

Symbolic Violence Represented in Royyan Julian's *Bulan Merah Rabu Wekasan*

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses and explores the ways Indonesian people experience the Covid-19 pandemics as represented in the short story *Bulan Merah Rabu Wekasan* written by Royyan Julian. The setting of the story is a rural area, an isolated village with poor infrastructure and less economic access. By applying literary criticism and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence this study shows the symbolic violence committed by the dominating group represented by three characters to the dominated group or the poor people in the village. The symbolic violence got its momentum in the situation of Covid-19 pandemic, in which the characters from the dominating group make use of their position as formal and informal leaders to do symbolic violence through language and image with the common people as victims. This study limits the aspect of symbolic violence, while the story has potentials of other aspects, for example, social, psychological, cultural and stylistics that can be observed by other researchers for future research.

Keywords: *Bulan Merah Rabu Wekasan, Covid-19 pandemic, short story, symbolic violence.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The discourse of pandemic does not only take place in the cities or urban areas, instead it reaches to the rural isolated areas. The government and many related institutions have been very busy in the centers of urban disruptive problems (Bowden, 2014). In many cases, people forget how it reaches the rural, isolated areas and takes the victims in more tragic ways. We can read from newspapers how many people in the rural areas did not believe it because of lack of comprehensive knowledge on the virus in the first year of the pandemic (Rahayu & Mediyansyah, 2021). The concern on the pandemic impact in rural areas is well narrated in the literary work that is discussed in this paper, as literary works do not only reflect the socio-cultural situation of the society, but also construct realities. The realities of Covid-19 pandemic that have manifested in many social cultural aspects of life need to be scrutinized, especially in rural areas. In doing the observation, literary works get their monumental roles to voice the complexities of realities in the rural areas.

This study aims to discuss the pandemic narration in rural areas context, which is interlaced with the power relation among the actors in the village. In this case it is represented in the short story entitled "Bulan Merah Rabu Wekasan" written by Royyan Julian (in Udasmoro,

2021). This story takes the setting in a rural village that is geographically isolated from the urban areas, nevertheless, the village also gets the impact of the pandemics in a no less complicated way. In focusing discussion of the story, the paper takes the topic of symbolic violence as its lens for unveiling the conflict that happened in the story. Symbolic violence can be defined as the ideas and values of a ruling cultural class who purposefully impose them (often through subconscious means) onto a dominated social group such as women, and poor people (Bourdieu, 1998). The dominating group plays a role in maintenance of the power relations in symbolic violence. This paper explores symbolic violence represented in the short story *Bulan Merah Rabu Wekasan* through the analysis of language, plot, character, and characterization in the story.

There has been some research on the themes of everyday narrations that are produced and consumed by society and transmitted through the media. Udasmoro's study on symbolic violence in Indonesian television focused on the dynamic relation between the social and cultural regimes and the construction of symbolic violence in everyday narrations through television in the electronic cinema or "*sinetron*" in Indonesia (Udasmoro, 2013). The study shows that symbolic violence is largely constructed by television, but the audiences are not aware

of this construction, and the image of the electronic cinema played important roles in shaping the public ideas. Another study on symbolic violence was done by Harris, Vigurs, and Jones (2020) under the topic of student loans as symbolic violence. Harris et al. observed that the symbolic violence occurs when two unequal agents unconsciously conspire in the oppression of the less empowered agent (in this case students), thus reinforcing and legitimating existing stratifications. Thus, the student loan system is perceived, among others, as symbolic violence (Harris et al., 2020).

The current study aims to explore the complexities of the pandemic narration in rural areas through literary works by focusing on the short story written by Royyan Julian's *Bulan Merah Rabu Wekasan*. In this rural context, the pandemic is interlaced with the power relation in daily life, that involves the symbolic violence perpetrated by the local actors. The question is formulated as follows. How is the symbolic violence represented in the short story of *Bulan Merah Rabu Wekasan*? The focus is the dynamic relation between the social and cultural ruling group and the construction of symbolic violence in the everyday narrations in the rural context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In our daily life, violence happens in our spaces, in the form of physical and symbolic. The physical violence can be easily identified as the action can be perceived through our objective senses and can be indicated by the rules or the enacted law. On the other hand, symbolic violence is mostly understood as something that is an unnoticed (or even unconscious) domination that people maintain in everyday living (Bourdieu, 1990). The symbolic violence is often manifested in the form of a soft violence perpetrated by the subject to the other. As it is often considered as unconscious or 'implicit' action, people do it repeatedly, in many significant aspects of life, and it raises concern, such as in education, family, or in mass media. Bourdieu stated that symbolic violence is consumed through the production of text and meaning in conversation, novels, television programs and other cultural products, all of which show that in everyday life it is practiced by people in many ways (Bourdieu, 1990).

