

# SRI SUMARAH: JAVANESE WOMAN UNDER DISCUSSION

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## Abstract

*One value which brings literature to endless fame is the universal truth which literature holds within itself. This is made possible by the fact that literature is a reflection of human life. Though it is a make-believe world, literature is deeply rooted in this real world.*

*Sri Sumarah is a novelette written by Umar Kayam which well depicts the norms and values of the Javanese world. It is richly loaded with the Javanese culture. In view of this, a full understanding of the culture needs mastering. No doubt misinterpretation will be observed if there is no understanding of the culture, and such is the case of the students of Oberlin College and Northern Illinois University.*

*Self-resignation constitutes a cultural aspect that is seen among the Javanese. Its concept among the Javanese women as reflected in Sri Sumarah will be perceived as an invisible shackle if a precise understanding of the concept is not pursued in its socio-cultural context. Realizing this, an attempt to analyze the novelette in its socio-cultural context has been done in this paper.*

## The Quest of Literary Truth

Literary truth is universal as literature concerns itself with the fundamental realities of human condition. Aristotle in his *Poetics* claimed literature is "a level of imaginative truth that transcends that of human imitation" (Goetz, 1987:397). This idea is strengthened by Sir Philip Sydney in his *Defence of Poesie* by launching an assertion that "it was the special property of literature to express moral and philosophical truths in a way that rescued them from abstraction and made them immediately graspable" (Goetz, 1987:397).

Literary truth is universally unquestioned while historical truth is open to suspicion, thus said by Denis Diderot, Frenchman of letters and influential philosopher in his era. In his attempt to affirm his statement, Diderot picked up Samuel Richardson's works, *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747), to be compared to history for the quest of the truth. He figured out that the works exposed the authentic world of girls. On the other hand, history was subject to misleading information. As a matter of fact, history can be politically biased for the sake of the ruling government.



## Culture in Literature

It seems to be a bit cliché to state that literature has cultural touches. Culture performs as an umbrella for all human beliefs and habits while the reflection of human activities is well conveyed in literature. In other words by reading literature, one can enhance his knowledge on culture as " ... one of the major functions of literature is to serve as a medium to transmit the culture ... " (Valdes, 1986:137).

Culture misinterpretation normally occurs as people will depart from their own cultural background to judge the others. Bakdi Sumanto, lecturer at Faculty of Letters UGM and outstanding short story writer and essayist, when teaching Indonesian Literature in Translation in Oberlin College and Northern Illinois University, witnessed that his American students misinterpreted the cultural aspect reflected in *Sri Sumarah*, one of the works Bakdi suggested reading. They perceived that Sri's attitude towards life was ridiculous. Departing from their culture reference, Sri was thought of being stupid. She manifested a desperate figure (Bakdi, 1987:25).

## Self-resignation

*Sri Sumarah* is a novelette, some prefer to call it a (long) short story, written by Umar Kayam. The novelette takes place in Java in the mid 1960s, the years when the Indonesian Communist Party attempted to carry out a coup d'état. It focuses on a pure Javanese woman with the norms and values of the Javanese world.

Self-resignation, the manifestation of which is seen in Sri, is among the cultural aspects of the Javanese world. Indeed, what is misunderstood by Bakdi's American students is the concept of self-resignation itself. The concept has been the main interest of this limited paper. Since it is too broad to cover, the paper will deal only with the concept of self-resignation reflected in *Sri Sumarah*, bearing in mind that misunderstanding will result in accepting ought to pursued in its socio-cultural context.

A good literary work must reflect human life. Set off from imagination, literature will never serve itself as a historical source. However, a good writer is always capable of presenting a vivid picture of his world with a detailed portrait on human objects. Being an outstanding writer of a Javanese background, Umar Kayam has proven his capacity in his masterpiece *Sri Sumarah*, which serves as the book title as well as the main character's name.

The name *Sri Sumarah* itself has suggested self-resignation. Teeuw has cleverly defined it into "she who resigns herself, who gives in to fate, who acquiesces" (Teeuw, 1979:181). It is not a mere coincidence that she is named *Sri Sumarah*.

