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Questioning Bourdieusian Symbolic Violence on Lesbian Characters in Ayu Utami's *Saman* and Djenar Mahesa Ayu's *Nayla*

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ABSTRACT

LGBTIQ has become a controversial topic concerning one's sexual preference over the past few years in Indonesia. Indonesian sexuality will always intersect with the norms, religious values and the state laws. Therefore, this phenomenon is socially binding as it restricts the identity construction of differing sexual preferences in Indonesia. The issue about sexuality particularly LGBTIQ is addressed in several Indonesian literature, given the significant and notable increase in Indonesian novels with LGBTIQ themes since 2000s. Taking the novels of Ayu Utami's Saman and Djenar Mahesa Ayu's Nayla as the objects of investigation, this study examines (1) how Bourdieusian symbolic violence is being questioned in the novels (2) how these novels also challenge the hetero-normativity in Indonesia. The study reveals the symbolic violence towards the lesbian characters in the selected novels through the process of 'normalisation.' However, by raising the issues of lesbianism, the novels and their circulation can somehow be seen as a form of resistance towards the Indonesian homophobic society.

Keywords: *symbolic violence, Indonesian novels, lesbianism, heteronormativity*

INTRODUCTION

Gender is considered as being unstable and unfixed as it is but a social construction (Diamond and Butterworth, 2008). It causes numerous interpretations and varied discourses on gender. Meanwhile, the society and culture also form their creation on gender roles and the differences of both sexes in behaving based on the social conventions. Thus, gender is 'not only a constructed identity but also a performative accomplishment with social audience.' The remarks later confirm Butler's statement on the performance of sex, gender and sexuality in which she says that it is related to the power in society (Butler, 1990).

This study specifically focuses on the issue of symbolic violence against the lesbian characters in two Indonesian novels. Homosexuality and lesbianism in Indonesia are often considered as a taboo subject for both Indonesian government and the society. Most of public discourses on same-sex particularly lesbianism will be limited by the fact that human sexuality in any form is rarely depicted openly and is rarely discussed. Moreover, the discussion about sexuality in Indonesian context will always circulate around the heteronormative relationship, national law, religion belief and also the *adat* value. Yet there is a growing numberof Indonesian novels with LGBT themes.

Indonesian novels with LGBT themes share a similarity: the gay and lesbian characters are often being 'normalised' to each *kodrat* as a man and woman. The rights for each human to embrace his or her sexual preference is often neglected in most

novels. As their *kodrat*, male will have to take a woman as a partner and vice versa. This kind of normalisation and restriction of sexual preference between male and female can be stated as a form of symbolic violence as addressed by Pierre Bourdieu. Through promulgation in the form of literature, sexual preference is controlled only by either of the two sexes – male or female. Under Bourdieu's view, the concept of heteronormativity, which states that the dichotomy between masculinity-femininity and male-female is challenged as it is merely socially constructed and binding. That kind of condition is portrayed in Ayu Utami's *Saman* and Djenar Mahesa Ayu's *Nayla* in which the manifestation of symbolic violence and the resistance of the novel towards homosexuality can be seen clearly. Using content analysis, this study explores how the narratives construct the portrayal of lesbianism and by extension how discourse on lesbianism is always expansively charged in the novel. Library study is used in this research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The majority of Indonesians see men's and women's roles and sexuality as God-given attributes. They use those attributes to control and to maintain the family honour and community orders (Benner, 2005). Yet lesbianism along with homosexuality stand in the grey area within the society because people will always have two ways of seeing lesbianism. In the traditional way, one should see it from the heteronormative perspective. It means that a woman should take a man as her companion. On the contrary, some people accept LGBTS and see it as a social construction of gender (Butler, 1990).

Those systematic pressures regarding the acceptance of lesbianism lead into the difficulties faced by the lesbian actors to assert their sexual identity. It is hard for them to 'come out of the closet' in the society and openly states their sexual preferences. This perception of gender sexuality and sexual preference in Indonesia are in relatable to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence. In understanding this concept, one should start with Bourdieusian concepts of dispositions and habitus. Bourdieu defines dispositions as things that 'generate practices, perceptions and attitudes that are regular without being co-ordinated or governed by any 'rules' (Bourdieu, 2003). These dispositions later constitute the habitus which are inculcated, structured, durable, generative and transposable. It means that they are acquired through a gradual process of inculcation. The childhood experiences are particularly important in this gradual process. Through these processes, one would acquire a set of dispositions which shape their personality. These dispositions are also structured which means that they reflect the society and the social condition where they are acquired. The structured dispositions are also durable because they embed in a way that they endure through one's life and operate in an unconscious way. These dispositions are also generative and transposable in the sense that they are able to generate a multiplicity of practices and perceptions.

