

EXAMINING THE FIGURE OF JAVANESE WOMEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SHORT STORIES BY AUTHORS FROM DIFFERENT ERAS AND ACROSS CULTURES

(Menelaah Figur Perempuan Jawa dalam Perspektif Cerpen Karya Pengarang dari Berbagai Era dan Lintas Budaya)

Yayah Chanafiah

Universitas Bengkulu

yayah.chanafiah10@gmail.com

Abstract: *Many writers have questioned the figure of women with various local perspectives, such as IBW Widiassa Keniten on Balinese women, H.R. Hidayat Suryalaga on Sundanese women, Mochtar Naim and Sastri Bakri on Minang women, and Umar Kayam who presents portraits of Javanese women. The locality of the female figures as characters presented by these writers strongly depicts their regional characteristics. In the short story entitled Mbok Jah, Umar Kayam, with his sociological background, is able to present a complex and realistic portrait of women. On the other hand, reading the short story entitled Mbah Marinah by Riqqah Dhianty also depicts the locality of Javanese women who work as porters at Bring Harjo Market with all their innocence and simplicity. What is interesting is that the depiction of the figure of Javanese women is presented by young/novice writers who come from ethnicities and cultures outside Java (Sumatra), and are also born in the millennial era. The thick Javanese character of Mbah Marinah is reminiscent of the female character Mbok Jah in Umar Kayam's short story. Both short stories depict a Javanese woman who is very weak, simple, but has strong and steadfast principles. Even in the short story of Mbah Marinah, resignation to her fate as a porter in the market is equivalent to the resignation of the character Mbok Jah as a household helper in Umar Kayam's short story. In this case, the existence of short story writers from different eras and ethnic cultures in questioning the figure of Javanese women who are Javanese, turns out to have equal social and cultural values, so it is very interesting to discuss it in more depth.*

Keywords: *Author; Differences; Era; Ethnicity; Perspective; Questioning; Women*

A. INTRODUCTION

The literary works presented are countless, produced by both renowned international and national writers and emerging authors. These authors also present a wide range of themes, including those that explore women from diverse local perspectives, such as IBW Widiassa Keniten's portrayal of Balinese women, H.R. Hidayat Suryalaga's portrayal of Sundanese women, Mochtar Naim and Sastri Bakri's portrayal of Minang women, and Umar Kayam's portrayal of Javanese women. The localized nature of the women portrayed by these authors strongly reflects their regional characteristics, even those that address the lives of marginalized women at the lowest point of their social strata. This phenomenon may be supported by the local background of each author, which allows for a captivating depiction of their distinctive details.

Umar Kayam, as a Javanese in several of his short stories, such as *Sri Sumarah* and *Bawuk*, tells about the attitude of a Javanese woman who grew up in a Javanese society, culture and philosophy of life. Likewise, the short story entitled *Mbok Jah* (1994) feels very "njawani" with the principles of simplicity in looking at life, far from the hustle and bustle of worldly desires, *nrimo ing pandum*. The depiction of *Mbok Jah* as a simple woman from Gunung Kidul who lives alone and serves faithfully to her employer's family for decades with a very small salary, because for her "For a widow who is too old, what is desired other than a roof for shelter and enough food and clothing" (Umar Kayam). *Mbok Jah* decided to return to the village after feeling her body getting weaker, because she was worried that she would be a burden on her employer. There was no rebellion, no protest, and even when her biological children, who lived in Surabaya and were no longer "remembered," *Mbok Jah* never lamented. She resignedly accepted her fate.

On the other hand, diverse judgments and assumptions often arise when a "foreign" writer questions (talks about) a region's culture, even though the writer is from outside the region and has a different culture. These diverse attitudes can be positive or negative, depending on how the writer is able to actualize themselves and absorb the different cultures from their daily lives. This is also evident in the short story by a novice writer, Riqqah Dianty, who was still a student at the time and participated in the annual National Student Arts Week (PEKSIMINAS) competition between universities throughout Indonesia (PEKSIMINAS) in Yogyakarta. Her short story, "*Mbah Marinah*," won first place. The uniqueness of her work lies in the situation and character of *Mbah Marinah*, which deeply captures the Javanese principles of patience, humility, and humility, a life of resignation, sincerity, and acceptance of all that is received. The author of "*Mbah Marinah*" is originally from Sumatra, specifically Bengkulu. Despite being from outside Java, this young writer seems to be trying to understand the simple, innocent, and uncomplicated lives of lower-class Javanese society. She presents the character of an elderly woman who works as a porter at Bringharjo Market in Yogyakarta. She doesn't dwell much on *Mbah Marinah*, but her insightful storytelling conveys the feeling of intimate familiarity with the intricacies of Javanese society.

