

Mystical Elements in the Novels of Marah Rusli

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ABSTRACT

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Marah Rusli is widely recognized as a prominent figure in Indonesian literature, particularly in the field of writing novels. He is regarded as the 'father' of contemporary Indonesian fiction. His well-known writings, including Sitti Nurbaya, were the subject of numerous analyses. The mystical components, another aspect of Marah Rusli's writing that appears to be recurrent, will be examined by the researchers in this article. The findings indicate that Marah Rusli, despite being aligned with modernist ideals and expressing criticism towards traditional Minangkabau rituals, exhibited a profound inclination towards mystical concepts that can be characterized as rooted in folk beliefs. His autobiographical novel *Memang Jodoh*, in particular, includes numerous mystical influences and illustrates supernatural events. For the reader, this fact is fascinating as it provides new, important background information about the work of Marah Rusli.

Contribution/Originality: The study looks at the work of Marah Rusli from a different perspective, i.e. it looks at the integration of folk beliefs in his literary work. Marah Rusli is considered to be a modernist. However, this article shows Marah Rusli in a different light.

1. Introduction

Marah Rusli was a famous novelist of the so-called *Balai Pustaka* era, which reached its main popularity from the 1920s to the 1940s. The Dutch colonial government created the *Balai Pustaka*, which should promote reading amongst the local population using the formal Malay language.

Sitti Nurbaya, Marah Rusli's most illustrious work, was released in 1922. This tragic love story highlights criticism of the social situation in Padang (Stark & Huszka, 2022). Marah Rusli was from an aristocratic family that adhered to the accepted customs of the Minangkabau society in West Sumatra. The matrilineages played a major role; he was expected to marry a local lady. However, he was unable to live up to these expectations and married a lady from West Java. His family was outraged as a result, and they severed the ties. Marah Rusli used a subtle style of criticism. He wrote the book *Sitti Nurbaya*, in which he described the conflict between modern and traditional ideas. Movies and telenovelas were produced as a result of the book's enormous popularity. Marah Rusli, however, produced other works such as *Memang Jodoh* or *Anak dan Kemenakan*. These books also thematized the conflict between traditional customs and the modern way of life, particularly the role of men who should take care of their nieces and nephews and, as a consequence, often 'neglected' their children.

The researchers seek to examine the mystical components of Marah Rusli's writing in this article, which is a completely new perspective. Numerous literary discussions haven't taken this into account yet. However, the researchers think that these components are important since they provide a novel viewpoint on Marah Rusli's inner attitude.

In this article, the researchers discuss three major works of Marah Rusli in order to detect whether there are any changes in his inner constitution. These works are *Sitti Nurbaya*, *Anak dan Kemenakan*, and *Memang Jodoh*.

2. A Brief Biography of Marah Rusli

Marah Rusli was born on August 7th 1889, in Padang, West Sumatra (Agung, 2019). He was born into a noble family. He attended the Dutch government school before continuing his studies in Bogor. However, he decided to marry a lady from West Java, which was the cause of the conflict. It was expected that a Minangkabau man with a noble family background would marry a lady from West Sumatra. He had to part ways with his family in the end. He published his first novel, *Sitti Nurbaya*, in the year 1922.

Sitti Nurbaya became a very popular book and was published by *Balai Pustaka*. Marah Rusli is considered one of the fathers of the modern Indonesian novel. He continued to practice veterinary medicine despite becoming a popular author.

Other novels by Marah Rusli include *Anak dan Kemenakan* or *Memang Jodoh*. In these novels, he still thematized the Minangkabau way of life and its rigid customary regulations. *Memang Jodoh* can be considered an autobiographical novel in which his life is outlined. Marah Rusli could express his criticism by using the medium of novels.

Marah Rusli was a dedicated veterinarian, and he got some teaching positions (Ensiklopedia Sastra Indonesia, n. d.). In his private life, he was an adorable father and grandfather. In the year 1961, he passed the book *Memang Jodoh* as a present to his beloved wife to commemorate the 50th anniversary of their marriage (Roesli, 2013).

