

Social Criticism in Okky Madasari's Children Novel

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ABSTRACT

Indonesian children's fantasy stories are not used to critically address social issues. They are treated as a parable of the moral values and viewed as a legacy that needs to be preserved. A new phenomenon appeared with Okky Madasari's first children's novel, *Mata di Tanah Melus* (2018). As a novelist who is always persistent in voicing criticism, she uses modern fantasy by utilizing Indonesia's traditional treasury (myth, legend, folklore) to address social inequality issues intended for child audients. Madasari uses magic and fantastical objects drawn from the traditional fantasy to question and criticize present reality. The magical and fantastical objects of Tanah Melus open a new experience for the characters coming from outside the magical land. They come to a realization of the powerful traditional culture that has been marginalized and forgotten by the dominating modern culture represented by the Jakarta people. With this experience, the urban characters are given a new perspective and start to question various duality issues, such as: traditional vs modern, spiritual vs materialistic, central vs rural, and eventually their new experience and perspective become a transformative power that they start to synergize the two contrasting worlds.

Keywords: Children Literature, Critics, Fantasy, Indonesia

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern fantasy genre was originally a genre that had a critical function, especially when it was precarious to convey criticism using the realist genre. Around the 1940's, the war situation of the time made realist works feel too risky. The writers used folklore elements as a disguise, as well as to smooth the tone of resistance in their works. The fantasy genre works that took elements of folklore became a trend in the publishing industry at that time.

In Indonesia, due to the influence of political power and governmental conditions, the function of the fantasy genre as a critical discourse has not been developed. Since its publication during the Dutch colonial period, children's fantasies, especially those originating from traditional fantasy stories, such as fairy tales, folk tales, myths and legends, have been developed as a deterrent to realist works considered to be critical and dangerous. Realist works can tell stories about hunger, poverty, epidemics, which were real and ongoing at that time to raise awareness about the existence of colonialism causing the suffering of the people. This can provoke resistance or rebellion. According to Setiadi [1], these fantasy works were considered as safe works by the colonial government because they only presented a fictional world and talked about past lives that were far from reality.

The tendency of the colonial government to publish fantasy children's works derived from traditional literature was continued by the Indonesian government in the post-independence era. Bunanta's study [2] indicated

that the publication of these works was intended to provide a basis for knowledge of regional cultures in Indonesia as well as an effort to document them so that the stories containing local wisdom would be preserved. In addition, due to the diverse Indonesian people, with hundreds of ethnic groups and cultures, the need for national unity and integrity has become a major concern. Stories that raise regional issues critically are undesirable because they can lead to division or even resistance.

The suppression of critical elements through children's reading was especially strong during the New Order era. Partiningsih [3] examined how the power of the New Order government controlled the Indonesian children's reading with the developmental idea through children's books published by Balai Pustaka in the 1980s. These books were used to confine children's minds so that they did not see other realities but were subject to ideas that the government wanted to instill in their citizens from an early age. Purbani's [4] dissertation showed a similar phenomenon. The fiction writing competition which was held in a strict manner was an extension of the New Order ideology to form the ideal concept of a child figure in accordance with the ideals of the state. The New Order government was considered to have strong interference in the regulation of children's reading in accordance with the ideology and interests of the state.

The 1998 Reform, which overthrew the New Order government, has contributed to changes in the writing of children's literary works. As usual, the new era is often marked by rejection or renewal of the old order. Although not immediately, children's literary works that were the extension of the government's hand in exercising control

over the people began to appear. Freer children's literary works or even those containing a more critical view of reality have also emerged. Hakim's research [5] examined the Indonesian children books after the 1998 Reform raising the topic of unsilencing Chinese Indonesians, who experienced silencing during the New Order era. The results showed that it took more than a decade after the end of the New Order government for the Indonesian children's books to have the courage to include Chinese stories and figures more critically. As the Reform era government attempted to restore the rights of Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent and promote and study their culture, children's literary works in Indonesia have started to raise these themes. One work that stood out was the children's novel series *Na Willa* by Reda Gaudiamo, which dares to raise and build awareness about what it is like to be a Chinese Indonesian, providing insights into the distinctive experiences and challenges faced by the ethnic group.

