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Article

Body's Economy and Politics in Paintings With A Dress Theme by Balinese Contemporary Painters

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ABSTRACT

This article contains an analysis of paintings with a dress theme by Balinese contemporary painters. Using sociological and cultural studies approach, the article discusses the relation between paintings as art artefact and cultural issues, especially in relation to economy and politics of signs. Since these paintings were made in the contemporary era, then this study of paintings is also related to the body's current cultural phenomena and economy and politics. This article reveals and describes the meaning of paintings with a dress theme by painters: Made Alit Suaaja, Polenk Rediasa, Tatang BSP, Wayan Pastika, and Agus Cahaya. This Article concludes that from the perspectives of the Balinese contemporary painters, Balinese women's dresses are body's economy and politics and at the same time the economy and politics of signs that do not separate between beauty and erotism. This discussion is expected to provide an expansive and deep understanding of the meaning of paintings with a dress theme by Balinese contemporary painters.

INTRODUCTION

A study on fashion, dress, or garment has been done in various perspectives. The results show that the history of life and human social life cannot be separated from the history of dress. This study has produced various scientific findings about beauty and health. However, on the other hand, it has also produced a number of impacts that threaten the survival of a particular culture, and has stimulated the growth of consumerism which increasingly has become fierce. However, dress as culture has given room for various and deep studies. A number of scholars in various parts of the world seem to never stop doing an investigation into dress. Many things keep on being able to be revealed and given meaning from one or two sheets of cloth that wrap a human body. It (the dress) has become the field of meaning making that has never been used up when being dug.

Studies on dress have been done by Jean Gelman Taylor in Java in the colonial time, 1880-1940 for example, showed that human body has been colonialized, as land and its resources. The habit of wearing Western costumes in Indonesia has lasted longer than the colonial government itself, as various changes in behavior such as changing the kissing of foot with handshaking

Like Taylor, Denys Lombard (1990) noted that in the archipelego, the history of dress no doubt expresses the obvious presence of European influence. In the vocabulary, for example, the word *kemeja* comes from the Portuguesese word *camisa*, *dasi* from the Dutch word *dasje*, *rok* from the Dutch word *rok*, *gaun* from the English word gown, *blus* from the Dutch- France *blouse*, etc.

In addition, the history also recorded that the dresses in the archipelego are largely influenced by Islamic culture and Chinese culture. How, for example, the concept of closing *aurat* (parts of the body which are not allowed to be displayed to others, according to the teaching of Islam) that is now reflected in various styles and fashions of Islamic dress. Similarly, the effect of Chinese culture that has transformed into one important part of a number of dresses in the archipelego. Take for example, *kebaya*, often thought to come from Chinese, although etimologically it is from Arabic through its introduction from Portuguese, however, its structure shows the influence from Chinese.

This article focuses its study on the contemporary Balinese women's dresses used as them by Balinese contemporary painters: Made Alit Suaja, Polenk Rediasa, Tatang BSP, Wayan Pastika, dan Agus Cahaya.

METHODS

This article uses sociological approach and cultural studies theories that focus their attentions and are related to the problem of power and politics, especially to the need for social and cultural changes (Barker 2014).

Methodologically, this article was prepared by organizing some steps that cover design of the writing, determination of types and sources of data, determinatioin of technique of data collection, determination of technique of data analysis, and presentation of results of data analysis (Sugiono, 2007).

Following Ratna (2010), there are two types of data sources determined in the process of writing this article. First, primary data source in the form of paintings and the concept of their creation. Secondly, secondary data, in the form of comments, notes from art journalists, art/culture observers and art academicians about the subject matters and themes that would be discussed in this article.

In the process of writing this article, the data collection was done through observation technique in the studios of the painters twice each, and unstructured interview through communication madia with the painters twice for each painter, and library research that involved reading monographies catalogues, posters, both printed and electronic. There were 40 works that could be collected successfully in this process, but according to the criteria determined and according to the need for wiriting this article, only 15 were analyzed.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Cultural Display and the Culture of Consumerism

Today, culturally, dress is associated with the image of the contemporary body built by consumerism, desire, and body forming technologies. Dress in this position is present as the symbol of rejection of the traditional meaning of body that is often claimed as natural in nature. The rejection of this claim shows the empowerment of women, but on the other hand, it is also felt that there is a burden behind it. In the perspective of Craig Thompson and Diana L. Hayrko (1977), this is called a paradox position. There is a stress in the individuality aspect but at the same time it refers to social conformity aspect.

In this context of Craig Thompson and Diana L. Hayrko, the closest element is the issue of women, body, and their dress. Dress for a woman does not serve as something to close the body form outside threats. Dress now has been freed from the burden to close the body, it now has freely shows the body. The need for a dress has shifted from the need to close the body to the need to display it. That it produces a new culture in interpreting the meaning of dress is a culture commodification construction. Now dress is associated with the pleasure to see (*voyeurisme*) which is formed by fascination. The desire to dress too is easily attached to sensuality, sexy, and the like. See for example, how the migration of underwear out of the place where it is forced to stay. An underwear easily presents itself outside. Madonna for example, has freely displays underwear in the public area.

