

Destabilizing Gender Norm in Contemporary Indonesian Discourses

(Destabilisasi Norma Gender dalam Wacana Indonesia Kontemporer)

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Abstrak

Menjadi laki-laki dan perempuan bukan semata-mata konstruksi alami, melainkan sebuah sistem kebudayaan yang dibentuk tidak hanya oleh rezim kebudayaan, tetapi juga oleh rezim politik yang berbeda. Perubahan rezim politik di Indonesia membentuk pembedaan laki-laki dan perempuan dalam tataran yang sangat ketat berupa nilai-nilai maskulin dan feminin. Bagaimanapun, dikotomi ini secara progresif dibentuk dalam praktik sosial, khususnya dalam media, sastra, dan wacana keseharian, tempat masyarakat mengklaim perbedaan gender sebagai realitas sosial. Masyarakat mulai mengekspresikan identitas mereka secara terbuka sebagai gay, lesbian, atau transgender sebagai bagian pengalaman personal dan sosial mereka. Artikel ini mencoba memperlihatkan bagaimana norma gender yang sejak lama dipercaya sebagai orientasi gender yang mapan distabilisasi oleh aktor-aktor sosial yang berbeda di Indonesia dalam rangka mengklaim perbedaan gender melalui nilai maskulin dan feminin yang dapat dipertukarkan dalam masyarakat.

Kata kunci: destabilisasi, gender, Indonesia, norma, wacana

Abstract

Being a man and a woman is not a question of nature but a system of culture where it is shaped not only by the cultural regime itself, but also by the different political regimes. The change of different political regimes in Indonesia shape the separation of man and woman through a very strict separation into the value of masculine and feminine. However, this dichotomy has been progressively defined in the social practice, especially in the media, literature and everyday discourses, where people start to claim the diversity of gender seen as a part of social reality. People start to openly express their identity as gay, lesbian or transgender as part of their personal and social experiences. This article attempts to show how the gender norm longtime believed as an established gender orientation of man and woman is destabilised by different social actors in Indonesia in order to claim the diversity of gender with the interchangeable value of masculine and feminine in the society.

Keywords: destabilisation, discourse, gender, Indonesia, norm

INTRODUCTION

The democratization in Indonesia as a result of the Reformasi movement in 1998 direct and indirectly gives influence to the most fundamental aspects of Indonesian people's life; the freedom of expression (O'Rourke 2002: 2). One aspect among the fundamental forms of the freedom of expression can be traced from the choice related to gender orientation. During the period of New Order Era (1968-1998), being a man and a woman had been constructed not only by a lesson learnt from the

cultural tradition but also systematically shaped by the State. The State created different vehicles, such as the laws, regulations, education and most importantly the government system of development. In the system of education for instance, the girls and the boys were constructed differently. The clear example was the system of the vocational school. This system is not merely based on the competence of the students but based on the gender orientation believed as taken for grantedly differentiate the boys and the girls. For the girls who wanted to go to the vocational school, they were directed to go to Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan (vocational school) with the majoring in cooking or fashion. The boys were directed to go to the Sekolah Teknik (Technological School). Some girls and some boys sometimes entered the opposite school, but the number was very small.

In the daily lives, the mindset of women and men construction is still following the separation between public and private sphere. Women were given bigger role in the domestic sectors, while men were put in the public ones (Wishermann and Mueller 2004). The example of the government in placing women to be in the domestic sphere can be seen from the regulation of the State related to Pendidikan Kesejahteraan Keluarga (Education for Family Prosperity) abbreviated as PKK (Suryakusuma 2011; Blackburn 2004:16). This organization was created to manage women to be the organizer of the family with their domestic role. For the high school students, the national curriculum separates the role of boys and girls. This separation has been started from the primary school. The girls are prepared to be good women which means to prepare for her domestic role, while boys are prepared to be the men, which means the leader in the family and society (Irawan 2014). Femininities and masculinities are oppositely defined. Men are masculine and women are feminine with all of the embedded symbols attributed to them, such as through the school uniform that differentiate those dichotomies.

