

January 2018

## Feminist Voice in the Works of Indonesian Early Woman Writers: Reading Novels and Short Stories by Suwarsih Djojopuspito

Aquarini Priyatna

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Priyatna, Aquarini (2018). Feminist Voice in the Works of Indonesian Early Woman Writers: Reading Novels and Short Stories by Suwarsih Djojopuspito. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 19(2), 230-243.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol19/iss2/15>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

## Feminist Voice in the Works of Indonesian Early Woman Writers: Reading Novels and Short Stories by Suwarsih Djojopuspito<sup>1</sup>

By Aquarini Priyatna<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Suwarsih Djojopuspito is among the most important early Indonesian women/feminist writers. This research intends to emphasize her rightful position among the first Indonesian feminist writers. Focusing on her very important novel *Manusia Bebas* (published originally in Dutch as *Buiten het Gareel* in 1940)<sup>3</sup>, one collection of short stories, *Empat Serangkai* (1954), and a novel written in Sundanese, *Marjanah* (1959), I argue that feminist spirits and ideas actually have existed and been elaborated in works by women writers in the era prior to the Indonesian New Order (1966-1998) as exemplified by Suwarsih's works. What is important in these works is that despite the unjust gender and sexual construction, the women protagonists and characters are shown to find their agency through their awareness of their particular situation. Suwarsih<sup>4</sup> reestablishes the construction of femininity and attributes it not to total submission and acceptance to males and the patriarchal culture but to female agency, subjectivity, and intelligence.

*Keywords:* Suwarsih Djojopuspito, Indonesian women writers, feminist voice, sexuality, gender, local culture

### Introduction

*Autobiography makes trouble: it is difficult to define as a distinct genre, and the borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary.* (Cosslett, Lury, & Summerfield, 2000: 1)

---

<sup>1</sup> A much simpler paper on this topic was presented for the discussions at the Komunitas Salihara Jakarta under the title of Suwarsih Djojopuspito: *Menciptakan Subjek Feminis Nasionalis melalui Narasi Autobiografis*/Suwarsih Djojopuspito: Establishing Nationalist Feminist Subject through Autobiographical Narrative, Jakarta, 9 April 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Aquarini Priyatna is currently teaching in the Department of Literature and Cultural Studies, University of Padjadjaran. She holds a Master's Degree from the Institute for Women's Studies Lancaster University, UK (2002) and another Master's Degree from the Women's Studies Post-Graduate Program, Universities Indonesia (2003). She completed her PhD, which looked at celebrity auto/biographies, at the Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research, Monash University, Australia. She has published two books on Feminist Cultural Studies. Her latest book publication is on novels by Nh. Dini, a prominent Indonesian feminist writer.

<sup>3</sup> I am referring to *Manusia Bebas* in my reading of the novel. Although some discussion regarding the *Buiten het Gareel* where relevant ideas are included.

<sup>4</sup> I refer to Suwarsih Djojopuspito as "Suwarsih" as Indonesians are recognized by their first name rather than their family names. In fact, some Indonesians do not even have a family name, like the former President Soekarno and Soeharto.

I have always been interested in women's life narratives, both those who can be categorized as public figures and those who are considered as "common people". The books by Nh. Dini<sup>5</sup>, a prominent Indonesian woman writer, for example, are among the first books that made me realize that writing autobiographically is an important strategy in putting forwards issues pertaining to women, or even feminist writings. My academic interest in auto/biographies have made me tend to write autobiographically. I believe auto/biographies help bring to the fore the issues discussed in the context of women's daily lives, as I also integrate the narrative of my own daily life into the context of my academic works. I am of the argument that such an act is strategic in showing how a woman is constantly fragmented among the different roles she has to play, yet somehow finds coherence in the different roles and identities, even domains that intersect in her life. A woman like me is fragmented among my roles as a female academic, a feminist, a mother, a wife, a Sundanese/Javanese/Bantenese<sup>6</sup>, and at the same time I am a woman who embodies a body that menstruates, that got pregnant and gave birth, a body that breastfed and maybe soon experiences menopause—to say the least. This fragmentation and coherence may be similar as and/or different from the experience of other women, as Shackford-Bradley contends while discussing *Manusia Bebas* (Shackford-Bradley, 2000: 217),

With a few exceptions, the women who appear in the novel are not rendered as characters with deeply analyzed motivations and personas. Rather, they form a landscape in which Sulastri sees herself in fragmented ways; through this process she gains a sense of her self (sic) as a woman and as an individual.

In this paper, I discuss Suwarsih Djojopuspito as the writer of the narrative and her narratives in three of her works, namely *Manusia Bebas* (Mankind Free), *Empat Serangkai*, and *Marjanah*. The works discussed are selected to cover the different genres that Suwarsih wrote, as well as the different languages she used in her works. *Manusia Bebas* was written in Dutch when it was first published as *Buiten het Gareel* in 1940. It was then translated into Bahasa Indonesia entitled *Manusia Bebas* in 1975. *Manusia Bebas* was Suwarsih's first novel and it is also Suwarsih's work that gets most attention, particularly in the context of autobiographical narrative, or what Shackford-Bradley (2000) refers to as "autobiographical fictions". *Empat Serangkai* is important to discuss in this paper because it talks about the different stories of women in the period of 1930-1940s and because it offers the stories in the genre of short story. The last work I discuss, *Marjanah* is significant to consider because it is a novel in Sundanese, which elaborates the issue of women in the specific cultural context and language. Arguably, the different works will contribute to the fuller discussion on how feminist subjects are represented in the three works.

