

Green Literature: Ecology and Social Movement in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This research departs from the conviction that literature studies should be contextualized with the social reality of the day such as ecological destruction that has become global problem. It is important to explore Indonesian eco-literature within the context of its authors and community. This paper aims at answering how Indonesian literature and its literary community deal with ecological problems. Critical reading method is used to identify contemporary Indonesian literature using environmental issues as themes. Observation and interviews with authors and eco-communities were also attempted to see their involvement in ecological issues. Lastly, using Ecocriticism and Papal Encyclical on Ecology, the conclusions of this study are as follows. First, although ecological issues are rare in Indonesian contemporary literature, ecological awareness is raised and nurtured by the existing eco-communities who use literature to further their causes. It is through communities of this kind that literature may likely transform people so as to partake in slowing down the speed of environmental damage.

Keywords: ecocriticism, contemporary literature, social transformation

Introduction

One of the human problems in the 21st century is the increasingly sweltering earth. Human beings have been exploiting nature excessively and unwisely, so that the ecological damage in turns hampers human survival itself. People are ever more challenged to master over passion or greed rather than to govern nature. "So far God only created one earth", said Samuel Sidin Oton, OFM. Cap a Franciscan abbot and environmental worker who recently received an award from the Indonesian government for his writings about the country's ecological crisis. He argued that environmental damage is a shared problem to all the faithful regardless of their denominations/beliefs (See Dewi 2013). Environmental issues become ever more urgent since the dimensions of socio-economic and psychological consequences of the ecological crisis are most keenly felt by the poor who have no access to social protection and adaptation of natural resources when their livelihood destroyed. Indonesia is one country that is dependent on the mercy of nature and the population of the poor is not yet all alleviated. In fact, according to the Directorate for Research and Strategic Studies of the Bogor Agricultural Institute, Indonesia becomes the burden of the world in the global crisis due to the high rate of deforestation, the use of engineering products non-organic farming, environmental pollution, and other socio-cultural impacts thereof (Hunga 2013).

Rationally and scientifically, ecology does help people to overcome the effects of environmental problem. However, ecological problems are not resulted from human beings who act, because it concerns with the selection of values or "ethical problems" (Sastrapratedja 2013: 169). Environmental expert Prof. Dr. Emil Salim (2013) in his paper

read at the Annual Meeting of the Bishops' Conference of Indonesia 2012 highlighted the inequality when people pay no attention to the social and environmental issues.

Literature can be instrumental in opening people's minds as to become aware of ecology, environmental ethics, nature conservation, and other pertinent values. Literature provides information through symbols, metaphors, style, and so forth without being judgmental. As such, the commitment and implementation of the policy regarding environment may likely become quite effective when the values in literature are internalized, for example, by way of literature.

This study therefore aims to investigate how literature interprets the real problems faced by the society, in this case, environmental destruction. It also aims to understand the involvement of writers and literary community through in-depth interviews and observations. The results of this research may contribute to the study of humanities (especially language and literature) and social sciences both theoretically and practically.

Literature Review

In this gradually smoldering earth, it is imperative to abandon anthropocentrism or human-centeredness, that is, the universe and everything in it are considered valuable only when people can take advantage of them economically and culturally (Clark 2011, Dewi 2013). Farm animals such as cattle, buffalo, goat, and horse are valuable because of their meat. They are also preserved as a cultural symbol or to increase the owners' dignity. In addition to livestock, poultry and fish as well as plants are also treated the same. The increasing population and technological progress require that human beings also increase their continual consumption and exploitation of nature. It is indeed perplexing when people start to clear up fields and meadows; rivers, lakes, and seas alike are exploited for the fulfillment of human consumptive desires. The damage and depletion of the natural resources pose environmental problems. Anthropocentric view easily ignores this ecosystem imbalance.

Conversely, ecocriticism or criticism of the environment is a relatively newcomer in social sciences and humanities that has probed further the relationship between literature and environment (Phillips 1999, Oppermann 1999, Tošić 2006, Huggan and Tiffin 2010). The working definition can be formulated thus: studies that look at the relationship between literature and the physical environment caused by the global environmental crisis and its efforts to practically and theoretically fix the crisis. Ecocriticism usually intertwines with postcolonial theory as both offer a discourse against power, i.e. the colonial and/or capitalist (Huggan and Tiffin 2010). There are various natural imagination in literature; and environmental criticism is a representation of the most radical one compared those that sing praise the beauty of nature as in romantic poetry or naturalistic realist/deterministic novels that resist the cruelty of nature to people (Clark 2010). Ecocriticism claims that nature is an integral part of human existence; hence it is not to be exploited.

