

Anti-Copyright



Queer Identity Politics and the Colonial Character

Juan Lee

Juan Lee
Queer Identity Politics and the Colonial Character
2023/08/20

sea.theanarchistlibrary.org

2023/08/20

The Women's March in Jakarta yesterday was a touching experience. A sea of people with colorful hair, free attire, rainbow flags, and even trans symbols flooded the area around the National Monument. This colossal golden and concrete tower was surrounded by people eager to break free from the shackles of patriarchy, state, capital, religion, and superstition – seeking liberation from forces forcefully thrust into all our throats. The area near the National Library wasn't just filled with the black smoke of motor vehicles and the bustling heartbeat of Jakarta; it echoed with speeches and posters about environmental crises, women's reproductive autonomy, the unresolved atrocities of 1998, the marginalization of disabled communities, protests against rape, and many other progressive demands.

At a glance, I felt like I had a chance to peek into a future world led by conscious, critical, and politically active people. A light at the end of this cyclical rotations between fascist regimes, all in the name of toothless reform.

But paradise didn't exist grace the inferno. Notice the widespread use of English throughout the event, starting from the name itself - "Women's March Jakarta." The Instagram account for the event included English phrases like "harmful practices," "revenge porn," and "marital rape." The open call for volunteer registrations was filled with English terms like "open recruitment," "stage manager," "liaison officer," and more. Many posters displayed slogans like "no one is less than human," "sisterhood is powerful," "I'm marching for those who can't be here," and so on.

Even though the event addressed the crisis of domestic and women workers' exploitation in general, why articulate the event in a language incomprehensible to the women selling drinks right outside the National Monument gate? If it's true that no one is less than human, that sisterhood is powerful, and that participants are protesting for those who couldn't be present, why use a language less accessible to workers who are systematically exploited and marginalized, our less educated women, and the sex workers who couldn't attend the protest?

Artistic expressions during the event, like the lyrics of "we are women king" by Yacko, reflect an understanding of ourselves, our practices, and our people through a colonial lens and language, which must be questioned. One of the women kings mentioned is Kartini, who fought against the marriage of Dutch colonialism with Javanese feudalism. It is inappropriate to address Kartini with a feudal title, especially since she wrote to shed her feudal title as a Raden: "just call me Kartini!"

It's crucial to question the deep-rooted colonial politics and psychology displayed during the event. Concepts like gender, queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender originate from the objective conditions of the United States and Europe. It's not entirely accurate to label non-binary or non-male/female individuals

in the Third World like the kathoey in Thailand and Bissu in Sulawesi as queer or transgender. The importation of these politics without critical digestion produces politics that don't align with the concrete needs of Indonesian people today nor the original function of these concepts in First World contexts.

For example, the term queer originated as derogatory language used by American society against those who refused to participate in the reproductive script, resisting the oppression of women by men in tasks such as unpaid household work, unequal distribution of chores, and the consequent norms of clothing and sexuality. Over time, the queer community began using the term as their identity, turning an insult into a shield, in the context of broader organized resistance where they provided housing and resources for their community members and others in need while attempting to dismantle that which constrains life. In other words, queer in that context is not just an identity based on hair color, clothing, and an individual's sexuality but a political identity representing organized mass resistance against exploitation.

Meanwhile, in the context of Indonesia today, there is no militant resistance from our community and mass organizations in that form – only NGOs funded by multinational corporations and First World countries – and being queer becomes crude identity politics. The meaning of queer identity in the First World is not based on the sound or dictionary definition but as a response by the queer community against the use of the term as an insult. This does not apply in Indonesia, where we are insulted by other names. I realized this when talking to a friend in our village who shared their fondness for long hair and playing female roles in the arts, often mistaken for a woman. However, when I used language and gender understanding imported from the First World to discuss this, it didn't resonate with their experience. Further reflection revealed that this language and understanding did not align with my own life experience. I don't want to be non-binary or a trans woman. I don't want to buy a rainbow flag bag from IKEA.

I want to be merdeka, to wear comfortable and beautiful clothes, full of flowers and pink, with long hair and no mustache, to love the people I respect, regardless of their sex, skin color, or religion.

