

Descriptions of Female Sexuality in Ayu Utami's *Saman*

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Ayu Utami's Saman, published in May 1998, describes female sexuality openly, a factor which has caused some controversy in Indonesia. Several critics have applauded the explicit descriptions of sexuality in this novel, claiming they are a means of 'talking back' and/or challenging patriarchal authorities in Indonesia. In contrast, some senior and well-known Indonesian writers have alleged that the novel is an example of the increasing Westernisation of their culture. The contemporary debate regarding depictions of sexuality in Saman, however, has failed to appreciate the complex post-colonial situation of the novel.

Written by Ayu Utami, a young female Indonesian, *Saman: Fragmen dari novel Laila tak mampir di New York* (*Saman: A fragment of the novel Laila didn't drop by New York*) was published in 1998.¹ The winner of a literary competition held by the Jakarta Arts Council in the same year, the novel is about an ex-priest named Saman, and four women – Laila, Shakuntala, Yasmin and Cok – all of whom are in their early thirties. *Saman* describes women's sexuality openly, a factor which caused some controversy in Indonesia. The novel, however, is not merely a discussion of female sexuality; it also addresses issues relating to religion (especially Christianity), as well as political and social injustice during the New Order period. Nonetheless, it is the descriptions of female sexuality that have received the most attention, as well as controversial and mixed responses from critics.

Some critics have applauded the explicit descriptions of sexuality in *Saman*, claiming them as a means of 'talking back' and/or challenging patriarchal authorities in Indonesia. Some senior and well-known Indonesian writers, however, have alleged that the novel is an example of the increasing Westernisation of Indonesian culture, arguing that it represents a betrayal of Indonesian national identity in that it borders upon being gratuitous pornography. By considering two of the female characters in this novel, Laila and Shakuntala, this article will discuss how the contemporary debate regarding depictions of sexuality in the novel has failed to appreciate the complex post-colonial situation of these characters.

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¹ Ayu Utami, *Saman: Fragmen dari novel Laila tak mampir di New York* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 1998). The quotes used in this article are taken from Ayu Utami, *Saman* (Jakarta: Grasindo, 2003).

The reception of *Saman*: Sexuality in Indonesian literature

Saman was published a few weeks before the fall of Suharto in May 1998. In the wake of its publication the works of several other female Indonesian authors, such as Djenar Maesa Ayu, Fira Basuki and Nova Riyanti Yusuf, have also been published. In each of their novels female sexuality is depicted explicitly.² For this reason, *Saman* is often considered to have been at the forefront of a new literary trend, which is often referred to as 'sastra wangi' (fragrant literature). Due to its notoriety, and role within this new trend, *Saman* was translated into English in 2005.³

Several Indonesian authors and critics have expressed cynicism and even disgust concerning this new 'trend' in women's writing in Indonesia. For example, Rosihan Anwar has stated that this new trend in women's literature is nothing but 'sastra mesum' (pornographic literature).⁴ In addition, even though the *doyen* of Indonesian literature, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, provided an endorsement of Ayu Utami on the back cover of *Saman*, in a subsequent interview he declared that he could not stand reading the novel since it mainly describes sex.⁵ Taufiq Ismail, like Pramoedya, has argued that the current group of young female Indonesian writers are competing with one another in terms of the sexual explicitness of their writings, a phenomenon that also disgusts him.⁶ Stating this at *Acara Deklarasi Gerakan Nasional Pemberantasan Korupsi* (The Program for Declaring the Abolishment of National Corruption) in Padang on 10 November 2003, he implied that these expressions of sexuality represent a form of corruption. Similarly, well-known Indonesian poet Rendra expressed doubts about the originality of *Saman*, although he had not even read the novel.⁷

These male critics were not alone in their condemnation. Well-known female author and literary critic Medy Loekito also expressed her disapproval of Ayu Utami's work. According to Medy, *Saman* depicts a form of Western sexual freedom that is not suitable for Indonesian ethics and morality. Her basic criticism is that 'the criteria of Western freedom, for instance, is not a suitable benchmark for this nation', while adding that the expressions of sexuality in *Saman* do not reflect a respect for Indonesian women's bodies; rather, they are degrading and insulting.⁸ Thus, the descriptions of sexuality in the novel are considered by these male and female critics to be a threat not only to morality but also to a sense of Indonesian nationalism. This is because the idea of sexual freedom and women's sexual openness has recently been linked to debates about globalisation and the increasing Westernisation of Indonesian cultural values.

2 Fira Basuki, *Jendela-jendela* (Jakarta: Grasindo, 2001); Nova Riyanti Yusuf, *Mahadewa-mahadewi* (Jakarta: Sentra Kreasi Inti, 2003); Djenar Maesa Ayu, *Jangan main-main dengan kelaminmu* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2004).

3 This is relatively quick for an Indonesian novel, particular since it was written by a fairly young author. The translator of the English version is Pamela Allen. Because my interpretation differs at times from that of Allen, I will use my own translation of the quotations taken from the novel. However, some of the translations in this article refer to Allen's, and are cited alongside the original when used; Ayu Utami, *Saman: A novel*, tr. Pamela Allen (Jakarta: Equinox, 2005).

