

The Formation of Gay Space in Joko Anwar's *Arisan!*

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ABSTRACT

Although the notion of gay space started out as a cultural geographic study that predominantly focused on Western countries where gay visibility was high, more scholars have begun to show keenness in tracing the existence of gay space in Asian regions in recent years. This article traces the formation of gay space in Jono Anwar's 2003 movie *Arisan!*. Set in modern day Indonesia where homosexuality is still deeply frowned upon, the movie explores how the male protagonist - Sakti struggles to come to terms with his own homosexuality in a world governed by heteronormativity. This study argues that the gay space in *Arisan!* is not formed by merely portraying the gay characters in a positive light but rather, by toppling the heteronormative structures that shaped the core of sexual hegemony as portrayed in the movie. This study examines how the formidable heteronormative structures are destabilized by toxic masculinity, toxic femininity, and the problematizing of heterosexual world for the purpose of making room for the formation of gay space.

Keywords: *Arisan!*, gay space, heteronormativity, toxic masculinity and femininity

INTRODUCTION

The universality of space renders it a subject that is relevant to everyone. Regardless of one's religion, race or sexual orientation, the subject of space is always pertinent. Ajtony and Pieldner assert that the notion of space makes it possible for human existence to exist in multi-faceted perspectives and this has resulted in us being able to "access to various literary, linguistic and social phenomena" (vii). Meanwhile, in explaining what space entails, postmodern geographer Cosgrove (1985) describes it as a product made possible by interpretive process. The formation of space is fueled by various factors and space can in actuality exist in both physical and abstract forms. Mehta (2013) explains streets are physical social spaces where people from all walks of life can congregate to celebrate and express different social experiences and behaviours (p. 2). In more abstract forms, space can also be formed by language or gender. In relation to this, Johnston and Longhurst discuss how modern feminism has been able to turn New York City into a space for four women in the highly-acclaimed American drama *Sex and the City* to fulfill their sexual and worldly fantasies. (72)

This present study aims to look at the notion of space through the queer lens and in doing so, it is imperative to discuss how gay space comes into existence. Leap (1996) theorizes that gay space can be formed through language where he explains how male public restrooms can be turned into a gay-positive space with the presence of gay-related graffiti (p.99). In discussing gay space, Waitt and Markwell (2006) assert that gay space can also be constructed through tourism. Travel as they see it, enables gay individuals to escape the mundane existence of being in the closet and by encountering different people. As a result, it allows them to experience a different reality where alternative sexual identities can be explored (p.31). The existence of gay space is crucial for the LGBT community as it allows the members of that

community to exist in a realm not oppressed by the power of heteronormativity. Gay spaces are usually more visible in metropolitans be it in Western or Asian countries. Castells (1997) notes that physical spaces deemed significant to gay neighbourhoods in America include bars, restaurants, movie theaters and cultural centers. (1997).

This paper aims to examine how gay space in formed in the Indonesian gay-themed movie *Arisan!*. Released in 2003, *Arisan!* is the first Indonesian mainstream movie that explores homosexual theme by portraying two main male characters as gay. It tells the story of Sakti who struggles with his sexuality. When he meets Nino, he finally embraces the fact that he is sexually attracted to men. When they become romantically involved with each other, Sakti feels the need to keep their relationship discreet for fear that his family members and friends will disapprove of it. *Arisan!* is set in modern Indonesia in the metropolitan area of Jakarta. Sakti's social life primarily revolves around women and this contributes to strong female presence in the movie. Even their regular social gatherings known locally as 'Arisan' are mostly attended by female members. Examining the gay space in this movie is deemed a viable attempt as it will demonstrate that gay space is universally present even in Indonesia where homosexuality is deeply frowned upon and punishable by heavy laws. This has resulted in the scarcity of homosexual-related elements shown in the media, particularly mainstream ones in the early 2000s. Boellstorff (2005) points out that references to homosexuality in Indonesian mainstream mass media were infrequent and inconsistent. Even if there were references made, homosexuality was always portrayed in a negative light. (p. 75) Hence, the portrayal of two main gay male characters in the movie *Arisan!* was nearly unheard of at that point of time. Because of this, it is also academically feasible to examine how the 'first' gay space was formed in a mainstream Indonesian movie as most presently available scholarly articles pertaining to the movie *Arisan!* were published in Indonesian Language. Due to the scarcity of scholarly articles written in English about the movie, this article will serve as a good reference for discussion pertaining to Indonesian gay space for a wider audience.

