

Chapter 6

State *Ibuism* and One Happy Family: Polygamy and the “Good” Woman in Contemporary Indonesian Narratives

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6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the construction of the modern Indonesian woman’s gender and sexual identities as “good” mothers and wives in the national imaginary by interrogating the intertwined discourses of polygamy, marriage and family in selected contemporary narratives. In Indonesia, the family structure is inherently patriarchal and hierarchical in nature, one which exhorts wives to stay at home while husbands are seen as breadwinners and whose roles are non-domestic. This structure is further upheld as the national ideal by multiple state ideologies that promote images of marital and familial bliss, including “*Keluarga Sakinah*” (harmonious family) and “*Keluarga Maslahah*” (virtuous and prosperous family). Not only do these ideologies play a vital role in reifying women’s subordinate status in the domestic space at the national level but they also perpetuate the vision of the nation as a united and inclusive family, or “one happy family,” in line with the *Pancasila*¹ principle of national harmony. At the same time, female marginalisation is endorsed by the state ideology of *Ibuism* (motherhood), which encourages women to stay at home and conform to the ideal, subordinate roles of wife and mother.

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¹Established by President Sukarno since the birth of Indonesia as a nation-state in 1945, *Pancasila* contains five principles that form the state ideology: (1) nationalism, (2) internationalism or humanitarianism, (3) representative government or consent, (4) social prosperity or justice, and (5) belief in God (Bertrand 2004, 31–32).

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As a social practice, polygamy is woven into the phallogocentric discourses of family and nation. It can thus be used as a key signifier to query the gender-based power hierarchies produced by the family and state as well as the role it plays in the wider national imaginary. There is a close correlation between the discursive tropes of the family and those of the nation in Indonesia as both are inherently phallogocentric constructs premised on ideologies that perpetuate male superiority and authority. By exploring polygamy and its effects on women, the narratives directly tap into the gendered inequities and imbalances that reflect the wider male-oriented power structures and networks operating at interrelated cultural, socioeconomic and political levels. In other words, polygamy involves the imagining of Indonesia as a nation; furthermore, this imagination is heavily drawn along gendered lines.

Three fictional narratives situated at different points of contemporary Indonesian history are used to compare and contrast the representations of polygamy: two prose publications by Titis Basino,² namely her short story *Dia* (Her 1963; trans. by Lamoureux 2001), and novel *Aku Supiyah Istri Hardhian* (I'm Supiyah, Hardhian's Wife 1998), and Nia Dinata's award-winning film *Berbagi Suami* (Love for Share 2006), which relates the stories of three women and their polygamous marriages. All the narratives specifically represent polygamy as polygyny, whereby a man can have two or more wives, and is considered the most common form of polygamy in patriarchal societies.³ Despite their different forms, these narratives share a common ground in reaching out to women⁴ through the themes of infidelity, deception, marriage and family with their portrayal of wives who silently struggle to cope in their unhappy marriages, mentally and emotionally. What interests me most is the manner in which these narratives ideologically and imaginatively situate their female characters as gendered subjects in the nation space as they negotiate their identities, roles and positions as "good" wives and mothers, and as individuals in polygamous relationships.

At the same time, I consider the relevance of the texts' differing time frames and settings to my analysis of Indonesian femininities within the framework of the

²With the emergence of the young generation of women writers like Ayu Utami and Dewi Lestari and their *sastrawangi* (fragrant literature) after the *Reformasi* movement, veteran writers like Basino have largely been ignored or "forgotten" (Arimbi 2009, 14) by Indonesia's contemporary literary scene.

³Polygamy also includes polyandry, in which a woman can have more than one husband. In Indonesia, polygyny is commonly practised as Muslim men are permitted by the Koran to marry up to four wives.

⁴The narratives of Basino and Dinata speak primarily to women readers and audiences. In an interview, Basino claims that she writes in order to give voice to women who have been silenced: "Since [women] cannot scream I let those people know how women feel when they are deceived through infidelity. There are many men who have extramarital affairs but their wives just cannot get angry or say no. I write so that those people can read" (cited in Arimbi 2009, 89). Similarly, Dinata believes that her film appeals to women like herself, "the daughters of a polygamous father that want to prevent this from happening in their own marriage" (Tehrani 2007). By catering to the female gaze, Dinata both challenges and subverts the established "heterosexual male gaze" (Tatyzo 2011, 29) in Indonesian cinematic tradition.

family and nation, and whether changes to the state’s prescriptions of ideal womanhood, if any, can be found (please refer also to Downes’ Chap. 7 in this volume). While Basino’s narratives were mostly published during the repressive decades of the New Order administration (1965–1998), Dinata’s film locates itself firmly in the post-New Order era, a time when democratic freedoms flourished.⁵ These temporal distinctions are reflected in their respective representations of gender and sexual identities and relations. According to Arimbi (2009), Basino’s exploration of heteronormative binary relations in the modern, nuclear family (rather than the traditional extended family) was influenced by the New Order government’s family planning programme at the time (87). In contrast, Dinata’s distinctively liberal films in the new millennium reflect the more open political space following the 1998 *Reformasi* (reformation) movement, and have been recognised for their bold tackling of controversial themes, including polygamy and homosexuality; the latter can be seen not only in *Berbagi Suami* but also in her 2003 film *Arisan*, incidentally known as the first Indonesian film to feature gay characters and themes.

