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*"The Role of Literature in Enhancing Humanity
and National Identity"*

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SASTRA ANAK DAN KESADARAN FEMINIS DALAM SASTRA

Editor:

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FAKULTAS BAHASA DAN SENI UNIVERSITAS NEGERI YOGYAKARTA
Himpunan Sarjana Kesusastraan Indonesia (HISKI)

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The Impact of Literature on its Readers' Reading Habits

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Abstract

Some experts claimed that most novels published by Balai Poestaka, a publishing house funded by the Dutch colonial government, were regarded as the pioneers of the Indonesian literature. Some novels published by other private publishers were regarded as illicit reading-materials so that they were not worth consuming by Indonesian readers. Those of Balai Poestaka, so to speak, enjoyed being canonized, whereas those of private publishers suffered from political discrimination. The ultimate reason was in relation to the political efforts of the Dutch colonial government in controlling the reading materials for and the reading habits of the indigenous people. It is, therefore, I argue in this paper that the people's reading habits cannot be separated from literary works. After scrutinizing the history of the early Indonesian literature, I found out two distinctive kinds of literature, based on its contents and/or politically subversive intent/purpose, namely: the didactic literature and the *l'art pour l'art* literature. The literary school of Balai Poestaka had a strong belief that all kinds of literature worth publishing and launching to the general public should be didactic in characteristic in order that they were in line with its politically-subversive intent to control the indigenous people's reading habits. The *l'art pour l'art* literature, no matter how it was creatively composed, was declined to being published by the Balai Poestaka's editors. Thus, this fact inspires me to theoretically infer that any literature written for the consumption of both children and adult readers will not only improve but may also have serious impact on the reading habits of its target readers, let alone, if it is related to the building of a national literature, such as: the Indonesian literature.

Keywords: reading habit, Indonesian literature, Balai Poestaka, didactic content, legitimacy, canonization, politically subversive intent.

Introduction

Nobody will disagree, I believe, to a statement saying that literature is an example of 'work of arts' or, to use a laymen's term, of 'literary products'. As a matter of fact, not everybody has ever taken an ample time to think of the reason why people need to create such a kind of products. The common answer to that rhetoric question is that literate people badly need something enjoyable to read. Thus, literature is usually used for enjoyment or pleasure. The common dictum in regards to the purpose of literature is "*dulce et utile*" or, to say in other words, a piece of literature must contain "beauty and utility". The translation of 'beauty' into 'artistic values' perhaps is easier to discern than that of 'utility' into 'the betterment of people's life', especially whenever I try to fish an answer to another rhetoric question, "what utility and for whom". In this case, I need to identify first who those people are: the producers or the readers (consumers) in general? Therefore, I would like to start this article with a discussion on the identification of the people involved in the process of literary production.

1. The Process of Literary Production

When an author finishes writing a final draft of novel, s/he will try to send it to a publishing house in order to have the novel published in the form of a book. The publishing house usually hires some editors who are in a position to select, evaluate and decide if the draft is worth publishing. From this brief description on the process of the novel publication, I can identify that a literary producer consists of the author, editors, lay-out men, and the owner of the publishing house. However, theoretically, I will categorize them into two different parties only, namely: the author and the editors (including the lay-out men and the owner).

My decision is based on the common dictum of *dulce et utile* as mentioned above. In my opinion, literary works must be not only ‘artistic’ (*dulce*) but also (socially) ‘useful’ (*utile*) in characteristics. It is, therefore, literary products are always the result of collaborative works between, at least, the author (who has highly artistic taste) and the editors (who play a role as the representatives of ‘ideal’ readers) although the latter may consist of one or several persons in number.¹ Their main task is to represent actual readers and to appropriately gauge the literary taste of the target readers in general so that the editors will have legitimated rights to edit and permit a certain literary draft to be worth publishing. In brief, the process of literary production is not different from the process of meaning making in the study of discourse analysis as Fairclough states that “the production of the text puts the focus on the producers, authors, speakers, writers; the reception of the text puts the focus on interpretation, interpreters, readers, listeners” (2008:10).

