



Annemer and Coolie: Social Reflection in Peranakan Chinese Literary Works

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Abstract

The products of literary works often present events closely related to the social context. One of the Chinese Peranakan literary works that reflects social phenomena is Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api. This study aims to describe the forms of social reflection and how literature relates to its history. The theory used in this study is the theory of sociology of literature put forward by Alan Swingewood. The method of data analysis is carried out by sorting and grouping qualitative data so that certain relations can be determined between one data category and another. The results obtained are that there is a social reflection on the phenomenon of land compensation and modernization in the Java region, as well as several historical events represented in the Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api about Chinese people as Annemer, the empowerment of local communities as coolies and the performance of dependent Annemer on coolies.

INTRODUCTION

Peranakan Chinese literary works have had their high and low points in the Indonesian literary arena. Many Peranakan Chinese literary works were produced before Indonesia became independent, but faded after Indonesia became independent. These Peranakan Chinese literary works have interesting dynamics but have not been studied much by Indonesian literary researchers. Peranakan Chinese literary works were mostly written in Malay from the late 19th century until 1945 (Salmon, 2010: 59). Consequently, many works are neglected and rarely "touched upon"

resulting in these Peranakan literary works being largely unknown. In addition, ethnic sensitivities have resulted in peranakan Chinese literary works becoming increasingly alienated from readers and connoisseurs, more specifically literary researchers. Literary works written by Chinese authors or intellectuals also reveal what was on their minds, and their thoughts (Susanto, 2012: 16).

Pre-independence Chinese Peranakan literature can be considered to be extremely abundant in terms of the number of works. The Chinese Peranakan writers presented a diverse

range of themes. Many of these themes present social issues that occurred at the time when the literary work was born. Between 1886 and 1910, more than forty poems by twenty-seven authors were published in book form, not to mention the numerous poems published in local newspapers (Salmon, 2010: 253). The types of poetry produced include adaptations of prose works, fables, entertainment, and commentaries on contemporaneous events. These literary works can be regarded as capable of reflecting the phenomena and dynamics of the society of their times. One interesting literary work to study related to social reflection is *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api*. This work presents a social reflection on the conditions of workers during colonial rule, as well as representing the history of *Annemer* and *Coolie's* roles in the social structure of the time. In several parts of the work *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api* directly tells the life patterns of *Annemer* and *Coolie's*, which represents the social conditions that existed at that time. The existence of a narrative about the clearing of land used for the construction of the railroad can also be used as an initial finding that there are historical events written in the *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api*.

This research focuses on how literary works serve as documents that reflect the social conditions of a certain period, especially in pre-independence Indonesia. The diverse conditions reflected in literary works are as diverse as the complexity of social phenomena. (Fahmilda & Prastiyono, 2021: 7). With regard to this, there are two problem formulations proposed in this research. First, what forms of social reflection are found in the work of *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api*? Second, what is the historical context of *Annemer* and *Coolie* represented in *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api*? Through the formulation of the issues

that have been set, this research seeks to elaborate on the forms of social reflection and historical context reflected through the narratives of *Annemer* and the *Coolies* in *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api*. This is also a means of proving that literary works can be part of sociocultural documents, which presence can be expressed directly or indirectly in literary works born during that period.

The author has reviewed various literature related to the material object of the research and other comparative literature related to the use of the formal object of Alan Swingewood's theory. Research with the same material object and formal object as this research, particularly the theoretical approach of Alan Swingewood in studying a literary work, in this regard *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api* has not yet existed and has not yet been found. Furthermore, research that focuses on discussing the form of social reflection and the historical context of *Annemer* and *Coolie* in *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api* has not been carried out. However, research that employed a different perspective related to *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api* was carried out by Claudine Salmon in her book *Sastra Indonesia Awal: Kontribusi Orang Tionghoa* (Early Indonesian Literature: Chinese Contributions) published by Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia in 2010. The book has a total of 560 pages. In this book, Salmon discusses *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api* in the context of the existence of Batavia's Eastern Railway Company and its relationship with the New "Region" which is reflected in *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api* in a sub-chapter on pages 253-269. Meanwhile, this research focuses more on how social reflection as well as the historical context of *Annemer* and *Coolie* are represented in *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api*. The analysis in this research more specifically discusses the social reflections of *Annemer* and *Coolie*,

thereby offering new and different findings in analyzing the *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api*, from various studies that have been conducted previously.

