

# Two Dark Stories from Rural Indonesia: Comparing the Poverty in Turah (2016) and Siti (2014)

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**Submission date:** 06-Feb-2023 07:58AM (UTC+0700)

**Submission ID:** 2007004647

**File name:** SEAS1102\_Muhammad\_Taufiqurrohman\_Aidatul\_Chusna.pdf (680.75K)

**Word count:** 10997

**Character count:** 58968

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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*Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2, August 2022, pp. 249-271.

## How to Cite:

**Muhammad Taufiqurrohman<sup>1</sup> and Aidatul Chusna.** Two Dark Stories from Rural Indonesia: Comparing the Poverty in *Turah* (2016) and *Siti* (2014). *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2, August 2022, pp. 249-271. DOI: 10.20495/seas.11.2\_249.

**2**

## Link to this article:

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**2**

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## Two Dark Stories from Rural Indonesia: Comparing the Poverty in *Turah* (2016) and *Siti* (2014)

Muhammad Taufiqurrohman\* and Aidatul Chusna\*\*

This paper examines the unsettling stories of poverty from rural Indonesia in two films, *Siti* (2014) and *Turah* (2016). The concept of structural poverty enables a thorough analysis of these films' depictions of poverty and the main characters' reactions to the poverty they experience. This paper also employs the concept of gendered poverty to highlight how gender injustice perpetuates the poverty of women, as depicted in the films. Both structural and gendered poverty are propagated by the interpellation of ideological state apparatuses. This paper argues that the poverty of the rural people depicted in both films results from structural engineering by the elite, not from natural or inevitable conditions. This poverty is further intensified by the patriarchal culture of rural communities, which perpetuates gender inequality and results in deeper poverty for women. Every woman in these two films seems to have accepted, or at least resigned herself to, the patriarchal system and the gendered poverty it produces. The sole exception is Siti, who struggles against the double burden of being both housewife and breadwinner, resisting the naturalization of poverty and thereby revealing the role that ideological state apparatuses play in perpetuating oppression in society writ large as well as in individuals' minds and souls.


**Keywords:** gendered poverty, Indonesian film, ISA, rural people, structural poverty

### Introduction


Since the New Order's political exit, Indonesia has faced many rapid transformations, including in the world of national cinema. Filmmakers today have more freedom to voice their aspirations and articulate social criticism. Many issues considered taboo under the

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New Order, such as lesbianism, poverty, and religious and social injustices, can now be explored in film. The medium has also yielded controversial biopics and polemical histories. This expansion of content has occurred alongside a diversification of genres, styles, and formats. In addition to films produced by the traditional industry, there are now many independent films that seriously challenge the film industry's accepted conventions. Katinka van Heeren (2012, 52) states that post-Suharto Indonesian cinema has gained visibility in the larger public sphere, with discourses on representation and Indonesia's public imaginations transformed by the birth of alternative genres, channels of distribution, and contexts of exhibition. Heeren further writes that the themes of domination and resistance have emerged in post-Suharto cinema. This transformation is consistent with broader trends identified by Third Cinema theories, which address global distributions of power and the political and economic domination of Third World countries by neocolonial interests. In the current discourse on redistribution of power, poverty has become a global issue and is starting to be taken seriously.

Throughout the Third World, and in post-New Order Indonesia specifically, poverty remains a serious problem. From Habibie to today's Jokowi, Indonesian administrations have routinely attempted to eradicate poverty. Likewise, this problem has become a central concern of many major civil society movements spearheaded by intellectuals, activists, NGOs, and journalists. Social disparities in Indonesia are still deep and wide. Statistics Indonesia (2020) indicates that the poverty rate decreased from 23.43 percent (47.97 million) in 1999 to 9.22 percent (24.79 million) in 2019. However, disparities between urban and rural poverty remain high. Until September 2019 the urban poverty rate was approximately 6.56 percent, while among the rural poor poverty was 12.6 percent. Meanwhile, the disparity between the rich and the poor also remains high, with the Gini ratio reaching 0.38 by the end of 2019.

The figures above do not reflect positively on government policies. Many government policies and laws tend to favor markets and industries over the poor, prioritizing profits for entrepreneurs and investors. Investors have dominated the majority of state apparatuses since the end of the New Order, with many senior positions in the major political parties occupied by business elites. The same trend recurs among ministers and senators. Defbry Margiansyah, a researcher from the Indonesian Institute of Science, reports that businessmen-senators make up 55 percent of the senate. This strengthens the concentration of oligarchic power in policy making, which in turn makes substantial democratic reforms increasingly difficult to achieve. Indonesia's supposedly representational bodies tend to cater to the economic interests of business while ignoring social justice, environmental sustainability, and public participation (Athika 2020).

Increasing public awareness of structural poverty has not had much discernible



impact on post-New Order films. From 1998, only a few Indonesian films addressed the issue of poverty and the lives of the poor, either as the main theme or as backdrop. Indonesian films are still dominated by stories from the middle and elite classes and usually situated in urban settings. Notable exceptions include *Bunga (Jangan Ada Dusta)* (No lies) (2000), *Joshua oh Joshua* (2000), *Marsinah* (Cry justice) (2000), *Pasir Berbisik* (Whispering sand) (2001), *Rindu Kami Padamu* (Of love and eggs) (2004), *Impian Kemarau* (The rainmaker) (2004), *Laskar Pelangi* (Rainbow troops) (2008), and *Dilarang Menyanyi di Kamar Mandi* (No singing in the bathroom) (2019), though even their depictions of poverty are mostly concentrated in urban settings. The voices of the rural poor remain profoundly underrepresented in Indonesian films.

