



A SOCIOLOGY OF LITERATURE STUDY ON RONGGENG DUKUH PARUK AND THE DONBRET-SINTREN TRADITION OF ERETAN: PATRIARCHAL HEGEMONY, SACREDNESS, AND CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION

STUDI SOSIOLOGI SASTRA TERHADAP RONGGENG DUKUH PARUK DAN TRADISI DONBRET-SINTREN ERETAN: HEGEMONI PATRIARKAL, KESAKRALAN, DAN KOMODIFIKASI BUDAYA

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Abstract

Traditional performing arts along the northern coast of Java often place female performers at the complex intersection of spiritual sacredness, patriarchal control, and modern economic commodification. This study aims to analyze the social realities, gender power dynamics, and cultural transformations represented in Ahmad Tohari's novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (RDP) in direct comparison with the empirical practices of Donbret and Sintren arts in Eretan, Indramayu. Utilizing a sociology of literature framework combined with feminist culture and political economy theories, this research investigates the persistence of animistic beliefs, mechanisms of patriarchal hegemony, and the erosion of sacredness due to commercialization. Data were collected through textual hermeneutics, in-depth ethnographic field observations, interviews with local cultural custodians, and socio-structural analytical methods. The findings reveal that while both the literary text and the living traditions share an ancestral lineage in animistic rituals where the female body functions as a sacred medium for ancestral spirits (*indang*), contemporary socio-economic pressures have significantly altered these structures. The sacred status of female performers is systematically degraded into an object of eroticism, saweran transactions, and male control. This paper emphasizes the vulnerability of traditional female-centered performing arts amidst societal transformation and commercialization.

Keywords : Sociology of Literature, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, Donbret, Sintren, Patriarchal Hegemony, Cultural Commodification.



Abstrak

Seni pertunjukan tradisional di pesisir utara Jawa sering kali menempatkan penampil perempuan pada titik temu yang kompleks antara kesakralan spiritual, kendali patriarkis, dan komodifikasi ekonomi modern. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis realitas sosial, dinamika kekuasaan gender, dan transformasi budaya yang digambarkan dalam novel Ahmad Tohari, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (RDP), dengan membandingkannya secara langsung terhadap praktik empiris seni Donbret dan Sintren di Eretan, Indramayu. Dengan menggunakan kerangka kerja sosiologi sastra yang dipadukan dengan teori budaya feminis dan ekonomi politik, penelitian ini mengkaji persistensi kepercayaan animistik, mekanisme hegemoni patriarkis, serta terkikisnya kesakralan akibat komersialisasi. Data dikumpulkan melalui hermeneutika tekstual, observasi lapangan etnografis yang mendalam, wawancara dengan para penjaga budaya setempat, dan metode analisis sosio-struktural. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun teks sastra maupun tradisi yang masih hidup tersebut memiliki akar yang sama dalam ritual animistik—di mana tubuh perempuan berfungsi sebagai medium sakral bagi roh leluhur (indang)—tekanan sosial-ekonomi kontemporer telah mengubah struktur-struktur tersebut secara signifikan. Status sakral penampil perempuan secara sistematis terdegradasi menjadi objek erotisme, transaksi saweran, dan kendali laki-laki. Tulisan ini menyoroti kerentanan seni pertunjukan tradisional yang berpusat pada perempuan di tengah transformasi masyarakat dan komersialisasi.

Kata Kunci : Sosiologi Sastra, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, Donbret, Sintren, Hegemoni Patriarki, Komodifikasi Budaya.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary works serve as interpretive reflections of societal structures, social norms, and the dynamics of power relations that develop within their respective eras (Wiyatmi, 2021). Within the framework of the sociology of literature, a fictional text is never isolated from the socio-historical environment of its creator; it functions as a social document that both reflects and critiques objective phenomena in the real world (Damono, 2021; Ratna, 2021). One socio-cultural aspect particularly laden with aesthetic complexity, mystical dimensions, and gender equality dilemmas in Java is the tradition of performing arts centered on the female body, such as *Ronggeng*, *Sintren*, and *Donbret* (Rokhmansyah, 2021).

