

Essay

CLASS AND GENDER IN FICTION

I am currently conducting research on class and gender in both Australian and Indonesian colonial fiction. The topical matters, class and gender, are regarded as sexy and juicy considering their growing penetration into various disciplines across the globe. The issues, to a serious degree, have also been found within various works of Indonesian literary fiction or critics' writings.

In practice, people may think that there is no specific defining concept about class-oriented social construct in Indonesia, where no concept of high, middle or working class is used. The idea of class-oriented perception is subject to identification in terms of the occupation held by the person. For example, people consider physicians and aircraft pilots with higher esteem than vendors. Even when the vendors or traders are richer in terms of earnings, their wealth still cannot go beyond the high social status of physicians and aircraft pilots.

In literature, the concept of class or the act of marginalized class in modern contemporary structure is a matter of economic classification. However, if we refer to the postcolonial status of Indonesia, we can see the demarcation between

the Dutch or even the Japanese rulers against Indonesian people. Though there was no literary use of the term "class" in Indonesian social construct, the demarcation of the elite social group from the lower group remains predominant. Examining the literary works and criticism of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Alip Josidi and H.H. Jassin, among others, will give pictures of class and gender issues.

Reading Pramoedya's works makes it very clear that he is expressive in letting the context of classification of the class in postcolonial Indonesia. For example, in his 1950 novel *Perburuan* (The Fugitive), there is the protagonist Hardo, who is accompanied by Dipo and Karnin as he rebels against Japanese colonialism. However, though these individuals are very strong on the individual grounds of Indonesia, they get struck by self-doubt, resistance against the marginalization of Indonesians by Japanese colonial power is much explored by Pramoedya or Prati.

There are cases of betrayal and mistrust that seem to show a sense of weak social construct in the country's postcolonial society.

In addition, Prati stays significant when it comes to his perspective toward

the concern of gender resistance. In the narrative *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind), Prati represents Minko as an exposure to modern social construct. It is here that the perception toward women in postcolonial Indonesian culture starts to get explored. The entire illustration of "modern" lies strictly as per the "western conceptualizations" and demanded reorientation of the native Indonesian culture.

The issues of gender resistance, too, were focused in this foreground. Similar approaches are also noted in Prati's *Punggil Alu Kartini Suja* (Call Me Kartini), where the efforts of women to attain freedom from their state of "gender



BY DONNY SYOFYAN

der off" led by the domination of male writers remain specific.

Meanwhile, the illustrative understanding of Alip Josidi through *Gelanyang* can be marked as the typical representation of postcolonial Indonesia after Dutch rule. Josidi was very practical in expressing his views about the deteriorated positioning of Indonesian natives during colonial times. In his writing, Alip expressed the ways through which the Dutch population treated themselves as first class, and the Indonesian natives as second class.

He expressed: "The Dutch will remain first-class citizens and we will be second-class in our own homeland."

The great influence of gender resistance from western literary works can also be found in his works. Alip reckons that postcolonial reading of gender resistance is necessary, and the importance of Indonesian postcolonial literature must get in line with western postcolonial expeditions. He accepts that western literature is very active in offering newer perspectives to the matters of gender resistance.

In interpreting gender resistance, H.H. Jassin is very peculiar. The outlook

of Jassin is much influenced by the western trend of understanding the coexistence, even in case of gender resistance, among the position of Muslim women. He interpreted gender discrimination as a part of ethical religious practices.

Jassin led innumerable contributions in the field of human rights, which remains inclusive of the oppressed female gender, especially of the Muslim community of Indonesia. He considered the Western thematic approach of gender resistance as part of domestic socio-religious criticism.

Regarding the postcolonial readings of literature, Jassin noted that a clear ignorance toward postcolonial female existence can be marked in many different literary narratives.

When reading issues of class and gender in literature, as exposed by the country's great literary authors and critics, we may infer that they work in terms of realistic representation and modes of resistance to the status quo, in both literary and phenomenological frontiers.

— The writer, a lecturer of literary studies at Andalas University, is currently a doctoral student at the University of Indonesia.

