

The New Female Image: Dewi Ayu's Feminist Consciousness in *Cantik Itu Luka*

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Abstract: Eka Kurniawan's novel "*Cantik Itu Luka*" is his first major novel successfully constructs the main female character, Dewi Ayu, which is unique, controversial and heartbreaking. This study aims to analyze the main female character, Dewi Ayu, in "*Cantik itu Luka*." This study argues that although the main character is not a native Javanese woman, she represents herself as a woman that is able to challenge traditional stereotypes. Based on the data analysis, Dewi Ayu's characterization, acts and actions it can be concluded that she builds feminist consciousness. She can be called new woman because the new character is able to challenge traditional stereotypes of Dutch and Javanese woman, which is mostly characterized by obedience to man and social norms under patriarchal society. It can be found out from the analysis that Dewi Ayu feminist consciousness challenges the social norms through her rebellious spirit, self-reliance, bravery, determined, and leadership.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper is going to discuss Eka Kurniawan's first major novel, "*Cantik Itu Luka*" which is firstly published in 2002. This novel is one of his works that made him awarded Prince Claus Award 2018 for literature and this literary work has been discussed in many literary circles. Instead of a mere fantasy, there are many interesting aspects that the reader can grasp from this rich literary work, such as history, legends, folklore of Indonesian under the colonial era and the early of Indonesian independence and the New Order regime.

Be In this novel, Eka successfully constructs the main female character, Dewi Ayu, that is different, unique, controversial and in some cases heartbreaking. Dewi Ayu is not a native Javanese woman instead, she is the descendant of a Dutch father and a Javanese mother. As portrayed on the cover of the novel (in the Indonesian 2015 edition), she looks like a woman with blue eyes wearing traditional Javanese attire sitting at a teak-wooden chair. The main female character attracts readers' attention because of her identity as a half Dutch and half Javanese native, as seen on the novel's cover. The picture gives impression as beautiful woman

constructed by male artist (Melosik, 2015), but it also impresses as a strong one.

The main character articulates the idea of a woman that is able to challenge traditional stereotypes of (Dutch and Javanese) woman. That is why this paper is aimed at discussing the novel by highlighting the challenging main character, in which the study needs the incorporation of postcolonial studies into feminist studies. In other word, this study is aimed at scrutinizing the main character of this novel, Dewi Ayu, by applying postcolonial feminism perspective (Takemura, 2010).

Postcolonial paradigm is popularly articulated in Edward Said's phenomenal book, *Orientalism* (Said, 1978) stating that postcolonial theory highlighted the issues of representation in colonial discourse and the urgency of emerging voices of the natives. In discussing the relationship between postcolonialism and feminism, we have to discuss the most influential criticism of the classic essays, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (Spivak, 1985) and "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (Mohanty, 1984). Spivak criticizes western feminism as the perspective that reproduces the axiom of imperialism (Spivak, 1985: 243). Mohanty's

criticism says that the image of the third world woman who is always oppressed is what sustains the illusion of "first world" women's autonomy: the assumption that they (western women) are secular, liberated, and have control over their own lives" (Mohanty, 1984: 353). These essays criticize that the Western feminist ideas tend to colonizing the postcolonial women. So, the criticism goes on to the point that it is necessary to build feminist individualism that highlights female problems by contextualizing in their own context.

In this postcolonialism context, one of the important questions is how the natives' voice subvert the assumptions of colonial discourse and the natives rewrite its history. The assumption of imperialist that justifies the colonialism says that the 'feminine' land out there to be explored by 'male' explorer (McClintock, 1995). This idea shows the interconnection between colonialism and the movement of feminism, in the importance to raise against the colonial power. Native's voice and feminist voice get the interconnection in the postcolonial studies, as one of the tools of analysis in scrutinizing the consequences of colonialism, dealing with the social and economics impacts of colonialism.

The context of colonial and postcolonial Indonesia is narrated in the novel "*Cantik itu Luka*" through the dynamic and tragic life of the female characters, Dewi Ayu and her four daughters. Dewi Ayu who is a Dutch-Javanese descendant needs to be analyzed and understood in her domestic and sexual arrangement in colonial Indonesia. In other similar study, Stoler builds the connections between "beliefs about European manliness, racial membership, sexual morality and the management of empire" (Stoler, 2002: 6).

Related with the postcolonial context, feminist literary criticism examines the way in which literature (and other cultural product) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women (Mikulan, 2009). In reading literary works, this is the readers' task to draw attention to the examination of the ways women are portrayed, search for archetypes from feminist perspective, examine the feminist values and the sense of community or focus its intention to the patriarchal way of subject construction and possible points of resistance towards gender inequality (Dresang, 2002).

