

# Subjectivity of Women in the Work of Seno Gumira Adjidarma *Drupadi* (A reconstruction)

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**Abstract**—This paper discusses the reconstruction of *Drupadi's* character as a strategy to present the subjectivity of women in the novel *Drupadi* by Seno Gumira Adjidarma. *Drupadi* is the retelling or the renewal of the epic *Mahabharata* which focuses on *Drupadi* as the female character in the story. As the representation of women, *Drupadi* in the novel *Drupadi* is presented with a new construction differ from the previous construction in *Mahabharata* both the Indian and the Javanese version (*Serat Baratajuda*). The method used in this study is the literary review with feminist perspective reading, and the application of feminist literary criticism *reading as a woman*. In its process, structural analysis is also applied to reveal gender issues within the narrative structure of the novel and the proof of *Drupadi* as the leading character of the story. The result of the study shows that the novel *Drupadi* is reconstructing *Drupadi* from *Serat Baratajuda* and retracing it back to the Indian version of *Mahabharata*. This reconstruction also shows a repudiation of women's weakness in the story of *Mahabharata* both Indian and Javanese versions by presenting the subjectivity of women through *Drupadi's* character, as well as denunciations over father/male lineage and myths of virginity.

**Keywords**—*drupadi; gender; feminist criticism; reconstruction; subjectivity*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Classical/ancient Indian literary spans are broadly divided into some periods. Most of the time in those periods of literary works, women are depicted to be in weak positions. Women are depicted as having no freedom. Even though at this period, women begin to be taken into account in social and political stand, discrimination is still concrete. Women in mythology and ancient Indian literature are represented by a submissive image. In mythology as well as the writing of ancient Indian literature, the practices of female domination are seen from the control of female sexuality through the practice of polyandry, arranged marriage, *niyoga*, and others. By still requiring virginity, polyandry which seems to recognize women's freedom and power over their own sexuality is in fact only part of the patriarchal norm in controlling women's power.

One illustration of the oppression of women in the writing of ancient Indian literature and mythology is *Drupadi's* character in the *Mahabharata* story. *Drupadi* represents the

oppressed women who are trying to get out of their oppression. As a woman, she is not seen as an independent subject/individual. This representation still appears despite the adaptation of *Mahabharata* into other cultures, such as Java (*kakawin*, *serat*, and *parwa*). *Drupadi* is a symbol of the oppression of a woman to fulfill the moral rules imposed upon her as a daughter, a wife, and a mother. While in the context of Indonesian literature today, *Drupadi* is presented again in novel *Drupadi* written by Seno Gumira Adjidarma.

The novel *Drupadi*, a work of Seno Gumira Adjidarma is a retelling of the story *Mahabharata*. The novel was written within a long-time span from the 1980s to the year it was published in 2017. Instead of showing the story of male heroism that is inherent in the story *Mahabharata*, Seno Gumira Adjidarma chose the focus of epic storytelling on one of the female characters who experienced oppression, namely *Drupadi*.

When the issue of polygamy is highly discussed in contemporary literary sphere in Indonesia, Seno Gumira Adjidarma raised the polyandry issue which is not exactly the common culture found in Indonesian society. This polyandry issue turns to become strength of its own as if to voice the oppression of women (*Drupadi*) in the story of *Mahabharata*. The novel *Drupadi* seems wanting to show the new construction of *Drupadi* figure as a representation of oppressed women in voicing their injustice *by addressing the injustice of gender* which appear in the *writing of Mahabharata*, as well as re-questioning male heroism (*male heroine*) in it

The study of *Drupadi* characters has been done quite a lot. Although specifically, the scientific study of the novel *Drupadi* the work of Seno Gumira Adjidarma has not been found, but some similar studies have been done by Gosh, S.M. & Singh, R. [1], Khrišnaveni [2], and Stanley, L. [3]. Their focus is upon how women's depictions are featured in adaptations *Mahabharata* that are written by women (gynocritics). Therefore, the three works can be said to be a keen interpretation of effort by seeing women from the eyes of a woman. Differ from those researches, this paper will reveal the reconstruction of *Drupadi's* figure and female subjectivity shown in the novel *Drupadi* by Seno Gumira Adjidarma.

