

WOMEN IN A MARILINEAL SOCIETY AS ILLUSTRATED IN NUR SUTAN ISKANDAR'S LITERARY WORK

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Abstract. The situation of women in a matrilineal society has intrigued many scientists. In this paper, the researchers analyze two novels by Nur Sutan Iskandar which describe the way of life in a Minangkabau village. These novels were published in the 1920s and 1930s. They illustrate the situation of women during that period. The researchers examine the perspective of women as perceived by Nur Sutan Iskandar. A structuralist approach was used to identify binary oppositions that could provide insights into the position of Minangkabau women in their community. The researchers used two ways of reading: a diachronic and a synchronic way. It has been observed that women actively participate in their society. They are involved in the decision-making process even though the men hold formal positions. Moreover, women tend to have stronger connections to village life and traditional practices, whereas men are more likely to be engaged in outmigration.

Keywords: *Minangkabau, Nur Sutan Iskandar, structuralism, West Sumatra*

Introduction

A great number of scientific articles pertaining to the Minangkabau culture have been published over the course of more than two centuries. Probably one of the major reasons was the role of women in a matrilineal society. Many anthropologists examined their positions. Therefore, numerous publications were written by both local and international scholars. Even Minangkabau writers thematized the stringent customary rules. Many of them were Western educated or influenced by modernist Islamic ideas. They wrote novels, which attracted many readers. The situation that they described was the situation of Minangkabau villages in the 1920s and 1930s. There are only a few research publications that cover that time (Joustra, 1923). However, this period is interesting as the Minangkabau village communities were still quite autonomous and followed the traditional way of life. Moreover, it could reveal the lifestyle before independence. According to De Jong (1981), the Minangkabau society has had a lasting impact on anthropological thought. This article will highlight the viewpoint of Nur Sutan Iskandar, a prominent author from the early Balai Pustaka era. The Balai Pustaka was created by the Dutch colonial government to promote the usage of the formal Malay language. The conflict between traditional values and modern elements attracted many readers. There was a whole group of Minangkabau authors, but Nur Sutan Iskandar was very gifted. The famous literary expert A. Teeuw wrote about him:

By far the best writer of this type of novel was Nur Sutan Iskandar, a gifted storyteller. As a corrector and editor at Balai Pustaka he had a strong influence on the moulding of the typical pre-war standard Malay, a language based on Malay

classical literary tradition, but with strong Minangkabau influence, in vocabulary as well as in syntax and morphology. (Teeuw, 2013)

Due to Nur Sutan Iskandar's unique standing, it is intriguing to examine his perspective on the situation in the highlands of West Sumatra. The researchers intend to discuss the situation and role of women in traditional Minangkabau society. Therefore, it was decided to analyze the novels *Salah Pilih* (The Wrong Choice) and *Karena Mentua* (Because of Mothers-in-Law). These two novels outline the situation of women in Minangkabau village communities in the 1920s and 1930s and give a comprehensive picture. By using a structuralist approach, the researchers hope to detect crucial elements that are not immediately apparent. This research article argues that Nur Sutan Iskandar employs an emic descriptive approach due to his background as a native Minangkabau author. Furthermore, the form of a novel gave him the possibility to describe the situation in a more critical way. The structuralist perspective intends to discover certain pairs of oppositions. These oppositions will assist in identifying the key aspects regarding the role of women in Minangkabau society. The following research objectives were formulated: (1) to describe the role of women in Minangkabau society as illustrated by Nur Sutan Iskandar: and (2) to analyze the content of two novels regarding the situation of Minangkabau women in a structuralist way.

A brief biography of Nur Sutan Iskandar

Nur Sutan Iskandar was born in Sungai Batang, on November 3, 1893. His name was Muhammad Nur when he was born. After he married, he got the title Sutan Iskandar from the family of his wife Aminah (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, 2022). The couple had five children. Nur Sutan Iskandar grew up in his village, which is located on the shore of Lake Maninjau, in the interior of West Sumatra. This area is the homeland of the Minangkabau. In 1909, he completed the *sekolah rakyat* (primary school). He got the opportunity to become an assistant teacher. He moved to Padang and Batavia (Jakarta). In Batavia, he got a job at the Balai Pustaka. Initially, he was in charge of corrections. He later assumed the role of editor. In later years, he even became the head of *Balai Pustaka* (1942-45). This is remarkable considering he only received a formal education up until primary school. Nur Sutan Iskandar was a famous storyteller, and he published many novels. His work was widely recognized, and he was awarded the *Satya* cultural badge in the year 1961 (Irfani, 2017). Nur Sutan Iskandar worked for more than 30 years at *Balai Pustaka* and contributed to the development of modern Indonesian literature. On November 28, 1975, he passed away.