In the treasury of Indonesian literature, Ahmad Tohari's novel trilogy *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (RDP) stands as an important monument that profoundly records how the *ronggeng* institution plays a central role in driving the economy, spirituality, and social order of the impoverished agrarian community of Dukuh Paruk. On the other hand, in the empirical reality of the coastal community of Eretan, Indramayu Regency, the performing traditions of *Sintren* and *Donbret* continue to endure as manifestations of folk art possessing structural-functional similarities, animistic values, and interaction patterns comparable to those depicted in the RDP novel. Both the fictional RDP novel and the factual traditions in Eretan consistently position the female dancer as the centerpiece of the performance.

Although in spiritual-mystical terms, female dancers such as *Srintil* in RDP and the *Sintren* dancers of Eretan are revered as mediums connecting with the supernatural realm, bearers of blessings, and symbols of animistic fertility, there exists a troubling social paradox (Nuryantiningsih & Prasetyo, 2022). These female performing artists find themselves trapped within circles of gender subordination, economic exploitation by capital owners or shamans, and condemned by the dual moral stigma imposed by their communities (Fakih, 2022; Walby, 2021).

This study focuses on a Sociology of Literature analysis to dissect and compare the representation of *ronggeng* in the novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* with the empirical performances of *Donbret* and *Sintren* in Eretan, Indramayu. The novelty of this research lies in its cross-media comparison (fictional text and living cultural practice) examined through three theoretical axes: (1)



the transformation of animistic sacredness and bodily sanctity; (2) patriarchal hegemony and female subordination; and (3) the shift from ritual values toward economic commodification amid the pressures of modernization.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-comparative design grounded in the Sociology of Literature framework (Endraswara, 2021; Ratna, 2021). This approach enables the researcher to treat literary works as social mirrors that are critically correlated with ethnographic facts in the field.

Research data were collected from two primary sources:

Textual Data (Literary): Narrative segments, character dialogues, and socio-cultural setting descriptions from Ahmad Tohari's novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* that represent belief systems, power structures, and the fate of the female dancer character (Srintil).

Empirical Data (Cultural-Ethnographic): Transcriptions of in-depth interviews with art practitioners, cultural custodians, and former Sintren/Donbret dancers in Eretan Village, Indramayu, along with documentation from direct observations of rituals and performances in the field.

Data collection was conducted through textual hermeneutics, participant observation, and content analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2020). Data analysis followed three systematic stages: data reduction, data presentation in the form of theoretical matrices and figures, and conclusion drawing based on patriarchal feminism theory (Tong, 2022) and cultural commodification theory (Mosco, 2021).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Animistic Belief Systems and the Sacredness of the Dancer's Body

The historical roots binding the ronggeng performing tradition in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (RDP) and the Sintren-Donbret tradition in Eretan lie in an intensely pervasive animistic-dynamistic belief system. In the worldview of traditional communities, the female dancer's body is not merely a biological or aesthetic entity but rather a connecting medium (vessel) between the profane world of humans and the sacred world of ancestral spirits (Supriatin, 2022). The dancer's body undergoes a transfiguration of meaning, whereby the boundaries of individuality are dissolved to become a collective vessel for supernatural forces that safeguard the community's social order.

In the novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, a woman's legitimation as an authentic ronggeng is not based on technical dancing prowess or physical beauty alone, but rather on the presence of an indang subtle spirit that enters and mystically selects the dancer's body. The indang is regarded as a metaphysical entity that chooses its host randomly yet absolutely. When Srintil becomes possessed by the indang, the entire population of Dukuh Paruk venerates her as a manifestation of the blessings of Ki Secamenggala, their ancestor and spiritual guardian. Srintil's presence is perceived as a guarantor of safety, soil fertility, a ward against calamity, and the survival of the entire community. Srintil's bodily existence no longer belongs to herself but transforms into communal property sanctified through various customary rites. In the Sintren ritual, a virgin girl who is still pure is tightly bound with ropes or chains and placed inside a chicken cage covered with dark cloth. After the dalang (puppet master) burns incense and chants magical invocations (spirit-summoning mantras), the dancer enters a state of trance (possession by the Sintren spirit, such as Dewi Lasiya). Supernaturally, the dancer is able to release the complex bindings inside the dark cage and emerges already fully adorned in costume and wearing the characteristic Sintren dark sunglasses. The arrival of the Sintren spirit symbolizes purity, spiritual protection, and blessings for the coastal community of Eretan.

