

# Between Erotic and Sensual

## Representation of Ronggeng in Indonesian Film

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Abstract: *Ronggeng* or *Tayub* is an art that has developed since long time in Indonesia. This art lives in Indonesian society as traditional performance which more flourishes in the villages. This show presents a woman both as a dancer and as a singer (*sinden*). Women as a *ronggeng* dancer in this art have always been viewed as erotic and sensual women. This fact shows that woman as a *ronggeng* has always been associated with a negative image. Over time, this negative image is not only presented in oral and written narrative, but also in modern art like films. Hence, this study tried to see how *ronggeng* image is represented in Indonesian films. This study used film titled *Sang Penari* (2011) adapted from *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* as a corpus to examine how the depiction of *ronggeng* is represented in a film beside in written or oral tradition. The method used in this research is descriptive analysis method, as a representation of Stuart Halls' theory. This theory is used to see how the image of *Ronggeng* represented in this film. This study results indicates that *Sang Penari* film is still represented *ronggeng* with sensual and erotic image, yet negative image of *ronggeng* as a prostitute is no longer presented in this film; *ronggeng* is depicted as an art which represented the commonality (*Wong cilik*) which is receded then.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

*Ronggeng* is a popular art in Indonesian society. This is a traditional art in form of dances growing well in agrarian society. *Ronggeng* usually becomes a medium for farmers to hold a ritual of gratitude for the harvest gained. Time to time, this art is not only utilized for sacred rituals, but also develops to be a profane art (Spiller, 2010; Yulianeta, 2013).

Besides being well-known as *ronggeng*, this art is also called *gandrung*, *lengger*, *taledhek*, *tandak*, and so forth. *Ronggeng Melayu* is developing in Sumatra, *Ronggeng Betawi* is spreading in Jakarta, in Subang and Sumedang West Java people call it *Bangreng*. In Banyuwangi, Bali, and Lombok, its famous name is *Gandrung*. *Lengger* is another name for it in Purwokerto, Wonosobo, and Magelang. While the name *taledhek*, *ledhek*, *joged*, *ronggeng*, and *tandak* are used to call female dancers in a *ronggeng* show or *tayub* in several regions of Central Java and East Java, people in West Java call them *sindhen* or *ronggeng*. This art spreads almost in all regions of Java Island (Raffles, 1965).

There are, at least, several words referring to *ronggeng* word, one of them comes from Javanese

language, which means *tandak* or female dancers accompanied by gamelan (Javanese traditional orchestra). Referring to the definition, women become the key of the art. In the Ensiklopedi Tari Indonesia Seri P-T (1986), *ronggeng* is classified into couple entertainment dances done by a woman and a man. On its shows, a female *ronggeng* dancer usually ask a male dancer by throwing her shawl to the man to go up to the stage and dance together with her. Once the dance is finished, the male dancer should give her money.

Since women become the core of the dance and men are the main party to enjoy it, the negative image of *ronggeng* dancers appears. As highlighted by Soeharto (1999) and Sooi-Beng (2005) that in a society, a *ronggeng* life is identical with prostitutes who frequently sell themselves to the men who desire them. Although not all people think the same, but people appraisal towards *ronggeng* particularly female dancers decreases.

It is an unavoidable thing that the negative image of *ronggeng* is possibly affected by the fact that most of *ronggeng* dancers possess plump bodies. To be a *ronggeng* dancer, a woman should have been dancing at the age of eight (usually called *lengger*)

(Geertz 1976; Koentjaraningrat, 1989). The requirements of changing a *lengger* into a *ronggeng* are frequently connected to a belief of *indhang* presence, a spirit possessing a *ronggeng* dancer. The myth of a *ronggeng* dancer perfect beauty after being possessed by *indhang* indicates how a *ronggeng* dancer image is, that they should not only be plump but also beautiful. This is the reason why the procession to be a *ronggeng* dancer is considered very sacred.

This image is then depicted in a variety of literary works either spoken or written, or visual (films). Pratista (2008) mention that films can be defined as a tool to convey various messages to people through a story medium. Films are not only visual media offering entertainment. More than it, films are media to transfer ideas to audiences. Films are described as mass communication media as well. Like literary works, films are expressed as cultural documents representing society culture per se.

One of the films concerning on *ronggeng* phenomenon is *Sang Penari*. The film adapted from a novel entitled *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* by Ahmad Tohari seems to be interesting for it re-appears a *ronggeng* representation which up until now is surrounded by negative image in our society, particularly Javanese. Therefore, the present research is intended to analyze how a *ronggeng* image is depicted in *Sang Penari* the film.

## 2 RESEARCH METHODS

The present research employed an analytical descriptive research method by focusing the analysis on textual analysis of *Sang Penari* the film. The representation theory from Stuart Hall was applied to read how the *ronggeng* image and dancers were presented in the film.