One factor contributing to this dynamic is that most film production centers are located in Jakarta and other big cities. The emergence of independent, or indie, film productions throughout urban and rural regions has begun to shift the overall thematic content of Indonesian films (Heeren 2012, 56). Local issues in rural communities, including poverty, have begun to gain ground. Initially, local filmmakers addressed these themes primarily in short films. More recently, they have begun to depict rural poverty in feature films. Both short films and feature films are distributed through film festivals and roadshows, making them more accessible to rural communities without movie theaters. One production house that has consistently raised the issue of rural poverty in feature films is Fourcolours Films, based in Yogyakarta. Its two most successful films, *Siti* (2014) and *Turah* (2016), both deal explicitly with rural poverty.<sup>1)</sup>

*Siti* is directed by Eddie Cahyono, an alumnus of the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (Institut Seni Indonesia) in Yogyakarta. A theater activist turned indie filmmaker, he founded Fourcolours along with Ifa Isfanyah and two other friends. Though preceded by several short films, *Siti* was his feature film debut. It won many awards, including Best Film in the 2015 Indonesian Film Festival; it even garnered some attention at international festivals. This film tells the story of Siti (Sekar Sari), a 24-year-old mother forced to become the breadwinner for her family after her husband, a former fisherman named Bagus (Ibnu Widodo), suffers an accident and becomes paralyzed. The rented ship that Bagus used, no longer an asset, becomes a liability, representing a mountain of debt that

1) This reflects not only the quality of these individual films but also the shifting landscape of Indonesian cinema. The diversification of content, genres, and formats and the emergence of online artistic communities have helped raise the global profile of Indonesian films and created more professional opportunities for filmmakers. In recent years, Indonesian filmmakers have won acclaim at several reputable international film festivals, including the Toronto Asian Reel Film Festival, Singapore International Film Festival, Shanghai Film Festival, Five Flavours Poland Film Festival, and even Cannes Film Festival. The latest and greatest achievement was the 2016 Best Short Movie award, which went to *Prenjak* (dir. Wregas Bhānutedja) (Agnes 2016).

Siti must repay. Since her husband can no longer work, Siti struggles to make a living for them, her young son, and her elderly in-laws. She sells *peyek jingking* (a fried seafood snack) on Parangtritis Beach during the day, and at night she works as a “lady companion” (escort) at an illegal nightclub.

Wicaksono Wisnu Legowo, the director of *Turah*, graduated from the Jakarta Institute of the Arts<sup>4</sup> and worked as a crewmember at Fourcolours before striking out on his own. Like *Siti*, *Turah* was its director’s first feature-length film; and like *Siti*, it won acclaim at several international film festivals. It was also selected to represent Indonesian film in the 2017 Oscars, or Academy Awards. *Turah* is set in Tirang village, where most people are very poor and lack access to clean water and electricity. Jadag (Slamet Ambari), one of the villagers, is known for his drinking. However, he begins to develop a political conscience after witnessing injustice in his village. He dares to fight Darso (Yon Daryono), the landlord who claims Kampung Tirang—which is actually a state-owned mound—as his family’s property. Darso uses Turah (Ubaidillah) and other villagers as slaves, paying little to nothing in wages. One of the slaves, a scholar named Pakel (Rudi Iteng), has recently become Darso’s accomplice, acquiring land and property in just three years, while his fellow slaves remain in a cycle of poverty. Pakel’s betrayal has drained the community’s energy, and only Jadag still retains the spirit to resist Pakel and Darso’s oppression.

Previous studies of these two films have not addressed the issue of rural poverty. Published analyses of *Siti* deal with the film’s distribution (Arinta 2017), treatment of gender inequality (Deuis 2018), and women’s more general representation in the film (Ganjar 2019). Previous research on *Turah*, meanwhile, has focused on its portrayal of Generation X (Muhammad Yunus Patawari 2018). The issue of poverty, though represented in both films, has not received the attention it deserves. This article therefore centers the representation of rural poverty in these films, exploring the distinct angles from which the films depict the issue and how the films are informed by local realities in two different post-New Order Indonesian villages. This article seeks to extend the discussion of rural poverty under the New Order initiated by Krishna Sen. In her classic work, Sen (2009, 238) highlights the absence of the middle class in the New Order’s national films. The New Order’s developmentalist films focused mainly on the urban elite, with the rural poor completely absent from the screen. This tendency persists in contemporary Indonesian films, which tend to either ignore poverty altogether or to present it as a personal problem to be overcome by individuals’ hard work, for example, attending university and earning a master’s degree (Ekky 2019).

With the above issues in mind, this paper seeks to investigate social class, especially as it manifests in the lives of the rural poor—the lowest class in society—and analyze

how it is depicted in *Siti* and *Turah*, two contemporary independent Indonesian films.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Analysis of Social Class in Indonesian Film*

The discussion of social class in Indonesian film must be placed in the context of the development of social class analysis in social studies and the humanities in Indonesia. Class analysis in general has been lost among the social sciences in Indonesia, mainly due to the New Order's policies, which explicitly restricted the use of class as an analytical lens (Hilmar 2006, 211–212). The result was the emergence and eventual hegemony of neoliberal-style social science under the New Order, which not only legitimized government policies but also became an integral part of those policies.

After the fall of the New Order, more opportunities to develop class analysis emerged, especially regarding poverty and the lives of the poor. Poverty is still a major issue in the context of “low-intensity democracy” (Amin 2004).<sup>2)</sup> Although it looks different on the surface, from a political economy perspective the material problems faced by the authoritarian New Order regime and by today's democratic administrations are both rooted in the expansion of neoliberal capitalism. The only distinction is the nature of the prevailing political regime, which in the 1980s displayed a militaristic, authoritarian character and today has a civilian, democratic character. In response to the decadence of democracy, the study of class analysis—which investigates the dynamics of relations between the lower, middle, and elite classes—must be revived in order to supplant superficial discussions of identity and lifestyle with more substantive issues.

In the field of Indonesian film studies, Sen (2009, 219–220) initiated an analysis of social class as portrayed in Indonesian films produced during the New Order era. She analyzed the lives of the poor, the middle class, and especially the elite class as depicted in New Order films. She also discussed the dynamics of rural and urban life in these films, pointing out that they reflected the New Order's developmentalist ideology, which centered on urban progress and modernity while marginalizing important issues in rural areas, especially in regard to poverty.

Sen further argued that the poverty depicted in the first wave of Indonesian “poverty”

2) When democracy has been hijacked by the market, it loses its *élan vital*. As a result, social criticism of the dominant ideology (the market) becomes fragmented and weakened. In Samir Amin's words, “you are free to vote as you choose: white, blue, green, pink, or red. In any case, it will have no effect; your fate is decided elsewhere, outside the precincts of Parliament, in the market” (Amin 2004, 46).



films was naturalized as a matter of fortune, discouraging viewers from interrogating its structural origins. If one embraced poverty, these films suggested, one would find happiness and one's life would be full of good fortune. Often, good fortune came in the form of generosity from members of the elite and middle classes. In effect, these films were propaganda tools, at once showcasing the largesse of the ruling classes and framing poverty as the product of God's will, not the result of a particular political economy, much less policies engineered to distribute the national wealth. For Sen, these films embodied the developmentalist ideology of the New Order.

