

Nyai Ontosoroh's Feminism Movement Against Dutch Colonialism in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's "Bumi Manusia" Novel's Movie Adaptation

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Abstract. This paper discusses about the character of Nyai Ontosoroh from Pramoedya Ananta Toer's "Bumi Manusia" (The Earth of Mankind). She is one of the feminist icons in Indonesian literature, and just recently gains more fame through the novel's movie adaptation which was released in theaters last August. Concubinage was very common when Dutch colonialists ruled East Indie (Sugihastuti-Saptiawan, 2007: 116). Indigenous women were made mistresses for Dutch men and faced both racial and gender discrimination. Through Nyai Ontosoroh, the late writer described how horrible the practice of concubinage was at the early 20th century. This paper aims to dig deeper into her character through descriptive qualitative method. This paper will be the analysis of how Nyai Ontosoroh fights for her equal rights in front of Dutch racist and sexist laws, and also how she tries to change the mindset of indigenous people of that time who degraded courtesans like her, who were considered as low as prostitutes.

Keywords: Bumi Manusia, Concubinage, Literature, Racial and Gender Discrimination, Equal Rights

1 Introduction

Bumi Manusia (The Earth of Mankind) is the first installment of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's "Buru Island Tetralogy". The novel was published in 1980 and until 2005, it was translated into 33 languages. *Bumi Manusia* is finally adapted into a movie which was released last August, produced by Falcon Pictures and directed by famous director Hanung Bramantyo. The 181 minutes long movie mainly revolves on the racial issue between Dutch colonialists and the indigenous people of East Indie, concubinage, and the romantic affair between an indigenous man named Minke (played by actor Iqbaal Ramadhan) and biracial woman named Annelies Mellema (played by actress Mawar Eva de Jongh). Another character that plays a crucial part in both the novel and movie is Nyai Ontosoroh, who was played by Sha Ine Febriyanti in the movie adaptation.

Nyai Ontosoroh is the concubine of Herman Mellema, and also the biological mother of Annelies and her brother Robert Mellema. As a mistress, she is constantly labeled with negative stigma and being put in a difficult situation. A mistress is degraded by both indigenous or Dutch societies. Nyai Ontosoroh is seen as low as a prostitute, especially because the purpose of mistresses is to satisfy their masters' sexual needs. Nyai Ontosoroh also has no property rights in her house, nor custodian rights on both of her children. When chaos ensues, she almost has no power in front of the ruling Dutch laws. Throughout the movie, she would fight against Dutch

colonialists' racial and gender discrimination enacted on her. She would also try changing people's view on concubines and challenge the norms in the society of that time.

The movie was set in the early 19th century in East India which is now known as the Republic of Indonesia. At that time, East India was occupied by Dutch colonialists who practiced concubinage with the indigenous people. Concubinage refers to a practice of illegitimate affair between a woman and a man. The woman is usually called as a concubine or mistress. There are several reasons of why people practice concubinage, one of them is because there's a norm or law that prohibits men to have more than one spouse. Concubinage was very common during the colonialism of the Dutch in East India (now Indonesia). Plenty of Dutch men took indigenous women as their mistress who was called "*nyai*" in the local language. The practice of concubinage in East India at the 19th to 20th century created the new social class of that time, which was called as Indo, the term that refers to someone who was born biracial (half-Dutch and half-indigenous).

Concubinage had been practiced since the era of VOC, because the population of Dutch men and women in East India was unequal at that time [1]. The presence of a wife was seen as a burden by the VOC government, hence that was why the main requirement to become a VOC soldier or employee was a bachelor European man. The practice of concubinage in the VOC era was finally disapproved by governor Jan Pieterszoon Coen who considered it was immoral for European men to have an affair with indigenous women. He proposed a lot of efforts to stop concubinage practice, such as sending tons of Dutch women to East India and made a law that prohibited the practice. The law was included in *Regering bij Plakaat* in 1625 [1]. However, J. P. Coen's effort to stop concubinage practice in Batavia was unsuccessful because the women sent from the Netherlands were those who came from lower class society, or those who were uneducated and immoral. Some of them were even prostitutes, because Dutch women who came from the upper-class families did not want to be sent to East India. As a result, they came back to the previous practice of concubinage between European men and East India native women.

