

SRINTIL: THE INTERSECTION OF TRADITION AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY THROUGH WOMEN’S EXPLOITATION IN *THE DANCER*

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ABSTRACT. Tradition is commonly seen as a carrier of cultural identity, yet it can also serve as an implicit mechanism legitimizing exploitation and political control. This study uses textual close reading as the analytical approach to examine the intersection of tradition and ideology through the exploitation experienced by Srintil, the main protagonist in *The Dancer*, a novel by Ahmad Tohari. The purpose of this study is to investigate how the ronggeng tradition, as a cultural symbol performed by Srintil, functions as a site of gender dynamics as well as a political and ideological instrument in the novel. The findings indicate that *The Dancer* challenges the romanticized notion of tradition by revealing its connection to power structures, exploitation, and political agendas, often without the performer's awareness or agency, in this case, Srintil. This article argues that analyzing the main female protagonist's experiences as a ronggeng offers a critical perspective on tradition, particularly those centered around women.

Keywords: Political ideology, *The Dancer*, Tohari, tradition, women’s exploitation

SRINTIL: PERSIMPANGAN ANTARA TRADISI DAN IDEOLOGI POLITIK MELALUI EKSPLOITASI PEREMPUAN DALAM *THE DANCER*

ABSTRAK. Tradisi umumnya dipandang sebagai pembawa identitas budaya, tetapi tradisi juga dapat berfungsi sebagai mekanisme implisit yang melegitimasi eksploitasi dan kontrol politik. Studi ini menggunakan pembacaan dekat tekstual sebagai pendekatan analitis untuk mengkaji persinggungan antara tradisi dan ideologi melalui eksploitasi yang dialami Srintil, protagonis utama dalam *The Dancer*, sebuah novel karya Ahmad Tohari. Tujuan studi ini adalah untuk menyelidiki bagaimana tradisi ronggeng, sebagai simbol budaya yang dibawakan Srintil, berfungsi sebagai wadah dinamika gender sekaligus instrumen politik dan ideologis dalam novel tersebut. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa *The Dancer* menantang gagasan tradisi yang diromantisasi dengan mengungkap hubungannya dengan struktur kekuasaan, eksploitasi, dan agenda politik, yang seringkali tanpa disadari atau di bawah agensi sang penampil, dalam hal ini Srintil. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa analisis pengalaman protagonis perempuan utama sebagai seorang ronggeng menawarkan perspektif kritis terhadap tradisi, khususnya yang berpusat pada perempuan.

Kata-kata Kunci: Ideologi politik, *The Dancer*, Ahmad Tohari, Tradisi, Eksploitasi perempuan

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, tradition and culture are often seen as valuable heritage that must be preserved. Be it belief systems, customs, and practices, traditions rooted in history are seen as markers of national identity that should not be forgotten. While these cultural traditions are often celebrated as part of a society’s identity, beneath them lie layers of power, gender norms, and political ideologies that shape how they operate. It is moreover undeniable that certain traditions, particularly those centered around women as the leading performers, are often used to perpetuate patriarchal values, ultimately leading to the exploitation that disadvantages women themselves. This tension could be seen in literary works that portray how tradition, gender, and power intersect.

Literary works, especially fiction, serve as a way to examine themes related to human experiences, emotions, and socio-cultural contexts, as they are intertwined with human nature and shaped by cultural contexts. Rockwell (1974) argues that “fiction can give us two types of information about society: first, in a descriptive way, facts about the state of technology, laws, customs, social structure, and institutions. Second, more subtle and less easily obtained information about values and attitudes.” and that “literature is a product of society rather than the crystallised result of private fantasy” the close relationship between literature and real life made literature a strategic lens to analyze traditions, ideologies, and gendered power structures, particularly literary works that portray traditional practices and how these customs interact with

broader socio-political contexts. For example, the work by Indonesian writer Ahmad Tohari's *The Dancer*. He provided an image of this tension where tradition not only plays a cultural role but can also become entangled with political ideology's interests, often at the expense of women's autonomy.

