

# 100 Years *Sitti Nurbaya*: A View on the Social Criticism in the Novel *Sitti Nurbaya*

Alexander Stark<sup>1</sup> & Balazs Huszka<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Language Studies and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> Language Center, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei Darussalam

Correspondence: Alexander Stark, Faculty of Language Studies and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Kampus Kota, 16100 Kota Bharu, Malaysia.

Received: March 20, 2022

Accepted: April 14, 2022

Online Published: April 25, 2022

doi:10.5539/ach.v14n1p67

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v14n1p67>

## Abstract

*Sitti Nurbaya* is one of the first modern Indonesian novels, and it was published in the year 1922. It illustrates the tragic story of a teenager who is forced to marry an older man. In this research paper, the researchers want to look at the social criticism of Marah Rusli, the author of *Sitti Nurbaya*. Such a perspective can reveal the inner dynamics of the Minangkabau society of West Sumatra (Indonesia), the setting of the novel. Marah Rusli originates from West Sumatra, and his novel describes the process of change at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The researchers used a mixed approach to analyze the novel *Sitti Nurbaya* and detect the traditional system's inherent criticism. The researchers used a methodology that comprised two methods, a structuralist approach and a biographical viewpoint. The research discovered that Marah Rusli criticizes the situation of men within a matrilineal society. He is also critical of the excesses of a growing capitalistic mindset.

**Keywords:** Indonesian literature, Marah Rusli, Minangkabau, *Sitti Nurbaya*, West Sumatra

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introductory Words

One hundred years ago (in the year 1922), the novel *Sitti Nurbaya* was published (Teeuw, 1967, p. 56), and this article wants to pay tribute to Marah Rusli for writing a novel that inspires people from all parts of society. The novel *Sitti Nurbaya* by Marah Rusli is famous and considered to be one of Indonesia's first 'modern' novels. For many literary critics, the story is significant, and it was very popular amongst the readers.

It was by far the most popular of Indonesian novels prior to the second world war and still retained a great deal of popularity after it. (Aveling, 1970, p. 228)

The novel describes the situation of a young teenager in a time of socio-economic changes in West Sumatra. At that time, the traditional values were questioned, and the fathers began to take care of their children. In the traditional Minangkabau society in West Sumatra, the oldest brother of the mother (the *mamak*) is responsible for the education and upbringing of his nephews and nieces. Marah Rusli, the author of *Sitti Nurbaya*, thematized this topic. There are 'smaller' storylines besides the main plot of the teenage girl *Sitti Nurbaya* that mention and illustrate what happened at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in West Sumatra.

The novel *Sitti Nurbaya* is still influential as there was a 'modernized' version of the story, a telenovela on Indonesian TV. There are also pop songs that thematize *Sitti Nurbaya*. Moreover, there are many changes in a globalizing world. Continuity and change were essential topics amongst anthropologists when they discussed the Minangkabau society.

The novel *Sitti Nurbaya* is complex and can be analyzed from different perspectives. The researchers chose a mixed approach that encompasses both the structure of the novel and the biographical background information of the author Marah Rusli. It comprises a structuralist approach that includes the concept of Claude Levi-Strauss. This concept was chosen as Levi-Strauss was a famous representative of anthropology, and his structuralist approach could give information regarding the worldview of the Minangkabau society at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by analyzing the famous novel *Sitti Nurbaya*.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a vivid intellectual discussion within the Minangkabau society.

On one side there were the traditionalists, and on the other side were the so-called modernists who wanted to integrate a 'modern' Islamic understanding within the society.

### 1.2 Research Objectives

This research has two main research objectives.

- a) To analyze the novel *Sitti Nurbaya* in a way that includes a structuralist and historical perspective.
- b) To detect elements of social criticism in the novel *Sitti Nurbaya*.