As social and cultural texts, *Dia, Aku Supiyah Istri Hardhian* and *Berbagi Suami* are an invaluable resource for understanding certain facets of contemporary Indonesian reality in that they explore the ongoing articulation and contestation of ideas, viewpoints, and acts in the transformative spaces of an increasingly modernised and globalised society. By mediating “reality” and imaginative interpretation to express distinctive viewpoints and meanings, these narratives provide us a means of critiquing the interrelated meanings of polygamy, gender and nation through their representations of women and family. My analysis will show how such meanings and representations mutually inform and engage each other in the ideological formation of identities and subjects in the national imaginary. Furthermore, I argue that the textual explorations of the female subjective state, articulated by acts of agency, desire and freedom, both resist and deconstruct the discourse of “nation” as a united and inclusive family in Indonesia. The following section discusses how polygamy—through the gendered tropes of marriage, family and nation—contributes to the ideological construction and circulation of knowledges and images in which female powerlessness and inferiority are embedded.

6.2 Polygamy and the “Good” Woman: *Ibuism* and One Happy Family

Polygamy as a social practice has a long history of dissent in Indonesia. One of the earliest recorded protestations can be found in the writings of Raden Adjeng Kartini, an iconic figure in Indonesia’s national narrative, when she angrily denounced polygamy as a “curse” and a “cruel wrong” in feudal Java:

⁵For background information on Basino and Dinata as well as an analysis of their works, see Arimbi (2009) and Tatyzo (2011) respectively.

I feel so much for the cause of woman, I am touched by her fate; ...I am swept violently forward in opposition to those customs and conventions which are the curse of women and children! ...Fate allows that cruel wrong which is called polygamy to stalk abroad in the land (1920, 53–54).

Kartini's criticisms emerged at a time when the practice was already deeply rooted in the religious and ideological foundations of Javanese beliefs and traditions. Long established before the arrival of Islam in Java in the sixteenth century, polygamy was a common practice among the elite and wealthy Hindu and Javanese circles (Blackburn 2004). For the Chinese too, polygamy was a cultural tradition upheld by Confucianism to ensure the perpetuity of the patrilineal line; it allowed the husband to take numerous secondary wives until a son is born (McNabb 2013). Similar to the Javanese situation, the practice was considered normal among the Chinese elite who had sufficient wealth to maintain a joint-family household.

A member of the *priyayi* or aristocracy herself, Kartini has rightly been hailed as a woman with a vision beyond her times. Progressive-minded, and extremely critical of the gendered barriers that she'd experienced, she not only fought for women's rights to education and employment, but also attacked the institutions held dear by the *priyayi*, including polygamy and arranged marriage. In the end however, the traditions of her day proved too powerful and she eventually entered a polygamous marriage despite being bitterly opposed to it.⁶ Although Kartini has since been recognised as Indonesia's first modern feminist and is annually celebrated on Kartini Day (April 21st), one also wonders, to what extent have women's gender and sexual identities, positions, and access to freedom and agency improved since her time?

Until today, heated debates and contestations on women's rights and polygamy continue to rage in both public and private spaces (Brenner 2006; Nurmila 2008, 2009; van Wichelen 2009; Nurmila and Bennett 2015). A contentious political issue, polygamy reflects, to an extent, some of the divisive forces at work in the Indonesian nation space since its independence in 1945. Although widely perceived by Indonesian Muslims as an essential part of *Syariah* or Islamic law, polygamy has nonetheless been opposed by women's organisations and feminists, both secular and Muslim. These groups not only highlighted the negative mental, emotional and financial consequences for women and children (Nurmila 2008, 2009) but also championed for the greater protection of women's rights under the marriage law. While their efforts to reform marriage customs did not yield much result during President Sukarno's government,⁷ significant inroads were made under President

⁶For a deeper insight into Kartini's emotional response to her impending marriage, read Coté's excellent work, *Kartini: The complete writings* (2014), particularly the section "Letters 1903," the year she got married. Kartini was not the only dissenting female voice in her family; her sisters too called for the abolition of the practice, particularly Soematri who, in a letter to the Welfare Commission, had observed its "depressing effect" on women and children (Coté 2008, 272–74).

⁷Sukarno was a known womaniser and practitioner of polygamy while Suharto was said to have frowned on the practice. The difference in their attitudes is reflected in their respective governments' treatment of polygamy. While it thrived under Sukarno's administration, polygamy came

Suharto’s New Order administration when the 1974 Marriage Law was legislated despite vocal protests from Muslim parties (Robinson 2000; Nurmila 2009).

The 1974 Marriage Law is a secular law that aims to unify the Indonesian marriage law regardless of religion. All ethnic groups, whether non-Muslim or Muslim, are subjected to it and are encouraged to follow Article 2(1) which states that “a marriage is legitimate, if it has been performed according to the laws of the respective religions and beliefs of the parties concerned.” Additionally, Article 2(2) stipulates that the marriage must be registered for it to be legal. Under this law then, “polygamy is legal [but] the law discourages and restricts its practice” as it “requires court intervention” (Nurmila 2008, 31) as well as the permission of the first wife. As representatives of the state, civil servants had to first obtain approval from their superiors before they could engage in polygamy or divorce their spouses.⁸

To an extent, the 1974 Marriage Law helped advance the rights of Indonesian women by imposing limitations on polygamy, establishing a minimum age for marriage, allowing women to initiate divorce proceedings, and protecting them from being coerced into marriages against their will. Despite these achievements, the legal system has not always succeeded in protecting women’s rights in polygamous marriages. According to Kurnia (2009), most polygamous marriages in Indonesia are practised illegally through two types of “secret” marriages: *kawin siri* or *kawin diam-diam*. *Kawin siri* is “legal under Islamic Sharia law, but illegal under state law” while *kawin diam-diam* refers to a situation when a man obtains a fake identity card to in order to marry another woman in a different town; such marriages are “possible because Indonesia keeps no national data on marriage” (Kurnia 2009). The prevalence of such marriages reveals how the patriarchal system allows men to get away with illegal practices of polygamy while women are left in a vulnerable position as they are not entitled to legal protection when their marriages fall apart. In other words, men are the ones with the power to “decide the form of polygamy and take advantage of polygamy” (Kurnia 2009).