4 *Khazanah*, 8 Jan. 2004. <http://www.pikiran-rakyat.com/cetak/0104/08/0804.htm>, cited 18 Feb. 2004.

5 *Tempo*, 4 May 1999. <http://www.tempo.co.id/majalah/index-isi.asp>, cited 1 Mar. 2004.

6 *Khazanah*, 8 Jan. 2004. <http://www.pikiran-rakyat.com/cetak/0104/08/0804.htm>, cited 18 Feb. 2004.

7 *Republika*, 13 Jun. 1998.

8 Medy Loekito, 'Ketika Perempuan Menulis', <http://cybersastra.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=3719>, cited 09 Aug. 2005.

In contrast, other critics claim that the descriptions of sexuality in *Saman* are remarkable, as they reveal new social and gender perspectives in Indonesia. Barbara Hatley, for instance, argues that *Saman* breaks all the rules by describing four independent women who are sexually open:

Most startling to readers, it seems, are its transgressions of sexual taboos. Here there is no distancing of a female narrator from sexual expression and assertiveness. All four women figures whose friendship constitutes a key theme of the text speak intimately, frankly and with earthy humour to one another of their sexual experiences as well as their conflicts with parents and others.⁹

Although some Indonesian critics argue that the sexual descriptions in the novel are a significant weakness of a book that claims to be taken seriously as literature, these descriptions, according to Hatley, constitute its strength.

In *Seks, teks, konteks*, a collection of articles discussing Indonesian literature in relation to women's sexuality, most of the contributors who discuss Ayu Utami's *Saman* pose similar arguments to Hatley: women's sexuality is a threat to patriarchal order, and the sexual transgressions of her female characters therefore challenge the Indonesian patriarchal system. Mariana Amiruddin, for instance, writes that *Saman* is an example of how the metaphors of female sexuality are used to challenge 'the stigma of female sexuality' and 'conventions in patriarchal culture'.¹⁰ In her book *Perempuan menolak tabu* (Women rejecting taboo), Mariana Amiruddin continues this line of questioning by claiming that Indonesian patriarchal society has imprisoned women's bodies and sexualities. The sexual transgressions of the main female characters in Ayu Utami's *Saman*, Mariana argues, have rebelled against the taboo of discussing the female body and female sexuality, thereby also challenging those in power. Similar arguments have also been expressed by Gadis Arivia, Julia Suryakusuma, Marshall Clark and Nirwan Dewanto.¹¹

Despite the significant divergences in critical opinion regarding *Saman*, there is a general consensus that the novel breaks the rules of mainstream Indonesian sexual morality. The main point of contention is that some critics insist that the novel is merely pornographic and a betrayal of Indonesian values, while others argue that it challenges patriarchy in Indonesia. This places the debate against the social and historical background of female sexuality and its depiction in Indonesia.

Several critics have noted that during the Dutch colonial period, people of the Indonesian Archipelago were sexually 'lax' compared with the then Puritan Europeans.

9 Barbara Hatley, 'New directions in Indonesian women's writing? The novel *Saman*', *Asian Studies Review*, 23, 4 (1999): 454.

10 Mariana Amiruddin, 'Perempuan, stigmatisasi seksual, dan pernyataan tubuh', in *Seks, teks, konteks*, ed. Taufiq Hanafi et al. (Jakarta: Kelompok Belajar Nalar Jatiningor, 2004), pp. 208, 211.

11 Mariana Amiruddin, *Perempuan menolak tabu: Hermeneutika, feminisme, sastra, seks* (Jakarta: Melibas, 2005); Gadis Arivia, 'Pembedaan sastra laki dan perempuan: membangun separatisme?', *Jurnal Perempuan*, 30 (2003): 1–2; Barbara Hatley, 'Post-coloniality and the feminine in modern Indonesian literature', in *Clearing a space: Post-colonial readings of modern Indonesian literature*, ed. Keith Foulcher and Tony Day (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002), pp. 146–9; Marshall Clark, 'Saman, a sensation!', *Inside Indonesia*, 57 (1999): 29; Peter Janssen and Juliana Wilson, 'Sex, sketches and stories', <http://www.guyanaundersiege.com/Literature/Sex%20sketches%20and%20stories.htm>, 18 August 2004; *Kompas*, 23 February 2003, <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0302/23/latar/143344.htm>.

Terence Hull, for instance, states that Westerners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries considered sexual practices in Southeast Asia to be very 'loose'.¹² Similarly, analysing the people of Southeast Asia in the seventeenth century, Anthony Reid describes how the sexual openness and lenience of Southeast Asians surprised the Europeans who until the eighteenth century were 'a very "chaste" society in comparative terms'.¹³

During the New Order Era (1967–98), however, the ideal of a sexually pure woman, as well as the control of women's roles, were emphasised through various channels and institutions. In literature, depictions of Indonesian women mainly centred upon domesticity and rarely touched upon the issue of their sexuality. Tineke Hellwig has argued that most Indonesian popular novels before and during the New Order, even those written by women, encouraged the importance of a woman's role as being a wife and a mother. In summary, 'marriage and children comprise the main goals for women in novels'.¹⁴ In most of the popular novels Hellwig discusses, being a wife as well as a mother makes Indonesian women more acceptable. Ideal wives and mothers are the ones who are loyal and if necessary, take full responsibility for their children.

