of data, determining the technique of data collection, determining the technique of data analysis and presentation of results of data analysis.

There are two types of data sources. First, the primary data source in the form of paintings, the concept of their creation and the biography of the visual artist. Secondly, secondary data were in the form of comments, notes from art journalists, art/culture observers and art academicians about the subject matters and themes that would be discussed in this article. The data collection was done using an observation guide, visual and audio recording device or camera (for photographs and videos). The method used to examine the data was based on documentation photography, documentation video, and documentation audio criteria.

In the process of writing this article, the data were collected through observation in Murniasih's studio twice and unstructured interview, both directly and through communication media with Murniasihasih four times, and library research using a monography, exhibition catalogs, posters, both printed and electronic. From the perspective of the objective of writing this article, there were 40 works that categorized in line with the objective. However, from the perspective of the criteria that had been established and according to the need in writing this article, only four of them were analyzed.

## III. DISCUSSION

Murniasih is child of a peasant family from Tabanan, Bali. Her full name is I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasihasih (henceforth called Murniasihasih or Murni). She was born on May 21, 1966.

One day she had to go with her father to transmigrate to Sulawesi. She expected to improve her life condition. However, in the transmigration area, a better life did not happen to her family. Then, she chose to work as a housemaid in a Chinese family in Ujung Pandang (Makassar). While becoming a housemaid, she was fortunately sent to a junior secondary school by her employer. She stopped studying when she was in the second year of her study because the Chinese family moved to Jakarta. The family also asked Murniasihasih to move to Jakarta with them. In Jakarta, she did not go to school, but she worked as a tailor in her boss's garment factory. She did not stay long in Jakarta. In 1987 she chose to return to Bali. In her hometown, she once worked as an artisan in a silversmith in Celuk, Gianyar. In Celuk, she got married.

Unfortunately, Murniasihasih got problems in her marriage. After a long period of marriage, she did not have any children. Her husband married another woman to have a child. Murniasihasih could not accept this. Then, she divorced her husband. After that, she lived alone. She built a house complete with her studio in Ubud. Her house was in the middle of many shady trees and a peaceful environment. Her house was cool. In her house and studio with brick and concrete floors, she continued her painting as she expressed her mind about gender and sexual unfairness. She never stopped questioning about bodies in her paintings.



Fig. 1. Photo of I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasihasih (source: Hardiman)

"I have painted many pictures of women. The picture of a woman in whose anus is inserted something and in her vagina sometimes. Such paintings are not liked by my female friends. But I keep painting that kind of theme since it is not a problem to me," Murniasihasih said to Mike Susanto when she held a single exhibition in Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta on April 17 to May 2, 2000.

This visual artist who learns painting from Pengosekan's painter, Dewa Putu Mokoh, in 1995 kept on exploring herself on canvas. As a painter, Murniasihasih had taken part in many exhibitions. Some of her important exhibitions included the exhibition in Media Park Sud, Jerman (1995), Bentara

Budaya, Jakarta (1995), Cemeti Gallery, Yogyakarta (1999) Women on Women Show in Seniwati Showspace, Ubud, Bali (2000); a joint exhibition with Seniwati in Asian Conference, Canberra, Australia (2000); the joint exhibition in a Show in Sky Door Art Place Doyama, Tokyo, Japan (2000); the joint exhibition in Casa De Cantabria Calle De Pio Baroja, Madrid (2000); a joint exhibition in CP Open Biennale, Jakarta (2003); a single exhibition in Nokia Gallery, Fringe Club, Hongkong (1998); a single exhibition in Estro Gallery Padova, Italy (1999), etc. In those exhibitions, Murniasihasih presented her existence as a woman painter. Murniasihasih presented her works as the concept of performing a sad biographical background concept. Bodies in Murniasihasih's paintings become her biographical representation. Through the bodies, Murniasihasih also played her fantasy world by relating it with objects such as mattress, mat, dining table, hat, shoe, brush, mask, onion, fish, gecko, even knife, file, and saw. These body objects were built to make her engage herself in a fantasy world about her biography easier. As admitted by Murniasihasih herself, "I follow my life's dream, sometimes I want to give birth to a child, but I cannot ever go out from my reality about not being able to get pregnant. The painting came from my dream and I just followed my conscience," she stressed.

"Whatever I experienced, I express 75% of the happiness and the sadness of my daily life on canvas. The things on canvas do not hide my everyday behavior. For example, the painting on the fact that I cannot get pregnant. I want to get pregnant very much, but I can only get pregnant on canvas. I want to breastfeed my child very much, but I can only breastfeed my child in my imagination." (the interview with Mike Susanto (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtY4zmB8dWk> accessed on July 31, 2019).