With the change of the political regime in 1998, the separation between men and women has to challenge the redefinition of masculinities and femininities in the general discourses. In the social practice, especially in the media and also the literature, people start to show the diversity of gender claimed as a social reality. People start to openly express their identity as gay, lesbian or transgender as part of social realm. Referring to the work of Judith Butler (1990), men and women are not the only dichotomy separating the gender dimension. The separation is only because this world is constructed by the heteronormativity norms, called by Butler as heterosexualized gender. This heterosexualized gender is repeatedly performed in the daily life a long the history of human being. As reusult, it becomes a priviledge orientation. In reality, men are not always bringing the values of masculine and women are not always feminine (Connell 1995) and this understanding can be seen in many societ including Indonesia. Men can choose to be feminine and women to be masculine according to their personal and social experiences are not a new phenomena in this country. Transgender also is repeatedly perfomed in the daily life in Indonesian society. In many society, this pattern may be taboo to be applied. In Europe, for instance, it is not frequent to see a transgender wearing woman dress crode in the public space, which maybe not the case in other societies, such as in

Thailand or in Indonesia. The new phenomena that can be noticed in Indonesia is that after Reformasi movement in 1998, the transgenders wear openly woman dress code in the public sphere.

Defining the self-expression to be different with the social is more possible during the Reformasi era with its slogan of democratization and freedom although this attempt is not always accepted by certain groups or individuals who based their understanding on the normative and religious understanding. As an example, the television programs in most of the channels show the representation of the transgender. The telereality show entitled *Be A Man* broadcasted by Global TV in 2008 was one of the programs apart from other shows such as *Pesbuker*, *Opera van Java* and many other programs that use the transgender in order to attract the interest from the public. In the program of *Be A Man*, 18 transgenders were trained like a military. They were trained to be “real” men.

The representation of the transgender created complaints from certain religious groups and the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission. They criticized the appearance of the transgender in the television. The Indonesian Broadcasting Commission, based on the refusal from the religious groups and organizations has twice sent letters to the television channels in 2013 (Syaiful 2013). They gave justification by saying that they did not want young people to follow the transgender attitude and behavior. The Indonesian broadcasting commission also argues that those channels violated the Guideline for Broadcasting Behavior (*Pedoman Perilaku Penyiaran*) Article 9, Article 14, Article 21 paragraph (1), as well as the Broadcast Program Standards Article 9, Article 15 paragraph (1), Article 36 paragraph (4) point d, and Article 37 paragraph (4) point a (Hasits, 2013). The letters of complaint were sent two times on 18 October 2013, and numbered 667/K/KPI/13 (Hasit 2013). Because the television did not stop the program, the KPI sent the second letter on the 30th of December 2013. However, these two letters were not responded by the television channels. The transgender performance in the television is continued to be performed.

During the Reformasi era, the space for the freedom of expression creates a new arena of contestation including the space for claiming gender orientation. The established social and religious norms are still perpetuated to maintain the “ideal” gender orientation according to the normative tradition of religion. However, the challenges to claim the “other” gender norms have also been produced and reproduced because of the openness in accepting differences.

In Indonesian context, after the Indonesian independence in 1945 until 1998, and especially during the New Order regime (1968-1998), the homogenization of ideas was implemented by the regulation of the State. Creating the ideal Indonesia became the agenda of the State. Similarities were the ideas used in order to direct people into the objective of the State. Men and women all over Indonesia were constructed through the same ways. However, during the Reformasi era, the State is not the only institution that has the strong authority to construct the identity of the people. Many

other actors and institutions are also involved in the arena of contestation. The media, for instance, becomes one of the institutions that contribute to challenge the regulation and the norms of the State by using their space. This article aims at looking at the attempts of different subjects to destabilize the normative gender orientation in Indonesian context. In order to understand the process of gender norm destabilization, the dynamics situation of the transformation related to gender orientation, especially the position of masculinities and femininities are used as explanation. There are diversities of voices related to gender orientation in the society that are mushrooming in the social level.