The popular media – ranging from television and film to magazines – during the New Order also constantly reminded Indonesian women about *kodrat wanita* (women's destiny). That is, they promoted the view that women's nature and destiny are to become a good wife and mother. As Krishna Sen observes in relation to New Order cinema: 'the attack on women working outside the home appears to be peculiar to post-1965 cinema'.¹⁵ In these movies, career women are often blamed for the failure of both their marriages and their children's education. The bad woman is usually described as one who is sexually experienced, ambitious, aggressive and assertive as opposed to a kind-hearted woman who is sexually inexperienced, caring and submissive. At the end of most of these films, the more traditional women, who serve their husbands faithfully, defeat the more assertive women. Thus, the usefulness of Indonesian women has been judged for decades by their function in their family.

Although several authors such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Umar Kayam and Mangunwijaya created strong, independent and assertive female protagonists during the New Order, these authors rarely addressed the issues of female sexuality.¹⁶ It is thus not surprising that the publication of *Saman* has caused many controversies amongst the public as well as many critics. Some scenes in the novel indeed remind us of famous

12 Terence Hull, *Indonesian fertility behaviours before the transition: Searching for hints in the historical record* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1999), p. 4.

13 Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce 1450–1680. Volume I: The lands below the winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 153.

14 Tineke Hellwig, *In the shadow of change: Images of women in Indonesian literature* (Berkeley: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, 1994), p. 182.

15 Krishna Sen, *Indonesian cinema: Framing the New Order* (London: Zed Books, 1994), p. 147.

16 Some of the best examples of strong female characters as written by these male authors can be found in the following: Umar Kayam, *Siti Sumarah dan cerita pendek lainnya* (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1986); Y. B. Mangunwijaya, *Roro Mendut: Novel sejarah. Masa kini* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1983); Mangunwijaya, *Durga Umayi* (Jakarta: Pustaka Utama Grafiti, 1994); Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Bumi Manusia* (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1980); Pramoedya, *Anak Semua Bangsa* (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1980); Pramoedya, *Jejak Langkah* (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1985); Pramoedya, *Rumah Kaca* (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1988).

American television programmes, such as *Sex in the City* or *Friends*, where four women talk about sex in a café or in their friend's flat. New York does play an important part in the novel, especially in signifying the sexual freedom of the four main characters. However, do the depictions of female sexuality in *Saman* break all the rules of Indonesian morality? And which cultural rules if any does this novel break?

The plot

Saman opens with Laila, who has just arrived in New York and is trying to secretly meet a married man she loves, Sihar. Laila waits for him for hours; Sihar does not come because his wife has followed him to New York. The next part of the novel shifts the focus to Wisanggeni, a priest who tries to help a developmentally challenged woman named Upi in Sei Kumbang village. While Wisanggeni is in Sei Kumbang, a conflict between the villagers and governmental authorities occurs, as they try to seize the villagers' land in return for an unfair payment. Involved in this conflict, Wisanggeni is finally detained by the government and he escapes amidst a villagers' revolt. Because of this, he decides to leave the priesthood and changes his name to Saman, so that his presence will not bring any danger to the Church.

The author, Ayu Utami, then leaves Wisanggeni/Saman and moves to the story of Shakuntala, who recounts her childhood and her abusive father. Shakuntala recounts her early sexual experiences with a European man and her dreams of becoming a dancer. Shakuntala's dancing ability eventually enables her to receive a scholarship to study in New York, where she meets her three best friends: Laila, Yasmin and Cok. The novel then flashes back to Saman's meeting with these three women, who smuggle him overseas, and ends with Saman writing romantic e-mails to the married Yasmin.

Between Laila and Shakuntala: Between the naïve and the independent woman?

Saman is mainly told from the points of view of three characters: Laila, Shakuntala and Saman. Only Laila and Shakuntala, nonetheless, describe themselves using the word 'I'; Saman is described in the third person, 'he'. The first person narratives of Laila and Shakuntala give the reader a sense of intimacy with these two female characters, as well as insight into their judgements. It is through these two characters that the societal ambivalence towards female sexuality in Indonesia is exposed.

Laila

Laila Gagarina was born of Minangkabau and Sundanese parents who were unhappy with the dominance of Javanese in Indonesia. Laila's second name is not her father's name – as is common in Indonesia – but rather that of Yuri Gagarin, the Russian cosmonaut, which may symbolise that she is independent from her family, especially the patriarchal lineage. Indeed, Laila is described as an independent woman who works as a photographer for an oil company, Texcoil, and is the only woman working at one of their facilities in the South China Sea.¹⁷ It is at this facility that this independent woman becomes powerless, inexperienced and naïve in relation to men and sex. Sihar charms

17 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 9.

