

Patriarchal Bias Against Nature and Women in “The Red Bekisar” by Ahmad Tohari: An Ecofeminist Reading

Carina Fernanditha

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
Email: carinafernanditha@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Ahmad Tohari is one of the most famous Indonesian contemporary novelists, whose works are praised for their social and environmental criticism. *The Red Bekisar* is one of Tohari's stories which specifically focuses on the danger of metropolitan life compared to the wisdom of the traditional way of living close to nature and God. With a woman as the lead character, *The Red Bekisar* might pass as a literary work representing environmental and feminist values at first glance. However, this research argues that when analyzed from the framework of ecofeminism, especially concerning the symbolic connection between nature and women, *The Red Bekisar* uses languages that naturalize women and feminize nature. It presents nature and women according to the patriarchal bias; as "others" who are wild, alluring to be conquered, dependent on male caretakers, and ultimately, as less than men.

Keywords: Ahmad Tohari, Bekisar Merah, ecofeminism, patriarchal bias

INTRODUCTION

People indulge in a variety of hobbies in their leisure time. In Indonesia, reading placed fifth among the most widely practiced hobbies in 2022 (Statista, 2023). Among many book genres and categories, one that people often read specifically for entertainment purposes is novels. The term “novels” comes from the word “novella” and originally consisted of narrative non-fiction genres such as biography (Talumepa et al., 2022, as cited in Mokalu, Moge, & Oroh, 2023, p. 70). Since all literary works “have a reciprocal relationship” with the real world (Mahayana, 2007, as cited in Suroso, Hartono, & Liliani, 2022, p. 7), novels also evolve and change over time. Nowadays, novels are understood as “stories written in a long prose style with a complex plot, numerous characters, and varied settings” (Sumardjo, 1988, as cited in Mokalu, Moge, & Oroh, 2023, p. 70). It expands to include fiction and allows more creative freedom from their authors.

One of the most popular and celebrated Indonesian novelists is Ahmad Tohari. Tohari's works mostly talk about sociocultural conflicts while incorporating nature, depicting struggling yet idyllic village life as a regular element of his stories (Setiari, 2022, p. 346). Suroso, Hartono, and Liani (2022) name Tohari as a prolific Indonesian author whose majority of works criticize social and environmental issues in Indonesia (p. 2). Mokalu, Moge, and Oroh (2023) praise Tohari for his deep understanding of poverty and its relation to natural resources issues (p. 71). Suharto (2022) credits Tohari for his attention to rural traditions and values of religiosity, as well as his commitment to representing marginalized communities' problems through his novels (p. 309). Some of Tohari's most famous works have been translated into multiple languages and analyzed in academic forums with various theoretical frameworks. Among them is *Bekisar Merah*, or *The Red Bekisar*, which originated as a series of short stories published in newspapers before eventually being published as a complete novel in 1993 (Kemendikbud, n.d.).

**Fernanditha: Patriarchal Bias Against Nature and Women in
“The Red Bekisar” by Ahmad Tohari: An Ecofeminist Reading**

Set around the 1960s, *The Red Bekisar* tells the story of Lasi, the daughter of a Japanese veteran and a Javanese woman who came from the poor village of Karangsoaga. In this traditional Javanese village whose only income comes from home-producing palm sugar, Lasi sticks out like a sore thumb. Not just because of her Japanese looks, but also because of the absence of her Japanese father which leads to wild rumors of her being an illegitimate child. Despite never feeling welcomed, Lasi is happy with the simple life of the village and -like many of the women in Karangsoaga- eventually becomes the wife of a humble palm tapper, Darsa (Tohari, 2011).

Having given her all, when her husband cheated on her, Lasi impulsively ran away to Jakarta where Japanese women have become a popular demand following the popularity of President Soekarno’s Japanese wife, Naoko Nemoto. Lasi’s appearance and simple upbringing ultimately caused her to fall victim to a pimp who transforms her into a woman desired by many rich and powerful men, yet is treated as nothing more but a trophy to be passed around. Despite experiencing a life of luxury that she has never had, Lasi still prefers the humble and peaceful village life. Following an accidental meeting with a childhood friend from Karangsoaga, Lasi falls in love with Kanjat, who eventually saves her and brings her back home (Tohari, 2011).