The dispositions later will form habitus as what Bourdieu defines as, 'set of dispositions that generate practices and perceptions within the original meaning in a normal or typical condition, state, or appearance of the body. The discussion about habitus cannot be separated also with its relations to the specific social context in which Bourdieu refers as market or capital. The fields or capital are divided into three which are economic capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital. Among these three, it is the cultural capital and symbolic capital that have a close connection to the discourse about LGBT particularly lesbianism in Indonesia. It is mainly because the discourse about lesbianism is related to certain factors such as one's understanding, knowledge and level of education.

Bourdieu then regards symbolic capital such as prestige and honour as an essential source of power. A symbolic capital holder will likely use his or her power against the agent who has less power, thereby s/he exercises the symbolic violence. Therefore, symbolic violence is kinds of violence coming in the form of signs that are accepted by the oppressor and ones being oppreseed. Further explanation related to the manifestation of Bourdieu's symbolic violence will be explained in the next subsequent.

DISCUSSION

Applying those concepts in Ayu Utami's *Saman* and Djenar Mahesa Ayu's *Nayla*, the stigma about relationship had been shaped since one is in her/his childhood. In the novel, one can see that childhood experiences play an important role in Nayla and Shakuntala in both novels. The heroine of Djenar Mahesa Ayu's novel which is Nayla herself lives only with the mother who keeps changing male partners. She goes for one man to another. The bitterness surrounding the absence of the father that left the mother for the younger women leads Nayla's mother to transfer her anger towards Nayla. Every time Nayla wets herself when she was a kid, her mother will punish her:

Ibu menyalakan pemantik lantas membakar peniti yang sudah dipilihnya. Peniti dengan ukuran terkecil tentunya. Dan ketika peniti yang menurut Ibu sudah steril itu ditusukkan ke selangkangannya, ia akan mengapit rapat-rapat kedua pahanya. Terisak. Meronta. Membuat ibu semakin murka. [Mother turns the lighter on and then burns the pin she has chosen: the smallest one of all. And when the pin that she thinks is sterile, she jabbed into her thights, she will flank her two thighs together: sobbing and wiggling. It makes her mother angrier] (Ayu, 2005, p.1).

Despite all those horrible things, Nayla keeps trying to love her mother. Nayla illustrates, "Saya pernah belajar mencintai perempuan. Mencintai Ibu. Tapi sayangnya, Ibu tak pernah belajar mencintai saya. [I have ever tried to love a woman. To love mum. Unfortunately, mum has never loved me in return]," (Ayu, 2005, p.5). Her disappointment of experiencing unrequited love eventually leads to enmity and hatred. Nayla does not understand the real reason behind her mother's cruelty. Her mother considers Nayla's laziness, such as her wetting herself as a betrayal to her generosity in providing Nayla with the finest care. She thinks that by doing so Nayla hurts herself such as her husband. She says,

…aku ini ibumu, satu-satunya yang bisa kamu andalkan. Kenapa kamu tega menyakitiku seperti ayahmu? Kenapa begitu banyak sifatnya yang menurut padamu? Kenapa tidak ada sedikit saja sifat dan sikapku yang setiap hari kucoba contohkan kepadamu ini kamu jadikan panutan" [I am your mother, the only one you can rely on. Why do you have to hurt me like your father? Why do you resemble him more? Nor even inherit some of my attitude that I try to demonstrate to you as your role model every day] (Ayu, 2005, p.7).

Nayla's mother emphasises that if Nayla is lazy, she cannot be independent and always depends on male. She considers that to conquer male, a woman should possess her richness in body, mind, and soul. She tries to implement her opinion into Nayla, yet she is unable in doing so.

Although Nayla tries to love her mother, her mother does not love her in return. Due to her Nayla's unrequited love toward her mother, she looks for other shelter outside her house. She finds solace in Juli's character that helps her during the time she faints in a discotheque. Through her interaction with Juli, Nayla's opinion toward male worsen. Juli keeps telling her that male only wants women's body. We

can see how Juli has important influence in shaping Nayla's worldview towards man.

