

Jora: The Centrality of Gender Equality for Sustainable Development

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Abstract. The paper is a semiotic study of Abidah El-Khalieqy's novel *Geni Jora*. Semiotics is defined with reference to the study of signs and sign systems, and "signs" concern any things that stand for other things. The semiotic analysis used in this paper was adopted from Chandler's framework where he combines the Saussurean and Peircean concepts of signs and modes of relationship. The result of the semiotic reading of *Geni Jora* is that Jora, the main character of the novel, is a symbol, representing Abidah's resistance to gender injustice within Muslim circle in particular and in Indonesia in general. The novel symbolizes Abidah's concern about Indonesian (Muslim) women, who suffer from discrimination, injustice, abuse, and violence due to the stronghold of patriarchy. It also signifies her insistence, urging the people of Indonesia to seriously take actions to bring about gender equality and to provide women's quality education, without which Indonesia would not be able to make sustainable community and development happen.

Keywords: *Geni Jora*; gender equality; sustainable development.

1 Introduction

In October 2015, countries across the world, members of the United Nations organization, reached an agreement on the seventeen (17) goals of sustainable development [1]. The Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs are to bring fruition by 2030, meaning that throughout the last fifteen years the international community has worked and has to continuously work together to combat poverty, hunger, inequality, injustice, exploitation, pollution, and climate change for the betterment of life on Earth.

Within the context of SDGs, and thus sustainable development, UNESCO—the UN body on education, science, and culture—holds that culture is pivotal for a community to develop sustainably, for « no development can be sustainable without including culture » [2]. Therefore, UNESCO, as is written in its website, feels the urge to ensure « that the role of culture is recognized through a majority of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those following on quality education, ..., gender equality and food security [2].

While culture is a concept too vast to define, cultural artefacts, such as literary works, films, fashion, and paintings, have been used to remind people concerning some urgent issues and to invite their participations to make some improvements. Indonesia's Jember Fashion Festival, for instance, was once held to remind people of the danger of plastics waste; therefore, all the costumes displayed in the festival were made of used

plastics. Here, people were reminded to wisely use plastics bags and plastics containers because plastics litter would remain intact for hundreds of years. Also, they were reminded of the importance of recycling plastics. Literary works provide another example of the value of culture to enable sustainable development. Poetry, prose, and drama have long become channels through which writers utter their concerns about gender bias, natural exploitation and depletion, poverty, or injustices.

In Indonesia, resistance to discrimination and patriarchy and the struggle for gender equality have endlessly been waved by woman activists, including by woman novelists [3-5]. One contemporary woman novelist who consistently writes against gender bias and patriarchy is Abidah El-Khalieqy [5-7]. Her works cover essays, poetry, and novels, all of which articulate her insistence that patriarchy has to be abolished because it has brought suffering to not only women but also children. This is the reason I have been interested in Abidah's novels, and for the current study, I decided to focus on the novel *Geni Jora* [8]. The novel would be analysed semiotically, so as to reveal to the readers the author's call to the people of Indonesia to reinforce gender equality and to provide women good education, since gender equality and women's quality education are requirements for Indonesia to bring the ideas of sustainable community and cities into effect. The discussion that follows consists of three (3) sections,

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which are signs and semiotics (2), Jora and the centrality of gender equality (3), and conclusion (4).

2 Signs and Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs and sign systems [9-12], and «signs» is a term used to refer to «anything which ‘stands for’ something else» [9; p. 2]. Signs can therefore «take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects», and things become *signs* as soon as «we invest them with meaning» [9; p. 13].

Signs, according to Saussure, consist of two inseparable elements, i.e. signifier and signified [9-12]. *Signifier* is the form of the sign or the sign vehicle, while *signified* is the concept or meaning [9]. The relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, as the connection is indirect and based on social convention [9, 12]. However, the degree of arbitrariness is relative. Therefore, adapting and adopting Peirce’s typology of the signs, Chandler maps the relation between the signifier and the signified into three modes, i.e. symbol, icon, and index [see: 9; pp. 36-37]. *Symbol* concerns a mode of relation where the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary; included in the category of *symbol* are words, languages, and mathematical equations. *Icon* is a mode where the signifier resembles the signified, such as photographs or realist paintings and drawings. *Index* concerns a mode of relationship where the signifier is physically or causally connected to the signified. *Index* covers such signs as handwriting, smokes, or animal footprints.

3 Jora and the Centrality of Gender Equality

The novel *Geni Jora* (Jora’s flame; Jora’s fire) centers upon the character Kejora or Jora, meaning the Star of Venus or the Goddess of Beauty, and her objection to patriarchy and search for justice and equality. Jora is a young Indonesian woman of an Arabic descent; she is described as gorgeous, intelligent, studious, and critical. She, however, was raised in a secluded Indonesian-Arabic family, within an exclusive Muslim circle. She was restricted, domesticated, and silenced. The child and teenager Jora functions as an iconic sign representing repressed Indonesian girls, who are victims of mental, physical, and sexual harassment, including those committed by close family members. The sign is iconic because to some extent it bears resemblance to what has happened in Indonesian society. For instance, a large number of Indonesian girls, as the *Komite Nasional Perempuan* or *Komnas Perempuan* (the National Commission on Violence against Women) stated in their annual report, have become victims of incest rapes conducted by their father and/or uncles. The figure of occurrence is tormenting: in 2017, more than two-thousand girls (2, 227) were sexually abused, 1,799 of which were incest (This is not to mention cases of mental and physical violence that girls have to endure!) [13].

