

Backlash As a Counter Assault to Woman's Progress: Feminism Reading on Habiburrahman El Shirazy's Novel *Cinta Suci Zahrana*

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Abstract

This study tries to reveal the backlash contained in Habiburrahman El Shirazy's novel, *Cinta Suci Zahrana*. The novel is mostly viewed as promoting feminist values in which the main character is fighting for her dream in education. However, it carries backlash, which is defined as a counter assault toward woman's progress. In Faludi's theory, backlash, taking form in myth constructed by patriarchal culture, is used to spread believes that progress women made cause only misery. It is trying to put woman back to inferiority by showing that what they are trying to achieve can make them suffer. This study investigates whether the ideas containing backlash appear in Habiburrahman's *Cinta Suci Zahrana*. By using qualitative methods and deconstruction reading, this study reveals a discourse that seems to be about women's struggle, yet carries backlash which takes a form of consequences of the struggle. The result shows that there are backlash ideas taking form as consequences the main character, Zahrana, has to suffer because of her persistence in pursuing her study. Revealing the backlash and how it is presented, this study offers different point of view, not from religious context but limiting the discussion in cultural context. The result is expected to promote critical reading and becomes a contribution to research about backlash.

Keywords:

backlash, counter assault, women's progres, feminism reading

Abstrak

Tulisan ini mencoba mengungkapkan wacana backlash yang terkandung dalam novel Habiburrahman El Shirazy, *Cinta Suci Zahrana*. Novel tersebut seringkali dipandang sebagai pendukung nilai-nilai feminisme dengan membawa karakter utama seorang wanita karir sukses di bidang pendidikan. Namun novel ini juga mengandung ide-ide *backlash* yang didefinisikan sebagai serangan balik terhadap kemajuan perempuan. Faludi menyebut *backlash* sejatinya dimunculkan dalam wacana-wacana mitos yang tak terpisahkan dari konstruksi budaya patriarki, bahwa kemajuan-kemajuan yang dicapai perempuan hanya akan menyebabkan kesengsaraan. Dalam penelitian ini, akan dilihat apakah ada wacana backlash dalam *Cinta Suci Zahrana*. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif dan pendekatan dekonstruksi, tulisan ini membedah apa yang tampaknya mendukung kemajuan perempuan namun juga memunculkan *backlash*. Hasil temuan dan pembahasan menunjukkan terdapat wacana *backlash* dalam *Cinta Suci Zahrana* yang muncul dalam bentuk konsekuensi yang harus dihadapi tokoh utama, Zahrana, sebagai akibat dari kegigihannya mengenyam pendidikan. Dengan mengungkapkan *backlash* dalam narasi novel serta bagaimana ia dimunculkan, tulisan ini menawarkan pembacaan kritis terhadap novel tersebut dari kaca mata yang berbeda, tidak dari konteks agama namun dalam batasan konteks budaya. Hasil penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan kontribusi terhadap penelitian khususnya mengenai wacana *backlash* serta mendukung pembacaan karya sastra secara kritis.

Kata Kunci:

backlash, serangan balik, kemajuan perempuan, pembacaan feminis

Introduction

The discourse of gender equality has become continuing issue and is still brought up by feminists around the world (Molyneux, 2021). Feminist discourses and movements that have long been initiated, voiced, and championed have yet to be fully successful, mainly because of the influence of patriarchal ideas that has so strongly dominated society. The theme is still favorable and can be seen in popular products like films, novels, even games. In fact, it does not only bring up women's struggle and success but also consequences they may obtain. It shadows women's progress today with backlash that appears in many aspects of live (Cooper, 2020).

Backlash, which is also the title of a book written by its postulator, Susan Faludi (1991), is defined as "an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that feminist movement did manage to win for women". She sees attempts to drag the mindset of women to the time before feminist movements emerged. The discourse came out in Britain and America in 1980s and Faludi sees them in many popular cultures, including novels as a form of entertainment.