3. A Succinct Rundown of Marah Rusli's Major Novels

In this chapter, the researchers illustrate the main storyline of the three novels that were analyzed. In order to avoid confusion, it is crucial to give background information about the key protagonists who will be mentioned in the other chapters.

- a) The novel *Sitti Nurbaya* describes the story of the teenager Sitti Nurbaya. She and her family are residents of the city of Padang. Her father, Baginda Sulaiman, is a successful businessman. Datuk Meringgih is a rich entrepreneur. He is old and unscrupulous. He desires to marry Sitti Nurbaya as soon as he sees her. With the help of his 'gangsters', he destroys the business of Baginda Sulaiman. Datuk Meringgih offers his assistance in exchange for the right to marry his daughter. However, Sitti Nurbaya likes Samsulbahri. In the end, Baginda Sulaiman's situation deteriorates rapidly. Therefore, Sitti Nurbaya marries Datuk Meringgih. During that time, Samsulbahri studies in Batavia (Jakarta). When he hears about the marriage, he returns to Padang. They meet each other. Datuk Meringgih is furious. He decides to poison Sitti Nurbaya. She passes away. A few years later, West Sumatra experiences a tax rebellion. Meanwhile, Samsulbahri works as a soldier for the Dutch colonial government. He has to go to Sumatra. In the battle, he meets Datuk Meringgih. They fight and kill each other.
- b) *Anak dan Kemenakan* [Children and Nephews] thematizes the way of life in a matrilineal society. A male person usually has to take care of the nephews and nieces of his matrilineage. Returning to Padang, Mr. Yatim intends to wed Puti Bidasari. However, Mr. Yatim's origin is unclear, and so her mother rejects it. She wants Puti Bidasari and Sutan Malik to become married. He is the nephew of Sutan Pamenan and is involved in many dubious activities. While helping out his nephew, Sutan Pamenan neglects his own child. When his son witnessed one of the mean activities of Sutan Malik, they decided to murder him. The child dies, and Sutan Pamenan regrets his behavior. Meanwhile, Mr. Yatim gets the information that he is of noble origin, and so he can marry Puti Bidasari.
- c) The main protagonist of the book *Memang Jodoh* is Hamli. He grew up in West Sumatra. After he graduated from the Dutch school, he decided to study in Bogor. He is melancholic, and that worries his family. One day, he meets the Sundanese girl Din Wati, and they both fall in love. Hamli recovers and wants to marry her. Hamli's family is against his relationship with Din Wati, though. Nevertheless, they marry, and his family breaks ties with him. The young couple had to overcome several obstacles before they could live together.

4. Literature

Numerous publications examine Marah Rusli's well-known works. Some writers have emphasized how Marah Rusli's West Sumatran birthplace and the distinctive cultural aspects of Minangkabau society were integral components of his literary work. According to [Syofiani et al. \(2018\)](#), the distinct matrilineal society and its kinship system are important.

The book *Memang Jodoh* mentions a lot of supernatural themes. Therefore, it is intriguing to observe the manner in which social scientists assess this particular book. Intertextual methodology was employed by [Kurnia et al. \(2019\)](#). The authors emphasized that the matrilineal family structure is one of the book's central topics. [Utari \(2015\)](#) underscored the significance of the matrilineal system and offered a critical analysis of its marital rules.

The other two books, *Sitti Nurbaya* and *Anak dan Kemenakan*, similarly place a significant amount of emphasis on traditional customary laws. As a result, pairs of oppositions appear (Nasri, 2017). On one side, some people represent the traditional worldview, and on the other side, there are people with a modern attitude. There is a kind of dichotomy in all three novels that will be considered in this research. Interestingly, Marah Rusli criticizes many traditions (Stark & Huszka, 2022). However, in this research paper, it will be argued that he still believed in traditional ideas, as his work *Memang Jodoh* can be considered an autobiographical novel.

Marah Rusli's literary works encompass a depiction of several historical occurrences, such as the tax uprising in West Sumatra (Atikurrahman et al., 2021) and the eruption of Mount Kelud. In chapter 4, it will be described that Marah Rusli relates some supernatural events to the eruption.

