

The Representation of Female Same-Sex Homoeroticism in Contemporary Indonesian Film

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This paper explores the emergence of non-heterosexual sexuality as a theme in contemporary Indonesian films. Unlike the representation of male and female bonding in Indonesian films of the Soeharto era, which tends to affirm the dominant hetero-patriarchal norms, a number of Indonesian films can be seen as negotiations of new understandings of sexual diversity.

Guided by Queer film theory and Tom Boellstorff's (2005 & 2007) studies on *gay* and *lesbian* communities, the study inquires into how the film *Tentang Dia* (2005) strives to negotiate "heteronormativity" and homophobia. Using focus interviews and visual analysis, it looks into the pattern of female non-heterosexual intimacy and friendship and suggests a breaking away from the dominant hetero-patriarchal norms. Finally, the study investigates the strategic devices used by the filmmaker to subvert censorship codes and social taboos in a country where non-heterosexual intimacy and friendship are accommodated, but homosexual identities remain outside the range of socially and culturally sanctioned subjectivities.

Keywords: lesbianism, homoeroticism, Indonesian film

Homosexuality in the New Order's Film

It can be argued that the representation of same-sex relationships is typically portrayed in unsympathetic ways in Indonesian films of the long Soeharto's New Order period (1966-1998). For instance, male homosexuality is depicted as part of an abnormality or as a sexual perversion. In Bay Isbahi's *Tinggal Bersama* (Living Together, 1977), the main male character is a single young man who is not living with a sexual partner. Highly obsessed with sexual experience, he tries to rape a younger man.

Similar characterizations can be seen in Syamsul Hadi's *Remaja Lampu Merah* (Red Light Teenager, 1979), in Chaerul Umam's *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh* (The Narrow Bridge, 1982) and in Wahyu Sihombing's *Istana Kecantikan* (The Palace of Beauty, 1988). In all these films, *gay* men are depicted as abnormal characters.¹ Male same-sex intimacy is represented as not a "pure relationship," but rather as a "wrong intimacy" which supports the heteronormative discourse that heterosexual intimacies and togetherness are

more equal and intimate. Nowhere in the history of New Order film is there any outspoken challenge to these stereotyped and clichéd representations.

A similar pattern can be found in the representation of *lesbian* relationships in such films as Slamet Riyadi's *Gadis Metropolis* (Metropolitan Girls, 1992), Bobby Sandy's *Gadis Metropolis II* (Metropolitan Girls II, 1994), and also Acok Rahman's *Pergaulan Metropolis* (Metropolitan Relationships, 1994). In all these films, lesbianism is closely associated with the disappointment with men.

Female intimacy among female characters seems to be depicted as a pathological problem. For example, *Gadis Metropolis* centers on the glamorous lives of three attractive girls named Lisa, Fanny and Sandra. They are represented as wild metropolitan characters who do not take their future seriously. Lisa is seduced by *tante* (aunt) Mirna, a *lesbian* character. When Lisa returns to Jacky, her ex-boyfriend, Mirna becomes enraged and kills Jacky (Kristanto, 1995: 394).

Gadis Metropolis was the fifth most popular film in Jakarta in 1993, watched by over 200,000 viewers (Kristanto, 1995: 394). Two years later, a sequel, *Gadis Metropolis II*, was released with Bobby Sandy as the director. In this film, Mirna, the *lesbian* character, strives to take revenge for Lisa's betrayal of her. However, in a fight with Lisa in a busy street, she is hit by a passing car and killed (Kristanto, 2005: 406).

Following the success of *Gadis Metropolis*, a similar motif appears in Acok Rahman's 1994 film, *Pergaulan Metropolis*. This film portrays the miserable life of Ineke, the owner of a successful advertising company who turns to lesbianism out of disappointment with men. She has a love affair with her secretary, Lisa. But Lisa is only interested in Ineke's wealth. She tries to embezzle Ineke's money but she is thwarted by the intervention of Budi, an insurance manager who falls in love with Ineke. Budi's rescue of Ineke restores Ineke's faith in men and the film ends with her return to heterosexuality (Kristanto, 1995: 409).

