

REDEFINING BEAUTY STANDARD IN LAKSMI PAMUNTJAK'S *THE QUESTION OF RED*

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Abstract

The word "beautiful" is closely addressed to women. The standardization of beauty attached to women by a patriarchal society has become an issue that is still strongly opposed by feminists. The feeling of being less attractive and less-loved will grow in the women's minds who are deemed less or do not meet the beauty standard in the patriarchal society. This study is aimed: (1) to discuss beauty standards set forward by a patriarchal society represented through an epic literary work, a novel by Laksmi Pamuntjak entitled *The Question of Red*, and (2) to identify how the character Amba redefines beauty in Laksmi Pamuntjak's *The Question of Red*. This study applies literary criticism to achieve satisfactory results, which refers to feminists' "reading as women." This study indicates that patriarchal society's beauty standard is represented by depicting Amba's appearance that is different from the physical depiction of the mother and the sister who always have a beautiful appearance. Besides, Amba believes that the beauty standard is a catastrophe that unwittingly harms women. Moreover, beauty is not always just about appearance.

Keywords: Beauty Standard, Patriarchal Society, Representation

INTRODUCTION

Being beautiful is a dream for almost every woman in the world. The hegemonic values of the privileged class are essential to beauty. This is why beauty is an enigmatic asset (Saltzberg and Chrisler 1997: 135). The meanings of beauty vary across societies and periods. Indonesia is not exceptional for its women's beauty standard (Moreblessing Matiza, 2013). Whenever identifying a woman, beautiful is a label. Then, how does the beauty standard as an image identify women? The beauty standard, in this case, is pursued on matters related to the material aesthetic physically. The beauty standard eventually constructs women's inconvenience about their physical appearance.

Furthermore, the definition of beauty is broad. Beautiful is what a woman wants to be; exciting, interesting, pleasant, amusing, or motivating. Beautiful objects bring joy, and this enjoyment may be experienced more or less strongly and in different forms (Donne,

2010). As Otto (1993) stated that satisfaction is a core aspect of sensory perception. Besides, a unique field is beauty, as attractiveness applies concurrently to feeling, inspiration, intellect, thought, and learning (Dinurriyah, 2016). Considering what Dorner said about a particular field is beauty, attractiveness applies concurrently to feeling, inspiration, intellect, thought, and learning. This statement might change the mind of feminism that beauty does not always come from appearance and attitude. From knowledge, women might be able to avoid more harassment and decrease suicidal or domestic violence. Feminism may be characterized as an acknowledgment, critique, and attempts to change male domination. In that way, feminist theory is appeared to criticize the literary work which consists of gender inequality. In the entertainment industry, women are often under-represented or sometimes misrepresented as sexual objects because most of the media industry is male-dominant. The dramatization of genre stereotypes and tropics is a comedy effect that affects the public's impression that the role of "competent and powerful woman" is unfamiliar, let alone woman, in society in general.

In her book, *Beauty and Misogyny Harmful Cultural Practises in the West*, Sheila Jeffreys states that some feminist critics think that beauty can be harmful to women. One of them is a writer named Andrea Dworkin. She says that beauty is one factor why women are hated in the patriarchal society. This hated culture outmaneuvers women into violation, death, even violence. Dworkin states that Feminism might be able to destroy this hated culture to avoid more violence happened to women, and Feminism can stand on women's side to support them to get everything they ever imagined, for instance, their physical freedom. Moreover, she also says that beauty ideals often influence women in psychology because "the connection among physical freedom and psychological growth, mental possibilities and artistic ability is an umbilical one (Jeffreys, 2005)."

Considering Andrea Dworkin's statement, beauty standards is positively taking women's expectation to be physically beautiful. For instance, long black hair, slim body, white skin or tan skin, beautiful eyes, chubby cheeks, even the excellent condition of the woman's reproduction organs. This beautiful standard commonly comes up among patriarchal, and by this beauty standard, some women who do not complete this standard would be affected physiologically. In other words, women would be insecure and ashamed of their physic which does not meet the beauty standard in patriarchy. Then, some of them are willing to beautify themselves by doing plastic surgery, which may be harmful for their health.

