

## Reading *La Barka* within the Perspective of Feminist Stylistics

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### Abstract

This article presents a feminist stylistic analysis of religion in Nh. Dini's novel *La Barka*. Proposed by Sara Mills in 1995, feminist stylistics aims to uncover gender bias in both written and spoken (literary) texts; feminist stylistics differs from other stylistic analyses in that it studies the context of text production and the context of text reception so as to reveal hidden sexist ideologies. (Literary) text production includes seven (7) factors, i.e. general language/ discourse constraints, textual antecedents, literary conventions, current literary trends, affiliations, publishing practices and sociohistorical factors. (Literary) text reception covers five (5) factors, which are intended audience, actual audience, implied reader, sociohistorical factors, and actual reader/s. Feminist stylistic reading of *La Barka* suggests that stereotypes of good women, as were prescribed by Indonesian New Order ideology and patriarchal Javanese traditions, do exist in the novel. Yet, there are also stereotypes of a good man; gentle, honest, assertive, independent, persistent, and tough are characters of good men, husbands, and fathers. Dini, however, does not just echo commonly accepted prescriptions of good women and men. She questions patriarchy, and religion is one social structure that she questions. Religion is sexist in that it does not properly educate women; it educates women in those skills necessary for housekeeping only. Also, religion does not accommodate women's voices and needs, for all religious leaders are men, who are unwilling to seriously address women's needs. Then Dini questions the hypocritical and uncritical attitudes of many religious believers; they observe religious rituals willingly and regularly but do not actualize the values in life.

**Keywords:** *La Barka*; novel; feminist stylistics; religion

### 1. Introduction

*La Barka* is the name of the house where Rina, a Javanese Indonesian, is spending her time with her daughter while processing a divorce against her husband, Bonin. *La Barka*, situated in the village of Trans-en-Provence, South France, belongs to a good friend of Rina's, Monique, whose marriage with Daniel is also about to end. The house is always open for all Monique's family and acquaintances; she welcomes family members and friends who want to rest in the house. This is why in *La Barka* Rina meets people from different socio-cultural backgrounds who have ranges of personalities. They, together with the complexities of their lives, then become the subjects of Rina's writing: a diary that she writes for her secret lover *kau* 'you'. The diary, as well as Rina's accounts of what is happening in *La Barka* during her stay, constitutes Nh. Dini's<sup>1</sup> novel bearing a title similar to the house name: *La Barka*<sup>2</sup> (Dini, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> Nurhayati Sri Hardini Siti Nukatin, abbreviated into Nh. Dini (1936-2018), is a feminist Indonesian novelist. She has published a number of novels, anthologies of short stories, and novelettes.

<sup>2</sup> PT Dunia Pustaka Jaya published Nh. Dini's novel *La Barka* in 1975 and reprinted it in 1976. Twenty-four years later, in the year 2000, PT Grasindo, reprinted the novel, and a decade afterwards, in February 2010, PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama issued the third reprints of *La Barka*. The last reprint of the novel is the one referred to in this paper.

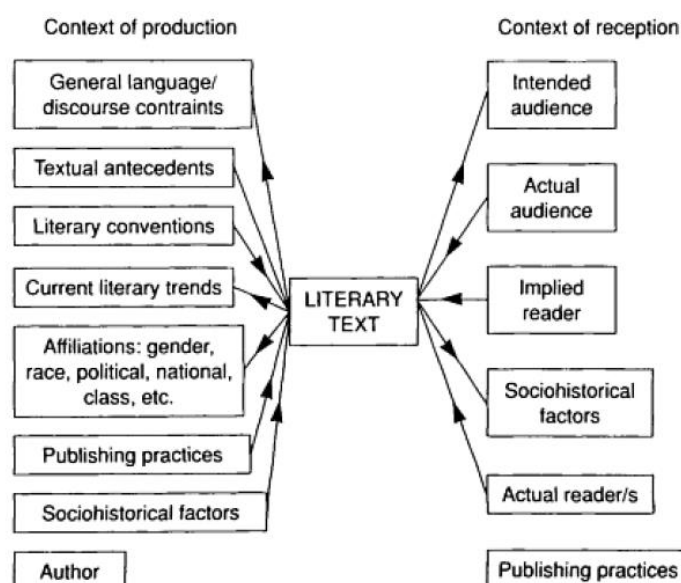
*La Barka*, like many other Indonesian novels (e.g. *Saman* (Utami, 1998), *Bilangan Fu* (Utami, 2008), *Supernova* (Dee, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2012), *Geni Jora* (Khalieqy, 2009), *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (Khalieqy, 2004), *Tarian Bumi* (Rusmini, 2007), *Tabula Rasa* (Kumala, 2016), *Gadis Pantai* (Toer, 2003), the trilogy of *Rara Mendut* (Mangunwijaya, 2019), and *Pohon-Pohon Sesawi* (Mangunwijaya, 2020)), presents religion as an inseparable part of human life. Dini dedicates pages 48-50 to Rina's thoughts and experience of religion and pages 233-236 to Rina's discussing her religious belief as a Javanese Catholic with her French friends and acquaintances. Interestingly, Rina's discussion of religion always connects to her presentation of life crises. Rina explores her thoughts of religion and recalls her religious experience in relation to her husband's bad tempers. In other part of the novel, where Rina and some other characters are exchanging opinions of religion, religion becomes part of their reactions to the sudden death of an ill-tempered character, Daniel's father.

