

## Consumptivism of Gender Role in Ni Nyoman Sani's Works of Arts

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### ABSTRACT

All this time, a woman has often been placed as an object per se in visual art in Bali. In every work of arts, there are motives and meanings involved. This happens similarly in the works of women visual artists in Bali. There is an ideology behind them. This article reveals and describes the gender ideology that works behind the visual representation of Ni Nyoman Sani's works. In-depth interpretations of Sani's rich works of arts were conducted and results showed the process of consumptivism is commonly utilized through the use of gender difference. This article concludes that the gender ideology works behind Ni Nyoman Sani's work, that is, concerning the consumptivism of the gender role in its use. It is expected that this discussion can give us a broader and deeper understanding of the gender ideology that works behind Ni Nyoman Sani's creative process.

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## INTRODUCTION

Art of this era is the art that cannot be fully understood without placing it in the whole framework of community and culture (Hasan, 2001; Saidi, 2008). Nowadays, Indonesian contemporary art is presented with rich human interests and problems. These include diverse human interests and issues, unstoppable global capitalism, continuous environmental destruction, rapid progress in information science and technology worsen wars of ideologies, human split personality, problems of woman and gender, increasingly sex and power issues, etc. These problems exist and are directly experienced by Indonesian contemporary artists. Among those are problems faced by Balinese contemporary women artists where, in addition to their existing social problems, the patriarchal cultural construction strongly rises. This phenomenon is worth interpreting deeper from multiple perspectives.

One of the Balinese women artists, Ni Nyoman Sani, has been expressing many of these issues through her artworks. Largely portrayed in her biography, gender problems have been prominent in her works and it is believed to be motivated by her experience on gender injustice. As confirmed by Winarno (2007), although art is a personal expression, it keeps giving a social function that can explain social situations in human life. Art, as emphasized by Sugiharto (2015) is also viewed as the basic element in all human activities, the inherent parts in all of their performances. It is in this position that works of visual art created by Ni Nyoman Sani have to be searched for.

All this time, analyses of previous studies on Balinese contemporary works, including Ni Nyoman Sani's works of arts have often used the aesthetical approach of modernism. Hence, the problems that have been mentioned were the structural problems in visual art, both visual and aesthetical aspects. Other concepts outside the visual text, such as social, political, gender, sexual, globalism phenomena are excluded from the analyses. This article focuses on the gender ideology that works behind the creative process of Ni Nyoman Sani utilizing theories of postmodernism, cultural studies, visual semiotic theory, gender and ideology theory, and representation theory.

## **METHOD AND THEORIES**

This article was prepared by writing a number of steps that covered the design, the determination of the types and sources of data, the determination of the techniques of data collection, the determination of data analysis techniques, and the presentation of the result of data analysis.

There were two types of data sources in the process of writing this article. The primary data consist of visual works of arts, the concept of creation, and the artist's bibliography. The secondary source involves in the form of comments, notes from art journalists, art or culture observers, and academicians on the works of arts studied in this article, as well as the biography of the artist. This study used the instruments of the interview guide, observation guide, visual and audio recorder and cameras (photo and video camera). The method of examination was based on the criteria of documentation photography and audio documentation.

The data were collected by using an observation technique in the studio of Ni Nyoman Sani, which was done three times, unstructured interviews both directly and indirectly through communication media and social media with Ni Nyoman Sani for four times, and library research using monographs, exhibition catalogues posters, both printed and electronic. There are 40 works that have been collected successfully in this process, but according to the criteria that have been determined, only 4 works were analysed.