It is, therefore, my decision to sever the producers of literary products into two parties only proves to be even more reasonable in the sense that the main producer is ‘the author’ and the assistant producer is ‘the editors’, who can play a role as the representative of an ideal literary institution and actual consumers or target readers at the same time. Thus, before any literary draft comes into the printing process, it must have been edited or, to use another strong word, censored by the editors. The criteria of censorship used by the editors must also be in accordance with some considerations, which are literary and non-literary in characteristics. I will call the non-literary considerations as ideological criteria.

¹ The number of editor(s) working for a publishing house can be one or more. From ideological viewpoint, however, the number is not quite important because as Vološinov states that “the individual consciousness is a social-ideological fact” (1986:12).

The concrete form of what I mean by ideological criteria is the social, cultural, political and economical factors that the editors have to take into account; though, in my opinion, the ultimate factors are those related to social and political ones so that the editors often use them to legitimate their decisions, when they are selecting, censoring or, in other strong words, discriminating against some literary drafts. Their common ground for discrimination is, they assume, that the contents of those rejected drafts may jeopardize the social and political values or policies prescribed by their publishing company. In this case, the editors undergo a process of meaning making by interpreting and evaluating the literary contents of the potential drafts they have closely read before they make any decision to let the draft be published. Such a process of meaning making in the realm of literary production is not quite different from one out of sixteen definitions of ‘ideology’, which is “the process of production of meanings, signs, values in social life” as proposed by Eagleton (1991:1). This definition leads me to interpret that, the tasks of the editors, as literary *connoisseur* when selecting literary drafts, are (a) to make the ‘meaning’ of the literary drafts they have closely read before editing and doing censorship; (b) to give a kind of sign, which means that the given draft meets a prescribed standard of quality; and (c) to consider the given draft as having some ‘preferable’ social and political values.

On the other hand, some literary drafts that the editors have rejected are considered as below the prescribed standard of quality so that they are not worth reading by the target readers. However, before the editors make any decision to either publish or reject any literary draft, they must equip themselves with a kind of ‘legitimacy’. Unfortunately, most kinds of legitimacy needed by the editors are oftentimes related to more social and political factors than artistic or literary ones. Therefore, in the previous paragraphs, I consider the non-literary considerations as the ideological criteria to be complied by the editors in the process of literary production.

2. Can (National) Literature Be Engineered?

In the previous section, I argued that the process of literary production is dependent on not only the author but also the editors. In practice, the role of the editors is even more decisive than that of the author. This fact leads me to have an inference that the author must work in collaboration with the editors to meet the ideological criteria legitimated by the publishing house prior to publishing a certain kind of literary works. On the legitimacy of an ideology, Eagleton writes “perhaps the most common answer is to claim that ideology has to do with legitimating the

power of a dominant social group or class” (1991:3). It means that the ideological criteria of the editors, agreed by the author, must be in correlation with the power of a dominant social group (class or government) emulated by any literary institution/publisher to which the editors belong. Thus, I can draw a tentative inference that ‘legitimacy’ becomes a crucial key-word for the editors to found an ‘ideal literary institution’.

The ideal literary institution can be the representation of a national literature (supported by a certain government) or of a dominating literary publisher/school. The story of promoting national literatures is not current news. For a good example, it ever happened in Germany in the years of 1830-1870, when the government realized that formal education was the most important channel to influence the students’ reading habits, as shown in a quotation below:

On the lower and middle levels of instruction in German, biblical stories, fairy tales, travel accounts, and the like are used to prepare the students for the reception of literature in the narrower sense. That task begins in the *Sekunda* (the sixth and seventh years of secondary school), where Herder’s *Cid*, the *Nibelungenlied*, patriotic lyric poetry by Edward von Kleist and Karl Wilhelm Ramler, and some of Klopstock’s odes are read. In addition, Hiecke recommended selected dramas by Goethe and Schiller, such as *Götz von Berlichingen* or *Wilhelm Tell* and possibly *Wallenstein*. Only in the *Prima* (the eighth and ninth years) was the strict classical canon of German literature to be studied (Hohendhal 1989:193).

Based on the quotation above, I can point out that the impact of literature on students’ (readers’) habits is not merely my own assumption. A couple of centuries ago, some literary experts in Germany did a kind of literature engineering via formal education at the levels of primary and secondary schools. What I want to focus on, in this case, is that the correlation of schools and literature with readers’ reading habits is quite significant.