When VOC finally dispersed in 1800, Dutch East India government began to take over colonized land. Concubinage practice reached its peak under the regime of Dutch East India government because the law that regulated the practice was not as strict as it was previously. This practice was also supported by the fact that a lot of indigenous families were willingly to sell their daughters to the Dutch colonialists for higher positions in offices or any other material rewards. A lot of indigenous women who were made mistresses by these Dutch men were enjoying the status and wealth they got as a concubine. However, as an illegitimate partner, concubines have no rights or power under the ruling Dutch laws. Their masters could easily send them away as soon as they did not need their mistresses anymore.

The fate of the children born as a result of concubinage was depended on their fathers. If their fathers deigned on their presence, they could get a legal acknowledgement under the law. They could use their fathers' surname, get a proper Dutch education, or even go abroad to the Netherlands. Still, their mothers would not get any advantages from this. Often times they were even introduced as the caregivers rather than the biological mothers of their mixed-race children, or worse, being separated from them as they grew up.

While concubinage was commonly practiced in East India at the 19th century, the liberal feminism movement began to rise in Europe. The word "*feminism*" derives from "*féminisme*", which was coined by a French utopian socialist and philosopher, Charles Fourier in 1837. The word "*feminist*" first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1852, while the word "*feminism*" appeared later in the 1895. Feminism can be defined as a social or political movements and ideologies in which the common aim is to establish and achieve equality

between men and women. Feminism was born from a concern of how society treats both genders unfairly, as the men are often being prioritized or having more privileges than women.

Historically speaking, feminism is divided into four waves. The first one began in the 19th to the early 20th century, familiarly called as liberal feminism. Liberal feminism actually began at the 18th century, pioneered by an English woman Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) who wrote "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" in 1792 [2]. She wrote about the social and economy condition of European women at that time, comparing the life of those who came from bourgeois background with the working-class ones. She stated that, though the bourgeois women seemed to live a perfect life after marriage, they were no different with birds in a cage that has nothing to do except showing off their beautiful wings. These middle to upper class women were often being kept at home by their husbands, with no chance to go outside and see the sun which made their body relatively weak and prone to illness. They also had no chance to make their own decision and improved themselves because everything was always depended on their husbands.

Through "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*", Wollstonecraft kept emphasizing the importance of logic for humans, specifically for women. She believed that logic is the one that makes someone an intact human, as it differs humans from animals. Therefore, she stated that it is a mandatory to educate women and to give them an opportunity to develop their logic and moral capacity [2]. Every page of "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" encourages women to become a decision maker who is entitled to their decisions. Wollstonecraft presented a vision that women have power on their own body and mind. Women, according to Wollstonecraft, is not just a slave to their desire, not a slave to their husbands and children.

Though Wollstonecraft died young at the age of 38, her legacy remains and inspires the feminism ideology in the upcoming century. In the 19th century, the liberal feminism movement in Europe that was inspired by Wollstonecraft demanded for women's political and economy rights [2]. Giving women political rights such as participating in the government's election was seen as an effort to develop women's logic and encourage them to be a decision maker.

The feminism movement of the 19th century inspired an indigenous woman called Raden Ajeng Kartini. She was a Javanese noblewoman who fought for women's education rights in her short lifetime. At the time of her life, Javanese women were ideally being secluded in their room as soon as they got their first menstruation. They would be kept there until a man came to propose and make them their wives. This situation was worsened with the discrimination from the colonialists which only gave education to the Dutch resided in East Indie and indigenous people who came from middle to upper class families. Kartini herself only attended school until she turned 12 before she was being secluded by her parents, until a man called Raden Adipati Joyodiningrat took her as his wife. Luckily, Joyodiningrat understood his wife's desire to educate Javanese women at that time and supported her idea and effort until the end of her life. While she was in her seclusion, Kartini continued to educate herself. Since she could speak Dutch, she acquired several pen friends, one of them was Rosa Abendanon. Her friendship with her Dutch pen friends gained her a lot of European magazines, books, and newspapers which encouraged her with the feminism thoughts and movements in Europe at that time.

Based on the fact discussed earlier, this paper is aimed at discussing deeper how Nyai Ontosoroh fights for her equal rights in front of Dutch racist and sexist laws, and also how she tries to change the mindset of indigenous people of that time who degraded courtesans like her, who were considered as low as prostitutes.

2 Methodology

This paper uses a descriptive qualitative method. It is a purely data-derived method that is generally characterized by simultaneous data collection and analysis. The data is collected by watching the movie *Bumi Manusia* itself. The movie was released in mid-August 2019 in all Indonesian theaters. After watching the movie, the researchers analyzed it with feminism approach, using the liberal feminism ideology. The ideology was heavily influenced by an English author Mary Wollstonecraft, through her writing called “*A Vindication Right of a Woman*”. The writing emphasizes the importance of developing logics for women and their rights to make their own decisions.