To find the answer to the problem in this article, content analysis was selected, especially in relation to gender theory and ideology found in the works of Ni Nyoman Sani. The analysis process was based on cultural studies theory, as stated by Barker (2014), cultural studies theory is an interdisciplinary field that selectively takes various perspectives and other disciplines to study the relations between culture and politics using an eclectic method. The interdisciplinary method has the procedure based on one discipline as its ontological basis. Works of arts as objects of the study is treated as an autonomous institution of the art itself that is built by relating

inter-elements in its structure. This is the basic analysis stage in hermeneutic as objectification or form analysis. This stage is then followed with the next analysis, that is symbolization. From here, the works of arts are read as a collection of signifiers that refer to various signified entities outside themselves.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A woman is sitting in a half lying position. She is wearing a dress which shows the stomach part of her body. Her face looks quiet and it looks like she is contemplating. The foreground and the background of the setting of the woman are whitewashed and there is a little light blue hue. The quiet impression becomes stronger with this setting. This painting in oil on canvas is entitled *Menunggu* (Waiting) (90 x 140 cm, 2003) (see Picture 1).



Picture 1: *Menunggu* (Waiting), A Work of Ni Nyoman Sani  
Source: The Painting of Ni Nyoman Sani, Singapadu

Ni Nyoman Sani, the painter, wants to express the mental condition of a woman who is waiting through this painting. “Menunggu” as explained in the lexical meaning is staying for some time at a place, expecting something to happen (to come). (Who or what) does the woman in this sexy dress wait? It is easy to draw the correspondences among the position, dress, setting and quiet facial expression. There are two meanings that can be understood in this painting.

First, the woman in this painting is the one who is often represented as an active woman. The body of the woman as expressed in Giddens (2004) is the instrument to win love. The woman in this painting is the subject who is aware that she herself is a visual object. The object that is ready to be viewed by male eyes. This is, of course, related to the role of gender based on sex or biological characteristic that causes the public world to be claimed as the men’s world, while the private or domestic world is for women. The patriarchal social relation is informed through law, system, tradition, and even on behalf of religion. Hence, a woman’s body is under the reign of the patriarchal power.

Second, the woman’s body in this painting is something presented in the universality concept. The concept of universality and universalism as noted by Prabasmoro (2004, p. 89) refers to a kind of “a meeting place” for “cultural variety”. Universality implies something which contains another.

Like the concept of universality and universalism, a type of a certain body, for example, is accepted more as something universal than the other types. The normal body, of course, can be accepted universally. In the case of Sani's painting, for example, the ideal body is the one with fair skin. Fair or white contains the meaning as an image of a nonworking class woman. White is also associated with cleanliness.

This concept is of course only a cultural construction. However, Sani as many women, dreams of this, as part of the way of life (or more accurately as a lifestyle). This woman artist represents a white body on canvases. The women's bodies in Sani's paintings are the bodies which because of the body aesthetical power – and then commodification - have been accepted by many women. The woman's body in this painting is a clean fair skin as the fruit of the body aesthetical process.

The painting *Apakah Wanita Harus Selalu Menunggu?* (Do a Women have to Always Wait?) (acrylic on canvas, 210 x 240 cm, 2005) also presents a similar condition. Four women in the positions and gestures which are almost alike or in a quiet position. The eyes of the four women appear to be looking at a distance, but with an empty gaze. There is an impression that in their minds they are waiting for something (see Picture 2).



Picture 2: *Apakah Wanita Harus Selalu Menunggu?* (Do Women Have to Always Wait), A Work of Ni Nyoman Sani

Source: The Painting of Ni Nyoman Sani, Singapadu

The waiting impression in this painting is stronger than before (Picture 1). This impression is presented through repetition that is built by the way how the four women are put in three panels with the same size. The vertical panels that are arranged in a row give the impression of repetition while on the other hand, they give an impression of frames or boundaries that enclose the women. *Menunggu* (Waiting) for these four women remind of the act of 'Waiting for Godot' (Menunggu Godot). The act of waiting, which may be active, is likely to be uncertain. The image of fair skin in some of Sani's paintings like those exhibited in "Seri Putih" (A White Series) at Santrian Gallery, represents the reality of women whose images of bodies are located in their minds and not in their bodies. Thus, the image is obviously not the real thing.

Women's bodies in Sani's paintings often present beauty as women's strength. In this sense, women's bodies are the tool to gain attention from the other sex. This image projection does not directly present an image of an interdependence. Women are represented as the side who need

men. Women on Sani's canvas are women whose dresses and makeups give an impression of producing a sign and at the same time meaning. A representation that shows the subject woman's pose with awareness as an object that is ready to be viewed. A body is a visual object whose owner is aware of as an asset.

