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A STUDY OF FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY: GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN INDONESIAN POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the concepts of femininity and masculinity in Indonesia through the analysis of two case studies of popular culture. The representation of femininity and masculinity in the field of popular culture is important because discussion, criticism, and controversy related to this topic directly affect the concept of gender and sexuality in Indonesian society.

Gender and sexuality in Indonesia must also be considered as it pertains to religion, especially Islam. Although there are a number of religions and belief systems in Indonesia, the Muslim population in this country is the largest in the world. Much debate about gender and sexuality has arisen in relation to the concept of religious “piety” or “morality” in Islam.

Since the resignation of Suharto in 1998, diverse subjects that are related to gender imagery or sexuality have received great attention in Indonesia, and criticism, debate, and discussions about these subjects continue.

In this paper, I discuss two particular cases: the famous Inul controversy in *dangdut* music in 2003, and a 2010 film titled “Madame X.” Using these case studies, I consider the representations and receptions of femininity and masculinity in the society of post-authoritarian Indonesia.

Key words: popular culture, Indonesia, masculinity, femininity, religion

1. Introduction

This study explores cultural views of gender and sexuality through the analysis of two case studies in Indonesian popular culture. It examines the ways that the concepts of femininity and masculinity are formed in Indonesian society. In a previous study, I examined images of men

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and women in “traditional” stories and discussed the ways that they have differed in comic book versions of those stories since the 1960s (Fukuoka 2011). The images of men and women that appear in “traditional” stories influence to some extent the formation of ideal gender imagery that people embrace; although, these images do not necessarily have a direct impact on daily life.

However, the cases of popular culture that were examined in this study have had a direct impact on the concepts that influence the daily lives of people in Indonesia, including those cases that have created social disputes. Visual and musical representations in popular culture and the various discourses and controversies regarding them are often transmitted and accepted as gender and sexuality norms. This phenomenon is associated with the remarkably recent development of cultural media, such as television and the Internet.

It is also necessary to consider the issue of gender and sexuality in Indonesian society in its relevance to religion, especially Islam. Although there are various religions and belief systems in Indonesia, the country’s Muslim population, comprising nearly ninety percent of the Indonesian population, is also the largest Muslim population in the world. The images of gender and sexuality portrayed by popular culture in recent years have stirred much debate, primarily in relation to Islam¹. Representations of gender and sexuality in popular culture are variously labeled “immoral” or “irreligious,” often from the Islamic perspective of “justice” or “piety.” In particular, various disputes arose in 2006 over whether to adopt the *Rancangan Undang-Undang Anti Pornografi dan Pornoaksi*, [Anti-Pornography and Pornoaction Bill] (RUU APP), which activated campaigns by human rights organizations and feminist groups on behalf of sexual minorities (Clark 2008: 40, Lindsay 2011: 172).

Beginning in 1966, Suharto’s “New Order” regime adopted a dictatorial and centralized political system that lasted more than thirty years. Islamic forces were suppressed when it was believed that they were considered as a potential threat impeding social regimentation. The regime recommended leading a righteous life based on the Islamic faith, but by which Islam, as political thought, was eliminated as a threat to the preservation of the regime (Miichi 2006: 120; Kurasawa 2006: 122-134). Similarly, community organizations, such as women’s associations, were considered important, whereas women’s movements and other group organizations were subjected to restrictions because they were viewed as forces that might threaten the order of social regimentation (Kurasawa 2001: 127-153; Nakatani 2007: 24-38).

However, as Islamic publications written in Indonesian language expanded rapidly, and educational opportunities increased, the literacy rate also increased, and many people, including those in middle-class urban areas, began sharing Islamic teachings as explicit knowledge (Miichi 2004: 119-123; Miichi 2006: 120-121; Kurasawa 2006: 130-134; Sasaki 2004: 211-216). Today, while women’s roles at home are considered important, there are many women’s social activities.

¹ Davies also pointed out that Islam prescribes various elements in daily life of Indonesian people, such as marriage, clothing, circumcision, behavior etc. (Davies 2010: 105-111).

Some interesting studies have been conducted in relation to gender (Brenner 2011: 212-234; Kurasawa 2006: 99-101).

The Suharto regime era was a time when it was difficult to openly engage in expressive or social activities with respect to religion or gender. However, people gained and accumulated knowledge in those areas through reading and education as well as from exposure to foreign cultures and various media. Thus, it was a period when people were exploring the meaning of social morality and religious piety.

After Suharto resigned in 1998, the law on the regulation of publications was repealed, which led to a relaxation of legal restrictions on expression and speech. Many subjects that may promote interest in sexual minorities and encourage challenging previous gender images are now topics in popular culture. Such topics were restricted in Indonesia during the Suharto period, and they were therefore less likely to lead to national arguments. While legal restrictions have been eliminated, there are some restrictive forces that can be defined as “social restraining forces” or “religious restraining forces.” These forces may be the engine that creates the controversies and protest movements that sometimes lead to serious struggles in which people resort to violence.²

With this social tension in mind, this study examines recently emergent forms of musical activities and film related to gender and sexuality in Indonesia. Through analysis of these cases, I evaluate the ways that the concepts of masculinity and femininity are represented in popular culture and are accepted in today’s Indonesian society.

2. *Dangdut* singer Inul Daratista’s musical career and the controversy surrounding her

The first case I will discuss involves the music and dance of the female singer, Inul Daratista (1979–), known as Inul, which have created controversy since 2003 (cf. Heryanto 2008: 15-31). The genre of her songs is termed *dangdut*. The genre of *dangdut* was established by the 1970s as a fusion of Malay music (*Orkes Melayu*) with elements of Indian film songs, Arabic music, and rock music.³ Musician Rhoma Irama (1947–), discussed below, played a significant part in the establishment of this musical genre. The word *dangdut* derives from the imitative sound of its rhythmic percussion pattern (the fourth beat in quadruple meter is a weak beat and there is an accent on the first beat in the next bar). In addition to the melody lines and lyrics, the most characteristic element of this music is the drum (termed *gendang*)-filled rhythm.