Sen also pointed out that under the New Order, Indonesian films tended to highlight success stories among the urban elites and middle classes rather than the happy lives of rural people. Unlike urban life, which was portrayed as rational and modern, rural life was associated with anarchy<sup>4</sup> and mysticism. Only one film from that era portrays rural people in a positive light: *Rembulan dan Matahari* (Moon and sun) (1980), directed by Slamet Rahardjo. This film centers rural people as protagonists and shows them successfully managing their communities and lives without the intervention of the urban upper classes. Members of the urban middle class<sup>17</sup> are allowed to live and earn money in the village as equal members of society but not as superiors.

It can be concluded that there is a contestation of discourse on the origin of poverty and its relation to the dynamics of rural-urban life. The dominant narrative insists that poverty is destiny and must be accepted, not a result of policies or structural inequalities. To sustain this dominant discourse, poverty is often associated with the irrationality and mysticism of rural life, while rationality and modernity are ascribed exclusively to urban settings. This results in the systemic marginalization of rural issues, especially rural poverty. Even though post-New Order social studies have emerged, class analysis has not yet received much attention in contemporary Indonesian film studies. This study begins to fill that gap.

### Structural Poverty

This paper assumes that poverty is a structural problem, not a natural one, that results from an imbalance in the distribution of wealth or national resources by the state. The unequal distribution of wealth produces extremes of wealth and poverty. The phenomenon of material inequality is referred to as social injustice and persists in Indonesia. As stated earlier, according to Statistics Indonesia (2020), the disparity between the rich and the poor remains high, with the Gini ratio reaching 0.38 by the end of 2019. This means that the fifth precept of Pancasila—social justice for all Indonesian people—has not been fully realized. Democracy apparently cannot guarantee an equitable distribution of wealth. Democracy opens the field of political contestation to anyone interested in competing,



but this includes the oligarchy and large corporations, which wield disproportionate power and use it to protect their own wealth and resources. Jeffrey Winters (2011, 11–18) identifies five kinds of power resources: political rights, official positions, coercive power, mobilizational power, and material power. The oligarchy has a stranglehold on all of these and has thus effectively hijacked electoral democracy and converted it to “low-intensity democracy,” “criminal democracy” (Winters 2011), or “dysfunctional democracy” (Fukuoka and Djani 2016).

This “criminal” or “dysfunctional” democracy is nurtured by a global context defined by the dominance of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism positions the nation-state as a field of contestation to realize free market agendas. Thus, the state apparatus must be controlled by free market agencies so that market interests continue to operate. Under neoliberalism, market agendas often contradict the agendas set by the state constitution. This has happened in Indonesia and throughout much of the Third World. Commercialization and privatization of public goods have occurred in almost every sector. Natural resources that should be available to the public have become private commercial commodities. In practice, neoliberalism benefits only conglomerates that have succeeded in employing political power to continuously increase their wealth. This has burdened Indonesia with one of the highest levels of economic inequality in the world, behind Russia, India, and Thailand. A survey conducted by Credit Suisse shows that 1 percent of the population of Indonesia controls 49.3 percent of the national wealth (Withnall 2016). As a result, the ranks of the poor and “precariously” lower middle class continue to grow.

### *Gendered Poverty*

The problem of poverty cannot be separated from the problem of gender injustice. Patriarchy marginalizes women not only socially but also economically. Women constitute 70 percent of the world’s poor, and research suggests that this percentage will continue to rise (Chant 2010). Efforts to eradicate poverty therefore cannot be separated from efforts to address the problem of gender injustice. Further studies on poverty and gender will be integral to any movement aimed at achieving a fair and equal redistribution of global wealth for both men and women.

One of the important books on gender and poverty is *The International Handbook of Gender and Poverty: Concepts, Research, Policy* (Chant 2010). It contains 104 articles discussing issues of gender and poverty in countries around the world, from the Global North to the Global South. Although the volume does not include Indonesia, some theoretical reflections, especially from the countries of the Global South, can help establish a foundation for analyzing gendered poverty in Indonesia. The most relevant articles are those that discuss gendered poverty in the context of dysfunctional democracy, neo-

liberalism, and oligarchy. These studies reveal that gender issues are not only about women and that poverty issues are not only about income.

One of the articles discusses gendered poverty, feminization of poverty, and labor justice for women in the context of neoliberal developmentalism in the Global South (Lind 2010). In this, Amy Lind argues that there are at least three main areas of concern to research on gender and neoliberalism:

first, the effects of neoliberal reforms on women's work and daily lives, including their volunteer labor; second, the "engendering" of macroeconomic development models; and third, the political and material consequences of women's participation in processes of neoliberal development. The large bulk of the literature focuses on linking macrolevel analyses of global economic restructuring with the microlevel and mesolevel effects on households and communities or nations, respectively. (Lind 2010, 649)

Many studies on poverty and gender have highlighted the failure of "empowerment" programs promoted by advocates of neoliberal developmentalism. Instead of reducing women's burden, these programs actually tend to increase women's workload so that they fail to lift themselves out of poverty. In practice, "empowerment" programs only perpetuate heteronormativity and compound women's domestic workloads with mandates to perform additional industrial labor.

In the Indonesian context, Angelina Ika Rahutami and Shandy J. Matitaputty (2017) point out that women suffer a systemic lack of access to work, education, and health care. Poor women in particular tend to bear much heavier burdens. In poor families, girls are usually considered the lowest priority for educational opportunities. Women often are not allowed to work outside their homes. Even those who are allowed to do so tend to remain confined to low-paying domestic labor in other families' homes. As a result, poor women are less likely to escape vicious cycles of poverty. This is known as the feminization of poverty. Even though poverty alleviation policies are often hampered by persistent patriarchal structures, gendered poverty has, to date, received little serious attention from the architects of these programs. Policy makers must increase their collaboration across specializations and coordinate poverty alleviation efforts with those aimed at tackling gendered injustices. Only with an active orientation toward gender justice can the fight against poverty and social inequality be effectively waged.