## II. METHOD

To answer that problem, the structural analysis method will be applied using feminist perspective through feminist literary critic *reading as a woman* from Jonathan Culler and Elaine Showalter [4,5]. This reading is inseparable from the gender analysis of the gender theory from Ann Oakley and RW Connell and the female subjectivity by Luce Irigaray [6-8]. Meanwhile, in its operation, the structural theory of Tzvetan Todorov is applied to help reading the gender issues in the narrative structure of the novel that initially weakens the female voice in the origin of the story (*Mahabharata* both in Indian and Javanese versions) to strengthen women in the novel [9].

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Narrative Structure of *Drupadi*: A Reconstruction

Narrative structure of the novel *Drupadi* displays the dominance of Drupadi as the subject that set the story in motion. Considered from the plot and flow of the story there are 12 main functions of the plot that introduces Drupadi as the main character. Out of the 12 main functions of the plot in this novel, eight functions (66.7%) display Drupadi's portrayal as a subject in the story and four functions (33.3%) portray Drupadi as the object in the story. All events in this novel are driven by Drupadi's character and her mobility in the story is central to the battleground of Bharatayuda.

Judging from her characterization, Drupadi's character in the novel is described as brave, intelligent, assertive, and resistant regardless of her gender that has been stereotyped as passive, submissive, weak, and just a loyal companion for her husband. These characteristics support Drupadi to be resistant to the oppression that existed considering that Drupadi lives amid patriarchal society. This is reflected from her symbolized portrayal as the birth of the lotus flower.

According to Paramadhyaksa, the lotus in the eyes of Hinduism and Buddhism is interpreted as a sacred flower that has many virtues [10]. This picture symbolizes the lotus as something that can separate itself from all the dirt surrounding its life. The presence of Drupadi as a woman who was born from the lotus indicates that from the beginning Drupadi in this novel is a subject who is trying to escape from the patriarchal environment that encapsulates her. Drupadi's character in the novel is described as an individual unaffected by patriarchal thoughts.

The mentioned depiction is different from what exists in the story of *Mahabharata*. From the description of the plot and characterization of Drupadi, there appears to be a rejection of the conventional Drupadi discourse in the Java version of *Mahabharata* (*Serat Baratayuda*) and restoration of the figure of Drupadi in her original story (*Mahabharata* Indian version refers to version P. Lal) [11]. Both Indian version and Java version of *Mahabharata* (*Serat Baratayuda*) are focusing the storytelling on the Bharatayuda war so that Drupadi only becomes a small part and not the center of the story. Thus, judging by the plot and characterization, this text wishes to present a new construction of the Drupadi as the subject, as the dominant one, and as the one to be heard. If to be illustrated in

a diagram, the reconstruction of Drupadi's character in this novel is as follows.

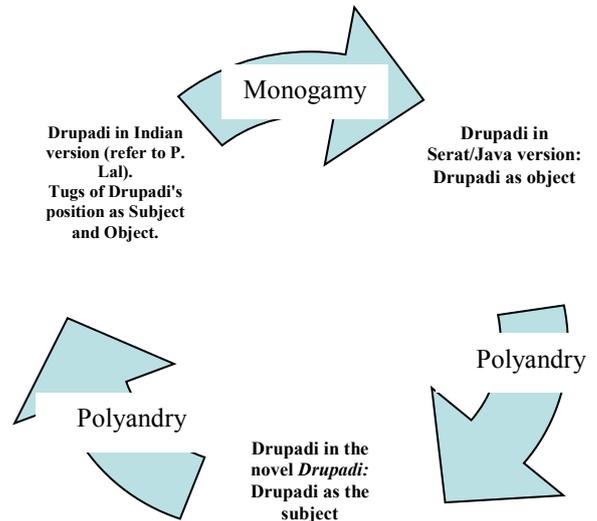


Fig. 1. The reconstruction of Drupadi's character in this novel.

