Kartini on Screen: Narrating Kartini as Feminist Agent

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ABSTRACT

Kartini is a national heroine who inspires Indonesian women. Her heroism is presented in lots of mediums: schoolbooks, history, stories, and movies. This research aims to explore the construction of Kartini ideological characterization in movies. To do so, it employs a qualitative method. Two recent Kartini biopic movies Surat Cinta Untuk Kartini (SCUK) (2016) and Kartini (2017) were selected as research objects. Through documentation techniques and employing Tzevetan Todorov concept of narrative structure, this study identified two issues in patriarchy resistance by Kartini in the two research objects: education and marriage. Vladimir Propp’s character narration analysis was implemented on those two issues within the movies to explore the feminist ideology of Kartini characterization. The analysis result from both movies demonstrated different narration structures. SCUK (2016) started the narration with equilibrium, while Kartini (2017) started with disruption. The Kartini feminist agency in both movies was presented differently. In SCUK (2016), it was dominantly presented by disequilibrium narration of Suwardi’s character. Meanwhile in Kartini (2017), it uses disequilibrium narration of Kartini character itself. As a conclusion, both movies implied liberal feminism ideology as agency characterization of Kartini character. These results implicated insight for narrating Kartini agency as well understanding it.

Keywords: Agency, Feminism, Kartini, Movie, Narrative Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Raden Ajeng (RA) Kartini is one of national female icon in gender equality in Indonesia. RA Kartini, a Javanese noble woman who was against the tradition and embracing modernity during colonization becomes a representation for Indonesian women’s struggling for emancipation. RA Kartini symbolization becomes more established since President Soekarno in 1964 released a decree stating RA Kartini as National Heroine, and her birthday which is on 21 April is celebrated as Kartini Day.

As a national heroine, Kartini gains personage in not only historical scope but also in art and entertainment. It means the narration of Kartini is not limited in schoolbooks. People may know her from fictions like novel, biopic literary works or movies. Some of the intended narrations are; “Panggil Aku Kartini Saja” novel in 2003, “Kartini” novel in 2016, “RA Kartini” movie in 1982, and many more. These narrations surely have its own point of view in constructing Kartini character. “Panggil Aku Kartini Saja” for example, the novel by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (Pram) which actually published during the years of political transition from Old Order to the New Order. The novel originally is a four volumes biography before being simplify for re-publish purpose in 2013 and re-printed until today. Prams, according to Wulan, characterized Kartini as Javanese representation against the gender base domination. She stated that the novel displays how Prams as “men-writer” narrated Kartini’s conflicts not in the context of colonial perspective but in patriarchal Javanese culture [1].

Other narration was “Kartini” a novel by Abidah El Khalieqy published in 2017. This novel was a movie interpretation with the same title “Kartini” which also released in the same year 2017. Both novel and movie used woman emancipation as theme. Indrawati in her research stated that Abidah El Khailieqy throughout Kartini’s dialogs describe some ideologies, such as rejecting male domination and resisting the hegemonic patriarchy system [2]. The “Kartini” novel by Khalieqy is unique for it is written based on “Kartini” movie script. It is unusual because the moviemaking is based on the novel, not the opposite, for instance “RA Kartini” in 1982 by Sumandjaja. It relays on written text, which is considered as one of the historical biopic movies in the New Order.
period. However, "RA Kartini" and "Kartini" in terms of story plot, both centralize on Kartini as figure. The Movies solely narrates Kartini through “Kartini” character.

Different from “RA Kartini” and “Kartini” movies, “Surat Cinta untuk Kartini” takes different approach in narrating Kartini. Azhar Kinoi Lubis, the director makes the use of Sarwardi character to characterize Kartini’s character. He characterizes Kartini into multidimensional characterization; they are leptosome-physical typology, psychological melancholies, and loyal-obedient to the Javanese tradition [3]. However, the similarity is the movie still presents Kartini as social hero who fights for the woman injustice in the Javanese tradition. Dewantara explains that the gender injustice in the movie is implied through stereotyping, subordination and physical violence [4].

2. METHOD

The objective of this article is to explore the recent narration construction of Kartini ideology agency characterization on screen. In doing this, the research article uses two movies as objects entitled Surat Cinta untuk Kartini (SCUK) (2016) by Azhar Kinoi Lubis and Kartini (2017) by Hanung Bramantyo. Considering the nature of the objects, it employs qualitative method. As stated by Bogdan, Taylor and L. De that qualitative methodology refers in the broadest sense to research that produces descriptive data-people’s own written or spoken words and observable behavior [5].