Her insightful portrayal of *Mbah Marinah* mirrors the detailed portrayal of *Mbok Jah* by Umar Kayam. It could be that the two elderly female characters presented in each short story by two different writers of different times and eras understand the social patterns of Javanese society, as stated by Geertz in Suseno (1988: 38) that "there are two rules that most determine the social patterns in Javanese society. First, in every situation humans should behave in such a way as not to cause conflict. Second, demands that humans in the way they speak and carry themselves always show respect for others, according to their degree and position." Suseno (1988: 82) emphasized that in essence, Javanese people do not distinguish between religious and non-religious attitudes, and social interactions are also attitudes towards nature, just as attitudes towards nature also have social

relevance. Between work, interaction, and prayer there is no difference in essential principles (Cf. Mulder, 1973: 36).

If examined closely, the short story *Mbah Marinah* by Riqqah Dianty is reminiscent of the short story *Mbok Jah* by Umar Kayam. The striking similarity is the presence of an old female character who maintains the basic Javanese character of patience, sincerity, and devotion. While the difference is that *Mbok Jah* lives in a domestic sphere, a loyal household servant, while *Mbah Marinah* is a porter whose work is not for her own enjoyment but rather to help or give to others. The assumption of the influence or connection between the two short stories is very interesting to be conveyed in the topic of this paper. According to Damono in Yulianeta (2017: 7-8) the study of influence and analogy focuses on the interaction and similarities of several literary works and their authors or around the function of a number of important figures who act as intermediaries so that literary doctrines and techniques in all literary works are widely disseminated.

B. METHOD

Comparative literary studies are an important approach in discussing the two short stories above because they allow for cross-examination of works, highlighting similarities, differences, and transformations. Riffaterre (1978) states that latent texts serve as references or sources for other literary works, allowing the relationship between texts to be understood through the traces of similarities and differences present, termed a hypogram. Ratna (2011: 173) states that intertextual understanding aims to fully explore the meanings contained within a text. Thus, while Barthes explored the quality of a text by considering the work as anonymous, orphaned, Kristeva does so by returning it to the cultural universe, albeit as an anonymous culture.

According to Damono (2005), comparative literary studies go beyond simply contrasting two works of literature from two countries or nations. They are also not limited to masterpieces, although they often focus on renowned authors representing a particular era. Studies of new authors who have not yet received international recognition can also be classified as comparative literature. The definition of comparative literature shows that comparisons are not limited to literature between nations, but also within one nation, for example, between authors, between genres, between eras, between forms, and between themes. Endraswara (2011) refers to comparative literature as the study of cross-cultural texts.

Basically, comparative literature can be distinguished based on time as diachronic and synchronic. The diachronic comparative method compares two or more literary works from different periods of creation. The synchronic comparative method, on the other hand, is a literary analysis that compares works within the same time period (horizontally), rather than comparing works from different historical periods (cf. Pradopo, 2002; Damono, 2005). Looking at the era of Umar Kayam's writing compared to Riqqah Dianty who is still very much a beginner, it is indeed not comparable, but if we look closely at the strength of the character of the Javanese female character *Mbah Marinah*

presented by Riqqah, it seems as if there is a power to compare it with the female character *Mbok Jah* by Umar Kayam in questioning Javanese women with all their simplicity, resignation, and philosophy of life.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on literary phenomena, the short stories "*Mbok Jah*" by Umar Kayam and "*Mbah Marinah*" by Riqqa Dianty represent the simplicity of elderly Javanese women's views on life, as they relate to Javanese philosophical principles, surrender, and wisdom. The gentle yet firm nature of Javanese women reflects a complex, traditional yet progressive beauty. They symbolize harmony between the past and the future, courage and wisdom, tradition and innovation. With each step, they act not only for themselves but also for their families, communities, and the world.