In the realm of fantasy children's stories, the children's adventure novel series of Mata, which begins with Okky Madasari's *Mata di Tanah Melus* [6], also presents a new phenomenon in the writing of the Indonesian children's fantasy genre. As a novelist who is always persistent in voicing criticism, Madasari uses modern fantasy by utilizing Indonesia's traditional literary treasure (myth, legend, folklore) to address social inequality issues intended for children. In the novel set in Belu, East Nusa Tenggara, which is the border area between Indonesia and Timor Leste, Madasari raises the basic problems of the people in the outermost areas (border areas) affected by central policies such as the issues of territorial ownership, ancestral traditions that are beginning to be capitalized, pre-modern community life, adaptation and resistance to progress. Through the point of view of the main character of the novel, an urban girl who enters the mythical world of Tanah Melus, the magical territory of the Melus tribe which is said to be the first inhabitant of Belu, Madasari combines the elements of tradition and myths from the past in a fantasy world that are used to highlight and convey critical views of the realistic life of the present.

This research examines how the fantasy world is used by Madasari to question and criticize social issues in modern Indonesian society and how Madasari builds a fantasy world in her work and how these fantasy elements are used to convey social problems in society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEWS

Sari, et. al. [7] explore the id, ego, and superego of the protagonist of *Mata di Tanah Melus*, while Sari [8] utilizes the moral lessons of the novel in high school pedagogy. A study on social criticism and problems in three Madasari children's novels has been conducted by Andalusia et al. [9] by using a sociological literary approach, examining social criticism in the three children's novels, focusing on the criticism of the educational system, particularly on the notion that good

education is identical to expensive schools. Budiyanto's research [10] uses a sociological approach to reveal social injustice and inequality problems in Eastern Indonesia in the form of access gaps and environmental conservation issues. The results of this study indicate that the display of social problems in the community makes Madasari's child novels an alternative educational medium that opens children's eyes to history, reality, and problems in Indonesia, especially in the Eastern region. Unlike previous studies that focused on educational and learning issues from a psychological and sociological perspective and were extrinsic in nature, this study will use a textual approach in analyzing this work. The study is intended to see how the fantasy world built from traditional elements is used as a transformative power to convey social criticism of the reality of the current modern society. *The Fantastical Pentad* theory by David W. Rick [11] will be used in this study to reveal the transformative power.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The Fantastical Pentad Theory of David W. Rick [11] is a development of Burke's Dramatic Pentad theory which uses five instruments to investigate a motive in the narrative, consisting of: Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose. These five instruments are used specifically in fantasy works to examine the transformative power of fantasy through the notion of fantasy as an action (a magical one), a fantastical object, and an experience. The main action in fantasy works is the creation or new interpretation (sub-creation or translation) of an object that involves imagination (fantastical element). This fantastical creation or interpretation causes the formation of a world, which Tolkien calls the Secondary World, which refers to the fantastical imaginary world to be distinguished from the world of reality which he calls the Primary World. In Tolkien's view, the fantastical imaginary world (sub-creation) or Secondary World is a free space to tell anything, and it can use its own logic, claims, and parameters.

Fantasy works have two elements, dubbed by researchers as escapism and subversive, because of sub-creation. Radek [12] explains that the imaginary world is separated from the real world and provides a place for escape or liberation from stereotypes, viewpoints, and applicable standard norms. Through the world of fantasy, themes, approaches, points of view, and ways that are unusual, or which are impossible to tell through realistic storytelling, can be told. The escapism element referred to here is not just an escape from the real world but a form of investigation of social-society life to find new possibilities.

