

## **Nostalgia in Yogyakarta:**

### **The Film *Biola Tak Berdawai* (Stringless Violin)<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **Social Change in the Post-Suharto Era**

May 21, 1998 marked the end of an era in Indonesian history. On that day President Suharto announced his resignation as the circumstances forced him to step down after thirty-two years. In Jakarta the days preceding Suharto's resignation were 'full of high drama, nerve-racking suspense, and unexpected turns' and four students from Trisakti University were shot 'without any provocation' (Suryakusuma 2004:3). Indonesia entered a period of *Reformasi* (reform) which gave way to more democratic institutions and more freedom of speech for writers, filmmakers, journalists, and the public at large. As *Reformasi* relaxed the long-standing constraints on media and public life at large, many women emerged publicly and engaged in cultural production. All of a sudden it was possible to challenge Suharto's authoritarianism and masculinist paradigm of power that had defined the roles of women almost exclusively within the domestic sphere (state *ibuism*).<sup>2</sup> A new generation defied the New Order's monolithic culture and way of thinking.

More liberated ideas regarding sexuality, particularly female sexuality as well as homosexuality have come to the fore since 1998, undermining the hetero-normativity and societal expectations of marriage and family that were strongly endorsed during the Suharto years. The much-debated novel *Saman* by Ayu Utami (born 1968), published one month before Suharto's fall from power (April 1998), presents in an outspoken (some would say blunt) way female characters who enjoy their bodies and sexuality, and are openly promiscuous. Some critics and readers have found the book's content immoral, and its language 'vulgar'. Five and a half years later (December 2003) the American-

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<sup>1</sup> A Dutch version of this paper was published in Willem van der Molen et.al. (eds), *Milde Regen* (2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibuism* is defined as an "ideology, which sanctions any action provided it is taken as a mother who is looking after her family, a group, a class, a company or the state, without demanding power or prestige in return" (Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis 1987: 44).

trained female film director Nia DiNata (born 1970) released her second feature film *Arisan!* (a social gathering for women, all contribute money and, as in a lottery, one wins the amount). *Arisan!* presents a gay male relationship in a positive way, and gives it a place in society, thus breaking through long existing taboos regarding homosexuality. Nia DiNata's most recent film *Berbagi Suami* (Love for Share, 2006) confronts its audiences with Muslim practices of polygamy, and offers a lesbian relationship as a solution out of a polygamous household. This film was declared the best film at the Hawaii International Film Festival.

It is interesting to examine the question of how young creative artists position themselves at a time of rapid social and political change. Do they 'write or speak against' dominant discourses, particularly the master narrative of Suharto's New Order that prohibited critical debates on gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race, religion, class, and nation?<sup>3</sup> We find in post-1998 cultural production that women emphatically celebrate female sexuality, and subvert "traditional" gender ideologies. In this paper I analyze and comment on one particular film, *Biola Tak Berdawai* (Stringless Violin, 2003) directed by Sekar Ayu Asmara, and produced by Nia DiNata. Coming from a western feminist perspective I will argue that this movie, in fact, reverts back to conservative, masculine notions of gender and sexuality. *Biola Tak Berdawai* reinforces the idea that women must follow their *kodrat wanita*, innate nature, and that they are destined to be mothers.

### ***Biola Tak Berdawai***

*Biola Tak Berdawai* is set in Yogyakarta/Kotagede in 2002, and portrays this place in Central Java nostalgically, as the heart of Javanese culture with centuries old traditions. Yogya is presented as a haven of tranquility in contraposition to the modern and cosmopolitan capital Jakarta, the signifier of the modern nation. Jakarta is not shown in the film, but only referred to. Ballet and violin music, as expressions of western art forms, have special significance in contrast with Javanese dance and gamelan (absent in

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<sup>3</sup> SARA (*Suku, Agama, Ras, Antar-golongan*) were topics that could not be publicly debated as they might challenge national stability.

the film). The volcano Merapi, Java's south coast (Pantai Krakal),<sup>4</sup> the Prambanan temples and a traditional Javanese house serve as the background of the events. These images, laden with symbolism, suggest a Javanese essence, a homogeneous and harmonious entity. We, the viewers, are well aware that this no longer exists - probably never existed - yet the movie maintains this distorted picture of essentialism, and evokes a sense of longing and nostalgia for an idealized and long-gone era.

