Romance magazines, television soap operas and young Indonesian women

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What is the relationship between contemporary social practices of courtship and marriage, young women as social actors, and popular cultural texts favoured by young Indonesian women? The analysis presented here is drawn from data including popular magazines and television soap operas (*sinetron* and *telenovela*) as well as some short compositions on 'love' written by young Indonesian women in English supplemented by fieldwork notes made in Bali in 1999. In their engagement with girls' magazines, with *sinetron*, and *telenovela*, the young Indonesian women observed in fieldwork were not passive dupes (Ang 1985, 135), but agentic subjects (Smith 1999). They engaged with the media discourse of romance through the same social practices that defined their involvement with the rest of everyday life (see Silverstone 1994; Fiske 1996; Golding & Murdock 1996). As McRobbie pointed out in 1991, young female readers of romance texts in popular magazines, as positioned heroines of the narrative, can derive meanings for their experiences as girls through the categories on offer (see also Walkerdine 1990). Since popular culture is a key aspect of the construction of subjectivity for young people (Furlong & Cartmel 1997; Best & Kellner 1998) we can assume that young women do look to the media discourse of romance in the entrepreneurial spirit of 'seeking information' (Currie 1997, 463) about appropriate social practices for flirting and courtship. Popular media texts aimed at women have been read by feminist observers in a number of different and useful ways. The reading offered in this paper is intended to contribute to the rich stock of analyses of media and femininity, rather than to refute any other possible reading.

· Of course the textual discourse of romantic love is not new in Indonesia. The lineage of texts stretches far back in time, across a range of traditional literary, performance and visual genres (for example the Panji stories, the Jayaprana legend in Bali). However, modern marriages are no longer arranged, and young women now generally manage the choice of marriage partner for themselves. In the era of media 'saturation' it can be argued that the wealth of material in Indonesian popular media relevant to romance can prove a resource, although this is certainly not the only way of reading these texts. Talking to well-educated young women in Bali in 1999, their main life-goal seemed to be a judiciously-made 'free-choice' marriage which was acceptable to their families. This was seen to offer not only financial security, but legitimate social status, egalitarian companionship, co-parenting and some degree of personal autonomy. However, they acknowledged that the pathway to this goal was paved with hazards and risks. Those still seeking a *pacar* (boyfriend) expressed concern over appearance — they wanted to look attractive and modern but not too attractive and modern, certainly not sexually provocative. Those who were dating someone expressed concern over whether he was right for her to marry. The popular romance media texts discussed below are analysed to show how they might help in managing risks of this kind through their constant presentation of criteria which might determine an attractive appearance, and through the equally relentless adjudication of qualities in suitable and unsuitable potential marriage partners. The short pieces of prose included in the discussion below were written by ten young Balinese, Madurese and Javanese women in a tertiary level English language class which I taught in Indonesia in late 1999. The topic was 'love', at their request. Their writing articulated idealistic discourses of romantic love and free choice marriage, similar in theme to those that characterised the media texts also analysed here. My intention is not to argue that that the media texts, the pieces written by the young women, and the observed social practices of young Indonesian women around romance, are causally related, but to demonstrate the intense circulation of the discourse of romantic love in contemporary Indonesian life for well-educated

young women. Discourse is certainly 'not limited to the text' (Smith 1988, 40). The major contrast with the equally ubiquitous discourse of romantic love in the West is the strength of the link to marriage in the Indonesian texts and social practices. For example, research carried out more than a decade ago with young women in Australia implied romance was enjoyed for its own sake and for short-term pleasure, rather than tightly tied to a marriage outcome (Nilan 1991).

Young women and marriage in Indonesia

Although the age of marriage rose sharply for both sexes in all regions during the New Order period in Indonesia (Jones 2001, 77), marriage still remains a pre-eminent signifier of social status in Indonesia. Motherhood (the 'natural' outcome of marriage) still defines full adulthood for women (Blackburn 2001a). Divorce happens rarely and single people tend to suffer socially. Women, in particular are shamed by divorce or single status, since the traditional role of women is very much to carry, in an embodied way, kinship relations and family honour in the next generation. However, the business of marriage has become a much more individualised matter than previously and the discourse of romantic love is pre-eminent in the social practice of courtship. This trend is noted in Sulawesi:

> In a community where marriage was once a family affair, the arrangement of a marriage by two families taking account of the need to establish a harmonious and economically viable household, the young *are now in the grip of a desire for free choice marriage based on romantic love*. The arranged marriages of their parents were based on a presumption that sexual passion followed the conclusion of the arranged marriage, rather than passion serving as the 'spark'. The young are able to able to exercise their choice because (due to economic changes) the old no longer control the resources necessary to conclude a marriage (Robinson 2000, 158, my emphasis).