The fantasy world also presents experiences outside of ordinary human life, which are considered absurd in the prevailing knowledge system (fantastical objects). This is where the subversive element in the fantasy genre, which according to Apter [12] shows a gap in our knowledge system to break through things that were

previously thought impossible. Thus, the fantastical objects generated in the sub-creation process contain transformative power by opening the possibility of experience in another world with a new perspective. In other words, experiencing a transformative fantasy provides an opportunity to question and re-examine what is being brought up in a fantasy world, whether it makes sense or not, and to understand why it is fantastical and what changes are sought in a fantasy world.

Rick indicates that this fantastic element represents three things: departure, transformation, and alternative modes of thinking that can become transformative power. Fantasy can present the transformation of thought by examining and reimagining the way the world works, re-visioning or seeing in a new way, including even questioning the central assumptions about the known world. According to Rick, this transformative power in fantasy cannot only occur in the work itself (intrinsic) as will be focused on and become the limitation of this article's study. The transformative power of fantasy can also affect readers (affecting audiences) and even produce new cultural artefacts. (Tolkien called this process "mythopoeia", when he used old myths and legends to construct the Secondary Worlds in the image of the Primary World, such as Middle earth in his works).

The relationship between fantasy stories and social-community life becomes the search or mission of the characters of the novel *Mata di Tanah Melus* [6], which is the corpus of this research. It is the first book in a series of Mata's adventures, three of which, out of the planned four, have been published. The publication of the novel series is intended to introduce areas in Indonesia that have not been widely written. The three novels that have been published have the same pattern, namely the adventures of a girl named Mata who comes from Jakarta to various regions in Indonesia. In every area she visited, Mata always experiences magical adventures in the mythical world known in the area. In the first novel, *Mata di Tanah Melus*, Mata ventures into the magical territory of the Melus Tribe, led by powerful humans who can control nature. In the second novel, *Mata di Pulau Gapi* (2019), Mata meets and has adventures with magical animals from the past, such as a talking cat and a spider who can write. In the third novel, *Mata dan Manusia Laut* (2019), Mata can breathe underwater and has an adventure in the underwater world of Masalembo with talking marine animals and humans who live underwater in the "Bermuda Triangle" of Indonesia.

In general, the scenes in Mata's adventure novels are divided into two, namely, first, Jakarta, where Mata lives with her mother and father; and second, the areas that Mata visits, where Mata experiences fantastical adventures. The fantastical experiences do not happen in Jakarta. Belu, in this novel, functions as a quest portal. According to Mendlesohn's [13] categorization, a model like this can be categorized as a fantasy quest portal, which is when a fantasy world is entered through a portal. In this model, usually the protagonist departs from the everyday world, where the fantastical things are

unimaginable, unknown (foreign), or at least not something they can experience or encounter directly.

This fantasy quest portal model can show a direct relationship between the Primary World and the Secondary World, namely that the Secondary World is built as a response and has a basis for situations or concerns in the Primary World. This allows a direct comparison between the Primary World and the Secondary World and explicitly highlights the similarities and differences between them within the same text. The entrance of the characters through a portal is not only a step into a magical world but also allows a meeting between "our world" which is already known by the main characters and the "other world" that is unknown. This meeting allows negotiations between the different worlds and spurred transformation.

The Primary World in *Mata di Tanah Melus* is described as a place where various problems occur. The novel consists of two settings, namely Jakarta where Matara's (nicknamed Mata) family lives and Belu. visited by Mata with Mama. In Jakarta, Papa lost his job as a journalist, so his family experienced financial difficulties. Mama became unhappy and then decided to leave Papa and go to Belu, the border area between Indonesia and East Timor. Mama who worked as a freelance writer hoped to get good writing material by visiting areas that had rarely been visited to get a lot of money which was the source of her happiness. Mata was forced to follow Mama, who told her to go to unknown areas like Belu. Mata preferred to go to popular tourist areas like Bali or Lombok.

