

# WOMEN'S STRUGGLE AGAINST THE PATRIARCHATE AND COLONIAL HEGEMONY IN PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER'S RUMAH KACA

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## ABSTRACT

In most literary works set in the colonial era, women were described as weak, helpless, unable to resist, unlike the character Siti Soendari whom Pramoedya in the novel *Rumah Kaca* presented. Soendari became a female intellectual figure who fought against the existing power. This article describes the struggle in breaking down the patriarchal system and criticizing colonial power. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method with feminism and a post-colonial approach. The result shows that Siti Soendari was a female figure who fought intellectually. She was an educated woman who delivered her opinion through writing and speech. The way she fought was manifested by writing in newspapers, building organizations, and giving speeches at a youth meeting. Boycotted by the colonial power, Siti Soendari did not run out of ideas. She circulated her writings instead of publishing them in newspaper. Her struggle was unique because her goal was not just to create gender equality. She struggled to foster a nationalist nature among young people. In other words, she fought not only for women but also for her nation and country. This study recommends that the novel *Rumah Hijau* can be used as primary reading material in high schools and colleges.

**Keywords:** women's struggle, patriarchy and colonial hegemony

## ABSTRAK

Dalam kebanyakan karya sastra berlatar zaman penjajahan, perempuan digambarkan lemah, tak berdaya, tidak mampu melawan. Berbeda dengan tokoh Siti Soendari yang dihadirkan Pramoedya dalam novel Rumah Kaca. Siti Soendari menjadi sosok perempuan intelektual yang melakukan perlawanan terhadap kekuasaan yang ada. Artikel ini mendeskripsikan perjuangan tersebut dalam mendobrak sistem patriarkat dan mengkritisi kekuasaan kolonial. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan pendekatan feminisme dan postkolonial. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan Siti Soendari adalah tokoh perempuan yang melakukan perjuangan dengan cara intelektual. Ia perempuan terdidik yang mampu menyuarakan pendapatnya lewat tulisan maupun lisan. Wujud perjuangan tokoh ini, antara lain; menulis di surat kabar, membangun organisasi, dan berpidato di pertemuan-pertemuan pemuda. Saat perjuangannya diboikot oleh kekuasaan kolonial, Siti Soendari tidak kehabisan akal. Tulisan-tulisannya tidak lagi dipublikasi melalui surat kabar, melainkan diedarkan dari orang ke orang. Perjuangan Siti Soendari menjadi unik karena tujuannya bukan sekadar menciptakan kesetaraan gender. Perjuangannya bertujuan menumbuhkan sifat nasionalis di kalangan pemuda. Dengan kata lain, ia tidak sekadar berjuang untuk kaum perempuan tetapi juga untuk bangsa dan negaranya. Hasil penelitian ini merekomendasikan novel Rumah Kaca digunakan sebagai bahan bacaan utama di sekolah menengah maupun perguruan tinggi.

**Kata Kunci:** perjuangan perempuan, hegemoni patriarkat dan kolonial

## Introduction

Mythologically, the first woman to live on earth was named Eve. Eve was believed to have been created from the rib of the man. The Creator commanded Adam not to eat the forbidden fruit. However, it was denied and Adam did so. From the very beginning, this creation story has patterned that men are superior to women. Adam, who directly spoke with the Creator, has become historically patterned that that women do not deserve to be leaders. Eve, who initially ate the forbidden fruit, resulted in a pattern that women were weaker and men were superior. Even though, in the very current there have been many theologians who have tried to clarify this view theologically (Arbain, Azizah, Sari, 2015). This pattern is still passed on from generation to generation and can still be found today, especially in the midst of a patriarchal society.