The young women I was teaching in Bali in 1999 were around twenty years old, well-educated, heading into jobs in the public service, or the white-collar section of the tourist industry. They controlled their own resources in the sense that Robinson

implies above, yet they were very much 'in love' with the idea of romantic love (see Soucy 2001), as the following excerpt from Dwia's composition indicates. At the time Dwia did not have a boyfriend.

> Love makes a happy marriage. A happy marriage is not based on property, but is based on understanding and love for each other. Love can prevent anything that makes marriages dissolve (Dwia, 20 years).

Dwia's composition implies a couple of different kinds of marriage risk: unhappiness caused by marrying for financial gain, and 'things' that make marriages dissolve. When asked for an example of the latter, she replied *masalah keluarga* (family problems) — meaning the family was not happy with the choice of partner. In the past, marriage was a social and economic contract between groups of people (families or clans), rather than a private bond between two people, so this risk would not have been so high. Now, however, risk management in the matter of courtship has been distributed away from extended families and clans, and is perceived as 'risk' at the level of individuals (see Beck 1992). Young people effectively 'arrange' their own marriages and have to make their own critical life choices, so responsibility for these decisions has devolved down until it rests primarily on the judgement and conscience of the two individuals involved. This is why they can be described as modern entrepreneurial individuals dealing with risk in the sense intended by Beck (2000). For example, in the Balinese context, it has been noted that wealth 'seems to play as important a part as, if not more important than, kin ties in securing the approval of parents' (Hobart 1995, 135). Hobart's phrasing here suggests both the entrepreneurial role of the young person 'tendering' for marriage, and the importance of a perceived 'profit' to be had from marriage, as well as pleasing the parents. Contemporary marriage still remains a contract (see Oakley 1972) involving the families of marriage partners in Indonesia, even though they may not be much involved at the seeking and courting stage. Marriage remains a contract for the production of the next generation, for the division of labour, and for the achievement and maintenance of social status — for all

parties, including extended family.

The status of a woman in marriage can generally be considered equivalent (in the sense of Southeast Asian bilateralism — see Karim 1995) to that of the man, according to the national marriage law of Indonesia (Blackburn 2001b, 276, see also Robinson 2001, 30). However, in Bali, the application of law at a regional and religious level tends to support the workings of the patrilineal system, which benefits the male partner in many ways (see Rubin 1975). Because customary cultural laws and conventions (*adat*) fill specially designated gaps in the national marriage law, legal marriage almost anywhere in Indonesia tends to reinforce the structural lower status of women compared to men (Ariani and Nilan 1998). Nevertheless, the status of an unmarried or divorced woman is so highly stigmatised that for most it is better to be married than not. A 'good' marriage with a solid and reliable partner ensures a 'safe' future for the woman, approval of family and kin, the guarantee of a number of quantifiable outcomes regarding children, wealth and housing, security for old age, and the minimising of all kinds of personal and social risks. Conversely, a 'bad' marriage risks personal unhappiness (see Wikan 1990), shame, dishonour to family and kin, debt, forced removal of one's children (especially in Bali), poverty and homelessness. The stakes are very high for girls, and good second chances are hard to find (see Hagul 1998, 391). As Robinson implies, contemporary urban individuals at the 'tendering' stage for marriage no longer have the automatic formal protection and entrepreneurship skills of larger constituencies (family and kinship groups) behind them. Instead, they must become entrepreneurial in their own right, and effectively manage for themselves the 'risk' of bad marriage, by a well-informed choice of partner. Past traditions of female 'honour' remain. Courtship risks include the possibility of sexual exploitation, and public humiliation. 'When we talk about risks, we argue over something which is not the case, but which might come to pass' (Beck 2000, 100, emphasis in original). When a girl is 'dumped' during a romance, if it has been widely perceived as 'serious' then she may be regarded as 'damaged goods' (see Jennaway 1996). It is therefore wise on the part of girls to deal with this risk

by seeking out as much relevant information and advice as possible when devising courtship strategies and making important decisions about a future marriage partner. While friends and female relative are obvious sources, media texts also play an important part in a highly media-literate society like Indonesia.