Laila – who sees him as very attractive – on their first meeting during a journey to a South China Sea oil facility. Different from most men working at the oil company, Sihar does not seem to be flirtatious with women:

Since the first time we met, he has always been in my mind. . . . Sihar was a man who didn't mince his words with his superiors or in the workplace. But when he was with a woman he never uttered a single unpleasant word. Nor did he tell an off-colour joke. There were never any lewd glances from behind his cylindrical glasses. . . . He seemed indifferent to women.¹⁸

Not only is Sihar very polite to women, he is also depicted as being compassionate because of his marriage: 'a man like him should have married a sweet virgin, but he married a widow with a child – a daughter'.¹⁹ Through such a depiction, Laila implies that such a wife is inferior. Because Sihar's wife is not a 'sweet' virgin and already had a child when she married, Laila gives the impression that she is not the best 'bargain' Sihar could get. In addition, Sihar's wife cannot have any more children after her marriage because of an illness, which means that Sihar will never be able to have a child of his own, although his Batak family really wants him to have a son. For this reason, Laila indicates that Sihar's wife is inferior because she is 'merely' a barren widow, which makes Sihar seem more considerate and generous to have chosen such a woman for his wife. It apparently does not occur to Laila that it is the high social demands and expectations placed upon Indonesian women that lead a man like Sihar to be perceived as generous and sympathetic.

At work, Sihar is also described as a man who is humane, especially compared with Rosano, Sihar's senior. A son of a high official, Rosano is mainly interested in money. He uses labourers as tools for producing as much profit as possible, while not caring about their safety. On the ship Rosano eventually makes a bad decision, which causes the death of three labourers. When Sihar criticises Rosano's decision, Sihar loses his job. Being very impressed with Sihar's bravery in opposing Rosano, Laila moves closer to Sihar after the incident, and promises him that she will help him seek justice for Rosano's victims and their families. This affinity later leads to Laila's affair with Sihar.

However, Laila's first 'sexual' encounter with Sihar is filled with guilt:

Then we lay on the bed, without taking off the bedspread; because we weren't there for a nap. He told me I had big breasts. I did not say a word. He asked me if I was ready. I said, 'Please, don't. I'm still a virgin (Could we do it another way?)'. He said, I had beautiful lips. Kiss me, kiss me here. I answered with no word. But I had sinned. Although I was still a virgin.²⁰

In this encounter with Sihar, the man she loves, Laila becomes merely an object of pleasure; she is the one being enjoyed and she lets herself be viewed by Sihar (her lips, her breasts). Her answer to Sihar when he is enjoying her body is silence. Although she describes her relationship with Sihar in the first person, she depicts herself as being perceived, just as John Berger states that 'the surveyor of woman in herself is male; the

18 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 25; Pamela Allen (tr.), *Saman*, p. 31.

19 Ibid.

20 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 4; Pamela Allen (tr.), *Saman*, p. 13.

surveyed female'.²¹ So ingrained is this notion in Laila that even when she has the opportunity to describe Sihar (in other words, to perceive Sihar), she still sees him as the surveyor and herself as the surveyed.

In her affair with Sihar, Laila is afraid since she believes that a woman should maintain her virginity before marriage. Nevertheless, Laila also sees herself as the sinner in the relationship, implying that she has internalised the demand that women be pure. In return, Sihar repeatedly mentions that they have to end their relationship: 'it would be better if we didn't see each other again (I didn't expect this). "I have a wife"'. Laila then argues that she also has other people who love her: 'I replied, I didn't have a boyfriend, but I had parents. "You are not alone, I also have sinned"'.²² Her guilt is not towards Sihar's wife, the person who she would probably hurt the most, but towards other people, her parents. Thus, Laila feels guilty not because she hurts other people but because she has offended an authority.

In front of Sihar, Laila often becomes submissive, non-argumentative and even naïve, often agreeing with whatever Sihar says or argues. For instance, when Sihar explains: 'A married man cannot be without sex', Laila's only answer is, 'I understood, although I was still a virgin'.²³ Does her answer signify her guilty feeling for not being able to please this male authority figure? Sihar is obviously not serious when he subsequently states that they have to break up, because he remains in contact with Laila. However, the notion of breaking up becomes a threat for Laila because Sihar, as a man, wants to and 'has to' have sex. If she does not want to have sex with him, they had better part.

Although in love with Sihar, Laila cannot overcome her fear of losing her virginity before marriage, and even fears pregnancy despite avoiding sexual intercourse. The idea of virginity becomes merely an idea for Laila, an idea which has only a tenuous relationship to her actual sexual activities. Being a virgin does not stop Laila from being sexually active, from 'betraying' Sihar's wife, and experiencing feelings of guilt. To be a virgin does not even protect her from the fear of being pregnant. After her 'virginal' affair with Sihar, Laila complains that her menstruation is late. When Laila confides in Sihar about her fears, he only replies that it is impossible and he does not indicate any intention to help her. Instead, it is her two female friends, Shakuntala and Yasmin, who look after Laila. They drive Laila to a laboratory for a pregnancy test and, since Laila is too embarrassed to take the test, Yasmin willingly brings Laila's urine sample to a laboratory, while claiming that it is hers. The close friendship of these women under these circumstances creates an even tighter bond and, when it turns out that the result of the test is negative, they celebrate by eating noodles together.²⁴ Sihar, in this case, escapes from his responsibility to look after or help Laila, but is still able to get some 'pleasure' from her.

