

SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE IN EVERYDAY NARRATIONS: GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN INDONESIAN TELEVISION

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ABSTRACT

The construction of violence against women is delivered through everyday narrations. Some of the everyday narrations produced and consumed by the society are transmitted through the media. The narration of violence is not necessarily physical but also symbolic. Related to gender relation, women are mostly target of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence here is defined as the ideas and values of a ruling cultural class (e.g., men) who purposefully imposed them (often through subconscious means) onto a dominated social group such as women. Male dominated culture plays a role in maintenance of the power relations in symbolic violence. This paper explores symbolic violence produced and reproduced in Indonesian television media through language and image. Since the Reformasi era in 1998, the role of media, especially television, has been crucial in shaping the ideology and common sense of Indonesian people. Many scholars argued that media to some extent replaces the role of the State in shaping the public idea. In particular, symbolic violence is largely constructed by television but the audiences are not aware of this construction. The dynamic relation between the social and cultural regimes and the construction of symbolic violence in everyday narrations through television in the electronic cinema (sinetron) programs will be the focus of the discussion.

Keywords: Narrations, symbolic violence, *sinetron*, misrecognition, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

When writing about gender relation in any social and cultural context, like in Indonesia, many scholars focus largely on the dichotomy on the relation between men and women through the imbalance of power (e.g., Fakhri, 1998). Women are seen as subordinated by men (Fakhri, 1998). Men are the ones considered as having a hegemonic power in many aspect of life. In the context of subordination and domination, it is always related to men who have more power to exercise over women. The power to exercise is usually related to their physical power. In the context of violence, for instance, physical violence toward women are also of an interest to many scholars. Although physical violence is crucial in consideration of the increasing number of rape, gang rape and domestic violence cases in Indonesia¹, however, people sometimes do not give attention to the more frequent violence that occurs in the social practice. People are not aware that there are many practices in the society that contain *symbolic violence*. The symbolic violence used in this article germinates from the classical work of Pierre Bourdieu's (1998). Bourdieu (1998) defined symbolic violence as an extension of the term violence to include other forms of violence. According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence is an imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning upon groups or

¹ In 2012, Indonesian people were shocked by the rape committed toward women that took place in Jakarta. The victims were raped in the public transport. Sexual abuses were also experienced by women in the public transport, which were committed by male passengers. Amelia, Mei. 2012. 2012, *Perkosaan di Angkot Masih Menghantui* Jakarta. Detiknews, 2 Januari. Downloaded on 9th of June 2013.

classes, accepted as legitimate. It is related to various modes of social and cultural domination. Symbolic violence is the unnoticed (partly unconscious) domination that people maintain in everyday living. Because symbolic violence is practiced and repeated in everyday life, people do not realize that certain act or attitude contain symbolic violence. He further states that symbolic violence is a soft violence applied by subject to other subjects. Symbolic violence is repeated from time to time through education in the family, formal schooling or informal learning. Moreover, symbolic violence is also consumed through the production of text and meaning in the conversation, advertisement, film, novels and other cultural products.

Symbolic violence in everyday life is practiced by people in different ways (Bourdieu, 1998). Women coming from different economic, social and political background experience symbolic violence. In Indonesian, when talking about sexuality in the television, women are mostly portrayed as the core of social moral problem. They are perceived as the cause of many sexually-related criminal problems. For instance, when rape cases occur, the discourse circulated is that women are raped because they do not wear appropriate clothes, which sexually motivate men to rape them. It is not men who are blamed but women. Women body is then controlled through different mechanism in the male dominated system (Walby, 1990). The good woman is portrayed as the one who wears the covered cloth (the veil). In the province of Aceh in Sumatra for instance, women cannot sit down in the motor bike like a man. They have to sit down as women, on one side of the motorcycle². They are considered as creating bad morality and must be seated as usual, like the rider, or men. In the television, good women mean traditional, and having soft character. On the contrary, bad women are portrayed with sexy fashion code of dressing. The dichotomy between good and bad women portrayed in the television is a symbolic violence because ideologically it creates stigma for certain group of women, such as women who do not wear the veil.