METHOD

The diversity of voices (Bakhtin 1984) related to gender orientation can be traced from different discourses in the society. Bakhtin argues that in every persons, there are always diversities of voices. Bakhtin argues that all of the speeches are heteroglot and polyphonic in nature. They resonate with "many-voices." Heteroglossia (other-languagedness) and polyphony (many-voicedness) are the base conditions "governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. In literature, for instance, the teenager literature, a genre in literature longtime constructed by the normative idea of the State using the education character type of narration, after the Reformasi movement is illustrated with the different ideas about masculinities and femininities in different ways. Previously, using teenager literature to explain this phenomenon was quite rare. Usually, the teenager literature is constructed to describe the normative question related to boy and girl. To be a girl in teenager literature has long time been defined as the process of making them a real woman by exercising the western type of character of princess. A girl has been defined as a soft, week and poor character. Oppositely, a boy is defined as a prince who has power and authority. In recent teenager literature, the gender orientation is not always showing the boys and girls into two different poles and roles. Being a boy is not always having roles like what the man has been described during New Order era in Indonesian period of social and political regime. Teenagers themselves, as readers, have also diversity of voices when talking about gender orientations. They do not have any more the perception of male and female into two dichotomy of masculine and feminine.

This situation is practiced in many different ways. Some are using the straight forward description by picturing different gender orientations reflecting the dynamics of the gender orientation in the society. Some are picturing the different ways in giving meaning to gender orientations. Despite those diversities in picturing masculinities and femininities as not embedded in the entity of men and women, it does not mean that the embodiment of men into masculine and women into feminine are totally deleted from the discourses and the social practice. There are still resistances, for instance about defending the position and identity of the transgender. However, the space to challenge the taboo is getting stronger, especially with the role of the open media that can be easily accessed by the society. The stabilization of the gender norms have been destabilized by different discourses. Seeing the fact that the discourses in general, as reflected especially in the media, the

literature and also from the everyday discourses give bigger space to the new gender orientations perspective but the norms and the taboo are still strongly reproduced by the society in the context of maintaining the gender norm (masculine for men and feminine for women), this article shows the different discourses on the process of destabilizing gender norm from the media, the literature and from the opinion of the teenagers. The questions posed are firstly what are the aspects destabilized in the discourses related to gender orientation? Secondly, what are the aspects changed and maintained in that process of destabilization? In which argument the process of destabilizing gender norm is done during the reformasi era?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In her book entitled *State Ibuism*, Julia Suryakusuma (2011) defined the process of forming women in the national context as a process of forming the homogenized motherhood (*ibu*). The media during that time was also coopted by the power of the State in reproducing the role of women specifically as mother. The word mother was becoming very important during the New Order era. Women were directly and indirectly forced to be mother as a complete achievement through many different discourses. The complete women were the ones who became mother, specifically defined as the ones who give birth to a child but also with the roles in the domestic space. They were sometimes called as the queen of the household, which means as the ones who occupy the domestic space. This approach was certainly not beneficial for the ones who did not get married or who did not have children (Udasmoro 2004).

Construction of Being Feminine and Masculine

Being feminine and being masculine were made through different discourses, such as language, regulations, performance, and other cultural products. Through language, many words coming from the ancient Javanese tradition were re-invented and re-established as a national jargon. These words became tools to construct women national identity. The word, *Ngadi Salira Ngadi Busana* (caring the body and the caring the clothes) were used to create women to be a good looking person. *Ngadi Salira* and *Ngadi Busana* were the terms used functioning at encouraging women to look after their body and to give big attention to their physical performance. National and local competitions of pageant beauty were organized in order to spread this State mission.

Many symbols were used in order to create how to be masculine and feminine. Julia Suryakusuma (2011) criticized this approach by using a clear example on how women were constructed to be "*ibu*" or mother. This construction was systematically controlled by the State. They were constructed to be soft domesticated women whose role was socially made to maintain the good of the family. The picture of women was nationally symbolized with the Javanese women as role model. Below is the picture of the couple of Indonesian president and vice president. The wives of the president and vice presidents wear the national dress code. The dress code had to be worn also by the wives of the government employees during the New Order era. The fashion of women code used in the picture show the Javanization of Indonesia. These Javanese clothes became the national dress code during that era.



Picture 1. Javanese Women Clothes
(Collection of Wiwid Nurwidyahening)

As result, the role of women to be mother was associated with the image of the Javanese women, with their symbols, including the fashion system. Javanese ethnic groups, especially women are pictured as soft and gentle. The choice of the Javanese fashion was related to Suharto background as a Javanese. The feminization process of women was a Javanization process of the Indonesian women. Although the most important targets of this policy was the government employees or the wives of the government employees, the fact that this picture was nationally constructed through the government discourses, such as in the State regulation and the media created a common sense that it should be followed by women from different backgrounds all over Indonesia.

