

***Tabula Rasa*, Point of View, and the Ideology of Feminism**

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Abstract

*This article concerns point of view and the ideology of feminism in Ratih Kumala's novel *Tabula Rasa*. Point of view is defined with reference to the angle of telling a narrative, whereas feminism is the belief that women and other minority groups suffer from violence, repression, and discrimination. Here, point of view is analyzed based on three different classifications, i.e. Fowler-Uspensky model, Simpson's mode of narration or Al-Alami's types of narrators, and Uspensky's types of narration. The result suggests that Ratih Kumala uses first and third person points of view and internal type of narration to communicate her support for feminism.*

Keywords: *tabula rasa; novel; Indonesia; point of view; ideology of feminism*

1. Introduction

Research on Ratih Kumala's novel *Tabula Rasa* (2016) has been conducted using several perspectives. Within the frameworks of psychology of literature are the works of Bahardur (2014), Catherine et.al. (2012), Parastiningsih (2005), and Sari et.al (2014). In gender studies, Rohmah and Indarti (2018) use Judith Butler's queer theory as the approach. Sociology of literature is the theoretical approach used by Asri and Hayati (2018), while feminisms are the perspectives by which Suryani (2009) and Wiyatmi (2006, 2012) study the novel *Tabula Rasa*. Other strands of research on the novel are structuralism (Pratiwi, Ghazali, & Lestari, 2012) and sociolinguistics (Amalia, Sukardi, & Ellies, 2018)¹.

In the context of psychology of literature, using Freud's psychoanalysis as the theory, Bahardur (2014), Catherine et.al (2012), Sari et.al (2014), and Parastiningsih (2005) study the lesbian protagonist of the novel *Raras*. They, however, focus on different aspects of the character's mental states. Bahardur (2014) portrays *Raras* as an ego-syntonic homosexual, for she is content with her being lesbian and has no intention to change her sexual orientation. This happens because there is an imbalance between her id, ego and superego. As the id takes control over the ego and superego, she becomes an individual who will do whatever she desires to even when it is socially unacceptable. For example, *Raras* opts to remain a lesbian and refuses to engage in a heterosexual marriage with the

¹ Indriyani (2006), Paramita (2010), and Tarigan (2010) have also studied Ratih Kumala's novel *Tabula Rasa*. However, since their full works are not available online, I cannot write any reviews for theirs. I myself have also conducted research on *Tabula Rasa* using Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory as the main perspective (Candria, 2019a). Unfortunately, due to printing errors during the publication process, all the references are unreadable.

male protagonist of the novel Galih. She knows that homosexuality is socially unacceptable in the Javanese and Indonesian society, but she chooses it anyway.

Bahardur's perspective to seeing Raras's sexual orientation as deviant and as the result of imbalance between id, ego, and superego is in accordance with that of Catherine et.al (2012) and Sari et.al. (2014). Catherine et.al. (2012) hold that Raras's homosexuality is a result of mental weaknesses and low adaptation ability: "*lemahnya pertahanan diri dan kurangnya kemampuan penyesuaian diri*" (2012: 397), while Sari et.al. (2014) state that Raras experiences internal conflicts due to imbalances between id, ego, and superego. Dyna Parastiningsih (2005), however, takes a different standpoint. Instead of seeing Raras as having a deviant sexual orientation or as an individual controlled by the id, Parastiningsih views Raras's traumatic childhood experience as factors that contribute to her identity crisis, and homophobia—fear and irrational hatred of homosexuals—adds her another burden.

A perspective quite similar to Parastiningsih's is that of Rohmah and Indarti (2018). They, using Judith Butler's queer theory, take a close look on Raras's incoherent identity. Raras was initially a heterosexual, but distressing life experience has made her a lesbian. In other words, it is traumatic past experience that has changed her identity.