Patriarchal society views women as subordinative objects. This implies that leader position is never to be suitable for women, such as leader of the smallest group, a country, a king or president. On the other hand, complementary will be given to women. This view that women as a subaltern group, which refers to the marginalized and low-ranking groups (Saputra, 2011). As a result, we might find stories of forced marriages, women victims of domestic violence, women trafficking, women as compensation for debts, and many other stories that clearly stress that women are objects of male domination and cultural power. Helena Cixous (as cited in Andriasari, 2019) called this condition with the term binary opposition. Ratna (2015) explained the term initiated by Helena Cixous as a situation where women are be marginalized and she claimed that women are represented as 'the other', with the metaphorical question "*where is she?*" To the context of Indonesia, it is never to be difficult to find such a situation because the social systems are patriarchal.

Marginalization towards women also appeared as a major theme in Indonesian literary works, especially in the post-colonial works. In these works, existing female figures was depicted to always to be against while there were also female figures who were depicted as with absolutely having no courage. The main character of *Gadis Pantai* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, for example, was described as a woman who had absolutely no power to fight when forced to marry at a young age and was eventually abandoned by her own husband and even separated from her own biological child. Her fight was very limited to crying (Saraswati, 2013). In the novel *Bumi Manusia* written by the same author, there was also the character *Sanikem*, who was married at a young age but was a tough and wanting to learn fight back. However, in the end, she was unable to win against the colonial hegemony at that time.

The doctrines and movements that advocate for gender equality to counter the subordinate actions and show the agreements with the interests of women are known as feminism. Feminism was born in the early 20th century, pioneered by Virginia Woolf in her book entitled *A Room of One's Own* (Ratna, 2015). Doctrines developed into a feminist theory that examined the representation of women in literary works because literary works representative matters of community life. Belivers

of feminism aim to present gender harmony. They have moved against denigrated actions that were marginalized by the dominant culture. The ultimate goal of feminists is not only to the domestic life but also to every aspect of life, such as education, politics, economics, Not only achieve their goals in domestic life, but also to extend the goals to every aspect of life marks feminists goals extend to every aspect of life such as education, politics, economics, constitutional and social life.

The existency of a female character named Siti Soendari in the novel *Rumah Kaca* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer was the opposite of the condition of women in general at that time as well as a form of balancing patriarchal hegemony and colonialism. This figure was described as a beautiful and charismatic woman, who received more education than most women at that time. She mastered Malay, Dutch, German, English, and French and her knowldege has opened doors to a wider knowledge. Siti Soendari, who was considered as the second woman after Kartini in Indonesia during the Dutch colonialism, had good writing skills. Through her writings, she voiced her hatred for colonialism and her aspirations to become a free woman, serving for her country andn her nation.

As the second child of two, Siti Soendari was raised by her father himself because her mother died when she was just seven months. The full love of her father allowed her to grow up as a woman without confinement, free to learn according to her wishes. When learning at school, she had been so active in participating in various organizations and had been chosen as a leader or administrator.

Pangemanann himself – who was the first "I" character in this novel – argued that it was impossible for a woman to be capable of writing in such the mass media (as a form of women's subordination). However, he was then amazed to know that systematically and neatly written ideas were Siti Soendari's writings, written in the Dutch and Malay daily. Naturally, at the time, existence of a woman who had the abilities to express her thoughts boldly was seen as super extraordinary. A woman, in colonial times, was ultimately rare to be found to express her thoughts through writing. Tragically, women had no ability to read letters. It as the consequence of limimted education both for men and especially for women

This study attempted to explain actions and thoughts that had subordinated indigenous women and their resistance against colonial hegemony through the character Siti Soendari in the novel *Rumah Kaca* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. The data were taken from the snippets of the novel and discussion of the findings will be elaborated in the discussions.

### **Research Method or Approach of Discussion**

The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative. Data were obtained from the novel *Rumah Kaca* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, published by Lentera Dipantara in 2011. Postmodern literary research has marked the ritual of research in a structured manner. Literary works are seen as the result of contemplation and even the philosophical thinking of a writer (Deshpande, 2018). Therefore, literary research requires an approach to explore these thoughts. This study employed a feminist and post-colonial approach.

