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Wiwik Sushartami
sushartami@yahoo.com

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PhD Thesis Summary

Representation and beyond

Female victims in Post-Suharto media

WIWIK SUSHARTAMI

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PhD in Social and Behavioural Sciences
Promoter: Prof. Dr. Patricia Spyer
Co-promoter: Prof. Dr. M.M. Steedly (Harvard University)
Prof. Dr. H.G.C. Schulte Nordholt (KITLV)
Leiden University

Abstract

This study analyses representations of female victims in post-Suharto media. In so doing, it underlines the import of the fall of the New Order regime and the concurrent opening up of the media world in Indonesia. The study is based on notably influential issues that emerged among media producers, feminist activists, social scientists, policy makers, and general audiences during the period of study (1998–2004). Based on observations made in women's NGOs and other institutions concerned with women, interviews and informal conversations with individuals engaged in projects related to female mediation, and content analysis of a large number of mainstream and alternative media presentations, this study finds that the context of the reform (*reformasi*) in Indonesia constituted a major factor in influencing the changes that affected women and the media, and more importantly, on the burgeoning of the discourse of female victimization. This study also addresses the concepts of ideology, interpellation, identity, and agency to show how the media culture during the reform period, or rather the cultural producers during that time, constructed female victims' identities by sorting out and selecting the representations that represented the context and the history of the regime's change.

WIWIK SUSHARTAMI took her master's degree from the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore in 2000. She works independently as a freelance translator. Wiwik Sushartami may be contacted at: sushartami@yahoo.com.

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Keywords
Images of female victims, media, reformation (*reformasi*), representation, violence against women.

Introduction

The fall of the New Order (*Orde Baru*) regime and the vibrant women's political movements that preceded and followed it brought to the fore an ambivalence of gender identity in Indonesia. While the New Order had constructed a dominant system of gender ideology and practice, its fall gave way to a vigorous process of the reification, renegotiation, and the contestation of gender identity in the power vacuum that emerged. The allegation that the state had misinterpreted women's roles and had mistreated women became one of the chief discourses upon which the emerging feminist trajectories came to be founded.

The debates on cases of violence against women cannot be separated from the general discourse on violence in Indonesia in a particular time and context. In focusing on the discourse of female victimization, this thesis underlines the importance of the fall of the New Order regime and the concurrent opening up of the media world in Indonesia. It finds that this process necessitated a reinterpretation of female identity while new vocabularies were adopted as political statements in the current feminist movement. The term "female victim" and associated phrases became the vernacular language in the process of the "reformation" of women's identity in the post-Suharto period which this thesis observes during its first five years.

Research questions and methodology

This thesis addresses three broad questions: first, why during this *reformasi* did images of female victims become so abundant in media presentations? Secondly, how were women represented as victims in the media? Lastly, in line with the questions above, how did this mediated new female identity play a role in shaping the nationalist gender ideology and frame the direction of the new feminist movement in Indonesia?

To answer these questions this thesis specifically analyses the representations which appeared in "public culture", including print media (comics, books, journals, newsletters, newspapers, and magazines), audiovisual media (video compact discs and radio/television programmes), and electronic-mediated media (internet).

Data for this thesis were collected via multiple methods of data collection. First, data were gathered through structured and unstructured observations at Rahima, Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan, and the State's Office for Women's Empowerment. Secondly, data were collected through participatory observation extending to other NGOs and social groups concerned with women issues. Thirdly, data were amassed through interviews and informal conversations with individuals engaged in projects related to female mediation, including people involved in Offstream Production House, the

women's organisation Kalyanamitra, the women section of *Kompas* daily, *Swara*, and others. And finally, data were compiled through content analysis of mainstream media presentations, such as nation-wide newspapers, magazines, television and radio programmes, and the Internet. This thesis is thus concerned with a discursive and descriptive examination of the images and the production and consumption of representations of female victims in various media presentations rather than with a quantitative analysis of the data.

Literature summary

This study reviews theories that discuss gender-based violence, *reformasi* and transparency, alternative media, identity, discourse analysis, and representation. Below is a summary of the relevant themes that appear in the theoretical discussion.