The issue of women's image in literary works has been narrated in many Indonesian literary works since the colonial period, the era of Balai Pustaka,

up to contemporary millennial eras. The novel, *Cantik Itu Luka* which is published in 2002 attracts people's attention because of the image of the main character is controversial and challenging conservative stereotype of woman. Dewi Ayu, the main character, is a woman who has a very striking beauty and having four daughters, three of which inherit her beauty and the one youngest child who is mysteriously ugly. Those women have interesting trajectory of lives and face many horrible sexual abuses during the Dutch and Japan colonialism and the early years of independent Indonesian up to New Order regime.

2 METHOD

This is a literary criticism, a qualitative and textual study designed to get detailed description on how the feminist character and her consciousness built and developed under the perspective of postcolonial feminism. The data source of this study is the novel "*Cantik itu Luka*", Indonesian version, written by Eka Kurniawan in 480 pages, published by Gramedia Pustaka utama in 2015.

The data from this novel are analysed by applying the concept of postcolonial feminism to get detailed description on how the main female character, named Dewi Ayu, acts, says, thinks and responds towards any event happening surrounding her. Postcolonial feminist literary criticism puts the focus on the female subject character's idea in struggling and articulating her opinion, voice, and interest in patriarchal society under the situation of colonial and postcolonial eras. Her success in articulating her interest and ideas, often with the necessity to break social norms, shows that how she is able to get access, control, and benefit to get survived in turmoil years of colonialism

The concept developed by Mohanty (1984) and Spivak (1985) helps to build the understanding on the connection of race-and-gender-conscious historical materialism. Through the connection, we are able to perceive the complexities, singularities, and interconnections between women. This connection is necessary to understand the power, privilege, agency, and dissent can be made by womann.

3 DISCUSSION

In the opening of the novel, the main character, Dewi Ayu is resurrected from her grave magically

and she is well shaped and dressed. All of a sudden this event shocked many people she meets but she does not care, instead she goes ahead to her home, where her youngest daughter lives. This daughter names Si Cantik (beauty), which is a very paradox name because of her physical appearance that is not beautiful in any sense at all. Then the story goes flash back to the era of nearly the end of Dutch colonialism, when Dewi Ayu was a girl. She is a granddaughter of Ted Stammers, a Dutch old man living in Java Island in the Dutch colonial era, in 1930s.

The end of Dutch colonialism is approaching. It is chaotic situation for Dutch government, people and families, who have been in this Javanese land for several generations have to escape or return back to Europe after Japan military occupy Java in the early 1940s. Most of Dewi Ayu's family, Stammer family, went back to Europe, but Dewi Ayu decided to live and stay in her home in Java. She feels at home in Java island, beside that she is aware that she was born here in Java, inherited Javanese blood, and her name is Javanese name instead of Dutch. Her Javanese identity is strongly built in her although she inherits European face and eyes that make her beautiful and different both from many Javanese girls and Dutch girls.

Dewi Ayu's identity is a kind of hybridity in which her physical appearance is European look, while her name is Javanese and she is haunted by the ancestor (her Javanese grandmother) misery life. The hybridity of the female character is enabled by her grand parents' inter-racial sexual relationship, in which her grandmother is Javanese and her grandfather is Dutch. This miscegenation brings many problems as the consequence of the unequal social political position between the Dutch and Javanese. As stated by Young (1995) that the centrality of colonial not only brings about economic consequences, but also concerns about miscegenation (inter-racial marriage) and "hybridity".

The occupation of Japanese military in Java Island brings misery for Dutch people who are still living in Java, which Japanese army collect all of them and bring them to an empty small island, as prisoners. All of the Dutch girls and women as well as children are brought to the prison island, Bloodenkamp. Dewi Ayu, a half Dutch is included in the prison Bloodenkamp with all her friends and neighbours who live in their village and surrounding. The Japanese army not only bring them to prison but the military also starts the prostitution business to serve them. The Dutch girls

in the prison, including Dewi Ayu, are selected to be prostitute for Japanese military, based on their beauty and healthy body. In this case, the healthy young women, especially Dutch, become the preference for male Japanese military. As a smart girl, Dewi Ayu knows how to deal with the men. Instead of screaming and getting depressed, Dewi Ayu prefers to keep aware and think how to control her own body (Wiyatmi, 2009).

