

The Phenomenon of Absurdity in Comics

A Semiotic-Pragmatic Analysis of Tahilalats Comics

Muh. Zakky Al Masykuri*, Aceng Ruhendi Syaifullah, Eri Kurniawan

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

*Corresponding author. Email: muh.zakky.almasykuri@upi.edu

ABSTRACT

Tahilalats Comic as one of the visual communication media holds the power to convey information in a popular manner yet makes an absurd impression and potentially generates various interpretations by the readers. This study aims to explore and describe the absurdity phenomenon in Tahilalats through the semiotics-pragmatics analysis. The study was focused on the attempt to reveal the tendency of Camus's absurdity. The qualitative approach was employed with the descriptive method. The research framework was based on Pierce's semiotic and Grice's implicature theories linked to Camus' absurdity in determining the absurdism. The source of data includes the Instagram account of Tahilalats comic @tahilalats. The objects of the study cover the speeches and signs displayed on the comic. The purposive sampling technique was used in selecting the data unit. The data were collected through observation, documentation, and transcription. The results show that the forms of Camus absurdity exist in the comic, representing the alienation, meaning of life, suicide, hope, and rebellion through the character's action. In creating an absurd impression, the comic artist has a tendency to provide visual signs through the interpretant element. Besides, the verbal sign was focused more on the cooperative principles in breaking the maxim of relevance and manner.

Keywords: *Absurdity, semiotics-pragmatics, Tahilalats comic*

1. INTRODUCTION

Judging from the development, the consumptive nature of the community who are hungry for information pointing to other media. One such medium is digital comics. Along with the dynamics of communication practice, digital comics are not only used as a medium of entertainment but also as a medium of communication and criticism. The criticisms made generally represent social phenomena that are unsettling for the community. Maharsi (2014) states that comics are a form of human desire to create experiences through signs. In this case, comics are perceived to provide new nuances in terms of communication.

Comics, as a medium for disseminating information, can be widely perceived and interpreted by readers. This is due to the diversity of background knowledge of everyone. After all, comics are a collection of side-by-side (juxtaposed) pictures that aim to convey information or create certain aesthetic characteristics from the reader (McCloud, 1993). Therefore, the presence of comics in the virtual space makes it easy for digital comic creators

to communicate with their messages globally. The data show that at least more than 13 million people in Indonesia often read digital comics and it is predicted that it will increase by twenty percent in the next 5 years (indotelko.com, 2018). This data shows a high interest in reading comics in Indonesian society. This encourages digital comic creators to create digital comics and upload them on social media.

Tahilalats as one of the popular comics in Indonesia has spread through the Instagram media platform @tahilalats since 2014. The Tahilalats comic as a visual communication medium has the power to convey information in a popular manner, yet absurd to its readers which provokes readers to express their arguments. The comics have potentially generated various interpretations by the reader through the comment's column. The absurdity can be seen from the way the ideas are conveyed (illustrations and conversations) which tend not to be easy to understand. This is reinforced by the evidence that shows the unclear meaning of the comic, as

quoted from the Instagram feeds @tahilalats in the following screenshot.



Figure 1 Instagram screenshot of Tahilalats comic.

Figure 1 above is one of the Tahilalats comics on the Instagram page @tahilalats. From the figure, some of the readers' comments show the diversity of arguments. For example, @thenamewaschanged commented "Makanya kalo dibully itu digubris biar yg membully ga kasihan krn ga digubris ☺" ("So if you are being bullied, you pay attention so that the bully does not feel sorry for being ignored"), @custom_suryamen who commented "Bully lah sblm d bully" ("Bully before get bullied"), and @naufaladen54 who commented, "Hmmmm... Otak gua mendadak filosofis" (Hmmm... my brain is suddenly philosophical"). This shows that the illustrations and conversations made by the comic artist led to various interpretations and impressions. In fact, the comic artist himself only conveyed a certain message or purpose. Apart from its popularity, this is the point of attraction of this Tahilalats comic. Readers are considered to be entertained and even encouraged to think out loud to find the meaning of the comic.

