



Voicing the Silenced: Female Agency and Resistance in Ratna Sarumpaet's *Marsinah Menggugat*

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Abstract. This study explores female agency and resistance as central dramatic elements in Ratna Sarumpaet's political play *Marsinah Menggugat* (1994). Set during Indonesia's New Order regime under Suharto's leadership, the play portrays the murder of labor activist Marsinah and presents her ghost as an accuser seeking justice and challenging historical silence. Drawing on feminist theatre theory, postcolonial discourse, and the concept of subaltern agency, this study argues that Sarumpaet represents Marsinah not merely as a victim of oppression but as a powerful female figure who resists the erasure imposed by state authority and patriarchal structures. Employing a qualitative research approach based on feminist literary criticism, the study uses the play script as the primary data source. Data analysis involves close reading, thematic categorization, and interpretive analysis through the perspectives of Diamond (1997), Butler (1990), Spivak (1988), and Suryakusuma (1996). The findings reveal four forms of female agency: the monologue as an expression of an autonomous female voice, the spectral body as a symbol of political resistance, language and naming as acts against state-imposed silence, and personal testimony as a foundation for collective feminist solidarity. This study demonstrates that *Marsinah Menggugat* transforms theatre into a counter-hegemonic space where marginalized women reclaim historical narratives, challenge authoritarian power, and preserve collective memory through performance and resistance.

Keywords: Female Agency; Feminist Dramaturgy; Indonesian Theatre; Marsinah; Ratna Sarumpaet.

1. INTRODUCTION

On May 8, 1993, Marsinah a twenty-five-year-old female factory worker and labor activist in Sidoarjo, East Java was found dead. Although there were numerous indications of severe tortures in her murder, there was never a thorough prosecution; military involvement was suspected but later denied. Her case became a symbol of the violence endured by workers, women, and dissidents under President Suharto's New Order (Orde Baru) regime, that governed Indonesia from 1966 to 1998. In relevance with this politically volatile condition, playwright and activist Ratna Sarumpaet wrote *Marsinah Menggugat* (1994) as a monologue drama that depicted the ghost of Marsinah returning to accuse and to curse her murderers and the system that enabled them. The play was immediately controversial as it was banned by the government, its performances disrupted, and Sarumpaet herself was arrested (Bodden, 2010). Yet the play still distributed underground and internationally, becoming a breakthrough of Indonesian political theatre and feminist resistance.

The play's political aspects such as its opposition to governmental censorship and its connection to labor rights rhetoric have typically been the focus of scholarly analysis. Relatively underexplored, however, is the question of female agency as a formal and thematic construction within the drama itself. This study tackles that gap, suggesting that Sarumpaet's

dramaturgy generates a style of female agency that is at once embodied, ghostly, testimonial, and transgressive. In doing so, the play not only commemorates Marsinah but also reconstitutes her as a subject capable of speech, accusation, and symbolic power. This paper is guided by the several research questions such as: How does Sarumpaet construct female agency through the theatrical and dramaturgical choices in Marsinah Menggugat? In what ways does the figure of Marsinah challenge gendered and political silencing within the world of the play and within its socio-political context? How does the spectral form Marsinah as ghost and accuser function as a mode of feminist resistance? How does Sarumpaet position her authorial and performative role as an extension of female political agency?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Female Agency in Feminist Theatre Theory

The concept of female agency within theatre draws on several traditions as Elin Diamond's foundational work on feminist performance argues that the stage can be a site where normative gender representations are disrupted and resignified. Moreover, Diamond (1997) states that theatrical mimesis is never neutral because it always way to encode power relations. When a female character speaks from a position of accusation, grief, or defiance, she disturbs the convention that women appear on stage as objects of the gaze rather than as speaking, desiring subjects.

This framework aligns productively with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, particularly she presents her argument in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender identities are constituted through repeated, citational performances. In Marsinah Menggugat, the action of staging Marsinah's voice and body itself is indeed a performative act that constitutes her subjectivity against forces that sought to silence and destroy her. Sarumpaet does not merely portrays Marsinah yet she also performs and brings social and political act of reconstituting a woman who was supposed to disappear.