Gender and gender-based violence

Gender is not the same as sex. Gender is not an inherent identity, but rather an identity one claims as one's own. Gender is not "a set of free-floating attributes" because there is always an essential effect of gender, which is "performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practises of gender coherence" (Butler 1990: 24–25). As societies almost everywhere "normally" emphasise and represent the "differences between men and women", and even reinforce these into norms, "sex roles and responsibilities are accepted, even idealized, as contrasted and complementary" and "represented as natural rooted in biology, and confirmed in history" (Cockburn 2004: 27). With regards to violence against women, or violent acts in a more general way, gender should be seen as a "relation" (Cockburn 2004: 24). Recent studies note that violence in Indonesia is "gendered" and that "the perpetrators of violence are all men, with the exception of a small female presence in cases of mob violence" (Colombijn 2002: 19). Susan Blackburn, while acknowledging that women may have been perpetrators in some cases of violence in Indonesia, argues that "women are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence, a fact connected to their position in the social and political structure, where they are more vulnerable than men and less able to voice their views" (2004: 196).

"Reformasi" and transparency

During Indonesia's *reformasi*, the promise of democracy has evolved alongside the development of the media and discursive formation of female victimhood has generated the significance of "transparency" (Siegel 1998b; Spyer 2002; Strassler 2004). Framed together, the violence that was prevalent during the *reformasi* on the one hand, and freedom of the press and the dream of transparency on the other, has spawned public fixation on the aspect of "visibility". The public demand for visibility is in line with both sustains and is sustained by the prevailing paradigm among journalists in their "search for the truth" (Vatikiotis 2001: 144). With reference to the debate on the May 1998

rapes, for example, the public call for visibility has led to the appeal for "hard proof" (Strassler 2004; Sai 2006) reference to the visual availability of victims.

Alternative media

There have been on-going debates on what defines alternative media. Some link the term "alternative" with "radical" where the definition of radical media is "primarily concerned with social change", while alternative media is "of more general application" (Atton 2002: 9). However, since no definition can be disentangled from its "historical and cultural contingencies" (Atton 2002: 18), the definition of alternative media as concerned here should also be put in context with Indonesian history, in this case, specifically with the history of the 1998 regime change. Common amongst states that have undergone similar political changes from authoritarian to democratic rule, is that the transitional period becomes a time when "the crisis of meaning produced by violence, spoken and marginalised forms of knowledge begin to weave new networks of representations that, ultimately, must be addressed—responded to" (Rotker 2002: 10). It is when the alternative voice begins to be recognized and manoeuvres its way into the mainstream.

Ideology, interpellation, and subjecthood

Ideology, according to the French philosopher, Louis Althusser, refers to "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 1971: 162). To illustrate how ideology allows individuals to recognise themselves as subjects, Althusser introduces the term "interpellation". He gives the example of a police officer yelling, "Hey, you there!" at an individual (1971: 174). When the individual turns around after hearing this call and "by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject" (1971: 174). As for Althusser ideology, interpellation, and subjecthood buttress each other, or in other words, "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subject, which necessarily leads us to the one last proposition: individuals are always-already subjects" (Althusser 1971: 176). Within the reach of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), such as the family, schools, and media forms, including newspapers, radio, and television, Althusser asserts, subjects are always ideologically constituted (Althusser 1971: 176).

Discourse analysis

Text analysis cannot be disentangled from the dynamics of the text production and consumption processes or from the socio-cultural background of the text. According to the linguist, Norman Fairclough, "textual analysis can give access to the detailed mechanism through which social contradictions evolve and are lived out, and the sometimes subtle shifts they undergo" (Fairclough 1995: 15). He further elucidates that "discourse analysis is an attempt to show systematic links between texts, discourse practices and sociocultural practices"

(Fairclough 1995: 16–17).

Representation

"Representation does not depend on quantity. It depends on the recognizable. It rests on the intimate knowledge of symbols and metaphors through which we grasp our reality. Hence a single sentence or a drawing may be enough" (Zarkov 1999: 122–123). In line with the above notion, this thesis finds that the representations of female victims in the Indonesian media during the *reformasi* to some extent provide some kind of "intimate knowledge" through which we can try to understand what was happening with women in the course of the regime change. In addition, these representations have even become vital catalysts through which political protests have been launched against the state.