Basically, comics are created and designed from imaginative things into concrete things through the help of text and images with specific aims and purposes. Comics are visual images captured from moment to moment, event to event, conveyed by presenting figures and backgrounds to represent something (Nurgiyantoro, 2005). In other words, in a comic, the function of text and images is seen as a sign that can be interpreted by the reader. However, when viewed from the reader's response, it is not uncommon for the signs contained in these comics to confuse the readers, thus encouraging readers to think hard in finding the meaning conveyed. It is strengthened by the evidence of news that the characteristic of the Tahilalats comic strip is that it tells various portraits of teenage behavior that are made absurd and funny, and seem eccentric (antaranews.com, 2016).

Researchers assume that the absurdity phenomenon presented in the Tahilalats comic is related to the philosophical concept of absurdity presented by Camus. Camus (1998) explains that absurdity is a genre of philosophy which states that human efforts to find the deepest meaning will completely fail, so that it is absurd. The term 'absurd' also refers to a philosophical category used by existentialist philosophy to express a reason beyond rational boundaries (Cornwell, 2006). The emergence of an absurd feeling is due to the conflict between the human world and his thoughts and the situations that occur in his world because an absurd feeling arises when humans want to understand life as naturally as possible which in fact humans will not be able to achieve it (Camus, 1998).

Several studies related to absurdity have been conducted by previous researchers. However, it is very unfortunate that revealing the absurdity phenomenon in digital comics through semiotic-pragmatic analysis is rarely explored, considering that the phenomenon of digital comics is something new. The study of absurdity was first carried out by Camus in his essay entitled *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Later, the theme of absurdism appeared in several works (*L'Etranger*, 1998; *The Rebel*, 2013;) and even to drama shows such as (*Caligula*, 2018; *The Bald Soprano*, 2007; *Waiting for Godot*, 2019).

Along with the development of absurdism, this study has increasingly expanded and applied in various forms. The study conducted by Fahmi (2019) was focused on analyzing the expression and the text which has the element of absurdism in the novel *Mencari Perempuan yang Hilang*. Adi (2016) focused on analyzing and assessing the absurdity of the play *Les Mouches* as a pessimistic humanism concept through semiotic study. Saputri (2019) examines symbols and signs that contain erotic values in the Tahilalats comic. The results show that there are new erotic symbols which symbolized incest, transgender, and masochism. Also, the use of Instagram has also changed the way it is presented and how to enjoy erotic content in comics and the comment feature gives the reader a big role in constructing erotic content in the comic Tahilalats. Also, Kurniawan (2018) has researched the humor creation technique of Tahilalats comics and revealed violations of the principle of cooperation in these comics. The results show that in creating humor techniques, the aspects of language include techniques of misunderstanding, sound play, irony, and gibberish. Meanwhile, in the logic aspect are analogies, impossibilities, and themes. There are tendencies to violate the principle of cooperation in the comic dialogue, including violations of the principle of

cooperation in the maxim of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner.

Based on the previous studies above, the studies on absurdity was focused on a drama script or novel whose unit of analysis is text only. Apart from that, the Tahilalats comics also have the potential to create a variety of interpretations among the readers. This encourages researchers to reveal further about the phenomenon of absurdity in the Tahilalats comic. Through semiotic and pragmatic studies, this research is appropriate considering that the signs contained in comics are presented in visual images and verbal in the form of word balloons. The writer hopes that this research will be important in order to expand the study of the philosophy of absurdism in various forms of work.

2. METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. With this method, the researcher tries to understand the phenomenon of absurdity and tries to explore the meaning of the signs contained in the Tahilalats comic through the visual and verbal that appear in the comic. Then, the results of this study are written descriptively so that readers can understand well the content of this study. Meanwhile, in understanding the phenomenon of absurdity, the researcher uses Camus absurdity theory to describe the absurdity in the Tahilalats comic through semiotic-pragmatic studies. By using the descriptive method, the data obtained will be more complete, in-depth, and credible in order to achieve the research objectives.

The subject of this research is the Tahilalats comic taken from the social media Instagram @tahilalats. Meanwhile, the object of the research is the utterances and signs which are illustrated in the Tahilalats comic. Considering the large number of comics published in the media, the purposive sampling technique was used in selecting the data unit. Therefore, the researchers had reduced the number of comics observed to be two comics considered to represent the absurdity phenomenon in the comic. In collecting the data, the data were obtained through observation, documentation, and transcription.