Moreover, while political reforms like the 1974 Marriage Law appear to be an “act of a secular, modernizing regime” (Robinson 2000, 147), the system clearly privileges male authority in its recognition of the traditional patriarchal family structure, with “the husband as the head of the family and the wife as the keeper of the household” (Robinson 2000, 147). Upheld as the national model for the “separate-but-equal” (Sullivan 1991, 74) positions and spaces for men and women, the Indonesian family—built on gender difference and inequality—also regulates

(Footnote 7 continued)

under intense scrutiny during Suharto’s governance when the practice was restricted through the 1974 Marriage Law. For an overview of Indonesian women and marriage traditions from early 1900s to the 1960s, please refer to Nurmila (2009, 46–52).

⁸For details of the 1974 Marriage Law, please refer to Robinson (2000), Blackburn (2004), Nurmila (2008). For its implications on the practice of polygamy as well as its consequences for civil servants, read Nurmila (2009, 45–64). Suryakusuma (1996) provides a fascinating analysis of the effects of the marriage reforms on male civil servants and their wives, including the manner in which their sexual life is regulated by the government.

women through the discursive forces of “housewifization” (Suryakusuma 1996, 101): the wife “plays a dominant role in household affairs. Having given his wife the money to run the household, the husband rarely interferes” (cited in Sullivan 1991, 75–76) as he fulfils the role of provider and protector. As a result, any power ascribed to the housewife is effectively limited since she is “circumscribed by her association with domestic life” (Sullivan 1991, 76).

Normative femininities are further constructed by male assumptions of woman’s nature, also known as “*kodrat wanita*” in the discourse of Indonesian femininity. *Kodrat*, which means “natural destiny” or “woman’s biologically ordained role” (Arnez and Dewojati 2010, 8), underscores the gendered workings of the New Order state as it normalises women’s subordinate status in the nation space through the ideology of State *Ibuism*.⁹ Coined by Suryakusuma (1996), State *Ibuism*—premised on the honorific *Ibu*, or mother¹⁰—politicises motherhood (and by that extension, womanhood) by distilling it to woman’s biological functions. An essentialist discourse that espouses the principles of *Panca Dharma Wanita* (Five Responsibilities of Women), State *Ibuism* “defines women as appendages and companions to their husbands, as procreators of the nation, as mothers and educators of children, as housekeepers, and as members of Indonesian society—in that order” (Suryakusuma 1996, 101).

Officially endorsed by the government and supported by major women’s groups, the responsibilities or duties set out in state *Ibuism* were incorporated into government-sponsored programmes, including the PKK (*Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga*) or Family Welfare Development, and disseminated across all sections of Indonesian society, reaching women even in the rural areas (Hull 1996). Media images of desirable feminine virtues and qualities were also promoted through events like cooking contests while TV shows that promote “good womanly behaviour” (Wieringa 2015, 203) stressed the greater importance of marriage and a husband’s career. The state’s discursive regulation of femininities as “good” women—associated with selfless service to men, children, family, society and the nation—invariably limits their rights, potential and agency as citizens and as individuals.¹¹ State *Ibuism* thus carries serious implications for women as it implicitly sanctions their continued political disenfranchisement and marginalisation in the nation space.

At the same time, women’s constructed identities and status as subordinated helpmates in the nation space are reinforced by male-oriented notions of the family, a powerful and revered institution in Indonesia. Patriarchal and hierarchical in structure, the Indonesian family has been heavily featured by the New Order

⁹Additionally, the concept of *Kodrat Wanita* is insidiously “justified as indigenous, ‘traditional,’ ‘our Indonesian way’—as opposed to alien, excessively Western-influenced conceptions of female equality and independence” (Hatley 1997, 99) in order to keep women toeing the line in both family and national discourses.

¹⁰Depending on social or cultural contexts, *Ibu* can be broadly used to denote a variety of women’s roles in Indonesia.

¹¹For an invigorating discussion of Indonesian women’s political engagement with the state over their rights as citizens, refer to Blackburn (2004, 84–110).

government as the cornerstone of *Pancasila*, which promulgates the vision of “unity in one nation” (Bertrand 2004, 31) throughout the archipelago of 17,500 islands, where 260 million people of diverse ethnicities, cultures, religions and languages reside. On the surface, the *Pancasila* principle of national unity promotes social harmony and cohesion amongst its diverse cultures and ethnic groups, but in reality, the state sought to represent “the nation as a family [by] portraying those who espoused alternative discourses as challenging the idea of an inclusive Indonesian family to which all... belonged” (Lloyd and Smith 2001, 11). The construction of Indonesia as a nation is thus premised on a homogeneous idea of nationhood that Lloyd and Smith call “inclusive unity” (2001, 3). This idea is further perpetuated through the national slogan, *Bhineka Tunggal Ika*, or “Unity in Diversity,” which has been employed by Suharto’s government to control the potentially explosive regional, ethnic and religious differences among its people.