In the social landscape, people maintain the social class in daily relation. The process of maintaining the position or social class is shaped through the process of social reproduction. According to Bourdieu (1998), social reproduction is a way how the social class is maintained through the mechanism where the rich will get the possibility to have access more easily to higher education, and other economic access while the poor will not have easy access to it. In this case, education takes roles as a machine to strengthen the social class.

Theoretically, the term "symbolic violence," according to Bourdieu (1998), is defined as an action in which the ruling class ideas and values are intentionally imposed onto the dominated social group. In the process of symbolic violence, culture plays an important role to maintain the power relation between the dominant and dominated group, in which the culture takes roles as the sites for reproduction of symbolic violence, through the process of "misrecognition" as conceptualized by Bourdieu (in Thapar-Björkert, Samelius, & Sanghera, 2016). Misrecognition is the process in which what people believe is not manifested, and people who do not critically observe do not realize what really happened. For example, people believe that education is intended to improve human life conditions. However, if the education only benefited a certain group or a few people, it can be concluded that the education is practicing symbolic violence. So, the education system does reproduce the social system, in which it enforces the system that the ruling class has strengthened its domination (Bourdieu, 1990).

How people at large construct ideology and through what device? Lassen (2006) highlighted that at least there are two devices that people can use to build an ideology, namely language and image. People define and perceive others by using language and image, and more importantly, people are able to exercise his/her power through these means. Bandura (1977) highlights the power of language, in which people internalize the social realities through languages they use in daily narrative, objectify and externalize it in their daily life. People learn how certain behavior is produced and consumed before reproducing a new but similar behavior.

The concept of language interlaced with power is also stated by Fairclough through his book *Language and Power* (1992) and constructs it into the important aspects in the theory of critical discourse analysis (CDA). The power relation always exists in the social interaction, in spite of the rural communal context. The perspective of power relation, history and daily narrative constitute Fairclough's concept of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1997). In doing the CDA there are three aspects that need to be observed and analyzed: micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis. At the micro level it covers the language device as it is used in social practice. The meso level covers the consumption and production of the text, and the macro level covers the social cultural context of the issue discussed.

3. METHOD

This paper takes a short story as the material object of study. The short story entitled "Bulan Merah Rabu Wekasan" is written by Royyan Julian, in a compilation of short stories book entitled *Wabah*, which was published by Faculty of Cultural Science, Gadjah Mada University, in cooperation with Kibul.In publisher, in

2021, the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. The formal object of the research is symbolic violence, a concept constructed by Bourdieu (1990) that strengthens the thought of symbolic violence as the ideas and values of the ruling cultural class who purposefully imposed them (often through subconscious means) onto a dominated social group (marginalized group).

The data source is the short story, entitled "Bulan Merah Rabu Wekasan" which consists of eight pages, and the story narrates the situation and problems of Covid-19 pandemics that people in rural areas have to face. There are four main characters in the story, three characters are, Kyai Jalil (the informal religious leader in the village), the head of the village (Mirna), and Doctor Simon. The fourth character, named Ramiso, represents the victim, the poor people in the village. In the story, Kyai Jalil plays an important role in building the narration of the myth of "Rabu Wekasan", the sacred day in which people have to expect a critical situation, and Kyai Jalil becomes the person who can handle the situation. Mirna, the head of the village made a plot in which he and the doctor made Ramiso to be the pseudo patient of Covid-19, with the purpose to get the money from the central government.

The short story can be considered as a cultural text that represents a particular social issue, in this case the symbolic violence. To address this issue, this paper applies Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995, 2006). The data collected in this study are in the form of words, phrases, and sentences obtained from the short story, "Bulan Merah Rabu Wekasan."

