“THE EMPRESS IS BACK ON THE STAGE“ : WOMAN LEADERSHIP IN MINANGKABAU FOLKLORE

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Abstract

This paper aims to do a critical analysis on power and gender constructions from selected Minangkabau folklore which has been transcribed into Minangkabau manuscripts: Kaba Cinduo Mato, Kaba Anggun nan Tongga, Kaba Malin Deman, Kaba Malin Kundang and Kaba Sabai nan Aluih. The main argument of this paper is that Minangkabau folklore strongly presents matrifocality. As a result, these kabs represent woman leadership either in private or public areas. The analysis is conducted within the frame of literary sociology, and feminist literary criticism. Based on the analysis, it can be said that to some extent, representations of woman leadership in the texts have competed against patriarchal conventional assumptions on gender.

Keywords: Minangkabau, matrifocality, adat, gender, kaba

Introduction

Minangkabau is not only well known as the world’s largest matrilineal society but also as one that coexists amongst the mostly Islamic societies within Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. The Minangkabau have attracted special attention as a result of what many observers see as its paradoxical character. This paradoxical character has been described by anthropologists as the “Minangkabau puzzle”. The puzzle is that the Minangkabau, on the one hand, is an ethnic group which still practises matrilineal social organization, strongly tied to their ‘tradition’ and homeland. On the other hand, at the same time the Minangkabaus are also well known for their strong alliance to Islam, a long tradition of migration, and a positive attitude to modernization. This puzzle has been the main interest area of researchers, especially cultural anthropologists, studying the Minangkabau. Within Minangkabau studies there are some questions remain unanswered, concerning power and gender.

Evelyn Blackwood (2001), in her research on Minangkabau society, has found that there are inconsistencies in the representation of men’s and women’s positions. She argues that this is largely because historians and anthropologists have relied on Minangkabau adat writings, produced since the early 1900s by urban elite Minangkabau men for their gender analysis. The aim of this paper is to contribute
to the discussion on how gender and power are constructed in Minangkabau society through analysing Minangkabau oral literature (folklore). Folklore has been studied as relics of the disappearing past. Later, some researchers, especially feminists, have used folklore as an alternative sources to trace the execution of gender and power relationship in a society (Yaqub 2003: 330). Siapno’s research on Acehnese literature can be taken as an example of how folklore is used as a source to trace power and gender relation within the traditional Acehnese political system (Siapno 2002). Siapno’s work also exposes misinterpretation in understanding the representation of men’s and women’s positions in Acehnese literature as a result of the use of patriarchal approach in reading the texts. Siapno, then, proposes the need to reread the texts from feminist perspective.

Building my work on Siapno’s work, this paper uses selected Minangkabau oral literature as the corpus to investigate how the texts construct the nature of female power, female agency, and autonomy within Minangkabau society. Within Minangkabau society women have a privileged status and play significant roles in their community as a result of applying matrilineal principles (descent and inheritance through the maternal line). Tanner argues that Minangkabau practises matrifocality. Matrifocality is a concept developed in anthropology. Literally matrifocality means focusing on mothers. This concept was stated for the first time by Raymond T. Smith who highlighted mother’s role as a central in kinship system (1996). Tanner, develops this concept, explains that matrifocality is a concept in which mother’s role is culturally, structurally and affectively central in a kinship system. (Tanner, 1974: 131). This paper argues that Minangkabau folklore strongly present matrifocality. As a result, these kabas represent woman leadership either in private or public areas. It can be said that to some extent, representations of woman leadership in the texts have competed against patriarchal conventional assumptions on gender

