

## COLONIZED BODY OF WOMEN IN AHMAD TOHARI'S NOVEL THE DANCER

Zita Rarastesa

Sebelas Maret University, Indonesia

Email: sweetsita@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze how the female body is colonized in Ahmad Tohari's novel "The Dancer." The novel portrays the lives of women in Javanese culture, shaped by colonialism and patriarchy, and illustrates how the female body becomes a site of domination, control, and exploitation. Utilizing a postcolonial feminist perspective, this research examines the experiences of physical, psychological, and social oppression faced by the female characters in the novel and their responses to various forms of colonization of their bodies. The findings reveal that through narrative and characterization, Ahmad Tohari explores the complexities of female identity influenced by colonial history and patriarchal structures. These findings highlight the importance of understanding the female body as a battleground between dominant forces and women's resistance against various forms of oppression. Thus, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender and colonialism studies in Indonesian literature.

**Keywords:** colonized bod; oppression; patriarchy; politics

### Introduction

This research discusses how Tohari presents his female character in his one-volume trilogy *The Dancer*. The first novel Tohari wrote in his trilogy, *The Dancer*, was first published as serials in the Kompas daily in 1981, followed by the second and the third novels in 1985 and 1986, respectively. The trilogy spans 1946 - 1971, a significant political era after Indonesian Independence when the Communist Party was still active. The third novel, *The Rainbow's Arc*, was originally serialized in Kompas but had to be rewritten due to the threat of censorship related to the September 30 Movement of 1965, which involved the assassination of six army generals and the disposal of their bodies at Lubang Buaya (Park, 2020). Eventually, the complete trilogy was published, including previously excised sections. Given the richness of Indonesian literature, I hope my research will enrich the postcolonial studies and foster further development in Indonesian literary criticism. Ahmad Tohari's female character in *The Dancer* is also victimized. Social and political oppression, as well as patriarchal oppression, are again elucidated. The mystic dance of the ronggeng (explained below) is associated with the

PKI (the Indonesian Communist Party), which is associated with the Indonesian Women's Movement. Due to its ties to the PKI, the Movement has been negatively portrayed, particularly under Soeharto's regime, which sought to rally public support against Communism, a strategy backed by the U.S. government. The central theme of the novel revolves around the colonization of women's bodies and the madness that arises from their struggles for identity amidst patriarchal oppression. While Ahmad Tohari may not be overtly recognized for feminist beliefs, he focuses on female characters in his works that delve into issues of human freedom (Thomas, 2023).

Ahmad Tohari's novel *The Dancer* dives into the complexities of postcolonial Indonesia, exploring how the legacy of colonialization continues to shape societal norms, gender dynamics, and power structures. Scholars in postcolonial studies have highlighted the significance of Indonesian literature in reflecting the country's struggle for cultural identity and Independence. Tohari's portrayal of the female protagonist, Srinthil, as a symbol of victimization within a patriarchal and politically oppressed society, resonates with themes commonly found in postcolonial narratives. In her article "The Role of Literature in Indonesian Development Process," Erna Wati said, "Plato said that literature is the reflection of the social condition (Laurenson and Swingewood, 1971). It reflects the real condition of the society, which also functions as the social critique of the condition." (Erna Wati, p. 54, *CaLLs*, Volume 2 Nomor 1 Juni 2016).

Feminist literary criticism enables the researcher to observe women's representation in literature, particularly in contexts of patriarchal oppression and societal expectations. In *The Dancer*, Srinthil's character embodies the struggles of women whose bodies are colonized by patriarchal culture, limiting their agency and autonomy. By applying feminist perspectives to Tohari's work, scholars have unpacked how gender roles, power dynamics, and cultural norms intersect to shape women's experiences in Indonesian society. Exploring gender politics in Indonesia provides crucial insights into the historical and cultural context that informs Tohari's narrative.