Fairclough's CDA provides the analysis on three levels (Fairclough, 1995, 1992, 2006). The first level is the micro-level of analysis, discussing language use in the social context, like words, metaphor, and syntax. The second is meso-level analysis, dealing with the production and consumption of the text, considering that the text and people is mediated through the discourse practice, in which a text is produced and consumed. The third, macro-level analysis, related to the socio-political context of the issue, that commonly concentrates on the discourse relation with ideology and power.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Bulan Merah Rabu Wekasan takes the setting of a rural area, named Sumber Bulan, an isolated village with only one bumpy road across the forest to the area. This is the only access to the village, which is not safe for the people to travel through. The village is led by a village administrator, the head of the village, named Mirna. In addition, there is an informal religious leader, Kyai Jalil, and a doctor, named Simon. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the people in the village are far from being well-being. They are all poor, with no education nor economic

access. This community is susceptible to become the victim of violence, moreover in the pandemic times. The Covid-19 pandemic constitutes a significant problem that reveals the latent conflicts in the village.

In the micro level, the language practice analysis, we can find out in the beginning of the story, Kyai Jalil constructed the myth of "Rabu Wekasan" (Javanese words, meaning the Last Wednesday). The myth refers to the last Wednesday of the month, considered as the bad, unlucky day, in which people have to be aware of the coming of critical situations. Kyai Jalil told the people that he was the one who witnessed the night in which he claimed as the sacred "Rabu Wekasan". Kyai Jalil chose the night of "The Last Wednesday" as the setting, to build the sacredness of the message. In addition, the place of the story happened at the cemetery of Sayyid Yusuf. He told people in the village that that night the moon shed the reddish light to the Sayyid Yusuf cemetery. Kyai Jalil claimed he saw a mysterious figure in the cemetery, and the event ended with the story that a leaf fell onto his foot. Mysteriously, on the leaf is written the word "taun" (pandemic). All the elements of the story conveyed by Kyai Jalil constructs the sacredness of his message, that happened in the night of *Rabu Wekasan* at the Sayyid Yusuf cemetery, the ancient tomb of a sacred man in the village, and Kyai Jalil got a leaf.

Kyai Jalil said, "The reddish moon of last Wednesday and the odd images might not be a good sign." The myth of "The Last Wednesday", the mysterious figure, at Sayyid Yusuf tomb, and a leaf written "taun" all of which constructs the meaning of the coming of the very critical situation of pandemics that forced the people in the village to be aware of. However, the story of sacred Wednesday did not mean people understand what the disaster is. Instead, the event increased people's trust in the power of Kyai Jalil to take care of the mysterious disaster.

At the meso level, there is misrecognition in the phase in which Kyai Jalil told the event of the Wednesday night. The misrecognition occurs as the people uncritically accept the myth of the sacredness of *Rabu Wekasan* and the message that Kyai Jalil tells them. People in the village cannot not critically think about the intention that Kyai Jalil wants to build. People cannot not recognize that Kyai Jalil built "a power". This misrecognition of reality is a symbolic violence as he takes advantage of the trust people place on him. Kyai Jalil enforces the myth of "The Last Wednesday" and he makes up the story by plotting a leaf with the word "taun" written on it. People's misrecognition of the pandemics brings about the harm for themselves. Instead of taking preventive action for the spread of the virus, they went into a crowd in the ritual to remove the virus.

At the macro level analysis, the symbolic violence that Kyai Jalil has done through the story of the leaf in the night of *Rabu Wekasan* is also a reproduction of

symbolic violence. Kyai Jalil has heard about the pandemics from the head of the village, Mirna, but he does not tell the people about the pandemics. In most Islamic dominated traditional communities, a *Kyai* is the most trusted person in a village, because of his religious knowledge. A *Kyai* is considered as the mediator or the bridge between the common people in worldly life and divination. Due to his religious knowledge the *kyai* has a special social class, higher than common people and holding economic political influence. In addition, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemics at the beginning months of the outbreak, people at large did not get enough information on the pandemics, so that the fake or hoax information was rampant. In this situation, Kyai Jalil does not honestly say to the people whether he understands about the pandemics, instead he tells a lie and makes up a story to maintain his power as the most knowledgeable people, of which he is actually not.

The other symbolic violence is related to the head of the village. The village of Sumber Bulan is led formally by a head of village named Mirna, who comes from a rich family, and his father and ancestor was the head of the village for many generations. Though there is a formal administration in the area, the facilities and infrastructure were not built. Consequently, people do not have more economic access, and they just live with a minimal standard of living. This situation is stated explicitly in the story, Sumber Bulan is an isolated village. The village is surrounded by wacky forest. It is said that the forest is occupied by bandits and robbers. Anyone crossing the bumpy would encounter the bandits. No vehicle is able to run smoothly on a very bad bumpy road. No authority had any idea to fix this road." As the head of the village, Mirna does not do his job, he does not care about how to improve people's well-being, how to build infrastructure, or how to safely travel in and out of the village. Mirna comes from the ruling class family, and it is easy for him to get the power and maintain his position without any challenge.