What happened in Germany is similar to the policy set up by the Nederland East Indies (NEI) government in this country circa 1900s. The NEI government issued *Regeering Reglement* (Government Regulation) in 1856, which was followed up by another regulation on primary education in 1871 (see Hendrarti 2008:51). The consequence was that the NEI government had to set up some primary schools for children of indigenous people and of foreign descendents so that the number of literate people was quite significant in 1900s. Seeing the fact, the NEI government realized the fact that its schooling project would be in vain if there was no effort to maintain the people’s literacy by providing them with good reading materials.

Then, the NEI government founded *Commissie voor de Inlandsche School-en Volkslectuur* (Commission for Indigenous Schools and People’s Reading = *Komisi Sekolah Boemipoetera dan Batjaan Rakjat*) in 1908 (see Hendrarti 2004b:128), whose main tasks were to manage

school curriculum and to provide literate people with good reading materials. The task of the commission reminds me of the similar policy set up by the German government discussed in the previous paragraphs. Although the commission might be different in form from that in Germany, both most likely had similar ideological criteria. One thing for sure is that both commissions (in NEI and in Germany) dealt with the procurement of reading materials in the form of: (a) school textbooks, and (b) literature. For practical purposes of this very paper, however, I would prefer to discuss the crucial matters of literature managed by *Komisi Batjaan Rakjat* in the 1920s decade.

3. The Ideological Criteria of *Balai Poestaka*

The *Komisi Batjaan Rakjat* was responsible for the procurement and the publication of reading materials for literate people in the country under the NEI government. The popular name of this commission was *Balai Poestaka* (BP). It enjoyed financial funds and socio-political power legitimated by the NEI government. The consequence was that BP, including its editors, had to conform and comply with socio-political policies set up by the NEI government. It is just what I have meant by the ‘ideological criteria’ of BP.

In terms of literature publication, the ideological criteria of BP can be seen in its strategies of action plan, which cover: 1) the selection of editors, 2) the networks of book distribution, 3) the literary criteria, 4) the dominating literary criticisms (see Hendrarti 2004c:147). All those kinds of strategies are assumed to be very necessary to meet the ultimate goal of BP, which is to provide the literate and indigenous people with the most appropriate reading materials. Out of these four kinds of BP’s strategies, I would like to discuss the selection of editors and the literary criteria.

First, BP selected and hired some editors, who derived from teachers’ schools and from Minangkabau ethnic group, for example: Armijn Pane and Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana. In my opinion, it is very reasonable because those editors must have preferred the use of High Malay (*Melajoe Tinggi*) to that of Low Malay (*Melajoe Rendah*). According to Purwoko (2008:94), the High Malay variety had been promoted by the VOC² government in Batavia long before the 1900s as he quoted from Adam as follows:

According to Francis Valentyn, the famous cleric and student of the Malay language in Ambon, from at least 1660 the authorities at Batavia had been promoting High Malay, and in 1677 and

² *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) is a name of a Dutch trading company closed down due to corruption.

1678 they sent out orders for it to be used instead of the “low, common and intelligible (although degenerate) language”. The VOC’s directors also expressed concern about the corrupted form of Malay and wished that it be “restored to its old purity” (Adam 1995:10).

Later in the first decade of 1900s, the High Malay was elaborated by the NEI government and considered as “the standardized Malay” soon after the publication of *Kitab Logat Melajoe* by Ch.A. van Ophuysen (1901) supported by two bilingual dictionaries, *Maleisch Woordenboek*, *Maleisch-Nederlandsch*, *Nederlandsch-Maleisch*, by P.S. van Ronkel (1918) and *Nieuw Nederlandsch-Maleisch Woordenboek*, by H.C. Klinkert, (1926); this language variety was also popularly known as *Bahasa Melajoe Balai Poestaka* or *Balai Poestaka* Malay (see Hendrarti 2004a:89-90).