Inul’s singing and appearance are not particularly outstanding, and she has no original songs. However, she became known for her highly unique style of dancing. This dance, called *goyang ngebor* [drilling dance], involves wild gyrating and shaking of the hips. She reportedly gained

² This is also includes the issue of the emergence of “political homophobia” that is pointed out by Boellstorff (Boellstorff 2004: 470)

³ Takonai (2006) argues that the musical characteristics of *dangdut* were generally fixed in the 1960s through the beginning of the 1970s and the term *dangdut* began to be used at about the same time (Takonai 2006: 172).

the inspiration for this unique motion from hula hoops; it is certainly similar to the motion used when rotating a hula hoop around the hips, but it is much faster and more erratic (Sasaki 2004: 221). Inul sings a variety of songs and performs her wild dance to the rhythm of the percussion during the introductions and interludes of the music.

Inul was working as a singer in the eastern part of the island of Java, where she originated, but when she appeared on television in 2003 performing her unique dance, she became nationally famous. Her unique dancing gained popularity because large numbers of illegal copies of her videos (VDC) were distributed (Sasaki 2004: 217; Heryanto 2008). Inul's popularity as a singer grew rapidly. She sang in the countryside; now she is working on a national scale. At the same time, however, her "sensual" dancing has generated both positive and negative arguments. In particular, organizations such as *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, which is a Indonesian Muslim clerical organization, criticized Inul's dance as "pornoaction" and "apostasy" and prohibited her concerts throughout the country. Furthermore, Rhoma Irama, the "king" of *dangdut*, accused Inul of demeaning the *dangdut* genre, which inflamed a variety of disputes over Inul in the public discourse. Many studies have already produced interesting results regarding this controversy (Sasaki 2004; Takonai 2004; 2006; Kurasawa 2006; Heryanto 2008; Weintraub 2010). Therefore, this study does not describe the details of this controversy or how it developed; instead, it considers the visual and musical representations relative to gender and sexuality and how they are perceived in Indonesia.

2.1. Femininity as demonstrated by Inul

Why was Inul's *goyang ngebor* criticized? According to the Muslim leaders' organization, Inul's dancing was viewed as pornography in action. The specific reasons for the criticism were that her dancing involves sensual motions that greatly stress her "hip-shaking," that she is scantily dressed, her figure-hugging costume also stresses hip motion, and these behaviors trigger sexual desires. In response to the criticism, arguments arose over whether Inul's dance should be viewed as pornography in action or whether her "sensual" dancing is subversive enough to pose a problem (Photo 1).

Inul's *goyang ngebor* is certainly unique with respect to motion. However, she uses it to sell her originality and to provide a service as she entertains the audience. Although I have never personally seen Inul's performance in Indonesia, I have collected and examined a variety of visual and audio materials of it, and, from my examination of those materials, I believe that her performance focuses on entertaining the audience, which is common to all professional singers. Previous studies about Inul have stressed the



PHOTO 1. The cover of Inul's CD.

entertainment aspect of her dance and she herself has also said this (Sasaki 2004: 221). Although her entertaining an audience can be witnessed at her domestic and overseas concerts, the dance element seems to be most intense in her homeland, particularly when she performs live onstage in Java.

Inul's performance is very similar to traditional entertainment. This is not only true of the way that traditional entertainments are performed; it is similar in that the repertoire is shared. In one of the visual materials, Inul talks to the audience in Javanese, pulls a man from the audience, draws him close to her, and then starts to sing. In this material, she sings a song written in Javanese titled *Anoman Obong*. This song is about a scene from the ancient Indian epic, Ramayana, which is widely known in Java (YouTube 2011). Usually, she sings *dangdut* tunes, but she sometimes arranges Javanese traditional songs with which people are familiar in the *dangdut* style when she performs in her home town. She presents traditional songs that have been arranged in the *dangdut* style interspersed with wild dancing. Although the fusion of these two elements gives an impression of incompatibility, I observed that the audience fully enjoyed the performance and was very excited.⁴

The style in which Inul performs her specialty onstage to entertain the audience, pulling people out from the audience to sing and dance with her, was frequently seen in traditional entertainment in the western part of the island of Java, where I conducted my investigations. Sometimes, people pay the traditional dancer a gratuity to get onstage to dance or they pay to have the singer insert their names into the songs. For the artists, these services may be necessary for maintaining their popularity as well as earning money.

Dancers and singers who perform folk entertainment in the western part of the island of Java are known as *ronggeng*. They often encourage members of the audience to come up onstage and sing and dance with them. Because *ronggeng* engaged in prostitution in the past, this folk entertainment was prohibited in western Java after its independence. Female folk dancers, such as performers of the masked dance, also often perform a dance termed *tayuban* with members of the audience onstage (Fukuoka 2002). Even elderly female dancers often do this. Female dancers usually get paid more because they perform this service of dancing *tayuban* together with audience members. Sometimes, a *dangdut* singer is called in to sing onstage during the traditional performances and to dance with the audience. Traditionally, men play the musical instruments, and there are many female singers and dancers.

In some cases, there is public criticism of this form of entertainment, or husbands may show their opposition to female singers and dancers who are selling their femininity onstage (Fukuoka 2002: 105). Even so, many female singers and dancers continue to actively work in Java. There is a strong sentiment that these performances and those who perform them contribute to the perfection of a ceremony (e.g., performances are essential for the implementation of ceremonies,

⁴ Video material: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWyTf6_LaWg Last accessed on September 4, 2011.

and performers have a certain spiritual power [Weintraub 2010: 190-192].⁵ In one respect, singers and dancers provide various services to the audience during their performances, and they resolutely continue their expressive activities to earn more monetary tips from the audience.