Thus far, however, none of the researchers aforementioned discusses the reason the novelist Ratih Kumala chooses a lesbian protagonist in her novel. This is why the studies of Yasnur Asri and Yenni Hayati (2018), Esti Suryani (2009), and Wiyatmi (2006, 2012) become important. Asri and Hayati (2018) see lesbianism in *Tabula Rasa* as not only representing social phenomenon in Indonesia but also voicing oppositions against patriarchy. Through the lesbian protagonist Raras, *Tabula Rasa* utters the author's objections to patriarchal traditions and practices (Suryani, 2009; Wiyatmi, 2006, 2012). A lesbian protagonist is chosen since Ratih Kumala, as the researchers (Asri & Hayati, 2018; Suryani, 2009; Wiyatmi, 2006, 2012) contend, embraces radical feminism, which suggests that lesbianism is a way women liberate themselves from patriarchy. Heterosexual marriage is a formalized institution leading to woman repression, which is why radical feminism rejects any forms of heterosexual relations.

Pratiwi et.al (2012) and Amalia et.al (2018) offer different strands of studies, in which they use structuralism and sociolinguistics as the approaches. The former concerns textual collages in *Tabula Rasa*, while the latter focuses on the interference of Jakarta dialect of Indonesian language on the novel. Textual collages are the insertions of various types of texts, such as poems, news, and the laws, into the novel. Textual collages have internal and external functions. Internally, collages are to build the structures of the text and of the story; externally, textual collages aim to develop the genre of collages, raising particular impression and effects in the readers. In the latter, Amalia et. al. (2018) state that Jakarta dialect of Indonesian language is pervasive in the novel and the interference of Jakarta dialect exists from the phonological to syntactical levels. The use of particles *dong*, *kek*, *sih*, *nih*, and *toh* (Pratiwi, Ghazali, & Lestari, 2012: 31), for instance, indicate the interference of Jakarta dialect on the novel. The use of Jakarta dialect is because of two reasons: first, the novelist Ratih

Kumala is of Jakarta origin, and, second, one setting of the novel is Jakarta (Pratiwi, Ghazali, & Lestari, 2012: 32).

In summary, Ratih Kumala's novel *Tabula Rasa* has been studied using different approaches, most of which belong to the domain of literary criticisms. Yet, none of the studies reviewed is concerned with the point of view of the novel. Parastiningsih (2005) does mention that Kumala plays with her points of view throughout the novel, but she does not discuss the novel viewpoint and its effects in detail. This is the reason I wanted to carry out research on the point of view of the novel and its effects in the reader. Research on point of view, nevertheless, encompasses a wide area of discussion, and, therefore, discussion of viewpoint in this article would be limited to that of ideological point of view. This does not mean that the article will result in a new interpretation of the ideology of the novel; rather, the article aims to show how the ideology of feminism (Asri & Hayati, 2018; Suryani, 2009; Wiyatmi, 2006, 2012) is expressed in one part of the novel using first and third person narrators or points of view².

2. Theoretical Framework

Point of view is defined with reference to “the *perspective* through which a story is told” (Simpson, 2004: 26). It is “the ‘angle of telling’ a narrative act – that is the perspective from which events and/or thoughts are related” (Neary, 2014: 175). Point of view, in the Fowler-Uspensky model, is classified into four categories: point of view on the ideological plane (1), point of view on the temporal plane (2), point of view on the spatial plane (3), and point of view on the psychological plane (4) (in Simpson, 2004: 77). A viewpoint on ideology concerns “the way in which a text mediates a set of particular ideological beliefs through either character, narrator or author” (Simpson, 2004: 78)³. Temporal point of view, the second category, refers to the organization of time in narrative, which includes repetition, flashback, and flashforward (Simpson, 2004). The third, spatial point of view, is concerned with “the position of space from which a scene is viewed” (McIntyre, 2006: 38); it is, in other words, a “narrative ‘camera angle’” (Simpson, 2004: 79), the narrator's sight of the surrounding space. This means that spatial point of view does not take into consideration the characters' internal or mental perception of their surrounding; once the viewpoint includes the characters' inner thoughts and feelings, it has shifted into the domain of psychology. Psychological point of view, in the words of Uspensky, is “the authorial point of view” which “relies on an individual consciousness (or perception)” (in Simpson, 2004: 79).

² Feminism will not be explained in detail in the theoretical framework of this article. For a more thorough reading of the ideology of feminism in literature, see: Wiyatmi (2012). Within the context of this article, feminism is defined with reference to Sara Mills's statement: “Most feminists hold a belief that women as a group are treated oppressively and differently from men and that they are subject to personal and institutional discrimination” (1995: 3).