Mata is depicted as a lonely only child, who has no friends but has many books. Mata likes fantasy stories from books as well as stories of the adventures of her grandmother, Nenek Mar, who entered the magical world. Mata believed these stories as real, but Mama and the other adults around her did not believe in them. Even though Mata often had her own opinion different from Mama's, she could never express it. She always obeyed Mama's words because she wanted to be closer to Mama. However, this never worked because Mama seemed to live in her own world that she could never share with Mata. Mama is described as a mother figure that is different from other mothers, "Among my friends and their mothers, Mama is like an unusual stranger, is always different, and often looks abnormal. She hates everything that everyone likes, and she wants everything that no one wants; she is angry with my teacher, she teases my friend's mother, she protests about a lot of things that no one has ever complained about." [6].

Mata hoped that the trip to Belu could be a shared adventure that allowed her to share stories with Mama, but her mother was absorbed in her work. "I turned to Mama. Of course, it would be nice when she was alone like this when she was telling me a story. A story about a line of rabbits jumping on a cloud, a story about Alice getting caught in a rabbit hole, about a child going on an adventure alone with her mother ... a story about

anything! But Mama is very absorbed in the laptop in front of her. She doesn't even know I am looking at her." [6]. Mata hoped that her mother could also enjoy the fantasy world with her, but her mother's commitment to her work separated the two of them, as if they had been in two different worlds.

Belu is a rural area with people being described as not prosperous, and its communities and traditions have been capitalized. The people of Jakarta, with a different style and appearance from the local population, are depicted to be a source of money. Even though Mama actually was in a shortage of money and hoped to earn money from her writing about this area, the people there took advantage of Mama's ignorance as a foreigner who did not know the existing customs. When a local driver of their rental car hit a cow due to the driver's own negligence recklessness, it was Mama who had to pay the big amount of fine, much more the price of a normal cow. Mama was also forced to pay for various necessities for carrying out traditional rituals because Mata had been haunted by the spirit of the cow hit by the driver of the car they rented.

In the midst of this chaotic situation, the Secondary World is presented as a response to the circumstances and various problems experienced by the characters in the Primary World. The novel contrasts these two worlds by showing the similarities and differences between them. The cross between the two different worlds allows for a new perspective which then encourages transformation in the characters. The fantasy narrative of this novel can be explained using the Fantastical Pentad theory which identifies three components that are always present in fantasy stories. The first component is the ability to perform actions beyond probability using supernatural or magical powers. Second, this fantastical world is inhabited by fantastical creatures that cannot be found in the real world. The presence of these fantastic creatures further strengthens the contrast between the Second World from the Primary World. The third component is the experiences that are different from everyday life and make the hero/heroine see with a new perspective so that they are free from the obstacles in the real world. This raises the potential for the hero/heroine to solve problems in the fantasy world (Secondary World). The hero/heroine's ability to solve problems in this fantasy world will equip him/her with the ability to solve any problems in the Primary World. This third element is where the transformation process occurs. The fantasy narrative of *Mata di Tanah Melus* also uses these three components. The protagonist (or the hero) in fantasy stories is generally not in an individual search, but a social one [13]. Research [14] shows that magical spaces in fantasy can be used to confront the status quo, question the hegemonic authority, and advocate for the marginalised members of the society. Similar to Radek and Zaja, the research of the fantasy for child readers by Hsin-Chun [15] found that fantasy worlds can activate sociological imaginations and incite curiosity to social realities and encourage change. Meanwhile, McLendon

[16] examines how modern child fantasy novels stand in opposition to the traditional fantasy to demonstrate female child empowerment.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Mata di Tanah Melus [6] is the first book in a series of Mata's adventures, three of which, out of the planned four, have been published. The publication of the novel series is intended to introduce areas in Indonesia that have not been widely written. The three novels that have been published have the same pattern, namely the adventures of a girl named Mata who comes from Jakarta to various regions in Indonesia. In every area she visited, Mata always experiences magical adventures in the mythical world known in the area. In the first novel, *Mata di Tanah Melus*, Mata ventures into the magical territory of the Melus Tribe, led by powerful humans who can control nature. In the second novel, *Mata di Pulau Gapi* (2019), Mata meets and has adventures with magical animals from the past, such as a talking cat and a spider who can write. In the third novel, *Mata dan Manusia Laut* (2019), Mata can breathe underwater and have an adventure in the underwater world of Masalembu with talking marine animals and humans who live underwater in the "Bermuda Triangle" of Indonesia.

