

HER

An Indonesian Short Story

By Titis Basino

Translated by Florence Lamoureux

Introduction

Titis Basino was born in Magelang, Indonesia on January 17, 1939. After completing secondary school, she graduated from the University of Indonesia in 1962. In 1963 she was introduced to Indonesian readers when one of her short stories was published in the Indonesian literary magazine, *Sastra*. Ms. Basino continued to write, although family and other personal demands on her time limited her creative output until 1997. She is currently on the faculty of the University of Indonesia and since 1998 has had three books published. In 1999 the government of Malaysia awarded Titis Basino the *Mastra* prize, a competitive literary award that involved submissions from throughout Southeast Asia. Although Ms. Basino writes on a variety of subjects, she is best known for her stories concerning women and deceptive relationships.

Indonesia is made up of over 13,500 islands. Among these are some of the largest in the world—Borneo, Sumatra, Suluwesi and Java. Over 200,000,000 people live in the archipelago, making it the world's fourth most populous country. We learn from early records that around the fifth century Hindu culture dominated Indonesia. Within the next 100–150 years, Buddhism was introduced and was integrated into daily life. Down through the centuries culture and the arts thrived, and trade within the island chain and abroad increased. Indeed, it was Arabic traders in the twelfth century who introduced Islam to Indonesia. Merchant ships arriving in Indonesia on the monsoon winds would complete their transactions and settle down to wait for the winds to shift, enabling them to sail home. During these layovers the Muslim merchants introduced Indonesians to their religion, and sultans slowly replaced the powerful rajahs of Java and Sumatra.

Europeans were aware of the goods—spices, silks, perfumes—available in Southeast Asia, but overland journeys were expensive, time consuming, and dangerous. However, Columbus's expedition, proving that ships could sail great distances and return home safely, prompted an interest in accessing the rich markets of Asia by sea. The Dutch came to Indonesia for this purpose in the late 1590s, and they remained a dominant political force there until the advent of World War II in 1941. An interesting consideration is the development of Islam and the Dutch colonial presence. Would Islam have spread throughout Indonesia more quickly and in a purer form had there been no Dutch presence there? Once Indonesia declared her independence from Holland on August 17, 1945, Islam was more evident in Indonesian society. Today Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population, with about 87 percent of the people practicing Islam.

Islam has five basic pillars. Muslims must: (1) believe in one God—Allah; (2) pray five times each day; (3) help the poor; (4) fast during Ramadan (the ninth month of the year); and (5) if able, make the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. According to the Muslim holy book, the *Koran*, a man may have up to four wives at any one time as long as he provides equally for each wife. A wife, however, may have only one husband at a time. Although it is not difficult for a man to divorce his wife, it is very difficult indeed for a wife to divorce her husband.

Just like that I let him leave. I listened to the steadily fading sound of his car as he drove away. The motor grew fainter and fainter until it was finally drowned out by the children's voices. At moments like that I felt that he accepted the freedom I had given him with too obvious relief.

For a while now he could live without demands from his fussy children and his immature wife. I knew his routine so well. As he came to the bend in the road past our house he would look back at the ten children lined up in front of the door. He would wave at them, but no one would wave back. They well knew that their father was not going to his office, but rather to another home, one where someone else would welcome him with that special warmth a wife reserves for greeting her husband.

The car disappeared into the distance and still the children continued to stare up the road. They seemed mesmerized, waiting there on the chance that he might turn back. I wished there were some way to make them forget these scenes more quickly.

Johan, my eldest son, was the first to break away from the group. He bore a strong physical resemblance to his father, but I was certain that he would never behave like him. He was terribly embarrassed whenever we had guests and they asked him where his dad was. He always got flustered and stammered as he tried to think up some excuse. It's not easy for a child to speak frankly about a painful subject. It was more than he could bear to just come right out and say that his father was with his other wife.

Once or twice he actually lied, but gradually the secret became a farce. Indeed, among those friends who visited us most often our situation had become a main topic of conversation—especially for those who had, or thought they had, the most faithful husbands.

The other children remained by the door, their sober vigil finally broken when one of them pinched another and they scattered in all directions.

