

MARGINALIZATION OF THE MAIN CHARACTER AS A WOMAN IN THE NOVEL "BEKISAR MERAH" BY AHMAD TOHARI.

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Abstract: This research analyzes the phenomenon of marginalization experienced by Lasi, the main character in Ahmad Tohari's novel *Bekisar Merah*. Through a qualitative approach and data collection via literature study methods, it was found that acts of marginalization were committed by other characters towards Lasi, both male and female. These discriminatory actions indicate that the phenomenon of marginalization experienced has been normalized within society. Therefore, this novel conveys the message that life should adhere to the principles of goodness and justice, especially for women who are vulnerable to marginalization.

Keywords: *marginalization, women, Bekisar Merah, Ahmad Tohari*

INTRODUCTION

In the social context of Indonesian society, the status of women has evolved over time. Awareness of women as individuals with rights and contributions to civilization has been a significant factor in advancing their status in society. However, it cannot be denied that women have had to progress from a position of inequality compared to men. This inequality is a gender phenomenon. Manifestations of gender injustice can be categorized into marginalization, subordination, stereotypes, violence, and excessive workload (Fakih, 2008). At certain times, these gender phenomena have inspired authors in their literary works. Therefore, literature becomes a part of the cultural achievements of a society.

The creation of a literary work is influenced by various factors affecting its author. On the other hand, literature depicts life, while life itself is a social reality (Damono, 1978). Therefore, the world presented in a literary work is a representation in the author's mind.

The influences on the author's mind used to build the world in a literary work can be viewed from several perspectives. Common perspectives include the author's background or the actual conditions in society reflected in the literary work.

A study of literature from the perspective of women's social status in society at the time can be used to analyze the novel *Bekisar Merah* by Ahmad Tohari. This novel was published by Gramedia Pustaka Utama in February 2011. It tells the story of Lasi, the main character who experiences various forms of marginalization throughout her life as a village woman. The depiction of real societal conditions concurrent with the novel's creation forms the basis of this analysis.

To focus this research, a specific research question was formulated: How does the phenomenon of marginalization experienced by Lasi as a woman manifest in the novel *Bekisar Merah*? This research aims to explain the process of marginalization experienced by Lasi as the main character and as a woman within the societal conditions depicted in the novel *Bekisar Merah*.

Previous literary criticism studies have been conducted. Ghazali & Christomy (2023) described the social discrimination process experienced by minor characters in a novel through ostracism. Kemal & Maharannita (2023) analyzed the internal conflicts experienced by main characters in a collection of short stories. The novel *Bekisar Merah* has also been examined in prior research. Natalia (1996) discussed Lasi's position as a character and her background. Setiawan (2018) explained Lasi's worldview as a Javanese woman through a sociological literary approach. Among these studies, no research has yet examined the social status of female characters in relation to the societal conditions depicted in the novel *Bekisar Merah*. This makes the topic of marginalization of women in the novel a novel contribution to this research.

Research on the social status of women in relation to the actual conditions in society depicted in the novel *Bekisar Merah* offers several benefits for Indonesian literary studies. Some of these benefits include deepening understanding for readers, academics, and literary researchers. The analysis results from this study can provide a fundamental understanding for further exploration of the novel's aspects. Therefore, this research can contribute to fostering further studies and discussions to improve future research directions.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach based on a literature study method from several reference sources used to investigate the data. A qualitative approach is associated with generated ideas and perceptions, which are not measured numerically (Basuki, 2010). The ideas and perceptions generated in this study relate to the phenomenon of marginalization experienced by Lasi as a woman in the novel. On the other hand, the literature study method involves obtaining various data sources and references such as books and previous research related to the topic being studied (Sarwono, 2006). In this research, the data source is the novel *Bekisar Merah* by Ahmad Tohari.

The research process for this paper begins with formulating a problem to discuss literary works from the social aspect of women depicted in them, leading to the selection of the novel *Bekisar Merah*. Then, the data collection process is carried out by identifying elements related to the portrayal of female characters and the events experienced by each character in the story. The analysis of the identified data uses M. H. Abrams' theory of literary analysis, highlighting two of the four aspects: the referential (mimetic) aspect and the internal coherence (objective) aspect (Teeuw, 1983). The results of the data analysis align with the problem formulation and objectives stated in this research paper, namely identifying the phenomenon of marginalization experienced by the main character as a woman in *Bekisar Merah*.

DISCUSSION

At the beginning of the story, Lasi is a happy wife, despite her husband Darsa's job as a palm sap tapper and his income being just enough for their daily needs. Lasi remains faithful when her husband becomes paralyzed after falling from a coconut tree. Lasi's loyalty is implied through Mbok Wiryaji's words when she complains to Eyang Mus, feeling pity for Lasi's household situation with Darsa.

