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**Women Writing about Marriage and Sexuality:  
Post-1998 Indonesian Fiction**

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## Women Writing about Marriage and Sexuality: Post-1998 Indonesian Fiction<sup>1</sup>

### MARRIAGE, SEXUALITY AND REPRODUCTION

This working paper examines contemporary Indonesian fiction of the post-1998 *Reformasi* period and the ways in which literary texts represent shifting concepts of marriage and sexuality, and gender roles. It focuses on literary works by four female authors: Ayu Utami, Alia Swastika, Fira Basuki and Stefani Hid. Analyses and close readings will give insights to what extent the female fictional characters serve as agents of change and how they deal with identity, agency, codes of conduct and self-actualisation. Critical theorist and feminist Judith Butler has in her work always expressed concern with identity and subjectivity and the ways in which these are formed and operate. Following Simone de Beauvoir's postulation that "one is not born but rather becomes a woman", Butler has theorized that gender and subjecthood are not pre-given, but evolve by endless processes of becoming, unstable and ever-shifting (Salih 2004, 91). Gender, she has argued, is "unnatural, a cultural construction" (ibid, 21), it is "performative" and "not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (ibid, 94). Our identities – be they racial, gendered, or sexual – are "doing" rather than "being", something we act out constantly in daily life. Butler further theorizes that "speech acts [...] bring about what they name" (1993, 224) and through the repetition, a speech act "*accumulates the force of authority*" (1993, 227, italics in original).

Speech acts are crucial at wedding ceremonies. In western contexts the couple's wedding vows include wording such as "I take thee to be my wife/husband", a speech act that will be repeated and gain power when the marriage commissioner states "I now pronounce you husband and wife". In Indonesia a religious officer (*naib*) officiates the Muslim *akhad nikah* ritual and publicly confirms the bride and groom's names. It should be noted that the bride herself remains silent and that her guardian verbally enacts the marriage contract. To marry and thus perform the role of a wife or husband is of great importance. According to Nancy Smith-Hefner, "[w]eddings remain the ceremonial highpoint of an individual's life" (2006, 148). It is the starting point for a couple (always heterosexual) to live together and create a family. Traditionally the ceremony served as a rite of passage when a young adult left the parental home and transitioned into adulthood. It marked the start of a new stage in one's life with a spouse and with offspring to follow. The newlyweds were not only allowed, but also expected to become sexually active. Premarital sex was, and still is, not condoned: "sexual intercourse should [take place] within the sanctum of marriage" (Bennett 2002, 100)

For the majority of Indonesians "marriage and raising a family is a religious obligation" (Situmorang 2005, 3, also Smith-Hefner 2006, 147). For Muslims in particular marriage is sacred as it "is mentioned in the Qur'an as among God's blessings to humankind" (Nik Noriani 2004, 118) and "God created human beings in pairs" (Situmorang forthcoming). A couple is expected to have their first child within the first year "to prove their maturity and

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Gavin Jones, leader of the Changing Family in Asia research cluster, for his suggestions and recommendations for research materials, and Manneke Budiman and the anonymous reviewer for their critical comments and suggestions.

fertility” (Smith-Hefner 2006, 149). Raising children and having a family are considered the main, if not sole purpose of marriage. Indonesians do not marry to ‘simply’ share their lives with a loved one, for emotional support, companionship, intimacy or a meaningful sense of interdependent connection. In Indonesia one marries to procreate.

Discourses of family and marriage were central during the New Order years (1966-1998) when President Soeharto consolidated his authority by projecting himself as Father (*Bapak*) of the nation. His wife, *Ibu* (Mrs) Tien Soeharto (Siti Hartinah), endorsed the concept of marriage as a life-long, monogamous bond and as the foundation of the family. As Gavin Jones et.al. noted, she had “a strong distaste of divorce and polygamy” (Jones, Asari, Djuartika 1994: e-9). With the concept of the nation as a family the New Order created a state defined by family-ism (*kekeluargaan*) and housewifization (*ibuism*). Its patriarchal master-narrative framed women almost exclusively within the domestic and private sphere in their roles as supportive wives and mothers (Suryakusuma 2004: 161-188). Masculinist paradigms were promoted through the governmental Family Welfare Movement (*Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga, PKK*) formulated in 1973, and *Dharma Wanita* (women’s organizations with compulsory membership for wives of civil servants), and prescribed women’s duties in terms of serving their families. Family planning campaigns (*Keluarga Berencana*) aimed at controlling women’s reproduction and reproductive health. Ideally – in state terms – women were subservient, they did not have much agency and did not play a role in the public domain. Women who were employed outside the home, were seldom praised for professional achievements, and many faced discrimination in education and in the work place (Oey-Gardiner and Sulastri 2000). The Soeharto regime viewed women’s activism, feminist ideas, and other challenges to the patriarchal order as undermining political stability and *Pancasila* (Five Pillars) national ideology and as promoting a form of radicalism that was associated with Communism (*Gerwani*).<sup>2</sup>

The New Order essentialised womanhood through the concept of *kodrat wanita*, woman’s God-given nature to nurture. State discourses were unequivocal about female gender performativity, which was a very *singular* act, unlike the way Butler defines it, to be reiterated time and again: “supportive wife and sacrificing mother”. State and religious (Muslim) instructions underscored that to remain unmarried meant to be “defective and incomplete” (Smith-Hefner 2006, 147). Single adult women suffered, and presently still suffer, from social stigma and they are “pitied and ridiculed” as old spinsters (*perawan tua*) or considered “selfish” if they deliberately choose singlehood over a marital bond (Situmorang 2005, 4, 7).

Sexuality and sexual activities are still topics that are “charged with anxiety and taboo” (Smith-Hefner 2006, 150). Being sexually active is confined to the realm of matrimony. Once married, however, sex is considered a religious duty (ibid, 161). Cohabitation is considered immoral and rejected as a life style. In Indonesian it is referred to with the derogatory term *kumpul kebo*, “shacking up”, literally “gathering like water buffaloes” (Bennett 2002 99, Jones 2004, 27, Situmorang 2005, 19). A 1994-95 survey conducted by Iwu Utomo among 15 to 25-year olds indicates that this age group has a strong sense of morally appropriate behaviour and generally disapproves of premarital sex (2002, 226).