As a product of its time, *The Red Bekisar* might have passed as an environmentalist work of literature that tried to introduce the perspective of a marginalized woman as the lead character. It is apparent in how the story invites modern audiences to reconsider the spiritual way of living close to nature and God as a better alternative to the corrupted secular world of big cities. It also employs an omniscient point of view (POV) that allows readers to understand how Lasi as an interracial rural woman experiences a life dominated by men. However, as time passed and theoretical frameworks evolved, it was necessary to review *The Red Bekisar* to check whether it suits Tohari’s reputation as an environmentalist author who represents the marginalized. Hence, this paper aims to analyze *The Red Bekisar* within the framework of ecofeminism to understand whether it supports the empowerment of women and nature, or perpetuates patriarchal views of women and nature instead.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Along with ecocriticism and the environmental justice movement, ecofeminism is a field that stems from the romantic ideas of living in harmony with nature at the center (Vijayaraj, 2017, p. 69). Ecofeminism combines ecological and feminist thinking on the basis that both nature and women suffer from oppression by the dominant patriarchal ideology (Buckingham, 2004; Cuomo, 2002; Glazebrook, 2002; Lalbakhsh et. al, 2015, p. 94; Vijayaraj, 2017). From the point of view of patriarchy, women and nature are considered “others” (de Beauvoir, 1952, as cited in Glazebrook, 2002, p. 12), who can be controlled and manipulated to fit his personal needs (Vijayaraj, 2017, p. 68). Patriarchal ideology caused society to operate within the model of domination, oppressing those considered to be the lesser ones within a binary opposition (Cuomo, 2002, p. 4; Glazebrook, 2002, pp. 13, 20).

Therefore, the common goal of ecofeminism is not only exposing the oppression of nature and women but also providing a better alternative to the model of relationships between living beings (Cuomo, 2002, p. 6) by reversing the normal hierarchy that puts men at the top (Buckingham, 2004, p. 147). Ecofeminism visions a better future in which society can transform from the patriarchal values of possession, conquest, and accumulation, into more feminine values of reciprocity, harmony, and mutual interdependence (Cuomo, 2002, pp. 5-6; Ruether, 1975, as cited in Glazebrook, 2002, p. 13; Warren, 1991, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p.

263). Ecofeminism acknowledges differentiation between masculine and feminine values but disagrees with traditional gender stereotypes of men as aggressive destructors and women as nurturing caretakers. The emphasis here is not that women should conform to their traditional feminine role as nurturing and non-violence caretakers, but rather “to expand that role to include men” (Glazebrook, 2002, p. 20).

Throughout the years, ecofeminism has been faced with many criticisms. One of the most persistent ones is the doubt over the inherent connection between feminism and environmentalism (Glazebrook, 2002, p. 13). Answering this criticism, Karen Warren proposes eight types of connections between environmentalism and feminism/ between nature and women:

1. Historical (typically causal) connections concern the historical roots of patriarchal domination and its connection to the predictable results in recent global issues about women and the environment (Vijayaraj, 2017, p. 73; Warren, 1991, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 265). Francoise d'Eaubonne argues that the exploitation of natural resources and the exploitation of women's reproductive systems that have gone on for centuries have caused a catastrophic combination of natural resource scarcity and overpopulation (d'Eaubonne, 1974, as cited in Glazebrook, 2002, p. 12). This domination can be traced back to two major events which are the Indo-European invasion in 4500 B.C. and the scientific revolution in the 17th century (Vijayaraj, 2017, p. 73; Warren, 1991, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 265).
2. Conceptual connections cover how male-biased conceptions still color several fields of study, highly disadvantageous to nature and women (Vijayaraj, 2017, p. 73). Since male bias values dualism and hierarchy in understanding phenomena, binary oppositions like male/female, mind/body, logic/emotion, and culture/nature, are still being used up to this day (Warren, 1991, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 266).
3. Empirical and experiential connections encompass the empirical evidence and real-world experiences of women and nature being dominated by men (Warren, 1991, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p.267). An example of this is how the early urbanization of male workers into big cities often leaves women as caretakers of the house in rural areas, which in turn makes them prone to the effects of pollution and environmental destruction inflicted by unethical factories in the surrounding area (Vijayaraj, 2017, p. 72, Bazregarzadeh, 2019, pp. 13-14). This is worsened by how policies on environmental pollution are often made based on men's body tolerance to exposure, ignoring women's body vulnerability towards chemical pollutants (Buckingham, 2004, p. 152).
4. Symbolic connections concern how women and nature are often symbolized as each other in religion, theology, art, language, and literature. An example of this is how natural terms are used to describe women (e.g. chicks, bitch) and vice versa (e.g. virgin timber, mother nature) (Warren, 1991, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 268).
5. Epistemological connections concern the effort to analyze, question, and uncover the epistemology behind fields of studies that value binary opposition and hierarchies, to propose a better alternative (Vijayaraj, 2017, p. 73; Warren, 1991, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, pp. 268-269). An example of this is a study on the history of science, which found that misogyny is what underlies the anthropocentric conquest of using science in manipulating nature to adapt to human needs (Merchant, 1980, as cited in Glazebrook, 2002, p.13), as well as the shift in viewing nature as a machine of production instead of a living being (Merchant, 1980, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 278).
6. Political (praxis) connections encompass how values that formed ecofeminism started from grassroots political movements against decisions and policies that threaten the