Here, Dini, through her protagonist Rina, does not present religion as a tradition and human praxis free from any errors. Religion is patriarchal, like other human traditions and practices, in that men enjoy more privileges than women do. Religion is therefore not something that we should embrace or follow without any critical assessments. This all has become reason I dedicate the succeeding discussion on the presentation of religion in Nh. Dini's novel *La Barka*. The novel is studied using feminist stylistics (Mills, 1995) as the theory, and, hence, section 2 below provides discussion of feminist stylistics. Section 3 concerns research methods, while section 4 presents discussion. In section 4, feminist stylistics is used not only to uncover gender bias in the novel but also to reveal the author's oppositions to the patriarchy in religion.

## 2. Feminist Stylistics

The term 'feminisms' is not easy to define because it covers a range of movements that strive and work for the equality of men and women in economic, social and political matters (feminism, 2014; Mills, 1995). Feminists hold that our society is in general patriarchal, meaning that there is a tendency in our society to favor men over women (and other minority groups, e.g. children, transsexuals, and transgender). While not *all* men enjoy similar privileges and "benefit equally" from social structure (Mills, 1995, p. 3), men in general enjoy more privileges than women do. Hence, feminists try to show to our society that there is inequality between men and women, and this needs to be changed or improved, as no-one is more superior or can enjoy more privilege than the others

In the feminist model of text, Mills considers context as consisting of 'context of production' and 'context of reception' (1995, p. 23). The former includes (1) general language and discourse constraints, (2) textual antecedents, (3) literary conventions, (4) current literary trends, (5) publishing practices and (6) sociohistorical factors. Included in the latter are (1) intended audience, (2) actual audience, (3) implied reader, (4) sociohistorical factors and (5) actual reader/s. The intricate relations between the two contexts and their influences on literary and non-literary texts are captured in the succeeding figure:



**Figure 1.** A feminist model of text (Mills, 1995, p. 31)

The ‘general language and discourse constraints’ restrict “the range of ideas which can be expressed within each sociohistorical conjuncture” and “the form which ideas can take when expressed” (Mills, 1995, p. 32). Human language is not without limit; it is limited despite the fact that it consists of millions of words. That language is limited restricts language users to some extent. Our ideas as well as our potentials to express our ideas are constrained within the limits that our language has set; as Foucault put it, “on the basis of the grammar and of the wealth of vocabulary available at a given time, there are, in total, relatively few things that are said” (in Mills, 1995, p. 29).

In addition to the limited and restrictive language through which we express our ideas, our society sets the extent to which our writing is appropriate, acceptable and readable:

We do not simply write anything we wish, but we write within the context of those elements which are considered appropriate within our society; all writings which fall outside these parameters are labeled ‘mad’, ‘deviant’, or unreadable (Mills, 1995, p. 29).

Other factors that influence text production are ‘literary conventions’ and ‘trends’. Literary conventions rule the structures, diction, subjects and genre of literary works produced in a particular period of time, while literary trends “affect which writers are published and what type of writing is published” (Mills, 1995, p. 32). For instance, literary conventions govern the number of lines, syllables and rhymes of Indonesian *sonata* (sonnets), and current literary trends ‘inform’ our authors that in contemporary Indonesia novels are more likely to be published than, say, anthologies of poems. Literary trends also ‘inform’ our authors which subject matter fits into the market demands and thus the wishes of the publishers. Arranged marriage, for example, was a theme in some modern Indonesian novels but is outdated for contemporary novels, where social criticism is preferable (see,

e.g., Ayu Utami's *Saman*, *Larung* and *Bilangan Fu* (1998, 2001, 2008), Oka Rusmini's *Tarian Bumi* (2007) or Leila S. Chudori's *Pulang* (2012) and *Laut Bercerita* (2019)).

