

Aceh and Nias in Several Reviews of Literature in Indonesian National Newspapers

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Abstract—This article aims to describe the review of Indonesian literary works with Aceh and Nias ethnic background in national newspapers. The object of this research article is a literature review article in five national newspapers: Kompas, Republika, Media Indonesia, Koran Sindo, and Koran Tempo for the past 4 years. From a number of Indonesian literary works that have been reviewed in national newspapers in the last four years, there are several literary works that elevate theme or background from the ethnic Acehnese or Nias. Aceh is the representative of far end region as the westernmost and northernmost tip of Indonesia which is often marginalized in the Indonesian-ness arena, including in literature. Likewise, Nias, which is geographically included in the North Sumatra region, has also been categorized as the outer ethnic group since the colonial period. Furthermore, it is found that in Indonesian literature, these two ethnicities are conferred in several literary works. Thus, Aceh and Nias with their diversification are an entity that is discussed in the context of contemporary Indonesian literary history.

Keywords: *literature, contemporary, newspaper, ethnicity, review*

I. INTRODUCTION

In many Indonesian literary works, several works voice or disclose certain local or ethnic themes. Undeniably, most of the Indonesian literary works revolve around the atmosphere of a big city like Jakarta, which has become a trendsetter in the middle-upper class life, a group that becomes the main supporter of the life of literature. The life of a metropolitan city like Jakarta seems like it will never run out to tell. Nevertheless, there are also some literary works which elevate the periphery into the topic of the story.

In the literary works of *Balai Pustaka* or *Pujangga Baru* period, it is not laborious to find the story of Sumatra (especially West Sumatra) appointed as the background or subject matter of a story. During this period, many authors of *Balai Pustaka* or *Pujangga Baru* came from this region. Marah Rusli's *Sitti Nurbaya* which was first published in 1922, tells the

story of Padang people's complexity with a number of local settings taken in this legendary story. Likewise, *Salah Asuhan* by Abdoel Moeis, which was first published in 1928, is also full of the stories related to West Sumatra [1].

In that period, there were only limited authors from Java or other regions who wrote in Malay. Only after the independence in 1945 did many authors from other regions such as Java, Sunda, Bali and even Minahasa begin to join in writing Indonesian literary works. It is from these authors coming from other ethnicities that the local setting of each author is introduced. One of them is Pramoedya Ananta Toer who began writing with a local setting such as Blora, which was his hometown in Central Java. Blora and other cities began to be told in a number of his works. In addition, Umar Kayam, Kuntowijoyo or Arswendo Atmowiloto whose literary works later became a milestone in Indonesian literary writing mostly exudes Javanese backgrounds in their compositions.

Putu Wijaya with a Balinese background also adds up the Indonesian literature richness. From Kalimantan or Dayak ethnic group, an author named Korrie Layun Rampan appeared. There is also an author from East Nusa Tenggara, Rote Island, named Gerson Poyk. Ramadhan KH more or less also brings up the stories related to the Sundanese theme. Meanwhile, several authors from Sumatra also continue to emerge with some important figures are Mochtar Lubis, A. A. Navis, Chairul Harun, Sitor Situmorang, Iwan Simatupang and others [1]. The authors from Aceh are also recorded in the trajectories of Indonesian literature history. Authors such as LK Ara and Ashari are Indonesian authors from this land called Veranda of Mecca (Aceh).

This article deliberates a number of Indonesian literary works that are related to the local or ethnic background of Aceh, the westernmost region of Indonesia and also Nias, another western region of Indonesia, which is an island in West Sumatra that geographically belongs to the area of North Sumatra Province. Aceh and Nias are the marginal areas that are

often ignored by abounding literary works that are concentrated in Javanese ethnicity. Of all the Indonesian literary works, as revealed previously, the works that raise regional themes are veritably limited.

Thus, discussing ethnic themes such as Aceh and Nias is a deliberation of minority themes from relatively marginalized ethnic groups. How are local themes such as Aceh and Nias explicated in the constellation of Indonesian literature, especially in recent years? This question is the key to scrutinizing the core of this article, particularly the discussion about the book reviews of literary works in national newspapers related to ethnic Aceh and Nias, published from 2016 to 2019.

