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EXPRESSIONS OF INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the expressions of individuals and society relations in some Southeast Asian novels, especially Pramoedya Toer's *It's Not an All Night Fair*, Alfred Yuson's *Voteurs & Savages*, Suchen Lim's *The Lies That Build a Marriage*, and Merlinda Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman*. Both individuals and society embody the social traditions with form together the human relations in these novels. Therefore, this article emphasizes this relation in the light of Marxist theoretical implications. Individuals represent the fragmented component of society which is the larger component of any human civilization. Thus, this contiguous relationship between individuals and society lies in the interaction encounters among individuals. This interaction brings about a cultural discrepancy which divides individuals into social classes. Accordingly, this study exposes the cultural defects in Southeast Asian literary culture and how art, in literature, bridges the gap between social classes to provide freedom for both individuals and society. The application of Marxist theory will reveal the literary portrayal of such cultural freedom.

KEY WORDS: Art, Marxism, Objective Reality, Social Classes, Southeast Culture

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1. INTRODUCTION

The application of Marxist theory to literary works results in different representations of reality depicted in the text. Such reality is vital to distinguish the actual experience undergone by individuals or society. Moreover, the expression of reality could be exemplified in Marxist insights found in the contextual clues of literary works. Besides being a social trend, Marxism is an economic theory, it contains within it a manner or a political ideology for how to improve and change societies by implementing socialism, and socialism aims at distributing wealth to all members of the society and ending the control of capitalists over the means

of production. Marxism aims to end the exploitation by Capitalists of the proletariat (Burns 15).

Additionally, Marxism carries out an ideology directed towards certain objectives to achieve social or economic welfare. Ideology carries out "certain" policies and beliefs that formulate the bases for economic and political systems. It is a group of discourses that comprise man's aims and deeds. The ideology is a vision of life, or a group of ideas suggested by the superior class of a certain society to all individuals in that society. The ideology can be defined as a set of concepts that are applied to general issues to make them fit political affairs. Implicitly speaking, every political or economic

affinity requires a certain ideology, whether or not this ideology is advocated as an overt system of thought (Burns 59). Accordingly, the most conspicuous feature of Marxism is the glorification of the social and individual's freedom at the expense of human equality and independent life. One of the viable ways to express such kind of freedom is the symbolical glorification of art in literary works. John Dewey supports this claim by replacing hierarchal societies with an equal system. In this system, people are provided with different opportunities to prove their existence and achieve an independent status: "Marxism had flourished in the nineteenth century as a pragmatic view of history that offered the working classes an opportunity to change their world and their individual lives" (Dewey 192).

Accordingly, the main purpose of this article is to emphasize that art is both an expression of individuals' and social freedom, and art as the accomplishment of social needs in Southeast Asian literary culture. Therefore, the selected works will mainly be Pramoedya Toer's *It's Not an All Night Fair* (2006), Alfred Yuson's *Voteurs & Savages* (1998), Suchen Lim's *The Lies That Build a Marriage* (2007), and Merlinda Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman* (2012). The theoretical analysis will utilize Marxist analysis for the selected texts. Thus, the literary manifestation of art in the selected works will primarily be in the depiction of society in general, the psychological aspects of individuals, the individuals' suffering, and social relations.

2. Society in *It's Not an All Night Fair*

In *It's Not an All Night Fair*, Pramoedya depicted how classism had made it difficult for the Indonesian society to achieve nationalism. In this novel, the narrator's father is a teacher and his goal is "To become a pioneer of independence" and "to become a nationalist" (71). However, due to internalized classism, it was difficult for him to do become a nationalist and make the Indonesian society be aware of nationalism because majority of the Indonesian society was more concern about how to survive from poverty. The narrator's father had a chance to become an assemblyman but he felt: "The local assembly is only a stage. And I don't fancy becoming a clown – even a big clown" (51).