As these plot descriptions serve to indicate, the representation of female homosexualities in the New Order films, such as in *Gadis Metropolis* and *Pergaulan Metropolis*, is unsympathetic. In addition, *lesbian* relationships are more focused on the exploration of female sexual exploitation than on friendships.

Ben Murtagh (2006: 217) argues that "these films are notable for what might be described as an erotic or soft-core flavor, rather than a serious grappling with the issue of lesbianism." Murtagh's comment suggests that in these films the female erotic body and female same-sex intimacy become a commodity for the voyeuristic male gaze.

Similarly, Kristanto (1995: 394) asserts that the portrayal of the three wild metropolitan girls is centered on the eroticization of their female bodies. He suggests that the film was produced for the lower-class cinema market and was designed to appeal to voyeuristic interests. It exemplifies the trend in the 1980s and 1990s towards the production of low-budget erotic films as a market strategy to compete with illegally imported American pornographic films and videos (Sen, 1994: 155).²

The homophobic attitude was supported by the state censorship regulation that banned the depiction of sexual intimacy. As noted by Murtagh (2006: 218), images of men embracing and kissing were cut from the 1988 Wahyu Sihombing film, *Istana Kecantikan*. Meanwhile, the Lembaga Sensor Film (LSF/The Board of Film Censorship) added a propaganda statement – “homosexuality is deviant” – to the film’s ending (Merayakan erotika queer, 2003). Likewise, a *gay* kiss was cut from *Kuldesak* (Dead End) (Lesmana, 2007).

The unsympathetic depiction of homosexuality in Indonesian films of the long Soeharto New Order (1966-1998) was influenced by the the state’s gender ideology that was based on a rigid distinction between “productive” men and “reproductive” women. Throughout the period of Soeharto’s rule, the regime’s ideology of proper manhood and womanhood was promoted through all kinds of media and government programs. The importance of “natural” gender roles was highlighted by the idea of the family principle (*prinsip kekeluargaan*) that is based on the heteronormative family: man in his role as head of the household and woman as wife with two children. In this way, individual subjectivity was closely aligned with heterosexual gender normativity (Boellstorff, 2005: 75).

Under this formulation of gender ideology, all sexual practices outside heterosexual marriage could be seen as contradictory to the God-given nature of Indonesian citizens. Lesbianism, for example, was considered as a deviant, shameful, and subversive sexual transgression since it contested the “prevailing ideals of pre-marital abstinence, compulsory heterosexuality and marriage for women” (Bennett, 2005: 40).

Tentang Dia (About Her): Queering Traditional Pattern?

The film discussed in this paper emerged in a context of fluidity and change in contemporary Indonesian society, in general, and in Indonesian film culture, in particular. The shift began during the fall of Soeharto (Indonesia’s Second President) in May 1998, an event that opened up a climate of freedom of expression in politics, arts and the media. The most striking shift was the abolition in 2000 of the Department of Information which was responsible for all government censorship policy and propaganda. It was replaced by

a Department of Communication which had a more limited institutional capacity and political power in controlling the increasingly varied and globally influenced Indonesian media. The change significantly diminished government control of the print and electronic media (Sen, 2006: 102).

Tentang Dia tells the story of Gadis, a formerly extroverted girl now prone to depression because of her boyfriend's affair with her own best friend. In her 20s, she becomes introverted, isolated and with no friends in her college campus except Randu, a 20-year-old boy who falls in love with her. Randu tries to encourage Gadis to forget her former boyfriend's betrayal, but his efforts are hindered by Wirda, one of Gadis' girl friends who is attracted to Randu herself.

One day, when Gadis is driving along a busy road, she hits a "tomboy" waitress named Rudi, and the accident brings Gadis and Rudi into an intimate friendship. They spend time together and share the same interests. Rudi's attention convinces Gadis that Rudi is a *lesbian*, and she asks Rudi for an assurance that their close relationship is merely friendship, not love. Disappointed by Gadis' question, Rudi firmly asserts that her compassion for Gadis is motivated by the experience of her younger sister's death, which she caused by her carelessness.

The situation becomes complicated when Randu takes Rudi to be a boy. At the same time, when Wirda insults Gadis, Rudi intervenes, and physically attacks Wirda. Feeling confused by the position she finds herself in, Gadis hears a TV news report of Rudi's death in a traffic accident. Diby, Rudi's boss, gives Gadis a diary belonging to Rudi, which shows that Rudi's feelings for her are merely the expression of a kind of sisterhood. Gadis finally opens her heart to Randu.