*"Bukan kebetulan ndhuk, namamu Sri Sumarah. Dari nama itu kau diharap berlaku dan bersikap sumarah, pasrah, menyerah. Lho, itu tidak berarti lantas kau diaaam saja, ndhuk. Menyerah di sini berarti mengerti dan terbuka tetapi tidak menolak. Mengerti ndhuk?"*

(Kayam, 1986:13)



*(Your name Sri Sumarah is not coincidentally given. By bearing that name, you are expected to behave resignedly. Well, it doesn't mean that you just keep silent about anything. To be resigned here means to understand and to be open but not to rebel. Understand sweetie?)*

Her marriage is out of human business and is a supernatural arrangement through the hands of her grandma. Therefore, Sri accepts her grandma's plan to marry her to Sumarto. She believes that he is her match. This phenomenon can be well understood as the social condition in many rural areas in Java at the time allowed parents much to take responsibility for the youths' match.

It is believed that when a wife gives in herself to her husband, he will be more obedient to her. Sri's grandma teaches her that her self-giving in to her husband means coming to the oneness and understanding towards him so that he will be more understanding and tolerant to her.

*"Kalau kita turuti mereka, laki-laki akan lebih lagi menuruti kita ..."*

(Kayam, 1986:16)

*(If we obey our husbands, they will obey us more ...)*

Being a noble wife in the traditional Javanese concept means holding a higher social status. Sri is aware of this status. After the premature death of her husband, she has to work hard to bring up her twelve-year-old daughter Tun. She accepts this condition. She refuses Pak Carik's proposal although he is rich. He is not of a noble family. Instead, she sees him as "Burisrowo", a celibate giant in the Javanese shadow puppet who is always madly in love with "Sumbadra", "Arjuna's" wife. Accordingly, Arjuna, the good and handsomest prince in the puppet, is personified as her husband.

### **The Spirit of Self-resignation**

The Spirit of Self-resignation as possessed by Sri has saved her from her family disaster. She is still willing to accept Tun despite her pregnancy before marriage which is against the Javanese values. Sri accepts this condition as her destiny and with the spirit of her self-resignation she saves Tun.

*"Cup ndhuk, cup. Ibu akan bereskan semuanya."*

(Kayam, 1986:35)

*(Stop crying, please. I'll settle the problem.)*

The spirit gives her power illuminating the darkness.



*"Tiba-tiba dia mampu mengangkat beban yang selama ini dirasakannya menindih dadanya. Dia merasa beban itu akan dia bawa berjalan dan akan diletakkannya baik-baik di satu tempat yang pantas dan apik."*

(Kayam, 1986:35)

*(All of a sudden, she is able to bear the burden which has always been felt suppressing. She is aware that she will have to carry it and lay it down carefully in a proper place.)*

She runs to Yos for his responsibility for Tun's pregnancy. In spite of her economic bankruptcy, she has to marry Tun. She mortgages her own rice fields to hold a grand reception for Tun's wedding day. She is aware of her noble dignity.

Tun's rebellion against the tradition serves to equip the strong depiction of Sri's role. Bakdi is of an opinion that Tun resembles Lady Chatterley in Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lovers* (1928) who shows her rebellion against the concept of Victorian moral (Bakdi, 1987:24). Even Tun and Yos join the Communist Party which is refused in Indonesia, for communists are regarded atheists.

### **The Role of "Wayang" in the Javanese world**

Sri has been prepared to become a true Javanese woman figure. She is expected at the same time to be like "Sumbadra" and "Kunti", two female characters of the puppet. Sumbadra represents a noble wife who is obedient to, loyal to, admiring with, patient with and understanding with her husband. Kunti represents a mother who has a great responsibility and is full of sacrifice for her sons..ls1

*"Embahnya dalam bulan-bulan berikutnya mempersiapkan cucunya sebaik-baiknya. Persiapan bagi seorang gadis untuk menjadi seorang istri yang sempurna. Modelnya Sumbadra alias Lara Ireng, adik Kresna, dan Baladewa, istri Arjuna, laki-laki dari segala laki-laki. Dialah istri sejati."*