The family problem, the problem with men, women, reproductive organ problems, and problems with genitals were the problems which had a deep impression in her biography. Her body was suffering. Her suffering had been become her motivation and concept in her paintings. From this concept, she had painted thousands of paintings since the beginning of her career as a painter. Many people knew her works were familiar with the word "genitals". Her paintings' themes were always around the problem of social genitals.

Her paintings serve as statements about gender and sexual unfairness, of which she was a victim.. Two events in her biography, namely being forced to have sexual intercourse and being divorced were a stimulus in the process of creating her paintings. Murniasihasih admitted that the theme or the subject matter of her painting was about women in the reality in her biography that merged with the fantasy on sexuality. Visual art for Murniasihasih served as a medium for expressing herself in reality in her biography. The statement that came from the gender differences and sexual problems caused unfairness. As a woman, the event in which she was forced to have sexual intercourse and her divorce were unfair to Murniasihasih and made her become a victim, which was manifested from sexual violence.

The visual artist who had been widely recognized at a relatively young age passed away at the age of 40. She died on

January 12, 2006, leaving, a pile of paintings that had been finished and those that were still in the process of creation.

Reading Murniasihasih's biography and her concept of creation using the intertextuality approach based on feminism, ideology, and psychoanalysis theories resulted in the meaning of naked bodies.

Almost at the same time with the appearance of young literary figures that focused their attention on sexual problems in their fictive works, Murniasihasih had explored her body in her paintings since 1995. Although Murniasihasih's works did not receive as much as the young writers' *sastrawangi* - a term used to refer to beautiful and sweet-smelling young writers, her works were present in various visual art events, both at the national and regional and international biennials.

One of her works exhibited in CP Open Biennale—an international event in Jakarta - in 2003 was *Pohon Kesukaanku / My Favorite Tree* (acrylic on canvas, 160 x 100 cm, in 2003).

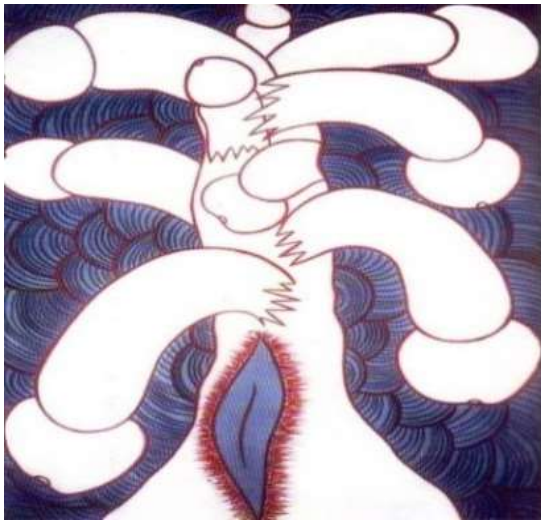


Fig. 2. *Pohon Kesukaanku / My Favorite Tree* by I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasihasih (source: CP Open Biennale 2003, Jakarta)

This painting was painted by forming a tree with a structure that transforms into a penis shape. This penis tree has seven branches that grow to all sides. It has a clean white color with a neat red contour. At the bottom part of the tree, there is an irregular shape that looks like a vagina. This irregular shape is dark blue with a set of irregular hatching that surrounds the outer part. In the background, there is a half-circle line pattern that is arranged repeatedly filling all parts of the painting area.

Some meanings can be produced in this painting. First, the penis and vagina with the choice and shape like in the painting are a social construction that places the penis and vagina as very different objects. Secondly, this is also related to a gender difference that produces subordination and dependence.

The way of drawing a penis and vagina is related to the assumption that male genitals are dry and directly has a clean connotation. In this painting, it is painted in a neat, white object with a definite structure. Murniasihasih, no doubt, had accepted this general assumption about a penis.

Similarly, when Murniasihasih painted a vagina, with the way she did it visually, she selected a vagina shape with an irregular structure. Her choice of color also emphasized further the irregularity: dark blue and untidy with a bit of black color creates a dirty image. The painting of a vagina in dark blue is related to the assumption that the vagina is given an image as something dirty, wet and bleeding. This impression is emphasized with a set of irregular lines that surround the contour of the vagina in dark red that gives an image about not virgin anymore.

Through this painting, Murniasih agrees with the socio-cultural construction that semiotics depicts a gender difference that produces subordination and unfairness. The image of the penis as something that has a clear and firm shape, dry and clean; on the other hand, the image of the vagina as an object with unclear shape, wet, and dry will put women at a loss or not virgin anymore.