“Not exactly. I think Lasi remains faithful to her smelly husband. And that's what makes me feel even more pity for her. The question is, does Lasi have to suffer physically and emotionally for the rest of her life?” (Tohari, 2011:45)

Despite trying to remain faithful, Lasi can no longer sustain her marriage when Darsa, having recovered, impregnates Sipah. Lasi is powerless because, according to the

marriage customs in Karangsoga, only the husband has the right to initiate a divorce. However, Lasi cannot accept the possibility of being in a polygamous marriage after having cared for Darsa for so long. Anger and despair drive her to run away from Karangsoga, hitching a ride on a palm sap truck driven by Sapon and Pardi, until she reaches the city. Lasi sees this act as her only form of resistance, even though it will worry her parents.

“Lasi sometimes feels doubt and fear. However, the pain from Darsa's actions, and more so the pain from feeling she is no longer valuable to a husband, strengthens her resolve. Running away, or rebelling, is the only way to express her resistance and assert her existence. She runs and runs, even though Lasi knows she has nowhere to go.” (Tohari, 2011:61-62)

Through the exposition of the early chapters of *Bekisar Merah*, the social conditions in the village community are depicted, which can influence the status of a woman, even as she approaches marriage and builds a household. Girls in rural areas are still bound by arranged marriages determined by their parents. If they do not marry soon, villagers will gossip about them as old maids. However, women also have the right to choose their spouses, of course, after reaching maturity in their thinking. This is one form of marginalization of women in the novel.

In the subsequent chapters, Lasi realizes that life in urban areas is different from the village, where mutual respect is lacking, and personal gain is prioritized. It is not surprising that the derogatory view of women comes not only from men but also from fellow women. Bu Koneng and Bu Lanting, as women themselves, play a role in placing Lasi as a mistress to an official, not far from prostitution, a business that does not value women except with money. The greater need for wealth and fierce competition for survival in the city are the main factors driving any business that can generate profit.

Moral values can be disregarded and even exploited. Like Bu Koneng and Bu Lastri, who intentionally provide wealth so that Lasi will comply with their wishes. Debt of gratitude makes Lasi show helplessness in redeeming it other than complying with the wishes of Bu Koneng and Bu Lastri. On the other hand, Lasi also lacks awareness of her rights as a woman. However, Lasi's doubts begin to surface when she realizes that all gifts from others surely demand something in return. Such as when she receives gifts from Bu Lanting and stays at her house.

“Lasi grew more uncertain. She believed in what Emak said. But now in her hands, there was a dress given by Bu Lanting whom she had just met. For the kindness of Bu Koneng who had given her shelter, Lasi had already provided her labor in return. But for the person who had given her the dress now in her hands, what would she give in return?” (Tohari, 2011: 105-106)

The first man to use Bu Lanting's services is Handarbeni. Lasi once again feels powerless after enjoying the wealth from Bu Lanting and Handarbeni. She complies when marrying Handarbeni, even though she does so reluctantly due to many debts of gratitude and the wealth she has enjoyed. The marriage process no longer feels sacred but merely a curtain covering up the high-level prostitution business to appear legitimate and official in society.

The fading of moral values in this story occurs because some characters prioritize personal gain. Men use their power to fulfill their desires, such as Handarbeni and Bambang. The powerless like Lasi can do nothing after being trapped in Bu Lastri's deception, who is nothing more than a procurer. Women of mixed blood like Lasi are indeed sought after by the rulers of that time to demonstrate their power and their own desires as men.

“The Bekisar is the offspring of a cross between a jungle fowl and a domestic chicken. What's sought after nowadays are mixed-race children like that, right? Japanese-Malay hybrids. Indeed, Mr. Han, mixed-race offspring often attract attention. Who knows, maybe they can evoke romantic illusions, or even lustful illusions. Fantasies of sensual pleasure. Oops, I'm being vulgar.” (Tohari, 2011: 117)

The divorce process between Lasi and Darsa was easily facilitated with the help of relevant officials, paid for by Handarbeni. Her second marriage to Handarbeni was carried out as expected. Although she had become Handarbeni's lawful wife, Lasi remained a simple woman. She still remembered her family and her difficult past. Yet, deep down, Lasi felt she did not fully love Handarbeni. Handarbeni, in turn, treated Lasi like any other woman, a trophy displaying his power.

