



Colonialism Inferences on *Negeri 5 Menara* from Contrapuntal Reading Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Ahmad Fuadi's *Negeri 5 Menara* is a novel that keeps being reprinted until now and remains on the top ten netizen-based Indonesian best novels of *GoodReads* list. In addition, it also has its place among recommended novels for student literary appreciation as announced by Badan Standar Nasional Pendidikan. Earlier studies on the novel have been mostly related to the moral aspects, and there was no discussion on the presence of colonial discourse in the novel. This qualitative research was based on postcolonial approach and offered an alternative reading of the novel using Said's contrapuntal reading method through recontextualization and revelation of power relation from the perspective of the main characters in the novel. Since Said's method allows the polyphonic dimensions of a text, contradictions, narratives and their counter narratives to be recognized and elaborated simultaneously as juxtaposed elements in the text, it was found that there is a colonial narrative operating in the text. The method also enabled the exposure of the muted, underplayed dimensions of the subjugation which is curiously related to the indistinct colonial subject experiences found in the text.

Keywords: Colonial discourse, Contrapuntal, Digital platform.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ahmad Fuadi's *Negeri 5 Menara* (hereafter abbreviated as *N5M*) is one of the recommended novels for Junior and High School students (Badan Standar Nasional Pendidikan [BNSP], 2019). The novel also remained on the top twenty of the best Indonesian novels list ranked by the netizen-based cataloging platform *GoodReads* in 2015 (Apinino, 2015). Surprisingly, it managed to stay among the forty recommended best books by *Gramedia* publisher in 2021 and also as an unforgettable Indonesian fiction by *GoodReads* (Azizah, 2022; *GoodReads*, n.d).

In the case of *N5M*, online platforms like *GoodReads* has undoubtedly contributed to public preference for the novel. On *GoodReads* platform, the cataloging works through reviews, tagging and rating in which "better reviews indicate popularity", so that "the retrieval performance gets improved by taking into account the book likeliness based on ratings and helpful votes" (Ullah & Khusro, 2020). Sometimes the promotion works more effectively when the *GoodReads* list is reproduced by some news articles, which is the case of the novel *N5M*, ranked the fifth best and one of the most popular

Indonesian novels so far. Thus, *GoodReads* lists has contributed in the discursive formation shaping the large readership of the novel, along with other forms of recommendations (Ullah & Khusro, 2020). The democratization of reading taste has even resulted in the exclusion of renowned writers such as Umar Kayam, Danarto, Budi Darma, Kuntowijoyo, and Linus Suryadi (Taum, 2019).

There are abundant academic discussions about the novel. However, discussions on the novel tend to focus on the moral and educational aspects of the novel as readers and researchers are overwhelmed by its inspirational, educational, and religious features. Among earlier studies related were Mashuri (2014), who applied a Peircean semiotic analysis on the meaning of the characters' actions and virtues. Fitriana, Atmazaki, and Thahar (2013) propose that *N5M* can be helpful for Indonesian students' character building project designed by the Ministry of National Education because it is rich with moral values. Huda (2019) also examines the educational merits of the novel and contends that the novel propounds dimensions of character education in terms of moral and social conducts, cultural and aesthetic sensibilities, and godly devotion. The novel *N5M* has

also been made into an animated literature-learning material as the novel accommodates the Ministry of National Education's project of character education, as elaborated in the research project report by Fratiwi, Munaris, and Suyanto (2017). Few other studies on the novel do not focus on the moral teaching, but still none take the bait of the colonial discourse hints in the novel (Nilofar, 2018; Hasibuan, Rohayani & Hanum, 2018).

The symbolic mention of the Nelson column monument and the historical figure of Columbus is a hint which needs further discussion. The opening and closing scenes of the novel highlighting the iconic Nelson column appear ironic against the background of the recently targeted monuments by anti-racism movements of Black Lives Matter. The Nelson column is among the targeted statues indicating the legacy of colonization, along with Robert Milligan and Cecil Rhodes statues in the UK, the statue of King Leopold II in Belgium, and also Columbus and the confederate statues in the US, which were protested, vandalized, or torn down by demonstrators of the anti-racism movement also (Fitz-Gibbon, 2020; Rea, 2020). Given the fact that Indonesia is a formerly colonized country, the neglect on this controversial racism-implied monument is quite bewildering, particularly because colonial discourse purports to construct "the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin" to legitimize colonization (Bhabha, 1994).

