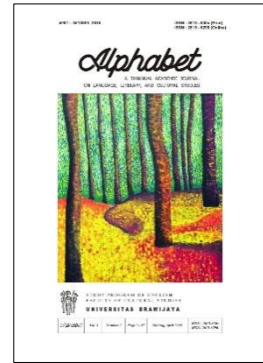


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## Multicultural Indonesia Reflected in Hendri Teja's *Tan* Novel

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# Multicultural Indonesia Reflected in Hendri Teja's *Tan* Novel

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## Abstract

Reading a literary work might give us an idea of the situations of society in a particular time. In the sociology of literature, this phenomenon is referred to as a mirror of an age. This means that a literary work does not simply describe the conditions of a society, but also values the tradition of the society. Taking *Tan* novel as its object, this study aimed to see the description of Indonesia's condition, at the time when the novel was composed by Hendri Teja. Alan Swingewood and Diana Laurenson's idea which sees literary work is the reflection of the age is used as the approach to this study. The data which were taken from the novel were analyzed by relating them to the secondary data taken from references discussing the situation of society depicted in the novel. The study concluded that the description in *Tan* novel portrays Indonesian conditions and values, i.e. plurality in religion and social class and general agreement in decision-making. The way the society perceives multiculturalism reflects the greatness of Indonesian people in accepting differences and in practicing democratic system. In addition, this study also found out that this novel also criticizes a long-running problem between the working class and capital owners in Indonesian society.

## Keywords:

*Tan*, mirror, condition of society, age of its production.

Descriptions in novels often resemble the real society's condition at a particular time. This may include various situations, like social structure, family relationship, class conflicts, or domestic issues. Indonesian novels such as Moeis' *Salah Asuban*, Khayam's *Para Priyayi* and Pramoedya's *Gadis Pantai* have shown the relationship between literary works and society (Taufiq, 2014; Suaka, 2016). These works come as the representation of the situation of a particular society and elaborate the idea of a multicultural Indonesia.

*Tan* is one of the Indonesian novels which are similar to those aforementioned works in terms of the setting and Indonesia's condition in the past. Yet, *Tan* novel is interesting since it is different from other Indonesian novels which narrate Indonesian history. While the other novels depict the past situation of Indo-

nesia, the story in *Tan* shows similar circumstances of the society at the time when the novel was written. In this way, even though *Tan* story is set in the past, i.e. the Dutch colonialization era, the descriptions of the situations actually resemble those happening in Indonesia during the reformation era, circa 2010-2015. Likelihood found in both society's condition described in a literary work and the circumstances of the society in which the work is created is not an unexplainable relationship. Sociology of literature sees that there is a relationship between literary works and society where these works are created. What happens to society in a given time may be reflected in literature. Thus, the age of production refers to the time when a literary work is created. Therefore, there is always a good possibility to understand the system/society by understanding literary works created at that particular time.

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There are critics who analyze the relation of the production of literary works and the condition of Indonesia. A review by Aveling (2008) shows that literary works as important reflection of Indonesia's culture, language and politics. Shifting into a more specific field of literature, Schaeftler (2009) reviews intensively on the works of exiled authors. Schaeftler argues that literary works show the ideology existing in the society where the works are created. She continues that a 'social commitment' is shown by literary works and they make an assurance of the idea of nationalism, as Indonesia.

Most of the researchers above studied Indonesia's past literary works, meanwhile this study tries to look at a new Indonesian novel entitled *Tan*. This novel is chosen as the material object is because *Tan* in recent Indonesia has a new place in the society. Although Tan Malaka is one of Indonesia's national heroes, few Indonesians know him. The ideology of new order era in the society has changed people's understanding on the idea of national hero. Even though there is a Presidential decree on Tan Malaka's as a national hero, there was no biographical writing or publication that truly revealed the life of Tan Malaka. Moreover, he had never been cited in any reference books in school in Indonesia (Faisal, 2015), until recently in the 2000's, Harry Poeze started research on the life of Tan Malaka and wrote four book series it (Budilaksono, 2014). Henri Teja, one of rising Indonesian writers, wants to fill this gap by writing a semi-biographical novel which soon becomes one of popular Indonesian literary works. This novel has its potentials to uncover the relation between the novel and Indonesian social condition at that moment.