Kaba and its function in Minangkabau society

In doing a critical analysis on power and gender constructions, the paper selects some Minangkabau folklore which has been transcribed into Minangkabau manuscripts: Kaba Cinduo Mato (KCM), Kaba Anggun nan Tongga (KAT), Kaba Malin Deman (KMD), Carito Malin Kundang (CMK), and Kaba Sabai nan Aluih (KSA). These folklores, except CMK), are in kaba genre. Kaba, literary means news or report, is a genre of Minangkabau traditional oral literature which can be told by tukang kaba/ sijobang (kaba teller) (Junus, 1984: 17). These folklore were selected because they are well known among Minangkabau from different social classes and generations. In addition, they have been passed into the Minangkabaus mostly by orally. Most importantly, the Minangkabau have refered to these folklores in their effort to understand their adat and customs.
KCM is a story about Bundo Kanduang (the Womb Mother), a prominent legendary female figure within Alam Minangkabau (Minangkabau world). KCM has many different versions. There are thirty three KCM texts which are kept in three libraries outside of West Sumatra. The Indonesian National Library (eight texts), University of Leiden Library (twenty four texts), and Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (one text) (Yusuf, 1994: 72). This kaba was also edited into eleven editions, published both inside and outside Indonesia (ibid., 9). For the analysis, I have chosen one of KCM texts, collection of the University of Leiden library with the catalogue number Or.8539. I decide to choose this version because according to M. Yusuf, the plot of the story of this text is complete, compared to the other texts. Beside that, it is also still in good condition (Yusuf, 1994: 159). This text, written in old Minangkabau language with Arabic-Malay script, has been transcribed by Yusuf into Latin script. KCM has been used by researchers, including Manan (1967), Abdullah (1970), de Jong (1980), and Elfira (2007), as a main source in analyzing Minangkabau adat, identity, and customs. In the same manner as KCM, KMD is also well-known among the Minangkabaus, and has many versions. There are at least twenty three KMD texts kept in libraries around the world: The Indonesian National Library (19 texts), London Oriental Bibliography (2 texts), and Center for Information and Documentation of Minangkabau Culture, and Padang panjang (2 texts) (Nurizzati, 1994: 22-48). It is assumed that there are still KMD versions which have not been documented yet. KMD manuscripts was written in Latin and Jawi. The text consists 15 episode (Nurizzati, 1994: 22-48). KMD is a story of a young man, Malin Deman, who marries a fairy, Puti Bungsu. The research uses KMD text of Dr. Majo Basa Suhaimi, who copied it from KMD text of Dr. Majo Basa (1901-1977). This Minangkabau text, written in Arabic-Malay, was transcribed into Latin by Suryadi (1998).

Regarding KAT, National Museum Jakarta keeps three version of KAT: Kaba si Tungga (Inventarisation No VDW 210 and VDW 211), and Cerita Sitong Magat Jabang (Inventarisation No ML32) (Muhardi: 1989). KAT, an oral story, has been transcribed and given title Anggun nan Tungga by Nigel Phillip (Phillips, 1981). Phillips’ transcript is used as the research corpus. Storytelling of KAT is known as basijobang. Like basimalin, it only tells a story of KMD. Basijobang also only tells a story of KAT. KAT is a story about Anggun nan Tungga, a king of Tiku, who is sailing with his loyal assistant, Bujang Salamaik. Sijobang has seven main episodes: Malaco Tanah Tiku; Ka Koto Bintawai (Maalah kapa nan tujuah); Mambaleh Jaso Intan (Maanta Intan pulang); Ka Koto Tanau (Malapeh Buruang Nuri); Nan Gondo Ka Gunuang; Ka Koto Indo Jati; Mandugo ka Tiku. KAT can also be expanded into 12 episodes (Bachmid: 2009).

KSA is equally as popular as KCM. For example, in 1928, the Perkumpulan Kaum Ibu (women’s organisation) in Padang performed this kaba, in a Western
theatre style. At the same time this kaba, after translated into Malay language, was also performed in Betawi (Sati: 1929). In addition, this kaba has been adapted reception into various modern literary forms such as play and short story. For example, the Kaba was adapted into a roman named Sabai Nan Aloeih: Tjeritera Minangkabau by Tulis Sutan Sati (1929). Sati’s story is used as analysis corpus.

