Sri Asih
A Heroine Between Cosmopolitan and Tradition

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ABSTRACT
According to Boneff, *Sri Asih* is the first superhero comic in Indonesia. Sri Asih is depicted as a female superhero in Javanese traditional dress and make-up, similar to heroic female characters in *wayang kulit* epics. Sri Asih has superpower and optimal intelligence. The depiction of Sri Asih is in contrast to the depiction of Nani, Sri Asih's alter-ego who is modern but not very sharp-witted. Furthermore, Indonesia's process in embracing the modern world at that time was also illustrated through various modern technology products such as airplanes, cruise ships, world metropolitan cities such as Singapore, New York, London, Macau. In the depiction of modernity, Sri Asih appears in traditional dress and make-up. This juxtapose illustrates the socio-cultural uncertainty when Indonesia wants to be modern, but also wants to establish its nationalist identity at the same time. The juxtapose also led to the replacement of Sri Asih comics with *wayangan* comics which later popularized Kosasih as a national comic artist. This paper analyzes the *Sri Asih* comics as an intersection of capitals, female agencies in comics and trend of Indonesian popular culture.

Keywords: Sri Asih, Agency, Cosmopolitan and Tradition, Indonesian Comics

1. INTRODUCTION

Sri Asih is the title of the Indonesian superheroine upcoming movie that will be released officially in 2021, after the movie *Gundala* remarked an extraordinary success. The success of *Gundala* has brought back the interest of the Indonesian people in Indonesian comic artists and has also been spotlighted by the media. In fact, this movie managed to attract many audiences. The two films are a form of transmedia of Indonesian comics that produced in different time. My attention was focused to the figure of Sri Asih, a unique superheroine in the comic books by R.A Kosasih (1919-2012). Boneff [1] mentioned that *Sri Asih* which published in 1954, was the first superhero comic published and the first Indonesian superhero comic that tells a story about the heroism of a woman. The alter ego of Sri Asih, Nani, is a modern young woman who dressed in modern western style and enjoying the comfort of modern technology. Nani will change into a traditional Javanese woman dressed complete with jeweler as found in a *wayang* female characters when she transformed into Sri Asih. Sri Asih's outfit and make-up appear to be out of place in the midst of modern conditions depicted on each panel and this shows a contrast to the new independent era. Sri Asih not only became a super heroine for Indonesian, but she rescued people in foreign countries such as Singapore, Macau, New York, and even London. As a superheroine in a deep heroic storyline, Sri Asih did not differentiate whom she helped with her superpower and extraordinary intelligence. Otherwise, when she became Nani, she was described as less intelligence women, who did not

involve in the heroism of Sri Asih. In addition, Kosasih's discomfiture came from his work as an illustrator when he had to create an Indonesian superhero at the comission of the publisher Melodie. Kosasih has never drew comics, he was an illustrator for the botanical garden in Bogor also he worked for the Department of Agriculture during the Dutch colonial period. This made Kosasih to take elements of heroism from American comics and earned him a great success. Amid the fame of *Sri Asih*'s comics, the situation changed because Melodie was pressured to stop the publication. *Sri Asih* was considered as lesser value by scholars who were anti-comics at that time. Comics written by Kosasih reveal the conflict of interest and power in Indonesian popular culture.

Several scholars have examined Indonesian comic books. Marcel Boneff has written a dissertation which was later printed into a book entitled *Komik Indonesia* [1], the prolific author Seno Gumira Ajidarma examines *Hans Jaladara's Panji Tengkorak* in his dissertation [2], a comic collector and researcher Henry Ismono wrote some of his research such as the discussion on *Cergam Medan* [3] and the biographies of major comic artists such as Man and Hasmi, and Ganes T.H. Boneff [1] wrote about Indonesian comics as a dissertation that examines various published comics, especially those related to the zeitgeist of the era and the existing socio-economic conditions at that time. Indonesian comic books have been overlooked since the 80s as Indonesian comic artists failed to promote the attentiveness of Indonesian comic books. The condition was exacerbated by the popularity of Japanese manga which introduces a new style of comics in Indonesia. However, since the massive