Accordingly, in this research, we want to analyze the resemblance of the description in the novel with the conditions of Indonesia, the situation and condition at the time of the novel production. It aims to see the reflection of Indonesia's multicultural condition at the time when Teja composed the novel. This study seeks for a plausible explanation on the use of story alluding to one part of Indonesia's history to reflect the present conditions and situation of Indonesian society.

## METHOD

### Data sources

There are two data sources in this study. The first data source is Hendri Teja's *Tan* novel published by Javanica in Februari 2016. The data taken from the novel are the statements containing the description of Indonesian society, particularly religion, class structure, and political situations.

The secondary data sources are references discussing the conditions and situations of Indonesian society at the time when the novel was written. The references reporting the conditions and situations of Indonesian society is categorized by the topics of religion, structure, and political situations in the society.

### Data collection and analysis

There were four steps taken in conducting this research. The first step was to read the story of *Tan* novel closely to find out the description of the situation and condition of the society in the novel. This includes the description of the social structure of the society, the known characters, and the main issue (topic) of the story. The next step was to study the circumstances in Indonesian society at the time when Hendri Teja's *Tan* novel was written. Relating the descriptions available in the novel which echo Indonesia's situation and conditions at the time of the novel creation was the next step taken in this research. The reflection of the condition and situation of Indonesia presented in *Tan* is analyzed and further interpreted to find out the social values and meaning embedded within the novel.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

*Mirror to the age* is one of the approaches to sociology of literature as it is considered as the documentary aspect of literature. Loid de Bonald (cited in Laurenson & Swingewood, 1972) explains that with a careful reading of any nation's literature "one could tell what this people had been". This implies that literary work offers description or information on the conditions of certain society in a particular period.

According to the sociological approach, sufficient skill and knowledge are needed to unravel details of history in particular periods. Thus, knowledge of the conditions and situations of a society from other (non-literary) sources will help to “find out how far certain social types and their behaviour are reproduced in a novel in an adequate or inadequate manner” (Laurenson & Swingewood, 1972, p 14).

In the view of literary work as mirror of the age, the analysis ignores the writer, his awareness and intention. It is because writers do not set out simply to depict the social world in largely descriptive terms. The conception of mirror arises in the term “mirror of the age” in the sociological analysis of literature. This means that literary devices are created and designed in such a way that they reflect values and meaning in the social world.

In sociology, society is more than a social structure; it contains norms and values. These norms and values, such as attitudes to sex by working class and middle class, are reflected in literary works. In this way, a literary work is seen as more than a medium which presents historical and social reflection (or refraction). Therefore, finding the core of meaning, such as values embedded within particular literary works, is the ultimate objective of literary analysis through sociology of literature (Laurenson and Swingewood, 1972).

Working from the framework of structuralism, sociology in literature has developed to a wider aspect of culture. Goldman believes that literature is a constitutive element in the making of social consciousness and not related to a real trans-individual consciousness. However, by only using general perspective, Goldman fails to critic hegemony in literary works which counts on the writer as individual of society. Swingewood, on the other hand, succeeds to build a dialectic between sociological theory and issues in cultural studies (Jadhav, 2014, pp. 660-661). By employing Swingewood and Laurenson’s theory and method, this study is purposely seeking dialectic analysis of *Tan* novel with the social condition of Indonesia as presented from the literary devices used in the

writing to elaborate the reciprocal relation of the system and values.

Study on sociology of literature, along with the development of the theories, is also growing to a wider range. In Indonesia, study on sociology of literature ranges widely from the canons to contemporaneous works seen solely from sociological perspective to a combination with education, reception, linguistics, representation and historical point of view.

Aveling (2008) overviews a wide range study on Indonesian literature, proving that literature indeed reflects how language is used to constitute reality, in addition to studying its close relation to society and picturing of the society. This study portrays a wide study on Indonesian literature without analyzing a specific theme or topic.

