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Provocative Women’s Literature: the Case of *sastra wangi*

Introduction

In this paper I intend to analyze, in which way the issues gender and Islam are addressed in *sastra wangi*¹, a genre that is thought to have its origin in the publication of Ayu Utami’s novel *Saman* in 1998. This work which paved the way for the appearance of other young women writers on the literary stage, is marked by its exploration of former taboo topics like sexuality, especially female desire, and its strong criticism of political violence, oppression and social injustice.

Until the fall of the Suharto regime Indonesian literature has been strongly dominated by male writers. Due to Suharto’s New Order ideology women were expected to stay at home, caring for the husband and children. They were not supposed to enter the public sphere so that writing primarily was a male occupation. Since 1998 young female writers between the age of 20 and 35 have been setting new trends by openly addressing issues like female desire, homosexuality, lesbianism and sadomasochism. They grasped their opportunity to openly discuss women’s problems and thoughts, trying to make the public more aware of the difficulties women have to face in Indonesian society. In that context especially the Muslim female authors raised problems associated with gender and Islam. The different approaches three selected Muslim female writers² have chosen to address Islam and gender problems will be emphasized in this paper.

Origin and characteristics of *sastra wangi*

The term *sastra wangi* was probably coined by a male journalist, Bre Redana. He evidently thought this genre to be of low literary quality so that he wrote a short story with the title

¹ This term can be translated as „fragrant“ or „perfumed“ literature.

² Other writers of the genre, whose work is not considered in this paper, are Djenar Maesa Ayu, Dewi Lestari, Nova Riyanti Yusuf, Nukila Amal, Linda Christanty and Fira Basuki and Oka Rusmini, among others. It should be noted here that *sastra wangi* is written by writers belonging to different religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism).

Banjar Tampak Gangsul, where he described the grandchild of a Queen Mother, Dewi Sastrawangi, as a goddess of temptation, distracting a group of religious men from their task to keep watch on a river. By means of the character of Dewi Sastrawangi the author conveys the message to the reader that the female writers have not much to offer besides distraction. One might assume that the journalist was simply jealous of the young successful women, who stepped into a new promising market. Despite of his personal feelings about *sastra wangi* though, the term was in fact being picked up by the mass media and became even more popular because of the promotion. Thus, one could say that the negative connotation has even increased the popularity of *sastra wangi*.

However, I should note here first, that *sastra wangi* is no homogenous genre. It is written by a heterogeneous group of writers; they come from different academic and religious backgrounds and obviously have diverse motivations for fiction-writing³. The term *sastra wangi* in itself is controversial because some female writers do not accept it as a category defining their literary work. These women argue that the term is artificial and does not give a clear idea of what the meaning of their texts really is. Moreover, so far there has been no clear definition of *sastra wangi*. Watson refers to *sastra wangi* as an “elite phenomenon confined to a readership of the upper urban middle class” (Watson, 2005: 69). Other aspects that clearly characterize *sastra wangi* are the outspoken, direct way, how taboo topics are addressed, and the young age of the female writers. Also the popularity of the genre is striking: many *sastra wangi* texts have become bestsellers, and the most popular texts *Saman* and *Supernova*, written by the Christian writers Ayu Utami and Dewi Lestari, sold almost 100.000 copies (García 2004)⁴.

Important questions raised in *sastra wangi* are: what function does female desire have for the understanding of the female role in modern Indonesia? What role do Islam and gender play in Indonesian society? In this paper I will explore these questions at the example of the novels of three different Muslim⁵ female authors: Herlinatiens, Dinar Rahayu and Dewi Sartika.

³ Apart from the writers mentioned in this paper, writers of *sastra wangi* include Ayu Utami, Dewi Lestari, Djenar Maesa Ayu, Nukila Amal, Fira Basuki, Nova Riyanti Yusuf, Linda Christanty, Sirikit Syah and Oka Rusmini.