Tentang Dia was directed by Rudi Soedjarwo, a popular young director (33 years old), who specializes in young love or adolescent romance films. It was based on the short story written by Melly Goeslaw who also directed the film's soundtrack album. Produced by Sinem Art, it was released on 17 February 2005, and became a box office hit. It won the Best Supporting Actress and Music Director awards at the 2005 Indonesian Film Festival, and the Most Admired Supporting Actress award for Adinia Wirasti, who played Rudi, at the 2005 Bandung Film Festival (Kristanto, 2007: 419).

Many of the reviews of this film emphasized the theme of the suffering caused by the loss of a loved one. One review, written by Ekky Imanjaya (2006: 170), explores the film's adaptation of Korean cinema style, which is dominated by a slow plot and simple characterization.

The only review which discusses the issue of homoerotic overtones and female bonding between the two main characters was written by Mujiarso (2005). Disregarding the theme of heartbreak and suffering, Mujiarso argues that female homoeroticism, which is a strong element of the storyline in *Tentang Dia*, logically implies the existence of a *lesbian* relationship between Rudi and Gadis. Comparing *Tentang Dia* to Upi's *30 Hari Mencari Cinta* (30 Days of Seeking Love, 2003), Mujiarso suggests that the two films portray the contested relationship between the dominant heteronormativity and the possibility of an alternative sexual orientation (2005).³

Between Sentimental Friendship and Female Homoeroticism

The exploration of female friendship is the central focus of *Tentang Dia*. It begins as Rudi gradually encourages Gadis to forget her former boyfriend and rediscover her optimism and self-confidence. The two girls start to spend time together in outdoor spaces where they can be alone, such as on a traffic flyover and on a bridge. On their first visit to the bridge, Rudi helps Gadis climb to the top. When Gadis, who is afraid of heights, reaches the highest point of the bridge, Rudi hugs her gently.

Later, when they return to the same place to ponder on the meaning of life, the film suggests that a strong emotional attachment has developed between them. Gadis has grown in self-confidence through Rudi's support, and as they sit together enjoying a moment of intimacy, Rudi reaches over and hugs Gadis, while Gadis' legs lean on Rudi's thighs. On another occasion, Gadis visits Rudi's workplace and they dance together in an intimate way. Rudi's attention and caring gradually revives Gadis' happiness. In her diary, she expresses gratitude to God who has sent Rudi to her.

At this stage of the film narrative, the relationship between the two girls may be classified as sentimental female friendship. Karen Hollinger (1998: 7) describes this type of friendship as "a very close relationship, emotionally effusive [...] which is often portrayed as stimulating personal psychological growth."

In the film, the relationship is presented as intensely personal and intimate. Rudi, who fled from her home as a child, seems very happy to have found a "younger sister" and strives to protect Gadis. Similarly, Gadis, who has become lonely and isolated, gains much enjoyment from her new outdoor adventures with Rudi.

As the narrative develops, however, their intimacy takes on homoerotic overtones. Martti Nissinen (1998:17) defines homoeroticism as an erotic

mutual interaction between persons of the same sex, even though there is no exclusive homosexual orientation. This can be seen when the two girls try to carry out ear- and body-piercing on each other. Gadis screams after the ear-piercing practice, and Rudi blows on Gadis's ears before giving her a glass of iced tea as a cold compress. As a modest and inexperienced girl, Gadis seems to enjoy this unusual adventure, and seems to gain confidence from it.

This type of interaction between Gadis and Rudi can be read as female homoeroticism or, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term, as homosocial desire because, even though there is no overt sexual contact, the combination of physical and emotional contact implies a strong degree of same-sex interaction between them.

Sedgwick (1985: 1-2) defines homosocial desire as "a potential unbrokenness of a continuum with homosexual, a continuum whose visibility, for men in our society, is radically disrupted" (1985: 1-2). She acknowledges that the nature of this boundary varies from society to society and from era to era, and, even within one society, it can differ between women and men since they may have different access to power (1985: 2).

