

# FANTASY, DESIRE AND IDENTITY FRAMING THE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF LUH SEKAR

**Evi Eliyanah**

Jurusan Sastra Inggris Fakultas Sastra Universitas Negeri Malang

**Abstract:** This article examines the roles of fantasy and desire in the process of identity construction as experienced by Luh Sekar, one of the characters in Oka Rusmini's most notable work of fiction, *Tarian Bumi*. Employing Stuart Hall's postulate on identity construction in critically reading the novel, it is found that the subject's identity construction is highly influenced by her fantasy and desire of caste and gender - not only does caste structure women's social location through rank and role, but that as part of the symbolic order it constitutes the women themselves.

**Key words:** fantasy, desire, *Tarian Bumi*, identity, suture, Rusmini

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini membahas tentang peran *fantasy* dan *desire* dalam proses pembentukan identitas Luh Sekar, salah satu karakter dalam novel *Tarian Bumi* karangan Oka Rusmini. Menggunakan teori konstruksi identitas post-struktural yang dipopulerkan oleh Stuart Hall, penulis membaca karya tersebut secara kritis dan menemukan bahwa proyek identitas yang dialami oleh Luh Sekar sarat akan, bahkan dituntun oleh, *fantasy* dan *desire* nya terkait dengan kasta dan gender – kasta tidak hanya menstruktur lokasi sosial subjek melalui kedudukan dan peran sosial yang diatributkan, namun kedua hal tersebut, sebagai bagian dari order simbolik, membentuk identitas gendernya.

**Kata-kata kunci:** fantasi, hasrat, *Tarian Bumi*, identitas, Rusmini

The cultural theorist Stuart Hall suggests that identities are about *becoming* rather than *being* and that these processes of becoming are embedded in history, language and culture (Hall, 1997:4). The experience of belonging for Hall entails the positioning of the self into these larger discourses, through what he calls a "suturing into the story." Hall's formulation emphasizes the construction of self-identity in and through culture, stressing the regulating influence of history and culture on the self. At the same time he indicates the capacity, indeed the inevitability, of selves engaging in processes of self-construction. These constructions, he

suggests, are always at least partly constructed through *fantasy*.

Making use of Hall's conceptualizations, I explore identity projects of Balinese womanhood represented in and through the literary work of Balinese author, Oka Rusmini, specifically in her novel *Tarian Bumi* (2001). This is a story of four generations of Balinese women in their struggle of identity project. Born into the lower *Sudra* caste, Luh Sekar enjoys drastic status mobility through her inter-caste marriage to a *Brahmana* man. While she may still be considered a *Sudra* woman, she is granted considerably higher status than

her fellow *Sudra* women as she is formally 'adopted' as a member of *Brahmana* family.

Rusmini's novel is significant at a number of levels, not least of which is the way that it places caste as a central regulating force in the lives and identities of Balinese women. Despite claims about the relative fluidity and openness of caste in Bali, compared for example with India, (Dwipayana, 2001; Hobart 1996; Jensen and Suryani, 1992), Rusmini's novel positions caste as central in the lives of the women and by extension to Balinese womanhood in general. Taking Hall's concept of "suturing in to the story", I take the opportunity in this essay to consider the way caste constrains and subjugates Balinese women, and also the way that *desire and fantasy* power gendered identity projects within the context of the Balinese caste system. In particular I am interested in the theoretical relationship between desire and fantasy and the way this can shed light on Luh Sekar's subjective "suturing in" to the cultural imaginary of Bali, while also illuminating, and arguing that insufficient intellectual attention has been paid to the regulatory influence of caste to Balinese social life, particularly to lives of women.

My exploration and argument unfolds in the following manner. An elaboration of the relationship between identity, fantasy and desire precedes a discussion of existing scholarly work on Balinese womanhood. I then present a detailed analysis of the character of Luh Sekar and the way she is positioned by Balinese culture and history and the way desire and fantasy power her identity project. Ultimately we see in the character of Luh Sekar a capacity to "suture in" only partially, leaving questions about the relative power of subjects to construct their own identity projects in the face of powerfully regulating cultural imaginaries, and the particular effects of this on Balinese women.