promotion of *Gundala* the movie which based on the *Gundala Putra Petir* comic by Hasmi, Indonesian comic books started to reclaim its popularity among Indonesians. Moreover, several articles began to appear on online media that reintroduce Indonesian comic artists which were popular in the 60s and 70s. Those years recognized as the golden era of Indonesian comic books which featured Indonesian comic artists such as Ganes T.H., Zaldy, Kosasih and Hans Jaladara [4], while the next generation who continue the passion of writing comic books such as Hasmi, Wid N.S., Djair and Teguh Santosa. Kosasih is also commemorated as the father of Indonesian comics because of his monumental works of *wayang* comics and superhero comics, namely Sri Asih and Siti Gahara [5].

As noted by Santos and Sihombing [6], the study of Indonesian comics always starts from the perspectives of history and nationalism. This also has something to do with research on Indonesian comic conducted by Boneff. As the first researcher that comprehensively research the world of Indonesian comics explained from a historical perspective that encompassed the world of printing, printing in his time and his dissertation had a major influence on comic researchers. Boneff concluded that Indonesian comics originated in the Dutch colonial period, namely *Si Put On* (1936) by Kho Wen Gie and discovered its heyday in the 60s and 70s. Moreover, Boneff also mentioned that superhero comics in Indonesia are imitating American comics [1]. Sri Asih comics which first appeared in the 50s also claimed as the impersonation of an American superheroine comic, namely *Wonder Woman* (1941). Rather than approaching the subject of Indonesian comic from its historicity, recent scholarship has shifted focus towards broader intangible contexts such as the notion of comic as a genre. In return, this condition gave way to the discovery and development of various other research topics. Kusno [7] examined *Si Put On* comic strip as a form of resistance to colonial rule. He also identified that there is a desire to be Indonesian in the silence of Chinese identity in Pak Tungtung comic strip published in Medan during the New Order era. The new viewpoint in analyzing comics is from the perspective of capital or publishing businesses such as Melodie, Firdausi [8] explains how Kosasih was obliged to change the superheroine theme on his works to *wayang* because it was deemed not appreciated by educators. Eventually, Kosasih received an award for his *wayang* comic works, and he is known as a *wayang* comic artist to this day. Various interesting topics can be found in the works of Seno Gumira Ajidarma. The essays on comics in the book *Tawa itu Bahaya* [9], comics are studied as one of the interesting thematic genres and spaces. Lilawati Kurnia [10] examined the representation of female characters in Zaldy's romance comics. Meanwhile, transmedia of *Sri Asih* comic had been done long before the remake of *Sri Asih* film which planned to be released in 2021. Released in 1954, the original *Sri Asih* film directed by Turino Djunaidi and Tan Sing Hwat. Turino also plays the main character along with Mimi Mariani as Sri Asih.

This paper will examine the representation of a woman who can be said to be the agent of change through the close reading of five *Sri Asih* comics entitled: *Sri Asih in Surabaya* [11]*, Sri Asih in Singapore* [12]*, Sri Asih vs. The Thousand Eyes* [13]*, Sri Asih in Macau* [14] and *Sri Asih Helping Sambas* [15]. The five comics by Kosasih tell the adventure of Sri Asih, who gets her superpower from Dewi Asih. Nani, the Alter Ego, only has to say the name of the goddess and she will transform into Sri Asih. The superpower possessed by Sri Asih can repel all kinds of sharp weapons, even heavy military weapons are unable to beat her. Sri Asih as a superheroine does not forgive criminals who hurt fellow humans, especially women. Sri Asih does not hesitate to chase her enemies, even abroad. As Nani, Sri Asih's alter ego is depicted as coming from a wealthy family, so she can travel to London and many other places. Nani is not depicted as having an official job and is seen often observing social conditions at that time, especially the existence of organized crime. The depiction of the cities in Sri Asih's adventure manifests Kosasih's efforts to show the impression of modernity as well as the various transportation used by Nani. Abroad, Sri Asih does not look strange in her traditional *wayang* clothes, as well as Nani is depicted as being able to move freely and adapt to local conditions. Abroad, Sri Asih helps Indonesians as well as local people who needed help. As an Indonesian woman, Sri Asih maintains her distinctive character. When the Sri Asih comic books became more popular, Melodie as the publisher decided to stop publishing it. Melodie was forced by Indonesian schoolteachers who felt that comics did not meet the educational value at that time. Kosasih was asked to make *wayang* comics, even though Kosasih had no experience in this field, he looked for interviewees and asked the *dalang* to be able to understand *wayang* stories. The *wayang* comics written by Kosasih turned out to be adored by its readers and even got good resonance from schoolteachers as *wayang* comics were considered represent the national culture. It seems that Sri Asih's superheroine identity construction cannot survive the hegemony of the educators and investors. Therefore, Sri Asih as a comic book will be examined as an intersection between women's representation, hegemony in the business world and trends in the world of Indonesian comics.