Each time he left I felt a terrible loneliness. It was almost as though I had a wound that left no scar. I tried not let my health deteriorate, however. There was no question about what would become of the children if I were to die. They would be taken to their father's other wife. It was for this reason that I was careful to disguise my emotions and maintain the harmony in our home—a home without my husband. Whether or not the children understood this sacrifice I'll never know; they were too young to express such thoughts. I simply went about life swallowing my pride with my rice.

I did not want my children to think that their mother was too weak to cope. I was determined to appear capable and intelligent in my own right. It was fairly easy for a woman who had yearned to be considered an ideal wife to maintain this charade. I had always been dependent on my husband and because of this I had worked very hard to keep him happy, albeit in vain.

The evening of my husband's second marriage I tried to reason with him. His voice sounded so strange that I could hardly recognize it. It was as though he were a child again.

"So you married her?"

"Yes, why not?"

"Couldn't you have stopped short of marriage? You already have one wife. I can deal with all your needs, can't I?"

"Are you sure of that?"

"Aren't I enough to make you happy? I've already given you children, an organized household, home-cooked meals, immaculate clothes, a warm and ready welcome for you and all your friends. All you've ever wanted I've given you before you've had to ask twice. Think about it." I droned on in my maternal tone while he remained silent, giving no response at all. "Aren't you embarrassed in front of the children?"

"Of course, you're right, but do I have to thank you for all these things? I don't expect you to understand because you can't look beyond the tremendous effort you've put into this marriage, which nevertheless has failed. I'm not satisfied with this life any longer. I'm tired of waiting for you to take an interest in something, like a club or anything outside of this family. Surely you must be aware that I've been encouraging you to do this for some time. I used to ask you to join me in some activity away from home, but you always laughed at my attempts. You seem to forget that when I fell in love with you, you were an involved and interesting woman."

"Is that the only reason you've taken another wife?"

"No, there are other reasons, but I don't feel that I must itemize them for you. They would be much too painful for you to hear."

"Tell me. I want to hear them." I pushed him on this point even though he was already married and any argument was futile. I wasn't sure why I was pursuing this questioning; it may have been just to annoy him.

"Enough, you must get the picture by now. I give you my promise that I'll never forget our children, but I will go to her—although less frequently than I come here."

"Why does it have to be like that?" I pulled myself together and shut out my despair. Why infrequently? Why at all? It isn't fair.

"Do you accept the fact that I go to her?"

"Why not, if it gives you pleasure?" I stared intently at his bowed head. "Do as you please, and I will remain an ideal wife."

"You are indeed the proverbial good woman."

After that night the word "her" took on a unique meaning in our conversations.

I continued to carry out all of his suggestions, whether for his benefit or mine. At the time he married her we had five children; over the years I gave birth to five more sons.

On the nights when my husband was with me and talked about "her," I listened to him with an odd mixture of patience and dejection. Deep down I begged that he would become tired of "her," but he never did. I began to be bored with his stories, and I frowned and became sullen each time he started talking about "her." Finally I learned to tune out his chatter and heard almost none of it. There are some things that simply try a person's patience too far.

I had a lot of time after my husband took his second wife, so I joined a woman's club in our city. I was soon appointed to the office of vice-chairperson. It wasn't that I was all that active, but rather that I was the wife of a high official. My husband occupied an important position, and as his wife I received this sort of recognition. I bustled about here and there as a representative of our organization. I felt like a new woman. The longing I usually felt when my husband was with "her" became almost nonexistent. It was easier and easier to welcome him with a smile because I no longer felt so desperately lonely when he was away. At first he was surprised when I greeted him with such enthusiasm. Perhaps he wondered about the contrast to my earlier self-righteousness. But hadn't it been my prerogative to be upset with him each time he left me to go to his younger wife?

Once he questioned my embracing him when he came in, and I answered that I was no less passionate than she was. I even displayed an open-mindedness by saying, "Ah, but isn't it your right to have two, three, even four wives, if you take care of them?"

He became quiet. It appeared that my intimacy had unnerved him. I looked upon it as something normal, as a test. A husband has the right to practice polygamy, and this was a test of my tolerance for it. I devoutly believed that as a woman I was destined to accept and to protect. Had I not believed that, and also considered the fate of my children, I would merely have asked for a divorce and left him.