To discover the phenomenon of absurdity in the comics, the researcher was based on Camus' theory of absurdity. Absurdity is an understanding based on the belief that human efforts to find the meaning of life will end in failure and the human tendency to do so is seen as absurd (Camus, 1999). Peirce's semiotic theory, namely signs that include representment, object, and interpretant to reveal their visual signs. The signs that exist in this

universe allow humans to think, relate to other people, and give meaning to what is displayed (Peirce, 1958). Meanwhile, to reveal the verbal sign, the researcher based on Grice (1989) which stated that implicatures are a speech can imply propositions that are not part of the speech. Also, the study applied violations of the four cooperative principles because basically, both parties (speaker and speaker) try to work together in communicating so that communication runs properly (Grice, 1970).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned before, this study aims to discover the phenomenon of absurdity in the Tahilalats comic. As can be inferred by the comments on Instagram @tahilalats, the phenomenon of absurdity was displayed through verbal and visual signs. The following two comics were displayed in this research.

From all the comics on Instagram @tahilalats, data 1 is selected based on the argument that the absurdity of alienation is represented in visual and language terms in the comic. This title tells the story of a boy who asks his father why a human being should marry. Then there is the girl character who questions the promise that the boy has made. However, the boy's answer in the comic's final panel showed an unexpected answer.



Figure 2 The title "Your dad will be proud of you" (source: Instagram @tahilalats).

The following is a description of Figure 2 above as identified from the verbal and visual signs.

Verbal Identification

Panel 1: "Pah kenapa sih kita harus menikah?"

"Dad, why do we have to get married?"

Panel 2: "Supaya bisa bikin anak selalu dan sepintar kamu nak"

"So that we can make children as funny and smart as you, son"

Panel 3: "Tapi kan kamu udah janji mau menikah???"

"But you promised to get married, right?"

Panel 4: "Maaf. aku tidak ingin menciptakan diriku sendiri, cukup aku saja yang jadi beban orangtuaku"

"I'm sorry. I don't want to create myself, It's just me as a burden on my parents"

Visual Identification

1) Representamen

Qualisign: the green and yellow colors refer to the colors of clothes in general; the grey colors and stripes refer to the color of the pants in general.

Sinsign: the sad faces and gestures in girls signal disappointment; the expression of the boy who was looking downwards showed sadness.

Legisign: the red color shows the uniform of a school.

2) Object

Icon: the boy (illustrative); the girl (illustrative); an adult male (illustrative); dress (illustrative); tie (illustrative); socks (illustrative).

Index: The man in the green shirt and gray pants shows the person as an adult with a simple style and looks simple; the boy who wears a yellow shirt and red striped pants and wears a tie with stripes shows that the child is a schoolgirl; the girl who wears a yellow shirt and a red striped skirt and wears a tie with stripes shows that the child is a schoolgirl.

Symbol: the shorts are worn by the comic character symbolize a boy; the short skirt worn by the comic character is a symbol of a girl; the gray trousers worn in the comic character show a grown man.

3) Interpretant

Rheme: A man on his knees indicates someone who is giving advice; a girl who furrowed her eyebrows and raised her hands was a sign of disappointment.

Dicent: A rare phenomenon that occurs in society.

Argument: A girl who looks disappointed because of a boy's promise.

Judging from the balloon's conversation, in the first panel, there is a boy who is asking an adult. The question is "Dad, why do we have to get married?". Judging from the dialogue, it can be ascertained that the adult dressed in green and gray pants is his own father. In the second panel, a father responded to his son's question by answering "So that we can make children as funny and smart as you, son". It can be seen here that the dialogue is a series of events. In the third panel, it is different from the previous situation. This panel contains girls who question the promise of the boy. There is a dialogue that says, "But you promised to get married, right?". Here it can be seen that the girl feels disappointed and the boy looks gloomy. Then in the last panel is the answer to the girl's question, which reads "I'm sorry ... I don't want to create myself, It's just me as a burden on my parents". Here you can see the boy's character is very sad.

The results of the analysis description on Figure 2 represent the phenomenon of absurdity which is shown in the form of alienation through the actions of the comic boy character. Alienation refers to feeling isolated from a situation or environment. The boy character in the comic shows the meaninglessness of his life so far. The facts are in the answer in the fourth panel. The fourth panel implies that why the boy does not want to get married, the answer is because the boy does not feel funny and smart like what his father said. In other words, he felt a failure to live so he felt isolated, empty, and meaningless because what his father longed for was to be a cute and smart child but in fact, he was not. Therefore, it is in line with Camus (1999) theory that something is called absurd because of the conditions in which human existence is in an irrational and meaningless universe, and where human life has no meaning. Therefore, the action of the character here is absurd according to Camus.

