

The Image of Syncretic Javanese Women in Digdo Irianto's Paintings

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Abstract

Through his paintings, Digdo Irianto unveils figures of Javanese women showing an expressive, bold and open face and body gestures. His imagination was based on a cultural change observed in Surakarta society which is heavily dominated by syncretic characteristics, evoking Javanese traditional cultures and modern culture. His conceptual imagination indicates his desire to put a woman in an honorable position where the body can be interpreted as a medium meant to sow and revive a dry soul following the presence of image embedded in modern life. Javanese women can synergize the spirit and essence of Javanese cultural values which uphold philosophical and practical, materialistic modern culture.

Keywords: Imagination, Javanese women, paintings, syncretic culture

1. Introduction

Female figures and the practice of paintings are closely related, because women usually draw the inspiration of painters in their paintings. Djien (2012: 256) drew a female figure as the most interesting subject matter throughout the development of art, since it possesses a lot of mysteries. Paintings that imagine women represent the community values as the main reason behind it where text and the socio-cultural context go hand in hand. Saidi (2008: 5) encourages an understanding of arts to acknowledge the existing socio-cultural aspects, placing them within the social and cultural framework. Paintings cannot be separated from its supporting community.

Surakarta has evolved and become a modern city that embraces the slogan of *Solo, the Spirit of Java*. Murtono (2013) explains that *Spirit of Java* represents the Javanese soul rather than the image it perceives. Besides, Solo can be interpreted as a modern city that continues to grow and develop based on distinctive Javanese cultural values as an identity of the city. Today's culture in Surakarta is syncretic, which is a mixture between Javanese culture and modern culture, as a response to the previous situation. Chizuwa (2014) states that teenagers' lifestyle in Surakarta has changed over the time due to the development of malls that encourage a consumptive culture as part of a modern lifestyle. The importance of malls as a center in shaping self-development and self-identity lies in its being a means of symbolic communication and personal meanings reaching the whole community.

As a painter, Digdo lives and works in Surakarta and intensely imagines and expresses Javanese women in today's cultural atmosphere. As part of Javanese society, Javanese women are open and closed. Sumardjo (2007: 329) asserts that Javanese society is open, closed and paradoxical

as well. Open because it accepts anything foreign to it, but closed because any foreign thing has to adapt with its cultural status quo. Thus, Javanese women are selective and accommodating to new cultures.

The exploration process conducted by Digdo in his paintings can be traced from his imagination and visualization of female figures in his paintings that have dynamic, open and bold images, far from passive and static images. The image of women that Digdo imagines is an attempt to put women back in their innate nature. Saadawi (2011: 143) emphasizes that the passive nature of women is not an inherent character since the society who imposed it. Depriving a woman of her positive nature is like taking away her responsibilities as a human being. Women are deeply uprooted from their inner core but what remains is their outside physical appearance.

As observed in Digdo's paintings, the imagination of Javanese woman demonstrates Digdo's subconscious. With regard to the importance of subconscious exploration in imagination, Ahmad (2017: 36) states that art is an indispensable tool to explore the subconscious, an opportunity to exploit the paint to be used as a medium for emotional expression. The artist automatically becomes a channel for transmitting emotions in the feelings poured into the painting. Marianto (2015: 145) affirms that a person creates art to represent his views through new expressions in thoughts and feelings. A painter does not just carve lines and paint on the canvas without careful consideration in the form of thoughts and feelings.

The imagination of the female body in paintings enhances the values of contemporary women as a medium for sowing cultural meaning. Raditya (2014) explains that artistic imagination is part of thoughts and taste. The body is produced as a series of texts that produce various unconventional, paradigmatic, eclectic, and irony meanings. Culturally speaking, Digdo's paintings is a means to education the public. According to Mustafa's (2009), art generates cultural benefits for the public, helps educate people, enriches cultures, brings prestige, and encourages cultural tolerance when the majority of the community is influenced by other cultures.

