

## VOICES OF THE SCIENTIFIC AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN LESTI, NYATAKAH DIA?, A SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL BY SOEHARIO PADMODIWIRIO

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### **Abstract**

*This article aims to explain the attitude towards science and folklore in Lesti, Nyatakah Dia? (2006), an Indonesian science fiction novel written by Soehario Padmodiwirio (2006). The novel displays a certain mediating attitude in the relation between science and Javanese folklore through portrayals of both the speculative science and folklore elements, manifested in the character Lesti, both a technologically advanced extraterrestrial and a mystical, supernatural being. Such explanation is necessary to understand a recurring motif of compromise between science and folklore in Indonesian science fiction. In exploring this attitude, Todorov's approach of the fantastic serves as a more flexible device in reading such a science fiction novel with apparent fantastical and supernatural elements. This novel represents the compromise by positing that science and folklore are one and the same but interpreted differently with a further suggestion that both interpretations are positive and beneficial for the people in the novel.*

*Keywords: science fiction; Indonesian science fiction; fantasy; folklore; Hario Kecil*

### **Abstrak**

Artikel ini bertujuan memaparkan sikap terhadap sains dan folklor dalam *Lesti, Nyatakah Dia?* (2006), sebuah novel fiksi sains karya Soehario Padmodiwirio (2006). Novel ini menampilkan upaya memediasi hubungan antara sains dan folklor Jawa melalui interaksi antara sains spekulatif dan unsur-unsur folklor Jawa, yang dimanifestasikan dalam karakter Lesti, yang digambarkan sekaligus sebagai makhluk asing luar angkasa berteknologi tinggi dan makhluk mistik supernatural. Pemaparan ini penting untuk memahami motif kompromi antara sains dan folklore yang berulang dalam fiksi sains Indonesia. Dalam memaparkan sikap ini, digunakan pendekatan formal Tzvetan Todorov tentang *the fantastic* yang lebih fleksibel dalam membaca karya fiksi sains yang dipenuhi oleh unsur-unsur fantasi dan supernatural. Novel ini merepresentasi jalan tengah tersebut dengan menyimpulkan bahwa sains dan folklore adalah dua sisi mata uang, hal yang sama dilihat dari dua cara tafsir yang berbeda dan keduanya dipandang sebagai interpretasi yang positif dan bermanfaat bagi perkembangan masyarakat dalam novel.

Kata kunci: fiksi sains; fiksi sains Indonesia; fantasi; *folklore*; Hario Kecil

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

*Lesti, Nyatakah Dia?*, henceforth shortened to *Lesti*, is a novel written by Soehario Padmodiwirio, more popularly known as Hario Kecil, a veteran of the Indonesian revolution. It was inspired by Padmodiwirio's own experience during the revolution, particularly during the first and second Dutch military aggressions of Java (1947-1948), which he combines with the stories of supernatural occurrences around Glagah Arum, East Java

and with his imagination of a female extraterrestrial. The story centers around Lesti, a technologically advanced ancient alien who contributed her knowledge and intellect to the betterment of the Javanese society over the ages and particularly during their struggle for independence.

In the novel, Lesti is presented as an enigma, a figure that many deal with but is understood by very few. To the Javanese people familiar with her figure and appearance, she is seen as a magical and mystical entity as respected as Nyi Roro Kidul, mythical queen of the south seas. Her technology is seen as an extension of Javanese mystic arts, and in many cases Lesti attempts to place herself within the Javanese beliefs. To herself, however, everything she has done and does to the Javanese people is mere implementation of her knowledge and her planet's technology, part of her mission to help developing the land she finds herself in.

*Lesti* is representative of a recurring motif in Indonesian science fiction written in the first decade of the 2000s: the blend of and ambivalence to both science and folklore. This article further discusses said blend and ambivalence in terms of formulating a narrative attitude that *Lesti* displays towards both science and folklore, particularly whether the ambivalence leads to either negation (of science or folklore) or compromise (between science and folklore).

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

This article employs a variety of theories and approaches in understanding science fiction. However, since the object of study is a science fiction novel that also integrates elements of fantasy through Javanese folklore, Todorov's more fluid approach towards the genres in speculative fiction seems more suited for comprehending the object.