1. A Glimpse of the Short Story "*Mbok Jah*" by Umar Kayam

The short story "*Mbok Jah*" by Umar Kayam tells the story of an old widow from Gunung Kidul named *Mbok Jah*, a domestic helper who has served the Mulyono family for twenty years and decides to return to her village, promising that she will come every Eid al-Fitr and Sekaten.

"Even though she has retired due to old age and fatigue from being a domestic helper, Mbok Jah maintains a good relationship with all the family members. She has spent twenty years working as a domestic helper in the home of a simple family with mediocre economic conditions."

Mbok Jah decides to return to her village, even though her employer's family does not allow her to, knowing that she is alone. *Mbok Jah* herself was acutely aware that she was living alone in the village because her only child lived far away and had even abandoned her mother, as illustrated by this quote: "*Furthermore, her only child, who lived in Surabaya and was rumored to be well-off, no longer wanted anything to do with her. The pull and embrace of his wife and children seemed so strong that he had forgotten his mother altogether. 'It's okay,' he consoled her.*"

Mbok Jah's simplicity, which represents the life of Javanese women in the countryside, is powerfully portrayed by Umar Kayam. There are no lofty aspirations or signs of luxury displayed by the author, as stated: "They were even more shocked when they found *Mbok Jah*'s house. It was small, slanted, and made of cheap bamboo and wood." So everything was simple, almost inadequate, because "Inside there was only one table, a few rickety chairs, and a bed frame that seemed to be *Mbok Jah*'s bed." *Mbok Jah* could have replaced the worn-out furnishings in her house with the savings she'd earned over the years, but instead used the money to help her relatives and neighbors in need. "My relatives are all poor, you know, sir. So, my allowance from the city will eventually run out, helping out with this and that."

Mbok Jah's determination to refuse the Mulyono family's invitation to return to their home in the city demonstrates an attitude of *andhap asor*, an awareness that her body has reached a point where it can no longer handle the strenuous work that exceeds her capabilities.

2. A Glimpse of the Short Story "*Mbah Marinah*" by Riqqah Dianty

Riqqah Dianty, a budding writer from Bengkulu, Sumatra, features *Mbah Marinah*, an elderly Javanese woman who still works as a porter at Bring Harjo Market in Yogyakarta, in her short story. There's a sense of wonder, a sense of admiration, and even a hint of curiosity in the author's portrayal of *Mbah Marinah*.

"A porter?" Suri asked, frowning, not understanding.

"Oh, like a porter in Bengkulu," replied Uda Jeki.

"A woman, huh? Really?" Suri asked incredulously. She imagined the porters at Pasar Minggu in Bengkulu, their bodies strong and muscular. There were none who were women.

Until now, the job of porter has been associated with men, considering that labor is their primary asset. Therefore, Suri, as the author's self-representation, deeply focused on *Mbah Marinah*. In this short story, the author doesn't dwell much on *Mbah Marinah*, but the central narrative and focus of the conversation between Suri and Uda Jeki are focused on this Javanese woman. Everything from her work style, her attitude towards those who use her services as a porter, her reciprocation of others' kindness, and her humble approach to life are deeply touching.

"Suri was moved, even though just looking at her appearance, one could tell that Mbah Marinah had a difficult life. Not to mention, he works with a very heavy workload every day."

As a young man from outside Java, specifically Sumatra, Suri gained a lot of understanding about life values from his conversations with *Mbah Marinah*, although he still couldn't grasp the essence of *Mbah Marinah*'s attitudes and life principles.

"Why did you move here, sir?" Mbah Marinah asked one afternoon.

Suri just smiled, finding it somewhat difficult to explain. "I want to be successful quickly, Mbah. Many people say that moving to the city brings quick success," Suri replied shyly.

Mbah Marinah chuckled at Suri's response. "So, are the successful ones rich, Mas?"

"Those with lots of money, Mbah!" Suri replied confidently. "So I can send my parents on the Hajj pilgrimage, buy a house for my wife and children, and buy a car. So many things."

Mbah Marinah laughed at Suri's antics. Then she replied again, "Why buy this and that, Mas?" Grandma Marinah asked with a smile.

"So that she can live happily, Grandma, so that she's happy," Suri replied again.