Regarding the costume (the typical costume of a *dangdut* singer), Inul's performance has been criticized for her use of a costume that is too tight or scanty. However, the costumes used in Javanese folk entertainment have characteristics that can be similarly criticized. The traditional costume for the upper body is a blouse termed a *kebaya*, which is figure-hugging. It is usually transparent and made of materials, such as lace, that allow the undergarments to show. The lower body is wrapped in a cloth that makes body lines stand out. Female singers who are dressed in these traditional costumes with facial makeup and hair swept up, are star performers, even on the stages of shadow plays or puppet plays.

The dancer's costumes of traditional dances frequently expose the neck, shoulders, and arms. Such exposure is sometimes the target of critical backlash. However, as described, there is a strong favorable sentiment toward the various powers of traditional entertainment. Thus, the performance of songs and dances by those who are dressed in such costumes is not at this point in danger of disappearing in Java. This is probably because traditional music and dance are frequently performed, even at the palace, a cultural hub on the island of Java. The Javanese people have accepted Islamic teachings, and they have managed to live side-by-side with them as they nurture the energy of these flourishing performances⁶.

When reviewed in light of explicit social morality and religious piety, many of the behaviors that challenge moral standards have actually been allowed in the entertainment performances that are presented in local communities. Inul's dance was understood as her ingenuity applied to such contexts until about 2003, when it became controversial. She invented a choreography that is novel, eye-catching, and that entertains the audience. However, when the same performance that had been exhibited on "countryside" stages was given on the national scene, the femininity she demonstrated was condemned based on a variety of morals. Takonai (2006) points out that sophisticated performances have been seen more often, and dance has been seen less often, in Jakarta since democratization in 1998 while sexy dance performances with scanty costumes have been seen on countryside stages, with a widening gap between the two (Takonai 2006: 175). The fact that Inul's femininity gained fanatical popularity while coming under heavy criticism embodies this widening gap.⁷

⁵ Using *tayuban*, entertainment of eastern Java, where Inul is from, as an example. Weintraub (2010) also points out the similarities between *tayuban* performances and Inul's performances (p. 191).

⁶ However, the situation varies depending on place and time. In Cirebon in western Java, there were villages where shadow plays, puppet plays, and dancing were regarded as taboo. In recent years, there are cases in which a performer puts on a long-sleeved leotard under risqué dance costume. In some cases, a performer puts a thin veil over her head before applying hair accessories for the dance to avoid exposing her hair.

⁷ Since the 1990s, *dangdut* singers in Indonesia, including a famous singer like Evie Tamala, announced that they would not dance onstage. Some performers appeared on stage wearing scarves called *jilbab* (Takonai 2006: 175; Weintraub 2010: 27).

What kind of femininity would be favored and welcomed, then, on the national scene? In his book on popular music, Heryanto (2008) names Malaysian female singer Siti Nurhaliza as an artist who is the opposite of Inul (Heryanto 2008: 27). She sings pop songs based on Malay music termed *Melayu* music, not *dangdut*, but *dangdut* is often mentioned because Malay music forms the basis of *dangdut*. In one way, the difference between Malay pop music and (local) *dangdut* embodies the contrast between “sophisticated” music and “countryside and indigenous” music. There also is a contrast between them with respect to the singing and dancing. Since she made her debut at the age of 17, thanks to her exceptional vocal talent, Siti Nurhaliza has energetically engaged in musical performances as a singer, representing Malaysia not only domestically but also internationally in places such as Indonesia and Europe. She has maintained a consistently high level of popularity in Indonesia. Using her excellent talent in pursuit of a sophisticated sound, she has become a singer that satisfies both national and international standards regarding musical abilities. During a concert held at the Royal Albert Hall in London, she sang popular songs accompanied by a full orchestra (the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Erwin Gutawa, maestro of Indonesia’s pop orchestra). She has also put her efforts into traditional Malay genres and she sings the songs of Islamic dance, such as *zapin*, when she performs in collaboration with traditional dance companies. She is a representative singer who performs the theme song of the tourist bureau of the Malaysian government. With beauty, purity, sophistication, intelligence, and excellent vocal talent, she has been positioned as an artist who is the opposite of Inul in many ways (Heryanto 2008: 27) (Photo 2).

Siti’s performances, featuring her singing talent, are quite a contrast to Inul’s performances, featuring powerful dancing. Siti embodies the ideal femininity of a “beautiful female singer,” whereas the femininity demonstrated by Inul, with her wild dancing, is underpinned by elements of “crude energy,” “sleazy sensuality,” and “unexpected creativity.” These are not necessarily viewed as negative elements in Indonesia and are fanatically welcomed in rural performances and in many other societies. However, the characteristics of Inul’s performances contain many elements that have been subjected to criticisms in discourses and evaluations made at the national level. The fact that the “femininity” demonstrated in the context of her rural stage performances is perceived as “pornography” or “apostasy” in violation of national standards of social morality and religious piety characterizes this controversy.

2.2. Rhoma Irama as an ideal male figure in *dangdut*

Even Rhoma Irama, the king of *dangdut*, who is considered *dangdut*’s founder, criticized

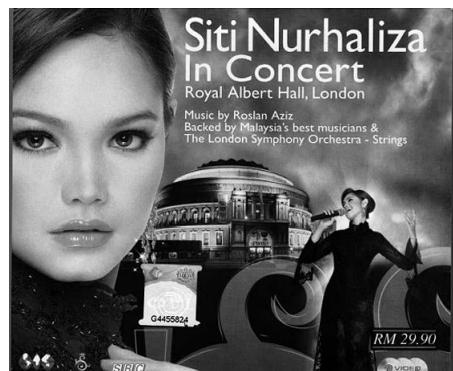


PHOTO 2. The cover of Siti’s CD.