The representation of women's bodies in literature has been a topic of significant academic interest, particularly in the context of postcolonial and feminist studies. Across various literary traditions, the depiction of women's bodies often reflects broader social, cultural, and political dynamics, including issues of control, domination, and resistance (C. , & S. J. Anderson, 2023). In many societies, the female body is constructed as a site of contestation where patriarchal and colonial forces exert their power. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in postcolonial literature, where writers use their narratives to explore and critique the legacy of colonialism and its intersection with local patriarchal structures (Rahman, 2021). Ahmad Tohari's novel, *The Dancer* (*Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*), offers a compelling case study of the colonized female body within the specific cultural context of Javanese society (Lee, 2019). Set against the backdrop of Indonesia's post-colonial history, Tohari's narrative captures the intersection of colonial and patriarchal forces, illustrating how the bodies of Javanese women are subjected to various forms of control and subjugation. The novel portrays the experiences of its female protagonist, Srintil, whose body becomes a site of both cultural symbolism and political struggle. Through Srintil's journey, Tohari addresses broader themes of

exploitation, domination, and resistance, positioning the female body as a central element in the negotiation of power (Anwar, 2022).

This study lies in its attempt to unpack the layered meanings of the female body as portrayed in *The Dancer*. By employing a postcolonial feminist framework, this research aims to contribute to the growing discourse on the intersection of gender and colonialism in Southeast Asian literature (Wijaya, 2021). While previous studies have analyzed the socio-political themes in Tohari's work, there remains a gap in understanding how the female body specifically functions as a site of colonial and patriarchal oppression and as a symbol of resistance (Tan, 2023). This study, therefore, focuses on how the narrative structures and character development in *The Dancer* reflect the complex dynamics of gendered colonization (S. Anderson, 2020). Relevant literature highlights various approaches to analyzing women's bodies in postcolonial contexts. For instance, recent scholarship has examined how female bodies are represented in postcolonial narratives as symbols of national identity, cultural continuity, or resistance to foreign domination (Hasan, 2022). However, there is a noticeable lack of focused studies on how these themes are expressed in Indonesian literature, particularly through a postcolonial feminist lens (Yusuf, 2020). This research seeks to address this gap by analyzing *The Dancer* and situating its findings within the broader context of postcolonial feminist critique.

Nuanced analysis of the female body as a contested site of both oppression and resistance. It examines how Tohari uses narrative techniques and characterization to depict the complexities of female identity in the face of colonial and patriarchal pressures (Chen, 2019). The research aims to highlight how *The Dancer* contributes to a more profound understanding of gender dynamics in postcolonial literature, particularly in Indonesia (Khan, 2023). This focus on the female body as a battleground for competing forces enriches the existing scholarship by providing a unique perspective on the intersection of gender, colonialism, and cultural representation (Sari, 2021). Field of literary analysis, offering insights into broader discussions on gender and power. By foregrounding the body as a site of struggle, this research emphasizes the importance of understanding literary representations of women in their specific historical and cultural contexts (Wahyuni, 2022). This approach can inform contemporary debates on gender justice and cultural politics, particularly in postcolonial societies.

### Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a close reading method to analyze the representation of the colonized female body in Ahmad Tohari's novel *The Dancer*. Close reading is an in-depth textual analysis technique where the researcher carefully examines the narrative elements, language style, symbolism, and structure within the text to uncover hidden meanings, central themes, and representations of specific ideologies. This method is considered appropriate for this research because it enables a thorough analysis of how Tohari portrays the female body as a site of domination and resistance within the Javanese cultural context, which is influenced by colonialism and patriarchy. The primary data for this study is the text from Ahmad Tohari's novel *The*

Dancer. The entire text will be closely read to identify narratives, descriptions, dialogues, and symbols related to the female body and how it is constructed as a site of domination and resistance.

