

# **(SI) “Two Faces” of Darsem: The Representation of Indonesian Migrant Workers**

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## **Abstract**

Darsem, one of Indonesian migrant workers who worked in Saudi Arabia and successfully escaped from the death penalty, had been reported by two famous newspapers, Kompas and Jawa Pos. These two newspapers constructed different points of view about Darsem when she came back to Indonesia on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2011. It is interesting to know how newspapers as mass media construct the representation of a migrant worker through Darsem. The aims of this research are to know how media represent Darsem and what kind of visual elements that mostly construct the representation of Darsem as Indonesian migrant workers. The research uses Barthes' semiotics to analyze some visual elements like the layout of Darsem's news, her photograph, and language selection on the news title and content. The analyses of two newspapers give us descriptions about Darsem as the object of the government and media's success. Again, we notice that media is not neutral.

**Keywords:** Representation, Indonesian Migrant Worker, Media.

## **INTRODUCTION**

There are approximately 400,000 Indonesians that are registered to have legally migrated to other countries each year since 1998. The actual figure is estimated to be much higher because of illegal migration. In 2004, the number of registered Indonesian migrant workers was 380,688 persons, 83% were women. Of this number, more than 90% of female migrant workers worked in the informal sector as housemaids. The rest worked in the agricultural and industrial sectors as daily labors, as caregivers to the elderly, shop assistants, and as waitresses. According to the World Bank, the reasons for their migration were because the income in their villages was uncertain and was not enough to meet their daily living expenses, the number of jobs offered overseas was much higher as well as more varied and more promising, following in the footsteps of family or friends who had already migrated earlier, influenced by agents whose role was significant in recruitment process, and to gain a higher social status.

Based on the data, we notice that Indonesia has a huge amount of migrant workers and has dealt with this sector for about fifteen years, but until this moment the fate of the Indonesian migrant worker is not as good as expected. Their higher income cannot compare with the risk of their work. Torture and death penalty still become a big threat. Not to mention, until this moment society often underestimate the work and sacrifice of migrant workers. We seem to forget the noble purposes and the contribution of our migrant workers. Unfortunately, this phenomena is “taken for granted” and accepted as natural by society. Society does not realize that its perspective about migrant worker is constructed by media. I believe that the image of Indonesian migrant worker is constructed by power holders, one of them is media. Things don't have meanings in themselves, but we construct their meanings using representational systems, concepts and signs. It is not the material world which conveys meaning; it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concept. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other

representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others (Hall, 2003: 25).

One of the famous cases about migrant workers was Darsem. She was put on death penalty by the Saudi Arabia Government for killing her Saudi employer, who had reportedly tried to rape her. She was freed after the Indonesian government paid a Rp 4.7 billion (US\$554,600) “blood money” ransom to the family of the employer (Post, 2011). Darsem’s release process and huge amount of money became a hot issue in all media. Among those media, I found that on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2011, the date when Darsem came back to Indonesia, the two big newspaper companies Kompas and Jawa Pos made reports about her home coming in different perspectives. Therefore, I believe that readers also read Darsem differently.

Darsem is not only well known but she can become the representation of Indonesian migrant workers. Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people. Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. Representation is the production of meaning through language (Hall, 2003: 15-16). Language is not only a group of words. When language is used to represent or communicate, it is possible to make message in certain ways (Danesi, 2004). It is interesting to know how newspapers as mass media construct the representation of migrant workers through Darsem. The aims of this research are to know how media represent Darsem and what kind of visual elements that mostly construct the representation of Darsem as Indonesian migrant workers.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research uses Barthes’ semiotics to analyze some visual elements in Kompas and Jawa Pos newspapers, like the layout of Darsem’s news, Darsem’s photograph, and language selection on the news title and content. There are two linked operations are required to complete the representation process by which meaning are produced. First, we need a basic code which links a particular piece of material which is cut and sewn in a particular way (signifier) to our mental concept of it (signified). Second, a wider level, which links these signs to broader, cultural themes, concepts or meanings. Barthes called the first, descriptive level of denotation: the second level, that of connotation. Both, of course, require the use of codes. Denotation is the simple, basic, descriptive level, where consensus is wide and most people would agree on the meaning. At the second level, connotation, wider meaning is no longer a descriptive level of obvious interpretation. This second level of signification, Barthes suggest, is more ‘general, global and diffuse...’It deals with ‘fragments of ideology (Barthes, 1981; Barthes 1983; Barthes, 1990).