Since the large readership of the novel is at odds with a hint of colonial discourse in the novel, this study was intended to show that politics of representation and hegemonic colonial discourse in the novel must be attended simultaneously, or contrapuntally to reveal the colonial power operating in the novel. According to Said (1993), contrapuntal reading is a mode of reading which takes into account narrations "of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded". In other words, a contrapuntal reading espouses a mode of reading which enables one to see how a certain novel might be connected to the "ubiquitous presence of imperialism" especially in canonical texts. Although contrapuntal readings were initially done on canonical texts to show the underplayed but crucial existence of the dominated subjects, such a reading can be invaluable to reveal the presence of imperialism in any other texts, as long as they articulate experiences pertaining to the submerged idea of the superiority of the West. Instead of only refusing a certain dominant cultural perspective, a contrapuntal reading allows one to show the complexities of the text which embodies competing perspectives in it, with the intention to reveal any absence, or silenced histories and voices, to "draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present" or ideologically under-represented in the novel examined (Said, 1993).

2. METHOD

This study is a descriptive textual study employing the postcolonial approach as a framework to examine the unattended colonial discourse in the novel. The analysis was based on Said's method of contrapuntal reading because it provides a rationale for the analysis of the colonial discourse at work in the novel. A contrapuntal reading examines the novel's underlying "structure of attitude and reference" which enables one to find relations between a text and the references or attitudes which cannot be found in the text itself (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 1999). This mode of reading shows how a colonized subject may make a way of "reading back" from his/her own perspective, shedding light into the hidden colonial discourse found in canonical literary works.

N5M is a novel which does not directly talk about a historicized colonial life or set in colonial time, but is set in the time when Indonesia is nearing the Reformation era long after its independence. Therefore, to conduct a contrapuntal reading on the text, the researchers firstly recontextualize the relation between East and West, the inadequately attended symbol of the Nelson Column and the figure of Columbus as the embodiment of colonial relations. The colonial discourse at work in the text is explained by revealing the unequal relation of power between the West, which is represented by the Western countries, from the East, which was represented by the main character.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *The Restriction on Islamic Expressions as the Context*

The *N5M* novel talks about the journey of a boy from a remote place in Sumatra to metropolitans in Western countries in a decolonization context. Therefore, to reveal the colonial contours of *N5M*, it must be noted that the novel published in the time when the repression on Islam serves as the "legal, political, economic, and social constraints" or contexts determining the printing of a text (Said, 1983; Bakry, 2020).

While Islamic identity politics is often admitted as the most notable form of identity politics flourishing in the Reformation era, it was an aspiration considered politically dangerous during Suharto's era (Bakry, 2020). The repressive state power of the New Order regime worked discursively through the "non-state agents" in many forms of popular culture, such as films and novels, by letting them reproduce the dominant ideology of the state characterized as "strongly developmentalist in outlook, anti-Islam, and anti-communist" (Heryanto, 2008). The burgeoning identity politics of Islam is made possible by the absence of such a "single social force" which savored "the privileged position of unchallenged

domination at the top of the political structure” which meddled with the production and consumption of popular culture in Indonesia (Heryanto, 2008). Such a repressive government is the manifestation of “postcolonial colonialism”, which is when a decolonized nation succeeds to free itself from a foreign power (Fanon, 1963). The decolonized country becomes “subject to colonial patterns of exploitation”, possibly by its own fellow country people (Upstone, 2009).

3.2. *The Dream of Modernity*

A vision of progress in the novel is especially expressed in the dream of studying abroad, around which the story revolves. It is in building this dream of studying abroad that the novel intersects with the colonial ideas of progress and modernity. Fuadi’s account of success is embodied in the main characters’ achievement of studying and establishing a career in the West. Modernity being often regarded as “a simple euphemism for Westernization” and is itself persuasively signified as “the dominance of Western culture” shares a view of progress which the post-colonial government of the New Order regime subscribes to, being so determined in bringing progress to the country through its emphasis in education (Ashcroft, 2001). This emphasis has unfortunately separated and judges people by their capacities of educational success through formal institutions (Sirimorok, 2008). Thus, the narrator’s modern consciousness which manifests in his dream to go West for education conforms with the modern ideology which divides realities into dualistic entities of subject-object, spiritual-material, man-nature, East-West on whose premises colonial discourse relies upon. This division bears various consequences, including objectification of human and materialism rampant in the practice of colonization (Sugiharto, 1996; Said, 1993).