## LITERARY ANALYSIS AND SOCIAL REALITY

While it may be argued that the world of fiction is far removed from social reality, literary analysis makes significant contributions to social understanding, especially when literature is treated as a form of medium, in which meanings are embedded. Cultural theorist Chris Barker (2008) posits that knowledge of the world can be deconstructed by exploring the textual generation of meaning, as well as investigating the modes by which meaning is produced in various contexts and materiality, in images, books, magazines or television programs (Barker, 2008: 6-7). In this sense, literary works become important 'texts' for understanding the world. Thus, literature is not produced in a vacuum or independent of the social and cultural events taking place in the world of reality (Ellen Rooney, 2006: 7). Indeed, as Nancy Armstrong suggests literary works, novels in particular, are arguably responses to particular historical events, such as Great Depression, Great Wars, colonization or globalization (2006, p.107). Novels, she says, not only respond to events, but also register the changes brought about by them. As a mode of cultural work, literature is part of social reality.

Feminists have found the representations of women and oppression in fiction enormously illuminating. For example Kate Millet argued that the study of literary works offered understanding about the oppression of women and how women have been subjected to violence or unequal treatment entailed in patriarchy (see Millet in Eagleton, 2008). Millet posits that socially engaged human beings produce literature, and their social engagement informs their literary production. Oka Rusmini, a Balinese woman herself, is engaged with and subjected to the patriarchal caste system of regulation. She

was born in Jakarta but relocated to Denpasar in her teens and has never permanently lived outside Bali. Texts about Balinese women written by a Balinese woman writer provide a very useful lens through which to understand the identity struggles of women in the caste system. In a sense, Rumini's novel provides an insider's rendition of such identity projects.

Oka Rusmini's *Tarian Bumi* has been acclaimed as a novel that possesses its own mythic quality through "evocation of the ongoing, timeless quality of female experience" (Hatley, 2000:139). The novel presents a tightly interwoven story of four generations of Balinese women who, despite their generational differences have shared experiences of the determining constraints of caste and patriarchy. These constraints are depicted through cultures and practices attached to marriage and to appropriate women's roles. I agree with Hatley (ibid) that the novel represents the caste system as constraining and subjugating Balinese women, yet whereas she reads the novel for the way this is situated historically and culturally within Bali, I want to take this further by considering how the novel also depicts the ways in which Balinese women live this cultural predicament. I do this by considering the role of fantasy and desire in Luh Sekar's aspiration to transcend the constraints of caste, as she attempts to 'suture herself in' to an alternative identity narrative. I consider fantasy and desire through the lens of psychoanalytic theories of identity formation.

Through the figure of Luh Sekar it can be gleaned that Balinese femininity is grounded in the caste system and that one's location in the caste hierarchy regulates one's social and cultural identity. Yet, while caste regulates, it does not determine one's identity. This distinction between regulation and determinism is important, and in the novel we see how Luh Sekar actively

engages in processes to recreate her identity. The work of the subject's fantasy and desire is central for the way they act as identity movers. In a sense they drive the subject's drastic status mobility. Fantasy and desire enable Luh Sekar to invest deeply in the processes of recreating her identity. However, it is not my claim, nor the author's claim that the character can be generalized to Balinese women in general, but because they render true for Luh Sekar, there remains the imaginative possibility that they exist for others.

### IDENTITY, FANTASY AND DESIRE

To understand identity as a construction is to eschew the notion that people have an underlying and unchangeable essence. As Hall (1997) suggests, identity is a process of becoming, which entails performativity, rather than being. Despite acknowledging that identity construction is partially motivated by the unconscious, through fantasy, this does not diminish the discursive nature of identity. Elliot (1992) drawing on Castoriadis' interpretation of Freud, argues that the unconscious itself is constructed of "an endless emergence of representational forms, drives, and affects – understood as an imaginary dimension of subjectivity, the dimension through which human beings create themselves anew and the potential shape of their society" (Elliot, 1992:4). In other words, the unconscious does not operate beyond representation; however, there is also a sense of active involvement from the individuals in the process of their identity construction. In this case, identity is neither an essence nor purely crafted by the social; identity is constructed from within the individuals as well as by the outside force. This notion does not negate the basic concept of self in psychoanalysis developed by Freud, but it demands reconceptualization of the subject, as proposed by Hall (1997: 2). Hall suggests the need to

rearticulate the relationship between the subject, the unconscious and discursive practices, which is particular in historical and social specificity.

Classical or Freudian psychoanalysis conceptualizes the self as constituted of three fragments—an ego, which is also recognized as the conscious rational mind; a superego, which is social conscience; and an id, which is also known as the unconscious. The unconscious is translated by Barker as the source and repository of the symbolic workings of the mind that operates differently from the logic of reason (Barker, 2008:896). According to Elliot's reading on Freud, unlike the conscious mind, the unconscious is resistant to reality; thus, it cannot do anything but wish (Elliot 1992:17). Elliot thus challenges conventional psychoanalysis by arguing that the unconscious cannot be separated from reality, as the pleasure it seeks is closely intertwined with "the needs of the human body, the nature of external reality, and actual social relations" (Elliot, 1992: 18).