Many studies have analyzed *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, or its translated version, *The Dancer*, by Ahmad Tohari, as their research object. These studies focus on issues of tradition, ideology, and gendered objectification through literary works. For example, *Gendered Objectification & Power* (Rarastesia, 2024; Nirmalawati et al., 2023; Wardani et al., 2023; Susana et al., 2022), and *Environmental & Cultural Values* (Fatmawati & Yulianto, 2024; Qomariyah et al., 2024). The study by Fatmawati & Yulianto (2024) explores the ecological and cultural values within the novel, explaining how environmental campaigns are conveyed through the narrative and characterization in literary works. While Qomariyah et al. (2024) apply an ecofeminist analysis to the text. Cited from Rarastesia (2024), "In many societies, the female body becomes a site where patriarchal and colonial forces exert control, and the female body is constructed as a site of contestation where patriarchal and colonial forces exert their power." This is a relevant basis for Ahmad Tohari's *The Dancer*. Still, instead of colonial forces, the protagonist's body is subjected to patriarchal traditions and ideological interests, showing the cross between cultural tradition and power. In addition, there is also an in-depth analysis of the *bukak klambu* ritual, which is one of Srintil's requirements to become a fully recognized *ronggeng*, conducted by Nirmalawati et al. (2023), who examine how a woman's virginity is auctioned off like an object, and another study regarding the hegemony of masculinity by Wardani et al. (2023). Although many studies have examined *The Dancer* by Ahmad Tohari in terms of patriarchy, female objectification, and cultural oppression, none of them have specifically explored the intersection of tradition and ideology through the exploitation experienced by the main protagonist, Srintil. Therefore, this study will fill a gap in the literature on the intersection of tradition and ideology, focusing on Srintil as the main object of research.

Many traditions in Indonesia still contain elements of coercion and gender inequality. One example is *kawin tangkap* (Piti Rambang), a forced marriage practice that continues to be upheld by the Sumba people in East Nusa Tenggara (Doko et al., 2021). The existence of such traditions raises

questions: Should all traditions be preserved? Or is it time for us to view our longstanding tradition through a critical lens? In this context, *The Dancer* is chosen as the subject of study because, while it is a work of fiction, it offers a critique of how women's bodies have historically been subjected to patriarchal and ideological forces. In the book, Ahmad Tohari creates fictionalized customs, such as *Bukak Klambu*. This tradition not only serves as an added thrill to the narrative storytelling but also as a reflection of a broader reality of women's exploitation, such as gendered objectification. Throughout Srintil's journey, the novel reveals that tradition, as a cultural inheritance, operates as a site of contestation where ideology and gender intersect, resulting in exploitation.

This study aims to examine how traditions centered on women, especially the *Ronggeng* tradition in *The Dancer*, intersect with ideological purposes, specifically communist ideology promoted by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). By analyzing Srintil's experiences, the study explores how tradition, as a cultural practice, can also serve as a medium for power contestation, ideological reinforcement, and political control.

METHOD

The focus of this study is to support the idea that tradition is not only a method of preserving cultural identity and shared values, but can also serve as a tool to perpetuate the exploitation of women. This study examines how the *ronggeng* tradition, as portrayed in *The Dancer*, intersects with communism as a political ideology through the exploitation Srintil experiences as a *ronggeng*. Data collection was carried out in three main steps, beginning with a comprehensive reading of Ahmad Tohari's novel *The Dancer*, focusing on the second part of the book, "*A Shooting Star at Dawn*". This section was chosen for its detailed exploration of Srintil's involvement with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) as an ideological force and the exploitation inherent in her role as a *ronggeng*. In addition to primary text analysis, secondary sources—including relevant academic articles and research papers on themes of tradition, ideology, and exploitation in *The Dancer*—were reviewed. These resources include feminist literary critiques and socio-political readings of the novel that support the analysis.