However, the beauty standard has been discussed in several studies and still a readable issue to be conferred since nowadays. The beauty standard is considered the leading cause of insecurity and indirectly harms women themselves. Moreover, this issue has a strong connection to feminism or gender studies. The recent study is written by Ida Rosida and Dinni Yulia Saputri (Ida Rosida and Dinni Yulia Saputri, 2019). They discuss how beauty is represented in music videos and lyrics entitled *Scars to Your Beautiful*. It also characterizes the word "beauty" and cannot be defined solely by such standards, such as possessing a slim body, white skin, perfect and intended for women only. However,

beauty also achieves a broader meaning in all shapes, ages, colors, and even gender. Lelu Dina Apristia builds up the following study (Apristia, 2019). The study exposes female beauty in the post-New modern era built up by male writers. According to male authors, beautiful females in the post-New Order are the ones whose bodies draw other people and who fight for equality. Itsna Syahadatud Dinurriyah (Dinurriyah, 2016) in her journal also identifies that The definition of beauty for women has shifted over time. The definition of beautiful women in the postmodern period varies from that of the previous era. The elegant performance is no longer seen as an ideal image.

From the previous studies, the authors deliver that beauty is shaped by society or even patriarchal society and grown up among them as represented in a real-life, social media, or literary works. Thus, it is clear that the issue of beauty standards needs to be further discussed today. In this study, the writers examine the redefinition of beauty standards depicted in the novel *The Question of Red*, the stunning novel written by Laksmi Pamuntjak. This novel was also translated into several languages, such as Dutch “Amba of De Kleur Van Rood” in August 2015; and Deutsche “Alle Farben Rot” in September 2015. This novel was exhibited at Frankfurt Book Fair, Germany, on 14th-18th October 2016. Besides, Pamuntjak achieved the prestigious award of Liberaturpreis 2016. Pamuntjak neatly brings feminist into this novel. She challenged the patriarchal society which has so far been rooted in Indonesian culture by creating the character of Amba, an Indonesian woman who dares to bring change to herself. However, the beauty standard issue is also discussed in this novel which has a post-colonial background. Amba's character also sues about beauty standard shaped by patriarchal society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Patriarchy

Patriarchy has been particularly described as the oppression of men over women. Feminism believes that it indicates male supremacy and female subordination. (Kramarae, 1992). Feminist philosophers define the patriarchy as an unequal and hierarchical social structure for women (Makama, 2013). Men exploit women to regulate their productive wealth, labor, and reproductive potential because almost all the upper tiers of society are filled as rulers. Based to Bhasin, gender is linked to the idea of hegemony in social life. The term patriarchy refers to the social structure in which the father (patriarch) is the head of the household. It also ensures that the father has complete power over all family members, including property ownership, sources of revenue, and decision-making authority. This social structure instills in men the illusion that they are superior to women and thus have the ability to dominate and use them as possessions. (Furoidah, 2019).

In line with the above definitions, Walby defines patriarchy as a social construction and practice culture in which men control, abuse, and oppress women (1990).” She highlights how men conduct women into six systems within a patriarchal society: paying jobs, household, culture and tradition, identity, abuse, and the state. She also explains that

because patriarchy could take on different aspects within a different society, the claim on patriarchy could only be valid in certain situations.

Patriarchal tradition has indeed been practiced by numerous feminist groups and female feminists who aggressively speak and enforce girls' rights. Thus, it is seen in Motherland, economy, politics, and cultural activities. These numerous social issues include domestic violence, sexual abuse, early or under-aged marriage, and divorce stigma. According to patriarchal culture, men are courageous and inclined to do something for women in Indonesia. It may cause the number of sexual harassment is high. This culture also offers construction and attitude since men are closely linked to masculinity ego while femininity is ignored and viewed as frail. Society tends to encourage men to whistle and tease women who are walking on the streets. They consider that they freely behave as they do not harm other people. Men who are perceived to be temporary seducers of the fair sex are the topic or deserve to be seduced, and a woman's body is the source themselves of abuse (Irma & Hasanah, 2014).

Beauty Standard Rejection

There are several reasons why it is crucial to evaluate the rejection of women in the ideology of patriarchal beauty standards. Considering power is still dominated by men in the community that retains hegemony, women have only a tiny number of social power and no public and cultural rights. They rely on men, particularly in the marriage bond, in economic, social, political, and psychological terms. Women in the family and culture are therefore put in inferior or lower positions. They have to do their homework, taking care of their husband and children. For women in the framework of patriarchal society, this domestic area is set.