Grandma Marinah smiled and then looked Suri in the eye. "Is that the only way to be happy? Hehehe."

Suri's conversation with Grandma Marinah raised many questions about the meaning of happiness in life. Why would such an elderly woman still work as a manual laborer, relying on physical strength? And remarkably, the fruits of her labor weren't enjoyed solely for herself, but rather for selflessly helping others. Suri felt the kindness of Grandma Marinah, who lent her money. Before she could even repay it, she found out that Grandma Marinah had already written a will, offering forgiveness for all her debts. *"Yesterday, Grandma Marinah's son came here to deliver his will. "Mbah Marinah said she had forgiven all her debts."* For those with discerning minds, this would certainly be a source of reflection and evaluation. It might be difficult to accept, in this day and age, what the old Javanese woman did, that everything she did was ultimately to make others happy.

3. Questioning Javanese Women from the Perspective of the Short Stories *Mbok Jah* and *Mbah Marinah*

The similarities between these two short stories are the depiction of a traditional Javanese woman who is very simple and modest, physically aged, but still possesses a fighting spirit in supporting herself and those around her. The "njawani" (Javanese) principles firmly held by both female characters in these two short stories evoke a sense of life that is *sumeleh* (simple), *sak madyo* (sacred), sincere, full of devotion, and not overdoing it.

Umar Kayam portrays *Mbok Jah* as an elderly woman living a domestic life. She is a housemaid in a simple family. She is extremely loyal, obedient, and accepts her life with complete resignation. Her character and actions reflect Javanese culture, which places women in a subordinate position, submissive to their employers, and with little choice but to accept her situation. Therefore, *Mbok Jah* is treated very well by her employer's family, and it's hard to believe she has worked for over twenty years. The passage of time brings changes to Mbok Jah's physical and mental strength, leading her to ultimately decide to "return" to her village. The request was rejected, but *Mbok Jah* insisted on returning to her home in Gunung Kidul, refusing to burden others with her vulnerability. Kayam wrote, *"For a widow who is too old, what else could she want but a roof to shelter under, food, and clothing."*

The simplicity and resignation of the Javanese female character in the short story "*Mbah Marinah*" are also striking among the two male characters from outside Java (Sumatra). As a porter at Bring Harjo Market in Yogyakarta, *Mbah Marinah* carries the burdens of those who need her help every day for whatever she can afford, even though the weight she lifts is disproportionate to her thin frame, which resembles bones wrapped in dark brown skin. *Mbah Marinah's* distinguishing features are her white hair tied back, and her wearing a t-shirt and worn-out shorts. His appearance did not dampen his intention to do good to others, "*As willing as he is to give, sir. There are people who are sincere and give a lot. There are people who are sincere and give a little, so they give a little. The important thing is to be sincere.*" *Mbah Marinah* answered.

Her admiration and admiration for *Mbah Marinah* became even higher when Suri found out that the money she earned as a laborer was actually used for people who had been thought to have helped her. Every day, *Mbah Marinah* buys a packet of spicy, coconut-based Padang rice, even though she's Javanese, an elderly woman with no teeth, "*It's for Mr. Yarto and Mr. Agus, who drive the Kopaja bus, you know. They drive us from Kulon Progo every day. The fare isn't much. Poor people, who knows, they might not have eaten yet. Hehehe.*"

Meanwhile, differences between the short stories by *Mbok Jah* and *Mbah Marinah* include characterization, setting, occupation, background, and the era in which they were written.

The female characters in both stories are distinct. The characters in *Mbok Jah's* short story are relatively flat, lacking any flashes of conflict. *Mbok Jah*, with her resigned nature, never demands anything from the family where she works as a domestic helper. The presence of the Mulyono family, where *Mbok Jah* works, develops *Mbok Jah's* character. Meanwhile, the author describes the character of *Mbah Marinah* in the short story as a somewhat comical woman, with a cheerful smile that reveals missing teeth on her wrinkled face. There are two other characters in the story, supporting *Mbah Marinah*: *Suri* and *Uda Jeki*.