<sup>2</sup> *Gerwani* (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia) was a communist-sponsored women’s organization that was banned after Soeharto took over power in 1965. *Gerwani* members were alleged to have assisted in the murder of the generals during the 30<sup>th</sup> September 1965 coup attempt and to have mutilated their bodies.

Smith-Hefner arrives at the same conclusion and finds that her respondents consider extramarital sex *zina* or sinful (2006, 155). Among them not only the women intend to guard their chastity and remain virgins (*perawan*) and “pure” (*suci*), but the men, too, prefer to be sexually inexperienced (*perjaka*, male virgin) until their wedding day. Both researchers find that pregnancies out of wedlock are strongly condemned and considered to cause great shame (*aib*). Yet, sex education and information about safe sex and reproductive health is alarmingly lacking among adolescents and young adults, they conclude. In addition, unmarried individuals have no official access to modern forms of birth control such as the pill, IUD (intrauterine device), diaphragm, contraceptive patches or the morning-after pill.<sup>3</sup> To avoid pregnancy non-married sexually active women must resort to condoms which men are often reluctant to use, or the rhythm method (Utomo 2002, 225, Bennett 2005, 62). This means that the situation regarding reproductive health has not fundamentally changed since 1998 and that the New Order’s guidelines which aimed its policies exclusively at married women and men through the National Family Planning Coordinating Agency (BKKBN), are still intact.

This working paper offers readings of literary writings taking critical feminist theories as a point of departure. Using New Historicist concepts and approaches it recognizes the “intricacy and unavoidability of exchanges between culture and power” and aims to “reveal through the analysis of tiny particulars the behavioral codes, logics, and motive forces controlling a whole society” (Veeser 1989, xi). While social scientists study human conduct, cultural practices and communities based on observations or surveys of lived realities, the materials for this study are literary texts, mostly fictional, that create worlds in words and offer representations of human experiences, ideologies and societal values that intersect with existing morals and ideals.

## POST-1998 FICTION: AYU UTAMI’S NOVEL SAMAN

Much has been written about Ayu Utami and her first novel *Saman*, published in April 1998 on the eve of Soeharto’s fall from power. The novel immediately generated an uproar as it was considered highly controversial because of its daring scenes of sex and sexuality. It also explicitly critiqued New Order modes of operandi, and therefore came to signify the start of *Reformasi* in terms of literary writings, freedom of speech and openness (*keterbukaan*). Ayu Utami was born in 1968 in Bogor and grew up in Jakarta where she attended the Roman Catholic Tarakanita high school. After her study of Russian language and literature at the University of Indonesia she worked as a journalist for several magazines and joined the Alliance of Independent Journalists (*Aliansi Jurnalis Independen*) in 1994 when three prominent weeklies, *Tempo*, *Detik* and *Editor*, were banned by the government. She has been involved in the cultural centre Komunitas Utan Kayu, the Kalam Foundation and Komunitas Salihara. Ayu became one of the main targets in the so-called *sastrawangi* (fragrant literature) debate in 2002. The *sastrawangi* naming was a speech act that pushed women writers of the new generation into a performativity of glamorous celebrities or “fragrant literati”. With much of the attention focused on their “attractive sexy female bodies” their creative works were pejoratively labelled chick-lit (Bodden and Hellwig, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> At clinics women must present their marriage certificate in order to obtain contraceptives. Unmarried women can find ways to have access to contraceptive means “by forging marriage certificates or finding clinics that are too busy to strictly enforce the requirement” or with “the cooperation or discretion of a willing doctor, midwife or chemist.” (Bennett 2005, 35).

I limit my discussion of *Saman* here to only one female character, Yasmin, whose behaviour by public standards would be considered unacceptable and immoral: she engages in an extramarital relationship without showing any guilt or remorse. In fact, several story lines are inextricably intertwined in *Saman* and told through different narrative voices. The protagonist, Saman, is a Catholic priest involved in labour activism. He has joined rubber farmers in a Sumatran village to fight for their rights against state corruption and intimidation. He is kidnapped but manages to escape and go underground. Four female friends assist in smuggling him out of the country to New York.

Yasmin Moningka plays a subordinate role in the larger scheme of the plot, yet the novel ends with an email exchange between her and Saman that reveals their sexual desires in unmistakable terms. Yasmin is a successful lawyer in her father's firm who uses her professional skills as an activist to help the underprivileged to get social justice (Utami 1998, 24). She has been married for five years and tied the knot with Lukas Hadi Prasetyo after eight years of going steady. They have no children. Yasmin is a modern, well-educated career woman. Among the four female friends she is the only one married, and the others are amazed that she can stand the monogamy. (Utami 1998, 147). However, on the eve of Saman's departure to New York, at the end of the novel, Yasmin breaks her conjugal fidelity. She deflowers Saman, the celibate priest. We read his recollection of this moment as told in his own voice:

“[w]e pressed close together. I was trembling. It was over before it started. I had no time to fathom what was happening. But Yasmin seemed to have no qualms – she led me to the bedroom. I don't know how I did it.”

(Utami 2005, 164; 1998, 177).

Yasmin takes the initiative to be physically intimate with Saman, and even though she does not reach an orgasm (Saman wakes up to find her masturbating after their sex act), she covers him in love bites afterwards. Once Saman has arrived in New York they email each other their sexual experiences: Yasmin admits to “allo-erotic” fantasies, imagining Saman while having sex with her husband. Saman emails her when he is masturbating and later suggests that they have virtual sex: sexual intercourse that remains in their imagination. While much has been written about the ways in which sexuality is depicted in *Saman* (e.g. Bandel 2006, 101-117), no critic, as far as I am aware of, has commented on the very ending of the novel with the last email communication from Saman to Yasmin: “Yasmin, Teach me. Rape me.” (Utami 2005, 180).<sup>4</sup> The fact that the novel ends with a request for such a violent sex act is puzzling and disturbing, because rape, in my view, can never be justified. In this particular scene it is the sexually inexperienced male who begs to be raped. Must we interpret the reversal of dominant sex/gender roles and the active role of a female rapist as a deconstruction of the violent nature of rape? I find that difficult to accept. In my opinion sexual assault and forced penetration should never be presented as desirable. Rape in its very essence means the brutal violation of a person's subjectivity and integrity that causes trauma and victimization. I do not object to the novel's earlier depictions of female sexuality as assertive or even domineering, neither to Yasmin taking the initiative to have extramarital sex. Yet, I consider this ending problematic and rather reprehensible.