Ecocriticism is clear in *Silent Spring* written in 1962 by Rachel Carson the American ecologist specializing in Marine Biology who was also an English Literature scholar. This book depicts migration and the near extinction of thousands of birds because of the use of chemicals in the environment. Conclusively Carson wrote that chemicals such as sprays, pesticides, aerosol commonly used in the fields, gardens, forests as well as common households could potentially kill not only insects, but also the entire chain of life. The birds no longer sing with which the nature is silent. Carson's appeal was finally heard and in some American states the use of DDT was strictly prohibited. *Silent Spring* was often dubbed as a very influential book after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Dewi 2013). From this

example it can be concluded that the literature could provide a solution to environmental crises.

Writers and literary community of environmentalists in this study can be assumed herein as a cultural movement. In contrast to the masses who are mobilized, the literary community as a cultural movement is always incorporated in the organization arranged neatly to create social, political, and economic changes. Besides having regular agenda and incidental alike, community social movements usually have role models (Dobson 2001, Valiente 2003, Thompson 2005). Researching community Kooththu dancer, i.e. a dance typical of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka, James Thompson, for example, dug a narrative of Tamil-Sinhala civil war in Sri Lanka through observation, participation and reflection during the workshop with the kooththu community under Jeyasankar. A writer, lecturer, and kooththu dancer, Jeyasankar not only creates and performs a dance/drama with the community, but also makes changes to the ethnic Tamil movement so as to make them realize the importance of reconciliation (See Dewi 2010). Through his dance community called "ThirdEye", Jeyasankar has participated in the peace process in Sri Lanka. The strategy employed by Thompson here was used in this current research coupled with ethnographic inquiry methods and lived experience (Saukko 2003, Pickering 2008, L' Etang 2012).

Research Method

This research applied qualitative descriptive approach with the perspective of Ecocriticism. The procedure includes a combination of a critical reading of texts and observation/interviews with producers and consumers of literature and other related parties.

Sources of primary data are in the form of literary texts on environment, in-depth observations, and interviews with authors and instigators within the literary community. In analyzing the data, extensive literature study was done to record literary works about environment published until mid-2015. Data were obtained through previous studies on a number of existing works through scientific journals, paper/ thesis/ theses/dissertation, and newspapers. In addition, direct information about the existence of the work was also tracked through the website, blog of the authors, publishers, and readers, as well as a variety of online libraries.

Informed by the directory data obtained earlier, in-depth observation and interviews with the authors and environmentalists were conducted. Interviews with authors were done randomly but sustainably, coupled with repeated readings of texts in order to capture some information about their social praxis, using the techniques of ethnographic inquiry (Saukko, 2003, L'Etang 2012). Here, sociological theory of art (Bourdieu 1994) was used to see the distinction: How these authors differ from those who do not work on environmental themes.

Validation of data was done through a re-reading of the texts and the observation of social texts that have been taken earlier. Another way to triangulate the data was also conducted by comparing the findings with other findings obtained through reports in newspapers, scientific journals, research reports that have similarities in certain aspects.

Discussion

How Green is Green Literature in Indonesia?

Studies on Indonesian literature with environmental themes are hard to find. Indeed, the natural beauty and stunning panorama of the country, for example, can be found in the old poems of Muhammad Yamin and novels from the Balai Pustaka period. In-depth

reflection on the impact of environmental pollution and natural disasters, however, are not so obvious because the authors in question tend to bring socio-political (and economic) problems in Indonesia into their writings from age to age (Dewi 2013). Meanwhile, ecocriticism looks at with scrutiny how nature is treated in literary works.

Among the scarcity of environmental criticism in literature, the novel by Martin Aleida *Jamangilak Tak Pernah Menagis* [Jamangilak Never Cries] (2002) is a lawsuit against the exploitation of the Asahan River by a multinational rayon factory. Women who became the main character in this novel attempt against the government but his efforts were thwarted by a political conspiracy and capitalism (Bandel 2008; Dewi 2013). Inspired by the Asahan river pollution caused by the toxic waste from a company rayon in Sumatra, this novel tells the struggle of a female character named Molek who fought against the local authorities to stop the company's business license. The river where residents gather fish becomes contaminated. From day to day, flood of sand gets higher and higher and the river turns shallow, while the government officials completely close their eye on this pollution. Molek then sues the Regent asking for accountability of the taxes paid by the people. She insists that at least the mound of sand in the river be relocated somewhere. Molek's protest is completely ignored and met instead by violence. The local authorities get Molek arrested and her son, too, is tortured. As argued by Dewi (2015), there is a sub-text in the arrest of Molek's son who is accused as a communist.