Subaltern Voice and Postcolonial Feminist Theory

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question 'Can the subaltern speak?' (1988) is keenly relevant to Sarumpaet's dramatic project. Spivak argues that the subaltern, particularly the subaltern woman, is doubly silenced: by colonial and neo-colonial power structures, and by gender hierarchies that deny women the position of the speaking subject. In relevance with the context of New Order Regime in Indonesia, Marsinah engaged in multiple subordinate positions such as working-class, female, unionist where all these positions targeted by a state design that used both legal intimidation and physical violence to maintain order.

Sarumpaet's play then classifies what Spivak argues is structurally impossible within hegemonic discourse: the subaltern woman speaks yet the play is deeply aware of this impossibility. Marsinah's speech comes from beyond the grave as she speaks as a ghost and as an impossible presence. This ambivalence the speaking subaltern who can only speak from death is central to the play's critical power. It does not naively claim that silencing is overcome; it performs the ongoing violence of that silencing even as it stages its transgression.

Political Theatre and the Indonesian Context

Sarumpaet's work lies within a longer tradition of Indonesian political theatre (teater politik) which has rooted in both pre-colonial ritual performance traditions and in the nationalist theatre of the twentieth century (Hatley, 2008). The Suharto regime exercised extensive control over cultural production through formal censorship bodies, military intelligence, and informal systems of intimidation. Theatre that engaged critically with state power operated under conditions of surveillance and risk.

Within this context, Sarumpaet's choice of a female protagonist is not only a feminist statement but also a strategic one. The regime's official ideology of gender encapsulated in the Dharma Wanita organization and the figure of the ibu (mother) as loyal wife and supporter of national development positioned women as domestic, subordinate, and passive (Suryakusuma, 1996). Staging Marsinah as an accusing, defiant, and politically articulate woman is thus an act of ideological subversion as much as theatrical innovation.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in feminist literary criticism and feminist theatre theory. Qualitative methodology is appropriate for the interpretive analysis of a dramatic text because it enables close attention to language, theatrical form, representation, ideology, and cultural context without reducing these to quantifiable variables (Creswell, 2014). The feminist critical framework ensures that questions of gender, agency, power, and resistance remain central throughout the analytical process. This design is consistent with established practice in Indonesian literary scholarship that engages with political drama as a site of social meaning (Bodden, 2010; Hatley, 2008).

Data Source

The primary data source is the script of *Marsinah Menggugat* (1994) by Ratna Sarumpaet, accessed through the publicly archived version held by Teater Sabit, Universitas Trunojoyo Madura (Teater Sabit, 2023). The script is written in Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia);

passages cited in this article are accompanied by the author's English translations. Secondary data sources include published scholarly analyses of the play in Indonesian and English-language academic journals, biographical documentation of Sarumpaet, and historical scholarship on the New Order period and the Marsinah case. Secondary sources were identified through searches of Google Scholar and the Indonesian national academic portal GARUDA, using the terms *Marsinah Menggugat*, 'Ratna Sarumpaet', 'teater politik Indonesia', 'female agency Indonesian drama', and 'New Order gender ideology'.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, the complete text of *Marsinah Menggugat* was read in full and annotated systematically. The annotation focused on five categories: (a) subject-position and voice whether Marsinah speaks as the agent of her own discourse or is spoken about by others; (b) the construction of gendered power relations between Marsinah and the state, employers, and institutions; (c) the dramatisation of violence and the framing of the female body; (d) formal and theatrical devices including repetition, direct address, and the use of the spectral; and (e) the linguistic register of accusation, testimony, collective identification, and political demand. In the second stage, secondary literature was gathered and reviewed to situate the primary text within Indonesian theatrical and feminist scholarship, and within the historiography of the Marsinah case and the New Order period.

Analytical Framework and Procedure

Analysis followed a three-stage procedure adapted from feminist literary criticism and discourse analysis of cultural texts. Stage one was close reading: the annotated primary text was reviewed for recurring patterns in the five categories identified above. Particular attention was paid to dramaturgical choices the monologue form, the spectral protagonist, the testimonial mode and their relationship to the construction of female agency. Stage two was thematic categorisation: the textual patterns identified in stage one were organised into four thematic categories that constitute the core of the analysis in Section 4, namely the sovereignty of voice, the spectral body as resistance, language as agency, and female solidarity. Stage three was interpretive synthesis: the thematic findings were read in dialogue with the theoretical frameworks described in Section 2 (feminist theatre theory, Spivak's theory of subaltern speech, Butler's performativity, and the New Order gender ideology), and the broader implications of the drama's formal and political choices were elaborated.