**Fernanditha: Patriarchal Bias Against Nature and Women in
“The Red Bekisar” by Ahmad Tohari: An Ecofeminist Reading**

minority (Vijayaraj, 2017, p. 73; Warren, 1991, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 269). Both environmentalism and feminism started as protests against environmental practices and policies that prioritize profit and disregard the needs and contributions of women, people of color, the underclass, and children (Buckingham, 2004, p. 152; Warren, 2000, as cited in Glazebrook, 2002, p. 15; Warren, 1991, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 267).

7. Ethical connections concern the need to reassess ethics concerning women and nature (Vijayaraj, 2017, p. 73). Deane Curtin argues how large-scale agricultural practices that emphasize modern, rational, scientific, and hi-tech aspects are unethical to both women and the environment; by marginalizing/ making invisible women’s labor in agriculture, and by forcibly manipulating the land for profit (e.g. monoculture) (1999, as cited in Glazebrook, 2002, p. 17). Following the main goal of ecofeminism, feminine ethics that are based on non-violence and respect toward life need to be developed as a guideline for handling issues concerning all living beings (Buckingham, 2004, pp. 152-153; Cuomo, 2002, p. 7; Glazebrook, 2002, p. 24).
8. Theoretical connections cover the relationship between environmental theories and feminist theories that form ecofeminism today, possible future theories and trajectories (Vijayaraj, 2017, p. 73), as well as their place in academic forums that are still dominated by male bias (Glazebrook, 2002). Karen Warren suggests how conceptual frameworks that are often used to justify racism, sexism, and naturism (and other oppressive -isms) are connected and strengthen each other. Hence, working individually on environmentalism or feminism alone without addressing the core problem of patriarchal domination throughout multiple fields is no longer sufficient (Bazregarzadeh, 2019, p. 10; Buckingham, 2004, p. 153; Gaard, 1993, as cited in Lalbakhsh et. al, 2015, p. 94). Instead, there is a need for alternative theories that act as the extension of ecofeminism’s non-violence ethics in handling issues concerning oppression and domination (Warren, 1991, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 263).

METHOD

This study employs library research to determine whether this literary work represents ecofeminist values, or carries patriarchal bias instead. This paper belongs to the critical paradigm, meaning “not taking things for granted, [but] opening up complexity, challenging reductionism, dogmatism, and dichotomies”, with the intention of “making opaque structures of power relations and ideologies manifest.” (Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018, p.12). This paper employs a qualitative approach, meaning that it “involves data collection procedures that result primarily in open-ended, non-numerical data”, which will then be “analyzed primarily by non-statistical methods” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 24). The object of analysis is the novel *The Red Bekisar* by Ahmad Tohari. Several quotations will be analyzed, especially narrations and dialogues from multiple points of view (POV) that discuss women and the environment. The analysis is based on Warren’s proposition of eight connections between feminism and environmentalism. More specifically, since the research’s object is a contemporary novel, this paper focuses on the symbolic connection between women and nature.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Ecofeminism proposes that patriarchal bias in the symbolic representation of women and nature often appears in the form of “sexist and naturist language” which “debases women and

nonhuman nature by naturalizing women and feminizing nature” (Warren, 1991, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 268). This kind of language often reflects as well as perpetuates harmful stereotypes that lead to the twin domination of women and nature. Such language is already quite apparent from the very title of the novel itself. *The Red Bekisar* came from the nickname given by Bu Lanting (the pimp) and Pak Han (the client) to describe Lasi:

“What do you mean by *bekisar*?”