The plot of the analyzed novels

For further elaborations, it is essential to give a short summary of the analyzed novels.

Salah Pilih in 1928

In the year 1928, the novel *Salah Pilih* (Wrong Choice) was published. Here is the synopsis:

Sitti Maliah and Ibu Mariati live in a traditional house (rumah gadang). Sitti Maliah adopted a girl named Asnah. She is an obedient and well-mannered young teenager.

She grew up with Asri, the son of Ibu Mariati. Actually, she loves him. However, it would be impossible to marry as they are from the same matri-clan (suku). When Asri returns from his studies, he proposes to Saniah. She is the daughter of a noble family. Her father is the local head of the whole area (Tuanku Laras). After Asri and Saniah get married, Saniah moves into Asri's home. Normally, the man would reside in the house of the wife. However, in the case of Asri, the mother is ill, and he must take care of her. Saniah cannot adjust to the life in her new home. She quarrels and frequently refuses to eat together with the other family members. Ibu Mariati's health condition becomes worse, and she passes away. Before she dies, she has said to Asri that Asnah would have been the better choice. More and more quarrels appear. After a heated argument, Asnah leaves for the nearby village. Meanwhile, Saniah's mother got the news that her son is going to marry. She is angry and calls Saniah. They head off in a rented car. During the journey, they have an accident, and Saniah and her mother die. Asri is shocked. However, after some time, he decides to marry Asnah. He marries her secretly. The people disagree because they are from the same clan. Therefore, Asri and Asnah leave the village and move to Java. The time passes, and one day a letter arrives. Asri was informed that the people of his village want him to be the head of the village. Finally, they return.

Karena Mentua in 1932

The plot of *Karena Mentua* (Because of Mothers-in-Laws) is as follows:

Ramalah lives with her husband, Marah Adil, in a small village. Day by day, they work together on the paddy fields. One day, Sutan Baginda, a merchant from the village who lives in Lampung, comes back and talks about his experiences there. Marah Adil is fascinated and decides to move there to get a good income. He departs for Lampung, while Ramalah stays in the village. After his arrival, he learns how to become a merchant. He is dedicated and soon becomes a successful businessman. Meanwhile, in the village: Mak Guna, the mother of Ramalah, wants her daughter to marry the businessman Taib. She even forces Ramalah to divorce her husband. Fortunately, he returns on time, and Mak Guna's dream could not come true. Marah Adil saved some money and opens a small shop in the coastal city of Padang. He lives in a small house with Ramalah and his mother-in-law. One day, Mak Guna meets Mak Amin. Her son, Ramli, is a rich government official. Even though both children are already married, the two women decide that Ramli and Ramalah should marry. Marah Adil got information about Mak Guna's plans. A heated argument follows. Marah Adil leaves the house and divorces Ramalah. She becomes sick. Meanwhile, Mak Amin continues with the marriage preparations. On the day of the planned wedding, the wife of Ramli is informed that Ramli wants to get a second wife. In the place of the bride: Suddenly, Marah Adil appears with a knife. He wants to stab her, but Ramalah interferes, and he kills her. After that, he kills himself. Ramli and his wife decide to leave Sumatra and move to Java.

Literature

During the 1920s and 1930s, several authors from West Sumatra, such as Abdul Muis (1886-1959), Marah Rusli (1889-1968), Tulis Sutan Sati (1898-1942), and Nur Sutan Iskandar, published books in the prestigious *Balai Pustaka*. Furthermore, there

were other Minangkabau authors who published novels with other publishers. Often, the situation in the Minangkabau village was thematized by these authors. Hamka, a famous Minangkabau writer, criticized elements of this traditional way of life (Stark et al., 2022). He described the situation for men. For example, the main protagonist in the novel *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck* (Hamka, 2015) grew up on the island of Sulawesi. The father was of Minangkabau origin, and the mother was from Sulawesi. After his parents had passed away, he returns to the village of his father. However, he could not become part of society as the society was matrilineally organized and he did not belong to any matriclan (*suku*). Other authors, like Marah Rusli, had a similar opinion. He described the strict regulations of the Minangkabau *adat*. His explanations are precise and provide a comprehensive understanding of specific practices, such as the relationship dynamics between nephews and uncles in a matrilineage. Stark et al. (2022) even argued that these descriptions can be used as a kind of anthropological source. This idea was also formulated by Postel-Coster (1977).