Validity and Positionality

To ensure analytical rigour, interpretations of the primary text were triangulated against published scholarship on the play (Bodden, 2010; Hatley, 2008) and against the historical record of the Marsinah case. All quoted passages from the script are referenced to the publicly accessible archival source (Teater Sabit, 2023) to allow independent verification. This article adopts a declared feminist critical positionality: the choice to foreground female agency rather than victimhood is itself a methodological and political decision, consistent with the feminist theoretical tradition outlined in Section 2. This positionality is acknowledged as productive rather than disqualifying; feminist criticism, as Showalter (1977) and Diamond (1997) argue, is always a positioned practice, and its explicit commitment to equity and accountability is a source of analytical clarity rather than bias.

Female Agency in Marsinah Menggugat: Analysis

The Monologue Form and the Sovereignty of Voice

Structurally, Marsinah Menggugat is written as a monologue a single voice occupying the theatrical space. This formal choice is dramaturgically significant: it gives an undivided claim to presence, voice, and time to a single female character. There are no interlocutors to qualify, contest, or domesticate Marsinah's speech. She speaks alone, and in speaking alone, she commands the stage absolutely.

The play's opening stage direction sets this condition immediately: Sarumpaet frames the drama as occurring outside the realm of the living ('alam diluar alam kehidupan'), in a graveyard. Marsinah is introduced as a restless spirit, troubled and hesitant, who has decided to return to the world of the living to confront those responsible for her death. From the outset, her agency is framed in terms of decision and will — she chooses to return; she will not be silenced even by death itself. Her opening lines establish an interiority defined by tension between isolation and anger:

"Kalau saja sesaat saja aku diberi kesempatan merasakan betapa diriku adalah milikku sendiri...."

[Translation: "If only for a moment I were given the chance to feel that I truly belong to myself...."]

(Sarumpaet, 1994, in Teater Sabit, 2023)

This formulation the desire to belong to oneself is a profoundly feminist articulation of selfhood under conditions of dispossession. Marsinah does not begin with rage or accusation; she begins with longing for subjectivity itself, for the most basic form of female agency: to

own one's own person. The entire trajectory of the monologue moves from this longing toward its impossible fulfilment.

The Spectral Body as Site of Resistance

The decision to stage Marsinah as a ghost rather than in scenes dramatizing her life is among the most politically and theatrically charged elements of the play. The ghost literalizes the return of the repressed: that which was silenced and buried comes back to haunt. In Sarumpaet's drama, Marsinah's ghost refuses the finality of death as erasure. Crucially, she frames her return not as personal grief but as political testimony:

"Aku tidak takut. Aku tidak takut. Aku tidak takut. Aku bisa mempertanggung jawabkan semua itu....."

[Translation: "I am not afraid. I am not afraid. I am not afraid. I can account for all of this....."]

(Sarumpaet, 1994, in Teater Sabit, 2023)

The triple repetition of 'Aku tidak takut' (I am not afraid) performs a rhetorical defiance that exceeds simple declaration. It reads as an incantation against the fear that defined her living experience the fear of soldiers, of dismissal, of violence. In death, she claims what was denied her in life: fearlessness. This is not triumphalism; the play is too honest for that. But it is a formal claim to courage as a mode of agency.

The ghost figure also allows Sarumpaet to stage the ongoing persistence of injustice. When Marsinah describes how even her grave has been violated her body exhumed twice by authorities the spectral becomes a figure for the state's refusal to let the dead rest, and by extension, its refusal to let the truth surface:

"Dua kali mereka membongkar kuburanku, juga untuk sia-sia, terkontaminasi....."

[Translation: "Twice they opened my grave, also for nothing, contaminated....."]

(Sarumpaet, 1994, in Teater Sabit, 2023)

The word 'terkontaminasi' (contaminated) carries a double meaning: it refers to the literal contamination of forensic evidence, but also to the contamination of truth by power. Marsinah's body, even in death, remains a site of state manipulation — which makes her ghostly speech all the more necessary as a counter-narrative.