(Kayam, 1986:13)

*(In the following months her grandma makes a good preparation for her granddaughter to be a perfect wife. As the model, she takes Sumbadra alias Lara Ireng, younger sister of Kresna's and Baladewa's, a wife of Arjuna's, a man among all men. She is a true wife.)*

*"Dan seperti embahnya juga, dia sedang menggeser perannya dari Sumbadra menjadi Kunti, ibu Pandawa."*

(Kayam, 1986:21)



(Like her grandma, she is changing her role from Sumbadra to Kunti, the mother of Pandawa.)

### **The Quest of Power in the Javanese Belief**

The aspect of the Javanese belief is well observed in Sri's quest of power. She carries out *tirakat*, "a religious nocturnal vigil for the purpose of receiving divine inspiration" (Teeuw, 1979:181). It is the way in which the Javanese believe to seek for power. Anderson has this to say:

*" ... the quest of power is pursued through yogaistic practices and extreme asceticism. Although these yogaistic practices in various parts of Java take different forms, including fasting, going without sleep, meditation, sexual abstinence, ritual purification and sacrifices of various types, one central idea underlies them. All are designed to focus or concentrate the primordial essence" (Anderson, 1980:23-24).*

Seeing that Yos is killed and Tun is imprisoned, Sri has to take care of Tun's daughter Ginuk alone. Through her *tirakat*, she can make a visionary communication with the divine world to which she has always resigned herself and in which her late husband comes to meet her. During the meeting, she gets a hint that he wants her to be a masseuse for a living. The spirit arising from her self-resignation emerges even much stronger.

The story is written flashback. Sri's fame as a masseuse constitutes the preliminary part of the story.

### **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that to arrive at literary appreciation, sufficient understanding on the culture which serves as the story background is necessarily mastered. Misunderstanding as resulting from Bakdi's American students' comprehension on *Sri Sumarah*; therefore, is inevitable. They belong to a culture totally different from that out of which the story is produced. Those of remote knowledge of the Javanese culture may hold the same outcome as that of the American students'. They may come to an opinion that Sri is stupid and passive because of her self-resignation. It can be a shackle which prevents her from reacting actively. That she cannot refuse her marriage-arrangement, never say "no" to her husband, does not accept the richman's proposal and mortgages her only belongings are among those that can be regarded as foolishness. Nevertheless, the Javanese believe in destiny which is unavoidable. If Sumarto were not her match, then he would not be led into her private life. Her "never-no" to her husband is a sort of a Javanese woman's policy to hold control over a husband. Her marriage refusal and loss of right over her belongings are to save her noble dignity. Pak Carik belongs to common people. According to Siti Sundari, giving good food and a shadow puppet performance in



a Javanese 'historic' party are traditionally observed as to perform a noble task (Sundari, 1987:13-14).

"Wayang" (shadow puppet) holds an important role in the Javanese world. Manu underlies this by affirming that it is one aspect of the Javanese culture which concretes the abstract concept of life (Manu, 1987:63). Sumbadra and Kunti accomplish the ace model of a Javanese perfect wife. Even in modern Indonesia, the touch of wayang is felt in many businesses. The Indonesian made-planes, for instance, are named after it, "*Tutuko*", a famous artist, "*Bagong Kussuardjo*", food, "*Semar Mendem*", a canopy of the Javanese traditional architect, "*Semar Tinandu*". And it is worth noting that the letter having brought Bapak Suharto into power is also named after it, "*Super Semar*".

Self-resignation as exemplified in Kunti and Sumbadra is not a cultural shackle. Sri's employment of it is under her full-cultural awareness. Human beings are compelled to make hard efforts in life but cannot avoid destiny as it is beyond human business.

Sri's step to observe *tirakat* is not stupid. To clarify this, Bakdi states that this step has metaphysical dimension which brings about a mystic relation between "this below-world" and "that above-world" (Bakdi, 1987:25).

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