5. Research Method

The authors studied Marah Rusli's main works and gathered the sections that have mystical aspects. After that, these excerpts were analyzed and juxtaposed. It was looked at how these supernatural elements were part of the lifeworld of Marah Rusli. Researchers like Winstedt (2007) stressed that historical events also shaped the so-called folk beliefs of the people. Initially, there were animistic beliefs that encompassed the concept of a life force attributed to plants and stones. Some plants or places were considered sacred, and the people offered some gifts in order to get a reciprocal answer (like health, safety, and so on). In later centuries, new religious ideas entered West Sumatra, like Hinduism. Reincarnation is a key component of Hinduism. The emergence of a new religion does not imply the total annihilation of previous beliefs. For instance, an ancient animistic belief would regard a particular tree as sacrosanct. In the Hindu period, the same place could be considered the living place of a certain deity. The people brought their offerings to please this deity. Later, Islam appeared and introduced monotheistic elements. Interestingly, religious ideas overlap. Structuralists might use the idea of geology. The earth consists of different strata. Similarly, this idea might be applied in the field of religion: animistic views are found at the bottom, Hindu beliefs are found in the center, and Islamic beliefs, which at first were mostly based on Sufi beliefs, are found at the top.

The world of people's everyday life is a significant element of phenomenological research (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The thinking about particular occurrences is influenced by one's social situation and position. The opinions and views could, however, evolve over time. In this article, three major works of Marah Rusli were analyzed (the original year of publication is in brackets):

- i. *Sitti Nurbaya* (1922)
- ii. *Anak dan Kemenakan* (1956)
- iii. *Memang Jodoh* (probably 1961)

It will be intriguing to observe how much Marah Rusli's work incorporates magical aspects. The books were published at various times: *Anak dan Kemenakan* was written in the post-colonial era, while *Sitti Nurbaya* was written during the colonial era. The following research objectives were formulated:

- i. To describe the mystical elements in the major works of Marah Rusli.
- ii. To analyze the different levels of mystical descriptions in Marah Rusli's novels.

- iii. To find out how the mystical elements changed over time.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1. The Mysterious Disease of Hamli (Marah Rusli)

In *Memang Jodoh*, Marah Rusli writes about a mysterious sickness, which he calls *pilu* (sadness). The book is autobiographical, and the main protagonist, Hamli, behaves normally, but suddenly there is an extreme sadness that also worries his environment. Hamli describes how something inside him wants him to move to another place. Even though the rest of his family wants him to study veterinary medicine in Holland, he takes his mother's advice and does so in Bogor.

In Bogor lives Wati, a Sundanese girl. She has good manners and is gorgeous. She has many admirers. They propose to marry her. However, she rejects all of them. The reason is a strange event that happened when she was a young girl. She was called by the Islamic scholar, Ajengan Kyai Naidan. He told her that one day she would be his mother. For many people, this statement is illogical. Nonetheless, Wati pondered about it, and for her, the future husband should be a pious person. A fortune teller was asked, and she said that she would soon meet her *jodoh* (soulmate). Soon afterwards, she meets Hamli. Despite numerous challenges, they both fell in love and get married. After some time, Wati becomes pregnant and gives birth to a young boy. They name him Marah Naidi.

6.2. Magic

The subject of magic is a recurring theme in all three literary works. Therefore, it is logical to examine the intentions of the protagonists with regards to its utilization.

- a) In the novel *Siti Nurbaya*, Baginda Sulaiman, the father of Sitti Nurbaya, is known to have been married to a single spouse. Therefore, his close family members, like his sister, are concerned. Consequently, they look for a traditional medicine man (*dukun*). He tells them that he wants to perform magic that will make Baginda Sulaiman hate his wife. However, nothing happened.
- b) In the book *Anak dan Kemenakan*, there is the nobleman Sutan Pamenan. He is the maternal uncle (*mamak*) of Sutan Malik. In his role as *mamak* he tries to support him. Unfortunately, Sutan Malik is a problematic and emotional person. When he competes in a contest with fireworks, he becomes enraged and sets the house of his competitor ablaze.

