

Article

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Supernova and the Struggle for Gender Equality

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Abstract

In this article, I present a semiotic study of Dee's novel *Supernova*, but the analysis is focused on the female character Diva or Supernova, which plays as the symbol of Dee's struggle for gender equality. Following Chandler (2007), I made use of the Saussurean and Peircean semiotics, in which signs consist of inseparable signifiers and signifieds, and the modes of their relationships are icon, index, and symbol. In the succeeding discussion, I argue that the title of the novel functions as an index that directs the readers' attention to the character Diva (Supernova). Supernova is a metaphor (iconic and symbolic) of an individual who is able to enlighten the life of others with wisdom. She also functions as a symbol of strong oppositions to patriarchy, in which good women are simplistically defined with reference to their marriage and family life. There are hundreds of reasons defining a good woman, including maturity, self-awareness, knowledge and compassion. Another metaphorical use of Supernova relates to the fact that she, because of all her qualities, serves as an Avatar, something uncommon in Indonesian context. Appointing a woman and a prostitute as an Avatar means a challenge to Indonesia's religious patriarchy.

Keywords: *Supernova*; semiotics; icon, index, symbol; gender equality

1. Introduction

Indonesians who are supportive of women's causes celebrated the 2018 International Women's Day by conducting various activities; the most massive actions were the women's marches that took place on Saturday, March 3, 2018, in Jakarta and twelve other cities in the country [1]. During the 2018 Women's March, the pro-women activists demanded, among which, that the government took serious actions to stop violence against women, incestuous rapes, virtual harassment and violence, and woman killing or *femicide* [1]. This is because the rates of violence against women in Indonesia

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are alarming. In 2015, *Komnas Perempuan* (the National Commission on Violence against Women) noted that there were 322,851 cases of violence against women; in 2016, the figure decreased into 259,150 cases. Unfortunately, the rate of violence again increased in 2017, reaching up to 348,446 cases [2]. What causes even more concern is that in 2017 occurrences of incestuous rapes conducted by biological fathers and/or uncles were increasing. *Komnas Perempuan* reported that in 2017 violence against Indonesian girls reached up to 2,227 cases, 1,799 of which were domestic rapes carried out by fathers and/or uncles. In 2017, the rate of virtual harassment and violence against women was also on the increase, and so were the acts of woman murders or femicide [2].

The vulnerability of girls and women in Indonesia has since long become the concerns of many pro-women activists or groups. They have tirelessly engaged in efforts to educate and empower women, so Indonesian women can gain positions equal to those of men. Efforts to promote gender justice have also been committed by Indonesian female novelists. Such authors as Suwarsih Djojopuspito, Nh. Dini, Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim, Helvy Tiana Rosa, Abidah El-Khalieqy, Oka Rusmini, Ayu Utami, Dewi Lestari (Dee), and Istiah Marzuki have published writings where the protagonists engage themselves in activities to promote equality between women and men [3;4;5;6;7;8]. Abidah El-Khalieqy, for example, voiced her sayings concerning equal opportunities for women and men to obtain good and higher education and to have wider accesses to public domains in the novels *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* [9] and *Geni Jora* [10]. She also insisted on the need of women and men to share mutual pleasures in sexual relationships and to share responsibilities of parenthood and domestic affairs [7].

However, presenting detailed discussion of the works of these female writers is not possible within the scope of this article; therefore, the article is centralized on the fiction of Dewi Lestari's or Dee's *Supernova: Ksatria, Puteri dan Bintang Jatuh* (Supernova: Knight, Princess, and Falling Star) [11]. The novel, which was published eighteen years ago, was chosen because it presents to the reader criticisms of patriarchy that are relevant to current Indonesia; the critiques, though, were written in a light and popular way. This is the reason the novel was very popular in the years following its first publication in 2000 [4].

Supernova made its first appearance when Indonesia was at the dawn of the Reformation Era. During the preceding era, the New Order, Indonesian men and women had to suffer from the tyrannical and corrupt government, but women were to suffer more because the government was not only authoritarian but also patriarchal. Women were treated as the second citizens (*warga negara kelas dua*), and they were brainwashed with doctrines, policies, and programs that pushed them to domestic areas [6;12;13;14;15;16]. Women were to be wives and mothers, and if they were to work in the publics, they were to work as *pencari nafkah tambahan* (assisting their husbands to get additional family income). Good women were to remain silent, submissive to their

husbands' wills, and to take good care of their husbands, children and houses. This picture of good, domesticated women is what dominates Indonesian novels before the fall of the New Order government [6;12;15]¹.

The birth of *Supernova* was regarded as blowing a wind of change in the world of Indonesian women's writings to some extent [4;17;6;18]. Barbara Hatley (2002:141-142) pointed out that:

..., it is surely positive that women's fiction is taking diverse paths – challenging dominant gender archetypes, locating the mythical in the everyday, addressing previously taboo political issue, engaging with fashionable scientific and philosophical discourses, appealing to different generations – rather than following predictable, stereotypical patterns.