### 1.3 Plot of the Novel

It makes sense to look at the storyline at the beginning of the article to avoid being confused by the names of the major characters and follow further explanations. The storyline of *Sitti Nurbaya* is as follows:

Sitti Nurbaya is the daughter of Baginda Sulaiman. She still goes to school, and she likes Samsulbahri. He is the son of Sutan Mahmud. Both live in the Sumatran city of Padang. One day Samsulbahri has to further his studies and moves to Jakarta. The other major character is Datuk Meringgih. He is very stingy, and he is already old. However, he is successful because of his rugged personality. Datuk Meringgih knows that Baginda Sulaiman is a successful businessman and so Datuk Meringgih decides to destroy his business. Therefore, he uses the help of some 'fighters' (gangsters) who burn the shops of Baginda Sulaiman and also destroy his ships and his plantations. Baginda Sulaiman is forced to borrow money from Datuk Meringgih; however, he is not able to pay it back. Therefore, Datuk Meringgih threatens to imprison him. However, there would be one way to avoid this. If he (Datuk Meringgih) could marry Sitti Nurbaya, the problem would be solved. For Sitti Nurbayah, this situation was a dilemma. She loves Samsulbahri, but she had no other choice than to accept the marriage. Consequently, she lived in a miserable situation. Samsulbahri, who studied in Jakarta, was shocked by the information. During holiday season, he went back and met Baginda Sulaiman and Sitti Nurbaya. The following evening, he met Sitti Nurbaya and kissed her and Datuk Meringgi saw that. A heavy fight was the consequence. Baginda Sulaiman, who was sick, stood up and passed away. Samsulbahri was driven out because of his immoral behavior. Sitti Nurbaya moved to her cousin Alimah and decided to meet Samsulbahri in Jakarta. However, she had to return as Datuk Meringgih made a police report. Sitti Nurbaya moved back and later was poisoned by Datuk Meringgih. She passed away. Samsulbahri was shocked and tried to commit suicide many times without success. His suicidal behavior results in a successful career in the army. Ten years after the incident that resulted in the death of Baginda Sulaiman, a tax revolt happened in West Sumatra, and Samsulbahri was sent there. He fought with Datuk Meringgih and killed him. However, Datuk Meringgih managed to injure Samsulbahri severely so that he passed away, too.

Besides the main plot, there are minor stories that thematize the traditional way of life and the upcoming changes. The sister of Sutan Mahmud is Putri Rubiah. She complains to her brother about not taking care of her daughter Rukiah. In the traditional understanding, the brother (and not the father) is responsible for the upcoming of the children. However, Sutan Mahmud took over the responsibility of his son Samsulbahri and sent him to Jakarta for his further education.

### 1.4 Literatures

There is a remarkable amount of literature that discusses and analyzes the novel. Aveling (1970) gives a good introduction and considers the matrilineal social structure. His article also tried to consider the unique features of the Minangkabau society in West Sumatra as the setting of *Sitti Nurbaya* is the Sumatran town Padang. The Minangkabau form one of the world's largest matrilineal societies, and on the other side, they are an Islamic society. Therefore, a sociological or anthropological view might be promising.

Another significant article about *Sitti Nurbaya* was written by Pierre Labrousse (2011). His analysis is very detailed and reveals the complexity of the story as he looks into the peculiar features of the Minangkabau society and the fascinating personalities in the book. Regarding the Minangkabau society, he stresses that there are commoners and noblemen in the story. However, the noblemen are in a crisis (Labrousse, 2011, p. 165). There is a class of successful businessmen who become more and more influential. This can be seen by looking at the character of Datuk Meringgih. He uses the title 'Datuk', which is normally used for the heads of a matrilineage. However, Datuk Meringgih is not such a traditional leader. He could just use this title due to his success in the business world.

Teeuw (1967) looks at the greater context of modern Indonesian literature. The novel *Sitti Nurbaya* is important as it is considered to be one of the first modern novels. He also mentions that Minangkabau concepts can be found in the novel's writing style. The Minangkabau society encourages to discuss (*musyawarah*) on certain

topics. In the ideal case, there will be a consensus (*mufakat*). In the minor side storylines, there are discussions about peculiar cultural topics. According to Teeuw, the way the author implements these cultural traits in the story follows the Minangkabau traditions.