Sutan Pamenan has also a son. His name is Marah Udin, and he is still a child. He is mistreated horribly by Sutan Malik and Sutan Pamenan. However, he is a witness to the incident involving Sutan Malik. Therefore, the two adults decide to consult a medicine man. He performs a magical ritual, and as a consequence, Marah Udin passes away. Even Dr. Aziz's medicinal attempts are ineffective. The medicine man performed magic that is called *tinggam* (Rusli, 2020, p. 190). It is a kind of magic that is well-known in Minangkabau society (Sidek, 2023). The victim typically gets many abscesses and dies slowly.

- c) In the book *Memang Jodoh*, there is also an incident that involves magic. Marah Rusli frequently emphasizes in his writing how the West Sumatran civilization is known for its use of magic. His *mamak* (mother's brother) and the entire matrilineage were outraged when the main character Hamli married the

Sundanese lady Din Wati. As a result, a member of the extended family engaged a renowned *dukun* (medicine man). The *dukun* looked around. Actually, he liked Hamli and his wife. Yet he got a good payment, and he went to his room. He took out a kind of yoyo (*gasing*) which he activates while reading *mantras*. Suddenly, he shouted for help. Some *jin* or guardian spirit of Din Wati, had attacked him.

The usage of a *gasing* is a hint of the famous magic *sijundai* that is used in West Sumatra (Stark, 2018). The magician recites a *mantra* in order to activate an evil entity. Often, the evil spirit will enter the body of the victim. As a consequence, the victim goes insane.

6.3. Paranormal Entities

In the novel *Memang Jodoh*, Marah Rusli describes the following incident (Rusli, 2017, pp. 322-328): Datuk Sati, a famous *dukun* was sent to kill Din Wati. At night, he puts out his ingredients and wants to begin with the magic. However, suddenly he screams, and he says that someone came to him and attacked him and that he was lucky to be still alive. He was told that Din Wati has a brother from the unseen world who protects her. The Datuk wants to know more, and he was informed that the mother of Din Wati was pregnant. Everything seemed to be normal. When the date of birth was close, the people began with the preparations. Finally, the mother of Din Wati was alone, and suddenly, she gave birth to a young boy. He cries, and the people enter the room. However, there was no baby. People claim that the infant took the name Muhamad Dobri and evolved into a *jin* (genie).

Din Wati was also shielded by other invisible beings, such as a ghostly tiger. It is unclear who or what attacked Datuk Sati, but he knew that Din Wati was well protected.

The main protagonists of *Memang Jodoh* live in Blitar, a town close to the volcano Gunung Kelud (Rusli, 2013). Suddenly, one night, the volcano erupts. However, Hamli thinks that this event is not dangerous as Blitar is far from the volcano. All of a sudden, he sees a white tiger that sits calmly near the window. It moves around as if it wants to order Din Wati to leave the house. Hamli recalls having previously heard the tiger's roar. He thought some robbers wanted to steal. When Din Wati sees this animal, she becomes worried. In the past, Hamli and Din Wati got the information that if they see a white or black tiger at night, they should not be scared. If it follows, then it means that it protects them. However, if it appears in front, then the people should stop to move forward because there is some danger in that area.

6.4. Mystical Phenomena as a Form of Entertainment

In his novel *Anak dan Kemenakan*, Marah Rusli describes strange elements that can be considered supernatural. The people feel attracted by these forms of entertainment:

- a) A group of *pencak silat* fighters enter the stage and show their capabilities as martial arts fighters (Rusli, 2020, p. 35). Dangerous weapons are also employed by them. Suddenly, four fighters attack one of the other fighters with their weapons. Surprisingly, he remains unharmed.
- b) A famous paranormal attraction in West Sumatra is the 'crazy fish trap' (*lukoh gilo*) (Rusli, 2020, pp. 39-40). The people take a normal fish trap, and a *dukun* recites a *mantra*. The fish trap moves on its own from right to left and left to right. The movement becomes stronger and stronger, and the performers ask the audience

to stop it. However, it is not possible. Even four men cannot stop the movements of the fish trap.