“A show bird that’s a cross-breed between wild and domestic chickens and used as decoration by the wealthy. Pak Han, children from interracial marriages are often very attractive.” (Tohari, 2011, p. 84)

The way Bu Lanting and Pak Han use a show bird as a metaphor for Lasi reflects how patriarchy views animals -as an element of nature- and women as trophies, as objects to be exploited instead of living beings (Merchant, 1980, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 278). Other than that, the use of a mixed-breed chicken as a symbol for interracial descendants also fits the proposition of how patriarchal view harbors degrading sentiment not only towards women and nature but also towards other marginalized groups like people of color and racially ambiguous individuals as the “others” (Cuomo, 2002, p. 5-6; Gaard, 1993, as cited in Lalbakhsh et. al, 2015, p. 94; Vijayaraj, 2017, p. 71).

A different degrading view of nature and women appears in the following quote from Bu Lanting, where she describes Lasi’s difficulties in adapting to city life. In this passage, Bu Lanting more specifically highlights the wild quality of a *bekisar*, which reflects her view of Lasi’s rural background.

“Pak Han, I’ve told you to be patient. Your *bekisar* is safe; she’s not used to Jakarta yet. She has yet to be tamed. I must be very careful with how I handle her. One wrong move can frighten her back to the jungle.” (Tohari, 2011, p. 86)

This demonstrates how nature as well as all life forms that share close relation to it, whether it is animals or rural villagers, are seen as “wild and uncontrollable” savages that have to be tamed to fit human standards (Merchant, 1980, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 278). It demonstrates how the male bias perceived things natural as secondary compared to modern culture (Cuomo, 2002, p. 7; Curtin, 1999, as cited in Glazebrook, 2002, p. 17; Merchant, 1980, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 281). Hence Lasi, being a woman with a close relation to nature, is seen as a wild animal that needs to be modernized before she can be considered a human being.

Since the negative metaphor of *bekisar* comes from the antagonists, one may reason that Tohari intentionally uses this degradation as an example of how urban people often underestimate the wisdom of nature. However, I’d like to argue that characters outside of the antagonists also display patriarchal bias, even when they describe nature or women in a seemingly positive light. This can be seen on the very first page of the novel:

Behind the curtain of afternoon rain, the coconut palms across the valley looked like bathing virgins, full of vigor and life. Willowy trunks swayed in the wind like slim bodies swinging with ease and charm, and wet fronds hung like hair between their shoulder blades... like the arms of a dancer following the rhythm of the rain, like girls playfully lined up beneath a spout of falling water. (Tohari, 2011, p. 1)

Fernanditha: Patriarchal Bias Against Nature and Women in
 “The Red Bekisar” by Ahmad Tohari: An Ecofeminist Reading

Told from the perspective of Darsa (Lasi's cheating husband), this passage depicts the trees showered by the rain as bathing young women, charming, lively, and alluring. Different from Bu Lanting and Pak Han's visibly degrading way of seeing nature and women, this metaphor represents the male view of nature as something beautiful and worth admiring, but also as something pure that is alluring to be conquered (Cuomo, 2002, p. 7; Merchant, 1980, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 281). This symbolism is an example of a language that feminizes nature, which talks about nature in feminine terms (Warren, 1991, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 268).

Darsa's patriarchal tendency in viewing nature is further confirmed within these next sentences, which not only further feminize the palm tree but also show how he naturalizes his wife, Lasi:

Just as the palms challenged him to tap them, Lasi, too, had a tempting promise and vitality... In Lasi, he had a receptacle to manifest himself as a man and a nira tapper. Darsa found a haven of trusting loyalty in his wife. Even more than in the coconut palms that never stopped giving, he saw in Lasi the very value and purpose of his life, even though they had been married three years without her having given him any children. (Tohari, 2011, p. 3)

In this passage, the virginal quality of “vigor” and “life” emanating from the coconut palms is projected into the quality of “tempting promise” and “vitality” that emanates from Lasi. How nature is seen as a provider of unlimited resources goes hand in hand with how women's role is associated with providing offspring and services for their husbands (Cuomo, 2002, p. 7; Merchant, 1980, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 281). Both in his relation to the palms as a tapper, as well as his relation to Lasi as husband and wife, Darsa represents how patriarchy views both nature and women as motherly providers upon which men can manifest their patriarchal tendency through conquest and domination (Lalbahsh et. al, 2015, p. 94).