In the short story, *Mbok Jah* is mentioned as coming from Tepus, Gunung Kidul, a village known for its barrenness and frequent droughts during the dry season. Therefore, she left her village to seek her fortune in the city as a domestic worker. Meanwhile, in the short story, *Mbah Marinah*, the female character is mentioned as coming from Kulon Progo, where she works at Bring Harjo Market as a porter. Another character from outside Java (Sumatra) is introduced in this short story to further develop *Mbah Marinah's* character. Both of the Javanese female characters in each short story are set in Yogyakarta. Although Umar Kayam himself is originally from Ngawi, since studying at Gadjah Mada University (UGM), he has spent half his life in Yogyakarta, making him very familiar with the life situation of Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat. Meanwhile, although Riqqah Dianty was born in Bengkulu and has very little knowledge of Yogyakarta life, her short story still feels

'njawani' with the presence of an elderly woman named *Mbah Marinah*. Her attitude, her speech, and her firmness in her life principles show her as a true Javanese woman.

4. The Relationship Between the Presence of Javanese Women in the Short Stories "Mbok Jah" and "Mbah Marinah"

These two short stories are interconnected by the presence of female characters who are deeply Javanese, related to their attitudes, behavior, and principles in life. Javanese women cannot escape the ethics that underlie their outlook on life, expressed in symbols with philosophical content. This is strongly evident in the characters in the short stories *Mbok Jah* and *Mbah Marinah*.

Mbok Jah's decision to retire after more than twenty years of service was a carefully considered decision. She did not want to burden her employer's family due to her advanced age and increasingly frail physique. Despite rejection from her employer's family, *Mbok Jah* remained steadfast, stating, "*But Mbok Jah's decision is firm. I don't want to be a burden like a helpless old horse.*" This elderly woman reinforces the image of the traditional Javanese woman, who is strongly loyal, sincere, and obedient to her employer, while also possessing strong principles and determination.

Mbah Marinah's friendly attitude toward people from various ethnicities and cultures is clearly presented in the short story "*Mbah Marinah*." How Suri and Uda Jeki, who hail from Sumatra, regardless of their background, became close to *Mbah Marinah*, as seen in the quote, "*Actually, he was a bit curious; it wasn't usual for Javanese people like Mbah Marinah to like spicy, coconut-milk-based Padang food. Most of the people who ate at Uda Jeki's food stall were immigrants, not native Javanese.*" Another sentiment is illustrated in the quote, "*Suri became close to Mbah Marinah and the other porter mothers. They often gathered in front of Uda Jeki's food stall to wait for their usual Kopaja bus pick-up.*"

The main character of this Javanese outlook on life is religious-mystical (John, 1962; Mulder, 1992 in Mudjajadi, 1999). This suggests that, according to the Javanese outlook, beyond the visible world, there exists another, supernatural power. This power is not only considered the center or epicenter of everything, but also encompasses all that exists. In the short story "*Mbok Jah*," the elderly woman is positioned within a Javanese cultural framework that emphasizes obedience and devotion. *Mbok Jah*'s sincerity is often interpreted as a manifestation of submission, even an attachment to the feudal system that places women in a subordinate position. This means that the character's sincerity is more often understood as "resignation" born of limited options: "*Mbok Jah* never demanded anything in return. Her life was solely for service, and she accepted it with resignation." On the other hand, in the short story "*Mbah Marinah*," sincerity is interpreted as moral strength and a source of happiness. *Mbah Marinah* not only accepts her fate but actively uses her sincerity to help and set an example for others. "*Yesterday, Mbah Marinah's son*

came here to deliver a will. He said Mbah Marinah has resigned herself to all her debts," Uda Jeki replied softly.

Furthermore, both short stories also show the elderly female characters exhibiting a high level of tolerance, accepting and respecting cultural, ethnic, and other differences without discrimination.

Umar Kayam relates that Mbok Jah's presence in her employer's family was highly regarded. There was no discrimination or arbitrary treatment. *Mbok Jah* also showed respect for the policies implemented by her employer. She preserved their cultural values, traditions, and beliefs, as shown in the following quote:

"Even Kedono and Kedini were always willing to accompany her, sitting slumped in the courtyard of the palace mosque to listen to the sound of the Sekaten gamelan, which only sounded like tang-tung-tang-tung-grombyang. In fact, over time, they became absorbed in and enjoyed the Sekaten atmosphere in the mosque."