The homoerotic aspect of *Tentang Dia* is strengthened by the film's advertising poster shown in Figure 1, which portrays the two female characters in an intimate manner. Rudi holds Gadis in a protective embrace, while Randu shadows them from behind. Randu seems very jealous as he watches Gadis and Rudi's romantic gesture. The position of the three characters suggests that Rudi has "displaced" Randu as Gadis' romantic interest.

The rivalry here is a rivalry between heterosexuality and homosexuality, not between persons of the same sex. Accompanied by an ambiguous subtext, "*Harapan itu datang saat dia kehilangan*" (Hope appeared when she was suffering from a loss), the film poster raises some basic questions: What hope? Whose loss?

The subtext of the poster may be read in two ways. First, it may refer to Gadis, who is prone to depression because of her boyfriend's betrayal. "Hope" here would mean the hope of finding another boyfriend to cure her heartbreak. After losing one boyfriend, she finds Randu. This first meaning may be what is intended by the filmmakers.

However, if we "read against the grain," the subtext may refer to Gadis and Rudi, since both are suffering from the experience of loss. While they mutually support each other and clearly enjoy their emotional bonding, they hope to find happiness in their relationship with each other. It is this second meaning that is strongly suggested by the film poster.



Figure 1: *Tentang Dia*'s advertisement.

As such, *Tentang Dia* is a good example of how a film poster may challenge the film's apparent, or intended, message. It suggests that there is a gap between the film's ending and the film poster that allows the viewers to challenge, and even to contradict, the film's heteronormative moral message.

In the way the two female main characters are depicted by the film's advertising poster above, the film encourages homoerotic overtones, since the two girls are portrayed along stereotypical "butch-femme" lines.⁴ Even the two girls' names reflect this dichotomy, as in Indonesian culture, it is not common for a girl to be named Rudi. Unlike Indonesian neutral gender names such as Nur, Eka, Dwi or Nurul, Rudi is normally a male name. Randu's suspicion that Rudi is a new "boyfriend" of Gadis thus becomes understandable.

Benshoff and Griffin (2006: 15) argue that "in more specific cinematic stereotypes, queerness can be found in the characters' names. For instance, in Western film culture, a woman named George or Frank is likely to suggest queerness."

This raises the question of whether a woman named Rudi in Indonesian film is likely to, or intended to, have the same effect. Although there is no

explanation why Rudi chooses to be called Rudi, rather than her real name, Dara Asanti, changing her name may be seen as part of her attempt to forget the past and begin a new life.

But why does she prefer a male name? Changing her name to Rudi means she changes, not only her identity, but also her gender role. In leaving behind the stereotypical feminine connotations of “Dara,” and taking a male gender identity with “Rudi,” she embodies the shifting and contingent nature of gender categories, which is certainly suggestive of queerness.⁵

Meanwhile, Gadis (Virgin), as suggested by her name, is a modest, feminine and a sensitive girl, a perfect example of a stereotypical female gender identity for women. She stands in complete contrast to the confident, tough and masculine Rudi, who seems to challenge the boundary between femininity and masculinity. In this way, the contrasting personalities of the two main characters are perfectly relevant to the stereotypical “butch-femme” *lesbian* pattern.

In Indonesia, as Boellstorff (2005: 159) argues, “[*lesbian*] sexual relationships take place between masculine and *lesbi* feminine women, not between two masculine or two feminine *lesbi* women.” In this way, as in the film poster, the film seems to encourage the homoerotic interpretation, even though this is negated at the end of the film narrative itself.

Lesbianism and Heteronormativity⁶

The homoerotic elements, which seem to slide towards making Rudi and Gadis’s friendship a *lesbian* relationship, are suddenly negated when Gadis pulls back from the shared intimacy of their relationship, and seeks assurance that their relationship is nothing more than a “friendship.” Up to this point, Gadis is portrayed as having a strong psychological need for Rudi, and for the caring and supportive relationship she has with her. When she asks Rudi for confirmation that their relationship is no more than a friendship, the viewer is likely to be as surprised and confused as Rudi herself. Previously, it seemed as though Gadis needed much more than just a simple friendship with Rudi. The conversation below proves this:

Gadis: *Gue lagi ingin sendiri, Di* (I want to be alone, Di).