As Nh. Dini, another Indonesian feminist writer, who states that she "writes to be the representative of women in general" (Dini, 2000: 76, my emphasis), Suwarsih who was productive in the period of 1940-1970s also wrote with the awareness of being a representative of women. In her memoir of Charles Edgar duPerron, a person who had been influential in making possible the

---

<sup>5</sup> Nh. Dini is one of Indonesian important woman writers who articulates feminist voices in her literary works, most of which can be considered as autobiographical fictions. She dwells upon the issues of relationships, sexuality and encounters and meetings of the "West" and "East", mostly drawn from her experience of being married to a French Diplomat and being located in various places in the world.

<sup>6</sup> Sundanese is an ethnic group that resides mainly in West Java. The Bantenese live mainly in the province of Banten, which is in the western part of West Java. Javanese refers to the ethnic group living in Central and East Java. The reference to the ethnic group includes the general cultural identity and practices, including the local language.

publication of her first novel, translated into *Manusia Bebas* in 1975), Suwarsih described herself as “a writer who writes about trivial things on women’s emancipation” (Djojopuspito, 1973). This statement can only be read as a feminist statement and thus it is important to take up in the reading of Suwarsih’s works which I am doing in this paper.

### **Suwarsih Djojopuspito: Indonesian Early Feminist Writer**

Suwarsih is arguably among the first Indonesian women writers/novelists apart from Selasih (*Kalau tak Untung*, 1933) and Hamidah (*Kehilangan Mestika*, 1935) whose works got published by Balai Pustaka, which was the literary authority before Indonesia’s independence (Suryaman, Wiyatmi, BW, & Liliani, 2011: 13). Suwarsih’s novel *Manusia Bebas* was published only in 1975, but its original version in Dutch was published in the Netherlands in 1940 thanks to du Perron. This is interesting because it means that Suwarsih had “gone international” even before her penwomanship was recognized in Indonesia.

As discussed by Suryaman et.al (2011), the small number of women writers correlates with the low level of education obtained by women at that time. In this context, it can be argued that Suwarsih Djojopuspito was among the few Indonesian women who were lucky to have obtained high education. As written by Korrie Layun Rampan (2000), Suwarsih had Dutch education, namely Sekolah Kartini, MULO (junior secondary level education), and Europeesche Kweekschool (teachers’ secondary education). She also worked as a teacher in various places, including *Perguruan Rakyat*, *Taman Siswa*, *Pasundan Istri* and HIS. With her high education, Suwarsih got exposure to Dutch, which later became the language she felt at home to pen her first novel with after the original version written in Sundanese was rejected by Balai Pustaka (Budianta, 2007).

Suwarsih was a polyglot. She spoke French, Dutch, German, and English, on top of her local Bahasa Indonesia and Sundanese. The ability to speak foreign languages, in addition to the national and local language enabled her to work as a translator and navigate through different cultures through the languages she was fluent in and through the books she read as apparent in her works such as *Manusia Bebas* (first published in Dutch as *Buiten het Gareel* in *Marjanah*, and *Empat Serangkai*).

Previous researches, such as done by Watson (2009) and Shackford-Bradley (2000) argue that Djojopuspito’s works are autobiographical. In many of her works, reference to Suwarsih is clear. All three works discussed in this article portray female protagonists who are intelligent and critical, who read ferociously and who are confident and have no hesitation in engaging in critical discussion about what they read with people who can actually keep up with them, as apparent in *Marjanah* (Djojopuspito, 1959: 74) and *Manusia Bebas* (Djojopuspito, 1975). In the short story *Perempuan Djahat*, Hersini the protagonist is described to be reading “Slauerhoff, Rilke dan Pusjkin” (Djojopuspito, 1954d). The point of reference to Suwarsih is also emphasized by the “I narrator” used in *Manusia Bebas*, and in three out of the four short stories in *Empat Serangkai*.

Close reference in the works to Suwarsih the writer is perfectly exemplified by Sulastri, the protagonist of *Manusia Bebas*, who documents her life by writing a novel. The protagonist Marjanah, in *Marjanah*, also provides clear reference to Suwarsih. Both Suwarsih the writer and Marjanah the protagonists are described to write journals that they carefully keep in their wardrobes. With these references, it can be argued that more than simply portraying women’s lives in general, Suwarsih documented her life through her writings, albeit her claim that her works are “simple” and that she only wrote on “trivial things” (Perron, 1975: viii). Both the journal and the

novel being written by the protagonist in the novel as well as the texts written by Suwarsih bear important historical values not only in the context of the state and national movement, but more importantly in the context of portraying the life of “intellectual” women who have to navigate around nationalist movement and/in their domestic space.

In the preface to *Buiten het Gareel*, du Perron writes, “the simplicity, which frequently appears in the form of document, is the biggest hope the book has, to be read over and over again as a book that doesn’t go obsolete [and] invaluable as the witness for a certain period” (Perron, 1975: xiv). The same thing is proposed by Toeti Herati, who contends that *Manusia Bebas* contributes to the portrayal of nationalist movement for a period of thirty years through “the long journey of a newly-wedded couple... [who] have to encounter constant blows of disappointment, overcome the marital problems and regain their ability to document the memory and write the dreams of an Indonesian country (Heraty, 2000: xvii).