### **Findings and Discussions**

Teew (2003) explained that there was a relationship between reality and fiction in works of fiction, especially novels or romances, "the real world and the fictional world are always intertwined, one is meaningless without the other." Literary work becomes an important document that describes past events. What happens in reality has often inspired writers to re-describe it in their created literary works (Wiyatmi, 2014). It is like in the presence of Novel *Rumah Kaca*, one of Buru's tetralogies. As a work in post-colonial, this novel told the story of Dutch colonial hegemony in the Indies around 1911-1917. Pramoedya represented the history of colonialism in this literary work. The story of the emergence of educated indigenous struggles through the formation of organizations was clearly described in this novel. Mingke is an indigenous scholar who was characterized to initiate the establishment of the Islamic Trade Association (ITA) organization and was a pioneer in the establishment of other organizations. Mingke also pioneered the emergence of newspapers published by indigenous peoples. This newspaper was in Malay so that a wider range of people could enjoy the information. However, this movement did not last long. Mingke was isolated and not allowed to publish her writings in any newspaper

because she was considered to have disturbed the power of the rulers of Dutch colonial.

Pangemanann was the main character of this novel who was himself a native Manado. He was raised by European education and devoted himself to colonial interests. His success in curbing Mingke's resistance to the colonialists put Pangemanann in an crucial position in the colonial government. He was in charge of supervising indigenous writers for the sake of keeping power of the governorship of the *Gubermen*. With a Pangemanann's letter of instruction, whatever and whoever attempted to trouble interfere with colonial power could be prosecuted. Even, the writers' position or activists could be exiled, deprived of their freedom, included their belongings. Siti Soendari, an indigenous educated person, was narrated to have fought against the colonialists through her writing and speeches. She had to strongly face Pangemanann, a native who devoted himself to Dutch colonial rule at that time.

### **Indigenous women under the hegemony of a patriarchal society**

Patriarchate is a system of gender relations based on fatherly succession (Wiyatmi, 2014). In Indonesia, the majority of ethnic groups or community groups adhere to this system. In a patriarchal society, men are manifested to be the *hope* and therefore it automatically conditions men's superiority. On the contrast, the nature of women was to get pregnant and givebirth. This was culturally mandated that the nature blocked women's aggressiveness. Instead, women were obliged to a passive and gentle in their nature and so on (Ratna, 2015). Often, women who were considered as subaltern often receive unfair treatment and were even abused to be the goods for men's interests.

The reality presented in the midst of a patriarchal society was that opportunities for women to develop and work were restricted. Women were considered not deserving of education and women's speaking in public was a taboo. Women were also viewed as weak people who had to obey men. As a result, forced marriages and other coercion of wills on women were often found in patriarchal societies. This condition is represented by the literary writers in their works. As Suyitno & Nugraha

(2014) argued that Indonesian literary marked the feminism as a counter hegemonic on patriarchal culture.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer also depicted women in the hegemony of the patriarchal society at the *Rumah Kaca*. The character of Siti Soendari was the daughter of a Pemalang public pawnshop employee. She had an older brother who studied in Rotterdam. Siti Soendari was described as an exemplary Javanese woman because she was good at *make up*, behaved polite, was flexible in relationships. She also liked to help people and was eager to work hard. She was skilled in public and at home. She was also a woman who was active in writing and in several organizations. Often, her writings were published in newspapers and her ability to deliver powerful speech had moved the masses. With all of her competencies and excellence, in this novel, it was told that she finally had to submit to patriarchal hegemony. When the colonial authorities were disturbed by Siti's political activities, her father was given a threat, to persuade Siti Soendari to get married. This aimed to disturb her attention and made her no longer active in writing and organizing. This consequently threat her father lose his position, his daughter, and his son to be dismissed from the commercial high school in Rotterdam.

The colonial ruler's request was certainly motivated by the awareness that Siti Soendari was under his father's rule and that she was no more important than her older brother. It was impossible to sacrifice her older brother's education for her political freedom. The following quote shows that Siti's father, even though he was educated and graduated from STOVIA (a school to educate native doctors), ultimately chose to curb his daughter's freedom for the sake of his office interests and for the his son's education.