Thus, fantasy and desire, emerging from the unconscious, work at the level of the subject and the social. The work of fantasy and desire in the construction of a woman's identity draws from both the entwinement of the psyche and the social. Feminist historian Scott (2001), considers fantasy "a formal mechanism for the articulation of scenarios that are at once historically specific in their representation and detail and transcendent of historical specificity" (Scott, 2001:288). Rather than operating beyond the realm of language and representation, fantasy is embedded in them. In his analysis of the work of fantasy and desire in Harlem renaissance poetry, Comprone (2006) argues:

Fantasy is not the antithesis of psychic reality; instead, fantasy is what shapes the subject's understanding of sociohistorical realities. Fantasy structures the subject's reality principle, and on collective level,

identifying with an ideological fantasy enables subjects to structure their unconscious enjoyment. (Comprone, 2006: xi)

Comprone's formulation of fantasy has a Lacanian essence insofar as fantasy functions to structure the subject's realities. According to both Elliott (1992: 124) and Mansfield (2000: 42-43), Lacanian fantasy refers to the narcissistic *phantasies* of the human subject experienced at the stage of pre-Oedipal imaginary, in which the subject recognizes itself as part of a continuous uninterrupted and limitless being. The pre-Oedipal imaginary begins to be repressed and constitutes the unconscious as the subject reaches the mirror stage, in which it begins to recognize itself as separate and at the same time unified; however, this image of him/herself as separate/unified is not its own construction. It is somewhat like a play of light on the mirror, which sends back the reflection of the subject. The wholeness image, his/her selfhood, is not the subject's own creation, but provided by the outside – the overarching order of structured signification, which is also known as the symbolic order. It is a system of meaning and identities from which he/she derives his/her selfhood. The subject's entry to the symbolic is as a result of this imaginary identification. His/her imaginary finds its archetype in the signifier. In other words, the subject's imaginary guides him/her to find the archetype in the symbolic.

At this stage, it is important to distinguish between fantasy and desire. They might appear so seamlessly linked that the difference between them is less recognized. McGowan, in his attempt to deconstruct David Lynch's cinematic works (2000), offers a simple way to distinguish the two:

Desire fuels narrative because it is the search for answers, a process of questioning, an opening to possibility. Fantasy, in contrast, provides an answer

to this questioning, a solution to the enigma of desire (albeit an imaginary one). (McGowan, 2000:51-52)

Desire is the search for answers and fantasy provides a potential solution. In Lacanian terms this is desire as longing for completion. According to Mansfield (2000), Lacan argues that the subject is in a state of lack – the subject's entry to the symbolic order is at the expense of the imaginary. Once he/she realizes that he/she has minimal control over the symbolic due to the fact that it pre-exists him/her and it is shared with other subjects, the image of wholeness it seems to supply is sucked away by its alien nature (Mansfield, 2000 44-46). This notion of the subject as lack, insinuates that while the subject seems to submit to the Symbolic order, defined as "the order of life which includes language, cultural codes and conventions, and whose principal function is to differentiate one thing from another, and to mediate between non-verbal experiences – the Imaginary order of identification – and the real events – the Real" (Rangland-Sullivan, 1982:7), the subject at an unconscious level still preserves the pursuit of intense satisfaction to be derived from self completion.

Hence, the core concept of desire is the longing for self-completion or seeking compensation to fill the lack. As the subject actually desires completion, fantasy provides a solution through imagining or longing for the self that it once had in the Imaginary. As completion can never be restored, the desire to achieve the pleasure of wholeness is insatiable. According to Zizek,

Fantasy functions as a construction, as an imaginary scenario filling out the void, the opening of the *desire of the Other*: by giving us a definite answer to the question "What does the Other want?" it enables us to evade the unbearable deadlock in which Other wants something from us, but we are at the same time

incapable of translating this desire of the Other into a positive interpellation, into a mandate with which to identify. (in McGowan, 2003:36)

This interpellation can be interpreted as the investment of psychic energy that eventually drives the actions of the subject in social reproduction (Elliott, 1992: 186). The subject might pursue any demand to try to appease desire, but only temporary satisfaction is ever possible. The demands, located in the Symbolic order, might include the subject's identification with particular group identities such as nation and race. The tension between *insatiable desire* and *hopeless demands*, Lacan argues, is the core of human tragedy. Fantasy, desire and identity are thus entangled in this tragedy of the human condition. In what follows I consider Luh Sekar's identity projects, in particular how fantasy projects her desire, and how eventually her desire commands her demand to associate with certain identities related to Balinese gender and caste.