Girls' magazines as a source of information for dating and romance

The twentieth century in Indonesia has seen the gradual and often disputed emergence of 'modern' ideas about marriage (Blackburn & Bessell 1997) and married life. Such shifts in attitude have come about in response to wider social and cultural change, particularly urbanisation, expanded education and employment opportunities for women (Mariyah 1995), lower fertility rates (Jones 2001), increased literacy, and movements for social reform. Since the age of marriage has risen, the period of 'flirting and courting' now starts earlier and lasts longer. The look and style of young women signifies now not only their value in the courting scene, but also signals their operative capability as entrepreneurs arranging their own marriages. Some of the compositions on love authored by my tertiary students invoked typical social practices associated with courtship. For example, Sri wrote:

> If someone falls in love, she will be daydreaming every day. She will imagine that she will be married and be together forever. She will try to get more attention from her lover. She begins to wear make-up and is always in a good dress. She likes to stand in front of the mirror for hours. She will try to look stunning and beautiful in front of her lover (Sri, 20 years).

The young woman is pictured alone here, actively working on herself and the nascent romance — using a set of social practices which match those articulated in Indonesian girls' magazines.

The two Indonesian girls' magazines discussed most fully below are *Gadis* (Young Girl) and *Anita*, but *Kawanku* (My Friend) and *Aneka* (Variety) are also mentioned. All four are commercially produced in Jakarta and distributed for sale throughout Indonesia. For example, *Anita* was launched by the Cemerlang Publishing

Group in 1986. It features advertising of clothes and cosmetics, fashion shoots, information on Indonesian and Western pop singers and film stars (all in colour printing). The central part of the magazine (in black and white) is a set of love stories apparently written by young readers of *Anita*, although there is no way of verifying this. *Gadis* has also been around since 1986 and is published by Gaya Favorit Press in Jakarta. It is also widely distributed in Indonesia. The contents are similar to *Anita*, but *Gadis* includes quizzes, makeovers and advice columns. It has fewer love stories. Indonesian girls' magazines are popular. Friends, sisters and cousins hand the magazines on and down so that their coverage is eventually very wide. They are filled with images of idealised young women (pale-skinned, with large, wide eyes) living modern lives. Pages of advertisements and photo-shoots push brand-name products. Indonesian girls' magazines depict young women involved in 'highly conspicuous participation in decadent consumption activities' (see Kinsella 1995, 249). They typically feature the latest fashion trends from the West, and popular music icons, both local and global, but as Christian-Smith (1990, 9) points out, such magazines somehow manage to imply these as 'essential to the romantic possibilities for young female readers'. It is curious that although Indonesia is a strongly Muslim country there are rarely any images of veiled young women in Muslim dress in the magazines, despite the increasing popularity of this trend among middle-class young Muslim women (see Nagata 1995). The clothing depicted in girls' magazines is often revealing and the poses are provocative. However, standards of female modesty are required of most young women in Indonesia, whether veiled or not. As indicated above the well-educated young women in Bali wanted to look attractive, but not instantly sexually available:

> Only 'good' girls... are likely to attract a mate. For a girl to be thought of as 'good' entails her attending to two sets of cultural codes: conforming with ideals of modesty as conveyed through the semiotics of dress-styles and the acting out of meek styles of behaviour (Jennaway 1996, 244).

It is unlikely though, that the readers of *Anita*, especially in villages

throughout Indonesia, ignore the fashion shoots and advertising because the text and images do not match up with the cultural norms that surround them. It is more likely that the images and captions represent fantasy or even escape. They may even be read as an indication of how not to appear in current or future courting situations. It is likely though, that they will be read as somehow embedded in the overall discourse of romance promoted by the magazine, as Christian-Smith (1990, 9) argues. Indonesia is not the only country in which the prevalence of the textually-mediated discourse of romance gives cause for comment. Writing of Vietnam, Soucy (2001, 33) describes how the 'cult of love' in magazines and TV programs contributes to continued gender inequality, and that 'romance and representations of romantic love' are the media images most often directed towards young, unmarried women (ibid., 39).