The blend between science fiction and fantasy is a combination of two speculative fiction genres of similar characteristics. According to Darko Suvin (in Rose (ed.), 1976: 61), both constitute the estranged literature, estranging their readers in a carefully constructed world. The difference lies in that science fiction commonly convinces its readers that a speculated scientific advancement (or *novum*, in Suvin's own term) can be explained logically and plausibly within the context of a science fiction story. On the other hand, fantasy imagines a world where magic, miracles and mystic creatures are commonplace, even when these supernatural elements occur in daily life against fairly realistic settings. In other words, science fiction attempts to offer a fictional context that is seemingly real and factual in an imaginary locality (Suvin in Rose (ed.), 1976: 61), while fantasy offers elements once considered non-existing or hidden into the 'realistic' realm (Jackson, 2001 (1981): 45).

Both science fiction and fantasy offer imaginary worlds that function as a mirror –a term used by both Suvin in science fiction and Jackson in fantasy- which gives a distorted reflection of the real world. In the case of *Lesti*, a hybrid of science fiction and fantasy, there are two mirrors that display two different reflections of one same imaginary world. The fantasy reflection brings the supernatural into the real world, while the science fiction reflection attempts at factualizing the supernatural as a *novum*.

Tzvetan Todorov, in his seminal *The Fantastic*, considers science fiction and most fantasy stories as part of a greater fantastic literature, as shown in the diagram below (Todorov, 1975: 44).

|                |                               |                                 |                  |
|----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Uncanny</i> | <i>Fantastic-<br/>uncanny</i> | <i>Fantastic-<br/>marvelous</i> | <i>Marvelous</i> |
|----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|

Science fiction and many fairy tales are classified into the marvelous, which consists of stories where supernatural events are commonplace and familiar for both the characters and the implied reader of those stories (1975: 55). Todorov also notes that science fiction in the beginning, like other fantasy stories, offers similarly supernatural concepts such as extraterrestrials and interstellar travels, but struggles to explain those concepts factually and logically.

To further dissect Lesti's narrative workings, Todorov's approach requires an understanding of narratology. In narratology, according to Chatman (1980: 19), a narrative text is divided into two levels: the discourse and the story. To put it simply, the story level is the content of a narrative text, including all its elements (actions and events) and existents (characters and settings). The discourse level is the way the content is narrated or communicated, which constructs a structure of narrative transmission.

In science fiction and fantasy, the discourse level becomes highly significant since it is the place where events, characters, and settings are constructed in a greater number of possibilities, more than those of realist fiction. An original example of this would be "The tree sat down and drew his breath." or "The computer thought for a while before answering the question to the meaning of life." Both are not examples of personification, but rather actions of actual characters, the tree and the computer, that can possibly be created within the imaginary world of fantasy and science fiction. This kind of possibility is the central characteristic of the fantastic literature, particularly that which Todorov classifies as the marvelous.

In science fiction, which Todorov calls the scientific marvelous, the supernatural still plays an important part, but is shrouded with logical explanations by the speculative science or scientific laws different from those in the real world (1975: 56). The supernatural elements used in the narrative discourse level, such as extraterrestrials or interstellar travels, often display the narrative formula that underlies a science fiction story. In a science fiction and fantasy hybrid like *Lesti*, there are two variables that serve as story elements. In the case of *Lesti*, the two variables are speculative science and folklores involving magic. Both variables are considered one same subject viewed from two different perspectives. Both are voiced in the narrative through the character Lesti.

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### a. The Story of *Lesti*, *Nyatakah Dia*?

The early chapters of *Lesti* tell about Sutopo, an army lieutenant with a secret mission for a guerilla squad battling the Dutch forces around Blitar, East Java. This mission is starkly different from Sutopo's previous mission because in this mission, Sutopo has to come into contact with supernatural beings residing in Glagah Arum through meditation. The purpose of this meditation is to ask for their aid to support the guerillas with their supernatural powers and to help plant cassava trees overnight, in order to construct both a hiding place and a source of ration for the guerillas.