Malin Kundang is considered as a non kaba story and printed only in Indonesian language (Junus, 1982:32). Malin Kundang is a story of a migrant faithless son, who denies his own mother. He then is cursed to become a stone by his own mother. Malin Kundang has become a symbol of a bad person according to Minangkabau values. This story is quoted in order to educate young Minangkabau, who are preparing to migrate, to not forget their mother, both their own biological mother or their mother land, otherwise they will follow Malin Kundang’s fate. Later, the story is not only broadly well known among the Minangkabau, but also among members of the Indonesian community.

In analyzing the folklore, this research will use descriptive-analysis method. The method strives to describe, analyze, interpret and criticize the way the folklore represented woman leadership, based on the evidence, spreading in the texts.

Gender, Literary Sociology and Feminist Literary Criticism

In order to explore woman leadership within the selected Minangkabau folklore, some theories on literary sociology, gender, and feminist literary criticism will be used. Relating to the function of literature, Alan Swingewood claims that literature is a social document (Swingewood, 1972:13). Moreover, Avrom Fleishman states that there are some ways of thinking about fiction and society, including dialectical and historicist. The dialectical concept claims that novels are a direct response to what takes place in the world, and therefore have something to say about the ideologies of their time, indeed that they are themselves an expression of ideology. While the historicist is a way of looking at novels as part of the cultural production of society. Since they are stamped with the stylistic traits and other individuating markers of the culture, they are good indices, mirror reflections, of the historical state of things (Belknap, 1990:185).

In order to avoid patriarchal bias in analyzing the texts, feminist literary criticism approach is used in interpreting female leadership and woman autonomy in the texts. since the research investigate how male and female figures are represented in the texts, it is necessary apply concept of gender as stated by Anne Oakley:

‘Sex’ is a word that refer to the biological differences between male and female [...] ‘Gender’, however, is a matter of culture. It refers to the social classification
into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ […] The constancy of sex must be admitted, but also must the variability of gender (Oakley, 1972:).

Based on Oakley’s argument, it can be said that gender are interrelated with culture. Moreover, Robert Connel argues that masculinity is a concept which cannot be visible and relevant if it is not contrasted with feminity, and vice versa (Connell: 1995:68).

Matrifocality Values in Minangkabau Folklore

The story of kaba is usually opened with a greeting from the tukang kaba (the story teller) who says “Ampun, ampun, ampun baribu kali ampun. Kaba urang kami kabakan, bohong urang kami tak sato (have mercy, have mercy, have mercy for thousand times, people’s story we deliver, people’s lies we do not get involve) (Yusuf: 1994:1). These sentence implies that the story had been transferred orally from one tukang kaba to another tukang kaba. Because of the nature of storytelling process, there is a strong possibility that every tukang kaba adds his own imagination and interpretation which is mostly influenced by his own cultural environment.

Stories told by kaba tellers suggest matrifocality values. The selected folklore which become the main corpus of this research present women as central figures in their kinship or community, as can be seen from KCM. From the first paragraph, the readers or listeners have been given a good description of the image of Bundo Kanduang (the Womb Mother), a prominent legendary female figure within Alam Minangkabau (Minangkabau world). Image of Bundo Kanduang (the Womb Mother), a prominent legendary female figure within Alam Minangkabau (Minangkabau world), and the authority, possessed by the Bundo Kanduang as the ruler of the Pagaruyuang. The sentence below indicates the strength of Bundo Kanduang’s power:

I will explain the book, consists of standard rules. If the old book should be exposed, not a single line has been disappeared, not a single dot has been forgotten. In the Minangkabau world [the old book] that I have tightly kept, I could blacken a rule which was white, and vice versa, I could make disappear a rule which was exist and vice versa, I could vanish a rule which was kept, I could upside down a rule, I could change the direction of a rule (downstream become upstream and vice versa), I could reshape it (flat become round and vice versa). The heirloom of Katemengungan of Koto Piliang is also within our rule (Yusuf,1994:68:69)

The paragraph shows that Bundo Kanduang is the guardian and corrector of her kingdom’s constitution. She is the central ruler and her position is above the law. It can be said that Bundo Kandung is a dominant and central figure in the text. That is why the story is also known among Minangkabau as Curito Bundo
Kanduang jo Cindua Mato (The story of Bundo Kanduang and Cindua Mato) (Yusuf, 1994:1). It is arguable that the dominant role of Bundo Kanduang in the story is the reason why the title mentions Bundo Kanduang’s name before Cindua Mato’s.