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The Secondary World is presented as a response to the circumstances and various problems experienced by the characters in the Primary World. The similarities and differences between the two worlds are highlighted and compared. The meeting between the two different worlds allows negotiations to take place and encourages transformation in the characters. This can be described using the Fantastical Pentad theory by Rick as follows:

4.1. Action – Magic

The action or sub creation of fantasy world was created with the introduction of the Tanah Melus, a magical land of the very first of Belu inhabitants, the indigenous people of Belu. When their land was invaded by people of different tribes, they had to protect their existence by retreating to an isolated area and creating magical barriers around their territory to prevent outsiders from entering and pillaging their homeland. This magical power and the enchanted land are the attributes given to these people to distinguish them from the people from the Primary World. Apart from the magical ability to protect themselves and their land, they are also equipped with the ability to master foreign languages in an instant. This magical power enables them to communicate easily with other people. It shows that despite them being exiled from the rest of the world, they have the power of language. Not only that, Emma Nain, the chief of the Melus tribe, is able to read minds. With this power, she can make appropriate decisions for her people. Laka Lorak, the highest deity in Melus tribe, is able to control nature, such as the ocean to protect the Melus Land from the invasion of outsiders.

The Melus tribe with its magic power is positioned as an agent to show or empower supernatural life which at the beginning of the story is positioned marginally. Mata as a child, who really likes and even believes in unreal life, has difficulty communicating with a mother who has a rational view. Mata feels closer to her grandmother, Nenek Mar, who likes to tell her fictional stories. As stated above, Nenek Mar had a spiritual experience by visiting the land of the sun-eating giant during an eclipse when she was a child. The people around her knew little Mar had been missing for days at that time, but they didn't believe Mar's story about the giant world. The story that has been told repeatedly until she is old is considered a fantasy story and lies making people get bored and not want to listen to her stories anymore.

The magical actions in the fantasy world of the Melus tribe become an agency aimed at bridging the gap between the material world and the spiritual world by showing that supernatural powers become the answers to modern society problems. While in Jakarta, there was a gap between Mata who liked to use fantasy as her language and her mother who did not believe in fantasy and was fixated on life's problems and things that are rational in nature. When in Tanah Melus, language is not a problem because in that land, fantasy becomes a daily

reality and the traditional elders do not need language to be able to penetrate Mata's mind.

4.2. *Fantastical Object – Fantasy*

The fantastical objects in the novel are always associated with natural elements, including characters who are the personification of animals such as The Queen of Butterflies and the god of crocodiles, people who have the power to control nature, and objects in nature that have magical powers, such as the magic leaf. These natural elements function as agents to voice what happens in the natural environment in relation to human behavior. In the novel, the supernatural world is not only placed in a position of power and is the answer to the problems of modern society as in the aforementioned study but also becomes something of material value in modern society.

In the kingdom of Butterflies, humans can enjoy nectar and food made of delicious petals and flower essence as a daily meal, can have wings to fly, and can live eternally in a young body. The Queen of Butterflies, who resided there, was originally the daughter of a Melus tribe member separated from her parents when the Melus Tribe was attacked by the Bunaq Tribe planning to plunder Melus' heirloom. She was helped by butterflies who gave her wings and eternal life. This comfort of life was given by nature as a protection to someone suffering from the greed of other human beings.