The novel is about to show that humans are not trying hard enough to maintain and preserve nature. It seems that only a handful of concern people like Molek who indeed care about the habitat. It is obvious here that economic development is not always aligned with the social development and the environment. Capitalism hurriedly seizes as much benefits as possible without considering the resultant social or environmental impacts. Although it may not have the same impact as *Silent Spring*, Martin Aleida's novel has opened human consciousness on ethics and threats to health through the narrative of people's awareness of water pollution.

In the short story "Kering" [Dry] by Wa Ode Wulan Ratna published in 2006, illegal logging in Pekanbaru, Riau is woven into the problems faced by the characters in the story as shown by Suryaningsih's reading of patriarchal domination over nature and women in this short story (2013). Nara is oppressed by her husband and her in-laws who show no objection to forest logging and burning in the dry season. The metaphorical support through the characters and the plot line here is enough to make this story green and intimate with nature.

The Balinese folklore "Gecko Cannot Sleep", for example, is interesting enough to be used at various levels of education. The story is simple but it has a profound message: all is but intertwined. Geckos protest to the Village Head because flickering fireflies interrupt their sleep at night; Fireflies light the road to assure that nobody get buffalo dung underfoot; Buffalos cover the road holes with manure so that rain water does not halt; the Rain has to go down and leave puddles of water so that mosquitoes can live; if there are no mosquitoes, the geckos will starve to death. At that point the geckos stop complaining. The next part will explore the role of the news media in treating environmental issues through their literary section.

Viewing Environmental Problems through Literary Lens

A number of Indonesian national newspapers, especially the Saturday or Sunday editions always feature short stories. "Literature newspaper", according Bandel (2006: 53) is debatable in terms of its literary quality, although it enjoys enormous popularity and acceptance among readers in Indonesia. The publication of collection of short stories in a book by one leading national newspaper *Kompas* since the early 2000s is one proof.

Therefore, short stories published by *Kompas* were used in this study, with the assumption that this kind of narrative discourse may adequately represent the conscience of the nation wracked by environmental problems, such as natural disasters, environmental pollution, logging, and so forth.

As conceptual theories, those of Buell (2001), Garrad (2004), and Philips (2008) were used. In addition, the Vatican document on ecology *Laudato si'* by Pope Francis (2015) was used as a tool of analysis. Encyclical No. 25 mentions that the worst effects of global warming and climate change are palpably felt by the developing countries, especially the poor and the marginalized. These community groups are the most affected and disadvantaged, because their livelihood depends on nature reserves and ecosystem stability, such as agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and other natural generosity. The poor do not have access to financial resources or other resources that allow them to adapt in the face of climate change or natural disasters. Besides, they also have limited opportunities to obtain protection and adequate social service.

By using the perspective of ecocriticism and Papal Encyclical as a reading device, Dewi (2015) looked at 25 (twenty five) short stories with environmental themes in *Kompas* in the period of 2010 – 2015. In summary, it was found that (1) most of the short stories use environment as the setting of place and time; (2) commitment to fight against environmental destruction is shown in stories where the water appears as an enemy (floods, rain storms) or friend of the persecuted or victims of polluted rivers; (3) Indonesian contemporary fiction is yet to turn “green” given the scarcity of environmental issues seen in scrutiny within the narratives.

In general, the environment in the short stories that were examined serves as background, such as floods in the fictional city Cibaresah by Aba Mardjani. Inspired by the hot mud disaster in Sidoarjo, R. Giyardi criticizes environmental damage in his “Remembering The Lost City”. Not infrequently the places invented appear with mystical atmosphere and serves as a symbol as in the short story “Rongga” [Cavity], “Ketapang Kencana”, “Romansa Merah Jambu” [Pink Romance], “Menebang Pohon Hidup” [Cutting Tree of Life], to mention some.

However, criticism of the destruction of the environment, especially deforestation and environmental pollution are also featured in short stories such as “Protes” [Protest] by Putu Wijaya and “Ikan Kaleng” [Canned Fish] by Eko Triono. A favorite theme of the most common is water pollution, for example, “Rumah Air” [House of Water], “Bidadari Serayu” [Angel of the Serayu River], and “Cikapundung”. Some stories affirm the gap between the ruling class and the oppressed. A handful of elite coerce the little people while contrasting urban culture versus traditional culture. River symbolically separates the rulers of the city (represented by luxury housing) and poor communities living by the riverside.