However, the national image and rhetoric of Indonesia as a united and inclusive family is a heavily contested one, considering the disparities in cultures and identities, and the resulting ideological conflicts and challenges which include, broadly speaking, “the role of Islam in political institutions, the relative importance of the central and regional governments, [and] the access and representations of ethnic groups in the state’s institutions” (Bertrand 2004, 3). Kingsbury (2005) argues that “it was always a rhetorical, if not actual, tenet of faith” (136) that national unity could be achieved; in short, the united and inclusive nation is an imaginary and elusive vision. To sustain this image of unity, the government has, in the past, employed repressive measures and military violence to subjugate rebellious regions that included Aceh, Kalimantan, and East Timor. Since Suharto’s resignation in 1998, the leaders of the post-New Order period have adopted a more democratic approach in governing Indonesia, but the challenges that presented themselves at the inception of the nation-state are still present.

Given that the national imaginary and indeed, the national consciousness, have been nurtured on masculinist views and representations of the “united and inclusive family” for decades, it is hardly surprising to find that it is the patriarchal model that has become the premise of such representations. As Robinson (2000) perceives, the “gendered model of political authority [has] its origins in an imagined tradition of a patriarchal family” while political leadership is based on “the ‘natural authority’ of the father” (141). The nation was thus promoted as a natural extension of family and kinship relations, and their political leaders represented as the father figures of the country: Sukarno is still recognised as the country’s “founding father” (he is also fondly known as *Bapak* or “father”) while Suharto was the self-styled “father of development” during the 1980s. The patriarchal-paternalistic family model on which the imagining of the nation is based is however incomplete without women playing their ordained role as gendered Other. As part of the natural order of things, women, as symbols of caring, virtuous and motherly nurturers, were charged with the task of protecting the integrity and unity of the family and the nation by State *Ibuism*; their duties included giving birth to and educating future generations of loyal, patriotic citizens for the state.

Following the sociopolitical upheavals of *Reformasi*, the post-New Order state ushered in an era of democratisation and with it, greater freedoms for the civil society. Heated contestations on gender and sexuality (and the role of Islam) proliferated in the public, social spaces, among them the issues of polygamy and women's rights. This time however, anti-polygamy movements faced a backlash when pro-polygamy supporters entered the arena, including well-known public male figures such as the country's vice-president, Hamzah Haz (who served from 2001 to 2004), and the entrepreneur Puspo Wardoyo, whose polygamy awards and campaigns sparked an outcry from feminist groups, both secular and Muslim (van Wichelen 2009). At the same time, the hegemonic forces of globalisation and rapid socioeconomic and technological developments also altered the shape of social communication and communities and, along with them, gender and sexual identities and relations. The state's anxiety over the negative influences of liberalism and globalisation on the cherished ideological foundations and traditions of the nation resulted in renewed attention on the family and women's identities as mothers and wives through the concept of *Keluarga Sakinah*; only this time, women are expected to be both "obedient and pious" with biology and religion "recruited to impress upon women the duty to maintain harmony at home" (Wieringa 2015, 97).

Based on Islamic morality, *Keluarga Sakinah* endorses messages and imagery of family harmony and happiness—represented by the family ideal consisting of the father, the caring mother (usually depicted wearing a headscarf), and at least one boy and one girl. Under this new guise, the same old tropes are repeated: the 'natural' authority of men as breadwinners and heads of their families, and the "separate-but-equal" positions of men and women as the much-touted model of familial—and gender—harmony (Wieringa 2015, 97–98). In this manner, the feminine duties and virtues espoused by *kodrat* and State *Ibuism* are given prominence once more by the paternalistic-patriarchal articulations of *Keluarga Sakinah*.

Although *Keluarga Sakinah* promotes sexual monogamy and the integrity of the family nucleus, the post-New Order state has not challenged polygamous practices either. To the dismay and anger of many women's groups, the government of Megawati Sukarnoputri, the country's first female President from 2001 to 2004, gave tacit support to the practice when the fact of Hamzah Haz's polygamous marriages was made public knowledge (Davies and Bennett 2015, 6). The public visibility of pro-polygamy sentiments and practices further contributed to the subversion of sexual monogamy as an ideal in the lived, social spaces. In fact, polygamous husbands have taken advantage of the concept of *Keluarga Sakinah* by emphasising woman's *kodrat* and submissive piety to persuade their wives to remain in polygamous marriages. Hence women are advised not to take their cheating or polygamous husbands to task as the fault lies with the "other" woman; besides, the onus is on the wife to maintain family happiness, peace and order (Wieringa 2015).

For decades then, the Indonesian national imaginary has revolved around the phallogocentric doctrines and representations of women as secondary citizens and gendered Other; not only do they collude in reproducing and sustaining the idea of the nation as "one happy family" but they also endorse women's "natural" place in

this order. The dominant, nationalised, and naturalised, images of women as dutiful, obedient housewives and mothers would have had profound effects on the perceptions and imagination of the citizenry; such representations regulate the norms of socially-acceptable gender identities, roles and behaviour, and define gendered spaces and subject-positions in both the private and public spheres.¹² After all, “symbols of nationalism are not gender neutral but in enforcing a national norm, they implicitly or explicitly construct a set of gendered norms” (Sharp 1996, 97). Such an insidious construction, authorised at the highest political levels, would have indirectly reinforced the polemical structures of domination that underline gender relations and positions in both social and cultural arenas as well. The question of how these gendered norms and discourses are imagined and explored through literary representations of polygamy is the subject of my analysis below.