A postcolonial evaluation was done by Foulcher (2002). He looks at the concept of mimicry in the characters of the novel *Sitti Nurbaya*. According to him, Samsulbahri is a typical example of an educated middle class that follows the Dutch lifestyle. Marah Rusli describes him as a person that resembles the Dutch in his appearance and way of life. He even tells Sitti Nurbaya a Dutch fable. However, it must be added that Foulcher does not consider that Samsulbahri is still rooted in Malay culture. Samsulbahri often uses Malay poems, particularly in his written communication. Nonetheless, Foulcher is right when he describes Samsulbahri as a person who follows a non-Minangkabau lifestyle, especially after his first attempt to commit suicide. He drinks alcohol and fights in the Dutch army. On the other side, Datuk Meringgih lives in a typical village. Foulcher argues that Marah Rusli wrote in that way because the readers in the 1920s and 1930s were most likely Dutch educated people.

The recent publications are, in general, more specific and focus on one topic. A good example is the article of Atikurrahman et al. (2021). This article describes the historical developments that are mentioned in the novel *Sitti Nurbaya*. Notably, the tax revolt is of major interest. In the historical context, there was a tax rebellion in the year 1908 (Young, 1994). The historical event and the fight between Datuk Meringgih and Samsulbahri are of interest. Therefore, Rizkiya et al. (2019) investigated the features of Datuk Meringgih in greater detail. Datuk Meringgih is often described as an evil person, but the article of Rizkiya shows that he has a consistent behavior. He is brave and protects his homeland. Another good example of a specialized topic that was published recently is the article of Asteka (2017). The author looks at the intertextuality in the novel *Sitti Nurbaya*. She also compares the novel to the famous story *Laila and Majnun* and found out that there were striking similarities

## 2. Method

The authors want to use a mixed approach to get a ‘complete picture’ in this research. The story of *Sitti Nurbaya* consists of different layers, and there are narrations within the novel that are interdependent. Therefore, it seems that there are structural traits that can be detected. A structuralist perspective was used to find out how far these determine the social criticism of Marah Rusli. The researchers chose the structuralist concepts of Claude Levi-Strauss because he also considered the influence of society and language. Furthermore, the researchers wanted to complete the picture by considering the biographical background of Marah Rusli. In this sense, the historical developments were taken into account too.

Claude Levi-Strauss analyzes the Oedipus myth in his article *The Structural Analysis of Myth* (Levi-Strauss, 1963). It is remarkable that the story of *Sitti Nurbaya* has a relation to a kind of myth. On the hill *Gunung Padang*, there is a small cave in which is, according to the people, the grave of Sitti Nurbaya. Levi-Strauss does not only look at the story itself, but he also looks at the meaning of specific names. This approach can be useful here, too: When the researchers read the novel for the first time, some unusual forms of addressing a person were detected. For example, one of the major characters, Datuk Meringgih, addresses some of his ‘fighters’ with numbers. The reader gets an anonymous and mysterious picture of these characters.

In this research, the biographical information about the author Marah Rusli should be considered too. He published an autobiographical novel in which the reader can get information about his life. It is expected that his biographical experience can reveal his motives why he thematized the topic in a specific way.

## 3. Results and Discussion

In this chapter, the results will be discussed. In the first chapter, it is necessary to look at the biographical and historical background. After that, the plot of the story will be analyzed to detect the points of criticism regarding the social situation.

### 3.1 Biography of Marah Rusli and Historical Background

For an understanding of the novel *Sitti Nurbaya*, it is necessary to consider the biographical information about Marah Rusli. He was born in the year 1889 in Bukittinggi. He originates from an aristocratic family. His father was Sutan Abu Bakar. On the other side, his mother had not such a background.

Marah Rusli got his education from the Sekolah Radja Bukittinggi (Aveling, 1970, p. 228). His teacher recommended him to further his studies in Holland, but his parents gave him no permission. The biographical details were written down in his autobiographical novel *Memang Jodoh* (Rusli, 2017). In the year 1915, he graduated from the faculty of veterinary science in Bogor. In his private life, there were plans of his family to marry him to a girl from his village, but he rejected the plans. He broke up with his family because he married a

lady from West Java without their permission (Aveling, 1970, p. 228). The couple got two sons and one daughter. He worked as a veterinary doctor in Sumbawa, and later, he worked in Java. He worked in different positions. For example, he became a lecturer in Klaten. In January 1968, he passed away.