From a feminist point of view my analysis focuses on the way *Biola Tak Berdawai* represents women, and implies gender roles and ideologies. Renjani and Mbak Wid, the protagonists, share the same fate as victims of a patriarchal order. They are not capable of resisting masculinist norms that allow them no autonomy over their own bodies and sexuality. Sekar's conservative take on female sexuality is striking when compared to cultural products from other women since *Reformasi*. At the end of this paper I will briefly discuss the novel *Biola Tak Berdawai* by Seno Gumira Ajidarma (2004) which is based on the movie.

### **Renjani and Mbak Wid**

The opening of *Biola Tak Berdawai* shows a nostalgic street scene of Kotagede with *andong*, mopeds and bicycles. An older man, dressed in a *lurik* jacket and a batik head cover, peddles his bicycle through the narrow alleys until he reaches a Javanese house. Its spacious, tiled veranda reminds viewers of Dutch colonial homes. Wooden pillars, beautifully carved at the foot, support the roof. The space is decorated with potted plants and teak furniture, and colonial-style lamps hang off the ceiling. The house, we later see, dates from 1857.<sup>5</sup> These first images imbue a historical sphere of hushed serenity and stillness, far removed from present-day hastiness and loud commotion. The house turns out to be an orphanage for children with severe disabilities (*tunadaksa*), and is called *Rumah Asuh Ibu Sejati* (The True Mother Orphanage). Two unmarried women manage the orphanage: Renjani, thirty years old (played by Ria Irawan) and Mbak Wid (Jajang C.

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<sup>4</sup> See Sekar [n.d.]: 11. I am grateful to Seno Gumira Ajidarma who gave me a copy of the film script. Audiences will no doubt recognize the film's images as Java's south coast. I do not know to what extent the specific site of Pantai Krakal is generally known and recognizable.

<sup>5</sup> According to the film script (Sekar [n.d.]:4) and the novel (Seno 2004:9) the house dates from 1887, but the year displayed in the movie clearly says 1857.

Noer), a forty-year-old pediatrician. On the morning that Pak Kliwon arrives by bicycle, they have to bury Larasati, a baby who only lived for five days. The small graveyard is located on a slope out in nature, surrounded by trees.

Renjani is particularly concerned with, and attached to one of the orphans, Dewa (Dicky Lebrianto), a stunted eight-year-old boy, whose head is bowed to the ground. Visually Dewa gives the impression of a “broken” child. As we hear from Mbak Wid, he has brain damage and is blind, deaf, mute and autistic. Dewa was expected to live only briefly, but miraculously he survived beyond his first year. Renjani behaves like a doting mother. She takes him with her everywhere she goes, and talks to him continuously in order to inform him about his surroundings. She verbalizes what she sees and hears *for* him so that he can feel involved in the world in which he lives. Dewa, however, never reacts to Renjani’s flood of words. He faces the ground, his face hidden. Initially it seems that Renjani gives meaning to Dewa’s life, but soon we learn the tables are turned: Dewa makes Renjani’s life purposeful.

From the very start the images indicate that Renjani and Mbak Wid are two diverging personalities. Their outer appearances are distinctly different, and so are their private room and work spaces. Renjani is an attractive woman with a friendly, open face and soft features. She mostly wears a colorful sarong and *kebaya* (traditional blouse) in which she can freely move around. Her hair is braided and she does not cover her head. Her office space and bedroom where Dewa’s crib is located too, are bright and sizable because of the open, high windows, and furnished with teak wooden bookcases, chairs and tables in art deco. Framed pictures of ballerinas hang on the walls. Renjani has a CD player and computer, yet these rooms create a sphere of the past. Large vases with tuberose are omnipresent and indicate a household well cared for. We see the tuberose also in the common space of the back porch where Mbak Wid, Renjani and Dewa eat their meals and spend time around a marble dining table.

Mbak Wid appears as two different figures: as a physician she looks professional in her white uniform and with her hair tied in a bun. Her facial features show no emotion, she

emanates an aloof authority in the clinic of the children. In the evening, however, completely dressed in black and wearing eye-catching jewelry she has a spooky demeanor with her blue eye shadow and long hair hanging loose. This becomes more evident in her role of fortuneteller: Mbak Wid enjoys reading tarot cards. When she makes predictions, but also in conversation, she speaks slowly and with circumspection, as if she carefully weighs every word. For her, life is full of riddles, *teka-teki*. This word is constantly on her lips. She lights dozens of candles in her bedroom every night, some in silver candleholders that remind one of the *kraton* (sultan's palace) paraphernalia. The flickering flames create a mysterious, frightening realm. With her dual identity Mbak Wid is an enigmatic individual.