He was an aristocrat from the old generation who was unable able to fully implement the modern spirit, was unable able to free himself to become an independent person. He was an educated old generation who thought great things could exist as a gift from the Governor. In his own way and style, he repeated what the father of the Jepara Girl had done: he chose his office interests. He was too afraid of the wrath of the Governor (*Rumah Kaca*: 423).

Patriarchal power was to be the link in the chain of male masculine power which formed a stigma to shackle women when dealing with men (Saputra, 2011:18). A form of subordination was also shown not only from a paradigm that underestimated women's abilities actions but also from direct treatments to the women themselves. It was depicted from what Pangemanann did to Siti Soendari in the following snippet.

Her pleasant courtesy did not reduce my disgust at having to step up to a person who called herself Siti Soendari. How would I fall if she was really a woman, still a virgin too. What am I going to be? Do you then have to track down a soup seller on the side of the road, because she can write well in newspapers or magazines? (*Rumah Kaca*: 352)

... a native, a woman too, wouldn't have the courage to broadcast something. (*Rumah Kaca*: 375-376)

Pangemanann felt that his pride was disturbed when he got an assignment from his superior to investigate a woman named Siti Soendari. The view that positions women as lower than men is clearly visible from Pangemanann's thoughts. He even contrasted women, the soup sellers on the roadside, as an analogy to confirm the position of women was much lower than him. The second snippet aforementioned showed a paradigm that underestimated a woman's competence (Putra, 2020). Women in a patriarchal society were seen as unlikely to have the courage to convey their ideas and thoughts in the public space, especially in newspapers.

### **Indigenous women under colonial hegemony**

The Dutch colonial hegemony that was established for three and a half centuries in Indonesia, called the Indies, had given birth to writings relating to colonial experiences. Literary work is a document that records the condition of the nation during the colonial era from various aspects; politics, economy, social, education, culture, and so on. In general, post-colonial literary texts described the colonial power which limited the development of thinking and the acquisition of knowledge of the colonized society so that there was stagnation and even decline in all aspects of life (Ratna, 2015). Dutch colonialism in Indonesia created a system that impoverished the people, depleted their property and even



empowered their to increase power and strengthen the power of the ruler.

Literature work is believed to be a bridge between fact and fiction, especially in romances or novels that described various conditions during the colonial era. One of the themes that is often highlighted is the restraint on native women's freedom to take part in the public sphere and the academic world. We can also find this in the *Rumah Kaca*, especially the life of Siti Soendari, who was told that she had to withdraw from her struggle to Dutch colonial hegemony. Siti was an indigenous scholar who graduated from HBS Semarang who made good use of her opportunity to get an education. Having the education, she had excellent writing, teaching, speech competencies that even surpassed the abilities of men at that time. Siti Soendari looked very different from most of the indigenous educated people who embraced colonial rule and lived in the view that prosperity came from the governor. Siti had a strong character, aspiring to be a free woman and worked for her homeland and nation. Unluckily, she lived in an era of colonial rule which forbade her generous intentions. This superior indigenous woman was gripped by colonial hegemony as Pramoedya describes in the following quotation. "The newspaper was immediately muzzled until the writer was terribly wanted. The open letter in Dutch was given the initials S.S. " The open letter published in the newspaper implied mockery of the Dutch government which had just celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Netherlands' independence from France. Pangemanann, a figure narrated to work at the *Algemeene Secretarie* and tasked with investigating indigenous educated writings threatening the Gubermen's position, recognized that writing belonged to Siti Soendari. She wrote with the motivation to encourage natives in facing colonial rule. Siti's noble intentions finally stopped and she had no strengths to survive the balanced fight.

The filtering of newspapers containing Siti Soendari's writing did not immediately stop her writing activities. In fact, her movement expanded to speeches that mobilized the masses and established the birth of various organizations in East Java. This brought Siti to a bitter reality that colonial hegemony could stop and even robbed her of hope at all costs. In the following quotation, it is illustrated that Siti, as the daughter of a public pawnshop employee, had to submit to the

colonialists for the sake of her father's position and the continuity of her older brother's education.