Developing a more specified study, Hoadley (2005) chose various modern Indonesian literary works specified in the topic of new order orthodoxy as his material object and employed sociology of literature by Adorno as the approach in relating the reality in the image in the novel and the factual reality. What missing in Hoadley’s study is the dialectic between the realities (of the image in the novel) and the factual one with subjective individual text maker resulted from structural analysis on the novels.

The structural study of how language represents the society is brought up by Rohmadi (2016) with his study on psychopragmatic aspect of language in Indonesian literature. This study is interesting since it analyses the structure of the language to unearth the behavior, values and functions of the language in the novels. Using a linguistic approach, he can show a detailed analysis of the social aspects of literary works. However, it fails to show the dialogue between the works and the author’s horizon of expectation influenced by the bigger structure and values of the society. This study, instead, considers the dialectical analysis between the work and the condition of the common man society.

Moving to a wider range in the study of sociology of literature, Kusno (2003), with the framework of the public and ideological space,

tries to analyze Tan Malaka's writings to gain geographical imagination of Tan's idea on nationalism. The relation between the imagination's realm in the writings and the factual geographical realm are shown by Kusno as to have a close relation with each other. A further analysis on the two aspects results in a dialogue of social space shown by Tan as an agent of the society. However, this analysis is limited on the geographical spheres surrounding Tan's writing, and leaving the analysis of the structure of the writing behind.

A more specific study is held by Schaeffer (2009) with her study on Indonesian literature written by exiled authors. She works on the aspects of stylistics and language forms that seek to elaborate social idealism in the context of Indonesian contemporary works of literature. The study uses historical, political and biographical approaches that still leave a point on the analysis in the effort to show the empirical evidence from the very writing behind.

As the study of sociology of literature varies from the perspective of Adorno to Goldman and Swingwood's perspective, it is a good possibility to analyze Indonesian literature from Swingwood's perspective since Swingwood can accommodate two important aspects in the study of sociology of literature. By combining Marx and modern sociology theories, Swingwood can scrutinize works, from the paradigm of functionalism cultural theory and the problem of modernity (Jadhav, 2014).

Swingwood has provided the theory of seeing literature from a more modern's perspective, and together with Laurensen who provides the method, they make a better alternative in the study of sociology of literature. Not only seeking for the reciprocal relationship between the work and the society, this method also seeks the development of values and meaning in the society.

The research by Taufik (2014) and Suaka (2016) view two different studies on modern Indonesian literatures exemplifying the identity and strategy of identity in modern Indonesian literatures. They employ the same approach that is sociology of literature. Taking canon

modern novels as the material object of the study, they elicit identity and the strategy constructing the identity in modern Indonesian literature.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

#### *Result from the primary data (Tan novel)*

##### *Pluralism portrayed in Tan Novel*

The characters in *Tan* novel come from various backgrounds. The first two chapters of this novel are allocated to discuss the identity of the main character that comes from Padang, West Sumatra, and the people of that region, with their tradition and belief. Chapter three only narrates the main character's engagement with *Priyayi* (educated people) from Java, and chapter four of the novel entitled *Lelaki yang Mendabului*, introduces more characters with more various identities. There are Chinese people from Hindia and *batik* businessmen from Surakarta. The final chapter, *Lelaki yang Mengatur Perkara*, introduces more diverse characters in terms of ideology, vision, and identity. However, in this final chapter they are described to cooperate and unite in their struggle for the nation's independence. There are a Chinese muslim named Haji Abdul Hasan (Kwe Ang San), who donates his wealth for founding *sekolah rakyat* for the poor; Ennur, Winanta and Abah, who are Sundanese; Agus Salim representing the religious group; Ki Hadikusuma from Muhammadiyah; and Arabian businessmen in Surakarta. There are also Semaun, Alimin, and comrades from communist party; Kaking and Pi'i (*jawara*) of Banten; and Kiras, Togap, and comrades as the representatives of Javanese villagers and the working class.