In spite of their diverging personalities Renjani and Mbak Wid share unspeakable life experiences that are related to norms and values regarding female sexuality. When Mbak Wid warns Renjani not to become overly attached to Dewa (*Kamu sudah terlalu lengket sama Dewa*), Renjani replies that he replaces her own, unborn child. She subsequently confesses that she is a victim of rape, violated by her ballet instructor, and that she had an abortion. Later in the film more details are provided: Renjani trained as a ballerina in Jakarta, and performed in public. Her rape abruptly ended her career, and because she had inherited her grandmother's house in Yogyakarta, she turned her back on Jakarta. However, she cannot rid herself from the traumatic memories, and regularly we witness her nightmares which are shot in black-and-white. In slow motion we see a ballerina with her male dance partner in close physical contact. These experiences haunt her, and every time she wakes up after such a bad dream, she winces with pain in her abdomen.

Mbak Wid responds disapprovingly to Renjani's confession of her abortion. She explains that her emotional reaction is caused by the fact that her mother had self-induced miscarriages up to six times. Her mother earned a living as a sex trade worker. In a black-and-white flashback we see how Mbak Wid as a child witnessed her mother's fornication. For that reason she made a vow that she would devote her life to save children's lives. Mbak Wid and Renjani suffer from enormous guilt complexes in a social context where abortion is condemned as a deadly sin (*dosa*). Mbak Wid's mother and Renjani

transgressed patriarchal boundaries of what makes a woman respectable as wife and mother. As women they are victims of respectively male violence (rape) and economic circumstances (prostitution) that exploit women. Renjani and Mbak Wid have been forced to keep their secrets, they were never able to turn to someone for moral or emotional support. At this point their frankness brings them closer together and they find consolation. It forges a strong bond of female solidarity.

### **Bhisma, the violinist**

One day Renjani finds Dewa on the floor with a box full of memorabilia from her past life. When she takes a ballet shoe from his hand, and dances her ballet steps on the music, Dewa lifts his head for the first time to look up. The moment Renjani notices this and approaches him, his head bows down again. Convinced that music will be therapeutic Renjani decides to take Dewa to a recital. The next shot is of the Prambanan temples, and the camera zooms in on a string quartet playing in the light of the full moon with the three temples in the background. After the concert Renjani meets the young violinist Bhisma (Nicholas Saputro). One will immediately associate the name Bhisma with the *Mahabharata*: Bhisma is the man who raised the Pandawas and Kurawas, and he could determine the moment of his death himself. While Renjani converses with Bhisma, Dewa grabs the bow and will not let go. Bhisma responds to Dewa in a natural and caring way; he accompanies them home. When he returns the next day to pick up his bow, he is given the opportunity to get to know Renjani better, but also to see the orphaned children with disabilities. Through his eyes the viewers see the babies born with hydrocephalus and other impairments, and share his compassion.

A close friendship develops between Renjani and the twenty-three year old music student which in Mbak Wid's eyes can turn into some sort of romance. Renjani's fear of (sexual) intimacy plays tricks on her. In one scene where Bhisma compares the orphans to stringless violins, Renjani tells him of Dewa's reaction to her ballet dancing. Bhisma suggests they test him once more. While he plays the violin and Renjani dances, Dewa lifts up his head as before and looks at what is happening. Elated by Dewa's response

Renjani and Bhisma embrace each other. But when Bhisma holds her closer and tries to caress her, Renjani rejects him. Traumatized she writhes herself from his embrace and tells him to leave. Later she tells Mbak Wid that she is afraid to succumb to this young man, eight years her junior. That night Renjani dreams of an embryo in a jar filled with formaldehyde. In a shot from above we see Renjani lying on her bed wincing with pain, an infinite suffering. She is filmed through the lattice of her four-poster bed as if she is detained behind bars, framed in a structure she cannot escape.

Yet, Renjani seems to be able to let go of her past. In a later scene we see her with the box of memorabilia on the beach of the south coast. One by one she floats her ballet shoes on the waves until she commits the entire box to the ocean. This “launching” evokes associations with the legend of Nyai Loro Kidul, the goddess of the South Sea, to whom the Javanese pay respect with offerings. Nyai Loro Kidul controls Java’s south coast with her supernatural power and regularly claims people’s lives. Renjani entrusts her past life to the almighty goddess in order to disengage herself from the oppressing complexities and limitations that haunt her, and to open herself up to a new future.

Meanwhile Bhisma is hurt, confused and insecure because of Renjani’s rejection, which he cannot understand. We see him out in the beautiful nature of Kalikuning with Mount Merapi in the background, lost in thought and playing with his cigarette lighter. Tormented by Renjani’s refusal he deliberately burns his fingers in the flame. We can connect this self-torture to a previous scene in which Bhisma witnesses how Renjani lovingly consoles Dewa after having burnt his fingers. Bhisma’s self-inflicted pain can be interpreted as his way of needing attention from the woman of his heart.