Like the Vietnamese examples, Indonesian girls' magazines certainly repeat themselves endlessly on the theme of romance, and where it is not stated, it is implied. For example, in one issue of *Aneka* there were two full pages of Lux advertisements, variously headed:

> I want to try everything new
> There are so many new passions
> All the many kinds of happiness and passion must be tested
> Temptations to enjoyment

There followed a useful two page feature on boys who are 'not good for you', featuring pictures of boys with long hair, wearing black T-shirts. Some 'bad boy' types listed were: intolerant, promiscuous, the egoist, the alcoholic. The next page of advertisement for Converse All Star runners featured a girl and boy embracing. Lyrics of love songs followed. Most of the magazine consisted of short romance fiction with the following evocative titles:

> There is No Word for 'Return'
> When You Left
> Say You're Jealous
> A Coverboy Model's Diary
> To Fight the Wind
> A Letter in a Pink Envelope

Let Love Go
Going Home
To the Limit
Morning Call
Not the End of Everything
Love Express

The stories were all about romance and making critical choices. The unrelenting march of fictional love triumphs and disappointments was briefly interrupted by a quiz entitled:

Does Your Boyfriend Really Love You?

The magazine closed with another three stories:

A Little Bit of Hope for Lana
Because of the Way you Looked at Me
Love to the 7th Sky

The stories are usually set in a middle-class milieu, and the names are often Western-like, sometimes Sanskrit-derived, but almost never Arabic/Islamic. These love stories should be understood as social texts; 'which attempt to narrow and finalize the range of meanings that social actors can attribute to their actions' (Currie 1997, 461). Plots foreclose possibilities as much as they offer them. The narratives offer stereotyped moralistic messages to the young reader. They are often sad or tragic. Young men are not what they seem and girls are fooled by them. A young woman gives in to sexual advances, her fiance abandons her, and her family is shamed.

Determining a first serious boyfriend constitutes a major personal liability in Indonesia where the 'double standard' for women is still a strong aspect of culture. The texts composed by my tertiary students in Bali showed awareness of the delicate negotiations involved in both showing interest, yet remaining suitably modest.

Can't sleep well and always think about him. Sometimes one can have strong feelings about someone but is afraid to tell him about their feelings (Ayu, 20 years).

This is treacherous territory because the girl who expresses interest

in a boy is committing herself to a path of safeguarding her reputation while managing the courtship in a way that will eventually serve her interests. The question of the moral worth of the young man is a crucial one. Some level of physical intimacy is usually assumed to accompany a serious romantic relationship. Because of this:

> Should the relationship end, for whatever reason, she becomes indelibly stigmatised as second-hand or used, in a manner analogous to the stigmatisation of divorcees ... girls who are discarded by a previous suitor become progressively less attractive to prospective ones (Jennaway 1996, 256).

Therefore, girls need the correct criteria to evaluate eligible young men. Most of the romantic short stories in girls' magazines dealt either implicitly or explicitly with these criteria.

The romance fiction offered in girls' magazines and in television soap operas stands as a significant body of knowledge upon which girls might draw in negotiating their own 'flirting and courting' dilemmas. We could even argue that romance texts bear a pedagogic relationship to the social and cultural construction of gender. Lusted (1986) maintains that in a certain sense all 'texts' are pedagogical — bearing information, and personal/group identity references, through which viewers may position themselves as subjects within discourse (see also de Lauretis 1987; Davies 1989; Cranny-Francis 1990). Yet media texts also work at the libidinal level of fantasy and imagination (see for example Horrocks 1995; Walkerdine 1997). The following sections of discussion deal specifically with some examples from romance texts widely available in Indonesia to illustrate how they provide relevant information and ideas about romance, the presentation of the self in courting, and choice of partner.

Full Moon over Matotonan Village

In a story in *Anita*, Mae and Mateu grew up together in the same small village, and then shared a desk (and other things perhaps) during senior high school. After graduation, Mae went on to study at university in Bandung and Mateu returned to the village, dedicating

himself to the preservation of its cultural traditions, and became a
kerei. Mae returns to the village after five years as a member of a
geology research team.

> He looked like an ordinary guy, wearing cloth trousers and a black
> T-shirt. Only on his head he was wearing a crown made of bark and
> beads. He was a *kerei* ... Was this really Mateu? How quickly he had
> become a man. His body was so well developed (Baiduri 1999, 35).

Later, Mateu asks Mae to accompany him to the river bank behind
the house. She is embarrassed by his revealing loincloth. The full
moon is up over the river. They discuss matters of tradition and
modernity. Mateu reveals he is betrothed to the pretty girl back at the
house. Mae is heartbroken.