This novel reconstructs the portrayal of Drupadi in *Serat Baratayuda* that previously presented as an object and this novel restore Drupadi to her original figure in the Indian version (referring to version P. Lal) [11]. However, the restoration of Drupadi's depictions to her origin is not intact. Drupadi in the Indian version is still depicted in the eyes of patriarchy while in this novel the recognition of Drupadi as the subject appears to be borrowed from Drupadi's focalizations by the narrator. This means that the presence of Drupadi does not come from the patriarchal eyes which also means that Drupadi's portrayal as the subject in this novel removes the tug of subject-object discourse that is in the origin of the story.

### B. Fulfillment of Drupadi's Subjectivity: Polyandry as a Reversal of Male Domination

By presenting Drupadi's character as a subject in its narrative structure, the novel presents Drupadi's subjectivity constructions as a representation of women who had not previously appeared, both in *Mahabharata* (Indian version) as well as in *Serat Baratayuda* (Java version). That construction is built through the inward and the outward aspect of Drupadi figure as female. Drupadi's inward aspect manifests awareness of the dominance of men who oppressed her and the awareness of her autonomy. Those awarenesses then led to the existence of Drupadi's outward aspect in the form of efforts to fulfill subjectivity as women both in the private space and in the public/social space.

Drupadi's character in *Drupadi* is presented as a subject who has an awareness or her autonomy. Drupadi is a woman who experiences both physical and nonphysical oppression. However, in the novel *Drupadi*, Drupadi character does not take it as such. She is fully aware of the oppression she experiences herself. This awareness is also what keeps her autonomous and fight for her subjectivity.

In this novel, Drupadi is described as a woman who married into a polyandry relation (marriage between one woman with many man). As a counter-act from polygamy, polyandry can be interpreted as a form of women's liberation of female subjectivity if indeed the desire for polyandry is a desire derived within women, as do most polygamy which is derived from the desire of men. However, in a patriarchal society it becomes a form of hegemony for women. Instead of giving women access of authority over their own bodies, polyandry in patriarchal culture becomes another form of oppression for women, the politic of man in the name of woman.

However, Drupadi in this novel is portrayed a vocal about it. Although the polyandry decision was not originally coming from her, Drupadi in this novel understands how to return to her maternal body and gain subjectivity in her polyandry marriage. Drupadi's marriage relationship with Pandawa is represented by Drupadi's relation with Yudhistira, Bima, and Arjuna. While Drupadi's relationship with Nakula and Sadewa is not so highlighted in this novel.

If analyzed as a whole, power relation in polygamous marriage of Drupadi with Pandawa represented by her relations with Yudhistira. This due to the fact that among the five Pandawa the highest authority is placed on Yudhistira. Therefore, if Drupadi managed to reverse her power back and took over her autonomy from Yudhistira, the power structure of Pandawa's dominance is definitely can be owned by Drupadi.

It appears that Drupadi in this novel is portrayed to be occupying the highest power of hierarchy in regard to her marriage with the Pandawa. Meanwhile, Yudhistira has power over his four younger brothers. The polyandry marriage which in the patriarchal society used to dominate women was successfully reversed by Drupadi in this novel. This is done by the depiction of Drupadi as a wife who became the controller of her five husbands. This relation of this marriage not only shows who is more influential to others but also how relationships between parties can create their own subjectivity.

As a woman, Drupadi show "tolerance" that is a quality does not own by men. It is as Irigaray says in *When Our Lips Speak Together* (1980) that the female body possesses a tolerance that is absent in patriarchal culture. It is this tolerance that enables the female body to accept other beings outside of themselves, such as the acceptance when they conceive, gives birth, breastfeeds, and even when they make love. Tolerance is the way for Drupadi to accept the reality of her polyandry marriage and use it to equally obtain subjectivity with her husband. Drupadi can avenge her spouses and her husbands can obtain the throne of Hastina.