³ ‘Ideology’ is a term reserved for “the matrix of beliefs we use to comprehend the world and to the value systems through and by which we interact in society” (Simpson, 2004: 78).

In addition to Fowler-Uspensky model, comprising of four different planes of viewpoint, stylisticians and narratologists categorize point of view based on the so-called ‘mode of narration’ (Simpson, 2004) or ‘types of narrator’ (Al-Alami, 2019). There are three types of narrator: first person, second person, and third person point of view or narrator (Al-Alami, 2019; Simpson, 2004). First person narrator or point of view, as the name suggests, is marked by the use of first person pronouns *I*, *me*, *my*, or *mine* for the singular one, and the pronouns *we*, *us*, *our*, or *ours* for the plural (Al-Alami, 2019). First person narrator is usually a character in the novel, be she or he a major or minor character. The major character of the novel is the protagonist, while the minor is the supporting one. This type of narrator, as Al-Alami (2019) puts it, generates an intimate relation between the narrator and the readers, for the readers are placed in the standpoint of the narrator: they share experience, stories, thoughts, and feelings. However, first person point of view is limited to what the narrator “says; thinks; feels; receives and perceives” (Al-Alami, 2019: 912). The knowledge and experience of a first person narrator is subject to her/ his knowledge and experience. The second type of narrator takes *you* as its main character, making the readers feel that they themselves are the narrator (Al-Alami, 2019: 912). Thus, second person narrator, like the first person, creates intimacy between the narrator and the readers. The remaining type, Al-Alami’s third person narrator or Simpson’s third person point of view, is the one where an outsider, *not* one character of the novel, passes the story. A third person narrative is that relayed by either an omniscient or a restricted narrator, and the omniscient or restricted narrator uses third person pronouns or names to tell what happens and what the characters do, say, feel, and think. An omniscient narrator tells everything regarding the narrative, including the internal states of the characters, while a restricted one tells what happens but has no knowledge of the psychological states of the characters.

In addition to Fowler-and-Uspensky’s model of point of view and Simpson’s mode of narration or Al-Alami’s types of narrator, point of view in a narrative fiction needs to be investigated in terms of the types of narration. Narration, according to Uspensky, is categorized into internal and external types (in Neary, 2014), in which the former concerns “narration restricted to ‘subjective viewpoint’ of a particular character in the narrative”, while the latter “is ostensibly ‘objective’ and can include commentary on the characters, actions and events depicted in the narrative” (Neary, 2014: 179). Internal narration is therefore limited to what that particular character sees, knows, and feels, whereas the external one “prioritises the perspective of the narrator rather than that of any specific character or characters” (Neary, 2014: 179).

3. Research Methods

The data of the study were taken from the second edition of the new-covered novel *Tabula Rasa*, published in 2016 by Gramedia Pustaka Utama. However, considering the scope of the article, it would have been impossible to present in detail the analysis of the entire novel. Hence, I focused on a part of the novel where the female protagonist Raras and her maid Yu Marsini talk about women,

marriage, and love (Kumala, 2016: 111-112)⁴. This narrative section was taken because it represents the author's support for feminist ideology, which suggests that women should be set free from the obligation to get married and to have a family. Then the narrative was analyzed relation to its mode of narration or types of narrator (Al-Alami, 2019; Simpson, 2004) and its types of narration (Neary, 2014). The study of the mode of narration and types of narration revealed how Ratih Kumala made use of point of view in her fiction to communicate her world view and value systems.

This all suggests that this study is descriptive in nature, as its main purpose is to describe point of view on the ideological plane and the linguistic elements used to support the ideological viewpoint. The study is also qualitative, for the data and the analysis are not related to numbers or statistics. The data and the analysis of this study are all in verbal forms.

4. Result and Discussion

The result of the analysis suggests that *Tabula Rasa* is told in first and third person points of view or narrators. The first person narrators are both the major and minor characters of the novel. Interestingly, only young people – Galih, Raras, Zdenka, Gale, and Violet – who pass their stories in first person: Galih and Raras are major characters (protagonists), while the rest are minor. Characters of older generation, such as Galih's parents (Ayah and Bunda), Raras's parents (Ayah and Ibu), or Raras's maid Yu Marsini, have never told their stories, expressed their thoughts, and conveyed their emotions in first person. They are always described or narrated by one of the young characters or by an omniscient narrator. For instance, Raras's father (Ayah) has never related any events or expressed his thoughts and feelings; he has always been in the third person, an object of narration (2016: 73-76).