Suwarsih was born on 21 April 1912, although some documented it to be on 20 April (Mohamad, 2013). She was only 28 years old when her first novel was published. Even though in terms of themes or topics of her writings Suwarsih was comparable to Kartini<sup>7</sup>, but as du Perron (1975) emphasized, unlike Kartini who was born to a noble family, Suwarsih was a child of a common family. Suwarsih’s astounding leap in her education and literary journey render her quite an extraordinary person. Furthermore, her ability to speak different languages and even the journey of her first novel shows not only her capacity and the different traversions she performed, but more importantly the different spaces she took as a woman who lived during the colonial and postcolonial eras. Within that frame, as Shackford-Bradley argues, Suwarsih played the different roles of “translator, both literally as well as figuratively, creating connections between a variety of cultural and linguistic gaps” (Shackford-Bradley, 2000: 189).

Such movement and acts of traversing carried out by Suwarsih require a high level of intelligence to navigate paradoxes and hindrances. On the one hand, she had put her feet on modern civilization; on the other hand, she still lived in a community that believed in superstition, accepted polygamy and undermined women as second class citizens who are not fully recognized as an intellectual being equal to men. Such complexity can be clearly seen in the portrayal of Sulastri, the female protagonist in *Manusia Bebas*, who is frequently the object of her husband’s mockery. Sudarmo, Sulastri’s husband, labels his wife as too “bourgeois” because she loves beautiful things and “unimportant pretty-pretties”. Sulastri, as well as Suwarsih, experiences the ambivalence and disorientation in her position in public domain as a “proletar intellectual” and in domestic domain as a wife, two domains that are often definitely marked and separated. The depiction of Sulastri that has to physically cross the different domains also illustrates the metaphorical movement, even transgression, of the intellectual and domestic domains that she has to constantly perform (Shackford-Bradley, 2000).

One very interesting depiction in the novel is the movement that Sulastri performs during a nationalist meeting at her house. During that occasion the house is clearly divided into two domains, the public, represented by the living room wherein the men are discussing the movement and the back room, usually referred to as “*belakang*” (back) which includes the kitchen, where the women (wives) are gathering, talking about their domestic problems. Being both part of the nationalist movement and the wives’ group, Sulastri has to constantly move from the kitchen, where she prepares the food to be served for the men, to the living room where the serious political discussion takes place, negotiating not only the physical but also the cultural and political domains.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kartini is the recognized pioneer of Indonesian women’s emancipation.

She has to be able to have a chit chat about “trivial” matters with the wives when she’s in the domestic domain, but engages actively in intellectual matters while she is in the nationalist domain.

The more intricate construct of self-formation resides between the nationalist and the feminist domains. Suwarsih, just like Sulastri, has to navigate her being part of the intellectual group in the national movement and at the same time her part as feminist intellectuals who specifically struggle for the improvement of women’s well-being and welfare. She depicts how women are marginalized not only in the domestic space (polygamy, domestic abuse and domestic harassment), but also in the national movement where women’s and personal interests are relegated secondary to the nationalist movement.

The complex twists and intertwining of the national movement, the women’s/feminist movement and self-identity, including the “freedom to be feminine” can be seen in the intricate issues involved in the way Sulastri spends her leisure time on reading romance novels, which quickly gains a cynical comment as an “unworthy waste of time” from her sister who is a women’s movement activist. The sister adds, “You’re always reading those romance. Read something good, something useful for our women’s movement” (Djojopuspito, 1975: 195). Here we can see how “feminine pleasure” of reading romance is negated as useless compared to the feminist movement, which is signified as a more meaningful activity. In this context, Sulastri is considered to be un-nationalist and un-feminist. Ironically, between the two: Sulastri and her sister, it is Sulastri who is the stronger opponent against polygamy committed by their own father. Suwarsih, just like Sulastri, was very critical to the position of women’s movement at that time, which was still ambiguous and had not found a more solid ground. In a critical yet good humour, at the end of the novel when Sulastri has found a form of happiness with her husband, she questions the militaristic approach of feminist movement which has seemed to ban her from feminine pleasure.

*Lalu apa dong yang harus kubikin, kalau aku sedang girang, Dar? Kueh untuk Rustini? Apakah PID dan pergerakan wanita akan mengizinkannya, kalau aku sekarang membuat kue untuk Rustini?”* (Djojopuspito, 1975: 292).

So, what should I make when I am happy, Dar? Cookies for Rustini? Will PID and women’s movement let me, if I make some cookies for Rustini?  
(Djojopuspito, 1975: 292).

Putting her question in different words, “if I wanted to be a woman, a mother who takes care of her children, will I be off the track of the women’s movement?”

The notion of being “off the track” or “out of harness” or “outside the lines” needs to be closely discussed, as proposed by Toeti Heraty (2000). The original title of the novel in Dutch is *Buiten het Gareel*, which is translated into “Out of Harness” by Watson (2009) and by Heraty (2000) into “*di luar jalur*” in Bahasa Indonesia, which means being “off track” or “outside the lines” and not *Manusia Bebas*, translated by Watson as “Mankind Free”, literally speaking in Bahasa Indonesia it would be “Free Man/People”. The question emerging from this notion is whether freedom and liberation demand that we should be outside the lines? The notion of “outside the lines” or “off track” are defining attributes that I argue will contextualize her other works, including the collection of short stories and the novel written in Sundanese that I will discuss in this article.