In Indonesia, majority of people have patriarchal cultural background. Patriarchal ideas are perpetuated by religious believes, society's rules and consensus (Palulungan, 2020). Backlash too can easily manifest itself in various media, including literary works, presenting what seems to be the widely accepted rules in its narration. Through stories that raise figures from the community with a strong patriarchal culture, backlash will more easily appear and "awaken" women to their "nature" and reaffirm patriarchal ideas.

Cinta Suci Zahrana by Habiburrahma El Shirazy is one of the popular novels published in 2011 with a female main character named Zahrana, an accomplished woman, successful as a lecturer, highly educated and has received many awards

both at national and international levels. At first glance, Habiburrahman, who is usually called kang Abik, presents a female character as a feminist stereotype with her tenacious, tough, and broad-minded character. However, backlash is one strong discourse which also appears in the novel yet out of sights from any discussion related with the novel.

Nafisa, Kanzunnudin, and Roysa focused on educational value in their article "*Nilai-Nilai Pendidikan dalam Novel Cinta Suci Zahrana Karya Habiburrahman El Shirazy (Educational Values in the novel 'Cinta Suci Zahrana' by Habiburrahman El Shirazy*" (2021). They discussed how the main character struggles for her education, put aside distractions like romance life to achieve what she wants, excellence in academic career. Ahmad Yani (2020) analyzed religiosity in his article "*Nilai Religius dalam Novel Cinta Suci Zahrana Karya Habiburrahman El Shirazy (Religiosity in the Novel 'Cinta Suci Zahrana' by Habiburrahman El Shirazy)*". This researcher focused on how the novel put forward religious values, such as obedience to parents, belief in God's help, and respect toward religious figure. Neither sees the story in feminism context.

There are three other researches digging into feminist aspect in the novel. It was done by Andestend (2021) in his journal article "*Feminisme pada Novel Cinta Suci Zahrana karya Habiburrahman El Shirazy (Feminism in the Novel 'Cinta Suci Zahrana by Habiburrahman El Shirazy'*". He put forward the success of Zahrana as a woman in her career and education, also how the society sees her as a successful woman. In his conclusion, Andestend mentioned that some characters like Zahrana, Lina and Hasan are representation of liberal feminism, which demands equality in intellectual basis.

The second research about the novel and feminism is by Syafrima Yeni et.al (2013) entitled *Fenomena Feminisme dalam Novel Cinta Suci Zahrana*

Karya Habiburrahman El Shirazy (Feminism in the Novel Cinta Suci Zahrana by Habiburrahman El Shirazy). They focused on finding the characters who are supporting feminist's thoughts and characters who are against feminism values. The result shows that some characters adhere feminist values like Zahrana, her parents, her best friend Lina, and her husband in the end, Hasan. On the contrary, some characters who are against feminism are Mr. Sukarman (Zahrana's Dean), Mr. Didik (her colleague), and terror sender.

The third research focusing on feminism is written by Nurani Martania (2013). She came up with a title *Kajian Feminisme Eksistensial Novel Cinta Suci Zahrana Karya Habiburrahman El Shirazy (Exstential Feminism Study on 'Cinta Suci Zahrana' by Habiburrahman El Shirazy)*. She discussed the main character's struggle against social norms which require women to marry before 30s, also her effort in pursuing higher education in spite of the belief in the society that education is not as important as building a family.

Many ideas in the story indicate Backlash. Sarah Faludi (2006) in her book *"Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Woman"* explained the term as counterassault thrown by the society through various means like culture and popular product and thoughts. Novel as a popular product is therefore an easy means to carry backlash. If it is not carefully read, the ideas can infiltrate women's thought and make them regress because they are afraid of the possible consequences.

Faludi's theory of backlash becomes the basis of this research in finding the discourse within the narration in the novel, especially ones that are rooted from cultural construct. The limitation becomes important since the novel is heavy with religious values as well.

Since early in her educational pursuit, Zahrana has been raised among patriarchal thoughts

induced by her parents. However, she struggles for her aspiration. She managed to negotiate what she wants, which are going to formal public school instead of private religious boarding house, and taking architecture department instead of teaching department.

After achieving Bachelor Degree, bigger issue which also rooted from patriarchal construct appears. People keep asking her to marry in her young age, while she still wants to continue her study. Parents try to arrange her marriage with the son of a respected person in the village, best friend offers to introduce her to a financially-established man, even a senior proposed her before she graduated. The suitors and married advices are ways to induce patriarchal ideas that marriage is the highest possible achievement a woman can have.