#### *The Interpellation of Ideological State Apparatuses*

The persistence of structural and gendered poverty reveals a fundamental irony of democracy. In the name of equality and justice, Indonesia's oligarchic hegemony has been perpetuating injustice for two decades since the Reformation. Even with the open flow of information, people remain powerless to address the structural inequalities occur-

ring before their eyes. According to Louis Althusser (1971, 174–175), “interpellation” is the process by which ideologies become embodied by ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) and repressive state apparatuses (RSAs). ISAs and RSAs, in turn, produce individual subjects’ identities through the relational process of “hailing” them in social interactions. Althusser identifies the following RSAs: the government, administration, army, police, courts, and prisons. These institutions use violence, enacted or merely threatened, to shape the behavior of the citizenry. For instance, Indonesians have been systematically discouraged from expressing criticism of ruling institutions in the public sphere, including social media, by laws such as the Electronic Information and Transactions Law, under which critics of the status quo can face imprisonment. Althusser also identifies several ISAs, including the religious, educational, family, legal, political, trade unions, communications, and cultural. Through these ideological apparatuses, Indonesians are interpellated, or hailed, to participate in discourses that situate social inequality as normal and natural, even inevitable—not an arbitrary product of neoliberalism. Thus, the persistence of poverty must be accepted as destiny or the will of God. Most Indonesians develop little political awareness because, from an early age, they are hailed to accept poverty and the discourses that naturalize it. Thinking critically about structural poverty, moreover, tends to be considered a waste of time.

This theory of interpellation was developed by Althusser because with the advent of the Internet and neoliberal globalization, the RSAs lost much of the efficacy they once had to control the thoughts and actions of the masses. The use of force, too, is increasingly receding from the modern public sphere, while methods of controlling the masses through ideological infiltration are widely considered more strategic and effective. As a result, the oligarchy and their corporate backers have focused on controlling the major state apparatuses, particularly the ideological apparatuses, so that the problem of poverty receives little attention.

## Methodology

This article employs descriptive-qualitative research and applies a textual approach by analyzing the films *Turah* and *Siti* as texts, focusing on visual, auditory, and narrative elements such as characters, physical settings, scenes, plots, and sounds in order to examine their discursive treatment of rural poverty. The dialogue (sentences) and actions of the characters in the films serve as the data, while *Turah* and *Siti* are treated as case studies. This method requires the researcher to focus on selected aspects of meaning in relation to a larger research question. In this study, the data analysis is



focused on the depiction of structural and gendered poverty in the two films, and the results of this analysis are correlated with secondary data on rural poverty in Indonesia.

## Discussion

Both *Turah* and *Siti* are set in rural Indonesia after the New Order. *Turah* is set in a poor kampung in Tegal, while *Siti* is set in a poor fishing village in Parangtritis, Yogyakarta. Tegal is part of Central Java Province, which has the highest rate of poverty on Java island (Dicky and Tri 2013), while Parangtritis is part of Yogyakarta Province, another area with high rural poverty. These two settings provide distinct social contexts in which to analyze the common issue of rural poverty.<sup>3)</sup>

### *Situating Poverty as a Public Issue*

From the outset, *Turah* situates poverty as a public issue. This sets it apart from most Indonesian films, which tend to portray poverty as a matter of personal misfortune (Ekky 2019, xxviii). *Turah* opens with the announcement of the death of a citizen in Tirang village, a community living on public land that should be under the government's stewardship but instead is controlled by the oligarch Darso family. Through his "kindness," Darso allows people to live in the kampung, but only if they work in one of the businesses owned by his family. As a result, poor citizens are reduced to cash cows, bolstering Darso's personal wealth and often dying young from overwork and inadequate access to health care and other public services. Under this oligarchic regime, the cycle of poverty in Kampung Tirang cannot end.

Early in the film, dialogue highlights the issue of structural poverty. Turah and his wife, Kanti, discuss a boy, Slamet, who has just died and been buried that afternoon. While they are making love, Turah finds himself plagued by thoughts of the deceased boy and initiates the following exchange:

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3) It is also worth noting that both films use the characters' mother tongues as the primary language of conversation. *Turah* uses Tegal-Javanese, and *Siti* uses Yogya-Javanese. Indonesian, the national language, is rarely heard in conversation. This is typical of post-New Order films and distinguishes them from the cinema of the New Order. New Order films were usually produced in Jakarta, though they might be set in other parts of Indonesia. Post-New Order cinema is decentralized, with local languages becoming the dominant media of film production as production houses have been founded in various outlying regions. This in turn helps make these films accessible to audiences outside Jakarta, including those directly impacted by the issues depicted onscreen. That said, only two industrial studios exist outside of Jakarta: in Yogyakarta and Makassar. Smaller cities such as Purbalingga, Tegal, Solo, Cilacap, Kebumen, etc., host only independent production houses.



Turah: Slamet . . .

Kanti: Yes. . . . This morning the pain was getting worse, the fever was getting higher. Not going down. Then this afternoon his mother just wanted to cross [the river] to take him to the doctor, but it was too late.

Slamet died only because his parents did not have enough money to take him to a doctor. Turah then recalls Slamet being scolded by his father for asking him to buy a kite. His father did not want to buy the kite because their family had no money.

The second exchange between Turah and Kanti centers on his desire for children and her refusal to have them:

Turah: Soon we will grow old, then die. No one knows if it will be me or you who dies first. If there are no children, one of us will be alone with no offspring to be proud of. If I die first, do you want to remarry, Ti?

Kanti: Mas . . . You always ask me questions that I do not need to answer. But yes, Mas, I understand what you mean. . . . You also understand, I do not want to have children who live like we do now. Do you want to bury your own child, Mas?

For Kanti, growing old without children seems preferable to having children who, due to their socioeconomic circumstances, will either die young or grow up and live out their lives in miserable conditions.

The third dialogue takes place between Jadag and his wife, Rum, and illustrates how poverty is experienced by their family. Jadag and his wife are in the midst of a very serious conflict, caused mainly by their economic problems. Jadag attributes their poverty to Darso and Pikel, Darso's assistant, whom he envies. This makes him irritable, and he takes out his anger on his wife:

Jadag: You just need to cook, clean the house, take care of the kids, accept money, and have sex. That is all, no need to take care of my work!

Rum: Are you "Mardiyah's grandson"?<sup>4)</sup> Why don't you have so much wealth?! What do you want to cook if you do not have money to buy food? Hah? Every day you get drunk and gamble; someone has reported you play with women! Your child is still young. Are you not ashamed? Where is your sense of responsibility?

