



## THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN'S PORTRAYAL, POSITION, AND CHANCE IN ASIAN LITERATURE

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### Abstract

Defining Asian literature is always problematic, whether the terminology covers the literary work written by Asians, about Asian or by Asians about Asian(s). Regarding the issue, the women's position in defining Asian literature is even more problematic since women are considered secondary to men and cultural dominance themes. This paper aims at giving a contribution to what to add in defining Asian literature through the advancement of women's portrayal, position, and chance in three different female writers. The objects of the review are *Ami Tan's The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *Ayu Utami's Saman* published in 1998 and translated by Pamela Allen in 2005, *Balzac's My Journey from Paris to Java* (2010). This study found that there is an advancement in the women's portrayal, position, and chance in Asia which are reflected in the three literary works. This advancement confirms the significance of women in representing Asia in the literary works as well as becoming its distinctiveness.

## INTRODUCTION

Defining Asian Literature (ALE) is always problematic. There are lots of categories that can be put under the term. The problem with Asian Literature that this paper aims to uncover is about the definition of ALE, especially regarding the barrier that the term can occupy. People may think that ALE is the literary work talking about Asia, or written by Asians or even more specific, is defined as literary works where Asians are telling about Asia(n). Since there is no clear definition of the terminology, all these assumptions about ALE can be applied to the richness and vast understanding of Asia as one big cultural unity and as the vastest continent.

This paper aims at giving a contribution to defining Asian Literature, particularly regarding women's position in this theme. This article argues that women's position in Asian Literature becomes its differentiating factor from Western Literature. This paper takes three works as materials to be discussed to represent the picture of Asia in three various background of the writer and type of writing. The chosen literary works are [Ami Tan's \*The Joy Luck Club\* \(1989\)](#), [Ayu Utami's \*Saman\* published in 1998](#) and translated by Pamela Allen in 2005, [Balzac's \*My Journey from Paris to Java\* \(2010\)](#). First, Balzac's *My Journey from Paris to Java* (2010) is chosen due to its focus on how women in Java (Asia) are portrayed through the orientalist European man's perspective. Although the novel is written based on Balzac's imagination about Asian women since he never went out of Paris ([Balzac, 2010](#)), the novel gives a picture of how European men imagined Asian women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Second, [Ami Tan's \*The Joy Luck Club\* \(1989\)](#) represents the Asian immigrant who is trapped in the Western culture while struggling to preserve her Eastern culture while convincing the eastern culture to her daughter. Her position as a hybrid character, Asian immigrant who depicts Asian women, is highlighted in the selection of her work in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Lastly, [Ayu Utami's \*Saman\*](#) provides a portrayal of Asian women through an urban Asian woman's point of view. The novel is an Asian talking about Asia, the people, and its culture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Besides the background of the writer, the time captured in the literary works is a significant point to consider as well. Balzac's *My Journey from Paris to Java* is an 18<sup>th</sup>-century portrayal of Asian women; Ami Tan gives the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Asia woman's depiction, and Ayu Utami provides a late 20<sup>th</sup>-century Asian woman in her novel.

This paper wants to add the significance of women and their portrayal in the selected literary works. The discussion about women is always placed secondary to men or cultures, although, in Eastern culture/ Asian culture, women do have an integral part of society. This

paper aims at investigating the gradation of women in Asia in how they are portrayed, their position in society, and the chance they have depicted in three different works of literature written by authors that have a different time and socio-cultural background.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Honoré de Balzac, Ami Tan, and Ayu Utami are the author that I choose as the representative authors to dig up the woman's representation in the literary works. Balzac is chosen because of its vivid and ancient representation (or imagination) about a Javanese girl in *My Journey from Paris to Java*. The work was originally written in 1829 and ceased to be published in 1970 (translated into English in 2010). How Balzac posits Javanese woman in the novel is a typical Orientalist gaze toward the Eastern/Asian woman. In Ami Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), the depiction of women, especially the mother-daughter relationship, is foregrounded about the struggle of Chinese born mother and American born daughter striving for their life both in China and America. Tan's position in this novel is the American born daughter, who originally writes her book in English. What is investigated here is the way she perceives and portrays Asian culture within a hybrid cultural background. The third author is chosen because of her concern in presenting modern women's perspective toward the oppressive patriarchal culture and her social-realism portrayal against the oppressive Soeharto's regime. What makes it more different from other woman writers is her depiction, which some critics consider too vulgar and open for eastern culture.

