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PAM NILAN
School of Humanities and Social Science, University of Newcastle Australia

This volume will primarily attract scholars of Indonesia with an interest in gender. More specifically, it will be useful for those interested in contemporary cultural texts, since it concerns representations of masculinity and gender relations in some contemporary cultural and literary texts produced in Java. On page 13 the key objective of the study is stated: ‘to examine the ways in which cultural transformations and literary developments are constructing new Indonesian masculine identities, with or without recourse to traditional narratives’. At the very start of the book we meet the revered elderly male Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer at the 1998 launch of new young female writer Ayu Utami’s novel Saman. This effectively creates the link in the sub-title of the book between culture, gender and politics in Indonesia, since 1998 marked the end of Suharto’s ‘New Order’ regime. During the New Order regime, Pramoedya Ananta Toer was imprisoned, narrow gender roles were mandated, and the publication of novels with subversive themes was prohibited. With the fall of Suharto in 1998 the reform era was born, and with it came a flourishing of literary and cultural endeavours, many of which are mentioned by the author.

As elsewhere in Asia, masculinity has been absent from most scholarly discussions of gender in Indonesia. The author attributes this slow development of men’s studies to the slow development of feminism in Indonesia, adding the debatable claim that feminism has hardly gained a foothold in the country. The main theoretical framework for the interpretive discussion of representations in the selected contemporary texts is stated to be that of Mikhail Bakhtin. Clark maintains that the Indonesian term pasar (open air market) is more or less equivalent to Bakhtin’s concept of ‘carnival’ (p. 28). However, despite the extent of description of the Bakhtinian framework at the
beginning of the book, the interpretive deployment of this set of ideas is implicit rather than explicit in the later critical discussion of texts.

Perhaps purposefully, it is not until page 6 of the book that specific mention is made of either gender or masculinity. The author then introduces the continuum of traditional Javanese masculinities, alluding to both ‘patrimonial hierarchy’ and ‘patriarchal social traditions’ (p. 7). His take on different masculinities in contemporary textual representations offers a divergent viewpoint from the usual accounts of gender in Indonesia that stress identity and sexuality. He mounts a sustained argument throughout the book that when Indonesian film-makers and writers create male characters and male voices, they are more often than not deliberately engaging broader issues through these representations, issues such as nationalism, colonialism, state authority, the changing role of women, debates within Islam, and the growth of political democracy.

A selected corpus of exemplary texts is then analysed, starting with the novels of Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Deconstructing emblematic male characters such as Minke in the Buru Quartet and Ken Arok in the novel of the same name, Clark proposes that understanding the masculine heroes of the pre-colonial and nationalist era can lead us to a better understanding of contemporary Indonesian representations of masculinity and the extent to which they refer implicitly to wider social and political issues. Other novels, including Ayu Utami’s Saman, are critically discussed in a similar way. The author follows up the literary theme in Chapter Six with a discussion of representations of gender relations, eroticism and violence in the work of controversial contemporary poet Binhad Nurrohmat.

In Chapter Four (p.75) and Chapter Five (p. 89) some recent Indonesian films are considered. For this reviewer the interpretation here has the strongest ‘bite’ in terms of critically analysing representations of new masculine identities and the depiction of gendered power relations. It begins with the ground-breaking urban angst film Kuldesak and ends with the horror film Pocong 2. Clark concludes that in the urban
angst films he mentions, ‘we witness essentially decent men tending towards reckless behaviour in response to the shame and internalised rage associated with poverty, powerlessness and anger, with little care to the consequences to themselves and their families’ (p. 96). Regarding the horror films he states, ‘the post-New Order horror cycle reflects the deep social malaise associated with Indonesia’s chaotic post-authoritarian political culture, not to mention the crippling effects of the nation’s ongoing economic disorder’ (p. 105). Clark’s exploration of the interpretive substance in these claims makes for fascinating reading.

The book concludes with the implication that a new cultural fluidity is growing in newly democratic Indonesia as the distance in time from the New Order lengthens and economic stability increases. Not only are the old homogenising concepts of masculinity and femininity being reshaped away from rigid and limiting roles, but gender relations themselves are being renegotiated. However, this does not mean complete reinvention, nor the wholesale adoption of western cultural materials to represent gender relations. Rather, as Clark demonstrates effectively in this book, post-New Order textual representations of masculinity and femininity in the public domain continue to draw in all kinds of ways on traditional myths and legends of the archipelago, particularly those in Java. Furthermore, representations of masculinity and contemporary gender relations in Indonesia are rarely self-referential. They almost always do imply wider social and cultural issues, economic dilemmas and political power struggles.