This study argues that the gay space in the movie *Arisan!* is not formed by merely portraying the gay characters in a positive light. Instead, the gay space comes into existence with the destabilization of heteronormativity. The destabilization of heteronormativity as seen in *Arisan!* is an unprecedented move particularly when it is challenged for the purpose of enabling gay space to form. Valera (2011) argues that heteronormativity represents a regime that allows heterosexual norms to be governed by a rigid sexual binary formed by sex, gender and sexuality. (p. 35) In respect to that, homosexuality is then regarded as a threat to heteronormativity as it champions alternative lifestyles that fall beyond the rigid regime upheld of heteronormativity. This being the case, it will not be hard to see how the existence of gay space in the movie means the heteronormative space has been destabilized. It is not possible for gay space to come into existence when the dominant structure of heteronormativity is still standing strong, it is only by destabilizing it that gay space can then be formed. It is observed that the destabilization of heteronormativity in *Arisan!* is achieved by the portrayal of toxic femininity, toxic masculinity and the problematizing of heterosexual world.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The vicious circle of toxic masculinity and femininity exerted by heterosexual individuals in *Arisan!* certainly places them in a negative light. Toxic masculinity and femininity are not just ruining their own lives but also inflicting prolonged emotional pain on the people whom they are close with. Although not as overt as the portrayal of toxic femininity, the presence of toxic masculinity can clearly be seen through the husbands of Mei Mei and Andien. Despite being just minor characters in the movie, their toxic masculinity is highly destructive to their wives. Whitehead (2021), points out that toxic masculinity can manifest itself in numerous ways such as physical and verbal violence, repeated threatening behaviours,

harassment, bullying, assault et cetera. He further explains how 70% of women can be victims of toxic masculinity at certain points of their lives. (p. 59-60) It is surely not difficult to see how Mei Mei and Andien are in fact victims of their husbands' toxic masculinity. Their husbands' infidelity is such major blow to them and they have to suffer repercussions that lead them to the path of self-blame and destruction. Not only that, the fact that Mei Mei's husband had to look at a salacious photo of a woman while having sexual intercourse with her is a total insult to her.

As mentioned in the introduction, *Arisan!* has strong female presence and consequently, the presence of toxic femininity is expected to be more overt when compared to toxic masculinity. It is crucial to mention that scholarly discussion with regard to toxic femininity is still presently scarce, but it certainly does not mean that women cannot be toxic. Whitehead also asserts that women can be racist, fascist or even homophobic because power has the ability to corrupt anyone regardless of their sexuality or gender (p. 232). Toxic femininity can be traced in many of the female characters in the movie. Meimei and Andien are best friends with one another. This movie focuses on how toxic femininity shapes them to act a certain way around the important men in their lives. The idea behind toxic femininity is that women like Meimei and Andien use their feminine traits excessively by appearing helpless and manipulative towards their men. More of this toxic feminine tendency can be seen during the women's monthly gathering where the group's main agenda is to upstage one another. They will drop names of their famous, rich in-laws and share information about their mega rich business plans which make their relationships with each other appear to be superficial. In relation to toxic femininity, the women in *Arisan!* appear to look happy on the surface, however, despite appearances, they are not content with their lives. As noted by Shamita Das Dasgupta, "In the Western conceptualisation, we have choices between two roles: traditional (read: backward, oppressive, sexist, uneducated, passive, and docile) and progressive (read: enlightened, egalitarian, active, vocal, and Westernised)" (p.12). In other words, women have to decide if they want to be traditional or progressive but if they try to be both, they will suffer the consequences.

Apart from that, Meimei also forces her husband to impregnate her which shows that she uses her toxic femininity to manipulate her husband into feeling guilty and giving her a baby. According to Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres in *Third World Women and The Politics of Feminism* (1991), "Feminist movements have been challenged on the grounds of cultural imperialism, and of short-sightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, and homophobia" (p.7). Therefore, for marginalised third world women like MeiMei and Andien, it is imperative that they stand out and this can be achieved by being manipulative and controlling with the men in their lives. It is observed that when MeiMei and Andien break away from the *Arisan* standards, they become individuals who can no longer relate with the rest of the *Arisan* members.