Green Literature: Coupling of Social Philosophy and Poetry

Calling themselves “Sastra Hijau” [Green Literature], Rayakultura is a community of literary activists. Initiated among others by Naning Pranoto, Soesi Sastro, and Sides Sudyarto DS, this community publishes poetry and other works through its website (<http://www.rayakultura.net/sastra-hijau-dan-eksistensi-bumi/>). The term “Green Literature” itself sounds poetic in that green is a mark of freshness, symbolizes the growing process, and is synonymous with fertility (Pranoto et al, 2013: xiv). Naning Pranoto, for example, in addition to becoming a speaker in various forums on creative writing, she also facilitates young writers to work through seminars or training related to writing, especially about nature conservation. The writer who is originally from Yogyakarta has encouraged the participation of youth in some short story writing

competitions on environment, for instance the Green Pen Award from the Ministry of Forestry.

It is clear here that the insights of ecological, environmental ethics, awareness of nature conservation, and similar values can be built through literature. Literature provides information through symbols, metaphors, style, and so forth without judging. As it is, the commitment and implementation of environmental policy will become effective when the values in literature are internalized. To cite Naning Pranoto:

One of the efforts to save [the environment] through the process of awakening can be launched through the cultural movements particularly by harnessing the power of literature, both in prose and poetry. The advantages and benefits of literature is that it has a powerful potential to realize universal human conscience, without being patronizing or giving bombastic propaganda (<http://www.rayakultura.net/sastra-hijau-dan-eksistensi-bumi/>)

The following is part of a poem, creation of one Rayakultura writer, Sides Sudyarto DS entitled “Jaga Daratan, Jaga Kehidupan” [Preserve Land, Preserve Life]:

Bumiku, bumi kita hanya Satu [My Earth, our earth is just one]
Bumi kecil yang yatim piatu [Just a small earth, an orphan]
Harus kita cintai selalu [We must love it, as always]
Jika hancur tiada gantinya itu [When gone, nothing to replace]

Seandainya bumi punya mata [If only the earth has eyes]
Pastilah ia sudah menagis [Surely it would give us cries]
Merintih-rintih mengalirkan air mata [Moaning and shedding tears]
Akibat terus digali, dibajak dan dibor linggis [For being continually dug, plowed and drilled by crowbars (in Pranoto et al. 2013: 9) [Translation mine].

Other communities that pay attention to both environment and literature can also be found in a social work agency formerly run by the Jesuit priest Y. Wartaya called Kursus Pertanian dan Taman Tani (KPTT) or Agriculture Course and Farmer Botanical Gardens in Salatiga, Central Java. KPTT also provides nature education and training for students during school recess as well as literary activities such as poetry writing, short stories, songs, etc. to show concern for the environment. While learning to make organic fertilizer or seed breeding, for example, participants are trained to use their imagination about nature that is so generous to humans through their simple writings. The young generations here take advantage of school holidays in creative and imaginative manners. School (or, to be more precise, crash course) of this nature helps sharpen our sensitivity for the environment and raise awareness about the impact of natural destruction.

Green community as such is outspoken and through literature, they show concerns about environmental issues. It seems that the literature could be a social movement. The different communities under studied make up a fascinating synthesis that has long envisaged by Anthony Giddens when he wrote “Literature and Society: Raymond Williams” (in Sunardi 2002), that is, social science could be a meeting point between social philosophy and poetry. Such communication should be encouraged and supported in order that social problems, in this case environmental problems, can be zoomed in (and hopefully solved) through the study of literature.

Conclusion

It should be noted qualitatively and critically how the world of Indonesian literature has translated the real problems faced by the community, for example, concerning the preservation of natural and/or environmental pollution. This paper has shown that Indonesian contemporary literature scarcely deal specifically with environmental problem, because attention is drawn more to social issues. Published works including short stories that appear in national newspapers do not significantly address environmental issues. Given the limited response to ecology in Indonesian fiction, it needs to be further studied other literary works of longer pieces such as novels, plays, and even movies with environmental themes by Indonesian authors.

This paper has also shown that the involvement of writers and literary community on environment (literature as praxis) is quite promising. The existing green literature community like Raya Kultura, for instance, has continually made efforts to raise ecological awareness by engaging in various literary activities such as poetry reading competition, writing workshop, eco field trip, etc.

Finally, this paper suggests that further research on ecology and social movement in Indonesia employ, as research method, lived-experience, in-depth interviews and observation with “green” or ecologically-inclined authors and literary communities. Perhaps by departing from here, one can develop more theories on reading environment literature.

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