Naming the Crime: Language as Agency

One of the most striking features of the monologue is its insistence on naming. In a context where censorship operated by suppressing the naming of perpetrators, Sarumpaet's text insists on specificity. Marsinah names the violence done to her with unflinching detail. The

extended passage describing her torture and rape is the play's most harrowing and its most politically significant:

"Aku tidak tahu berapa kali tubuhku diangkat, lalu dibanting keras. Diangkat lagi, lalu dibanting lagi.... Kelantai..... Kesudut meja....Ke kursi.... Sampai akhirnya aku betul-betul tak berdaya....."

[Translation: "I don't know how many times my body was lifted, then slammed hard. Lifted again, then slammed again.... To the floor..... To the corner of the table.... To the chair.... Until finally I was truly helpless....."]

(Sarumpaet, 1994, in Teater Sabit, 2023)

The repetition and enumeration in this passage lifted, slammed, floor, table, chair enacts the relentlessness of the violence through its very syntax. Language itself becomes the instrument of witnessing. Feminist linguist Sara Mills (2003) has argued that naming one's own experience is a fundamental dimension of agency for women who are structurally denied the power to define and represent their reality. In speaking the unspeakable, Marsinah seizes exactly this power.

Equally significant is her denunciation of the judicial system that failed to bring justice. She addresses the audience directly about how witnesses were silenced and false confessions manufactured:

"Aku menyaksikan bagaimana saksi-saksi utama dibungkam, dilenyapkan.... Menyaksikan saksi-saksi palsu berdiri seperti boneka, remuk dan ketakutan...."

[Translation: "I witnessed how the key witnesses were silenced, disappeared.... I watched false witnesses stand like puppets, broken and afraid...."]

(Sarumpaet, 1994, in Teater Sabit, 2023)

The image of witnesses as boneka (puppets) is a powerful condensation of the play's critique of state-managed justice. The institution meant to produce truth has been turned into a stage for fabricated performance and Marsinah, the ghostly witness who cannot be silenced or manipulated, stands in direct contrast to it.

Female Solidarity and the Collective Voice

Marsinah does not present herself solely as an individual. Her monologue consistently positions her as a representative of a broader community of female workers and the poor. This collective dimension is crucial to the play's feminist politics. When she describes the economic conditions that define the lives of workers, she speaks in the plural — 'kami' (we/us) rather than 'aku' (I):

"Lembaga Peradilan adalah harapan terakhir bagi orang-orang kecil seperti kami. Satu-satunya tempat yang seharusnya memberikan pada kami perlindungan."

[Translation: "The judicial institution is the last hope for small people like us. The only place that should give us protection."]

(Sarumpaet, 1994, in Teater Sabit, 2023)

This movement between individual testimony and collective identification between 'I' and 'we' is one of the play's most sophisticated political moves. Marsinah's death is not merely an individual injustice; it is structural. By speaking for 'orang-orang kecil' (small/ordinary people), she expands the moral scope of her accusation beyond her personal case to the systemic violence of the New Order's treatment of labor, poverty, and dissent.

This also connects to her critique of how her death has been instrumentalized how institutions and politicians have appropriated her memory for their own agendas while doing nothing to address the conditions that caused it. Her bitter observation about the political economy of her suffering articulates a sharp intersectional critique:

"Sekarang lihat bagaimana mereka menjadikan kematianku bagi jembatan emas demi kemanusiaan; Demi ditegakkannya keadilan; Demi perbaikan nasib buruh."

[Translation: "Now look how they have made my death a golden bridge for the sake of humanity; for the sake of justice; for the improvement of workers' conditions."]

(Sarumpaet, 1994, in Teater Sabit, 2023)

The bitter irony of 'jembatan emas' (golden bridge) captures the play's central political indictment: that Marsinah's suffering has been converted into symbolic capital for those who did nothing to prevent it. Her agency in the play is, in part, the agency of refusing this appropriation of insisting that her death be understood on its own terms, as an injustice demanding accountability, not a resource for political posturing.

Sarumpaet's Authorial Agency: The Playwright as Political Actor

It is impossible to read *Marsinah Menggugat* without attending to the figure of Ratna Sarumpaet herself as a dimension of the play's meaning. Sarumpaet is not only the playwright but was the original performer of the monologue. As a middle-class female intellectual choosing to embody and amplify the voice of a working-class female murder victim, Sarumpaet's performance constitutes an act of what Diana Taylor (2003) calls 'transfer' the transmission of traumatic cultural memory through embodied performance.