The isolated, bad-managed village administration is also described in the following citation. "When all of the regions in this country have been led by many different presidents, Sumber Bulan is still devoted to the New Order." It is an ironic comment in response to the bumpy road, which is the only road connecting the village to the other world. It is logical that there is no reason to visit the village. The only vehicle that dares to cross the bumpy road passing the wacky forest is a car which brings the people's basic needs. With extra guards."

The citation above shows the isolated, remote village of Sumber Bulan, which has almost no physical interaction with other villages, and it means there is no exchange of information with other people. The only information the villagers get is from the only one car coming to the village bringing the basic needs to be sold in the only store owned by Haji Ansori. In addition,

people in the village have no idea of the Covid-19 pandemic, nor any information to deal with the virus. They only know the deadly virus, from Kyai Jalil who said, "I believe, in the short time, there will be a person from Sumber Bulan infected by the deadly virus...and in the following day, Ramiso, a labor in the village, was evacuated by an ambulance at mid night. People in the neighborhood were able to hear the siren of the ambulance at the silent night. Of course, his wife and children have to self-quarantine at home, while their daily needs are supported by local administration."

The citation above shows that people have no idea what happens to Ramiso, because they have no information, but the mythical story from Kyai Jalil. In fact, Ramiso is not infected at all. He is bribed to be a fake patient, just to stay in the *Puskemas* (community health service) led by Doctor Simon, and in return, he would get a million Rupiah. This plot shows that no information access becomes very fatal, because they know the realities based on what is said by the manipulated ruling class, like the head of the village, religious leader, and the doctor. In addition, they could not respond to it critically.

Doctor Simon, as the intellectual actor, knows exactly about the danger of the Covid-19, and there was not any case yet in the village. However, the doctor agrees to Kyai and Mirna, the village's head, to manipulate the pandemic, for their own benefit. Doctor Simon indirectly makes the whole village at risk because of giving no information to the people nor making any prevention action. What he does is a betrayal against his oath as a doctor.

The analysis above shows that the actors or perpetrators of symbolic violence are the three dominant characters in the village: the village head, religious leader, and the doctor. Those three dominant characters belong to the ruling class in the village, who have the power to control most people who are not critical and so they are led to the misrecognition. The symbolic violence done by the dominant group brings effect to people's economic access and well-being. Ramiso, the representation of the majority of poor people in the village, becomes the victim of the symbolic violence. He is given one million rupiah to be a fake patient while the head of the village in conspiracy with Kyai Jalil and the doctor would get a much bigger amount of money. The symbolic violence done by these characters in power is for their own benefits.

Nonetheless, perhaps the most significant symbolic violence is committed by Kyai Jalil. As the religious leader, Kyai Jalil has social and symbolic capital, because of his religious knowledge. He can influence the people that there will be a disaster, signed by the myth of *Rabu Wekasan*, his experience of getting the sight of the sacred sign in the cemetery of Sayyid Yusuf. Kyai Jalil builds the story of *Rabu Wekasan* to attract people and makes

them believe that he has knowledge of the situation, can predict what will happen and has the solution, that is the ritual in which he is the leader of the ritual. The symbolic violence done by Kyai Jalil can be seen as a reproduction as he does many layers of symbolic action. He makes people misrecognize the realities, instead of giving the right information. In Bourdieu's perspective, the misrecognition is the main cause of the symbolic violence.

An informal leader like Kyai Jalil can play the most important role, because people believe in him while he manipulates the information. He made the people go in a crowd of ritual, all of which against the health protocol for prevention of the virus spread. He built the discourse of fear through the myth in order to maintain his own power. He made the pandemics as his business without any knowledge about cost and the risk that people have to bear. In our reality of pandemics nowadays, maybe there are people who take advantage like Kyai Jalil, whom people must respond critically.

5. CONCLUSION

The story of *Bulan Merah Rabu Wekasan* represents the realities of pandemics in Indonesian rural areas. Though it takes the setting of a rural area, this story implies that the same manipulation, conspiracy also happens in the community at large, in various manifestations. The author of this story successfully narrates the complexities of pandemic in the community that needs to be strengthened to improve its resilience.

For future literary research, the literature of pandemics provides a wide space of topics for the researchers to explore. The Indonesian and world literature of pandemics are also growing as the effect of the global pandemic, which enables people to produce and consume the literature of pandemics to get more knowledge from pandemics.

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