In this discussion, I want to examine the commonality or difference in the portrayal of women, their position in society, and the chance to promote the significance of women in defining Asian literature in three selected novels. It is interesting because those three novels are set in a different time, place, and authorial background. This investigation wants to highlight the significance of woman position as one topic in defining Asian literature. The position of women in Asian Literature is different because it contributes to how the West perceived/ perceives Asia. It contributes to giving a different notion of struggles within the family, and it illustrates how women move forward from an oppressive patriarchal culture, to start a movement.

## DISCUSSIONS OF MAIN THEMES

### Portrayal of Woman

Balzac starts the story with his amazement for Java as a wonderful island through two depictions, land and woman. Although the depiction of Java's land is also significant in this

novel, the discussion will only focus on her portrayal of a woman. Woman in Balzac's depiction is captured more on their physical attractiveness. His portrayal is more on the physical appearance and woman's desire for European man and the comparison with the dangerous/ sublime animal which serve their orientalist perspective of Other in comparison to European (men) Self. They are seen as more interesting than women in Paris. Nevertheless, the main reason behind this assumption is the imagination of Javanese women as having a more challenging characteristic than women in Paris. Besides, the measure used for depicting the physical beauty of Javanese women is also by European standard, that is the whiteness.

“In Paris, you live as you wish: playing, loving, drinking as you please—and boredom with it all sets in very past. But in Java, death is in the air. It hovers around you in the smile of a woman, in a glance, in a fascinating gesture, in the undulations of a dress” (Balzac, 2010).

The quote compares Javanese women to Paris women. In Paris, everyday life is filled with freedom. People are free to do anything. Java, then, is seen as a different place where the more beautiful and, at the same time, more dangerous women are living. Nevertheless, the “beauty” of Javanese women is measured by using the “whiteness” of European women.

“Women there are as white and smooth as the finest vellum; no shade of color touches their complexion; their lips are pale; their ears and their nostrils—all are white; only their fine black eyebrows and their brown eyes contrast with this bizarre pallor. Their hair is wonderfully luxuriant and just by shaking it, they can seem hidden under a pavilion impenetrable to the most ardent gaze—and this veil falls to the ground on all sides. This precious ornament, of which they are unbelievably proud, is the object of the most meticulous care.” (Balzac, 2010)

Besides, the portrayal of dress and jewelry used by Javanese women is based on the aristocratic measures. It is referred to as the rich Javanese women, while Javanese women of the lower or middle classes are depicted as “quite ugly” and merely serving these rich women. These rich women are compared to a beautiful animal (gazelle) or “sublime animal.” “Although Parisiennes think and are witty, an oriental woman is a sublime animal” (Balzac, 2010).

Balzac's has never been to Java before. The story is inspired by the travel done by his friend, an honorary Commissioner of Ordnance, Monsieur Grand-Besançon, in 1831, which is a botanist that just come back from his 1829-1830 travel to Java (Langguth, 2012). Andrew Watts (2008) commented Balzac himself is more interested in the Other's world like Africa or Asia rather than the well-established Paris at that time. He adds that Paris is boring and not challenging to be explored, but he had never get the chance to leave the city, which becomes the reason why he imagined a lot. Based on this fact (written in the afterword of the novel), it

is seen that Balzac's depiction of Javanese women cannot be seen as a historical fact. Still, it is his imagination built upon his orientalist perspective of desired Asian women. Balzac's depiction of the woman in Java or Asia then is limited in his Orientalist point of view, which seen Asian women as a sublime animal that is physically beautiful, dangerous, full of desire, and exotic.

In contrast to what Balzac pictured in his novel, *Ami Tan* focused more on the family ties and struggles experienced by immigrant mothers with their American born daughters. The story works around the warmness of their club, how they support each other, and how they share their stories before they migrate to America, especially when they deal with their oppressive patriarchal Chinese culture. Besides, the story also tells about how their American born daughters face a different situation and cultural input from the American community and the frictions they have with their Chinese parents about the American culture they adopt.

