

REPRESENTING INDONESIAN DIVERSITY IN *SURAT DARI LEMBAH BALIEM*

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Abstract

Story books, through the pictures and simple language they use and also the age of their readers, could become a strategic media to promote multiculturalism among children. Multi cultures also mean multi identities of the people living in Indonesia. This article is aimed to dismantle how the identities of children from various cultures in Indonesia in *Surat dari Lembah Baliem*, a book for children describing Indonesian diversity, are represented. Despite the multicultural values it contains, the stories in this book also show us that Indonesian multicultural diversity implies dynamic communication and tension among the cultural groups it describes. Moreover, the representation still shows stereotypical model that operates against the multicultural idealism it promotes.

Keywords: story books for children, media, multiculturalism, stereotypical representation.

Multiculturalism: A Brief Introduction

Culture is spatial in several ways (Ryan, 2010: 13). Indonesia, a very large country expanding from Sabang to Merauke, has population that are distributed geographically with cultural differences manifesting themselves most palpably as differences of place. The existence of thousand languages and ethnicities so do religions and other identity markers create the diversity of Indonesia. Those differences at the same time have a very big potential in creating dynamic

communication and tension among the peoples.

Culture is also information that is transmitted spatially (Ibid). The way people learn their life and perceive reality are learnt from their family, their school teachers/friends, their reading materials and those they interact with in the surroundings. In a bigger context, this spatial perception in seeing themselves and the world get challenges since it will encounter with other, potentially spatial, perceptions.

Children undeniably experience this process. One of media that gives them chance in learning multicultural values is story books. Story books can be used to promote respectful thought and attitudes toward Indonesian diversity. Problem arises when the people from around Indonesia with diverse cultural backgrounds are presented stereotypically.

Surat dari Lembah Baliem is a story-book for children containing 12 short-stories about children from different parts of Indonesia. It was written by Endang Firdaus who tries to promote multicultural issues through the books she has written. The aim of this article is to dismantle how the identities of children from various cultures in Indonesia in *Surat dari Lembah Baliem*, a book for children describing Indonesian diversity, are represented.

Children literature: media to disseminate multicultural idea

Medium is the message (Durham & Kellner, 2006: 108). It implies two things reservely. First, the content is the medium in transforming message. Second, the medium itself has

uniqueness that has certain meaning in the process of distributing information.

The distribution of information over and across paragraphs arranged in a certain order is called narrative. We tell the narrative or story of things, events, people, and the world when describe it in a certain order. Narrative usually have a subject, the doer of the action or the voice of the story teller (Ryan,2010: 125). *Surat dari Lembah Baliem* distributes the multicultural information through events and people in the short stories to Indonesian children who read it. Therefore, events and people in the short stories become the medium for the idea/issue of multiculturalism to be disseminated. In another hand, children literature has uniqueness that has certain meaning in the process of distributing information. Peter Hollindale ini Rudd (2010: 11) defines child as someone who believes on good grounds that his or her condition of childhood is not over yet. Moreover, Lacan (ibid, 201) notifies that the mirror stage, a phase when child sees itself as an entity, involves the child misrecognizing itself. A child does not have the seeming completeness that it is represented because the image is in the mirror,

separate from the child itself. This tendency to identify with idealization continuous throughout life, whether it is to partners, film stars or other things. Storybooks for children, based on those two opinions, should be about children and teach goodness. Since the readers are children who identify idealization, reading materials should also fulfill this need.

Linda T. Parson (2016) states that multicultural literature should validate experience of marginalized/oppressed ones, provide factual information, offer varying perspectives/worldview, present diversity as natural, foster critical inquiry, and provide enjoyment as an art form. Presenting Indonesian diversity in story books for children is very demanding because the representation of any particular culture should be neutral, not victimized nor colored. Stereotypical representation would be problematic since it would become source information for children to understand their world.

Stereotypical representation and Althusser's interpellation

There is a strong tendency in any culture to think of everyday reality

as normal, as being as it should be (opcit, 124). What children see and read in stories foster and maintain supposedly "normal" pictures of reality in their minds by using certain words and images to represent that reality to them. Those words and images are often their only access to that reality. In a way, when the children try to picture that world in their mind, what they see is the images the media have put there.