Both Sulastri and Sudarmo, her husband, are figures that are outside the lines. They both represent those who seek freedom in achieving the ideological objectives and goals by not taking

the road mostly taken at that period. Just like Suwarsih and her husband, both Sulastri and her husband chose to teach in “underground schools” that are not recognized and endorsed by the Dutch colonial authority. In Bahasa Indonesia, it is called “*sekolah liar*” (literally: “wild school”).

The questions remain: are they outside the lines therefore they are free, or does the freedom they aspire require them to be outside the lines? However, it is clearly depicted in the novel that no freedom comes free. There is always a price to pay. For Sulastri it includes the ambiguity she has to go through as a highly educated woman who is not fully accepted in her group of “common” women, mainly women who are housewives. As a feminist who has a critical mind even towards women’s movement, she can be regarded as being outside of the women’s movement mainstream. As a nationalist intellectual proletarian, she does not always get a space in the national movement because she is not only occupying one area at a time, she is everything at the same time, making disruptions and interventions that may not easily be welcomed within a particular group. In this autobiographical narrative, the tension between the different gaps and spaces, between what is acceptable and what is not, between what is the same and what is different, contribute to the construction of feminist subjectivity established upon different contexts lived and encountered. As Chanfault-Duchet argues (2000: 61),

The autobiographical process uses not only facts and events, but also social representations and cultural values. A tension exists between self and society, which is resolved by the narrative presentation of unique self which can also be recognized by society.

Suwarsih and Sulastri are both writing their life-in-process, documenting the fixtures and fractures of their fragmented lives, contextualizing, evaluating and reevaluating them. Both put their life experience in writing, and label them an act of “women’s emancipation” in the form that intertwine their personal context and the national movement as a significant part of their own history. Such an act also saturates her feminist perspective into the local context of Indonesian culture, bringing into the surface various problems faced by women within specific time and space in Indonesian history, including a sense of being out of place in any endeavor she has taken.

### **Women “Outside the Line”: Sexuality and Empowerment**

As has been discussed, being a feminist and a nationalist, a wife, a mother, and a daughter caused Sulastri, the protagonist of *Manusia Bebas*, to have a sense of being fragmented and out of place, different and not being fully accepted in any domains she puts herself in. The notion of being “outside the lines” is significant not only in the discussion regarding the domains of the political and the personal, the nationalist and the feminist, but more particularly in the context of sexuality. Suwarsih’s novel *Marjanah*, and her collection of short stories, *Empat Serangkai*, elaborate a crucial part of the feminist perspective that Suwarsih articulates.

The issue of sex in literature, particularly in Indonesian women’s writings, triggered heated discussions in the early 2000s. The opinions can be roughly divided into those who found it empowering and those who found it demeaning, if not morally corrupt. The term “*sastrawang*”—fragrant literature, which derogatively refers to women writers who include the issues of sex and sexuality into their works, was widely used to undermine the issues of sexualities elaborated by women. Indonesian newspapers published differing opinions in their literary pages making sexuality and women an inevitable issue in literary criticism and works. Interestingly, the inclusion

of the issue of sexuality or any elements of sexuality into literary works, particularly written by women, seemed to focus on the works published by Ayu Utami and Djenar Maesa Ayu. In reality, the issues of sexuality was dealt also by earlier women writers such as Nh. Dini in her works published around 1970s. Suwarsih even examined it in the works she published in the 1950s in what I argue to be done in a very strong feminist perspective that elaborates the complexity and intertwine sexuality and local values and context. More significantly, Suwarsih shows the importance of sexuality in the construction of women's sense of self, agency, and subjectivity.

As many feminist literary theorists have often put forward, women who do not submit to the normative standard and construction are often considered transgressive. Terms such as “mad” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2007), and “monstrous” (Creed, 1993), for example, have been discussed as the ways women are portrayed when they transgress the normative boundaries. Sexual women are often described as “whore” and the sinned, and are often described to be doomed in the stories. Suwarsih deals with the issue of women transgressing conventional construction in the works discussed here. She depicts how such construction limits women's space and reduce women to their position as object, while at the same time shows how women are capable of not submitting to the fate of being the second sex, even confronting and subverting such construction. Her feminist articulation is quite apparent in her works.

The first work I discuss is a novel in Sundanese, *Marjanah*. I had not read any novel in Sundanese for a long time when I started to read *Marjanah*. I had no expectations except enjoying the ride the narrative takes me on. The challenge was doubled because not only was it written in Sundanese, it is also written in the old orthography. I did struggle in the beginning but without my realization I was already transformed to the world of *Marjanah*. I imagined quite a stereotypical beautiful Sundanese woman, having a lean body, wearing a bun on her head with a big beautiful flower adornment. The woman described is interesting not only because she is depicted to have a very nice countenance and attitude, she is also a woman who loves reading and writing. Having learnt Suwarsih's own life story, I could not help associating *Marjanah* with Suwarsih. Even though the autobiographical reference between *Marjanah* and Suwarsih is not as strong as that of Suwarsih and Sulastri, and it is not even the point of significance, but any writing with a close reference to the life of the writer has always captivated my interest, and in this context, is important.

*Marjanah* was published by Balai Pustaka in 1959, but the setting of the novel is 1920s up to 1935. Written in a chronological plot starting from the time when *Marjanah* is twelve years old until she has become an adult and finally marries the man she truly loves. *Marjanah* is described to have been born to a wealthy family. She is not only portrayed as a person with a good attitude, but also depicted as physically appealing within the context of Sundanese culture at that time.