Summary of findings and conclusions

This thesis presents its findings in five chapters focused on the representations of female victims during the May 1998 rapes, in areas of conflict, in instances of religious discrimination, in cases of domestic violence, and in a popular media setting respectively. Taking into consideration the visualization of female victims of the May 1998 rapes which underlines perceived "racially"-related physical traits or stereotyped material possessions in the comic *Jakarta 2039; 40 tahun 9 bulan setelah 13–14 Mei 1998*, (Ajidarma 2001). This thesis brings two trends to light: first, the blatant racialization of the May 1998 rapes in the generous media coverage enabled some of the ethnic majority to emotionally detach themselves from the horror and to assign this genre of political violence specifically to Chinese women. Secondly, with regards to the popularity of Chinese artists and films about Chinese people in Indonesia following the *reformasi*, an alternative reading of slanted eyes as icons of ethnicity may instead blur and even erase the horrors of the violence.

In reading the films *Perempuan di wilayah konflik* (Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan 2002) and *Badë tan reûda* (Yayasan Tifa and Offstream 2003), this study finds that in both, violence in conflict areas is marked with the silencing of the victims, who are primarily women. This is in line with the general discourse of victimhood in which the loss of the victim's agency is often considered to be the effect of the unavailability of a space to speak.

When the Islamic movement was condemned under the New Order in the 1980s, female students who started wearing veil were symbolized as victims and fighters at the same time: victims of the *kafir* state and fighters for the Islamic truth. Meanwhile, in the case of progressive Islamic women's organizations advocating the freedom for female Muslims to choose whether or not to cover up, the struggle is twofold. While they attack the state's imposition on the veil, they simultaneously criticise the male-centrist interpretation of the *sharia*. The incorporation of popular media presentations, that is, the comic genre, such as the one used by *Swara Rahima*, alleviates the representations of female victims and tones down the image of the woman fighter in a parody and in a playful manner.

Campaign media, such as the film *Menguak kekerasan dalam rumah tangga* (Kalyanamitra 2001), has been an important tool in the Indonesian feminists' attempt to enter domestic violence into the public view. What appears to have been the most important issue in the venture to make domestic violence public is how to present it in public media campaigns that are as real as possible and that will ultimately prompt public awareness and contribution.

The last chapter analyses the transformation of the female image from aggressor to victim to survivor, embodied in the popularly controversial *dangdut* star Inul Daratista. The stamping of *dangdut* singers as erotic aggressors was not specific to Inul. However, never before had the condemnation of sexy female *dangdut* singers been followed by the positioning of, and public support for, those women as victims. Her comeback television programmes became celebrated spectacles that symbolised not only the freedom of expression, but also the power of the producers of the entertainment industry.

This thesis presents two major conclusions. The first conclusion concerns context. The context becomes very important in reading representations. The violent regime change in 1998 no doubt caused countless major changes in the lives of Indonesians. Amongst many things, this thesis focuses on the changes that affected women and the media. The conditions of the multidimensional crisis that hit Indonesia hard in 1998 also influenced the direction of the feminist movement. Few women activists voiced their criticism of the state's failure in handling the crisis. However, it was only after Suharto's resignation that public discussions concerning cases of state violence against women flourished and many feminist groups working on crisis and conflict emerged. The representations of various images show examples of how the opening of the media during the initial processes of *reformasi* prepared the ground for, and were partly boosted by, women's abundant use of the media to express their ideas and protests.

The second conclusion concerns the representations of female victims as discussed in the empirical chapters that build a framework for the new identity of women during the *reformasi.* Using the concepts of ideology, interpellation, identity, and agency we can see how the media culture in the reform period, or rather the contemporary cultural producers, constructed the identities of female victims by selecting and sorting out which representations fitted the context and history of the regime change.

(Adapted from the summary as appeared in Wiwik Sushartami (2012), *Representation and beyond; Female victims in Post-Suharto media*. PhD thesis, Leiden University)

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