The dialogue above highlights two things. First, Jadag is a traditional, patriarchal Javanese man. He considers his wife a *konco wingking* (domestic householder) woman whose only duty is to take care of domestic chores and who must not interfere in her husband's affairs.

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4) Mardiyah is a cultural figure in Tegal, an extremely wealthy woman with unlimited resources. When someone is called "grandson of Mardiyah" or "son of Mardiyah," it suggests that person has inherited wealth.

Rum does not explicitly object to being relegated to the status of *konco wingking*. However, she cannot tolerate Jadag's irresponsible behavior, especially with their first child, Roji, about to enter elementary school and their second soon to be born. She criticizes the symptom—her husband's poor behavior—but fails to identify the disease—the convergence of structural poverty and patriarchal norms. Meanwhile, although Jadag's bad behavior cannot be justified, his criticism of Darso and Pakel's oligarchic power is still worth considering, for the latter two are the oligarchs who have engineered the villagers' poverty. These frustrations, initially articulated in only the private, domestic realm, eventually lead to rebellion against Darso's power in the public sphere.

The above exchanges situate structural poverty as a problem that may manifest and be articulated mainly in domestic spaces but whose solutions can be found only in the public sphere. At home, Turah cannot even focus on making love to his wife, instead obsessing over the negative effects that poverty is having on their community. Jadag, meanwhile, initially uses his poverty as an excuse to treat his family poorly; but as the film goes on he eventually channels his suffering into more critical behavior, bringing together the people of Kampung Tirang and launching a rebellion.

#### Questioning Structural Poverty

Poverty produces a state of learned helplessness in most of the residents of Kampung Tirang. Lacking autonomy, the villagers depend on Darso's goodwill and follow all the rules that he establishes to govern their lives. On the other hand, the government (both executive and legislative) is depicted as completely absent from their social lives, except in the form of census officers who only carry out routine data collection. Besides these officers, no other representatives of the middle class appear in the film except for Pakel, who holds a bachelor's degree and becomes one of Darso's cronies and contributes to making the villagers' lives miserable. In the absence of an activist government or compassionate middle class, most citizens of Kampung Tirang come to see poverty as God's will—a condition that must be accepted, not one that has been engineered by humans and can therefore be challenged or changed.

As mentioned earlier, Winters (2011, 11–18) identifies five types <sup>5</sup> of power resources: political rights, official positions, coercive power, mobilizational power, and material power. Darso has monopolized at least three of these—material power, coercive power, and mobilizational power—and uses them to increase his wealth and fashion himself as a hero, a savior of the poor, allowing them to live on his family's land as long as they work in his businesses for very low wages. Most of the villagers, including the protagonists Turah and Kandar, accept Darso's rule as well as his heroic self-representation. Jadag is the only figure who dares to oppose him. The following dialogue between Turah and

Jadag illustrates the beginning of Jadag's rebellion:

Jadag: Do you get a big reward for your new position, Tur?

Turah: Enough, Dag.

Jadag: Enough to support two people?

Turah: I've spent very little of that money, Dag.

Jadag: I am stressed, Tur. Doing a lot of work with Darso is just like that, forever coolie. In fact, Pakel, who has only been working for three years, has become a person Darso trusts. He already has a house in the housing complex. People say it is because of his undergraduate degree.

This exchange is intriguing because when Turah says his wages are enough to support his family, what he means by "enough" remains open to interpretation. Is "enough" just enough to eat, drink, and fulfill his and his wife's most basic material needs? What about the need to buy land and build a house, prerequisites for self-sufficiency and most forms of public participation? Are Turah's wages enough to encourage him and Kanti to bring a child into the world, even with a life that is not messy? It seems that "enough," for a poor man like Turah, means enough only to eat and survive with his wife, without children. The concept of enough, in this instance, reflects the larger culture of the Javanese poor, who are resigned and accept the destiny that has been given by God without critically questioning the root of their poverty. Religion plays a role as an ideological state apparatus, shaping people's attitude toward poverty and conditioning them to accept the oligarch Darso's rule.

Meanwhile, Jadag begins to express an interest in rebellion. Unlike Turah, Jadag immediately challenges the accepted definition of "enough." Having worked for a dozen years without a raise or a promotion from the status of coolie, Jadag begins to compare himself to Pakel, who has become Darso's right-hand man after only three years of service. In this short time, Pakel has been able to buy a proper house in a housing complex, something inconceivable for Jadag and the other people of Kampung Tirang. Here, the issue of class conflict comes to the fore. The landless proletariat of Kampung Tirang grows ever more helpless, deprived of decent wages and bargaining power. Meanwhile, Pakel, who was originally landless but has a bachelor's degree, is able to leverage his social bargaining power and increase his wages. Pakel is the perfect portrait of the decadent middle class, using his scholarship to achieve upward mobility from landless and poor to a landed homeowner. His admission into the elite structure does nothing for the majority of the proletariat. On the contrary, he becomes an agent further propagating injustice and oppression. This reflects the acute problem of the decadence of the Indonesian middle class. Historically, this can be traced to the birth of the New Order, when all forms of social class-based politics were effectively eliminated. As we can see,



<sup>19</sup> after the decline of the New Order, the discourse of the Reformation era failed to reactivate class politics or revitalize the Indonesian middle class as a coherent, cohesive political subject. In fact, today's Indonesian middle class may best be understood as passive, fragmented masses controlled by, and fundamentally supportive of, the corporate oligarchy.

The issue of social injustice is reflected eloquently in Jadag's expressions of frustration toward Darso and his efforts to discuss social problems with his neighbors. From the perspective of power resources theory (Winters 2011), Jadag is attempting to obtain the only power resource<sup>5</sup> that remains available to exploit, namely, mobilizational power. The other four types of power resources—political rights, official positions, coercive power, and material power—remain out of reach, beyond his worldly vision. By trying to influence his neighbors to think more critically of Darso and cultivate their courage, Jadag seeks to mobilize them in order to achieve bargaining power or even overthrow the oligarch. This represents an attempted clash of social classes rooted in the resource struggle between the proletariat, championed by Jadag, and the capitalist Darso.