The father wanted to change the system that is in place through education. He had told his son "I wanted to be a nationalist". Silence again. "That's why I became a teacher." Silence again. "To open the door for the hearts of children to go on to the garden..." He held it awhile, "of patriotism" (71). However, this was not something easy for the father to achieve. Pramoedya also wanted to point out how difficult it was to educate people and changing their beliefs as classism has such a profound effect on the way the Indonesian society think. This was portrayed in his writing through the character of the *dukun* who is also a teacher. He had told the narrator the challenges of being a teacher and trying to re-educate them. "What's hard is teaching, swallowing the bitter taste of the miseducation which parents given their children. That's the thing which so easily breaks a teacher" (42). It was difficult for the father to change the society's acceptance of the class system. The class system had not only divided the people but it had ensured that unity among all the class will be difficult to achieve. This leads to the next effects of classism which is education ignorance among the Indonesian society in *It's Not an All Night Fair*.

In addition, ignorance is one of social dilemmas. In *Social Class and Education: Global Perspectives* (2012), Lois Weis and Nadine Dolby argues that education and social classes represent a "starting point, with specific focus on the ways in which education is still a critically important space where class is struggled over, engaged, produced, and lived out, as we simultaneously resituate the analysis in its global reality" (2). Nevertheless, if there is social class inequality, ignorance dominates the educational identity of society "in a global context in new ways" (2).

In line with this argument, *It's Not an All Night Fair* embodies depicts ignorance a consequence of social class inequality in a global context. Ignorance is especially reflected in the medical retardation in Indonesia. For example, the narrator describes the hardships of his father's deteriorating health: "during that week nothing happened, except father's health gave cause for increasing concern. When I looked in, father didn't want to eat as had been the case for the whole of

that week. Ice! Ice that was always what he asked for" (57). The narrator's father, here, lacks the minimum requirements of patients, such as ice and food.

As the story goes on, the implication of education ignorance comes out. In the hospital, for example, medical care is not all satisfactory. Instead, it is very preliminary and there are no proper health care for the patients. This problem comes out of the rarity of trained nurse or doctors. The narrator still regrets his father's poor health. He could not find any exit of the father's medical dilemma: "three hours later I went to the hospital. Before I went in, I heard father groaning and complaining. His breathing was heavy and difficult and every now and again it was interrupted by a slight, low, painful coughing" (59).

The father's deteriorating health is developing. The narrator keeps maintain that the poor medical care is the reason behind his father's bad health. This is an implication of medical apparent ignorance, whereby there are no qualified staffs to take care of the patients. The narrator, here, describes his sufferings while accompanying his father in the hospital "on the bed I saw father sleeping limply. I approached on tiptoe. But father opened his eyes. He seemed to gather all his remaining strength. Then in a reproachful voice-a voice which reproached everything" (59).

Then, the narrator, talks about the Dutch period when the medical care had been better. After the Dutch the current status of medicine had changed as a result of medical education ignorance: "in our little town, there was only one doctor. In the Dutch period there had been three doctors. But it has always been true that death is to be found everywhere in time of war even when the war is a small one" (61). Therefore, the doctors become rare, and even those available are braggarts and "sovereign" while treating the clients: "and now the doctor who was sovereign here sat like a king behind his desk. His voice had the tone of someone wanting to belittle everything he faced" (61).

3. Individual suffering in *Voyeurs & Savages*

In The first chapter "Of Smoked Dark Wood," the individual sufferings are depicted through the character of Chief Antonio. He wants to

get by his life by hunting. But he is rivaled by other people: "It was the farthest Chief Antonio had ever thrown his spear. As soon as it left his hand he knew it would pierce the ground past the first white line the white men had chalked up in the grass. Other lines Curved beyond, but only the big white men with their long, heavy spears ever reached past the distant mark" (11).

Chief Antonio also tries several times to hunt alone without the other to achieve his desire to gain hunted animals or birds by his spear: "That was how he had learned to throw a spear since boyhood. Make it sing and fly so straight until it found a mark. The target was often only as tall as he was. Sometimes it was as high as his breast. Sometimes it was much higher than his eyes. Or it could be lower than his taut body as he bid it pierce, not ground, but a mark" (11).

Chief Antonio's desire to get by his life is similar to Cornelius James's story in the third chapter "Brown Boys". He is also obsessed with good life by work and hunting: "Cornelius nodded toward the native guide beside him. He set his duffel bag down on a flat rock, and quickly dug in with his fingers. Bringing up a leather portfolio, he drew out a sketch pad" (15).

In the fourth chapter "The Mission," Dr. Thomas Haywood recounts the sufferings of the children. The children themselves are victims of food, shelter, and clothes shortage: "They're all little children. They'd like nothing better than to exhibit their toys. And remember, gentleman, we're telling them they'll be perfectly attended to for a year. Nary a worry about food, clothing, shelter" (19).