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<sup>4</sup> Yasmin, Ajarilah aku. Perkosalah aku. (1998, 197).

Yasmin becomes adulterous when she and Saman find themselves in a situation that is conducive to sexual intimacy. Their friend Cok has left them in a hotel suite on the eve when Saman is to leave Indonesia for good. He is hiding from the authorities and cannot go outside. The two have known each other as friends for over a decade and when it dawns on Yasmin that, if he gets caught, he will be “languishing in jail [...], she] started to cry. I [Saman] held her in my arms to comfort her.” (Utami 2005, 164). Readers will recognize that comforting and consoling her is only a small step from more intimate physical tenderness, sexual closeness and intercourse. As the story ends, readers are left with the images of Saman and Yasmin on separate continents, their carnal hunger and unbridled lust spelled out in no uncertain terms. Indonesian readers immediately reacted strongly to the ‘uncensored’ portrayal of Yasmin in relation to Saman, her feminine *jouissance* and total lack of guilt of fornication or *zina*. Her agency and choices are deliberate and conscious. This portrayal is in line with Holzner and Oetomo’s findings about the sexual curiosity and erotic desire among Indonesian youth in spite of campaigns that advocate abstinence and repression of sensuality (2004, 43, 45). Bennett, too, mentions female desires to be physically intimate with men and ways in which women seek sexual satisfaction (2005, 61-63). Still, many young adults face a moral conflict when they feel attracted to someone of the opposite sex and want to act upon it (Utomo 2002). The candour with which Ayu Utami depicted her characters was shocking to her Indonesian audience and *Saman* was defiled as vulgar, obscene and pornographic. Yet, it has been reprinted many times and reached record sales.

## THE SINGLE PARASITE

In 2003 Ayu Utami published a collection of short autobiographical sketches and critical commentaries entitled *Si Parasit Lajang. Seks, Sketsa & Cerita* (The Single Parasite. Sex, Sketches and Stories). With tongue-in-cheek Ayu presents her outspoken feminist ideas and challenges patriarchal notions and sexual double standards that dominate Indonesian ways of thinking. She openly resists marriage and comes out as a ‘non-married-by-choice, sexually active woman’. She proudly declares herself a *parasit lajang*, “single parasite” (2003, 111-115). The term “parasite single” was launched in Japan in 1999 to refer to employed unmarried twenty-to-thirty year olds who earn an income, continue to live comfortably in their parents’ house ‘for free’, and enjoy a life style without being burdened by high living expenses (Jones 2004, 23). In Indonesia a “parasite single” is an alien concept as never-married young adults would never be considered “parasites”: they are expected to live in the parental home and would be frowned upon for deciding to move out, especially to reside independently. Such singles would, however, endure increasing social and family pressure over time to abandon singlehood and settle into married family life. For Ayu to pronounce herself a *parasit lajang* is a defiant speech act, which gives her license to perform gender in a subversive way.

Ayu points out how marriage leaves an Indonesian career woman stuck with the double burden of pursuing her professional path and her duties as wife and mother. She presents marriage as anything but attractive for women until she observes: “We [Indonesian upper/middle class women] benefit from poverty. [...] Because we can have servants who take care of our babies for one-twentieth of our salary.”<sup>5</sup> With this comment she points to a systemic problem of educated (urban) women taking advantage of and at times abusing poor

<sup>5</sup> Kemiskinan menguntungkan kita. [...] Sebab kita bisa punya pembantu yang menjaga bayi kita dengan upah seperduapuluh gaji kita. (2003, 114).

(rural) women to carry out domestic work and child rearing for very low wages. Without explicitly spelling it out, she hints at the exploitation of all domestic helpers, housemaids and care providers, including female migrant workers (*tenaga kerja wanita*) from developing countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines who are employed overseas.

One vignette (“In a Train Carriage” 2003, 90-93) is a tirade against marriage as an institution. Ayu detests the ways in which wedlock is accepted as the normal, “neutral position” (*titik netral*), and not being married is defined as “below standard” (*minus*). Not being married also equals not being sexually active. She despises the euphemisms that address sexuality only indirectly. Physicians, for example, ask “Miss or Mrs?” while what they mean is “Are you sexually active or not?” and assume that as “Miss” a woman would have no sexual experience. Ayu abhors narrow-minded public discourses that frame sex exclusively within the nuptial sanctity and connect it to a (religious) duty to procreate. The view that sex equals being married, equals penetration and vaginal intercourse, is completely incorrect according to her as “there is, in fact, no correlation between sex, love and marriage”.<sup>6</sup> Ayu advocates that sex be enjoyed and include autoeroticism, and she rejects that it is exclusively a conjugal prerogative.

We find a similar train of thought in “Sex Class at School” (2003, 62-67) in which Ayu recalls sex education classes in her Roman Catholic high school. The instruction for the girls, separated from the boys, focused on the biological functions of the inner reproductive organs. With hindsight she wonders why the students were never taught how to take pleasure in sex (*menikmati seks*) in the same way they learned to appreciate music, paintings or to enjoy sports. In another piece (2003, 79-84) Ayu explains how everyday, frequently heard phrases expose Indonesian hypocrisy regarding sexual habits. She reiterates overall shortsightedness concerning marriage, sex and reproduction. When asked “Are you married?” she is not supposed to reply “No, I’m not” but “No, not yet”,<sup>7</sup> leaving open the option that marriage will happen in the future. It is beyond public comprehension that a person makes a positive choice to remain single. Therefore, when she states with conviction “I am *not* married”, the reaction is “Huh? How come you don’t want to marry?”