- c) A martial arts master wants to show his invulnerability (Rusli, 2020, p. 41). He opens his shirt. Then he reads a mantra. He takes out a machete and tries to cut his body. Nevertheless, he stays unscathed. The visible mark on the upper body is limited to a single white stripe, indicating the precise location of contact with the machete.
- d) Another form of entertainment that is described by Marah Rusli is *Dabus* (Rusli, 2020, pp. 41-42). A master (teacher) recites a mantra. After that, the other participants are in a trance-like condition. Their skin is incised, but no blood appears.

6.5. Reincarnation

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), reincarnation can be defined as “the belief that a dead person’s spirit returns to life in another body”. If we use this definition, then we have some elements of reincarnation that are described in the book *Memang Jodoh*.

In chapter 4.1, it was already mentioned that Kyai Naidan announced that he would be reborn as the son of Din Wati. He got the name Naidi. During his life, he emerged as a courageous man who was active in the independence struggle.

Another intriguing occurrence was mentioned about the parents of Din Wati. Her father, Radin Jaya Kesuma, became sick and passed away. He passed down a dry grape to the younger sister of Din Wati, and he also informed other family members what they should inherit. After that, he passed away. During the subsequent night, the various members of the family experienced dreams involving the father. For example, the father provided them with instructions regarding the location of specific items. Three months later, the younger sister, Radin Munigar, dreamt that her father was skinny and somehow entered her body. Later, she discovered that she was pregnant and gave birth to a boy. One day before the birth, the brother of Radin Jaya Kesuma dreamt of him, and he was informed that he would be born the next day. The mother is sure that these events mean that her husband was born again.

6.6. Predictions of the Unseen

In the novel *Memang Jodoh*, Din Wati and her mother visit Mpok Nur, who is able to predict forthcoming events with her cards (Rusli, 2017). The cards are slightly different from ‘normal’ cards. Some symbols have a particular meaning. Din Wati is not married yet, even though some men have shown their intention to marry her. Therefore, the mother asks Mpok Nur, and the cards reveal that she will meet her future husband soon. In order to be sure, Mpok Nur asks the cards again, and the result is the same. The fascinating element is that after a short period of time, the future husband arrives in Bandung, and Din Wati meets him.

Marah Rusli makes reference to more occurrences whereby unanticipated factors will be disclosed. He mentions that the father of Din Wati knows the date when he is going to die, and he shares his information with his family members. When he announced that, he was in good health, and there was no sign that he would soon pass away (Rusli, 2017). Three months later, he became sick. However, the family members did not consider the disease to be serious. Several months later, the family remembered the words of Radin Jaya

Kusuma, the father of Din Wati. His stomach was filled with water, although his body was thin. On a Friday, the whole family was called because the death of Radin Jaya Kusuma was immediate. He gave some advice and looked at the clock. After a period of time, he uttered *Allahu Akbar* and died.

6.7. The Manifestation of Mystical Phenomena in the Literary Works of Marah Rusli: An Analytical Examination

By looking at the descriptions of the mystical components in the novel of Marah Rusli, it becomes evident that his earliest work, *Sitti Nurbaya* does not contain many of these elements. However, the element of magic can be found in all three novels. *Memang Jodoh* contains, without a doubt, most of the supernatural events. Examining the setting of the three novels proves to be intriguing. The major storylines of *Sitti Nurbaya* and *Anak dan Kemenakan* are set in West Sumatra, while *Memang Jodoh*, predominantly takes place in Java. The paranormal ideas of both areas are different, and what Marah Rusli describes can be considered a part of folk religion. It differs from the orthodox understanding of the main religion (Islam) in those areas.

It is also essential to look at the publisher. The novels *Sitti Nurbaya* and *Anak dan Kemenakan* were published by *Balai Pustaka*, while another publisher released *Memang Jodoh*. Actually, *Balai Pustaka's* primary objective was to promote the standard Malay language and to entertain the people. Interestingly, there was a significant proportion of Minangkabau authors like Nur Sutan Iskandar, Tulis Sutan Sati, and others. Often, they thematized the conflict between traditional values and modernity.