Efforts to meet the subjectivity of Drupadi in the public/social space is inseparable from the achievement of subjectivity in the private space. In other words, Drupadi's subjectivity in the private sphere has a major effect on the achievement of subjectivity in the public/social sphere.

Drupadi in this novel uses her body and sexuality as a strategy to gain explicit power in public/social space. The return of Drupadi's character to her sexuality and her body can signal that as a female figure Drupadi is creating her own

language. This is in accordance with Irigaray's view that women can create their own language by utilizing the clitoral/vaginal libinal organization (aspect of sexuality) to regain their power [12]. All this time, women experience various forms of castration: sexual, social, and semiotic. Women's bodies are only used as fantasy object for men who are always measuring using their male parameters. That what causes women lose what Irigaray calls the "mystery" in the female body [12]. Therefore, by returning women to their bodies (including their sexuality) when women explore different areas of their bodies, women can think, use, words, and perform actions against the phallus so that subjectivity can be recovered. Attempts to attain subjectivity through sexuality are apparent in Drupadi's decision not to bun her hair until her revenge to Kurawa (symbol of injustice) is avenged. Drupadi in this novel uses parts of her body to assert her authority over a body that has been insulted and abused as a woman.

In this novel, Drupadi is portrayed as women with the beauty of the Goddess. Drupadi's hair is an inseparable part of the intrinsic beauty that all men expect (male fantasy symbol). Hair can also mean a symbol of the mind for Hindu women. In Hinduism, to show the sanctity of women to roll their hair up as they enter the temple as a form of respect for God. Unraveled hair is interpreted as a state of being filled with lust, anger and unholy, Ananda [13]. This rule seems very patriarchal. Hair roll means the restraint of women's mind.

Drupadi's character in the novel shows her awareness of her power over such a sacred body part. She then used her hair as a way to gain subjectivity. Drupadi's decision is also complimented by her oath of not having sexual intercourse with her five husbands until her goal is achieved. She is well aware that beauty is the most desirable thing for all men including her five husbands. She uses her body parts that are very influential for her beauty in order to break the male fantasy by letting her hair not be tied and not washed for years [14].

The choice of Drupadi to not bun and not shampoo her hair before all Kurawa die so that she can wash her hair with the blood of Dursasana signify that Drupadi did not want to meet the expectations of beauty of all men including her five husbands. This can also be interpreted as a form of liberation of the mind over the restraint of the female body.

In this novel is illustrated that in *Balairung* (hall), Drupadi's hair which is not buned and not shampooed for years, hanging on the floor, "Drupadi wags her long hair almost touching the floor." [14], from this illustration appears over her body.

In addition, Drupadi's subjectivity to her sexuality in the novel was also shown when Drupadi was harassed the second time by Kichaka's character from the Kingdom of Wirata. The indifference of Yudhistira makes Drupadi realized that she must save herself. Her body and beauty that men desperately desired is used as a tool to persuade Bima (Abilawa) to help her to kill Kichaka's character [14]. From the previous description, it appears that Drupadi deliberately uses her sexuality to achieve her goal. This means that Drupadi obtained subjectivity over her body and sexuality. With Drupadi's return to owning the autonomy of her body and her sexuality in this novel, it signifies that she creates her language as a woman.

### C. Pancawala: Demystification of Male/Father's Lineage and Virgin Myth

In *Speculum of The Other Woman* (1985), Irigaray explains that in a patriarchal life, phallogocentric is very dominating [15]. Phallogocentric is the restoration of all this to the law of the father and a child is always referred to the father. This father lineage then distorts the existence of the mother, so do not be surprised if the mother in patriarchal society becomes alienated (dereliction). Castration of mother's right is a form of mastery of female subjectivity.