When Ayu is at a clinic with a urinary tract infection the doctor will ask her: “Do you have children?” (*Sudah berkeluarga?*), which is his medical understatement for “Are you sexually active?” The doctor may continue “Where does your husband work? Does he often go out of town?” (*Suami bekerja di mana? Sering ke luar kota?*) This is his euphemistic way to inquire whether the husband has unsafe sex or visits sex trade workers on business trips elsewhere. Ayu flippantly closes this particular sketch “Let’s Have Children in Town” meaning “let’s have sex using a condom”.<sup>8</sup> Deconstructing these common speech acts Ayu ridicules the duplicity of Indonesian discourses.

*Si Parasit Lajang* is filled with highly recognizable everyday scenes that speak of double standards, male chauvinism, sexism if not misogyny. It highlights that in urban middle-class circles more public freedom in terms of courtship, sex and sexuality is still not tolerated in spite of the greater societal openness and feminist activism since *Reformasi*. The sexual and cohabitation revolution that took place in western societies (Schwartz 2010) never reached

<sup>6</sup> [S]ecara hakiki antara seks, cinta, dan perkawinan tak ada korelasi. (2003, 92).

<sup>7</sup> “Apakah Anda menikah?” “Tidak” “Ah, bukan tidak. Tapi belum.” (2003, 81).

<sup>8</sup> “Mari kita berkeluarga di dalam kota.” (maksudnya, “Yuk, kita bersetubuh pakai kondom.”)



Indonesia and the feminist slogan “the personal is political” never entered the public domain. Ayu asserts in her writings that it is insincere to deny the meaning of libidinal forces and that it is backward to remain silent and pretend to be prudish about sexual desire and intimacy. She campaigns for pleasurable sex that gives a person satisfaction and fulfillment. In her view intimate sex must be acceptable for all age groups inside and outside marriage and she also endorses that to remain unmarried is a positive choice. Such a radical stance is truly exceptional and seldom heard-of.

The recently published studies by Smith-Hefner, Utomo, Situmorang and others have brought frictions to the fore between the conservative attitudes concerning sex and sexuality because of Islam and other religious beliefs, and global influences and modern lifestyles which have “fuelled parental fears and public panics surrounding youth promiscuity” (Smith-Hefner 2006, 147). They concur with Ayu Utami that society at large does not deal with these transformations openly and directly. Megan Jennaway contends that Balinese women of marriageable age must maintain “an outward show of [...] passionlessness” and “appear chastely undesiring” (2002, 77, 81). Instead of living up to these expectations adolescents and young adults date in secrecy, so-called *pacaran bekstrit* (backstreet dating, Bennett 2002, 106, Smith-Hefner 2005, 452). They engage in premarital sex without their parents’ knowledge while keeping up appearances of innocence and abstinence. Parents are habitually anxious about their daughters’ outings at night, but they do not count on their ‘girls’ spending the day time in their boyfriends’ beds usually in boarding houses when room mates are at school or at work (Utomo 2002, 219, Bennet 2002, 111). It is unfortunate that because sexuality is an anathema lack of sex education leaves young people uninformed or misinformed, as mentioned earlier. Unwanted premarital pregnancies cause women to drop out of school and into hastily arranged marriages (Utomo 2002, 225). As a writer, activist and feminist Ayu Utami stands out as an agent of change and as one of the very few women who openly challenge the sexual taboos and hypocritical attitudes, not merely through her fiction but also through the frank vignettes about her personal life.

### ALIA SWASTIKA’S SHORT STORY “A REQUEST”

Alia Swastika presents a striking perspective on marriage, albeit in a less confrontational style, in her 2002 short story “A Request” (Sebuah Permintaan) published in *Jurnal Perempuan*. The time span of the plot is just a few hours over the course of one evening. The first-person female narrator/protagonist Ranti tries to explain to Anta, her boyfriend of seven years, that she prefers not to get married. They have been together since she was seventeen. Anta is three years her senior and has completed his medical studies at age twenty-seven. To Ranti Anta is the ideal life partner, loving and attentive, and she is fully committed to their relationship. But the idea of being married distresses her. As an independent woman, journalist and activist she fears that being a wife will force her to ‘perform gender’ in a way that does not suit her. She foresees that she must subject to family expectations and obligations. Self-actualisation is an important priority to Ranti and she is not prepared to give up her career and professional identity to become a sacrificing wife and mother. She proposes to Anta that instead of marrying they cohabit first, *hidup bersama*, to which he retorts: “You mean shacking up (*kumpul kebo*)?” (2002, 143). Ranti is aware that for a devout Muslim (*taat beribadah*) from a *priyayi* (aristocratic) family background such as Anta cohabitation is unacceptable. Ranti tries to explain that they, as human beings, are not *kebo*, “water buffaloes” driven by a bestial biological urge, but that they have agency and can make decisions. She suggests that they define personal happiness on their own terms and choose an

alternative life style. Matrimony with its prescribed gender division of labour signifies to her an oppressive institution that will leave her a second-class citizen. Anta considers her views too radical and is not ready to break with social expectations. The two must go their separate ways.

In a more subdued tone than Ayu Utami, Alia Swastika presents a similar critical stance with regards to marriage. Her protagonist is a self-conscious modern woman with professional ambitions who fears that marriage will suffocate her and limit her career options. Ranti's portrayal is remarkable because she makes no compromises in her anti-wedlock stance. She sticks to her principles and gives up a seven-year relationship with an in many ways ideal boyfriend. With her self-confidence and unconventional attitude Ranti can serve as a positive role model for change to female readers who themselves do not want to be pressured into marriage. The story advocates that women stand up for their rights to develop their talents, pursue their interests and find top-level employment.