Affiliations relate to “the conscious links which individuals make to situate themselves as individuals,” e.g. as a woman, an Indonesian Javanese, a Catholic, etc. (Mills, 1995, p. 32). Affiliations have significant contribution to text or book publications because a publisher will not publish a work unless it is in line with the publisher's mission and ideals. For instance, a publisher of mainstream and moderate religious books will not publish a draft that contains radical teachings of religion. Similarly, the publishers of literary works will really select those texts they need to publish, and they may be unwilling to publish those texts that are not in line with their ‘standard’:

Since the publishing, reviewing and teaching of literature are implicitly informed by the notion of ‘this text speak to us’, affiliative statements in the text may signal to ‘gatekeepers’ of literature that this text is or is not written by one of ‘our kind’. This makes a great deal of difference in terms of whether a writer is published, who publishes her/ his work, whether the book is reviewed and where it is reviewed (Mills, 1995, p. 32).

The next element in the context of book or text production is that of publishing practices, since publishers influence considerably the way authors write their books. This is because publishers know which types of books are marketable, and they will suit their publications to the market demands. They can therefore influence the writers in terms of editing and reworking the content of the books. Publishers do not always want to publish literary works; it may well be the case that financial profit is their drives. Consequently, they will choose which authors are to be published and which are not. They also influence the way books are marketed because the way they publicize the books will have great impacts on the way the books are read. Books with greater publicity will certainly attract more readers than those books that are not greatly publicized.

Socio-historical factor is another factor that affects the production of texts and books. Socio-historical factors influence the production of texts in that authors consciously or unconsciously write about the social and historical background of their era:

The economic, social and cultural background of the production of text is vital to the construction of a text, since so much of the commonsense knowledge of that period is contained in the book either to be unconsciously included by the author or to be resisted (Mills, 1995, p. 33).

These factors determining the production of texts work together with those within the context of text reception. In the context of reception, Sara Mills lists *intended audience*, *actual audience*, *implied reader*, *socio-historical factors* and *actual reader/s*. The phrase ‘intended audience’ refers to “the general community of readers to whom the book will be marketed”, while ‘actual audience’ concerns “the people who buy and/ or read the book” (Mills, 1995, p. 33). The term ‘implied reader’ relates to “the position to which the text is directed” (Mills, 1995, p. 33), and ‘actual reader(s)’ refers to

individual(s) who actually read the book. ‘Socio-historical factors’ determine the way the readers perceive a book, as Mills (1995, p. 33) puts it:

Sociohistorical factors also affect the way that the book is received and read; for example, general trends in buying, lending in libraries and reviewing may determine the availability of the books, and also may determine the views that readers have about the books and the readings that they make of the books.

As far as socio-historical-cultural factors are concerned, Rachmat Djoko Pradopo (2002) writes that literary men and women are not immune to their socio-cultural values and norms. Society and culture affect literary works on the one hand, and, on the other hand, literature reflects what happens in its socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, Pradopo (2002) suggests that a reader needs to have adequate background knowledge of the socio-cultural factors that influence a work in order to be able to read and interpret it properly.

### 3. Research Methods

This study is qualitative in that it presents a verbal analysis of Nh, Dini’s novel *La Barka* (2010). The analysis, as has been mentioned, uses feminist stylistics (Mills, 1995) as the theory. One aim of feminist stylistics is to reveal gender bias or sexism in a text. Yet, in this article, the theory is useful not only to show the bias that the novel contains but also to uncover the novelist’s criticisms and oppositions to patriarchy. Dini critically assess those teachings and practices of religion that discriminate and oppress women.

To come to the possible interpretations of *La Barka*, I read and re-read the novel while also taking notes of some important points. The impression of my first reading was that the novel was feminist in tone, for Nh. Dini always took the side of women throughout the novel. To support the finding, I conducted library research and discovered readings presented arguments consistent with mine. However, a deeper and a more thorough reading of the novel suggests that there are parts of the novel following the stereotype of New Order ideology and of Javanese traditions. In these parts of the novel, Rina praises such qualities as soft, calm, and loving or caring as the characters of good women. This is in line with New Order state ideology. In other parts of the novel, nevertheless, Dini questions, criticizes, and opposes patriarchy. Pages 48-50 present sharp critiques to religion, and these pages play pivotal roles in this article.