The issue is ignored in this novel by presenting a character named Pancawala. From polyandry marriage performed by Drupadi in this novel, born a child named Pancawala. In the thought of phallogocentric both in monogamous marriage and polygamous, although born from the womb of a woman, the child is always attributed to the father (male), for example Pandawa son of Pandu, Kurawa son of Destarastra, and others. By presenting the figure of Pancawala in Drupadi's polyandry marriage where the exact biological father among the five are not clear, Pandawa helped Drupadi in this novel to get her subjectivity. The Pancawala character in the novel does not only belong to his father but also a possession of his mother. This explains that from this polyandry marriage Drupadi gains an acknowledged powers (explicit) over their son (Pancawala). That authority is at once undermined the phallogocentric, as a "knife" that castrate the subjectivity of women. It also means that from this polyandry marriage, Drupadi gains her subjectivity as a mother.

The presence of Pancawala in this novel is also a marker of the loss of virginity *point* charged to Drupadi in the story of *Mahabharata*. Drupadi's character in the story *Mahabharata* (Indian version refers to P.Lal version) is portrayed as a figure whose gets her virginity back after each intercourse with one of her five husbands. That way, the five husbands of Drupadi will still get her virginity even though she has five husbands. By presenting the unknown biological father figure for Pancawala from the five Pandawa, this novel seemed to dismiss the rule of virginity which is also a form of oppression for female sexuality. The myth of virginity is also a shackle created by the patriarchal system of society to rule women. Drupadi through this no-virginity bound of polyandry marriage finds her subjectivity over both of her sexuality and the lineage of her son, that the status of her son is not only known as the son of Pandawa but the son of Drupadi with Pandawa.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Drupadi in the story of *Mahabharata* represents women who live in a tight patriarchal society. Drupadi in ancient Indian literary works became an active individual who escapes from oppression even though in reality She remained dominated by patriarchal values. The dominance of patriarchy strengthens when this story has been adapted into Java version (*Kakawin* and *Serat Bharatayuda*). In this Javanese version Drupadi becomes the representation of women who are bound to the Javanese society's philosophy of life. She is portrayed as the ideal figure of a wife who serves and accompanies a man (husband). This portrayal then undergoes a reconstruction in the novel *Drupadi*. Women in the novel *Drupadi* are presented as a

conscious subject who actively do various efforts to obtain their subjectivity.

This Drupadi's reconstruction form in the novel *Drupadi* can be seen from the narrative structure of the novel. Characterization and distribution in the novel shows the existence of a new construction featuring Drupadi as the subject of the story. Drupadi in this novel is reappeared as a smart, courageous, assertive, and resistant over her oppression to gain her subjectivity as a woman.

The subjectivity of Drupadi in this novel is constructed through the inner aspect and the outward aspect of Drupadi's character. The inner aspect of Drupadi shows her awareness of male domination against her. This dominance manifests the objectification and sexual violence that Drupadi must encounter in public spaces. Awareness of this dominance then raises awareness of autonomy over self as an individual. In this novel the character Drupadi is portrayed as having an awareness of authority over herself and the choices in her life.

From this inner aspect then manifests the outward aspect in the form of actions that encourage Drupadi to meet her subjectivity as a woman. In this novel, Drupadi's character is depicted to make various efforts to obtain subjectivity. She takes back the strength of her maternal body as a woman and uses it to achieve her subjectivity in the private/domestic sphere (reflected in her polyandry marriage) as well as in the public sphere (her revenge to Kurawa and the seizure of Hastina's throne).

The subjectivity of Drupadi in this novel is described as always in motion and reaching its peak towards the end of the narrative, from which it was not recognized or recognized only in the private/domestic space until it was finally recognized in the public/social space. Safe to say in the world level, the subjectivity of Drupadi in this novel gains its recognition. However, at the level of spirituality, the subjectivity of Drupadi has not been recognized. This novel seems give an impression that subjectivity is constantly moving and should be fought continuously.

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