Several studies examined the status of women in Minangkabau society. In many cases, the term "matriarchy," which is fraught with controversy, is used. Despite the fact that this term may be problematic, a significant number of Minangkabau people themselves use it while having conversations about their community. Therefore, Sanday (2002) argues that it would be useful to use the local categories. In history, there was a legendary figure with the name *Bundo Kanduang* who could make decisions. Her descendants are influential to this day (Frey, 1986). The anthropologist Zainal (2013) stresses that the power of women in Minangkabau society is limited to the house. Local intellectuals who wrote non-fictional books emphasized that the men in Minangkabau society are in a precarious situation without any power (Hamka, 2006). If the boys reach a certain age, they cannot stay in the house and have to relocate to the prayer house (*surau*) (Radjab, 1995). Among the members of the academic community, the books *Salah Pilih* and *Karena Mentua* were reviewed and discussed. Different perspectives are available. Irfani (2017) examines the male characters in her thesis, focusing on the novel *Salah Pilih*. She stresses that some male protagonists have a more European mindset, such as the male character Asri, while others adhere strictly to traditional values. Aprilia and Fauziyah (2022) utilized a comparative methodology in order to examine the similarities and differences between the novel *Salah Pilih*, written by Nur Sutan Iskandar, and the novel *Salah Asuhan*, written by Abdoel Moeis. They described that Asri and Asnah of *Salah Pilih* are well-mannered compared to the main characters of *Salah Asuhan*.

Asri (2014) is another author who used a comparative viewpoint. He juxtaposed the books of Nur Sutan Iskandar with those of Hamka. Hamka focused more on religious values, while the main protagonist of *Salah Pilih* is Western educated. Nonetheless, Nur Sutan Iskandar describes him as a well-mannered person. The novel *Karena Mentua* received less attention in the scientific community compared to the novel *Salah Pilih*. One possible explanation is that the book *Salah Pilih* by Nur Sutan Iskandar provides a more detailed description of rural living situations. The novel *Karena Mentua* covers different urban settings, like Lampung and Padang. The literature review shows that there is no publication that covers a structuralist view. The reason might be that some scientists consider this methodology outdated. Nonetheless, the researchers consider this approach fascinating as it might give a new understanding of Nur Sutan Iskandar's perspective in regard to the Minangkabau culture. The researchers chose to evaluate the novels in a manner that facilitates the identification of underlying features. The aim was

to investigate cultural norms and gain understanding of a Minangkabau novelist's perspective on Minangkabau women. In the field of anthropology, there is a differentiation between an emic and etic perspective. An emic description reflects the perspective and worldview of the local community, whereas an etic description examines society from an external viewpoint. Nur Sutan Iskandar's novels provide an emic perspective.

Materials and Methods

In this research, two novels of Nur Sutan Iskandar's literary work were analyzed in a structuralist way. Linguists and anthropologists employed this method, applying a diachronic and synchronic approach to reading (Leach, 1976). Usually, the reader reads the text in chronological order, from beginning to end (this is the diachronic way). On the other hand, stopping the reading process at a specific point and examining the circumstances at that specific point is also an option (this is the synchronic way). Such a methodology is generally helpful in identifying and separating dichotomies.

Results and Discussion

In this article, the two novels *Salah Pilih* and *Karena Mentua* will be analyzed. The researchers employ a structuralist method to identify dichotomies.

Statements and important features in the novels Salah Pilih and Karena Mentua

The novel *Salah Pilih* has some remarkable features. For the reader, the most striking one is that the women are the most active part of the novel. Asri seems to be the only male person who displays emotions and is active. He does not accept the situation. One of the reasons might be that he was Western educated. On the other side, the men who follow the traditional way of life appear to be quite passive. A good example is the *Tuanku Laras*, the father of Saniah. Despite holding an important position, he remains silent while his wife makes decisions. At the end of the novel, it becomes evident. He is fine with his son marrying someone of his own choice. Nevertheless, his wife refuses to accept it and chooses to intervene. This indicates that women have the ultimate decision-making power. Nur Sutan Iskandar utilizes insignificant occurrences and conversations to convey broad statements about gender roles. Here are some key statements about that topic: (1) Men do not have to take care of their children. However, in their role as *mamak* (brother of the sister), they are responsible for the well-being of their nieces and nephews; and (2) Unmarried women have a lower social status compared to married women.