This procession affirms that virginity and physical purity of the dancer constitute absolute prerequisites for communication with the supernatural realm to be established. Both Srintil in RDP and the Sintren dancers in Eretan position the female body as a means of spiritual negotiation between the human community and the transcendental entities governing the universe.



2. Patriarchal Hegemony and Gender Subordination

Behind the veil of spiritual veneration and animistic sacredness lies the bitter reality of patriarchal hegemony that grips the lives of female dancers (Sugihastuti & Saptiao, 2021; Walby, 2021). In both the literary text of RDP and the field reality in Eretan, the female body is systematically controlled, transacted, and dominated by male authorities (shamans, dalang, traditional leaders, or pengibing audience members) for material gain and symbolic dominance. The hierarchy of power relations places women at the lowest and most vulnerable position. In RDP, patriarchal hegemony reaches its cruelest recital through the Bukak Klambu tradition (Prabasmara & Setiawan, 2023). Before Srintil is officially recognized as a legitimate adult ronggeng, her biological virginity is auctioned to the man willing to pay the highest material price in gold ringgit. The Ronggeng Shaman (Kertareja) acts as a commercialization agent who exploits Srintil's reproductive organs and virginity for personal economic gain and the elevation of Dukuh Paruk's social prestige. In this regard, Srintil's agency over her own body is entirely stripped away in the name of adherence to customs that are, in essence, constructed by patriarchal interests.

A parallel condition occurs in Donbret performances in Eretan (Rahman & Indriani, 2022). Donbret is a profane adaptation of coastal ronggeng that heavily relies on physical interaction with male audience members (pengibing). In the saweran ritual, dancers are required to perform erotically, respond to vocal provocations, and allow sensitive areas of their bodies to be touched by pengibing in exchange for rupiah banknotes. Female dancers are trapped in a dilemmatic vicious cycle: they are forced to sell eroticism and bodily beauty to survive amid the structural poverty of coastal areas, yet at the same time, the community that enjoys these performances accuses them of being immoral women, home wreckers, and husband seducers. This gender subordination demonstrates how social structures exploit women's economic powerlessness to commodify their femininity while simultaneously branding them with permanent social stigma.

3. Structural and Socio-Economic Comparative Matrix

To provide a comprehensive, structured, and in-depth overview, Table 1 presents a comparative matrix between the novel Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk and the Sintren-Donbret tradition in Eretan based on parameters of sociology of literature analysis and the empirical reality of society.

Table 1. Sociology of Literature Comparative Matrix: RDP vs. Donbret and Sintren Eretan Traditions

Analysis Indicator	Novel Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk (Literary Text)	Sintren & Donbret Eretan Traditions (Empirical Reality)
Belief Roots	Animism-dynamism; veneration of the spirit of Ki Secamenggala as the ancestral guardian of Dukuh Paruk.	Coastal animistic rituals; use of mantras, incense burning, and spirit invocation (Dewi Lasiya) in Sintren performances.
Initiation Ritual	Bukak Klambu ceremony (auction of the dancer's virginity to the highest bidder as a condition for becoming an official ronggeng).	Chicken cage ritual, rope/chain binding, and trance-inducing incense burning to summon the Sintren spirit into a virgin dancer.
Gender Role & Status	Revered as a sacred medium and village protector, yet controlled by the Ronggeng Shaman (Kertareja) and male patrons.	Sintren dancers are considered sacred and respected; Donbret dancers are viewed as low-class erotic entertainers.
Economic Mechanism	Traditional reward system (rice, livestock, gold)	Direct saweran (tip) transactions from male



	controlled by the shaman and traditional elders.	audience members during performances; income shared with the art group manager.
Forms of Commodification	Ronggeng used as a political propaganda tool by certain factions exploiting the villagers' naivety.	Desacralization of Sintren's magical rituals into commercialized Donbret entertainment with dangdut music and erotic performances.
Social Stigma	Labeled as a seductress, immoral woman, and agent of moral destruction by outsiders.	Considered marginal art workers, instigators of disturbances at entertainment events, and targets of moral condemnation from religious leaders.