This attempted mass mobilization effort begins with Jadag talking to Turah, continues with him talking to Kandar, and peaks when he addresses the wider public, the people of Kampung Tirang. The issues raised by Jadag include the following: (1) unfair distribution of wages, (2) Darso's use of charity as an ideological apparatus to control the masses, and (3) the possible illegitimacy of Darso's claim to landownership. The first issue encompasses not only the unfair discrepancy in wages between Jadag and Pakel, discussed above, but also the unfair distribution of profits between the workers and Darso. Jadag cites as an example Kandar, who works raising Darso's goats. According to Jadag, the profit distribution from selling goats should be equal, since Darso contributes material capital and Kandar labor capital. Instead, Darso pockets the majority of the profits, while Kandar, who is also landless, gets only a small portion. Jadag urges Kandar to be more critical so that he has the courage to negotiate profits. This would elevate his bargaining power in front of Darso. Kandar counters by asking Jadag to accept what Darso has given him. For Kandar, it is natural and rational that the owner of capital should get a bigger share. From this, we know that people like Kandar consider capital to be limited to commodities and do not consider their labor a form of capital without which production would not have been possible.

Jadag: Kandar! Try to think now. Every day you work, feed the goats, bathe them, throw away the waste, but for every sale how much do you get? How much is the goat? And how much does Darso get? Yes, even though he did not do anything!

Kandar: Yes, it is reasonable, Dag. It is right. Darso is the one who gives the capital.

Jadag: What do you think is reasonable? You are the one who is wasting energy and time manag-



ing the goats. Why is Darso getting more money? . . . You should be aware, Ndar, be more critical! Do not be fooled by cunning people like Darso and Pakel!

After raising the issue of unfair wage distribution, Jadag continues his efforts to mobilize the masses by addressing more of his neighbors in public spaces. In this setting, he frames Darso's charity as the oligarch's ideological attempt to deceive and control the people of Kampung Tirang. Capitalists, as the dominant class, strive to control the worldview of the people by many means, both repressive and ideological. One of the ideological means is charity. As mentioned above, the process of taking control of these ideological tools is called interpellation (Althusser 1971). It is the embodiment process of ideology by which ISAs and RSAs come to constitute the very nature of individual subjects' identities through hailing them in social interactions. Through the ideological apparatus, the marginalized class is interpellated, or hailed, to participate in a particular discourse: in this case, that poverty is a normal manifestation of God's will. Such interpellation deactivates the public's political awareness by hailing them, from an early age, to accept all forms of poverty they encounter, and dismissing critical inquiries into structural poverty as a waste of time.

Before his neighbors, Jadag gives a speech about the deceitful nature of Darso's charity—but he receives only blank stares in return:

Brothers and sisters. Come out. Come closer. Jadag wants to talk. The money we all receive from Darso is not free money. No. Not even charity money. The money is your right, because you are already working. So it is a reward. Understood? But Pakel sold out. As if we are all begging for Darso. Fucker. That bastard Pakel. Who is Pakel? Who is he?

Instead of responding as Jadag hopes, his neighbors seem to infer that he is jealous and crazy because of his own poverty. Jadag's harsh words reveal how brutal life is for members of the lowest class, but they also echo serious criticisms of capitalism, though he does not speak in academic language:

I've worked for you a dozen years, but what are the results? Almost nothing. I do not even have a house. I am still renting. I cannot have my own house like Pakel! Even though Pakel was a newcomer, you gave him everything he wanted! And you know, everything Pakel has is what I want! Let my family live well! I should have more than Pakel!

As working-class laborers, Jadag and his fellow villagers have no other option but to play the game established and rigged by Darso. The capitalist maintains his wealth and power by establishing an economic system in which workers like Jadag, Turah, and Kandar have no opportunities to exit from their never-ending cycle of poverty. Darso accomplishes this by using several types of ideological apparatuses, such as the trade union, which

enforces a goat farming contract with Kandar that benefits Darso. He also uses the family and cultural apparatuses by distributing money, i.e., charity, to families throughout Kampung Tirang. In fact, this money is their own money, for they should have earned it working for Darso. Jadag argues that this money should be viewed as a form of wages strategically withheld, not kindness or charity.

Next, Jadag moves to attack something more fundamental, namely, the status of Kampung Tirang's land, which supposedly belongs to the Darso family. This time, he goes even further by delivering his criticism not only in front of the neighbors but also before Darso himself. He argues that the land in Kampung Tirang has never belonged to the Darso family and is instead supposed to be state property to be used for the benefit of the people, not privately owned by an individual enterprise. He articulates this view in the following excerpt: "Darso! This is not your family's land! And we are not your maids! Do not act like a hero, as if we cannot live without your help!"

Unlike Turah, who talks about this matter only in his home—or, more precisely, in his bedroom with his wife—Jadag, motivated by jealousy for Pakel, dares to bring up the issue in public, in front of the whole village. Jadag's oration identifies the root of the poverty that plagues him and his neighbors, namely, landlessness, homelessness, and dependence on the oligarch for employment and shelter. The dual problems of landlessness and homelessness cannot be separated from state policies related to the redistribution of state land first implemented during the Sukarno regime in the form of the 1960 Agrarian Reform Law. Dianto Bachriadi (2000) states that the law mandates four types of land can be redistributed to people who have none: (1) land that exceeds a certain maximum area, (2) land held by absentee landlords, (3) land (formerly) owned by traditional ruling families or courts (*swapraja*), and (4) state-controlled land. All land subject to reform is, in practice, first declared to be state-owned land before being redistributed. From this perspective, if Kampung Tirang's land can be categorized as state-owned land, then Jadag is on the right track in questioning Darso's claim to ownership. His claims echo thousands of land conflicts that have occurred throughout Indonesia. As noted by the Ministry of Agrarian Affairs and Spatial Planning/National Land Agency (ATR/BPN), by October 2020 nine thousand cases of land conflict had occurred in Indonesia (Ardiansyah 2020).

Jadag's public criticism of Darso disturbs the status quo and threatens the stability of Darso's businesses. The oligarch inflicts punishment not only on Jadag but also on all of the villagers: the electricity is cut off, and the water supply is stopped. Thus, Darso demonstrates his power using a repressive apparatus in the form of control over natural resources. Power over clean water and electricity can be categorized as belonging to the government and the administration because it is integral to the public interest.