**Close Reading Process:** First Stage: An initial reading of the entire novel to gain a general understanding of the storyline, characters, and background. Second Stage: Repeated readings focusing on sections of the text that contain descriptions, dialogues, or narratives relevant to the theme of the colonized female body. These sections will be identified, marked, and categorized based on themes such as colonial domination, patriarchy, exploitation, and resistance. Third Stage: In-depth analysis of the identified sections. At this stage, the researcher will analyze Tohari's use of language, metaphors, symbols, and writing style to depict the female body. The focus will be on how the text represents the female body as a field of power and resistance. Once the data is collected and analyzed, the researcher will interpret the findings based on a postcolonial feminist theoretical framework. This interpretation will focus on how the female body in *The Dancer* reflects the complexities of interaction between colonial power and patriarchy, and how Tohari uses characterization and narrative to demonstrate forms of resistance against such oppression.

To ensure the validity of the data and interpretation, this study will use source triangulation techniques. This will be done by comparing the findings from the primary text with relevant literature on postcolonial feminist theory and previous studies discussing Ahmad Tohari's work and the representation of the female body in postcolonial literature. The results of this analysis will be systematically compiled into an academic paper. Each finding will be explained in detail, accompanied by relevant textual quotes to support the generated interpretation. These findings are expected to contribute new insights into understanding the dynamics of the female body within the colonial and patriarchal contexts in Indonesian literature.

## Result And Discussion

In Tohari's novel, the female character descends into madness because she is unable to live the life she desires. Her existence is dictated by those around her, as she is the mystic Dancer, known as *ronggeng*. Chosen at the age of 11 due to her love for dancing and the sexual allure perceived in her innocent young body—at least by her grandfather and the village spiritual leader, the *dukun ronggeng*—Srinthil has no say in her fate. She is trained to dance, with the expectation of enticing male audience members or clients for tips during or after her performances. The dances are intimate, often featuring movements that may be deemed too provocative according to Javanese standards of modesty. Historically, the sensual aspects of these performances have led to *ronggeng* being associated with prostitution, masquerading as a legitimate art form. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronggeng> retrieved on July 15, 2012). *Ronggeng* is more prominent in Central Java due to its proximity to East and West Java, as those regions exhibit a more open and less normative culture, with greater sexual expressiveness compared to the more reserved Solonese and Yogyakartaese traditions. Traditional

dances in Solo and Yogyakarta are characterized by their politeness and adherence to conventional Indonesian sexual values.

Ahmad Tohari, in *The Dancer* raises issues through the point of view of villagers who are uneducated and simple-minded instead of having educated and more sophisticated characters. The characters, particularly Srinthil, appear puppet-like, reflecting the villagers' naïveté in their beliefs, as they place excessive trust in spiritual leaders like the dukun ronggeng. This reliance on spiritual authority allows these figures to manipulate the villagers, who are largely uneducated and easily swayed. Consequently, the people of Dukuh Paruk adhere to their local norms while remaining disconnected from the political incidents that is critical, outbursting in their country. In relation to that, Hellwig says:

When events occurring in and around 1965 are told by an external narrator, the focalization is so concentrated on the isolated and ignorant Hamlet that the word "Communist," which is unknown there, is never used. Someone from outside the village talks about the "oppressed proletariat" and "imperialists, capitalists, and colonialists," but in Dukuh Paruk, these words are not understood (Hellwig 147). This lack of awareness leads to Srinthil's tragic fate as ronggeng. Her performances are often funded by the Communist Party, which associates her with Communism. When Soeharto imprisons everyone linked to the Communist Party in 1966, Srinthil and her band of musicians are also arrested, and Dukuh Paruk is set on fire. After two years, Srinthil is released, but she has lost her former ronggeng charm. She hopes that a man named Bajus will help her and propose, but she is horrified to discover that he intends to sell her to his employer for one night in exchange for a job. Trapped in Bajus's room and feeling hopeless, Srinthil descends into madness. It is Rasmus, the man she loves, who ultimately rescues her from Bajus and admits her to a mental hospital.

Women and insanity have been widely linked and discussed in feminist literary conversation. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe this notion as "the madwoman in the attic." Literary discourse on *The Mad Woman in the Attic* concerns women writers depicting female characters. Their portrayals and discourse reveal that these writers know the feelings of confinement and oppression. Consequently, they experience the frustration and anger that end in insanity. Nevertheless, the discussion still misses the point that the Mad Woman is not Jane's or any other heroine's enemy, but a whole person outside of any relationship with colonizers, with ideas and aspirations who has been driven mad. The madwoman in the Attic is a victim of colonization, "othered" by colonizers. As Spivak explains, the "maddening" process is unfortunately treated as insignificant when discussing the madwoman in the Attic.