Rudi: *Dis, lu itu kenapa sih? Ini khan tempat kita, kalo lu ada disini, gue harus ada. Apa lagi sih, Dis? Siapa lagi yang nyakitin lu, gue khan pernah bilang, gak ada lagi yang berani jelek-jelekin lu.* (What do you mean? This is our place. If you are here, then I must be here also. What’s wrong? Tell me, Dis. Who’s hurting you now? I’ve told you once that no one will hurt you anymore.

[Rudi intimately strokes Gadis' hair.]

Gadis: *Lu menganggap gue apaan sih, Di? Kita temenan, khan? (What am I to you? We're friends, right?)*

Rudi: *Maksud lu? (What do you mean?)*

Gadis: *Lu gak menganggap gue lebih dari itu, khan? (You don't take me for more than that, right?)*

Rudi: *Aslinya gue benar-benar gak ngerti, maksud lu apaan sih, Dis? Bilang aja kenapa. Gue ngerti sekarang maksud lu, Jadi selama ini lu menganggap gue lesbi dan suka sama lu? Pantesan lu aneh sama gue. Gak nyangka gue, pikiran lu kayak gitu. (To be honest, I don't understand what you are talking about. Tell me what it is [Rudi touches Gadis' hand, but Gadis refuses it]. I know what you mean now. So, all this time, you thought that I am a lesbian and that I like you. No wonder you were acting weird to me. I had no idea that's what you were thinking.)*

This exchange takes place on the top of the bridge, the girls' favorite spot. The situation between them is strained. Gadis leaves Rudi but Rudi chases after her. Unexpectedly, Wirda appears with her female friends and threatens Gadis. Rudi, who arrives just in time, attacks Wirda. However, Gadis feels disappointed with Rudi's action. For a second time, she reconfirms their relationship status with Rudi.

Gadis: *Lu ngapain tadi, Di? Lu gila ya? Lu kalo marah ke gue, bukan ke dia. Sekarang lu buktiin ke gue kalo gue salah. Buktiin kalo gue bukan pacar lu. Ayo...kok diam? Pengecut lu, gue nyesel ketemu sama lu, Di. (Are you crazy, Di? What did you do? If you want to be angry, you can be angry with me, but not her. Now you prove me wrong. Prove that you don't take me as your girlfriend...Come on...Why don't you say something? You are such a coward...and I'm sorry I ever met you.)*

Gadis's statement deeply hurts Rudi. In busy and crowded traffic, Rudi asserts that her relationship with Gadis is based on genuine feelings of compassion, and her need for sincere friendship.

Rudi: *Lu boleh Dis, gak percaya sama orang. Tapi kalo lu gak percaya sama orang yang tulus sayang sama lu, itu namanya pengkhianatan. Beda tau gak, Dis? Itu yang lu sebut pengkhianatan dan*

itu sakit. Dan satu hal yang kamu harus tahu dari gue. Gue gak mau kehilangan lagi, Dis. (It's OK if you don't trust people. But if you don't trust a person who cares about you sincerely, that's different. That's what you call a betrayal and that hurts. There is one thing that you need to know about me. I just don't want to lose anyone anymore.)

From the dialogue, we can see how the filmmakers construct the meaning of female bonding. It is clear that at this point the film is suggesting that passionate emotional attachment between persons of the same sex is “dangerous.” Rudi's confession that her protective attitude toward Gadis is merely a kind of sisterhood functions as the film's assertion of heteronormativity.

Rudi's fury when she is suspected of being a *lesbian* and Gadis's need for reassurance that their relationship is a “normal” friendship indicate that the film narrative is undermining its own logic, and presenting lesbianism as deviant and abnormal sexual desire. Rudi's fury can be read as a kind of self-defense mechanism that suggests the ambiguity of the filmmakers to explore more on the possibility of female same-sex relationship to survive.

Rudi Soedjarwo, the director of *Tentang Dia* who graduated from San Diego State University, asserts that it is the right of the audience to have their own interpretation. He argues that his film is about “an unusual love story” and about the meaning of love and friendship, saying that “love is not limited to eroticism, but can also be the expression of sincere friendship” (R. Soedjarwo, personal communication, May 3, 2008).