Conflict arose again when Handarbeni failed to satisfy Lasi's emotional needs and instead offered another man to fulfill them. Lasi was shocked because she still considered her marriage sacred and believed it should be upheld, even though Handarbeni only treated it casually. A moral crisis stirred within Lasi, who had tried to remain faithful to her new

husband throughout her life. Bu Lanting saw Lasi's problem as a new opportunity for her business. She offered Lasi the option to divorce Handarbeni. Similar to her story after divorcing Darsa, Bu Lanting would find another husband for Lasi who could better fulfill her needs both physically and emotionally.

"Lasi, I am indeed old. I can no longer provide enough for you. So, if you wish, I allow you to seek from another man. And the condition is only one: you keep it discreet and stay here and remain my wife. If necessary, I will find that man for you myself." (Tohari, 2011: 192)

In this chapter, Lasi begins to realize that the moral violations that have occurred must be ended after the incident. Lasi can only return to Karangsoga to rest and reunite with her family because she is exhausted from all the problems. In Karangsoga, Lasi meets Kanjat again. Since their previous meeting, she has fallen in love with the palm sap collector's son, and likewise, he with her. Therefore, after Lasi divorces Handarbeni, she intends to marry Kanjat instead.

The story unfolds with Bambang's interest in Lasi. He borrows Lasi from Handarbeni with the guarantee that he will still hold his position. However, Lasi manages to resist Bambang's temptation while in Singapore. Handarbeni is enraged when Lasi rejects Bambang, but when Lasi defends that her status still belongs to him, Handarbeni immediately divorces her. When about to be picked up by Bambang, Lasi chooses to flee to Karangsoga again. Once again, Lasi, as a woman, can only run from the injustice that befalls her because she is powerless to face the problem.

In Karangsoga, Lasi intends to go further to Sulawesi to avoid Bambang, as the police are also pursuing her. Kanjat wants to accompany her, but it is not appropriate for them to go alone without a formal relationship. Eyang Mus once again provides a solution by marrying Lasi and Kanjat so they can accompany her in fleeing to Sulawesi.

"Hold on, Cah Bagus. I don't intend to cancel your departure. Finding a third person isn't easy right now, as it's currently the season for working in the fields. What I want is for both of you to depart, but within proper limits. So, to make it appropriate for both of you to leave together, you and Lasi should get married first. Oh, don't be surprised. This is an important yet simple matter." (Tohari, 2011: 307)

After a simple wedding, Lasi and Kanjat head to Sulawesi with a stopover in Jakarta, but they are apprehended by the police beforehand. During her two days as Kanjat's wife,

Lasi finally experiences the true meaning of marriage, and she is already pregnant with Kanjat's child. On the other hand, Bambang is forced to wait until she gives birth to their child to marry Lasi. Kanjat tries to find Lasi in Jakarta and eventually reunites with her when she is already apprehended by the police on suspicion of involvement in the misuse of Bambang's ill-gotten wealth. With the examination and assistance from Blakasuta, Kanjat's old friend and lawyer handling her case, Lasi is freed. She returns to Karangsoga and lives happily with Kanjat.

The main issue in the novel is addressed through Lasi's journey throughout the story, which is the marginalization she experiences as a woman. Fakihi (2008) defines marginalization as a process of impoverishment or lack of opportunities for development. Lasi's opportunities as a female character in the novel are easily overlooked, even exploited for personal satisfaction, implicitly criticizing the real-life situation in a society that still views women only as objects of male desire and easily exploited with worldly wealth. Ahmad Tohari encapsulates this issue through the conflicts experienced by Lasi, from being Darsa's wife to becoming a mistress of an official, and being involved in dirty business dealings between Bu Lanting and the rulers.

As the central character, Lasi tries to fight against the marginalization she experiences as a woman, starting with fleeing from Karangsoga and resisting the temptations of Handarbeni and Bambang. The disparities of life in the village and city that she directly experiences do not change Lasi's stance because she has been raised since childhood as a simple woman.

CONCLUSION

One of the functions of literature for authors is as a means to convey their views, as seen in the novel *Bekisar Merah*, which draws from real-life conditions in Indonesian society. The rural setting and the wisdom of its inhabitants are still utilized by Ahmad Tohari to imply the values and messages within it. Lasi's story touches on a moral crisis related to the views and attitudes of society that justify the marginalization of women. Indirectly, Lasi is able to explain the marginalization experienced by women amidst social events and society. With a dramatic storyline, Ahmad Tohari successfully places an important message about living life with adherence to morality and justice.

The novel *Bekisar Merah* also constructs criticism of the real-life conditions in society that still harbor the potential for marginalization, especially towards women. It is important for society to have moral education and to apply it in everyday life. This will also impact attitudes and views towards respecting others, regardless of their origin or gender. This is also directed towards women who, from the outset, should have a foundation in moral education and awareness of their rights and equality in order to make their own life choices.

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