The third-person narrator is used in the novel by an omniscient narrator to tell events or the thoughts and feelings of the characters involved. For example, an omniscient narrator describes how cold-hearted Raras' father is:

*Laki-laki yang darahnya mengalir di tubuh Raras itu tak pernah mengatakan cinta dan sayang pada anak-anaknya.
.... Hanya saja Raras kadang meragukannya, mungkin ayahnya tak menyayanginya*
(Kumala, 2016: 76).

The first and third person narrators are either used independently, as the earlier extract suggests, or used together, as would be illustrated in the succeeding excerpt. In fact, in the novel, the author often shifts from first person narrator to the third or vice versa. The shift from third person to the first can be observed in this part of the novel, where Raras and her maid Yu Marsini talk about love and marriage (Kumala, 2016: 111-112):

⁴ In another paper, I made use of this scene to argue for Ratih Kumala's strong support for feminism and inclusiveness, but the discussion of the paper concerns nothing related to point of view of the novel (Candria, 2019b).

Wanita itu menyerit rambut Raras yang panjang sepundak. Mulutnya berlagu tanpa syair dengan nada tertentu, bermaksud nembang ‘Dandang Gula’, tembang yang biasa dilagukan sinden-sinden saat resepsi pernikahan sebagai penghibur sekaligus nasihat untuk mempelai. Sudah lama Raras sebenarnya ingin memotong rambutnya, tetapi selalu ia kembali diingatkan bahwa rambut adalah mahkota wanita.

“Yu, bisakah beri tahu aku kenapa aku harus menikah?” tanya Raras pada Yu Marsini.

“Karena kamu perempuan, *Nduk. Cah ayu yo kudune* menikah, punya suami lantas mengabdikan. *Kuwi kodrate wong wedhok.*” Itulah kodratnya perempuan.

Raras terdiam. Tak bisakah wanita ini memberi jawaban yang memuaskannya? Jawaban yang tidak terlalu klise. Terlalu Timur. Terlalu Jawa. Tak diungkapkannya, Raras merasa lebih baik diam.

“Dia dari keluarga terpendang. Anak lelaki baik-baik. Yu dengar kuliahnya di luar negeri,” sambung wanita itu.

“Kalau aku *ndak* suka?”

“*Lha wong* belum ketemu *kok* bilang *ndak* suka?” Itu *lh...* kata pepatah, tak kenal maka tak sayang. Makanya kenalan dulu.”

“Kalau sudah kenal, terus ternyata *ndak* cinta?”

“Ah... cinta. Cinta itu apa *tho?* Yu dulu nikah sama suami *ndak pake’* cinta-cintaan, *ndak pake’ yang-yangan. Bocah zaman sak iki kok mesti pake’ yang-yangan tho?* (Anak-anak zaman sekarang *kok* mesti pakai pacar-pacaran sih?) Padahal di TV Yu lihat banyak artis yang selingkuh, cerai. Tapi *suwe-suwe yo...* Yu *tresna* sama suami.”

“Apa bedanya cinta sama *tresna*, Yu?” “Kan sama saja.”

“Yo *bedha... tresna kuwi...*” Yu Marsini jeda, berpikir sebentar, “...sayang, *tresna kuwi...* maknanya lebih dari cinta.”

Ah... lugu sekali pemikiran orang-orang ini, tak tahukah zaman sudah bolak-balik? Apa yang akan mereka katakana kalau tahu aku lebih suka pada perempuan? Pada Violet! Bisa-bisa pada gantung diri. Yu... padahal aku sangat ingin cerita padamu. Kau mungkin bukan ibuku, tetapi di darahku mengalir juga darahmu karena aku telah menikmati air susu saat Ibu menyapah payudaranya dari mulut kecilku⁵.