4. Desacralization and Contemporary Cultural Commodification

With the rapid pace of modernization, rationalization by mainstream religions, and the demands of capitalist economics, the sacred-animistic values within these traditions have undergone severe erosion (Strinati, 2022; Barker & Jane, 2021). This massive process of social change creates the phenomena of desacralization (the dissolution of sacred values) and cultural commodification (the conversion of aesthetic-spiritual values into economic commodities) (Mosco, 2021). In the novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, the process of desacralization occurs when the clash of political ideologies in 1965 destroys the customary order of Dukuh Paruk. The ronggeng art form, once venerated as a unifying force of the village shrine, is repurposed as a medium of political propaganda by certain factions exploiting the villagers' naivety. When that political leadership collapses after the national tragedy, Srintil is no longer viewed as a sacred dancer bearing the indang but is instead accused of being an immoral political agent. Her human dignity is destroyed through detention, deprivation of civil rights, and severe psychological trauma culminating in mental breakdown.

In the empirical reality of Eretan, Indramayu, a similar phenomenon is evident in the decline of pure Sintren performances (Kurniawan & Haryanto, 2023). The elaborate Sintren ritual, which requires a truly pure virgin dancer and is laden with mysticism, is now rarely staged due to the powerful tide of religious purification that views such rituals as shirk (polytheistic), as well as declining interest from modern audiences. As a pragmatic adaptation to ensure artists' survival, the Donbret art form emerged.

In Donbret art, the spiritual dimension, virginity requirements, and incense rituals are entirely eliminated and replaced by the commodification of eroticism and popular dangdut music. Donbret dancers are no longer perceived as sacred figures bearing blessings or warding off calamity but as low-wage art laborers peddling physical attractiveness on the stages of coastal nighttime entertainment. This shift illustrates how cultural capitalism reduces ancestral traditional values to raw consumer commodities solely to satisfy the desires of the economic market.

5. Sociological Dynamics and Community Response to Dancer Exploitation

The social dynamics surrounding the lives of ronggeng dancers in RDP and Sintren-Donbret dancers in Eretan cannot be separated from the collective perspective of society toward the system of values, morality, and economic needs. Traditional communities often apply a double standard in responding to the existence of female dancers. On one hand, the dancer's presence is highly needed as a cultural symbol, a crowd attraction, and a means of fulfilling entertainment needs. On the other hand, the same community imposes social exclusion and moral stigma on the dancer. In the novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, the residents of Dukuh Paruk regard Srintil as a savior figure who elevates the village's status from backwardness and poverty following the *tempe bongkreng* tragedy. Nevertheless, this appreciation persists only as long as Srintil is willing to comply with the patriarchal customary norms



that position her body as "communal property." When Srintil begins to express personal agency—such as her longing to become an ordinary housewife and build a monogamous family with Rasmus—the Dukuh Paruk community rejects her. This rejection demonstrates that the community values the dancer only insofar as her instrumental function is fulfilled, not as an individual entitled to personal freedom.

In the empirical reality of Eretan, Indramayu, this dilemmatic pattern manifests in the lives of Donbret dancers. When performing on coastal nighttime entertainment stages, the dancers are compelled to appear attractive to entice pengibing into giving saweran tips. The dancer's success in collecting saweran often serves as the primary economic pillar for the art group and their families. However, outside the performance arena, these dancers frequently face rejection from their residential communities. The wives of pengibing often view Donbret dancers as home wreckers, while religious leaders and local community figures consider them instigators of the moral decline of coastal society.

6. Psychological Impact and Subjectivity of the Dancer Figures/Subjects

The impact of patriarchal hegemony, social stigmatization, and the process of bodily commodification does not stop at the realm of social structure but penetrates deeply into the psychological condition and subjective consciousness of female dancers. Both Srintil in the literary text of RDP and the Donbret dancers in the field experience alienation from their own bodies and identities.