Bodies in Sani's paintings as formulated by Synnott (2003, p. 12) do not only "have existed" naturally, but also become social categories with different meanings produced and developed every time by the different populace. In other words, bodies are like a sponge in their ability to absorb meanings, besides having a very strong political nuance.

In this case, women's bodies are the habitat for the growth of cultural, public, private, positive, negative, economical symbolism and commodification. Bodies, especially those of the women are related to a discipline that has to and will be undergone by them. Bodies are socialized in a system in such a way that it then has a hierarchy. Thus, we know very beautiful, beautiful, less beautiful, and even not beautiful bodies. In Sani's case of paintings, women's bodies are very beautiful bodies. The painting is served by paying attention to the perfect body anatomical structure. Part by part, the body is placed in a perfect pose and proportion. To strengthen the ideology, Sani even changed the colour of women's bodies to fair, something that is culturally constructed.

Women's bodies in Sani's paintings are also the habitat for the growth of private and public meanings. Bodies that must be private and domestic are presented by Sani publicly. Women's bodies are presented as visual objects. Sani's way of looking at women's bodies, as expressed in her concept about paintings may be influenced by the patriarchal culture and under the dominance of men who appreciate the bodies to be "consumed" as the visual objects. Even, the bodies in this painting also give an impression as an object of touch, an object of male desire. Her painting entitled, *Seandainya Aku Sewangi Mawar* (If only I were as Fragrant as a Rose) (acrylic on canvas, 180 x120 cm, 2003) (see Picture 3).

This painting is made up of a picture of a woman in a sitting pose with feet joining each other. This pose is very closely associated with the word fashion or photography. This impression is confirmed by the position of the head that turns to the side. It is clear that there is a style in this position. This style is associated with the meaning of the pose as a way to be seen. As the definition of a pose, which is the style or attitude that is presented when one takes a picture of it or paints it. Hence, a pose is an attitude as the result of an arrangement with the aim of obtaining a certain style. Or in other words, a pose is very different from a gesture that is related to body language.

The woman in this painting is wearing a dress with a wide neck which enables the neck and shoulder to be clearly seen. The red dresses unite with the whole set of the painting. The dominance of this red colour immediately stimulates the eyes to see it. At the beginning, the process of looking at this painting starts with the glaring red colour. After a while, the eyes are led to see the strange colour. The colour is white with a little hue of brown in the parts of face, neck, fingers, legs and toes.



Picture 3: *Seandainya Aku Sewangi Mawar* (If Only I were as Fragrant as a Rose).  
A Work of Ni Nyoman Sani  
Source: The Painting of Ni Nyoman Sani, Singapadu

It is easy to see that this painting is presented by the artist with the stress on the strange colour. This strange colour is on the part of the body that is interesting to see. The strange colour with its meaning is a disorderliness that shows a deviation from a common uniformity. The disorder in this work of Sani serves to give a focus of attention. The woman in this painting clearly shows her appeal to be seen. Hence, the meaning of women's bodies has migrated from the domestic (private) domain to the public. This is made clearer by the title of the painting: *Seandainya Aku Sewangi Mawar* (If Only I were as Fragrant as a Rose). Rose, of course, can have a connotation of a visual object, an object of smell, an object of desire. Rose, its fragrance, its beauty, then is presented with its public characteristic.

Sani did not criticize the quasi-world of this beautiful woman. Sani did not criticize the sociocultural construction of a male territory. She even tended to campaign about white, and at the same time, she adopted it. This was seen by Sani through the look of the dress of her painting to the real dress. Sani then designed dresses inspired by her paintings.

In the opening of her single exhibition at Santrian Gallery, Sanur, Sani presented an exhibition of dresses that she designed using the visual art performing approach. There were fifteen dresses of her design that were exhibited by models. Interestingly, one of the models was I Nyoman Sura, a choreographer who was also a Balinese contemporary dancer. Thanks to Sura, this exhibition of Sani's dresses entered the domain of performance or theatre in a broader sense. Sani and Sura collaboration erased the differences between fashion and art and blended them respectively. In this light, Sani and Sura owed it to Paul Poiret, a couturier (a haute-couture fashion designer) at the beginning of the 20th century that collaborated theatre and fashion.