As a result of his resistance, Jadag is ostracized by his neighbors and blamed for the absence of electricity and clean water. Nobody supports him or his criticism of Darso, and his social status rapidly deteriorates. He tries to escape by dreaming of winning the lottery. The climax occurs when his affair with Darso's wife, Ilah, receives news coverage and public attention. This threatens not only Darso's business but also the stability of his family. However, it is Jadag's wife and child who end up leaving him. Soon thereafter, a group of people enter Jadag's house at night, after which Jadag is found lifeless, hanging from a tree. Even though the film does not explicitly identify the killer, it can be inferred that Darso has once again deployed a repressive apparatus: violent means in the form of thugs or gangsters, which in Althusser's categorization are included under the army or police—the guardians of security and order established by the power of the capitalist. Darso's power and wealth, initially built on a foundation of ignorance among the residents of Kampung Tirang, persist even after that ignorance has been publicly challenged. Indeed, the challenger's execution is even tacitly sanctioned by his neighbors, demonstrating the power of ideology and the apparatuses that enforce it to sustain even miserable status quos.

*Turah*, with its dark story about rural poverty, breaks the myth of the harmonious Indonesian village. Ben White (2017), a rural sociologist, argues that this myth is not only demonstrably inaccurate but also harmful and dangerous, because it covers up the common practice of democracy being hijacked in the village by powerful local elites. This myth, which can be traced to the New Order, ascribes the Indonesian village attributes such as homogeneity and classlessness. Villagers are assumed to work together without conflict, guided by shared romantic values such as *gotong royong* (working together), *kekeluargaan* (family spirit), and *rukun* (harmony). However, many researchers have exposed counternarratives that tell of the importance of social and political divisions, hierarchies, tensions, and social conflicts within village communities.

This gloomy portrait of Indonesian rural poverty confirms the findings of previous research indicating that in the process of transition from authoritarianism to democratization, 1998 to the present, democracy has been hijacked by oligarchic interests (Robison and Hadiz 2004; Winters 2011; Fukuoka and Djani 2016). Public awareness is starting to increase, with popular discourses beginning to reframe poverty and social inequality as products of structural policies made by elites in the context of dysfunctional democracy and oligarchic capture of resources, not destiny. The growth of social media and independent films as alternative media plays a very important role in shaping public awareness of these issues, especially in a context where Indonesia's mainstream media has effectively been captured and repurposed by the oligarchs (Tapsell 2018). *Turah* represents part of a larger alternative media movement aimed at articulating the relationships



between rural poverty, structural poverty, and state policy in a space where the oligarchs do not have control.

### *Against the Godliness of Poverty*

*Turah* treats the gendered aspects of structural poverty very differently from *Siti*. All the women in *Turah*—including Kanti (*Turah*'s wife), Rum (*Jadag*'s wife), and Ilah (*Darso*'s wife)—are depicted as traditional housewives who take care of the household and remain financially and socially dependent on men. They are described as *konco wingking*, women whose only work is cooking and taking care of the home. They are also portrayed as completely submitting to their husbands. Unlike Kanti and Ilah, though, Rum eventually rebels against *Jadag*'s patriarchal power by leaving him alone and taking their two children. However, it remains unclear whether the filmmaker intends this to be interpreted as a righteous rejection of abusive gender norms on the one hand, or as simply one more aspect of *Jadag*'s unjust victimization on the other. Unlike *Turah*, *Siti* centers a woman who clearly realizes her agency over her own body and strives not only to survive but also to achieve more autonomy over her own life.

*Siti* opens in an illegal karaoke house, with a lady companion (LC) suddenly collapsing in the midst of a raid conducted by a police team. This woman is *Siti*, a 24-year-old mother of one son, whose fisherman husband suffered a stroke. Before his stroke, her husband took a debt of IDR 5 million to buy a boat. Because of their economic situation, *Siti* works as an LC and a karaoke guide. She is a typical poor Indonesian woman in a rural community: she has not graduated from high school; she got married and had children young, lives in a shack, has no regular income, and is burdened with debt. Unlike the poverty in *Turah*, which is represented as a public issue, the poverty in *Siti* is never discussed openly. In public spaces, the problem of structural poverty is never discussed at all.

The characters in *Siti* consider poverty to be God's will and see no point in discussing its worldly causes. This surrender to poverty is clearly articulated in a dialogue between *Siti* and her mother-in-law, *Darmi*, when they talk about their lives. When *Darmi* entreats *Siti* to "Be patient, Ti . . . God never sleeps," *Siti* responds with, "Yes Mom [in-law]. Maybe [God] is just having a picnic." *Darmi* explicitly attributes their material circumstances to God, and although *Siti* responds satirically, she does not challenge the premise directly. This dialogue shows how family and religion function as ISAs, playing a crucial role in interpellating the ideological discourse that frames poverty as God's prerogative. *Darmi*, a senior member of the family, cites God as their savior whose will should not be questioned, and thus imbues this perspective with her authority as an elder.

Unlike *Darmi*, *Siti* opposes this regime of knowledge. Because poverty is a human



problem, she believes, the solution to poverty must be achieved by humans themselves. She works hard as an LC to earn a living and repay her family's debts, suggesting that she sees only one way out of the cycle of poverty: individual effort and commodification of her voice and body. In the course of the film, she receives IDR 750,000 from Gatot, a policeman and customer with whom she is later obliged to carry on an affair, and IDR 250,000 from the karaoke boss, Sarko. The film thus endorses Siti's conception of poverty as a worldly problem with worldly solutions. Unfortunately, however, the solutions represented in this film do not involve addressing structural poverty through policy changes but instead come in the form of generosity, or charity, from other, wealthier parties.

### Against Gendered Poverty

References to structural poverty remain wholly absent from *Siti*, and in this context it makes sense for Siti to sell her body and voice at night and snacks during the day to increase her family's income. However, other structural problems interfere with her ability to implement this survival strategy. Her husband does not like her working as an LC and refuses to talk to her at all, adding to Siti's burden. In fact, Siti does not only work to earn a living but also works to take care of all the household needs, including cooking, washing, helping her children do their homework, and taking care of her disabled husband. In a conversation with her friend, Siti expresses anger toward her husband's attitude:

Siti's friend: And your husband? Is he still not talking to you?

Siti: Not a word since I've been working at the karaoke bar! He stopped talking. He is pissed. Whatever, it is just confusing. Actually, I am the one who should be angry, right?

Siti's friend: Then be angry! I'll pretend to be your husband, and you be mad at me, OK? Come on, spill it out!

Siti: Honey, why are you not talking to me? I am tired of being ignored! What do you think of me? It should be me who ignores you! You asshole!