### 4. A Feminist Stylistic Reading of *La Barka*

*La Barka*, as has been mentioned, was first published in 1975. In the 1970-s, New Order regime, a regime known as authoritarian and patriarchal, ruled Indonesia. The regime outlawed criticisms, disagreements, and oppositions; hence, they kept their eyes open on every aspect of Indonesian life, including on literature (Bandel, 2006; Hatley, 2002, 2008; Oey-Gardiner, 2002). Literary writings had

to cohere with the state ideology if they were to be published; otherwise, they would be banned or burnt.

The New Order held that the place of good women was at home; they were to be wives and mothers, and they were supposed to be refined, passive, submissive, and silent<sup>3</sup>. Less virtuous women went out and were actively involved in public domain. Immoral women were independent, critical, and outspoken (Hatley, 2008). The government indoctrinated this stereotyping of decent and evil women in such a way that numbers of novels published within the era followed suit. The state ideology that a decent woman from the east (*dari Timur*) should be courteous and shy marks Dini's novels as well (Hatley, 2008). In *La Barka*, Dini portrays Rina, the protagonist, as a reserved person: "*Dengan sifat-sifatku yang ingin menyendiri, ...*" Not only is she reserved, but also she is calm and tactful. Calm and tact are qualities Rina praises as qualities decent women should possess. She, in the following extract, compares Tani, Monique's female dog, to a decent woman, since Tani behaves in a way calmer than the other two dogs of Monique's:

*Tani lebih santun daripada lainnya. Seandainya seorang manusia, dia adalah seorang wanita yang pantas, sedikit pemalu, menarik. Kalau menghendaki sesuatu, dia tidak mengutarakan maksudnya secara kasar* (Dini, 2010, p. 51)<sup>4</sup>.

Rina, however, says nothing of the male dogs Wiski and Arsui. If a decent woman should be calm and considerate, should a good man be calm and considerate? Why does she not consider calm and tact as the characters of good men? What are the qualities of good men, then?

In some other parts of the novel, Rina mentions several characters men ought to have. While gentle and affectionate to their families, good men are honest, tough, decisive, assertive, and persistent. She criticizes some male characters due to their negative personalities, and these negative traits contribute to some extent to their divorces. Bonin, Rina's husband, is rude in that he always abuses her verbally. He is not gentle and caring to her wife and daughter. Daniel, Monique's husband, is childish, weak, and dependent. He lets his parents interfere his marriage life too much. Francine's husband, Rene, is indecisive, timid, and dishonest.

Rina represents Dini, her creator, to some points. Hence, although Rina has got married to a French man and has lived in several foreign countries for years, her thoughts and attitudes reflect Javanese traditions to some extent. Javanese affects her Catholic belief as well. Her belief in life after death is not purely that of Catholicism, for it is mixed with Javanese mystical concepts of the afterlife: "*Katolik tetapi di Jawa,*" jawabku. "*Agama Islam atau Katolik di sana selalu atau kebanyakan*

<sup>3</sup> The state ideology, I believe, is strongly influenced by a conventional Javanese held belief that women are *kanca-wingking*, which literally means a friend who is at the back. Women's places are behind their husbands, and at home, their places are in places normally located at the back of the house, such as the laundry and the kitchen. This is because the tasks of (good) women are serving their husbands, keeping the house, and rearing the children. This kind of stereotyping and traditional role division exists in novels published very much later than *La Barka*, but in these contemporary novels the projection of such a stereotyping is to evoke criticisms (Khalieqy, 2009; Kumala, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Tani is more polite than the others are. If she were a woman, she were a decent one, a bit reserved, attractive. If she needed something, she would not ask in rude ways.

*bercampur dengan mistik Jawa. Boleh kau sebut pula sisa-sisa dari tradisi atau adat*” (Dini, 2010, pp. 235-236)<sup>5</sup>.