The new female image of Dewi Ayu presented in this novel gives us the idea that she is totally different from traditional types. Moreover, she takes the attitude against the social norms. Dewi Ayu's rebellious spirit, self-reliance, and strong mind make her the ideal new female image.

According to Wang (2010), there are two types of female images in the traditional culture. The first type is the discriminated femaleness where men are always considered to have rational mind, superior intelligence, and their capability of leadership, while women are considered as inferior to men in all aspect. Moreover, they maintain their roles in society as their nurturance role, and considered as not capable of reasoning and organization. The second type is the praise worthy femaleness. This second type implies that there are women who are praised because of anything related with her femaleness.

Guan (2004) states that during the Middle Ages, men no longer attack women, they begin to flatter women's ability and achievement. Women are praised as wives to support husband and they sacrifice for family. However, these ideal female images did not put down the existing sexism. Instead, it is justification for men to limit women within the circle of family life. Power and reason still belong to men and the only thing that became women possessions are their beautiful bodies and frail minds.

The two types of women mentioned above are designed to maintain the stability of men social status. Shang (2000) asserts that women are dependents towards their father, and then their husband and because of the possibility of widowhood, then women are dependent to their son if they any, or any surviving males relatives. The two of women are forever under control of men and never have their right of independence.

Dewi Ayu, the major characters in *Cantik Itu Luka*, does not fit within those two types of traditional women according to Wang and Guan, thus, the writer refers to this as the new female image. The description of new female images is expected to be an inspiration for the women

nowadays to recognize and resist the rules and forces that undermined women's self-confidence and assertiveness and strive for optimistic ideal, which is equality between men and women.

3.1 Dewi Ayu's Rebellious Spirit

The main female character in this novel is constructed as distinct woman, with specific and strong characteristic. The peculiarity of the character developed is important to support the plot and develop the conflict. Dewi Ayu has her consciousness that makes her rebellious to anything or anybody that does not make sense for her. She will fight against anybody who tell her what to do.

When Dewi Ayu wants to die and she believes that she will die after she gave birth to her fourth daughter, she wears shroud (white cloth for dead corpse) everyday before her real dead. Her action infuriates a kyai, (a religious leader) in her village, Halimunda. The kyai then told her to strip the kain kafan off (Kurniawan, 2015, p.8). Commonly, people will obey whatever the religious leader says. However, Dewi Ayu refuses to do so. Instead, she said to the kyai that if he wants a prostitute to strip her clothes off, he should pay for it. Dewi Ayu said that with high confidence, so that the kyai feels embarrassed, and without saying anything else he leaves her.

Dewi Ayu's response to the kyai shows that she is confident to anybody even the kyai who has high social status in the society because of his religiosity. In Dewi Ayu's mind, everybody is equal, and she does not want to do whatever tell her to do something without her consent although she is a prostitute but she is a prostitute that knows how to determine her own choice. Her confidence also means that she builds her own power over the other men and women in her surrounding. Because of her action, wearing shroud everyday to be dead soon, there are many people visit her and try to get benefit from the situation.

Dewi Ayu is already rebellious since she was a little girl. She is never afraid to speak what is in her mind. She always does what she want, not what other people wants from her. At her school age, Dewi Ayu has been assertive and confident. When the nuns at her school suggest her to be a nun with the reason that her beauty would be a problem later in her life, without hesitation Dewi Ayu turns down their suggestion. She replies that if all women become nuns, then humans would go extinct like dinosaurs (Kurniawan, 2015:38)

Realizing her power makes little Dewi Ayu confident in speaking to her teacher. The nuns who teach Dewi Ayu are worried with the way she thinks which always speaks what is on her mind and even the way she thinks is unlike any other women of her age. She even says to the nuns who tell her and her classmates about the war to learn how to shoot a gun rather than just talk about it. Dewi Ayu points out that they could actually do something for themselves; learning how to shoot a gun. Dewi Ayu has a very unique way of thinking, because she does not believe that she is powerless and she is not afraid to say what she thinks. Dewi Ayu does not agree with the other girls who believe that they are powerless and helpless

3.2 Dewi Ayu's Self Reliance

During the Japanese colonialism, people in Halimunda are having a hard time to survive for their life. The entire cocoa and coconut farm are bombed and Mexoli Olvado palm oil mill is under Japanese military. Dewi Ayu, as the only remaining Stammler descendant, refuses to return back to the Netherlands with her grandmother, thus she must face that unprecedented condition by herself. A couple of months later she is imprisoned because she is Dutch descend. Instead of hoping her condition will get better like other prisoners, Dewi Ayu decides to make a plan for her own life when she is freed from the prison. Preparing for her future, she decides to swallow six-edged rings jade and diamonds. This not only shows that Dewi Ayu is independent, but also that she is smart.