*Beungeutna buleud, tarangna rubak, halis melengkung hideung, ari imut pipina kempot seabeulah, panon seukeut, buringhas hurung . Dina pasemona katembong parangi manis, berag matak hegar anu ningal. Rupana seger siga kembang nu tas kahudjanan. Saparipolahna rikat, singer, henteu matak djengkel hate. Buukna pondok, dibeungkeut ku pita beureum...[...] (Djojopuspito, 1959: 7)*

Her face is round, her forehead is wide, her black eyebrows curve beautifully, and when she smiles she will show her dimple on one of her cheeks, her eyes are sharp, burning and lively. Her expression radiates sweetness and friendliness brightening the feeling of anyone looking at her. Her countenance is fresh just like

the flowers newly wetted by the rain. Her gesture and mannerism are quick and light, which will rid any revulsion. Her hair is short, tied by a red ribbon.

Even more than just having physical appeal, and good attitude, through the narrator and other characters in the novel, Marjanah is also described as intelligent, polite and caring for people around her. One of the characters says,

*Neng Marjanah mah ku koloteun, sok resep tunja tanja ka nu keur nandang kanjeri...*" (Djojopuspito, 1959: 11),

Neng<sup>8</sup> Marjanah is so sweetly mature, she has this compassion for those who are suffering.

The positive depiction of Marjanah is consistent throughout the novel to the extent that she is very close to being portrayed as perfect embodiment of womanhood. The incessant blows of hardship encountered since she is very young and the suffering and temptation for loving a married man only make her portrayal "more perfect". She is a woman of everything good. On top of those positive characteristics and values, she is also described as patient and well-refrained to temptations, particularly that concerning Sutrisna, the man she finds herself falling in love with.

For me, the appeal of the novel lies significantly in the fact that the novel is populated with women characters representing different types of women in the society. Along with Marjanah, the novel depicts those considered 'good women', including *eyang istri* (Marjanah's maternal grandmother), who is motherly and caring, who is compassionate and polite even to people of lower social class working for her. Another good woman includes Ma Supi, the wife of Mang Supi, the gardener. The most striking qualities attributed to these good women are their patience and strength in withstanding suffering and pain. Marjanah's mother, Suleha, just like Marjanah, is narrated to have all the appealing attributes as a woman. She is kind, beautiful and faithful to her husband. Despite all that, she has to endure the suffering of being left by her husband for another woman, namely Nji Sumarni, who is sexually very appealing.

Nji Sumarni is the epitome of "bad woman". Most bad women in this novel are portrayed to be highly sexual. Apart from Nji Sumarni, the mistress of Marjanah's father, the novel also narrates the story of Nji Sati, the daughter of Marjanah's gardener, who becomes a mistress of a trader of Chinese descent. Nji Sati's sexual transgression is described even further as she becomes a mistress of a Dutch man, simply called "*Tuan Belanda*" (Master Dutch). Another sexual woman is the fun-loving Martilah, Sutrisna's wife, who reads the semi erotic magazine *La Vie Parisienne*. Taking the context of the 1920-1930 period, the description of Martilah is quite intriguing. She is portrayed to be a coquette who enjoys night-life, the company of men and actually seeks for sexual fulfillment from another man other than her husband. These women can easily be considered transgressive that break the border of sexual taboos, even for the Sundanese culture of today. Through this particular situation, Suwarsih problematizes the construct of women's sexuality that divides women into the good women/bad women as a binary opposition.

Overt sexuality is not the only trouble women are portrayed to cause. Another form of 'trouble' is presented in the form of Pinuk, a woman character who is not easily accepted by the society because she is regarded to be crazy, the notion that only Marjanah refuses to accept. Pinuk

---

<sup>8</sup> The Sundanese way of addressing young girls. Sometimes also used to address women considered to be younger than the speaker.

turns out to be a loyal and ‘sane’ person as she saves Marjanah who is almost drowned while swimming in the river. The story of Marjanah is told along with the stories of these different women playing different roles and taking up different spaces in the society. In the context of Sundanese culture, Nji Sumarni, Nji Sati, Martilah, and Pinuk, can be easily regarded as “outside the lines”, which is the notion that can be useful in discussing the different women characters present in the works of Suwarsih Djojopuspito elaborated in this paper.

In general, *Marjanah* is built on a simple plot similar to a bildungsroman, which is the traditional plot of autobiographies where the protagonist has to experience a fall and is forced to struggle hard to overcome the hardship and suffering to finally emerge a victor of some sort. Marjanah lives as part of an upper-class rich family until her father becomes addicted to gambling and is hopelessly seduced by Nji Sumarni, who is “*kasohor bisa ngabengbat pameget*” (infamous for her flirtation and makes men do anything for her). As the narrator says, falling into Nji Sumarni’s seduction, her father becomes totally ignorant of his family, his faithful wife and his daughter Marjanah, “*henteu tolih ka istrina nu satia. Henteu emut ka Marjanah*” (Djojopuspito, 1959: 17). Her father practically sends her mother and herself to her maternal grandparents, with whom her mother spends her final days unable to bear the pain inflicted on her. During the time her mother is still alive, Marjanah is studying in the city while her ailing mother stays with her parents. Marjanah’s blows comes one after another as the grandmother and the grandfather pass away within a short period of each other, leaving her totally alone. She does manage to be a little bit happy when she meets Sutrisna and finds herself attracted to him, but this happiness is short-lived as she later finds out through her best friend, Jacky, that Sutrisna is actually married. The plot becomes a little bit twisted here as Jacky himself loves Marjanah despite the fact that he frequently goes out with Martilah, Sutrisna’s wife. The plot get even more intricate as Martilah sexually desires Jacky which she expresses bluntly in one of their nights out,