Words and images are some of elements that we use to stand for or represent what we want to say, to communicate a thought, concept, idea or feeling. So do sounds in spoken language, physical gestures in body language, items of clothing in the fashion industry, digital dots on a screen in television, red, green, yellow lamps in traffict light. Those elements are part of our natural and material world; but their importance for language are not what they are but what they do, their function. They construct meaning and transmit it. They signify. They do not have any claeer meaning in themselves. Rather, they are the vehicle or media which carry meaning because they operate as symbols, which stand for or represent the meaning we want to communicate. Gyles & Middleton

(1999: 57) explains three possible senses to the word 'represent' those are to stand for/thing that signs a presence of something, to speak or act on behalf of, and to re-present moment or event which has already occurred. Hall (1997: 17) defines representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts through languages. It is link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events. Therefore, words and images in story books is set of signifying process where meaning is produced through the representation process.

The images the children see in any media, are not free from stereotyping. Nakayama & Martin (2004: 167) says that stereotype is widely held beliefs about some group. It tells us what a group is like. Even positive stereotype can be damaging in that they create unrealistic expectation for individuals. Moreover, stereotypes become detrimental when they are negative and are held rigidly. While Hall in Baker (2000: 248) states that stereotype involves the reduction of persons to a set of exaggerated, usually

negative character traits. Stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes "differences". The words and images the children see is the representation process that is sometimes stereotypical.

In talking about diversity or multiculturalism, we can not separate it from talking about identity. Nakayama and Martin (2004: 156-167) describe some major types of identities, those are gender identity, age identity, racial and ethnic identity, religious identity, class identity, national identity, regional identity and personal identity. Sometimes, different identities are contradictory and seemingly impossible to reconcile; nearly always identity positions are located in relations of power, in the binary opposition 'us/them' (Gyles and Middleton, 1999: 33)

Identities are relational and contingent rather than permanently fixed. They depend upon what they are defined against, and this may change over time or be understood differently in different places. Differences are marked symbolically as well as experienced socially. The symbolic marker of difference can be physical

appearance and skin color. Identity, however, is not only experienced at the level of the individual. Collective, ethnic and national identities are important ways in which people negotiate a sense of belonging, often to this, political solidarity (ibid: 45)

Identity that is relational and individual-collective at same time is sometimes presented stereotypically. Instead of trying to show diversity and uniqueness, it has risks that what a certain identity marks and how it is represented could be stereotypical. Using the idea that Althusser proposes on Ideological State Apparatus, children books are themselves a product of such ISAs as publishing houses, schools and the family and should in no way be seen as neutral in the way they depict 'reality'. Powerful social groups represent themselves as providing a kind of cultural, through which their values and interests may gradually become adopted and embodied in a widespread manner leadership. Story book as a media could play a role in giving cultural leadership, through which their values and interests may gradually become adopted and embodied in a widespread manner. The dominant discourses

position people to accept ideology. In Althusser's concepts, it is through the process called interpellation.

All depiction, through images and words, in story books could be perceived by children as natural and in the long run, what they believed affect the way they see themselves and other people as the thing that they should be.

Methods

This is a descriptive qualitative research that mainly applies theory of representation and Althusser's interpellation. The researcher reads the text *Surat dari Lembah Baliem* repeatedly to get the comprehensive meaning. After finding the issues that are relevant to the issue of multiculturalism, the researcher looks deeply at how the child characters, along with the identity markers they bring, are represented in the stories and discuss how these representations have potential in interpellating children in understanding their world.

Aku Anak Indonesia: Surat dari Lembah Baliem as the representation of Indonesian diversity

There are some categories that I found in *Aku Anak Indonesia: Surat dari Lembah Baliem* that they show the relational power operating in the texts. Some of the stories put Java and non Java, male and female, young and old, also poor and rich in the frames. These binary-oppositional relations define how the life of children from different cultural backgrounds are represented.

Representing ethnicity

Java-non Java. In some of the stories, there are descriptions about children coming from non-Javanese ethnicities that it is shown through their speaking accents (in *Gatotkaca Bingung*), their traditional way of life (*Sali Anak Suku Dayak*, *Seminggu di Bunaken*, and *Surat dari Lembah Baliem*), and also their being Chinese descendent in (*Ahong teman kami*).