> Now I was really sick at heart. The burning pain of sadness ... Clear
> drops ran quickly down (Baiduri 1999, 36).

Mae ponders the relationship between Mateu and his betrothed.

> I don't know whether she knows there were ever relations between
> me and Mateu. As far as I could see, she seemed to admire me. She
> wasn't sophisticated. Mateu said himself, the girl did not suspect
> anything. There are girls who just stay in one place ... but then if
> you can complete primary school here you're lucky! (Baiduri, 1999,
> 36–7).

Symbolically, Mateu gives Mae a complete set of poisoned arrows as
a parting souvenir.

> Quickly I turned and went away. I didn't care that the other
> members of the team were staring, full of questions. ... They would
> never understand. My tears were for my full moon, which would
> always live in Matotonan (Baiduri 1999, 37).

This story offers some pointers on key aspects of romance
and marriage in a narrative of star-crossed lovers. Mae's rival
(Mateu's village fiancée) is traditional, 'unsophisticated' and poorly
educated. She will make the 'ideal' wife-partner for *kerei* Mateu,
assisting cultural preservation. Their marriage will benefit the whole

collectivity of Matotonan village. In contrast, the individualised personal relationship between Mae and Mateu is constituted entirely within the discourse of erotic/romantic love, but has no future. Eroticism/romance is linked to modernity and the formal contract of marriage is linked to the traditional past. For Mae, Mateu is not suitable as her marriage partner, nor she as his.

In a curious way, romantic love is often thwarted in these stories because of other problems in the courtship, the most common being incompatibility, treachery (often by another woman) or that the boy in question is not what he seems. Representations of the last problem were ubiquitous in popular romance texts, both print media and television.

Regarding the Nature of Ken

In a story in *Gadis*, we first meet the exquisitely-dressed Vira sitting in Hasanuddin Airport, Makassar, ready to fly to Jakarta to meet her boyfriend, Ken, whom she idolises.

> For a whole year she had been feeling the loss of her beloved. The essence of the pure-hearted prince, Ken (Simbar 2000, 86).

Ken is described in impossibly rapturous terms.

> Ken who was full of love. Always cheerful. Lively. Never complained about anything. Ken who was never rowdy with his classmates. Who never got into scuffles with his friends, or with anyone. Ken who always gave in to people. Ken who cried when other people cried, and laughed when other people laughed (Simbar 2000, 86).

Ken is not handsome:

> Ken was certainly not good-looking. He did not have an attractive nose. He did not have good bone structure. He did not have an athletic body (Simbar 2000, 86).

But this is really a plus, because he will probably be more faithful than a highly attractive young man.

Vira arrives in Jakarta and Ken is pleased to see her. But he smokes a cigarette. She is shocked. He drives very aggressively, swearing at other drivers and not excusing himself. She is outraged.

He has changed in the big city. 'One has to adapt', he tells her. Her
heart is broken. She gives him an ultimatum. She will go back to the
airport and wait. If he wants to become his old self again and be
reconciled, he can come and find her. If not, she is going home. She
jumps out and goes back to wait at the airport. Hours pass, but he
does not come. She buys a ticket and flies to Sulawesi, knowing she
will never see Ken again. The postscript informs the reader that Vira
will never know how Ken tried to come and see her, wanting to
change, but his aggressive driving on the way to the airport caused a
serious accident and he was taken to hospital. The readers are
reassured that even if she did know, it would make little difference.
Ken had failed the test.

The compositions of the tertiary students in Bali also included
acknowledgment of the need for men to 'prove' their love. For
example, Diana wrote:

> The behaviour of someone in love usually is to give more and more
> attention, with all his heart. Besides that, giving a present and a kiss.
> If you are sick or have a difficult problem, the other one must take
> note of your problem to prove that they are in love (Diana, 21
> years).

In the *Gadis* story Ken failed to 'prove' his love, in the same way
Diana implies here. Even though the initial list of his personal
qualities reads like a suitable suitor checklist, later, smoking, swearing
and driving aggressively effectively disqualify him from the potential
marriage stakes. In the big city Ken had developed several of the
characteristics of 'boys who are bad for you' — egotistical and
intolerant — listed in the *Aneka* article. This story at least partly
encodes a warning about men who do not remain consistent in
changed circumstances, men who are easily influenced and seduced
by big-city, modern, uncaring norms of behaviour.

