



Indonesia in the Making: Portraits of Customary Women in Perempuan Batih By A. R. Rizal

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-06-10 Revised: 2026-06-17 Accepted: 2026-06-29 Keywords: Perempuan Batih; Minangkabau women; adat; feminism; sociology of literature; Indonesia in the making DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.11479 Corresponding Author: Nur Sapta Riskiawati nursaptariskiawati@gmail.com Universitas Handayani Makassar	<i>This paper examines Perempuan Batih by A. R. Rizal within the framework of Indonesia in the making, positioning customary women as key subjects in the process of contemporary Indonesia's social and cultural formation. Through representations of batih or nuclear family life, the text reveals that adat or customary norms do not operate as a fixed value system, but rather as a social practice that is continuously shaped, negotiated, and contested amid changing times. Employing approaches from the sociology of literature and feminist literary criticism, this paper analyzes value conflicts, gender relations, domestic labor, and shifts in authority within the domestic sphere as reflections of broader social dynamics. The analysis shows that women in Perempuan Batih are not merely portrayed as guardians of tradition, but also as agents of change who actively participate in the production of meaning surrounding adat. This paper argues that the text offers a critical reading of Indonesia as a process of becoming, in which women's adat plays a significant role in shaping Indonesia's present and future.</i>

1. Introduction

Literary works are never produced in a social vacuum. They are formed within historical, cultural, and ideological conditions, while at the same time they participate in shaping how society imagines itself. The sociology of literature views literary texts as cultural products that are connected to social structures and historical circumstances, rather than as isolated aesthetic objects (Laurenson & Swingewood, 1972; Williams, 1977).

In the Indonesian context, the novel has become an important medium for articulating tensions between tradition and modernity, domestic life and public change, as well as gendered obligation and individual agency. This article situates A. R. Rizal's *Perempuan Batih* within that debate by reading the novel as a literary representation of customary women in Minangkabau society.

Perempuan Batih is significant because it focuses on Gadis, a Minangkabau woman whose life is tied to the *rumah batu*, matrilineal inheritance, marriage customs, motherhood, and economic survival. Previous studies have shown that the novel represents Minangkabau cultural elements such as inheritance, matrilineal kinship, customary marriage, and *merantau* (Hibtiyah, 2020). Dewi and Indarti (2023) also note that *Perempuan Batih* portrays Minangkabau traditions, including matrilineal kinship, where women occupy an important position in the family, although such authority is not always absolute because male relatives may also intervene in family power structures. This is why the novel does not romanticize matriliney as a system that automatically liberates women. Instead, it exposes contradictions within a cultural structure where women inherit symbolic centrality but still confront male authority, domestic burdens, abandonment, and social judgment. Yangsen et al. (2021) further argue that the novel depicts a shift in the character and role of Minangkabau women, from women who firmly maintain customs to women who face modernity and identity change. This tension makes the novel a productive object for feminist and sociological literary analysis.

Studies of women in literature examine not only how female characters are depicted but also how texts construct gendered subjectivity, authority, and agency. Feminist literary criticism argues that literary representation is inseparable from structures of power because narratives often reproduce or challenge social assumptions about femininity, domesticity, sexuality, and labor. Showalter's discussion of women's writing emphasizes the importance of recovering women's voices and analyzing the cultural conditions that shape female expression (Showalter, 1979, p. 25). Moi also positions feminist criticism as an intervention into the ideological assumptions of literary interpretation (Moi, 1985, p. 1).

In postcolonial and indigenous contexts, women's representation cannot be separated from culture, class, ethnicity, and customary authority. Spivak's critique of representation warns that marginalized women are often spoken for by dominant institutions, making it necessary to examine how texts stage voice, silence, and authority (Spivak, 1988, p. 287). This perspective is relevant for *Perempuan Batih* because the novel does not simply portray Minangkabau women as cultural symbols; it dramatizes how they speak, act, suffer, command, and resist within the social rules of adat.

The sociology of literature provides a framework for analyzing literary texts as cultural practices embedded in social life. Laurenson and Swingewood argue that literature is related to society not only because it reflects social reality, but also because it organizes and interprets social experience (Laurenson & Swingewood, 1972, p. 13). Williams' concept of structures of feeling is particularly useful because *Perempuan Batih* captures the emotional and social tensions of a community in transition (Williams, 1977, p. 132). Gadis's life embodies such a transitional structure: she belongs to a matrilineal world that demands cultural continuity, yet her children and social environment are increasingly shaped by urban mobility, individual desire, and changing gender expectations.

Bourdieu's sociology of cultural production also helps clarify how characters occupy different positions within social fields. His concepts of field, capital, and habitus explain how social actors internalize cultural structures while maneuvering within them (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 30). In *Perempuan Batih*, the *rumah batu*, inheritance, kinship reputation, marriage, and women's labor become forms of symbolic and social capital. Gadis's choices

cannot be reduced to private decisions; they are shaped by a cultural field in which honor, lineage, gender, and survival are intertwined.

