

Keeping Gender and Sexuality Issues in Indonesia's Public Discourse

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As part of the 'Contemporary Film as a Platform for Democracy in Indonesia' 2022 series at the University of Melbourne Australia, I was asked to give a talk on 'Gender and Sexuality' for the screening of the film *YUNI* directed by Kamila Andini in 2021. While preparing for the talk, I read the film review by *Variety* magazine describing it as a coming-of-age tale of a 16-year-old girl who is not prepared to follow tradition and become a teenage bride.¹ I cringed at the orientalist undertone and questioned what tradition the review was referring to, since it gave the impression that there is not a 'variety' but only a singular tradition. Therefore, at the screening I proceeded to tell the audience that it is said that there are 1,340 recognised ethnic groups in Indonesia. Not only is there more than one singular tradition, but tradition is also often syncretised with one or more of the six recognised religions (Islam, Catholic, Christian Protestant, Buddhist, Hindu, and Confucius or *Kong Hu Cu*), as well as varied localised expression and practices.

The film *Yuni* is set in a community of mixed ethnic and religious backgrounds, in a peri-urban area of West Java near the border with Central Java. Java is one of the most heavily populated islands. Forty percent of Indonesia's population is also of Javanese descent and about ninety percent are Muslim. Nevertheless, to contextualise the mixed community in the film, it is important to understand the variety of gender and sexuality norms present in Indonesia as well as the aspect of syncretised tradition and religion. Some of these issues are explored in studies by the following female anthropologists: Christine Helliwell on the Christian *Gerai Dayak* who stress sameness between genders;² Sharyn Graham Davies on *Muslim Bugis* who recognise five genders;³ Lyn Parker on the Muslim Matrilineal *Minangkabaus* and the valued role of young women;⁴ and Hildred Geertz on the Javanese who are known for their syncretic animistic belief of *kejawen*.⁵ These Javanese individuals also practice a bilateral descent kinship system (equally recognising the mother's and father's sides). Identified Javanese gender norms associate men as having more reason or *akal* to overcome passion or *nafsu* which is associated with women.

The story of *Yuni* also focuses on the intersection of Islam with daily life and gender norms. The main premise of *Yuni*'s story is the pressure she faces to be married straight after completing high school (presumably as a virgin or *perawan*) and the associated local belief that rejecting two marriage proposals brings the risk of never getting married at all. However, the proposals she received are not appealing to her; the second man wants her to become his second wife. A Muslim man can have up to four wives if he can prove that he is able to provide for them equally. This is stated in the Islamic *akad nikah* or religious ceremony which consists of the groom entering into an agreement with his bride's *Wali* or male guardian, usually her father, as a woman may not give herself independently in marriage. Nevertheless, the agreement ensures that her rights are covered in the case of divorce due to neglect or the inability of the husband to materially provide for his wife. A marriage ceremony often consists of two facets: the religious and the traditional. The Javanese part of the wedding ceremony includes a demonstration of subservience where the groom breaks an egg with his feet and the bride proceeds to wash them, which symbolises that she would serve her

husband who is the head of the household. Thus, deference and subservience are ideal forms of femininity as expressed in the combination of religious and traditional marriage practice found in both West and Central Java.

In the film, *Yuni* faces similar ideals of femininity for young woman, which existed at both the local and national level. Specifically, she is expected to obtain the valued, biologically deterministic role (*kodrat*) of being an *ibu*, a term for mother and wife. At the national level, this is symbolised through a state-sanctioned women's organisation called *Darma Wanita* that began during the Javanese president Suharto's New Order era (1968-1998). Indonesian women's roles are enshrined in the motto *Panca Darma Wanita*: "To be a wife first, then a mother, an educator, the guardian of her children's morals and a citizen last."⁶

Nevertheless, Indonesian women have used the *Ibu* identity strategically under the banner The Voice of Concerned Mothers or *Suara Ibu Peduli* (SIP) to demonstrate in 1998 against the high inflation of domestic goods caused by the corruption, collusion, and nepotism of the New Order authoritarian regime. This was an act of political motherhood that I called Strategic *Ibuisim*.⁷ Furthermore, post 1998 or during the *Reformasi* era, the women involved in SIP organised a conference to deconstruct '*Ibu*' and the New Order ideals of femininity.