When Rochester takes Jane to see Bertha, Jane describes seeing a figure "whether beast or human being, one could not tell." Bertha's bestiality reflects a common belief in colonial discourse that individuals with mixed-race parentage are degenerate, possibly not entirely human, and more akin to animals. Her animalistic traits exclude her from the journey of self-determination that Anglo-American feminist critics celebrate in Jane. (Tyagi, 47). Countering the Anglo-American feminist critics' celebration of Jane's self-determination, Jean Rhys published *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the 1960s to speak for the

colonized women, in this case, Bertha, to point out the humanity of the Mad Woman in the Attic. This novel is compelling since it gives Bertha a soul and a voice to tell her side of the story so the readers can be aware that Bertha is not simply "The Mad Woman in the Attic", but she is a human being and a woman who was driven to insanity by the cruelty of colonization.

Ahmad Tohari may not have personally experienced the oppression faced by women in a patriarchal society, but he seeks to illustrate its psychological effects on women living in Indonesia, particularly in Javanese culture. In *The Dancer*, Srinthil adopts and internalizes her identity as *ronggeng*. When the political landscape shifts and she no longer has to perform this role, she loses her sanity, highlighting her inability to develop an identity separate from being *ronggeng*. In patriarchal culture, women lack opportunity to determine their own roles. Srinthil is trapped in the role of being *ronggeng* as that is the role the villagers assign her to play. She does not have much to say about it. Moreover, Srinthil grows as a woman who does not know to play the role other than being a *ronggeng*. This can be seen when she gets out of prison and does not know what to do. This could be the sign of agoraphobia, only in this case the space is not physical, but psychological. Escaping her role as a *ronggeng* she is never given a chance to learn and explore the possibility of what she can do without the *ronggeng* role.

In Tohari's novel, the depiction of women's bodies as commodities, particularly through Srinthil's character, symbolizes the broader impact of colonization on Indonesian land. This is especially relevant to the Japanese occupation, which left lasting traumas on Indonesian women who were designated as "comfort women." In "Listening to Voices: Testimonies of 'Comfort Women' of the Second World War," Maki Kimura writes:

The term "Comfort Women" is one of the most controversial arguments around "Comfort Women." Some "Comfort Women" reject the title of "Comfort Women," claiming that "Comfort Women" implies that they provided sex voluntarily, although they argue this was not the case. These "Comfort Women" and those who support them request the term "sexual slavery" to be used in order to differentiate those "Comfort Women" who were forced into prostitution from voluntary military prostitutes. I am afraid I have to disagree with distinguishing between those who were "forced" and "not forced" as this is the very distinction that I would like to tackle. Therefore, I will continue to use the term "Comfort Women" but with quotation marks out of respect to these victims' disagreement (Kimura, 2)

Although Kimura refuses to differentiate between the "forced" and "not forced" aspects of the term "comfort women," it is significant for Indonesian women who claimed they were forced to become sex slaves. In "Who Are the *Ianfu* (Comfort Women)?" Kirsten Orrell explains the term "comfort women" from the Japanese *Ianfu*, meaning prostitutes who voluntarily provided sexual services to Japanese soldiers during World War II:

Ahmad Tohari's novel *The Dancer* illustrates how women's bodies and minds are colonized. Therefore, Srinthil loses her autonomy and the ability to determine her own path, particularly after being labeled a *ronggeng* from a young age. The term "lost" may

