

THE PAIN OF BEAUTY IN NON-WESTERN FEMINISMS

Hapsari Dwiningtyas Sulistyani *)

Abstract

Keberagaman bentuk kekerasan terhadap perempuan di negara-negara non-Barat termasuk Indonesia membutuhkan pendekatan feminisme yang mempertimbangkan konteks lokal yang melingkupi terjadinya peristiwa opresi. Di beberapa negara non-Barat konsep mengenai kecantikan perempuan terfokus kepada bagian-bagian tubuh tertentu dari perempuan dan seringkali untuk menjadi cantik seorang perempuan harus mengalami rasa sakit luar biasa sebagai akibat dari tindakan transformasi bentuk tubuh. Representasi perempuan di media massa juga mengindikasikan keberagaman tipe-tipe opresi yang dialami perempuan.

Key Words: Women's Oppressions, Media's Representation, Non-Western Feminisms

A. Introduction

The rise of multicultural issues in feminism challenges the unity of mainstream feminisms. Both western and non-Western women experience some forms of repression that involves them being controlled through their body. Because the repression of women varies, from culture to culture, "woman" cannot be considered a single monolithic category based only on a shared biological sex, and this alone. In most cultures, for a woman to be desirable she must be regarded as beautiful. Certain non-Western cultures focus on particular parts of women's body in their concept of beauty, which often involves specific violent acts, including the infliction of pain and transformations of women's bodies (Ping, 2000:xi). The forms of women's oppression in non-Western countries vary in different eras and different cultures. In more recent times women's subjectivity is still constructed through their body, but the media now also play a part in the construction of female subjectivity. The various representations of women in the media of different cultures also reflect the different types of oppression or issue experienced by women from one culture to another. The appropriation of white women's experiences of oppression as a theoretical base for understanding those experienced by women of non-Western or third-world countries suggests an overgeneralising of the theory of women's oppression (Ang, 1995:61). The notion of the repression of women through their body should not be understood as an idealised unified experience of all women, rather it should take seriously the voice of the "other" 'in its distinctiveness and specificity' (Ang, 1995:64). So the differences in cultural op-

pressions of women through their body in non-western countries call for many different forms of feminism.

B. Discussion

Ien Ang (1995:58) argues that the ability to deal with the differences in feminist discourse is required for the survival of feminism. However, she states that the difficulties of dealing with difference cannot be resolved through the reconciliation all women's differences into one mainstream feminism. Therefore, in order to deal with differences we have to understand the effect and the source of difference.

The practices of sexualising the meaning of specific parts of women's body such as the foot, ear, or neck in non-Western countries should be understood in its specific cultural context, for example the sexualised meaning of Chinese women's feet in the construction of "female beauty" in late imperial China. In 1966 under the Mao Zedong regime China fought against 'the remaining powers of feudalism, capitalism, ... , and the practice of footbinding – the symbol of feudal oppression of women' (Ping, 2000: x). Even though, in recent times, the practice of footbinding has become a symbol of national shame, the practice, that involve pain, violence, mutilation and self-mutilation of women's bodies, was carried out and accepted by women in the past, because having small feet represented women's beauty and prestige or nobility (Ping, 2000:xi). The practice of footbinding practices raised concerns not only about its relation to the concept of beauty, but its implications for notions of gender, sex and class. Ping says that a woman was not

considered to be really a woman if she unbound her feet. Chinese women also 'turned the binding into a bonding among women family members, relatives and friends ... and they inverted male writing that fetishized the female body into a female writing that was rooted in speech and interaction among a female community' (Ping, 2000:226). Interestingly, Ping shows a similarity between the practice footbinding in traditional China and some thoughts of contemporary Western women. According to Ping in *The vagina monologues*, Eve Ensler questions hundreds of women in western countries "If your vagina got dressed, what would it wear?" The answers are varied including: a leather jacket, silk stockings, Mink, A pink Boa, A male tuxedo, Jeans.... (2000:232). Ping argues that traditional Chinese women had already translated these thoughts into real actions. She suggests that 'Chinese women bound their feet (their symbolic vaginas) and dressed them in all manners (binding, covering, piercing) and in all styles (transvestites, animals, plants, objects)' (Ping, 2000:233), just like modern Western women in the *Vagina monologues*. So the practices of foodbinding in traditional China should be viewed not as an uncivilized behaviour of non-Western people but the specific cultural practises that influence in the construction of Chinese women's subjectivity and continues to establish certain values in contemporary women in China.