The final chapter of the novel also describes the biggest labour congress in Surabaya, which was attended by people from many regions of Hindia, representatives of labour unions in Hindia, such as *Serikat Pegawai Pertambangan Hindia* and *Persatuan Pergerakan Kaum Buruh*, and other political organizations, businessmen, religious organizations, doctors, and education activ

ists. They met in the congress to elect the leader of the union.

The idea of plurality in Hindia is not only seen from the number of the characters with various backgrounds and different identities, but also there is an explicit statement that Hindia is not only Java, but also Sumatera, Celebes, Ambon and Borneo. Thus, people who think that Hindia is only Java might be uninformed.

#### *Working class and the capitalism portrayed in Tan Novel*

Many parts of the novel describe the lives of the labour in the plantation in contrast with those of investors and factory owners. It is described that the relationship among those parties is not equal. Their inequality creates social classes based on the economic condition. The labour is described to be exploited during the plantation era. The villagers are forced to rent their land for the plantation or factory on very low rates. As a consequence, the villagers live in poverty. This condition forces many people to work as harbour porters or contracted labours. These unskilled and low-educated labours are underpaid. Their economic condition is vastly different from the European migrant-labours and the investors. They also have limited access to express their voice. These conditions are worsened by the fact that the colonial authorities take side with the investors and factory owners. Some policies such as the founding of *Indie Weerbaar* and *Volksraad* are made only to secure the investment of the capital owners.

#### **Results from other references on the social background around the novel's production**

##### *Pluralism of religion in Indonesian society*

According to an article in Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs titled *'The Role of Religion and Ethnicity in Jakarta's 2012 Gubernatorial Election'* by Ken Miichi (2014), Candidates in Jakarta Gubernatorial Election in 2012 used the issue on religion and ethnicity to support their campaign. *"Religious rather than ethnic symbols or reasoning were increasingly used in the course of the gubernatorial election."* This strategy was still used in other elections,

including in the general election in 2014 when the candidates took advantages on both issues. This condition had created discrimination and segregation in some elements of society, especially shown in social media.

#### *Working class and capital owners in Indonesia*

In Jakarta Post dated May 4, 2013 Endy Bayuni wrote *Commentary: The Indonesian Labor Movement Comes of Age*. It tells about strikes and struggle of Indonesian working class around the years.

The massive May Day rallies in Jakarta and other major cities this week revealed the growing strength of Indonesia's labor organizations. That they were able to create so much havoc and disruption and then win a major concession from the government means that the labor movement has come of age, at least politically.

Indonesian labors still struggle with the demand of a proper social welfare. The labors usually express their opinion in their movement on Labor Day on May 1<sup>st</sup>. Labor in Indonesia does not only include factory workers but also office staff and teachers.

## **Discussion**

### **Pluralism**

As it is suggested in the literature review, literary devices are created and designed in a way that they reflect values and meaning in the social world. Accordingly, the characters in *Tan* novel are invented and placed in circumstances so as to evoke the significance of pluralism in Indonesia's society. The characters, especially the main character, explicitly communicate his disagreement to any discrimination. In a conversation with his colleague, Tan states his idea that people are equal regardless their background, economical condition, skin color, and their religion.

The invention of characters that comes from various backgrounds, including religion, ethnic, vision, idealism, economic condition and social class support the idea of pluralism. There are Abdul Hasan, who is a Chinese and

moslem; Alimin and Semaun who believe in communism; and also Togap and other characters, the working-class people. In addition, there are also characters invented to represent Moslems, like Haji Agus Salim, Arabs, the indigenous people of Padang and Sunda, the capitalists, and other characters from the educated class. Those different groups of characters are resourcefully involved in the struggle for independence of the nation. This harmonious situation pictures mozaic of Indonesian's society. Apart from their differences, the idea of plurality is broad-mindedly accepted. The value of plurality is established in harmonious collaboration of many different groups working for the independence. Through the voice of the characters, the value of plurality is seen positively as the strength rather than weakness.