Textually, from the illustration of the comic Tahilalats data 1 above, it is understood that there are small children who question why someone should get married. This is considered to be a rare phenomenon in a society. However, if related to the context, the comic above has a very deep meaning. The context in the above conversation is about boys asking for answers on why someone should get married. Here, the thing that makes the reader confused is the boy's answer to the girl's question in panel 3, and in the last panel he answers "I'm Sorry ... I don't want to create myself, It's just me as a burden on my parents". The thing that confuses the readers is because comic artists violate the principle of

cooperation, the maxim of relevance and the maxim of manner.

Panel 3: "Tapi kan kamu udah janji mau menikah??"

"But you promised to get married, right?"

Panel 4: "Maaf.. aku tidak ingin menciptakan diriku sendiri, cukup aku saja yang jadi beban orangtuaku"

"I'm Sorry ... I don't want to create myself, It's just me as a burden on my parents"

From the dialogue, the boy's speech violates the cooperative principle, maxims of relevance and manner. If the reader does not know the context of the conversation in the previous panel, the reader will be confused about the boy's meaning because what was said was irrelevant and unclear with what was being asked. When connected to the context, then the reader will understand what the boy means.

From the illustration of the conversation above, if we look at the context, the second panel of the comic is the answer to why this boy does not want to get married. Because he thought that his figure was not as funny and smart as what his father thought, so he considered him a burden because he was not the person his father wanted him to be. In this case, the comic artist plays the setting of the event and plays the maxim of relevance and maxim of the way in illustrating the comic.

Another Tahilalats comic which represents the phenomenon of absurdity shown in the following Tahilalats comic which tells the story of a man who complains that he wants to have a large amount of money. With advice and suggestions from others, the man demonstrated his action in subsequent panels. At first glance, this comic only talks about complaints in life. In fact, behind it all there is a deep meaning to the meaning of life. The following is an illustration and an explanation.



Figure 3 Tahilalats comic (source: Instagram @tahilalats).

The following is a description of figure 3 above as identified from the verbal and visual signs.

Verbal Identification

Panel 1: "Entah kenapa selama hidup tak pernah sekalipun ngerasain punya duit banyak buat di nikmatin"

"I don't know why during my life I never a lot of money had to enjoy"

Panel 2: "Hey kamu masih muda semua jawaban ada di dalam dirimu, bangkit dan lakukan"

"Hey, you're still young all the answers is in you, get up and do it"

Visual Identification

1) Representamen

Qualisign: red, black, green shows the clothes; the gray and black colors denote the pants; the rectangular object represents a pillow; there is a shining object hanging showing a lamp.

Sinsign: the character's expression that tends to be flat indicates the possibility of a tense, nervous, or happy face.

Legisign: Generally, people who wear suits and dress neatly are a motivator; in general, people who wear a green head covering as illustrated in the above are a surgical procedure.

2) Object

Icon: two men (illustrative); suit (illustrative); suit (illustrative); lights (illustrative); light beam (illustrative); surgical tools (illustrative).

Index: the presence of a green head covering indicates a surgical operation will be performed; the existence of a scalpel indicates that the surgery will be carried out; the presence of a dashed line on the part of the character indicates an object to be dissected.

Symbol: a person who wears a neat suit and gives advice/ input to others is interpreted as a motivator; the dotted line is a common marking symbol in the surgical process

3) Interpretant

Rheme: judging from the way he dresses, a person wearing a suit can be a motivator or an office employee or just an ordinary person.

Dicent: the presence of a green head covering indicates the person will be going to operate.

Argument: every time a person is going to perform a surgical operation, that person must wear a surgical gown.

Judging from the balloon conversation, there is a character in the comic who is complaining in front of a man who is wearing a neat suit, said: "I don't know why during my life I never had a lot of money to enjoy". Then on the panel, the two people wearing the suits said: "Hey you're still young all the answers are in you, get up and do it". Here, it can be understood that this person is most likely a motivator. A motivator is someone who works by providing motivation to others. In this case, it is implied that the main character in the comic feels motivated to take action in the process. In the third panel, you can see the main character wearing a green head covering and lying on the mattress with a face that tends to feel happy. On the fourth panel, it is clear that the main character will perform a surgical operation. The last panel here is the response/ action of the character to the answer from the motivator.