Inul's performances for "demeaning the genre of *dangdut*" and "destroying people's morality." Many, including feminists, greeted this criticism with hostility. This part of the controversy and how it developed has been analyzed in several studies (Sasaki 2004; Heryanto 2008; Weintraub 2010). The controversy can be viewed in a contrastive schema, with statements such as "mainstream *dangdut* accepted at a national level" and "sleazy *dangdut* performed rurally," in opposition to the reactions of advocates of "androcentrism" and "feminism."

Here, it is important to specifically consider the issues of masculinity and femininity that surround the musical genre, *dangdut*. Even without the elements of social and religious morality, this musical genre can be interpreted as one in which masculine norms predominate, at least for Rhoma Irama. Currently, the overwhelming majority of *dangdut* singers are female, and Rhoma has often sung duets with female singers, including Elvy Sukaesih. However, Rhoma has used *dangdut* to sell himself as an "ideal male figure," and he still does. In doing so, he has redefined this musical genre as music that can be accepted at the national level. Rhoma condemned the excessive demonstration of femininity in Inul's performances. His condemnation can be interpreted as an action taken because he improved *dangdut*'s image by demonstrating his personal masculinity and selling himself as an ideal male figure through its establishment.

Born in 1947, Rhoma Irama was exposed to many kinds of music, including that of western Java as well as the music of the West. Around the end of the 1960s, he began to explore a new style of pan-Indonesian musical expression from which he established a genre termed *dangdut* in the 1970s (Manuel 1992: 476-477). His music, with strong percussive beats, began to gain widespread popularity, primarily in urban areas.

His achievements include importing foreign genres to Indonesia and establishing an ethnically original genre based upon them. Using Malay music (*Orkes Melayu*) as the foundation, he integrated the musical styles of Indian film songs, Arabic music, and the rock music popular at that time, and he simultaneously created a unique composition of musical instruments. Although not all of the components of *dangdut* have been clearly defined at this point, the use of a bamboo *suling* and a drum termed the *gendang* are currently seen as characteristic elements.⁸ The rhythm of the *gendang* is an important element in *dangdut*, and this rhythmic music has been described as originally intended for dancing. Rhoma himself has frequently performed using a variety of choreographies. In concerts, it is typical for the audience members to both listen and dance to *dangdut*.

Having established the original sound and composition of the musical instruments, Rhoma also transmitted a variety of messages to his audience through the lyrics that he composed. In this respect, his appealing singing voice played a significant part. He expressed deep empathy for the urban, working-class young people (i.e., men), who were his main audience at the time

⁸ There are lyrics that state, "bamboo *suling* (flute) and *gendang* (drum) made of buffalo leather" in a song titled, "*Dangdut*" that was released in 1975. This indicates the characteristics of this instrumental composition.

the genre was established. He taught them the importance of morals and the right way of living, using songs such as “*Judi* [Gambling]” and “*Begadang I* [Staying up Late],” that warn against the poor choices their titles entail. “*Begadang II*” is a song that cheers up young people. Rhoma’s repertoire also includes songs that do not contain clear social messages, like “*Santai* [Relax]” and “*Sampai pagi* [Dance until Morning],” as well as love songs.⁹ However, his primary lyrical characteristics are that his songs contain messages. By targeting young male workers, he expressed that he was a role model and he encouraged them by convincing them that their hard work would eventually pay off and they would live happy lives. He not only conveyed messages through his songs, he demonstrated in his own life that a man can struggle with hardship yet achieve stardom by writing and acting in films. The most obvious example of this is a 1980 film titled *Perjuangan dan Do ’a* [Struggle and Prayer], in which Rhoma starred.

With respect to the right way to live an authentic life, Rhoma achieved stardom by presenting himself as a role model. In his early days, his fashion was mainly influenced by rock singers (Photo 3).

The way that the illustration shows Rhoma holding his guitar and singing passionately while exposing his upper body was a symbol of male “sturdiness” and an “engine for overcoming difficulties” that became an idealistic image for young people. Working class youth copied his fashion, imitated his choreographies, and sang his songs. On weekends, they danced in the streets to his cassette tapes and went wild watching his films and at his concerts (Frederick 1982). *Dangdut* thus became a social phenomenon, and Rhoma reigned as its idol. This can be viewed as a process in which he commercialized his personal masculinity through *dangdut*, with which he targeted urban, working-class, young men in Indonesian society during the time when development was on the rise (the late 1960s through the 1980s).

Rhoma also criticized politics and society. In 1978, he made a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia and was given the title of *Hajj*. He then began to teach the importance of faith and prayers (e.g., the aforementioned *Perjuangan dan Do ’a* [Struggle and Prayer] and *Koran dan Qur ’an* [Qur ’an versus the Newspapers]). As he gradually shifted toward Islamic fashion, he became a “singing evangelist” who taught the importance of faith. However, Rhoma’s habit of criticizing society and stressing the importance of religion is his personal style, and younger singers did not adopt it. Thus, only the musical genre has persisted.



PHOTO 3. The cover of Rhoma’s CD.

⁹ There are many duets with female singers in his repertoire.

Starting in the 1980s, the popularity of *dangdut* began to change direction. This happened partly because Rhoma joined the world of politics and switched sides from the *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* [United Development Party], which is an Islamic political party, to the ruling party, *Golkar*, a move that disappointed many people (Manuel 1992: 477). Soon after, Rhoma became the chairman of the *Persatuan Artis Musik Melayu Indonesia* [Indonesian Malay Music Artists' Association] (PAMMI) in 1992; he approached the ruling party *Golkar* and began to work on improving *dangdut*'s image (Takonai 2006: 174-175). He produced some musical works intended to recast *dangdut*'s image from "sleazy and rural" to music that is acceptable on the national level. Recently, he has devoted his efforts to rearranging his existing repertoire for revival, and, at the same time, his son Ridho has released many of Rhoma's original songs using a novel sound. Rhoma himself has kept up his vigorous level of activity. In the promotional music videos and images for his 2010 album, he is shown wearing Islamic clothes and sitting on a white horse, which may be viewed as the "ideal image of Islamic masculinity," and he performs an original song titled AZZA (Photo 4).