Next we see Bhisma in his modestly furnished student lodgings composing a piece *Biola Tak Berdawai* which he has dedicated to Renjani and Dewa. He intends to express the life energy of Dewa and the other orphans through his music, but as the many balls of paper on the floor indicate, he is not very productive and becomes increasingly frustrated. When he tries to play his violin, he is unsuccessful because of the bandage on his finger. Eventually he visits Renjani to beg her, literally on his knees, not to refuse/reject him

(*Jangan singkirkan saya*). She is his muse; he cannot function without her. Renjani encourages him to complete his composition and explains that she needs time to make peace with herself and her past. After this meeting Bhisma's creative inspiration returns and over the phone he invites Renjani and Dewa to the premier performance. Again he asks, or rather orders, Renjani not to reject him.

However, Renjani and Dewa do not attend Bhisma's concert. Disappointed and desperate Bhisma throws his sheet music in the air: his musical creativity and talents are useless if he cannot share them. In the days following, he struggles with himself and his memories of Renjani. This time he directs his anger not toward himself but toward his violin. One by one he tightens the strings to such extent that they snap. When finally he visits Renjani's house, Mbak Wid informs him Renjani has died because of uterine cancer as a result of her abortion.

The film ends with Bhisma, dressed in black, and Dewa, in white, at Renjani's grave. Bhisma plays his *Biola Tak Berdawai* for her, and Dewa lifts up his head to the sky and utters some sounds: "D..de...f..faa...shaa.aaang...ii..buu"<sup>6</sup> (*Dewa sayang ibu* - I love you, mommy). Bhisma holds Dewa in his arms while the camera zooms out, and from increasing distance the two of them disappear in the natural environment of the graveyard that looks out on to Merapi.

### **A Western Feminist Interpretation**

The first time I watched *Biola Tak Berdawai*, on VCD "at home"<sup>7</sup> in Jakarta. I was fascinated by the familiar images of an extremely idyllic Yogyakarta and surroundings. I enjoyed the nostalgic representation even though I realized I was deceived by the stereotypical depiction. At the same time I was shocked by the denouement when Renjani dies as the result of uterine cancer caused by her abortion. I became aware of how the interplay between the visual aspects and the plot reinforces a gender ideology that is

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<sup>6</sup> Sekar [n.d.]:69.

<sup>7</sup> From September to November 2004 I lived in Jakarta with my cousin Achmad Danial and his family. I am grateful for their hospitality and the way they allowed me to share in their family life.

explicitly confirmed at the very end of the movie. The film attests to its audiences that abortion leads to uterine cancer and death, and warns women not to have an abortion.<sup>8</sup> The message is that ultimately women must fulfill the duties of motherhood under all circumstances. They have no rights to decide over their bodies and sexuality, they are not allowed to terminate an undesired pregnancy, even when it is the result of rape.<sup>9</sup>

Renjani and Mbak Wid's mother transgress the rules and expectations imposed on women, and commit a sin against humanity. Mbak Wid has internalized her mother's scandalous and shameful actions, and spends her life as an old spinster. Both she and Renjani dedicate themselves to the children with disabilities, abandoned by their parents. These unwanted babies, one of whom is Dewa, were rejected by their parents, "aborted" after birth. But they, too, are, in Bhisma's words, "creations of God, they have their own beauty".<sup>10</sup> Because of his posture - his stooped body, his head bowed, and curved shoulders and back - Dewa can, in fact, be interpreted as the personification of a fetus. Renjani's overwhelming love for this child must compensate for the loss of her own unborn child. She cannot be absolved of her sin of abortion, however, hence she is penalized and pays with her life.

To me, as a western feminist, the direct link of cause and effect between Renjani's abortion and her uterine cancer<sup>11</sup> is extremely problematic and unacceptable because in

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<sup>8</sup> E, Djohan et al. mention "the sensitivity of the topic in a country where abortion continues to be very restricted and socially condemned" (1999:284). Kartono Mohamad and Ratna Megawangi (2000: 57-59) make a plea for legalizing abortion under strict conditions. Suryono Ekotama et al. conclude their expose as follows: "Dalam kasus *abortus provocatus* bagi korban perkosaan, peranan pemerintah sebagai pembuat kebijakan memegang posisi kunci yang amat penting [...] Penelitian-penelitian dan aspirasi-aspirasi masyarakat seputar legalisasi *abortus provocatus* harus segera ditindaklanjuti dan dikaji lebih dalam lagi" (In the case of *abortus provocatus* for rape victims, the government as policymaker plays a very important role [...] Research and people's aspirations on the legalization of *abortus provocatus* need to be followed up and studied further. 2001:202).