2. SRI ASIH AMID CULTURAL HEGEMONY

Kosasih has no experience working as a comic artist because he worked as a plant and animal illustrator at the Department of Agriculture during the Dutch colonial period. A small ad in the newspaper by Melodie, a publisher company, caught Kosasih's interest and he tried to apply to become a comic artist. Melodie recruited Kosasih and ordered him to make Indonesian superhero comics. Kosasih has no experience drawing comics, to fulfill the order given by Melodie, he tried to imitate American superhero comics such as Superman, Wonder

Woman and many more. Referring to those American comics, Kosasih began to work on the first Indonesian superhero comic, but as to keep the nationalism attitude which was promoted at that time, he chose a *wayang* profile for a woman as the first superheroine in Indonesian comics. Melodie, based in Bandung, was one of the first publishers to publish comics in the 50s and was able to make comic artists like Kosasih and John Lo famous. In its early days, Melodie published comics as a comic magazine named *Madjalah Komik* which published twice a month, then to satisfy readers Melodie published *Aneka Komik* which published three times a month [3]. Apart from Melodie, there are dozens of small publishers in Jakarta that have published Indonesian comics. Boneff suspects that several investors have made it possible for these publishers to flourish. However, the proliferation of publishers, according to Boneff, did not make the world of Indonesian comics expand because publishers collapsed in a short time due to unfair competition. In the late 60s, Melodie had to compete with Maranatha, a publisher company which also based in Bandung. Maranatha was originally a bookstore, the owner Marcus Hadi tried the comic genre by publishing superhero comics in the 60s such as Kus Bram's *Laba-Laba Merah* [8]. Meanwhile, Melodie had not published comics for about 2 years (1967-1968) and Kosasih published his comics through Cahaya Kumala, a Jakarta based publisher.

Melodie has a very strong influence on comic artists because comics are made at the request of the publisher. Only comic artists with big names like Ganes Th can decide their own comic themes. At that time, Melodie always referred to the trend of American comics for its own comic. This trend can also be found in Kosasih's second comic, which was published simultaneously, namely Siti Gahara, a superheroine but with Middle Eastern nuances. Siti Gahara is more metaphysical as it dwelled on the genies and criminals' theme along with the use of Middle Eastern costumes. Criticism arose because Siti Gahara's story was considered to be superstitious [3] and it was discontinued. Therefore, the *Sri Asih* comic was chosen, because it became a nationalist icon that was being promoted nine years after the Proclamation of Independence by Indonesia's first President. Besides, readers also prefer *Sri Asih*, so the comics was reprinted. Apart from Sri Asih, Melodie also asked John Lo to make a superheroine named Putri Bintang which published in the same year. Even in Kosasih's work, Sri Asih once met Putri Bintang in New York and the two superheroines worked together to defeat their enemy, Seribu Mata, which headquartered in New York. According to Ismono, Melodie has made Indonesian comics flourish with its courage to print and publish comics. Melodie encouraged other publishers to recruit Indonesian comic artists and publish their works. The triumph of Indonesian comics cannot be separated from the role and initiative of Melodie in supporting comics, despite criticism and even opposing pressure. When the demand for superhero comics got higher, Melodie did not hesitate to place advertisements in the

mass media looking for new comic artists. Through the advertisements Melodie recruited talented new comic artists like Kosasih. Beside publishing superhero comics, Melodie also published Tarzan-style comics, so that the character Nina, John Lo's *Gadis Rimba* was born along with Sri Asih. The Tarzan-style story seems to be favored by children, so the character Roban appears from John Lo's comic entitled *Pemuda Rimba*. The name Roban refers to Alas Roban, a forest in Batang Regency which in folklore is said owned by Roban. In the Dutch colonial period, the highway connecting Batang and Semarang was made through the forest which was considered haunted.