Thus, Rhoma Irama established *dangdut* basically as a genre predominated by masculinity. He accomplished this through his self-presentation as an ideal male figure. His criticisms of Inul can be interpreted as his objection to the notion that *dangdut*, which he had established as a symbol of masculinity, would be demeaned by commercialized femininity. This situation is similar to the difficulty of establishing oneself as a female musician in the genre of rock music, where masculinity predominates, as pointed out by Minamida (2009: 272).

In fact, the majority of *dangdut* singers have been female. Elvy Sukaesih, who formed a duo with Rhoma, is a songstress representative of Indonesia known as the "queen of *dangdut*" (Weintraub 2010: 123-131). Moreover, before Inul entered the scene, there were many female singers who gave seductive and sensual performances, such as Cucut Cahyati. Since 1992, Rhoma has worked to restrict excessively sexy performances from his position as the chairman of PAMMI. The direct trigger of his 2003 criticism is believed to be his fear that Inul had achieved so much recognition that she could pose a threat to his throne and that the musical genre of *dangdut* would come under public scrutiny. By condemning Inul, Rhoma redirected people's attention back to the musical genre itself. Although he faced social criticism, Rhoma ultimately showed the public that he was the king of *dangdut*. This illustrates Rhoma Irama's "toughness" because he continues to reign as the "king of *dangdut*."



PHOTO 4. The cover of Rhoma's CD.

2.3. Discussion: Femininity as seen in local stage performances and national discourses

This case provides many interesting topics for discussing the cultural aspects of Indonesian society. As topics embodied by this case, Heryanto (2008) suggests various factors such as, local sentiment / national authority, syncretic Javanism / new Islamic piety, patriarchy / the women's movement, lower / upper-class cultural tastes, digital divide / empowerment (Heryanto 2008: 20). Bearing these cultural factors in mind, I would like to focus on the representations of femininity.

In her 1997 book, *Feminine Endings*, Susan McClary uses Madonna's dancing as an analytical example, as follows: (1) dance is the genre most closely associated with physical motion; (2) to the extent that the appeal is to physicality, dance is often trivialized and at the same time regarded as something that has power to distract and arouse; and (3) its power is always regarded with anxiety (in society) (McClary 1997: 234). Based on these assumptions, McClary analyzed Madonna's artistic activities as follows: (1) the charismatic performance of one's music is often crucial to its promotion and transmission; (2) by giving such charismatic performances, Madonna manipulated audience responses through her enactments of sexual power and desire; and (3) one of her primary achievements is that she brought to the surface the hypocrisy of being a sexual commodity that sells femininity and then problematized it (McClary 1997: 231-234). Minamida (2009) also positions Madonna as an artist who presented her own symbolized femininity in a reversed manner with an extreme portrayal of female sexual behavior in a genre where masculine norms predominate (Minamida 2009: 272).

Thus, Inul's and Madonna's cases are alike in that both use sexual dance that commodifies femininity to provoke sexual desire. However, Madonna consciously and strategically presented femininity as a symbol, but Inul did not. Before the controversy arose in 2003, Inul was performing her dance to entertain people within the boundaries of rural performances. Under national discussion, her performances were criticized as sexual commodification, selling femininity. That criticism was met with the backlash of feminists defending her.

Heryanto (2008) argues that Inul's performances are typical of "subaltern" activity (Heryanto 2008: 26-29). Inul's case embodies the public unrest that is provoked when subaltern performance activities suddenly enter "national" discussions. In his paper on the uproar over Inul, Sasaki (2004) frames this situation as a controversy arising in the era of "disorientation." The femininity that Inul was selling was accepted and welcomed on rural stages while, in national discourses, it was labeled as "apostasy" and "pornography" and framed as femininity in violation of social and religious morality. The performances in the provincial areas where the people enjoy sensual dance as entertainment were suddenly the focus of criticisms, such as their "lacking religious devotion," their viewing is a "sexual commodity," and they portray "femininity and pornographic behavior," which created a great deal of debate. The action of criticizing local entertainment performances as backwards and lacking religious piety, as well as the critical perception that the femininity expressed there is also backwards, is behind this controversy. Throughout the

performing arts, including those of popular culture, are found the gaps and the hegemonic relationships seen in Indonesia that were embodied in this controversy.¹⁰

3. Gender and sexuality in Indonesian films

The second case under analysis is a film, the comedy *Madame X* (2010), which deals with a confrontation between transvestite people and homophobic politician. As stated, the law regulating media publications was relaxed in Indonesia with the resignation of Suharto. Thus, more artistic works on gender and sexuality are being presented, including those with themes that pertain to sexual minorities.

For example, *Arisan!*, released in 2003, features a young gay man, an unusual hero in Indonesian films. The director, Nia Dinata, is a woman who previously directing video clips and commercials. She received the “most talented new filmmaker” award in 2006. *Arisan!* is her second feature film, and in it she grapples with homosexuality directly for the first time in Indonesian film history.