## BALINESE WOMANHOOD

What does it mean to be a Balinese woman? In the register of identity, it is important to interrogate the socio-historical context for the discursive context of the symbolic realm in which women's identity projects occur. Anthropological accounts of Bali provide important cues about this context, particularly in the area of religion and ritual. Hinduism is widespread as culture and as practice. As a practice-oriented religion, Balinese Hinduism puts great emphasis on rituals. An extensive range of rituals mediates most stages of life from pregnancy through to death. Rituals are seen as the manifestation of the followers' devotion to the Gods, ancestors and spirit (Geertz 1973: 177). Proper preparation and implementation of rituals depend on men and women appropriately

and adequately performing their respective roles. Thus, Balinese womanhood is often studied in relation to women's role in the preparation and implementation of rituals. Creese (2004) and Nakatani (2003) have both studied Balinese women's identity and both suggest that Balinese womanhood is profoundly linked to fulfillment of their roles as religious subjects.

Creese (2004) analyses representations of women in the notable regional newspaper, *Bali Post*, in the post-Suharto era, arguing that the massive campaigns of the Suharto regime to promote a gender ideology that stressed the importance of women as mothers, still finds resonance in Balinese patriarchal culture in the post New Order era. The central focus of the articles published in the *Bali Post* in the period of 1999-2003 is the idea of women as culture-conservationists. That is, an emphasis on them embracing their traditional roles accorded as a way of preserving Balinese culture. Women are represented as performing their essence, as an extension of their nature or *kodrat*. Although the women in the articles analyzed are reportedly complaining of the burden of culture, they are also presented as women who seem to accept their roles, or resigned to them when they feel there is nothing they can do about it.

Nakatani (2003) also analyzes Balinese womanhood through the lens of religious roles. These roles are studied in relation to their other, non-religious obligations, such as being involved in remunerative activities. She argues that because Balinese women are required to perform extensive labor in the preparation and presentation of offerings in all types of ritual, they are left with little or no time to perform other, non-religious activities. While they protest that their heavy ritual workload precludes engagement in remunerative activities, they also accumulate a sense of themselves through their enhanced household status.

Nakatani (ibid) highlights the discrepancy in the task distribution between men and women and between women of *Triwangsa*, the three noble castes: *Brahmana*, *Satria* and *Wesia*, and women of *Sudra*, the lowest caste in the hierarchy. Ritual rules then are differentiated according to both gender and caste. All women are called upon to perform ritual activities regarded as an extension of their domestic roles, such as the production and presentation of offerings and the presentation of gifts to the sponsors of the rituals. Men are responsible for setting up and decorating the venues and for preparing meat for the ceremonial feast. At the level of caste difference the division exists around degrees of labour intensity, For example in the marriage ceremony, women of *Triwangsa* are involved in making offerings that are physically less demanding. The women of *Sudra* however undertake more menial and labour intensive works, such as serving the guests and washing dishes.

Nakatani's work is important for the way it illuminates the reproduction of gender through the symbols and labour of ritual, highlighting the intersections of caste and gender difference. Yet her analysis is perhaps overly schematic insofar as it allows for little differentiation within caste rank and mobility within the hierarchy. For example it is possible to occupy a noble rank within *Sudra* itself. Women who might be *Sudra* advance their rank and their social status through marriage to men of higher caste levels in the *Triwangsa* group. Nakatani does not take into account how women who suture into this identity position are awkwardly positioned by other women in their society and how this awkwardness is reflected in the labour of rituals.

It is rather astounding that while scholarly attention has been paid to the structuring of Balinese society through caste

system, Balinese womanhood is rarely studied in relation to the caste system. There exists a notable absence of inquiry into how the caste system contributes to the construction of a gendered subject and how caste has been a significant locus of women's oppression. This lack of interest is likely based on the unproblematised assumption that the Balinese caste system is less rigid and therefore less worthy of attention than the caste system in India. For example, quoting Hildred Geertz, Dwipayana (2001) argues that the Balinese caste system is much looser than the Indian system. There is no strict restriction on physical contact between higher castes (the Triwangsa) and the lower (the Sudra or Jaba) and the concept of *dalits* or the untouchables, the people who are not categorized into any caste, does not exist in Bali (Dwipayana, 2001:120). Hobart et al (1996) claim that the Balinese caste system is not much more than the adherence of good manners in interpersonal interactions. They also note the existence of mechanisms that enable lower caste people to advance their nobility rank through a legal marriage between a noble man and a *Sudra* woman (Hobart et al, 1996:82-3). Like other studies, which focus on the structural mechanisms of caste, this account does not consider what is at stake when a lower caste woman enters a new social milieu of a higher rank in the hierarchy.