In *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1996), Roger Webster states that "A number of issues regarding the representation of women in literature began to be addressed in the twentieth century, mainly by women writers such as Virginia Woolf and then by feminist literary critics" (p.75). Consequently, this is an indication that women issues, including toxic femininity has been an ongoing issue as women and feminism go hand in hand together. *Arisan!* champions women issues by showing us that women can be both toxic and feminine in order to appear significant in the patriarchal world. In her essay entitled "The New Woman in South Asian and Diasporic Literature" (2005), Yasmin Hussain reflects, "Within these writings the image of South Asian novels has moved away from the traditional self-sacrificing woman toward characters searching for identity" (Hussain, 2005, p. 55). Although MeiMei and Andien finally realise that toxic femininity should no longer be part of their lives and identities,

their toxic femininity has certainly taken a serious toll on the people close to them. In short, toxic masculinity and femininity have put the heterosexual characters in the movie in a negative light and this gives way to the formation of gay space in the movie. By portraying these heterosexual individuals from such a negative angle, it will significantly tilt the balance in the non-heterosexual individuals' favour.

Apart from the negative portrayal of non-heterosexual individuals through toxic masculinity and femininity, *Arisan!* also resorts to problematizing the heterosexual world by destabilizing the structure of heteronormativity as a way of enabling gay space to form. Kimport explains how it is often difficult to see the problems of heteronormativity because the structure is often undisrupted and when nothing is done to challenge it, inequality in sexuality and identities shall always remain. (130) Marriage and procreation are the primary structures associated with heteronormativity and when these two structures are challenged, heteronormativity space is thus under threat. In Indonesia, heteronormativity is put on the pedestal and Boellstroff also argues that getting married and producing children is one way for gay and lesbian Indonesians to show their proper citizenship and their inability to take up such responsibilities is deemed a failure as a person and citizen (p. 107). In *Arisan!*, the heteronormativity space is certainly not portrayed as a safe haven for the female characters. In fact, the structure heteronormativity is so broken that this formidable structure begins to shake.

Meimei seems to have it all from a young age, as she comes from a privileged background. However, she struggles with fertility problems, which she believes is the reason for her husband's estrangement from her. In reality, her husband has an affair, and when she finds out about this, she blames herself because she believes that if she can give him a child then only, she deserves to be loved. Meimei who is superior in terms of her intellectual ability feels the pressure to be perfect both in her career and in her personal life. Instead of discussing her need to be a mother with her husband, Meimei just fades in the back as she feels helpless. She could only confide in her good male friend Sakti where Sakti points out that he feels that it is strange that Meimei is unable to communicate her needs with her own husband. Meimei blames herself for not being able to conceive and sustain her husband's interest in her. The fact of the matter is that Meimei is the most rational and sensible person and any man is lucky to have her as his wife, childless or not.

Meanwhile, Andien believes in a perfect utopian life but her life totally falls apart when her husband confesses that he has been cheating on her. She rebels by finding a lover on her side and she stops being a doting wife to her husband and twin daughters. She feels that there is no point being a good wife if it is still not enough for her husband. This is another façade of toxic femininity where Andien just hides away from her own marital problems and finds escapism with another man. She dresses sexier as she wants to break away from the idea of being a wife and mother of two children. She behaves like a single woman with no commitments. However, this version of toxic femininity is only a temporary solution for her, and she even ends up at the police station. Women like Meimei and Andie somehow feel that if they cannot make their husbands happy, then it must be solely their faults. They wonder why is it when they transform themselves to become what their men want them to be, it is still not enough.

In discussing the problems related to heteronormativity in India and Indonesia, Wieringa (2016) observes that women are always shown how heteronormativity should be their ultimate goal that allows them to enjoy a normal and harmonious life. She further notes that heteronormativity is not always a safe haven and women often suffer emotionally, intellectually and financially when heteronormativity begins to crack. (95). This is precisely what Meimei and Andien go through in *Arisan!*. They suffer as a result of pinning too much of hope in getting what heteronormativity promises but only to feel painfully disappointed in the end when things go awry.

CONCLUSION

The gay space is *Arisan!* is not built by merely portraying the gay characters in a positive light but instead, it comes into existence with the heteronormative space slowing being destabilized. When observed closely, the two main gay characters Sakti and Nino actually restore order to remedy the chaos created in the heterosexual world. While they may not necessarily be the ultimate heroes that eventually save the day, their presence in the heteronormative space is both non-threatening and well-intentioned. Although the road to forming a wider gay space for the gay community in Indonesia is still filled with numerous obstacles and hurdles, the triumphant success of *Arisan!* upon its release in 2003 both commercially and critically somewhat suggests the hope that one day gay space can tacitly co-exist with the heteronormative space is not entirely absent.

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