The social reflection studied in this research is following Alan Swingewood's concept. According to Swingewood, literary works are sociocultural documents that can be utilized as a medium to examine phenomena in a society of a certain period, therefore they can be termed as literary documentations that refer to the reflection of the times (Wahyudi, 2013: 57). This is certainly related to how the content of literary works born at a certain period becomes relevant to express what was happening at that time. Any phenomenon that arises at that time, knowingly or unknowingly, can inspire the authors of literary works in producing their works. In the context of being representative, literature can build an imaginary world, an imaginary environment of interaction that reflects the patterns of interaction found in the real social world (Faruk, 2013: 54–55). In the context of this research, these representations are present in the material object of this research, one of which is concerning *Annemer* and *Coolie*. The social and cultural records within *Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api* show that there are things that are intentionally revealed by the author. Especially on how the conditions of the coolies as low-class workers were always being put in a position far from being appropriate. Representations of social interaction also appear in Peranakan Chinese works, for example, related to inter-ethnic interactions, such as interactions with Javanese, Sundanese, Arabs, and others (Bandel, 2013: 45).

In the historical context, *Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api* has a systematic narrative, especially related to the social aspects of the forced laborers that were rampant at the time when this work was

written. In other words, the context concerning the text has a determinant factor for a scientific study of sociological literature (Atikurrahman et al., 2021: 3). In this regard, literary studies always consider societal aspects both from a socioeconomic perspective and other aspects with constructive nature towards the birth of a literary work. Stemming from this, this research seeks to present the social and historical reflections represented in *Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api*.

METHOD AND THEORY

This research has two objects as the basis of research, namely material object and formal object. The material object is the object of the research, while the formal object is the object that is observed from certain points of view (Faruk, 2012: 22). The material object is related to the main data of the research. Accordingly, the material object of this research is the novel *Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api* in which there is a social reflection relations, which is of particular interest to be discussed by analyzing the data available within *Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api*. While the formal object of this research is concerned with the theory used. This study refers to the sociology of literature approach based on the concept developed by Alan Swingewood to dissect a literary work (*Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api*) related to social reflection and historical context in the representation of *Annemer* and *Coolie*. Literature is a structuration of possibilities, where initially the possibilities were only in the form of fragments, then writers provide a structure (plot), including by mentioning themes, characters, conflicts and conflict resolution, so the important difference with history is in the history of experience (evidence) is completely concrete reality, in literature experiences

are mostly only possibilities (Kuntowijoyo, 2004: 20).

The author collected data by gathering data related to social reflection and historical representation through the narratives of *Annemer* and *Coolie*. The data was divided into two parts, namely primary data, and secondary data. The primary data of this research is *Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api*. Meanwhile, secondary data is a collection of data outside literary works, such as books, journals, essays, and others related to the object of the research. With these data, the scope of space and time of social practices are very diverse and it provides a systemic form.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Social Reflection in *Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api*

Within the context of social reflection explained in the research findings, there are two fundamental issues. First, is the phenomenon of land compensation; the second is related to modernization in the Java region.

Land Compensation Phenomenon

The land compensation phenomenon is a very common matter when it comes to various kinds of projects undertaken by government institutions. These land compensation patterns appear to have a long history of dynamics. Based on its name and implementation practices, land compensation often raises various polemics because many parties are wronged, especially landowners who do not get their due rights. The phenomenon of land compensation also features as a narrative in *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api*, trying to highlight its objectivity.

*Many trees were cut down
All financed by the company
People's houses were demolished*

Everything is handed over to the boss

Many houses were evicted in the village

Landlord Tan Kang Le

Have a lot of land

The rows are different, many are missing

There is a bridge across

Companies that pay village people

Something has been damaged

Pay the proper fees

Which can still be measured

(Kie, 2000: 38).

The author attempted to see the objective side of the distribution of compensation rights by putting the project owner in the position of just, stating that the project owner had made proper compensation. The distribution was based on what impacted the landowners. Compensation is given to the entitled party based on the results of the assessment determined in deliberation (Subekti, 2016: 390).

The positive narrative built by the author implies that the practice of compensation in the past was done appropriately, although it does not rule out the possibility that many patterns of compensation practices violated the regulations. Patterns of unscrupulous elements asking for rations and the like have become a common occurrence in various arrangements of land compensation of government projects from before the nation's independence until it became independent.

Within the context of an independent Indonesia, there are many patterns related to land compensation, including the emergence of new terms with different practices. Be it in the era of the old order, new order, reformation, and even post-reformation era, land compensation still creates problems. These days, the term

land compensation has been changed to land profit exchange.