The removal of the difference between fashion and art was performed explicitly by Sani in her exhibition of seven of her designs in bamboo-made mannequin works. The making and displaying of these mannequins employed the installation art approach. It did not stop there. The catwalk long straight white cloth that was once used at the time of performance or fashion show was displayed all the time during the exhibition. On the edge of this long cloth, there was an exhibition of a bamboo-made mannequin. This work was more like an installation produced by

a fashion show index. Thus, this dress design by Sani was not present as an exhibition as commonly seen at a fashion house, instead, the dresses with the bamboo-made mannequin were the works of fashion and at the same time, it was also a performing art and installation art.

In art terminology, this work belongs to the genre of contemporary visual art – another term for postmodern visual art. This is marked by, for example, the erasure of the border between pure art and applied art, visual art and performing art, dress and installation, and even art and kitsch (see Picture 4).



Picture 4: Fashion Show and a Bamboo-made Mannequin Installation, A Work of Ni Nyoman Sani  
Source: Sani's Documentation

While adopting Barnard's opinion on fashion (1996) that has become classic, according to Budiman (2004, p. 95), fashion is presented in front of us through an ambiguous face. On the one hand, a face looks attractive and tempting. On the other hand, it reveals a meaning that is associated with falsehood and deception.

Fashion is often called as the existence of a body that serves as a bridge between the biological body and the sociocultural reality. It is often viewed as something secondar. Sani through her works – paintings, performances, and installations – represent fashion not only in the position as applied visual artworks but also an effort to produce the meaning of fashion in the pure art environment.

The dresses that are worn by the women in Sani's paintings also show certain parts of the body, like the shoulder, back, thigh, leg, and even breast split. The dresses are presented with denotative meanings of the covers of the bodies, but the more important ones are the connotative meanings; something that can be interpreted more than what is visually seen. Meanings that can be produced from this work, among others, is in the selection of colours in the dresses. The painting entitled *Seandainya Aku Sewangi Mawar* (If Only I were as Fragrant as a Rose) (2003), *Garis* (Line) (2003), *Menunggu* (Waiting) (2003), *Apakah Wanita Harus Selalu Menunggu* (Do Women Always Have to Wait) (2005), *Pelangi* (Rainbow) (2003), *Senyum Tipis* (Thin Smile) (2003), etc. are dominated by red which has the gender connotation. The red colour in culture is often constructed as women's colour. Hence, red is also associated with feminineness; a person who is wearing it can be regarded as womanlike.

All the presentations shown in the selected samples of works of arts reveal a pivotal general idea. In gender difference, the process of consumptivism is likely taking place. Cultural construction as accepted by the global world is often existed in these kinds of works of arts. The patriarchal culture which shows the dominance of men was also present as a part of the appreciation and visual works of arts. While arts may involve other relevant activities, like a fashion show, a postmodern visual art that belongs to contemporary works of arts, may largely take place. All of these strongly suggests that consumptivism exists in gender works.

## CONCLUSION

Women in Sani's paintings are fashionable with the dresses, white skin, lipstick, and various body attributes whose class position can be read semantically as the representations of upper-middle-class attributes. Women in their sociocultural position are in a conspiracy of enticement who are fond of consuming dresses and cosmetics more than what they need, showing an explicit sociocultural reality close to commodification. Hence, women in these paintings are the cultural subjects and objects of rapid commodification development. A lived and revived reality in the process of consumptivism through the use of gender difference. Sani, through her paintings, may tend to accept the reality of the gender difference, but she goes beyond the accepted reality into deeper meanings that have provided interesting portraits of the issue of women in interpreting the meaning of their bodies. Studies using cultural point of views like this one has enriched the works of arts themselves presented with multiple interpretations. It is suggested that further deeper relevant research, like visual iconography and biography study on contemporary artists or authors, should be conducted.

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