<sup>9</sup> The same message was conveyed through the popular novel, later turned into a movie, *Karmila* by Marga T. (1975, see Hellwig 1994:183-185).

<sup>10</sup> "Mereka juga ciptaan Tuhan [...] mereka mempunyai keindahan tersendiri." (Sekar [n.d.]:43).

<sup>11</sup> See Sekar [n.d.]:65: "Kankernya akibat dulu pernah melakukan aborsi [...] aborsi yang ceroboh." The word *ceroboh* (vile, bad, irresponsible) could indicate that this abortion was illegal and riskful. I wondered whether the film could be interpreted as an indictment against clandestine abortion practices in which women lose their lives, and as a plea for legalization, but concluded that this is not the case. Renjani's uterine cancer manifests itself more than eight years after her abortion; her death is not the result of haemorrhaging because of unprofessional treatment.

my view it represents women who choose for abortion in an unfair and misogynist way. One of the important issues of the second feminist wave in the western world was that women obtained the final say over their bodies and sexuality. In the 1960-1970s feminism and the sexual revolution in the West made contraceptives widely available, and led to more openness, better education, a breakdown of taboos and liberation from social and sexual restrictions. Virginity and monogamy were no longer considered norms for “decent and acceptable” female behavior. As a result women today can have a legal and safe abortion in special clinics in a number of countries. With regard to rape it is no longer automatically the case that a male dominated society points the finger at women as guilty and “having asked for it.” If in the past women were blamed and the rapist remained scot-free, present-day ways of thinking and the legal situation have changed, and the man is charged as the offender and violator.

Feminism as a grassroots movement and the sexual revolution of the 1970s never reached and impacted Indonesia as such. While Indonesian women today have many more opportunities than before in terms of education and careers, liberated ideas regarding sexuality and sexual behavior are in Indonesia not (yet) commonly accepted, at least not to the same extent as in (certain parts of) the West. To a large extent patriarchal (religious) principles dominate society, depending on the region and other circumstances. *Biola Tak Berdawai* underscores a sexist gender ideology that denies women their rights over their bodies. It is striking that Renjani’s rapist is never indicted in the film. On the contrary, the effect of the visualization of Renjani’s nightmares might be that viewers tend to make *her* responsible for the rape. The black-and-white shots of her dreams show two dancers: she in a tutu with thin straps, he stripped to the waist. They are in close physical contact as is common in ballet: his hands hold on to her waist when he lifts her, her legs rest against his torso. In contrast to the ballet flashbacks we never see the rape visualized.<sup>12</sup> In other words, ballet replaces the rape, and functions as a metaphor. An implied logical link between ballet and rape explains the unexpressed assumption that a woman who chooses for ballet, asks for being raped. The man remains out of sight, he is

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<sup>12</sup> Mieke Bal stipulates that rape cannot be visualized as it is both physically and psychologically an *inner* experience, it is an “irrepresentable experience” (1988:26-27, italics in original).

anonymous and we never see his face. He is not charged as guilty. In this context the omnipresent tuberose in the house become more meaningful. On the one hand the Indonesian word for the flowers, *bunga sedap malam* (literally flowers that are fragrant at night), also refers to sex trade workers,<sup>13</sup> and the clearly visible flowers can be interpreted as a metaphor for the two inhabitants of the house: Renjani as an immoral ballerina who displays her body publicly, and Mbak Wid as a prostitute's child. On the other hand the flowers are associated with death: people bring tuberose to the house of a deceased. As such the flowers foreshadow Renjani's pending death.

In *Biola Tak Berdawai* ballet functions as the licentious western dance form. It runs counter to traditional Javanese court dances, absent and invisible in the film, but notwithstanding strongly suggested by the visuals of refined (*alus*) Javanese culture: the house that resembles the *kraton*, and Prambanan, the site of *Ramayana* dance performances. Renjani's ballet career and experiences in Jakarta are in flat contradiction with the stylized Javanese *serimpi* and *bedhaya* dances, considered the apex of *alus* dance art.<sup>14</sup> Jakarta represents the modern, western, permissive and debauched capital, a cesspit of vice where women bring disaster to themselves. Yogyakarta functions as Jakarta's counterpoint, as a safe cultural haven where Javanese traditions provide a strong footing, and wounds can heal.