Fast forward 20 years, gender and sexuality issues in the film *Yuni* have been a concern of a coalition of gender rights groups which includes members visibly showing their religious identity, such as Muslim women wearing headscarfs and Catholic nuns wearing their religious garb. Between 2017 and 2019, during International Women's Day, the gender rights groups along with LGBTIQ activists demonstrated annually in a street march. Their main demand was for the Indonesian parliament to ratify the 2016 draft law for the elimination of sexual violence (*RUU PKS*) a bill that also focusses on the issue of domestic violence. In addition, organisations present at the march such as SAPA or friends of Women and Children also demanded that the constitutional court amend the 1974 Law on Marriage to raise the legal age to 18.⁸

The result of these campaigns by gender rights organisations was that, after 6 years of deliberation, on 12 April 2022, the Indonesian Parliament passed the bill on sexual violence. The main opposition came from conservative religious parties such as the Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* or *PKS*), linked to the proselytizing Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt, who problematise the wording 'sexual relations' fearing it extends outside religious sanctioned marriage. Although the new bill on sexual violence has a limited scope, and it was watered down from the original 2016 draft, it has included forced marriage as illegal. However, a new Criminal Code Bill (*Kitab Undang Undang Hukum*

Pidana or *KUHP*), pushed by conservative religious parties, has been ratified by the parliament on December 6, 2022. Among other things, it will punish sex outside of marriage with a year imprisonment, which covers pre-marital, cohabitation, and same sex relations.⁹ Street demonstrations, by gender rights coalition on International Women's Day and university students against the *KUHP*'s curtailing of civil liberties including 'indecent' will also be illegal under this new criminal code.¹⁰

Earlier, on September 18, 2019, Indonesia did amend the marriage act and increased the age of legal marriage from 16 to 19 years old for both women and men with parental consent, and to 21 years old without parental consent. However, Ariane Utomo,¹¹ in a review of the book 'Marrying Young' argued that 'informal marriage' still exists and it will take more than a law to control this.¹² Specifically, the common practice of *pernikahan siri* (or informal religious marriage), seen as a solution to unplanned pregnancies and because premarital sex and cohabitation is now illegal (*KUHP*).

What is important to note is that under Indonesia's current marriage law (1974 Law ratified in 2019), both parties must hold the same religion, or one party must convert, requiring a ceremony conducted by a religious figure such as in a Church, a Hindu, or Buddhist temple who provides the registered certificate for the Civil Registry Office. If you are Muslim, the religious ceremony must be performed by an Imam at the Office of Religious Affairs who will provide the legal certification and registration. The book 'Marrying Young' however provides local cases across Indonesia discussing the variety of gender and sexuality norms related to how unregistered religious marriage is understood and practiced.

Another everyday practice of religion confronting young women that is addressed in the movie is the scene at the beginning whereby the Islamic student club had prohibited a rock concert because it feared such activities lead to sinful acts such as drug use, sex, and violence. This means that *Yuni* can no longer sing with her band. I wonder if Kamila Andini, the director of the movie, has included this scene knowing that three religiously devout hijabi-wearing 14-year-old girls who went to an Islamic Boarding School in a rural area of West Java in 2017 deliberately tried to break gendered and religious stereotypes with their viral funk-metal-rock band called the Voice of Baceprot.¹³ Making global headlines, the band has about two million online views for their songs 'School Revolution,' 'God (please) allow me to play music,' and 'Not Public Property.' The last one is aimed at raising awareness against violations of women's rights with sales of their single recording donated to help victims of sexual violence and abuse in Indonesia. In recent media interviews, these young female hijabi musicians also talked about the backlash they faced, such as religious figures telling them to stop

performing the devil's music, but they also insist that religion and music can go hand in hand.¹⁴

The changing ideas on sexuality and religious morality is what *Yuni*'s director, Kamila Andini tries to address. Namely, she focuses on structural issues such as patriarchy, misogyny and ideals of femininity, as well as female agency in the face of societal pressure to marry young, or what Anissa Beta calls 'constructing Indonesian girlhood on film'.¹⁵ The movie does so, she explained, using multiple elements: sound, the use of textures, and the colour purple. Purple is associated with passion or *nafsu*, and it is a gendered ascription to Javanese women. I ended the talk with what the director Kamila Andini has stated in her film festival interviews:¹⁶ that she hoped that *Yuni*, based on a true story, is relatable and will keep the conversation going on gender and sexuality issues as part of public discourse, not only in the predominantly Muslim yet diverse country of Indonesia, but also internationally, so that depictions of this country in the media, which are often still orientalist, can change.

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Notes

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Fig. 1: Detail of online poster for Monika Winarnita's 'Gender & Sexuality in Indonesia' public lecture for the film *Yuni* at the University of Melbourne, November 2022 (source: <https://events.unimelb.edu.au/arts/event/25010-yuni-gender-and-sexuality-in-indonesia>)