Being married and having children are mentioned as a very important achievement for a woman.

"Tidak salah perempuan seperti kita meraih pendidikan setinggi-tingginya. Tapi kamu tidak boleh lupa prestasi lain yang sangat penting Rana... Melahirkan generasi yang akan menjadi pemimpin negeri ini."

It is not wrong for a woman like us to pursue higher education, but you must not forget other important achievement (as a woman). ... Giving birth to a generation who will lead the country in the future" (El-Shirazy, 2005, p. 25)

Through the narrations, which are told to Zahrana by parents and best friends, patriarchal ideas about women's position in society is foreshadowed. Women's best job is a wife and a mother, no matter how successful they are in education or in career. They are not seen as fully successful and defective, if they are not married or has no child.

Although Zahrana has internal struggle maintaining her freedom of thought and belief, being a daughter who is raised among patriarchal

norms and values makes it hard for her to shake those “patriarchal-righteous” ideas. It is what holds her back and causes regret in the end, which can be seen as the backlash of what she has fought for.

Cinta Suci Zahrana is more seen as a novel that promotes feminist premises. It narrates how the main character is persistent in pursuing higher education in spite of her parents’ disagreement. The consequence which becomes the main conflict in this story is not pointed out in any discussion. Therefore, this research tries to look at it more deeply.

In the end, backlash is action to take down something but it is often obscured. It can take form in many cultural products, habituation, as well as social norms that are forcefully persuasive. Therefore, it is important to identify backlash and dismantle it to empower the free will of human being. Presenting the data and finding in qualitative form, this research took the evidence from the narration in the novel. The data are obtained by reading the novel several times to find the empirical facts. In analyzing the novel *Cinta Suci Zahrana*, the researcher reads it several times and highlights empirical facts that are related to the problems formulated. Further, it is analyzed critically by using deconstruction strategy.

Result And Discussion

Patriarchal Value and Woman’s Progress

Sarah Faludi (2006) in her book *“Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Woman”* explained the term as counterassault thrown by the society through various means like culture and popular product and thoughts. Feminists’ movements, in which women continuously seek for equality, has been facing what she calls the “Big Lies”, ideas that do not actually exists.

Women’s inferiority in society is culturally programmed and thus seems to be the correct idea and the “nature” that we all must follow. An example

mentioned by Tyson is when a little girl is told that they cannot do math and it is okay to fail in math because they will not need it later in life (Tyson, 2006, p.87).

In line with Faludi’s premise about Myth, the narration in the novel also highlights an issue about woman and the surrounding culture. One example of myth Faludi mentioned is the shortage of man (2006). She implied that women outnumber men and thus, when a woman is not married in her thirty-five to forties, big chance is it will be hard for her to find a spouse since men will be looking for younger women to live with.

It is made worse by the spread of another myth that is wrapped under a research umbrella, saying that women who are not married by thirties to forties tend to suffer from misery (Faludi, 2006). However, what makes it seems true is not because the presentation of the idea is academic, but because it is widely spread by media and accepted by the society who are constructed by patriarchal ideas. These two myths are apparent in the narration of *Cinta Suci Zahrana* as well.

The main character’s best friend quoted the society’s believe about women, her age, and married partner, saying

“Masalahnya dia sudah berumur, agak repot mencari jodoh buat dia. Kalau yang pas untuk dia tentunya harus yang lebih tua dua atau tiga tahun. Dan biasanya lelaki yang lebih tua sudah beristri. Kalaupun ada yang lebih tua dan pendidikannya imbang, biasanya akan memilih yang lebih muda.”

(The problem is she is aging, it’s not easy to find a match for her. The one should be two or three years older, but man that age are usually married already. If there was such a man, he would choose a younger woman.” (El-Shirazy, 2011, p.44)

The text reveals similar myth stated by Faludi, that good man available for a woman is not many.