The results of the analysis are described with words, clauses, and sentences instead of numbers and statistics. Since this is a qualitative research, the object is analyzed and interpreted based on the researcher’s perspectives, according to the theories mentioned in the introduction.

3 Findings and Discussions

This section will discuss about the character of Nyai Ontosoroh in movie *Bumi Manusia* and how she represents the feminism movement against Dutch colonialists in East Indie at the 19th century. Though she is not explicitly claimed as a feminist, but it can be seen from her traits and the way she acts or reacts towards racial and gender discrimination by the Dutch colonialists.



Fig. 1. Nyai Ontosoroh in movie *Bumi Manusia*, starring Indonesian actress Sha Ine Febriyanti.

Nyai Ontosoroh, born as Sanikem, is a woman on her 30s who was made a mistress by Herman Mellema, a rich Dutch man resides in Wonokromo, East Indie. Their affair resulted two biracial children, Robert and Annelies Mellema. Nyai Ontosoroh was being sold to Herman Mellema by her own father when she was only 14. In the beginning of their relationship, Herman Mellema takes care of his mistress a lot. He teaches her to read, write, and speak in multiple languages including Dutch. He also teaches her business management and involves her in managing his dairy company, *Mellema Melk* and his farming business, *Boerderij Buitenzorg* [3].

Nyai Ontosoroh is described as a woman who is ahead of her time. Unlike any other East Indie native women, specifically concubines, she is aware of the importance of education and logic development. This characterization is a reflection of Wollstonecraft’s feminism thoughts

and also Raden Ajeng Kartini's character, who was practically living in the 19th century and aware of education for indigenous women of that time. Both Nyai Ontosoroh and Kartini were exposed to the Dutch education system which was already influenced by European's liberal feminism, because at that time Dutch women were already allowed to attend schools just like men did.

The protagonist of the movie, Minke, describes Nyai Ontosoroh as a woman who always makes him questions a lot of things. The indigenous young man who originally underestimates mistresses is fascinated by her mind and the way she speaks, also by her manner. Nyai Ontosoroh despite being a concubine who did not get formal education, does not look insecure around Minke who is a HBS student. HBS or *Hogere Burgerschool* (Higher Civic School) is a secondary school with a 5-6 years program for its students. The school is established in both the Netherlands and colonized lands such as East Indie. In East Indie, only the natives with middle to upper class background attending HBS. Minke has the opportunity to attend HBS because he is the son of a well-known regent, yet he decides to hide his actual identity and goes with a nickname given by his former teacher instead. Minke later writes an article in the newspaper under the pen name Max Tollenaar, entitled "*Een Buitengewoon Gewoone Nyai die Ik ken*" (An Extraordinary Ordinary Mistress I Know). The article expresses his amazement towards Nyai Ontosoroh, as he never met such an educated and well-behaved mistress like her before [3].

Chaos in Mellema household ensues when Herman Mellema's legitimate son, Maurits, comes from the Netherlands. He demands his father's responsibility on his legal wife which is also Maurits' mother, who was left without being divorced and abandoned in poverty with Maurits by Herman. This is a turning point where Herman begins to change. He rarely comes home, regularly visits a brothel house owned by a Chinese man named Ah Tjong, and is addicted to alcoholic beverages. His horrible lifestyle also leads to a change of his character, as he becomes a short-tempered man. This can be seen in a scene when Nyai Ontosoroh invites her children's guests, Robert Suurhof and Minke to have dinner together. When Herman Mellema comes home and sees Minke, he immediately points his fingers at him and yells, "*Who gave you permissions to come here, Monkey? Do you think wearing European clothes, interacting with Europeans, and speaking a little bit of Dutch could make you a European too? Once a monkey always a monkey!*" At that time, "*monkey*" was used by colonialists as a derogatory term towards indigenous people, because the word "*kowé*" in Javanese has dual meanings: "*you*" and "*monkey*" [4].



Fig. 2. Herman Mellema insulting Minke's native root.

Concubines are often portrayed as vulnerable even in her own household, yet Nyai Ontosoroh does not show any kind of vulnerability. In the scene where Herman Mellema comes home and gets mad at the sight of Minke—a native man—in his house, Nyai Ontosoroh immediately stands up from her seat and firmly tells him to go to his room instead of messing with her guest. This kind of act is impossible to be done by mistresses, to stand up straight in front of their masters and tell them what to do.