The film portrays a young man, one of the lead characters, in a suppressed daily existence, hiding the fact that he is gay. He finally comes out amongst the relationships he has with his friends. Not only does the film deal with a gay theme, it also takes a new perspective in the way that it portrays the struggles related to human relationships. It does this by portraying the daily lives of rich young men and women and how they socialize in urban areas. The title refers to “*arisan*,” a rotating savings and credit association found throughout Indonesia. An *arisan* is a mutual aid group among relatives, neighboring organizations, and so on, that is established to provide assistance to members who are temporarily over-burdened with the expenses of education, home repairs, and so on, and, in the process, to strengthen the social bonds among the members. In this film, however, it is portrayed in relation to rich, urban, young men and women having luxurious lunches and socializing (Ueno 2006: 180). The portrayal of rich people in the urban upper class with a variety of problems, such as infertility or divorce, despite the fact that they have no financial problems, is completely different from the primary themes covered by Indonesian films before 2000, such as poverty, religion, and ethnic strife. Because the film treats gay themes, it is seen as unusual, even among traditional love-themed contemporary films.¹¹

In September 2010, the Q! Film Festival, focusing on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) films, was held in various cities in Indonesia. Because it was held in the country with

¹⁰ Inul’s activities seem to have gradually changed her reputation as a singer “from a countryside rural area” after the controversy. Heryanto (2008) saw the performance she gave on television after the controversy and suggests that her disruptive power as a subaltern had gone and her position was upgraded (or “upgraded unfortunately?”) (Heryanto 2008: 20-31). Recently, Inul released a CD in which she sings a religious song dressed in Islamic clothing.

¹¹ In addition to this, Ueno (2006) discusses a 2004 film titled *Virgin*, directed by Hanny Saputra, which portrays a female student in Jakarta who repeatedly engages in compensated dating to earn money for having fun. Ueno (2006) points out the problem of the young people in the urban areas driven by the traditional value of “chastity” that is deeply rooted in Indonesian values and by the culture of consumption (Ueno 2006: 179-180).

the largest Muslim population in the world, it did not fail to draw attention, which can be interpreted as increased interest in sexual minority- and gay-related themes within the country. On the other hand, at some of the venues where the film festival was held, organizations such as *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI) [Indonesian Ulama Council] requested the event's cancellation, providing evidence of a strong opposition to, and controversy over, sexual minorities by Islamic groups (Voice of Asia News 2010).

Bearing in mind the context of controversy in which the film was released, this study considers the issues of gender and sexuality in the film *Madame X*, produced by Nia Dinata, directed by the young male director Lucky Kuswandi, and released in 2010.

3.1. *Madame X*: Plot

The plot of *Madame X* does not explicitly state that its setting is Indonesia. It is presented as the story of "some fictional country." It opens under a dark sky where Kanjeng Badai ("Mr. Storm") nurtures the ambition to conquer this country. He is a tough man with three wives and the goal of removing all "immoral" behavior, including homosexuality, transgender and transvestite behavior, and the like. He forms an armed group named BOGEM to attack sexual minorities. BOGEM makes it to the capital city of "some country" and almost occupies it.

Meanwhile, the lead character of the story is a young transvestite man named Adam who works at a hair salon that is run by his acquaintance. The film begins on his birthday. A mysterious lady comes into the salon and prophesies that Adam will be killed by a certain dance (this prophecy was told by one of Kanjeng Badai's wives to end his power). That night, when a group of Adam's transvestite friends are celebrating his birthday, the members of BOGEM, led by Kanjeng Badai, burst in, snatch Adam and his friends, put them on a truck, and drive away.

Adam is thrown from the truck and falls onto the road. He is then picked up by a gay couple, Rudy and Yantje, who lead a dance company. The place where Adam was picked up is a quiet coastal village in a rural area (the scene was filmed in Jogjakarta in central Java). Rudy and Yantje train Adam to be a member of their dance company and they give to him the mission of defending the rights of sexual minorities, turning him into a superhero named "Madame X." The couple's real purpose was to solve human rights' problems that happen in this country while running their dance company. Full of hope, they had already prepared state of the art equipment, weapons, and a costume. Then, they waited anxiously for a superhero candidate who could oppose BOGEM.

A fictional dance termed *lenggok* (wriggle) is used in the film. This dance is based on Indonesia's traditional martial arts-infused dance, *silat*. *Lenggok* dance features sexy and eye-catching unique movements. It is also important for the dancers to acquire make-up application

skills.¹² The dance, choreographed in the film by Rusdi Rukmarata, is depicted as a mysterious dance that can defeat opponents not only with dance fighting; it sometimes disables them with just a look or a breath. BOGEM is gradually taking over the rural coastal village and the film depicts the female members of the dance company being captured and held captive illegally under the guise of overseas work. Adam comes to their rescue.

Adam's boyhood is portrayed in three flashbacks. His best friend, Harun, is Adam's first love. Harun was punished severely by his father for having a boy-boy relationship and he was traumatized by the experience. His father marked an "X" on Harun's chest with a machete as punishment. This X-shaped scar is an important symbol in the film. The best friend, Adam's first love, Harun, later becomes the homophobic politician, Kanjeng Badai.

To rescue the female members of the dance company, Adam leaves the coastal village and heads towards the capital city. He meets up with the sister of his friend from the beauty salon where he had worked and she agrees to help him. He appears onscreen as a superhero riding a motorcycle and dressed in a patent leather suit as he embarks to rescue his friends. After the rescue, he battles with Kanjeng Badai's three wives: a legendary opera singer who uses her singing voice as a weapon, a fortune-teller who uses her sixth sense, and a mysterious artist who seduces men with her beauty. After many physical fight scenes, the three wives are eventually dispatched in pursuit of a luxury handbag, which is thrown by Adam.

After besting the wives, Adam confronts Kanjeng Badai in the final scene. In the middle of the ensuing battle, Adam sees the X-shaped scar marked on his opponent's chest and he realizes that this is his boyhood friend and first love. Adam tries to help him, but Kanjeng Badai throws himself into the ocean.

Leila Chudori, an Indonesian journalist, argues in her review of the film, that the portrayals of the villains (the three unique wives) and the hero (Adam) are excellent. She writes positively of the process by which the lead character with a dark past goes through difficult times and begins his mission, as well as the way that flashbacks are used to depict what happened in his boyhood (Chudori 2010). A plot in which the lead character engages in training under a hermit, acquires power by mastering certain skills and tricks, confronts the opponents once again, and beats them, is one often



PHOTO 5. Cover illustration of the Madame X DVD.