Based on context and actual facts, Digdo sees that women exist in our everyday life as it keeps to unfold. Women current lifestyle is increasingly diverse because of the freedom and capacity to choose the kind of lifestyle we want to uphold. In the contemporary imagination, Javanese women are present novelty and diversity. The visualization of female figures in paintings represents Digdo's view of Javanese women in a syncretic cultural atmosphere. The Javanese women of today are different from old ones, each based on the existing socio-cultural conditions of the community. The current woman in Surakarta cannot be separated from the spread of the world image. Pilliang (2003: 207) shares the view of Heidegger claiming that in contemporary society human existence is nothing more than an image that is sometimes ironic, prioritizing sign-free play and codes rather than truth, message and ideological meanings.

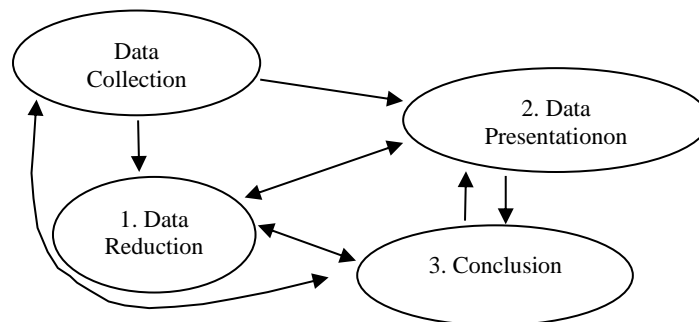
The kinds of images of Javanese women displayed paintings is the result of the reading, analysis and personal view of Digdo on life practices experienced by most women. The current context of socio-cultural life in Surakarta's places women in a syncretic cultural field. Women never cease to fight facing life conditions in order to become independent, open, critical and selective in accordance with their current era.

Based on this description, the research problem would be 1) what factors motivate Digdo Irianto to imagine Javanese women's body in his paintings? 2) What conceptual basis underlies Digdo Irianto in choosing the imagination of Javanese women's body as bold, open, and critical imagery in paintings?

2. Research Methods

This research was conducted in Tegalgi, Nogosari, Boyolali, Surakarta, Indonesia, from April to August 2020. It is a qualitative descriptive study using critical social approach. Ratna (2010: 58) states that critical theory in cultural studies gives intensity to subjectivity based on social, local and specific experiences, various realities that cannot be generalized, the relationship between subject and object as one unit. The findings of this study are relative, subjective, bearing no universal meaning. Based on Ida's point of view (2011: 133), this research site was set in the production area, unveiling the creation of visual images. Things that were explored include: who made the image, why was it made, what are the contextual basis of the image. The data sources include a) informants, Akhmad Ramdhon as Surakarta socio-cultural expert, Fadjar Sutardi as Surakarta painting expert; b) places and events, in the form of painting studios, painting activities; and c) archives or documents, in the form of painting photos, photo exhibitions and catalog exhibition. Based on the view of Sutopo (2002: 55), the sampling technique uses purposive sampling, selecting informants who are considered to know the information and their problems to become a solid data source.

The data collection technique uses a) ordinary observation, the researcher is not involved in an emotional relationship with the perpetrator who is the target of the research, b) in-depth interviews, typically resembling conversations compared to formally structured interviews, c) analysis of the contents of documents / archives. The data validity technique used source triangulation and informant reviews. The analysis technique uses an interactive model, consisting of three components, namely: data reduction, data presentation and conclusion drawing.



Scheme 1: Interactive Analysis Model (Miles and Huberman, 1984 in Rohidi)

3. Results and Discussion

a. Digdo's Background in Displaying the Javanese Women in his Paintings

Surakarta, which is located in Central Java, is one of the cities that has become the center of the Javanese cultural development. Digdo was born in Klaten but currently lives and works in Tegalgi, Nogosari, Boyolali, an area located northwest of Surakarta. Surakarta today is different from the Surakarta in the past, because the culture practiced today is syncretic, which is a marriage between traditional Javanese cultures and modern cultures from the Western countries. Due to globalization, syncretic culture does not only occur in Indonesia, but also in all parts of the world. Monda (2015: 69) asserts that syncretic tendencies in multi-cultural and multi-religious environments also occur in metropolitan India.