Survival in the prison with hundreds people, Dewi Ayu realizes that they face a big problem of food supply. For overcoming this problem, Dewi Ayu again shows her self-reliance in surviving her life by doing many things that Dutch people never think before, like hunting crocodile that gives them with the abundant meat of crocodile to make soup (Kurniawan, E, 2015:69-70). During two years in prison where many people died one by one, Dewi Ayu is increasing her ability to survive at wild life, such as hunting crocodile, lizards, mice, and frogs rather than depending on the limited supply food from Japanese soldier. Wang (2010) in his research stated that this is the true success for the femaleness, which is not dependent upon men. Other evidence of Dewi Ayu's independence in surviving her life is when Dewi Ayu is freed from Japanese camp and planned to take her money for her own business.

Common women in this novel hold that women's role as a good wife is indicated through the ability to

manage their children and husband. The setting of place of this novel is Halimunda, a Javanese traditional village in 1940s, with the dominant view that the place of women are at home with domestic chores. Any public affairs belong to men or husband. The women traditional role and the challenge is one of dominant themes in many Indonesian and Malay literary works which becomes important theme to be discussed (Izharudin, A., 2018).

In a patriarchal society with dominant traditional view, Dewi Ayu rebelled against the traditional gender role. After she got out from the prison, she never wed to anyone. The Japanese prison becomes the place when learns a lot about how to survive and be more independent and relies upon her. She becomes a prostitute with the highest price, and she chooses the man who can be with her, not any man who wants her can be with her.

She becomes a self-reliant woman, economically, socially, and politically. Economically, she gets her own money to fulfil her necessities for herself and her daughters. Socially she is able to be the trendsetter for women in Halimunda. Whatever she wears becomes the main reference for Halimunda women who always gossiping her and at the same time imitating her style. Politically, in many chaotic situations, she is able to overcome her problems. She is able to “conquer” three powerful men in Halimunda, Maman Gendeng, the most powerful thug, Kamerad Kliwon, militant lefties politician, and Shodanco, the most powerful military person in Halimunda. Dewi Ayu ‘embraces’ those three powerful men in Halimunda by making them her sons-in law for her three daughters, Alamanda, Adinda and Maya Dewi. Through Dewi Ayu’s conflict management, those three men who are conflicting each other can be domesticated.

Women existence to overcome the problems and challenges is determined by her performativity. Her ability to be the subject, instead of object, that is able to make decision on her life will make sure that she is knowledgeable and able to calculate any situation (Butler, 1990). Dewi Ayu’s performativity is described obviously in this novel. She makes herself a subject who is able to make decision on her fate. Any action she takes is based on her conscious consideration and material calculation. This is obviously narrated when she has to give her sexual service to the commander of the Bloodenkamp (the prison) as a payment for medical service to help Ola van Rijk’ mother. She considers her sacrifice is less

important than her friend’s mother’s life. This shows the humanistic values that she believes in life.

3.3 Dewi Ayu’s Bravery

Bravery is a courageous behavior or character, commonly associated with men in patriarchal society. Women on the other hand, are always associated with femininity; soft, quiet, pretty, perfect, weak, but rarely brave. Dewi Ayu has these remarkable traits. She is brave in facing many terrible situations that broke her flesh and heart. When she and her chosen friends are being transferred from Blodenkamp prison to Mama Kalong (prostitution house)’s place back in Halimunda, the girls are shocked, afraid and finding their fate as prostitutes they are all crying and depressed, but not Dewi Ayu. Though she knows exactly where they are brought to and what they have to do, she stays calm and entertains herself and the other girls.

Dewi Ayu and her friends are forced to be prostitutes and they do not get paid for it. In facing this, all the Dutch girls are angry, hysterical and some are got mad. However, Dewi Ayu, realizing that doing that is pointless, she thinks of another way to accomplish the job. She stays motionless during the sexual intercourse so her client would eventually get tired of her. Dewi Ayu suggests her friends to do what she always does during the service time, in which she stays still, or chose one of the clients that they like, and then pleasure them so they will come to them every night, and hope to be their mistress. However, her friends could not face that because they are afraid. The girls think that this is terribly unbearable. The other thing she does in this Japanese military prostitution is she gets pregnant. By having pregnancy she is free from the obligation of doing sexual service for the Japanese military, and she gets privilege of special care.