However, Rina, like Dini herself, is not entirely uncritical towards Javanese customs. She does criticize Javanese traditions, including the thought that women should stay at home once they get married. She, reflecting on Francine and Rene<sup>6</sup>'s marriage life, is asking rhetorical questions related to the traditional role division between a wife and husband:

*Mendengar dan melihat itu semua, aku berpikir, manakah yang benar? Seorang istri yang mengikuti jejak suami dalam dunia kerja, dalam hal ini dagang, ataukah yang tinggal di rumah? Istri yang menginginkan sekadar keuntungan sebagai uang saku sendiri, dengan bayaran risiko yang mahal, yaitu menjauhnya sang suami* (Dini, 2010, p. 70).

Listening to and observing all this (happening to Francine and Rene) have made me think, which one is correct? A wife who, following her husband, runs a business, or a wife who stays home? A wife wishes to earn a small amount of profit for her pocket money, but with a great risk of causing her husband away.

These are surely not real questions; they are rhetorical. Rina—and, thus, Dini—know the exact answer to the questions. Rina stops working after her marriage because Bonin, her husband, due to working requirement, has to move to another country. She needs to go with him, which she does voluntarily before discovering his real nature (Dini was a professional before getting married. She resigned, as her husband was a French diplomat, who needed to move from one country to another. Yet, she had never stopped writing throughout her life).

Once figuring out how bad Bonin's temper is, Rina opts to fight him back. She refuses to remain submissive and silent even when her attitudes and acts are considered to be violating the religion she embraces. She refuses to submit to the patriarchal and dogmatic teachings of Catholicism (Dini, 2010, pp. 48-50). Raising open criticisms to religion and its patriarchal side may be acceptable to some respects in current Indonesia; however, by the time Dini was working on the novel, the act of criticizing religion was quite brave. This is why Katrin Bandel (2006) points that before reformation (1998), Indonesian female novelists were reluctant to raise religion and religiosity as topics of their prose. Religion was presented normatively, rather than critically, in the novel because critical assessments of religion were not welcomed<sup>7</sup>. One possible explanation why Dini, through the protagonist Rina, could openly criticize the aspects of Catholicism that were formal, doctrinal, and patriarchal is that she criticized the praxis of Catholicism in France, not that in Indonesia. Another

<sup>5</sup> “Catholicism in Java,” I replied. “Islam or Catholicism in Java is always affected by or is mostly mixed with Javanese mysticism. You may say that it is the remnant of old tradition or belief”.

<sup>6</sup> Dini divides *La Barka* into five chapters, all of which are named after the supporting female characters: Monique, Francine, Sophie, Yvonne, and Christine.

<sup>7</sup> Bandel (2006) notes that in 1968 H.B Jassin was imprisoned because Kipandjikusmin's short story “*Langit makin mendung*,” published in *Sastra* magazine, was considered to blaspheme Islam. Jassin was back then the redactor of the magazine. In 1991 Arswendo Atmowiloto was sent to jail for religious blasphemy. This was because the tabloid he led published a survey that ranked the Prophet Muhammad in a position lower than those of other public figures.

possible reason is that she was bold enough to criticize Catholicism, since Catholicism was not the religion of the majority in Indonesia. Her criticisms might not have stirred massive protests and strong oppositions from the public.

## 5. Conclusion

Feminist stylistics studies literary and non-literary texts with the purpose to convey their bias representations of men and women. To reach such a purpose, feminist stylistics offers a model of text that approaches context from two different but interrelated aspects, i.e. context of production and context of reception. The former includes: (1) general language and discourse constraints, (2) textual antecedents, (3) literary conventions, (4) current literary trends, (5) affiliations, (6) publishing practices and (7) socio-historical factors. The latter covers such elements as (1) intended audience, (2) actual audience, (3) implied reader, (4) sociohistorical factors and (5) actual readers.

Feminist stylistics, throughout the article, is used to analyze Nh. Dini's novel *La Barka*. The novel presents a diary written by the protagonist Rina, a Javanese Indonesian, who gets married to Bonin, a French engineer. The marriage has turned to be an unhappy one because Bonin is temperamental and rude. The born of their first child makes things worst, which encourages Rina to file a divorce. To ease her mind and mental state from the complicated divorce process, Rina rests in La Barka, the house of her good friend Monique. In La Barka, Rina manages to finish writing her diary, where she writes about herself and the people she meets. One thing that Rina writes in the diary relates to her religious thoughts and experience. She criticizes the patriarchal and biased traditions of Catholicism; she also criticizes the formality of religion: a number of religious believers observe rituals but never really think of and actualize their morals and values. Rina holds that piety should be defined in terms of not only strict observation of religious rituals but also concerns about others' well-being.

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