3.3. *The Center and the Periphery*

Colonial power can be “durable and continually reinforced” through novels in a way that “is not comparably to be found elsewhere” by consolidating the colonizer’s global vision of imperialism by echoing the “structure of attitude” and feelings towards imperialism which are articulated by the colonizer’s writers (Said, 1993). This underlying structure of attitude can be identified by reading the novels from the perspective of the colonized and “with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history and of those other subjected and concealed histories against which the dominant discourse acts” (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 1999). In this way, one can examine what Said refers to as the voices, notions, or ideologies excluded forcibly from the text.

Applying a contrapuntal reading on *N5M* requires an examination on the ‘structure of attitude’ of the decolonized context of the novel reaffirms ideas about

the relationships between East and West. In light of Said’s ideas of ‘home’ and ‘abroad’, the idea of the naturally harmonious relationships between East and West espoused by the narrator is at odds with how the West is adorably described in the *N5M*. Such a relationship between East and West is suggested in the novel, albeit the model is quite reversed and modified. It is partly due to the fact that *N5M* is a novel which is written for an Indonesian audience. What stands as ‘home’ in *N5M* is Indonesia, while ‘abroad’ refers to countries in the middle East, Europe, Africa, and America, which maintains a central importance and are given much significance because it drives the characters’ motivation and plot.

Fuadi’s idea of the harmonious relationship between East and West is hinted through the protagonist’s English speech which he recites in front of the English Ambassador at Madani Islamic boarding school. In his speech he proposes for an egalitarian relation between East and West based on trust and respect, as the key to have a fruitful relationship (Fuadi, 2009). It is told that Alif, the main protagonist, took pride in the event and sent home his picture with the English Ambassador. Alif’s perspective about the land of his dream, the West, is apparently not a traumatic one. What matters is the dream of success, the dream of having a chance to visit the West, and hope that it will help make him an important and respectable person, regardless of the pain of colonialism. Judging from the modernist sense, setting his foot on the West, making a career in journalism, speaking as a panelist at an international platform of World Inter-Faith Forum means success.

What one should notice is how description of the West is interspersed in the novel, each time pictured with a positive and often admiring tone. It ranges from popular movies like *Rambo*, *the Magnificent Seven*, *James Bond 007*, and *Terminator* to Western historical figures and places such as Admiral Horatio Nelson, Christopher Columbus, Thomas Aquinas, the Trafalgar square, Big Ben, and the Capitol building in Washington D.C. Although the novel makes some mentions of Islamic figures such as the Persian poet and Sufi master Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, the philosopher Ibn Rushd, and the Commander of Al-Andalus conquest Tariq Ibn Ziyad, his utmost dream is to visit America, not the Middle East.

In addition to those aforementioned points, the dichotomy of the West as the center and the East as the periphery is underpinned by the representations of the powerless periphery against the powerful center. Alif, the narrator of the story, depicts the idea of the powerless periphery through his addressing himself as coming from a remote village he calls “*kampung liliput*” meaning a “tiny village”. The periphery is also represented by the disfavor Islamic schools he refuses to go to at the beginning of the novel. As Islamic boarding schools lie outside the structure of the formal education, the State

does not recognize diplomas issued by them, which inflicts an additional agony on its students, as they cannot go to college unless they pass the National High School Equivalency Examination first. The marginalized Islamic boarding schools is depicted in Alif's mother's concern for the fact that most parents send their children to Islamic schools either because their children fail the entrance exam to good state schools or because they cannot afford state or private schools. Although Alif admits that Pondok Madani Islamic boarding school has equipped him for his future, he nevertheless confesses that during the time he is there, he often gets anxious about leaving the boarding school and getting a formal education at the public school.

