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# Chapter 7

## Fate, Desire, and Shame: *Janda* in Indonesian Pop Culture



Monika Swasti Winarnita, Petra Mahy, and Nicholas Herriman

**Abstract** Research on images of femininity in Indonesia has largely focused on either the image of femininity produced by the state or, relatively, high-brow cultural forms of femininity. However, popular culture produces images of females that often stand in contrast to such symbolism. This article contends that the *janda*, the divorcee or widow, one of the foremost images of femininity in popular music, drama, and literature, has been, for the most part, overlooked. Seen as sexually available and lascivious, the *janda* represents the “fallen woman”; an object of both fascination and pity. This article analyses the *janda* image as one of the foremost symbols in Indonesian popular culture. It is argued that the *janda* image must be analysed in relation to maiden and mother images. Furthermore, culturally specific ideas of desire, fate, and shame contextualise the *janda* image. As will become apparent, Indonesian popular culture is patriarchal, and a heterosexual male perspective frames much of the symbolism. This means that actual women live with the very real stigma of being a divorcee or a widow in Indonesia. In this study, we focus on the *janda* image and include discussion of how its representation has evolved to include a cosmopolitan ideal.

**Keywords** Divorcees · Indonesia · Popular culture · Widows · Women

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## 7.1 Introduction: Images of Women

Various female images and symbols pervade Indonesian popular culture and artistic genres, including that of the *janda* (widow/divorcee). The *janda* stereotype encompasses several interrelated and somewhat conflicting aspects. She occupies a position of shame for having divorced her husband or, to a somewhat lesser extent, been left as a widow due to unfortunate fate. A *janda* is to be pitied for this state which is likely to include straightened economic circumstances. At the same time, a *janda* is also assumed to have heightened sexual libido and to be on the hunt for a new man, and due to these “presumptions of promiscuity” (Mahy et al. 2016, p. 47) she is also widely desired by men. Other (presumably more virtuous women) feel threatened by the lure that a *janda* may present to their husbands.

The *janda* image must be situated and understood in relation to other symbols of females in Indonesian culture. Depending on the cultural genre and the historical period, certain images of women appear so frequently that we could call them “tropes” or “stereotypes.” For example, in the imagination of the 1950s Indonesian literary elite, the figure of the prostitute was popular. Along with her male counterpart, the pedicab (*becak*) driver, the prostitute was a symbol of the downtrodden and oppressed (Herriman 2010). Other stereotypes have been predominantly promoted by the state. These include the national hero Kartini (Coté 2005; Rutherford 1993; Mahy 2012); the communist woman/maniacs or models (Tiwon 1996); the model mother (Suryakusuma 1996; Tiwon 1996; Wieringa 2012); and the young female virgin (*gadis* or *perawan*) (Heryanto 1999; Winarnita 2013). Other symbols are more commonly found in popular culture. Among these are the *tante girang* (“sugar mamma”) (Hatley 2008a, b; Winarnita 2014); the conniving stepmother in soap operas; the high school virgin or maiden *perawan* such as in the 2002 popular movie called *Ada Apa dengan Cinta?* or What’s Up with Love? (cf. Hanan 2008); a female ghost commonly appearing in low-budget horror movies (cf. Siddique 2002); martial arts fighting women in fantasy soap operas; women in polygamous marriages such as in the popular 2008 movie called *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* or Verses of Love (cf. Hariyadi 2010 and Widodo 2008) and the 2006 movie *Berbagi Suami* or Sharing a Husband (cf. Kurnia 2009); a rape victim, concubine and prostitute, for example, in the epic Chinese Indonesian movie *Ca Bau Kan* (Budiman 2011; Sen 2007); and the professional, modern women in a genre of literary female pop novels dubbed *Sastrawangi* (Aveling 2007; Budiman 2011). Women in the *Sastrawangi* genre of novels (for example Ayu Utami’s *Saman*, 1998), as well as popular movies such as *Arisan* and *Dewi Ucok*, are depicted in what is perceived to be a lurid fashion: as lesbians and as married women who get away with having affairs.

Sen (2007) argues that although Indonesia now has female directors who make popular films about women’s roles, they may not necessarily revolutionise gender codes. It is only in non-commercial media:

in films, shown to tiny audiences in kine-clubs, cafes and college common rooms, [that] we find everything from the bizarre to the poetic, and the most gut-wrenchingly realistic documentaries on women political prisoners; where one can discover the potential cinema holds for women's emancipation on screen and off (Sen 2007).

Congruent arguments have been made by various scholars (Aveling 2007; Budiman 2011; Imanjaya and Citra 2013) about the *Sastrawangi* novels by female authors. These novels challenged gender and sexuality in the post-*Reformasi* period (1998), depicting women in roles other than “mother” and “wife.” These novels, however, straddle genres; in-between literature and popular fiction. This is even though some titles in this genre have sold copies in equal numbers to that of popular fiction (Aveling 2007). *Sastrawangi*, as well as popular fiction and films, also includes stories of Indonesian *jandas* in places like New York and Melbourne with cosmopolitan lifestyles that challenge historical depictions and earlier stereotypical images of this gendered identity. Compared with literary, state-endorsed, and popular symbolic female stereotypes, the image of the *janda* has obtained far greater significance.

