

## The Darkness in Umairoh

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*Abstract: This research aims to find information about gender issues exploited by the author in The Jakarta Post short story ascribed by Yanusa Nugroho entitled Umairoh. The objectives of the research are: 1. To investigate how women are described and positioned in the short story. 2. To assess the implied attitudes of the author toward gender in the short story. 3. To identify the attitudes of the editors toward gender in the short story. The research results that; first, women are described and positioned in the short story as suffered and powerless human beings. Second, the author implies that both women and men have ambivalent attitudes toward gender. Third, the editors let gender issues go to the public without qualification.*

*Keywords: Gender, short story, and literature research.*

**YOU** whore, I remind you that you must start to be thankful to me. I have helped saved you from being paraded around the village and stoned to death by all the villagers. Don't forget, slut, when you had just moved to this village everyone hated you because they knew you are the scum of the earth. And now you try to turn me down.....! This excerpt explains that Umairoh lives by herself and has no family at all. Therefore just because she lived at the street she had

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become a victim of men's sexual desire, then she had been getting a whore. In our society being a whore is a disgusting thing, the society will isolate them. Regardless the reasons why they become a whore, they do not care. What the society knows is they are whores and being whores forever, and no apology for them. This value becomes so important to Indonesian, because most Indonesian hold firmly to religious teachings and traditional values. Psychologist from the University of Indonesia Yati Utoyo Lubis acknowledges that religion and cultural dictates remained a controlling force in the lives of Indonesian women.<sup>1</sup>

### Methods

This research employed a descriptive method. This method is considered to be relevant to the present study since it involves the collection of data for the purpose of describing existing phenomena. In line with this Best<sup>2</sup> defines a descriptive method as the following: The descriptive method describes and interprets

what conditions or relationship that exists, opinions that are held, processes that are going on, effects that are evident or trends that are developing. To analyze these short stories, I then used a document analysis. A document analysis describes a given state of affairs as fully and carefully as possible. Fraenkel and Wallen<sup>3</sup> assert:

Document analysis is just what its name implies -the analysis of the written or visual contents of a document textbooks, essays, newspapers, novels, magazine articles, cookbooks, advertisements, political speeches, pictures - in fact, the contents of virtuality any type of written or visual communication can be analyzed in various ways. A person's or groups conscious and unconscious beliefs, attitudes, values and ideas are often revealed in the documents they produce.

I used the content analyses because I tried to look into specific characteristics in the document i.e. a short story in *The Jakarta Post*, which is related to gender issues, specifically 'gender darkness'. The

short story is written by Yanusa Nugroho, entitled *Umairoh*. In doing this I made use of some conceptual categories relevant to gender issues, in addition to the theory given by Heine and Inksters<sup>4</sup> about how to examine the gender roles in literature. All the given concepts provide theoretical supports of techniques in conducting this present research.

More specifically, in evaluating how women were described and positioned in the short story, I used the following six categories as suggested by Heine and Inksters<sup>5</sup>: 1. Examine the personal traits of the character. *Complex character*, does the character display a variety of emotions, abilities, and concerns? *Dynamic character* is the character perseverant, courageous, feisty, intelligent, spirited, resourceful, capable, independent? *Admirable traits*. Does the character wrestle with significant problems and issues? 2. Examine the issues important to the character. *Gender issues* Is the character concerned with gender images, with determining what actions, atti-

tudes, and roles are appropriate for females and males? *Body-image issues*, is the character concerned with body image? Is physical beauty an issue? Is the character facing experiences that help in growing up and reaching maturity? *Social, political, ethical, or moral issues*, is the character concerned with issues that make a difference in the world? 3. Examine how the character solves problems. *Strength of character*, does the character use personal qualities such as humor, intelligence, strength, or cleverness to solve problem as appropriate to situation? *Initiative*, does the character initiate solving problems rather than waiting for someone else? *Inner strength*, does the character find strength and answers from within? *Variety of problem-solving strategies*, does the character use a wide range of strategies, including seeking help from others, discussing problems with family or friends, exploring solutions through writing and reading? 4. Examine the character's relationships with others. Does the character put forth effort in