Gender analysis, which understands the identities of women, non-binary individuals, and men as aesthetic labels limited to forms of self-expression fails to delve into sexuality further as one's position in the political economy and reproduction of society along with the accompanying psychology. The reason being, this analysis separates gender from politics, history, and the living conditions of the Indonesian people. Culture is detached from political economy. The identities and exploitation of queer communities in Indonesia are divorced from population

control through family planning programs during the New Order, government policies and societal intimidation forcing women to become mothers, and the modern family system with one husband and one wife introduced by colonialism. As a result, the marginalization of queers appears as if it fell from the sky, magically arising from emptiness, with no understanding of its roots in a capitalist system that endlessly pursues profit and a reproductive system that exploits women's sexuality and household work. And, of course, a phenomenon not understood at its roots and its relationship with the overall life of the people cannot be effectively fought against. This Westernized gender analysis is part of the shaping of a people's spirit that is silent, obedient, passive, detached from history, and apolitical – in other words, an "ideal" workforce for multinational corporations. It's not surprising that one of the guidelines for making posters prohibits "creating posters for political campaigns." It's unclear what is meant by politics in that prohibition. By paying taxes, dressing modestly, and cooking rice, I am already involved in politics by complying with the state, adhering to sexual norms, and not cooking sago or other foods being erased by Javanese colonialism. It's not surprising that gender research entered Indonesia in the 1980s with the support of Western organizations and conferences, where activists were trained to understand gender analysis funded by the New Order government. Nicola Spakowski writes that a similar phenomenon occurred in China, where the influx of gender research was funded by Western organizations and accompanied by erasing memories of past progressive women's movements that connected the tragic conditions of women's lives with labor exploitation, colonialism, and imperialism, and therefore fought alongside mass movements against all of these. This aligns precisely with the erasure of Indonesia's people's memories of pre-1965 mass movements, including the destruction and slander of the Indonesian Women's Movement (Gerwani) by the New Order fascist government. Even today, the propaganda film against Gerwani by the New Order regime is still being shown in various schools, including the high school I once attended.

What is to be done? In my opinion, it's not about replacing men and women by replicating feudal sexualities, like Bugis society with the Oroane, Makunrai, Calalai, Calabai, and Bissu. Nor is it about mimicking women's movements in the past, such as the struggle of the Indonesian Women's Movement against imperialism and colonialism. In short, history never walks backward. Indeed, there is much to be learned from erased histories. For example, few know about Tris Metty, one of the founders of the Indonesian Women's Movement, who, according to Saskia Wieringa's documentation, identified as a lesbian. Similarly, some male fighters in the Buru concentration camp had romantic and sexual relationships with each

other. The history of that era, where "queer" individuals fought against capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism alongside the general population, is worth studying and complementing. The erasure of "queer" individuals from the political, economic, cultural, and linguistic history of Indonesia is an example of the hollowness of our nation's character, more similar to a buried cavity than humanity and life. Nevertheless, their struggle was based on the objective conditions of that time and people, different from our current context. Today's struggle must be based on the objective conditions of the present people. Analysis and movements must organically arise from the needs, difficulties, and pleasures of everyday life for people in that region, not created from the spit of Western intellectuals or elite activists who aspire to be white. The mentality behind this phenomenon, namely blind obedience to authority, feeling smarter and more cultured when speaking English, and restricting oneself to begging for the contents of analyses and political practices from First World countries, in other words, the lie that feminism, justice, humanity, and civilization originate from the West, must be dismantled. In my observation, a language, culture, and politics that can tangibly improve the conditions of our people and the living environment, regardless of the province, sexuality, dressing style, religious beliefs, or skin color, has not yet emerged in Indonesia. I affirm Pramoedya Ananta Toer's statement that Indonesian culture is decayed and empty, and the younger generation must create a new culture, without which we are "basically livestock, only living to reproduce oneself." Ironically, this statement resonates most with "queers", who, due to their sexuality, are often not reproducing themselves. The very origin of the term "queer" itself is rooted in resistance against the livestock-like reproduction of capitalism and patriarchy. Personally, I don't want to be livestock reproducing myself as a husband or wife working all day as a corporate slave with low pay and unclear contracts, only to return every night to a cramped, windowless dormitory. I want to live surrounded by people I love, sipping sweet tea, reading novels and writing poetry, playing chess and planting chili, cooking soup together and singing, sharing kretek while sewing clothes, in a world where humans neither oppress nor are oppressed. Our historical condition is at a crisis point where the old is dying and yet the new has not been born. The young generation of Indonesia must step forward with critical thinking and precision through these turbulent currents, advancing beyond the struggles of Srikandi, Tris Metty, Gerwani, and the Women's March Jakarta.