The powerful 'Center' in the novel is represented by big cities as opposed to *kampung*, Java island as opposed to Sumatra island, and European and the U.S. as opposed to Indonesia. In Said's words, the novel unwittingly suggests "imperialist venture" by echoing the idea of the West as the Center of the world as opposed to the rest of the world (Said, 1993). Even though the novel suggests that the West as a center is to be challenged by Middle East which represents the dream land of two other main characters of the novel, the fact that Europe and the U.S., as representations of the West are the main character's dream lands makes the West gain the position of the privileged center in the novel.

N5M is a novel about a journey from the periphery to the center, a journey from the marginalized rural and remote Minangkabau village in West Sumatra to the more modern center in Java, then to the center of the world. This journey underlies the perpetuation of the contours of imperialism, albeit with a shift in its constellation of power, as Europe is now rivalled by America. In a discussion of "American ascendancy" Said (1993) shows that the reformulation of imperialism includes the U.S. as "the last superpower", referring to what writers like Ronald Steel and George Kennan think about the "idea of American leadership and exceptionalism" in the world. Despite the fact that there has been a "decrease in American economic power", domestic crisis, and the rise of Asian and Pacific Rim states, the consolidation and ideological justification of America's "domination in cultural terms that has been the case in the West since the nineteenth century" continues to exist. Alif's reference to America as a great continent and the fact that he takes pride in 'conquering' his tower set in the West can be assumed as the representation of the hegemony of the West in the novel. The lack of any definite reason for asserting his dream to visit the West, which he confesses, leads to the speculation that he is acting out his sense of inferiority as part of the periphery. In addition to that, he simultaneously set the West as his utmost standard for quality.

3.4. Questioning Nelson and Columbus

The Trafalgar square in London is more than just a setting of place for the narrator. The fact that it is where the opening and closing scene of the novel take place shows the significance of this iconic place, put succinctly in the claim of "*Pertemuan bersejarah, di tempat yang bersejarah*" which in English means a historical meeting in a historical place (Fuadi, 2009). The novel closes with the remark that God has made their dreams come true by sending each of them to their dream continents. The Trafalgar square is an embodiment of their dream which is symbolized by the tall monument of the Nelson column. It represents their big dreams of gripping the world in their hands. When Alif is gazing at the Nelson monument, he remembers reading about the monument in his reading book back in year three at the boarding school (Fuadi, 2009). In his opinion, the real monument looks even bigger and taller than he had imagined. The moments of standing at the Trafalgar square is very important because it symbolically marks the achievement of his dream.

Admiral Horatio Nelson's decisive victory over the French fleet which prevented the invasion of England is considered as his legacy, creating the deification of his patriotic figure to blend into English national pride (Konstam, 2011). Nelson's immortalization continues in the completion of Nelson's column and the four bronze lion statues, placed as if they are guarding the column. The intertwine between British pride and Nelson's legacy remains at least until recent time when BBC conducted a "poll of the 100 greatest Britons" where Nelson ranked ninth, showing that "the majority of the British public still regard Nelson a great national hero" (Konstam, 2011). It is important to note that the issue of slavery is excluded in Nelson's legacy.

In an interview with BBC History Magazine, Afua Hirsch reveals that, at the wake of the movement to topple down statues of confederate figures in the U.S., she notices such complacency in the way British people are so critical about America's involvement in slavery in the past, but quite unwilling to expose their own dark past in terms of slave trades (Attar, 2020). Historian Christer Petley (2011) remarks that "British colonies and the metropole-as a single, conjoined entity" and that historians start "viewing it as a series of interconnected networks and treating 'the metropole and colonies as interconnected analytical fields'". This has formed a view among the revisionist historians who see "that British identities were formed through connections with the wider worlds of exploration, imperial conquest, and colonial rule" (Petley, 2011). At this point, it can be seen that there has been a new way of looking into the glorification of Nelson, symbolized in his statue at the Trafalgar square, as some revisionist historians start to realize that if the main role of the British navy in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was to secure Britain's

interest in its worldwide colonies, then the glorification of a naval hero like Nelson also means complicity with British colonial vision, racism, and slavery. The fact that the British had participated in transatlantic slave trades in the eighteenth century may add to the complicated situation for the British navy as the extended hand of the empire, guarding British government interest. The economic consequences of the slave trade for the eighteenth-century British empire was great, as it caused rapid urban development in some port towns as well as “opened new markets for British exports in Africa, the Caribbean, and North America” through tobacco and sugar commodities (Brown, 2020).