Yet again, Darsa's position as a morally ambiguous character (in the sense that he can be seen as both a good guy and a bad guy; protagonist and antagonist) might still leave room to negotiate about whether *The Red Bekisar* uses male-biased language to perpetuate gender stereotypes. To that, I argue that even Kanjat, the protagonist and the hero of the story, also naturalized Lasi as animal, as shown in these sentences:

Lasi's name had stayed with him even after she became Darsa's wife. She was the beautiful white rabbit often taunted by the boys. As a little boy, he tried to defend her, and never could. (Tohari, 2011, p. 67)

Similar to how Darsa sees Lasi as the alluring palm trees, Kanjat also shows male bias in naturalizing Lasi as a rabbit. Different from the “trophy” and “wild” image perceived by the antagonists, or the “alluring” and “life-provider” image perceived by Darsa, Kanjat perceives Lasi as a poor weak animal in need of protection. Even though this view seems like the typical desire of a gentleman to help a woman, it is rooted in the anthropocentric patriarchal ideas that define both women and nature as passive objects that need superior male caretakers to survive (Bazregarzadeh, 2019, p. 11; Cuomo, 2002, p. 7; Lalbahsh et. al, 2015, p. 94).

Kanjat's patriarchal bias in viewing Lasi as weak and dependent is further confirmed in the part when Lasi is forcibly taken by a powerful lobbyist and political figure named Bambang. Kanjat continuously doubts Lasi's judgment and loyalty, ignoring Lasi's assurance that she will escape as soon and as safely as possible, for she is pregnant with Kanjat's child.

Can I trust Lasi? If I can't restrain myself when alone in a room with Lasi, what about Bambang, the horny old goat? (Tohari, 2011, p. 239)

What if Lasi grew to enjoy her growing wealth and luxurious lifestyle? What if Bambang wanted to keep Lasi? (Tohari, 2011, p. 242)

Within these quotations, one of the more interesting things to note is that Kanjat mostly worries about what Bambang as a man will do to Lasi, forgetting about Lasi's agency and determination to defend herself against Bambang's approaches. This shows how Kanjat perceives Lasi as a helpless woman in need of rescue, disregarding Lasi's wisdom and ways of solving her problems. Kanjat's way of thinking represents the male bias that views women as fragile creatures, "ignoring women's mental capabilities to make decisions on their own and think critically for themselves" (Bazregarzadeh, 2019, p. 11).

The symbolic connection between nature and women does not stop on the male protagonist alone but also continues to Lasi as the female protagonist. It is quite interesting to read the metaphors from Lasi's perspective, which demonstrate how a woman can also see herself in terms of nature.

The water was so clear rock crabs could be seen crawling at the bottom of the creek. Her favorite crab had incredibly strong pincers almost the same size as the rest of its body. The crabs honed in on the source of the splash, but Iron Pincer swept everyone aside.

She wanted an encore of the show when footsteps at the other end of the bridge made her raise her head. Four boys her age approached, giggling.

"Your mom was raped by a Jap. It's no wonder you've got slanted Jap eyes."
"Lasi-pang, Lasi-pang, Lasi-pang. Lasi the Jap kid."

Lasi whipped her ruler from under her arm and ran to the end of the bridge, ready to take on her tormentors. Deep down, she felt like the rock crab with the giant pincers. She had no qualms about snipping the boys' heads clean off their necks, but she only had a wooden ruler. (Tohari, 2011, pp. 14-15)

In this passage, it can be seen how even a woman cannot escape from the tendency of naturalizing femininity. However, the way Lasi naturalizes herself in this instance provides a unique point of view in the sense that she sees herself more actively and powerfully compared to how the men naturalize her (Pak Han thinks of her as a *bekisar*, Darsa sees her as palm trees, and Kanjat symbolizes her as a white rabbit). How the men perceive nature as decoration, life-long provider, and weak, become a source of empowerment from the perspective of women.