establishing healthy relationship with others? *Characteristics*, are the character's relationships with others based on or working toward admirable traits such as mutual respect, equality, loyalty, honesty, friendship, commitment, and collegiality? 5. Examine how the character departs from traditional stereotypes. *Typical female stereotypes*, is the character moving away from the following traits: passive, frightened, weak, gentle, giving up easily, unoriginal, silly, confused, inept, dependent, follower, conformer, emotional, concerned about appearance, innate need for marriage and motherhood, passive language and behavior? *Typical male stereotypes*, Is the character moving away from the following traits: active, strong, brave, rough, competitive, logical, unemotional, messy, decisive, leader, innate need for adventure, aggressive language and behavior? 6. Examine whether the character provides a voice for those who are often unheard in literary works. *Roles*, is the character in a role not usually found in literature such as male nurses,

female inventors, female during the Gold Rush. *Parallel cultures*, does the character represent a cultural, religious, ethnic, ability, or socioeconomic group found infrequently in literature?

### Finding

Umairoh, who had a four year old child, was a so lonesome woman that what gave her happiness was only a tale of tenderness before her beloved grandmother died. She had forgotten so many other ordeals in her life, including how she felt when she reached nine, ten or eleven years of age. She had also forgotten when she first had her period. Or had she ever had it? Because the only reality she remembers is that months have come and gone just like the men who have welcomed her in bed.

Umairoh had caught a serious fever, which had sent her to bed for most of the time. She had no idea what had happened to her because all the doctors had only smiled after they heard her grievances. She had become more sure that the time would come

to take her away. In one morning at three o'clock, Umairoh heard someone knocking rudely at her door. After opening the door, Umairoh stood still and said nothing. When the man was about to touch her, she said: "Perhaps not tonight but another night." The man grumbled and tried to force his will but Umairoh repeated the same explanation, which made him more resentful. Umairoh's rejections made the man even angrier that he slapped her across face, he felt Umairoh had belittled his manliness. Umairoh thought the humiliation was enough for her. Taking her child, she ran away. She kept running.

After some moments, barefooted Umairoh stopped running, bitten by the cold wind she walked and walked although she had no where to go. Several passing cars stopped and offered her a lift but Umairoh turned them down. They reminded her of the offers by men who pretended to be good Samaritans but later abused her. Umairoh went on to continue her pursuit for safety despite the fact that her

legs could hardly support her. At an empty security post she stopped. It was dark there but at least she could smile and lay her child on a stool until the sun rose. Suddenly she felt it was difficult to breathe but she did not know why. People walking from dawn prayers at the nearby mosque were surprised to find a child crying in the lap of a mother who was lying all alone on the ground. None of the villagers recognized the dead woman. The only thing they knew was that she had died smiling.

### **Discussion**

This story uses the third person's point of view, Umairoh that is the main character to tell the story. Most stories talk about her life, she is a lonesome woman and never feels happy, especially since her grandmother passed away. The only thing that makes her survive is her daughter, Umi, four years of age. Her life, which is so lonesome makes her forget whatever has happened in her life, including her periods, she never feels sure if she ever had it. She had also forgotten when she

first had her period. Or had she ever had it? Because, the only reality she remembers is that months have come and gone just like the men who have welcomed her in bed.

Umairoh is also described as an independent woman, who lives with her only daughter alone. But she earns her living by sleeping with many men, although the men come to her, she is doing prostitution. Feminist opposes to this case, since, women are treated as whatever men like. Women cannot avoid it just because of survival and economic factors, or they did an unwanted sex.

The first conflict of this story took place when Umairoh was visited by ten men at three o'clock in the morning. The angry ten men were looking for a man, one of Umairoh clients, they believed that the man was hiding at Umairoh's house. They knocked the door rudely and pushed her to open the door soon. They shouted at the peak of their voices and threatened to punish her if she would not let them in...