The extract begins with an omniscient narrator telling a scene where Raras and the maid Yu Marsini converse, but it ends with a presentation of Raras’s thought in first person point of view, which the author marks using italic font style. Thus, the final paragraph is all printed in italics to distinguish it from the rest of the text. However, if we changed the third person point of view to the first, we would readily find that there would be no significant change of meaning:

Wanita itu menyerit rambutku yang panjang sepundak. Mulutnya berlagu tanpa syair dengan nada tertentu, bermaksud nembang ‘Dandang Gula’, ... nasihat untuk mempelai. Sudah lama aku sebenarnya ingin memotong rambutku, tetapi selalu aku kembali diingatkan bahwa rambut adalah mahkota wanita.

“Yu, bisakah beri tahu aku kenapa aku harus menikah?” tanyaku pada Yu Marsini.

“Karena kamu perempuan, *Nduk. Cah ayu yo kudune* menikah, punya suami lantas mengabdikan. *Kuwi kodrate wong wedhok.*” Itulah kodratnya perempuan.

Aku terdiam. Tak bisakah wanita ini memberi jawaban yang memuaskku? Jawaban yang tidak terlalu klise. Terlalu Timur. Terlalu Jawa. Tak kuungkapkan, aku merasa lebih baik diam.

⁵ I retain the font style of the original, so the reader can see Ratih’s uses of graphology to mark words and phrases in languages other than Indonesian language and to indicate shift of point of view (the last paragraph differs from the rest in that it uses first person viewpoint to convey Raras’s thought).

In the previous extract, the names “Raras”, the third person possessive adjective “-nya” (her), and the third person pronoun “ia” (she) are replaced with the first person pronoun “aku” and the first person possessive adjective “-ku”. Yet, the meaning of the extract remains the same. This means that although it is in third person point of view, the narrative is told in *internal*, rather than external, narration. This kind of positioning puts the reader in line with Raras’s stand, not with Yu Marsini’s. Yu Marsini is in fact placed in the third person, creating distance between the readers and her. The positioning, in the words of Daniel Chandler, produces “univocal narrative” that “offers a single reading of an event” (2007: 191). We, as the reader, feel what Raras feels: restriction, repression, and discrimination. We are positioned in her position: she has no authority over her own body. She does not even have right to have her hair cut: “*Sudah lama Raras sebenarnya ingin memotong rambutnya, tetapi selalu ia kembali diingatkan bahwa rambut adalah mahkota wanita*” (Raras has since long wanted to have her hair cut, but always she is retold that hair is woman’s crown). The adverb phrase of time *sudah lama* (since long) and the adverb *sebenarnya* (in fact, actually) signal her strong wish (to cut her hair). However, she is always prevented from performing the action she desires mainly because she is a woman. Interestingly, it is unclear who stops her from doing what she wants to because the clause *tetapi selalu ia kembali diingatkan bahwa rambut adalah mahkota wanita* is in passive voice. This leaves open the question of who reminds her that hair is women’s crown: Is it Yu Marsini who does not want her to have her hair cut? Is it Raras’ mother who tells her not to cut her hair? Is it the patriarchal society, who wants Raras (as well as other women) to be appealing with long hair?

The entire narration is an internal one and is inherently subjective from Raras’ perspective. The readers can “see” her critical thoughts and her evaluation of patriarchy: *jawaban yang memuaskannya* (unsophisticated answer), *tidak terlalu klise* (too cliché), *Terlalu Timur* (too Eastern), *Terlalu Jawa* (too Javanese). Similarly, she expresses her criticism in the utterance: *Bisa-bisa pada gantung diri* (They would hang themselves). Her criticisms to Javanese patriarchal tradition and practices indicate the influence of feminisms, which surely oppose any forms of discrimination and oppression against women. In this context, it is relevant to argue that it is lesbian feminism that Raras embraces because she is not after heterosexual marriage; instead, she longs for a homosexual relation (*aku lebih suka pada perempuan* ‘I prefer women to men’).

5. Conclusion

This article concerns point of view on the plane of ideology in Ratih Kumala’s novel *Tabula Rasa*. Ideological point of view refers to “the way in which a text mediates a set of particular ideological beliefs through either character, narrator or author” (Simpson, 2004: 78). The ideology of the novel is feminism, which holds that women and other minority groups experience discrimination and oppression. The ideology of feminism in the novel is communicated through the use of first person and third person narrators and the use of internal type of narration.

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