The novel *Sitti Nurbaya* was written in Bogor and published in 1922. The so-called *kaum muda* (the young generation) movement probably liked some parts of this novel. The *kaum muda* was a reform movement during that time that interpreted the Islamic regulations in a 'modern' way by following the ideas of Muhammad Abduh. In the novel *Sitti Nurbaya*, the topic of polygamy is thematized in some chapters and discussed in a detailed way. For the reader, it is evident that the author Marah Rusli supports the modernists' ideas that rejected polygamy.

Looking at the biographical information, it is striking that there are close similarities between some family members of Marah Rusli and the personalities in the book. The father of Marah Rusli, Sutan Abu Bakar, has similar features like Sutan Mahmud. Both are noblemen. It would be interesting to know whether Putri Rubiah has similar features as the mother of Marah Rusli. In *Memang Jodoh*, there is some information about her, and Marah Rusli describes her as a traditional person who supports the traditional way of life.

The most striking historical event mentioned in the novel is the tax rebellion that happened in 1908. The Dutch colonial power implemented a new tax. The people opposed this tax, and this led to unrest. The last chapters of *Sitti Nurbaya* thematized that topic as a kind of background that culminated in the fight between Samsulbahri and Datuk Meringgih.

In the novel, the living conditions of the higher middle class during the colonial time are described. The reader gets a good impression. The main personalities are Western-educated and follow in some parts the Dutch lifestyle: They dance, use Dutch tales and so on.

### 3.2 A Multi-Layered Story and Synchronic and Diachronic Reading

In chapter 1, it was mentioned that other stories were interwoven within the main story. In the main story, Sitti Nurbaya is in the center. However, there are so-called side stories. The major storyline is the love story of Sitti Nurbaya and Samsulbahri.

Two minor storylines are differently related to the main story itself. The first one is the discussion of Putri Rubiah and Sutan Mahmud about the responsibilities of the brother of the mother in a matrilineal society. This storyline seems to have nearly no connection to the major storyline. The other minor story happens in the latter part of the novel when Sitti Nurbaya stays at her cousin's place, and the family discusses the situation of women.

A diachronic and synchronic reading is well-known in the field of structuralism. The diachronic way of reading is reading from beginning to end. The synchronic way of reading 'stops' at a specific place and discovers peculiar matters. In table 1, the two ways of reading are illustrated. Columns 1, 2 and 3 form the diachronic reading if the reader reads it from top to down. The other two columns belong to the synchronic reading and reveal the inherent special matters. The authors decided to use a table as it shows the diachronic and synchronic reading process in a well-arranged way.

Table 1. A synchronic and diachronic reading of *Sitti Nurbaya*

Ch.	Major Storyline	Minor Storyline	Peculiarities	Dichotomies
1	Sitti Nurbaya and Samsulbahri return from school.		Ali is the coachman	Noblemen vs. Commoners
2		Putri Rubiah scolds her brother for not following tradition.	A person is going amok.	Tradition vs. Modernity
3	Journey of Sitti Nurbaya with her friends to Padang hill			Up vs. Down
4		Putri Rubiah meets her brother Sutan Hamzah	They call a traditional healer ( <i>dukun</i> )	Rationality vs. Irrationality
5	Samsulbahri moves to Jakarta to further his studies.			Padang (Minangkabau Homeland) vs. Jakarta (outside region)
6	Datuk Meringgih		The author addresses Datuk Meringgih directly. Datuk Meringgih uses a title that is normally used by traditional heads of a matrilineage.	Darkness vs. Light Filth vs. Cleanliness

7	A letter of Samsulbahri to Sitti Nurbaya.		
8	A letter of Siti Nurbaya to Samsulbahri. She informs him that she was forced to marry Datuk Meringgih.		
9	Samsulbahri returns to Padang. He meets Sitti Nurbaya. A fight with Datuk Meringgih is the consequence. Samsulbahri is expelled by his father.	Baginda Sulaiman dies.	Father vs. Son, Tradition vs. Modernity
10	Memories about Samsulbahri. Sitti Nurbaya stays in the house of her cousin Alimah.		
11	Sitti Nurbaya looks for Samsulbahri in Jakarta. However, Datuk Meringgih files a police report, and she must return.		
12	Sitti Nurbaya is poisoned and dies.	Talk with the family of Alimah about gender issues.	Women vs. Men
13	Samsulbahri tries to commit suicide.		
14	10 years later, Samsulbahri is part of the Dutch Army.		
15	Tax Revolt in Padang	Datuk Meringgih is one of the Dutch vs. Minangkabau leaders of the revolt	
16	Fight between Datuk Meringgih and Samsulbahri.	Datuk Meringgih, Samsulbahri, and Sutan Mahmud die.	