On the other hand, dress is also associated with social status. We can easily read someone's social status from the dress he or she is wearing. See for example how costumes are constructed as part of the power to uniform starting from employee's (public or private) dress, traditional dress to dress for praying. Here we can easily see how the practice of power works through uniforms.

In Bali, in which various crosses, touches, and meetings of cultures occur, dress has become the sign that makes it possible for various meanings to develop. How, for example, foreigners' dress behaviour brings with them their own culture to Bali which then has an effect on Balinese. This is an asset. This asset is also strengthened by maintenance of the tradition of wearing traditional dress in its development through the movement of Ajeg Bali which is injected through the state power and the power of the religious leaders. Bali then grows into a region of dress commodification. This is seen very clearly by the political practice and economical practice that see dress as promising commodity. Parallel to this, then dress enters an area of the maintenance of dress through the strengthening of ethics of traditional dress: the area of dress creation through creation or recreation of traditional dress; and the area of the flux of various dress image makings. In short, from fashion to ant fashion we can see all of them in Bali; and from the image making to anti image, all exist in Bali.

Traditional dress in Bali, up to now is maintained well. The culture keepers in Bali with various traditional strengths place dress as an important part of the traditional ceremonies. In various parts of Bali, people do not only have their traditional dresses, but they also have the ways on how to maintain them in Desmon Morris's term (1977) what occurs in the Cultural reality of dress in Bali is cultural display. There is a communication built from this traditional dress. At least, we can easily recognize Bali from their traditional dress worn by Balinese.

Aside from this, Balinese cannot avoid from interactions with the dress tradition outside their culture. In the urban environment in Bali and in the the subcultural environments such as in

Kuta, there are a number of ways to interact that are reflected from the dress worn by the people who support the tradition. Consumerism culture, for example, has played the role in this interaction process. The worship of a healthy body actually soon correlates with a beautiful body. The modern myth about a beautiful body is the one that can universally be accepted in various cultures. It is no wonder then if Bali easily acts as a sponge that absorbs whatever. The cultural traditions that come from outside through the door of consumerism is also absorbed easily. According to Jean P. Baudrillard, this is a functional beauty, a new ethics that does not separate beauty and eroticism.

What we discussed above can easily be read in a number of paintings by five Balinese contemporary who are interested in presenting a dress theme in their paintings. Paintings as media used by the artists to state the subject - matters that they think of can describe their perspectives of the topic or the dress theme. From the perspective of semiotics, this is called an expressive function. However, also from the perspective of semiotics, there is what is called a pragmatic approach that gives the freedom to the readers to interpret the meanings of the work of art. Below is a discussion about the paintings with the dress theme by five Balinese contemporary painters

3.2 Reading Dresses

The painting entitled *Sisir Biru / Blue Comb* (oil , 188 x 80 cm, 4 panel) and the painting entitled *Introspeksi/ Introspection* (oil , 140 x 40 cm, 5 panel) by I Made Alit Suaja firmly shows the reality of cultural display. Why not? Tenganan traditional dress presented in these two paintings show the continuity of the tradition that has been maintained long by its people . This traditional dress is inseparable from the special traditional ceremony of Tenganan. It is believed by the Tenganan people that *gringisng* cloth that only contains yellow color as basis and red and black colors as the motif in terms of macrocosmos symbolize oxygen, energy, and water in nature. And in terms of micro cosmos, they are also found in human body. If the three elements are out of balanced, then, the nature or human body will suffer from a disease.



Fig. 1. *Red Apple* by Alit Suaja

Tenganan as a Bali Aga village is not only guarded by its supporting community, but also by the tourism community. It cannot avoid being involved in the commodification process. It was this that was seen by I Made Alit Suaja in *Red Apple* (oil , 147 x 200 cm). The red apple on the

right side of the area of the drawing is like rolling to pass the iron fences guarded by a Tenganan girl. There is a picture about the consumerism culture in this Bali Aga village.

Like the work of I Made Alit Suaaja, Tatang BSP firmly criticized the consumerism culture. The dress and the woman who is wearing it has a number of signs whose relation can be read with consumerism culture. There is an image about the stable social status built from the painting by Parrot-Fashion (acrylic , 140 x 180 cm). See for example how the brand of a dress that is attached to the woman's body. The woman with her image making as having a status in the mainstream of the brand world is a subject who (is not) aware of herself as the brand object. Tatang in this painting presents the woman's body and a dog - with the writing "Donna Karan" along her body—on a dining table. Then, who is actually the object of the eating? It is the woman who is eating the consumerism culture, but at the same time she is also the food of the consumerism culture.