The invisible violation of rape contrasts poignantly with Renjani's abortion. Twice viewers are confronted with Renjani's memories of the abortion in black-and-white dream visions. In one scene a forceps comes into view as a menacing tool.<sup>15</sup> Another scene shows the earlier mentioned fetus in formaldehyde. This last image cannot but leave a strong impression on the audience, and must have been intended to provoke

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<sup>13</sup> See Stevens and Schmidgall-Tellings 2005:887. According to Manneke Budiman, the Javanese associate the fragrance of *bunga sedap malam* with the presence of *kuntilanak* or *sundel bolong*, wandering spirits that rob parents of their babies. *Kuntilanak* and *sundel bolong* were usually sex trade workers during their lives.

<sup>14</sup> See Brakel-Papenhuijzen 1992.

<sup>15</sup> See Sekar [n.d.]:33: "Sepasang kaki perempuan di sandaran kaki yang biasa terdapat pada bangku periksa diruan praktek ginekolog. Sebuah tangan yang kasar memegang sebuah forceps." Even though the word *biasa* is ambiguous here (i.e. meaning that this is not a normal situation), the fact that a gynaecologist is mentioned implies that Renjani's abortion was conducted professionally. Compare footnote 11.

repulsion. Personally I associated this particular scene with images used in anti-abortion campaigns which portray a fertilized ovum or embryo as a viable fetus. This, in my view, false representation of abortion propagates a sexual morality that forces women to adhere to masculine control over female bodies and reproduction, particularly in cases where pregnancy is the result of sexual violence.

*Biola Tak Berdawai* confirms conservative, (religiously) patriarchal norms and values that protect unborn life unconditionally. Renjani's moral offence costs her her life.<sup>16</sup> The figure of Mbak Wid as a physician, on the other hand, could serve as a role model for a successful and respectful career woman. Her metamorphoses, however, undermine her credibility. Moreover, professionally she devotes herself to a cause she missed in her personal life: the caring mother figure she never knew and she will never be herself. Significant in this respect is the name of the orphanage: *Rumah Asuh Ibu Sejati*, The True Mother Orphanage. It speaks metaphorically to "true motherhood" as a woman's destination. All in all the film conveys that women cannot deny their *kodrat wanita*, innate nature, as mothers.

Bhisma's violin music plays a central role in the film, both visually and in the plot line. It is Bhisma who uses the metaphor of a stringless violin for the children with multiple disabilities: "They cannot produce beautiful sounds".<sup>17</sup> The film music, composed by Addie M.S., intensifies the significance of visual aspects and dramatic moments. Within the plot line the music, which accompanies the ballet dance, offers the possibility to stimulate Dewa's perception and improve his development. Renjani and Bhisma's experiment leads to the result they hoped for, and the moment that Dewa lifts up his head for the second time, forms the climax of the relations among Renjani, Bhisma and Dewa. At this point the ideal hetero-family of male, female and child seems within reach. However, as positive as the experiment is for Dewa as expressed in his reaction, the effect is negative on Renjani and Bhisma. Renjani rejects Bhisma and an intimate relation

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<sup>16</sup> As one Indonesian friend put it, when I asked her opinion of the movie: "You take a life, you pay with your life".

<sup>17</sup> "Tidak bisa menghasilkan nada-nada indah" (Sekar [n.d.]:43). This is Renjani's reaction to Bhisma's observation.

which causes him to resort to self-inflicted pain and destruction of his violin, literally a stringless violin.

Bhisma's music runs parallel with Renjani's ballet, both are western art forms that in the Yogyakarta context serve as contrasts against the vacuum of the non-visible Javanese dance and inaudible gamelan. Bhisma may find obstructions in his musical career, but he can overcome them and eventually celebrate his creativity and talents. Even though he and his musical inspiration cannot rescue Renjani from her downfall, his composition *Biola Tak Berdawai* is triumphant in the end. He is able to give a voice to the muted orphans. At Renjani's grave Dewa not only lifts his head but even expresses through unarticulated utterances that he loves his mother because Bhisma's music stimulates him to do so. The film's ending seems to hold an optimistic promise that Bhisma will commit himself to the care of Dewa.

*Biola Tak Berdawai* undermines women's rights to decide over their bodies and their lives, and justifies a patriarchal gender ideology that can easily victimize women. Yet, the film presents Renjani and Mbak Wid as economically independent, in their social circumstances they are quite well off. Strikingly, no explanation is given of how Renjani can afford to finance and manage an orphanage, or how Mbak Wid, the daughter of a single mother who earned her living in the sex trade, succeeded in completing a medical degree at university. The film is suspiciously reticent about family relations or an explicit social context: Renjani, Mbak Wid and Bhisma interact as individuals without any references to family members or their specific backgrounds.