In KCM Bundo Kandung is not only described as a good and powerful ruler, but is represented as a wise and nurturing mother who has successfully educated her children to be good individuals and future leaders (Yusuf, 1994:2,29). In tambo Minangkabau is told that Bundo Kanduang, represented as Indo Jalito (Indra Sejati), successfully educated her children, Datuk Ketemagungan and Pepatih nan Sabatang, to be Minangkabau rulers. It is believed that Datuk Ketemagungan and Pepatih nan Sabatang codified Minangkabau laws known as Adat Limbago (Djamaris, 1991:65). One of the application of Adat Limbago is matrilineal principles.

In her capacity as a mother, Bundo Kanduang is depicted as a nurturer, caring and affectionate. It is towards Cindua Mato, who is her adopted son, Bundo Kanduang’s affectionate is emphasised (ibid, 21). Within the text there are many sentences which show the different expressions of Bundo Kanduang. Unlike her expression as an authoritarian king, Bundo Kanduang is more described as a soft, sensitive, caring and loving person as a mother (ibid, 23,26,31). Bundo Kanduang gives her full protection and guidance to her children. It is Bundo Kanduang who looks after, educates them, finds spouses for them and gives wealth to them. Similarly, the text exposes Dang Tuanku’s and Cindua Mato’s ‘spoiled’ and dependent behaviors to their mother.

What is clear is that the text shows the strong bond between the mother and her children, especially the multi type-relationship between Bundo Kanduang and Dang Tuanku: ruler-successor; patron-client; teacher-student; and mother-child. It can be argued that Bundo Kanduang and Dang Tuanku is ‘a person’ in two bodies, who cannot be separated. It is Dang Tuanku, not Cindua Mato, who accompanies Bundo Kanduang to the Seventh Heaven (langiak katujuah) in avoiding Tiang Bungkuak’s attack.

The strong relationship of mother-child can also be seen from the closeness of Sabai nan Aluih with her mother in KSA. While in KCM Bundo Kanduang is represented as a strong mother, in KSA, however, Sabai’s mother is depicted as a caring but weak mother. Unlike KCM, it is Sabai, a daughter, who takes over family responsibility after her father, who used to be a family leader, was killed. Nevertheless, KSA also exposes the idea that a woman, either as a mother or a daughter, has a central position within her kinship system. If a mother cannot fulfil her responsibilities and rights, a daughter, usually an eldest one, will take over the mother’s rights and responsibilities to be the central figure.
Mother as a central figure in her kinship can be seen also in KMD. Unlike KCM, KMD clearly mentions name and title of Deman’s father, Rajo Dewa, and his position as a King of Camin Ombak land. Because of his position as a king’s son, Malin Deman gets a title as a Sutan (noble title). Nevertheless, activities of Malin Deman’s father have rarely been exposed. In contrast, information on Malin Deman’s mother’s activities are visible within the text. The text shows the dominant role of Main Deman’s mother, Puti Mayang Sani, and the text also shows the closeness of Puti Mayang Sani and Malin Deman relationship. It seems that Malin Deman depends more on his mother than his father in solving his life problems. For example, Malin Deman asks her mother to secretly keep Puti bungsu’s clothes in order to keep Puti Bungsu, a fairy, stay with him, become his wife and a mother of his child, Sutan Duano.

Matrifocality values in KMD can also be seen from the way the story teller explain Malin Deman’s home. Despite the fact that the house is a King’s palace, where Malin Deman’s father reigns, the story teller calls the house as Mayang Sani’s house. It means that the house belongs to Mayang Sani, Malin Deman’s own mother. In other words, the mother is a central figure in the house, and the house is identified as the mother’s authority.