Fig. 2. *Belenggu/ Handcuffs* by Tatang BSP

Concerning the painting entitled *Undercover* (acrylic, 130 x 150 cm) and *Belenggu/ Handcuffs* (acrylic , 100 x 140 cm) they speak frankly about commodity and body. That body is the commodity for the formation of a self identity is something the women are aware of. Women with their dresses are two inseparable parts in the effort to form a self identity. In this effort, it is very often that what is present is nakedness that ties itself to the process of an endless identity forming process.

Dress according to Polenk Rediasa is presented more as an important part in the effort to form a sexy, sensual body with its magnetic appeal. The painting entitled *Di Atas Awan / Above the Cloud* (oil , 130 x 130 cm) shows stockings as the way to form sensuality. There is a dream world which can be read from this painting: the sensual woman sitting above the cloud. An analogy that has the connotation of a top achievement.



Fig. 3. *Di Atas Awan/ Above the Cloud* by Polenk Rediasa

Openly, Polenk Rediasa presents the reality of sensuality on *Biar / Let* (oil, 145 x 135 cm) and *Narcis / Narchisim* (oil, 168 x 130 cm). There is the warmth developed in this painting. The warmth that is also found in its setting: a white floor and a modern bathroom. A warm atmosphere that Polenk Rediasa is developing.. This warmth is not present as a way to stimulate a desire, but as a way to stimulate the natural meaning of sensuality as we usually feel from clean modern white objects

Different from Polenk Rediasa, I Wayan Pastika even questions a cold body. In representing a dress as an effort of self imaging, I Wayan Pastika puts a model like a mannequin. The woman in *Gaun Pesta / Party Gown* (oil, 150 x 200 cm) and *Manik-Manik/ beads* (oil, 150 x 200 cm) that is being absorbed in fashion has made her body an area to display dresses. There is an impression that can be read that body is not present as an object of desire, but more as having a connotation as a functional object. See for example how fashion has become the subject of creation with its function as in the fashion itself. A luxury in the aesthetics of dress

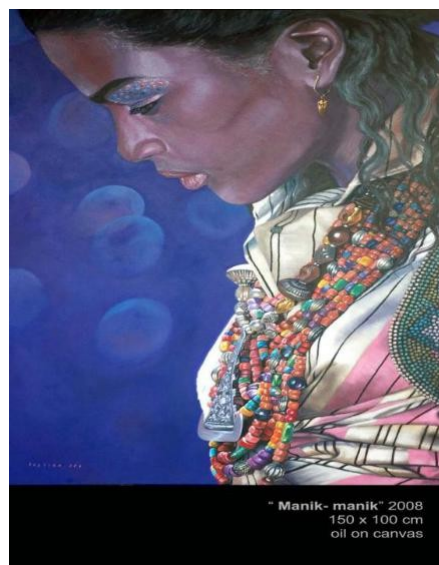


Fig. 4. *Manik-manik / beads* painted by Wayan Pastika

However, I Wayan Pastika through *Siaga Satu / Red Alert* (oil 147 x 200 cm) presents a luxury in another image. Glowing yellow cloth under a light above the bed immediately leads to the connotation of desire. The woman in this painting firmly shows her position as an object of desire. And the cloth that gives an impression of freshness is the supporting element to strengthen the position of a woman as an object of desire. A social construction that keeps on being agreed on.

Different from his colleagues who raise questions on domestic women, Agus Cahaya even asks questions about foreign women (tourists) in Bali. In *Memoir of Bottle # 1* (oil, 150 x 150 cm) and *Memoir of Bottle # 2* (oil, 150 x 150 cm), Agus Cahaya presents cultural tourism by showing two key icons: a tourist's body and a drink. The subject is almost untouched by Indonesian artists. We do not know why. On the other hand, in Bali a tourist's body has become part inseparable from Bali. These two paintings have their core critical power which is crystalized in *G-String* (oil, 148 x 198 cm). The woman with the G-string is an Indonesian. She is like a foreign tourist too, sunbathing on the beach. There is a Western attraction (foreign woman) who wants to be criticized by Agus Cahaya. The practice of imitating because of this fashion has only developed up to the level of freedom. The irony is the Indonesian woman is sunbathing on the beach with the dream of a male power. A subordination that keeps being preserved.



Figure 5. G-String by Agus Cahaya

CONCLUSION

The paintings in this discussion are the male contemporary Balinese painters' perspectives of women's dresses. Male's exploration while celebrating their fashion that is formed by the patriarchal culture. Woman's dress in the contemporary Balinese paintings shows the role of the body's economy and politics that is very closely related to the existence of women in the area of the economy and politics of signs. It also plays the role in the economy and politics of signs that is related to the role of women as sign. It is also associated with the economy and politics of body that frees women from the repression of desire.

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