Unfortunately, this interesting point of empowerment is eventually dismissed by Lasi herself in the later chapter. Contrary to how she associates with nature in an empowering way, the following passage shows how Lasi naturalizes herself as passive compared to men.

Back then she believed her life was easy. She gave herself fully to Darsa and prepared herself to be the field in which he planted his seed. (Tohari, 2011, p. 228)

Fernanditha: Patriarchal Bias Against Nature and Women in
 “The Red Bekisar” by Ahmad Tohari: An Ecofeminist Reading

By symbolizing women as a field that has to be touched by men to be fruitful, this metaphor places the value of women and nature as dependent on their relation to men (Lalbahsh et. al, 2015, p. 94). This is further strengthened by how Lasi describes her feeling as Kanjat’s wife:

Lasi had found herself, especially when she and Kanjat melded into one so completely... The time spent with Kanjat took Lasi to the peak of her being. (Tohari, 2011, p. 226)

The way that Lasi only feels complete when she has a husband obviously caters to patriarchal bias that puts husbands and children as the determinate values of a woman’s life (Bazregarzadeh, 2019, p. 12). By painting nature and women to be dependent on men, it justifies the thoughts of manipulating nature and women as unlimited providers that can be taken for granted, as they need men’s intervention to be meaningful (Cuomo, 2002, p. 7; Lalbahsh et. al, 2015, p. 94; Merchant, 1980, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, pp. 282-283).

Another proof of Lasi’s patriarchal bias appears when she shares her thoughts on the possibility of having a baby. She uses the metaphor “bloom” to describe her pregnancy, continuing the theme of her womb as a field and her husband as the farmer in charge of it.

Lasi was certain something bloomed inside her womb, and she smiled.

Allah had entrusted her with carrying a new life. This gave her more meaning as a woman.

Lasi steeled her resolve and made a decision: no matter what happened, the safety and sanctity of her womb was everything. She would die defending it. She shut her eyes as she felt stirring at the bottom of her soul. Her confidence slowly rose. (Tohari, 2011, p. 228)

On one hand, it is good that something feminine like being a mother gives her the strength to escape from Bambang and Mrs. Lanting. Lasi’s determination to raise the child is also justifiable from the feminist point of view that a woman should have autonomy over her own body and not be forced to comply with social influences (Glazebrook, 2002, p. 14). But on the other hand, this is the only time Lasi is ever depicted to have the motivation to escape from her fate as a *bekisar*, as an object. Lasi’s tendency to value herself based on her husband and children also leads to her statement towards Mrs. Lanting that demonstrates how women can also impose patriarchal expectations on other women:

“You don’t understand. I’m not against the abortion because of pain. I’m against it because I want this child. We’re women. Have you never felt like this?”

Lasi’s position as the lead protagonist and the way she says this line implies that it is the nature of women to want children; and that women who do not wish to procreate are not normal. Being empowered by motherhood is great, but if that is the only reason for a woman to feel meaningful, then it only perpetuates the patriarchal bias of viewing women’s value based on their role as family caretakers (Bazregarzadeh, 2019, pp. 11-12). It reproduces harmful stereotypes that support the exploitation of women’s reproductive system to meet patriarchal society’s needs (d’Eaubonne, 1974, as cited in Glazebrook, 2002, p. 12).

Other than metaphors used to describe nature and women, another thing that came to light while analyzing *The Red Bekisar* is the depiction of the conflict between Karangsoga’s tappers

and the land. It was established pretty early that the nature surrounding Karangsoga is not ideal for producing palm sugar, yet this remains the main source of income for the people.

The fertile volcanic soil kept all the vegetation green and lush. Bamboo grew in tight clumps and snake-fruit trees bordered the fields. Strangely, coconut palms grew poorly there. Karangsoga was too high, which made the air too cold for palms to grow. (Tohari, 2011, p. 12)

Nature had lavished the village with an abundance of water and fertile soil. Yet, the coconut tappers of Karangsoga were poor—a situation that was never mentioned or questioned. (Tohari, 2011, p. 26)

Despite the message of inviting people to live close to nature, the depiction of the poor living conditions in Karangsoga tends to pit humans against nature. There are implications that the solution to this poverty is to address the villagers' lack of skill in "manipulating" the land, instead of realizing that maybe they should opt for other forms of agriculture that are more suitable for the land. This implies how nature is secondary and must bend to meet human needs.