Melodie is the first publisher that published comics in the form of magazines [3], previously they were published only in comic strips. After that, Melodie published *Sri Asih* and they were recognized as the pioneer of the publication comic books. However, Sri Asih's popularity turned out to be problematic due to the hegemony of the schoolteachers who were against comics. Comics were considered dangerous for the younger generation at that time. This assumption was circulating in those years based on the writings of Fredrick Wertham [16], a German psychiatrist who stayed in America since 1954. Wertham wrote about the dangers of comics because it would make young people imitate criminals due to violent scenes in comics. The wave of anti-comics has swept the world as well as Indonesia, so that educators, literary critics, parents and many others have blasphemed comics that have become popular reading as well as a new literary genre [17]. Blasphemy is not only directed at comics but also at other popular culture products that are considered to have no value compared to high culture. However, comics are still the best sellers, especially from the growth of various reading rentals in major cities in Indonesia and its affordable price. Thus, the door was opened to develop popular culture, especially when comic fans appeared who initially only had a hobby of collecting comic books, but over time became fanzines. In Indonesia, this situation influenced the old comics to be expensive. Something similar can be seen from the development of comic collector communities in various big cities that hold various conventions or meetings among themselves. It showed that the comic subculture has developed in Indonesia. The old comics fans communities are not only consisting of comic collectors from older generation, but also the younger generation who were initially interested in manga and anime, they began looking for Indonesian comics and joined various community forums on social media. It is not surprising that *Sri Asih*'s comics transmedia to the silver screen was conducted in the 60s and then now it has returned to be the film that the younger generation has been waiting for.

The success of comic artists in presenting superheroes is a story that we commonly read, but behind that, in the early years when comics became popular, comic artists did not own the copyright of their works. The most famous superhero comic, *Superman*, by its comic artists,

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, sold for only $135 and they signed a document stating the rights to their work were given to the publisher [18]. This also happened to Indonesian comic artists like Kosasih, or the next generation like Hasmi, they sold the rights to the publisher. Because of that, most comic artists do not have the original comic manuscripts. At that time, comic artists were of course unfamiliar with the creative industry. *Superman*, for example, exploded in the market and in line with that, the transmedia of Superman into films, merchandise, and many more had made copyright holders richer. Film industries like Warner Brothers are making huge profits by making superhero movies. The authors of *Superman* then filed a copyright case at the court and were lucky because the court won (1975) their case so that their lives became better. The circumstances of comic artists today are much better than their predecessors, but the issue of copyright is still an obstacle to the comic world. This issue also affects how the theme and the market tastes are being controlled, resulting in the fans being forced to accept whatever the company make. On the other hand, the demand on comic genre from the investors and business owners made the world of comics popular again among younger generation and the continuity of Indonesian comics can be achieved.

In Indonesia, the *Gundala* transmedia from comics to the big screen in 2019 has revived the fever of old comics in the society, not only the old generation but the younger generation also looking for their identity in the heroism of *Gundala si Putra Petir* who was inspired by the story of Ki Ageng Selo sang Penangkap Petir. *Gundala* by Harya Suraminta, published in 1967, is the second generation of Indonesian superheroes who are still oriented towards American superheroes, and is a work that has received a decent reward from the publisher. Meanwhile, comic fans welcome each edition of *Gundala* comics (23 volumes made up to 1982) with joy. Today's old comic fans not only watch the *Gundala* film, but also buy its various merchandise. Even though the comic copyright is owned by Bumilangit Corporation, they allow young comic artists to work on the remakes. Young comic artists' products can open opportunities for the younger generation to bring back the glory of comics in the past. Bumilangit Corporation also markets various Sri Asih merchandise in 2021 after previously they launched Gundala merchandise, including the series of postage stamps of Gundala, Sri Asih and Si Buta Dari Gua Hantu.