What Nur Sutan Iskandar characterizes, is a kind of conflict between two values, a more individualistic Western attitude on one side and a more traditional view on the other side. In the novel *Salah Pilih*, there is a discussion about this. Asri questions the function of men and discovers that it is advantageous to be a man, as they are not burdened with as many responsibilities. The traditional leader responds:

“Hal itu tidak jauh daripada adat kebiasaan, adat yang telah jadi hukum tiada tertulis di alam kita ini. Yang berkuasa di dalam rumah tangga ialah bangsa perempuan. Jadi pihak perempuan harus menanggung segala-galanya” [Translation:

That's not far from a custom (adat), a custom (adat) that has become an unwritten law in our world. The power in the household is the female side. So, the women's side has to bear everything] (Iskandar, 2006).

In this excerpt, it can be seen that men in the Minangkabau society do not have power as they reside in the house of the wife. Therefore, the family side of the woman must bear the responsibility.

A structuralist reading of Salah Pilih

In the plots that were given previously, there is a reading of the stories from beginning to end. Within the structuralist framework, this is referred to as diachronic. Regarding the subject of this study, some significant characteristics could be highlighted. In *Table 1*, the binary pairs of oppositions are outlined when the reader uses a synchronic way of reading and looks at the happenings at a certain moment. In *Table 1*, some general features could be detected. They give a good impression about the role of women in a traditional Minangkabau village community. The most striking element is that the men seem to be quite passive compared with the female characters. Even though the men might have a high position, nonetheless, the women seem to have the power. Some women exhibit emotional and impulsive behavior. Yet, not all women behave that way. Asnah appears to embody an ideal. She stays in the house and is gentle and soft-spoken. Asri, on the other side, returns from his studies. To migrate from the village to the area outside is a widespread feature of Minangkabau society (Naim, 1984; Kato, 1982). Usually, women are responsible for the maintenance of the traditional houses and the ancestral land, so they stay in the village while their husbands move to other areas. However, it must be mentioned that it is possible that the women follow the husband. This depends on the situation. For example, in the novel *Karena Mentua*, this form of outmigration is described.

Table 1. Elements of the Story Salah Pilih and Dichotomies.

No	Elements of the story	Dichotomies
1	Saniah and her mother are of noble origin and try to maintain a 'high' position.	People of noble descent versus commoners
2	The mother of Saniah does not accept the marriage of her son in the city. She tries to prevent it. On the other side, her husband does accept it.	Active versus passive
3	Saniah does not eat with the others. She eats only in her room. She often insults Asnah. Asnah is patient and forgives most of her shortcomings.	Well-mannered versus not well-mannered
4	Without any considerations, Saniah and her mother depart from the village. They die in a car accident.	Spontaneous/ emotional versus thoughtful
5	Asri is Western educated and criticizes some elements of the Minangkabau customs.	Modern versus traditional attitude
6	Asnah lives in the house together with Sitti Maliah and Ibu Mariati. Asri on the other side comes back from his studies.	Home versus outmigration

A structuralist reading of Karena Mentua

The synchronic way of reading helps to carve out the following binary pairs of oppositions: In *Table 2*, some dichotomies of the novel *Karena Mentua* are listed. The novel *Karena Mentua* reveals intriguing features. The name 'Marah Adil' may serve as a clue. 'Adil' means 'just'. So, when he decides to kill the evil mother, it might appear to be 'fair' for many readers as she destroyed two families. In the end, the act of killing is bad, and Marah Adil is punished. Perhaps, the sad outcome could have been prevented

if Marah Adil had been more proactive in confronting and resisting the malevolent actions of Mak Guna. The content of *Karena Mentua* resembles the novel *Si Sabariah*, the first novel of Hamka (Hamka, 2020). Both authors come from the same village, Sungai Batang, at Lake Maninjau. It was reported that such a tragic incident inspired Hamka (and probably Nur Sutan Iskandar) to write about this event. The tragic behavior of Marah Adil shows that he could not see any other way to prevent the marriage of Ramalah. Even the *mamak* (the older brother of Mak Guna) of Ramalah did not agree with his sister's behavior and could not prevent her course of action. Nur Sutan Iskandar is very critical of the way of life in West Sumatra and the strict customary laws. Moreover, Mak Guna is very selfish and greedy. She does not care that her behavior is sinful in the Islamic sense.

Table 2. Binary pairs of opposition in the novel *Karena Mentua*.