The everyday narration here can be defined as the everyday life activities in the social context but can be also from the everyday life portrayed by the media. After the political reformation (*reformasi*) movement in Indonesia in 1998, the role of media, especially television, became more influential with the importance of capital accumulation in the arena of text production towards the society. The myths, stories, and ideologies are shaped by television channels in their daily programs. The owners of the television channels certainly contribute to the production of text and meaning in their media (Arthurs, 2004). They have different ideology to promote their programs. Some attempt to bring people to the construction of nationalism, religiosity, or to life prosperity issues. However, in regard to women, they have no specific ideology to promote but for commercial gain. Women are always subjects and at the same time objects of television programs. Television channels are interested in promoting women because of their sexuality and their role in stimulating the public to watch the television. Hence, women become the *accessories* to make the screen 'colorful' with their physical appearance and beauty (Macdonald, 1995).

This article focuses on the symbolic violence exercised in Indonesian television. The television can have a crucial role as producers of everyday narrations related to the symbolic violence because it is consumed by people regularly. People, coming from different gender, class, ethnicities watch films, advertisements and other programs in the different televisions stations. The product of the television programs on society cannot always be seen as positive. It constructs people's mind through its soft ideology, where the usage of language and image contribute to the construction of one's ideology (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966)).

² Suhendi, Adi. 2013. "Larangan Perempuan Duduk Kangkang Abaikan Unsur Keselamatan". *Tribun News*, 2 January. Downloaded on the 9th of June 2013.

One of the programs consumed by Indonesian people is the electronic cinema, popularly called *Sinetron*³. *Sinetron* correlates with drama series in American television program or *telenovela* in a South American program, and has become one of the most consumed television programs in Indonesia. Indonesian *sinetron* is watched by people during the prime time at seven o'clock at night and onwards. The biggest television station, such as *Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia (RCTI)* plays *sinetron* everyday. Other Indonesia television stations, such as *Indosiar*, *SCTV* and *Trans TV* also play some of the *sinetron* programs. The three specific crucial questions explored in this article are: (i) *How do Indonesian television stations exercise symbolic violence towards women in their sinetron programs?* (ii) *How women are positioned in this symbolic violence?* (iii) *What is the ideology constructed in this symbolic violence?*

LANGUAGE AND IMAGE AS AN ARENA OF SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE PRODUCTION

Language and image are two crucial elements of any narrations that contribute to the construction of symbolic violence towards women. In this contemporary world, the media has a significant role in the construction of meaning through both language and image, which are important tools to create meaning (Lassen, 2006). In the book titled, *Mediating Ideology in Text and Image*, Inger Lassen (2006) emphasizes that both language and image contribute in shaping the ideology of people. Through language and image, people define others. Moreover, by using language and image, people exercise their power in any social context. In the pre-image media years, people concentrated on the usage of language that was considered not just a tool to interact and to communicate, but also a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1992). Language constitutes and it is constituted. However, with the booming of media in the ideological arena of contestation, image becomes a very important aspect to be viewed together with language (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Media is not just a text but contains also context where power and ideology are at play to capture different interests. Language and image are used and manipulated by people *consciously* and *unconsciously* to gain different objectives (Kellner, 2003). There is a tight-linear linkage between language, media, and social or cultural context. Social structure and gender relation can be seen through language and image. Image is used in combination with language to produce new meanings in the social context of gender relation. Crucially, this perspective drives the analysis in this article.