Among those visual elements, the layout gives the description about how important the news is. Layout is a plan or arrangement, as of an advertisement or a page of a newspaper or magazine, indicating the arrangement and relationship of the parts, as of type and artwork.

The photograph has the strongest impression than the other visual elements. The news title or headline becomes the element that supports the reading of photograph and vice versa. Understanding photography as a body of practices and aesthetic values which follows a paradigmatic structure is helpful in understanding its representational role, for it focuses our attention on the attractions between the conceptions of photographers in constructing their images and the uses to which their photographs are put (Hamilton, 2003: 80). As Fulton makes clear, the “documentary” nature of photographic journalism, whether for a newspaper, magazine or book, is essentially interpretative. The representations that the photographer produces are related to his or her personal interpretations of the events and subjects which he or she chooses to place in front of the camera lens. However, they are also assumed to have some ‘truth-value’ in the sense that they allow the viewer privileged insight into the events they depict (Fulton, 1988). The photograph doesn’t stand alone. The ‘meaning’ of

photograph, does not lie exclusively in the image, but in the conjunction of image and text. Two discourses, the discourse of written language and the discourse of photography are required to produce and ‘fix’ the meaning (Hall, 1972).

The language selections become the third step analysis to know the different language usage between Kompas and Jawa Pos. Language remains rule-governed. But it is not a ‘closed’ system which can be reduced to its formal elements. Since it is constantly changing, it is by definition open-ended. Meaning continues to be produced through language in forms which can never be predicted beforehand and its ‘sliding’ (Hall, 2003: 35).

### “TWO FACES” OF DARSEM

It is not easy to see the different constructions of Darsem news because the photographs in Kompas and Jawa Pos are similar. Besides photograph, there are other elements that support the construction of representation that should be categorized for further analysis. The visual elements are categorized as: layout, photograph and language selection (Table 1.).

Table 1. The Categorization of Visual Elements

No.	Item	Sub Item	Newspaper		Remark
			Kompas	Jawa Post	
1.	Layout	Size	260 mm x 2 column 1 column = 42 mm	110 mm x 4 column 1 column = 50 – 60 mm	
		Position	Upper front page	Bottom front page	
2.	Photograph	Size	23 cm x 13.7 cm	7 cm x 7.8 cm	
		Position	On the Right side of article	In the middle of the article	
		Color	Color	Color	Same
		Object	Darsem & her son	Darsem, her son, photographer	
		Object position	Right face of Darsem Front face of Darsem’s son	Right face of Darsem Left face of Darsem son’s Front side of photographer with camera	
		Point of interest	Her son	Darsem	
3.	Language Selection	Headline (News title)	Darsem Kembali ke Tanah Air	Masuk ke Rumah, Warga Siram Air Kembang	
		Sub headline	Buruh Migran	(1) Darsem, TKI Rp. 4,7 Miliar yang Lolos dari Hukuman Pancung, Pulang Kampung (2) Bisa Pulang karena Lolos dari Hukuman Publik	
		Article size	26 cm x 2 column (page1)	11 cm x 2 column (page 1) 14 cm x 3 column (page11)	
		News Content	Buruh Migrant Tenaga Kerja Indonesia	TKI	
			Darsem Binti Dawud Tawar Darsem	Darsem	
			Artis	Selebriti (3x) Konferensi Pers Pahlawan yang baru pulang dari medan perang dengan kemenangan.	
			Kompensasi diat sebesar Rp. 4,7 miliar (2x)	Membayar diyat (denda) 2 juta riyal (4,7 miliar) (3x)	
			Dusun Truntum	Kampung Truntum	
			Safii (6)	Syafii (5)	