Persoalannya…lelaki menciptakan mitos perempuan ideal perempuan ideal adalah perawan. Alat kelamin perempuan yang ideal ada kelebihan cairan dan otot vaginanya kencang [The problem lies in the male's myth about women. To a man, an ideal woman is one who is still virgin. The perfect female genital is one over liquid and a tight genital muscle] (Ayu, 2005, p.78).

Based on Juli's counselling, Nayla has low appreciation toward man, eventually she chooses to be Juli's lesbian partner in which Nayla grows her emotional and physical bound. This situation illustrates how women start to have close connection, both emotionally and sexuality toward each other due to their shared enmity toward man. She always confirms, "Lebih baik saya memilih mencintai Juli ketimbang laki-laki yang menginginkan selaput dara saja [I'd rather be with Juli than being with a man who want my hymen]" (Ayu, 2005, p. 6).

The impact for not being able to have the emotional connectedness with the father leads those characters to find a "shelter" from their same-sex friends. As aforementioned, one can look at the example of Nayla-Juli. Nayla finds and feels not only emotionally secured but physically secured when she is surrounded by her female companion which is Juli. The portrayal of this *lesbian continuum* in which women grow togetherness can be seen also in Ayu Utami's lesbian characters in *Saman* which is Shakuntala. She is portrayed as a Javanese Catholic yet is considered as an immoral and a bisexual. When she was young, she realises that she is a bisexual by claiming,

"Sometimes I'm the Ramayana monkey-king Sugriwa, complete with a low guttural growl. Other times I am Cangik, whose slow, sluggish voice somehow seems to suit the flabby skin around her armpits. When I was a teenager I always used to dance as Arjuna in the *wayang orang* and all the girls would idolize me without realizing it, they saw no sign of femininity in me. But I was also Drupadi who ignites the passion of all five Pandawa brother." (Utami, 2015, p. 122).

Mentioning one of the Javanese leather puppets characters that is Arjuna who is an androgyny so people say, the implication is that Shakuntala does not recognise herself as a woman but as a fusion between male and female. She also does not have good emotional bound with her father who sends her away to the remote area. This will later lead her dislike towards men, as she says, "It was 1975, and my father sent me off to a strange new city…I learnt a lot from Hansel and Gretel. They had an evil father too (Utami, 2015, p. 133).

Although Shakuntala does not identify herself as a woman, her father's presence obliges Shakuntala to embrace her womanhood. In other word, her willingness to be a woman does not come within her own conviction as her parents especially her father is the one who forced her to do so. Her father is the first person she knows who made a clear description between the functions of boys and girls. He also uses the bible verse to "legitimise" the women's duties which is *"beranak pinak"* [bearing children], while men *make* the children. She points out:

Orang tuaku percaya bahwa pria cenderung rasional dan wanita emosional. Karena itu pria akan memimpin dan wanita mengasihi. Pria membangun dan wanita memelihara. Pria membikin anak dan wanita melahirkan...Aku tak pernah dipaksanya untuk hal yang sama, sebab ia percaya pada hakikatnya aku tak mampu (My parents believe that men tend to be rational while women are emotional. Because of that men will lead and women will be the compassionate ones. Men are the ones who develop while women are the caretakers. Men make children and women

will nurture them...I have never been forced by him [her father] to do things like my brother because he believes that I am not able to do them (Utami, 2015, p. 146).

As aforementioned, this kind of low appreciation towards men which holds biased and sexist view towards woman leads Shakuntala to experience her lesbian escapades. Her first experience of being bisexual starts with a *pesinden* (Javanese traditional female singer) who has taught her to dance and to sing. She learns about *Serat Centhini,* a classic Javanese manuscript which is likely considered as an erotic manuscript, and experiences her first same-sexual interaction. In the end, she understands that she has the tendency of being a bisexual as she states,

Ia seorang pesinden. Aku pun datang padanya untuk berguru ...Tapi ia juga membacakan aku Serat Centhini dan menyanyikan keluhan dengan suara duka ...Suatu malam, ketika aku duduk dalam sebuah ruang dan mengagumu dia menyanyi...lelaki dalam diriku muncul dari belakang tubuhku seperti energy yang lepas...Mereka melepas kain masing masing dan berdekatan ("She is a *pesinden.* Then, I came to her to learn...But she also read me *Serat Centhini* and sang with a sad voice...One night, when I was sitting in the room and admiring her voice... The male side in my body emerged from the back of my body like a liberated energy...They [the male side of her and the *pesinden*] took off each other's *kain* [traditional clothes] and got close one to another") (Utami, 2015, p. 149).