Jensen and Suryani (1992) similarly understate the regulating power of caste in Bali, claiming that caste division today is no longer significant in defining an individual's function in the society. They suggest that it now operates primarily as kinship relations. They highlight that the caste system, which is originally derived from the Hindu teaching on the society's division of labor: *Brahmana* (high priests), *Satria* (rulers), *Wesia* (businessmen) and *Sudra* (farmers or commoners used to perform tasks for the other three castes), but

suggest that these vocational prescriptions no longer exist. Their only significance today is in the realm of inheritance and social status. Moreover, they state that priesthood is no longer dominated by the *Brahmana* descent groups, for even the lowest caste has its own priest, who enjoys a similar level of respectability as the *Brahmana* priest (Jensen and Suryani, 1992:16). Yet their study of caste not only ignores Nakatani's emphasis on the gendered divisions within caste, it has little to say about gender at all.

Because Rusmini's book and my analysis of it, involves two castes, the *Brahmana* and *Sudra*, it is important to provide some background on how *Brahmana* and *Sudra* identities are constituted in relation to each other. In her analysis of ancient *Brahmana* texts Raechelle Rubinstein (1991) found that the high respect accorded to the *Brahmana* descent groups can only be understood in relation to the significance of religion to the Balinese people. It is only the *Brahmana* descendants who can be *pedanda*, the high priests—the highest position in the religious hierarchy. Because religion imbues every single dimension of Balinese life, the existence of *Brahmana* in the society is highly desirable, powerful and greatly respected. Moreover, Rubinstein argues that the well being of a *Brahmana* family depends on the existence of a *pedanda* in the family or on having kin relations with a deceased *pedanda* in not too distant past. A *pedanda* will usually have clients they serve by providing the holy water. These students are called *sisia* (religious students) and commonly provide the *pedanda* family necessities and luxuries as a token of gratitude to their spiritual guru. As there is no restriction for the *pedanda* to receive such gifts, the *pedanda* who has many *sisia* can become very rich indeed (Hobart et al, 1996:81).

It is only through understanding how *Brahmana* are positioned and indeed how

they position themselves in society, that we can begin to understand the social location of *Sudra*. Dwipayana (2001) outlines how *Sudra* members provide labor to the *Triwangsa*, tilling the lands or doing menial work. *Sudra* are positioned as the lowest in hierarchy of caste system (Dwipayana, 2001:118, so lowly that even a *Brahmana* descendant whose mother is *Sudra* cannot eat at the same table as ‘pure’ *Brahmana* and can never be religious teachers to the latter (Rubenstein, 1991: 58)

Endogamous marriage is a feature of the caste system, yet, while marriage between a *Brahmana* man and a *Sudra* woman is a legal possibility, the inverse is not permitted. It is not possible for a *Sudra* man and *Brahmana* to marry. Water is an important symbol pertaining to this cosmology. According to Laura Bellows (2003) this cosmological order conforms to the flow of water – from the higher place to the lower. The water is the *kama putih* (semen), considered to be purer when it travels “downstream” than “upstream”. It is acceptable for the semen of a man of higher caste to flow downwards to a commoner wife. Same caste marriage is also considered downstream due to the gender hierarchy. Men occupy a higher position than women in Hindu teaching. Accordingly women are subjected to the will first of all of their father, then of their husbands, and finally of their sons (Hobart et. al. 1996). “Upstream” marriage is considered bad luck as it violates the natural law of water and creates pollution. Thus, when a woman transgresses this cultural convention, she risks being disowned by her pre-marital family and becomes a woman of her husband’s caste. The rules and symbolism attached to inter caste marriage demonstrate the gendered foundations of caste governance.

The scholarly literature on Bali mostly acknowledges and attends in varying ways to the saliency of caste and Balinese

Hinduism, particularly their force in regulating social structure and social division. There has been significant attention paid to rituals and symbols of Bali, yet my claim is that most scholars and indeed all those dealt with here underplay the significance of caste in defining and regulating Balinese personhood. This is in stark contrast with the representation of caste and gender in Oka Rusmini’s novel. My analysis of her representation and an elaboration of my arguments about the entwined relations of identity, fantasy and desire as seen in the identity projects of the character Luh Sekar are presented in the following sections.