“*Jacky*”, Martilah *njusup kana harigu Jack. “Jacky... [...] ulah sieun njeseup kembang nu ragrag kana lahunana! [...] Lungas-lengis Martilah njarita teh, panon hurung ku birahi nu teu kalaksanakeun kahajang.. [...] “Jacky, kasukaan nu kudu diwujudkan ku urang teh! Keun kuring anu siga seuneu ngentab2 ngarerab djasmani andjeun! Urang suka! Urang Bungah! Hirup mah ngan sakali!”* (Djojopuspito, 1959: 101-103)

“*Jacky*”, Martilah buries her head against Jack’s chest. “*Jacky [...] fear not to satisfy yourself with a flower that falls on your lap! [...] Martilah’s voice gibbers and mumbles, her eyes darken with the lust that come unfulfilled... [...] “Jacky, desire is for us, let it free! Let me unleash my burning desire to satisfy your flesh! You like it, I like it. Be happy! We only live once!*”

In that episode, Jacky refuses Martilah’s proposition because not only Sutrisna, Martilah’s husband, is his best friend but also because Jacky has promised Marjanah to become a good person (“*djelema bener*”). Jacky even has enough conscience to remind Martilah that what they are experiencing is only lust that only lasts a flash and that it is not love in any way.

“*Marti, ulah kitu, eulis! Karunja, Sutrisna! Djeung deui kuring mah henteu mikatjinta ka andjeun teh, sabab ieu rarasaan surser kieu, lain anu disebut*”

*katresnaan tea! Lain, Marti! Ajuena asa mani seungguh ku kahayang, tapi isuk?"*  
(Djojopuspito, 1959: 102)

"Marti, please...! Think of Sutrisna! Besides, it's not love that I feel for you. I don't love you. This feeling we're having is not love! It is not, Marti! We are now consumed by it, but tomorrow?"

What I want to emphasize is that this novel does not punish Martilah's desire, and it does not even suggest any social or cultural sanction imposed on her, except that it brings Martilah to the realization that living with her husband is not the life she wants and desires. The narrative rather tells of Martilah leaving her husband, and not even being divorced by her husband. In the end of the story, it is Martilah who comes to see Jacky and proposes for a romantic relationship with him. Her husband, Sutrisna, is finally reunited with his love, Marjanah. While the narrative shows the impact of the divorce on Sutrisna, who does not look like his old neat self towards the end of the novel, he is not described to have a hostile feeling towards his former wife. Rather he is happy that the divorce has enabled him to be with the woman he really wants to be with. What I am arguing is that if we are to consider Martilah to be "outside the lines", then she is the one who decides to change the lines, not because she is forced to get out of the line. There are two things that can be argued in this process of Martilah's salvation. First, because Martilah longs for warmth and lifestyle not offered by her husband, and despite waiting for her husband to divorce her, she makes the decision to free herself from the marriage that does not make her happy. In this context, Martilah is the agent of her own happiness. Second, it can also be argued that Martilah has conducted a highly risky sexual transgression, and despite punishing her, the novel rewards her with the newly-found happiness with the man that suits her better. It can be argued that for these women outside the lines, insanity and sexual prowess are agentive. While sexuality is always associated with men's subjectivity, these female characters show that sexuality is also part and parcel of women's subjectivity and to deny women's sexuality is to deny their subjectivity. These women reclaim their subjectivity through their sexuality. Likewise, the novel also shows that what is described as "women's craziness" may just be the incapability of the patriarchal world to understand women. Pinuk, the crazy woman, is depicted to be sane, even saner than the supposedly sane people when she senses danger is threatening Marjanah.

Looking into her other works in in *Empat Serangkai* (Djojopuspito, 1954c), namely *Seruling di Malam Sepi* (the sound of bamboo pipe at night), *Badju Merah* (red dress), dan *Perempuan Djahat* (evil woman), Suwarsih describes women's sexual desire as something not only as normal and common, but also part of their agency. Considering the fact that this work was published in 1950s, such an act on the part of Suwarsih was quite extraordinary and bold. This can be seen in her depiction of quite explicit sex scenes found in the different stories, for example in *Seruling di Malam Sepi* (Seruling in a Lonely Night) which tells the story of how a wife whose husband is working overseas for a long time gives in to her carnal need and desire and submits herself sexually to the man she has been attracted to.

*... aku tiba2 merasa lesu, tak mempunyai kekuatan lagi. Ia tinggal bermalam. Di kamar gelap aku membiarkan dia me-raba2 tubuhku dengan tangan jang hangat dan penuh keinginan. Aku membiarkan bibirnja menutup bibirku rapat. Dan aku menjerah. Aku hanya wanita ketjil sadja, lemah dan tak mempunyai tudjuan lagi. Aku merasa kalah.* (Djojopuspito, 1954e: 12)

... I suddenly feel weak, I have no more power. I let him stay the night. In that dark night I let him touch my body with his warm hands passionate desire. I let him close my lips very tight. And I gave in. I was just a small woman, weak and have no purposes anymore. I feel I have lost.