Because of the norms and values propagated in the film I was curious to learn more about Sekar Ayu Asmara. The back cover of Seno's novel displays her photo and a blurb on her work as a film producer, writer, composer and painter. The internet provides some information, but no interviews and nothing about Sekar's socio-political ideas or personal convictions.<sup>18</sup> Because of lack of data on where she stands ideologically regarding gender and feminism, or on her religious convictions, I have not been able to find an answer to

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<sup>18</sup> A Google search (November 24, 2005) resulted in 9610 items on Sekar Ayu Asmara.

how *Biola Tak Berdawai* fits in her gender politics. Viewed within the larger framework of cultural production since 1998 *Biola Tak Berdawai* stands out because of its reactionary-conservative moral tone. As mentioned above, since *Reformasi* women writers, female filmmakers and artists intentionally subverted sexual taboos, and appropriated their female sexuality in no uncertain terms. If women writers during Suharto's New Order presented masculine, or even sexist points of view in accordance with the *Darma Wanita* ideals, in recent literature, film and theatre women express themselves far more critically about misogyny and oppressive mechanisms. Hence, the unprogressive and patriarchal message of Sekar's 2003 film is exceptional, and indicates that conservative perceptions regarding sexuality have not been uprooted. *Biola Tak Berdawai* received a number of awards: it was declared the best film with the best music and best actor (Nicholas Saputro) at the 2003 Bali International Film Festival, and was awarded the Naguib Mahfouz prize at the Cairo International Film Festival. Ria Irawan received the prize of best actress at the Asia Pacific Film Festival in Shiraz, Iran, and in 2004 the film was nominated for an Oscar Academy Award in the category of best foreign film.<sup>19</sup>

### **Seno Gumira Ajidarma's Novel**

Following a new trend in Indonesia novelists these days are approached to write a book based on a movie, rather than the other way round.<sup>20</sup> In February 2004 Seno Gumira Ajidarma published his literary version of *Biola Tak Berdawai* in 198 pages. Seno is a journalist and writer of Javanese descent who grew up in Yogyakarta. In a most creative move Seno chose the seemingly blind, deaf and mute Dewa as his protagonist-cum-omniscient first-person narrator, and the reader experiences the events through Dewa's perception. As the narrator Dewa creates a world in words, but as the protagonist at the plot level he is not capable of communicating with his *ibu* (Dewa refers to Renjani exclusively as *ibu*, mother), Mbak Wid or Bhisma. The novel consists of fifteen chapters

<sup>19</sup> See Dwi Arjanto 2003, *Republika* 2003 and Yus 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Besides *Biola Tak Berdawai* the film *Ungu Violet* by Rako Prijanto (2005) was turned into a novel (written by Miranda), and the *sinetron* (soap opera) *Dara Manisku* came out as novel under the title *Sejuta Rasa*.

narrated by Dewa and six chapters, printed in italics and dispersed through the novel, in which an external narrator relates episodes from the *wayang* literature that are relevant to Dewa's story. This way Seno highlights some of Mbak Wid's statements about *wayang* characters such as Gandari, Drupadi and Bhisma, and about the great war of the Bharatayuda (Sekar [n.d.]: 6,18,41,63). Thus, with this extra dimension Seno positions the events explicitly in a Javanese context and he verbalizes the filmic cultural-visual aspects that are lost in print.

The novel literally adheres to the film's dialogues, and the plot remains unchanged. Yet, Seno does not simply regurgitate the film's narrative. He uses his imagination to elaborate on certain scenes and to create new details. Dewa's perspective is a brilliant invention, and gives the book its specific approach. Dewa starts his account as follows: "My name is Dewa. Actually it is strange they call me Dewa, because isn't a *dewa* (deity) an almighty being with supernatural powers? Whereas I, what kind of power do I have except for stirring up sympathy among my fellow humans?"<sup>21</sup> Many times he emphasizes his posture with his head bowed (*kepalaku tertunduk, aku tertunduk*), reinforcing the visual image from the film. However, the narrator Dewa is all knowing about the world around him and his fellow orphans. He ruminates on existential questions of life and death, and possesses a sixth supernatural faculty that allows him to communicate with the spirits of the deceased babies.