#### **LUH SEKAR AND HER LIFE IN THE NOVEL**

As outlined earlier, *Tarian Bumi*<sup>1</sup> is the story of four generations of Balinese women. Ida Ayu Telaga Pidada, the daughter of Luh Sekar, narrates the story.

Luh Sekar is a *Sudra*, the lowest in the hierarchy of caste. She holds her father responsible for the family’s misery and poverty and the social sanctions these incur. She sees her father’s association with the doomed Indonesian Communist Party as the cause of their poverty and the derisory public attitude towards her and her mother. She was more tormented when her mother was violently gang-raped and was left pregnant and blind.

Frustrated by her poverty and low social status, Luh Sekar is driven to do something to change her life. In her teenage years, she is involved in a dance group and through her beauty and her graceful dance, she becomes the *pragina*, the best dancer, of the group and even of the whole village. This

<sup>1</sup> The novel is actually written in *Bahasa Indonesia*. However, for the sake of making it accessible for the non-English speaking readers of this essay, I translate the parts quoted in this essay.



remediated the standing of her family in the social life of the village yet, She remains unsatisfied with the rewards of this achievement. She imagines that life as a *Brahmana* wife would offer more. She meets a *Brahmana* man, Ida Bagus Ngurah Pidada who later becomes her husband.

Unsurprisingly Ngurah Pidada's mother, Ida Ayu Sagra Pidada, who desires and expects her daughter in law to be a *Brahmana*, does not welcome Luh Sekar. Yet, Luh Sekar persists and finally marries Ngurah Pidada and is incorporated into this *Brahmana* family. Her life changes dramatically. She is no longer deprived of wealth and social status and so her fantasies are partially realised. Yet suffering still remains a significant part of her being. As a *rabi*—*Sudra* woman married to a *Brahmana* man—a new identity is assigned and she is called upon to recreate herself as a new woman. It is expected that she will not only change her name and acquire new attitudes, but also that she will sever her ties with her past life. This marks the beginning of a new set of tragedies for Luh Sekar.

While her comparative social status, in relation to other castes is enhanced, her low-caste status is intensified within her husband's family compound where she is perpetually regarded as a *Sudra* woman, not a noble. The torment worsens when her mother is reportedly drowned in a river and she is prevented from even touching her dead body due to her higher social status as a noble. Her misery accumulates with the knowledge that her husband is having affairs with many women, including both of her younger twin sisters. Her husband also has gambling and alcohol problems, while her mother in law constantly accuses her of lacking the capacity to make her husband happy and to provide her daughter with proper guidance. Eventually, her husband is stabbed to death in a brothel.

Luh Sekar resolves that her daughter is her only hope for her elderly life; thus, she

sees the need to invest in her. She raises her as a dancer and attempts to arrange her marriage with a *Brahmana* man. However, this time, her plans are not realized and even though her daughter becomes a famous dancer, she chooses to marry a *Sudra* man. Luh Sekar finally disowns her daughter and continues to live as a noble at her adopted home with her father in law. From this point in the story, we hear very little of her, until her daughter returns seeking her permission to undergo *patiwangi* ceremony to formally adopt a new identity as a *Sudra* woman.

### FANTASY AND DESIRE POWERING IDENTITY PROJECT

As previously discussed, there is a relative lack of scholarly focus on the intersections of gender and caste in Balinese social and cultural life and where it does exist, the 'looseness' of the Balinese caste system is emphasized. Oka Rusmini's *Tarian Bumi* is significant insofar as it confronts and complicates this picture. In the novel, caste is an organising principle of gendered life whereby lower caste women enact and express their sense of marginalization and their striving for recognition. The novel, through Luh Sekar, presents the constraining and regulating aspects of caste life. It also portrays Luh Sekar's attempts to enhance her social status and to alter her assigned subject position and identity through inter-caste marriage. This dynamic of constraint and transformation, central to the story and to the gendered identities of the women in the story, is indicative of Hall's (op cit) notion of 'suturing in' to imaginary identification. The drive to suture in can be understood by way of the power of fantasy and desire.