Along very similar lines, *Gadis* directly addressed the matter
of boyfriends who might prove unsuitable by providing a list of
absolute criteria for terminating a romance:

rima

He doesn't really care about how he talks. He interrupts. He lies.
He thinks drugs are 'cool' while you abhor them.
He thinks it is possible to have more than one girlfriend.
He thinks it is great to be 'macho' while you think it is a waste of
energy.
He thinks you are not 'funky' because you have to observe an
evening curfew.
He thinks you are old-fashioned because you don't believe in 'free
sex'.

Gadis, however, also advised readers to 'never break it off in a hurry. You might regret it', and 'conflict with a boyfriend is not always bad. You and he can discuss it and get to know each other better after a fight.' Young women were encouraged in the latter part of this article to listen and try to understand him. Yet should it come to the final decision the girl must be firm; 'because of your strong religious values, you always walk a straight line'. Strong religious values are signalled as a moral property of the individual, but these cultural values are more accurately those of families and communities. In this way, young female readers are reminded of their obligation to maintain family honour through appropriate female behaviour within the parameters of pious conduct.

Discourses of romance and marriage in Indonesian soap operas: opera sabun

Television is a major source of information, entertainment and messages about lifestyle in Indonesia. By the time of fieldwork in 1999 even some of the poorest households in regional Indonesia had acquired a television set (see Hobart 1997; Sunindyo 1998, 247). On a typical government salary of about Rp.500,000 to Rp.800,000 a month, a television set was worth about two and a half months' salary. However, like the family motor-cycle, also a mandatory purchase, money for a TV is often borrowed from a bank or obtained some other source, such as relatives or *arisan* (local money-sharing collective). Obviously a second-hand TV is much cheaper, and very few sets are ever thrown away. There is a thriving back lane

trade in fixing and re-selling them. While it is a struggle for a very
poor family to buy even a second-hand black and white TV set,
sacrifices tend to be made to obtain one, since television has become
an integral part of family life, social life and private leisure in
Indonesia. While men, women and children all watch television, it
may be noted that Indonesia women watch a lot of TV, often in
groups, and often while doing something else (see Hobart 1999,
267). Favourite viewing is *opera sabun* (soap operas), although Indian
films ('Bollywood' musicals) are also popular.

Indonesian television soap operas are either locally-made
sinetron (sinema elektronik) or imported *telenovela*. *Sinetron* and *telenovela*
dominate prime daytime and early evening programming on
commercial television stations. Beilby and Harrington (2002)
maintain that *telenovela* from Latin America and Brazil 'are the most
exported television products in the world' (219). Dubbed into
Indonesian, *telenovela* have found great favour with Indonesian
viewers, dating from the time of the Latin American soap star Maria
Mercedes in the 1980s. *Sinetron* though are made in Indonesia. Over
40 per cent of Indonesian *sinetron* programs are controlled by a
single Jakarta production house, PT Tripar Multivision (Widodo
2002, 9). Widodo maintains that Indonesian *sinetron* 'copy imported
TV drama from India and Latin America' (ibid.). Several key
elements demonstrate their generic similarity. These include: a young
woman in a desperate situation, male wealth, a neglectful
suitor/husband, the 'bad' other man who threatens the central male-
female dyad, a range of powerful older women, both good and bad,
and often a child (or children) over whom an ownership struggle
rages ——who is sometimes not yet born. Another characteristic they
share, which differentiates them from Western soaps, is the absence
of explicit sexual material. Romance and intrigue are the central
themes (Nilan 2001, 96).

When discussing television in Indonesia ordinary Balinese
tend to be dismissive. Television-watching is described as just
'entertainment' *(iseng-iseng –* Vickers 1997, 6) or 'just an image' *(lawat*
– Hobart 1999, 281). Yet there is no doubting the popularity of
sinetron and *telenovela* for 'millions of Indonesians, especially women'

(Widodo 2002, 8). For example, the Brazilian *telenovela Rosalinda* on SCTV in 1999 was reported as gaining consistent ratings as high as 18 per cent (if television ratings are ever to be believed!). The serial apparently attracted strong following amongst some viewers. 'Each and every *telenovela* gains its own group of fanatical supporters' according to the SCTV public relations officer (*Nusa Tenggara* 1999a, 12, my translation). Indonesian analysts of *sinetron* have tended towards a pessimistic view. For example, the dominant depiction of women in *sinetron* has been described as:

> Dependent, emotional, passive, weak and incapable women subject to the leadership of men ... a debilitating portrayal of women (Aripurnami 1996, 258).