We argue that the links between the pop world and the real world (Mahy et al 2016; Parker and Creese 2016) are difficult to trace exactly, but most likely they reinforce one another. The *janda* image can be found in different expressions of popular culture, including popular literature (see Watson 2023 and Wieringa 2023, this volume) and *dangdut* music lyrics. The *janda* image also crosses time, as shown in media scholar Yusuf's (2020) lists of films and *dangdut* songs with *janda* in the title spanning from the 1950s through to the present day (Yusuf 2020). While the *janda* image certainly has a long history of endurance through Indonesian popular cultural products, our chapter shows that the *janda* image has also evolved more recently to indicate a more cosmopolitan and global aspect that affects this local Indonesian gendered identity construction. We also demonstrate the relational ways that the *janda* figure is posed in contrast to other symbols of femininity in Indonesian pop culture, particularly that of the *ibu* (wife/mother) and the *gadis* (girl/virgin). All translations used in this Chapter are our own.

## 7.2 *Janda* in Film, Literature, and Music

### 7.2.1 *Films*

To analyse the image of the *janda* compared to the honoured *ibu* (wife/mother), two films are first used here. One is a titillating 2011 comedy entitled *Mati Muda di Pelukan Janda* (Dying Young in a Janda's Embrace). The hero is a parentless boy, raised by a transsexual “mother.” At 21, he falls in love with a young widow; the “good *janda*.” Modest and hardworking, she cares for the boy's injured arm. She is, in the young man's words, “beautiful, friendly and good.” The “bad *janda*” is another local woman who has her own roadside food stall, but also entertains men

at her home at night. In fact, she is not a *janda*, but only pretends to be one to attract more clients. The “bad *janda*” falls in love with the hero and uses dirty tricks to attract him. The plot is based on things not being as they seem; the transsexual “fake” mother has the properties of a real mother—loving the child s/he has adopted; the parentless youngster has all the properties of being her real child; the bad *janda* has all the qualities of a real *janda*; the good *janda* will be eventually restored to her rightful status as a wife. Superficially, the movie is light-hearted if not crude; the advertising poster warns that “male virgins are banned from watching” (*perjaka ting ting dilarang nonton*), implying that the movie might arouse such viewers.

A comparatively more recent 2021 comedy-drama film, in *Ali & Ratu Ratu Queens* (Ali & the Queens of Queens), distributed by the globally popular Netflix streaming platform, the Indonesian *janda* are portrayed more subtly and sympathetically. The plot involves 17-year-old Ali travelling from Jakarta to New York in search of his long-lost mother. She had gone to New York many years before to pursue her dreams of becoming a successful singer. In doing so, she split from Ali’s father (who accused her of not being a proper wife and mother for not returning to Indonesia). The early scenes of the film clearly show a young Ali and his father’s domestic struggles without a mother/wife. While in New York, Ali finds refuge in a flat in Queens with four single Indonesian women—at least one of whom is clearly a widow, one mentions having had a string of lovers, while the history of the other two is left unclear. These four women provide Ali with a safe place to stay and emotional support as he reunites with his mother. Ali’s mother eventually appears to find some redemption after initially wanting to hide Ali from her current husband and children, to whom she finally confesses his existence.

The five Indonesian women in New York are juxtaposed in the film with Ali’s aunt in Jakarta—a *jilbab* (veil)-wearing woman of obvious Islamic piety who explicitly disapproves of Ali’s mother’s choices and is visibly unsettled by the freely behaved four “queens of Queens.” Therefore, the contrast with the *Ibu* figure is quite clear in this film. *Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens* is sympathetic, but still contains a juxtaposition of life choices between *ibu* and *janda* figures.

### 7.2.2 *MetroPop Novels*

A different popular culture text are the novels belonging to the ‘MetroPop’ genre. This recently popular literary genre grew out of the international trend in female-focused audiences and narratives. Suri (2013) describes MetroPop as a genre born from the “Chick-Lit” phenomenon in Western literature. With best-sellers such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, Chick-Lit was popular in English-speaking countries from the mid-90s to the early-2000s. By 2003, such titles were also clearing the shelves of Indonesian booksellers. In response, Gramedia, one of Indonesia’s largest publishers and retailers, wanted to promote what it called “MetroPop.”