The excerpt above presents the fact that a woman is treated rudely and dishonored by men. It has been proved that gender differences create violence to women. Men think they are powerful to do whatever they want to women, because they know that they are strong and women are weak to fight them. It is well known as stereotype for men and women. Moreover, our society has a history of encouraging men to be aggressive and powerful - while at the same time encouraging women to be weak and submissive. It is not wondering that the balance of power usually tips in favor of men. If men choose to use this power in harmful ways, the result can change form some of the more subtle forms of domestic violence to severe injury of death.<sup>6</sup>

In Umairoh's case, she lives only with her daughter. Therefore, the men dare to dishonor her. The man's eyes turned red and he looked right at Umairoh's breasts. One of the ten men tried to tease Umairoh to sleep with him at the night. But, Umairoh refused him softly. It made

him angry and slapped her. Umairoh's last words made the man even angrier that he slapped her across face... the man felt Umairoh had belittled his manliness. He roared, shouted and turned mad. This extract shows that Umairoh is described as weak, frightened, and has passive language that has not ever been able to slap the man back.

When she was treated rudely and slapped by the man, the only thing that she could do was crying or singing for her daughter. Umairoh hugged Umi and sang a lullaby softly. Umairoh's tears streamed down her cheeks. It is a traditional stereotype for women who often cry and for men who are always rude and strong. The same stereotypes are also found in the characters of this short story.

According to Pheterson<sup>7</sup> there are some activities that are generally subsumed under whore dishonor by straight society, i.e. society identified as legitimate, lawful, and necessarily unassociated with prostitution: as a woman, (a) engaging in sex with strangers; (b) engaging in sex with many

partners; (c) taking sexual initiative, controlling sexual encounters, and being an expert of sex; (d) asking for money in exchange for sex satisfying impersonal male sexual fantasies; (e) being out of night alone, on dark, dressed to attract male desire; (f) being in situations with supposedly brash, drunk or abusive men whom one either can handle (uppity or vulgar woman) or cannot handle (victimized women).

This story arises, when the villagers messed Umairoh's house up. She could not stand anymore, she ran away as far as she could from the village. Umairoh thought the humiliation was enough for her. Taking her child, she ran away. For some seconds she stared back looking at the men ransacking her house.

The excerpt above indicates that Umairoh did not seek for help from others, she ran away till she found an empty security post instead. She stopped there, took a rest and laid her child on a stool until the sun rose. Suddenly she felt it was difficult to breathe but she did not know why. And describing the process of

umairoh's dead ended the story; people walking from dawn prayers at the nearby mosque were surprised to find a child crying in the lap of a mother who was lying all alone on the ground. None of the villagers recognized the dead woman. The only thing they knew was that she had died smiling.

After analyzing each character of this short story, it can be stated that women in this short story are positioned as women who are marginalized by men. They are described as object of men's sexual desire and as the victims of violence. Prostitution is considered as a hidden violation, because most of the women are forced to do it. Meanwhile men do it to make fun or to release their stress. When the human being is reduced to a body, objectified to sexually service another, whether or not there is consent, violation of the human being has taken place. The human being is the bodied self that human right is meant to protect and human development is intended to support. Therefore, prostitution is considered as a violati-

on.<sup>8</sup> More specifically, the followings are six categories how women were described and positioned in the short story, as suggested by Heine and Inksters.<sup>9</sup>

First of all, in examining the personal traits of the character; Umairoh does not display a variety of emotions, abilities, and concerns. She is not perseverant, courageous, feisty, intelligent, spirited, resourceful, and she does not wrestle with her problems and issues. She chooses her living by doing prostitution. This decision makes her suffered a lethal sickness. Secondly, examine the issues important to the character. She is not concerned with gender issues, with determining what actions she did by being a whore. She is concerned with body image. She is facing experiences that help in growing up but she is not reaching maturity. Her grandmother passed away, and she only cries and cries over without finding a best solution for her own life. She is not the character concerned with issues that make a difference in the world. She is doing prostitution instead. Third-



ly, examine how the character solves problems. Her grandmother passed away, and then she lost her virginity. She does not use a wide range of strategies, such as; seeking help from good friends, discussing problems with her family, or even exploring solutions through writing and reading. She does not have a strength character. Because she does not use her personal qualities such as her intelligence or cleverness to solve her problem as appropriate to situation. She gave up and just waited for the men come to her room. Fourthly, examine the character's relationships with others. She couldn't find a good person. She continued her relationship with her bad man, who is her client as a whore. The man is persistent to intimidate her to serve his desire forever. It means that she puts forth effort in establishing unhealthy relationship with the men. And the relationships are not based on admirable traits such as mutual respect, equality, loyalty, honesty, friendship, commitment, and collegiality. Fifthly, examine how the character departs from tra-