The symbolic order of Balinese society interpellates Luh Sekar as a daughter of a *Sudra* man and a *Sudra* woman, insinuating for her an identity of the lowest rank in

caste hierarchy. Her gender and caste identity are located as part of the symbolic order. As theorized, the symbolic involves language, cultural codes and conventions, which function to differentiate one thing from another. Hence, Luh Sekar's sense of *Sudra* identity only has meaning in relation to other castes, in this case, *Brahmana*, the highest in the hierarchy of caste system. The symbolic order and Luh Sekar's identification with *Sudra* caste can be inferred from the narrator's introduction of her:

"Indeed, her mother is not a noble. Telaga's mother is a *sudra* woman, a woman of the commoner who is married to a *brahmana* man, a man in whose blood flows the values of nobility, magnificence, and gallantry, as well as arrogance." (p.7)

"Mother is just a junior woman. She knows nothing. She does not even understand the values of nobility. The senior woman is an older woman who possesses magnificent qualities because God has sprinkled magnificence, beauty and elegance in her body." (p.9)

In the above quotations, Luh Sekar as a *Sudra* is positioned in opposition to a *Brahmana* man, in this case her husband, and a *Brahmana* woman, her mother in law. A distinct difference can be derived: a *Sudra* woman of common people, possessing no extra ordinary qualities, such as magnificence, gallantry, beauty and even arrogance, unlike the *Brahmana* man and woman who is endowed with and understands the value of them all. The novel offers critique through exposing the common-sense formulaic perception of the characteristics of *Sudra* as opposed to *Brahmana*; as if to say that when someone is *Brahmana*, we can expect that he or she has such particular characteristics and when someone is a *Sudra*, we can expect the absence of them.

Luh Sekar receives her symbolic identity image as:

"I'm tired of being a poor woman, Luh. Nobody respects me. My dad was involved in political action; we never know if he's still alive or dead already.

People are alienating me. They say I'm a daughter of a traitor. I'm a PKI<sup>2</sup> daughter!" (pp 16-17)

In the symbolic order where she is apprehended as a daughter of a communist, she deserves alienation. It is interesting the way Luh Sekar addresses herself as a poor woman; she identifies gender and poverty as causes for her lack of social respect. Furthermore, because "a woman is subjected to the will of the father", as argued by Hobart *et.al* (1996), her identity is fastened to the image of her father as a traitor of the nation. Society perceives that as a daughter of a very horrible person she warrants disaffection. Her identity within the symbolic is obviously not singular; rather it is multiply constructed through gender, class and descent.

At one level she accepts her identity as a woman of lower caste, a daughter of a traitor. Yet, she consciously desires and unconsciously fantasises about filling the void in her miserable life. Luh Sekar imagines that her self-completion will be achieved if she can make her mother happy. Her desire to seek intense satisfaction for herself is also multifariously linked to her desire to remediate her mother's tragic life. This is poignantly revealed during a visit to her mother when her sisters cynically confront her.

"She can do nothing but be silent. She has so many things in her mind. Don't they know that they were born through extra ordinary efforts of this old powerless woman? Don't they have a dream like hers to make the woman who

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<sup>2</sup> PKI stands for *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (Communist Party of Indonesia)

has lent her body for them to be born happy?" (p.42)

Further in the story, it is revealed that her mother has a big dream of "to build a better generation" (p.43). Linking her own tragedies to her bad karma—she has experienced bitter life of losing a husband, being poor, being raped, being blind and being pregnant to unknown man—she has desires that Luh Sekar and the following generation can escape her circle of karma. Her mother's desire is implanted in Luh Sekar's sense of destiny. From a very early age, she has fantasized that through marriage this complicated desire could be realized: "... Since her teenage years, she has wanted to marry a *brahmana*. She wants to build a new dynasty. A more respected one." (p.45) Her life then, her sense of identity becomes powered by desire and fantasy.

Seeking intense satisfaction and self identity in the symbolic seems to "hold out for the subject the intense identifications that will return to it the sense of completeness it now lacks." (Mansfield 2000, p.45) She fantasises that a noble identity will appease her desire of self-completion and return to her imaginary whole. Symbolically interpellated as a woman of lack—she lacks social status and material wealth—suturing into the symbolic differently, and elevating her social status by marrying a rich noble might satisfy her desire. As Stuart Hall (1997, p.4) states, "...identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being..."(1997:4). She, thus, makes use of the resources available for her in the symbolic, an order that constitutes her social location and her unconscious desires, which constrains her and provides the means by which she can attempt to alter her identity.

By becoming an accomplished dancer she endeavours to prove to the society that she, a poor *Sudra* woman, a daughter of a nation's traitor, is worthy of more than that which society names her:

"What are the conditions for a woman to be a dancer?

She has to be good looking. Have a beautiful body.

What do you think of my body?

You start it again.

It's not an answer, Kenten. What I am asking is what you think of me, Luh Sekar. A human being in whose blood flows the blood of a traitor, a man who is said to have commanded the massacre in the village. A man who cheated the republic's fight, a man who is said to have the heart to kill a baby. I am a woman who has never met the man who shapes her body. I didn't ask God to choose him to complete my shape as a human being so that I can live in this world, in this village. Is it wrong then if I want to be a dancer who is adored by many people?"(p.20).