Alia Swastika was born in Yogyakarta in 1980 and graduated in 2002 from the Department of Communication at Gadjah Mada University. She was an editor for several newsletters and also contributed articles on culture, art and society to *Lattitudes* magazine. Currently she works as a curator for art exhibitions and produces a film and theatre performances. Sociological research conducted in 2001-02 among women studying and working in media and communications reveals that the working conditions in this sector are "unappealing to women, the work itself is at odds with the prevalent middle-class discourse of genteel, respectable femininity" (Nilan and Utari 2008, 140). Reporters and journalists must often chase down news stories at night which "signifies a moral peril" for women (ibid. 141), or they have to be out of the house at other irregular hours. Media work conflicts with *kodratan wanita* and the expectations of the traditional domestic role for women. As a result women end up in "low-paid, non-professional and non-technical support areas" (ibid. 138). These research findings show that "A Request" has a high degree of verisimilitude. Ranti foresees that her mother and mother-in-law will object to her coming home late at night. Her marital status would mean that she must first and foremost safeguard her husband's reputable name and sacrifice her own aspirations, as the informants in Nilan and Utari's surveys reported. Ranti's portrayal reflects a high degree of social reality, yet her resistance to the institution of marriage is remarkably unusual.

### **FIRA BASUKI'S NOVEL ROJAK**

Fira Basuki was born in 1972 in Surabaya and completed her BA and MA degrees in Communications and Public Relations in the USA after which she lived in Singapore with her American born Filipino-Tibetan husband and daughter. She was employed in radio and TV broadcasting and in journalism for magazines. Her novel *Rojak* (Mixed Fruit Salad, 2004) is set in Singapore between December 2001 and June 2003. The main character Janice Wong is a married woman with two children. She makes a conscious choice to engage in an extramarital affair, which gives her a lot of sexual and personal gratification. For the largest part of the novel Jan serves as a first-person narrator and readers also have access to her interiority through her diary entries. An external narrator relates other passages, which focalise on her Javanese husband Setyo Hadiningrat, his mother Nami and on Ipah, the domestic helper (*pembantu*). Jan, or Wong Feng Huang as is her Chinese name, is a *peranakan* (mixed Chinese-Malay) Singaporean and has been married for seven years. Her family life sours when Setyo's widowed mother moves in from Jakarta. Nami constantly

points to the cultural differences between her own ‘superior aristocratic’ Javanese ways and Jan’s *peranakan* life style. Setyo is caught in the middle and tries his utmost to keep the peace between the two women.

Jan decides to return to her job as a TV reporter when she and Setyo notice that their household savings are dwindling rapidly. She hires Ipah from the Jakarta area to run the household and look after her two young children, Boy and Mei-Mei. This causes all kinds of problems as Ipah is not familiar with what is expected of her in a Singaporean household and Nami finds her below standard. Meanwhile, Setyo is regularly assigned to business trips abroad, which are inevitably accompanied by sexual entertainment. He does not want to involve himself in what he considers immoral behaviour but peer pressure forces him to participate. Feeling at fault toward Jan he remains silent about this excess of corporate debauchery. When he discovers that he is infected with gonorrhoea, he avoids all physical contact with his wife.

In her frustration about the situation at home Jan willfully throws herself into a fiery sexual affair with Eric Tan. Even though Jan has some sense of guilt, she cannot restrain herself as her lover makes her feel whole and attractive again. One day, however, Eric tells her that his parents have found him a marriage partner (*dijodohkan*, 2004, 80)<sup>9</sup> and that they must wind down their illicit relationship. The week before his wedding they spend time together in Japan where Eric attends a conference. The hotel room becomes their love nest, the site of tireless lovemaking, erotic pleasure and amorous excitement, as we read in great detail in Jan’s diary.

While Jan tries to forget Eric, her world starts to unravel and eventually spirals out of control. It is May 2003 and Singapore is in the grip of the fast-spreading SARS epidemic. Her mother is hospitalized and quarantined. She dies shortly after. Jan notices that Ipah behaves in weird ways and that Boy, while playing with his sister’s Barbie and Ken dolls, imitates them having sexual intercourse. Moreover, her neighbour makes insinuating comments about Ipah. Eventually, when Setyo, the children and Nami are away on Java, Jan discovers that Ipah is pregnant. Her head starts spinning and she is suspicious that Setyo impregnated Ipah. She becomes hallucinatory and in her imagination Ipah turns into a snake that poisons her life. Not to be defeated by this creature she grows into a monster and pours boiling water over the snake. The novel ends with Jan in detention.

Until Jan’s discovery of Ipah’s pregnancy she has been oblivious about her maid’s functioning and habits. As readers, however, we have been informed through the external narrator that Ipah has entered a world of her own. She has joined gatherings of migrant workers and has become sexually involved with Rajandran Krishnan, a Tamil construction labourer. Ipah blindly follows what Raja orders her to do, particularly after he has promised to marry her. In order to get money out of her employers they consulted a local shaman (*bomoh*) and Ipah applies black magic on Setyo. The *bomoh* told them to contaminate the house and therefore, when the adults are out, they have sex in the master bedroom in front of the children. Ipah’s unsupervised presence at home enables her to undermine her employers’ family and household without much effort. In the end Jan intuitively realizes that Ipah intends to ruin her. Because the style of narration has guided us, readers, to empathise with

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<sup>9</sup> *Jodoh* means one’s life partner or soul mate. It is an Indonesian concept that implies an almost divine intervention that the *jodoh* is “meant to be” your well-matched and life-long spouse. You can meet or find your *jodoh* on your own, or others (parents) can find a *jodoh* for you.

Jan we comprehend her temporary blanking out as a result of the circumstances and possibly the *bomoh*'s magic. We are inclined not to blame her for her attempt to eliminate Ipah. Rather, we tend to find Ipah at fault for creating her own downfall.

In *Rojak* Fira Basuki provides a realistic picture of Singaporean family life on the twelfth floor of a Housing and Development Board flat. Janice is likable and credible as a professional modern woman. Her family – mixed race children from an interracial marriage – represents the *rojak* fruit salad that serves as a metaphor for the racial, ethnic and cultural mosaic of Singapore society. The chapter titles indicate *rojak*'s various taste sensations: bitter, sour, sweet, salty and spicy hot (*pahit, asam, manis, asin, pedas*). These flavours determine the stages in Jan's life and can define any person's life at one time or another. The Malay word *rojak* does not refer to an exclusively Singaporean dish, Indonesians are familiar with it as *rujak*. Hence, through Setyo and his *peranakan*-Javanese children one can read the novel to impart to its Indonesian readership that Indonesia, too, is a mixture of ethnicities, cultures and values with their own zest. On the one hand *Rojak* conveys the message that with their close proximity the two countries share certain commonalities, while on the other hand the novel portrays distinct cultural and societal clashes between Singaporean and Javanese standards through the attitudes and actions of Nami and Ipah. The title itself, *rojak* rather than *rujak*, signifies nuances of otherness in similarity.