6.3 Woman and Polygamy in Contemporary Indonesian Narratives

This section examines how the patriarchal state discourse of “one happy family”—considered the basis of national culture and reflective of the *Pancasila* principle of inclusive unity—underscores the imagining of Indonesia as a nation in the following narratives: *Dia*¹³ and *Aku Supiyah Istri Hardhian* (henceforth *Supiyah*) by Titis Basino and Nia Dinata’s *Berbagi Suami*. Each story is told from the female protagonist’s viewpoint and voice, and explores the effects of polygamy on her life. In my readings, I consider the following questions: How is polygamy imagined and represented in contemporary Indonesian narratives? What kinds of gender and sexual identities, roles and relations are explored? To what extent do these narratives express the sociopolitical imperatives of *kodrat*, State *Ibuism* and *Keluarga Sakinah*? How are female desire, agency and freedom negotiated in these narratives? And how do these stories reflect and contribute to the changing identity formations and social processes of the nation space?

In *Dia*, Mrs. Hamid is a dutiful housewife who depends on her husband financially. Although she experiences shame and anger when her husband marries his second wife, she decides to “sacrifice” her happiness by staying with him for the sake of their children and family. In her mind though, her unnamed rival is always referred to as *her* (*dia*), the other woman whom she refuses to think about too much but whose invisible presence in her life causes her both emotional and mental

¹²The pervasiveness with which women are associated with subservience is, for instance, reflected in Indonesian cinema. According to Sen (1998), the citizen/subject is invariably assumed as male: “Agency, whether in reproducing or challenging the political and economic structures of Indonesia, is thus ascribed almost exclusively to men. In all these scenarios women play the roles of victims or, at best, survivors against great odds” (37).

¹³For my analysis, I use Lamoureux’s translation of Basino’s *Dia*, titled *Her: An Indonesian short story* (2001).

distress. Similarly in *Supiyah*, the titular protagonist is devoted to her husband, Hardhian, until she finds out about his secret second marriage to Fatma. Unlike Mrs. Hamid, Supiyah refuses to accept her situation and divorces Hardhian in order to marry a wealthy widower, Sofyan.

In *Berbagi Suami*, the effects of polygamy on women's lives are shown through the intersecting stories of Salma, Siti, and Ming. All three protagonists, who differ from each other in terms of age, class, education, race, culture and religion, meet as acquaintances or strangers through brief encounters in the crowded urban spaces of Jakarta. Alone in their personal experience of polygamy, each character offers a distinctive viewpoint and voice about the subject. Salma the gynaecologist represents the angry first wife who feels betrayed when she finds out about her politician husband's infidelity and secret marriages, but she eventually accepts them and even endorses polygamy on national television. Siti is reluctantly coerced into a polygamous marriage as the third wife but finds herself unexpectedly falling in love with her co-wife, Dwi; in the end, both leave their husband and home to start a new life together. While the first two narratives are told from the dominant Indonesian Muslim perspective, the third story captures the voice of the non-Muslim Chinese minority in Indonesia through the character of Ming. Ming's narrative is the counterpoint to Salma's as she represents the woman who willingly becomes Koh Abun's secret, second wife in order to have financial security. In the end, Ming is discovered and attacked by Abun's first wife, Linda, and the event leads to the disintegration of her marriage.

Among all the narratives, the family that is most closely modelled on the state vision of "inclusive unity" is that of Pak Lik's in Siti's narrative in *Berbagi Suami*. Pak Lik's masculine identity and sexual power are validated by his possession of three wives—Sri, Dwi and Siti—and several small children and infants, all who appear to live quite harmoniously under one roof and are representative of the "one happy family" on which the nation is based. Unable to curb his sexual appetites while in Aceh, he marries a fourth wife, Santi, whom he brings back to Jakarta and whose presence fuels tension in an already congested small house¹⁴ with only two rooms: one for Pak Lik and choice of wife/wives for the night, and the other for the rest of the family. The imagery of one man ruling a house full of women and children is representative of the paternalistic-patriarchal authority upheld by the nation-state. The camera projects Pak Lik as a man whose sexual and physical needs are fulfilled or taken care of by his many wives in numerous scenes: he is depicted as lounging on the bed, waiting for his wife/wives, or he pins Siti to the wall when she resists his advances. In another scene, Siti likens him to a Sultan surrounded by his concubines: Pak Lik, with his fourth wife and current favourite, Santi, seated beside him, proudly surveys his other wives as they work—Siti who is ironing clothes and Dwi who fetches his coffee.

¹⁴Kurnia (2009) perceives this big family as a symbol of the "overpopulated Javanese family typical of the most overpopulated island in Indonesia" and that the film "gestures towards the issue of the lack of family planning, and the associated poverty and overpopulation."