The magical world of the Melus tribe is described as having a variety of wealth arousing the interest of outsiders to plunder it. There is a magical crocodile Lakaan which can be sold for one billion attracting hunters to find and catch these crocodiles. The heirloom of the Melus tribe has not only attracted the attention of the Bunaq Tribe to plunder it but also scientists to study it in order to get awards in the field of science. The life of the Melus tribe is also an interesting writing material that can bring money to Mama.

In the novel, this magical world is depicted as having the power to defend itself while making choices. They can also distinguish between people with bad intentions and those with good ones and can decide who can gain access to the world. The god of crocodiles forbade the crocodiles to attack Mata and Atok because he knew that they had no bad intentions, but he mobilized the crocodiles to frighten and drive away the hunters. While Mata's presence was accepted and treated as friends by the Melus tribe, scientists and Mama were not accepted by the Melus tribe because they had an agenda to take advantage of the Melus tribe for their own personal gain. The Queen of Butterflies also gives the magic leaf which helps Mata and Atok to survive their journey.

Fantastical objects in the form of natural elements in the novel make Mata see nature with different perspective. Mata sees that on the one hand, modern humans, represented by hunters and scientists, try to control and exploit nature to gain wealth and fame while,

on the other hand, nature itself offers protection and friendship. In addition, the magic leaf that the Queen of Butterflies gave her so that Mata could survive her way out of the region demanded strong faith in Mata to risk her life on something seemingly impossible, a fragile leaf. This gives provision for Mata to look at life more boldly and with full confidence in the spiritual power and not in the power of rationality.

The Primary World or the realistic world outside Melus is filled with people who value material, money, and fame above all else causing a lot of damage to nature and social problems. They exploit and objectify other humans, other living things, and nature relentlessly. On the other hand, in the Secondary World, nature offers comfort and protection, with creatures that are positioned as guardians of nature and vice versa. Nature is also friendly and preserves its own existence.

4.3. *Experience – The Enchanted*

The characters from outside Tanah Melus experience various enchanting things in the form of contrasts or answers to problems faced outside the magical world. The Mata family in Jakarta experience loneliness and isolation because they cannot understand each other. Materialistic life makes them measure happiness with money and take actions that destroy nature or objectify others for money. It also shows the social disparity between Jakarta and Belu and the tradition that has been capitalized. The Melus tribe, on the other hand, lives in peace, harmony, and friendly relationship with nature. They have leaders who can understand their subjects so that they believe in and follow their policies.

In this contrasting position, the fantasy world of the Melus tribe is shown as an ideal and empowered party and is used to criticize life outside of Melus which is full of problems. This experience in the fantasy world that presents a contrast with life in the real world encourages new perspectives and changes in the characters. The lonely Mata found a friend from the Melus tribe who teaches her sincerity and sacrifice in the name of friendship. Mata, who had originally been an obedient child, was able to express her opinion to reject Mama's wrong opinion. Mama, who since the beginning of the story had never asked Mata's opinion, at the end of the story after their experience together in Tanah Melus, began to pay attention to Mata's opinion. Thus, the gap between the two different worlds can be bridged better.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion, the fantasy story that Madasari builds in her first child novel does not only serve to teach morals to child readers but also serves to invite children to see the more complex problems of human life. The Secondary World, which is presented as a parallel world with the Primary World, is used as a space that offers a different model of life from that of the main character. A life model that is closer to nature and

more humane provides an alternative way of life that allows the main character (heroine) to overcome the problems she faces in the real world.

Through a fantasy world that offers a better alternative perspective and way of life than those found in the real world, this novel presents a critique of the values of materialism that turn humans into beings oriented towards money and personal gain. The novel shows that this value turns humans into exploitative creatures who lose touch with nature. Madasari also raises the idea that the life of harmony of the traditional human life from marginalized tribes is a way out of the social problems caused by modernity.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Wikan Satriati and Dhita Hapsarani. The first draft was written by Wikan Satriati. Review, supervision, and editing were performed by Dhita Hapsarani. Authors read and approved the final manuscript.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by PITMA B Research Grant from The Directorate of Research and Community Service Universitas Indonesia.

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