Secondly, in line with its literary criteria, BP accepted literary drafts written in High Malay variety only and rejected all *cerita cabul dan takhyul* (indecent and superstitious stories), which BP would never reckon them as ‘good reading materials’ (see Anonymous 1948:10). In other words, there are two essential issues which meet the literary criteria of BP; they are the High Malay variety and the concept of ‘good readings’. The first issue is truly pertaining to socio-political or (I would say) ‘ideological’ considerations. The second issue sounds to be very prescriptive, normative or, I would say in a positive connotation, ‘didactic’. That BP had a didactic mission is not very surprising to me and it is also detected by Jedamski, who writes that BP is “not only a publisher but a multifunctional agency of socialization” (1992:23), so that I also dare to speculate that BP must have carried out some hidden socio-political agenda (cf. Purwoko 2008:101). To present a striking evidence of its didactic mission, I can refer back to the qualification of the selected editors. They graduated from teachers’ schools. To support my argument on such evidence, I would zero-in on a certain genre of literature produced by BP, which is popularly known as *roman* or novel in English term.

4. Didactic novels of *Balai Poestaka*

In the 1930s decade, many literary scholars believed that BP’s *roman* (novel) was ‘didactic’ in characteristic whereas other stories, in *Melajoe Rendah* (Low Malay), published by private publishers might not be quite ‘didactic’, if seen from the viewpoints of the BP editors, so that

most of those stories were considered as *bacaan liar* or ‘illicit readings’ (cf. Soenoto 1980:162-3) and, due to the price, as *roman picisan* or *stuivers roman* or ‘dime novels’.³

In fact, most private publishers that produced non-didactic stories commonly belonged to the Chinese or Indo-European ethnic groups. As profit-oriented companies, they published any genres of printed materials that I have ever summarized elsewhere (cp. Purwoko 2008:110) in Table below:

Genres of Printed Materials	Examples	
1) Translated Chinese novels	<i>Sam Kok</i> (1859)	<i>Lawah-lawah Merah</i> (1875)
2) Translated European novels	<i>Robinson Crusoe</i> (1900)	<i>Le Comte de Monte Christo</i>
3) Malay <i>Hikayat</i> (Stories)	<i>Hikajat Sultan Ibrahim</i>	<i>Hikajat Amir Hamsa</i>
4) Asian Stories	<i>Siti Akbari</i>	<i>Hikajat Jan Pietersooncoen</i>
5) <i>Nyai</i> Stories (prose & plays)	<i>Njai Isah</i>	<i>Raden Beij Sorio Retno</i>
6) <i>Nyai</i> Stories (<i>syair</i> = lyrics)	<i>Sja’ir Rosina</i>	<i>Sja’ir Njai Dasima</i>
7) Real Stories	<i>Tjerita si Tjonat</i>	<i>Oey See</i>
8) Short Stories	<i>Doenia Pertjintaan 101 Tjerita jang soenggoe terdjadi...</i>	
9) Fables or Myths	<i>Cerita Abu Nawas</i>	<i>Hikayat Pantja Tanderan</i>
10) Popular Stories & Crime Stories	<i>Mata Gelap</i>	<i>Doenia Bergerak</i>
11) Historical Novels	<i>Surapati</i>	<i>Robert Anak Surapati</i>
12) <i>Tendenz Roman</i> (Political Novels)	<i>Hikayat Kadirun</i>	<i>Regent Nekat</i>
13) <i>Cerita Silat</i> (Cloaks & Gagger Stories)	<i>Hikajat Louw Djeng Tie atawa Garuda Mas ... Siao Liem</i>	

Tabel: Various Genres Published by Private Publishers (Non-BP)

Some private publishers also published daily newspapers, while BP had never published any single newspaper at all. They also published some stories or novels in the newspapers in the form of *feuilletons* (series). The fact is not quite surprising to me because it reminds me of *Pamela*, the first English novel, written by Samuel Richardson in England.

From my brief discussion in the previous paragraph, I can draw an inference that BP, facilitated by the socio-political legitimacy of the NEI government, enjoyed the rights to do censorship on or to discriminate against non-BP stories or novels and, at the same time, to canonize those of its own. To prove that BP novels were claimed to be the canonized genre and considered as the ‘good literature’ worth reading is not difficult. Some Dutch literary scholars, for example, claim that the first modern novel in this country is *Salah Asuhan* (published by BP in 1920), by Abdul Muis (see Hoykaas 1965 and Teeuw 1967 in Hendrarti 2004c:144). Their

³ The term, *roman picisan*, had lingered on up to 1950s (see Teeuw 1979:13; Rolvink 1958:159; Oshikawa 1990:18).

claim implies that other novels (published by private publishers) are not modern yet, let alone 'canonized'.