When her desire is realised, and she becomes a famous dancer, she wants more. She wants to become the most famous dancer of all. "...I want to know if I have become the most beautiful *pragina*<sup>3</sup>. A dancer who can attract all the male audience attending my performance..." (p.30). Then, her ultimate desire to transcend her rank through marriage. The novel reveals that she has always rejected the love of *Sudra* men. She tells her best friend Luh Sekar:

"Whatever happens to my life, I have to be a *rabi*, a wife of a noble. If I can't find that man, I will never marry!' Luh Sekar's voice sounds very serious." (p.16)

She dares to challenge the cultural convention by marrying up because she is tired of being a poor and disrespected

<sup>3</sup> The best dancer in the group

woman. Once she asks Luh Kenten to find her a *Brahmana* man; whatever the conditions, she is willing to meet them. She is even willing to invest in being subjugated to the man's power. She says, "I am going to submit myself to him. Can he lift my pride from this poverty and indignity?" (p.17)

Her suture into nobility identity requires her to drop her maiden name and take a new name given by her new family. Her attachment to the name as her identity is to be severed to signify that Luh Sekar, the *Sudra* woman has died and has been reincarnated as a noble, named Jero Kenanga. Later when she dies, her soul will reincarnate into a *Brahmana* body (p.41). This is the dramatic, transformative, yet tragic moment of Luh Sekar's exit from her mother's karma and the beginning of her own effort to build her own karma as a better person. Furthermore, she is prohibited from praying at her old family's *sanggah*<sup>4</sup>, and must not eat the offerings dedicated to her ancestors. She has to learn the codes of conduct of being a noble woman, including positioning herself above her mother and her fellow *Sudra* women.

"That is what a woman named Luh Sekar has to pay. Not only does she lose her old habits, but she also loses the world that has shaped her womanhood. That woman has to create a new world." (p.42)

Despite the loss, Luh Sekar's mother supports her, "Go! Don't cry. Be a new woman. A woman who has high self esteem, power and big dreams." (p.43). While she has to perform the part of a noble woman in front of her fellow *Sudra*, in her husband's family compound, she is still perceived as a low-caste. She has to speak in polite language in her interaction with other family members, notably *Brahmana*; she must not share the same cup of drink with them, not even with her own daughter,

who is *Brahmana* by birth. Moreover she cannot even touch her own deceased mother's body.

The happiness of her marriage is short lived. Her husband has gambling problems and has affairs with other women, including her own sisters.

"Since the beginning, she has suspected that the man who has planted his seed in her womb is a disgusting animal. Kenanga knows exactly that she cannot demand him to do otherwise and she cannot do anything about it. ... She can only say, 'There is nothing free of charge in this life. Water, air, and any energy you use to live incur costs. Have you ever been happy? If you get that present from life, you have to prepare yourself, as in a matter of seconds suffering will arrogantly stand right before you.' That is what her heart says to get her back to her senses – that life has to be strategized unless one wants to be a loser." (pp.63-64)

The above elaboration of Luh Sekar's transformation into a noble and her insistence that her daughter become a dancer and a *Brahmana* wife imply the inability of the demand to meet her desire. Her desire to suture into nobility has her perpetually negotiate her ever-precarious identity. Ultimately, while Luh Sekar is driven by her desire, a complicated layering of her mother's desires with her own, the symbolic order continues to regulate her life, and tragedy prevails.

To conclude, the novel, in contrast to existing scholarly literature on Bali, presents the inextricable and regulatory link between gender and caste in Balinese womanhood. In contrast to accounts of the weak structuring power of caste, this novel presents its power to tightly bind its subjects and explores through its character's life trajectories, the highly salient influence of caste on gender. Moreover, in this essay I have attempted to demonstrate that not only

<sup>4</sup> Term for family's shrine for *Sudra*

does caste structure women's social location through rank and role, but that as part of the symbolic order it constitutes the women themselves. Their identity projects are fusions of desire and fantasy derived from the symbolic. The emphasis of psychoanalytic theory on the way that subjects are motivated socially through desire and fantasy has been helpful in illuminating the content and process of Luh Sekar's identity projects. We see how she develops the desire to fill the lack of social recognition and material wealth and how this is experienced as a constant interior yearning and a life source. That this book is hugely popular in Bali, and Indonesia in general, speaks to the resonance it has with women in Balinese cultural life and may perhaps inaugurate a new intellectual interest in caste and gender in Bali.

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