This implication is further strengthened by how the novel represents Kanjat as the hero for caring about the tappers and helping find better ways to manipulate palm sugar production. It can be seen from these passages that describes how Kanjat utilizes science, knowledge, and technology to manipulate nature.

Developing a cheap and easily available chemical preservative would help them immensely. They also needed an additive to make the sugar set. The tappers also needed to be taught the importance of fertilizing the palms, which they knew nothing about. (Tohari, 2011, p. 127)

Kanjat set up a team of researchers. Joko Adi was the chemistry expert, Topo Sumarso knew about agricultural production, and Hermiati prepared their findings for publication in the mass media. (Tohari, 2011, p. 128)

"He's working on an experiment to process nira on a large scale, like a palm sugar mill, so the tappers can save on fuel. Kanjat plans to use a large pump stove to process all the nira from the villagers, but he doesn't have enough money." (Tohari, 2011, p. 143)

Despite the general negative connotation towards modern secularity throughout the novel, Kanjat is represented positively for using that modernity to help the people of his homeland. This depiction has anthropocentric implications that the needs of the people are what matter most; instead of humans adapting to nature, nature can be made to adapt to humans by using man-made technology. It suits Deane Curtin's concerns about agricultural practices that value profit, large-scale, modern, rational, scientific, and hi-technology which are characteristics of patriarchal views of conquest and domination (1999 as cited in Glazebrook, 2002, p. 17; Merchant, 1980, as cited in Zimmerman et. al, 1998, p. 283).

Lastly, the overall representation of male and female relation to nature shows a binary opposition. Throughout the novel, Lasi as a woman is represented positively when she is naturalized as rural, alluring, and simple. Despite being the victim of continuous negative rumors and marginalization in her village, she is depicted as morally good. When Lasi eventually gets away from her rural home, runs to Jakarta, and encounters modern life, she is represented negatively. On the contrary, Kanjat as a man is constantly represented positively regardless of his relation to nature. Whether he naturalizes Lasi as weak, shows sympathy and

**Fernanditha: Patriarchal Bias Against Nature and Women in
“The Red Bekisar” by Ahmad Tohari: An Ecofeminist Reading**

close relation to his home village, or encounters modern science that helps him manipulate his environment, he is always represented as a hero.

This binary opposition is in line with Astuti (2012) who mentions the myth among the rural tribe of Kubu in Sumatera, Indonesia. The rural villagers believe that things and matters outside the tribe are inherently evil (p. 56). Since men are considered stronger and more capable, they may come in contact with the outside world and deal with external affairs. Women are seen as mothers and caretakers who must stay close to their homes and raise their children. Hence, they are not allowed to leave the village and must be ‘pure’ out of external matters. Women who come into contact with modern cultures are then considered impure and evil. This binary opposition leads to most women being illiterate, while most men have learned to read, write, and count (p. 57).

CONCLUSION

This paper concerns the representation of nature and women in a contemporary novel that at first glance, seems to carry environmentalist messages through a woman as the main character. *The Red Bekisar*, told mostly from the perspective of Lasi, invites its readers to mend their relationship with nature and be wary of the danger of secularity. This paper analyzed the representation using the framework of ecofeminism and focused on the symbolic connection between women and nature as depicted by language use. By checking for naturist and sexist languages that feminize nature or naturalize women, this paper tries to determine whether *The Red Bekisar* is ecofeminist or reproduces harmful patriarchal bias instead.

Upon closer inspection, it is concluded that *The Red Bekisar* represents life close to nature as more ideal and noble than modern city life. However, the language perpetuates male-biased ideas of nature and women as the “others”, depicted in various degrees of degradation (from weak and dependent, to pure and alluring, to wild and savage). This is shown by how antagonists and protagonists of the novel represent nature and women as decorations, providers of unlimited resources, or dependent beings who need caretakers. The message carried by the language also represents nature and women as savages that need to be modernized, as virgins that are alluring to be conquered, and as weaklings that have to be protected by men as superior beings. Overall, the representation reinforces the patriarchal binary opposition that depicts men as modern and sophisticated being close to civilization, and women as rural and inferior being close to nature.