In movies, actors play the scripts to construct the movie as a whole. Therefore, the research gained the research data by observation and documentation techniques. The movies are observed and then collected through the documentation process. Khatib explains the documentation technique is collecting procedure on documents; events notes, images, arts, etc., which includes identification, classification and categorization in process [6]. Fragments scenes identified, classified and categorized based on the relevance with the research topic. Therefore, the article firstly discusses the research object using narrative structure concept by Tzvetan Todorov in order to gain perspectives to identify and classify the issues as primary data.

The primary data then descriptively discussed using Vladimir Propp’s character narration analysis and Anthony Giddens’ structuration (agency) concepts as tools of analysis. Propp’s character narration is concerning the character function as part of the narration structure. How characters have its own function to make the story intact. Propp stated that the character function within the narration structure is conceptualized from two aspects: (1) the character act, how it differs from other characters, and how it defines the meaning of the story; (2) the consequences of the action in the narration, how the acts influence other characters within the story [7]. Those character functions then analyzed using Structuration theory by Anthony Giddens. This theory discusses where man as agent is a dominated by the social structure. Giddens stated the structuration theory is based on the premises that social structure must be re-conceptualized as duality-structure duality, the society (object) and (subject) man as agent [8]. The research employs character narration function to signify meaning. As Hall stated, meaning depends not on the material quality of the sign but on its symbolic function [9]. In this case, feminism ideological agency characterizations of Kartini were figured on screen.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this article, the narrative characterization from both movies was analyzed simultaneously, it means both narrative and feminist agency analyses from the movies are discussed jointly.

3.1. SCUK (2016) and Kartini (2017): Narrative Structure

Denotative layer is informational layer, communicative signs that may easily inform messages to the audiences [10]. In movie narration, structure may be considered as this layer because narration is representation from sequences or events [7]. Therefore, first, let us discuss the narration aspects of the movies. The narrations in movies are sequences of events composed through causality in certain specific time and space. Both Kartini and SCUK movies use similar cultural space and time: Jepara in the early 19th century. The differentiations are the narration of the movies, story, and plot. In Kartini (2017), the story was centered in Kartini’s character from childhood, marriage and her past away but the plot is not presented chronologically. The story uses Kartini’s flashback as the plot. Meanwhile in the SCUK (2016), a kindergarten teacher, Rangga, narrates Kartini’s character in the present time. Rangga as storyteller uses Sawardi, the post-man character to characterize Kartini. For further explanation, it can be seen on the Table 1.

| Plot       | SCUK (2016) | Kartini (2017) |
|------------|-------------|----------------|
| Exposition |
| Rising conflict |
| Conflict |
| Climax |
| Anti-climax |
| Resolution |

| Narrative Structure       | Disruption | Equilibrium |
|---------------------------|------------|-------------|
| SCUK (2016)               |            |             |
| Kartini (2017)            |            |

Todorov, a Russian linguist explained that texts have its own structure because, realized or not, the author has composed text into a structure [7]. Therefore, it is important to understand the narration based on the text structure; SCUK and Kartini narrative structure in these cases. Kartini (2017) started with Kartini squat walking to her father who asked her to become Raden Ayu. The scene then continued with the depiction of Kartini in her childhood, conflicted with her brothers for sentimental reason; because Kartini or Trinil, her childhood nickname, would like to accompany her birthmother who is not a Javanese noble. While in SCUK (2016) started with two schoolteachers, Dian and Rangga. Dian’s students feel unenthusiast about listening to the Kartini’s story for its too common and often to them to listen. Rangga then steps in...
and offers to tell the story of Suwardi, a postman in the movie. SCUK exposition of the story implicates the exploration of Kartini's traditional narration.

On the central conflict, both movies also use different angles. Kartini (2017) uses Kartini's resistance toward Javanese patriarchy system as main conflict, while SCUK (2016) blurs use social issues as main conflict. SCUK frame the conflict by using Suwardi's love story towards Kartini. These differences influence the narrating plot. Kartini (2017) started the conflict within the story much earlier rather than SCUK. In Kartini (2017), the early scenes already show the social patriarchy issues, for instance; Kartini quarrel with his brothers because she wants to sleep with her commoners’ birthmother which is forbidden in the Javanese royal tradition. Kartini (2017) employs disruption as the beginning of the narration structure. On the other hand, SCUK conflict doesn’t appear in the early exposition scenes, it starts to appear when Suwardi starts falling in love with Kartini. SCUK employs equilibrium as the beginning of the narration structure. These differences, if we refer to the four stages of Todorov narrative structure; (1) equilibrium; (2) disruption; (3); disequilibrium; (4) new equilibrium [8], it can be said that Kartini (2017) movie is more progressive in presenting Kartini characterization.