### 3.3 Dichotomies between Sitti Nurbaya and Datuk Meringgih

By looking at the two main characters of the novel, i.e., Sitti Nurbaya and Datuk Meringgih, some opposition pairs that are evident. In Table 2, these dichotomies are listed.

Table 2. Pairs of opposition between Sitti Nurbaya and Datuk Meringgih

<i>Siti Nurbaya</i>	versus	<i>Datuk Meringgih</i>
young	vs.	Old
'good' (has no contact to gangsters)	vs.	'evil' (hires gangsters)
'bright'	vs.	black, darkness (his teeth, he does not turn on the light to save money)
peaceful	vs.	Fighter
humble, obedient	vs	tough, cruel

The opposite characters that are mentioned in table 2 fascinate the readers, and they want to see how the marriage between the teenager and a much older man will succeed or fail. The two main characters are like two binary poles. One person is good and a little bit naïve, while the other person has evil character traits and is cunning.

One chapter is completely dedicated to describing Datuk Meringgih in a very negative way. Marah Rusli describes Datuk Meringgih as a filthy and disgusting individual (Rusli, w.y., p. 103). The following bodily features were described:

- Regarding his age: His few hairs are white; his back is bent (like a prawn)
- 'Filthy' and 'repulsive' features: Black and dirty teeth; many scars (from smallpox) on the face.
- Other physical features: thin body, small eyes, big ears.

Marah Rusli describes bodily features together with animal-like features. His ears are big like the ears of elephants, and his teeth are like the teeth of a squirrel. The reader gets the impression that Datuk Meringgih is

more like an animal than a human being. It might be a hint that Marah Rusli sees the upcoming capitalistic way of life as uncivilized. However, this would mean that Datuk Meringgih represents an upcoming ambitious businessman. On the other side, there are ‘noble’ businessmen like Baginda Sulaiman. He is a modest, honest and humble person, but he fails in his business. Marah Rusli illustrates the modern capitalistic world as merciless. The new ambitious business people have forgotten God and the Islamic way of life. It is remarkable that the author addresses Datuk Meringgih directly:

*Hai Datuk Meringgih! Apakah paedahnya kekayaan yang sedemikian bagimu dan bagi sesarmu? Engkau dilahirkan dari perut ibumu dengan tiada membawa suatu apa, dan apabila engkau kelak meninggalkan dunia yang fana ini, karena maut itu tak dapat kau hindarkan, walaupun hartamu sebanyak harta raja Karun sekalipun tiadalah lain yang akan engkau bawa ke tempat kediamanmu yang baka itu, melainkan selembar kain putih yang cukup untuk menutup badanmu jua.* [Translation by George A. Fowler: Hey Datuk Meringgih! Where is the profit in such wealth to you and to your fellow man? Born from the stomach of your mother, you brought nothing with you. When the time comes for you to leave this fleeting world – for you cannot avoid death – even were your possessions as numerous as those of King Karun, you will bring nothing with you to your eternal home, save a piece of white cloth sufficient to cover your body.] (Rusli, w.y., p. 106 / Fowler, 2011)

### 3.4 Social Criticism in the Novel *Sitti Nurbaya*

In the chapters before, the main contents were mentioned. In this part, the social criticism will be outlined. Some social criticisms focus on different levels of society.

#### i) Criticism on an upcoming successful business elite

Datuk Meringgih is a successful businessman. However, he is without pardon and destroys the businesses of his competitors. The father of Sitti Nurbaya, Baginda Sulaiman, is one victim of Datuk Meringgih. Baginda Sulaiman’s shops were set on fire, and his other businesses were destroyed by the ‘gangsters’ of Datuk Meringgih.

