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Army Wives Serve, Too
(A Novelistic Sense In Sociological Imagination)

Wida Ayu Puspitosari[1]

Under The Sabers: The Unwritten Code of Army Wives. Written By Tanya Biank. Fifth Avenue: New York State St. Martin Press, 2006. Pp. xi+261

Gentlemen:

"I reverently pledge you: The ladies who have shared our lives from the Equator to the Arctic; the ladies who have condoned our reverses, and inspired but to applaud our success. May we live to make them happy, or, and the great day comes, so die as to make them proud. The Army Women, God Bless Them".

General George Smith Patton, Jr.

April 5, 1924

(A toast to "the ladies" at a West Point dinner in Kansas City)

We frequently hear about the heroic soldiers struggle for their nation, but we seldomly hear about what their wives have made. Army wives are conjoined by unwritten codes. They

[1] Jurusan Sosiologi, FISIP, Universitas Brawijaya. Email: widapuspitosari@ub.ac.id

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are expected to endure hardships with kindness and tragedies with heads held high (Moelker, Andres, and Poot 2006). The media commonly focuses only on the families' tearful goodbyes and tearful reunions – or, in the case of spouse murders, their deaths. Yet the reality is far more complex and breath-taking.

In summer 2002, Tanya Biank, military reporter for the Fayetteville Observer in Fayetteville, North Carolina, the town outside Fort Bragg, was observing crisis in a military post. The post is home base to several Army's most elite soldiers, called paratrooper, Delta Force Commandos and Green Berets of the U.S. With a density of high-achieving people who prosper on adrenaline, Fort Bragg is the biggest military installation, a stimulating place to serve, a fact not missed by visiting VIPs, government officials and other dignitaries who often note the privilege place. Yet that summer, in over six weeks, four Fort Bragg soldiers killed their wives; then two of those committed suicide, and a third would hang himself in jail eight months later. In a fifth case on an officer's wife was accused with killing her husband (Biank, 2006).

It was gripping, headline-provoking material, and Biank reported on those stories as well as the bigger picture that united them. While she dug deeper and deeper, she realized that there was a broader truth to tell – a tale that was buried in the turmoil of one tragic summer in Fayetteville. Even without scandalous murder, the lives of Army wives themselves are the stuff of drama. These women play roles attached to convention in conditions that are sometimes precarious, solid, and too often distressing (Rosen, Carpenter, and Moghadam 2018). Yet what life is really like for Army wives has never been precisely examined. Here in Biank's non-fiction work, we will see how sociological imagination works in novelistic sense.

Under the Sabers (Biank, 2006) is a thought-provoking narrative describing the complex personal and political challenges Army wives face, portraying a provocative new look at Army life. Biank goes beyond the snippets and portrayal of military life and shows what it is really like to be an Army wife, such as: carrying furniture off the rental truck by yourself at a new duty station when your husband is in the field and comforting your son who wants his dad home from Afghanistan for his fifth birthday. She takes readers into the hearts and homes of today's military wives.

By that autumn, Biank, an Army brat herself, realized the untold story of Army wives lay in the ashes of that tragic and dramatic summer. She knew the truth, wives were the backbone of the Army. They were strong, not helpless and deserved more than sugar-coating stuff that often attached to their stories in the media. Under the Sabers tells the story of four different Army wives, who find themselves severely dependent on circumstances that eagerly force them to redefine who they are as women and Army wives. In this intriguing and ambitious researched account, Biank takes the reader to pass the Army's gates; where everyone has a role to play, rules are strictly followed, discipline is expected, perfection praised, and perception often prevails reality. Biank (2006) explores what happens when real life collides with Army convention. Clearly, she explains what it means to be a wife and mother in a subculture and in constant situation of readiness for war. In this heart-breaking and influential book, she takes a close outlook at the other woman and the Army convention impact on wives emotion, marriages, and home life. This story of strength and perseverance is an eye-opener for those who have never experienced military life and everyday conducts of the women who each day live the "unwritten code."

Basically, their personalities and backgrounds vary significantly, but those things must be fitted to gender expectations and restrictions of the military. It is a world where wives carry the billets of their husbands, where class disparities determine whom they associate with and where and how they live – sometimes it is a world where poverty is common among the lower billets, such as enlisted. For much of the time that Biank was following these women, Fort Bragg was on high alert, with soldiers awaiting deployment. Stress levels intensify marital problems, but for either a man or his wife to seek counselling is perceived as a sign of weakness and bad for a man’s track record.

Even though Biank’s non-fiction work is sometimes thickset and some of the history feels a bit out-dated, Biank's novelistic sense in constructing social life and friction vividly explains how the Army could bring couples closer together, or it could tear the relationships apart. Army wives themselves are used to cope with unpredictable deployments and struggle to raise children alone, often on small pay checks, in a community both interrelated and severely judgmental. It is very relevant to say that Army wives serve, too. She makes sympathetic both for their pride and their tragedies.

Moreover, Rosen and Moghadam (2015) could clearly provide supportive argument to what Biank has stated. They examine socio-environmental aspects that affect the development of peer support among wives of combat arms soldiers in the U.S Army. The study is based on data from the evaluation of deployment new system which aims to keep soldiers and their leaders together for long periods of time in order to promote the development of solid military units, and to improve supportive relationships among military wives. They found that in all Army Units, both traditional and non-traditional, commissioned officers' wives enjoy much higher levels of support than enlisted wives. In non-traditional Army units which promote cohesion and bonding, they found that junior enlisted wives have developed higher levels of support than wives of Non-commissioned officers (NCOs). In addition, in these units, while there are increased friendships between officers' wives and enlisted wives, there is no improvement in friendships between junior enlisted and NCO wives. The marginality of the NCO position is one of the reasons referred to their failure to develop supports and to bond with more junior wives.

Unfortunately, the book is a bit confusing as the author skipped between telling the stories of each wife separately, then starts adding in her own personal jokes, opinions, and then there are parts where she no longer separates the wives' stories by chapter. The timeline bounce around a little bit and could be confusing too. It felt like it wasn't edited very well and it took the reader out of the book. However, the stories themselves basically were very touching and arise multitude of emotion. This book is relevant to researcher on gender studies to explore how situated knowledge of gender and sexuality are contested as political and cultural domains of representation as well as expression, how they are still interweaved in structures and practices of territoriality or class, and grasp through radical feminist anthem: the personal is political (Tong, 2009).

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