From an exploration in five national newspapers (*Kompas*, *Republika*, *Media Indonesia*, *Koran Tempo* and *Koran Sindo*), there were at least nine reviews of literary works related to Aceh and Nias obtained. The reviews descant seven literary works: (1) *Pasie Karam*, (2) *Siti Kewe*, (3) *Tanah Para Pendekar*, (4) *Kura-kura Berjanggut*, (5) *Romansa Gayo dan Bordeaux*, (6) *Jejak Kata* and (7) *Lolong Anjing di Bulan*.

II. ACEH BACKGROUND IN LITERARY WORKS

A. Aceh in Several Poems

There is a poetry anthology book that canvasses Aceh, precisely about Meulaboh, written by a number of poets from various regions or abroad. This poetry anthology is entitled *Pasie Karam* [2], another name for the city of Meulaboh. In the 15th century, Meulaboh was known as Negeri Pasir Karam. *Pasie Karam* contains the work of 163 poets from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Russia. The 450-page A5-sized book involved curators from Aceh and Jakarta. They are D. Kemalawati, Mustafa Ismail and Fikar W. Eda from Jakarta. The book was launched by West Aceh Arts Council in Bappeda Aceh Hall on Sunday (8/28/2016). At the same time, 16 poetry books were also commenced by the Indonesian poet community [3].

Several well-known poets' works were also chosen by the curator team to be presented in *Pasie Karam*. Among them are Taufiq Ismail, Ahmadun Yosi Herfanda, Ahmad Kamal Abdullah (Malaysia), Anie Dien (Singapore) and Victor Pagodaev (Russia). A famous poet from Lampung Isbedy Stiawan ZS is also featured. There are more than 30 poets from Aceh whose poems are included in this book. These poems have no less quality than those of poets from outside Aceh. Therefore, these poems are considered representative to be used as the basis of discussion. The diversity of the theme also represents the entire poem in this collection.

West Aceh Regent, H. T. Alaidinsyah in Meulaboh called *Pasie Karam* an important reference as well as an

important document to tell the long history of the area now called West Aceh Regency. He hoped that the presence of the artists who were members of Nusantara poet in this land of Teuku Umar (Aceh) could become a new nuance for the development of the activities of artists and writers in carving the culture of the area. On this occasion, Alaidinsyah also explained that the implementation of West Aceh Cultural Week (*Pekan Kebudayaan Aceh Barat/PKAB*) which is held every two years is a great achievement from the government and the community in an effort to preserve cultural values as identity.

"Hopefully with the presence of *Pasie Karam* which contains historical sites and initiating figures can be known and passed on to our grandchildren and forward to replenish development," said Alaidinsyah in Meulaboh as quoted by Chairani [3].

Pasie Karam was compiled by the Chairperson of West Aceh Arts Council (*Dewan Kesenian Aceh Barat/DKAB*), Teuku Ahmad Dadek along with guest editor Hermansyah, an Acehnese manuscript expert residing in Germany.

Furthermore, another highlight of Aceh in a number of poems appears in a book entitled *Jejak Kata* [4]. The exact title of the book is *Jejak Kata, Antologi Sastra 80 Tahun LK Ara* (published November 2017) that is intended as an honorary offering to LK Ara. This poetry anthology (and a number of other literary works) was written by Ahmadun Yosi Herfanda, et al. Besides Ahmadun, there are also other writers such as D. Zawawi Imron, Rida K. Liamsi, Eka Budiarta, Rizaldi Siagian, Fikar W. Eda, Zulfaisal Putra, Wayan Jengki Sunarta, Dedy Tri Riyadi, Deni Kurnia, Sulaiman Juned, Sulaiman Tripa, Syarifuddin Arifin, Salman Yoga, Teuku Ahmad Dadek and Nurdin F. Joe.

LK Ara is a poet (and a number of other predicates) from Gayo who was born in Central Aceh on November 12, 1937. LK Ara (Lesik Ketu Ara) not only writes poetry but also stories, folklore, essays and encyclopedias. He is also determined in collecting traditional poems such as *didong* from Gayo and *pantun* from Bangka Belitung. He had worked at *Balai Pustaka* until his retirement (1963-1985). Since the end of the 1960s to 2017, LK Ara has written 120 books [5].

These two poetry anthology books, *Pasie Karam* and *Jejak Kata* directly present the colors and spices of Aceh, specifically about Meulaboh and an Acehnese literary figure named LK Ara from Gayo. Each poem featured is written by a number of poets in the country, even in *Pasie Karam* some come from abroad. Both of these books are works of tribute, both to places and figures.