The Indonesian government provides greater compensation for land affected by national strategic projects. Landowners are compensated handsomely, but this still led to polemics. Landowners who received large amounts of money became extremely consumptive, resulting in the amount of compensation that should have been invested in, being spent rapidly. Those who are mostly farmers, naturally no longer have any income since they no longer own their productive agricultural land. Through this phenomenon, both the pattern of land compensation and the change to land profit exchange, have created polemics both directly and indirectly for landowners affected by government projects. This fact cannot be avoided because land is an economic asset in meeting community needs (Rahman, 2017: 42).

Modernization in the Java Region

The 19th century became one of the milestones of modernization that occurred in the world and Indonesia or more precisely the Dutch East Indies was no exception. The manifestation of modernity is demonstrated by the development of infrastructure, such as roads, rail, ports and buildings (Samidi, 2017: 158). Modernization that penetrated the Dutch East Indies was certainly inseparable from what the colonial regime did. One form of modernization that was present was the presence of railway transportation on the island of Java. This transportation became one of the signs that, the Dutch East Indies, especially Java, entered a new era with the rapid construction of railroad lines from the west to the east of the island of Java. The construction of the Batavia-Buitenzorg railroad began on October 15, 1869, and was marked with various ceremonies by Governor General

P. Myer and led by Engineer J.P. de Bordes (Lasmiyati, 2017: 205).

*The railway line opens in Bekasi
Please excuse yourself
from the landlord first
Also to the police
Measured with an iron tool
(Kie, 2000: 8).*

*The train has problems
From Batawi to Tanjung Pura
The Bekasi River is like an estuary
The bridge is unbelievably high
(Kie, 2000: 39).*

Modernization on the island of Java was supported by technological developments and economic liberalization policies of the 19th century, which saw many Europeans come to the Dutch East Indies creating an ideal environmental construct. The emergence of the epithets Venetie van Java (for Batavia), Hollan Tropische Stad (Malang), Costa Brava van Java (Semarang), and Switzerland van Java (Garut) is an indication of how cities in the Dutch East Indies were formed based on idealized perceptions of European cities (Budiman, 2017: 165). The idealized image of Europe that was presented provided its standards based on the paradigms and patterns of European society, which of course had many differences with the people of the Dutch East Indies. This modernization created a distance and polarization between local and non-local. Dutch East Indies society, as the local majority, did not necessarily harmonize with the efforts of Dutch government projects that were considered to represent European (non-local) society.

The construction of railroads, idealized European neighborhoods, and other developments used much of the land belonging to local communities. The immediate impact of this was that it alienated local people from the

neighborhoods and areas they were accustomed to. The establishment of European standard values in the midst of the life of the Dutch East Indies community more or less influenced the behavior of the locals. This process of change from traditional to modern not only targets urban infrastructure and facilities but also changes people's behavioral patterns (Primaditya, 2021: 177). This significantly changed the local characteristics as modernization spread in Java since the 19th century.

The modernization of Java's transportation and environment was a realization of the idealized image of Europeans outside their homeland. This further reinforces the assertion that local people should be able to adjust to the existence of Europeans, not Europeans adjusting to the existence of local communities on the island of Java or more broadly the Dutch East Indies.

The history of Annemer and Coolie in Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api

The history of *Annemer* and *Coolie* that will be presented in the discussions of this research emphasizes several points, namely; First, the Chinese as *Annemer*; Second; Empowering the Surrounding Population as Coolies; Third, the *Annemer's* Performance Dependence on Coolies.

Chinese as Annemer

The Dutch colonial rule projects often sought the help of non-local people to become *Annemers* or contractors, one of which was the Chinese. During the Dutch colonial era, Chinese descendants were given concessions to engage in the economy, especially in the trade sector. In its development in Indonesia, the Chinese community was divided into two groups, the Totok, and the Peranakan. The Totoks are the full Chinese who have not been mixed with Indonesian blood,

are generally born in mainland China, and are still oriented towards Chinese culture. The Peranakans, on the other hand, are Chinese with Indonesian blood through marriage to Indonesians (Wibowo, 2001: 64).

*Baba Tan Ek Joe founded
in other areas
Bekasi is also where he lives
Become a company
that provides bricks
Along with building materials
and sand
(Kie, 2000: 44).*

*Annemer Bun Kwe
bought up the landfill
It was handed over to him
His work is neat and trustworthy
The taste is incomparable
(Kie, 2000: 49).*

Annemer or project contractors were entrusted to the Chinese. They became executors whose workers (*coolies*) were mostly local people and lower-class Chinese. In the social strata, many Chinese people were also in the lower class because not all of them were successful in the trade and economic sector. The narratives in *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api* place the Chinese *Annemer* as an example of a good worker. The work of the Chinese *Annemer* made the Dutch government believe that they were doing the job with optimal efficiency. In the historical context, the phenomenon of Chinese workers in the projects of the Dutch colonial government appears in various historical records. The Chinese community has professions, one of which is *Annemers*; this was done before the railroad construction project (Agustin et al., 2023: 44).