Seno accentuates two visual aspects from the film that recur a number of times in his book. First he uses butterflies as a metaphor. A short scene in the movie shows Renjani and Dewa in the paddy fields in which Renjani explains how a caterpillar turns into butterfly. She continues to express her hope that Dewa, like a butterfly, will fly out into the world. The metamorphosis serves in the novel as a metaphor not only for Dewa who considers himself a caterpillar who will never realize his mother's expectations to become a butterfly, but also for Renjani who, when she dances, is as light as a butterfly.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "Namaku Dewa. Sebetulnya aneh sekali aku diberi nama Dewa, karena bukanlah dewa adalah makhluk sakti mandraguna yang sangat berkuasa? Sedangkan aku, apalah kekuasaanku selain menerbitkan belas kasihan sesama manusia?" (Seno 2004: 7).

<sup>22</sup> Seno 2004: 38-43, 78-79, 81, 83, 117, 151, 172, 187.

Butterflies represent transformations and cycles of subsequent stages in life. For Dewa butterflies hold the promise that he can overcome his physical challenges, and for Renjani they indicate that she can liberate herself from the oppressive cocoon of the past. Seno connects a second image to that of the butterfly, namely the candles in Mbak Wid's bedroom. In the film the candles are a (quite cliché) metaphor for life: whenever a baby dies, we see a candle extinguish. In the novel Dewa associates the glow of flickering flames with frolicking butterflies. Flames and butterflies represent hope and faith in the future. However, the candlelight is also ominous and related to Mbak Wid's passion for the tarot cards: a flame that wavers in the wind, always risks to be extinguished.

As omniscient narrator Dewa is able to enter Renjani's past life and her dreams (Seno 204: 55, 77, 129). He is present (*Aku berada di sana*) when Renjani's ballet instructor rapes her. Remarkably, the novel depicts the rape far more explicitly than the film does: how Renjani resists him, how she hits him and escapes from his grip, but eventually is forced to succumb to him (Seno 2004: 78). Relating another nightmare Dewa identifies himself with the innocent fetus in the jar with formaldehyde (*janin tak berdosa*) (Seno 2004: 129-130). While I read Seno's depiction of the rape as a clear denunciation of this reprehensible act of violence against women, I interpret the narration of the second dream as a condemnation of abortion much in line with what the movie conveys.

In Dewa's version we read how at times he wishes to share his emotions with his mother, but is not capable to do so. At the moments when he lifts his head as well as when he grabs Bhisma's bow, he is overcome by an extremely powerful force.<sup>23</sup> Readers of Seno's novel realize how extremely grateful Dewa is for the love and care he receives from his mother, how his life is filled with her attention and affection. The literary version emphasizes the theme of unconditional motherly love through the eyes of the child, and underlines the importance of the self-sacrificing mother and *kodrat wanita*.

The six *wayang* chapters report on different *Mahabharata* scenes and characters: on Gandari, Desarastra's wife who gave birth to the one hundred Kurawas to witness them

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<sup>23</sup> "Tenaga yang mahadahsyat entah darimana, kekuatan entah dari mana." (Seno 2004:83, 105).

later fall in battle in the Bharatayudha; on Drupadi, the spouse of all five Pandawas who is publicly stripped of her clothes by Dursasana and would have been scandalized were it not for Kresna's divine intervention; on Bhishma, who forefeits his right to the throne and opts for celibacy and therefore is rewarded by the gods to determine the moment of his death; on Sangkuni, the slick politician who traps Yudhistira in the game of dice with his deceit but eventually dies by Bima's hand; on Kunti, who secretly entrusts her premarital son Karna to the river and sees him being killed by her other son Arjuna; and lastly on Drupadi who takes revenge on Dursasana and washes her hair in his blood. These episodes are part of Javanese culture and refer to the inevitable fate of humans, a combination of predestination and agency that no person can escape. They are related to Dewa's account: in the same way it has been determined that the Pandawas will be victorious and that Karna will die in a man-to-man fight with his half brother, Dewa is destined to accept his life as *tunadaksa*, a person with multiple disabilities, and Renjani is preordained to die an early death.

In closing I return to Yogyakarta. Seno's novel confirms the film's message, namely that time stands still in Yogyakarta, that *kodrat wanita* reigns supreme, that abortion is a crime but rape is not. This society in Yogyakarta is not at all part of the modern nation-state of Indonesia, and postmodernity is far beyond the horizon. The cinematography of *Biola Tak Berdawai* contributes to present Yogyakarta as utopian and pre-modern, as a harmonious and uncomplicated space that can exist as long as influences from outside do not upset the equilibrium. While the film may attract those who indulge in a sense of nostalgia, it may not appeal to critical feminist viewers.

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