These descriptions give readers information about the beauty of Indonesia with its diverse ethnic groups. Children are given information about the other children coming from different cultural backgrounds from them. In *Surat dari Lembah Baliem* there is a little girl named Ayu, supposedly living in Java, having a penpal named Magdalena from Irian

Jaya—the eastest island in Indonesia. The fact that they are friends who share stories are nice, but the chosen issues to depict the life of Magdalena the Irian girl through Magdalena's words in her letter to Ayu trigger discussion on the work on representation. Magdalena is described as having poor and remote living, that they have no money to buy detergent and they rely on people who come by plane to their village (because of its inaccessible location) and who probably buy their Noken (Irianese-handmade bag):

Aku tidak mencuci pakaianku yang terbuat dari kain karena aku tidak punya sabun. Aku tidak punya uang untuk membelinya. Aku baru punya uang bila ada orang asing yang datang ke tempatku dan membeli Nokenku. Sementara orang hanya bisa datang ke tempatku dengan pesawat terbang. (SdLB: 5)

This description tell the readers how the life of Irianese are and readers (children who read this story) who do not have more information yet about Irian will take it a valid information to their brain that all Irianese are poor and living in remote places. It goes further in the description that “Sali memang mirip pakaian jaman batu” (ibid). Stone

Aged-outfit is the way the information of Irian traditional clothes represented. Clothes, whatever they are like, have neutral function that is protecting our body, but when they are said as stone-aged ones, the mind of the readers will work to understand them as the primitive ones. It is supported by the picture of Sali that is made from grass and contrasted by the picture of Ayu who reads Magdalena's letter in her cozy living room, in clean carpet and cushion. Ayu is putting on her nice girly outfits that are apparently different from Magdalena's Sali.

Despite the negative tone of the Sali description, there are two positive things that are represented. Those are the issue of ecology and the ability of Irianese in resisting cold weather.

Tapi Sali pakaian yang cocok untuk kami. Aku tak perlu mencucinya seperti pakaian yang terbuat dari kain. Kalau rusak, bikin lagi. Mudah. Yang penting, karena tak perlu mencuci Sali, sungai kami jadi tidak kotor oleh busa sabun. Aku dan orang-orang Lembah Baliem yang lain masih minum langsung dari sungai. Karena tak tercemar, kami tak perlu takut keracunan.

Convenience goods that make the life of modern people easy, detergent for example, have resulted some drawbacks for human and environment. The simple and natural Irianese's way of life contributes in preserving nature. Irianese are also described as people who can resist the mountenauos Jayawijaya's cold weather. They only need to apply porky oil on their body to survive in the nearly freezing degree. (...)

The information about the non-Javanese people is also delivered through the accent of Bonar as a Batakese child. Bonar who is a Batak descendent speaks in an 'odd' way to the ear of his friends, as the mainstream. His role as Gatutkaca, a character in Javanese traditional folktale, becomes an object of mocking among his friends since Gatutkaca speaks in Batakese accent. The mocking shows that Bonar's accent is not 'natural' and that is the reason he is ridiculed. (...)

The description of non-Javanese people as people who live traditionally is also presented in *Seminggu di Bunaken*. The main character in this short story is a

Jakartan boy taken by his pilot uncle to spend his school vacation in Bunaken. They are the visitors, the spectators who enjoy the Bunaken beautiful unspoiled scenery—the objects being observed. The Jakartan boy's unfamiliarity to the Bunaken traditional fishing shows a distance between the Jakartan boy with the object he visits. All beauty and traditional life in Bunaken are things to see, to observe, to ask about because they are strange for him. Moreover, at the end of his very impressing vacation, the boy has to go back to Jakarta going to school—his real daily life.

In *Sali, Anak Suku Dayak* (AAI, 23-26), the description of Kalimantanese people is also still polarized into modern-traditional one. Sali must undergo an initiation ritual that he must be sent to the woods for a week without any companion. The achievement is measured from Sali's ability in surviving in this process. Hunting and fishing tradionally are the only ways Sali can do to get food. Sali's outfit is also different from the common clothes children usually wear.

Representing the life of children coming from different

ethnicities in Indonesia through the narration in *Aku Anak Indonesia* in a polarization of modern-traditional would result generalization in the children mind in seeing other children life and taking it as information or even belief.

Representing age identity

One of identities that compose diversity according to Nakayama (2010) is age identity. In *Aku Anak Indonesia*, children are met with those considered aged both in the mental quality or in the interest. In *Terima Kasih, Pak Ali* (AAI, 11-13) the children characters are described as subordinates in front of a wise and aged figure, Pak Ali—an old man who devotes himself in teaching children and the kampung people to read Qur'an and to learn religion. In his old age, pak Ali is described strong and energetic. All people and children love and respect him. When Pak Ali passed away, children and the kampong people were so sad. Here, it is cleraly seen that old people, represented by Pak Ali, is figured out as having wise mentality.

While in *Adit Suka Ketoprak* (AAI, 14-17), children are described

not having reliable information and interest on traditional art or performance. There is a Betawi traditional food named *ketoprak* that in this story, Adit misunderstands it with *kethoprak*, a Javanese traditional play. Children here are described as unfamiliar with traditional art.