Although the film represents Pak Lik’s wives as energetic, industrious and strong, they are mostly confined to the domestic home and its many responsibilities. The co-wives, when not giving birth, have to take care of their children, or do the laundry, cooking and cleaning. Furthermore, the co-wives are expected to be sexually available¹⁵; this ideal also underscores the dominant Indonesian discourses on Muslim women whose “purpose is to reproduce healthy citizens and satisfy their husbands”(Blackburn et al. 2008, 12). The trope of the “good” woman is similarly raised in *Dia*, where Mrs. Hamid too takes pride in providing her husband “children, an organized household, home-cooked meals, immaculate clothes, a warm and ready welcome”; even her husband recognises her as “the proverbial good woman”. For all her emotional wounds and “deteriorating health” after he marries his second wife, Mrs. Hamid continues to carry out her marital duties and fulfil her husband’s desires by having “five more sons” on top of the five children they already have prior to his second marriage. As dutiful housewives and mothers who preserve family peace and unity by deferring to their husbands’ authority, Pak Lik’s wives and Mrs. Hamid fulfil State *Ibuism*’s prescriptions of Indonesian femininity.

In these stories too, women’s dependence on men and their segregated space in the home are pronounced. This is highlighted in *Berbagi Suami*, when Pak Lik gives Sri some money just before he departs for Aceh, and asks if it is sufficient during his absence. While it is disturbing to consider how an entire household of co-wives and children is dependent on one man’s ability to make ends meet,¹⁶ the scene is also relevant for its criticism of the gender biases espoused by the model of “separate-but-equal” relations between husbands and wives. The potential vulnerability of women with limited power and agency is underscored by the co-wives’ collective financial dependence on Pak Lik and their lack of mobility, bound as they are to their circumscribed identities as housewives and mothers.

Equally important is the manner in which the word “*kodrat*” keeps recurring in many of the narratives. In *Dia*, *Supiyah*, and Salma’s narrative in *Berbagi Suami*, the first wives are portrayed as women who embrace their womanly destiny or *kodrat* for the sake of the children and family. This idea is best captured by Mrs. Hamid when she reflects on her marriage: “A husband has the right to practice polygamy, and this was the test of my tolerance.” She also “devoutly believed that as a woman, [she] was destined to accept and protect” her marriage and family to the extent of withholding her true feelings: “I was careful to disguise my emotions and maintain the harmony in our home”.

Salma the gynaecologist in *Berbagi Suami* is another case in point. As a highly-educated and financially independent woman, she has more choices compared to Mrs. Hamid and can divorce her husband if she wishes to. When

¹⁵It’s worthwhile noting that the co-wives are also portrayed as women comfortable with their sexuality and desires, especially Sri and Dwi. Tatyzo (2011) argues that they challenge “the wife/whore binary in Indonesian cinema in which sexually active women are often presented as prostitutes, and wives’ sexuality is limited to reproduction” (34).

¹⁶This scene also raises questions about poverty and its related social ills, although Dinata does not fully engage these issues in her film.

questioned by her son however, she explains to him that it is *kodrat* for her to accept polygamy as proof of her Islamic faith. To show her conviction, Salma even goes so far as to support her husband's political career with her public endorsement of polygamy on a televised talk show; by doing so, she toes the official line that "encourages civil servants' official wives to... [support] their husbands in their careers" (Robinson 2000, 148) as part of the national discourse of inclusive unity. By performing the roles of the "good" wife, mother and citizen, both Mrs. Hamid and Salma maintain the gendered hierarchies of family and nation through the ideological imperatives of the "one happy family".

The concept of "*kodrat wanita*" is similarly explored in *Supiyah* when the protagonist initially tries to uphold her duties "as a wife and as a mother for her two children"¹⁷ (61). Although she tries to rationalise her pain by ascribing her suffering to "*kodrat Allah*" (68), she is also tempted by the possibility of divorce. In this sense, Supiyah is a much more rebellious character compared to Mrs. Hamid or Salma as she eventually follows the angry urgings of her heart by divorcing Hardhian at the end of the novel.

Despite the different time frames of their narratives, both Basino and Dinata observe that the double marginalisation of women as subordinated Other in the spaces of family and the nation has remained a constant, while traditional attitudes and viewpoints towards women have prevailed despite the social shifts and transformations of the past few decades. At the same time, the narratives also suggest how multiple state, social and religious discourses have colluded in the reproduction of gender-based power relations and abuses.

Berbagi Suami, for instance, highlights examples of gender inequality and injustice through its depictions of polygamous relationships. In Siti's narrative, Pak Lik's first wife, Sri, unknowingly contracts a venereal disease from him and has to seek treatment at a clinic. Sri's story reflects lower class women's lack of access to education on health and family planning (Kurnia 2009); since they have no control over their bodies or lack access to fertility control and treatment, women are prone to being infected with venereal diseases. Moreover, the film calls to attention the manner in which women are reduced to sexual objects and playthings; all the co-wives are at the beck and call of Pak Lik and, in Siti's case, marital rape is alluded to as she does not have the right to say "no" to sex.

Illegal practices of polygamy through *kawin siri* and *kawin diam-diam* are similarly explored in all the narratives in *Berbagi Suami*¹⁸ as well as in *Supiyah*, when Hardhian marries Fatma without Supiyah's permission. But it is Ming's story in *Berbagi Suami* which shows the failure of the Indonesian legal system to protect women's rights in such secret marriages. Koh Abun, who has to migrate to America with his first wife, leaves Ming behind with a thick packet of money as a form of compensation. While the scene demonstrates the commodified female body as the object of men's sexual pleasure, it is Ming's silent passivity—in stark contrast to

¹⁷All translations for *Supiyah* are my own.