A feminist condemnation of maquillage and other appearance practices originated in the 1970s from movements that increased consciousness. The American radical female theorist Catharine A. MacKinnon dubbed the methodology of feminism awareness-raising (MacKinnon, 1989). Women explored how they feel about themselves and their bodies in these classes. The strain within male dominance was established, making them believe they could eat, depilate, and makeup. Feminine authors have denied men's aesthetics that have left them unauthentic and intolerable in their face, leading women to believe their bodies were insufficient and exercising expensively and time-consuming (Wolf, 1993).

In the 1990s, a significant difference occurred amongst feminist theorists in the degree to which Western beautifulness is the inferior status of women or the expression of the preference or organization of women. Ideas appear in particular due to the concatenation of social forces which enable them. A mood of optimism for social reform came into being in the 1960s and 1970s, amid a new social revolution in feminism, black power, animal liberation, bisexual and gay politics. The belief in social constructionism and the notion that progressive social change can occur in the pursuit of social inclusion have fueled these

social movements. The radical feminist criticism has promoted the idea of beauty and originated from that era.

Those views about the power of choice in the 1990s inspired many feminists' ideas as well. Several modern feminists who speak of women encouraging the feminist revolution to choose beauty behaviors that could no longer be viewed as restrictive question the notion that women were coerced to beauty by the mode/beauty complex. The terminology of "agency," "choice," and "empowerment" which infiltrated feminist thought throughout all-out right rhetoric. Women have educated customers who were willing to practice their preferences on the market. Ones may choose between activities and goods. Feminists who tried to contend that women's choices were severely skewed and rendered in the sense of the relative powerlessness of women and the dominion of men were harshly attacked for being "victim feminists" (Wolf, 1993).

Moreover, women are turned into fetters by restricting the role of women by the patriarchal society. In family life and community, the tradition of hegemony gives power and superiority to men. Besides, the female body stereotype is also exacerbating the condition. Men's gradual dominance of women will affect the mental state of women. They must follow the laws of men with the definition of beauty because women compete to look after their bodies and beautify themselves. Women are just the second born after the men unintentionally. If a woman cannot achieve beauty, a man and society, in general, would not love her in particular. It can rob women. (Asri, 2018)

METHOD

The theory constructed by Andrea Dworkin and Naomi Wolf about feminism reject beauty standards, and it will be incorporated in this analysis. The writers try to find out how beauty defined by patriarchal society is represented in Laksmi Pamuntjak's *The Question of Red* and how Amba redefines beauty. This study also explains the behavior of certain persons, symptoms, circumstances, or classes. The data are taken from the monologues, dialogues, phrases, or sentences that depict the plot and the characterization, especially in the part where Amba redefines the beauty standard built up among society and must have different thoughts about the beauty itself. Several steps are essential to supply the details. The first section is to identify a section from the topic-related monologues, dialogues, phrases, or sentences. The writer has to do a close reading, which can be applied while selecting details to take the first move. Data are obtained by highlighting or labeling such monologues, dialogues, sentences, or phrases representing the beauty standard or Amba's rejection of the beauty standard over the close reading. Besides, the writer will choose the secondary data from the specific databases related to the study examined.

This analysis contains feminist literary criticism or can be referred to as "reading as a woman. Sugihastuti and Suharto (Sugihastuti and Suharto, 2005) state that in literature, feminism is related to the concept of feminist literary criticism, called literary studies that direct the focus of its analysis on women. If so far it is considered that men who represent

readers and creators in Western literature, feminist literary criticism shows that women bring perceptions and hopes into their literary experiences. In analyzing the beauty standard in Laksmi Pamuntjak's *Question of Red*, based on Feminist theory, the writer would be highlighting the chosen part to find the beauty standard of patriarchy and the redefinition of beauty Amba in the novel.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis's focus, this analysis's results include two things: the definition of beauty constructed by the patriarchal society in the novel *The Question of Red* and the main character's (Amba's) rejection of patriarchal society beauty standard by redefining beauty. The results of the analysis are described as follows.