Mellema family begins to split after Maurits' visit. Robert refuses to continue his education nor helps managing his father's business. He also denies that he is a biracial guy and often despises natives, even his own biological mother. While Annelies stays faithful to Nyai Ontosoroh and takes part in managing the family business with her. Nyai Ontosoroh, despite not having a legal right on her master's properties, handles both *Mellema Melk* and *Boerderij Buitenzorg* because she has been involved in the business for a while and she does not want the business she and her master has built to go in vain. This portrays the inner strength Nyai Ontosoroh has despite being a mistress. This is a depiction of Wollstonecraft's feminism idea that women should be a decision maker on her own, with or without a man by their side.

The real conflict in the movie begins when Herman Mellema suddenly dies from opium poisoning in Ah Tjong's brothel house. This makes Nyai Ontosoroh has to go for trials along with her soon to be son in law, Minke. In the movie, before the trial begins, Nyai Ontosoroh says to Minke that they will be the first native people to fight against the Dutch court and its discriminating law on indigenous people, specifically concubines [4]. The discrimination towards Nyai Ontosoroh as both a native woman and also a mistress can be seen from the scene where she has to take her footwear off and crawl to the front of judges' table. She also has to sit on the floor instead of chairs [4].



Fig. 3. The discrimination towards Nyai Ontosoroh as a native and concubine.

Throughout the trial, Nyai Ontosoroh is given a little amount of time to speak and every time she voices her argument, it is being cut by the judge himself or the audiences who provoke chaos during the trial. The Dutch court is putting the blame on Nyai Ontosoroh, accusing her to be greedy of her master's wealth and also envious of his legal wife in the Netherlands who is not yet divorced. At the time of concubinage practice in the 19th century's East Indie, criminal acts such as abortion, infants' murders, and poisoning towards the masters done by mistresses occurred often [1]. This case is finally closed when it is discovered that the actual murderer was Ah Tjong itself, and his motive was just because he was bored of seeing Herman Mellema way too frequent in his brothel house.

However, this is not the end of Nyai Ontosoroh's suffering yet. Not long after Annelies and Minke are married under the Islamic religion laws, Nyai Ontosoroh is being called by the court and informed that Annelies should be sent to the Netherlands. With the death of Herman Mellema, Annelies is technically orphaned since Nyai Ontosoroh has no custodian rights on her, because she was never legally married by Herman. Annelies and Minke's marriage is also not admitted by the Dutch court because Annelies is still considered underage by the law, and Islamic laws in East Indie has no power against the ruling colonialists laws.

During the trials fighting for Nyai Ontosoroh and Minke's custodian rights on Annelies, Nyai Ontosoroh is succeeded to convince the natives to support her. They who once degraded her for being a mistress then change their mindset and support her instead, though at the end of the trials both Nyai Ontosoroh and Minke lose the case. Annelies is being separated from her mother and husband, as she is sent to the Netherlands to be taken care by her legal custodian there.

Though they fail to win custodian rights on Annelies, Nyai Ontosoroh says to Minke, "*We have fought, son, in the best way possible, in the most respectable way possible*" [4]. This shows that although they technically lose the case against the Dutch court, at least they have shown their power as East Indie natives, who will not surrender easily under the discriminating laws. This also shows that at the end, everyone acknowledges that Nyai Ontosoroh is not like any other concubines. She is not to be underestimated nor compared to prostitutes. She owns her mind and strength to fight for her rights as both native woman and mistress.



Fig. 4. Ending scene of movie *Bumi Manusia* when Nyai Ontosoroh and Minke are being separated from Annelies who will be sent to the Netherlands.

4 Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it can be said that Nyai Ontosoroh's character in *Bumi Manusia* portrays the feminism movement in the 19th century's East Indie, despite not being blatantly mentioned as a feminist. Throughout the movie, Nyai Ontosoroh fights for two things: racism and sexism. Despite her opponent—which is the Dutch will all of their laws—being more powerful than her, she does not give up easily and keep fighting for her rights till the end. Even when she finally loses the case and has to be separated from her beloved daughter, she still holds on a strong belief that she—along with her son-in-law Minke—has given the best efforts to fight for what she thinks is right, and has fought in the most respectable way as an indigenous woman and concubine she is.

She might lose the case in the Dutch court, but throughout the process, she is succeeded to convince the indigenous people to change their mindset about concubines. She shows them that although she is a mistress, she is not as bad as what people always thought about her. She shows both the natives and colonialists that mistresses have powers and abilities to voice their mind or make their own decisions. Nyai Ontosoroh, contrary to the stigma the society has given to concubines, is a powerful and intelligent woman who deserves respects from others.

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