The first MetroPop novel, *Jodoh Monica* by Alberthiene Endah (2004) was “about a 34-year-old woman, who has a successful career in advertising but encounters difficulties in finding a romantic match” (Suri 2013). MetroPop characters inhabit a cosmopolitan world of malls, cafés, and boutiques, take overseas trips, speak with interspersed English words, have drivers, work in offices and use Blackberry mobile phones (the mobile communications device of choice during the MetroPop years). Such novels soon began to chart the lives of *janda*. Thus, in the novel entitled *Divorciare* by Ika Natassa (2008) the narrator Alex is a divorcée who was educated in Australia. She spends most of her time in malls, offices, or hotels, or being driven between them by her personal driver. She watches American dramas and eats at international franchise outlets. But her life is not perfect. As she reflects, in English, “the dating game is a bit tricky for a divorcée like me,” as she is, “after all a damaged good” [sic.] (Natassa 2008). Although Alex worked hard to prove she could survive independently, she ended up remarrying and “embracing her traditional feminine role as a good wife.” Her storyline depicts her being happier as a married woman than remaining single as a *janda* even with a successful career (Atmaja et. al n.d.).

The MetroPop novel considered most closely here is *Janda-Janda Kosmopolitan* a MetroPop novel Aksana (2010). This narrative was serialised in *Kompas* (a major national newspaper) and then published as a complete novel by Gramedia. The novel’s structure mirrors the popular 1998–2004 US television series *Sex and the City*, based around the romantic lives and struggles of four single professional women in New York. The series frequently portrayed scenes involving a relationship with a man, which is followed by a scene where “the girls” discuss the previous events. The novel *Janda-Janda Kosmopolitan* mirrors this structure. In fact, *Sex and the City* is even mentioned in the novel.

The story centres on a mother called Rossa. A young divorcée in the capital, Jakarta, Rossa owns her own fashion boutique and is raising her daughter. Her two closest friends Inge and Dilla are also *janda*. She hires a new maid Nunung, another *janda*, and a friendship between employer and maid quickly develops. We follow both Rossa and her maid in their search for love. Throughout the novel, their romantic journeys mirror each other. Both Rossa and Nunung did not end up remarrying, as described further in the later section of this chapter, as their *janda* status continues to determine their lives throughout the book and ultimately their failed romances.

### 7.2.3 Dangdut Music

Regarding music, several songs from an Indonesian dance-music genre, *dangdut*, are examined. *Dangdut* is a popular hybrid music form that emerged in the 1970s. It combines rock lead guitar with Indian-style drumming, melodic flutes, disco, violin, and a style of singing vaguely reminiscent of Arabic chanting. The style has evolved over the decades, through the addition of electronic beats (“house” music style) and other effects. Over the years, it has also become more erotic (Bader 2011). In tandem with this evolution, the lyrics, initially heavily pious and Islamic, became

increasingly sensual. In live performances, especially those played in the villages, female singers often wear sexy clothes and perform provocative dance moves while young men dance (*joget*). In the early-to mid-2000s, a *dangdut* singer named Inul Daratista attracted a lot of attention for her “fast gyrating of the hips and bottom in a sensual way” (Bader 2011, p. 342). In particular, she was associated with a move known as the *ngebor*, which resembled a bore or a drill, causing a sensation dubbed “Inulmania.” Some Muslim clerics denounced Inul’s performances. The King of *Dangdut*, the man who played a large role in the development of *dangdut*, Rhoma Irama, apparently issued a religious ruling against Inul (Bader 2009). The scandal of Inul, along with the publication of Indonesian Playboy, is thought to have been a driving force behind the proposed Anti-pornography Law of the mid-2000s, which was eventually passed in 2008, and upheld by the Constitutional Court in 2010.

*Dangdut* has an ambiguous status in Indonesian popular culture. The back cover of *Janda-Janda Kosmopolitan* carries a blurb indicating this ambiguity: “Can two worlds be united? Boss and maid? City and village? Pop and *dangdut*?” These cultural dichotomies epitomise the idea of *dangdut* being a village (and hence lower-class), rural, music form. Although the genre seems to have attained mainstream acceptance as an Indonesian national music genre, many Indonesians find its often overt sexuality difficult to reconcile with their religious perspective (Bader 2011; Pioquinto 1995; Weintraub 2006; Winarnita 2011). For some fundamentalists and modernists, the sexual element to *dangdut* is offensive to Islam, while many non-Muslims consider *dangdut* to be music specifically for Muslims (Weintraub 2006; Pioquinto 1995).

Several *dangdut* songs are analysed here. Two share the same title, “*Nasib Janda*.” To differentiate for the purposes of this paper, one is translated as “Fate of the *Janda*” and the other as “The *Janda*’s Fate.” Another song is simply called “*Janda*.” This, apparently, was based on an earlier song “*Duda*” (widower/divorcé), in which the speaker, a widower who has just lost his wife, bemoans the difficulties of his life. This was re-released as a song called *Janda*, performed by a female singer narrating as a widow, and it became wildly popular. These and the other *dangdut* songs examined for this chapter are considered to be among the classics of the genre. As in the novels and the films discussed previously, in these songs, humour underlies this apparently serious topic. However, this humour-in-severity is, for the most part, heavily dependent on context and thus difficult to convey to people unfamiliar with the cultural context. Nevertheless, it is through these popular media examples that we can analyse the image of the *janda*.