Sometimes as he lay asleep beside me I felt revolted looking at his bare chest with its sparse sprinkling of hair. It was loathsome to me to think that not only had I embraced him, but also in another bed another woman had caressed this same broad chest. However, moments like that quickly passed. They vanished when I heard the children stirring and heading for their morning baths. I always got up and met them at the kitchen door.

One morning one of the children announced that his shoes were worn out and that he needed a new pair. Another one asked for a school uniform. I smiled, promising to buy them next month if they were good children and studied hard. In my heart I added: Don't you realize that your father has additional responsibilities now? He has new small mouths to feed and others for whom he must buy clothes and shoes. I kept these thoughts inside and tried to present a cheerful front. I didn't want to burden the children with my problems. I just felt that they were too young to understand the situation so I just went my way trying to keep things running smoothly.

Then something happened that took the wind out of my sails. I don't know if there was some invisible bond between "her" and me, but what happened was strictly by chance and not the design of either of us.

Our club was to have a convention, and as usual I was to represent our local organization. The site chosen for this convention was "her" city. She was active in the organization there and I was certain that she would attend. I was prepared for a face-to-face encounter with her. I realized that my friends who

knew what to expect were watching me closely. I heard them praise the resolution with which I accepted what could only be an uncomfortable situation, but don't think there weren't those who derided and ridiculed me. Some said that I had no shame and little self-esteem to go into her territory like that. But their cruel gossip only went in one ear and out the other.

I came into the convention hall rather late, so I knew neither where she might be nor what her function was there. But I suspected she must be the leader. I was always the chairperson in these meetings whether in my city or in any other, and I saw no reason for it to be different this time.

When the meeting was called to order and Mrs. Hamid was elected chairperson, I assumed it was I being named. It had completely slipped my mind that she, too, was Mrs. Hamid. It was like a scene in a stage comedy, a scene where the audience failed to laugh. They fell silent as both of us began to walk toward the rostrum. Realizing the confusion, we looked at each other with mutually understanding smiles and went back to our seats.

That hall was a beehive of activity. The committee was blamed for not having organized things carefully enough. However, I sat quietly in my place in the front row. After a moment, when the hall was quiet, I heard the staccato clicking of high-heeled shoes approaching me.

"Please Madame, come to the rostrum." I heard a gentle voice and looked up into a lovely young face.

"Do you mean me?" I asked.

"Yes," was all she answered.

Somewhat reluctantly I made my way to the speaker's platform to the accompaniment of applause. "Why do they applaud me?" I wondered. Possibly this rather impressive reception was a joke or possibly it was praise for her graciousness in handing over the chairpersonship of the meeting to me.

Nevertheless, the applause had a special meaning for me. It was like a rousing chorus in recognition of all the agony and sacrifice I had suffered in the name of respectability. It seemed to say that my rejection deserved to be acknowledged and now I was being vindicated by the very one who had been the cause of my misery. I appreciated her where I had once feared her. Had I met her earlier I would have been impressed with her cunning at capturing a husband; now I was impressed with the graceful manner in which she protected her rival's feelings.

Everything had turned out for the best. I was now much more content when he went to her, because I was convinced that she was no less dedicated to making him happy than I was. She also had a right to a husband, even though fate had decreed that he also be mine. *

SEE THE TEACHER'S GUIDE
ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES



A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO *HER* DISCUSSION AND ESSAY QUESTIONS

By Tammy Sakato and Florence Lamoureux

1. How would you describe the main character, Mrs. Hamid? Cite examples from the story to support your ideas. Engage the class in a debate about how they perceive Mrs. Hamid, drawing upon cultural differences.

(a) Dedicated to her family, strong, good mother, intelligent, capable, responsible, unselfish, loyal, devoted woman, traditional. She sacrificed her needs to ensure that her children were taken care of; cared for her health because she did not want her children to live with their father's new wife; maintained harmony in the home without her husband; always got up and met her children at the kitchen door; joined a woman's club; behaved in a mature manner when confronted by an uncomfortable situation with the second Mrs. Hamid.

OR

(b) Weak, irrational, dependent, insecure, overly devoted to her husband. She felt pain but chose to put up a facade; she "swallowed her pride with her rice"; wanted to be an "ideal wife" and did not pursue her own interests; worked hard to keep him happy; had five more children with her husband after he had taken a second wife; was more of a mother than a wife to her husband.