In spite of this, after finding out that Sihar is being sent by his company to the United States, Laila is willing to temporarily leave her job to travel to New York, using her saving of \$2,000, so that she can meet Sihar. The United States becomes a place where Laila can free herself from the norms which entrap her; she now has an opportunity to

21 John Berger, *Ways of seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 47.

22 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 4; Pamela Allen (tr), *Saman*, p. 13.

23 Ibid.

24 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, pp. 130–1.

become anything she likes. As she writes when waiting for Sihar in Central Park: ‘In this park, I am a bird that has flown thousands of miles away from a country which knows no seasons. I have migrated in search of spring; spring, where the fragrance of grass could be smelled, and the trees; trees, whose names or ages are not known.’²⁵ Identifying herself with a bird, Laila then notices how the animals in the park can have sex without any boundaries or any norms: ‘There are no moral judges or police. People, especially tourists, can be like the birds: mate when they feel like it. No regrets afterwards. No sin.’²⁶ Stating that she comes all the way to New York for its blossoms and for the fragrance of the grass, and in the meantime noticing the seemingly free life of animals in the park, Laila implies that New York City is a better place than from where she originates.

Laila’s description of New York is in contrast to her description of Indonesia, where female sexuality is more or less denied, especially during the New Order, when this novel was set and first published. Laila’s insistence that New York has given her much more freedom than Indonesia is indicated when she repeats later, ‘We are in New York. Thousands of miles away from Jakarta. There are no parents, no wife. There is no sin.’²⁷ In this place, she can imagine having sex without any guilty feelings and meet the man she loves without any obstruction.

In Laila’s narrative, moral judgements, police, parents and wives make the rules, and their positions are inscribed and shaped by society and culture. They are equated with the existence of sin, and they are posited in opposition to nature – to the birds which have sex as they please or to Laila who is searching for her freedom by imagining herself as a bird or a squirrel. Thus, not only is this American city a place for more sexual freedom, it is also a place of respect for nature. For example, when Laila talks about the squirrels in the park, she describes them as ‘delicate and alive. There are no *kampung* children who kill them just for fun with their slingshots, and then leave the corpses in the streets, or bring them home as trophies. Perhaps this is a country where city squirrels face no danger. Neither do we.’²⁸ Laila tries to escape from ‘trophies’ of the patriarchal society in Indonesia so that she does not have to feel like a sinner when she wants to have sex with Sihar. The desire of human beings to control nature, Laila implies, has imprisoned and threatened her.

These somewhat ‘threatening’ characteristics, however, do not belong merely to Indonesian society, because the coloniser also attempted to control nature years ago in Southeast Asia. This becomes clear with Laila’s analysis of the plant *Rafflesia arnoldi* during which she criticises how plants are named after the people who claimed to have discovered them. It is also in New York that Laila is reminded of how a Westerner has inscribed definition, by asserting his importance and eternalising his individuality in Southeast Asia:

The scent of woods, the coldness of stones, the smell of moss and mushrooms – do they have a name or an age? Man has named them, just like parents name their children, although the trees are older than man. *Rafflesia arnoldi* blooms not in Central Park, but in

25 Ibid., p. 1; Pamela Allen (tr), *Saman*, p. 11.

26 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 3; Pamela Allen (tr), *Saman*, p. 12.

27 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 30; Pamela Allen (tr), *Saman*, p. 35.

28 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 29; Pamela Allen (tr), *Saman*, p. 34.

the tropical forest of the Malay highlands, but we know that that Englishman has become its father because he has given the flower its name.²⁹

As Laila implies, the desire of human-beings to be superior to nature and to control it, to define things by words and names, indicate that the relationship between signified and signifier is arbitrary. *Rafflesia arnoldi* represents human ambition and colonialism rather than the plant itself. The naming and social construction of nature has, in Laila's narrative, the potential to imprison and limit. Through such observations, Laila has once again become vocal, perceptive as well as critical of her surroundings. She becomes a knowledgeable person who can analyse the relation between the signified and signifier, and the mental concept of certain definitions, rather than a person who just agrees with whatever a man (in this case, Sihar) says. 'Does beauty need to be named?', she asks in New York, challenging conventions, definitions and boundaries created by humans.

Like the *Rafflesia arnoldi*, Laila is also 'named' by her society – in her being a virgin or not a virgin. For this reason, her sexual rebellion is signified by her identification with nature, with squirrels and birds, which have sex without feeling guilty. Laila's sexual restraint in this case can also be understood from a post-colonial perspective, as the colonised land has often been associated with nature and the lack of civilisation, whereas the coloniser represents culture and civilisation. As was explained above, the European colonisers formerly condemned sexual 'laxity' in Southeast Asia from a Christian/Puritanical point of view. Both the naming of *Rafflesia arnoldi* and the obligation for women to remain virgins before marriage indicate the pride of civilisation over the uncivilised, culture over nature, which has constructed certain moral stereotypes and values. The ongoing tyranny of the discourse of virginity in Indonesia can be compared with this ongoing tyranny over nature. Such a view indicates that certain moral constraints may not merely be a product of Indonesian ideological constructs, but possibly also a result of colonialism during its long history in Indonesia.