To achieve this purpose, Topo has to face a powerful supernatural being in the form of a female human called Lesti. Lesti is an extraterrestrial alien from Andromeda, stranded with her crew on Earth two million years ago. They could not return to their home planet in Andromeda due to their ship getting damaged and their communication devices getting

destroyed during the continental drift that changed the face of the earth into the shape that we know now. Topo then falls in love with Lesti. Lesti also falls for Topo, the first human being she falls in love with. Assisted by other characters, such Bung Uman and Pak Sastro, Lesti and Topo carry on with their secret mission. They succeed in helping the guerillas fend off the Dutch forces at the end of the second military aggression, with the help of the supernatural army of Glagah Arum and Lesti's crew.

The rest of the novel reveals the relationship between Lesti and Topo. Lesti, who is depicted as a very intelligent woman and a polymath, transfers her knowledge to Topo and his friends. Lesti reveals that she and her crew are instrumental in constructing the Javanese civilization since the day she got stranded on the island. She has taught the Javanese people agriculture, food processing, and use of herbal medicine. Some of her crew are living along with humans, while the rest remains invisible. After thousands of years, she finally lives alongside humans again, due to her feelings for Topo.

At the end of the novel, Lesti's home planet eventually finds her. Lesti is allowed to marry and is given a new task. She is no longer responsible only to Indonesia, but also to the whole world. After marrying Topo, Lesti transforms Topo into a celestial being like her with a similar set of powers. Topo's aides, Bung Uman and Sastro, are also given supernatural powers and celestial forms. From then on, they are called PKA (Pejuang Kekal Abadi – Immortal Fighters). After the revolution, Lesti and Topo start doing their task in helping the humans "with consciousness and without expecting reward and recognition from the humans on Earth (p. 491)."

#### **b. Science Fiction and Fantasy Elements in *Lesti, Nyatakah Dia?***

*Lesti* offers at least three elements commonly included in science fiction stories. The first is the existence of alien or extraterrestrial life, marked by the existence of Lesti and her celestial soldiers. The aliens in *Lesti* are depicted as beings of a higher intellect and of a highly advanced civilization. In the case of *Lesti*, the Javanese are two million years behind Lesti's native planet in Andromeda.

The second element is the superhuman and genetic engineering. Lesti is a being with superhuman strength and intellect, endowed with a high level of supernatural powers, and is practically immortal (except if she chooses to vanish entirely from the world of the living). She is not born with these powers. Lesti is a genetically engineered being. She spends her childhood and adolescence in the ship destined for Earth. In the ship, new knowledge and technologies are literally implanted in her body.

The third element presented in *Lesti* is alternate history. The story takes place during the Indonesian revolution, a period following the declaration of independence on August 17, 1945, during which the Indonesian army and militias fought against the returning Dutch forces. Even though the course of Indonesian revolution does not deviate from its historical path, the role of Lesti is added. One of the reasons for this addition, as Padmodiwirio himself admitted both in the preface to the novel and his war memoir, was his attempt to imagine an explanation to his seemingly mystical and supernatural experiences while serving as a guerilla fighter during the Indonesian revolution (Padmodiwirio, 1995: 34). One such example in the novel is the success of the Indonesian guerilla squad in East Java, whose rather unexpected victory is explained as being supported by the Lesti-led Glagah Arum mystic soldiers who build a cassava plantation overnight as both a hiding place and a source of ration for the guerilla squad.

As the novel moves on to talk about events beyond Glagah Arum, Lesti's role also expands beyond supporting the revolutionary fighters. As Lesti's role expands, the blend between science fiction and fantasy in the novel also becomes more apparent. The science fiction and fantasy hybrid utilizes the same source for the construction of its imaginary world. The source here can be interpreted as the Javanese folklore. As such, besides the three familiar elements of science fiction, Lesti also devotes a large part of the story to the incorporation of Javanese folklore. In short, in the novel Lesti is constructed as one of the main sources of Javanese folklore, which lends the novel its fantastic elements. Lesti is the inspiration for stories of supernatural women who rule the mystic realm, and the preceptor of all the mystic entities. The novel also depicts the relationship between Lesti and the folkloric belief in local haunts, such as *genderuwo*, *setan*, and *demit*. Besides the folklore of the supernatural, Lesti also features a detailed description of Javanese traditional culinary and medicinal herbs. These are also considered Lesti's legacy, as the Javanese culinary wealth derives from Lesti's exploration of the island.