⁴ This is a very good run on Indonesian terms. It must be kept in mind that Indonesian literature is not very popular since there is no reading culture in Indonesia like in many European countries, for instance. In his article García points to the fact that “the first printing of works of fiction by even the biggest publishers rarely exceeds 3000 copies” (García 2004) and many texts are not reprinted at all.

⁵ I will not talk about the works of the Christian authors in this paper in more detail since the focus is on Muslim female authors.

The authors

Herlinatiens (Herlina Tien Suhesti) was born in 1983 in Ngawi (East Java). Her family has a *pesantren*⁶ background. She studied Indonesian language and literature in Yogyakarta. Despite her provocative book *A Lesbian on the Margins* (2003) she neither fears to be condemned by the Islamic establishment nor does she believe that her book will be among those being purged by radical Muslims. Dinar Rahayu was born in Bandung in 1971. She graduated from the ITB (Technological Institute) Bandung with a degree in chemistry. Since 1998 she worked as a chemistry teacher at the SMU Plus Muthahhari, Bandung, and started giving private lessons in chemistry. Her great interest in Greek mythology and painting human beings is also reflected in the novel to be discussed below, *Ode to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch* (2002). Dewi Sartika was born in 1980 in Cilegon (West Java) but her family is of Minang origin. Dewi is currently studying Indonesian language, literature and anthropology at the UPI (Indonesian University of Education). She has been writing literature since she was a child, mainly in form of short stories. Her novel *Dadaisme* won the first prize in the “2003 Jakarta Arts Council Novel Competition”. The author has not at all expected to win the competition because her formerly written teenage stories have never been published. So we can say that her first novel was an immediate success.

Personal motives for fiction-writing and model writers

Before interpreting three selected texts of the three above-mentioned Muslim authors, I would like to give the reader an idea about the authors’ individual reasons for writing. Herlinatiens intends to “report on the lives of marginalised people”, as she explains in an interview. Her model writer is Mochtar Lubis (Graham 2003). In his work *Twilight in Jakarta* (1963) Lubis delves into the problem of social injustice by dealing with the problems the poor and marginalized contract workers have to cope with, for instance.⁷ Dinar Rahayu claims that her most important aim in fiction-writing is to mirror the experiences of her characters. She neither wants to criticize politics nor “scold anybody else” (Laksmi 2004: 187). She says that she likes the work of Ayu Utami but was influenced by the ‘wild’ style of writing of Danarto and Budi Darma (Laksmi 2004: 187). From international writers she likes Junichiro Tanazaki and Guy de Maupassant, for instance. Dewi Sartika’s motive for fiction-writing is to involve her readers, to make them “arrange her puzzle in an orderly fashion” (*Khazanah* 2004). Dewi Sartika was influenced by Ayu Utami.

⁶ School for Koranic studies for children and young people, most of whom are boarders.

⁷ This, naturally, is only one of the topics addressed in that book which also describes the corrupt lifestyle of the leading political figures of 1956-1957.

The novels: *A Lesbian on the Margins*

This novel was written by Herlinatiens in 2003. It highlights the difficulties lesbians have to face in Indonesian society. Ashmora Paria⁸, the protagonist, is in love with the woman Rie. The latter complies with her mother's wish to marry a man. Rie does not want to disappoint her mother because she is ill. The protagonist stays behind, desperately longing for Rie to return. Ashmora Paria's loneliness sometimes even makes her want to commit suicide. After having several affairs with different women, the protagonist almost marries a man called Mahendra because her family also tries to force her into a marriage. But at the end of the novel she receives a letter from Rie, who lives in Paris now. This letter gives Ashmora Paria hope that she can be re-united with her lover. Herlinatiens describes here, how the protagonist, who was just about to marry Mahendra, although she did not love him, leaves everything else behind and takes a plane to Paris, full of enthusiasm.