2. How would you describe Mr. Hamid, her husband? Cite examples from the story to support your ideas. Engage the class in a debate about how they perceive Mr. Hamid, drawing upon cultural differences.

(a) Selfish, inconsiderate, immature, cruel, ungrateful, weak. He married another woman without telling his first wife; did not consider her feelings, or those of his children, in the matter; embarrassed his wife and children; constantly spoke about his new wife to his first wife; left his first wife to see his second wife whenever he wished; did not spend much time with his children; had five more children with his first wife.

OR

(b) Strong, self-assured, confident, devoted follower of Islam, successful, financially stable, active, interesting. He had a right to take additional wives so long as he could support his families; he made an effort to return to both wives; he wanted his wife to have outside interests but she refused; he supported his children financially and did not spoil them; he was active and involved with different organizations; he spared his first wife's feelings by refusing to list reasons why he married a new wife; promised to care for his children; called her a "proverbial good woman" as a compliment; he was a well-respected high official.

3. Examine the dialogue on pages 2 and 3 between Mr. and Mrs. Hamid. What reasons does he give her for marrying his new wife? How does she react when she hears the news?

The conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Hamid started off with an indignant question, "So you married her?" Her husband's immediate response, "Yes, why not?" suggested that he felt that he could do what he wanted, when he wanted,

without much consideration for anyone else. The conversation resembled a mother trying to reason with her immature egocentric son. Mrs. Hamid was incredulous. She could not believe that she had not fulfilled her husband's needs. There was a layer of sarcasm from the husband when he stated, "Are you sure of that?" which placed responsibility on his wife rather than himself. He sounded ungrateful and selfish since he was only concerned with his happiness and satisfaction. The "blame" shifted to his wife when he implied that she used to be an "involved and interesting woman." His reasons centered on the fact that their failed marriage was the result of her self-righteousness and lack of outside interest. His dissatisfaction was reason enough to take another wife despite the fact that Mrs. Hamid had been the "proverbial good woman." Her desire to understand why her husband would hurt her and their children motivated her to push the issue. She felt that an injustice had occurred at the hands of her husband, but soon accepted his decision without much of an argument. When he asked, "Do you accept the fact that I go to her?" she immediately responded with a bowed head and the statement, "Do as you please, and I will remain an ideal wife." She basically resigned herself to the fact that she had no choice but to share her husband.

4. How did their children feel about their father taking another wife? How do you think you would feel?

They had five children prior to him taking a second wife, and had five more sons afterward. Johan, their eldest son, was "terribly embarrassed," making up excuses for his absent father. He even lied on a couple of occasions because it was so painful. The sentence, "The children remained by the door," conjured up an image of confusion and sadness when their father left. Their "sober vigil" implied that they longed for their father, and kept watch in hopes that he would soon return.

5. Mrs. Hamid chose not to leave her husband despite his actions. What led her to make this decision?

Mrs. Hamid believed that her husband had the right to practice polygamy, and this was a test of her tolerance for this practice. She stated, "I devoutly believed that as a woman I was destined to accept and to protect. Had I not believed that, and also considered the fate of my children, I would merely have asked for a divorce and left him." She felt that as a woman and mother, she had an obligation to care for both her husband and family. She sacrificed her own interests and suppressed her feelings to "maintain this charade." Islam permeates Indonesian culture and society, and a devout Muslim adheres to its guidelines. Since polygamy is allowed for Muslim males, Mr. Hamid was not breaking any law, and in fact had every right to marry another person without consent or permission from his wife.

6. Discuss the issue of gender equity in this story. Who showed the most responsibility? Who had more influence and power in the relationship?

Muslim society is essentially male-oriented, with distinct rules for males and females. The very concept of "gender equity" in this story contradicts the message conveyed through the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Hamid. One could argue that both parents displayed responsibility for caring for their children, with

Mr. Hamid providing the financial support and Mrs. Hamid taking care of the cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. Others may perceive Mrs. Hamid as being the most responsible because she maintained the household independently, got up with her children every morning, had home-cooked meals ready, and refused to show her frustrations. She put her needs and feelings aside for the sake of her children. She kept herself healthy because she was concerned about the welfare of her children, and did not want her husband's second wife to care for them. The individual with more influence and power in the relationship, however, was Mr. Hamid. He was able to keep his first wife and his family, and without consulting them, marry a second woman. Although his first wife protested and disapproved, Mr. Hamid made no apologies for his actions, and did not concern himself with how others felt about his decision. He was in control of his actions, yet was able to transfer responsibility of their failed marriage to his wife.