The analysis centers on the intersection of tradition, political ideology (specifically communism), and the exploitation of Srintil within the cultural context of the *ronggeng* practice. This

study positions Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminist framework in *The Second Sex* (1989) as the primary foundation for understanding how Srintil is constructed as “the other”. Sandra Bartky’s concept of sexual objectification (1990) further sharpens this analysis by explaining how Srintil’s body becomes an instrument of cultural and political use in which exploitation happens. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence (2001) supports this analysis by explaining how this objectification is normalized and preserved through emotional and cultural pressures. Additional perspectives from Edward Said’s postcolonial theorization in *Orientalism* (1994) and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology (1963) are selectively incorporated to strengthen the interpretation of identity formation, otherness, and the social structures embedded in the narrative. Lastly, the research focuses on the intersection of the ronggeng tradition and communism as a political ideology, specifically how Srintil’s role is manipulated to serve political purposes. This involves analyzing how her body, as the subject of tradition, is exploited within a cultural framework and simultaneously instrumentalized to promote an ideological agenda. This study explores the relationship between culture and political strategies, with women at its center.

In the Results and Discussion section, the analysis will be organized thematically to explore the intersection of tradition and ideology through the exploitation experienced by the main character, Srintil. Key scenes will support each theme as textual evidence from the novel *The Dancer*, which reflects how traditional practices and PKI’s agendas operate through Srintil’s body and role as a ronggeng. The structure of the discussion aimed to make the connections from the analysis clear and cohesive, guiding the reader through the entanglement between traditions and political ideology and the exploitation theme in the novel..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

More Than a Cultural Identity: How Traditions Shape and Silence Srintil

Culture is not a static heritage but a dynamic construct continually shaped by those in power and internalized by individuals and groups as subjects of culture. Honko (1995) mentioned that “Cultures may be viewed as systems of elements constituted through the selection, interpretation, and internalization of traditions by individuals and groups.” In *The Dancer*, the ronggeng dance is a cultural tradition that follows the same process. It was upheld by Sakarya, a

respected elder of the Paruk village, who cited the male ancestor in Paruk’s common genealogy, Ki Secamenggala, and the villagers accepted this cultural tradition. The Ronggeng dance offers a sense of identity to the Paruk village community while, at the same time, functioning as a biased system that molds, limits, and even silences the individual agency of a ronggeng. This is evident in the character of Srintil, whose identity as a ronggeng is socially assigned and enforced rather than self-made.

As Simone de Beauvoir notes in *The Second Sex*, “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being (de Beauvoir, 1989, p. 26). This is the foundation of Srintil’s identity formation. Her transformation into a ronggeng is rooted in the villagers of Paruk’s desire for prosperity, something they believe naturally follows the presence of a ronggeng. Her identity as a ronggeng comes from communal projection. Paruk defined who she must become first and required her to become what they had already imagined. Her worth is measured by how she fulfils the expectations of her community. However, this pursuit of prosperity comes at the cost of Srintil’s autonomy as a performer and as a person. The process of becoming a ronggeng is enforced through a system that reduces her body into an instrument, which is where the exploitation emerges.

Srintil is chosen because her body is believed to carry the “ronggeng soul,” and this belief justifies treating her body as an object for tradition. This reflects Bartky’s theory of sexual objectification, mentioned in *Femininity and Domination*, where “a person is sexually objectified when her sexual parts or sexual functions are separated from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her.” (Bartky, 1990, p. 26). Her performance is not recognized as a product of talent or training, but as an automatic ability of her body credited to a spiritual essence rather than her skill. At the age of eleven, Srintil is swiftly removed from the realm of childhood and molded into an instrument of tradition, where the villagers' expectations define her worth. After being recognized as having the “ronggeng spirit”, she is nurtured by Kartareja, a ronggeng shaman who accompanies Srintil on her journey to fulfill all the requirements to become a paid ronggeng performer. Srintil was only 12 years old when she is deemed fit to enter the final stage of becoming a ronggeng, which is the dehumanizing ritual of Bukak Klambu or opening the mosquito net,

a competition open to all men in which her virginity is auctioned off to those who can pay the price set by her ronggeng trainer, which is a gold piece worth around the price of a large water buffalo.