Being someone who lived in the United States of America, it is a lamentable situation because no one in Indonesian society is likely capable to understand Shakuntala's sexual desire. It is probably the reason why Ayu Utami takes the U.S as her setting of place where people are relatively more considerate on one's sexual preference. Therefore, when she meets her Indonesian friends especially Laila, she can relate herself and expresses her love to Laila. Laila herself is a virgin who is ready to give up her virginity to her lover, Sihar.

Based on the analysis of the two novels, one can see that childhood experiences play important part of forming those characters to have the same-sex desire. The examples in three novels mentioned in the previous paragraphs do not only indicate the emotionally absent father from Nayla and Shakuntala's side but also the dominant of the mother in Nayla's case. Those are the indications for their lesbianism. It also confirms Joseph Nicolosi's statement saying that a man is looking for emotional connectedness with his father through homosexual behaviour (Nicolosi, 1991). The lack of emotional connectedness with the parents during one's childhood has a great impact in forming one's sexual orientation. In addition, the fixation of the gender in the society as what one can see in the novel will lead into stereotyping an individual in which male and female are taught to behave according to their '*kodrat'* in the society. It is also a doxa as what conceived by Bourdieu as a particular "truth" that is accepted as the "universal" truth. The symbolic violence occurs when both sexes accept the stereotype as their label.

Another manifestation of symbolic violence in the novel is seen by the notion of Indonesian heteronormativity that is reflected in the novel. Ayu Utami through her lesbian character Shakuntala also raises the issue of women's '*kodrat'* and gender roles in the patriarchal society. As aforementioned, Shakuntala lives with the dominance of her father. She borrows a parable, the story of the ogres in Hansel and Gretel when she tells how cruel her father is; and in which she comes out with a realisation: she is educated within a society that sets double standard for male and female. From the parable of Hansel and Gretel, she muses over the following thought:

First, it is prerogative solely of the male to approach the woman. A woman who chases men is a whore. Second, a woman shall give her body only to the right man, who shall support her for the rest of her life. That's what is known as marriage." (Utami, 2015, p. 155)

This concept of gender roles in Indonesian patriarchal society makes Shakuntala see marriage as "nothing more than hypocritical prostitution" (Utami, 2015, p. 155). She also believes that society "considers women only from their physical appearance" and "people did not consider a girl who didn't yet have breast to be virgin" (Utami, 2015, p. 118). Shakuntala who was born and raised as Javanese Catholic woman, was also advised by her parents about virginity as "woman's gift to her husband. And virginity is like a nose, once you lose it, it can't be replaced." Therefore, she must never give it away before she gets married, because then she will be "damaged good" (Utami, 2015, p. 118). It is assumable that the concept of virginity that is enforced by her parents is the trigger for her rebellious character. Instead of obeying her parent's order, she gives up her virginity to her foreign lover before she leaves for the United States.

Regardless of the fact that she had exposed herself to sexuality and eroticism when she was a teenager, people can see from these texts that Shakuntala does not only represent the gender role oppression in Indonesian patriarchal society but also portrays Ayu Utami's perspective on the East and West dichotomy. As a lesbian character in the novel, she describes her understanding of how people from the West think about people from the East.

In this country (America) people thought those in the East lived according to strange customs. Their men attached decorations to their penises, on the surface or within the skin. Their women, without shame, aroused the desire of their men and also of strangers, since they indulged in sex without any sense of taboo." (Utami, 2015, p. 127).

Shakuntala sees that American's women are more liberal in expressing their sexual desire. She then compares it with the women's sexuality which is perceived differently by her society.

In this country, people speak of your land and our land, your people and our people. We are the noble of the East. You, the depraved of the West. Your women wear bikinis in the streets and have no regard for virginity. Your school children, boys, and girls, live together out of the wedlock. In this country, sex belongs to adult through marriage even if they were married at the age of eleven and regarded as already mature. In your country, people have sex on television. We do not have sex on television. We have a decent foundation in the in the great East. Your customs in the West are not noble." (Utami, 2015, p. 127).

In its relation to Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic violence, one can see that it is not only the acceptance of homosexuality in the Indonesian homophobic society, but also the gender roles which is used to control the relationship between male and female in Indonesian heteronormative society are the form of symbolic violence. It is also a doxa as what conceived by Bourdieu as a particular "truth" that is accepted as the "universal" truth. To illustrate this issue from gender perspective, the rigid adherence of two-sexes; male and female is usually considered as universal truths. Yet in fact, this conception is an example of particular truth, as although this view is held by the religious believers and conservatives, the feminists and LGBTQ agents dispute this perception by pointing out the existence of intersex This symbolic violence then occurs when both sexes accept the gender dichotomy of male-female and live within the unwritten gender roles context in the society.