Previous studies have established *Perempuan Batih* as an important text for understanding Minangkabau culture and gender relations. Hibtiyah (2020) reads the novel as a reflection of Minangkabau culture, including inheritance, matrilineal kinship, customary marriage, and merantau. Yangsen et al. (2021) examine the shift in the character and role of Minangkabau women in the novel. Dewi and Indarti (2023) discuss the functions of matrilineal culture, while Bahardur (2024) analyzes Minangkabau masculinity and hegemonic gender relations in the text. These studies are valuable, but the present article develops a different emphasis by reading customary women as agents in the making of social and cultural Indonesia.

The concept of Indonesia in the making is used here to refer to Indonesia not as a completed cultural formation but as an ongoing process of negotiation among local traditions, gender relations, family structures, and modern social expectations. Through this framework, *Perempuan Batih* is interpreted as a narrative that shows how national and cultural futures are shaped from everyday domestic spaces. This study asks how the novel represents customary women as social subjects, how it portrays adat as a contested practice, and how women negotiate gendered power within domestic and cultural structures.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive-interpretive design. The approach is appropriate because the research aims to interpret meaning, representation, and social relations in a literary text rather than measure variables numerically. The analysis combines sociology of literature and feminist literary criticism to examine how *Perempuan Batih* represents customary women, adat, and gendered power in Minangkabau society.

The primary data source is A. R. Rizal's novel *Perempuan Batih*, published by Laksana in 2018. The data consist of narrative descriptions, dialogues, and character actions that represent customary women, matrilineal expectations, domestic authority, gendered labor, and conflicts between adat and modernity. Secondary data include scholarly books and journal articles on sociology of literature, feminist theory, Minangkabau culture, and previous studies of *Perempuan Batih*.

The data were collected through close reading and note-taking. First, the novel was read repeatedly to identify major narrative patterns. Second, textual units related to women, adat, domestic space, marriage, motherhood, labor, and cultural conflict were marked. Third, selected quotations were categorized according to thematic relevance: women as custodians of adat, women as economic subjects, women as domestic authorities, women as objects of social regulation, and women as agents of change.

The data were analyzed through thematic textual analysis. Each selected quotation was interpreted in relation to character, conflict, setting, and narrative function. The analysis then connected these textual findings to sociological concepts such as social structure, habitus, symbolic capital, and cultural negotiation, as well as feminist concepts such as agency, otherness, performativity, and intersectionality. The interpretation prioritizes evidence from the novel rather than the conclusions of previous studies.

3. Result and discussion

The analysis identifies seven major findings concerning the representation of customary women in *Perempuan Batih*. These findings show that the novel does not present Minangkabau adat as a static inheritance, but as a living practice continuously shaped through residence, marriage, labor, care, and intergenerational conflict.

Women as Custodians of the Rumah Batu

The rumah batu functions as more than a physical house. It is a symbol of lineage, inheritance, memory, and female responsibility. Gadis understands the house as a space that must be continued through women, especially daughters. The expectation placed upon Siti reveals how women are positioned as custodians of matrilineal continuity.

"Tempatmu di rumah batu. Kau yang akan menggantikanku. Itulah takdirmu sebagai anak perempuan." (Rizal, 2018, p. 101)

This quotation shows that female identity is tied to spatial belonging. A daughter is not imagined as an autonomous individual only, but as the future holder of the house and lineage. The novel therefore represents adat as embodied in women's residence, labor, and continuity.

Women as Subjects Who Challenge Deterministic Adat

Although Gadis often defends adat, the novel also gives space to female resistance through Siti's refusal to accept destiny as culturally fixed. Her statement challenges the idea that women must merely inherit prescribed roles.

"Aku yang membuat takdirku sendiri, Bu." (Rizal, 2018, p. 141)

This sentence marks one of the clearest moments of female agency in the novel. It does not reject Minangkabau identity entirely, but it questions the interpretation of adat as fate. The text thereby presents tradition as open to contestation.

Women and the Desire to Transform Social Horizons

The novel links women's agency to the desire to move beyond the boundaries of village expectation. Siti's ambition to grasp the world directly confronts Gadis's fear of social and cultural disorder.

"Kalau aku bisa menggenggam dunia, mengapa mesti takut mengubah takdir?" (Rizal, 2018, p. 141)

The quotation reveals a generational conflict between cultural continuity and self-expansion. For the younger woman, modernity is not necessarily moral decline; it is an opportunity to reimagine the limits of womanhood. Butler's notion of gender performativity helps explain this moment because gendered identity is produced through repeated acts but can also be reworked through different performances (Butler, 1990, p. 34).

Domestic Space as a Site of Shared and Contested Authority

The matrilineal household does not automatically grant women absolute authority. Gadis's power in the rumah batu must be negotiated with male presence, especially through Zaki. This shows the complexity of gender relations in a matrilineal setting.

