

Living a Shared Soul Mate

(Perceiving love and sense of belonging in a polygamous household based on “Antara Ibuku dan Ibuku” by Desni Intan Suri)

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Abstract—Polygamy is a sensitive issue for women around the globe; Indonesian women are no exception. The issue of polygamy has influenced the Indonesian literature including fiction. *Antara Ibuku dan Ibuku* novel by Desni Intan Suri is one of Indonesian fictions stressing on polygamy. This study aims to describe the state of women’s acceptances of polygamy; how they perceive love and sense of belonging and how they cope with the infidelity in their marriage lives. This study is qualitative descriptive in nature by examining and describing dialogues in the novel focusing on women perspectives of polygamy from the main female characters. The results showed that these women have different ways of perceiving love and sense of belonging and coping with the infidelity in their marriage lives.

Keywords—love; sense of belonging; marriage; polygamy

I. INTRODUCTION

Although fiction remain untrue for the characters and setting, the story told is often time the reflection of truth and fact derived from everyday occurrences. The purpose of bringing social phenomena into stories often time not only to show the kind of life that people living but also as media to express ideas, visions and even protest against a certain issues in the society; polygamy for example. Polygamy is still a controversial issue around the globe as not everyone is happy sharing their loved ones to the arm of other/s. In Indonesia, polygamy has becoming quite a popular topic discusses in novel. Some famous novels by the issue are *Ayat-ayat Cinta* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* by Abidah El-Khalieqy, *Surga yang Tak Dirindukan* by Asma Nadia, and *Athirah* by Alberthiene Indah. Interestingly, these novels have also released into the wide screen.

The topic of polygamy in novels is highly concerned on how women struggle in the marriage and how they find their existences in the patriarchal society. This paper focuses on the women acceptance of polygamy in *Antara Ibuku dan Ibuku* (Between My Mother and My Stepmother) novel. *Antara Ibuku dan Ibuku* is a 2011 novel written by Indonesian author Desni Intan Suri that follows a cast of characters living in a polygamous family. First published by Salsabila, this book was awarded Islamic Book Fair Award 2012 category Adult Fiction books at the book fair event Islamic Book Fair 9 to 18 March

2012. *Antara Ibuku dan Ibuku* explores polygamy and its polemic which settled in Minangkabau traditional society [1].

This novel demonstrates conflicts in a polygamous family which affects its members. Tata, the main character in the novel have a psychological conflict concerning her father’s practice of polygamy. She has two mothers, her biological mother and her stepmother. Unlike other polygamy novels, this novel shows the other side of polygamy. The second wife is associated as a woman who takes another person’s wife. Tata’s mother is the second wife, and her stepmother allows her father to practice polygamy. She is not fully able to discern why they, the two wives could live peacefully and help each other. Since the wives accept the polygamy, this study intends to find out how the women in the circle of polygamy accept and able to share love of a husband. The first half of the novel shows how the stepmother and the children from the two wives live happily in a polygamous family. As the time goes, the harmony is slowly faded away as the children grow up. This novel leaves the readers to decide their point of view of polygamy. The author does not show whether she is in support of or against polygamy. She shows a point of view about the advantage and disadvantage of polygamy. Tata, the main character of the story, has seen many men in her culture practice polygamy, including her father. She believes that polygamy has become her culture, the tradition of Minangkabau. Two women, her mother and her stepmother who are always there beside her father are the victims of the polygamy system which is a common thing in their society. As one of the requirements of polygamy is the husband should act fairly to each wife, Tata believes that the fairness and harmony in her family is not because of her father, rather the sincerity of the wives. Her father enjoys his polygamy without any burden, even when he eventually remarried for the third time.