Another example of the oppression of women through their body is to be found in -the Kayan concept of female beauty based on the length of women's necks, where the practice of stretching their women's neck with coils threatens mobility and independency of Kayan's women. Kayan women have worn coils around their neck for hundreds of years as a symbol of beauty and cultural identity (Maydan, 2000:11). According to Mydan, Kayan women wear neck coils from the time they are five years old. The weight of the ring can be up to 12 pounds, and it causes the widening of the base of the neck and 'pushes down the collarbones and rib cage, causing the shoulder to slope' (Maydan, 2000:11). As a result the Kayan women's neck has a lengthened appearance. The application of the coils to women's necks causes the neck to become dependent on the support of the coils. Several myths about the coils also produced to justify the practice. But actually the practice is also based on safety guarding of the coils, because they are a family treasure (Maydan, 2000:11). Today the long neck women of the Kayan tribe are a major tourist attraction of the area (espe-

cially Kayan tribe in Thailand). In other words, the sexualized practice of lengthening women's necks not only controls the presentation of women's bodies, but it also constructs them as a commodity that attracts an economic benefit from tourism. According to Mydan, because the long-necked women are a valuable commodity, both as a tourist attraction and in terms of the value of the coils they wear, Kayan men prefer them to women who have not carried out customary practice of stretching their neck. Because of the tribe's construction of beauty and the economical benefits to be gained through tourism, the practice of stretching women's necks continues to exist. So, the practices of stretching women's neck in Kayan tribe should be viewed not only as a cultural construction of female beauty but also as a reflection of kayan women's role in the economical discourse.

These forms repression based on women's body influences how non-western women represent their body in society. Certain Western feminists view these kinds of oppression as barbaric behaviour of third world people (Heliwell, 2000:793). While, such oppressions such as rape occur in Western society, they are perceived as a natural function of male biology or a universal violence inflicted on women's bodies. However, some feminist thinkers such as Heliwell reveal the notion of women's body across time and place. Heliwell argues that not all cultures or societies are familiar with the violent oppression of women's body within Western feminism discourses, such as the discourse of rape. Certain cultures such as the Dayak, in Borneo do not have a specific term for 'rape' in their language. Heliwell was trying to explain what rape is to a woman who a man had attempted to force to have sex with her climbed in her chamber window. Heliwell says to her that it was a bad thing and the man was trying to hurt her. The woman said that it was not a bad thing rather it was a funny experience and she also stated 'It's only a penis, how can a penis hurt anyone?' (Heliwell 2000:789).

Even though, in certain areas of Indonesia, women have a different perception about rape as a sexual violence. Many Indonesian Cinema, however, use a relatively similar way in representing the sinister of rape. They use "water" as the representation of cleaning the sin after a woman raped. This "cleansing" by the water is related to a recognised cinematic convention dealing with rape scenes that signifies that a woman feels dirty after being raped and feels the need to wash away what has happened to her. According to Ann J. Cahill

(2000:60),

The typical reactions of a rape victim, marked by overwhelming guilt and self-loathing, are the reaction of a person who should have known but temporarily forgot that she was always at risk, that in fact the risk followed everywhere she went, that it was inescapable. To have believed for even a moment that she was not in danger, for whatever reason, is felt to be the cause of the attack.

In addition, "water" as a cinematic convention relates to the notion of the "purity" of women. Purity is, socially and conventionally, a characteristic of a "good" woman, and suggests that a woman who possesses such a characteristic protects her body from unwanted sexual encounters. The construction of a good woman as "pure" contributes to the feelings of guilt suffered by victims of rape, which, in turn, causes the victims to experience deep psychological trauma.

The various perceptions of rape also show how it is almost impossible to create a universalised notion of oppression of women's body. It is undeniable that all women live with the threat of sexual violence (Brisson qtd. in Heliwell 2000:790) but the forms and the conditions of violence are different from one culture to another. So the multiplicity of forms of sexualised control and violations of women's body in non-Western countries should be viewed as specific phenomena that have distinct circumstances and need specific feminism agendas to address the problem, not simply as an addition to the universalisation of Western women's oppression. Violence is one of the primary themes in the mass media, especially violence against women. However, "violence against women" cannot be thought of as a universal term, because it covers diverse situations and conditions that each individual woman experiences differently. The multiplicity of violations of women that this concept encompasses should be viewed as a spectrum of specific incidents that each has a distinct set of circumstances. Therefore, representation of the violence against women in the media should address the complexity of the issue, and not simply deal with it as a uniform and universal category.