In Javanese culture, for instance, language determines the social class but it is also identified by the social class. The determination of social class is evident in everyday language usage in the society. Among the lower class people, they are regulated to use certain language dialect for their own class or strata. The regulation also applies to the higher class people, but with another level of the dialect in the same language. The usage of such language stratification determined the position of people in the social relation. It is a requirement that the lower class people will use the higher or polite language when they communicate with higher class people. On the contrary, the higher class people will use the lower class language to communicate to the lower class people. In that context, we can see that the symbolic violence exercised is the creation of positioning that creates social stratification differentiation between the higher and lower class people in the society through language. In a TV program

³ Nielsen research survey reported in 2011 that the number of *sinetron* audience in Indonesia increased 51% in 2011 from 960,000 in 2010 to 1.4 million people in 2011. Most of the audiences of *sinetron* were women aged more than 30 years old and they came from middle and lower social class. Priyambodo, 2011. "Jumlah Pemirsa Sinetron Meningkat". *Antarnews*. 3 Mei, downloaded on the 9th of June, 2013.

in one of the Javanese television channel, image is pegged together with language to perpetuate this class stratification. Moreover, the fashion code of dressing by an actor in that program is used as an image to define the class position of that individual in the Javanese society.

Related to gender relation, the determination of language for men and women distinction is practiced in many different languages and cultural groups. The language used for men and women are socially and culturally determined. In particular, the symbolic violence can be seen in various language determinations for men and women respectively. Women, for instance, are placed in the category of passive or object, while men are in many ways considered as active subject. In French language for example, there are some words where male article is placed as subject while female as object (Udasmoro, 2011). The word masculine *un balayeur* in French means the ones who sweep the floor. The feminine word is *une balayeuse* that become an object, because it means a broom. In Indonesian language, many sentences give privilege to man as subject. The sentence "I will marry you" will only be spoken by man. Women will be the object because they become the ones, the men will marry. The ways in which the words and sentences are constructed contain symbolic violence toward women because it creates a conviction that they cannot be subjects. They are objectified through the construction by the usage of language. In the media, images are used to strengthen and reinforced the language and to construct the gender identity (Gauntlett, 2002).

TELEVISION SHAPES SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998) used the term "symbolic violence" to describe how the ideas and values of a ruling cultural class are purposefully imposed (often through subconscious means) onto a dominated social group. Culture plays a role as maintenance of the power relations. He claimed that culture contributes to the systematic reproduction of symbolic violence. It is achieved through a process of "misrecognition" (Bourdieu, 1998). Bourdieu (1998) defined misrecognition as a process where people believe that education is projected to improve human life condition. However, such education is taken for granted for that purpose but in reality, does not enable many people to improve their life. It only improves the life of certain privilege people. In that work, Bourdieu gave an example of how education can be an arena of exercising symbolic violence. Education creates a system to control but the system established in reality does reproduce social reproduction. According to Bourdieu (1998), social reproduction here is seen as a way how the social class is maintained through the mechanism where the rich will get the possibility to have access easily to higher education while the poor will not have easy access to it. Education is a machine to perpetuate the social class. In the actual context, education is not only a formal education but includes other channels of learning. Television can also be an arena for education. Children learn a lot from television programs. They internalize the program, objectify and externalize it in their daily life. They learn how certain behavior is produced and consumed it before reproducing a new but similar behavior (Bandura, 1977). The adult learn also from the television. The day to day repetitions of television programs that they watch shape their cognitions and understanding. They believe in common sense constructed by the television. The advertisement, for instance, is consumed everyday and creates misrecognition for the audience. The fact that advertisement is watched everyday thus creates a conviction for the audience to a certain degree of persuasion.

Related to gender, there are several mechanism of symbolic violence exercised in the television: Firstly, it is recognized as a normal, and natural that shape gender subjectivity and

objectivity (Bourdieu, 1998). Who is the subject or object is a matter of daily construction. Secondly, it is seen in sign, symbol and meaning pictured in different ways depending on the position and disposition of gender. How men and women are portrayed constantly use sign, symbol and meaning. Women are portrayed as *flowers* and men are *tigers* can be seen frequently in many different programs in the television in many different societies. Thirdly, it reproduces the symbolic hierarchy that creates discrimination, marginalization and domination. Symbolic violence is the domination of others, either consciously or not, brought on by the every day to day paradigms such as gender, social and class, and how they are used in the media television system particularly in order to effect outcomes.