B. Aceh in the Historical Range

Aceh which stretches out in the historical period is fully canvassed in a novel written by an Acehnese author named Azhari Aiyub. This 960-page novel is titled *Kura-kura Berjanggut* [6]. The novel has just been awarded the 2018 *Kusala Sastra Khatulistiwa*.

Kura-kura Berjanggut became a subject of discussion because of Azhari's uniqueness and perseverance in composing the story. Some parts of this novel have also been published as short stories in several mass media. The novel, which began to be written in 2006, reached the readers after more than a decade in the writing process. The process is quite long but it can also be categorized short enough to produce great work. As a comparison, for example, Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote his canonical title *One Hundred Years of Solitude* for six years, starting in 1961 until it was first published in Spanish in 1967 as Afandi revealed in a review [7].

Not only has the most pages, but *Kura-kura Berjanggut* also unfolds a story with a very long background story. This story departs from the fictional world in the 16th century, then had a chance to jump until the beginning of the 21st century, when a researcher from the Netherlands, Tobias Fuller, tracked records for notes about *Kura-kura Berjanggut* book.

Azhari's long story was driven by a motive for the murder of Sultan Nurrudin from Bandar Lamuri [8] by Si Ujud. Si Ujud was a *sangkalat*, a spy placed by Sultan Nurrudin in one of the towers in order to observe the movement of spice merchant ships and pirates who controlled the seas. Long before becoming a *sangkalat*, Si Ujud was an explorer to the Middle East and Istanbul to study.

In that journey, he received news that his family and all people in his residence were exterminated by Sultan Nurrudin's accomplices. This revenge then brought him back to Bandar Lamuri and forced him to plunge into the line of trust of Sultan Nurrudin.

According to Afandi, three centuries later, a researcher from the Netherlands, Tobias Fuller, conducted a study of some of the deaths of Dutch people who were not recorded by the Dutch East Indies government. This research then reveals how wonderful a mysterious book called *Kura-kura Berjanggut*, which is believed to have contributed to the death of Sultan Nurrudin in part one. This notebook starts on May 3, 1914 and closes with a mystery on October 1, 1915.

As for part three, *Lubang Cacing*, it is the part that actually does not become the main part of Si Ujud's story, but has the role to explain some pieces in the previous two parts so that these supplementary notes are important to cover the holes that have not been covered in part one and two.

Since opening the very first page, Azhari's noetic world stretches to be explored. At each turn, he inserts stories and inter-texts with history and figures in the real world. In this novel, Azhari implicitly alludes to some names that are indeed true in history, for example, Hamzah from Fansur or the character Snouck Hurgronje during the era of Dutch colonialism [7]. Although the entire setting in this novel takes place in Aceh which revolves around the 16th century to the 21st century, the readers can enjoy the flexibility of the story presented with the reality that is happening in Aceh today [9].

The pure fictional story of *Kura-kura Berjanggut* succeeded in making the readers come to imagine Bandar Lamuri and Istana Darud Dunya as if all the story are facts. Azhari's success in telling the story needs to be highly appreciated. Patience in composing the story with very strong research without any gaps has strengthened *Kura-kura Berjanggut* as one of the best novels throughout 2018 and won the prose category in the 2018 *Kusala Sastra Khatulistiwa* [7].

C. Aceh in the Vortex of Violence

Another literary work that confabulates Aceh as the setting of the story is a novel entitled *Lolong Anjing di Bulan* by Arafat Nur, published by Sanata Dharma University Press in 2018 [10]. Besides being entertaining, this novel adds to the flow of history. Howling dogs woke up the memories of the Acehnese people's struggle that had been buried for decades by power. According to Dewi, since 2008, the conflict between armed criminal group and Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) had killed 79 civilians. Allegorically, this novel is considered less luxurious as it is adorned with the names of real historical figures and events. Nevertheless, the message is clear: war makes humans lose their humanity and the roar of creatures named dogs is a sign of this error [11]. Cruelty, revenge, scattered corpses and bloodstains frequently color the novels with a background in war. However, this is not the case with Arafat Nur's *Lolong Anjing di Bulan*. Written by the recipient of a number of literary awards, this novel signals early on the futility of war. The author of the novel *Tanah Langit Merah*, which won the 2016 Jakarta Arts Council's Novel Contest, again discussed the armed conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka/GAM*) and the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) from 1976 to 2005.