Supernova, according to Katrin Bandel [17], offered anew the notion of religiosity and spirituality, for being religious and spiritual was not defined with reference to strict observations of religious rituals but to individual growth and maturity. The idea of spirituality was connected to science because science offered human beings perspectives to see human life and condition differently. Science fiction is what Maman S. Mahayana [18] regarded as the “added value” of *Supernova* because other Indonesian novelists were thus far unable to write science fiction as well as Dee. Another comment is that of Harry Aveling [4], who wrote that although *Supernova* was written in a popular art form, it does offer deep moral teachings.

All the previous readings of *Supernova* were carried out within the field of (feminist) literary criticisms. For this paper, though, I would concentrate on the analysis of the character Supernova or Diva rather than of the entire novel. To analyse this very particular character, I use semiotics as the basic theoretical framework. The reason I was interested in *Supernova*, or *Diva*, is that she symbolizes the author's strong rejection to woman discrimination and patriarchy. In other words, *Supernova* is the symbol of Dee's search and struggle for gender equity and justice in Indonesia. This article is thus a presentation of a semiotic reading of *Supernova*, the symbol of Dee's search and struggle for gender equity.

2. Semiotics: The Study of Signs

Semiotics is defined with reference to the study of signs, and ‘signs’ is a term used to refer to “anything which ‘stands for’ something else” (Chandler, 2007:2). Signs, as Chandler (2007:2) puts it, “can take the forms of words, images, sounds, gestures and

¹ There are few exceptions, I think, because the works of Suwarsih Djojopuspito and Nh. Dini had already presented the portraits of emancipated women though they were written before Reformation [20;8] (Hoed, 2014; Watson, 2005).

objects". This suggests that an Indonesian word such as *beruang* (bear) is a sign because it represents an idea or a concept and an object other than itself. The word stands for an animal that is strong, large, furry, and omnivorous.

A sign, according to Saussure, consists of two inseparable elements, i.e. a *signifier* and a *signified*. A signifier is the form that the sign takes or, to put it in another word, the sign vehicle. A signified is the meaning of the sign or the concept that the sign bears. In the aforementioned word *beruang*, the signifier is the word *beruang*, consisting of the phonemes /b/, /ɛ/, /t/, etc., and the signified is the meaning: a strong large omnivorous mammal.

The relation between the signifier and the signified of a sign in the Saussurean framework is arbitrary, for their relation is purely conventional [19;21;22]. Peirce, however, holds a different perspective. Arguing that a sign consists of *representamen*, *interpretant*, and *object*, Peirce asserts that the relation between a *representamen* (Saussure's *signifier*) and its *object* (Saussure's *signified*) can be distinguished into three modes, i.e. *symbol*, *icon*, and *index*². A symbol is "a mode in which the signifier does *not* resemble the signified but which is fundamentally *arbitrary* or purely *conventional*" (Chandler, 2007:36). Included within the scope of the symbolic mode of relationships are signs such as languages, mathematical equations, flags, and Morse code [19;23]. Iconic mode of relationship concerns those signs where the signifiers resemble the signifieds, such as portraits or realist paintings. The last mode, index, involves signs in which the signifiers are in some way connected to the signifieds [19]. Smoke, for example, rises up from something burning or fire; smoke is therefore an index of fire. Handwriting is also an index because it usually is very individual.

4. Semiotics and *Supernova*

A supernova, semantically speaking, is an exploding star that appears suddenly at random positions in the sky and produces very bright light within a short time. In its short period of luminosity, nevertheless, a supernova can produce light 10 to 10.000 million times brighter than that of the sun [24;25]. This suggests that the word 'supernova', like other verbal signs, is symbolic, since the association between the signifier and the signified is mainly based on convention. However, the word 'supernova', in the context of Dee's novel, is used indexically and metaphorically for reasons that would be elaborated in the forthcoming paragraphs.

² *Representamen* is the form that a sign takes or the sign vehicle, while *interpretant* is defined in terms of "the meaning that one gets from a sign" (Sebeok, 2001:6). In other words, interpretant is "the *sense* made of the sign" (Chandler, 2007:29). *Object*, as Chandler (2007:29) puts it, is "something beyond the sign to which it refers"; object is thus a referent. Representamen, according to Chandler [19], is in some way similar to Saussure's *signifier* and *object* to *signified*. Since this comparison is more practical to follow, for the rest of the article I would rather use the Saussurean terms than those of the Peircean.

First, an indexical mode of relationship, as mentioned earlier, indicates a direct connection: the main title of the novel is *Supernova* because Supernova is the alias the female character Diva uses when she chats virtually in the ICQ³. The title *Supernova* directs the readers to Diva, whom Dee considers to be the most importance of all characters. Diva is beautiful, intelligent, cold, indifferent, and cynical. Yet, she is a kind, caring, wise, and independent young woman [4]. A famous model and a high-class prostitute, Diva is a representation of a grey area, where there is neither good nor bad:

“She is... an individual who fully represents a grey area. She is a walking theory of relativity. A person of paradox. Neither an antagonist, nor a protagonist. Full of kindness as well as bitterness” (Dee, 2000:44)⁴.