Responding to a question on sexual diversity, Soedjarwo claims to be very open to the reality of sexual diversity but acknowledged that he was not fully informed about it. “I'm still learning about it,” he commented (R. Soedjarwo, personal communication, May 3, 2008).

In other words, while the film narrative itself seems to contain an ambiguous stance on non-normative sexuality, the director's intention was not to denigrate the possibility of same-sex attraction.

However, at the same time, the film uses music and song precisely to suggest that Gadis regrets the way she has treated Rudi. In her car, she is sorry for what she did to Rudi. “*Di dekat engkau, aku tenang. Sendu matamu, penuh makna. Misteri hidup akankah menghilang, dan bahagia di akhir cerita.*” (Beside you, I feel so peaceful. Your calm eyes are full of meaning. The mystery of life, will it disappear in a happy ending?)

In the following scene, she hears of Rudi's death in a car accident. Gadis then goes to see Rudi's former employer *pak* Dibyo in his seafood *warung* (food

stall). *Pak* Dibyo tells Gadis that Rudi had been running away from her family since her childhood. She refused to be called by her real name (Dara Asanti), and preferred to be called Rudi. *Pak* Dibyo gives her Rudi's diary. From Rudi's diary, Gadis understands the meaning of Rudi's affection for her. The film then moves to a flashback scene which depicts Rudi's clarification of her feelings for Gadis.

Rudi: *Gue gak mau kehilangan lagi, Dis. Lu gak tahu rasanya, orang yang lu sayang mati dihadapan lu cuman gara-gara lu gak bisa jagain dia. Gue emang sayang sama lu. Buat gue, lu pengganti adik gue yang meninggal. Paling tidak gue menjadi kakak yang bener sebelum gue mati.* (You don't know how it feels to see the person you love the most die in front of you, just because you can't protect them. I care about you, Dis. You replace my sister who died. That's all. I thought, at least I could be a proper sister before I die.)

The flashback scene reinforces the moral message of the film. It shows the intense trauma of Rudi's guilt because of her failure to prevent her younger sister's death. The flashback is intended as the subjective truth of past experiences (Hayward, 2006: 153), which means, in this case, that this is the primary motivation for Rudi's close attachment to Gadis.

In other words, she is seeking to redeem her failure to save her sister's life by "rescuing" Gadis. As *pak* Dibyo tells Gadis: "*Dia ingin melihat kamu tidak sedih lagi. Mungkin itu yang akan membuat dia bahagia.*" (She wanted to see you not unhappy anymore. Maybe because that would make her not unhappy, too.)

Therefore, it is not an erotic attraction, but a psychological need which is the basis of her relationship with Gadis. With this, the suggestion of lesbianism – so strongly implied in the portrayal of the two girls and their relationship – disappears, and Rudi, like Gadis before her, assures the viewer of her normative sexual orientation.

On the other hand, the film plot structure is similar to the 1970s Western lesbian film. In his article, "Stereotyping," Richard Dyer (1977: 34) argues that the central stereotypical lesbian film in that era involves the struggles of the main female character to decide between her female close friend and her male love interest.

Gadis seems to keep secret her close relationship with Rudi, especially from Randu. One scene shows Randu asking Gadis whether Rudi is her new

boyfriend. Although there is no open competition between Randu and Rudi, it is clear that Gadis is in a dilemma. As suggested in the film poster, Gadis becomes a point of intense competition between Randu and Rudi.

Gadis perfectly fits Dyer's definition of a girl who lacks definition. She is unformed, nothing and absent, and because her sexuality is malleable, "she will be had by anyone" (1977: 34). In her diary, Gadis expresses her feelings after her ex-boyfriend's betrayal:

Kini, tiada lagi yang kurasakan. Hanya rasa sakit yang tersisa. Tuhan, mengapa kau memberiku seorang kekasih dan teman yang akhirnya hanya menyakitiku? Semua itu membuat cinta dan persahabatan menjadi tanpa makna. Tak ada gunanya lagi bagiku untuk lari, Tuhan. Mungkin aku harus terbang, sehingga bebas dari semua ini. Aku ingin terbang dan menghilang. (Now, I don't feel anything. What is left is just pain. Lord, why did you give me a lover and a friend who would hurt me in the end? It made love and friendship meaningless. There is no point for me in running away. Maybe I have to fly, so that I can be free from all this. I want to fly and disappear.)