7. Polygamy is legal for Muslim (Moslem) males in Indonesian society, but not for females. Give your opinion on this issue.

Answers will vary. Additional library or Internet research may be helpful in understanding the Islamic religion. However, this question gives students an opportunity to voice their opinions regarding the issue of polygamy, and the fairness of having the practice only be for males. Students may also wish to discuss both the advantages and disadvantages of polygamy for all parties involved—husbands, wives and children.

8. Analyze the meeting between the two wives at the convention. What did the applause mean to the first Mrs. Hamid?

Both wives were active in women's clubs, and both women assumed leadership roles. Their meeting at the convention in the second Mrs. Hamid's city led to an interesting turn of events. When both wives approached the podium to speak as the elected chairperson, there was confusion since no distinction was made as to who would assume the leadership role for this occasion. However, both women were graceful and poised as they returned to their seats. The second Mrs. Hamid's gesture and subtle invitation for the first wife to take the rostrum was significant because it demonstrated that she was willing to give up the power position to her. In handing over control of the meeting to the first Mrs. Hamid, she was perhaps showing the audience that she knew and understood her own place, not only in the professional circuit, but also in the personal arena as well. The applause from the audience was important to the first Mrs. Hamid because it was as if they felt her humiliation and pain, recognized her endurance, and validated her suffering for the sole purpose of saving her family. The fact that it was the second Mrs. Hamid who was kind enough to honor and respect her was powerful. When the first Mrs. Hamid thinks to herself ". . . now I was being vindicated by the very one who had been the cause of my misery," she no longer feels hostility toward "her," the other woman.

9. What were some of the Indonesian cultural values and beliefs expressed in this story?

The value of "saving face" was salient throughout the story. The first Mrs. Hamid persevered in the face of personal humiliation in order to keep her family stable and together.

She did not let her children see her as "weak," and maintained the image of being an "ideal" woman. Mr. Hamid also protected his image by maintaining two wives and his ten children. He was able to appear as a successful, strong Muslim male figure because his devoted and "proverbial" wife accepted the situation and continued to be the "ideal" wife. He had several sons to carry on the family name, another important aspect of Indonesian culture. Even their children attempted to perceive their family as "normal and intact" by making up excuses and lies to avoid the shame and embarrassment they felt. The second Mrs. Hamid helped protect the first Mrs. Hamid's feelings by giving the podium to her. Respect is given to people of authority and prestige in this society. The first Mrs. Hamid was appointed to the office of vice-chairperson not because she was active, but because her husband was a high official, occupying an important position. In Indonesian society it is not uncommon for the differences between men and women in terms of responsibility to be striking. Most Indonesians understand this and accept it. Men have more leeway to do as they please, so long as their financial obligations to their families are met. Women, however, are still the primary caretakers of households and children. In the story, the first Mrs. Hamid believed that a woman was destined to "accept and to protect." She translated this into tolerating her husband's actions, showing a strong commitment to her family.

10. Have two students improvise a dramatic presentation; first as it takes place in the story, and then as they think it might play out in American society.

11. Rewrite the ending of the story in a creative way.

A Related Activity

Check the two Indonesian newspaper Web sites below and report on an article you find that pertains to Islam. Use the newspaper's archival sources if necessary. Consult newspapers from other Muslim countries for articles on Islam as well. For a selection of international newspaper Web sites, go to: <http://www.zafo.com/news/asia.html>.

Indonesian Newspapers, English versions:

1. Kompas at <http://www.kompas.com/9807/07/ENGLISH/>
2. The Jakarta Post at <http://www.thejakartapost.com/headlines.asp>

Suggested Internet sources for educational materials

on Indonesia:

1. University of Hawaii, Center for Southeast Asian Studies: <http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/outreach.html>
2. Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program: <http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/SoutheastAsia/outreach/EdResources.html>
3. Classroom Teacher, Avi Black: <http://members.tripod.com/kebyar/indonesia.htm>
4. U.S. State Department, Country Background Notes: http://www.state.gov/www/background_notes/indonesia_0010_bgn.html ■

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