The author Marah Rusli narrates the story of *Sitti Nurbaya* often as a kind of distant observer. However, from time to time, he ‘interferes’ and expresses his opinion. For example, when he describes the living place of Datuk Meringgih: He is a rich man, but he lives in a shabby house and thinks only about money. The author comments:

*Ingatlah! Kekayaan dan kemiskinan, kemuliaan dan kesenangan, ya sekaliannya, datangnya daripada Tuhan Yang Esa. Jika dikehendaknya, dengan sekejap mata, bertukarlah kekayaan menjadi kemiskinan, kemuliaan menjadi kehinaan, kesukaan menjadi kedukaan dan tinggilah yang rendah, kayalah yang miskin, mulialah yang hina, dan tertawalah yang menangis.* [Translation by George A. Fowler: Think! Riches and poverty, nobility and baseness, yes, all of these, indeed come from God, Who is One. If it is His Wish, in the blink of an eye, those riches can turn to poverty, nobility to baseness, joy to sorrow, the low made high, the poor made rich, the base exalted, and weeping turned into laughter.] (Rusli, w.y., pp. 107-108/ Fowler, 2011).

Marah Rusli interferes as the author. He describes a scrupulous person like Datuk Meringgih. Interestingly he is called ‘Datuk’. However, in traditional Minangkabau society, such a title is used for the heads of the matrilineage. Datuk Meringgih got this title because he is a rich businessman. The erosion of traditional values and a materialistic worldview are criticized. This is even more interesting as Foulcher describes the work as a work that includes the view of bourgeois modernity (Foulcher, 2002, p. 95). However, it could be possible that Marah Rusli saw the challenge of an upcoming non-aristocratic class of successful people, which could be a reason why he described Datuk Meringgih in a very negative way.

#### ii) Criticism on the traditional way of life

Marah Rusli used an interesting approach. There are discussions about the traditional way of life in the ‘minor storylines.’ Interestingly the women defend the traditional way of life in the book, and their main criticism refers to the changes they experience. These are the following:

- a) The men (in the case of the novel: it refers to Sutan Mahmud, the father of Samsulbahri) stay at their wife’s house and neglect their task as *mamak* (brother of the mother). In a matrilineal society, the *mamak* is responsible for the upbringing and education of his nieces and nephews.
- b) The men begin to marry only one woman, which is against the traditional way of life of the higher class.

Marah’s Rusli criticism about the traditional way of life is represented by the utterances of two men, namely Sutan Mahmud and Ahmad Maulana. They listen to the criticism and reply to it. The only female persons who

have a similar opinion are Sitti Nurbaya and Alimah.

In the above paragraphs, Marah Rusli argues in three ways. The first way is that the representatives of the traditional way of life express their opinion. However, their argumentation seems to be sometimes ridiculous to the reader. The following excerpt should illustrate this when the sister of Sutan Mahmud complained that her daughter has not married yet:

*Wahai, kasihan Anakku! Celaka benar untungnya. Sudah tiada diindahkan oleh mamandanya, jodohnya pun tak dapat dicarikannya. Anak orang berumur 12 atau 13 tahun, setua-tuanya umur 14 tahun, telah dikawinkan, tetapi anakku, hampir beruban, masih perawan juga.* [Translation by George A. Fowler: My poor child! She's known nothing but misfortune. Her uncle pays her no mind, and no suitor can be found for her. Children twelve or thirteen years old – fourteen at the oldest – have been given away in marriage, but my child, who's almost going grey, is still a maiden.] (Rusli, w.y., p. 20 / Fowler, 2011).

For the reader, this comment seems to be somehow ridiculous as the daughter of Putri Rubiah is just around 15 years old and still far too young of becoming grey.

In the novel, the strongest proponents of the traditional system were two ladies, Putri Rubiah and the mother of Alimah. Hamzah, the brother of Sutan Mahmud, was also an adherent of that system. However, he seems to be quite passive. Nonetheless, he and Putri Rubiah decided to use a traditional healer (*dukun*) who should fight a kind of love spell that they assumed would influence the thinking of Sutan Mahmud. This event shows that Marah Rusli relates the traditional system with backwardness and irrational beliefs.