The higher staff had ordered the Pematang Regent to carry out a gentle force to girl's parent to immediately marry his daughter. This procedure was carried out successfully to a girl twelve years ago on Jepara. The Pematang higher staff had summoned the wretched parent and insisted him on choosing between losing his position or retiring without respect and losing his daughter or making his daughter happy with an honorable marriage, remaining in position and retiring on day. (*Rumah Kaca: 422*)

This very mean method was chosen by the authorities to maintain their superiority. This was an embarrassing act if the colonials with their authoritarian rule had to catch a beautiful girl who was still a teenager. Forced marriage was a form of restraint for women who were considered not to violate norms by the patriarchal society. This was very beneficial for the colonialists because, in addition to securing Siti Soendari, this mean method avoided the negative stigma of society.

### **Women's struggles in patriarchal and colonial hegemony**

Previously, it was explained how indigenous women were treated by patriarchal and colonial hegemony. Not many indigenous women in the colonial era fought against these two forces. The women's efforts to escape from patriarchal and colonial rule are also rarely found in Indonesian literary works, such as Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana's *Layar Terkembang* with a female character named Tuti, *Tetralogi Buru* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer which presented Nyai Ontosoroh and Siti Soendari, and R.A. Kartini with her collection of letters *Out of Darkness Comes to Light*. Literary works mainly narrated female characters who were helpless, submissive, pessimistic, and passive.

In *Rumah Kaca*, the character Siti Soendari was not the main character and her story was only a small part of the novel. However, her personality who dared to fight against the colonialists left a very deep impression on the readers. It was contrast to the reality in that era when typically woman like her was hard to find. Pramoedya wrote that Siti was the second native woman after the Jepara girl and infact, no other

women were able to write and broadcast their writings to the public space. The form of resistance that Siti did in this novel was also very intellectual because she did not rely on physical strengths but through her writing and organizing society. In contrast to the conditions at that time, only a small proportion of women had the opportunity to receive education even just to read and write. The presence of the figure Siti Soendari was the proof that women had the power to fight colonialism.

Pangemanann, the main character of the novel, thought the emergence of Siti Soendari as a social symptom that must be seriously investigated. The fights played by Siti Soendari are displayed in the following quotes.

At the hotel, I read newspapers and magazines for a month, especially to investigate Siti Soendari's writings. From a pile of thick paper that I found, only four pieces of writing in Dutch and French.

She really could express her thoughts well ....

From her writing, it seemed that she had integrity and knew what she wanted. And in her integrity, there was something burning: her hatred of colonialism.

*(Rumah Kaca, 356-357)*

Pramoedya created indigenous female characters who had intellectual abilities, rivaled men's abilities. Even, the female abilities were used to shake the superiors at the times. It was said that Siti's efforts succeeded according to her hopes because her writing had become the main talks of many people.

The debates in my office were getting more and more disturbing. The talks were still about the open letter that many people felt so fierce.

The debates ran everywhere, reaching the offices of the plantation administrators in the mountain areas.

*(Rumah Kaca, 374-375)*

In addition to practical fights through writing, Siti Soendari, who devoted herself to her homeland and nation, was told to take part in instilling the values of love for the country and a sense of belonging to

the surrounding environment to her students as a seed to the growth of nationalism.

Children, I often take you out into the openly beautiful nature with the purpose to get you know your own homeland. It is because this is a place where you will live and grow. Love the nature around you as it is yours. I would be very happy if one of you could love it, and understand that all is yours. (*Rumah Kaca*, 409)

Siti Soendari was increasingly courageous in showing her fights to colonial hegemony by stepping forward from writing to speech that amazed many people and mobilized the masses to organize and even took more obvious actions to harm the authorities.

Now, Siti Soendari, his beloved daughter, one of the few women in the building, climbed onto the pulpit under great cheers.

The girl's fists were briefly raised, sometimes pointing her index finger. Her smooth palm had even hit the podium table.

The applause and exclamation of *Live Juffrouw Soendari*, rang out endlessly, accompanying her down from the podium.