“I believed that Srintil was born to be a ronggeng dancer, a woman who all men possessed.” (Tohari, 2012, p. 51).

Through these ritual obligations, Srintil’s body is claimed by the cultural and ritual demands of this socially constructed cultural tradition, and in the process, stripping her of autonomy. Her identity as a ronggeng is less about personal agency and more about fulfilling people’s expectations. Her body becomes an object—a symbolic carrier through which societal values and ideologies are perpetuated—and her worth is measured by physical attributes and her ability to perform for the community.

“Srintil does not belong just to her parents or relatives. She doesn’t even belong just to Paruk village. She belongs to all people. To you, and to me as well.” (Tohari, 2012, p. 191).

Edward Said’s concept of constructed identity complements this reading. Just as the Orient is defined by Western narratives rather than its own essence (Said, 1994, p. 1), Srintil’s portrayal in *The Dancer* mirrors this process. Similar to the Orient, her essence does not shape Srintil’s identity; rather, it is the repeated expectations and performances demanded by society and tradition. As a result, she becomes a constructed subject whose body is objectified and degraded into that of a woman who serves cultural and economic needs. The community defines her identity, and she is forced to embody the tradition without regard for her desires or sense of self. Similarly, Miller (1984) emphasizes that a woman’s sense of self is often developed through emotional connection and mutual responsiveness. Srintil is made to embody a tradition and political narrative, yet lacks the space to construct her emotional core. The ronggeng tradition, often celebrated as a cultural asset of Paruk village, becomes the very mechanism for Srintil’s exploitation. Her community not only designates her as the bearer of their prosperity but also assigns her duties that extend far beyond the act of the Ronggeng dance. Srintil is made to believe that entertaining male guests, including through sexual acts, is an

essential part of being a ronggeng. In reality, these expectations reflect a system shaped by society and those in power that silences her autonomy. Despite the severe personal cost, Srintil is unable to protest. Her silence is maintained by the illusion that the ronggeng, as a significant figure in Paruk village, must accept these “sacrifices” as part of her revered role. Thus, cultural glorification becomes a subtle but potent form of coercion.

All of the obligations and rituals imposed on Srintil as a ronggeng are not just expectations of tradition and community. They are mechanisms of control over Srintil that invalidate her autonomy. Srintil is not allowed to question or reject the rules and obligations she must fulfill, because questioning them is to deny the values the Paruk village community holds sacred. Furthermore, a ronggeng is seen as a symbol of wealth and tradition, and any protest against this role would be seen as disrespectful rather than self-expression. Complicity is socially expected, and the violence she experiences is masked as tradition and respect. This aligns with Bourdieu’s (2001) theory of symbolic violence, in which it operates precisely in these moments when the dominated internalize the meanings imposed upon them, mistaking coercion for duty and silence for virtue.

From Stage to the State: How Politics Claimed and Exploited Srintil

In *The Dancer*, Srintil’s detachment from her role as a ronggeng marks a significant emotional and psychological turning point. This change is triggered by the departure of Rasus, her childhood friend who had been her source of support and strength. His absence forces Srintil to confront the fragility of her identity. In his absence, Srintil begins to withdraw from her identity as a ronggeng, thereby signaling the disintegration of the very societal structures that once defined her. Levi-Strauss (1963) theorizes in *Structural Anthropology*, that “The term ‘social structure’ has nothing to do with empirical reality but with models which are built up after it,” meaning that social structures are not simply about people and how they are interact with each other, instead it explain a system that built society like custom, beliefs, that shape how people think and behave in so they can relate to one another in community. The ronggeng tradition, as part of the social structure, had determined Srintil’s role, value, and performance. Her identity, previously shaped by the community’s expectations and the cultural system governing the ronggeng tradition, begins to break down. This

situation illustrates how symbolic structures can shape individual agency and identity, and how the same systems can leave individuals like Srintil vulnerable when they become emotionally detached or disconnected from their constructed roles.