Yet it is argued here that there are other ways to read the genre. Ang (1985) proposed that larger-than-life formats (such as *sinetron* and *telenovela* in the Indonesian context) allow for the expression of emotions in a more direct way than realist genres. Clark (1990) maintains that what gets played out in the soap opera genre is the landscape of the heroines' considerations, ideas and feelings, while the actual outcome of their deliberations about their problems does not get much emphasis. This representation of the decision-making process rather than its outcomes 'invites the participation of the spectator to complete the process of meaning construction' (Clark 1990, 119). In *sinetron,* women are represented as woven into a tight fabric of time, space and relationships, which orders and defines their lives and possibilities (see Widodo 2002, 10). This textual 'fabric' is flexible, stretching into crisis with every episode, yet still containing and shaping the emotional lives of the female characters. As in the West it is probably the case that soap operas are popular because they articulate the 'caught yet struggling' quality of women's lives (see Gray 1987).

The genre of *sinetron* (soap operas) dates from the very early days of Indonesian television (Widodo 2002, 8). Themes of luxury, romance and marriage dominate. The plot of a typical *sinetron, Lembah Kenangan* (Valley of Memories), in 1999 depicts a marriage crisis precipitated by a dubious romantic intervention:

Wiwara is an ambitious young man who seeks out any way of achieving his worldly goals, including pretending to love Larasari, the lonely wife of a rich artist. One day, Wiwara lies in wait for Larasari at the side of the road near her home. When he sees Larasari about to enter her house, Wiwara follows her straight in (*Nusa Tenggara* 1999a, 12).

Larasari is represented as a financially and emotionally dependent wife, neglected by a workaholic husband. She loves her husband, but isolated in her city house, neglected by her male protector, she is easy prey:

> She screams, "You scoundrel! You devil, you want to break up my household'. A tense scene erupts, in which both Larasari and Wiwara snatch at the telephone. "Your wife is a cheap whore — a prostitute!" cries Wiwara into the handset, while at the same time repeatedly slapping the face of Larasari who falls, screaming (*Nusa Tenggara* 1999a, 12).

Wiwara has gained entry to Larasari's lonely life by pretending romance, but she turns out to be loyal to her husband, fighting off Wiwara's attack:

> She reaches for a vase of flowers and crashes it over his head (*Nusa Tenggara* 1999a, 12).

In this plot, as so often in *sinetron*, it is revealed as the husband (Sindhu) who is at fault. A basically good man, he has changed towards his wife (like Ken in the *Gadis* story). Their childlessness is his fault since he has selfishly dedicated himself to writing poetry. In this reading, women are advised to manage personal risk by safeguarding the moral and spiritual strength of the married couple. The young female viewer is at the same time implicitly alerted to good and bad qualities in prospective husbands.

Like *sinetron*, South American *telenovela* at least partly imply the qualities of men as actual or possible husbands. The *telenovela Esperanza*, which went to air in Indonesia in 1999, dealt specifically with the problem of men as prospective husbands through a negative example, similar to the story of Vira and Ken above. Esperanza is a young Brazilian woman who is 'not-yet-married' in a

world of rich and privileged men. Much of the action in Esperanza takes place on a cattle-breeding ranch owned by the seriously wealthy Consuelo. Esperanza had been engaged to Consuelo's handsome business partner Luis, but he ended it suddenly.

> Fermin attempts to persuade Esperanza to take revenge on Luis by proposing that she marries him. He promises that he will treat Esperanza like a queen. Esperanza, horrified, refuses his proposal. Surprisingly, Consuelo and Luis agree that Esperanza should marry Fermin. Overhearing this, Esperanza faints and is rushed to hospital. After recovering, Esperanza goes secretly back to the ranch. She wants to find out why Luis ended their relationship. She is certain that the change in Luis' attitude was due to the influence of Consuelo (*Nusa Tenggara* 1999b, 12).

Esperanza (similar to Mae, Vira, and Larasari above) originally thought she and Luis were absolutely right for each other. However, as so often in these narratives, she was wrong. He 'changed', and she wants to know why. The answer is (once again similarly to Mateu, Ken and Sindhu), the elevation of egotistical masculine ambition (which can take many forms) over a love commitment to a female partner. We can see how *telenovela* and *sinetron* frequently address the issue of qualities to look for in a prospective marriage partner, often by negative inference.