This alienation process unfolds through several stages that damage the psychological order of the individual:

- **Violated Inalienability:** The body, which should be the most personal domain for a woman, is transformed into a market commodity or a collective ritual instrument without the full consent of the subject.
- **Self-Alienation:** The dancer begins to view her own body not as part of her soul but as an "external object" that must be continually maintained to satisfy the expectations of the audience or the shaman.
- **Dissociation and Depersonalization:** In the advanced stage, the dancer experiences an inability to connect her emotional feelings with the physical actions she performs on stage.

In RDP, the peak of this psychological tension is depicted through Srintil's mental breakdown at the end of the novel. After enduring a series of exploitation traumas—ranging from the Bukak Klambu ritual, political manipulation in 1965, political detention, to betrayal by male figures she trusted (such as Bajus)—Srintil descends into madness. Srintil's mental destruction constitutes Ahmad Tohari's allegorical critique of the failure of the social order to protect women from systematic violence.

Meanwhile, in the context of Donbret dancers in Eretan, the psychological impact manifests in prolonged social vulnerability. Many former Donbret dancers struggle to build stable marital relationships due to the shadow of past stigma. The uncertainty of economic future in old age, when their physical attractiveness fades, creates profound existential anxiety. Most of them remain trapped in cycles of intergenerational poverty, where their female descendants are vulnerable to falling into the same profession due to the absence of adequate access to education and social mobility.

7. Synthesis Implications of the Sociology of Literature Study

Through the integration of literary textual analysis of Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk and the empirical facts of the Sintren-Donbret tradition in Eretan, this study affirms that literature does not merely function as fictional creation or aesthetic entertainment but as a sociological document that reflects and critiques the objective reality of society.

Table 2. Synthesis of Sociology of Literature Analysis Findings and Cultural Implications

Key Finding	Sociological Implication	Policy & Cultural Implication
Abuse of Cultural Authority	Rituals and traditions are frequently used as tools to legitimize male domination	The need for reinterpretation of local traditions to be



	over the female body and its reproductive functions.	oriented toward human rights and gender equality.
Economic-Cultural Vulnerability	Structural poverty drives women to accept exploitative roles as a survival strategy, perpetuating the cycle of subordination.	Provision of economic empowerment programs and access to alternative livelihoods for female traditional art workers.
Desacralization Without Protection	The shift of tradition from sacred to commercial erodes symbolic protections without offering new social security for the dancers.	Advancement of traditional arts that guarantees legal protection, fair wages, and social insurance for performing artists.

Overall, both RDP and the field reality in Eretan demonstrate that women's struggles to obtain rights over their bodies, identities, and well-being still confront the thick walls of patriarchal and capitalistic social structures. Literature stands as a critical mirror that challenges this injustice, while simultaneously inviting society to reconsider how it treats traditions and the women within them.

8. The Role of the State and Cultural Policy in the Dialectics of Tradition

In the discourse of the sociology of literature, the existence of traditional arts such as Ronggeng in Central Java and Sintren-Donbret in Indramayu is influenced not only by customary communities and markets but also by the presence (or absence) of state instruments. In the novel Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk, the state manifests through repressive security apparatus and political machinery in the aftermath of the 1965 events. The state labels folk art as an ideological instrument, ultimately extinguishing the right to life of traditional artists without providing reconciliation or restoration of dignity.

The paradigm shift in state interaction with folk art significantly determines the fate of female dancers:

- **Ignorance and Marginalization:** In modern reality in Eretan, the state or local government frequently neglects the fate of Donbret dancers. This art form is not categorized as high-value cultural heritage requiring protection but is instead regarded as lower-class entertainment potentially triggering public disturbances.
- **Absence of Labor Protection:** The lack of regulatory standards and legal protections for traditional art workers leaves dancers vulnerable to physical harassment, unfair wage payments, and the absence of health or social insurance.
- **Need for Gender-Based Policy:** The state should be present not merely as a curator of artistic aesthetics but as a guarantor of citizens' fundamental rights. Cultural policy must be oriented toward restructuring traditions to be free from elements of human exploitation and gender-based violence.