Indeed this novel portrays different arguments and ideology amongst the groups in the society. Yet, almost all the time they prove that a forum is the place where many ideas and problems are brought to be discussed. Either formal or informal meetings are used as a forum to seek for constructive solution. *Tan* novel frequently describes meetings as forum for *musyawarah* (consensus/ general agreement in decision making). The beginning of the novel pictures *musyawarah* organized by Padangnese. In the novel, the people solve their problems in *musyawarah*, which is a part of their tradition. It is also used as a forum to make important decisions. The other parts of the novel also show conference or meetings as an occasion to discuss various issues especially those related to their independence movement. Through such a portrayal of the structure of the society in the novel, *Tan* novel emphasizes on the significance of discussion in society.

*Musyawarah* and election verify basic democratic system practiced in Indonesian society. The ability to practice this system also means the willingness of the people to respect others regardless of their differences. Accordingly, this novel mirrors a value in Indonesian society, which is plurality.

### ***Working class and the capitalists***

The conflict between the capitalists and the working class is one of the main issues in *Tan* novel. It depicts the capitalists as the party who exploits the working class. While the capitalists gain profit and make fortune, the working class never gets the appreciation they deserve from the company they work for. Their low wages make them suffer economically. Practically the working class lives in poverty. The struggle to improve the economic condition of the working class is done in several ways, including campaigning for a change in the economic system, advocating the prosperity of the working class through media, and direct action.

Eventhough the time setting is in the colonialization era, the description of the condition of the working class in the novel bears a resemblance to the condition of society around the time of *Tan* novel creation. In the early 21st century, Bureau of Statistics recorded a gradual increase in the number of Indonesian labors that there were 131.55 million workers in early 2017 (Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2017). Most of them work as office staff, civil servants, and factory workers. 'Strike for pay hike' is usually held to celebrate Labor Day every May 1st. In this event the workers usually show aspiration to improve social welfare.

In many parts, what Hendri Teja describes in the novel is in accordance with Indonesian labor force. For example, the policies made are controlled by capital owners to secure their plantation business. This causes any efforts by the unions to negotiate with the authority futile. Disillusionment of economic disparities and the unfair treatment of the capital owners to the laborers have led to a strike. In this condition the novel illustrates that there is no chance of the workers to advocate welfare. Direct action is the last and most effective resistance that must be done by the workers in the plantation companies.

This circumstance resembles the conditions of the workers in Indonesia during the reformation era where the dialogue between the la-

bour and the capitalist fails due to lack of bargaining power. Direct strike is taken as the last way to express their call for labour's welfare.

The conflicts and the relations between the labor force and the capitalists during the plantation era under the Dutch colonization described in the novel show that the capital owner has more power and fortune, and that the labor is exploited and positioned as the second class in the society. The labours can demand economic justice, but they will not succeed without the approval of the higher class. This social structure accurately reflects the situation during the time when Hendri Teja created his work, *Tan* novel.

### CONCLUSION

The title of the novel, *Tan*, reminds the readers of the real character of Tan Malaka, a national figure in Indonesia's independence movement. However, the writer feels necessary to clearly mention in the cover that the book is the 'novel' so people should take it as fiction instead of a biography which implies more factual narration. Readers who know the history of Tan Malaka will often refer to the character in the novel with that they have known from history. However, the younger readers who are not familiar with Tan Malaka, especially since there are very few texts telling about him due to his ideology, still can enjoy the narration by relating the story to today's condition in Indonesia. The novel narrates events that take place in the past, but Hendri Teja creates the narration depicting a more recent Indonesia, especially the condition where the people deal with pluralism and working-class struggle. Hendri Teja himself writes a lot about Indonesian Labor in many of his writings in his blog.

*Tan* novel is perceived to comment on social condition in Indonesia around 2010-20, the novel's production age. The narration shows how people from various social background work together to get independence for Indonesia and to fight for labors' right against the capital owners who exploit their workers. This novel can be read as a criticism about the social condition in Indonesia around 2016 when the

novel was published for the first edition including on the general election in 2014 and other national occurrences. Media expose the discrimination or even segregation on religion and ethnicity. This discrimination and segregation issue might be more of an issue allegedly perpetuated by some untrustworthy media sites, at least on social media. Nonetheless, the government, through the Ministry of Communication and Informatics has already shut down the sites.

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