In the course of the novel the protagonist's thoughts constantly focus on her lover; she cannot think of anything else. To highlight these thoughts, almost the whole novel is written in form of inner monologues. *A Lesbian on the Margins* is characterized by a poetic tone on the one hand and a vulgar tone on the other hand. Poems are inserted into the text, but also slang words like *bangsat*⁹ or *dancuk*¹⁰ for instance, are frequently repeated. This stylistic device functions to highlight the rapidly changing emotions and mood of the protagonist. These controversial feelings can be explained by her unfulfilled love on the one hand and the reaction of her family and her friends to her homosexuality on the other hand. This inner struggle makes the protagonist lose her balance. The protagonist feels rejected by her family because they do not tolerate her love. They feel that a lesbian relationship brings shame upon them. Although Ashmora Paria wants to be accepted as a 'normal' person, enjoying the same rights as 'ordinary' people, she is denied that wish. The family members try to persuade her to marry a man as soon as possible, her friends do not show any sympathy for her love, and in her job her movie projects are not being supported anymore, as soon as it is known that she is a lesbian. According to the protagonist, who reflects the author's opinion here, it is disturbing that homosexual love leads to isolation: "I'm certainly a woman loving women. But it is really unjust to isolate me".¹¹ (p. 45) Herlinatiens criticizes that radical Muslim groups make life more difficult for lesbians, making them feel even more isolated. The protagonist

⁸ This is a telling name because *paria* is a term that is used for the lowest Hindu caste, the 'outcasts'.

⁹ Scoundrel, bedbug

¹⁰ Fuck

¹¹ Aku memang perempuan yang mencintai perempuan. Tapi sungguh tidak adil bagiku untuk diasingkan.

complains to a friend about such radical groups having reacted to her planned movie production by terrorizing the company she works with: “[...] my company is afraid of continuing my movie project. They were terrorized by religious figures”¹² (p. 45). Muslim extremists, thus Herlinatiens’ argumentation, are a danger for society. Non-mainstream groups like lesbians are especially attacked by the extremists, who try to force a heterosexual way of life on them. The author propagates a moderate Islam which can serve as a home for marginalized groups, who see Islam as a part of their identity. By showing her praying, for instance, Herlinatiens emphasizes the protagonist’s deep religiosity several times in the novel. The author intends to illustrate that love is a gift of Allah, for heterosexuals and homosexuals alike: “The moment I fell in love with Rie I felt the closeness to Allah even stronger, although she is a woman and I’m also a woman.”¹³ (p. 45). According to Herlinatiens lesbianism is not seen as being incompatible with Islam. Rather, radical Islam on the one hand and people’s lacking sympathy for other persons’ necessities and their fixed role models on the other hand are responsible for a colder world.

Ode to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch

This fictional text, Dinar Rahayu’s pioneer novel, was written in 2002. It mainly describes the experiences of persons showing sexual behaviour like sadomasochism, sexual devotion, incest and transsexuality. Among the figures portrayed are the main characters Jonggi, who needs to be tortured to reach sexual satisfaction, and Dinar, a transsexual. The novel often directly refers to Greek and Scandinavian mythology, thereby explaining the characters’ present behaviour, especially as far as sexuality is concerned. Jonggi sees himself as an incarnation of Apollo and Dinar thinks to be an incarnation of a valkyrie¹⁴. The author draws attention to Apollo being sent to earth to serve several people as a slave¹⁵ and to Dinar serving Odin, accompanying deserving soldiers to Walhalla. Dinar sacrifices her virginity to Apollo so that she is able to leave the world of Gods. Later in the novel, the line between the mythological and the real characters is drawn. Dinar is described as a man, who changes his sex because due to his experiences in the era of Nordic mythology he believes to be a woman. Therefore, he undergoes an operation to become a transsexual. The author connects Jonggi with Apollo by showing their common experience of being a slave, the first voluntarily, the other

¹² [...] perusahaan ketakutan untuk meneruskan proyek film ku, mereka mendapat teror dari para tokoh agama.