Hukuman mati	Hukuman pancung Hukuman mati Hukuman publik
Memohon agar diampuni Menempuh upaya banding	Menemukan celah hukum Melobi
Darsem ketakutan dan menangis	Darsem tidak nyaman
Pemerintah Kalangan masyarakat lewat situs jejaring sosial & media massa.	Pemerintah Warga Subang sempat mengumpulkan dana.
Wartawan Fotografer & kamerawan	Wartawan

## Layout

Kompas and Jawa Pos both placed Darsem's colored picture and news as the main headline in the front page. Through the news paper layout, Kompas placed the news in the main page; covered almost half of the page. Kompas tried to bring this issue as a very important one, the news that sells. In Jawa Pos, the Darsem's news is placed as box news at the bottom of the main page; the size is less than a quarter of the first page. The local news about the accident in Bojonegoro seems more important. The layout position and the size of the photograph determined the importance of Darsem's news. Kompas as a national newspaper company brought this case as a national issue, but Jawa Pos as a local newspaper emphasized on local events, including their own event.



Figure 1. Kompas and Jawa Pos Newspaper Layouts

## Photograph

The photographs in Kompas and Jawa Pos look similar, but the focus of the photographs are different. Kompas focuses on Darsem's son (Safii) who snuggles in his mother's arms, but he seems to not know her very well because they have been separated for a long time. Her son's eyes are full of questioning. He looks deeply at the camera as if he is asking who she is, the person that he hugs. He doesn't seem to want to see her face. His gaze is empty and tries to find the answer what is going to happen to him. Besides the eyes of Safii, his hair captures my attention. It is dyed a bit blonde, just in the front side. It can be the symbol of struggle, but can also show us that his family is modern and fashionable, even though that it is not common for young boys to dye his hair. It is not his decision; it can be his family's decision. Similar with his fate, he doesn't have the power to decide for his life, the "normal" life with his mother. His life is determined by the older persons without looking at his needs.

Looking at Darsem, it is interesting that Kompas displays her photos while she closes her eyes. This physical sign can show the emotional feeling of Darsem. She maybe so tired through all this process or she is praying or enjoying her son's hug and trying to feel him better. It also can tell us that she is sleeping or doesn't care about her surroundings. There is only her and her son or even only herself. The eyes that closes can have positive and negative meanings, but I see that Kompas wants to show the human side, such as the struggle of migrant workers when they have to leave their family, while working abroad, and even when they come back to their families. Not only the eyes of Darsem speak, her ears that wear the double earrings are also the symbol of struggle. Common women only wear a pair of earrings, but Darsem totally wears four earrings. The women, who decide to pierce her ear, must stand with the risk that she will have more pain. The ordinary women do not pierce her ear more than twice. But Darsem is willing to receive more pain in order to be different, to obtain modern status and the image of city women. She provides more space to show her wealth. This image shows her covered by her veil because a veiled woman usually represents a virtuous woman. Darsem can be the representation of a mother who sacrifices her life for her son, but she can be the representation of a mother who does everything to gain a higher social status. There are three points in the caption at the bottom of the photo. The first explains that Darsem who is sentenced to death penalty hugs her son Safii. Second, there is formal handover ceremony to her family. Third, Darsem can escape from death sentence because the government pays Rp 4.7 million. This caption describes more about the process of handover; it does not describe the photograph itself, except that she hugs her son.