Wilson Cangbay also embodies personal sufferings of individuals in the fifth chapter "Getting to Know." Wilson Cangbay uses a sundial watch to live a happy life: "The young Wilson Cangbay proved to be an inexhaustible source of information on the Cordillerans.... It was as Wilson had said. Just like a sundial, the stone calendar of Besao relied on the sun's slanting rays to dictate the appointed time for the villagers' most essential activity" (21).

In Marxism, the sufferings of individuals' represent "the functional nature of these dramatic tactics" which may vary independently, yet they share one component. They permit the repressed,

the muzzled, the censored or the directed to discover a path into the text in exactly those spaces that the dramatic system makes likely. Consequently, they have become double-coded discourses, fictionally enacting the stiffness at the heart of an ideological system established on obliteration and obligation. In *Modern Sociological Theory* (2008), George Ritzer argues that “economic determinism” is the dialectical nature of the ideological system in capitalist societies. Capitalist societies incorporate imagery of this “economic determinism” and “It was this imagery that led to the major criticism of significantly oriented economic determinism – that it was untrue to the dialectical thrust” (Ritzer 140).

In *Marxist Literary Theory* (1996), Terry Eagleton contends that “realism” demonstrates a personal longing for change and prosperity. Individual wealth, therefore, springs from people’s potential and progress: “The literature of realism, aiming at a truthful reflection of reality, must demonstrate both the concrete and abstract potentialities of human beings in extreme situations of this kind. A character’s concrete potentiality once revealed his abstract potentialities will appear essentially inauthentic” (146).

4. The Psychology in *The Lies That Build a Marriage*

In the first story “The Morning After,” the narrator does not find any proper way to tell the old lady about bad news regarding David. In this sense, the narrator is psychologically conscious of the old lady’s state: “My feelings were in a state, too, that morning. I didn’t know what I was supposed to feel. I was still dizzy from David’s news. I wondered if I should tell her about her grandson. Could the old lady cope with two shocks?” (10).

In the second story “My Two Mothers,” the narrator wants to be kind to the old ladies because he wants them to be his real grandmas: “I shut the door. Cut her off in mid-sentence. Didn’t bother me that I was rude. I was a teenage pimple on the face of the earth.... My two mothers were old enough to be my grandmas” (19).

In the third story, “Usha and My Third Child,” the crisis of the narrator’s needs for more domestic and social life culminates in his longing for

stability and freedom. He feels these feelings when he sees the people sufferings in the streets. This is the psychological feature of the narrator: “I asked about sleeping arrangements, diet and how the work was shared out at the crisis centre, which took in abused foreign domestic workers, abused wives and children, and unmarried mothers” (33).

Moreover, in the fourth story “The Lies That Build a Marriage,” the narrator describes the hopeless psychological conditions of Mei who needs a perfect family life: “Mei plonked herself on the sofa next to me. She liked to act as though she was my mother’s pilot younger sister and part of our family. But she wasn’t. She was Mother’s prized lodger and the major source of her income” (43).

The discussion of psychology and society is a central interest in Marxist critiques. As John Dewey puts it, in *Art As Experience* (1934), that “intensified” personal “experience” is a vital agent to bridge the gap between society and people: “A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of fine arts. This task is to restore the continuity between the refined and the intensified forms of experience that are works of art and everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience” (3). This specific incarnation of the individual spirit justifies Dewey’s belief in “intensified forms of experience that are works of art and everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience”, which is why society records its most influential presence in times of major personal thrift, when inspired people fight against trouble to envisage and articulate bankruptcy sufficiently beyond depiction.

This idea is emphasized in Kenneth O’Brien’s *The Sociology of Literature: George Lukacs* (1969), where he argues that social critiques represent a “gap” between social individuals and their reality: “But often the poetic critique of that society had an idealistic form, a realistic literature in idealistic gap” (141). This transition mismatch results in a classic association that itself casts distrust on the probability of social groups’ demonstration, or rather, it problematizes the decrees of realist demonstration. Social-realist texts thus function as alternative versions of individually circumscribed

reality. The “subjective” concept hidden by the dominant version is regained in the text and noticeably becomes part of the procedure of the analytical framework. Such a “shocking” reality creates solid social estrangements at the level of one’s personal recognition of cultural circumstances. In this sense, their structures are exactly social, since learning dramatic textualizations goes with apparent official contextual representations, dramatizing the continuous infiltration of cultural reality via its semiotic ideological replica.