THE CONSUMPTION OF SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE IN EVERYDAY NARRATIONS

There are different ways television stations produce symbolic violence in their programs over time. The process begins in the evening, where it is common for Indonesian family to gather in the living room to watch television programs. Most families usually chose *sinetron* as the favorite program to watch in most days of the week, which in a way contributes to their ideology formation. This does not mean that the meaning transferred by the television give direct effect ideologically to the family who watch television. However, the fact that *sinetron* is watched everyday it thus shapes a pattern of understanding of the meaning being constructed. The successful *sinetron* (i.e., watched frequently by a lot of audience) can reached more than 600 series or it can take more than 3 years to be screened in the Indonesian television stations. *Sinetron*, as a mini film portrayed many different stories but mostly focus on the relation between a young man and a young woman in a relationship. The stories of these *sinetrons* are quite similar. The popular one is that the young woman in the relationship is poor and the young male partner is rich. The relationship is not always smooth because there some other actors in the film that attempt to disturb the relationship. The obstacles to the relationship, firstly, come constantly from the mother of the young man and another young woman who want to get the heart of the young man. These two women become the evils in the story from the beginning to the end of the series. The good woman who is in the relationship has to face other women to maintain the relationship with the young man. The woman is seen in the story as angel and evil at the same time. The symbolic violence portrayed in these social dynamics of relationships among actors is the system of mental model that women are always competing among each other (Macdonald, 1995). In that competition, there are constructions of two kinds of women. One is the weak, soft, poor, subordinated but portrayed as very beautiful. The other one is bad woman, strong, manipulative and has more financial capital. There is no woman outside those two categories. There is *black* and *white* mechanism in the portrait of women in this *sinetron* film.

The second obstacle comes from another young man who loves also the young woman in the relationship. He is as competitor, however, the young man here is pictured differently from the above two evil women. He is good, handsome and is rich as the main actor (the young man who already has a relationship with the young woman). Hence, these two good men struggle to win the love from that beautiful and good young woman. The power of the hegemonic masculinities is constructed (Connell, 2005). Finally, in the story this second young man falls out of the competition of capturing love from the young woman but it is not because he is a bad man. It is a question of luck and who initially loved the young woman. Most of the *sinetron* films focus and evolve around this kind of story. Good woman is constructed as subordinated, weak and soft being. The message mostly explained in such *sinetron* story is that patience and goodness will get one to happiness. The problem is that, the happiness the young woman experiences is only towards the end of the stories. All along

the entire different series of this *sinetron* story, it talks about her sadness, depression and incomplete struggle in life.

Another type of electronic cinema is the religious cinema. Love story and telling about the good and the bad character is the objective of this program. The good person is symbolically shown through the wearing of the veil by women. The goodness of the person is pictured through the language used by the actors and the actress. The good people always use soft language and the opposite for the bad person. Good women are created as soft but then they are saved by God because of their good character. Women are target of this symbolic violence. The marginalization is created through the characters. Thus, women have never been created as strong, determinative or having decisional character.

During the Muslim feast, *Ramadan*, different television stations compete to create *sinetron* with the emphasis on the stories related to religious messages. The symbols of Islam, as the religion of the majority of Indonesians are emphasized through those TV stations. The language used is referred mostly to Islamic text, such as the usage of Muslim greetings used frequently in the television stations. Ramadan is the period of fasting and prayers where Muslims do fast for one month. They stop eating early in the morning around 4 a.m. and will have their break to eat in the evening around 6 p.m. The television stations use the time when people wait to break the fasting moment in the evening to promote Islamic religious greetings. The religiosity is the primary messages of all of the *sinetron* during one full month.