### 7.3 The *Janda* Symbol in Popular Culture

To understand what the *janda* represents in the symbolic world of popular culture, we might first consider how the *janda* is inevitably understood in relation to two other female images—the virgin/maiden and the wife/mother. Once a female child reaches puberty, she should become the shy and retiring object of desire, that is, the *gadis*. *Gadis* means “girl” or “maiden,” although sometimes the word *perawan*,

which means literally “virgin,” is used to refer to her. Generally, the *gadis* is portrayed as being modest and guarding her virginity, although she might flirt with the local boys and might fall in love with one. The *gadis* must secure a husband quickly. If she is already in her mid-twenties and not married, she clearly is not attractive and “*tidak laku*” (an expression used to describe, among other things, produce which does not sell at the market). If she waits much longer, she will become a *perawan tua* (old virgin). This is perhaps the worst fate of all. A *janda* is pitied, but at least she was once an *ibu*. Ideally, the *gadis* will marry young, thus transforming her into the ultimate ideal of femininity, the *ibu*, the devoted mother and loyal wife.

The *ibu* is portrayed as soft and gentle, devoted, and affectionate. They work hard at keeping their family together and raising their children, all for the good of the entire Indonesian nation (Suryakusuma 1996). Marriage is the ticket to adulthood, but, for a woman, adulthood (and, in a sense, civic life) should be limited to being a wife and mother. The *ibu* is sexualised, but only in a limited sense. Her sexuality is creative (making a family) and binding (keeping her husband loyal). The *ibu* is desirable to her husband, but absolutely not to anyone else. The only exceptions are some soap operas, in which a woman who is apparently an *ibu* commits adultery, and is discovered, with the result that the family unit is torn apart with devastating consequences, and she becomes a *janda* through divorce.

Some narratives in pop culture depict *janda* as being desirable and beautiful, especially if her husband died or left her while she was still a “young *janda*” (*janda muda*), sometimes referred to as “flower *janda*” (*janda kembang*). Here “flower” implies beauty. This symbol of the desirable *janda*—the topic of this chapter—is to be distinguished from older, undesirable *janda*. For example, in the *dangdut* song “The *Janda*’s Fate,” the singer laments:

What’s worse is if the *janda* is still young,

Many come to tempt her,

And what’s strange is that those who tempt,

Do it just to satisfy their *nafsu* (lust).

If the *janda* is lucky, she will be saved from this clearly forlorn state; an honest man with good intentions will marry her, perhaps as a second wife, and will undoubtedly receive heavenly rewards (*pahala*) for his generosity.

We thus have three sexualised female categories: *gadis*, *ibu*, and *janda*, which indicate availability to nobody, availability only to their husband, and availability to everybody, respectively. Accordingly, a woman should either be an unmarried virgin (property of the family), or a married non-virgin (property of the husband). The *janda* symbol does not fit into these established categories.

Being female and being no longer married carries a stigma that is not shared by males in the same situation. In comparison, the stud–slut distinction in English cultures reflects the idea that a male who is sexually promiscuous is more positively valued than a female engaging in the same practices (Flood 2013, p. 97; Holland et al. 1996). Similarly, for ostensibly possessing the same characteristics,

the *janda* is subject to disapproval where a *duda* is not. For instance, the narrator in the novel *Divortiare* observes, “While ‘cool *duda*’ sounds really cool, ‘*janda kembang*’ actually sounds really deprecating” (Natassa 2008). We also see this double standard in the novel *Janda-Janda Kosmopolitan*. As a friend of the heroine reflects:

‘If a *janda* has children, her status is even more embarrassing (*memalukan*)!’ hissed Inge fiercely. ‘Yet if a *duda* has children he will be worshipped. He’ll be considered as a responsible man, who shoulders his children’s fate. He’ll even be called a gentleman because he has a heart and morals (Aksana 2010, pp. 255–256).

The mention of “worship” might be exaggerated here, but it is an otherwise accurate appraisal of the symbolism of *duda* in contrast to *janda*. To summarise, each female symbol is defined primarily by its relationship to and distinction from other female symbols; the main distinction between these symbols being the level of sexual availability to men. Of these sexualised stages, a *gadis* is sexually unavailable, an *ibu* is only available to her husband and a *janda* is available for extra-marital sex. The *janda* is sexualised because she is presumed to be available to all men. Unique ideas of desire and fate contextualise these symbols, as discussed in the following sections.

### 7.3.1 *Desire (Nafsu)*

*Janda* must be understood in terms of *nafsu* as it is construed in Indonesian popular culture. *Nafsu* can be glossed as desire or lust, particularly for food, drink, and sex. *Nafsu* is essential. Without hunger (*nafsu* for food), we would not eat. Without thirst, we would not drink. Without sexual desire, men would not marry a *gadis* and produce children. Moreover, in Indonesian pop culture, to be lacking desire (“*kurang nafsu*”) is a lamentable state—it usually means that you do not want to have sex but could also imply you do not want to eat, sleep, or do anything that is useful to existence and procreation. Desire, therefore, sustains existence.