#### iii) Criticism on new administrators

The new upcoming administrative elite is personified by Sutan Mahmud, who is the *penghulu* of Padang. Even though *penghulu* is a term that refers to the head of a matrilineage, it is in this sense a modern concept as it refers to Sutan Mahmud as a kind of administrator of Padang. He follows modern ideas. However, he fails in many respects. He cannot control the evil behavior of Datuk Meringgih, his wife dies out of sadness, his son is expelled from the village community and so on. Therefore, it can be said that the administrators cannot handle the new situation. The final showdown of the story is the tax rebellion in the area, which leads to a chaotic situation.

Marah Rusli's way on how to describe and criticizing certain concepts is interesting. Some persons represent a specific type of occupation, opinion and so on. Sutan Mahmud represents the new administrative layer, Datuk Meringgih stands for an unscrupulous business person, Putri Rubiah expresses the traditional view, and Sitti Nurbaya and Samsulbahri represent a newly educated stratum.

#### iv) Criticism on the aristocratic elite

Sutan Mahmud and his family members like Sutan Hamzah and Samsulbahri form the noblemen of the society. Furthermore, Baginda Sulaiman belongs to this elite too. They are faced with a new situation. A new ambitious group of people is successful. The noblemen in the novel seem to be soft and cannot stand challenging situations. Baginda Sulaiman dies after there was a fight between Datuk Meringgih and Samsulbahri. Samsulbahri also wants to commit suicide to escape his new miserable situation. It seems that the old elite is not able to live in the new situation. Even though they try to imitate the lifestyle of the colonialists.

#### v) Criticism on the social situation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

There are people who might criticize Marah Rusli for not showing a clear criticism against the Dutch colonial power. However, it must be taken into account that the publisher (in this case *Balai Pustaka*) was controlled by the colonial government. Nonetheless, there are critical comments about the situation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He included a discussion between locals (including Datuk Meringgih) who decided how they should act against the colonial government. Some of these opinions of the locals are as follows (Rusli, w. y., 328-337):

- The West Sumatran people did not ask the Dutch for any help.
- The colonial government did not build any houses for the locals, buy any animals and so on.
- The schools are only in towns.
- The pupils would be, in general, Dutch children and not locals.
- The Dutch take the money for themselves only. The population in Sumatra is still poor.
- The colonialists want to influence the people so that they become Christians. They only build churches and do not support the construction of mosques.

- The people cannot trust the Dutch.

These are some of the major points mentioned during the discussion.

From the story itself, it is obvious to the reader that the whole situation of society is not safe. There are gangsters who roam around, and suddenly they appear in the dark or behind a tree. Marah Rusli gives the gang members no names and uses numbers like four or five. By doing so, the whole situation becomes more obscure.

Other events show that the whole situation is not safe. At the beginning of the novel, Marah Rusli describes the idyllic scenery of the village when suddenly a person appears who runs amok. The people cannot leave the house, and the men must hunt that person.

### 3.5 Marah Rusli's Social Criticism and Its Influence in the Postcolonial Period

In his chapter, the authors intend to show that the novel *Sitti Nurbaya* is still influential. Therefore, this chapter differs from the chapters before as the structuralist approach is not the main focus anymore.

In the chapters before, special structural patterns were carved out, and most of these patterns are in the 'unconscious' mind of the reader. At first glance, it is a romantic and sad story about unfulfilled love. Such a story is still popular amongst many people, particularly in countries with strict marriage restrictions. Therefore, the social criticism of such regulations is still relevant. *Sitti Nurbaya* is thematized in many songs. For example, there is a song by the music group *Dewa 19* with the title *Cukup Siti Nurbaya*, which means 'enough (with) *Sitti Nurbaya*'. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a telenovela about *Sitti Nurbaya* was broadcasted on Indonesian TV. It shows some critical points that are timeless, like the misuse of power and the helpless reactions to ruthless behavior. Interestingly the traditional restrictions of customary law seem to be not that important nowadays. Nevertheless, the idea of a reckless person seems to be as up to date as before.

By carving out binary pairs of opposition, topics that cannot be seen at first glance become important. Some topics are not of current interest as the difference between aristocratic and common people. On the other side, gender issues are still of interest. Moreover, there are many young women like *Sitti Nurbaya* who get a good education and want to decide whom they want to marry. They also might oppose polygamy, a topic that has become more and more controversial in Indonesia in recent years (Muthis, 2017).