A *sinetron* can be seen in many different ways. It is a form of enthusiasm in time and space context. In terms of time, women are the ones who usually watch the *sinetron* (Priyambodo, 2011) because these are the moments where they are free from domestic tasks. In term of space, religious cinema is also used by women to get spirituality. Fasting time is used by Indonesian Muslim to get highest spirituality before going to *Idul Fitri* celebration. The television response to this need and create a specific *sinetron*. However, the connection between the need of women to free themselves from domestic occupation or to get highest spirituality and the need of the television to sell the product creates a gap. The audience meets the process of misrecognition. The symbolic violence created is that, the television channels seem to fulfill the needs of the audience for their spirituality by promising programs that contained spiritual aspects. They promise to provide education about the relation of people from religious perspective. However, the programs are only using the language (text) and the image that symbolize religiosity. It is just a superficial spirituality and religiosity they display. There are no new things proposed. Women are still undermined and objectified in the content of the stories. The audience does not realize that the television is only changing the symbols to religious symbols.

There are at least three aspects of symbolic violence that are consciously and unconsciously shaped by the television channels. First, it is about the construction of women subordination, including their weakness and softness. The second aspect is about women as object. They are positioned as object in front of the male subjects. Women are also object in front of other women coming from higher economic background. The third aspect is what Baudrillard (1983) referred to as *hyperreality*. *Hyperreality* here is about women as dominant but the dominance of women here are exaggerated by putting them as the ones who exercise power by using bad methods to get what they want.

An example of the *sinetron* that portrays the weak, soft and subordinated women is titled *Cinta dan Anugerah* (Love and Grace). This *sinetron* was one of the programs of one the most popular channels in Indonesia call, RCTI. This *Cinta dan Anugerah* story was played in 2006. Some popular actors and actress took part in this *sinetron*. To attract the audience, the

young actors were imported from Malaysia to act in that *sinetron*. Below is the image of this *sinetron*.



Courtesy of helloskyblu.blogspot.com

From the pictures of actors and actress above, it can be seen how symbolic violence is constructed in Indonesian television. From pictures of the five persons displayed above, three of them are women and they are portrayed as sad and depressive. On the contrary, the two men are not seen behaviorally and emotionally the same as women, but portrayed in the picture as strong and assertive. This dichotomy is produced in everyday life and thus creates a public idea that it is normal if women are weak or weaker than men.

The electronic cinema has the intention to create the bad and the good image through signs and symbols. However, the signs and symbols created thus place women in a marginal position. They are good but not powerful. They want to get love but need a grace of God to have it. This is an example of how symbolic violence is practiced through everyday narrations. Women as audience, they are structured by the idea that they are soft. This symbolic violence is used to legitimate the form of power by the dominant culture. In this case, the dominant culture is male dominated system and also through capitalism. There are a lot of other examples of how the structure of symbolic violence is perpetuated in everyday narration. It is not always related to men and women, but it can be also related to class category, such as the domination of the higher to the lower class people, or an ethnic group's symbolic violence.

The second aspect of symbolic violence pictured by the television is creating women as objects. The popular narration created in contemporary Indonesia is polygamy recently become a common display in the media. Many politicians and public figures, including the religious leaders practice polygamy. The *sinetron* also normalize polygamy. The symbolic violence is created by stating that polygamy is allowed, and women have to follow this practice, even most do not like polygamy practice. Polygamy in Indonesian context is not a new issue. It is contested from time to time. Polygamy is not only practiced in Islamic religion but other aspects of society as well. Traditionally, many different cultural societies in Indonesia practice polygamy. In terms of the regulation polygamy by the State, during the first President Sukarno's era of political rule, polygamy was allowed by law. The President himself had several wives. During Suharto regime, it was forbidden by law, especially for the civil servants. Any male civil servant found practicing polygamy got punishment from the

government. With the *reformasi* era in late 1990's, and the rise of the religious parties, polygamy is practiced more explicitly. The people involved in polygamy justify the polygamy practice by making reference to the old practice of polygamy in Islamic tradition. One of the *sinetrons* that focus on polygamy is entitled *The Wife for My Husband*. Several other related films also broadcast polygamy practice. One of the box office films elaborated this issue is *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (The Verses of Love). The picture below illustrates one of the *sinetrons* talking about polygamy, *The Wife for My Husband*.