(*Rumah Kaca*, 427-429)

As Soendari's fighting activities intensified, the colonial took advantage of Siti's father to urge her to get married. Various methods were used. Various reasons were created so that Siti wanted to get married, following in the footsteps of the Jepara girl which resulted in freezing writing and other activities that disturbed the colonial power. His father was totally in a forced position, between his love for Siti and his son's study. Siti Soendari's writings became increasingly significant, and their distribution became more organized. They were not broadcasted in the newspapers and were not sent by post to avoid arbitrary filtering by the authorities. Siti's writings increasingly influenced the organizational movement in the regions and increasingly threatened the position of power.

At that time there was a transportation strike in Semarang. A colonial newspaper assumed this to a strike that had taken

place in Europe. The streets were quiet because the gigs also stopped working, as well as carts and public vehicles.

After the lord's daughter returned home, what happened?  
For the first time the sugarcane fields caught fire.

(*Rumah Kaca*, 442)

Women's fights in post-colonial literary works were difficult to find. It is different from the novel that is present at the beginning of the 21st century. Purbani's research (2013) showed several novels that displayed the fights of female characters to discriminating acts. The novel writers presented women who were smart, critical, open, and brave to oppose the patriarchal society. In addition, these female figures fought for equal stance and moral justice. The presence of women's fights in literary works is growing not only in national but also in local literary works. The novel entitled *Sri Rinjani* presented the main character of an educated, moderate, and independent woman. Sukmawati, Sudardi, Susanto (2017) who examined that *Sri Rinjani* showed the magnitude of women's struggle for a paradigm shift in Sasak society through education.

## Conclusion

From the analysis of a female character named Siti Soendari in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Rumah Kaca*, we have found a historical document that is very close to the real world. The Dutch colonial rule actually controlled the Indies at the time which was described in the novel. We can find the elements of the told place as well as the events in the very real world. This reinforces the view that literature is a representation of the real world combined with the writer's imagination.

With the background of Pramoedya's historical knowledge, the emergence of the figure of Siti Soendari seemed very close to reality. Siti Soendari was presented as a female character who was not only beautiful, good at *make up*, and having good manners but also having maturity to think, speak, and act. Her maturity and emotional stability could be seen from the writings of Siti Soendari. The style of language, expressions, and comparisons in her writings did not contain arrogance. The writing was gentle, organized and each paragraph delivered constructive ideas and that the readers might feel so real.

Siti Soendari used her good writing skills to voice her hatred for the colonialists. When broadcasting writing in a newspaper became an impossible choice for Siti, she changed her strategy by spreading her thoughts through speeches and organizations. She moved the people to be aware of their rights and fight against the injustices by the Dutch colonialists. In her teaching activities, she took the opportunity to instill a sense of love for the country and a sense of belonging to the country and the nation in her students as a seed to the birth of a nationalist spirit in her students.

There might be a lot of fights that this indigenous female figure has to face. Beside being hated by the authorities, Siti Soendari also experienced rejection from her students' parents because they were worried that their children would not be employed by the governor due to being taught by a teacher who had different opinions with the colonialists. In the end, Siti Soendari's fights finally had to stop due to the mean strategy of the colonial power who took advantage of her father's condition, who worked as a civil servant in Pernalang pawnshop. Siti Soendari finally chose to flee to Rotterdam to escape the coercion of being married. She did it in order to save her father's position as well as her brother's education.

Siti Soendari proved that women, especially indigenous women, had the power to shake colonial power. With her writings and thoughts, Siti was the living proof of fights the colonial power as well as a counterweight to the patriarchal hegemony of her era. Even though colonial power continued to triumph in the country after the resistance carried out by Siti Soendari, her figure still carried an influence that gave birth to more nationalists in the Indies. The presence of female figures such as Siti Soendari in this literary worked to elevate the position of women from being always positioned as the weak and passive to become the strong, dynamic, active in the public sphere, and able to have a positive influence on the growth of nationalism in the midst of colonial society.

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