Representation is viewed as an accurate illustration of a reality. Hall (1997) defines representation as a critical practice in producing culture. The process is divided into two, which are 'mental' and 'language' representation. The 'mental' representation connects to abstract thing in mind while 'language' representation relates to a process of constructing meaning. The process is sensed as how a world is reconstructed socially to and by us in certain meaning.

Two key words in representation is to understand it as a language use for expressing or represent meaning to people. In connection to *ronggeng* image representation in *Sang Penari* the film, the analysis is focused on meaning of the second key word which is a language use to represent meaning to people.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 *Ronggeng* Illustration in *Sang Penari* the Film

The *ronggeng* in *Sang Penari* the film was illustrated by figuring Surti and Srintil. Surti, played by Happy Salma, was only appeared in several scenes in the opening. Surti was narrated to pass away by a poisonous *bongkreng tempeh* tragedy which also killed some villagers of Dukuh Paruk. Through Surti, Srintil, the character played by Prisia Nasution, was then interested with *ronggeng*.

Little Srintil once watched a *ronggeng* show in Dukuh Paruk when the *ronggeng* danced was Surti. From her interest, Srintil became fond of dancing and singing. When she was five years old, she had shown the talent of dancing and singing. Moreover, Sakarya (Srintil's grandfather), played by Landung Simatupang, assured that Srintil talent was not just a talent, but also possessed by *indhang*.

Growing to be a beautiful and plump girl, Srintil was pointed as the Dukuh Paruk *ronggeng* by the assistance of a *ronggeng shaman* named Kartaredja, played by Slamet Rahardjo, and his wife (Nyai Kartaredja), played by Dewi Irawan.

Being a *ronggeng* was Srintil's dream since she was little. By being a *ronggeng*, she did not only pursuit her dream. More than it, she could devote herself to Dukuh Paruk and Eyang Sacamanggala, the ancestor believed by people to protect the village. Besides, she was able to regain her family dignity which was lost for several years due to the tragedy of poisonous *bongkreng tempeh* made by her parents (Santayib couple) that caused some villagers losing their lives.

### 3.2 *Eroticism and Sensuality of Ronggeng*

Sensuality refers to the word 'sense'. This understanding refers to individuals' sexual imagination meaning towards the object they see. This imagination comes from someone sensory towards someone else body which at the end emerging enjoyable experience. Jennifer L. Hillman in her book "Clinical perspective on elderly sexuality", clarifies that the enjoyable experience will result on pleasure gotten from other people sexual activities that felt by his/her sense. Nevertheless, sensuality is not only obtained by involving other people as the object, but also through things, pictures, sounds that directly touch the sense (William, 2005; Satria, 2013).

While eroticism emphasizes on the aesthetic shape leading to sexual impulse. The impulse is a feeling appeared and stimulates someone to make a sexual activity. The aesthetic shape can be realized in visualization representing the impulse.

Within a *ronggeng* soul, body sensuality becomes a certain pride in attracting people to come and see her dance. Sensuality is emphasized by Javanese context that believes in the presence of *indhang* spirit. Its presence is trusted to be able to give more attraction power for a *ronggeng* dancer, which cannot be obtained by everybody but a *ronggeng* dancer.

The representation appeared in *Sang Penari*. The *ronggeng* of the film was described as a beautiful woman representing Dukuh Paruk women's beauty, had a plump body and white skinned as seen on Figure 1. Beside the requirement of having a *ronggeng* aura or being possessed by *ronggeng indhang*, only good looking women could be *ronggeng* dancers.



Figure 1: Srintil was crowned as a *ronggeng*.

*Ronggeng* is also believed to be depicting fertility and manliness. No wonder if many ladies in Dukuh Paruk competed to praise and give compliments to Srintil only to let their husband sleep with her. At this point, a *ronggeng* does not only benefit her body sensuality as a *ronggeng*, but also has been more on eroticism value as a *ronggeng*. This can be seen from Srintil's performance which was complete with her *ronggeng* properties, such as a costume showing her sensuality side and her dance movements stimulating men sexual desire. Throwing a shawl to a man audience to dance with her and at the end sleep with her are categorized into actions to stimulate sexual desire.



Figure 2: The men of Dukuh Paruk talked about Srintil becoming a *ronggeng*.

On the scene as shown in Figure 2, it was showed how the men were talking about *ronggeng* eroticism and sensuality which supposed to be possessed by Srintil as the *ronggeng* to be, as written in the following part.