Meanwhile, in Jawa Pos, Darsem's photograph shows us that she is taken photograph by someone. There are three persons in the photo which are Darsem, her son and the photographer. The photo seems to tell us that there is home coming ceremony that involves a lot of journalists, so that the photographer has difficulty to take Darsem's photo exclusively. I believe that Jawa Pos has selected their photos, so there must be a reason for choosing this photo. The presence of the third person in this photo is interesting for me, especially why Jawa Pos includes this man in this photo. The man holding the camera is taking Darsem's photograph. He wears a government uniform; it is a formal clothing that symbolizes Indonesian government staff. The person whose picture is taken by the government staff must be an important person. Darsem is the important person. The picture cannot tell us how important Darsem is and who she represents. She looks in front like she is staring at the future. Her son doesn't want to look at the photographer's camera, neither the Jawa Pos camera. He seems to not care about what is happening, again an empty look, with no question. The caption directly explains the photograph as she is holding her son and welcomed by a lot of journalists. The person, who is welcomed by many journalists, is usually potential in becoming famous. Here we see that Darsem has become a famous person.



Figure 2. The Photograph and Articles of Darsem in Kompas and Jawa Pos

## Language Selection

In the headline, Kompas with the title *Darsem Kembali ke Tanah Air* emphasizes on her coming back to Indonesia. Jawa Pos with the title *Masuk ke Rumah, Warga Siram Air Kembang* shows us that Darsem is not only returning to Indonesia, but she's already been to her hometown and welcomed by her neighbors. The words *tanah air* and *kampung* give us a description about the scope of Darsem's representation. In Kompas, Darsem represents the Indonesian migrant workers but in Jawa Pos, Darsem is only a *kampung* woman who works abroad and finally comes back to her *kampung*.

In the sub headline, Kompas only writes *buruh migrant* without any explanations, but in the next sentences Kompas mentions the words *Tenaga Kerja Indonesia*. In Jawa Pos, the subheadline *Darsem, TKI Rp. 4,7 Miliar yang Lolos dari Hukuman pancung, Pulang kampung*, gives us a description that Darsem is an "expensive" migrant worker that finally comes back to her *kampung*. In the second page, the sub title is *Bisa Pulang karena Lolos dari Hukuman Publik*. The words *lolos* are mentioned two times.

There are many different language selections in the news content. I just compare the different language usage between Kompas and Jawa Pos. The language that use by one media is used to support the analysis. Kompas uses the word *buruh migrant* and *Tenaga Kerja Indonesia* without abbreviation but Jawa Pos uses TKI without explain the meaning. As we know, some of us use *buruh migrant* for the appreciation to Indonesian worker who work abroad, while a few years ago we often use TKI to refer to persons like Darsem. Kompas as a national newspaper selects the words *buruh migrant*; meanwhile Jawa Pos still uses TKI to explain about Darsem. There is always a reason for language selection, it's not just a matter of appreciation but also the education level of the readers. Jawa Pos might presume that TKI is better known by their readers.

I find some of the information is different between Kompas and Jawa Pos, like Darsem's name that mention in full name by Kompas but only Darsem in Jawa Pos. Darsem is mentioned as an artist in Kompas but in Jawa Pos she is mentioned "like celebrity" three times. Jawa Pos also describes Darsem as a hero that comes back from the battle. The words *dusun* and *kampung* also give different meanings, *dusun* is a village, meanwhile *kampung* is a group of housing which is part of the city and inhabited by low and middle class citizen. Kompas only mentions death penalty only with *hukuman mati* but Jawa Pos makes many terms like *hukuman pancung*, *hukuman mati* and *hukuman publik*. The readers might not know the difference between those terms of punishments, but Jawa Pos seems to show that Darsem has heavy punishment, that means it is a miracle that she can escape from all of those punishments. There is also different information about the name and age of Darsem's son and also the Arabian currency. The readers cannot know which one is right.

In Kompas, the process of Darsem's release is because she begs for mercy and takes appeal efforts. In Jawa Pos, she escapes from death penalty because the government can find legal gap and succeeds in lobbying the Saudi government. Kompas mentions the role of government and society through social network and mass media in the process of release. Jawa Pos mentions about government role and Darsem's neighbors' role in collecting donation for Darsem. The scope of donation in Kompas is national; while Jawa Pos only mentions that donation is from the local area, her neighbors. When dealing with journalists, Kompas describes Darsem as afraid and that she cries, while Jawa Pos mentions that she only feels uncomfortable. This statement is just like the action of celebrity who is disturbed by media. Kompas mentions in detail about the person who take Darsem's news, which are journalists, photographers and cameramen. While Jawa Pos only mentions journalists.