In this description, it is clearly seen how women's sexuality "outside the lines" is not easily accepted even by the women themselves. The phrase "gave in", "small" or "lost" all imply the character's feelings of being a failure, unable to control herself. Women's sexuality is often regarded as a form of dirt or pollution (Attwood, 2007: 234), causing women outside the lines who have sex outside the wedlock to be imposed with social and or marital sanction. The narrator I in *Seruling di Malam Sepi*, is finally divorced by her husband, who actually does have sex with women other than his wife. However, instead of hoping that her husband would change his mind, or her lover would marry her, the "I" character decides that living independently will make her happy and she does not mind the hard work implied for she believes that romantic love only works when it is dedicated to one person only. The "I" character also asserts that being a subject is more important than being in a relationship that reduces her to be secondary.

*Ah, mengapa aku bermimpi me-nanti2 barang jang tak mungkin terdjadi. Lebih njata aku pergi sadja ke Harjadi sebagai isterinja jang kedua. Tidak, tidak. Lebih baik aku mendjadi tukang tjutji. Tjinta tadk dapat di-bagi2* (Djojopuspito, 1954e: 17)

Ah why am I dreaming of something that may never happen. It's much better for me to go to Harijadi and be his second wife. No, no. I'd rather be a laundry maid. Love cannot be divided.

The sanctions imposed on women "outside the lines" are the consequences that are forced upon and accepted by three out of four female protagonists of Suwarsih's short story collection *Empat Serangkai*. The narratives also show the unfairness as the same sanction is not imposed on the husbands who clearly have done worse in terms of resorting their sexual desires to women other than their wives. This unfair social sanction is elaborated as an important issue in Suwarsih's works, yet the approach taken by Suwarsih is empowering and dismissive of the normative values.

In *Badju Merah*, the resistance to the double standard and bias against women's sexuality that labels women in the dichotomy of "good women" and "bad women", angels and sluts, is seen through the "I" character who determines to force her husband to accept her back because she enjoys the sex with her ex-husband. What is interesting is that despite the anxiety of being called "*binatang jalang*" ("slut"), Hartati, the character narrator in this story embraces the labeling, "I am bound to him and have only one desire; to be close to him, to feel his body, to be in his arms. Ah, I'm such a slut" (Djojopuspito, 1954b: 57, my emphasis).

A similar gesture is also found in Hersini, the protagonist in *Perempuan Djahat*, who is willing to cohabit with the man she wants and loves. Considering the local values and beliefs that sex outside the wedlock is considered a big sin and taboo, cohabitation represents an ultimate sexual transgression, particularly on the part of the woman. In this case, while Hersini is seemingly punished by being killed for being pregnant outside the wedlock, it is actually her husband who is punished more severely by suffering from the deep guilt of having treated his wife so badly during

their marriage. It is the husband who is forced to retrospect and reflect of his own sin for denying his wife's right to be treated as a person and a woman. It is also the husband who is cornered to finally admit that her running away from him is a sign of his own failure to be a good husband and man. And finally, it is the husband who is depicted to admit his inadequacy compared to his wife's lover who is portrayed to have more understanding and respect for her, a man who is her equal both intellectually and sexually.

As a woman who writes about "women's emancipation", in this collection of short stories, while detailing the way the patriarchal double standard works against women, Suwarsih is also protesting against the tendency of the marriage as an institution that reduces and dismisses women. Another short story, *Artinah*, does not describe the protagonist, Artinah, as a woman who has transgressive sexual desire, but that is also where the irony lies. Even a "good woman" cannot really be free from oppressive sexual relations manifesting in a marriage. Artinah's husband, just like other husbands in the other three stories in this collection, are having sexual affairs with other women in addition to committing physical abuse to her. In this marriage, even a woman like Artinah who is described as a strong woman, an activist and a brilliant orator is reduced to "a mouse in the corner of the room", small and scared.

The voice of Suwarsih who herself was a woman activist/feminist is quite clear in the conversation between the narrator "I" (Suwarsih) and her fellow activist Rukajah in this short story. The conversation also reveals another issue pertaining to women's sexuality in the context of heteronormativity strongly bounded in local values. That is how Indonesians expect women to be married even to the least eligible men, even when the marriage is bound to be doomed and engender unhappiness. The depictions in the three short stories as well as the conversation between the two feminist activists show how patriarchy manifests in the personal life of a woman, in her construct of selfhood and sexuality.

*Apa gunanya aku mengeluh. Aku merasa bahagia djuga hidup seorang diri, malah rasaku lebih bahagia dari pada kawan2ku jang telah kawin. Sebetulnya orang Indonesia itu lutju sekali. Mereka memandang wanita jang belum kawin tjelaka atau bernasib malang. Mereka lebih senang melihat kami kawin dengan seorang duda, bertjutju banjak atau dengan seorang lelaki yang rupanya sebagai hantu. Kami dianggap belum sempurna, djika belum kawin itu, biarkan untuk setahun, sebulan atau beberapa hari sadja. Mereka tak sedikitpun menginsjafi pendirian kami, bahwa kami mungkin djuga lebih seorang diri dari pada kawin dan menderita karena suami buruk (Djojopuspito, 1954a: 19-20).*

There is no point in complaining. I feel happy living by myself, I even think I am happier than my married friends. The thing is Indonesian people are funny. They regard unmarried women to be doomed or to have a really bad luck. They are happier to see us being married to a widower with a lot of grandchildren or to a man whose face is as good as a ghost. We are deemed to be incomplete if we have not been married, even for a year, or a month, or just a few days. Little did they acknowledge our determination that we may be happier being single than being married just to suffer from the pain inflicted by a very bad husband.