“*Kiye sus tek omongi, dadi ronggeng kue ora gampang (tertawa)*”

“*Iya sus, kalau cuma nari tayub si bisa aja, tapi kalau ronggeng kudu kena indhang, sama harus ada kaya kue-kaya kuene (merujuk pada aktivitas persetubuhan yang dilakukan oleh seorang ronggeng dengan lelaki yang membayarnya) (tertawa)*”

Nonetheless, the *ronggeng* image as a prostitute is considered a bit vague in the film. Srintil was given a motive to frame her sensuality and eroticism in order to maintain *ronggeng* as a sacred people art. As a *ronggeng*, Srintil was fully aware that she belonged to people, collective belongings, who should prioritize communal needs. The priority included both giving a chance for a man who gave her an amount of money to sleep with her in the ceremony of *bukak klambu* and after she was crowned as the *ronggeng*.

Besides, there is an interesting illustration within the film adapted from this Tohari novel, namely the illustration that *ronggeng* comes into reality indicating an independent woman image who can free herself from men shadows. She was financially settled, meaning that she could fulfil her needs by herself from *saweran* (the money given by men after dancing) she got. Being the *ronggeng* was likely having a particular social class above the women of Dukuh Paruk in general.

However, being an independent *ronggeng* was collided with a reality that she did not get a life she desired. In front of people, as a dancer, entertainer, a



cult figure bringing the spirit of Dukuh Paruk, Srintil got a noble position. But deep in her heart, privately, she lost someone she loved. Being a *ronggeng* meant that she was close to sexuality issue so that a *ronggeng* was identical with a prostitute who could be approached by those who had got an amount of money. That was the reason why Rasmus, Srintil's loved one, left her though Srintil had asked him to marry her.

### 3.3 Ronggeng as the People Art

As the people art, the *ronggeng* presented in Sang Penari was admired by people of Dukuh Paruk. Even the absence of a *ronggeng* after Surti death in the tempeh tragedy, it was likely the demise of people lives in Dukuh Paruk. So when Sakarya discovered Srintil had potential to be a *ronggeng*, he then notified Ki Kertaredja that Dukuh Paruk would be alive again, as seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Little Srintil played a role as a *ronggeng* accompanied by her boy friends.

This was proved by people fast acceptance of Srintil as the *ronggeng* dancer, that for the villagers she was not only a dancer but also their ideal.

*Ronggeng* as the people art is also presented though the faith connecting with animism and dynamism in which this belief is close with people lives. In the film, it was showed that people of Dukuh Paruk were sub-urban people admiring *ronggeng*. A woman who could be a *ronggeng* was the one who got blessed by Ki Sacamanggala (the ancestor of Dukuh Paruk). Therefore, there were some particular ceremonies to hold before Srintil was decided to be a *ronggeng*. One of them was *bukak klambu*. At the first step, there was a scene in which the beautiful Srintil who had put on make-up like a *ronggeng* and ready to dance, should have failed dancing since she had not gotten a blessing from Ki Sacamanggala. The scene was realized by the absence of Ki Kertaredja as the *ronggeng shaman* in Dukuh Paruk. Besides the blessing from Ki Sacamanggala, *indhing* from the previous

*ronggeng* was also crucial in determining whether a woman could be a *ronggeng* or not. This was proved by the presence of *keris* (Surti sacred property) symbolizing that someone had been totally blessed both by Ki Sacamanggala or the late *ronggeng indhang*.

The film *Sang Penari* then focused on the issue that *ronggeng* as people art had a close relation with PKI. At the end of the film, *ronggeng* became an illustration of how people, who were blind of ideological polemic of what happened in the state, were manipulated by a particular ideology which at the end completely destroyed them. *Ronggeng* then became a profane art which slowly but sure was left by people. Srintil who had been a cult figure as a realization of people belief towards a sacred thing, remained alone as a street dancer *ronggeng*.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

From the discussion, it can be drawn a conclusion that a *ronggeng* has particular beauty and sacred values. The erotic and sensual image of a *ronggeng* can be a certain point which makes her accepted by people. The *ronggeng* cult figure as a symbol of fertility and manliness make people openly welcome the *ronggeng*, although the sensuality and eroticism of a *ronggeng* are frequently identical with negative image of morality. As an art, *ronggeng* is collective possession, thus a *ronggeng* dancer belongs to a society. At this level, a *ronggeng* dancer is the goddess praised by the belief that a *ronggeng* brings beneficence. However, at the individual level, a *ronggeng* dancer is still very close to immoral woman image who let her body be slept by everyone who can give her big amounts of money. In this film, *ronggeng* is also represented as culture of low level people which still close to animism and dynamism faith. It is an art which far away from open mindedness. For those reasons, the art is utilized for particular political benefits, manipulating the party intention for the sake of people. At the end, the *ronggeng* art in the film leaves its cult, and just become the profane art which time to time is then left behind.

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