Darsem's news seems like one coin with two sides, a single case that has different perspectives, constructed by two media. That's why I named it "two faces".

## THE REPRESENTATION OF INDONESIA MIGRANT WORKERS

Kompas tries to construct Darsem as the Indonesian government's success. In general, Kompas brings this case as a national issue; how the migrant worker is successfully saved by the government. The ideology of government's success is strongly described in this news. Kompas describes the bureaucracy of her release in detail, like the person's name, date, location, government institution and the process are carefully mentioned. The news can become national archive. Darsem's case is a national issue because Indonesian people has helped her. Darsem and her son are the two persons in struggle, struggle for their past, present and future and without government they are nothing. They have no choice but defenseless on the power, there is no negotiation. Like any Indonesian migrant workers, they try hard to change their fates, they have to surrender to power and become powerless. Kompas constructs the image of Indonesian government's success and it becomes a new hope for many migrant workers who being threatened with the death penalty. Like Darsem, they wait for the mercy and the help from Indonesian government. Darsem's case is happy ending story, so hopefully there is at least same government action for all migrant workers.

Meanwhile, Jawa Pos as a local newspaper mostly discusses about the local issue of Darsem. Jawa Pos represents Darsem as an 'expensive' migrant worker who is celebrated by her neighbor. The ideology of celebrity is being constructed by Jawa Pos. Darsem becomes a new celebrity at her *kampung*. Migrant workers will be back to '*kampung women*' again. In the beginning of the article, it said that government's effort is not instant because it has been done continuously. But on the headline and at the end of the article, the words explain as if she can come back to her *kampung* because of her luck and all the hard working process seems to disappear. She is lucky because the government finds a gap of law and clever in lobbying. The actions of her neighbors that throw the flower water filled with pray to take away from the bad luck strengthen the role of the image of luck. In addition, in the sub headline the statement of being lucky is constructed by the words *lolos*. Darsem still represents the poor 'kampung woman' who finally comes back to her hometown because she is so lucky that she can escape from many punishments that describe as: *hukuman pancung*, *hukuman mati* and *hukuman publik*. Darsem is a "lucky TKI". It seems like Jawa Pos knows the level of its readers very well, as we often associate that people who come from middle and lower class believe on superstitions.

## CONCLUSION

The analyses of two newspapers give us descriptions about Darsem as the object of the government and media's success. Both media tell the chronology of how Darsem can be freed from death penalty. The happy ending story of Darsem becomes representation of the victim of injustice who finally gets justice. It seems that it can give a new hope for Indonesian migrant workers and their family. I can see that both media celebrate the Darsem homecoming. Kompas celebrates this success as the nation's success, the success of Indonesian government because of their hard work. Meanwhile Jawa Pos describes the celebration as local people's happiness; this success is because of luck. The image of Darsem as "lucky" woman could decrease the level of trust to the government. Indonesian government should not stop only saving Darsem, but must proof that they can save another Darsem, so Darsem is not a "lucky" one but she is saved because of the "hard work" of Indonesian government. Both media describes Darsem as victim of power, like employee power, government power and when she comes back she is also under journalists' power. Event in her hometown, she cannot resist when her neighbors pour the flower water on her.

From those visual elements, I find that photography is powerful, but it can't speak without the headline and sub headline. In this case, the headlines give more impact than the other elements. The events that are being blown up can be powerful and construct the

representation of migrant workers as people that are secured by government or lucky by the kindness of someone else.

This is a good chance for our government to build a good system in order to have society's trust, so our immigrant workers and their families could live peacefully. Through this analysis, again we notice that media is not neutral. Media should recognize their readers in order to be read but they also construct their readers' points of view. However, media should educate their readers but the readers should be educated enough to read the media.

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