The significance of the Nelson’s column and the Trafalgar square in the novel *N5M* story has made the colonial and racist background of the monument oblivious. What the revisionist historians and the Black Lives Matter protesters see in the monument is definitely absent from the novel. Thus, what is excluded from the novel is the link between the collective memory represented by the Trafalgar square, the Nelson’s column, and British colonial role in the past. Fuadi unwittingly downplays the darker side of the revered monument to highlight the grandeur of his dream, by repeating and emphasizing the iconic place and monument representing the glorious achievement of his life-long dream.

The novel *N5M* also mentions Columbus’ landfall on America continent which enables the influx of the Europeans into the continent, of which he remarks that the people of the American nation had been able to free themselves from the repression in Europe and successfully a “*dunia baru*” or a new world which is “*lebih baik*” or better than their original country (Fuadi, 2009). Fuadi’s statement on how the early English colonies in America made a new world better than their ancestors’ underplays the fact that Columbus has helped the expansion of European colonialism in the Atlantic (Childs, 1995). The novel somehow overlooks the fact that “Imperialism not only is a relationship of domination but also is committed to a specific ideology of expansion” (Said, 1993). Applying Said’s method of contrapuntal reading, it can be pointed out that the experiences and perspectives of the English visitors are opposed to the underrepresented native Americans’, which Fuadi’s novel fails to see. In addition to that, Fuadi’s statement of the ‘*dunia yang baru*’ or ‘a new world’ is based on the myth of Columbus’ ‘discovery’ of America (Paul, 2014). He further discloses that the mythology of the ‘new world’ is first of all built upon the European projections of an idealized utopian land that would release them from the stultifying ‘old world’ and would offer them abundant wealth, and secondly sets the foundation of the USA as a nation and its westward expansion, or “its manifest destiny” (Paul, 2014). Therefore, the implication of Columbus’ arrival in American continent is deeply inscribed in not only the history of the USA as a nation

but also in the suppression and the “internal colonialism” of the native American Indians (Churchill, 2012).

It should be noted that Fuadi does not share a special attention for Columbus or regards him a hero. However, the fact that he reserves critical views on the repercussions of the fateful arrival of Columbus in America reveals what Said calls as the “structure of attitude and reference articulated by the novel”, in this case is one which evades refutation of the imperialist views (Said, 1993). Fuadi’s preference to circumvent a situation in which he must denounce racism and colonial history is well-phrased in his peaceful speech in front of the English ambassador who visits his boarding school, which has been discussed earlier in this article. The attitude of abstaining from a revisionist perspective on imperialism and racism should not, as Said (1993) suggests, be judged in a direct political manner, but should rather be perceived as a participation or a contribution to “an extremely slow, infinitesimal politics that clarifies, reinforces, perhaps even occasionally advances perceptions and attitudes” about the relation of power between European imperialist or the ‘superpower’ America and the rest of the world.

4. CONCLUSION

Doing a contrapuntal reading on *N5M* means finding synchronized counterpoints both between elements within the text, and between the text and a counter narrative. In the novel, Fuadi clearly attempts to synchronize counterpoints within the text that is present in the juxtaposition of the East and the West, asserting his proposition of the possible peaceful coexistence of the two. However, this proposition of harmonious relation between the two polarized entities can be perceived as a suppressed consciousness of colonial subjugation, and reveals how this set of assumptions about the harmonious relationship between East and West reaffirms the uncritical judgement toward colonial and racism practice.

The reluctance to endow either a confirmatory approval for, or denunciation of colonial and racial practice that are concealed behind the glorification of the personal achievement of the main characters, as suggested in the muted background of the symbolic Nelson’s column at the Trafalgar square and the marginalization of the native Americans, shows that the novel unwittingly submits to the dominant narratives about the supremacy of the West. It also obscures the fact that Columbus’ voyages had inflicted land occupation and cultural destruction upon the Native American people. Insensitivity towards colonial discourse in the novel *N5M* can be seen as a continuum of it. The inclination toward dominant narratives about the West as the center of the world remains traceable in the novel, underlying the assumption of colonial ideas operating in the story.

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