First, how patriarchal society defines beauty can be looked up from how the society treated the character of Amba and her twin sister differently. Amba's twin sister is a defined blessing with white skin, slim and tall body, long black hair, and good manners of polite and feminine women. Somehow, Amba's Twin sisters have descended their mother's beauty, While Amba's appearance is the opposite.

Second, the patriarchal society's beauty standard is rejected by Amba. Amba redefines the meaning of "Beauty" itself and considering herself is not much different from another woman, even might be better. How Amba redefines beauty is depicted from how she struggles to prove that she can win her parents' heart in another way instead of being beautiful as society defines.

How Patriarchal Society Defines Beauty in Laksmi Pamuntjak's *The Question of Red*

Patriarchal society inherits several cultures that corner women as inferior. One of them is making women's physical possessions the medium to limit rights and space for women. Somehow, this limitation creates some consideration for women who do not fulfill the beauty expectation defined by patriarchal society felt left out, different, and even insecure when the society sees those women who "is not beautiful" considering those women as uninteresting objects.

Patriarchal society beauty standard is depicted in *The Question of Red* novel, where the depiction of Amba's character is so inversely proportional to the depiction of her twin siblings, Ambika, Ambalika, and their mother. They are depicted as the figure of beautiful women in society.

"In time, Amba came to know she was not unlovely-she had a cat's eyes, piercing and disarmingly almond, and all her power was in that pillowy, firecracker mouth." (p. 75-76).

That monologue above shows that the only "beautiful" part of her body is her eyes and mouth. Instead of those, Amba's appearance is not as attractive as her twin sisters and mother. Her skin, body shape, nose, hair, and even behavior are different from their twin sisters and mother. Based on her study, Aquarini (2009) argues that the discourse on femininity is inseparable from the racial discourse, which constructs whites as desirable and desired. The skin should be white in the colonial context. Dark skin, particularly black

skin, is perceived as a dirty body cultivated and cleansed from uncultivated. However, the novel *The Question of Red* is in Indonesia's background where the country is colonized by white people, England, Netherland, Japan, Spain. So, the beauty standard in a patriarchal society is women with white skin, and they should be seen as desirable, attractive, and beautiful. Besides, most of the countries that colonized Indonesia is European, and Europeans mostly have tall and good body shapes. In that case, Amba is not represented having those all of appearance expectations. The patriarchal beauty standard causes body dissatisfaction that makes women feel insecure and unwanted since society would treat them who do not fulfill the standard differently. It is also shown in the novel *The Question of Red* in the monologue below;

"Going about their town of two hundred thousand, with her mother and her sisters next to her, Amba felt loose and formless, like a spilled grocery bag." (p. 75)

Even though Amba is characterized as the one who does not feel ashamed of her appearance, but not impossible she can be insecure when anyone treats them differently.

"People would greet her warmly, sometimes even fondly, but her mother and sisters they would positively fete. They would often praise her bouncy big hair, or the fact that she'd grown a few inches taller, but her mother and twins- they were lovely." (p. 75)

From the monologue above, we can see that society seems to treat people the same. Yet, there is some differentiation for those who do not fulfill society's characterization, for instance, for the patriarchal beauty standard. This factor is one of the causes why women feel unwanted and insecure. It also can be the factor of gender inequality. Therefore, beauty is depicted as the media of male supremacy to take advantage of women and limit their workspace. It is in line with a statement that the feminist sues beauty standards since it might cause a big danger for women (Jeffreys, 2005).

The patriarchal society beauty standard also depicted in the novel is when Ambika, one of Amba's twin sisters, enters adolescence when she begins attracted to a boy who quietly peeked at her behind the big tree when she is dancing.

"She was like a pixie in a fairy tale: pretty and easy and flighty, and given to surges of passionate feeling." (p. 81)

She refers to Ambika, who is depicted as a beautiful girl in the village. Pamuntjak describes the character of Ambika, Amba's sister, as a girl with beauty appearance (since she has a different appearance from Amba) in the eyes of society, desired and wanted. In case, she must be taking all the attention of boys in the village. In the monologue above, it shows that how a beautiful girl attracts a man sexually. Moreover, the monologue takes time when Ambika is still a girl. In society, a girl in her teenage is a "flower that has just bloomed." she starts liking a boy and has new sexual arousal.