In one of the stories, *Lindo Jong* narrates her experience of being in the position of Chinese women within the family, which should follow what has been decided to her. She experienced an unhappy arranged marriage with a man from a wealthy family. As [Williany and Turuk \(2019\)](#) discussed in their paper, Lindo's first entrance to "Huang's huge house, [made] Lindo realized Huang was of a much better position than her family. Lindo wasn't welcomed well. Instead, Huang ushered her to go to the kitchen, a place for cooks and servants. Lindo knew her standing.... Lindo was forced to learn to be an obedient wife." However, the depiction does not stop there. The story is actually about the struggle of young Lindo to manage her way out of the oppressive family. Here is the moment of young Lindo puts herself together and becomes the turning point of the story,

"After a while, I didn't think it was a terrible life, no, not really. What was happier than seeing everybody gobble down the shiny mushrooms and bamboo shoots I had helped to prepare that day? How much happier could I be after seeing Tyan-yu eat a whole bowl of noodles without once complaining about its taste or looks? Can you see how the Huangs almost washed their thinking into my skin? I came to think of Tyan-yu as a god, someone whose opinions were worth much more than my own life. I came to think of Huang Taitai as my real mother, someone I wanted to please, someone I should follow without question." (Tan, 1989))

The point of this story is that finally, young Lindo successfully managed her way out from the family and migrated to America.

Besides the story about the life of the mothers before they migrated to America, the life of their American born daughters was also being highlighted. As [Huiqin Guo \(2018\)](#) clustered in her paper that the second biggest concern in this specific Tan's novel is how the daughters negotiate their American culture absorbed from their society to their Chinese

family. One of Guo's elaborations of the daughters' marriage is about Waverly, Lindo's daughter. She has a daughter, Shoshana, from her first marriage with Marvin, who shows no duty and care to the family with laziness at his young age, and then she is engaged to her boyfriend, Rich Schields. Rich loves Waverly and Shoshana freely and deeply enough. Still, he does not make sense of the Chinese traditional culture, so there is some awkward time in her family dinner, such as it needs some soy sauce to advise the delicious food made by Waverly's mother but do not understand what modesty means in Chinese communication (Tan, 1989). Guo concluded from the story that "just because of Rich's impolite behaviors, Waverly already knew what Lindo would do, how she would attack Rich, how she would criticize him. Waverly has never known love is so pure before meeting Rich, and she was afraid that it would become sullied by her mother" (Guo, 2018).

To continue Guo's interpretation of the story in the original text, Waverly also says that "I wondered if perhaps my mother had poisoned my marriage" (Tan, 1989). From the quotation and Guo's interpretation of the passage, it is depicted that there is a strong bond of family there. How they care one to another in their way, how a mother-daughter bond is built, and there is cultural preservation there at the same time (Hays, 2017). One important point is that all these stories are shared in the Joy Luck Club while playing mahjong.

Moving forward to the more recent era, translating Ayu Utami's masterpiece *Saman* is one of the challenging duties for Pamela Allen. *Saman* was written in 1998 and translated into English in 2005. The work is controversial because of, according to some critics, the theme it explores and the way Utami exposes some narration vulgarly (Libriani, Candraningrum, & Setyabudi, 2015). The portrayals of women in *Saman* are different from the previous novels discussed above. The women are pictured as a strong figure, a decision-maker, rebellious, open-minded, unconventional, and active. While in the two previous novels, women are objectified and portrayed as the victim of the oppressive culture, *Saman* foregrounds the women's agency in taking the initiative in deciding for themselves and in criticizing the oppressive culture/regime.

Libriani et al. (2015) also commented that *Saman* gives women a voice to speak up for themselves against the oppressive patriarchal culture. The work exposes the direct challenge to the constructed culture, which sees (woman's) virginity as something sacred and sex as something taboo to be publicly discussed. Due to this concern, the portrayal of the women represented by four women as the main character of the novel is focused on their sexual life and how they challenge the oppressive culture with their own ideas and way of life.

The main characters of the story are Saman, Laila, Shakuntala, Cok, and Yasmin. As it is elaborated above that the story depicts open-minded women who are boldly exposing their sexual life in the notion of criticizing it. One significant point in the story is when Shakuntala tells how she loses her virginity, how she gives it to the ogre, and how she values virginity.