### c. Narrative Discourse Analysis of *Lesti, Nyatakah Dia?*

*Lesti, Nyatakah Dia?* is told through a narrator focusing on two main characters, Sutopo and Lesti. The narrator also acts omniscient at times when narrating the events that do not involve Sutopo and Lesti. In the context of the relationship between science and folklore, the focalization on Lesti becomes highly significant. This focus allows Lesti to be described as a character that bridges the past and the present, the natural and the supernatural, as well as the traditional belief in the supernatural and the modern belief in technology. In other words, Lesti mediates between traditional folklore and science. Lesti is both the bridge and the source of local belief and knowledge. Lesti is both the scientific and the supernatural, and the narrative through Lesti also gives voices to both. Lesti is also depicted as a nearly omniscient character, having strong telepathy and telekinesis, appearing in several places at once, and manipulating and manifesting objects at will.

The focus on the other character, Sutopo, a young Lieutenant in the Counter Intelligence squad of the Indonesian armed forces, is also as significant, as his character is the one that changes over the course of the novel. As a soldier familiar with technological military advances and modern warfare, Sutopo represents a new generation of post-independence Indonesia, one that relies on science to solve problems and doubts the more Javanese supernatural or mystical approach to solving problems. However, Sutopo is invited to try a different way of solving his problem, through his accessing the supernatural world. To his surprise, he is thrown into the world of Lesti, where science and the supernatural are not two different topics, but rather two different ways of looking at one same world. In the end, Sutopo believes that there is more to the science that he believes in, and that the superstitions that he once doubts are just a different manifestation of science.

Through meditation, Sutopo finally meets Eyang Glagah Arum in another dimension. This is the beginning where Lesti mixes up science and folklore. The Eyang, a spirit hundreds of years old, is shown to have known the theory of continental drift, a theory that is only recently speculated in the novel's present. Woro Lesti Lestari (Lesti's full name), an alien more than two million years old, lives in the same dimension, and is also frequently worshipped as Nyi Roro Kidul, the ruler of the southern sea, whose tales of supernatural interferences are legendary in the lives of the Javanese people. The technology of Lesti's planet is not entirely understood by the Javanese people, and Lesti welcomes these people to interpret the technology as magic or supernatural occurrences. In conclusion, in *Lesti*

tradition and the belief in the supernatural are seen as dynamically interpreted; they live on the present time as science and should be interpreted as such.

In the beginning, *Lesti* places the supernatural in a familiar position; it is something that most characters in the novel are familiar with. However, for Sutopo it is not. The story unravels following Sutopo's introduction into the supernatural realm, in the vein of familiar fantasy stories. It is safe to say that *Lesti* begins like a fantasy story, instead of a science fiction story. The uncanny at first appears in form of scientific and technological advances of the *Lesti*'s homeworld civilization. However, *Lesti* slowly reveals that the supernatural and the scientific are actually the same, and towards the middle of the novel, both the supernatural and the scientific are treated with the same degree of familiarity.

What also needs to be considered in detail is a number of narrative events that involves *Lesti* in lengthy elaboration of the mediation between science and folklore. The events can be listed as the following:

1. The main characters consider mysticism as commonplace in their culture. These characters are Sutopo (whose induction into the supernatural occurs a little later), Mayor, Sastro, Pak Joyo, Bu Joyo, and Bung Uman. Their belief in the supernatural is never negated, but rather further amplified by *Lesti* who gives logical and scientific explanation of their supernatural experience, even though this explanation is not immediately understood by these characters.
2. *Lesti* tells the story of her origin and her initial purpose of coming to Java: to accelerate the development of human civilization. *Lesti* reiterates this story several times to several characters, particularly in exceptional length to Sutopo. It is implied that the Javanese civilization is ignited and accelerated by the science introduced as folklore by *Lesti* and her crew. These events are significant in the sense that they describe folklore as ancient science passed on from one generation to the next as local genius. For most parts, these events show that science and folklore adhere to the same domain.
3. *Lesti* explains that what the Javanese believe as traditional folklore is actually the results of interaction with *Lesti*'s crew, but given their initial limited understanding of science, they consider *Lesti*'s crew supernatural beings, adherents of a higher supernatural power represented by *Lesti*. *Lesti* does not think of this understanding as wrong and explains that it is the result of a very young civilization trying to make its own sense of the world. *Lesti*, however, states that there will come a time when people will be able to discern her origin and her planet's technology.