At the end of the day, what Tohari did by focusing on nature and women might be effective for his time. It is only when viewed from a newer theoretical framework, that it becomes obvious how *The Red Bekisar* is no longer relevant to the ideas of environmentalism and feminism that have evolved throughout the years. However, it is also important to note that ecofeminism looks to the past, not to lay blame, but to understand the connections in search of redemption towards all the “-isms of domination” (Warren & Cheney, 1991, as cited in Glazebrook, 2002). Therefore, it is concluded that although *The Red Bekisar* may no longer fit the environmentalist and feminist framework, it does not close the possibility that other Tohari’s works can fulfill this position and inspire many young authors who want to focus on ecofeminist issues.

REFERENCES

- Amoussou, F. & Allagbe, A. A. (2018). Principles, theories, and approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, 6(1), pp. 11-18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.0601002>
- Astuti, T. M. P. (2012). Ekofeminisme dan peran perempuan dalam lingkungan. *Indonesian Journal of Conservation*, 1(1), pp. 49-60. <https://doi.org/10.15294/ijc.v1i1.2064>
- Bazregarzadeh, E. (2019). Susan Glaspell's "Trifles" in the light of ecofeminism. *K@ta*, 21(1), 10-16. <https://doi.org/10.9744/kata.21.1.10-16>
- Buckingham, S. (2004). Ecofeminism in the twenty-first century. *The Geographical Journal*, 170(2), 146–154. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3451591>
- Cuomo, C. (2002). On Ecofeminist Philosophy. *Ethics and the Environment*, 7(2), 1–11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40339033>
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. USA: Oxford University Press.
- Glazebrook (2002). Karen Warren's ecofeminism. *Ethics and the Environment*, Autumn, 2002, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 12-26.
- Kemendikbud. (n.d.). Bekisar Merah (1993). In *Ensiklopedia Sastra Indonesia*. Retrieved December 18, 2023 from [https://ensiklopedia.kemdikbud.go.id/sastra/artikel/Bekisar Merah](https://ensiklopedia.kemdikbud.go.id/sastra/artikel/Bekisar_Merah)
- Lalbahsh, P., Khoshnood, A., & Gholami, F. (2015). Juxtaposition of women, culture, and nature in Alice Walker's *Possessing The Secret Of Joy*. *K@ta*, 16(2), 93-100. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.9744/kata.16.2.93-100>
- Mokalu, P. V. V., Moge, T., & Oroh, E. Z. (2023). Women's resistance against hegemony in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Ahmad Tohari's *Bekisar Merah*: A comparative study. *JELTEC: Journal of English Language Teaching, Literature and Culture*, 2(1), pp. 6-83. <https://doi.org/10.53682/jeltec.v2i1.6239>
- Setiari, I. (2022). Novel "Belantik" karya Ahmad Tohari (suatu kajian intertekstual). *Jurnal Diksatrasia: Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Juli 2022), pp. 345-349. <http://dx.doi.org/10.25157/diksatrasia.v6i2.9006>
- Statista. (2023, May 2). *Most popular leisure activities in Indonesia 2022* [Graph]. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1344302/indonesia-most-popular-pastime/>
- Suharto, A. W. B. (2022). Al Quran and Hadits as ideas and sources of stories in Ahmad Tohari's novels. *IBDA: Jurnal Kajian Islam dan Budaya*, 20(2), pp. 308-321. <https://doi.org/10.24090/ibda.v20i2.6945>
- Suroso, Hartono, & Liliani, E. (2022). Nature representation in Ahmad Tohari's works of fiction. *European Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 8(2), pp. 1-14. <https://revistia.org/index.php/ejls/article/view/5932>
- Tohari, A. (2011). *The Red Bekisar*. Jakarta: Dalang Publishing

Fernanditha: Patriarchal Bias Against Nature and Women in
“The Red Bekisar” by Ahmad Tohari: An Ecofeminist Reading

Vijayaraj, B. (2017). A comprehensive study of ecofeminism. *The Anthropologist*, 30:1, 68-75,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09720073.2017.1377862>

Zimmerman, M. E., Callicott, J. B., Sessions, G., Warren, K. J., & Clark, J. (1998).
Environmental philosophy: from animal rights to radical ecology (2nd ed.). New Jersey:
Prentice-Hall