“My name is Shakuntala. My father and my sister call me a whore because I’ve slept with a number of men and a number of women (even though I’ve never asked them to pay). My sister and my father don’t respect me. I don’t respect them.” (*Saman*, 1998:118)

“When I was nine I was not a virgin. People didn’t consider a girl who didn’t yet have breasts to be a virgin. But there was something I was keeping secret from my parents” (*Saman*, 1998:123)

“When my parents discovered that I was going out with an ogre from the forest, they gave me their second piece of advice. Virginity is a woman’s gift to her husband. And virginity is like a nose: once you lose it, it can’t be replaced. So you must never give it away before you get married, because then you will be damaged goods. But the day before I was sent to this foreign place I made a decision. I would give my virginity to my lover the ogre.” (*Saman*, 1998: 124)

From the three quotations above, it is already clear how Utami portrays women in the narrative. The vulgar depiction is not only applied to Shakuntala but all four women characters. Another proof is when Utami depicts Laila, the most innocent one in the group, which has a desire for the married man. When Laila is in the park waiting for the man, she says “I’m going to be embraced, I’m going to be kissed, we’ll walk, we’ll drink tea in the Russian Tea Room a few blocks away to the southwest. A bit expensive, but what the hell. It will be just this once (*Saman*, 1998). Through Laila’s case, the novel wants to show the reality that happens in daily life, but people tend to look away from it. This is a form of criticism for both virginity concepts, which is strictly put over women and social reality that people tend to look away. [Mulyani \(2017\)](#), in her thesis, also highlighted that virginity in *Saman* is not something taboo. *Saman*, she said, presents the other side of the concept, which tends to curb and intimidate women into being something common and not special (Mulyani). This argument confirms the goals of *Saman*, which are to criticize and challenge the oppressive patriarchal status quo.

In this first part of the analysis, it can be seen that the portrayal of women is changed over time. It is also different in the eyes of the non-Asian author, Asian immigrant, and the local Asian author. The depictions of women in these three novels show the advancement of how women are portrayed in literary work, I argue. The focus of the depiction is gradually changed. In Balzac’s novel, the portrayal is limited to physical beauty. In Tan’s novel, their

struggle in the family is put forward in the narrative. Lastly, in Utami's *Saman*, the focus of the depiction is her attempt to criticize the culture and start a movement.

### **Position and Chance of Woman in Society**

This part examines the role of women in society in the selected novels. The women's role will affect their position, how they are perceived, and later how they perform within the society. After examining how their portrayal has advanced in the previous subchapter, women's position in society is affected by the portrayal. The argument is that, just like the previous subchapter, the position of women in society has advanced.

*My Journey from Paris to Java* reveals how women are objectified and exoticized by Balzac. His focus on women's body and desire represents his interest in Javanese women. In his novel, the position of Javanese women is seen as an object of amazement, the sexual object for European men, and a representation of the exotic nature of Java. Javanese women are depicted as physically beautiful and dangerous, which makes them more interesting than the women in Paris, as elaborated previously. However, that depiction was made to serve European men's desire to own and make them their concubine.

Javanese women are assumed to regard European men as higher than men from other races. They are depicted as unfaithful women who are easy to forget their late (local) husband. Nevertheless, even if they are rich women, they need European men. It means that European men in the eyes of Javanese women are more appreciated than local Javanese men. Some of the sentences in the story can indicate this statement, such as "Accept as a principle that Javanese women are mad about European men"; "Most of the women are rich and, many of them, widows. Soon after arriving, a European can make a marriage as rich as any he dreamt of during his long, cold nights back home."; "Javanese women consume many European men."; and "Javanese women never weep over the man they bury—having worshipped him more than God; they just forget all about him." (Balzac, 2010)

Besides, Javanese women are also assumed to regard European men as their treasure, as something very precious. They are inclined to be very jealous if their European men are taken by other women. This characteristic makes Javanese women more interesting or more challenging than European women to the point they are comparable to a vampire. In the narration, it is said that "[there is] the fearful warning written on the foreheads of these ladies who have almost been married five or six times and have been widowed five or six times. What is there more tempting for an artist than a struggle with these pale, frail, delicate vampires?" (Balzac, 2010).



In the story, there is no indication that the woman can fight back. However, Javanese woman is also depicted as a dangerous woman who is experienced in poisoning their European husband. The situation is portrayed under the circumstances that the Javanese woman is jealous.

“... the fair sex in Java was inclined to be very jealous. He attributes the sudden deaths of many European men to the revenge of Javanese women, who, he says, are highly accomplished in the preparation of certain poisoned beverages.... There, where love is so deadly, so rare, every woman must guard her treasure like a miser.” (Balzac, 2010)

In the quotation above, it is seen that there is no woman agency. Women's voice is portrayed through Balzac narration. This condition does not allow women to have a chance to fight back or at least protest against the oppressive white European men. Women are passive and earn no chance in society.