The strong bond of woman with her home is also implied in KAT, such as in episode “Mambaleh jaso Intan Korong (Paying Intan Korong’s merit)”:

Big House which has nine rooms,
Becoming ten with kichen
Eleven with high raised platform
Twelve with its women

From the quotation, it can be seen that it is a woman who becomes the central figure of the house. This description suits Minangkabau matrilineal principles which allocate a house for women. In the past, it was a mother with her young children who were allowed to live in Rumah Gadang (Big House). While mature sons and unmarried men, lived in surau (mosque) and banjar (community house). Despite some changes, women still inherit parents’ houses. Even in many divorce cases, it is a husband who usually leaves the house, despite the fact that he himself built the house (Elfira: 2011).

It is clear that the selected folklore depicts a mother who has power in her hand as she has an ability to reward and punish people around her. For example, in KCM, as a gift of Sutan Rumandung’s loyalty toward Bundo Kandung, his position as a successor of Pagaruyuang kingdom is protected. Sutan Rumandung’s authority is continued by his own children. It can be said that through Sutan Rumandung, the paternal line of Pagaruyuang kingship is acknowledged. On the contrary, Malin Kundang is punished into stone by his own mother because he rejects his own
mother. How strong is the power of a mother can also be seen from KAT in “Mambaleh jaso Intan” episode. The episode shows a ‘battle’ between a mother, Andam Sari Andam, and her own daughter, Intan Korong. It exposes how Andam Sari Andam, having noble title Sari Mulia, as a mother has more power than Ulak Sumano, her husband and Intan’s father, in deciding her children’s destiny, and in punishing the children who disobey her command. The episode also shows that it is a mother instead a father who has control over family’s wealth. Because of her control right, the power is in her hand. As a result, the community and her children, have more respect and fear toward her than toward Ulak Sumano.

The selected folklore put forward more active female figures, especially mother figures, than male figures in ‘moving’ the stories, as can be seen from KMD. Despite the fact that Malin Deman, a young man, is a lead figure in the stories, all along the story he is accompanied by female figures who are actively involved in determining the journey of Malin Deman’s destiny or the direction of the story. Some of them are Mande Rubiah, whose husband is never exposed, Puti Bungsu’s mother who is presented without accompanied by her husband, and Puti Bungsu’s all-female siblings. The analysis concludes that because of matrifocality values, women as mothers have active and dominant roles either in private and public areas.

**Leadership in Minangkabau Folklore**

In the selected folklore, it is taken for granted that women can occupy the highest political position in their society. This is evident from the way Bundo Kanduang is represented in KCM. In describing Bundo Kanduang’s appearance, character and abilities as the reign of one of female ruler, the ‘author’ used the same appropriate language and schematic formula used to describe other male king. For example, in the text Bundo Kanduang is always referred as female king (rajo=king, perempuan=female) instead of queen (ratu).

Moreover, Bundo Kanduang is depicted as a talented person, which she needs to fulfill her position as one of the most powerful queens in the world: smart, wise, independent and firm. Her intelligence can be seen from the way she forms a government, similar to that of a modern day parliament. She is helped by four ministers, Basa Nan Ampek Balai. Bundo Kanduang educated Basa Nan Ampek Balai certain abilities such the knowledge on Minangkabau adat. Bundo Kanduang also gives them certain authorities to conduct their different tasks. She also establishes a democratic system of governance. It means every decision regarding the kingdom’s matters will be decided based on consensus (mufakat) by her cabinet members:

(Bundo Kanduang then orders: ‘[I agree] If that is the best solution, a result of the meeting of Basa Nan Ampek Balai. How happy I was’…listening to this kind of
words [expressed by Bundo Kanduang]. Tuan Kadhi from Padang Gantiang then gave respectful greeting: ‘Please forgive me Bundo Kanduang, everything depends on you. If this is good for you, it will also good for us, all your children) (Yusuf, 1994:82-83)

The text shows that Bundo Kanduang is a wise king who respects and considers advice expressed by her subordinates. However, the final decision is still in her hands, as she says to her son, Sutan Rumanduang: “finally, it [the final decision] will depends on us. This system [the ruler as the final decision maker] is based on [our] customs, it is the way of [our] laws” (Yusuf, 1994:6). Sutan Rumanduang also recognized Bundo Kanduang’s position as the highest authority of the Pagaruyuang kingdom, and Basa Ampek Balai are only Bundo Kanduang’s ‘right-hand men’ whose task tends to formally stand by Bundo Kanduang’s decisions (Yusuf, 1994: 257-258).