¹² There is a fighting dance called *silat* in Indonesia, but the dance termed *lenggok* does not exist as a traditional genre; it is an imaginary dance created for the film.

seen, even in the world of traditional Indonesian stories. The dances with unique choreographies based on martial arts dance and the story constructed to win the sympathy of the people also contributed to many Indonesians' admiration of it (Photo 5).

3.2. *The transvestite population in Indonesian society*

The young male lead in *Madame X* belongs to the social category *waria*, or *banci*, in Indonesia. In the film, *waria* or *banci* is positioned within the same category as "gay," or homosexual. However, *waria* or *banci* was not originally synonymous with gay. Features such as appearance, occupation, and daily activities are defined for categorization as *waria* or *banci*, but sexual orientation (i.e., being a homosexual) is not one of those features (Oetomo 1996: 261).

The young gay man featured in *Arisan!* is not different from heterosexual men in his appearance. Therefore, the fact that he is homosexual is and will remain unknown to the people around him unless he chooses to disclose that fact. On the other hand, Adam is a transvestite man, works at a salon as a hairdresser, and spends his nights seducing men at clubs. Unlike the hero of *Arisan!*, Adam appears as and behaves like *waria* or *banci*. Oetomo (1996) lists typical *waria* or *banci* characteristics as dressing in women's clothes, feminine gestures and behavioral patterns, and specific occupational interests, to name a few. Salon hairdresser, dancer, and singer are typical *waria* or *banci* occupations. Other characteristics include being highly skilled at makeup, cooking, sewing, and embroidery (Oetomo 1996: 262).

Boellstorff pointed out that most *waria* see themselves as men who (1) have the souls of women from birth, (2) dress as women much of the time, (3) have sex with "normal" [normal] men (Boellstorff 2003: 231). However, the third point is not always true. There are *warias* who do not have sexual relationships with men. Rather, the second point is more characteristic. Boellstorff also emphasized the transvestite power of *waria* to change the public appearances of others (in line with their ability to change their own public appearance.) (Boellstorff 2003: 232).

Waria or *banci* can be seen in parks or markets in urban areas. Many of them sing, using musical instruments such as tambourines, to seduce male customers at dusk. On the other hand, there are some kinds of traditional rural entertainment that feature singers and dancers dressed up as women. It is unclear whether these professional artists are viewed as *waria* or *banci* in their daily lives when they get dressed as women. Either way, their sexual orientation (whether they are homosexual or not) has not become much of a social issue.

It seems there has been a tendency in Indonesia to attribute socially negative images, such as "miserable, pitiful people" or "being timid," to *waria* and *banci* who lack "manliness." However, the phenomenon of seriously criticizing their lifestyle and sexual orientation as well as occasionally resorting to violence against them is particularly evident only in recent Indonesian society. Boellstorff (2004) calls this "political homophobia". In his study, Boellstorff (2004) discusses a series of attacks made on homosexuals since 1999 (Boellstorff 2004: 470).

These homophobic violent activities also relate to intensified Islamist movements, primarily

in the urban areas. Being a transvestite or a homosexual is perceived as an impious, immoral, and anti-Islamic way of living. When protest movements over the *Anti-Pornography and Porno Action Bill* intensified in 2006, Islamists in urban areas held demonstrations and attacked human rights groups, gay activists, and houses of prostitution. Gambling venues and restaurants that were open during fasting were also attacked. The performances by Inul once again became a target of criticism. A dispute also arose over the publication of the Indonesian version of *Playboy* magazine (Clark 2008: 40; Heryanto 2008: 18; Kato 2011: xxiv).

However, this situation was not caused only by the Islamic influence. In *Madame X*, the conceptual grounds for homophobia are not clearly explained. Either way, the armed group BOGEM's attacks on gay clubs and the presence of homophobic politicians remind us that the current situation in Indonesia entails strong condemnations and attacks on transvestites and homosexuals.

3.3. Kanjeng Badai as a symbol of “manliness”

Kanjeng Badai (“Mr. Storm”) is a character featured in *Madame X* that is a symbol of the “ideal” male in contrast to the *waria or bawci* lead character, Adam. It is important that Badai, a homophobic politician, also is the embodiment of polygamy, with his three wives, because polygamy is a long-standing issue that has caused a variety of social disputes. Although the number of men who openly have multiple wives is not high in today’s Indonesia, polygamy is allowed by traditional Islamic values. For men, being able to provide for multiple wives can serve as their evidence of a financially sound foundation. This is one of the elements of “masculinity” that has been permitted and justified in Indonesian society. On the other hand, there currently are many criticisms of polygamy as being discriminatory toward women.

Nia Dinata, the producer of *Madame X*, is known for previously addressing the issue of polygamy in the film she directed in 2006 titled *Berbagi Suami* (this title literally means “sharing a husband”). In 2004, Habiburrahman El Shirazy wrote a novel titled *Ayat-ayat cinta* [Verses of Love] that also confronts the issue of polygamy. A film of the same title was released in 2008 and it had a large impact socially (Brenner 2011: 223-229; Heryanto 2011: 70-77). Although these works did not directly criticize polygamy, they provided an opportunity for people to consider it. The fact that both works received a strong response certainly indicates increased interest in this issue in Indonesia.

Taking into account this conflicting social situation, the polygamous politician appearing in *Madame X* embodies a “parodied” ideal male figure. It is interesting that this character is a man who condemns homosexuals and transvestites while engaging in polygamy, a practice that itself is socially controversial. Such portrayals are a way to remind the Indonesian people of the disputes over polygamy and the violence toward transvestites or homosexuals in today’s Indonesian society. The actor in the role of Kanjing Badai is actor and singer Marcell Siahian, who became popular in an Indonesian television drama series. Marcell, who has a strong

physique and fighting techniques that are polished with martial arts, certainly embodies the “ideal” of masculinity.