In semiotics, the meaning of Murniasih's painting can also be produced by transforming its composition. By putting the vagina under the penis, the vagina is drawn as something which is part of the penis. This is connected to the act of subordinating women to men. This is related to the origin of Eve from Adam's ribs. The reason is usually used to justify the inferior status of women. Connotatively, there is an impression that the vagina is something whose vitality depends on the penis' vitality.

This subordination also corresponds to dependence. Dependence is one form of violence against women. In this painting, women are represented by the vagina which does not have any space other than that given by a penis. The title of the painting is *Pohon Kesukaanku / My Favorite Tree*, which stresses that the penis (the transformational shape of the tree) is the main object, and it places the vagina as a complementary object, a subordination that stresses that dependence.

The way of how Murniasihasih painted was open and very verbal which at a glance looks as if she only batters down the sexuality taboo. The message contained in the painting is not about battering down the taboo. The painting can be appreciated more as a spirit that accuses the patriarchal culture. This corresponds to her biographical background shows that she was marginalized. When she was still young, at the age of 7, she experienced something that made her very sad: being forced to have sexual intercourse by a man. This event influenced her thoughts and feeling up to the time when she was dying. Murniasihasih had been seriously wounded psychologically.

The painting title *Ketergantungkanku / My dependence* (2004) describes the position of women that are subordinated to men's. This painting was composed by the arrangement of two subject matters, a naked woman tied to a huge penis. In semiotics, the painting produces some meanings. The size of the penis that is bigger than the size of a woman's body means that man is superior, and a woman is something inferior. The woman's body becomes very small or it has no power in front of the superiority of the penis (see Figure 3).



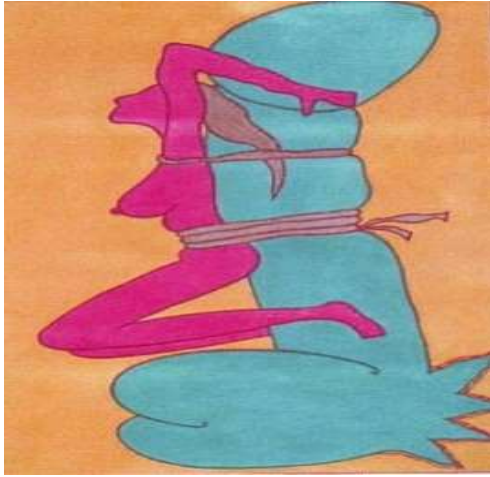


Fig. 3. *Ketergantungan / My Dependence* by I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasihasih (source: *Galeri Nava, Denpasar*)

Another meaning that can be produced from this painting is the meaning of subordination and dependence of women to men. A woman's body is the area where there is an abundance of man's power and domination. Something that corresponds to this painting is the external criterion, that is, Murniasihasih's biography in which it can be read that Murniasihasih had been ruined by men, including her family life that was not only broken but also hurt her very much.

Another thing is the fact that in the number of her paintings naked bodies are commonly seen interspersed with sharp, hard, objects or objects that hurt or can cause injuries such as onion, brush, saw, file, sickle, bottle, sword, etc. A naked body and the objects describe herself as a woman that had faced sexual violence for example, often painted as broken, wounded, open and vulnerable genitals. Around the genitals are sharp objects which spread over the place. Woman's bodies in these paintings are imprisoned by man's desire and power.

Several paintings that show this include *Action* (acrylic on canvas, 50 x 35 cm, 1996) that shows a naked woman on a table with her rear up where a strange creature is making love with her. The creature looks like a reptile. The size of its body is about four times from the woman. There is an impression that can immediately be understood in the painting. That is the woman's body is like an object that can be eaten by the strange creature which looks like a reptile. A reptile is a carnivore which in semiotics produces the connotation: a reptile is men's metaphor. A painting of a symbolic narrative that stresses the position of women as objects (See Figure 4).

Furthermore, *Trauma 2* (acrylic on canvas, 50 x 50 cm, 1998), depicts a woman's body as a sexual object of violence. This painting is composed of the fragments of the woman's body, namely waist, buttock, and thigh. It colored in light blue, the back part of the body in the rear up position. It can be seen in the condition of being touched or stabbed by a sharp object. From its structure, the sharp object looks more as a tool in carpentry: a file. In the background, a group of lines in a scattering pattern appears to center around the middle part of the woman's body.