Examining the story plot, in the first half of the novel, the story goes with a husband with two wives live with more than ten children. They live happily and support each other. However, in another half of the novel, the plot quickly turns around. When the children grow up and build their own family, and the father remarried for the third time, the conflict began to burst. At that point, the mutual disappointment also began to emerge. The family started to tear apart where they are in conflict where suspicion, untrustworthiness and blame occur

among all members of the family. The conflict continues until envisaged that polygamy is not as beautiful and easy as saying. At the end, the author describes the state of polygamy that still carries a psychological impact on the children. This impact is due to the vagueness of education and different styles of parenting. Other effects for girls are they become difficult to trust men because they believe men will have a polygamous marriage.

The writer formulated the main research questions as follow.

- How do women in the circle of polygamy perceive love and sense of belonging?
- How do women in the circle of polygamy cope with such marriage?

II. METHODS

This study applied descriptive qualitative as the method. Descriptive means the collected data are textual, images and non-numerical [2]. Descriptive research involves gathering data that describe events and then organizes, tabulates, depicts, and describes the data collection [3]. According to Taylor and Bogdan, qualitative method is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written words or oral utterances from people and their observable acts [4]. Descriptions and dialogs from the novel that depicts the feelings and perceptions of the women in the circle of polygamy in the novel *Antara Ibuku dan Ibuku* novel are used as data. As literary critic, this paper also applied feminist approach since the practice of polygamy as this novel is about, is prone of injustice and unequal relationship between male and female.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist literary criticism is the critical analysis of literary works based on feminist perspective which focus on the justice of women existence. Feminist literary criticism rejects the patriarchal norms in literature in which marginalizes the point of view of women politically, economically and psychologically. The focus of the feminist literary criticism is the authors' point of view about women, how women pictured in literature, and how the women maintain relationship with men. Goel stated that feminist literary criticism is the rebellion of the female consciousness against the male images of female identity and experience [5]. Tyson examines that feminist criticism is "the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (p. 82) [6]. He adds that feminist criticism is also concerned with less obvious forms of marginalization such as the exclusion of women writers from the traditional literary canon: "... unless the critical or historical point of view is feminist, there is a tendency to under-represent the contribution of women writers" (pp. 82-83). Even though there are a number of approaches exist about feminist criticism, the commonality also exists among those.

Topic on Polygamy is considered issue in feminism literature since women in polygamous marriage are often

forced to accept polygamy or being treated unfair by their husbands and therefore it is considered an act of gender inequality. As polygamy is commonly practiced in Indonesia, many authors write about polygamy in their works such as novels and short stories. There are a number of patterns about polygamy are found in the novels. According to Wiyatmi, the patterns of polygamy in feminist novels are [7]:

- The first pattern, polygamy was done openly with the permission of the first wife. The first and second wives get along well. The cause of polygamy in this pattern is because the first wife cannot give birth. This pattern is found in the novel *Geni Jora* by Abidah Al-Khalieqy and *Dadali* by Dewi Sartika.
- The second pattern, polygamy was done openly, but the first wife is forced to give permission. The relationship between the first wife and the second wife is unfavorable. The disharmonious relationship between the first wife and husband is the cause of polygamy in this pattern. They were married for matchmaking, not love marriage, and the husband having an affair that led to the pregnancy of other women. This pattern is found in the novel *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* by Abidah Al-Khalieqy.
- The third pattern, polygamy is done by stealth, without the permission of the first wife. The relationship between the first to the second wife is not well. The cause of polygamy is the relationship between the husband and his first wife is not harmonious. They were married for matchmaking, not love marriage. The husband has an affair. This pattern is found in the novel *Biru* by Fira Basuki.

There are works done examining gender inequality in polygamous marriage in Indonesian novels such as Nurna [8], Hernina [9], Ristiana & Adeani [10], and Putri [11]. Those studies revealed in polygamous marriages it is women who are less benefited and tend to suffer psychologically as they can only be sincere and accept it as their destiny. This paper is aimed to examine how the two mothers of Tata, accept polygamy as part of their marriage reality.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This story took place in Minangkabau, West Sumatera. The author mentioned that it is common to practice polygamy in Minangkabau culture is a common practice. It has a mixed plot where the period of time ranges in the eyes of Tata, the daughter of the second wife from a child that continued to her teenage and adult years as a mother and a wife. There are three main female characters; Tata, Nilawati, and Bu Rahmi in *Antara Ibuku dan Ibuku*.