¹⁸See Kurnia (2009) and Imanjaya (2009) for their readings of the secret marriages in the film.

her usual vivacity—that underlines the susceptibility of her situation. By voicing the powerlessness of women who are treated and viewed as secondary subjects, the narratives thus show how the repressive, authoritarian discourses of State *Ibuism* and *kodrat* contribute to the systematic “ideological devaluing of women and the feminine” (Robinson 2000, 145) in Indonesian society.

6.4 Changing Identities: Agency, Resistance, Autonomy

In the past few decades, gender identities and relations have slowly been changing shape in Indonesia due to the forces of globalisation and modernisation, the increased awareness of gender equality and civil rights among men and women, as well as to the determined efforts of women’s movements and NGO groups in their fight for women’s rights and issues, including greater protection for women at work and for women subjected to violence (Robinson 2000; Blackburn 2004). Feminists and activists have also demanded that the state recognise women’s contributions to the economy, society, education and politics (Robinson 2000, 2004). In addition, contemporary Indonesian women have access to different kinds of media representations of women other than the stereotyped images of mothers and wives (Sen 1998); these ongoing shifts in femininities, seen also in the rise of educated young women and affluent career women in public, social spaces, go a long way in redefining women’s traditional identity, role and place in the home and society.

Although *Dia*, *Supiyah* and *Berbagi Suami* capture women’s marginalisation and devaluation, they also reflect ongoing social shifts and identity transformations in the nation space by visualising women’s struggle for power and autonomy, seen in the smaller or less visible acts of resistance that go against the grain of the dominant national trope of the united and inclusive patriarchal family. Such acts of resistance not only reveal the agentic possibilities possessed by women, but also the myriad ways in which they are negotiated, with some acts taking place within prescribed boundaries, while others pose as challenges, both covert and overt. Above all, they reveal that the female protagonists are not entirely helpless, subservient or passive, but are individuals who attempt to take charge of their own well-being and happiness as they mediate different roles and identities.

In *Dia*, Mrs. Hamid finds a new lease of life when she joins a woman’s club and is soon elevated to the rank of vice-chairperson. Her active social life brings her out of her “terrible loneliness” and she begins to feel “like a new woman.” Mrs. Hamid’s new social role is thus an empowering one for it moves her out of the confining limits of domesticity through a different identity as “vice-chairperson” of an organisation. Through her newfound social freedom, Mrs. Hamid becomes more accepting of her polygamous marriage. While her subtle assertions of agency remain within the discursive boundaries of social and religious acceptability, they nonetheless undermine her husband’s assumption of her subservience and passivity, traits that he has taken for granted. Not only is he “surprised” and “unnerved” by her sudden displays of affection, but he is clearly uncertain of what to make of these

changes. Considering that Mr. Hamid's reason for a second wife was justified by blaming his first wife for not being the "involved and interesting woman" that he "fell in love with," his reaction is both comical and ironic to say the least.

The antithesis to Mrs. Hamid and her limited agency, the protagonist in *Supiyah* is an independent woman, both financially and intellectually. A respected university lecturer, Supiyah has always had access to mobility, visualised by her possession of a car and freedom of movement in the city. Due to her academic and career achievements, she also has economic and social status. Although she shares Mrs. Hamid's desire to remain a good wife and mother by taking comfort in her children, religion and work, Supiyah is unable to move past her husband's infidelity or her own bitter feelings of betrayal and humiliation. Driven by an unspoken desire to hurt Hardhian and equally flattered by Sofyan's attentions, she decides to go on dates with the latter (although she withholds physical intimacy and uses it as proof of her moral superiority to Hardhian). Supiyah's rejection of the normative identities and roles imposed by *kodrat* and *Ibuism* correspondingly engages the negotiation of an alternative—and subversive—identity as a desirable "single" woman being wooed by another man.

It is also worth noting that, of all the female characters examined here, Supiyah is the one whose conflicted mental and subjective states are the most realistically explored and portrayed. She goes through the whole gamut of emotional responses when she discovers Hardhian's betrayal, from suspicious uncertainty and paranoia to jealous rage and bitter humiliation. As an intellectual too, she recognises how she has been unfairly subjected to a man's world and begins to question the status quo: "Why can man love more than one woman? Why can't I as a woman have a right to happiness by loving more than one man?" (92). These provocative questions should also be considered an implicit criticism of the gender bias encoded in the marriage law that allows polygyny, but not polyandry: "If only there is a law that permits a woman two husbands, I would have done it" (135). By acknowledging her desire for two men, Supiyah stands out as an unconventional woman "who dares to construct a world comparable to a man's where she can practice polyandry" (Arimbi 2009, 123). However, her subversive desire is contained as this construct remains in the imaginary realm, since polyandry is an immoral practice that is forbidden by Islam (Arimbi 2009, 123). By divorcing Hardhian and marrying Sofyan, Supiyah makes the choice of preserving her self-worth and integrity albeit at the cost of losing the man she loves.

As for the three protagonists in *Berbagi Suami*, each too negotiates desire and agency as wives and as individuals in different ways. Among them, Salma—as a gynaecologist with her own clinic—is the most successful in terms of education, occupation and financial standing. According to Tatyzo (2011), Salma's independence as a career woman is "contrary to the ideal of the devout Muslim wife in mainstream Indonesian imagery" (33). Although she accepts polygamy as a man's right, she also undermines Pak Haji's authority in small but powerful ways. One example is her openly dismissive attitude towards him at the dinner table and her

decision not to join him to go to Aceh and help the victims of the 2004 tsunami; instead she decides to join her son (who also dislikes his father) on a separate mission. By snubbing her husband’s authority, Salma not only conveys her lack of respect for him, but also rejects the role of a “good” wife in the private domain. Her acts of resistance thus occur at a private, personal level that is at odds with her public face of conformity.