not be entirely accurate, as she never had the opportunity to choose differently; she was conditioned to believe that her identity was tied to being a ronggeng. In this context, ronggeng is more than just a dancer; it represents a role infused with a mystical significance meant to serve men sexually. Ironically, becoming a ronggeng is seen as a desired position in Paruk village, as it brings popularity and desirability. Families take pride in having a ronggeng member, viewing her as a valuable asset who can provide financial support. However, this role effectively reduces her to a sex slave, unaware that she does not truly possess her own body. Instead of feeling degraded, she feels honored by the status. This reflects the workings of patriarchy, as Srinthil is conditioned into believing that being a ronggeng is her true aspiration, all while men and the community manipulate her to satisfy their desires. The villagers attribute her beautiful dancing to being possessed by the ronggeng spirit, despite her lack of formal training, which they interpret as evidence of her possession. This belief is a socially constructed tradition designed to reinforce her identity as a ronggeng, limiting her understanding of herself. The villagers refer to it as a socially constructed tradition that leads Srinthil to feel it is her duty to fulfill the role assigned to her. She is convinced that her purpose in life is to be a ronggeng.

In Paruk village, the idea of marriage is viewed as less than sacred, with a very casual attitude towards it. The villagers see it as unimportant and feel they can engage in sexual relations without the need for marriage. It seems natural to them that, at just eleven years old, Srinthil began to display signs of becoming a ronggeng, singing an erotic song without realizing its explicit nature. As she sat on the ground, absorbed in her task, she joyfully sang "Senggot," a popular ronggeng song. Although "Senggot" was erotic, Srinthil, still a child, sang it enthusiastically, likely unaware of its true meaning. This did not concern the villagers, who accepted her singing such a song without hesitation. (Tohari, 6)

Based on this phenomenon, Rasmus turned down Srinthil's marriage proposal because he believed she was motivated by a fear of growing old alone. In reality, Srinthil's feelings were rooted in love; she envisioned a happy life with someone she truly cared for. Rasmus misunderstood her intentions. Henry Spiller notes that a ronggeng fulfills a man's desire, embodying both maternal and object-like qualities.

Ronggeng—professional female singer-dancers who typically provide sexual services—reflect many traits of Lacan's concept of the other/mother. They serve as objects of desire that can satisfy a man's cravings, as long as he can harness the influence of the Other (symbolized by the rhythmic drumming). Similar to the mother figure in the Sangkuriang myth, ronggeng are seen as both divine, due to their connection with the rice goddess, and profane, owing to their involvement in sexual activities that challenge societal norms. (Spiller, 82)

Rasmus's situation reflects his loss of his mother due to the Tempe Bongkrek incident, which left him yearning for Srinthil to fill the emotional gap in his life. However, his suspicion that he might be just an option for her challenged his sense of masculinity. Additionally, Srinthil's past as a ronggeng, which suggests she has been with many men, may have contributed to his refusal. His rejection of Srinthil can be seen

as an act of othering; he positions himself as an outsider, feeling disconnected from the villagers of Paruk. Rasmus perceives himself differently from the other men, particularly in relation to a woman like Srinthil, and he confines her to the traditional and cultural expectations of Paruk village.

## Conclusion

This study has analyzed the representation of the colonized female body in Ahmad Tohari's novel *The Dancer* through a postcolonial feminist approach and close reading method. The findings reveal that the female body in this novel is constructed as a complex site of domination and resistance. The female body, particularly the character Srintil, is depicted as a battleground where colonial and patriarchal powers interact to subdue, control, and exploit. Within the Javanese cultural context influenced by colonialism, Tohari uses narrative and characterization to highlight the experiences of physical, psychological, and social oppression faced by female characters, while also illustrating their forms of resistance against various types of bodily colonization.

This analysis demonstrates that Tohari not only critiques the legacy of colonialism and patriarchal structures but also delves into the depths of female identity in confronting these dominant forces. The representation of the female body in *The Dancer* reveals the complexity of interactions between local culture and external influences, simultaneously opening up space for understanding the female body as a symbolic site of struggle against oppression. In conclusion, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender, colonialism, and Indonesian literature by offering a new perspective on how the female body is used as a tool to question and challenge dominant powers. The study also underscores the importance of an interdisciplinary approach in understanding gender representation within specific cultural contexts, as demonstrated in Tohari's work, ultimately enriching postcolonial and feminist literary studies in Indonesia.

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