From this exchange, we learn that although Siti cannot confront her husband directly, deep in her heart she realizes that she has more right to be angry than he does. It remains nearly impossible for her to speak openly in front of her patriarchal Javanese husband. However, even though her husband does not approve of her profession as an LC, she still takes this job because it is the only employment available that lets her earn money quickly. When faced with her husband's anger, she does not verbally challenge him but continues working as an LC.

This case study of poverty is consistent with research findings about gendered poverty in Indonesia, showing that Indonesian women tend to bear heavier burdens than

men (Angelina and Matitaputty 2017). According to Angelina and Matitaputty, Indonesian women spend 66 percent of their time working but receive only 10 percent of the income they should earn (Tjokrowinoto 1996, cited in Angelina and Matitaputty 2017). They also work 30 percent to 50 percent longer hours than men, even when controlling for age and forms of labor, both paid and unpaid (Cahyono 2005, cited in Angelina and Matitaputty 2017). On the other hand, Siti's affair with Gatot may be seen as her way of breaking free from patriarchal family ties and resisting her husband's power. Patriarchal marriage institutions are structured to fulfill the needs of men, often at the expense of women. For instance, if a wife suffers a stroke that results in an inability to fulfill her husband's sexual needs, the norms of patriarchal society tend to allow the husband to remarry in order to fulfill his needs. This is not the case when it is the husband who suffers a stroke. As a young woman, Siti certainly has her own sexual needs, but her husband cannot fulfill them because of his condition, and social norms do not permit her to seek fulfillment elsewhere. Nevertheless, she finds sexual fulfillment as well as financial support from Gatot in spite of the social and cultural norms that stigmatize her decision to do so.

One night, after finally getting the money to repay her husband's loan, she comes home drunk. Embracing her husband, the drunken Siti announces that she has got the money (IDR 5 million) and that she wants to separate from him. She also says that she has met another man, Gatot the policeman, who has asked her to marry him. Sarcastically, she asks her husband for permission. Surprisingly, her husband manages to speak, saying, "Just go, Siti!" Siti is shocked with the answer and shouts loudly, "You asshole!" She leaves her husband, gives the money to her mother-in-law, and departs to seek her freedom. Her actions resonate with the values of second-wave feminism, which demands women's freedom not only in domestic and professional contexts but also in regard to sexuality. All in all, the case study of Siti's life reveals that addressing the problem of poverty cannot, in practice, be separated from discussions of patriarchy, sexuality, and labor.

Unlike *Turah*, Siti does not attempt to situate poverty as a public issue. Although Siti objects to the idea of poverty as destiny, she seems to share a perspective with Turah and Kandar that poverty and the accompanying humiliation and stigma should be considered private issues to be resolved through individual action. Siti also lacks a public villain, like the oligarchs Darso and Pakel in *Turah*, who embodies the societal origins of the status quo. The appropriate response to poverty, it seems, according to Siti, is not to challenge its structural origins in public spaces or institutions, but rather to discuss and find solutions for the problems that poverty causes in private domestic spaces, particularly the bedroom. In Siti's case, the problem of poverty is compounded by her patriarchal husband's attitude. The shame and stigma that she, a woman working to alleviate her

poverty through sex work and other demeaning forms of labor, must bear—both in public and in the home—incentivize her to keep these efforts private; but this privacy, in turn, obscures the structural causes of her poverty and undermines the possibility of collective action. Here, we see how gendered poverty along with unacknowledged structural poverty doubles her burdens as a housewife and a working woman.

## Conclusion

*Turah* and *Siti* both portray rural Indonesian poverty, but each emphasizes a discrete aspect of the problem and each has its own blind spot. Using the character of Jadag as a discursive vehicle, *Turah* situates structural poverty as a public issue, identifies the mechanisms that produce and propagate it, and ascribes responsibility to the ruling class. While most characters, including Turah and Kandar, only discuss their poverty privately, Jadag calls a public forum, seeks to mobilize his neighbors, and even blames Darso and Pakel to their faces. Through Jadag, the film argues that poverty should be understood as a public issue because it derives not from God's immutable will but rather from socio-economic systems engineered by human beings. Effective resistance against such unjust systems requires mass mobilization. Although Jadag fails to effect such mobilization, and in fact gets murdered because of his efforts, this only underscores that resistance requires more than one committed opponent of a deeply rooted system, and any oligarch who inspires credible fear and ostracizes his outspoken critics has already won. *Turah* reflects the reality of daily life, where any sporadic resistance against the oligarchy will end in death or absolute defeat, making it less a Marxist call to arms and more a cautionary tale.

Unlike *Turah*, *Siti* does not present a character who brings the issue of poverty into the public sphere. Siti and Darmi seem to take their poverty for granted and do not consider it a topic worth discussing, let alone publicizing. This, in turn, explains why *Siti* does not face a public enemy, such as an oligarch, a corrupt politician, or a corporate overlord, as Jadag does in *Turah*. Siti and her mother are pragmatic enough to keep their heads down and avoid confrontation with such figures, even if this means forgoing any possibility of collective action. In this regard, Siti and Darmi, like Turah and Kandar, seem to represent the majority opinion on poverty. However, Siti breaks from the "commonsense" perspective, too, by rejecting divine explanations for poverty, treating it instead as a material problem with material solutions, albeit ones that she as an individual must pursue alone.

With no explicit mention of structural poverty, *Siti* focuses instead on the gendered aspects of poverty, in particular Siti's double burden of being her family's breadwinner



and, at the same time, a housewife socially confined to domestic spaces. Eventually, she decides to separate from her patriarchal husband and take another man as her partner. Her decision to leave her family in order to escape the cycle of poverty can be seen as an effective method of resistance for her as an individual, though it comes with high social costs and may not be easily scaled up and implemented at the societal level. From this analysis, we can conclude that both the problems of structural poverty and gendered poverty are interpellated continually by the family and the religious as part of ideological state apparatuses. Often they even reinforce each other, for attending to one may mean neglecting the other, allowing certain modes of poverty and oppression to persist even as others are resolved. Siti's pragmatism and Jadag's idealism may be difficult to reconcile in practice, and yet reconciling them seems necessary in order to tackle systemic poverty effectively and at the societal scale.

Accepted: October 28, 2021

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This work was supported by Universitas Jenderal Soedirman's research grant (Riset Institusi 2019).

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