Alue Rambe, a remote village in the mountain range of North Aceh, south of Lhokseumawe City, is a setting that is rich in natural resources but cannot be wielded by its inhabitants. Houses are overgrown with rambutan trees, guava and mangoes that bear fruit; vast turmeric fields, coconut groves, rice fields and mountain rice. Towards the city area stood factories of fertilizer, paper

and perfume. Asphalt roads donated by American gas company are provided for trucks and heavy vehicles owned by the company.

Working with private entrepreneurs, authorities and the army, multinational companies exploit Aceh's natural resources. The processing pipes seem in contrast to the modest peasants who harvest and sell agricultural produce before the army seizes it.

According to Dewi [11], Arafat Nur was obedient and painstaking in details, but a description of excessive sadism was not found. The tyranny of the government and the rebel army was narrated to touch the conscience of fellow children of the nation. Although somewhat anthropocentric, the description of harvest in Grandpa's garden reflects the meaning of life. Every three months, the banana *tauke* brings his workers to find their banana bunches that are ready to be harvested.

Nature is friendly to humans when treated well, like Grandpa's garden which is well-groomed and proven to support the family. In this banana garden, Nasir learned the meaning of the word "fight". Overcome by fear, the 13-year-old boy peeked at a group of soldiers ransacking the garden. Failing to find the rebels they were looking for, they left while carrying a bunch of ripe bananas. That is when Nasir understood why the Acehnese people dared to fight the soldiers. War arises from a passion for fighting, more than fear.

In addition, this novel is a work of reconciliation. The people's hatred of the army is described as balanced by the soldiers' anger at the rebels. It also delineates the disaster that befell when a family member is involved with an army of fighters. Nasir witnessed his loved ones snatched from his life because his uncle, Arkam, joined GAM [11]. The novel *Lolong Anjing di Bulan* by Arafat Nur has become one of Indonesia's novels that presents a background of violence in Aceh, the westernmost region of Indonesia, particularly during the conflict between the army and GAM.

D. *Gayo and a Number of Culinary Delights*

In addition to Aceh's long historical setting as illustrated in the novel *Kura-kura Berjanggut* or violent conflict as depicted in *Lolong Anjing di Bulan*, there are also Indonesian literary works that display Aceh's geography or ethnicity and are related to the culinary world. This kind of literary work is shown in the book *Siti Kewe* [12] (by Raihan Lubis, published in 2017) and *Romansa Gayo dan Bourdeaux* [13] (by Win Wan Nur, published in 2018).

Siti Kewe is the debut novel of Raihan Lubis, a woman born in Medan. This novel takes its setting of place in Tanah Gayo. Three characters (each from the

ethnic Acehnese, Gayo and Javanese) who became the main axis of the story stirred in the emotions of the readers [14]. In each section of the book, the author aims to introduce the main commodities that are so enticing, Gayo coffee, Gayo tribe, Gayo Land and a number of destinations worthy of being a tourist attraction.

In addition, the armed conflict in this region is another aspect revealed in this novel. The tense situation at that time caused the residents to flee. However, as they need to eat, the farmers have some tricks in which women take an important role. In this novel, they are also wrapped up with peace between GAM and the government, thus ending a series of riots in the Veranda of Mecca. Even so, the author also highlights the devastating tsunami disaster that struck Aceh in 2004. Aceh anthropologist Teuku Kamal Fasya said reading this novel was like feeling the fragrance of coffee beans and the cold feet of Mount Bur Ni Telong merged with the breath of diversity and complexity of the community [14].

In the novel *Romansa Gayo dan Bourdeaux*, the story begins with a backpacker from Gayo, Win who met a female backpacker from Bordeaux, France named Anne-Sophie in Sabang, Aceh. The meeting began with a conversation about coffee and wine which are the two main commodities representing their respective regions. The book, which is 400 pages long and has been stored as a 15-year draft novel, covers many things, from coffee, wine, to ethnic discrimination, the authoritarianism of the New Order government and the tragedy of the G30S PKI. This novel also contends the tragedy of the Girondis massacre by 'Reign of Terror' after the French revolution, cultural receptions in Gayo and France and also divine philosophy.

Win Wan Nur, the author, was born in Takengon in the 70s decade. He spent his youth and early adulthood in Banda Aceh between 1989 and 2002. In 1998, he was actively involved in the reform movement. Since 1999, he has actively studied coffee and delivered it to represent Indonesia in "The First Roundtable Sustainable Coffee" in Chiang Mai, Thailand. In the novel *Romansa Gayo dan Bourdeaux*, he wants to state that humans do not care about their racial, cultural, or religious background and beliefs wherever they are, is essentially the same. There is a spirit of universal humanism with a strong message of equality, a spirit of anti-racism and discrimination [14]. The serious problem seemed to be resolved simply, as simple and as delicious as drinking Gayo coffee.