In the aspect of tourism, for instance, it was organized the election of "Putri Pariwisata" (Indonesian Pageants for tourism), "Putri Kampus" (Campus Girl) and many other beauty pageant competitions. The aim was to choose the beautiful women that could be the symbol of beauty in tourism and also in campuses. The State even created a beauty competition for mothers organized from the level of small district to the national level, supported by the Indonesian cosmetics companies in order to make women beautiful. Women were constructed to be feminine with the pattern shaped by the State in order to establish the division of masculinities and femininities in the social level. This approach was criticized by Julia Suryakusuma (2011) as a symbol of women submission. The aim, according to Surjakusuma, was to promote the power of men also for the wives, it was dedicated to promote the carriers of the husband. The successful husband was seen also from the performance of the wives. The State regulation had structurally shown the intention of feminizing women and masculinizing men.

Another institution created by the State was Dharma Wanita (the Contribution of Women), functioning as an organization for women empowerment. The members were civil servant women and also the wives of the civil servant (Wieringa 1995).

The same as the above term, *Dharma Wanita* was created by the State in order to create Indonesian women as the supporter of the husband and the family. These two organizations were part of the dream of the State to create Indonesian women as the symbol of the super women. They had to be good in the domestic and also in the public space. They had to show their femininity to empower their role in the domestic space. However, above all, this was to empower the role of the husband in the public sphere. In the context of feminism, if Betty Friedan (1963) in her book *The Feminine Mystique* was criticizing the fact that women were shut up from the narration and Gaye Tuchman (1978) and Rosi Braidotti (1997) argued that women were narrated but when they were narrated they became only object in the narration, in this case, more specifically, women were promoted to be in the narration. However, their presence in the narration was for the interest of the husband. They gave their voices but their voices were becoming their gift for their husband.

The fact that militarism was becoming the picture of the State created a discourse about men's masculinities. Being a man means being masculine. Many symbols in the social discourses were produced and reproduced. The films, for instance, showed the masculinities of men through the symbols of strength, braveness, and in many cases were violence. Some actors were chosen by the film makers from their body build. The names such as Barry Prima, Advent Bangun or Ratno Timur became the best seller actors during the 1980s. Action movies, such as *Jaka Sembung*, acted by the masculine actors Ratno Timoer or most of action movies in the 1980s and 1990s showed the spreading discourses related to the creation of masculinities in Indonesian context during the New Order era. Here is the picture of the masculinities created during that era. The portraying of men with masculinities aspects cannot be separated from the influence of Hollywood movies presenting the masculine heroes like Arnold Schwarzeneger or Sylvester Stallone.

Militarism of the New Order regime with the power of the militaristic men strengthened the idea of men masculinisation. Man had to be masculine and woman had to be feminine. The transgender lived freely in the society but they were not explicitly discussed. They were present but their presence was only becoming object of narration. This construction was progressively destabilized in the discourse during the Reformasi era. Masculinities and femininities are slowly moving from the dichotomy of male and female (Wulan, 2013). The homogenization of the State discourses on gender orientation has been contested by different regimes of truth. The State is not anymore the only regime of truth that dominates the discourse on people's gender orientation. The media and the literature, for instance, becomes powerful alternative regime of truth that picture gender orientation in different ways. The media and the literature destabilized the gender norms by showing different pictures of other realities. The taboo talking about other gender orientations can be seen from the society that deals with this situation in their everyday life. Despite the denial from the normative gender perspective as ideal believed by the State and the society, the discourses related to different gender orientations have been mushrooming during the Reformasi era (Paramadhita 2011). The homosexual people and groups for instance, are openly revealing their identities in front of

public. The groups of LGBT have also their forum. Arus Pelangi, for instance is one of the forums struggling for the rights of the LGBT. This forum was founded in 2006. It is stated that the aim of this forum is to struggle for formal legal representation of the LGBT Community (Retaduari 2015). It is also aimed to affect the societal norms and perceptions towards, and to increase an overall awareness of the rights of the LGBT community. With the Human Rights groups, this group attempts to create space for the LGBT narration. The discrimination and violence experienced by the LGBT in the society are among aspects struggled by this group. For the homosexual people, although some radical religious groups refuse their presence, some same sex partners are starting to show their relationship in the public space. Some students are openly admitted that they are gay or lesbian in the classroom.

