

Justification of The Asian Literary Canon

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Abstract

The term "canon" is a term in question over time because it is considered incapable of answering a certainty about the criteria used in classifying literary works. The question arose from reasons such the neglect of some literary works which containing unacceptable topics politically or have no commercial values in the time of its publication. Furthermore, there is a work of literature that is not recognized because the author is not derived from the origin state or origin culture raised in his work. Seeing this, this research has sought to reveal the acceptable criteria in classifying literary works into a canon. The concept of canon used are based on Smyth, Kolbas, Lise, and Benton. Their thoughts are different but complete each other. The objects of this research are notable literary works from three different authors and countries. They are Arundhati Roy, Pramoedya A. Toer, and George Orwell. Each them contain different issues which represented the most common issues appear in Asian countries. Throughout the three works, the face of Asian is seen and the acceptable criteria are found. There are four criteria suggested in this research. They are: first, the work may contain cultural and moral values of Asian ; second, the work may inform ideologies and social of the Asian; Third, it may inform the historical value of Asian countries; and the last, it is already criticized and reviewed by others, in this case, researcher or readers.

Keywords: Canon, Asian literature, justification, Asian literary canon.

Introduction

There are lots of literary works over the world written by authors from periods. It is difficult to recognize them without any distinction. The meaning of the works may be interpreted wrongly, since each works have their own voices to be spread. Therefore, recognizing the classification of a work is important. It helps readers to be argued about the intention of the work at a certain time. It calls canon. Simply, the term canon refers to a classification of literature. For instance, a book can be the part of a literary canon when it attains a certain status of authority. Furthermore, its' quality has a significant impact on other writers or readers to see and to regard it as a high aesthetic quality work in the literary world. Also, ones believe that if a book or a literary

work used in a school curriculum, then it can be included in a literary canon.

Nevertheless, there are debates on the criteria in canonizing and justifying a literary into a canon literature according to Kolbas. He says that:

“In the past twenty years, the controversy over the literary canon has generated a wide range of critical commentary, from editorials, and polemics in journals and newspapers to theories and case studies in seminars and symposia.”(Kolbas: 1).

Referring to Kolbas, a literary canon rises questions from some parties which have a close relationship to literary works. Editors, journalists and researchers are debating the term of literary canons. They are questioning requisites used to include a work into a literary canon. Unfortunately, this question has stayed in the mind of today's readers.

Oppositely, Arnold and Thomkins and others have ideas about it. While Arnold (Jailant:7) sees the canon as “the best that had been thought and said”, Jane Thomkins and others (Kolbas) have described literary reputation as a historical reputation depend on the social, political and commercial interests of the time.” Both views are quite similar, nevertheless there are three problems arose when a literary canon is classified based on Arnold, Jane and others. First, there are notable works that not included in any literary canon. It is because they are unacceptable politically. Second, some works are famous over their period. And the last is, some famous works are not included in a literary canon due they were written by author beyond the events in the works take place. It is in line with Shwartz in Lise. He says that in every era, there are many excellent writers who achieve some measure of literary success in one period but find themselves set aside in another. The criteria used in justifying or grouping a literary work into a group is a bias for the political and gender reasons.

The debates is happening at around the world, such as westerns contest the fix definition of ‘canon’ and the criteria used in canonizing their literary works, how Asian American position themselves and their literary works into and what criteria they use to group their works and themselves. This has also happened to Asian literature. The phenomenon occurs because the unclear definition canon and criteria in justifying a literary into Asian

Literature. Bloom feels unsure after listing down the works of The Chaotic Age authors in his book ‘*Western Canon*’. It is because of the contradiction of the definition and criteria which another may also consider the issue of social-politics of groups authors and their works in a period. However, there are four related issues in canonizing a literary work. They are textual choice, literary quality, prescription and recommendation.

Moreover, there is another problem of literary canon is the translation of literary works. Translation is not only translating text from a source language to target language, but also translate the issues in the source text to target text according to Tymoczko. Translation involves many aspects, such as the linguistic features of source language and target language, the suitable vocabularies in the target language, the culture of the source language and target language and so forth. These aspects need to be considered to achieve sufficient translation. Based on these, the result of translation of a literary work be accepted and called a literary work.

Referring to the phenomenon of the literary canon and similar problem faced by writers and their works surround Asia, this research is conducted. It aims to seek the criteria used in justifying a literary work into Asian Literary Canon. The subjects of this research are chosen around Asian countries. They belong to Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things*, Pramoedya’s short story *No Resolution*, George Orwell’s essay *Shooting Elephant*.

However, it is needed to clarify the term of Asian Literary Canon firstly. Then, the elaboration of the three works from different authors are elaborated.

1. Discussion

a. What is Asian Literary Canon?