"... [K]ami mempunyai perkembangan evolusi berbeda, sehingga kami dapat mencapai peradaban yang lebih maju ditinjau secara filosofis dan teknis-biologis. Begitu besar bedanya hingga manusia bumi tidak dapat mengerti kita, seperti contohnya, ya sekarang ini, seperti kalian tidak dapat sama sekali mengerti kami. Sehingga kalian menganggap kami sesuatu yang kalian namakan setan, peri, dan lain-lain..." (337).

"... [W]e have a different evolutionary development, so that we were able to achieve a higher level of civilization philosophically and techno-

*biologically. The difference is so big that humans cannot comprehend, like now, for instance. You cannot comprehend us that you call us demons, fairies, and other names" (337).*

4. Lesti explains that all beliefs in the spirits of the ancient originate from her, who becomes a teacher for all humans who choose to leave the corporeal world and live in the same dimension as Lesti's and embrace the knowledge inherent in that dimension (which common Javanese people interpret as magic). This is shown, among others, through the character of Eyang Kelud, an ancient supernatural being who respects Lesti very highly. In Lesti's explanation, a character like Eyang Kelud is a person that has mastered the science given by Lesti.
5. Lesti shows herself as a highly intelligent being that is also well-versed in sciences that have and have not been discovered by human beings. Among other explanations by Lesti, her explanation of her knowledge and of human utilization of science and technology is the longest. Chapters 16, 18, and 30 are exclusively devoted to Lesti's view of the relationship between human beings and their technology, some of which is the result of her initial introduction of alien technology to the Javanese people

Lesti also makes certain remarks on the future of human science, referring to astrophysics and grand unified theory as the future shape of science. In the present world, these two subjects are highly speculative and in the context of the settings of the novel, these two subjects are not yet familiar. Lesti's explanations are not always coherent and more speculative than scientific. For example, it will be difficult to find the relation between the Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's and the search for a new source of energy. The sole purpose of these events seem to be to highlight that human sciences are not yet adequate to usher in a new civilization; Lesti and her crew are ready to help human beings to reach the new civilization. This later culminates in the transformation of Topo and his friends into Pejuang Kekal Abadi (Immortal Fighters) who are tasked to assist the struggle of human beings against occupation and help them reach a new civilization.

The events listed above can be interpreted as compromising between science and folklore. This compromise can be best explained by the progression of Sutopo. He needs to compromise with the past in order to reach the future. Sutopo not only goes back to his roots but also goes forward for scientific advances, not limited to the revolution but expanded for the greater good of a new civilization. At the end of the novel, *Lesti* strives for a grand purpose of utilizing science for the greater good of humanity. Hario Kecik, in the afterword of the novel, realizes also that his choice of writing science fiction and delivering the message of science for the welfare of humanity reflect the spirit of the age or the zeitgeist of a post-war or post-revolution Indonesia.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The idea for utilizing science for the greater good of humanity reverberates the ends of many hard science fiction stories. In hard science fiction, science is commonly considered as the boon for human welfare. It is therefore not surprising that hard science fiction tends to be didactic and expository (Cramer in Mendlesohn and James (ed.), 2003: 188).

The same didactic and expository qualities are also found in *Lesti*. The character Sutopo represents a new generation that relies on science to solve problems yet forgetting that local genius is not mere superstitions, but rather a science that works differently. What is unique in *Lesti* is the way Sutopo's problems are solved, in which it is revealed that science is not always the way of the future and folklore is not the way of the past; both are one and the same, but different people perceive it differently. Some interpret it as folklore, while some others comprehend it as science. The character Lesti who bridges these interpretations can also be interpreted as voicing both the scientific and the supernatural.

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