The awareness of human ambition to control nature also leads Laila to challenge the sexual norms that she would normally obey in Indonesia. She plans to have sexual intercourse with Sihar:

We will do it without taking all of our clothes off, because it is still too cold to be nude. After that, we'll do it again in a hotel room, slowly, where, without our clothes, my skin touches his, and his skin touches mine. . . . After that, darling, we fall asleep. And when we wake up, we will be so happy. Because we will not have sinned. Although I will no longer be a virgin.³⁰

Somehow, New York bears so much magic for Laila and it makes her find a new 'courage'. This 'courage', nevertheless, becomes transgression against as well as submission to the patriarchal values of Indonesia. It can be considered as transgression because the patriarchal Indonesian society still demands that women remain virgins until they are married. Nevertheless, giving up her virginity for Sihar is also a way of pleasing this man sexually, although Laila originally does not really want to do this. Similarly, her bravery in helping Sihar with his case against Rosano and in going to New York on her own are not really signs of independence but rather sacrifice for the sake of Sihar.

29 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 1; Pamela Allen (tr), *Saman*, p. 11.

30 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 30; Pamela Allen (tr.), *Saman*, p. 35.

After Laila waits for him for hours in Central Park, Sihar does not turn up. The only reason Laila can think of is that Sihar is in danger, that is, he has been attacked or even murdered. Only later, with the help of Shakuntala, does Laila find out that Sihar cannot meet her because his wife has arrived in New York. However, Laila does not blame Sihar for having stood her up. In this case, Laila cannot be considered an independent woman. This also begs the question as to whether her dream of finally having sexual intercourse with Sihar is her rebellion against patriarchy or rather her submission to Sihar's desire. Laila's patience and naivety make her vulnerable, and sometimes sound unreal, as is apparent in her conversations with Shakuntala.

Shakuntala

The plot of *Saman* then moves to the story of Shakuntala. When she meets Laila, Shakuntala blames Sihar for not letting Laila know that he would not be able to meet her. She says to Laila, 'He should have told you. You gave your address to him, didn't you? Why couldn't he ring you up? . . . Does he also have to be around his wife when she is having a shit? Maybe she shits quickly.'³¹ Laila's excuses for Sihar often sound unreal as is revealed by Shakuntala in the above dialogue. In this case, Laila can fit nicely into a male fantasy: an independent woman who dedicates herself totally to the man she loves and is sexually naïve. Her independence only makes it easier for men to take advantage of her. Laila does not need to ask Sihar for any financial help to be able to meet him in New York, or to meet him somewhere else. She is the one who will make the effort to see him and has even been quite generous to him. Shakuntala further articulates this point when she reminds Laila that, 'You have given him 5 CDs, a book about testing children's intelligence, a book on general gynaecology, and sent lunch to his office on three separate occasions: Pizza Hut, Hoka-hoka Bento, GM noodle.'³² Is this not a picture of a woman that patriarchal inscriptions in Indonesia try to produce after all, and is not the promotion of women's education and independence often for the benefit of men and families rather than for advancing women's careers?

Laila is not merely naïve as a character; she seems to be made naïve for the sake of Shakuntala's character. Indeed, Laila is often described *vis-à-vis* Shakuntala. She is Shakuntala's best friend, mirror-opposite and the two women can talk openly. The comparison of the two female characters can also be seen in the following passage, in which Laila tells Shakuntala about her experience of being kissed by Sihar: "I was kissed by him", she said one morning. You cannot just be kissed, I said, you must kiss each other next time. One afternoon, she reported: last night, we kissed each other. And were you wet? – I asked. Don't know, she said, what's the difference with a discharge?³³

Laila, thus, often represents herself in a passive form. For instance, she is being kissed, she does not 'kiss'. That idea is unacceptable to Shakuntala, who states that they have to kiss each other, implying that Laila should not let herself be an object of Sihar's passion. When Laila finally reports that she and Sihar kiss each other, her naivety is still depicted as she does not even understand what Shakuntala means by being wet. Her

31 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 122; Pamela Allen (tr.), *Saman*, p. 116.

32 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 131; Pamela Allen (tr.), *Saman*, p. 124.

33 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 128; Pamela Allen (tr.), *Saman*, pp. 121–2.

kissing is thus merely a form of obedience to Shakuntala's suggestion rather than a form of independence and confidence. Besides being compared with Shakuntala, another possibility of the creation of Laila is that the author wants to use her as a paradigm of how long-established gender restrictions have been integrated in an individual who is otherwise a liberated and successful career-woman.

Shakuntala often shows that Laila is naïve by undercutting Laila's descriptions of Sihar. While in the previous part of the novel Laila describes Sihar as attractive, humane, courageous and sympathetic, Shakuntala offers a different picture of this man: 'I don't like Sihar. . . . For me, he is too serious, lacking in imagination, slow in digesting jokes so that he always laughs too late – sometimes he has no idea of what the joke is about. Having sex with him must be boring.'³⁴ Shakuntala also expresses her concern that Sihar merely uses Laila, as he seems to avoid her whenever he feels like it.