III. NIAS BACKGROUND IN LITERARY WORKS

A review of literary work set in Nias Island or Nias tribe is found in Vanni Puccioni's book entitled *Tanah*

Para Pendekar [15]. This book is retelling the story of a researcher, Elio Modigliani's adventure on an island to the west of North Sumatra during the Dutch colonial era, precisely in 1886. The original book's title is *Viaggio A Nias* or *Trip to Nias*. Vanni Puccioni, the author of the Italian book, translated (into Bahasa Indonesia and English) the story of Modigliani's exploration as well as the journey he undertook following the footsteps of Modigliani in Nias in 2010.

Nias' predicate as the island of head hunters has been listed on Arab navigation maps since 100 BC. However, it was the beauty of the Nias girls that made the island a target for pirates and colonial soldiers who then sold them to the slave market. Through this book, the readers could understand why the island with the greatest risk of earthquakes and tsunamis in the world entered the struggle for power of European nations. On the other hand, that context also opened the eyes of why the primitive culture of human headhunting was a logical consequence of the various pressures that were occurring in Nias society at that time.

According to Krisanti [16], Puccioni was also quite detailed in writing each war carried out by the Dutch to conquer Nias. However, many times the Dutch navy had to sail back as they were unable to deal with head hunters from Nias villages. In the anti-colonial conditions and the war between villages, Modigliani landed on Nias. Puccioni said that Modigliani explored various aspects of Nias people's lives by comparing them with the civilizations that were already advancing at the time and with the current conditions of Nias.

The experience of working in Nias and the Modigliani's journey back in 2010 made Puccioni have a fairly good understanding of Nias and its people. For example, he agreed with Modigliani's opinion that beyond the primitive and barbaric culture, Nias people are a democratic nation free from social levels. Even at the end of his exploration, Modigliani said that Nias people were kind and respectable people [16].

For Puccioni, personally, the book also revealed a cross between his destiny and Modigliani. Modigliani has 26 human skulls that were secretly brought from Nias to the anthropology and ethnology museum in Florence, Italy. [16] According to Chairani [17], the story of Elio Modigliani's adventure is part of Nias' historical and cultural fragments that have been lost so far.

In Chairani's review [17], Puccioni also told the continuation of Modigliani's life after exploring Nias, recounting his old age in Italy. In his country, he became known as a scientist. He once returned to Sumatra to go to the Mentawai Islands, precisely to Sipora Island and Siberut Island. Modigliani died on August 6, 1936.

Modigliani's only child was named Mohua which is derived from the Nias word meaning "fragrant".

Although this book is written by a foreigner, an Italian writer, it can still be classified as an Indonesian literary work as it has been translated into Bahasa Indonesia, which is deliberately intended for Indonesian readers. The information about Nias, especially in the past when hunting and beheading of humans are still rife and become a tradition is interesting enlightenment and needs to be noted separately. This book is classified as an adventure story, part of a literary work that emphasizes true stories rather than fiction. In this way, the description of Nias tribe life becomes more admissible in a wider scope.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the span of the last four years, there are a number of Indonesian literary works that depict a background story or theme related to ethnic Acehnese or Nias. The presence of these literary works highlighting the outermost geographical areas such as Aceh and Nias also appeared in a number of reviews published in five national newspapers. Aceh as the context of the story appears in several works such as (1) *Pasie Karam*, (2) *Jejak Kata*, (3) *Kura-kura Berjanggut*, (4) *Lolong Anjing di Bulan*, (5) *Siti Kewe*, and (6) *Romansa Gayo dan Bordeaux*. Meanwhile, the book in which the background of ethnic Nias appears is in *Tanah Para Pendekar*.

Not all of these literary works are written by authors of the same origin. *Pasie Karam* and *Jejak Kata* are co-written by a group of writers and poets from various regions in the country and even some of them are from abroad. *Siti Kewe* is written by an author from Medan. Moreover, *Tanah Para Pendekar* is written by an Italian writer. Meanwhile, the three other books, *Kura-kura Berjanggut*, *Lolong Anjing di Bulan* and *Romansa Gayo dan Bordeaux* are written by authors from Aceh, i.e. Azhari Aiyub, Arafat Nur and Win Wan Nur, respectively.

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