Courtesy of helloskyblu.blogspot.com

This *sinetron* was screened in RCTI in 2006. It is a story about a wife who looked for another woman to marry her husband. The symbolic violence produced is positioning women as the ones who are good. However, being good here is through reproducing the male narration of accepting polygamy and accepting certain religious construction that polygamy is allowed. The good woman is defined as good wife who follow the religious text although they have to suffer silently in their feelings.

The text of polygamy since *reformasi* era has changed the discourse of family in Indonesia. Polygamy is not only displayed in the television but it has socially been practiced. In July 2003, one of a businessman in Indonesia who practices Polygamy, Puspo Wardoyo, organizes an award called Polygamy award for Indonesian men considered as successful practicing Polygamy⁴. The vice president at that time, Hamzah Haz was considered as one of the winners. The television helps this social practice by emphasizing it in their everyday narrations to become common and normal. There is no positioning of media toward women whose husband practice polygamy. This is symbolic violence because the programs created conviction to men that polygamy is not forbidden. The program thus educates men to practice polygamy, and in a covert way, encourages psychologically violence toward women.

The third aspect relates to symbolic violence is creating women as having dominance or portraying evil character in the *sinetron*. The example of how women are put as dominant is through a *sinetron* titled *Suami-Suami Takut Istri* (Men who are afraid of their wives). This *sinetron* is about four women who are dominant in their own ways toward their husbands. They come from different ethnic groups. Their husbands also come from other ethnicities.

⁴ Imanjaya, Ekki. 2009. "Window onto Polygamous Life". *Jump Cut A Review of Contemporary Media*. www.ejumpcut.org downloaded on the 9th of June 2013.

They dominate their husband through the language they use in the story. The husbands are portrayed as subordinated and afraid of their wives although they are the ones who earn money for economic functioning of the household. In the film, the arena of contestation is open when an unmarried woman comes and lives in the same residential area. The husbands of the women in hidden way try to get in touch with the new female neighbor. The everyday stories resolves on how their wives try to punish their husbands after seeing the husbands try to form relationship with the new neighbor, but the husbands keep on doing it. Below is the image of this particular *sinetron*.



Courtesy of pangeran229.worldpress.com

In regard to that *sinetron* film, a symbolic violence here is the way how television creates all women as problematic. The wives in the story are obsessive but the young sexy woman has the sexual appeal for their husbands. By that, the television portrays women as strong, powerful and dominant but in reality they are still weak because the husbands are still practicing the acts that their wives do not want them to do it. Women are created as failed evils. Women try their best to get power but always fail because men will not give up to struggle also for their own power. The young new female neighbor can be seen as how the television create woman as purely for sexual appeal for men. Women's sexuality is used to entertain men (Gauntlett, 2002). The young woman is a portrait of how sometimes to be young and beautiful is seen as problematic in a society that perceived beauty as a threat, something that other women will be jealous and envious towards the beautiful female. Moreover, woman becomes also object or victims of male sexual harassment for their beauty.

CONCLUSION

The symbolic violence against women is shaped through a habituation process over time. It is a day to day production, consumption and reproduction in the social practice. Media, like television as we have seen in this article becomes a machine that contributes to the perpetuation of symbolic violence. People are not aware of how television can be an agent of gender imbalance construction. The identity of women is shaped through a process of misrecognition. The audiences are influenced with a program portraying women as sad, subordinated, evil or objects. They are convinced by the language and the image created about women because the repeated information in everyday narration shapes their perspectives. In reality, the image created towards women is just a constructed image (Berger

& Luckmann, 1966). The television contributes to the creation of symbolic violence by putting narration of women as the objects and marginalized subjects. The media television helps reproduces the stigma toward women as jealous subjects, evils or when they are good, they are weak. The symbolic violence towards women reproduces also the position of men who are portrayed and displayed as always powerful and “correct”. It is “correct” when men practice polygamy or try to have extra-marital relationship with another woman. The masculinities are strengthened through media television in the *sinetron* films.

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