Diva, as Harry Aveling puts it, “is the most complex (if that is the right word) of all the characters” (2007:21), and she, in her free time, goes online in the chat room to share “advice on the good life and nature of reality” (Aveling, 2007:21) (This is the reason she is also attributed as a “cyber Avatar”):

I am simply offering a new perspective. Untying the knots I see you all suffering. You decide what happens next. I have absolutely no interest in whether the knowledge I present fits with the rules, norms, culture and ideology in which you and most people believe. My aims are not comparative. I offer analogies for you to think about, to create a better life and world. That is all (in Aveling, 2007:24).

Second, ‘supernova’ is used metaphorically: giving Diva an alias *Supernova*, Dee compares Diva to a supernova, an exploding star that produces very bright light in the sky but fades suddenly. “*Dia adalah meteor di langit setiap orang. Penuh kesan, tapi dengan cepat melesat hilang*”⁵ (Dee, 2000:44). A metaphor involves two modes of relationship, viz. symbolic and iconic [19]. It is symbolic because the resemblance, based on which the comparison is made, is unobvious; there is no connection whatsoever between Diva and a star. Here, the comparison is imaginative, non-literal. Dee compares Diva to a supernova because she enlightens her respondents with wise advices. She is a supernova because the light she creates will not last forever, for it is the respondents who need to decide what happens next in their lives; they can just ignore Diva’s insights, remaining as the way they have been, or they think over her words and make some changes for their better future. What she does is, as she claims, to offer advices expected to be able to enrich her respondents’ views of life and the world.

³ ICQ (I Seek You) was a chat software that was quite popular at the end of the 1990-s.

⁴ Translation is mine.

⁵ “She is a meteor in everyone’s sky. She is impressive but suddenly disappears.”

A metaphor, according to Chandler [19], is also iconic since the comparison is made based on resemblance. In the context of the novel, Diva is considered to resemble a supernova as she can “explode” and brighten her respondents with thoughts that have never crossed their mind before. However, no matter how impressive she is for everyone she meets, she will suddenly disappear because she is an individual independent from any ties and bonds.

Supernova (Diva) is also metaphorically (therefore, symbolically) used by the author to express her strong criticisms to patriarchy. Diva is not at all a good woman, let alone an ideal one, by the moral and social standards of Indonesians. She is a prostitute who refuses to be bound by any forms of familial relationships and social ties; she is not a wife, let alone a mother. She, in short, is in stark contrast to all the stereotypes of good women prescribed by the New Order government and embraced by the patriarchal society (Hatley, 2002: 141-142; Dee, 2000: 44-45). Yet, she is the only person in the novel who owns vast knowledge and deep understanding of life and the world (Aveling, 2007: 24). Not only is she wise, but also she is compassionate. The following extract, for instance, describes her deep love and care for other fellow humans:

Diva memang merasa sakit sungguhan. Kepenatan tersebut adalah sakit yang baginya lebih nyata daripada kena flu atau cacar air. Kadang-kadang ia memang tak kuat menahan. Inilah saat ia ingin memaki semua orang sekaligus memeluk semua orang. Menyatakan kesedihannya sekaligus cintanya yang mendalam (Dee, 2000: 115-116).

It is simplistic to define good women in terms of their marriage or family lives, for there are hundreds of reasons why women are good women. It is simplistic to judge people based on black-and-white moral standards (Dee, 2000: 46). Widely accepted values, traditions, and practices are not always right because everything is relative, depending on which standpoint we hold. Maturity and true self-awareness are what matters.

Another metaphorical use of Supernova is that Dee elevates her to a cyber-Avatar. How can a morally defiant woman be an Avatar? An Avatar is an incarnation of Hindu deity in human or animal forms; an Avatar is the Messiah. In Indonesia, where the majority of the people embrace Islam, an *Imam* or a religious leader is supposed to be men; women are not to be religious leaders (they can lead congregational prayer or *shalat* when there is no man). This is also the case in Catholicism, Hinduism and Buddhism. In the novel *Supernova*, the Messiah is a woman, and she, by common knowledge, is not a woman of character. This is a symbol of objection to religious patriarchy where religion always nominates men as leaders. Sexual gender should not become reason why an individual deserves to be a (religious) leader; knowledge, wisdom, and good characters make the best reasons for one being a leader. Can a man of no virtue be a good leader? A woman of knowledge and merits certainly serves better.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, 'Supernova,' in the context of Dee's novel, is indexical and metaphorical. It is indexical because it directs the readers to one female character, i.e. Supernova, or Diva. Conventionally we hold that when the name of a novel character is projected as the title, she is the most importance of all. This character plays a central role in the novel because she stands for the gist of Dee's novel, i.e. a strong disapproval of patriarchy and a struggle for gender equality. In other words, Supernova symbolizes Dee's struggle for gender equality and justice.

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