

# **‘Other’ in Relation with ‘Subject’ in *Centhini – Empat Puluh Malam dan Satunya Hujan* – an Existentialist Feminism Reading**

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**Abstract.** The present paper portrays the freedom in engagement in the existence of feminine character as depicted in the adaptation performed by the French author and poet Elizabeth D. Inandiak on one of the masterpieces of Javanese literature, *Serat Centhini* initiated by Sunan Pakubuwana V and supported by a team of author. There are several volumes of adaptations materialized by Inandiak with different titles. The focus on *Empat Puluh Malam dan Satunya Hujan* (2004) is based on the captivating depiction of Javanese women in various roles in this volume, Ratu Pandhansari and Niken Tambangraras. The study of these two women was performed implementing an Existentialist Feminism concept of Simone de Beauvoir, emphasizing upon Subject (male) and Other (female) notion. Meanwhile, as a method, a hermeneutic qualitative descriptive method was chosen to place the research inside the work of art. Result shows that both women live an authentic existence in their roles as Javanese wives. Ratu Pandhansari lived an existence as a woman who seemed ‘out of line’ when she was victorious in the war and Niken Tambangraras exists as Other with a voice which is existentially important because of its leading nature.

**Keywords:** *Serat Centhini*, Inandiak, Existentialist Feminism, Other, Subject, Local Wisdom

## **1 Introduction**

How has feminist voice presented in the adaptation of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Javanese masterpiece could be consequential in women’s contemporary existence? The aim of this paper is to uncover how notions of Object and Subject coined by de Beauvoir portrayed through Javanese literary characters in their marital institution. Illustrating how lived Javanese local wisdom elegantly turns subjugated issue into engaged freedom and place marriage women in a place that the French named *bien dans sa peau* or feeling good about oneself.

Women frequently depicted in depressing image in literature, due to culture and traditional myth [1], guided by oppressive patriarchal rules. Whilst Bloom [2] argues that the issue of female characters is misrepresented by some writers. Nevertheless, by representing women as such, author aims to educate its reader to a certain situation of the society in which it was born. Thus, its function is not only reflected, but also inspire and motivate. The feminist issue is represented in the work of the Indonesian writer such as; *La Barka* (1975) by Nh. Dini, *Tetralogi Buru* (1980-88) by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (1982) by Ahmad Tohari, *Saman* (1998) by Ayu Utami, *Biru* (2003) by Fira Basuki; also, in the literary work of the francophone writer: *Femme d’Afrique. La vie d’Aoua Kéita racontée par elle-même* (1975) by

Aoua Kéita, *Une Si Longue Lettre* (1979) by Mariama Bâ, *Moi, Tituba Sorcière* (1986) by Marys Condé and many other oeuvres of writers around the world who voiced feminist issues.

Despite the dispiriting depiction of women in feminist oeuvres, numerous studies were conducted focusing on the resilience and strength found in them. The following are several exemplifications. In line with her exploration on the work of Calixthe Bengala, Dokotala [1] expresses her approval of the feminist depiction of the protagonist in *Comment Cuisiner Son Mari à l'africaine* (2002) who has triumphantly expressed her existence despite oppressive patriarchal rules. The depiction of a confident feminine, capable of traversing domestication and shows authenticity in decision making and its implementation in various important life spheres, is in the context of educating its readers. Another similar research on the depiction of empowered women in literary works was performed by Diana [3] focusing on protagonist in *Kartini* (2010) by Putu Wijaya. The character boldly voiced her position that she is unwilling to follow Kartini, who she considered passive. She chooses Cut Nyak Dien who marched in the battlefield as a role model. She is a woman who exists in word and action and continuously improve herself. Other research conducted by Saputra [4] to *Tetralogi Buru* (1980-88) and other novel in which women were oftentimes presented inferior as subaltern who cannot speak. In addition to depicting women inequality, Saputra also presenting Prinses (proper name, correctly spelled), a wife who is in equal position to her husband. She consciously handed the decision-making privileges to her husband. Saputra argues, that consequently Prinses showed her power, and thereby increasingly establishing an equal position with her husband [4]. In connection with the latter mentioned, the study does not include the characteristic needed in order for women to gain such a powerful position in marriage. I argue that an embodiment of a set of Javanese local wisdom uniquely applied, as portrayed in *Centhini – Empat Puluh Malam dan Satunya Hujan* in regards of marital situation will further situated women in a place of comfortably engaged freedom.

## 1.1 Existentialism and Existentialist Feminism

Existential learning begins when humans are faced with choices that must be made in life. As according to Kierkegaard [5] that "... our entire life is an ongoing choice and that the failure to choose is itself a choice for which we are equally responsible". This notion was underlined again by Sartre who clearly stated, "... for human being, to exist is to choose and to cease to choose is to cease to be". Therefore, it is true that humans who exist and live life must make decisions and make choices, because if not then humans are the same as not existing and not living life. In so doing, whilst living socially, this individual decision-taking needs to take others into consideration. Commensurate with the present study, existential notions are placed within man and woman alliance.