ditional stereotypes. She is symbolized as traditional female stereotypes. She is described as passive, frightened, weak, giving up easily, unoriginal, silly, confused, inept, follower, concerned about appearance, innate need for marriage and motherhood. She is passive and frightened by men who force her to fulfill his sexual need. She does not take care of herself and her healthy by giving her body to the greedy man. And she is a follower of her bad temper clients, to follow his desire to be a whore, even though it against her will. Sixthly, examine whether the character provides a voice for those who are often unheard in literary works. She is not the character in a role that found infrequently in literature. She represents Javanese culture and poor women who are intimidated by men. And she is described as a whore that many are exposed in *The Jakarta Post* shot stories.

### Conclusion

First of all, women are described and positioned in the short story as suffered and

powerless human beings dominated by men. Women are objects, especially objects of men's sexual desire. For instance, in the case of Umairoh, she lost her grandmother and then she becomes a whore, she is described as a weak, sick woman and earns a living by doing prostitution.

Secondly, the author implies that both women and men have ambivalent attitudes toward gender fairness. For example, they agree to feminist criticism, they look down the men who admire sexual desire and cannot survive without fulfilling sexual need. It seems that getting involved into affairs is something that can be proud of as men. But, on the other hand they believe that having affairs is natural for men. More specifically, I would say that for those who support it would likely have to work harder and need a long time to seize gender fairness, rather than gender darkness. For those who are against it seems to be supported by patriarchal culture where men tend to dominate women. Unconsciously, there are collective attitudes in the

society that give more power to men to be superior to women.

Thirdly, from the way the women are portrayed in the short story, we get some impressions that the editor let the gender darkness go to the public without qualification. Ironically, gender fairness comes from Western culture. Then, why does it tend to expose gender darkness instead of gender brightness?

Fourthly, the author writing the short story is a man. The man author ascribed about the dark side of women, he did not raise the bright side instead. This might indicate the fact that gender related awareness among Indonesian writers is lacking, *The Jakarta Post* as an International daily with represents educated people should have a more balance perspective.

### **Recommendation**

From the conclusion above, some recommendations as an effort to increase the awareness of gender fairness among Indonesian society and to increase the criticism of literature students toward

other literature genre are specifically put forth to the literature instructions.

For the literature learning and instructions, I suggest that the teachers should adopt critical stance in addition to aesthetic stance when reading literature. This is important to develop the habit of giving criticism of the students toward literature works, because so far, literature learning and instruction in Indonesia are only focused on efferent stance.

I recommend that literature researchers search other gender issues in literature genres, regarding the lack of gender awareness within Indonesian society. And more importantly, they should make the findings public, because in our society publishing research and books are so infrequent. Therefore, it is important to accustom ourselves to publishing our writing, especially our research findings.

Finally for the literature writers, I suggest that the authors should choose good and proper dictions, reducing misconceptions and bad impacts among readers. As we know

that Umairoh is derived from Arabic, *Humaira*, red or the reddish cheeks, this is the nick name of Siti Aisyah, the wife of our beloved prophet Muhammad pbuh. But, in this story the author describes Umairoh as a whore! It is better for the author to describe the name as the bright character instead of the dark character.

#### Endnotes:

1. Tuti Gintini, "Baby Makes Two a Choice for some Indonesia Women", *The Jakarta Post*, August 6, 2001, p. 7.
2. W. John Best, *Research in Education*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1979, p. 166.
3. Jack R. Fraenkel and Wallen, Norman E, *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education*, New York: McGraw-Hill Inc, 1993, p. 389.
4. Patricia Heine, et. al, Talking about Books: Strong Female Characters in Recent Literature, *Language Arts*, Vol. 76, No. 5, May 1999, p. 429.
5. *Ibid.*
6. W.I.S.I – Women's Issues and Social Empowerment, Domestic Violence Information Manua: What is Domestic Viiolence?, (online), available as: WISE, Home Page <../index.html>, January 6, 1998.

7. Pheterson, Gail, *The Prostitution Prism*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996, p. 45.
8. Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, New York and London, New York University Press, 1995, p. 23.
9. Patricia Heine, *op. cit.*, p. 429.

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