"Perempuan memang jadi penghuni di rumahnya. Di rumah batu Gadis mesti berbagi kuasa dengan Zaki." (Rizal, 2018, p. 122)

The quotation demonstrates that the domestic sphere is not a simple female domain. It is a contested arena in which symbolic female ownership coexists with male authority and practical dependence. This finding complicates the assumption that matrilineal kinship automatically produces gender equality.

Gendered Labor and the Training of Girls

The novel represents domestic competence as a socially demanded feminine skill. Gadis teaches Rani that womanhood requires endurance, self-sufficiency, and the ability to perform household labor. This training is both protective and disciplinary.

"Jadi perempuan itu tak gampang. Kau mesti bisa melakukan segalanya sendiri. Kalau tak pandai, kau akan dicibir orang." (Rizal, 2018, p. 169)

This passage illustrates how gender norms are reproduced through everyday instruction. Gadis does not merely impose tradition; she prepares Rani for a society that judges women harshly. The novel thus reveals the double burden of female socialization: survival through competence and constraint through expectation.

Female Care as Kinship Responsibility

The novel emphasizes women's role in sustaining kinship beyond biological motherhood. Cakni's care for Gadis is framed as moral responsibility and emotional kinship, showing that women's social labor maintains the family structure.

"Kau sudah kuanggap sebagai anak kandungku sendiri. Tentu aku ingin melihatmu menjadi orang berhasil. Tapi, ibumu mengamanahkan kepadaku agar menjagamu tetap berada di rumah." (Rizal, 2018, p. 15)

This quotation shows that customary women produce kinship through care, obligation, and continuity. Women's agency appears not only in acts of rebellion, but also in their capacity to sustain social bonds. In this sense, adat is produced through affective labor as much as through formal rules.

Marriage, Origin, and the Regulation of Women's Social Boundaries

The novel depicts marriage as a key site where adat regulates belonging, origin, and legitimacy. Gadis's concern over a prospective daughter-in-law's origin shows how women can also become guardians of social boundaries.

"Banyak anak gadis di kampung ini. Kau bisa memilih yang jelas asal-usulnya. Jangan kau memilih karena terdesak hasrat saja." (Rizal, 2018, p. 107)

This statement reveals that women are not only regulated by adat; they also participate in regulating it. Gadis's judgment shows how customary authority operates through everyday family decisions, especially marriage choices.

Adat, Female Agency, and Indonesia in the Making

The findings demonstrate that *Perempuan Batih* portrays customary women as central agents in the social production of adat. The novel does not present Minangkabau culture as a static inheritance, but as a set of practices continually negotiated through women's everyday actions. Gadis sustains adat, but her children's responses reveal that adat is never fully stable. It must be repeatedly defended, interpreted, and renegotiated.

This interpretation corresponds to Hauser-Schäublin's view of adat in Indonesia as a field of identity-making and social positioning (Hauser-Schäublin, 2013, p. 5). In the novel, however, the negotiation occurs not primarily in legal or political institutions, but within intimate domestic life. The rumah batu becomes the micro-space where the larger question of cultural continuity is staged.

The novel's feminist significance lies in its refusal to portray women only as victims or only as empowered matriarchs. Gadis is authoritative but vulnerable; Siti is resistant but judged; Rani is trained for survival but disciplined by gender expectations. These layered representations support a feminist reading that sees agency as situated within constraint.

Gadis and Siti are not merely symbols of Minangkabau identity; they become subjects who argue, command, refuse, care, and suffer.

By focusing on women's everyday negotiations, *Perempuan Batih* contributes to imagining Indonesia as a process rather than a finished cultural entity. National transformation is often narrated through political events, public institutions, or male-centered histories. This novel redirects attention to the domestic sphere, showing that cultural change is also made through mothers, daughters, grandmothers, kinship obligations, marriage decisions, and women's labor. The phrase Indonesia in the making therefore becomes meaningful at the level of adat and gender.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that *Perempuan Batih* by A. R. Rizal represents customary Minangkabau women as complex social subjects who preserve, negotiate, and transform adat. Through Gadis, Siti, Cakni, and Rani, the novel depicts women as custodians of the rumah batu, producers of kinship, transmitters of gendered labor, and agents who challenge deterministic interpretations of tradition. The findings show that adat in the novel is not a fixed cultural essence, but a living practice shaped through conflict, memory, obligation, and resistance.

The combined use of sociology of literature and feminist theory reveals that the novel's domestic conflicts are connected to broader social transformations. The rumah batu, marriage, motherhood, labor, and generational disagreement become narrative sites where Indonesia in the making can be observed. The novel's contribution lies in its portrayal of indigenous women not as passive symbols of culture, but as active actors in the making of social and cultural meaning. Future research may compare *Perempuan Batih* with other Indonesian novels that portray matrilineal or customary societies, or use postcolonial feminism, ecofeminism, and intersectionality to explore class, migration, land, and ecological belonging.

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