From the LGBT category, the transgenderism is the category that can be openly expressed compared to other orientations. Related to transgender, although it is not a new phenomenon in Indonesia because it has been practiced in the society just like the practice of manhood and womanhood, presenting a self as a transgender is a new phenomena in Indonesian gender identity construction. During Reformasi era, the transgender people are starting to show their presence in the public space. In one of the cities, considered as a student and cultural city called Yogyakarta, for instance, in many traffic lights, the transgender people who come mostly from lower class social level appear openly in the public. For the middle and high class social level, they start also to appear in the public space although they are not as open as the lower class people.

For the lower class transgender, their presence destabilize the space normatively created only for men and women. They were previously hidden in the limited space in their village or in their own community. However, the fact that they present themselves in the open public space, destabilize the normative space previously privileged only for men and women. For the higher class transgender people, their presence destabilize the image of the middle-high class people as the perfect groups in the society. The status of the middle-high social class with the perfect image, including related to gender orientation is destabilized by the middle-high class transgender who are openly presenting themselves in front of the public. It was before taboo for these groups to show this orientation. However, the presence of some middle-high class transgender in front of public has encouraged the high class people with transgender orientation to speak up and show themselves in front of the public.

One of the examples of the presence of this high class transgender can be seen from an important figure in Yogyakarta. This is a business person in Yogyakarta. At least two restaurants in Yogyakarta, owned by this transgender. The name of the restaurant is the House of Raminten and the Warung of Raminten which are open for public. These restaurants are full of clients coming from different gender orientations. There is also another restaurant in the third floor of a Batik shop in Malioboro street. In this restaurant, there is also a stage of *Oyot Godhong Cabaret* and the photos of the transgender who acted in the cabaret. This cabaret show is

routinely performed as part of the self expression of the transgender performing in show. Below is the picture of the owner of the restaurant in Javanese women dress code. The photo can be found in front of the restaurant and also in the batik shop.



Picture 2. House of Raminten
Courtesy: jogjawhere.blogspot.com

The writing in the photo means “don’t call me Raminto.” Raminto is a Javanese name for a man. The name of the restaurant is Raminten, which is a name for Javanese woman. This means that the owner of the restaurant declares his identity as a woman.

The presence of this business person with the expression of his personal identity is a new phenomena after Reformasi era, which was not the case during New Order era. Previously, the middle and high social class transgender hide their identity for the sake of the family dignity. They are always in the society but for the middle and high class social level, their presence was denied by the family. However, after the Reformasi era, it is more common to see them appearing in the public space. The space for contesting the gender norm, such as the presence of *Raminten* in public space becomes one of the entry points for the middle and high social class transgender for expressing their self-identity. *Raminten* is the symbol of the transgender struggle coming from the middle and high class who explain who I am. The posters of *Raminten* such as in the above picture are displayed in big sizes. No one complain about the representation of *Raminten* although it is known that in Yogyakarta, many different radical Muslim groups living in this city.

Construction of Self Gender Orientation in Literature

Apart from the narration of the transgender in everyday life as a new discourse after the change of the political regime, this situation happens also in literature. The literature previously showed the embodiment of masculinities and femininities into male and female has changed also the direction. Many different works of literature start also to show the different orientation related to gender choice. The narration about homosexuality and lesbianism is mushrooming after the open narration about sexuality written primarily by Ayu Utami in her novel *Saman* (Marching 2007). *Saman*, talking openly about woman telling her own sexuality motivates different authors to talk about sexuality from different perspectives. In the beginning of the Reformasi era, several novels talk about the practice of homosexuality and lesbianism. Some of these novels are *Garis Tepi Seorang Lesbian (The Border Line of a Lesbian)* written by Herlinatien, *Tabularasa* by Ratih Kumala, *Dadaisme* by Dewi Sartika, *Supernova* by Dewi Lestari, *Geni Jora* by Abidah El Khalieqie, and *Larung* by Ayu Utami.