No	Elements of the story	Dichotomies
1	Marah Adil moves to the city of Lampung in order to find a job.	<i>Merantau</i> versus home village
2	Marah Adil is (at the beginning) a poor farmer while other men are rich.	Poor versus rich
3	Ramalah is modest and well-mannered. Her mother is greedy.	Modesty versus greediness
4	Marah Adil kills Ramalah and himself	Death versus life

Both novels, *Salah Pilih* and *Karena Mentua*, convey a similar concept regarding the role of women in a Minangkabau village community. While men may have formal positions of authority, such as the head of a matrilineal (*penghulu*), women play a more active role in the decision-making process. The women in the novels of Nur Sutan Iskandar adhere closely to the local traditions by refraining from seeking employment outside the village. From the women, it is expected that they behave in a refined way. Other authors, like Marah Rusli, emphasized that women are close to *budi* (Stark and Zakaria, 2022). It is expected that the women follow well-mannered behavior. In the Minangkabau society, this is called *baso-basi* (Errington, 1984). There is a whole set of unwritten rules on how to behave in specific situations. Nur Sutan Iskandar himself gives a fascinating picture of them in his novels. For example, if someone approaches a house, a man should behave as explained by Asnah:

Ingatlah, Kanda, sedangkan jika seorang laki-laki hendak naik ke rumah saudaranya atau kemenakannya yang perempuan, sebelum naik tangga ia harus batuk-batuk dahulu. Atau ia berdiri di halaman sebentar, sambil berkata-kata kuat-kuat, sekadar terdengar ke atas rumah. [Translation: Remember, brother, whereas if a man wants to go up to his brother's house or his female niece, before going up the stairs he must cough first. Or he stands in the yard for a while, talking loudly, only to be heard inside the house] (Iskandar, 2006).

The customary regulations are very detailed. Women are often considered to be a kind of keeper of such traditional values. The cited part is a good example. Asnah is reminding the male protagonist, Asri, to behave in the correct way. On the other side, men are sometimes described as 'wild'. For example, Nur Sutan Iskandar describes a fight and also the killing at the end of the novel *Karena Mentua*. In Minangkabau society, it is expected for women to control their emotions (Heider, 2006). In the culture, it is accepted in some events that men do not follow a refined way. The well-known pig hunts are a good example (Errington, 1984). Nur Sutan Iskandar describes in both novels two protagonists who studied outside and follow a more Western lifestyle.

These two men are Asri (in *Salah Pilih*) and Ramli (in *Karena Mentua*). Interestingly, they are described as well-mannered, and they could see that some of the strict *adat* regulations are not good and that there must be changes. Nur Sutan Iskandar discusses these components. For example, the wife of Ramli, who is from Java, has no rights at all. Moreover, the older generation is depicted as a generation that seeks to control the way of life. By showing the tragic consequences, Nur Sutan Iskandar encourages the readers to get a critical perspective. He made it clear when he described that the only solution for Ramli and his wife is to get a peaceful life outside of Sumatra. The role of the parents-in-law in Nur Sutan Iskandar's literary work is quite interesting. Both novels depict the mothers-in-law as being characterized by their materialistic tendencies and manipulative behavior. They want to control the whole situation. The daughters must follow their will, and their greedy behavior leads to a calamity at the end of the novel *Karena Mentua*. It seems, that Nur Sutan Iskandar supports a more 'modern' understanding of family life in which the so-called nuclear family (wife and husband) can live together without the interference of other family members.

Conclusion

In this article, the role of Minangkabau women, as illustrated by Nur Sutan Iskandar, is analyzed. The structuralist analysis has shown that there are binary oppositions that are important components of Minangkabau society. This culture is well-known for the coexistence of contradictory components. In such a society, the role of women is crucial. They govern the houses and the ancestral land. Therefore, it is not surprising that mostly men went outside to look for a livelihood. Nur Sutan Iskandar stresses some general features. Women exhibit higher levels of activity, while still upholding traditional norms. Particularly, the refined manners are closely connected to Minangkabau women. On the other side, the men are described as passive. Nur Sutan Iskandar criticizes certain parts of the Minangkabau customs, like the role of the mothers-in-law or the marginal position of men in the house of the wife. The form of the novel allows him to illustrate the 'problematic' elements. In this article, it was also shown that the form of novels can give a good impression of the Minangkabau culture and the inner conflicts that are below the surface. Of course, they will not replace ethnographic descriptions because of the lack of scientific rigor. Nonetheless, they could give a fascinating picture of daily life.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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