At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a conflict of ideas between modern Islamic and traditional understandings. It is more surprising that Marah Rusli believed and somehow promoted ideas that are contradictory to a modern understanding in his later works. It is likely that his beliefs were shaped by the folk religion prevalent among the local population. In anthropology, there is a differentiation between little and great tradition (Stanford & Whitehouse, 2021). The concept of the little tradition encompasses the indigenous practices and customs of a particular locality, whereas the great tradition encompasses the orthodox religious aspects. During the cultural history of Indonesia, new elements came up, while the older elements did not disappear completely. For example, in the book *Memang Jodoh*, Marah Rusli describes the view of Kyiai Naidan. He is an Islamic scholar, but nonetheless, he believes that he will be reborn. The concept of reincarnation is not inherent in Islamic theology. The concept of rebirth was prevalent during the historical periods of Hinduism and Buddhism.

In the Minangkabau concept, there is the idea that nature is a kind of teacher (Navis, 2014). This implies that individuals acquire knowledge from natural phenomena. An example of such an approach could be the observation of animals to learn their behavioral responses in the event of injury. Sometimes paranormal or strange events manifest themselves. The element of the unseen is an integral part of Islam. Both angels (*malaikat*) and *jinn* cannot be seen with the eye. It can be said that paranormal elements are part of people's daily life. The people know that they might have to fear consequences if they break some rules. For example, there is a kind of physical disorder called *keteguran*, a kind of 'warning' sent by the *jinn* (Stark, 2018). The "warning" typically manifests as a form of fever experienced by individuals when entering an area inhabited by invisible entities.

Marah Rusli is well-versed in the folk beliefs of the Minangkabau. In his book *Anak dan Kemenakan*, he describes many mystical and strange performances that seem to be an attraction for many people. However, he also describes magic. Sometimes the consequences could be severe. Interestingly Marah Rusli is frequently labeled as a modernist with a rational attitude. Moreover, he was a scientist and veterinarian doctor. Nevertheless, he was surrounded by people who believed in mystical ideas. Probably, he wanted to use a more vivid and realistic picture of the lives of the locals. By doing so, the readers get an impression of the ideas and beliefs of the people. Furthermore, the description of paranormal elements does not necessarily mean that Rusli was an adherent of mystical views; it means that he was attracted by the local belief system so he illustrated it in his novels. Sometimes he might even be critical, as it is somehow irrational. Particularly in the novel *Stiti Nurbaya*, he is critical of the old-fashioned view of the sister of Bagindo Sulaiman. She represents values that are, according to Marah Rusli, not significant in modern times.

7. Conclusion

This article presents a novel viewpoint on the literary contributions of Marah Rusli. In all three novels that were analyzed, there are paranormal events. However, the book *Memang Jodoh* contains most of these elements. Nonetheless, the other novels also contain such features. It is quite surprising, as Marah Rusli is considered to be a kind of modernist who is critical of traditional values. However, it is worth noting that the novels incorporate supernatural themes. Moreover, the book *Memang Jodoh* contains many autobiographical patterns. Interestingly, Marah Rusli is not critical of the illustrated paranormal events, and he does not give any scientific or Islamic explanations. Hence, it can be inferred that he adopts an emic standpoint, which refers to the viewpoint held by a significant number of individuals within the local community.

The use of paranormal events in the novels of Marah Rusli has many benefits for the readers. The story becomes interesting and fascinating, particularly for the readers who were Western educated at the time when the novels were published. Moreover, it must be considered that folk beliefs are part of the cultural heritage, even though some people might consider it outdated.

It can be speculated why Marah Rusli incorporated supernatural stories, but probably they were part of the daily lives of the people. When they wanted to know what would happen in the future, they contacted a traditional diviner, or when they needed a special protection, then they believed in protective entities. A description of the way of life in West Java without considering folk beliefs would be insufficient. Therefore, the mystical elements in Marah Rusli's books reveal something about himself (namely that he is part of the community) and the people who are influenced by folk beliefs that were transmitted through generations.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

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