

Female Ghost in Nusantara: *Dulce Et Utile* Aspects

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate world of Nusantara folklore, focusing on female ghost stories such as Sundel Bolong and Kuntilanak/Pontianak/Kuyang. Informed by Alan Dundes' assertion that folklore serves as a cultural mirror, the study delves into the socio-economic values and cultural nuances embedded in these narratives. Drawing inspiration from Clifford Geertz's extensive research in 1950s Java, the classification of spirits like memedi, lelembut, and tuyul is scrutinized, emphasizing their roles and characteristics. Employing a descriptive qualitative research design, the investigation centers on the dulce and utile aspects of these female ghost stories. The results showcase how storytellers invoke intense fear through the portrayal of supernatural entities, tapping into primal instincts associated with darkness and solitude. Moreover, the narratives convey moral lessons addressing societal challenges of the time, such as maternal mortality rates and the victimization of women. The researchers concludes by highlighting the contemporary risks of misinterpretation, particularly in media, where female ghost stories are exploited for sexual arousal rather than emphasizing their moral utility. Overall, these folklores provide a profound understanding of Nusantara society, urging responsible storytelling that empowers women and challenges harmful stereotypes in the modern context.

Keywords: Dulce et Utile; Folklore; Stereotype

A. Introduction

Alan Dundes states that folklore is the mirror of culture (2007: 53). As the mirror of the society, therefore, it conveys the socioeconomic outlook and value in the community. This view can be applied during in different cultures like what Clifford Geertz did in 1950's in Java with extensive research about the mental, ideology, and belief that the Javanese people had at the time. Clifford Geertz ,

an Indonesianist in his famous book *The Religions of Java* stated on chapter II on his book that the Javanese people classified the spirits into three, the memedi, lelembut, and tuyul (1976:16). Geertz translated memedi as the frighteners , lelembut as ethereal, and tuyul (Geertz did not give equivalent English word for it, but gave explanation as children who are not human beings).

Contrast to lelembut who make make somebody get made or sick and even die, but a memedi does not do that. A memedi, said Geertz, just scare people but do not do serious damage (Geertz, 1976:16). Geertz stated that male memedi are called gendruwo and female ones are wewe. Memedi are commonly found on dark or lonely places (Geertz). On page 17, Geertz focused on memedi, and stated that the spooks are borrowed from Europe like djerangkong or a man with the flesh of or the wedon, the spirit covered with white sheet like “our” ghosts. Then he also mentioned setan gundul and finally Sundel Bolong. Geertz translated sundel bolong as “a prostitute with a hole in her”. Geertz gave the detail description that a sundel bolong is a beautiful naked woman with a long hair until her buttocks so that it can cover her hole on her back. Geertz showed that there are two opinions regarding this female ghost. The first is, a man who sees her feel frightened directly and runs away, but the second is that she is very attractive that a man cannot resist, so that he goes with her until when he knows the truth, she castrates him (Geertz, 18).

From the explanation above, the researchers feel interested in studying the female ghosts on how the female ghosts are constructed as a dulce and utile aspects. Horace (died in 8th BC) stated

that a good literature or story had to have two aspects, dulce et utile. Dulce means the the story pleases its reading and utile is the aspect of usefulness (Wellek and Warren, 1982:28-29). The interesting aspects of studying the female ghosts from the dulce et utile aspects is that how the story is constructed within the Nusantara value that is held by many people in this archipelago.

B. Research Methods

Applying descriptive qualitative research design, the focus of this research is the folklore of Nusantara about the female ghosts that include sundel bolong, kuntilanak/pontianak/kuyang. All stories are parts of the female ghosts stories that can be shared by people of Nusantara even though the localities can be various Sundel Bolong is mostly understood by Javanese people with the extension to west Java and then becoming nationally understood from Suzanna, a famous Indonesian artist in 1970's and 1980's while kuntilanak/pontianak/kuyang are understood by mostly all Indonesians and become an archetype of female ghosts. The data is taken from the folklore that can be found through the websites and films.

This research studies the female ghosts from the folklore study and its function related to utile, and the dulce

aspects of its formalism aspect (for Russian formalism see David Charter on his Literary Theory).

C. Results and Discussion

The female ghost stories in this research are studied from 1) dulce 2) utile, therefore, the findings from the story from dulce aspect of sundel bolong and kuntilanak/pontianak/kuyang, and can be as follows:.