It is commonly interpreted that “God gives us desire,” but “we must control it,” because as useful and good as desire is, it can also be dangerous. The danger is that it can lead to sin: in particular, sex outside of marriage. So *nafsu* needs to be directed. The wife bears responsibility for directing her husband’s desire. The *ibu* (the ads for herbal treatments remind us) must maintain her husband’s sexual interest and must be concerned with serving and pleasing him. This stops healthy desire leading him to sin, most likely in the form of contact with a *janda*. If the husband loses interest in the wife and divorces her (or he dies) the *ibu* herself will become a *janda*.

Once a *janda*, she becomes the object of other men’s desire. Sex with a woman outside of marriage is a great sin (*dosa*). Sex with a *janda* constitutes, if not a loophole to the rule, at least not as grave a sin. After all, the *janda* was once married, so she is not a *gadis*; and she is not anybody’s wife, so she is not an *ibu*. The implied reasoning here is not thoroughly convincing, but it at least allows for sufficient ambiguity to permit the expression of desire.

However, the *janda* is not only the object of desire, but she also possesses ample *nafsu* herself. In *Janda-Janda Kosmopolitan*, the *janda* characters have desires which stem from their loneliness. One of the heroine's friends, a *janda* called Dilla, is caught in bed with the heroine's boyfriend. The narrator describes:

Dilla's body was shaking because she felt in the wrong 'I'm just a normal woman...' she sighed hoarsely, 'who needs to be close, who needs to be touched...by a man...I'm lonely...there aren't any women who are steadfast enough to live alone, there aren't any women who can live without a man' (Aksana 2010, p. 417).

The likely majority female readers are supposed to pity her, while a heterosexual male reader may be aroused.

Desire stemming from loneliness is also apparent in the *dangdut* song "*Janda*." The singer addresses a man who is seducing her. "I can't resist, please leave me be... [so I can] avoid the temptation of Satan," she sings, "I'm only a human without strength." Thus, when she sings about their desire to "pour it out," with reference to the feeling of "longing and love," the significance is not lost on the audience. She is lascivious and immodest in spite of herself; she cannot control her natural desire. Thus, the *janda* is both desired and desiring.

### 7.3.2 Fate (Nasib)

We also cannot understand the *janda* symbol without relating it to *nasib* (fate). *Nasib* is a powerful explanatory tool in Indonesian culture. "*Nasib*," Hay suggests, "indicates that God indeed dictated the event to turn out as it did...It does not place blame on others [or anyone for that matter, and] ...is used to explain a negative event, not a positive one" (Hay 2005, p. 35). If a woman's husband dies or leaves her, in Indonesian pop culture, blame or responsibility seems muted, one says it is *nasib* or rather her bad fate (*nasib buruk*). The actions of the *janda* might be no better or worse than the *ibu*. What matters is *nasib*—if it is bad, an *ibu* becomes a *janda*.

This relates to a crucial semantic point. While English language, for example, distinguishes between widow and divorcee, Indonesian language possesses no such distinction. In English culture, unless she murdered her husband, a woman has no say in whether she becomes a widow. If she becomes a divorcee, she may have had a role. In Indonesian language and pop culture, however, the woman's actions and motivations are of secondary concern, if not wholly irrelevant. What is relevant is her fate.

The idea of fate recurs in *dangdut* representations of *janda*. In the song "Fate of the *Janda*" the singer reflects:

Hey, everything's messed up if you're a *janda*...

The fate (*nasib*), yes the fate (*nasib*),

This is the fate (*nasib*) of a *janda*.

Aside from “*nasib*,” the word “*takdir*” also denotes fate. In the song “*Janda*,” the singer relates that she was “fated (“*ditakdirkan*”) to become a *janda*.” The song lyrics of “Young *Janda*” take a similar line on being a *janda*; “That’s the Almighty’s fate (*takdir*) for me.”

This is what makes her a threat to the *ibu* and the harmonious family ideal: she has been fated to both attract, and be attracted to men, including those who are married. This is through no fault of the *janda*; unlike the idealised Western damsel, God has equipped her with a healthy sexual appetite. But since her husband has left her (possibly for another *janda*) just as she was getting accustomed to fulfilling her ample desire, now she is left hungry and single, so she cannot really be blamed, only pitied and desired. Similarly, the husband cannot be blamed for his desires or actions either. So, as much as the *ibu* is the cornerstone of the nation’s moral health, the *janda* represents a threat to it.

### 7.3.3 *The Janda as a Threat*

The threat posed by a *janda* to other women is portrayed in the song “Drunk on *Janda*.” The singer, an *ibu*, recounts:

The signs are clear; my husband is drunk on *janda*,  
 He forgets to give me affection,  
 Seduced by *janda kembang* (a young, beautiful *janda*),  
 Makes his wife miserable.