In spite of its Singaporean setting *Rojak* is a novel for an intended Indonesian audience written in Indonesian. The Indonesian characters Setyo and Ipah migrate from Java to Singapore but their migratory trajectories are far apart. Setyo is employed as a marketing executive in a company with many international clients (2004, 53, 57-59). He is part of the privileged class of so-called "foreign talent". This term refers to highly qualified and university trained professionals who were attracted to Singapore through government policies when birthrates started to decline in the late 1990s. Immigrant workers who fall in the "foreign talent" category are invited to stay and make Singapore their permanent new home. Ipah, on the other hand, belongs to the group of low-skilled or unskilled "foreign workers", the underclass in a two-tiered immigration system. The domestic work for which she is hired has low value and her prospects and opportunities are limited. Both Ipah, the uneducated Betawi-Sunda village girl,<sup>10</sup> and Setyo, who is of Javanese aristocratic descent, fail to be successful in their adopted country. Setyo must perform his business executive role and abide by the unwritten rules of sexual entertainment against his will while Ipah's immigrant status away from her family leads to a performativity of sexual permissiveness that results in premarital pregnancy. *Rojak*'s verisimilitude directs readers to reflect on sexuality, gender performativity and societal expectations concerning marriage and family. Jan, the Singaporean protagonist, does not perform gender according to the *kodrat wanita* principle. She is not the type of self-sacrificing wife and mother who is single-focused on her husband and children but returns to her profession when her home life and marital relationship deteriorate. When she realizes that her female *yin* energy accumulates inside and needs a release to compensate for her stagnated sex life (2004, 73-75), she puts herself first by indulging in a passionate affair. Oblivious of Setyo's venereal disease she puts her marriage at risk by seeking sexual intimacy and satisfaction elsewhere in order to regain a sense of wellbeing. With Eric she immerses herself without reservations in feminine *jouissance*. In this respect Jan resembles Yasmin in *Saman*.

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<sup>10</sup> Ipah is from an area at the border of Jakarta and West Java where villagers identify both with the Betawi culture of the capital as well as with the Sundanese (2004, 44).

Jan and her mother-in-law Nami serve as metaphors of two sides on the scale of womanhood: modern versus traditional. Jan is young, independent, career-oriented and sexually active while Nami represents the subservient mother, the widow beyond sexual desires, an older, conservative woman dependent on her son. A revelation at the end of the novel highlights the personal sacrifices that Nami made for Setyo. Nami, who was a photo model in New York when she married Hadiningrat, was unable to conceive. Without her knowledge her husband fathered a child with one of his employees and brought the baby home to be raised by Nami. Initially she hated Setyo as much as she hated his mother who passed away in childbirth but eventually she was able to adopt him as her son. Nami discloses her secret to Setyo – who never tells Jan – because she has found documents of land ownership in his biological mother’s name among Hadiningrat’s papers. This unexpected disclosure places Nami in a different light: coming from a glamorous career of literally being in the spot lights she had to endure the bitter consequences of her husband’s polygamy. Her character reinforces the *kodrat wanita* traits of acquiescence and contrasts sharply with Jan’s life choices.

*Rojak* ends with Jan in custody for her catastrophic attack on Ipah. Giving the story an ultimate surprise twist Fira uses the literary device of Jan’s diary. In fact, the narrative opens with Jan in prison, desperately begging her friend Bernice to find Eric Tan and give him her diary. When we, as readers, read the diary notes, we do so through Bernice’s eyes and at times we experience her astonishment about learning about Jan’s innermost feelings and her candid sexual revelations. Bernice is not judgmental, however, but rather bewildered about her friend’s audacity. Notably, the diary adds one more flavour to the story, namely chocolate. Jan named her diary and confidante “Chocolate” as it is “sweet”, patient and brown (2004, 39-40). With her mother-in-law around she has come to the realization that life and love are not like chocolate so she turns to “Chocolate” for consolation.

In the final scene of the novel Bernice has finished Jan’s account and reflects on what has happened to her friend. At that very moment the doorbell rings and two policemen come to collect her husband Tan Yang Sheng. It turns out that Bernice is married to no one other than Eric Tan. She is paralyzed with shock and drops the diary on the floor.<sup>11</sup> The bombshell ending leaves readers to reconsider Jan’s sexual affair. If throughout the novel we were sympathetic to Jan’s need for sexual satisfaction and personal attention and were ready to understand her actions given the circumstances, at the end we realise that Jan has duped one of her own female friends albeit unintentionally. It underscores that the impact of an extramarital relationship reaches far beyond those involved and can cause unforeseen emotional damage long after the fact.

I find *Rojak* thought provoking in the way it represents race, class, gender and female sexuality. The story line of Jan looking for personal and sexual fulfillment and recognition through an extramarital affair counterbalances the commonly found theme of promiscuous men who engage in multiple sexual relations and subsequently ‘save’ their reputation through a legal but polygamous marriage. Yet, what does the novel ultimately convey about marriage, gender performativity, female sexuality and promiscuity? Does it write back to the New Order in a critical deconstructive or merely a gently nuanced way? We can read the ambivalence of Jan’s extramarital affair as a mirror of the ambivalence and potential disruption of gender roles raised by Reformasi more generally. The reader is left with Jan in prison being fooled by her domestic helper. At an earlier moment, when her mother dies of

<sup>11</sup> The novel ends as follows: “*Aku [Bernice] berdiri kaku masih terkena hipnotis. Buk! Buku coklat jatuh mencium lantai.*” (2004:174; italics in original).