The conversation displays the feminist perspective of independence and liberation affirming that marriage is not the only goal in a woman's life and it is not even compulsory or

even beneficial for all women to be married. While the embracing of a single life for a woman is found to be liberating for the activist narrator, it is not without its own rigor, which they have decidedly taken up. Freedom and liberation are not portrayed to be an easy choice, but still the female characters are shown to have the courage to live up to the challenges and face the consequences.

Suwarsih's portrayal of the various women outside the lines have served to construct femininity, which highlights female agency, subjectivity, and intelligence, while at the same time explore forms of negotiation and acceptance within their different specific context.

In the three works I have discussed, it can be seen how Suwarsih has asserted her resistance to the social construction that refutes and discriminates women's sexuality not simply by showing that women are human beings with sexuality but also by showing that women are capable agents of their own happiness. Furthermore, these short stories, as well as *Marjanah*, and *Manusia Bebas*, offer women a space for resistance to the biased sexual construction even when it implies social cultural risk. These women in the various works discussed are portrayed to enfold their being outside in a way to reestablish their subjectivity and agency.

## Conclusion

Women's narratives and women who narrate, write history not only in the national context, but also in the more private and personal context. The autobiographical narratives written by Suwarsih Djojopuspito have opened up a space for women to reflect on their lives through the narratives she told. I argue that the narratives encourage the readers to ask questions, to question what seems obvious, to find the answers to various issues, and to accept differences when developing new answers. Nothing is written as black and white in her works, no woman is totally "slutty", yet no woman is totally 'perfect'. Being perfect is being able to negotiate those different terrains and domains and to traverse the different spaces that have fragmented and cohered women. Suwarsih's works are populated with women of different characters who are constantly transforming themselves, who are not afraid of changes and who are actually making changes not only for herself but also for the people around them. I argue that Suwarsih's works portray feminist subjects as agents of change not only in the personal domain, but also in the public domain. The narratives of these women make trouble, such that Suwarsih reestablishes the construction of femininity, attributing it not to total submission to men and the acceptance of the patriarchal culture, but to agency, subjectivity, and intelligence.

## Works Cited

- Attwood, F. (2007). Sluts and Riot Grrrls: Female Identity and Sexual Agency. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 16(3), 233-247.
- Budianta, M. (2007). Diverse Voices: Indonesian Literature and Nation Building. In L. H. Guan & L. Suryadinata (Eds.), *Language, Nation, and Development in Southeast Asia* (pp. 51-73). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Chanfault-Duchet, M.-F. (2000). Textualisation of the self and gender identity in the life-story. In T. Cosslett, C. Lury & P. Summerfield (Eds.), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (pp. 61-75). London and New York: Routledge.
- Cosslett, T., Lury, C., & Summerfield, P. (Eds.). (2000). *Feminism and Autobiography: Text, Theories, Methods*. London, New York Routledge.
- Creed, B. (1993). *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- Dini, N. (2000). *Sekayu*. Jakarta: Gramedia.
- Djojopuspito, S. (1954a). Artinah *Empat Serangkai* (pp. 18-38). Jakarta: Pustaka Rakyat N.V.
- Djojopuspito, S. (1954b). Badju Merah *Empat Serangkai* (pp. 39-57). Jakarta: Pustaka Rakjat N.V.
- Djojopuspito, S. (1954c). *Empat Serangkai*. Jakarta: Pustaka Rakjat N.V.
- Djojopuspito, S. (1954d). Perempuan Djahat *Empat Serangkai* (pp. 58-101). Jakarta: Pustaka Rakjat N.V.
- Djojopuspito, S. (1954e). Seruling di Malam Sepi *Empat Serangkai: Kumpulan Cerita Pendek* (pp. 3-17). Jakarta: Pustaka Rakjat N.V.
- Djojopuspito, S. (1959). *Marjanah*. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka.
- Djojopuspito, S. (1973). Sahabat yang tidak pernah mati *Kian Kemari: Indonesia dan Belanda dalam Sastra* (pp. 102-112). Jakarta: Penerbit Djambatan.
- Djojopuspito, S. (1975). *Manusia Bebas*. Jakarta: Penerbit Djambatan.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (2007). *The madwoman in the attic : the woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.
- Heraty, T. (2000). Kata Pengantar. In S. Djojopuspito (Ed.), *Manusia Bebas* (kedua ed.). Jakarta: Penerbit Djambatan.
- Mohamad, G. (2013). Perempuan di Luar Garis yang Lurus.  
<http://www.tempo.co/read/caping/2013/04/21/128802/Perempuan-di-Luar-Garis-yang-Lurus>
- Perron, E. d. (1975). Kata Pengantar. In S. Djojopuspito (Ed.), *Manusia Bebas*. Jakarta: Djambatan.
- Rampan, K. L. (2000). *Leksikon Susastra Indonesia*. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka.
- Shackford-Bradley, J. (2000). *Autobiographical Fictions: Indonesian Women's Writing from the Nationalist Period*. (Doctor of Philosophy), University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley.
- Suryaman, M., Wiyatmi, BW, N., & Liliani, E. (2011). *Sejarah Sastra Indonesia Berperspektif Gender* Retrieved from  
<http://staff.uny.ac.id/sites/default/files/pendidikan/Dr.%20Wiyatmi,%20M.Hum./Buku%20Sejarah%20Sastra-Gender.pdf>
- Watson, C. W. (2009). Feminism and the Indonesian Nationalist Movement: A Reading of Soewarsih Djojopoespito's Novel *Buiten het Gareel Sari*, 27(1), 125-142.