Gadis is not just passive; she desires to be nothing, an absence. This is symbolized by her habit of flying paper planes around her room.

In the rivalry for her affection, it is Rudi, the *lesbian* competitor, who must be defeated. Significantly, Randu finally wins the competition when Rudi is killed by a passing car as she stoops to pick up a photo depicting her together with Gadis. As Dyer comments: "[The] defeat of the lesbian by the man signals that the true sexual definition of a woman is heterosexual and that she gets that definition from a man" (Dyer, 1977: 34).

The film ends with the heterosexual couple hugging each other passionately in heavy rain. Randu expresses his deep feelings for Gadis: "*Dis, mungkin aku tidak tahu apa yang kamu rasakan, tapi aku tahu satu hal, aku tidak akan pernah meninggalkan kamu*". (Dis, I might not know how you feel, but I know one thing, I know that I will never leave you.)

In this way, the filmmakers suggest that a heterosexual relationship is the normal and the ultimate sexual relationship. Ultimately, the heterosexual love story defeats (the possibility of) homosexual desire, and *Tentang Dia* takes its place alongside other Indonesian adolescent romance films. Just as in Rudi Soedjarwo's *Ada Apa dengan Cinta* (What's Up with Cinta, 2002), Indra Yudhistira's *Biarkan Bintang Menari* (Let the Stars Dance, 2003) and Nasri Chepy's *Eiffel I'm in Love* (2003), the main protagonists turn out to be

heterosexual adolescents who fall in love with persons of the opposite sex, and same-sex intimacy emerges as a developmental stage leading to a more mature heterosexuality. Female intimacy becomes an inadequate adolescent stage in a woman's psychological development before a more satisfying and fulfilling heterosexuality.

This pattern is reminiscent of the way relationships between women were often portrayed at earlier stages of queer film history in the West. Robert Towne's *Personal Best* (1982), for example, centers on the camaraderie between two women athletes, Chris Cahill and Tory Skinner, who become involved in a sincere and loving lesbian relationship. As the relationship progresses, however, Tory, who is older, more active, and more independent than Chris, fails to grant Chris the autonomy she needs to reach full adulthood. Chris then moves to her male love interest, Denny.

In her reading of this film, Karen Hollinger argues that *Personal Best* is "an example of film which depicts lesbianism not only as a stage in the immature girl's progression to a more fulfilling adult heterosexuality, but also as appropriately replaced by a more acceptable female bond" (1998: 143). At the end of the film, Chris and Tory meet again at the Olympic trials, where Chris easily makes the Olympic team while Tory struggles. Chris then motivates Tory when she desperately wants to quit the event. She sacrifices her own position to give Tory an opportunity on the Olympic team. This conclusion suggests that lesbianism is a device used to glorify the female friendship. Just like *Tentang Dia*, *Personal Best* ends by exalting female friendship at the expense of lesbianism.

Ultimately, it may be helpful to see *Tentang Dia* as existing on Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum.⁷ In its uneasy movement between female friendship and lesbianism, it can perhaps best be described as *in-between*, able to be read in a way that allows for identification and desire. For its viewers, especially for female queer audiences, *Tentang Dia* may encourage the pleasure and identification with and/or desire for the female characters on the screen at the same time as it confirms their non-normative sexual identity. In this sense, it can be seen as another exploration in an emerging genre of Indonesian queer cinema.

Conclusion

In *Tentang Dia*, female friendship functions primarily to resolve women's psychological problems and, also, to fulfil their emotional needs. This means that their intimacy can be a double-edge sword. On one hand, it may provide women with much-needed ego support. On the other hand, it can reinforce their social disempowerment. The portrayal of Rudi and Gadis' friendship is

politically ineffective since it influences only their personal lives rather than leading them to action in the public sphere. Pat O'Connor (cited in Hollinger, 1998: 24) defines this phenomenon as "palliative coping" since their "female bonding separates them from the outside world and discourages their venturing out into the public sphere." Female friendship in *Tentang Dia* negates the possibility of a challenge to hetero-patriarchal culture or women's traditional societal role.