5. Social Relations in *Fish-Hair Woman*

In the first story “Beloved,” social relations come out when Pilar lives with her mother in a family life: “At the foot of the bed, Pilar feels faint. She sees her mother trying to staunch the blood with a blanket, but it won’t stop, and she keeps muttering, ‘But she was fine, she was, I don’t understand.’ The blanket grows soggy in the midwife’s hands” (30).

The social relations are also reiterated in the second story “Gestures.” The relationship between Luke and a girl represents the social relations among the young: “Luke sees the girl first. She is in shadow. She is at foot of the winding staircase. She has a bunch of gardenias in her hands. Her shoulders are bare. Her white dress has delicate beading on the bosom. She walks into the light. She walks towards him. She does not stop staring. She almost touches his face, or is it his hair. She hands him the flowers. She is also nineteen” (85).

In the third story “Iraya,” the social intimate relations are embodied in the soldiers’ treatment of the narrator. The soldiers take the narrator to the river to treat him in a good manner: “Listen to that night when the soldiers came to take me to the river, and how the coffee grove detained us. Tony, i want you to hear my history. I want you to know my village beyond your grief, of love- not yours but theirs” (137).

The fourth story “Testimonies” represents another aspect of social needs for intimacy. This is evident in Matt’s mild consideration of Minyong and giving him a peaceful life: “Believe me, after all these years... you’ll be safe again” (209).

In the light of these texts, the projection of Marxist social relations in literary text relates to

community. This is in contingent relation to Karl Marx’s concept of the “automatic subject”. With this concept, Marx initiates an eminent “change” in the personality of social individuals in their communities. In *Capital Vol. 1* (1976), Marx contends that:

It is constantly changing from one form into the other without becoming lost in this movement; it thus transforms itself into an *automatic subject* ... In truth, however, value is here the *subject* of a process in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and of commodities, it ... valorizes itself ... [V]alue suddenly presents itself as a *self-moving substance* which passes through a process of its own, and for which the commodity and money are both mere forms (italics in original). (255–256)

6. CONCLUSION

This essay has studied Pramoedya Toer’s *It’s Not an All Night Fair*, Alfred Yuson’s *Voteurs & Savages*, Suchen Lim’s *The Lies That Build a Marriage*, and Merlinda Bobis’s *Fish-Hair Woman* as Marxist texts addressing the convention of art as an expression of reality. Such expression involves two conflicted perceptions regarding a stable life for individuals and the fulfilment of social needs. These individuals’ life and social needs are discussed in terms of Marxism which “does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx’s investigations. It is not the ‘belief’ in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a ‘sacred’ book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to method. It is the scientific conviction that dialectical materialism is the road to truth and that its methods can be developed, expanded and deepened only along the lines laid down by its founders” (Lukács 1).

The Marxist analysis of the selected works expands the idea of social revisionism. This idea indicates a utopian quest for authority is to be found in “objective” reality social groups (Lukács 5). He also claims that society needs “continuity” or development to go through different periodic stages in order to reach the peak of social perusal for the “ultimate” social order (7). Furthermore, the expression of such reality goes along with individuals’ aspiration for freedom “for if the social

order which is defined as the ultimate objective already existed in the past, if it were merely a question of reinstating a previous stage of development, then ignorance of the existing legal order represents only an apparent, and not a real, violation of the limits of the given legal orders: one real legal order confronts another real legal order" (10).

Both the individuals' quest for liberty and the social needs are fulfilled through humanistic art dimension. This dimension evolves from "individual" enhancement and modernity towards productive systems (Lukács 20). Human beings can adapt to different economic changes by adopting various positions. And those changes, consequently, lead to radical moderation in the human conceptualization of "proletariat" positions (21). Thus, art reconciles "two possible remedies. Either the individuals who constitute the proletariat realize that they can help themselves only by voluntarily setting about the strengthening of labour discipline and thereby raising productivity; or, where they as individuals are incapable of doing so, they create institutions which are in a position to carry out this necessary function" (26).

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