Seen from the narrative point of view, the use of the third person, Rangga in SCUK, makes the story has two plots which are main plot and side plot. Main plot means the main story while the side plot means the frame of the story that is the small events encircling the main events. In SCUK, Kartini’s struggle seems using the side plot, for instance in the scene of Kartini teaching and being forced to get married for the sake of her struggle is not the way to narrate the story but to construct the Kartini’s character. Next, between Rangga, the storyteller of Kartini and Dian is also the side plot. In the contrary, the main plot is emphasized on Suwardi’s love story to Kartini as the main conflict which ended with Suwardi’s willingness to let go Kartini. The point of view of the Kartini’s story in SCUK makes the focus split and it makes the movie is more dominant in constructing Kartini verbally rather than visually. While in Kartini (2017), the point of view of Kartini as the main character makes the movie focuses on Kartini as an intellectual woman in Javanese patriarchy environment in colonial era. The side plot in this film functions as the supporting of the main plot. The conflict in this movie focuses on Kartini in terms of seclusion, teaching, willingness to learn, capability of writing, scholarship, to the engagement and married.

The striking difference from Kartini (2017) and SCUK lies in emphasizing the different narration structure namely plot and story. Both movies use Kartini as the plot, but only in Kartini (2017) which consistently use narration of Kartini not only as the plot but also as story for a narration basically take a certain event. The whole events (from beginning to end) are called story. This whole story can be shown or not in the text [11]. However, both of them narrate Kartini’s resistance role to the patriarchal concept of Javanese society, especially in two scopes; they are education and marriage. These two main conflicts appear in these two movies, but they are shown differently.

The initial difference in the narrative structure from the story and plot which relates to Kartini’s characterization shows that both are not intended as reflections of Kartini’s reality but rather as an ‘illusion of reality’ or ‘reality impression’ about Kartini’s figure and what she experiences. A movie becomes a process of imitation of signs in a system of image representation (reality) which is then modeled so that it can be identified by the audiences and constructed the relationship among the meanings conveyed, which is the Kartini’s character.

3.2. Kartini as Feminist Agent Narrative Characterization

The results of the analysis of Kartini’s characterization as a feminist agent in both data are as follows:

| Depiction | SCUK (2016) | Kartini (2017) |
|-----------|-------------|---------------|
| Figure    | Newcomer actress | Popular actress (Pop Icons) |
| Characterization tools | Language, Clothes, behavior | Language, clothes, behavior |
| Characterization method | Verbal exploration dominance | Verbal and visual exploration |
| Character Function | Symbolic representation | Symbolic representation |
| Agency    | Social concept | Social cultural concept |
| Ideology  | Liberal feminist | Liberal feminist |

3.2.1. Kartini Depiction

In the context of biopic movie, Kartini’s character is central. Image and character of Kartini needs to be shown as close as possible to the original figure. Therefore, filmmaker usually will first conduct a research related to Kartini’s characters, both her ideology and her life-figure. Related to the figure, the choice of actor or actress from the two movies is interesting to observe. In Kartini (2017), Kartini character is played by a popular Indonesian actress, Dian Sastro. Other characters from this movie are Acha Septiasari as Roekmini, and Ayu Shita as Kardinah. Bramantyo, the director said that the election was due to Dian Sastro often talks a lot about women’s issues, and they (Ayu and Acha) are the current pop icons [12]. In other words, popularity is one of the factors of Kartini’s characterization.

SCUK (2016), on the other hand, is different from Kartini (2017). Kartini’s character is played by a newcomer actress, Rania Putrisari. Kinoy explains that he wants to create Kartini’s character based on his version who was an ordinary person for he needs an actress who plays like ordinary people without any burden. According to him, the new role actress can be more easily directed and formed to represent the character that has been widely known in different version [10]. In SCUK, the established actor is represented by Chicco Jericho as Suwardi. The choice of the actor and actress shows the emphasis on characterization, namely SCUK (2016) centered on Suwardi while on Kartini (2017) is centered on Cartini’s
character. This choice can be interpreted as a method what Hall called imaginative discovery, which is to build the sensations as ‘they’ and ‘we’ [13]. The popularity of the actors and actresses is an attempt to stimulate the present generation that these movies are not the documentaries movies about ‘they’ who live in the past, but a biopic movie about the figures who fight for ‘our’ interests.