## 4. Conclusion

Even though the novel *Sitti Nurbaya* was written 100 years ago, it is still of importance. The social criticism of Marah Rusli reveals information about the Minangkabau society at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but some elements are keeping the people engaged. Only this explains why *Sitti Nurbaya* is thematized in different media. The gender topic is of current interest. *Sitti Nurbaya* is an obedient and good young woman, but the consequences are severe. All the main characters die. The telenovela *Sitti Nurbaya* that was aired at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century showed that the story could happen again in a slightly different environment. There are unscrupulous businessmen who want to act according to their lust.

*Sitti Nurbaya* is a fascinating novel, and a reading that uses both a diachronic and synchronic approach shows fascinating details that cannot be detected directly. Moreover, it offers an interesting perspective. The view shows dichotomies between different groups: modernists versus traditionalists, aristocrats versus commoners and many more. These binary oppositions lead to some excitement for the readers. However, from time-to-time Marah Rusli interferes and points out his view.

*Sitti Nurbaya* is a novel that reveals part of Marah Rusli's emotions and attitude when he lived in the West Javanese town of Bogor. In his autobiographical novel *Memang Jodoh*, he mentioned how difficult it is to deal with the traditions in West Sumatra. So, he thematized the traditional views and the challenges of a modernizing world. Even after 100 years, there are still elements that show the importance of the novel *Sitti Nurbaya* nowadays.

## References

- Asteka, P. (2017). Kajian Intertekstualitas dalam Novel Siti Nurbaya Karya Marah Rusli dan Laila Majnun Karya Syaikh Nizami. *Bahtera Indonesia. Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia*, 2(2), 13-21. <https://doi.org/10.31943/bi.v2i2.28>
- Atikurrahman, M., Ilma, A. A., Dharma, L. A. et al. (2021). Sejarah Pemberontakan dalam Tiga Bab: Modernitas, belasting, dan kolonialisme dalam *Sitti Nurbaya*. *SULUK: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, dan Budaya*, 3(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.15642/suluk.2021.3.1.1-22>
- Aveling, H. G. (1970). 'Sitti Nurbaya;' Some reconsiderations. With comments by Taufik Abdullah. *Bijdragen tot*

- de Taal, Land -en Volkenkunde*, 126(2), 228-245. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90002816>
- Foulcher, K. (2002). Dissolving into the elsewhere. Mimicry and ambivalence in Marah Roesli's Sitti Nurbaya. In K. Foulcher and T. Day (Eds.), *Clearing a Space: Postcolonial readings of modern Indonesian Literature* (pp. 85-108) Leiden: KITLV Press.
- Fowler. (2011). *Translation of Marah Rusli. Sitti Nurbaya*. Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation. (E-Book).
- Labrousse, P. (2011) Makam Sitti Nurbaya. Sebuah Esei Pentafsiran Sosial. *Jurnal Terjemahan Alam & Tamadun Melayu*, 3(Dec.), 155-176. <http://journalarticle.ukm.my/5137/>
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1963). *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books (1963).
- Muthia, R. (2017). Polygamy in Indonesia: Why some men are promoting it again, and what a leading women's rights expert thinks about that". *South China Morning Post* 11/01/2018. <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/families/article/2127630/polygamy-indonesia-why-some-men-are-promoting-it-again-and-what>
- Rizkiya, R., Manugeran, M., & Ekalestari, S. (2019). Distinctive Attitude of Datuk Maringgih in Marah Rusli's Novel Siti Nurbaya. *KnE Social Sciences/The 2nd Annual International Conference on Language and Literature (AICLL 2019)*, 646-651. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v3i19.4893>
- Rusli, M. (w. y.) *Sitti Nurbaya. Kasih tak sampai*. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka.
- Rusli, M. (2017). *Memang Jodoh*. Bandung PT Mizan Pustaka.
- Teeuw, A. (1967). *Modern Indonesian Literature*. Leiden: KITLV. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-0768-4>
- Young, K. (1994). *Islamic Peasants and the State: The 1908 Anti-Tax Rebellion in West Sumatra*. New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies (1994).

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).