¹³ Kedekatan dengan Tuhan yang menjadi terasa semakin dekat saat aku mencintai Rie, meski dia perempuan, dan aku juga perempuan.

¹⁴ In Nordic mythology valkyries are female spirits, who accompany deserving soldiers to Walhalla.

¹⁵ Apollo is being sent to earth by his father Zeus to herd sheep and take care of horses.

involuntarily. The topic of master-slave which is used for both Apollo and Jonggi alike, has already been explored in the novel *Venus in Furs* (1870), a novel written by the Austrian writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. This author lived up to a utopia he invented himself. He fixed a six-month contract with Fanny Pistor Bogdanoff¹⁶, giving her permission to treat him as a slave. In return, she had to dress in furs as often as possible, especially, when she was in a cruel mood. When this unusual affair was over, Sacher-Masoch wrote down his experiences which he included in the novel *Venus in Furs*. In that novel Severin von Kusiemski drafts an agreement with Wanda von Dunajew, a beautiful widow, giving her the permission to be his master. To make Severin jealous, Wanda starts an affair with another man and she even orders her new lover to whip Severin. This disgraceful experience opens his eyes and he has no wish to continue his affair with Wanda. In contrast to *Venus in Furs* in *Ode to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch* Jonggi has involuntary sexual relations with several people. In his childhood he was a victim of his brother's sodomy for several years. Also his lonely mother sexually abused him, when he was a child and even, when he was grown up. However, as he gets older, Jonggi starts to enjoy his sexual relationship with his mother. He offers himself to her because he thinks this is an adequate tribute for a beloved person. Later on, he is tortured by a group of women and by his teacher Kartika.

The novel describes women as cruel monsters, wishing to dominate, rape and torture men according to their wild sexual phantasies¹⁷. In contrast to Severin of *Venus in Furs* Jonggi is not cured of his wish to be tortured at the end of the novel. However, also an explanation is given for the sexual 'abnormal' behaviour of some of the characters: not only Jonggi has experienced violence in his youth, but also Kartika did. In her case her father almost beat her to death. Rahayu illustrates here that the past has immediate consequences for the present behaviour of people. By referring to the characters' mythological and real past Rahayu helps the reader better understand their sexual behaviour.

Dadaisme

This novel which was written by Dewi Sartika in 2004, describes the inner world of autists and ponders on diverse topics, reaching from autism, coincidence and death to homosexuality and polygamy. It has several plots that are quite difficult to 'unpuzzle' by the reader but I will only focus on the most significant one in the context of Islam and gender issues. The book

¹⁶ The woman was called Fanny Pistor, but she gave herself the title of Baroness Bogdanoff.

¹⁷ In comparison to them Jonggi can still be seen as harmless, although he also commits violence by raping a little girl from the neighbourhood.

focuses on the life of Dr. Aleda, a female psychologist, who tries to cure the autistic girl Nedena of a traumatic experience. When she was a few years old, Nedena played with a match, although her mother told her not to do it. Suddenly, the whole house was on fire, and Nedena's mother died in the flames. Since that time Nedena has lost her speech. In many sessions Dr. Aleda struggles to reach Nedena's subconscious, and finally she succeeds. But in the end, Nedena is unable to live with her refreshed memory, and kills herself. The psychologist's hope that she can help her patient by using her sharp intellect, fails. She finally has to accept that all her efforts are in vain, that she cannot prevent her death.

Dadaiisme is marked by a strongly religious tone. Death and coincidence are recurring leitmotifs of the novel. Death is always preceded by the appearance of a little dark one-winged angel called Michail, obviously the death angel.¹⁸ He lessens the doomed people's anxieties and comforts them, when they are sad. The death angel seems to enter people's lives by coincidence, but finally it turns out that there is no such thing as coincidence: all persons, who have seen Michail, are either dead or doomed at the end of the novel because it was destiny. The relation between coincidence and Islam is also discussed in the novel, when the topic of *qadar*, the belief in destiny, its good and evil, is raised. Magnos, Aleida's colleague and friend, who has a similar case like her, raises the topic of *qadar*. Magnos does not believe in pure coincidence but Dr. Aleda does. She hopes that the coincidence of the similar cases offers her a chance to heal Nedena. She hopes it is a way God has shown her. However, the similarity of the cases, a painting of an angel, turns to be the angel predicting death.