Ayu Utami, in this case, challenges the passive way of reading and of agreeing with whatever the narrator states since the voices in the novel belong to several people with different characters and narratives, thus producing different descriptions and interpretations of events. Nevertheless, she indicates whose descriptions are more reasonable as Laila's naivety is apparent when placed alongside Shakuntala. On the other hand, Shakuntala seems to be more rational and sensible than Laila, and thus Shakuntala's descriptions of Sihar seem to make more sense.

Differing from Laila, Shakuntala is bright, sexually experienced and outspoken. In the novel, for instance, Shakuntala introduces herself as follows: 'My name is Shakuntala. My father and elder sister call me a whore. It is because I have slept with several men and several women. However, I have never asked for any payment. They don't respect me. I don't respect them.'³⁵ Unlike Laila, who often shows submissiveness in her relationship with Sihar, Shakuntala also confidently declares that she is bisexual. Rather than being ashamed of, or feeling bad about, her bisexuality, she criticises the people who criticise her, challenging their definition of a prostitute. She shows that she, a sexually overt woman, also has a sense of respect. For this very reason, she is able to express the fact that she disrespects people who do not respect her.

Shakuntala's father is described as being quite abusive but this does not make Shakuntala hate herself or despise her body. Rather, she states: 'For me, to live is to dance, and dancing begins with the body. God blows breath on the fortieth day after an egg and a sperm became a speck of flesh in a womb, so soul is indebted to body.'³⁶ In Shakuntala's narrative, the importance of the body can thus be explained in spiritual terms. As God gives the foetus life after 40 days, the importance of the body over the soul (rather than the other way around) can thus be justified.

Shakuntala's confidence in respecting her body, despite what her family thinks, is further manifested in her being a dancer. Shakuntala believes dancing does not mean that she is allowing her body to be objectified. She does not dance to entertain other people. As she describes, 'I dance because I am celebrating my body. . . . For that reason, I always

34 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, pp. 131–2; Pamela Allen (tr.), *Saman*, p. 126.

35 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 115; Pamela Allen (tr.), *Saman*, p. 110.

36 Ibid.

come back to that room inside myself, where the dancer and the accompanying musician perform separately.³⁷ This is a woman who enjoys the sexuality of her own body, which is described by Luce Irigaray as alloeroticism, suggesting that women should explore their ability to touch and enjoy their bodies rather than being embarrassed about them.³⁸ Shakuntala does not even need music to accompany her dancing; she wants to be independent in her own performance and thus in her sexuality.

Shakuntala's desire to be independent from her parents and to have control over her own body and sexuality is also signified by her secret relationships. As Barbara Hatley writes, Shakuntala 'defines her very identity in terms of sexual assertion and rebellion', and the most interesting case is that with a man she refers to as a European giant.³⁹ Described mainly as a '*raksasa*' (giant) who is '*galak*' (fierce) and arrived in her land centuries ago, the man Shakuntala loves symbolises power.⁴⁰ He is bigger, stronger, rougher, more powerful and much older than the then nine-year-old Shakuntala. This can also be a metaphor for the coloniser and his power over the inexperienced colonised Other, although this Other is neither stereotypical nor conventional.

Such a metaphor is sustained in Shakuntala's illustration of the giant's arrival by sailing ship:

The infidel giants came with their priests, who were also infidels and giants, and in Java and Bali they found brown women dancing naked in the river. . . . In fact, slim brown men also bathed naked in the rivers, but their eyes only perceived what was chosen not by the eyes.⁴¹

The arrival of the infidel giants with their priests resembles how Europeans came to the Archipelago. The giant's meeting with Shakuntala is also a metaphor of the colonisers' discovery of their colonised lands, which are often described as feminine and exotic, a place to be penetrated by the male coloniser, which she describes as, he 'entered deeper into the interior . . . spying on me dancing without a thread on my breasts in a mountain brook'.⁴² For this reason, when the European giants come to Java and Bali, they see only the presence of the naked females in the islands, and ignore the males.

Being a metaphor for a colonised land, Shakuntala is also a unique individual who rebels against her family and society, and this gives an awareness that a colonised Other is not necessarily weak and powerless. Shakuntala's confidence and perseverance do not make her a submissive victim like Laila in her relationship with Sihar. In describing Shakuntala's relationship with the giant, Ayu Utami suggests how women also have an option to rebel, to challenge, rather than to give in or to remain compliant to patriarchal superiority.

Shakuntala's challenge to patriarchal power is sustained when upon receiving a scholarship, she goes to New York not only to study at an art academy but also to gain

37 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 126; Pamela Allen (tr.), *Saman*, p. 119.

38 Luce Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*, tr. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

39 Hatley, 'New directions in Indonesian women's writing?', p. 454.

40 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, pp. 120, 134.

41 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 134; Pamela Allen (tr.), *Saman*, p. 126.

42 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, p. 134; Pamela Allen (tr.), *Saman*, p. 127.

more freedom from her family. She describes New York sympathetically as a highly cultured city, and a city where she can express herself with freedom. In this case, for Laila and Shakuntala, New York – and America, which represents the heart of capitalism and Western culture – becomes a haven which provides liberty from Indonesian sexual mores and moral restrictions.