If a woman is not married in their thirties, they will not find a perfect match because a good, older man would choose to marry younger woman. Such thought is mere myth because it is not proved by statistics. Lina, the best friend, also uses the word “usually”, which is taken from what she believes happen in usual situation. It is once more idea that results from cultural construct.

Such idea appears repeatedly. In addition to Lina’s thought, the statement that can undermine woman’s confidence is presented from Mr. Sukarman’s thought. The Dean in the faculty where Zahrana works proposed her to be his wife. Yet it is not because he loves Zahrana sincerely but because he thinks little of her as a woman, putting aside the accomplishments she has achieved. Again, the aging issue is highlighted here,

“Gadis yang sudah berumur dan cerdas seperti Zahrana tidak akan mudah menemukan jodoh yang benar-benar ideal. Dia (laki-laki yang sama pintarnya dan lebih tua) tidak akan mencari yang seperti Zahrana, yang sudah tiga puluh empat.

An unmarried, aged, and smart woman like Zahrana will not find an ideal match easily. He (an older man with the same educational background as Zahrana) will not consider a woman like Zahrana because she is in her thirty four. (El-Shirazy, 2011, p.138)

Here too, Zahrana’s age and intelligence is highlighted as the cause of her not being married. It implies that because she is thirty-four and also smart, possessing high degree, men will think twice to approach her. Even if there is a good man, the narration says that he will not pick a smart aged girl and choose to marry young girl instead. This is still in line with one myth mentioned by Faludi as the construction of patriarchal society, man’s shortage.

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patriarchal thoughts induced by her parents. However, she struggles for her aspiration. She managed to negotiate what she wants, which are going to formal public school instead of private religious boarding house, and taking architecture department instead of teaching department.

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norms and values makes it hard for her to shake those “patriarchal-righteous” ideas. It is what holds her back and causes regret in the end, which can be seen as the backlash of what she has fought for.

Other myth appear is that women tend to be more emotional than man. Zahrana, the main character is told that it will be better for her to go to religious school rather than general high school. Although she can finally prove that she can be outstanding as a high school student, and wants to continue her study in medical faculty, again she is told that studying to be a teacher is better for her. Parents keep telling her to give up her big dream. The narration used to show disagreement with zahrana, the female main character in the story, is “*Mbok yo uteke dienggo ojo perasaanne wae sing dienggo! (Use your logic, not your feeling)*”.

Tyson implies that one of patriarchal constructs is the idea that women use their feeling more than their brain. “*They (traditional gender roles) cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive*” (2006, p.85). With the traits, women are most suitable to be a mother, nurturing the kids at home.

The statement “*Mbok yo uteke dienggo ojo perasaanne wae sing dienggo! (Use your logic, not your feeling)*” (2005) carries patriarchal idea, which says that women use their feeling more than their logic. Whereas, Zahrana, who excels in architecture, must be very good with her logic. It is showing that patriarchal construct is merely patriarchal construct, not a fact.

Backlash As Counter Assault To Women's Progress

Sarah Gamble in *Introduction to Understanding Feminism and Post feminism* defines backlash as a counter attack, “a sudden movement that is a reaction to something” (Gamble, 2004, p.257). In this case the “reaction” refers to ones of patriarchal ideology against the feminist movement which has

so far attacked conservative and patriarchal ideas that place women in a marginal position.

The main character in this novel is a woman named Dewi Zahrana, a lecturer at one of the leading universities in Semarang, her hometown. She is described as a highly educated woman, taking bachelor degree at UGM (Gadjah Mada University), and S2 at ITB. The two universities are mentioned as the benchmark of a reputable university in Indonesia. According to Word University Ranking in 2011 (taken from lldikti.ristekdikti.go.id), UGM is placed the third and ITB is the first among Indonesian University in that year. Thus, as a graduate from the two best university in the country, the novel shows how excellent the main character's achievement is.

Not only that she graduated from the best university in Indonesia, Zahrana is also facilitated to conduct research at Hamburg University, Germany, successfully published her article at the *Journal of the Osaka Institute of Technology and International Scientific Journal* (Shirazy, 2011). She even received an international award from Tsinghua University, China. Achieving international award and publishing article in international journal were extraordinary achievements for a scholar, let alone woman. It shows that the novel has placed its main character very successful and a good role model for feminist adherents.