A. Perception of Love

This novel shows that in the circle of polygamy, women have different ways of perceiving love. As the story flows, it depicts how the characters in the story perceive love and sense of belonging. Tata, the main character does not believe that two women with a husband manage to live in peace. In addition, she has witnessed events that reveal the injustice in

polygamous family. The second wife mostly takes responsibility for that as she is labeled as the one who takes another woman's husband. She sees that her mother is positioned as the second person at almost everything happens in the family. The second wife is treated as if she is an outsider in the family. She does not get to decide or choose. Tata thinks that it is not right. Her point of view can be seen from her statements:

Istri kedua tetap saja dicap sebagai pihak yang merebut. Orang tidak akan pernah berbelas kasihan kepada si perebut, tapi akan memberi simpati kepada yang kena rebut (p. 167).

The second wife is always associated as the one who takes another woman's husband. People will not pity the second wife. They will pity the first wife instead (p. 167).

In another passage, she mentioned that she hates seeing her mother taking this whole family drama by herself. She hates to see that her mother is treated injustice. She will never believe that love is shared fairly to every wife a husband has. Love is a spiritual bond is the second point of the novel. This is defined by the character of Nilawati, Tata's mother. She believes that love is a spiritual bond between humans and God, and it requires sincerity and sacrifices. Nilawati is the second wife. She lives by the image that the second wife is the one who seizes another woman's husband. She is an educated, a smart, brave, and has a strong personality and passion. She has a good career as a journalist, writer, and teacher in a Dutch course that she owns. Although she is an educated woman, Tata only knows that her mother is a woman with no power against superiority which is the will of Tata's father. Tata shows her point of view of her mother in the following statement:

Orang melihatnya sebagai seorang wanita yang berkepribadian kuat dengan kecerdasan dan keberanian memajukan dirinya di antara kaum laki-laki. Namun hanya aku yang tahu, ibu adalah seorang wanita yang tak mempunyai kekuatan untuk menantang arus. Ia lebih memilih mengikuti derasnya arus walau ia tahu, ia akan terhanyut jauh dari kehidupan yang ia impikan (p. 10).

People see her as a woman who has a strong personality with the intelligence and courage to promote herself among men. But only I know that mother is a woman who does not have the power to challenge the current. She prefers to follow the swift currents even though she knows that she will drift away from the life she has dreamed (p. 10).

Nilawati decided to follow the current even when she knows that she will lose her dreams, the life she has dreamed. She accepts that she is the second wife and has to take care of the children of the first wife. She seems lost in her life as she sacrifices her own good for her husband and other members of family. Nilawati views love as a spiritual bond. She shows Tata that love need to be shared in the same amount and portion to each individual. Ones cannot have love for their own. Her points can be seen in this passage:

Sebagai manusia dan seorang wanita, sungguh sulit menanamkan sebuah keikhlasan dalam hati untuk menunaikan tugas ini. Namun ketika hati kita sudah dipenuhi rasa keikhlasan yang sempurna, inilah yang Ibu

sebut sebuah ketenangan dalam jiwa. Tahukah kau, Tata, bila keikhlasan itu sudah memenuhi seluruh seluruh jiwa kita, engkau akan merasakan sebuah rasa cinta dan kasih sayang yang berkobar dalam dirimu. Engkau akan rindu pada semua yang telah kau miliki dan akan berkali-kali mengucapkan rasa syukur pada Allah karena kita yang dipilihnya untuk mengemban tugas berat ini (pp. 146-147).