Conclusion: lived social practice and media discourses of romance and marriage

Young women in Indonesia engage with the media text discourse of romance, that is: ideas, images, sets of logical practices and suggested strategies — which magazines and television offer — in the same field of reference as their lived social practice (Silverstone 1994, Fiske 1996). The discourses of romance and the implied strategies of choosing possible suitors offered by media texts may not translate directly into social practice. They may, however, be used as a point of reference in young women's day-to-day talk about personal issues and problems (see for example, Gillespie 1995). This paper concludes with an example from fieldwork of how one young woman was grappling with the same kinds of dilemmas and

problems about courting and marriage partner selection depicted in
the media texts discussed above.

In conversations conducted over a two month period with Kristal in Bali, there was opportunity to observe her manipulation of the discourse of romantic love, and her operative capacity as a young woman negotiating her way towards a successful marriage, while managing all kinds of risk along the way. Kristal and her boyfriend Ketut were in a holding pattern of advance and retreat. Both university students in their final year, they had been *berpacaran* — seriously dating — for two years, and Kristal wanted Ketut to ask her to marry him. However, she would not raise the subject. Instead she tried a number of strategies to get him to ask her to marry him. These strategies included:

1. initiating a serious conversation about their relationship
2. telling him in detail about other couples who had just got engaged
3. watching 'romantic' movies together
4. dressing up in a different, more attractive way
5. saving up and buying a perfume which was noted for its romantic appeal
6. going to a *dukun* (traditional healer) to buy a magic love potion
7. praying in the temple
8. cooking special food for him
9. suddenly refusing to talk to him
10. talking in a very friendly way to other boys in front of him
11. suddenly giving back gifts he had given her.

Some of these were combined. It is interesting, in the light of the themes of this paper, to speculate on where Kristal got her ideas. One answer is: partly from the lived culture and society around her, and partly from textually mediated discourse described above. So strategies three, four and five pertain to strategies of romance readily available in popular culture texts, while other strategies — six, seven and eight — most likely derive from Kristal's cultural and religious tradition. The other five strategies listed are likely to have been developed from a diverse range of cultural and social discourses, including both textual and 'live' sources.

Each time Kristal tried through these strategies to force his hand, Ketut withdrew. Sometimes they quarrelled and did not see each other for a couple of weeks. Sometimes, rather than get into a difficult conversation, he suggested a fun thing to do instead. Kristal was very frustrated. Although she praised Ketut's excellent qualities in a boyfriend (he was not promiscuous, egotistical, intolerant or alcoholic — see *Aneka* list above), she felt there was not much point if he had no intention to marry her. She did not mention sex, although it may have been the case that she was unwilling to allow further intimacies unless they were actually engaged. An unhappy young man who was a mutual acquaintance confessed to me that he had been in a position similar to Ketut, then suddenly his girlfriend allowed him to have sex with her. He was very pleased until she got pregnant, went to his upper middle-class parents and told them she was carrying their grandchild. He was 'forced' to marry her and the marriage was 'lifeless'. Kristal knew this story. When we discussed it, she said that Ketut had to ask her to marry him of his own free will. If she forced him like that, it would be an unhappy marriage, since they did not enter it on equal terms of 'love' and 'free choice'. It was another year before Ketut finally proposed. Kristal asked him why he had waited so long. He said he didn't want to stop having fun. Perhaps Ketut was the one committed to romance — the fun stuff, while Kristal was ready for the serious stuff — marriage. Since then they have been formally engaged for three years, but are still yet to marry.

The discussion in this paper suggests a relationship between texts, and contemporary social practices of courtship and marriage in Indonesia. Even though young women, particularly in the cities, are in sense modern entrepreneurial individuals out to make the best life for themselves, they must still negotiate high levels of risk in negotiating 'free-choice' marriage. The major identified 'risk' for young women in the matter of courtship is a poor choice of prospective partner, which threatens personal status and family honour. In this way the reputation, status and future of young Indonesian women are still hostage to their capacity to achieve a successful marriage. While this is nothing new, contemporary media

texts about romance address a relatively new set of anxieties about young women having to manage themselves as a kind of commodity in the marriage market, and make effective executive choices about the suitability of a marriage partner in the modern contractual business of marriage. While media romance texts such as girls' magazines and television soap operas cannot solve the dilemmas faced by modern young Indonesian women, it can be argued that they offer both direct and implicit guidance and information that may assist in making important choices.

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