3. SUPERHEROINE SRI ASIH AS AGENCY FOR CHANGE

Sri Asih is depicted as a superhero who is fearless, always ready to help but will not forgive her enemies. Meanwhile, her alter ego, Nani, a girl who comes from Surabaya, is described as a girl from a wealthy family and often travels. Nani does not work in the office or at home, she is only described as enjoy hanging out with her friends and often going out with her parents. Nani's economic and social condition is certainly an advantage

because she does not need to work and only needs to disguise herself as an ordinary and "stupid" woman. The adjective "stupid" is often found to describe Nani who looks innocent and does not know anything. This depiction is certainly not suitable for a woman who comes from a rich family. However, Kosasih wanted to present this juxtapose further to highlight Sri Asih's abilities as a versatile superhero. Comics can present various representations that allow the creation of different identities of a superhero. A superhero is usually identified with a man but in the case of Thor, in the 2014 comic book Thor # 1, the Myölnir hammer can be lifted by a woman [19] indicating that gender identity in comics is very fluid. Cocca [20] also discussed how the changes in the Wonder Woman character, who were originally made with male gaze, become a subject who has independent and non-gender power. This needs to be highlighted because the strength of a superheroine is sometimes considered a threat that threatens male dominance, even though this power indicates that rigid gender division is no longer valid. The fluidity of identity in popular culture is an unavoidable reality and this is precisely what attracts the younger generation. The rigid role divisions of the past can no longer be sustained in superheroine roles.

Wonder Woman is said to have the characteristics of Greek gods such as a face that looks like Aphrodite, wisdom like Athena, extraordinary strength like Hercules, and speed like Mercury. However, Diana, the real name of Wonder Woman, as the royal princess of Amazona, and also referring to the ruler of the jungle in mythology who became a feminist icon also gives a clearer nuance. Sri Asih also has the characteristics of Wonder Woman's persona such as extraordinary strength, intelligence, and wisdom. Sri Asih, however, was not made based on male gaze, because it does not have a sexy image or sex appeal in this superheroine figure. The costumes worn by Sri Asih do not emphasize the beauty or the perfection of her body, indeed Kosasih seems to be avoiding this and it seems that he is trying hard not to get caught up in bad comic imagery. As an ordinary woman, Nani is also depicted as not highlighting her beauty, but the stupid predication that accompanies Nani is still a patriarchal perspective towards women. The innocent Nani is being said to be unattractive to men, which was shown in the episode *Sri Asih Menolong Sambas*. Sambas, a young journalist, was curious about Sri Asih's power and beauty. Sambas observes this superheroine phenomenon when Sri Asih supports a fallen plane with her hands. Sambas once met Nani who was suspected of being Sri Asih, but because of her innocent look, Sambas put aside his suspicions. Sri Asih is depicted as not being too interested in Samba, yet she secretly cares about him. That can be seen when Sambas and Mimin, Sri Asih's friend, were knocked into the middle of the sea, Sri Asih flew to save him. Sri Asih is a humanist superheroine and according to her name, Asih, she shows a loving character towards anyone.

Sri Asih's partiality for her people is seen in the episode Sri Asih chasing the leopard gang that kidnaps a beautiful young woman in *Sri Asih di Singapura* or *Sri Asih in Singapore*, continued with *Sri Asih di Macau* or *Sri Asih in Macau*. The story begins when Nani kidnapped by an accomplice of the Macan Tutul gang while on a ship from Surabaya to Jakarta. Sri Asih's interrogation of the group resulted in a clue that the gang was involved in women trafficking. Sri Asih, who immediately wanted to investigate it, flew to Singapore. Even though Sri Asih was able to destroy the plot in Singapore and free the women who had been held captive. The leader of this gang, Macan Tutul, escaped and fled to Macau. Sri Asih knew that she had to finish off Macan Tutul in Macau, so that he would no longer operate the trafficking syndicate. Therefore, as Nani, Sri Asih went to Macau to find out Macan Tutul's exact location. In Macau, Sri Asih faced Macan Tutul's men who came from various nations, which was skillfully illustrated by Kosasih through different costumes. When Sri Asih finally confronted Macan Tutul, she managed to beat and knocked him out, his costume was opened and revealed that Macan Tutul has white skin. By showing the real identity of Macan Tutul, Kosasih again emphasized Sukarno's anti-West policy at that time. On the other hand, Sri Asih's gesture, that sided with women and opposed objectification against women, was common at that time. This can be seen from the feminist movement in Indonesia that has started to exist. It also can be seen from the establishment of women's mass organizations under NU and Muhammadiyah called Muslimat and Aisyiyah. Perkumpulan Istri Sedar, founded in the 1920s, has spread the spirit of early feminism, influencing the emergence various women's mass organizations until the formation of Gerwis in 1950.