As a human and a woman, it is hard to instill sincerity in my heart to fulfill this task. But when our hearts are already filled with perfect sincerity, this is what I call the peace of soul. Did you know, Tata, when it had complied with all the sincerity of the whole soul, you will feel a sense of love and affection that flared up in you. You will miss the entire thing you have done and will repeatedly utter gratitude to God because we are chosen to carry this heavy task (pp. 146-147).

She believes that God has arranged everything. The decision to be the second wife is the God's will. She believes that it is the best thing God gave her, to be the chosen one. For her, living in a polygamous family is the task from God that she needs to complete to achieve true love. It shows in her conversation with Tata as the following.

"Tata, kehidupan, kematian, dan perjodohan kita bukanlah hak kita mengatur. Semua keputusan berada di tangan Tuhan. Itu harus kita yakini sebaik-baiknya, Tata. Selama ini Ibu mencoba meyakinkan diri bahwa pilihan Ibu untuk menikah dengan ayahmu adalah yang terbaik yang diberikan Tuhan pada Ibu" (p. 145).

"Tata, life, death, and love are not our rights to set. All decisions are in the hands of God. That is what we should uphold, Tata. During this time, I try to convince myself that the choice to marry you father is the best God-given me"(p. 145).

Nilawati believes that love can be shared as ones can obtain a good relationship with the one who creates love, God. The third point of the story is love grows through an arranged marriage. Bu Rahmi, another female character in this novel views that love gained through an arranged marriage. Bu Rahmi is the first wife in this non-monogamous family. She was a wife by a marriage certificate without the presence of her husband on the day she was married. Tata describe Bu Rahmi as the opposite of her mother. It can be viewed from this narration:

Wajahnya begitu polos. Kulihat kedua matanya. Tidak sama dengan mata ibu yang berbinar menyinari dengan seribu makna. Mata Bu Rahmi menyorot lemah dan seperti keletihan (p.42).

Her face is so innocent. I see her both eyes. They are different from mother's eyes which sparkle shone with a thousand meanings. Bu. Rahmi shows weak and tired eyes (p.42).

Bu Rahmi believes that love can be obtained through an arranged marriage. There is no actual love. Sometimes Bu Rahmi looks tired and her face reflexes an innocent woman, she actually has a strong personality, and it is intimidating. She warned Nilawati not to marry her husband. She believes

Nilawati is an educated woman, and she can have a better life if she did not marry her husband. She even blamed Nilawati for letting their husband married for the third times, and said that Nilawati is weak. Her strong personality and an intimidating person can be seen from her conversation with Nilawati as provided below:

"Itulah Nil, terlalu lemah! Dari dulu seperti itu. Kalau Nil tak lemah orangnya tentu Nil juga takkan masuk dalam kehidupan Uda. Uni sudah mengatakan siapa Uda dan bagaimana Uda jauh hari sebelum Nil masuk dalam kehidupan Uda. Seharusnya sebagai perempuan yang banyak ilmu, Nil bisa mencari yang tepat untuk kehidupan Nil!" (p. 182).

"That is because you are too weak, Nil! You have been weak from the beginning. If you were not weak, you certainly will not involve in Uda's life. I have already told you who Uda is way before you came into his life. Supposedly as an educated woman, you could seek a better life, Nil! (P. 182).

Bu Rahmi does not want to be in a marriage where there is more than one wife. The conversation between Bu Rahmi and Tata took place in Bu Rahmi's house as Bu Rahmi stated that it was not her choice to marry her husband.

"Ibu tidak memilih, tapi keadaan yang memilih. Sama seperti ketika Ibu menerima ayahmu sebagai pendamping" (p. 196).

"I did not choose, but the circumstances chose me. Just like when I accepted your father as my husband" (p. 196).

In another line she also said that she does not feel love as she implied in her conversation with Tata that she is just a uneducated women and she know nothing about marriage and birth control. She and her husband married without love. When she married, the groom did not even show up. She just received a piece of paper stated that her husband accepting her to be his wife. When her husband asked for her permission to marry another woman, there was nothing she can do but accept it as she considered their children's future. It is stated in her sentences.