In Ming’s narrative, an admirer named Firman actively encourages her to fulfil her aspirations as a film actress. Firman, whom Ming is attracted to despite being married to Abun, offers her a path to eventual independence should she decide to pursue her acting career. Like Supiyah and Salma, Ming refuses to conform to the role of the wife staying at home and is represented instead as an active, sexy and independent young woman who freely roams about the city, attending acting classes and meeting Firman whenever her husband is not around. When not playing the role of wife to Abun, Ming appears to be leading a single life; in this way, she “negotiates two identities, that of single young woman and secret second wife” (Kurnia 2009).

However, the biggest act of resistance is contained in the second narrative where in an interesting twist, Siti falls in love with her co-wife, Dwi; their relationship develops to the extent that they, with Dwi’s children in tow, run away together at the end of the narrative. Their acts of transgression—falling in love with each other, and abandoning their husband—resonate with significant meanings. While Siti’s and Dwi’s escape can be seen as a metaphor for their liberation from patriarchal dominion, the film’s exploration of female sexuality and solidarity through the emerging lesbian relationship is nevertheless a bold statement of women’s agency and autonomy, seen in Siti’s and Dwi’s acts of taking control of their bodies and destinies. Furthermore, the narrative’s ending suggests an alternative family structure through the lesbian-led family, another powerful image that challenges the phallogocentric, heteronormative tropes of “one happy family” and male sexual potency encoded at cultural, social and national levels.

More importantly, *Berbagi Suami* considers how men too can contribute to the dismantling of entrenched hegemonic discourses by exploring their changing attitudes towards polygamy, seen when the film pits the viewpoints of young, educated and liberal-minded men like Nadim and Firman against those of the older men like Pak Haji and Koh Abun. Salma’s acts of resistance are supported by Nadim who condemns his father’s practice of polygamy; he displays his anger to an extent where he is seen as a disrespectful son. In an ironic reversal, a dying Pak Haji finally acquiesces to his son’s thinking when he advises Nadim to marry only one wife. Firman too questions Ming’s status as a second wife when she can be independent on her own. By depicting the ongoing shifts in the perceptions and attitudes among young Muslim men, the film emphasises not only men’s equally significant role in altering the shape of future gender identities, relations and positions, but also the need for differing definitions and representations of masculinity and femininity to take place in the national imaginary.

6.5 Conclusion

Although Basino and Dinata belong to different generations and their narratives were published/produced in different sociopolitical contexts and times, both women share a common ground in their criticism of polygamy as a patriarchal privilege and practice. By continuing the tradition of feminist protest that began with Kartini more than a century ago, Basino and Dinata not only stress the negative impact of polygamy on women who struggle emotionally to carry on their duties as “good” wives and mothers, but they also emphasise the gender disparities and biases embedded within the discourses and ideologies of family and nation, underscored by the repressive tenets of *kodrat*, *State Ibuism* and *Keluarga Sakinah*. At the same time, their narratives also reveal tensions and fractures in the polygamous relationships that speak of women’s discontent with patriarchal control and dominance, as well as their refusal to be helpless victims of polygamy and patriarchal authority.

In varying degrees then, all the narratives explore women’s negotiations of power, agency, desire and freedom through acts of resistance, both covert and overt. The characters, Supiyah and Siti in particular, represent some of the most compelling articulations of women’s desire for self-empowerment and autonomy. Supiyah harbours insidious thoughts of polyandry and in the end divorces her polygamous husband to marry a man she’s been dating for only a few weeks. Both Siti and Dwi betray their husband when they fall in love with each other and flee their marital home. Through the representations of strong protagonists who break the mould of traditional femininities prescribed by *kodrat* and *Ibuism*, Basino and Dinata convey an affirming vision of female sexuality, agency and independence. However, although Basino is a veteran writer whose subversive explorations of infidelity and polygamy since the 1960s place her as a woman beyond her times, it is Dinata who pushes the boundaries to interrogate sexual identities and binaries; in this, she clearly belongs to the new wave of Indonesian film directors who “deal with issues relating to gender and sexuality that previously would not have found public space” (Baird 2009, 1). By boldly tackling previously taboo subjects like homosexuality and particularly, women’s sexuality, *Berbagi Suami* should be seen as the positive result of the democratisation processes of the post-New Order state. Another notable difference is Dinata’s inclusion of men as active participants in the debate on polygamy for the system to evolve and change.

As social texts of their times, the narratives invariably reflect the throes and transformations of a nation in constant flux, and the ensuing changes in gender identities, roles and relations. By giving voice to these changes, Basino’s and Dinata’s stories counter the state’s “fixed” rhetoric and regulated imagining of the nation as “one happy family” with the vision of a nation space that is vibrant, dynamic, and transformative, where minority voices and identities struggle for political expression and representation, and where “Other” gendered identities and relations are continuously being formed and are able to emerge from, or escape, the

regulated dominant discourse of the nation. These emerging voices and imaginings not only challenge the patriarchal-paternalistic ideologies and discourses of Indonesia, but also reflect the ongoing democratic transformations in post-New Order Indonesia.

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