SARS, Jan reflects on how her mother's passing may be a punishment for her own infidelity. The narrative style has directed the readers to justify Jan's unfaithfulness and it has also explicitly portrayed her as a non-abusive employer of Ipah. In relation to her maid she is unobservant and too self-absorbed to pay attention rather than exploitative. At the end we may come to the conclusion that Jan's imprisonment is her own demise, the rightful penalty for her sexual transgressions and moral decline. Such an interpretation would mean a condemnation of her agency, choices and conduct as a woman. Yet, the novel's ending leaves open the possibility to speculate on whether Jan will be charged and found guilty of abusing Ipah or not. There is a chance that she will go free. After all, the external omniscient narrator informed us that Ipah was at fault in her dealings with the *bomoh*. Hence, Jan or her defendant could argue in her favour that she was in a state of temporary mental impairment being under the magic's influence, or that she acted out of self-defense. It does not justify her cruel act of pouring boiling water over Ipah but it explains and contextualizes it. Such arguments might lead to a verdict of being innocent. The text offers, in fact, an option for a positive ending whereby Jan is forgiven for her deeds. One scene implies that she will be joined again with her family even though Setyo, Boy and Mei-Mei are on Java when Jan assaults Ipah and is taken into custody. Before Jan married Setyo, her mother consulted a Chinese fortune-teller who predicted that the couple would face many challenges during their first ten years together, but that they would share a happy and prosperous old age.<sup>12</sup> I believe that this prophecy supports an interpretation in which Jan is exonerated and happily reunited with her husband and children. This way of reading means that Jan is not beyond redemption and that womanhood as she performs it is not reviled but accepted.

As the victim Ipah does not die from Jan's violence but she has lost her baby. She, too, has a chance to turn her life around, and we can interpret her earlier conduct as the result of Raja's bad influence. In that way the Tamil man, not the Indonesian woman, is at the root of a situation that has gone awry. In terms of class the novel suggests that both the Indonesian lower class maid and the Singaporean middle class professional woman behave in deviant ways but will be excused for their digressions. *Rojak's* intriguing plot presents the complexities of gender performativity in interracial and intercultural relationships and challenges its readers to understand the intersecting power dimensions of gender, race and class that are constantly fluctuating. While the novel is open to several interpretations, I prefer to read *Rojak* in a way that empowers the female protagonist and shows female sexuality in a positive light.

### STEFANI HID'S NOVEL I'M NOT CRAZY BUT THEY ARE

Stefani Hid was nineteen years old when she published *I'm Not Crazy, But They Are* (*Bukan Saya, Tapi Mereka Gila*) in 2004. Born and raised in Surabaya, she studied graphic design at Trisakti University in Jakarta before she returned to East Java. *I'm Not Crazy, But They Are* presents the perspective of a teenaged female adolescent. Nian, the first person narrator/protagonist, relates her life experiences over the years 2001 to 2004 and they include depressions, neuroses and existential anxiety attacks. In three chapters Nian's friend Putri serves as the narrator, in one chapter her lover Keken.

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<sup>12</sup> Si peramal menyebutkan, walaupun banyak cobaan datang di sepuluh tahun pertama pernikahan, masa tua bersama pria berwajah *shen* akan bahagia dan makmur. (2004, 19).

Nian comes from a broken family background: her parents are divorced and her mother has remarried and leaves at some point for the Netherlands. Her father lives in Surabaya. In Jakarta Nian and her younger brother are left in the care of their maternal grandparents. Putri, a problematic female-to-male transgendered individual, is her only friend. Even though Putri does not play a significant role in the plot until the very end, his/her character stands out as a trans-person who does not fit the sex/gender binary and subverts preconceived notions of ideal femininity and masculinity.

At age sixteen Nian is a high school reporter who interviews Keken Sukendar, a member of parliament (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat). She immediately falls in love with this forty-three year old married man and father of a teenager just two years younger than herself. Nian actively pursues him by sending text messages. Keken replies that he has a family and professional responsibilities but agrees to meet her again. Their subsequent secret encounters are intimate and sexual from the start. Nian narrates how she is obsessed by Keken and details their lovemaking.

Keken starts to avoid contact with Nian after her stepfather has discovered their liaison and warned him not to continue. After seven months, however, Nian re-establishes their relationship and experiences more freedom residing with her grandparents. An uncle informs her that he heard rumours that she sells herself for sex. Nian denies this but confesses that she is sexually active. His spontaneous response is an invitation to have sex with him. Nian is indignant and concludes that in her family “I’m not crazy but they are”.<sup>13</sup> The uncle’s incestuous attitude is outrageous and points to perceptions of sexually active, unmarried women as “sluts”.

Eventually Keken ‘formalizes’ their relationship by renting a luxurious flat. Nian reflects on their plans to cohabit in terms of *kumpul kebo* but for her it has no negative connotation. On the contrary, she almost seems proud to live with a married man.<sup>14</sup> In the one chapter where Keken serves as first-person narrator we are presented his perspective and learn that his marriage is merely an empty shell. Divorce, however, is not an option given his position as a public figure and elected legislator. He feels truly committed to Nian and wants to marry her but polygamy is problematic. He contends himself with keeping her as his mistress.

Events unfold rapidly toward the end of the novel when Nian, at age twenty and by now a university student, becomes unintentionally pregnant. Soon thereafter Keken is shot dead. It turns out Putri is the perpetrator. She has been in love with Nian for a long time and decided to eliminate her rival. After that, with a most unexpected twist to the plot, the very last page of the book reveals that everything we have read so far, never really happened to Nian. It was just a fantasy and a result of her imagination in her depressed and anxious state of mind.

*I’m Not Crazy, But They Are* is one of a number of novels and stories that have adolescents and young adults as their main characters. They are portrayed as searching for selfhood in an urban and fast-paced society affected by globalizing forces. While transitioning into adulthood the teenagers are learning to understand the “processes of becoming” and how to perform their identity. In Nian’s case we do not see any signs of religiosity or religious

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<sup>13</sup> Sebenarnya siapa yang gila? Bukan saya tapi mereka. (2004, 84).