“For the first time in her life, she asked herself the question, ‘Why must I be a ronggeng?’” (Tohari, 2012, p. 123).

The transition from Srintil’s active participation in and attachment to her cultural identity to emotional vulnerability aligns with Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence (2001), which refers to the subtle, often invisible force that dominant social structures use to impose certain norms, values, and roles on subordinates or individuals. At first, Srintil’s role as a ronggeng was celebrated as a symbol of prosperity and cultural identity for the community. But later, her Ronggeng role is revealed to be a tool of exploitation. As she becomes distanced from this role, the pressures that previously burdened her—cultural expectations—now leave her vulnerable. She is no longer viewed as a cultural asset but as an individual who can be easily exploited. It is at this moment of emotional fragility that Srintil becomes defenseless against manipulation by external political forces. This manipulation is first carried out by her grandfather, a person Srintil considered important in her life, who convinces her that she risks being penalized if she refuses a government request to perform on Independence Day. Despite her initial unwillingness to return to the Ronggeng role, the burden of her family’s expectations, along with the guilt she feels upon seeing Sakum’s family—the *calung* player who usually accompanied Srintil’s performance—in a state of suffering, leads her to comply and perform again, hesitantly. Her decision is not made on her own free will, but as an emotional obligation, driven by pressure and guilt that present as moral responsibility. This moment shows what Bourdieu (2001) calls symbolic violence: a subtle, mostly invisible form of coercion, rarely recognized as such, yet highly effective in shaping obedience through emotional and cultural pressure.

As Srintil becomes increasingly famous beyond Paruk village, she no longer functions solely as a cultural figure. She begins to attract the attention of political forces, particularly members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). These political actors recognize her as more than a dancer; they see her as a strategic asset, symbolizing a deep connection to the people, culture, and tradition. Her

presence at political gatherings, rallies, and village events is carefully planned to imply ideological alignment between the PKI and the local customs of Paruk. Through her body and ronggeng image, tradition begins to be politicized, and her role as ronggeng becomes a bridge between upholding cultural power and political agendas. This politicization of culture extends beyond Srintil herself. During preparations for her performance at a political rally, Sakum and his *calung* band are ordered to revise their lyrics to align with the Communist Party of Indonesia’s (PKI) ideological messages. What was once an organic expression of tradition is now controlled and altered to serve new purposes, eventually becoming a tool to serve political goals. This is a clear example of how political power exploits cultural symbols and actively reconstructs them to serve its own purposes.

“Srintil did not understand the need for political rallies, speeches, and parades. In particular, she didn’t understand the purpose of the rallies, which preceded her dance performances. All she really understood was that she, a simple child of life and nature, was the most important element of Paruk Village.” (Tohari, 2012, p. 252).

The political takeover of Srintil reaches its peak when she is no longer referred to as the "Ronggeng of Paruk Village." Instead, it becomes known as the "Ronggeng of the Proletariat." As stated in the novel,

“By the end of 1964, Srintil, now closely associated with Bakar and his followers, had become popularly known as the Ronggeng of the Proletariat. Her previous title, Ronggeng of Paruk Village, was all but forgotten.” (Tohari, 2012, p. 253).