Syafrima Yemi in her article in the *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia* places Zahrana as one of the pro-feminist figures (Yemi, 2013). Yemi sees that the character is described as a modern woman who does not have to obey the rules of traditional norms and customs. Zahrana did not obey her father's wishes, who asks her to go to a boarding school after graduating from MTS (*Islamic Secondary School*), but fought for her desire to continue to the best high school in the city of Semarang because she feels more comfortable there (Shirazy, 2011, p.5). She also fought for her dream

to continue studying at Engineering Department instead of Education Department, the one chosen by her father. In the end, she was able to prove her achievements in Architecture major, Faculty of Engineering, Universitas Gadjah Mada, one of the most prestigious universities in the country.

In the novel, Kang Abik elaborated the struggle and persistence to prove one's existence in the midst of patriarchal society within a female character. Zahrana's success in pursuing education up to Master's level is a highly satisfactory achievement, not to mention, she becomes the best graduate at every level she takes. Those, and the fact that she was offered lecturer position at UGM are proves that women can have high achievement in education and career. She was even offered a scholarship to continue her Master's degree in the Netherlands, and was offered a doctoral degree at a university that awarded her a prestigious international award in China.

The main character's success is the progress a woman makes in spite of thick patriarchal values instilled to her. Then came reactions narrated in the form of parent's and close friend's comments. The father scolded her when she just arrived home from Beijing,

"Kebanggaan apa? Nyatanya semakin kamu terkenal, semakin banyak penghargaan, semakin bikin malu orangtua!"

What pride? In fact, the more you are famous (the award was published on TV), got many awards, the more we are ashamed" (Shirazy, 2011, p.114).

Father's utterance is a reaction toward Zahrana's excellence in her career. It implied that what she achieved is not worth it, compared to an achievement as a woman when she's married. The achievements that Zahrana thinks can make her parents proud of her were seen as mere cause of shame, as the father said "The more you are famous, the more we are

ashamed". It is implying that if Zahrana did not get married, her fame would let people know the shame. One fact that she is not married yet override the many academic achievement she has got thus far.

Another reaction is shown by Lina, her best friend, who says

"Coba kamu pikir juga, kalau kau sampai meraih gelar doktor terus kamu tidak punya prestasi membina keluarga, kau bisa mengajar mahasiswa tapi kau tidak terbukti bisa mendidik anak, lebih memprihatinkan lagi kalau punya anak saja tidak, kurasa kau tidak layak berbangga."

(Think about it. What if you achieve doctorate degree but you have not married? You can teach your student but you cannot teach your own child, even more pity when you have no child. I think you cannot be proud) (El-Shirazy, 2011, p.107).

This came from Zahrana's best friend, someone she trusted the most, and she said that achieving academic degree is not something to be proud of if she has not married. It indicates a backlash because it is a reaction toward Zahrana's dream to pursue her study. It is implying that her doctorate degree will make her more miserable because the higher her education, the harder it is for her to find a good spouse.

Zahrana with her success as a career woman experiences mental pressure because she has not married yet at the age of thirty-four. She began to grow anxiety of being unmarried because she was too focused on her achievements and her pursuit of knowledge and teaching. This fear appears after the parents kept pressing her to get married and even tended to be hostile. The fear was narrated when she shares it to her best friend, Lina, *"Tapi sekarang di umurku yang sudah tiga puluh empat, pemuda mana yang mau denganku?"* (But now at the age of thirty-four which young man would want to be with me?) (El-Shirazy, 2011, p.107)

The fear of being aged and unmarried is the source of Zahrana's sadness.

"Akhir-akhir ini, ada satu hal yang ia tangisi setiap malam.... Ia menangisi takdirnya yang belum juga berubah. Takdir sebagai perawan tua yang belum juga menemukan jodohnya."

There's one thing she's been crying about every night lately. ... She was crying over his unchanging destiny. Destiny as an old woman who has not found her soul mate"(p. 184).