In contrast, Tan's depiction of the position of women indicates an active struggle of women in Asian society. In Lindo's story explained above, it is depicted that she attempts to fight back or at least escape from the oppressive family. In another story in the novel also, the American born daughter of the Rose Hsu Jordan fights her husband, Ted, who wants to divorce her. She struggles for the position of the house by hiring a good lawyer in the court and finally wins the case just for maintaining her life (Guo, 2018). In another daughter's case, Lena St. Clair, she struggles to manage an equal salary for her and her husband since there are running the same company. She demands the same salary in their company as well as the equal distribution of the household needs (Guo, 2018).

Most of the stories in Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* represent the struggle of the mother and daughter in that club. In Tan's depiction, women are still portrayed as secondary to men. Their position is complementary, cannot decide for themselves, and less capable of running the life on their own. However, in the novel, Tan succeeded in promoting the struggle of women as a form of resistance that is simple but very crucial, I argue. In this novel, women have the chance to fight back, and they take it, by daring to get out of the unhappy marriage life, challenging the oppressive husband, pursuing their salary and equal household needs. The fact that their position in the society as immigrant mothers and part of the club does not weaken their struggle. Those situations work altogether to strengthen their struggle, to strengthen their mother-daughter relationship, and to preserve their club as their support system.

The third one is about the women's position and role in *Saman*. Aziz (2017), in his discussion about Pamela Allen's translation of *Saman*, commented that the domestication of cultural-specific terminology is dominant rather than foreignization. He adds that the

intention is to make the target reader easier to understand the plot of the story rather than transfer the cultural detail that is also embedded in the story. Utami's *Saman* gives a prominent portion of women's position and role in society by criticizing the constructed patriarchal culture at the same time. The presentation of the jobs and their sexual life indicate Utami's presumption that women and men are essentially equal in role and chance in society. It is also confirmed by Libriani et al. in their paper,

“Yasmin is Saman's friend. Yasmin is also a smart woman. She works as a lawyer in her father's firm, Joshua Moningka, and Partners. Yasmin is attracted to Saman, and she decides to have virtual sex with Saman, although Saman does not know how to make her satisfied. Shakuntala is Yasmin's friend. She has a great talent. She likes dancing very much, so she is given a scholarship by the Asian Cultural Center to explore dance in New York for a couple of years. Cok is also Yasmin's friend. She is a businesswoman. She is interested in hotel management and continues her mother's business. Cok helps to smuggle Saman out from Medan. Laila is Yasmin's friend too. Laila works as a photographer. She falls in love with Sihar, an already-married oil rig worker.” (2015)

As it is elaborated in the introduction, Utami's attempt to criticize the oppressive patriarchal culture and to promote equal rights and role for women have been the primary concerns of this novel. Women are not merely the object of the men's desire like in Balzac's or marginalized in the society like in Tan's. Utami gives women the agency to make an initial movement to challenge the oppressive culture, not only run away from it. *Saman* promotes the challenge from the root of the oppressive culture, which is the mindset of the people. It tries to reconstruct people's minds by deconstructing the constructed/ common cultural values.

## CONCLUSION

This paper wants to show the significance of women in Asian literature, especially in defining it. Women who are commonly portrayed secondary to men or culture are considered complementary to civilization. This notion in society, especially in the literary world, should be revised. Women do give a crucial role in Asia. Starts with the presentation of their exoticism in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by Balzac, it is seen that how Asian was first seen because of the women. Despite natural resources were also primary in that period, comparing to men and culture, women were one of the elements of European admiration for Asian peoples. This admiration can be traced through Balzac's *My Journey from Paris to Java*. Moving forward to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ami Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* presents Asian women in more than their physical appearance but in their struggle against the oppressive patriarchal culture. The portrayal of Asian women has advanced and even more advanced in Utami's *Saman*, which gives a chance for women to criticize and challenge the oppressive culture.

The portrayal, position, and chance of women in Asia advanced hand in hand. It indicates that the literary world should consider Asian women writers as one of the particular significant elements in literary studies because women contribute significantly to the development of Asia. The advancement of the portrayal, position, and chance represents how Asia grows as one big community as well. It captured the development of Asian civilization with its richness and uniqueness from a different perspective and with all its distinctiveness of each culture, which I argue is significant and not complementary to men and culture.

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