Moreover, for those who are beautiful and still "virgins," men desire to have it. Somehow, it has a strong relationship with what Naomi Wolf (Wolf, 1993) argues in her book that beauty is also categorized as "sexual selection." The beauty one must have suitable reproduction organs and the reproduction process more capable of being a success. Since youth and virginity stand for experiential and sexual ignorance, youth and (until recently) virginity has been "beautiful" in women. The virgin females always have a

good value from patriarchal society since they are described as pure and good women. Those who lost their virginity do not get married yet, and they would have bad values from society. However, whether a woman is a virgin or non-virgin, a woman never deserves a bad treat from patriarchal society when they do nothing for bad. "Virginity" based on medical science cannot be categorized according to the shape of the body, breast, or even hymen, since every human born biologically different.

The other patriarchal beauty standard representation in Laksmi Pamuntjak's *The Question of Red* is depicted by Nuniek, the mother of Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika. In this case, Nuniek is also depicted as a beautiful woman like Ambika and Ambalika. Instead of appearance, the patriarchal beauty standard also defines beauty from how a woman should behave.

"Take her mother, who always felt she had to be nice to people just because they were generous with their praise. She was not just the town belle in her day, she was the belle of belles." (p. 76)

From the monologue above, we can see that all that women should do is limited by tradition. When people see something like the good things, the woman should say so even though she might have a different perception. Many things limit a woman, and tradition can be the one. A woman would copy what is done to get a good value from society as "the polite and good woman" or "a good wife." It was used to be mentioned that self who aspires will be a good wife, a good mother, and an effective homemaker (Wolf, 1993). Wolf also discusses that the characteristics that a given period considers beautiful in women are simply indicators of the female activity the period finds desirable: The beauty myth often prescribes behavior rather than appearance. Women are always required to be polite and friendly, especially to men and to their husbands. With an outline, this case describes the male dominance in the patriarchal society and makes modesty and manners as standardization of beauty limits women's decisions.

Redefinition of Beauty

In the subsequent discussion, it discusses how the character of Amba rejects the patriarchal society beauty standard by redefining the image of beauty which is not cornering women's position and not limiting the workspace of women. Firstly, Amba redefines beauty by the action. Amba proves that being "interesting" is not always seen from the physical appearance. The soul also shows beauty; commonly, it is mentioned as inner beauty. This analysis is supported by the monologue below;

"Even at the age of two, she knew how to win hearts without relying on her looks; she'd squeal at the right moment, poke her father's nose when he was nuzzling her, do that clicking thing with her tongue that seemed to delight people to no end." (p. 75)

Being useful for her surroundings is the way the character cannot help surrounded or even for women themselves, just like Donne (Donne, 2010:88) argues that beauty is a pleasurable sensation that increases in - person's consciousness. The interpretation of beauty is an incredibly fascinating subject because it includes feeling, inspiration, cognition, thought, and learning all at once (Donne, 2010). Thus, Amba uses her feeling to

redefine beauty by making herself the center of happiness for her surroundings. People will recognize her existence just the way she is, not only by physical appearance, sexual looks, or even pretending to be someone else. Moreover, she means it to receive social recognition even if it is harming and demeaning her self-respect as a woman. It is related to what Keats argues in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" that Truth is beauty, and beauty is Truth—all that is there is to it.

Furthermore, Amba also uses cognition to redefine beauty. Amba realizes that she will not ever be as beautiful as her mother and her twin sisters. So, she decides to be independent to attract and own the heart of her parents.

"She finished her food without fuss, refrained from crying even if refused something, attempted to sing or dance, drew difficult things like a mosque or a proper goat." (p. 75)

That monologue above represents Amba's effort to reach the recognition of her parents; being independent is also depicted as beauty. The other redefinition is beauty as intellectual. Being an intelligent woman has a different level of beauty. It also includes inner beauty. Being an intelligent woman also can fascinate people on a different level. Amba fascinates people with her knowledge instead of appearance. She is grown up being a critical woman even almost nobody can answer her question, not her father. This part is represented in the monologue below;

"So began her lifelong relationship with books. It came to no surprise, then, that at twelve she often sounded twice older- the difficult themes she raised, the brutality of her observations." (p. 76)