Unlike its predecessors that designated their organizational values on the base of women's nature or *kodrat*, Gerwis strived to encourage women to move away from that very concept of *kodrat* [21]. Gerwis is a unit of 6 nationalist and leftist women's mass organizations. In 1954, Gerwis got closer to the center of power and changed its name to Gerwani, which was affiliated with *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (Indonesian Communist Party). SK Trimurti decided to leave Gerwis because she felt that Gerwis was not following its original purpose. The ideas of women's freedom and equal rights were widespread in those years, until then Gerwani was scapegoated and stigmatized as a banned organization when the Suharto regime came to power. Whereas Gerwani as a women's organization fights women's domestic issues such as polygamy, because they feel that women are capable and should get a bigger role in politics. According to Wirienga [22], Gerwani still combines the issue of motherhood with the role of women as workers and citizens, so it might be far-fetched that people judge Gerwani as a radical women's organization as suggested by the New Order regime. Feminist ideas advocated by various women's mass organizations at that time may have also permeated Kosasih's work, so that heroism no longer belongs only

to man but also to woman. In this case, educators assess comics, not only in terms of visual comics which are considered uneducated, but also in terms of "dangerous ideas" in comics. Comic was seen as an arena of violence and crime, which being feared to be imitated by younger generation. Nonetheless, when we look at the tendency of heroes in early Indonesian superhero comics, they are strong women. Then, it can be identified that the representation of a woman's courage and courage was an important agency for change in the early years of the establishment of the Republic of Indonesia.

4. CONCLUSION

Sri Asih's heroism shows that a woman can actually have superhero abilities, so she can beat any male criminals and cannot be hurt by any weapon. This invisible superpower is one of the characteristic imitations of American superheroes. This imitation is not merely a plagiarism but is accompanied by appropriation which makes Sri Asih as a character can be seen as an Indonesian superheroine. The world of Indonesian comics as well as in America and other countries began with the role of a publisher such as Melodie. On the one hand, the hegemony of publishers can be seen in selecting themes and at the same time recruiting talented comic artists, but on the other hand publishers are also supporters of Indonesian comic when they continue to produce comics which at that time were considered uneducated and inferior. This has resulted in the present generation being able to read those old comics. Through the regular publication of comic magazines as well as books, publishers have revived the imagination and creativity of comic artists as well as developing the world of comic fans in Indonesia. This can be seen when publishers fulfill the varied desires of their readers by publishing comics in other genres such as romance comics, Tarzan-style comics, horror comics and even humorous comics. Indonesian comics as a genre should be included in mainstream studies of Indonesian literature and discussed as well as established written and oral storytelling genres.

Sri Asih as an Indonesian superheroine shows partiality for women through two episodes that describe her exposing the crime of women trafficking. This can be seen as a representation of the situation that the Republic of Indonesia had to face at that time by gradually improving itself. Indonesia is trying to become one of the countries in the international world that is the same as other countries in the modern world. On the other hand, as a new nation and state, Indonesia must struggle to maintain its nationalism. Unlike Wonder Woman who has several weapons, Sri Asih does not use any weapons; she only relies on her own fists. As a woman Sri Asih does not rely on help from anywhere, even from fellow superheroines, this independence is the hallmark of Sri Asih. As a woman, Sri Asih used her superpower to fight against injustice and crime, so it is not surprising that Sri Asih was popular and got a lot of fans at that time. Unfortunately, this comic was considered not educative,

even though Sri Asih's courage and self-reliance would inspire women in her time and perhaps even today.

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