"... Ketika ayahmu menikah dengan ibumu, Ibu sudah memiliki tujuh anak. Bisa kau bayangkan apa yang akan terjadi dengan ketujuh anak itu bila ibu memutuskan untuk bercerai?" (pp. 200-201).

"... When your father was married to your mother, I already have seven children. Can you imagine what will happen to my children if I decided to get a divorce?" (pp. 200-201).

So, in order to maintain of her children's welfare, she decided to remain in her polygamous marriage because there was nothing she can do. This shows the weak position of woman with little access to be financially independent rather than depends fully on the husband for the living.

B. Coping with Polygamous Marriage

Women in polygamous marriage are forced to accept the other woman in their marriage lives. There are many ways female characters in this novel shows how they cope with the

fact. The most prominent one is showed by Bu Rahmi. She may look weak, but she is actually a woman with a strong personality. Even when she is forced to live in a polygamous family, she can handle it well. She accepts the second wife with open arms, although deep in her heart she grotesque about it. She has long been want to get divorce from her husband at the time he asked a permission to take another wife. It can be seen from her conversation with Tata:

"Selama untuk menyelamatkan anak-anak Ibu, Ibu tidak akan menyanggah. Bahkan ketika ayahmu minta menikahi ibumu, Ibu tidak menyanggah karena tujuannya untuk menyelamatkan anak-anak Ibu. Tapi sekarang ayahmu minta menikah lagi, Ibu mentah-mentah menyanggahnya. Ibu tidak setuju karena tindakan ayah ini jelas sudah merugikan keluarga (p. 204).

"To save my children, I would not deny. Even when your father asked for permission to marry your mother, I did not deny it because I wanted to save my children. But now he asked me to let him marry again, I absolutely refused it. I did not agree because your father's action was clearly giving no benefit to the family (p. 204).

She handles the fact that her husband has another wife by standing upright for herself and self-empowerment. She remains in her family despite the urge to get a divorce has always been there. Her conversation with Tata reflexes her willingness to get a divorce.

"Ibu mau jujur Tata. Keputusan ini sebetulnya sudah ingin Ibu ambil semenjak ayahmu meminta izin pada Ibu untuk menikahi ibumu.".... "Namun keputusan itu harus Ibu pendam karena ayahmu meminta izin pada Ibu di saat Ibu mengandung empat bulan kakakmu, Evri (p. 200).

"I want to be honest, Tata. I wanted to take this decision when your father requested permission to marry your mother. "..... "But the decision was not being realized as I was pregnant for your sister, Evri at that time (p. 200).

Tata got to know that Bu Rahmi got divorced eventually from her brother, Irsal. Bu Rahmi really is determined in her divorce. It shows in Tata's narration in the passages.

Mengenai Bu Rahmi, dari Uda Irsal aku mengetahui, semenjak ayah menceraikannya dengan talak tiga. Bu Rahmi seakan tenggelam dalam kehidupan keluarga besar kami. Ia tidak pernah lagi mengunjungi ibu. Ibu pun tidak pernah lagi ke Bukit Tinggi (p. 224)

Regarding Bu Rahmi, from Uda Irsal I know that since my father divorced her. Bu Rahmi has gone from our family life. She never visited my mother anymore. My mother did not visit her as well to Bukit Tinggi (p. 224).

Another way of handling this situation in the marriage is showed by Nilawati. As she perceives love as a spiritual bond, she believes that sincerity is the key to her marriage. She copes this by believing that it has been her destiny to be in this kind of marriage. She even treats her step children better than her own children. Tata was jealous of her action. It is can be pictured from Tata's narration of the disappointment her mother makes.

Pertentangan demi pertentangan mulai terjadi antara aku dan ibuku. Pertentangan itu semakin tajam saja ketika aku merasakan bahwa perhatian ibu terlalu berlebihan kepada kakak-kakak tiriku yang ikut bersama kami (p. 29).