The ambiguous attitude of female same-sex relationships in *Tentang Dia* may indicate that the representation of lesbianism is still at an earlier stage of development in Indonesian film industry, but it also reflects the bias of a hetero-patriarchal culture which burdens *lesbian* subjectivity. In Indonesian social and cultural contexts, especially in the long Soeharto's New Order period (1966-1998), women are expected to become mothers and devout wives (Blackburn, 2004: 139). In this respect, depicting *lesbian* women as mothers is still a long way from *Tentang Dia*'s filmmakers' consideration.

It is important to note, however, that in 2006, a more affirmative and non-judgmental representation of female homosexuality is depicted by a queer-friendly female director, Nia Dinata, in her influential film, *Berbagi Suami* (Sharing a Husband, 2006). *Berbagi Suami* explores women's perceptions, motivations and strategies in negotiating the practice of polygamous marriage, and also presents lesbianism as a symbol of sisterhood and women's freedom to control their own lives.

Despite the depiction of lesbianism in *Berbagi Suami* (it only occupies a minor sub-plot of the whole film narrative), female same-sex relationships is presented as much more empowering and assertive than is the case with *Tentang Dia*. As Eric Sasono (2006b) notes, in showing a *lesbian* couple as parents, the film introduces a new element into the Indonesian discourse on gender and sexuality. In its affirmative depiction of a female same-sex relationship, *Berbagi Suami* can be seen as a breaking away from Indonesian dominant hetero-patriarchal norms.

Notes

- 1 I use italics for "gay" and "lesbian" when they are being used as Indonesian language terms, with meanings that differ somewhat from their English equivalents (cf. Boellstorff, 2005: 7-8). Similarly, "normal" in italics refers to the "dominant [Indonesian] understandings of modern sexuality" (Boellstorff, 2005: 8). While Boellstorff uses *lesbi* exclusively as a translation of the English "lesbian," I believe the term *lesbian* is now common usage.

- 2 Krishna Sen argues that in the 1980s, erotic-content films were the only Indonesian film genre which survived in mainstream cinema (1994: 155).
- 3 *30 Hari Mencari Cinta* centers on the story of three female characters who live together and share the same activities as single women. Their close relationship raises rumors about their sexual orientation, and their rival accuses them of being lesbians since they have no boyfriends. To counter the accusation, they compete to find boyfriends within 30 days. However, after dating a number of males in 30 days, they come to the conclusion that their friendship is more valuable than finding instant boyfriends (Kristanto, 2005).
- 4 The definition of lesbianism became a hotly debated issue in the 1970s. Western lesbian feminist movement was marked by two positions: "cultural feminism" and "radical feminism." Andrea Weiss (2004: 44-45) describes radical feminists as emphasizing "the political importance of "woman-identified-women as a threat to patriarchy and as an antidote to male power, [while] cultural feminists moved away from immediate political concerns to explore ancient matriarchies and female forms of power." In this respect, the film supports the 1970s Western lesbian stereotypical butch-femme dichotomy with a strict feminine and masculine gender role.
- 5 In his article on Rudi Soedjarwo's films, Eric Sasono compares *Tentang Dia* with Soedjarwo's latest film *9 Naga* (9 Dragons). He argues that the two films seem to challenge the stereotypical gender identity (2006a). In *9 Naga*, for instance, the film depicts the world of masculine hired killers. But the masculinity of the main characters is challenged by the usage of a feminine name. Leni, one of the hired killers, is a masculine and brave character who is unable to speak easily with women. However, the overall heterosexual bias of the two films suggests that Soedjarwo is not quite confident about exploring the fluidity of gender identity and sexual orientation. He seems to raise the possibility, but in both cases the film ending itself negates the wider interpretation (Sasono, 2006a).
- 6 Heteronormativity - the social norm responsible for sexual inequality and the domination of heterosexuality over homosexuality (Corber & Valocchi, 2003: 2-3).
- 7 In her influential 1980 essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich wrote: "If we consider the possibility that all women...exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not" (cited in Jagose, 1996: 49). Jagose comments that the concept aims to connect all women, regardless of their sexual object-choices, especially to break down the ideological barriers between straight women and lesbians (1996: 48-49).

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