The singer/wife in “Drunk on *Janda*” may complain about her husband succumbing, but it is implied that she should also accept that it is natural that he should. In this song, no one is to blame really. In any case, underneath the superficial lamentations (the wife complaining she is “miserable”) the song is really about the pleasures of gambling and canoodling. A Youtube clip available at the time of writing<sup>1</sup> shows young male dancers enjoying this song too much and the usual brawl that accompanies live *dangdut* performances eventuating.

This idea of *janda* as a threat is ostensibly criticised in the novel *Janda-Janda Kosmopolitan*. Two women, Sisil and Siti, disagree about the *janda* maid, Nunung. Sisil asserts:

A rebel like her can destroy national morality.  
 How could it be that Nunung would destroy the nation?’ asked Siti ingenuously. ‘Nunung said she was a *janda*, she didn’t cover it up.  
 If you know about it, why are you defending her?’ Sisil continued pointedly. ‘Just be careful she doesn’t take your man!’ (Aksana 2010, p. 372).

Although the author, Andrei Aksana, is ostensibly defending *janda* from such aspersions, in fact he ends up reinforcing the stereotype.

### 7.3.4 *Shame*

According to the popular culture portrayals, for being the seductress and for being both lonely and desired, God has fated that the *janda* naturally occupies a low status. For this, the *janda* should feel ashamed. We see this *dangdut* in *dangdut* song lyrics. In “*Gadis or Janda*,” the male seducer/singer asks:

Are you a *gadis* or a *janda*?

Just tell me, don't be embarrassed.

Of course, the seducer expects that she might be a *janda* and would be embarrassed to have this known. Similarly in “*The Fate of the Janda*”, the woman singer bemoans, “It's the most difficult thing being a *janda*, because many guys look down on you.” And in “*Janda 7 Times*” the singer presents a figure of a seven-time divorced woman in pitiable terms—most recently she was fooled by a sweet-talking man who left her. At the same time, she remarks “I'm ashamed (...) of becoming a *janda* again.” Low status and shame go together for the *janda*.

As if to underscore the ignominy of *janda*, a male who is divorced or widowed (a *duda*), does not carry the same shameful status. We see this when the *janda* characters in *Janda-Janda Kosmopolitan* reflect on their status at multiple moments within the novel:

In the eyes of men, *janda* are like second hand goods...there isn't anyone who wants to marry a *janda*.

*Janda* aren't appropriate for marriage...' muttered Rossa sadly. 'Because we are not of the same level...

'Divorced women are considered incapable, considered to be failed wives...' added Dilla...

'If an unmarried man wants to marry a *janda*, his family will oppose it no end,' responded Inge excitedly. 'Let alone the sneering community. They will think it was the *janda* who tempted him.'

'It's different for a *duda*,' continued an exasperated Dilla. 'The community will care for them. [He'll] be considered a victim because he's been betrayed and neglected.'

If the *janda* has a child, her status will be even more embarrassing.

'An unmarried young man marrying a *janda* is considered a scandal,' Dilla reflected angrily. 'But a *duda* can easily marry any unmarried lady!'

'We have to rid the community of this spectre!'' was Inge's passionate cry. 'We have to show that becoming a *janda* is respectable.'

'Women should be proud to be a *janda*,' sighed Rossa, confused. 'Look at us. We have the means to provide ourselves with a living...'

'We can exist without men,' continued Dilla with conviction. 'We can make our own decisions to get on top of life.' (Aksana 2010, pp. 255–257).

These *janda* in *Janda-Janda Kosmopolitan* are portrayed as constantly struggling with the stigma of their status.

The shame of being a *janda* is reinforced in the plot of the novel. The heroine, Rossa, has been dating Marco, but concealing her status as a *janda*. When Rossa finally reveals that she has a child, Marco rejects her, not ostensibly because she has a child, but rather because she has obviously been previously married. Her two friends, Dilla and Inge, talk it over. “Maybe Rossa didn’t have the heart to hurt Marco by telling him [earlier] about her status [as a *janda*],” says Dilla defending Rossa. Inge is more pointed: “That’s the peril (*risiko*) of being a *janda*” (Aksana 2010, p. 246). In other words, if the man finds out, he might leave the *janda*, so the *janda* tries to hide the fact. But then when the man does find out, he is aghast that he was not told earlier. As the narrator reflects: “Rossa’s experience did not just hurt Rossa, but also made Inge and Dilla aware, as *janda*, how much *janda* have been marginalised” (Aksana 2010).