The next characterization is the setting of Javanese culture. Kartini comes from a Javanese noble family, and she is the second daughter of Jepara Regent. The setting of this Javanese noble figure is explicitly expressed through three things: language, clothing, and behavior. The clothing from both movies, Kartini wears Kebaya. Conceptually Kebaya is a cloth that shows the subtle and gentle of a Javanese woman Jawa [14]. The concept of Kebaya is used in both movies to reflect the nobility of the Javanese woman in Kartini’s character. However, there are differences in both movies. In SCUK, Kartini’s figure is shown at least with two Kebaya models; the first is white and the second one is a white Kebaya patterned with flowers in blue, green and purple. These two models are combined with Jarsik. The use of patterned Kebaya shows the element of modernity that is not focus on basic color. While in Kartini (2017), Kebaya is displayed with the dominance of white base color with variation in white ivory that shows the simplicity and classic impression. Besides, the use of Kebaya is to show the difference between Kartini’s clothes and the women who wear Kemben and strengthen Kartini’s social class background. The characterization of the class social background in both movies was also confirmed by the use of Sandal as footwear and Delman as a means of transportation for Kartini.

The depiction of Kartini as a Javanese woman is also shown through Javanese language; although it’s limited due to the commercial aspects for it can be counter-productive for audience segmentation. Javanese is less used in SCUK than in Kartini (2017), but both movies tried to show it through dialects on verbal dialogue. As for actions, both movies feature the role of Kartini in driving the economy of Jepara regency which led by her father through sculpture carving. The action is illustrated by directing Kartini’s carving motifs and affirmations by other characters in the movies. It’s just that Kartini (2017) is more prominent than SCUK. Kartini (2017) highlights the Javanese cultural, myths, such as the fear of ‘Kualat’ of the carver for making puppets motifs. Here the figure of Kartini through her actions is characterized as a mystical disbelief and rational. These two characterizations then reflect the ideology that was built, namely a moderate noble feminist.

3.2.2. Feminist Agency

In narration, the characters can have certain characteristic or behavior which can be a way to express ideas. Propp explained that characterization serves to make the narration complete, conceptualized through two aspects; (1) actions perform by the characters, and (2) the result of the actions in the story or narration [7]. In SCUK and Kartini movies, the preeminent action from Kartini is her action in fighting for education for women. It becomes the topic narration from Kartini’s character, although shown in different ways.

In SCUK, the verbal aspect in the dialogues between Kartini and Suwardi become the most frequently method. SCUK explores the ideas through dialogue statements and argumentations, as a means of discourse on the feminist agency from Kartini. Because the social movements did not form meaning and discourse related to the goals of the movement for granted, but discourse in social movement is formed through the dialogues with the existing social reality [15]. The visualization is limited to the scene of Kartini teaching on the edge of the river, using a stick and books. A place for teaching on the edge of the river has been prepared by Suwardi and the girls who are invited by Suwardi’s daughter show two things. Firstly, Kartini as the agent of her struggle role is a drafter and a teacher who later shares her role with Suwardi as a helping driver. Secondly, Kartini’s struggle is shown by the emphasis on space, that is the ‘river’. This ‘space’ in intended to give the impression of stealth; that education for women is taboo. This narration is reinforced by the scene of parents who do not allow their daughters to study. What is described here is a form of structural violence. Galtung explained that the forms of structural violence do not harm or kill directly, but through social structure that causes poverty, economic imbalance, or the injustice of social and political [15].

Things are different from Kartini (2017) which did not only show the dimension of structural violence, but also the dimension of cultural violence. As Galtung stated that cultural violence refers to cultural aspects, symbolic fields of our existences-such as religion and ideology, language and art [16]. The scene of rejection of the carving motifs for they are afraid of ‘Kualat’ is one of the examples. In Kartini (2017) who looks comfortable with the blackboard and class in her house. The impression highlighted is the confinement of space, limitation for Kartini’s actions. The equation from both is the Kartini’s character against the ignorance for women. Kartini represents liberal feminist thought, regarding women as autonomous human led by ratios, and through the ratio women can understand the principles of morality and individual freedom [17]. The thought is narrated through the teaching activities and her critical thinking in both movies. Kartini is illustrated by creating social activities continuously through men as of self-confirmation that is a social agent [8].