The life of Digdo is embedded with syncretic culture which shaped his views on everyday experiences. In fact, painting is an indispensable activity which can be used to express personal

daily experiences in order to explore new life values. Fariás (2011: 440) emphasizes that everyday aesthetics in art are relatively new. Everyone may have aesthetic experiences as observed from daily activities and from the appreciation of the objects s/he encounters. Contemporary art explores anything that may look ordinary using a new approach. Digdo uses the syncretic cultures as a new approach that intersects with the dimensions of humanism and divinity.

Javanese women in Surakarta as syncretic cultural actors are influenced by a modern lifestyle that celebrates physical sensuality. Adlin (2006: 225) affirms that the body is the source of desire, sensuality, image, self-esteem, and fame. The body has to be taken care of so that it plays an important role in imagery field. Abdullah (2002: 75) asserts that within the consumers' culture, the body has to be reconstructed and presented with care and conforms to the expected image.



Figure 1. Nyawiji / Acrylic on Canvas / 140 x 180 cm / 2016

Digdo imagines a brave and open modern Javanese woman based on the spirit of autonomous artistic creativity. This image that distinguishes traditional Javanese women, dares to free herself from the shackles of traditional Javanese cultural values that have been burdening her. Awuy (2003: 99) emphasizes that body construction comes from a patriarchal culture supported by a certain spirit of religiosity which requires women to be submissive, feminine, passive and able to objectify. Digdo builds the image of a Javanese woman who break away from patriarchal culture by introducing human values in it. In general, the values observed in men and women are interchangeable. Nugroho (2008: 7) claims that the traits inherent in men and women are socially and culturally shaped. Usually, women are known to be gentle, beautiful, emotional, motherly, while men are considered as strong, rational, manly, and mighty. The characteristics of that nature are interchangeable. Such effort strives to thwart hegemony by rejecting the affirmative lifestyle of a consumerist society. Adian (2006: 30) considers such effort as an interpellation process, not necessarily as a passive subject but active subject in producing cultures that identifies dominant cultures.

Digdo respects women and makes them life energy, and the viewpoint regarding the body sensuality keeps going. Strinati (2016: 226) affirms that women's body as cultural objects has diverse images, mutually growing over time. Digdo's opinion on female body sensuality is not trapped in the material that makes it like a billboard. Digdo's painting on women are not merely advertisements since it embraces love, affection which upholds divine values, and not trapped in the domination of consumers' culture. There are diverse kinds of lifestyles perceived in society,

where some are against consumerism while others choose different paths such as spirituality in order to get satisfaction that does not originate from material things.

The expression of a naked woman's body is based on the view that all creatures created by Allah are beautiful, that does not need additional accessories to enhance its beauty. This view is a form of response to the demand that painters should be able to bring up alternative attitudes and views that are different from general public as a form of creativity. Audifax (2006: 92) emphasizes that in contemporary culture, lifestyle possesses varied alternatives implying its resistance against mainstream culture and differentiation in conformity with the follow of cultural mainstream by building up self-identity which differs from others. Digdo's painting rests between the two in order to fabricate his identity.

For Digdo, Javanese woman never cease to maintain her own identity, who is selective and critical for current cultural values. Besides, women possess new actual and contextual values with the spirit of the times. Digdo started to raise his concept on Javanese women due to external factors based on modern lifestyle practices that lead into practical and materialistic life. Other than that, another internal factor urged him to reflect on the latest women's lifestyle practices by visualizing Javanese women as brave, open, and independent.

b. Digdo's Conceptual Foundation in Imagining Women

As painter, Digdo hopes to enlighten the society through his paintings since for him, arts provide responses to our society, as expressed by Soetrisno (2006:86) claiming that art is a creative expression of the artist's response to life within his community. It is hoped that through his paintings, Digdo can provide enlightenment for the community to see life not only from material values but also from a beautiful and creative humanitarian side.

Enlightenment is conduct to display an image of a woman who is brave, open and critical when encountering the today's life context in Surakarta which always continues to change. Also, Digdo chose such artistic path as manifestation of self-reliance by always defending his choice when encountering cultural mainstream. His self-reliance concept is expressed in his choice to interpret female body within the human and divine dimensions.