In adopting the ontological and ethical language of existentialism, de Beauvoir observed that man named "man" the self and "woman" the other [6], subsequently self-regarding other as a threat therefore in order eliminate this threat, other needs to be subjugated by self. De Beauvoir labeled woman's tragic acceptance of her own otherness the feminine "mystery, which passes from generation to generation through the socialization of girls (176)". When these girls are married, they are *given* in marriage by her parents. Whilst boys *get* married, they *take* a wife [7]. This marital situation applies also in the depiction of married life of Ratu Pandhansari and Niken Tambangraras, that will be discussed the in the latter part of this paper.

## 1.2 Engaged Freedom and Becoming Authentic

Departed from but continually intertwined with the realm of Sartrean Existentialism, this terminology, engaged freedom, is coined by Simone de Beauvoir [7] whilst taking over Sartre's hinted characterization of 'authenticity' in his famous lecture 'Humanism in Existentialism' (2007). Engaged freedom is one kind of freedom that surging of from oneself and is immediately given to others. As human we are always engaged in social situation and that involve commitment with its continual decision-taking. In order to becoming authentic, an individual needs to be forever conscious in considering chooses and possibilities, then come to a decision.

## 1.3 Javanese Local Wisdom Regarding Married Women

Ratu Pandhansari is Javanese, and Javanese women in the 19th century obeys their men completely. This is a feminist issue, because women at that time, normally did not have a voice at all to express opinions or make decisions. When a situation causes a woman to leave her domestic sphere, she does so with her husband's consent. This is in line with the superior attitudes of women which are also local wisdom (a knowledge that is closely related to the cultural values of Indonesian society). Javanese women are *rela* (willing to surrender part of their life to their husbands), *nrima* (feeling satisfied with their obligations and fate as a companion to their husbands), and *sabar* (careful conduct for the happiness of their husbands) [8].

## 2 Research Method

As above mentioned, the chosen method is hermeneutic descriptive qualitative. Hermeneutic focalization is chosen based on the fact that interpretation of the characters is manifested by building the meaning of the work. This research also produces descriptive data; spoken or related to this research, written, from the characters as object of study [9]. This research conduct in the following steps; The first is to do hermeneutic readings of works that involve close reading, followed by an analysis of the feminist issues found and documented the results of the research descriptively, and conclude the research.

## 3 Result and Findings

### 3.1 Ratu Pandhansari

Sultan Agung, King of Mataram arranged his younger sister, Ratu Pandhansari, to marry Pangeran Pekik who was a descendant of Sunan Ampel, with a political agenda, to end the power and popularity of Sunan Giri, which had long been a thorn in the flesh of the Mataram. Immediately after, Prince Pekik went to see Sunan Giri and openly told him to surrender to Sultan Agung. Confidence about his power, Sunan Giri firmly refused. Therefore, war cannot be avoided. However, the first day of war Sunan Giri's troops exhibit its superiority and Prince Pekik's troops is forced to withdraw. Seeing her husband's helplessness, Ratu Pandhansari requests to intervene. As a result, with her gentle voice, and a brilliant strategy, Ratu Pandhansari managed to rekindle the spirit of her soldiers and won a landslide victory. She even

killed Sunan Giri's adopted son who was unbeatable the day before. The following describes the scene of Ratu Pandhansari and Pangeran Pekik at the moment of determining Endrasena's fate:

*“As soon as Pangeran Pekik nodded in agreement Ratu Pandhansari took her handgun, aimed and shot Endrasena's right hand....”* [10].

The superiority of older brothers to Javanese women is absolute, especially with deceased parents. Likewise, Ratu Pandhansari, especially since her brother is also a king with enormous power, she is always very obedient to whatsoever his command. Including when Sultan Agung ordered her to marry Pangeran Pekik who had surrendered without resistance to the Mataram kingdom. Even though Prince Pekik already had a wife, at that time it was customary for a man to have more than one wife. Ratu Pandhansari consent was not even sought-after. Only total obedience was expected, furthermore arranged marriages were one of the local cultures that commonly practiced at the time.

The next feminist issue was when Sultan Agung ordered Pangeran Pekik to immediately depart on a mission to conquer Kedaton Giri. Prince Pekik intended to entrust Ratu Pandhansari under the Sultan's protection while he is away. However, the Sultan ordered Ratu Pandhansari to follow her husband to go to battlefield. Even at that time, it was uncommon for women to participate in battle. However, the Sultan's power and superiority over his younger sister was absolute, therefore Ratu Pandhansari and Pangeran Pekik had no choice but to obey. In this situation, although she unable Ratu Pandhansari is again voiceless, her voice and opinion is unheard of.