On Sundel Bolong

In Geertz' book the Religions of Java, Sundel Bolong is closely related to a female ghost that becomes a ghost after she delivers her baby and dies. Therefore, she brings her baby when she becomes a ghost on certain kind of the stories. The dulce of the story is that the ability of the story is revealed. The storytellers or filmmakers on Sundel Bolong make the listeners, readers, or spectators on the films feel the intense fear when the Sundel Bolong appears with her long hair, pale face, blood on her head, completely white, long hair that covers her hole back, and her power to to super-human activities like eating hundred satays. This intense fear can be produced within the situation of darkness, gloomy, and lonely place. The creativity to make intense fear of the Nusantara people by enjoying story shows that the story tellers and the filmmakers can touch the deep

dark instinct of human being that feels afraid of darkness and lonely also an enigma thing.

On Kuntilanak / Pontianak / Kuyang

The difference among those three are mostly related to the naming of the female ghost. People in Java call her, Kuntilanak, while Pontianak is common use in Malaysia and Borneo, while Kuyang is famous in Borneo and Sumatra. The story by using the fabula and suzhet perspective of Skhlovsky can be summarized as the women die because delivering baby or being raped and then she takes revenge to men. The dulce of this story is that the readers, listeners, or moviegoers can feel fear and intense heartbeating when the female ghost with her long hair haunts the men. Like Sundel Bolong, a kuntilanak also haunts in lonely places and darkness.

Utile

As stated by Horace that a good story must have moral teaching so that the audience get the value on it. The story of mother death after delivering a baby shows that when the first time story appears, the people in Nusantara had very high dead mother cases after delivering baby. The problem was haunting at the time, while now the decreasing numbers of dead women after delivering babies give a moral lesson that delivering baby

must be conducted within the good birth procedures. The people at the time of the story appears for the first time did not have good access of health, especially during the Dutch occupation and the illiteracy of the Native people that still live within the superstitious ways of thinking.

On the other hand, like the story of the Sweet Maiden of Ancol Bridge, the raped girl that becomes Kuntilanak, or Pontianak shows that women are the victims of abuse in society. At the time of the story was produced within the cruel society against women. The dark roads in village and lonely places become the favorite place for criminals to rape women passing the ways. The women that are raped often are killed and dumped, and the killers can live normally after that. During the time when formal school was hard to find, the moral teaching of Kuntilanak is related to concept that it is very danger for women go outside especially after dark arrives on sunset and men who go outside are taught that if they do not control their lust and meet powerless girls at night on lonely place, and then they rape her, it is possible that the woman that is raped can take revenge by doing cruel thing to them.

The utile aspect of the ghost stories reflect the zeitgeist of the

Nusantara mode of thoughts at the time that illiteracy, superstitious, and patriarchal society that can produce the stories. The poverty cannot reduce the high rate of death of women after delivering baby show that Nusantara people at the time did not live accordingly to sophisticated world like western technology. The contribution of patriarchal society helped men at the time to rape women because they were not taught to respect women.

This can be proved also when the fact that *sundel bolong* is related to prostitution. When someone becomes a prostitution, the patriarchal society just mocks the prostitution, while on the other hand, sometimes they use the service of them. But, from the analysis, the researchers can study that from all stories, it is important to note that the woman empowerment about to avoid the sexualizing them as sexual commodity can get worse when the female ghosts lately related to woman exploitation through female ghost films that focus on sexual arousal than the utile aspect itself.

D. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has delved into the rich tapestry of Nusantara folklore, specifically focusing on female ghost stories like *Sundel Bolong* and *Kuntilanak/Pontianak/Kuyang*. By

applying a qualitative research design, the investigation aimed to unravel the dual aspects of *dulce* and *utile*, drawing on the works of Alan Dundes and Clifford Geertz.

The results of this research revealed that these female ghost stories serve as mirrors reflecting the socio-economic values and cultural norms of Nusantara society. The *dulce* aspect, emphasizing the intense fear invoked by storytellers and filmmakers, taps into the primal instincts of the audience, exploiting the elements of darkness, gloom, and loneliness.

On the *utile* front, the narratives convey moral lessons deeply rooted in the societal challenges of their time. The stories of maternal deaths after childbirth and the victimization of women reflect the pressing issues of high mortality rates, abuse, and societal cruelty. The patriarchal structure prevalent in Nusantara society during this period is evident in the stories, highlighting the need for women's empowerment and societal change. Moreover, the study underscores the potential risks of contemporary interpretations, particularly in media, where female ghost stories are exploited for sexual arousal

rather than emphasizing their *utile* aspects. This calls for a responsible approach to storytelling that promotes empowerment and challenges the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes.

In essence, these female ghost stories, with their dual nature of pleasurable fear and moral utility, offer valuable insights into the historical, cultural, and social dimensions of Nusantara society, urging a nuanced understanding and responsible portrayal in the modern context.

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