Yet to consider *Saman* as challenging Indonesian cultural values by merely following Western standards, as Medy Loekito argues, cannot be justified because the novel shows an awareness of cultural hybridity and plurality.⁴³ In the novel, which is full of flashbacks, and allegories as well as myths, Shakuntala is described as having sex with her giant lover. This European giant, who came two centuries ago, condemns a land that resembles the Indonesian Archipelago: 'In the land where our God is not yet known, the people adore the lewd. They make herbs in a cauldron, merely to achieve devilish pleasures, and erect statues of Lingga Yoni.' Shakuntala disagrees with him, stating, 'We are the highly moral people of the East. You Westerners are immoral. Your women wear bikinis in the streets and do not care for virginity, while your school kids, male and female, live together outside marriage.'⁴⁴

Such a strange encounter indicates that Ayu Utami is aware of the obscure boundaries between Eastern and Western decorum. The European sailor condemns the Archipelago because of the people's ignorance of the European God, their sexual symbols of Lingga and Yoni (the union of penis and vagina) and their 'uncontrolled' sexuality. Shakuntala defends Eastern culture by stating that the contemporary Eastern people are the highly moral ones, as opposed to the 'immoral' Westerners. Later, both get tangled in their arguments in identifying themselves as moral and sexually restrained people, because they sleep with each other outside marriage. Notions of superior sexual morality in both cultures and societies are thus mocked in this novel.

Indeed, as was mentioned previously, it was precisely the Europeans who came to Southeast Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who considered the sexual practices in the Archipelago to be 'loose' and immoral. Showing how cultures could interact, and what is considered moral in a certain culture in one period could be condemned in another period, *Saman* implies that in the era of globalisation the influence of culture is often perceived as an outside value coming in. Thus, while Western values influence local/traditional Indonesian values, Ayu Utami offers the possibility of a local, Indonesian value moving outward – that is, that archipelagic culture(s) have influenced other culture(s). In this regard, *Shakuntala* is also the title of a Sanskrit drama which was widely translated in Europe in the nineteenth century, which influenced some great European authors with its form and style. For example, it made Johann Gottfried von Herder conclude that the Greek model was not absolute.⁴⁵ Parallel to this, Ayu Utami is pointing out that cultural values and norms are never absolute.

Shakuntala's rebellion thus can be considered not merely against Indonesian cultures but also against the post-colonial Puritanism of Europeans, which has been used

43 Medy Loekito, 'Ketika Perempuan Menulis'.

44 Ayu Utami, *Saman*, pp. 135–6 Pamela Allen (tr.), *Saman*, pp. 127–8.

45 In addition, Shakuntala is also an important figure in Hindu mythology; Dorothy Matilda Figueira, *Translating the Orient: The reception of Sakuntala in nineteenth-century Europe* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 14–15.

to condemn and reconstruct the more liberal sexual mores in the Archipelago. Through the encounter between Shakuntala and the giant, Ayu Utami refutes the criticism that *Saman* betrays Indonesian cultural values by its liberal descriptions of sexuality. Shakuntala's sexual freedom, which may on the surface be related to Western culture, can also be a means of reminding the readers of the older – the more 'authentic' or 'traditional' – culture of the Indonesian Archipelago.

Epilogue

While there have been various responses to Ayu Utami's novel *Saman*, they seem to concentrate on its depictions of sexuality and how these depictions break the rules of contemporary Indonesian sexual morality. In addition, these arguments mainly oscillate between two points of view, namely, that sexual transgressions are a betrayal of Indonesian national identity, or a sign of female independence from patriarchy. My reading of the two female characters in the novel reveals that its depiction of sexuality is much more complex, going beyond these two standard views.

Laila is described as independent and perceptive, but at the same time is naïve and submissive in her dealings with the man she loves, Sihar. Her willingness to have sexual intercourse and to give up her virginity before marriage is ambivalent, as it is unclear as to whether she does this to challenge the norms of Indonesian patriarchal society, to please Sihar, or both. Shakuntala, on the other hand, is much more experienced and outspoken. She consciously defies the restrictions enforced by her family and her society, and she is persistent in being able to express her sexuality and her body more freely. In their transgressions against the sexual mores of their society, both characters refer to the constraints imposed by Europeans who came and colonised the Archipelago. In her discussion of *Rafflesia arnoldi*, Laila indicates how Southeast Asia has been labelled and defined by its European coloniser(s). A similar idea is also reflected in Shakuntala's encounter with the giant, as her narrative implies that her land was infiltrated and her people judged by the Dutch.

The dialogue between Shakuntala and her European lover further challenges the assumption of some critics that the novel *Saman* follows Western norms and transgresses Indonesian moral values. The aforementioned dialogue questions the clear separation between one culture and another, and asserts the possibilities of cultural transformations. Thus, a postcolonial reading of the text reveals that the female characters' sexuality is not intended merely to antagonise Indonesian sexual morality; rather, it demonstrates that the novel also criticises such sexual constraints by referring to the impact of colonialism on Indonesia.