In these two situations where an older brother exhibits a complete power over his younger sister is part of the Javanese local culture in this bygone era. His power is ultimate because he holds the mandate as a substitute for a deceased parent, furthermore an older brother is wiser and more experienced with the best consideration for his younger siblings. Related to the second situation, Sultan Agung has a complete trust in Ratu Pandhansari mastery in battlefield, whilst he does not have faith that the strengthless Pangeran Pekik could deliver Kedaton Giri to him.

In the battlefield, since the beginning of the second day of the war, it has been prominent of how powerful the Mataram troops were under the leadership of Ratu Pandhansari. However, to take action that would complete her victory, Ratu Pandhansari made a choice to ask her husband's consent. If her husband disagreed at that time, she would not have shot and killed Endrasena, adopted son of Sunan Giri. As stated by Tong [6] “...women's opinion by men is unique for two reasons: First, unlike the opinion of race and class, it is not a contingent historical fact, an event in time that has sometimes been contested or reversed. Woman has always been subordinating to man. Second, women have internalized the alien point of view that man is the essential, woman the inessential”. That whatever the achievements of a woman, she will always be subordinated by men.

However, in this situation Ratu Pandhansari as a Javanese woman adheres to the tradition of obeying her husband, and it is always the husband who makes decisions. Even though Ratu Pandhansari outperformed her husband by victoriously winning the war, she was still an ‘Other’ to a ‘Self’. She remains subordinated in the institution of marriage. Ratu Pandhansari is a strong woman, and it was possible for her to make up her own mind without asking her husband's permission before shooting. By giving her husband the privilege to make decisions, she submits to the local wisdom of Javanese women and continues to show respect for her husband regardless of the situation. In this case, Ratu Pandhansari exercises engaged freedom, in which in order to act like *lila, nrima and sabar* as a Javanese woman, she consciously makes a decision to keep herself positioned below her husband, subjugated, thereby keeping her household

atmosphere normal. This decision that is taken consciously and freely according to her own will makes her authentic, she lives her daily life as a good wife, keeps her husband's feelings in a good household and it makes her content.

### 3.2 Niken Tambangraras

Adaptation to *Serat Centhini* by Elizabeth D. Inandiak is favored in this study solely because of its prominent feminist voice in the main part of the novel performed by one of its feminine protagonists Niken Tambangraras. An adaptation, a composition written in a new form [11], is different from a translation. Author of an adaptation has more freedom in reproducing the oeuvre than translator who has to be fidel to the original oeuvre. In the prologue of her oeuvre Inandiak stated that, in one scene Niken Tambangraras is presented as a character who has a voice to speak her mind, intelligent and agile [10].

In the novel, it is depicted that after being legalized as husband and wife, for forty days Syekh Amongraga gave religious lessons to Niken Tambangraras before finally on the forty-first night they were together for the first time in an intercourse. Every night Syekh Amongraga gave a religious discourse based on a question posed by Tambangraras:

*“Oh, my fire, I hear you joyously, but teach me about cycles in prayer.”*

*“Listen carefully, Dinda, because this is known only to a few people...”* [10].

Throughout the narrative of the newly wed scene, it is Niken Tambangraras who is in control of the direction of the conversation. She is the one who determines the topic of the discourse. In this small but important part, this version is slightly different from the original. The original *Serat Centhini* depicts Niken Tambangraras as a woman who is totally submissive to her husband, voiceless. I consider that nonetheless this is a courageous attempt to represent women empowerment by Inandiak through her heroine. In *Second Sex* de Beauvoir also saw that sartrean existentialism is oftentimes impossible to be implemented in a marriage woman situation. True freedom of a married woman is often shadowed by her Quotidien as a wife and mother. De Beauvoir [12] further notion is that even when a woman maintains all her independence through all their servitude, she will ardently love her freedom in (her true) Nature.

## 4 Conclusion

Thus, I conclude that Ratu Pandhansari, although she is unable to be disengaged from the construction as ‘Other’ inside marriage institution, she lives her existence authentically by adhering and excreting Javanese local culture that a woman should exhibit a complete obeisance first to her brother, then to her husband. She is not being forced to embodies this local wisdom in her everyday life because she possesses a concrete comprehension that her conduct would convey to a harmonious marital life and that authenticity makes her unique. As for Niken Tambangraras, her authenticity shows in her leading nature in an important phase of her life. She is the one who determines which type of lesson she wants to learn while conserving her submissiveness. This portrayal of Ratu Pandhansari and Niken Tambangraras as authentic ‘Other’ while preserving local culture could be situationally and contextually applied to contemporary life while prioritizing the state of *être bien dans sa peau*.

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