3.4. Discussion: From an “oppressed existence” to “fighter”

The lead character, Adam, is played by the popular comedy actor Amink. He plays Adam as an “oppressed person” at the beginning of the story, which is far from the traditional ideal male figure. The young male drag queen, who was leading a humble life of working as a salon hairdresser, and seducing men, did not consider coming out. The leader of the armed group BOGEM, kidnapper of transvestite and gay men in the capital, tells Adam and his friends, in effect, “You are the garbage of society. You are useless like that, but if you get recycled, in other words, if you convert yourself, you will be useful.” This line expresses a deep-rooted homophobic discrimination toward transvestite or gay people.

At this point in the story, Adam’s best friend, Aline, tries to save him but is thrown from a truck and killed. Although Adam is distressed by this incident, he will not return to the dangerous capital. Even after being picked up by the *lenggok* dance company, he cannot accept the mission to rescue his friends. At the dance company, he cannot get used to the intense training. However, he gradually opens his heart to the members of the dance company, begins to train, and becomes an excellent dancer. Even after this, however, when he discovers the true purpose of the couple, Rudy and Yantje, and is asked to fight as a hero protecting human rights, he cannot answer their plea.

One night, the members of BOGEM burst into the venue where the dance company is performing and set fire to the stage to stop the performance. This is when Adam first accepts his mission and tries to help the dance company, donning his disguise. The gay couple is happy to see this; however, one of them, Yantje, is killed during the incident. Adam sees Rudy mourning Yantje’s death and he finally begins to accept his mission. To rescue the female members of the dance company, who have been illegally imprisoned by the members of BOGEM, Adam decides to take a stand. Toward the end of the story, he transforms into a “fighting gay person,” mounts a motorcycle in a patent-leather suit and boots, lets his blond hair fly, having mastered the *lenggok* dance, and then defeats his opponents one after another.¹³ The way he comically fights by using a variety of state-of-the-art weapons that take the form of hair spray, a hair dryer, and a hairpin is very unique.

This film maintains a comedic approach throughout its depiction of a serious problem in Indonesian society, the battle between transvestite people and “political homophobia.” An interesting aspect of this film is the process by which the lead character transforms over the course of the story from a person living an “oppressed existence” to “a fighter.” The film’s use

¹³ The line he states when transforming, “Dengan kekuatan bulan, akan memukulmu!” is borrowed from the line used in the Japanese animation, *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon*, which was very popular in Indonesia: “In the name of the moon, I will punish you!.”

of the fictional dance *lenggok* as a vehicle for this shift is also unique because Indonesian martial arts emphasize mental practices as well as physical techniques, which frames it as a symbol of mental or supernatural powers. Thus, Adam being required to master dance as the key to obtaining strength was a convincing approach. Considering that dance is a typical occupation for *waria* or *banci*, it also is interesting that a “fighting transvestite person” is born by mastering dance techniques. The general Indonesian perception that dancer is a typical occupation for *waria* or *banci* is a stereotype used to define their characteristics, lacking masculinity. The plot, in which the lead character masters the technique and fights to protect the human rights of sexual minorities, will probably lead to the subversion or deviation of such stereotypes.

4. Conclusion

The two cases described in this study, dancing in popular music and themes in film, provide visual and musical representations of masculinity and femininity and the controversies surrounding them. Depictions of gender and sexuality in popular culture influence cultural norms and people’s thoughts in their daily lives, and they are expressed by them in various ways, such as through their clothes, bodily expressions, lifestyles, behaviors, and sexual orientations. In Indonesia, the home of many Muslims, controversies often arise over the rightness or wrongness of these representations and expressive activities in relation to Islamic teachings.

In post-Suharto Indonesia, an increasing number of expressive activities and artistic works are emerging that focus on gender and sexuality, and as a result there are many disputes over them as people grapple with the issues. Also contributing to this situation is the relaxation of the laws that control media publications within the country as well as access to global information. Today, Indonesians can easily view media expressions of gender and sexuality from around the world and be exposed to foreign cultural influences from various places of the world. As a result, people are pursuing a variety of new themes within popular Indonesian culture.

Specifically regarding the concepts of gender and sexuality, there are international cultural influences. During the controversy over Inul’s dance, the sensual expressions from foreign media, such as those shown in Hindi films, were often cited as influences. Gay-themed films not only highlight men dressed as women, which has existed in traditional culture; they show the strong influence of the LGBT social movements coming into Indonesia from Europe and the United States. International influences also impact the concept of women’s chastity and the ideal marriage, although that is not specifically discussed in this study.

As the expressions of gender and sexuality become more intense, social and religious restraining forces are emerging, bringing criticisms with them that sometimes result in violent incidents. The globalization of information is also effecting on religion; people can easily learn the thoughts and beliefs of the whole world as well as witness the controversies and circumstances surrounding them. In contemporary society, in which such information is plentifully available,

we can see why Islamic religious groups in Indonesia target representations and expressive activities related to gender and sexuality.

In addition, Islam is gaining ground through Indonesian media. Miichi (2006) points out that various Islamic acts have been presented in the media as reflections of the Islamization of daily life, which is a ploy the producers of the media use to avoid criticism from the public and to present a model of the modern Islamic person (Miichi 2006: 122-123). Maintaining a balanced relationship between diversified expressions of gender and sexuality and criticism from the Islamic perspective is one of the important themes of the discussions about popular culture in Indonesian society today.

People establish norms for specific versions of gender and sexuality, including defining ideals of femininity and masculinity, using a myriad of information, including information from media outlets. Expression of gender and sexuality in popular culture raises many questions about the nature of physicality, media representations, and ideologies, to name a few. Analyses of the controversies and criticisms directed toward these representations and expressions, enables us to gain a deeper understanding of conflicts over social values in various contexts, such as social class, ethnicity, and religion, as well as the hegemonic struggle that is present in Indonesian society today.

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