They start talking about the practice of homosexuality with the opinion of agreement and disagreement. Abidah El Khalieqie, for instance, a popular female author, coming from Islamic boarding school background wrote her novel, entitled *Geni Jora*. This novel talks about the practice of lesbianism in the Islamic boarding school. Although the message of the story is trying to educate people not to be lesbian, however, the fact that the setting of the story is in the Islamic boarding school show that the author reveals something that might happened in the Islamic boarding school. Why should in the Islamic boarding school, a place where the morality of the students are controlled strictly? Many Indonesian scholars have analyzed her novel, however, most of them are interested in the position of women in the novel and not the practice of lesbianism itself. Wiyatmi (2010), for instance, look at the position of Muslim women as still subordinated in the novel. The orientation of gender which is crucial in the novel did not given attention. The taboo talking about lesbianism is still flagrant in the Indonesian scholarship although the author has mentioned about it. Following the argument of Bakhtin (1981), there are diversities of voices in certain phenomenon. There are always contradictories, paradox and multiplicity of discourses in every phenomenon.

There is no clear argument about certain phenomenon. On the one side, there is a social structure that is very strong in maintaining the ideal gender orientation and rejecting the other forms of gender orientation. However, the social situation sometimes encourages also the individual to construct their own self-construction (autonomy). The change of political situation from the authoritative to a more democratic one encourages new discourses on gender orientation. The issue raised in literature for instance is the issue of masculinities and femininities. If during previous era women and men or boys and girls were divided into two different roles, in the Reformasi era, there is no such clear division. Boys and girls choose their roles and do not always follow the gender norms expected by the society. The tomboy, for instance, is becoming an issue where the role of masculine and feminine is interchangeable. One of the novels, entitled *Venus*, for instance, tells the story

about how a boy has talent to be a make-up artist. The story is about his struggle to get what he wants despite the refusal and denial from the parents, "On the table, there is a quite big box. If you look inside, you will see brushes in various sizes, various lipstick palettes, some foundation bottles, some false eye lids and other make up tools. I appreciate whatever your answer. I am a man and this is my room."

Make up (such as powder and lipstick) in the traditional context, especially in Java, is not a forbidden instrument for men. Men put also make up in several occasion, such as wedding and also most of the traditional performance. The makeup is an instrument for a performance. However, the makeup was not accepted for men to be put in the daily life. The man who put make up in the daily life is considered as a transgender (*wandu*). The makeup was strictly directed to female activities but now discussing it becomes an issue in the literature. In the story, the main hero of the novel has to hide his preference to be a makeup artist from the parents but finally has to sacrifice the family to be honest with himself.

In this case, the author attempt to open a new horizon by giving the position to the hero of the novel who struggle to express his own identity. One of the symbol used is makeup. There is a kind of reversing the situation where the authors play with the opposite roles. In another story, a girl is placed as having the competence usually described for a boy, such as very smart in the mathematics or winning the mathematic Olympiad. This stories are common in contemporary Indonesian teenager literature because the femininities and the masculinities are not seen as two opposite borders but more an interchangeable values that can be shared by girls and boys.

CONCLUSION

From the explanation above, it is concluded that the destabilization of the gender norms are done in many different ways. There is a question of narration where the open space of the Reformasi era create a possibility for different gender orientation to challenge the established gender norm. The aspects destabilized are the positions of masculinities and femininities which are placed in many different variations. Men are not always masculine and women either. The masculinities and femininities are interchangeably used by men and women for challenging the heteronormative enforced structure. In the process of destabilization, some aspects are changes. Firstly, it changes the courage of people to openly express their identity as a choice. This identity is continuously redefined although it is not purely a new phenomena in the society. Secondly, it changes the way how people attempt to redefine their identity. Some people use media, some use literature and the other use the openness in the society to show who they are. However, these changes have to challenge the normative position of other people. The persons who would like to destabilise the gender norm need to negotiate and strategise their attempts. The process of destabilizing gender norm is done during the reformasi era because it is not only a question that the regime has changed and become more open but because all of the aspects outside the regime support this possibility. The openness of media and

literature mingled with capital support also the possibility of destabilising the gender norm.

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