Empowering The Locals as Coolies

Local people or natives who were in the lower strata during the colonial period were also part of the lower-class workers in various jobs. Nieboer revealed

that the natives were completely controlled by their bodies and services, positioned as the lowest social class, and obliged to carry out all orders of the ruler (Yasa, 2013: 251). There is a pattern that dates back to the Dutch colonial period, regarding the practice of assigning community members around strategic projects as workers. This practice is certainly related to the various strategic projects that were developed under the Dutch colonial regime.

The author of *Sya'ir Jalan Kreta Api*, tries to reveal the patterns of worker recruitment around the project area. This can directly help the surrounding community to experience and feel the benefit and good impact of the project in their area, but it can also create various polemics. On the one hand, they want to help, on the other hand, the surrounding community was positioned as the lower-class people. The people around the project were usually only recruited as low-class workers, especially in the context of the Dutch colonial rule in the 19th century, they became coolies, the lowest strata of the working class. This was done as an anticipation measure of the worker recruitment around the project and would only serve as a pacifier so that there would be no polarization that led to chaos.

*Banten people become coolies
Working long hours
has become a habit
What are the orders of the leaders
They already understand the rules
(Kie, 2000: 38).*

*Mixed coolies from the west and east
Cutting, filling and clearing forests
All departed along with the demons
All visible types
(Kie, 2000: 39).*

The stigma put on communities around government projects as lowly

workers is a stigma that continues to happen in various eras until present-day Indonesia. It has become a common matter and is ingrained in Indonesian society. Throughout its development, the stigmatization is not as evident as what happened in projects during the colonial rule, however, communities around strategic projects' position as lower-class laborers remain unchanged. The term *coolie* is no longer used among the working class in present-day Indonesia.

This does not mean that the social strata of the communities around a project are seen as better or elevated as upper-class or higher-class workers, they remain as lower-class workers with new terms assigned to replace the term *coolie*, such as parking attendants, gardeners, security, janitors, porters, and many others. Whatever the names and terms used for lowly workers, they should still respect fellow humans and nature because humans and nature are one unit that must always be in harmony (Dewi et al., 2023: 59).

Annemer's Performance Dependence on Coolies

Annemer's work will proceed well and successfully if supported by hard-working coolies. The coolies determined *Annemer's* performance, and therefore the relationship between *Annemer* and the coolies affected each other. If the coolies' work is not good, then *Annemer* will immediately have a bad reputation as well. The image of *Annemer* as a good contractor, however, is prominent in this work.

*Dig up the land on the edge of
the river
Annemer worked with coolies
Prepare food for buyers
Lots of out of pocket costs don't care
(Kie, 2000: 39).*

*Coolies work the swamps
Stockpile soil, sand and rocks*

*One of his coolies died
Because of breaking the rules and
because of ghosts*
(Kie, 2000: 46).

Low-class workers or coolies certainly did not have many options regarding their rights in their work. The life of the coolies is miserable, in contrast to the *Annemers* who have comfortable facilities (Herdiansyah, 2017: 942). This practice ultimately leaves them in a vulnerable position, as they were required to work harder but without proper protection and rights. So long as the relationship between upper-class workers and lower-class workers is mutually supportive of each other, then any class of workers will equally receive positive effects since they are aware that all parties need each other. This awareness should be cultivated because both classes of workers need each other. Furthermore, it is important to revere the human values that serve as the basis of religious teachings in interacting with fellow human beings (Dharma, 2021: 21).

CONSLUSION

Based on the research conducted, the social and historical reflections in Peranakan Chinese works feature a diverse representation of the social and historical conditions of the Dutch East Indies society in the 19th century. Alan Swingewood's methods and theories used in this research resulted in findings relevant to the research objectives. The analysis resulted in several findings, including social reflections on *Annemer* and *coolies*. The social reflection represented in *Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api* related to the phenomenon of land compensation and modernization in the Java region. The historical events represented in *Sya'ir Jalanan Kreta Api* are related to the Chinese people as *Annemer*, the empowerment of the

community around government projects as coolies, and the performance of *Annemer's* dependence on coolies.

Peranakan Chinese literature still have many exciting things to research using various perspectives in literary research. Specifically regarding *Annemer* and coolies, it is also still possible to carry out research using other approaches, such as postcolonial and literary psychology.

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