In the short story "*Mbah Marinah*," Riqqah recounts how Mbah Marinah received the respect of those around her who knew her upon her death for her many good deeds, as quoted in this quote:

"Many people are sad, Sur. Including Mr. Yarto and Mr. Agus. They said no one else brought them rice packets," Uda Jeki said, seeming to understand Suri's feelings. "Many people came to pay their respects. I even joined them yesterday. There were also a lot of condolences for Mbah Marinah. Many shop owners in Beringharjo sent money. During her life, Mbah Marinah loved to help carry things with sincerity, she said." Uda Jeki recounted, adding at the end of the call, "Indeed, Sur. There are many ways to live life. Like Mbah Marinah and the other porters, she still has the strength and sincerity to endure even though she carries a burden beyond her capacity every day."

The Javanese women's Javanese attitude, as seen in the characters of *Mbok Jah* and *Mbah Marinah*, is characterized by a strong sense of empathy for others. Developing empathy to understand others is not easy, but it doesn't seem to be a major problem for these two female characters.

"And the state of that house? Where did all that substantial savings go? Didn't she dare to return to the village because she was confident her relatives would be able to help and accommodate her there?"

"And Mbok Jah, as if understanding what her relatives were thinking and imagining, quickly explained. "My relatives are all poor, sir. So my allowance from the city will eventually run out, helping with this and that." (Mbok Jah, 2013)

Mbah Marinah's empathy emerged when she learned that her father, Suri, had died, forcing her to return to Bengkulu. However, she couldn't withdraw money because the market was closed, and the cash she had wasn't enough to buy a plane ticket. So *Mbah Marinah* said, "Here, take this for me, so I can buy a ticket soon." She said with a smile, her missing teeth no longer making Suri laugh. Sobbing, Suri reached for the money from *Mbah Marinah*. She couldn't bear to take it from the decrepit old woman. But she had to go home soon.

Mbok Jah and *Mbah Marinah* maintained a high standard of politeness with everyone, even though they were younger than her. *Mbok Jah* and *Mbah Marinah* applied politeness in every interaction.

"Finally, all the food was ready and served on the table. What was mentioned was tiwul rice, boiled cassava leaves, and red chili sauce with salt. Drinking water was provided in an earthen jug.

"Please, sir, eat as you please. Mbok Jah's Gunung Kidul tiwul and chili sauce didn't have shrimp paste because she ran out of shrimp paste, and the accompaniment was boiled cassava leaves."

Acknowledging that all individuals have an equal right to respect, regardless of cultural background or otherwise, *Mbah Marinah*, speaking with Suri, conveys her views as quoted below:

"Mbah Marinah smiled and then looked Suri in the eye, "Is that the only way to be happy? Hehehe." ...

"There are many ways to be happy, aren't there, Mas?" She chuckled and then boarded the Kopaja bus with the other women workers."

Ultimately, the two short stories by *Mbok Jah* and *Mbah Marinah* are works that examine Javanese women from a traditional domestic perspective and transform fragments into moral agents capable of inspiring the younger generation to uphold the value of solidarity.

D. CONCLUSION

1. Umar Kayam, in his short story "*Mbok Jah*," questions the domestic role of female characters, as household servants who are fiercely loyal to their employers. Strong elements of loyalty, obedience, sincerity, and resignation to fate are present, demonstrating a vertical relationship between servant and employer. This short story also reinforces patriarchal traditions in the Javanese feudal context.

2. Riqqah Dianty, in her short story "*Mbah Marinah*," questions the role of female characters in the public sphere, as porters at Bring Harjo market. With a strong, hard-working character, *Mbah Marinah* also possesses a strong sense of solidarity, sincerity, and generosity. This character makes *Mbah Marinah* a Javanese female figure who serves as a moral agent and role model for others, regardless of background or origin. The horizontal relationship that emerges in this short story, which is solidarity with others and leads to a very strong humanism. In this case, the figure of the old woman is no longer merely a symbol of obedience, but also an example of solidarity, resilience, and wisdom in life.
3. The true philosophy of Javanese women lies in "subtlety and strength." With each gentle yet meaningful step, Javanese women symbolize harmony, uniting courage and gentleness. They are the embodiment of a strength that is invisible, yet manifest in their wisdom. Amidst these changing times, Javanese women's philosophy remains a strong foundation, radiating the timeless values that shape their noble character.

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