### 7.3.5 Redeemed by Men

Redemption through marriage is promised in *Janda-Janda Kosmopolitan*. Initially, it seems that the maid, Nunung (Nung), is fortunate. When she confesses “I’m a *janda*,” Karim, a very charitable fellow, says, “I...I accept you, Nung... whoever you are” (Aksana 2010, p. 181). This is consistent with the author’s portrayal of Karim as a good man: just as he helps his fellow Indonesian workers in Jeddah, so he proposes to Nung, a *janda*. It makes the story even more romantic that even though she is a *janda*, Karim will nonetheless accept her. After the proposal, Rossa states to her, “it’s a shame to be a *janda* ...but the main thing is that you have passed this test. You’ll get back your whole [*utuh*] status as a woman with a husband” (Aksana 2010, p. 127). However, Karim, it turns out, wants her to be his polygamous second wife. Rejecting this proposal, she is back where she started—a pitiable *janda*.

A similar play on the idea of shame and redemption emerges in the film *Mati Muda di Pelukan Janda* (Dying Young in a Janda’s Embrace) (EduNitas 2011). The good *janda* asks the young man, “Aren’t you embarrassed (*malu*) to go out with me? I’m a *janda*.” He responds, “For me, the status isn’t important, whether you’re a *janda*, whether you’re a maiden, the important thing is that you’re not a criminal suspect or an accused person.” This is, of course, exactly what she is—but what makes the scene romantic is that he denies it, and the next moment he kisses her.

### 7.3.6 Pretext

Depictions of *janda* often operate on the pretext of defending *janda* from scurrilous rumours, entreating the audience not to believe the stereotype. In other words, they take the line that owing to their loneliness and insatiable appetite for sex many

*janda* threaten other women's husbands' fidelity, but there are some exceptions. This reinforces the stereotype. What makes this even more pleasing, from a local male heterosexual perspective, is that when female *dangdut* singers perform live, and entreat people to not believe that *janda* are sexually voracious, they cavort and canoodle with male audience members on stage. Music industry releases for these songs are also highly sexual, although not to the point of simulating sex, which one might find at a circumcision or wedding ceremony in the villages. If the audience takes the songs seriously, these performances will appear to mock the women in the real world who are labelled "*janda*."

We see this pretext of concern in many forms. In "*Fate of the Janda*," the singer reflects:

Hey, *janda* are indeed lonely,

But don't suppose that they are cheap women...

The singer thus affirms one part of the stereotype, their loneliness, in order to negate another—their availability for free or cheap sex. Similarly, in "*Young Janda*," the singer poses a rhetorical question, regarding *janda*, to the listener:

Is what they say true?

Don't you believe it,

Maybe there are *janda* like that,

But I've never felt like that...

Again, this concedes the possibility of the existence of *janda* such as has been described.

The *janda* themselves are portrayed as taking advantage of that pity. In a 2013 film *Dying Young in a Janda's Embrace*, the "bad *janda*" attempts to woo the hero, Mat, telling him: "my status is *janda*. Frequently people flirt with me Mat. I'm a lonely, downtrodden woman." This gets to the heart of the matter. The concern for the *janda* and their pitiable status is used as a pretext (for *janda* and those men who chase them) for desire.

But possibly the greatest exponent of this pretext occurs at the end of movie. After 80 min of close-up shots of breasts, with animal sound effects to boot, at its end the following important reminder is written on a blank screen:

Don't presuppose that a *janda* is something negative. There are many *janda* who maintain honesty and virtue.

One would never say "there are many *ibu* who maintain honesty and virtue" because that would imply that some *ibu* do not. However, for a *janda*, the point is always that "even though she is a *janda* she might still be a good person." The movie's final words thus reinforce the stereotype under the pretext of challenging it.

Desire is also dressed up as pity in the *dangdut* song, *Janda 7 Times*. The singer states she has been "fooled" by sweet-talk and is now "ashamed" (*malu diri*) about becoming a *janda* for the seventh time. What makes this sexually arousing is that it

implies that seven men have managed to trick her, and “have their way with her”. She thus cuts a pitiable, but tantalising, figure. The male listener is encouraged to feel desire as much as pity in songs like *Janda 7 Times*. Here the speaker bemoans her fate as her husband died only a month into their marriage. The *janda* pleads to God to save her from a temptation to which we suspect she will succumb. This is supposed to evoke pity (*kasihan*). Under the convenient disguise of sympathising with the woman who is struggling to resist temptation, the heterosexual desire of men is heightened.

For the *dangdut* singers, the movie producers, the Metropop authors, their respective audiences, the treatment, and fate of *janda* is pitiable. It is a common perception that these women must deal with the prejudice as well, making things unenviably worse. Almost everyone agrees that the *janda* suffers, yet so pervasive and gripping is the image that no one seems to get past the stereotype. So, the attitude towards the *janda*—the way people bemoan her fate—represents an element of the emotional repertoire of contemporary Indonesians, in as much as they are engaged in popular culture.