Fig. 4. *Action* by I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasihasih (source: *Galeri Nadi, Jakarta*)

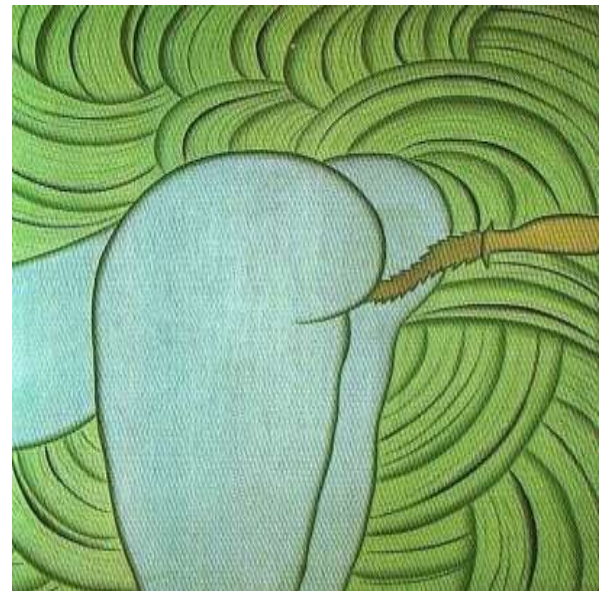


Fig. 5. *Trauma 2* by I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasihasih (source: *Galeri Nadi, Jakarta*)

This painting is a depiction of violence against women's bodies. In this context, the violence corresponds to her biographical background that certainly shows that she had violence twice. The woman's body in light blue seems to emphasize that a woman's body is in a state of a mental

frightening situation. The file can be read as a symbol of the act of violence. That tool of carpentry with toothy contour can be used as the symbol of the violent act. It is usually used to smoothen an object surface (wood or metal) immediately connected to violence. The background with the scattering pattern even emphasizes that the target of the violence is a woman's genitals. Genitals or vagina is a place to pour in violence (See Figure 5).

Marjorie Kramer in [9] classifies feminist painting into two, namely the unconscious and the conscious. Both explain the point of view of women. They are sympathetic to women and socially flawed. They communicate something that the artist put there compared to simply being completely subjective or expressing oneself. Marjorie Kramer further explained that works unconsciously express a feminist point of view can be men in a nude state, self-portraits, portraits, images of us, namely views of the kitchen. Feminist painting is sympathetic toward women in the sense they do not degrade or exploit us.

Feminist art is not art for the sake of art, art in a closed system of collectors by the supervisory board and several superstar artists. This art only talks to small groups who have something special, usually some friends of the artist who have learned the blurred art. Feminist art responds to people especially women who are communicated. Feminist art must be socially readable.

Based on the concept and scope as proposed by Marjorie Kramer, Murniasih's work can be classified as a feminist artwork. Based on the concept of feminism as stated in [7], feminism ideology can be divided into subordination, equality, and subjectivity construction.

Structurally women's subordination is described by feminists as patriarchy with derivative meanings consisting of households headed by men, mastery, and superiority of men over women. Subordination shows its most decisive face, which is limiting women only in certain activities. Subordination can also be seen from the assumptions which emerge in society, for example, women are irrational and emotional.

The following painting which openly shows the subject matter of subordination is *Thank you Father* (acrylic on canvas 60x40cm, 2003) by Murniasih (see figure 6). This painting is depicting an orange-colored woman sitting in a worshiping pose and in front of her standing upright a fresh blue figure that shaped like a phallus. In the background, there are red areas with blue horizontal stripes. The main focus of this painting, namely the thematization that lies in the father represented by a figure who transformed into a phallus. Thematization, as explained in the semiotic view, is the process of textual regulation which is expected by the reader in such a way that they can pay attention to the most important parts of the contents of the text, namely the theme [1].



Fig. 6. *Thank you, Father*, Murniasih (Source: Mondo Documentation)

In this painting, it is very clear that the woman is sitting cross-legged to worship the phallic figure. This painting can be interpreted openly as a subordination of women. The woman in this painting appears inferior before the phallus (father) who stands firmly in control of space and superiority. Falus (father) strengthened because it was depicted by a clear, fresh blue structure that stood firm with both legs open. The head of the phallus (father) is also depicted with a firm structure and pure white. The firm structure of the phallus in clean and fresh colors clearly shows that the phallus (father) is superior. Meanwhile, the woman becomes very inferior because they are depicted through orange body poses and gestures that sit worshiping in their backward position. This position shows that the woman is weak. Meanwhile, the phallus (father) is in a strong and stable position standing firmly at the center of the plane of the image. This is the subordination of women before men (father).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Since 1995, Murniasih had kept focusing her themes on sexual problems. These themes were motivated by the reality in her biography which shows that she experienced physical violence against her body: harassed sexually and divorced an act of violence that places a woman (Murniasih) as a sexual object for men. The difference in gender and male power that caused this violence has been represented by Murniasih in her paintings.

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