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REPRESENTATION OF ACEH IN PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER'S *THIS EARTH OF MANKIND*

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Abstract

Acehnese has been depicted for their heroism and craziness in great deal of literature as a result of their firm stand and continuous fight during the war against the Dutch colonial power at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century (Siegel, 1979; Hurgronje, 1906). As in a number of his other works of fiction, in his first novel of the Buru Quartet, This Earth of Mankind, Pramoedya Ananta Toer also makes many references to Aceh and the Acehnese (Toer, 1982). This paper aims to explore the aspects of heroism of Acehnese fighters and another side of human tragedies in the context of Aceh war as represented by Toer in this novel. The two themes are extracted and highlighted as the results of the analysis of Toer's narrative through the flashback made by one of his characters much of whose life has been dictated by his past engagement against Acehnese fighters in a number of battles in Aceh. While the heroism is amplified as being part of the characteristics of the Acehnese fighters, the tragic elements feature the suffering experienced by the colonial soldier later in his life. Both aspects reflect Toer's perspective and emotional tie to one of the ethnic groups from the extreme west of the archipelago.

Keywords: Representation, Acehnese, courage, heroism, tragedies.

INTRODUCTION

Sitting on the extreme west of the archipelago, Aceh in the colonial time caused great troubles for the colonial power. The Dutch, the then colonial power in the archipelago, had to engage in a long-lasting war against the Acehnese fighters costing loss of many lives to both parties. As a result of these troubles and long-held struggle, Aceh has been known to the outside world for their tenacity which has been interpreted in many different ways by different scholars and writers. Snouck Hurgronje, for example, a Dutch scholar and adviser General van Heutz, the East Indies Civil and Military Governor for Aceh from 1898 – 1904, described among other things the Acehnese as the least well-mannered people of the archipelago (1906, p. 119). On the other hand, an American scholar, James Siegel, explores the aspects of heroism of the Acehnese people through an analysis a *hikayat* called *Hikayat Pocut Muhamat* (Siegel, 1979). Regarding the courage and bravery of the Acehnese during the war, A. So'dy, as quoted in Siegel's earlier work (1969, p. 125), said the greatness of Aceh was the result of their desire to perform *dakwah* to advance the religion.

In Toer's works of fiction, Aceh is not alien although he was born and lived in Java and narrated critically about Java and its Javanese culture and the people's socio-psychological dimension especially both before and after Independence of the Republic of Indonesia. As highlighted by Fasya (2012), Aceh has been represented in some of Toer's works such as his 1995's *Arus Balik* and 1991's

Bumi Manusia, the latter being more imminent in its representation of Aceh and the focus of this paper.

Bumi Manusia, which has been translated into English *This Earth of Mankind* by Max Lane in 1981, was written by Pramoedya Ananta Toer in 1975. This novel is one of Toer's works as a political prisoner in Buru Island, where he was a political prisoner for more than ten years. During the first few years of his imprisonment along with other political prisoners, reading and writing activities were banned as noted by the translator and therefore, Toer told his story orally to other prisoners as a means of keeping stories alive in his memory (Toer, 1982). In 1975 after the ban was revoked, he finished the writing of the novel and since then has been translated in tens of foreign languages.

The story *This Earth of Mankind* revolves around the life of the central character in the novel, Minke, a native student the colonial school called H.B.S in Surabaya at the turn of the twentieth century. As a result of European education Minke is considered extremely successful and so well educated that he is able to see and voice the injustice and unjust treatment of the East Indies government. The other side of the narrative also highlights the reluctance and unwillingness of the natives, the Javanese, to awake and stand up against the oppression of the colonial power as well as to act critically and consciously against the hierarchy and social structure of their own society. The climax of the novel rises as the result of Minke's introduction to Annelies, the daughter of a Dutch master and his concubine, Nyai Ontosaroh, who is also being the central character of this novel.

The reference to Aceh in *This Earth of Mankind* was mostly made in relation to another important character in the novel, Jean Marais, a friend of Minke. Jean Marais was a French painter who had fought for the East Indies government against the Acehnese and had cost him to lose of one of his legs. Not only had his involvement in Aceh cost him a leg, but also had left him with trauma and psychological impact for the rest of his life as a result of his complicated relationship with an Acehnese woman. This paper explores Toer's portrayal of the heroism of the Acehnese and the tragic it had caused through the eyes of Jean Marais.