### 7.3.7 *The Janda of the Cosmopolitan World*

The *janda* image in Indonesia’s popular culture, while it largely retains the deeply ingrained aspects described above, nevertheless has also evolved to some extent in interaction with cosmopolitan identity and lifestyles. Most notably, we see this in the “MetroPop” novel *Janda-Janda Kosmopolitan* which as noted above was inspired by the *Sex & the City* popular TV show based in New York, the novel *Divortaire* and its sequels *Twivortiare* (one & two) set in the “cosmopolitan centres” of Jakarta and New York, as well as in the film *Ali & Ratu Ratu Queens* which was set in New York itself. Two American scholars of the Indonesian *Sastrawangi* novels, Sears (2007) and Bodden (2016) traced a cosmopolitan presentation of Indonesian female sexuality through the story of four women who went to New York in Ayu Utami’s ground-breaking internationally acclaimed novels *Saman* and *Larung*. But what do they mean by “cosmopolitanism” and how does this differ from the depiction of *Janda-Janda Kosmopolitans*? Sears saw the women in Ayu Utami’s novels, none of whom are *jandas* but are either *ibu* (wife/mother) or a virgin, though they took part in transgressive sexuality, specifically “inhabiting a Kantian subjectivity through their ability to travel, move between Indonesia and New York and exists beyond the nation.” (Sears 2007, p. 61–62). Bodden (2016, p. 426) however analysed cosmopolitanism beyond just ideas of being a “citizen of the world” that is feeling at home in Jakarta or New York but also about the tension between the universal ideal of rights and the local struggle for democracy. He also argues that cosmopolitanism exists in the juxtaposition of temporal spaces of global urban and rural local inherent in Ayu Utami’s storyline set in the late 1990s during Indonesia’s struggle for democracy against the authoritarian Suharto regime.

*Janda-Janda Kosmopolitan* a MetroPop novel (Aksana 2010) also juxtaposes the urban-rural spaces through the story of *jandas* Rossa, Inge and Dilla who live in Jakarta, a city that is portrayed as worldly, international, and global in outlook and Rossa's *janda* maid Nunung who comes from the village yet is able to have an open mind and helps Rossa who is also a mother with her street smart. The genre itself as "metro" speaks to this very cosmopolitan tension of women who may have a gendered identity as a *janda* but living an economically independent metro urban and worldly cosmopolitan lifestyle, even as a rebel *janda* maid from the village, seeking true love. The MetroPop novel *Divortiare* is argued as having a cosmopolitan worldview in its Latin title for divorce, and its sequels *Twivortiare*'s connection with the global social media (Arimbi 2017). She also argues that the urban metro setting of Jakarta and New York where the main character Alex and her husband Beno, whom she was remarried to later in the series, visited to evoke their illusory romantic feelings is a specifically middle upper-class space. Quoting Homi Bhabha, Arimbi further argues that these MetroPop novels should also be read as a critique of cosmopolitan spaces that represent a "separation of totalised culture, unsullied by intertextuality of historical location, utopianism of a mythic memory of unique collective identity" (Arimbi 2017, p. 252). In other words, these urban metro centres are a mythical city for the privileged section of society and an object of aspiration to those who aspire to live the cosmopolitan dream.

The movie 2021 film *Ali & Ratu Ratu Queens* also caters to the middle upper-class audience with a storyline about Ali's mother, who travels to New York to launch her international singing career but became a *janda*, divorced for choosing this cosmopolitan lifestyle over returning home to her husband and child in Indonesia. The four other Indonesian women who took care of Ali in his journey to New York in search of his mother, some of whom are *jandas*, also struggle on in a city that Bodden calls the "space of the cosmopolitan" (Bodden 2016, p. 428), where their dream of opening up an Indonesian restaurant will be achieved. In a global-local way, their national identity as Indonesian is what enables them to become internationally successful in New York. It is also in this "space of the cosmopolitan" (Bodden 2016, p. 428) that Ali's mother come to terms with her *janda* status and was able to have a second chance at a successful new life (with an American husband and daughter) free from the associated stigma of being a *janda* back in Indonesia, and eventually redeemed herself as a mother to Ali.

## 7.4 Conclusion

In summary, the *janda* of Indonesian popular culture must be understood in relation to other important symbols of femininity—the mother (*ibu*) and the maiden (*gadis*). The three could also be seen as potential stages in a woman's life span, defined in terms of masculine desire. The stereotyped *janda* image can also be understood as occupying a shamefully low status, fated by God to desire and be desired by men.

Because of this, she is a threat to the *ibu* and thus to the cohesion of the family. The heterosexual male is expected to gaze at her with desire dressed up as pity.

The object of this chapter was to initially describe how the image of the *janda* had become the object of male heterosexual desire in popular culture. However, like all symbols, it dominates our imagination and perception. We fit reality into these pre-existing categories. This means women are perceived according to these a priori categories. Indeed, millions of real-life women who are without a husband, either through divorce or death, contend with this popular image; a challenge which might be equal to or above the other challenges they might face in real life. Nevertheless, the *janda* image has evolved over time through popular culture to include a more cosmopolitan and global outlook to this local discourse of Indonesian gendered identity construction.

## Note

1. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6zH0t9sEUE>> (at 2:45).

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