The prostitution house in which the girls have to serve Japanese is managed by Mama Kalong. In this house the girls have to work in each of the room. They do not get paid, or only a very little payment to serve Japanese soldiers and military men. Sexual worker is a job that cannot be imagined by the Dutch girls, because this job is commonly done by women in need of money or those in low class people. This job is often considered as a morally negative-stigmatized for the workers but the customers are usually the men having financial abundance or social capital or those in having structural or political position in society. The social and moral negative stigma is labelled to the women not the men

involved in the business of prostitution. Dewi Ayu later on proves that by being a prostitute she can build her own social capital, and her power. She knows exactly who are politically and socially having power in the society of Halimunda and she can overcome the social problems through her social capital.

3.4 Dewi Ayu's Self Determination

Other praiseworthy traits of Dewi Ayu are her determination. She is very decisive, she knows what she wants and she always finds a way to get it. When Dewi Ayu is afraid that Maya Dewi, her third daughter will follow her sisters' footsteps and be rebellious, she decided to wed Maya Dewi to her lovers, Maman Gendeng. When Maman Gendeng is informed about it, he knows that he cannot refuse it, and his fate is decided because he knows just how determined Dewi Ayu is. At first Maman Gendeng wants to get married with Dewi Ayu, but Dewi Ayu does not want him. She asks Maman Gendeng to marry with youngest daughter, Maya Dewi. Maman Gendeng, the most feared thug in Halimunda is conquered by Dewi Ayu. While determination is always associated with men, Dewi Ayu has proven to be more determined than men, and when she already put her mind onto something, there are nothing other people, could do about it.

Dewi Ayu's self determination to get married with Ma Gedik, an old man who looks psychologically unhealthy, living in a hut alone far from any normal people, surprises many people. Dewi Ayu is a beautiful woman who is wanted by any normal man in Halimunda, but she wants to get married with a deserted man. But what she wants must come true. She instructs her people to look for Ma Gedik, and when Ma Gedik is found out, he is forced to be brought to Dewi Ayu's house to be married, and he just refuses anything. He does not want to eat or drink or doing anything. Dewi Ayu gets big challenge with Ma Gedik's attitude. At last, Ma Gedik runs away from the house and kills himself by throwing away his body on top of a steepy hill across the hill where Ma Iyang, his old love, died years ago.

3.5 Dewi Ayu's Leadership

Society in the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* was still trying to distinguish masculine and feminine ways of doing things in

The workplace and public space. Majority of women in colonial era are portrayed as dependent and

socially marginalized. However, Dewi Ayu is able to build her own leadership in many things in her life. She is very decisive; she knows what she wants and how to get it. This trait leads her to have a natural leadership capability.

Her leadership is showed when she is a girl, in Japanese camp, Bloodenkamp. Seeing that nothing she can do in her free time, and finding out that many children are idle, Dewi Ayu creates a class in the hall corner and teaches the children many simple knowledge that she knows, like history, geography, and literacy - how to read and write. In the late-night, she will gather all of the children in the camp and telling them a story before going to sleep. Also, she tries to find a doctor and later create a hospital beside the class although without enough bed and medicine. She is then trusted as the leader of the group because she is considered matured enough and has a strong sense of leadership, a trait that is important to build in the global inter-ethnic communication (Kaul, 2016).

When she is placed in Mama Kalong's house with other girls, she becomes the only woman who is calm and uses strategy in facing her fate. She manages to accept all the situation and she is able to overcome any problem. When Dewi Ayu have to deal with Shodanco, the most powerful military person in Halimunda who is temperamental and fierce, she knows how to deal with this man. Maman Gendeng is also another man who is very fierce and feared by people in Halimunda, and Dewi Ayu can make him a good lovely man. Kamerad Kliwon, a leftist activist and politician is also safe in her hand. Dewi Ayu proves herself as a good leader that can manage social and political conflicts arisen from those three powerful persons.

4 CONCLUSION

Throughout the analysis of the novel "*Cantik Itu Luka*", it can be concluded that the main character of the novel, Dewi Ayu is a woman who has the traits different from the two types of traditional women according to Wang (2010) and Guan (2014). Eka Kurniawan creates a brand new female image, the one that has a rebellious spirit, independent (self-reliance) even during difficult times, brave, determined, and has leadership. The new consciousness of being a woman shows the progress of the literary work in providing the example of new feminist consciousness that inspires the woman movement in postcolonial context (Keown, 2015). The new feminist conscious character that is successfully developed in a literary work like what

we find out in this novel will bring new perspectives in understanding social problem in real life, dealing with the man and woman relationship.

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