Patriarchy system illustrated in the movie is formed of involvement of social relations in a structure, and Kartini’s resistance activity is an effort to structure it. Giddens stated the conditions that arrange the repletion or transformation of structures and hence the reproduction of social systems themselves [8]. The new-equilibrium narration is a form of the result from that structure.

Both movies reveal the life structure of Javanese women in that time, especially a noble. A noble woman gets basic education at the age of 12, they are secluded at the age 15 or 16 and then get married and they live with a repetitive pattern of social structure. Kartini (2017) shows the agency changes in structure through several scenes, including when Kartini and her siblings modernize the trade of carving art in Jepara. They become the agent who are illustrated in breaking the myth of Javanese carving art and open the perspective on international market opportunities. This scene constructs the seclusion, that becomes a barrier, can be passed by the economic success
of carving art. In contrast to Kartini (2017), in SCUK, the economic improvement of carving art is only briefly, verbal narration of Kartini’s thoughts is expressed in her dialogues with Suwardi. But SCUK shows the advantages of the illustration of Kartini’s action through Dian’s character who becomes a teacher. Implicitly, Dian becomes the illustration of the impact of Kartini’s success in fighting for women in education.

Both movies with their respective proportion show Kartini, like what Giddens stated as a reflexive of knowledge to move the social life away from the tradition establishment [18]. Kartini as a figure through the fragments in the movie is characterized as a symbol of the structure of Javanese patriarchal values. These two biopic movies, although with the different narration structure still use the conflict of marriage and education access for women to rebuild the feminist characterization through Kartini’s figure. This implies that the viewpoint on the values of Kartini’s struggle in those movies is not explored. This popular narration makes both movies show the same things over and over as like the previous narrations, only use different medium packs. The narration of the Kartini’s characterization in both movies functions as symbolic representation that is likely to be easy to understand by today’s generation. However, it is uncertain that the impact of changes in the value of Kartini’s struggle can be accepted for the consequences of biopic movies are the limited space and time which the emphasis is on the biography of the figure itself, not to the impacts. Thus, this paper implies that an innovation is needed in the biopic movie, Kartini to explore the ideology with the story and plot that can be a bridge for the impacts and causes of the values of Kartini’s struggle.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper shows that both movies have two different narration structures with the emphasis on the role of the same theme figure, that is the resistance of Kartini to the concept of Javanese patriarch in two scopes: education and marriage. Structurally, the narration of SCUK (2016) starts with equilibrium and ends with new equilibrium where the plot of the story is Suwardi’s love story to Kartini. While in Kartini (2017), the narration starts with the disruption and ends with new equilibrium where the plot follows the story of Kartini’s struggle against the Javanese patriarchal system. The narration structure in SCUK movie framed by the love story theme makes the narration seems slowly comparing to Kartini (2017) which shows progressively the role of kartini’s agency as a feminist.

The narrative characterization of the Kartini’s character from both movies is shown through the role selection and Javanese culture. Kartini’s character in Kartini (2017) played by a famous actress, on the other hand, in SCUK Kartini’s character is played by a newcomer actress. Kartini (2017) uses the icon as an approach to the audience of pop culture generation. Different from SCUK which explores more the side plot with the character of Suwardi and construct the narration of Kartini’s character using a newcomer actress. As for the characterization of Javanese culture, both movies apply three things: language, clothing, and behavior. Both SCUK and Kartini (2017) use Kebaya and Kenben to differentiate the social background. But SCUK shows more modernity by using motifs on the Kebaya than Kartini (2017) which only use basic color on the Kebaya. The Javanese language in both movies is limited and only focuses on the use of dialects. As for actions, Kartini (2017) is more illustrative in showing the Javanese culture comparing to SCUK.

In the context of feminist agency from Kartini’s character, viewed from the perspective of character by Propp, it is known that Kartini (2017) is more integrated (visual and verbal) in showing Kartini’s struggle against the Javanese patriarchal system than SCUK which emphasizes the use of verbal dialogues between Suwardi and Kartini. Marriage and education become the conflict’s plot to build the characterization of Kartini feminist agency against Javanese patriarchy at that time.

The description of analysis shows that narrative characterization in both movies can be influenced by the shape of the structure, which in turn can affect the quality of the characters in the movie itself. In addition, this paper shows that the narration from both movies structure a limited biopic narrative in illustrating the impact of the values of Kartini’s struggle through the exploration of their fictional aspects. Therefore, the narrative structure is the representation of the symbolic values of Kartini’s figure.

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