METHODS

The analysis is based the English version of the novel *This Earth of Mankind* translated by Max Lane which was accessed from www.bookfi.net. The references to Aceh and Acehnese in different parts of the novel were laid out and a closer and in depth assessment of the references were carried out. The assessment was to find out what sort of representation were being offered about Aceh and the Acehnese by Toer. Two imminent features of representation of Aceh and the Acehnese are the heroism of the Acehnese during the war and the tragedy the Aceh war had caused.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first mention of Aceh appears on page 55 where a description of Jean Marais language attitude is put forward. He was according to the narrator had a resistance to learning Dutch although he had fought for and paid by the East Indies government in Aceh. Instead, he learned Malay and was becoming more fluent at it. At first, readers could regard that the mention of Aceh is a mere background to the description of the character Jean Marais. It turns out that the following pages continue to talk about Aceh through the perspective of Jean. The war in Aceh was further explored through a painting that Jean was sketching. The painting portrays:

"A Netherlands Indies soldier—it was obvious from his bamboo hat and his sword—was thrusting his foot down onto the stomach of an Acehnese fighter. The soldier was pushing his bayonet down towards the bosom of his victim. The bayonet pressed onto the black shirt, and from under the shirt emerged the breast of a young woman. The eyes of the woman were wide open. Her hair fell in bunches over fallen bamboo leaves. Her left hand was resisting as she tried to rise. Her right hand powerlessly held a dagger. Above them both, like an umbrella, was a cluster of bamboo bent down by the attack of a strong wind. It was as if only those two lived: one who was to kill and one who was to be killed."

This is a vivid and detailed depiction of a war event in Aceh in Toer's perspective through the medium Jean's paintings. The fact that the Acehnese fighter depicted in the painting was a woman provides at least two purposes. First, it seems Toer wanted to offer a confirmation that in Aceh not

only women went to war in Aceh but also they were as courageous as men in the battle. Second, the presence of the woman in the painting gave Toer the opportunity to develop the life drama of character Jean. The conversation that follows the description provides more meaning to and interpretation of the painting. The soldier was Jean himself, who eventually did not kill the Acehnese woman although she begged that her life be taken. Instead, later on Jean had a relationship with the woman and had a daughter, the *little French-Acehnese Mixed-Blood girl* May Marais.

Acehnese Heroism

Toer also explores quality of the heroism of the Acehnese. Through the perspective Jean, Toer acknowledges the toughness of the Acehnese. They are so tough that the Dutch army chose Javanese from Purworejo who were *calm* and had very *strong nerves* to fight the Acehnese. Through Jean's concession of his wrong assumption that Acehnese was somewhat naïve to fight the colonial army, Toer provides more elaboration of the toughness of the Acehnese. The Acehnese is said to have great ability although their weapons were inadequate compared to those of the Dutch army. Their strength to fight the rifles and canons of the colonial army was from the combination of the use of local environment, dagger, spear, Acehnese bamboo trap, and all their abilities.

The morale and spirit for fighting of the Acehnese was also describe as extremely high by giving the example of Tjoet Ali, an Acehnese commander. Although he had lost many of his men, the Acehnese did not surrender and still kept fighting, not only resisting the army but also resisting their own decline. This morale that is possessed by the Acehnese almost made the Dutch generals gave up the war in Aceh.

The source of this morale was described as basically comes from religious aspects. As described in Jean's story of the ambush of the Dutch army camp in Blang Keujeren, the source of the motivation of the Acehnese was inferred to have come from belief as they heard the shouting calling to Allah. In this battle Jean lost his leg, lost his wife, the Acehnese woman fighter, after being stabbed by her own brother.

Human Tragedies

While suffering of the Acehnese is treated as being peripheral; the suffering of a colonial soldier, one the novel characters, is being amplified. The sufferings from the Acehnese's end could have been expanded more than merely the picture of the horror of the Acehnese woman fighter who almost died being pointed by a bayonet, and being dead after the stabbing. However, this is clearly understandable as Toer's novel takes the perspective of Minke, the student of H.B.S, the colonial school in Surabaya. Therefore, the perspectives of Minke's friends who were mostly Europeans and Indos are more reasonable to be taken into account for expansion, including Jean's suffering after returning from war. His situation after the war, having to raise May without being able to tell the story of her mother created everlasting trauma for Jean.

The reference to Aceh was also made a metaphor to boost moral of the central character, Minke, when he had his own turmoil after getting involved and getting married into Wonokromo's family, the family of Annelies. Minke, Nyai Ontosaroh, and Annelies had to fight the law of Netherlands which planned to take away Annelies from Nyai Ontosaroh as she was regarded not to have the legal right of Annelies. She was only a concubine and a Native. Here, Toer took the metaphor of Acehnese fighter situation for Minke's family fight against the Dutch legal power. "... the Acehnese know they can't win, ... the Acehnese still descend to the battlefield..."

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The English version of the novel can be a very good resource for literature study at English Department, especially at universities in Aceh. *This Earth of Mankind* can be a choice because in the novel there are a lot of references to Aceh which will make it much easier for students in Aceh to relate to the content of the novel. It also provides vocabulary that describe local situation such as those use in describing Jean's painting. Pramoedya Ananta Toer's works are considered the jewel of Indonesian literature works. In *This Earth of Mankind*, there are a lot of issues being raised that can make students strive to search their own identity, consciousness and purpose of life, including what it means to be a student and an educated person as portrayed by Toer through his character, Minke.

Therefore, using the English version of this novel especially in literature class can bring multiple benefits to the students.

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