This study therefore confirms that the characters' childhood experiences as a form

of disposition shape that individual as a habitus. This habitus is strongly shown in Ayu Utami's Shakuntala in *Saman* and Djenar Mahesa Ayu's *Nayla*. Returning to the discussion on symbolic violence, those habitus later will deal with the power which Bourdieu refers as a capital in the society.

As this study analyses the lesbian characters, these characters often experience the symbolic violence because the discussion about homosexuality in Indonesia will always intersect with bigger cultural capitals that are norms, religious belief, and *adat*. The symbolic violence occurs when the dominated accept what the dominant does to them such as accepting their gender roles in the society or the stereotype that the society puts as their label. In this case, most of the homosexual characters in the selected novels likely accept their label as sick lesbian or homosexual men. In this point of accepting, Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence is applicable to discuss the homosexuality in Indonesia.

These selected novels also articulate the resistance towards heteronormativity in Indonesian homophobic society through their circulation. The Indonesian *adat* almost universally acknowledge that any sexual relationships outside heterosexual marriage are morally prohibited (Bennet, 2005). It is in this light that one needs to understand the recent increase in homophobic attacks in Indonesia has increased (Dearden, 2017). While in the West, the concept of sexuality is seen as something as a part of the daily life as they embrace one's sexual preference openly, in Asian countries especially in the Indonesian state and *adat* emphasise gender normativity, the Indonesian media are telling stories about homosexuality since the beginning of the 1990s (Blackwood, 2007). Scholars have observed that Indonesian media tend to treat homosexuality as a crime or mental illness or disease. In addition, people associate LGBT often with free sex, prostitution, promiscuity and criminality (Gayatri, 1993). Thus, through their circulation and the portrayal of lesbian heroines, these novels also portray kind of resistance towards the Indonesian heteronormativity.

As a lesbian, the heroines of those two novels will have to face the obstacle and the rejection from the society. Therefore, Shakuntala will have to struggle in order to embrace her sexual preference as a lesbian. In the perspectives of character, the character of Shakuntala is contradictive. She hates the oppression that she experiences through Indonesian heteronormativity yet she does not show a strong resistance because she prefers living in the U.S where people are more considerate about others' sexual preference. Meanwhile, through the perspective of characterisation, Nayla in Djenar Mahesa Ayu shows no resistance at all. The reason is because she accepted her "*kodrat*" as a woman. In other word, she is willingly being "normalised" in the novel.

To summarise the discussion, living in the Indonesian standards of "morality", a lesbian is oppressed and forced to normalise herself by taking a male partner and also often being submissive. One sees the manifestation of symbolic violence in the form of stereotyping Indonesian lesbianism and in the form of Indonesian heteronormativity. Meanwhile, the novel also resists the Indonesian heteronormativity by raising the issue of LGBTIQ in Indonesian homophobic society.

CONCLUSION

The two novels *Saman* by Ayu Utami and *Nayla* by Djenar Mahesa Ayu enrich Indonesian literature by offering new perspectives to the Indonesian readers. These novels raise the controversial issue about lesbianism in the country where lesbians often experience violence, be it physical or symbolic, when they are honest about their sexual preferences. The physical

and emotional attraction and contact have been narrated clearly in both novels with regard to the same-sex relationship.

In relation to the symbolic violence, the lesbian characters have experienced violence since their childhood amidst the mainstream Indonesian society's belief in heteronormativity. They cannot embrace their sexual preference and are considered into sexual deviation. The absence of father figure, the dominance of a father and a mother have become their reasons to look for a 'shelter' in same-sex relationship.

Meanwhile, the symbolic violence towards the lesbian characters in the novels also shows resistance towards the heteronormativity itself. Led by the discussion of LGBT that always intersects with the law state, norm and *adat* that reject, LGBT actors are seen as someone deviant and sick. Yet these novels show their resistance by having the lesbian heroines in their story. Meanwhile, from the perspectives of a character, Shakuntala in Ayu Utami's *Saman* resists the Indonesian heteronormativy by keeping her sexual identity as a lesbian even she prefers to live in the U.S. This kind of resistance is not seen in the character of Djenar Mahesa Ayu's Nayla because she finally returns to her *kodrat* as a "normal" woman through a process of social and cultural normalisation.

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