As a matter of fact, the publication of *Salah Asuhan* itself is not without controversy. Its original draft had been censored by the BP editors before the printing process. Hendrarti (2004c:149) observes that there is a sensitive issue of racism on the Indo-Eurasian heroine, Corrie, who is described as having a bad and promiscuous character. Such a bad character definitely deviates from the 'didactic mission' of BP. Only had it been revised to meet the literary criteria of BP, the editors let the novel be published. From Watson (1982:40), I also learn that, in the era of BP, Abdoel Muis composed some novels in Low Malay published by private publishers; for example, *Saidjah*, which was published in the form *feuilletons* (series) in *Hindia Serikat* newspaper, in 1913. Some copies of his novels are now safely reserved in the library of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (see Purwoko 2008:109-10).

There is another controversial case of BP's publication which is also related to Abdoel Muis' novel, *Soerapati*. It causes me to question that BP did not implement the 'didactic' literary criteria consistently. The novel was declined by the editors of BP though it had been published by Abdul Muis in the form of *feuilletons* in *Kaoem Moeda* newspaper in 1913. Only in 1950 was it finally published by BP in the form of a book. Its year of publication becomes a crucial matter for me to argue here. There are, I think, two possible reasons for its publication. The first reason is in relation to its linguistic variety, and the second is in relation to its central theme, which I will discuss in the following paragraph.

First, the original draft of the novel might likely be composed in Low Malay variety, suitable for the Low Malay newspaper. If it was the case, it must have been rejected by BP due to its campaign to promote High Malay or, at least, *Balai Poestaka* Malay. Secondly, the central theme addressed by Abdul Muis in *Soerapati* was against the socio-political policy of the NEI government. The protagonist of the novel performed rebellious acts against the government officers. That is why the novel was considered to be acceptable by the editors of BP in 1950, when the dominating socio-political power of the NEI government was over or no longer in effect. Thus, now I can safely point out that the main character in *Soerapati* was considered as **a public enemy** in the era of BP under the NEI government in 1920s but, on the contrary, the same character was regarded as **a national hero** in the era of BP under the new RI government in 1950s.

At this very moment, I can end up with a critical question questioning the real purpose of BP in its novel publications: “Why did BP prefer such a literary genre (didactic *roman*), when providing the literate people with ‘good reading materials’, to any other various genres as I have summarized in the Table?” I learn from Bakhtin that some genres of literature can be classified according to “how the image of the main hero is constructed: the travel novel, the novel of ordeal, the biographical (autobiographical) novel, and the *Bildungs Roman*” (2002:10-19). The *Bildungs Roman* is also popularly known as the *Erziehungs Roman* (the novel of education). That is why it is quite easy for me to get an answer to my own rhetoric question questioning the real purpose of BP, which preferred the didactic *roman* (the *Bildungs Roman* or the novel of education) to other genres of literature. The main reason is that the didactic novel is the most appropriate genre to be used by BP to ‘educate’ the literate indigenous readers and, at the same time, to influence their reading habits. It is in line with its ideological criteria.

Conclusion

The central point I have discussed so far proves that the second party, which are the editors (including the lay-out men and the owner), becomes a very decisive in the process of literary production (please refer back to section 1). Having equipped with the legitimacy and been supported by socio-political power of the dominating group, class or government, the editors have the rights to discriminate against any literary drafts they assume to be ‘literary objectionable’ or, to use a technical term in literary studies, they have the rights to canonize and/or to debase any literary drafts. That BP preferred didactic novel to other genres proves that BP did a kind of ‘canonization’. According to Rabinowitz, “canonization is, at least, a process by which certain texts are privileged” and, he adds that, “canons are always ideological at base, not only in terms of their treatment of content, but even more in their treatment of form” (1987:212). Thus, if my understanding of canonization done by the editors of BP is true, it will be easy for me to conclude that its literary production is a striking example of socio-political engineering when a dominating publisher (or group or literary school or government) tries to influence the reading habits of its target readers.

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