Digdo has a solid foundation when imagining women for amidst the rising demand for public open space that raise awareness to the general public regarding the essence of true image of women displayed within the context of human values. For him, women are not objects but subjects that hold the same position as men. When it comes to virtual body, Mohanty (2017: 328) emphasizes that women use cyberspace for personal activities in a socio-anthropological perspective. Cyber feminism is used to thwart male domination that is accepted in Indonesia. Similarly, through his paintings, Digdo wants to express that women and men have a complete self-authority.

Javanese women retain their own identity and possess the exact same values as men. Digdo realizes that civilization is continuing and that the figure of female represents the spiritual image of all times. The shape of female body that discloses physical beauty transform into a more essential and philosophical form. Spirit places women in human and divine perspective, so that women are part of nature in a macrocosm. Such transformation is indispensable as Zimmerman (2011:173) expressed that feminist aesthetics about nature in the current era of ecological crisis very necessary. Feminist aesthetics require the role of the subject that unveils the context perpetrated by the painter.

Digdo tried to find his own aesthetic language, based on a personal interpretation that leads to Javanese spirituality. Spiritual art is defined as an expression of the artist's personal interpretation of the values between humans and God. Sabana (2018: 239) affirms that contemporary Indonesian art works carry spiritual values in various forms and characteristics due to the plurality of religious life. Digdo presents the Javanese women spirituality in his search for their artistic identity. Dasgupta (2011: 651) said that identity is complex and complicated when connecting it with nation and sexuality. India's sexual identity was founded based on the perception of tradition, modernity, colonization and globalization that often contradict one another. Similarly, Indonesia, through Digdo's paintings produce such plurality of existing cultures which encourages him to seek and find his artistic identity based on the spirit of local Javanese cultural values that still exist today.



Figure 2. Love Is You / Acrylic on Canvas / 140 x 180 cm / 2016

Women are usually visualized naked, her body visibly seen from the side, facing backwards, not showing more details, disguising the vital organs, with more focus on hand, facial, hair, and buttocks expression. Digdo's sensuality expresses a physical charm wrapped in Javanese spirituality which has an exotic and aesthetic impression. His creative imagination is spontaneous, uncontrollable but flows according to the inner mood. Such visualization of women sheds light on a shift in visuals and images, indicating that women have their own identity, value and image which keeps change based on the existing cultural changes.



Figure 3. Plane / Acrylic on Canvas / 560 x 180 cm / 2017

Moreover, his imagination represents the spirit of poststructuralist feminism, as stated by Prabasmoro (2006: 219) that constant identities and categories are problematic, women are markers of changing meanings. Subjects are built and placed based on certain ideas and discourses. Women are expressed as indicators within a changing era.

Digdo observed myriads of images in women that represent the dynamics of syncretic cultural practices in Surakarta. Women have become subjects who keep producing new cultural values that enrich the cultural journey in Surakarta. Based on a synchronic perspective, every period basically produces a new culture different from the previous one. In this context, Digdo is seen as an agent of change, because his paintings often produce new women's values from the results of thoughts based on syncretic culture in Surakarta.

The woman that Digdo imagined embraces human, divine, microcosm, macrocosm and dimensions. Modern culture traps women in a materialistic lifestyle and practically alienates the soul from the body. Digdo revives the soul, so that the body can express itself and exist. Women are placed as part of society which provides space for their identity. In the end, women are able to free themselves from the pressure of traditional cultural values, so that they can be independent, open and critical, both as social beings and as God's creatures.

4. Conclusion

The main reason behind Digdo's imagination of Javanese women was influenced by external factors impacted by modern lifestyle practices that lead to practical and materialistic life. Besides, his background was also influenced by internal factors encouraging him to reflect on lifestyle practices that make the female body as a medium for imaging and sensuality seen as brave, open and independent. The major concept of Digdo's imagination of female body in hope to give women an honorable position that embraces both human and divine nature, so that they are not trapped into material values alone. The body of a woman is considered as a medium meant to sow and revive the dry soul in this modern era. Syncretic Javanese women can free themselves in finding their own identity by synergizing the spirit of philosophical Javanese cultural values, practical and materialistic modern cultures.

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