The disagreement began to happen between me and my mother. The contradiction was intensified as I feel that my mother gave too much attention to my half brothers and sisters who live with us (p. 29).

It even makes Tata thinks that her mother loves Bu Rahmi's children over their own, Tata and her brother, Irsal. Tata questioned her mother why she takes a good care of Bu Rahmi children, even ignored their own. Nilawati mentioned that it is because her own children will understand her more than the others. From the following passage, it shows Nilawati's point about Tata's disappointment.

"Yakinlah, Nak. Ibu bukannya tidak tahu bahwa engkau berkali-kali kecewa, kesal, dan marah melihat tindakan Ibu yang kau anggap tidak pernah mengistimewakan atau paling tidak memprioritaskan perhatian kepadamu. Ibu sangat tahu apa yang kau rasakan, Sayang. Tapi Ibu lebih paham lagi, tindakan apa yang harus Ibu ambil dalam posisi Ibu sebagai istri kedua ayahmu" (P. 144).

"Believe me, dear. I was not unaware that you repeatedly disappointed, upset, and angry to see my actions that did not prioritize attention to you. I know exactly how you feel, Dear. But you should understand that what I do is because of my position as the second wife" (P. 144).

She acts like that because it is her responsibility to look after the children. Tata believes that it is because her mother feels guilty for marrying a man with wife. It shows in her conversation with Nilawati as follow.

"Aku bukan anak kecil lagi, Bu. Sebentar lagi aku sudah tamat SMA. Kurasa aku sudah boleh memberikan pendapatku mengenai Ibu. Yang kukatakan tadi adalah sebuah kejujuran tentang apa yang kurasakan selama ini. Bagiku, hidup Ibu selama ini tak lebih hanya dihabiskan untuk membayar kesalahan Ibu karena telah menikahi seorang pria yang sudah mempunyai istri dengan banyak anak" kataku. (p. 143).

"I am no longer a child, Mother. Soon I will be graduated from high school. I think I am allowed to give my opinion about you. What I said earlier is honesty about what I feel for this. For me, your life is just spent to pay for your mistakes for marrying a man with a wife with many children" I said (P. 143).

V. CONCLUSION

In *Antara Ibuku dan Ibuku* novel, it shows that women have different ways of perceiving love in the circle of polygamy. Their perceptions of love are viewed by analyzing the three female main characters in the novel, Tata, Nilawati, and Bu Rahmi. There are some points of how love and sense of belonging occur in polygamous family; first, love cannot be shared. Tata, the main character in the novel perceive that love

cannot be shared. As she lives in a polygamous family, Tata has seen two wives with a husband cannot manage to live in peace. Despite at the beginning they try hard to build a peaceful polygamous family, at the end it will not be as it is expected. Second, love is a spiritual bond. It is defined by Tata's mother Nilawati. She urges that love is a spiritual bond between humans and God. Love requires sincerity and sacrifices. She accepts the polygamous family as she believes that all the sacrifices she done is for the God. Love with sincerity brings humans closer to God. Third, love possesses through the arranged marriage. Bu Rahmi believes that love is obtained through an arranged marriage. For her, there is no actual love. Love is merely the arrangement. Once people are in the marriage, love can be obtained. It is not necessary to fall in love in the first place as love can emerge later as the marriage progress.

In dealing with the infidelity in their marriages, the female characters of this novel copes it by standing upright and self-empowered. Bu Rahmi handles it by keep being a good wife and wait until all of the problems in her marriage are over. The second way is by handling it with the sincerity. Nilawati handles the infidelity in her marriage by believing that it has been her destiny to be in polygamous marriage. As she perceives love is a spiritual bond with sincerity, she deals with the problem in her marriage is a God-given test. All she needs to do it take in sincerely

The female characters' point of views of men in general and their husband in particular is that men are superior in Minangkabau's tradition. She believes that this character of men is gained because of the cultural influence.

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