The results of the analysis description on Figure 2 represents the phenomenon of absurdity and the meaning of life as illustrated in the comic. The absurdity lies in the main character's behavior which is illogical because it contradicts reality. In the first panel, it is illustrated that the main character feels not alive because he does not feel that he has much money to enjoy. This is in line according to Camus (1999) that the life that humans go through will not always be enjoyable according to what they want. There are times when what humans think is contrary to reality. Here it is implied that the action of the character in facing this reality is by selling their organs, which most likely are kidneys. Selling kidney organs is a phenomenon that is currently common in society. This organ is the organ most sought after because it can be donated to other people. With a very large amount of money in return, making this phenomenon of selling kidney organs for some people is a short way to get wealth. Therefore, in this condition humans do not understand what life is and what humans live for. This is what Camus believes that human life is something absurd.

Textually, from the illustration of the comic Tahilalats data 2 above, it is understood that there was a man who complained about his life which was considered insecure. Lately, the phenomenon of selling kidneys is

something common among a society. However, when viewed contextually, the comics above have very deep criticisms and messages. The thing that has a funny effect on the reader is because the character's actions are considered illogical. In this illustration, the comic artist plays a violation of the maxims of how to convey his message.

Panel 1: "*Entah kenapa selama hidup tak pernah sekalipun ngerasain punya duit banyak buat dinikmatin*"

"I don't know why during my life I never a lot of money had to enjoy"

Panel 2: "*Hey kamu masih muda semua jawaban ada di dalam dirimu, bangkit dan lakukan*"

"Hey, you're still young all the answers are in you, get up and do it"

From the dialogue, it can be seen that the motivator's speech violated the cooperative principle, maxim of manner in expressing ambiguous and unclear things. The ambiguity and ambiguity of his speech lies in "all the answer is in you, get up and do it" which makes the main character misconstrue the intention of the motivator's speech. Here, the motivator is only trying to encourage the main character to get up and work hard in order to make a lot of money. However, the main character of the comic responds differently to what the motivator's speech implies. The main character responds to the way out of the problem within him. In this case the main character thinks of selling his kidney to someone else because of the suggestion of the motivator. In other words, it can be concluded that the motivator should just say clearly that "you are still young and can work" but in his speech he violates the principle of maximal cooperation in a way where there is ambiguity and ambiguity in his speech so that what is conveyed to the speaker is not conveyed.

4. CONCLUSION

Having discussed the findings above, it can be concluded that the Tahilalats comic deployed the phenomenon of absurdity representing the alienation, meaning of life, suicide, hope, and rebellion through verbal and visual signs of the character.

In expressing its absurdity, the comic artist plays more on the visual side of the interpretant. In terms of verbally, the comic artist plays more violations of the cooperative principle in the maxim of relevance and manner. Judging from the way comic artists play their

verbal and visual signs, the Tahilalats comic tends to be difficult for young people to understand and interpret. In revealing its meaning, the Tahilalats comic will not be separated from the accompanying visual and verbal so that a semiotic-pragmatic study is needed to explore the deepest meaning of the comic.

The study of absurdity in comics through semiotic-pragmatic analysis seems to provide limitations. As in the case of this study, semiotic-pragmatic studies have a fundamental weakness, which are unable to reveal a wider phenomenon of absurdity because the study relied on visual and text (empirical) inside of the comics. Besides, the role of the author's subjectivity in research is quite dominant. Therefore, for further research, it is suggested that the study of absurdity is conducted through analysis of multimodality because such an approach is apt to analyse texts that have more than one semiotic mode, visual and verbal mode, simultaneously to convey meaning.

The Tahilalats comic by Nurfadli Mursyid is a comic with a distinctive absurd style. This comic raises a lot of social issues in the daily life of the Indonesian people so that what is illustrated tends to be a representation of Indonesian society. As a popular comic, this comic has received a lot of attention from teenagers to adults. The role of verbal and visual in this comic really determines the meaning of the comic so that it distinguishes this comic from other comics in general.

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