The term “Asian” is broadened to be employed to refer to the authors whose ethnic origins in the Far East, South, Middle-East, Southeast Asian and even the Hawaiian islands of the Pacific according to Huang (p.4). In short, Asian refers to people who live in Asia countries. Due, the definition of canon is indefinite yet. Therefore, it is needed to elaborate about the definition. Smyth, based on his idea of Canon, then he defines the Canon of Indonesian Literature as below:

“Literary canon is a historically defined body of text whose contents are declared, at a given time to be of outstanding national, ideological, cultural, or moral value and to show exemplary attainment and standard in their literary style and use of language. The intrinsic and extrinsic literary qualities of the canon are deemed by its proponents to be timeless and to exist above and beyond their given historical, ideological, social, and artistic context.” (Smyth. p.152).

By this, Smyth intends to specify the criteria in justifying literary works into a canon. There are more than social, political and economical receptions. Moral values, cultural, ideological and aesthetic values are the things considered by Smith as the other criteria of literary justification.

None of the definitions of canon are called false. They need to be re-formulate due to suit the context of issue regarding to the literary classification. Therefore, this research is summing that Asian Literary Canon is a group of works collection, which present Asia, Asian and its culture. Moreover, the authors are from either Asian countries or beyond Asian countries.

Referring to Smyth’s and Benton’s criteria in grouping and justifying a literary work, there are four significant points summed up. First, the writing and dissemination of literary works showed the emergence of the form and aesthetic which influence other canon writers. Second, the broader the form of literary works, the more open opportunity allowed for a synthesis of the historical and the mythological. Moreover, it is also developing more accessible narrative lines. Third, a literary work marks its notable democratization of literature which is perhaps becoming the evident in ideologies of a place they belong to. The last is the literary works reveal significant events which influence social responses.

In addition, there are special criteria. They are moral and cultural values. They reinforce the significance of literary work which included a canon. As Smith reviews (Bloom, Lynn Z. pp. 401-430), his criterion proposed, he says that a canonical literary work should be criticized and reviewed, evaluated and re-evaluated, listed in a literature rank, and awarded literature prices in order to ensure the

reasons in justifying a literary work into a canon is definitely right. Likewise him, this research sees that a literary work are simply understood as a part of art, but meaningful in spreading the issue(s) it intends to spread. Reviewed, evaluated and awarded are actions taken to appreciate the meaningful which owned by a literary work.

Seeing this, it is a need to see the coherence of the previous considerations of literary canon through famous works from two different countries in Asia. Therefore, this research discusses two major works of two notable writers. A feminist and environmentalist from India, Arundhati Roy, and a nationalist and a revolutionary from Indonesia, Pramoedya Ananta Toer. They are famous through their notable works.

b. The Notable Asian Writers

There are some prominent authors from Asia such as Arundhati Roy from India, Naguib Mahfouz from Egypt, Park Wan Shu from Korea, Murasaki Shikibu, Pramoedya A. Toer from Indonesia, Jose Rizal from Philippine, and many others. Arundhati Roy is one of Asian writers who write in English. Most of her works are written in English. Meanwhile, Pramoedya and Jose Rizal are examples of writers who write their works in their native language. However, their works are translated into several languages and known worldwide.

Asia countries rich for natural resources, which then become the main reason to be colonized by western. During the colonizing

time, many aspects of Asia countries affected by the western such as social life, political view, and education. These issues become an interesting not only for Asian writers but also for non-Asian writers such as George Orwell, a famous British writer, poet, novelist, essayist. He was born in India, which may be the first reason why he concerns and writes about Asia.

c. Arundhati Roy's *God Of Small Things*

The God of Small Things is a semi-autobiographical because the story starts with the telling of her childhood life in Ayemenem (May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid). Referring to the title, Roy establishes multi-perspective way of storytelling. It informs the value human and Love Law. 'The God of Small Things is a story of the love affairs of Ammu and Velutha, and Rahel and Estha. Their families are ignoring them for that reason. Rahel and Estha are twin, but non-identical twin. After their parents' separation, Estha moves and lives with their family named Babu.

As aforementioned that the story starts in a town named Anyemenem in India. There is an Imperial Entomologist named Shri Benaan John Ipe or Pappachi. John Ipe marries Mammachi. They have a son named Chacko and a daughter named Ammu. Chacko has an opportunity to have better education, while Ammu does not. Their parents' marriage life is unhappy. John up tends to beat his wife without any specific reasons. Responding to this, his wife decides to divorce. Nevertheless, his wife

mind is already constructed by the social judgement that man is the powerful person, while woman is the powerless person. Therefore, she loves Chacko instead of Ammu.