9. Comparative Synthesis Recapitulation: Literary Text vs. Empirical Reality

To comprehensively encapsulate the dialectics between Ahmad Tohari's literary work (Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk) and field facts (Sintren-Donbret Eretan), Table 3 presents a thorough comparative synthesis based on the domains of the sociology of literature.

Table 3. Comparative Recapitulation of Ronggeng Phenomena (RDP) and Sintren-Donbret (Eretan)

Domain of Analysis	Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk (Literary Text)	Sintren-Donbret Eretan Tradition (Empirical Reality)
Epistemological Construction	Literature as social-allegorical critique of patriarchal ideology, exploitation, and	Coastal cultural reality adapting to market demands, religious purification, and the economic interests of art group managers.



	violence against women within traditional structures.	
Locus of Patriarchal Power	Ronggeng Shaman (Kertareja) and customary leaders who control the dancer's body, virginity, and economic access.	Dalang, art group managers, and pengibing (male audience members) who control performance rules, saweran income distribution, and physical interaction.
Response of the Subject (Women)	Passive resistance (desire to become an ordinary woman) ending in tragedy (madness and destruction of identity).	Compromising/pragmatic response (dancing for survival) with prolonged social vulnerability and intergenerational poverty.
Ultimate Cultural Fate	Extinction of the tradition due to political trauma and the destruction of social structures following the national tragedy.	Desacralization of Sintren into profane Donbret entertainment reliant on dangdut eroticism and saweran economics.

10. Theoretical Implications for the Development of the Sociology of Literature

Theoretically, the findings of this study strengthen and expand the scope of the sociology of literature, particularly the reflection theory and the sociology of authorship approach. This research demonstrates that:

- Literature as a Living Cultural Document: Fictional literary works do not stand alone as products of pure imagination but rather record the deep structures of social, gender, and economic conflicts that actually occur within their communities.
- Critique of Tradition Absolutism: The sociology of literature is capable of exposing how "tradition" is often validated and sanctified to conceal practices of human exploitation, particularly against women occupying marginal positions.
- Importance of Interdisciplinary Studies: Analyzing literary works comparatively with empirical cultural facts (ethnography) provides a more comprehensive, rich, and objective analytical framework for dissecting the dynamics of humanity.

Through this analytical exploration, it can be concluded that both Srintil in Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk and the Sintren-Donbret dancers in Eretan are tragic cultural heroines. Their bodies are venerated when they provide benefits and entertainment for the community, yet they are cast aside when they demand justice, protection, and equality as whole human beings.

4. CONCLUSION

The comparative sociology of literature study between Ahmad Tohari's novel Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk (RDP) and the empirical facts of the Sintren-Donbret tradition in Eretan, Indramayu affirms that literary works constitute a sharp mirror reflecting the socio-cultural reality of society in profound depth. Both entities—the fictional literary world and field reality—reveal identical historical roots, namely the animistic-dynamistic belief system that positions the female dancer's body as a sacred medium (vessel) between the profane world and the world of ancestral spirits.

Nevertheless, behind the veil of sacredness and spiritual veneration, structures of patriarchal hegemony and economic exploitation tightly grip the lives of dancers are revealed. Women consistently occupy subordinate positions: their bodies are controlled by male authorities (shamans, dalang, or pengibing), transacted through virginity auction rituals (Bukak Klambu) and the saweran system, and turned into market commodities for the financial gain and social prestige of dominant groups.



With the powerful currents of modernization, religious rationalization, and the shift toward capitalistic economics, a massive process of desacralization and cultural commodification has occurred. Dancers who were once venerated as guarantors of village blessings have been reduced to low-wage art workers vulnerable to harassment and moral stigmatization. The impact of these structural pressures creates psychological alienation and prolonged trauma for female subjects, as demonstrated by Srintil's mental instability in RDP and the socio-economic vulnerability of Donbret dancers in Eretan.

This study concludes that the protection of women's rights and the restoration of the human dignity of traditional performing artists require an inclusive collective response. The state, customary leaders, and society are called upon to restructure cultural perspectives so as to no longer exploit women in the name of tradition or the market, but instead uphold the values of equality, gender justice, and social welfare guarantees.

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