Based on the quotation, it can be said that Bundo Kanduang, indeed, has a full authority, and broad, acknowledged responsibilities and rights as the Ruler of Pagaruyuang. This finding is in contrast with Taufik Abdullah’s, whose work considered as one of the classic works on gender politics in Minangkabau society. Regarding to Bundo Kanduang’s authority, in his article ‘Some Notes on the Kaba Tjindua Mato: An Example of Minangkabau Traditional Literature’, Taufik Abudllah argues that:

…but inspite of her function as a source of wisdom, Bundo Kanduang could not make any decisions. She was neither the authority on adat, which was under the jurisdiction of the Rajo Adat and the Bendahara, nor the expert on sarak, which was under the Raja Ibadat and the Tuan Kadhi. Bundo Kanduang was powerless because she had no official position in the hierarchy of the Minangkabau political system (Abdullah 1970:16 italic is added).

Despite the fact that some scholars of Minangkabau studies continue to refer to Abdullah’s article as an authoritative work on power and authority within the traditional Minangkabau political system, I argue that Bundo Kanduang is not only a ceremonial leader without authority. The other texts also expose strong leadership by female characters, as can be seen in Kaba Sabai Nan Aluih. In contrast to the meaning of her name (the soft Sabai) Sabai is also portrayed as a strong person, who bravely took revenge on her father’s death. Sabai took over the leadership in her family after her young brother, who was expected to be a leader of the family, shows his uselessness and incompetence. Unlike KCM, which de jure and de facto KCM gives women leadership roles, KMD de jure mentions that men have leadership roles, either as a spiritual leader or clan leader. For example, Rajo Dewa, the father of Malin Deman, gives a leadership role a king. Nevertheless, the story shows that it is Puti Mayang Sani, Malin Deman’s mother, who has control over
the family and the community’s everyday activities. Moreover, despite the fact that KMD gives Datuk Soyiah Panjang Janggut, Malin Deman’s teacher, a role as a spiritual leader, the story gives more opportunity to Mande Rubiah, an adopted mother of Malin and Puti Bungsu, than to Datuk Soyiah Panjang Janggung to present in the story. It is Mande Rubiah who unites and looks after Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu. It can be said that de facto KMD gives women leadership roles.

Woman strong leadership can also be seen from KAT in episode “Mambaleh jaso Intan” which tells the strength of a daughter, not a son, in contesting her mother’s domination. The episode explicitly shows that women also have ability and power not only to lead but also to oppress. In other word, women can also be tough, brave, dangerous, and even brutal. It can be seen from the act of Intan’s mother who, in her anger, has the heart to hit Intan with a big stick. In order to avoid her mother, Intan prefers to run away and keep moving from one ship to another ship to live. The episode exposes the bravery of Intan in survival and keeping her honor while sailing with various sailor men.

Base on the analysis, it can be said that Minangkabau folklore exposes the idea that not only are women have ability to lead, but also the idea that their leadership are naturally accepted within their community. As can be seen from the actitivities of Bundo Kanduang (KCM), Mayang Sani (KMD), Malin Kundang’s mother (KMK), and Sabai nan Aluih (KSA). In short, the selected folklores represent women’s leadership capacity in public and private areas.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the selected folklore (Kaba Cinduo Mato, Kaba Anggun nan Tongga, Carito Malin Kundang, and Kaba Sabai nan Aluih), the text strengthened the description of Minangkabau as a matrifocal society in which women possess a privileged status and play significant roles in their communities. As a result, Minangkabau women in the texts are represented as relatively having privileged not only in private sphere but also in public sphere such as in society’s political structure system. To some extent, the representations have competed against patriarchal conventional assumptions on gender. Moreover, the texts express the idea that women’s leadership is naturally accepted in Minangkabau.

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