This renaming is not a simple change; it also marks the takeover of Srintil’s identity and its shaping by political ideology. Her previous village-based cultural role becomes an ideological symbol. She no longer represents Paruk, but an entire class struggle she never chose to speak for. In this context, the ronggeng tradition transformed from a medium of communal expression into a tool of ideological influence. Her reputation is used to create unity and local support, a propaganda for the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

During this time, one of the key figures behind the politicization of Paruk is Bakar, a

representative and local leader of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Unlike earlier authority figures in the village, Bakar presents himself as modern and generous. His approach in influencing the Paruk's villagers is not rooted in fear; it appears progressive and protective, making him more difficult to resist. By providing resources like a loudspeaker—considered luxuries in the underdeveloped village—Bakar wins the villagers' trust and positions himself as an agent of change and a benefactor. Yet beneath this surface of advancement lies a more calculated strategy. When he later requests Srintil to perform at political rallies, refusal becomes out of the question. She is burdened with symbolic debt, and her consent becomes clouded by the illusion of gratitude. This mirrors Bourdieu's (2001) concept of symbolic violence, which, in his words, is “imperceptible and invisible even to its victims,” where domination is exercised through socially accepted forms like “honor,” “progress,” or “debt,” which can be considered as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2001) rather than plain force. Srintil, as a ronggeng, holds cultural capital in her community's eyes. When political actors use it, it becomes a tool of persuasion and dominance. Srintil's symbolic status silently boosts an ideology she never consciously agrees with.

After being projected as a cultural-political icon, she is ultimately abandoned by the very system that used her. She is arrested without warning, accused by the authority alongside those whose agenda she never consciously aligns with. Her final fate reflects the cruelty of ideological exploitation; when she is no longer needed, she is discarded. Her body, which before was paraded as a symbol of identity and unity of the people, became a burden that was eventually silenced.

Srintil's narrative demonstrates how tradition, ideology, and exploitation intersect through her body and identity. What begins as a cultural performance turns into political symbolism, and ultimately, a mechanism of control. Her agency is continually taken over by forces bigger than herself. The novel invites readers to reevaluate the traditions that society celebrates and the ideologies they inherit. It pushes readers to examine how cultural heritage is preserved, who benefits from that preservation, and what it costs. Through this fictional narrative, *The Dancer* forces critical reconsideration of the romanticism surrounding tradition and exposes how ideological exploitation operates through silences.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing how Srintil's body becomes a site of cultural and political contestation, this study demonstrates how gender, power, and tradition are interconnected in shaping a woman's role in society. The finding illustrates how both tradition and ideology can merge to hegemonize women, reducing them to objects of male control and political exploitation. Through a feminist framework, the study revealed how various societal needs drive this intersection: The villagers of Paruk's faith in the ronggeng tradition as a bearer of prosperity and political ideologies, such as the PKI, seize the tradition to gain mass sympathy and local influence.

Ultimately, this study calls attention to the importance of critically examining traditions, especially when they intersect with political ideologies. Without this awareness, the harm often falls on those who are made into objects of culture. As seen in the ronggeng tradition, certain customs may reinforce patriarchal structures and enable exploitation. When harmful traditions are preserved without scrutiny, they risk perpetuating systems that limit women's autonomy and agency.

This research invites readers to question who benefits from maintaining a tradition and who is made to carry its burden. The authority of culture is not neutral, and it can be shaped by gendered and ideological interests to sustain unequal power relations.

This study can contribute to the broader discourse of gender, culture, and ideology, and how traditional practices can become tools of exploitation. While many global feminist critiques focus on Western contexts, this research highlights the importance of critically examining Indonesian cultural traditions, which have not been widely questioned or explored in literary critique. By analyzing Srintil's experience, this study opens a pathway for further inquiry into how other local traditions may function within systems of power. This study invites readers, scholars, and society at large to rethink the role of tradition, not only as a symbol of cultural pride, but also as a possible mechanism of control. It also encourages deeper engagement with literary works as critical tools for exploring the hidden structures of domination. By paying closer attention to how fiction reflects or challenges lived realities, readers can better understand how culture, ideology, and gender interact in ways that are often overlooked.

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