Also, Amba considers that "Beautiful" is not always creating happiness and joy but also suffer and damage. Related to the feminist fundamental disagreement in the 1990s, the feminist theorists revealed a bitter dispute on the degree to which Western beauty patterns are inferior to women or reflect women's choices or entities. Her book *Woman Hating* is a perfect example of the intense criticism of the concept of beauty by radical feminists in the seventies (Dworkin 1974). She analyzes the concept of "beauty" and the way men's patriarchal society despises women. Dworkin argues that beauty standards influence women's bodies and lives widely. Beauty tradition is not only time-consuming, costly, and unpleasant for self-esteem, but "standards of beauty define specifically the interaction a person should have with his own body. They recommend his versatility, spontaneity, place, baiting, the uses she may bring on her body." (Jeffreys, 2005) Considering the above theory, it will be helpful to relate how Amba redefines beauty as a curse for women. And this monologue below proves to support the analysis;

"Besides, what was the need for self-pity? She always knew that beauty is more a curse than a blessing. It exalts and entraps." (p. 76)

The patriarchal practice also set forwards that woman should not reject a man's proposal too often, even though a woman is beautiful. A woman is not good for married in old age. This thought also affects the thought of Amba that a beautiful woman will have many admirers, especially man admirers. Besides, they will have men who ask her to be their wife. So, there are reasons to marry as faster as possible without any rejection at a

young age. Amba is a girl who likes freedom and knowledge. However, knowledge exists inside the book, and the book will be own if she gets the higher education. Amba unwilling to married sooner and being submissive to her husband when her husband forbids her to continue her study. Somehow, Amba does not like it, since the faster you are married, the more limited the time you have to get free and reach what you wish for, for instance, to reach your dream. So, beauty is an absolute curse.

"Murder, of course, was the extreme consequence, and should be avoided at all costs, but befell the unfortunate daughter of the merchant from Sleman all the same, the girl they said was almost as pretty as the twins, who was found dead on a dike not far from the main road, with fourteen stabs on her body and, rumor had it, a torn vagina."(p. 76)

This monologue is also related to the Dworkin analyses, which said that "Beauty" concept is an element of how people's patriarchal society is despised. Dworkin is blaming women's hatred for "deaths, murder, and brutality" committed against women; feminists suggested that women "find new forms against kill civilization as we know it and redefine it as we can imagine" (1974, p. 26) (Jeffreys, 2005). Amba redefines the patriarchal beauty standard since beauty is "a curse" for the woman. Amba also thinks that beauty is the cage that limits the woman's choice to receive what they deserve to get and be whatever they ever dream about. Besides, beauty can be a threat of death and violence for the woman since it can give rise to the male's desire, for the reason that Amba rise, it relates to the feminist theory which fights for equality and woman rights. The woman deserves to get what they want to, to be whatever they ever dream about, just equal to a man. If "Beauty" is the reason that can prevent this equality and her right to get a "choice," it can be the reason she rejects it and builds up her beauty standard instead of physical appearance.

CONCLUSION

Pamuntjak's *The Question of Red* places feministic theory in the context of a feminist-led dialogue. The dialogue presented in this book is a review of the principles of modern ideals founded on female views. The author introduces modern principles and criticizes established principles by metaphor or following a history of inconsistencies. Here, beauty is a beautiful inconsistency, as a conceptualized physical image centered on patriarchal society and a beautiful idea that builds on the female-field perspective. The concept is used in women's criticisms of ancient ideals, especially the importance of appearance defined in patriarchy for a woman. Beautiful ideas are presented in the manner of the feminine patriarchy. Meanwhile, it explains otherwise the idea of attractiveness developed from the point of view of women, physical appearance, and behavior between men and women.

The patriarchal society's beauty standard which is represented in this novel is about how women should look like (based on physical appearance): thin body, white skin, tall body, sharp nose, having a reasonable manner of femininity, and having a sexually attractive or can be called as "virginity." Somehow, the character of Amba disagrees with this kind of beauty standard since it can be a curse and murderer for the woman since it causes insecurity and anxiousness. Amba redefines beauty by her action as the

independent, intellectual, yet useful and heart-warming woman. However, being beautiful is not always depicted from physical appearance, but also the attitude and intellectual.

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