Unfortunately, Ammu and Chacko repeat the thing their parents done, divorce. Chacko's wife was a white woman named Margareth. They have a daughter named Sophie Mol. Meanwhile, Ammu is's husband was Babba. They have twin babies named Rahel and Estha. Ammu loves Estha and cousin Shopie more than Rahel. She is repeating her mother action toward her. Her action makes Rahel sad.

In other side, Rahel is healing herself for her disappointed toward her mother. She likes a man named Velutha. Velutha comes from the lowest class, which Roy addresses him as 'God of Small Things' or 'Small Things'. However, people are not knowing the secret love of Ammu and Velutha. They keep their relationship until found by Rachel, Estha and Sophie. The response of the three is beyond expectation. They take a rowboat and go to sail. Unfortunately, the rowboat is sinking and Sophie is dead.

The time is passing by. Ammu dies in her 31 year old for lung disorder, while Rachel repeats her parents and her grandparents' attitude, getting divorce from her husband Larry McCaslin. She backs home and lives with Estha and her grandmother, Mammachi. This time, Rachel repeats the thing her mother did, falling in love with wrong person, Estha.

d. The points highlighted in the story

The action and the thought of her parents and her show how Indian person's belief the patriarchal culture and practice it in their daily life. Man is overpowering woman, and the woman has no right to defense herself and decides what to do. The only way in solving the problem is running away from the marriage life or divorce. Also, this culture generates the differences on woman and man. Man is loved and admired and appreciated by all society, meanwhile woman is undersestimated, sub-categorized and discriminated by society. Simply, it is a bias gender culture.

The attitude done by Rahel and Estha is similar but not the same with Ammu and Velutha. Both of the couple are contesting the Love Law. Rahel and Estha as Ammu children, should not have sex or falling in love according the Indian culture, religion and the Holy Bible. Meanwhile, Ammu and Velutha should not have forbidden love, because they come from different social classes, which there is love law that man and woman cannot have a love relation with different social class. Both of them and the whole family would be ignored by the whole society.

Throughout her work, Roy tries to contest the Love Law of how and how someone should loved by other. Moreover, she intends to show the Indian woman's position in social and culture. In addition the depiction of the concept of patriarchy in India through the characterization of the characters which already buried deep down of its peoples' hearts and

practice it consciously shows her intention to argue the concept of patriarchy.

e. Pramoedya's Short Story 'No Resolution'

Pramoedya is one of the prominent Indonesian authors. *Buru Tetralogy* is the notable works of him, which ever bring him as a Nobel nominator in Literature for six times. Before the novels, he has written short stories. *No Resolution* is one of his short stories which compiled in his short story collection entitle 'Tales from Djakarta'. This short story translated by Julie Shackford-Bradley. The original title of *No Resolution* is *Tanpa Kemudian*. This story is written in Jakarta after his freedom from the jail in 1956. He backs to Jakarta and finds the complicated life of Jakartanese and the big wave of urbanization from other villages to Jakarta. As a nationalist and socialist, these issues, encourage him to portray the problems in his short stories.

No Resolution portrays the lives and attitudes of society in the Revolutionary era. People face economic problem which influence their life quality and somehow it scrapes their life ideology, beliefs and cultures. Other people treat people inhumanely and badly. People do anything for a better life. Above all, the government only acts as a watcher who watching all the miserable experiences of its citizens.

No Resolution starts with the portrayal of a beautiful young virgin named Nana. Indirectly, Nana as a beautiful young woman works with

a white man and attracts colonials and Indonesian soldiers (Toer. p.191). Many men fall in love with her, but also many of men want one night show with her, or even want to make her as a concubine. Nana sees these as a solution for her to escape from the life difficulty. She becomes a Japanese concubine. She lives a life as a rich concubine. She wears a gold necklace and earrings (Toer. p.193).

The happiness does not last longer than she thought. The revolution time comes and rapes her happiness. The colonial leaves her. Thus, she backs to where she belongs to. She does the usual activities as others do. She goes to wash her clothes at the well. She acts bashful since she is not Mr. Ozima's concubine anymore. She feels a shame if she meets people. However, her miserable life is changing over the time. She uses her beauty to attract others, but this time is for her survival. Soldiers and men are spending nights with her, some with love, while others without love. Then, she marries Khalil and tries to be a good woman. Nevertheless, the life they lived does not suit her hedonist character. Then, she frames her husband an abductor who abducted her in the village. Her husband is captured by the soldier for abduction issue (Toer. p.200). Khalil gets death penalty without any investigation and evidence. He dies in his firmness of his true love for Nana.

f. The points highlighted in the story

Throughout this short story, Pram wants readers know the real life condition faced by minority group such as a Javanese woman who should break the cultural rules for a better life

which better does not really mean well and better. Moreover, he wants to show that among people in the war condition or revolution era, women and also children are suffering more than men. They are shaped to be the fragile individual to live in a life such as revolution era.