<sup>14</sup> Aku akan minggat. Kumpul kebo dengan suami orang! (2004, 140) Yang penting [Papa dan Mama] selalu mensupport aku secara materi. Sepertinya kumpul kebo kami direstui oleh kebetulan-kebetulan, walau mereka sama sekali tidak tahu. (2004, 145).

overtones of morality even though she mentions her grandmother's Catholic faith and Putri comments that Nian's family is devout (2004, 75, 89). Nian flouts feminine modesty and enthusiastically explores her agency and sexuality. She has no qualms chasing after her married love interest and takes great pleasure in their sexual adventures. Graphic descriptions of their lovemaking include kissing, sucking, fondling and intercourse. These are, in fact, the sexual activities on which Utomo collected data in her sociological survey. Among her informants in the 15 to 24 age group 89-98% disapproved of such premarital intimacies (2002, 215). Nian also recounts having oral sex with Keken (2004, 40, 104), a sex act that is not sanctioned within Islam according to Smith-Hefner: "even more liberal authors typically draw the line at such things as oral sex, sodomy, or sex with animals" (2006, 162). This indicates how extraordinary Nian's sexual adventures are.

Nian remains monogamously faithful to Keken except for one time when she and Putri have a seemingly casual sexual encounter during a sleepover (2004, 121). We can interpret this scene to undermine traditional notions of sexuality because Putri is transgendered. Are Nian and Putri heterosexual or same-sex lovers? Putri already incorporates gender difference and therefore signifies gender liminality (Davies 2010, 50). Her sexual involvement with Nian adds questions of sexuality to gender transgressions and challenges heteronormativity. Their intimate exchange may not have been as innocent as it appeared to be, however, as it may have fuelled Putri's desire for Nian and her subsequent violent behaviour. Even though the related events turn out to be a fantasy, as readers we are presented this teenager's perspective of her imagined sex life, which is far beyond what the average Indonesian considers appropriate. The fact that the entire story turns out to be only part of the protagonist's imagination speaks volumes about the persistent taboos. Sexual experiences cannot be addressed openly and therefore the phantasmagoria serves an alternative site of sexual expression.

Recurring themes in stories about adolescents are broken homes, neglect or even abuse – physical, emotional, sexual – by parents who are preoccupied with other issues. I find it unfortunate that in many such narratives a situation of divorced parents is presented as identical with a dysfunctional family background. Single motherhood, in most cases a divorced woman with custody over her children, almost always equals economic hardship and poverty, abandonment and emotional struggles. Such literary representations reiterate the idea that divorce destroys family life and is disgraceful. Divorce occurs among Indonesians, but it is considered highly undesirable in middle and upper class circles. As vigorously as parents and relatives pressure young adults into marriage, as forcefully do they discourage a couple to 'go public' with their failed marriage by divorce. In *I'm Not Crazy, But They Are* Nian's parents have split up and implicitly this explains Nian's daring and immoral behaviour or, for that matter, her neuroses that generate her sexual fantasies. While we witness Nian perform her adolescent sexuality in a liberated and celebratory way, in the end her life story is an aberration. In my view this novel ultimately does not offer positive alternatives to subject formation, self-actualisation or womanhood, but rather reconfirms the stereotypical gender dynamics of power.



## CLOSING REMARKS

My discussion of the contemporary fiction by four women writers demonstrates that since 1998 change has taken place in the discourses around marriage, families, sex and sexuality. The literary texts zero in on the individual experiences and experiments of fictional characters. They say and portray what in everyday life remains taboo and concealed. The stories demonstrate that marriage, sexual relationships and sexuality are undergoing revision and that the politics of desire are more exposed than before. Sexuality does not merely serve the purpose of reproduction and sexual relationships are not restricted to matrimony only. The writings underscore that sexuality is an integral part of the human condition and that women as well as men must be able to enjoy sexual pleasure as an expression of physical intimacy. Other contemporary novels by women also explicitly address premarital or extramarital liaisons and deal with issues that people in everyday life prefer to remain silent about, such as sexual abuse, (marital) rape, domestic violence, polygamy and lesbian sexuality. Further research will provide more in-depth insights in these literary themes.

Social scientists who have studied trends in courtship, dating (*pacaran*), marriage, reproduction and fertility, have concluded that in general adult Indonesians disapprove that youngsters (their children) engage in premarital sex and hope to see them tie the knot for a life time.<sup>15</sup> Religion is a determining factor in common understanding of what is morally appropriate. Pepper Schwartz asserts that in the USA, too, parents are “extremely uneasy” about their children being sexually active and believe that “sex is dangerous for youth – emotionally, physically, morally” (2010, 123). Parents strongly support abstinence and often do not provide sex education for their children. School curricula in Indonesia teach adolescents about biology and bodily functions solely in terms of reproduction and as a result many youngsters rely on distorted information (Smith-Hefner 2006, see also Schwartz 2010, 123). Unfortunately, pornography and blue movies, which are readily available on the internet or for rental at *warung* (stalls), also serve as sources to acquire knowledge about sex, particularly for young men. This can have detrimental effects on male-female relations as those films do not present sex as an expression of affection and intimacy or as eroticism. Rather, they focus on genital sex and penetration, and often equate sex with male power, domination and violence. On the other hand, there is a growing market for Muslim “medical/sexual advice” books for men. Interestingly, while Islamic teachings strongly advocate virginity before marriage for both men and women, these texts are meant as guidance for men on how to satisfy their (future) wives and they emphasize the importance of female sexual pleasure (Smith-Hefner 2006, 162-163).

A greater socio-political openness (*keterbukaan*) in Indonesia since 1998 has brought about social transformations that leave more room for self-actualisation and personal choices. Marriage, however, is still sacrosanct and alternative life styles, such as cohabitation, being childless by choice or self-chosen singlehood, cause tensions and conflicts. Works of fiction and popular culture can present readers new, eye-opening points of view but only time will tell to what extent these will affect their audiences in real life.

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<sup>15</sup> See Bennett, Hull and Hull, Jennaway, Jones, Nilan and Utari, Situmorang, Smith-Hefner and Utomo.

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