This stories support assumption that children need guidance from older people and they also, especially those living in big cities, do not have any connections with traditional arts.

Representing class identity

Diversity is also composed by an identity called class identity that it deals with economic condition. In *Made* (AAI, 42-45) and *Menolong Sesama Itu Indah* (AAI, 30-33), poor children are represented to have to work hard and in needy condition. Made is an orphan who has to be a diver in a tourist spot in Bali, waiting for coins thrown to the water by the tourists. What he must do is diving to get it in the water. A miracle comes to those who wait that someday a boy, a son of a rich family, fell down to the sea, and Made rescued him. As a token of thank, the rich family gave him amount of money. Here, the poor is the

ones who have to be granted money for the good deed they do and the giver is the rich ones.

In *Menolong Sesama Itu Indah* (AAI, 30-33) a poor boy is described cry hopelessly because his family can not send his sick father to hospital. A group children who meet him help him to take the boy's father to hospital. In *Ahong teman kami* (27-28) the writer of the story obviously tries to promote an ideal tolerance between local people and Chinese-descendent family (an issue which has a very long history in Indonesia's history).

Seharusnya, dengan kehidupan keluarga Ahong yang serba ada, Ahong bisa bersekolah di sekolah orang-orang kaya dimana anak-anak keturunan Cina banyak sekolah di sana. Tetapi Ahong tidak mau. Ia ingin berbaur dengan kami, anak-anak pribumi. Itu sebabnya, meski beberapa kali ia diperlakukan tidak baik oleh teman-temannya di sekolah sebelumnya, ia selalu ingin sekolah di sekolah yang mayoritas anak-anak Indonesia asli. Ia ingin dianggap sebagai orang Indonesia asli juga. Dan, mama dan papa Ahong pun berpikiran seperti itu. Mereka pun ingin dianggap sebagai orang Indonesia asli. (28)

Chinese family is described as rich but insecured and they try to be kind to

local people. *Mereka pun ingin dianggap sebagai orang Indonesia asli* implies that there are drawbacks in being Chinese living in Indonesia. Recognised as true Indonesian becomes a big one for this family, implying that their being Chinese resulting problems.

Representing gender identity

Gender identity becomes one important topic to discuss in multicultural relation. How female and male figures are presented in any media will contribute in the proses of meaning making that it will eventually be received by the children who read and see them. It help children in taking position on how they see their own gender.

In *Belajar Silat itu Indah* (AAI, 46-48) there is a problem on what sport proper or not for a girl is. Ani wants to join Silat, a traditional Indonesian martial art, but her mother does not agree with it. Her mother thinks that silat only fits for boys, not girls. Situation changes when Ani rescues her mother and her daughter from a thief. This story promotes a gender consciousness that male and female can

share abilities that are not restricted by the biological difference.

Both in *Karapan sapi* (AAI, 34-37) and *Upacara kasada* (AAI, 38-41) man is represented dominantly. In the first story, all jockey, bull-owner, the spectators are all male. *Karapan Sapi*, the traditional bull-race from Madura Island, is described as a race requiring physical strenght and all figures seen in the scene are male. In the second story, Kusuma the male figure is described as a man who voluntarily did self-sacrifice that because of his deed, all Tengger people were safe.

These representations show that diversity of Indonesia has dynamic relation and tension among identities in it. Through stories, children learn how to see, to understand to behave in their multicultural environment.

Conclusion

From the discussion, it can be concluded that Endang Firdaus's *Aku Anak Indonesia: Surat dari Lembah Baliem*, as type of children literature, depicts the life of children from various cultural backgrounds in a stereotypical way. As shown in the stories, Endang Firdaus through the various points of

view she uses narrates the dynamic communication and sometimes tension among them that strengthen that stereotype. The identities that arise and become the issues in dynamic communication and tension are, namely: ethnicity (Java-Papua, in *Surat dari lembah Baliem*, Java-Batak in *Gatotkaca Bingung*, Java-Dayak in *Sali, Anak Suku Dayak*, local people-Chinese descendent in *Ahong Teman Kami*), modern-traditional (in *Seminggu di Bunaken, Sali Anak Suku Dayak, Adit Suka Ketoprak*), social class rich-poor (*Made, Menolong Sesama itu Indah*) and gender (*Belajar silat, Karapan Sapi* and *Upacara Kasada*). The stereotypical representation, though in one side give hands for children to understand their uniqueness, in other hand it provides children possibility of a merely fixed-position they should take in the next process of their life—in term of their own identity or in the way they see others.

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