An independent woman and accustomed to working hard for her success will not show her weaknesses to others, including her sadness. In the narration above, Kang Abik shows Zahrana's "defeat", implicitly saying that the female character in the end can only cry and beg for her destiny to change. When pursuing a career and achievement, she can use her intelligence and abilities to achieve success. However, the success that she pursues turned out to be a sadness that made her only cry and regret, as narrated by the author.

The effect of the reaction are Zahrana's thoughts about how miserable she is in spite of her excellence in academic and career life. It is not really a direct reaction to a progress, but it is the effect of the reaction. It is often shown in the narration of the novel, like when she is on the way to Beijing for her award,

"Tetapi satu sisi nuraninya menegurnya, bahwa ia adalah perempuan yang egois. Kenapa juga ia tidak segera sadar bahwa umurnya sudah melewati kepala tiga."

(But her other sense reprimands that she is a selfish woman. Why she did not aware that she has been in her 30s)" (Shirazy, 2011, p. 26).

Even in her way to attend award invitation from Beijing University, she is miserable in her own thought, thinking about how selfish she is because

she has not married in her 30s.

The statement that she is miserable is also repeatedly presented in the narration. Another time it is stated in narrator's sentence, *"Dalam keseharian ia tampak biasa dan ceria. Ia bisa menyembunyikan derita dan sedihnya.."* (In daily life, she looks fine and cheerful. She can hide her suffer and sadness)" (El-Shirazy, 2011, p.184). Woman's strength in facing life is presented as a lie to hide sadness and misery within. It is an irony that is included in the novel to show that woman's misery is actually because their own progress.

Another part showing her regret is when she talks to her best friend, Lina, after arrived from Beijing,

"Aku juga memikirkan itu, Lina, Tapi sekarang di umurku yang sudah tiga puluh empat, pemuda mana yang mau denganku."

(I've been thinking about it too (about getting married), Lina, but now that I am 34, who would want to marry me)" (Shirazy, 2011, p.107).

The sentence *"now that I am 34, who would want to marry me"* shows Zahrana's regret. She is so desperate, regretting that she did not think about marriage earlier and kept pursuing her education instead. She also regrets that she declined proposal from her senior, who did not have anything when proposing her but has had some fashion retail branches on his own now.

All the consequences, cold gesture from parents, who also get angry and thus force Zahrana to get married, bad comments from neighbors (which are mentioned to parents), insistence from close friends, are forms of counter assault to the main character's achievement. They lead to an idea that Zahrana's life is incomplete, miserable, and unworthy to be proud of because she has not married, and it all because she is too busy achieving academic excellence.

The idea aims to get woman, in this case Zahrana,

aware that the nature of being a woman is when she is married, has a husband and has children. Without that, all great achievement is nothing and only causes misery. Whereas, her achievement as an individual should also be considered, appreciated, and the willing to marry should come from within. When it comes from the surrounding, not to mention from coercive process, then it should be re-considered whether it is truly for good or to maintain patriarchal construct in the society.

Conclusion

The novel *Cinta Suci Zahrana* seems to be heavy with feminist ideas and shows the success of a woman in pursuing her dream. However, there is backlash that is underlying the story. The main character in the story is indeed a woman, and she is described as a modern woman who excels, never gives up on circumstances, has broad insight, and is highly educated. Yet she faces consequences of her action in pursuing her dream, a successful academic life. The character described in this way may lead the reader to the discourse that women who have such a feminist spirit will actually make themselves miserable.

This novel brings a backlash by presenting the model of a woman with a feminist spirit. The main character of the story is narrated so persistently and successfully as a woman and then “dropped” her career and psychologically broken. The inner suffering and regret experienced by the main character is resulted from her eventual awareness of her “nature” as a woman, who needs a man as a spouse. Her priority to self-development is described as self-defeating in the end, because in the patriarchal ideas narrated in the story, the greatest success for women is when she is married and having children.

In the end, the discourse that was formed in Habiburrahman’s novel led women to “realize” their nature. Therefore, it is apparent that *Cinta Suci Zahrana* novel contains backlash, an attempt to restore women to their position in patriarchal society. This research will lead readers to be more aware in reading, whether it is critical reading or extensive reading, so any messages and ideas presented in a story can be more thoroughly accepted.

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