Jora experienced domestic violence committed by her grandmother, uncles, and younger brother, but she views Nenek (Jora’s grandmother) as the cause of her wounds. Using verbal signs to express her deepest emotional state, to her best friend Elya Huraibi, Jora said that Nenek was the root of all abuses that she (and her older sister Lola) had to experience as child and teenager: «She caused the tragedies to happen. The root of all tragedies. The source of all hatred and injustices. She, the evil grandmother» [8; p. 69]. The verbal signs that Jora used are symbolic, for they, like most of verbal signs, are based on social convention, but the signs are indexical in the sense that they have causal relationship with what Nenek has always done to Jora. She is verbally abusive; she depreciates Jora and all women, holding to the patriarchal viewpoints that women are but to submit to men’s will and that women, no matter how excellent their achievements are, will remain the second to men [8; pp. 80-81].

It is interesting to discover why Abidah made Nenek Jora’s «enemy» and why she is always sceptical and unsupportive to women’s causes. Logically speaking, Nenek should have loved, supported, and appreciated Jora more than her younger brother Prahara (Hara), as she excels him in many respects. Also, as a woman, and like many other women in the world, Nenek must have endured and suffered from discrimination and patriarchy. She should have learned from the past and made it lessons to encourage her granddaughters to have a life where equality and justice are the norms. Unfortunately, Nenek takes quite the opposite stand: she prefers to submit to patriarchy; she refuses to challenge the status quo. As a result, she becomes a pessimistic and bitter person.

In this context, it is relevant to argue that Abidah uses «Nenek» symbolically to stand for the old generation and beliefs. She represents former President Soeharto and his practices of gender bias [14]. Soeharto ruled Indonesia in 1966-1998, and within this 32 years of his presidency, he imposed on Indonesian women what he held true: women were to be wives and mothers, and women’s main roles were within the walls of their homes. He pushed women to domestic area; however, when women were to work in public, they were seen as *pencari nafkah tambahan*, meaning that they worked to get additional family income. Women were thus but a complement, the second class citizens.

In stark contrast to her grandmother, Jora decides to use all the abuses she faced as reasons and encouragement to fight for women’s causes. In her search for justice and equality, she pursues higher education abroad. This is because she believes that quality education is the only means by which women can status and power equal to those of men. Vast knowledge of religion is also important for a woman to be able to see that the teachings and practices of religion are not patriarchal. Very frequently, it is the interpretation that is used to sustain men’s status quo. Therefore, in addition to protesting the practices of gender bias in Islam, she projects another face of Islam, a face that has frequently been hidden in the patriarchal world of Islam. This liberating face of Islam is present in its unpopular history, and this was the time when women

were as free and empowered as men. Malikah, Sulthanah Radhiyyah, Queen Balqis, Princess Barun, and others function as indexes of Muslim woman empowerment. Also, they are signs indicating Jora's (and Abidah's) objection to the thought that Islam is patriarchal. Throughout the history of Islam, many female Muslims have played and hold important public roles and positions. This is an indexical sign pointing out the relationship between powerful female Muslims and Islam's being a religion that places women and men equally.

Equity, justice, and quality education have to be fought for, as nobody will grant them to us. Revolution is what we need so that we can have a better future and a good life. Here, Jora emphasizes on the importance of gender equality for sustainable development, a development that « meets the needs of the present » [15]. This suggests that everyone, be they men or women, has every right for prosperous future. For women, quality education is important because some women may want to become mother, and when they become mother, they would be « *klorofil bagi anak-anaknya* » (a mother is a chlorophyll for their children) [8 ; p. 87]. A metaphor is used here to compare a woman (a mother) to a chlorophyll. The comparison is symbolic as well as iconic. It is symbolic because there is no direct connection between a mother and a chlorophyll, but it is also iconic because there are some similar qualities between a mother and a chlorophyll. For instance, they share a quality of providing and nurturing life. In the case of a mother, she nurtures the lives of her children, who in the long run will continue the cycle of life in Earth. A happy and prosperous mother is expected to be able to « generate » happy, prosperous, and strong generations, and, more importantly, they would become future leaders who care for their fellow humans and the natural world. A chlorophyll, according to Jora, is independent and kills bacteria [8 ; p. 87]. She compares women to bacterium killers as women provide good, healthy, and clean environment for their offsprings and other family members.

4 Conclusion

The previous discussion suggests that Jora, the main character of Abidah's novel *Geni Jora*, is used as a symbol to signal Abidah's opposition to patriarchy and gender bias. She is a symbol because the relation between the character « Jora » and resistance to gender injustice is mainly based on convention. There is no direct relation between Jora and the struggle for gender equality. However, Abidah tries to build the connection between Jora and the search for equality and justice throughout the novel. Thus, the fictional character Jora becomes picture of an Indonesian woman who struggles for freedom, prosperous future, and gender justice.

Gender equity and women's rights to quality education are what Jora fights for. They are pivotal for a community if it is to develop sustainably and to generate a low carbon society because sustainable development will not come true if there is no good, sustainable cooperation between men and women.

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