Sarumpaet's own biography further enriches the play's feminist politics. As a woman who was arrested for her political theatre, who faced ongoing state harassment, and who continued to produce politically engaged work throughout the New Order period, Sarumpaet enacts in her own life the very agency she dramatizes in Marsinah. The final words of the monologue in which Marsinah implores the audience to find her murderers not for her own sake but for the sake of the living serve as a direct address that implicates both playwright and audience in the political project of accountability:

"Menemukan siapa pembunuhku yang sesungguhnya, bagiku tidak lagi berarti apa-apa. Namun, dengan sangat aku memohon, setidaknya, demi kawan-kawanku, Temukanlah!!!"

[Translation: "Finding who truly killed me no longer means anything to me. But I beg you earnestly, at least, for the sake of my companions, Find them!!!"]

(Sarumpaet, 1994, in Teater Sabit, 2023)

This closing plea is addressed not to an abstract justice but to the audience in the room and by extension, to the reader and to Indonesian society. Marsinah's agency, in the play's final movement, becomes an ethical demand upon others. Female agency here is not only self-constituting; it is relational and political, calling others into accountability.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Taken together, the analysis yields several interconnected conclusions about the construction and function of female agency in Marsinah Menggugat.

Agency Through Form

The dramaturgical choices of the monologue form, the spectral protagonist, and the testimonial mode together produce a particular kind of female agency: one that is sovereign within the theatrical space, even as it is framed by historical victimization. As the script demonstrates, Marsinah's agency is constituted through language — through naming, repetition, accusation, and collective identification. This is an agency premised not on physical power or institutional access, but on the power of voice and the refusal to be silent.

Subverting the New Order Gender Ideology

The play constitutes a direct challenge to the Suharto regime's official gender ideology. Against the image of the passive, domestic ibu, Sarumpaet stages a woman who speaks publicly, makes political accusations, questions institutions, addresses legislators directly ('Bukankah bapak yang duduk di pojok itu adalah seorang anggota DPR?' 'Is the man sitting in the corner not a member of parliament?'), and refuses subordination even in death. This

theatrical counter-image was not merely representational; in the conditions of authoritarian Indonesia, staging such a figure had material consequences as the play's banning and Sarumpaet's arrest demonstrate.

The Limits and Power of Spectral Agency

The spectral mode of Marsinah's agency also honestly encodes its limits. Marsinah cannot undo her murder. She cannot bring legal justice. The play ends not with resolution but with an urgent plea 'Temukanlah!!!' (Find them!!!) that remains unanswered. This structural irresolution is the play's most politically honest gesture. It does not offer false consolation or triumphalist narrative. It holds open the wound of injustice even as it gives that wound a voice.

Feminist Theatre and Political Memory

Finally, the play performs the crucial function of counter-memory in conditions designed to enforce forgetting. Marsinah's closing words 'Menyelamatkan mereka, kalian telah menyelamatkan Negeri yang kalian cintai ini dari dosa dan kehancuran' (Saving them, you have saved this nation that you love from sin and destruction) transform an individual tragedy into a collective ethical imperative. Female agency in the play is ultimately mnemonic and political: the agency of refusing to let injustice be buried alongside the body.

5. CONCLUSION

Marsinah Menggugat is a richly layered political drama whose construction of female agency constitutes one of Indonesian theatre's most sustained and sophisticated feminist interventions. Through the monologue form, the spectral protagonist, the testimonial mode, and the insistence on naming all grounded in the play's own script Sarumpaet constructs a female subject who speaks with authority from a position that patriarchal and authoritarian power had defined as the position of the absolutely silenced.

The play's central dramatic power lies in its formal innovation: Marsinah's voice is not supplemented or modulated by any other; she speaks alone, fully, and directly. The theatrical space becomes a space of female sovereignty, even as the content of that speech is defined by experiences of violence, dispossession, and injustice. Agency and victimization are not opposites in the play's world they are the condition of each other.

For students of drama, Marsinah Menggugat offers an exemplary case study in how theatrical representation can function as political resistance, and how feminist dramaturgy can transform victimization into agency without denying the reality of violence and injustice. Ultimately, Sarumpaet's play enacts the very possibility it stages: that women who are silenced

can, through the transformative power of performance and testimony, continue to speak — to their own time, and to ours.

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