Reactions to the novels

There were different reactions to the novels, but remarkably, Islamic authorities left *sastra wangi* writers untouched. There was no *fatwa* issued against the *sastra wangi* writers, although one might have expected that. There are only minor events to highlight here. Herlinatiens was mobbed for wearing the *jilbab* in public by a group of teenagers at her book presentation in Surabaya in 2003. But in the same year the author presented her novel at the IAIN (Governmental Institute for Islamic Studies), where around 500 people were present, and no radical forces protested against it (Graham 2003). At a book presentation in 2004 Dinar Rahayu's novel *Ode to Leopold von Sacher Masoch* was regarded as being morally subversive and obscene. The text itself was only superficially discussed because the audience showed a deeper interest in the author's private life. And shortly after the publication of her

¹⁸ Although in Islam Michael also stands for the growth of plants and rain, in the context of the story the interpretation of Michail representing the death angel is more likely.

first book *Ode to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch* Dinar Rahayu was dismissed because her school thought her work to be too provocative (Kurnia 2004). Although this may have been cutting through the author's further plans, this reaction of the school probably was simply rooted in its desire not to have its reputation ruined by hiring a teacher using slang words, breaking with moral traditions. Dewi Sartika's *Dadaisme* was criticized for its chaotic structure rather than for her view of Islam. According to several critics it is still an immature book that would have needed editing before it was published.

Conclusion

As far as female desire is concerned, it can be seen from the texts analysed above that in contrast to earlier literary works this topic is addressed openly. However, especially Dinar Rahayu shows in her novel that women cannot express their sexual desire in an adequate way. By means of the female characters in *Ode to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch*, who display sexual obsession, for instance, Dinar Rahayu points to their impossibility to restrain their innate passions and to see men as equal partners. Rather, the characters can only find satisfaction by sexually dominating men. Thus, the idea is rejected that women can more easily restrain their passions than men or that the female sex is more disciplined than the male one.¹⁹ By describing them as monsters with perverted, cruel sexual phantasies, Rahayu substitutes the image of housewife and mother by the image of domina, which is just as inadequate to define the female role in modern Indonesia. Hence, according to her, the question remains, how the female role can be appropriately defined.

In the other two literary works the female desire and the female role as a whole are described in a more positive way. The female characters presented there are no longer seen as being dependent on men but they also do not try to completely reverse the formerly existing model of obedient housewife and mother. They play an active role which can be seen from the examples of Dr. Aleda and Ashmora Paria. Dr. Aleda even deliberately chooses a second wife for her husband because she herself cannot have children anymore, thereby clearly determining the way, how she and her husband are going to live. She advocates polygamy since she regards it as a chance to give her husband the baby he is so badly longing for, and as an opportunity to live in a harmonious relationship. At the end of *A Lesbian on the Margins* Ashmora Paria has also succeeded in living her dream. In both novels Islam provides an opportunity for women to cope with the difficulties they face in society. Dr. Aleda's problems

¹⁹ This idea is referred to in Brenner (1998: 149, 150), for instance.

are rooted in family relations and her job as a psychologist and Ashmora Paria has to struggle with society's negative perception and reaction to her lesbian love. Both authors do not blame Islam for the existence of social problems. Although Herlinatiens points to the threat of extremist Islamic groups to society, thereby drawing the reader's attention to the danger resulting from a radical Islamic model, the main character feels comfortable with Islam. Especially in *A Lesbian on the Margins* the protagonist is often shown when praying and trying to reach closeness to Allah. It can be stated that not Islam but deep-rooted prejudices and hypocrisy are being made responsible for social defects like the marginalization of women.

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