As previously discussed, the media plays a significant role in maintaining the construction of women's body as sexualised. The media is also a space where the representation of women's body is mediated by certain institutions in society, such as religious institutions, and government institutions have the power to determine the way women's bodies appear in the media. While mass media is a

global phenomenon, the content of the various forms of mass media is negotiated by each nation and region to reflect local contexts. So how women's body presented in the media is a result of negotiation between many powers in society. If the media present women's body outside of the negotiated boundaries, it creates controversy amongst the various parties and power brokers whose interest media served. The huge controversy about Inul's style of dancing was an example of how various powers in Indonesian society involved on the media's constructions of female body. In truth the style of Inul's dancing is not much different to western singers such as Shakira or Jennifer Lopez, performers who have been seen on Indonesian television long before the appearance of Inul. So actually the main reason for the controversy is not the dance movement itself, but the fact that it is an Indonesian woman, Inul, who danced in a sexy and powerful style. According to Faruk and Salam (2003) the reason Inul's performance became a controversy was because she not only reflected the image of sensuality, -big bottom, seductive movements of her hips- but she combined with it the image of a cute, innocent and honest Indonesian village girls. The controversy sparked by Inul in Indonesia signifies the complexity of female body politics. The different opinions on the "proper" construction of women show the specific discourses of female body in the Indonesian media. It is important to understand the minor narratives of each element in women's oppression. Because the religion and traditional practices in certain non-Western countries are relatively still strong, the doctrines of mainstream west feminism do not adequately deal with the issues that confront women in these cultures.

In her essay Ien Ang stressed on the difficulties of non-white/Western women "to construct a voice for self-presentation in a context already firmly established and inhabited by powerful formation (what is now commonly called, ..., 'white/western feminism')" (1995:57). Ien Ang notes the rise of multicultural issues (such as race and ethnicity) in feminism challenges mainstream feminisms in the beginning of her essay. She says that feminism should be understood as a multi-cultural phenomenon, not as a system of thought that suggest all women share a universal identity. As a result the category of 'woman' is not the factor that unites women for feminist politics anymore. Ien Ang agrees with Spelman who argues, 'even if we say all women are oppressed by sexism we cannot au-

tomatically conclude that the sexism all women experience is the same" (Spelman qtd. in Ang, 2000:58).

In order to show the difficulties of addressing non-western women's issue with white women's experiences of oppression as a theoretical base for understanding, this article will look at the representation of women's oppression in an Indonesian short story. The title of this short story is *Her*.

"Just like that I let him leave. I listened to the steadily fading sound of his car as he drove away. The motor grew fainter and fainter until it was finally drowned out by the children's voices. At moments like that I felt that he accepted the freedom I had given him with too obvious relief.

For a while now he could live without demands from his fussy children and his immature wife. I knew his routine so well. As he came to the bend in the road past our house he would look back at the ten children lined up in front of the door. He would wave at them, but no one would wave back. They well knew that their father was not going to his office, but rather to another home, one where someone else would welcome him with that special warmth a wife reserves for greeting her husband" (Basino:2001).

Because women from Western society do not experience the practice of polygamy that is represented in that short story, they may not understand the implication that is holds for Indonesian women. Polygamy is still a common issue for Indonesian women in everyday life. Indonesia has specific religious, cultural and national laws that allow the practice of polygamy. As a result we cannot examine the issue of polygamy in Indonesia through western women perspectives.

One of the reasons why non Western women have difficulties to raise their voice for their self representation within feminist discourse is the tendency of mainstream feminists such as Pettman who suggests in order to deal with difference women should recognise "unequal power and conflicting interests while not giving up on community or solidarity or sisterhood" (qtd. in Ang, 1995:59). Pettman suggestion also implies that other women voices should absorb into mainstream "feminism's essentialising frame" (Kirby qtd. in Ang, 1995:60). Another barrier for non-Western women to present their self is "an overconfident faith in the power of open and honest communication to overcome the differences" (Ang, 1995:59). Some non-Western women do not have the same mode of communication as Western women. Thus, it is important to pay attention in communication barriers between

mainstream feminism and "other woman' feminism. We have to realize that the failure to reconcile all women differences into one grid mainstream feminism signifies that there are moments no common ground in feminism. So the unity White/Western feminism is not a monolithic concept and white feminism also must begin "to detotalise their feminist identities and be compelled to say: 'I'm feminist, but ...'" (Ang 58).

C. Conclusions

The complexity of women's oppressions in non-Western countries suggests the various challenges faced by feminism in the non-Western countries require various approaches. According to Spivak corporate globalisation and the "intranational" cultural differences between an elite bourgeoisie and the rural poor 'maintains subaltern women in a position of subalternity' (qtd in. Sharpe 609). Spivak argues that feminism in third-world countries should 'engage with everyday lives of subalterns' (qtd in. Sharpe 609). So global and local or traditional narratives constructs specific female identities that relates to their particular cultures, which provides the diversity of challenges to the application of feminism to non-Western / third-world countries. The complexity of issues involved also signifies that non-Western feminism should not be considered as a universal theory that encompasses all women's oppression in non-Western countries. Non-Western feminism is not a monolithic category with an approach or strategy that covers all women's conditions and struggles in non-Western countries. Women's issues in one country also need a multiple approaches. In Indonesia for example in the psychological rubric in women's magazine reveals that women's virginity still an important issue for many women but in certain area such as in some part in Borneo virginity is not an important issue at all. Thus the local narratives of women's oppression should be the main consideration for determining the proper feminist approaches.

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