Jakarta is usually portrayed as a better destination for the unemployed, poorer and villager, who want to seek the better quality of life. However, through this story of a beautiful young woman, Nana, and a brave man, Khalil, Pram overs different sights in seeing Jakarta. Jakarta is not a heaven or a utopia for the unemployed, poorer and villager. It does not provide happiness. The reality is Jakarta life is harder than a village. Jakarta is a problematic city. The citizen treats other badly.

Moral and cultural values are scraped by the life difficulties. We can see that from the ideology shifting of Nana. Nana throws her dignity and shifts it with fake happiness. It is only a short happiness. However, nothing is impossible when someone tries to be good, and it needs more than a willingness. It needs passionate and consistency to live as a good personality. This is that Nana never tries to do. In other words, people need to work instead of talking about the difficulties of life. Through this, Pram is suggesting readers to act rather than to talk only.

g. George Orwell and an Essay 'Shooting an Elephant'

Orwell is a pen name of Eric Arthur Blair. *Animal Farm* is one of his notable works which criticized by some critics such as Bloom. His

essay entitles *Shooting an Elephant* is an Englishman life experience in Burma, which could be himself or another. This essay is controversial for the issues of imperialism, conqueror and conquered.

The story starts the narration about some knowledge about imperialism. As a son of an Opium Department servant in the Indian Civil Service, he works in Burma in the Indian Imperial Police. He tells about his life in Burma as the western side with the people but hated by the Burmanese, which this makes his life in danger.

There is one elephant entered a state of dangerous frenzy on an unspecified day. The person in charge is out of the village, thereby the narrator acts as the substitute to take care about the elephant problem as ordered by the sub inspector. The thing becomes worse, when the elephant kills a coolie. Then, the narrator decides to bring his rifle to defense himself at the urgent time. However, the crowd of Burmanese who follow him and run after the elephant ask him to kill the elephant if he meets it.

“As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so. When a Burman tripped me upon the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. This happened more than once
“(Orwell,p.1).

Responding the request from the Burmanese, he kills the elephant. There two reasons of him. His life would unsecure if he disobeys the Burmanese' request. He should play an image of a western who never failed in doing something. Otherwise, he feels guilty to kill the elephant. Killing an elephant is an unacceptable reason to save his life and pride as white man according to him.

h. The points highlighted in the story

As aforementioned that, beyond the issue of imperialism and his position as anti-imperialism, the issues of conqueror and conquered are portrayed (Orwell.p.1). He shows the impact of western colonialism in the country is horrible. That is the reason why Burmanese hate him, as the representation of a white in the country. Therefore, his sympathy on Burmanese is rejected. On the other side, Burmaness show their power over the elephant. The elephant is seen as the conquered and the Burmaness is seen as conqueror (Orwell.p.1).

Above all, he position himself in a higher position than them. He acts as the hero in the elephant incident. Winning the heart of Burmanese as their savior from the elephant incident, and saving his prestige as a white man or western who live in Burma.

2. Conclusion

Classifying literary works into Asian literary canon basing on one or single reference is too selfish and can be called as early justification for it. Seeing that Kolbas',

Jailant's, Smyth's and Benton's thoughts in justifying a literary into a canon are completed for each other, this research sums up their thoughts into four justifications in justifying Asian Literary Canon. First, the literary works may present written form and aesthetic of Asia, and give significant influence toward afterward Asian writers. Second, the literary works may able to inform the historical background of Asia. Third, the literary works may able to show and mark Asian ideologies, thus they able in achieving Asian responses, even world communities. Fourth, the literary works might be criticized and reviewed for the quality of the texts and other issues portrayed in the texts. Awards or prices of literature may be awarded as forms of appreciation to the works and showed that the works are worldwide accepted.

Referring to Benton, Smyth, and Jailant and others, and the previous justifications, this research concludes that Asian literature is grouping and justifying as Asian literary canon based on the Asian issues portrayed in the literary works such as: the issue of colonialism, nationalism, discrimination, socialism, cultural differentiations and moral values. Therefore, either Asian writers or Non-Asian writers who write their works, whether in English or in their native languages which fulfill the justification may be included into Asian literary canon. This also applies to the translation of Asian literatures, because the translation is a process of rendering text from the original language into another language by considering both the

linguistic features and cultural values of the source language and target language.

Roy, Pramoedya and Orwell are notable authors in the world. Their works inspire others in writing similar issues. The issues are also the continuing issues. Due to the issues occur in the past and still exist until today, although they may appear in different packaging. In other words, the three works are famous over the origin time of published and beyond the origin of their countries. So, these three works by prominent Asian writers from different eras are able to canonize as the Asian literature.

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