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English Studies in Indonesia: A Possible Alternative

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ABSTRACT

The history of English is closely connected with the maintenance of power. During the Victorian England it was used to replace religion that had experienced dwindling authority among the working class. During colonial time, it was used to disseminate the idea that Great Britain was helping the colonized to be more human. As for now, it has been established as an academic discipline with professorship in the universities throughout the world. English literature has also metamorphosed into literatures in English, making it more inclusive and "tolerant" in accommodating literatures from the formerly marginalized nations. This development can be seen as the manifestation of what Goethe envisioned as the future of world literature despite the fact that what he imagined was rather elitist. This paper seeks to explore some possibilities of teaching English literature with the awareness of such historical background. It will see how critical theory might help teachers teaching English literature more contextually, relevant with Indonesia as a postcolonial nation rich with vernacular literatures.

Key words: postcolonial, canon, vernacular, translation, theory, culture

The emergence of English Studies is closely related with how English literature was used by the aristocrats and then bourgeoisie to maintain their privileges within the existing social and political relation. They used to rely on religion to maintain order and submission of the working class but as theo-centrism was moving unstoppably towards anthopo-centrism, religion started losing its effectiveness. Terry Eagleton thus puts it:

As religion progressively ceases to provide social 'cement' affective values and basic mythologies by which a socially turbulent class-society can be welded together, 'English' is constructed as a subject to carry this ideological burden from the Victorian period onwards. (Eagleton, 2003, p. 21)

This historical background indicates that English studies is political from its inception. This is further evidenced by the institutionalization of English literature in the institutes and colleges for working class in its very early development as a university subject. The idea was to make the working class feel that no matter how unfair the redistribution of wealth was, they have to restrain this discontentment for the sake of nationalism, more refined attitudes and sense of propriety. They were one English after all.

Academically speaking, the institution of English literature as a department separated from linguistics was challenged by, among others, a professor of history, Edward Freeman, who argued that the study of literature can never be scientific (Barry, 2002). It was not after 1920s that English literary studies become an accepted discipline in Oxford University. The objection once mentioned by Freeman on the difficulty of studying literature academically has actually been troubling the students of literature even until today. The format set this conference committee for full paper submission is case in point. It requires literary article to comply with the existing regulations found in other social sciences

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i.e. that it should consist introduction, theoretical framework, methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion. Literary thesis and dissertation format in the U.S., Australia and elsewhere has moved beyond this point.

Moving to colonial era English was used to help imperialism thrive by inducing false consciousness among the colonized that they were participating in a grand movement of civilizing the world. English literature was used to boost assimilation by which the colonized were driven to adopt the colonizers' taste, ideas, culture and language. Works such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Tempest* have been an epitome of successful symbol of assimilation process depicted literarily. Postcolonial writers have been very critical and adopted anti-colonial consciousness when writing and theorizing literature in response to this colonial gesture.

English in the Aftermath of Colonialism

English literary criticism has since been divided into two main schools: the liberal humanism and the ideological criticism. The liberal humanist with its belief in the possibility of non political reading can be seen as the continuation of colonial method of approaching literature: seeing literature as cultivating compassion and embodying universal values. Although this school has been abandoned by many critics for its naivety, it is still alive and well in Indonesian class rooms. The other school, the ideological criticism, has begun to develop in Indonesia. The school has been inspired by grand theories ranging from structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, cultural materialism etc.

Non political reading

This view of the ideological base of literary criteria has baffled Harold Bloom who stresses the aesthetic base of Canon formation. He strongly criticizes those whom he derogatorily calls the 'resenters' as being too ideologically driven, saying that:

those who oppose the Canon insist that there is always an ideology involved in canon formation: indeed, they go farther and speak of the ideology of canon formation, suggesting that to make a canon (or to perpetuate one) is an ideological act in itself" (Bloom, 1994, p. 22).

Bloom argues that aesthetic criteria are the only consideration in Canon formation. The aesthetic, for Bloom, is originality, the sublimity of the work and the difficult pleasure arising out of its sublime content. Originality is defined, not merely in term of authenticity, but as "a strangeness that we either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies" (Bloom, 1994, p. 4). In other words, there is a sense of timelessness in the value of the work: a really aesthetic work can stand the test of time in keeping it valuable and worth reading through all ages.

These three aspects of the aesthetic: originality, sublimity and difficult pleasure are what the 'School of Resenters' fail to grasp and there is nothing we can do about this because, in Bloom's opinion, "pragmatically, aesthetic value can be recognized or experienced, but it cannot be conveyed to those who are incapable of grasping its sensations and perceptions. To quarrel on its behalf is always a blunder" (Bloom, 1994, p. 17). It seems Bloom wants to divide the two schools, the aesthetic and the resenters, into two unreconciled worlds. The aesthetic can only be understood by people capable of grasping a work's sensations and perceptions and this capability is so special that to question these people's capacity for aesthetic experience, for example by suggesting a certain ideological aspect implicit in the experience as the 'resenters' do, is a blunder and therefore totally out of the question.

Bloom argues that aesthetic criteria are non ideological, while 'the resenters' are driven by their ideological belief. Contrary to the 'resenters', who "insist that the aesthetic stance is itself an ideology," Bloom defends that what he has written is "nothing but the aesthetic" (Bloom, 1999, pp., p. 9). He

insists that there is no connection between his way of reading and any social group he has been related to. It is the resenterers, Bloom suggests, who are themselves in the service of an ideology. To challenge the resenterers' mettle Bloom asks a question which for him is the ultimate blow to their stance, i.e. why is it Shakespeare and not Ben Jonson, who centres the Canon if this is a matter of arbitrary decision? For Bloom, Shakespeare seems to be the last bastion for the aesthetic base of Canon formation against which the 'resenterers' have no ammunition at their disposal.

It is regrettable to Bloom that the 'School of Resenterers', which he identifies as consisting of (1) the cultural materialists, (2) the New Historicists and (3) the Feminists have abandoned the aesthetic quest for the sake of the sociological explanation, which make Shakespeare no different from John Webster and Thomas Middleton (Bloom, 1994). The move from Shakespearean aesthetic into sociological, historical and gender analysis, for Bloom, is not properly literary. Moreover, many of these schools were initially Bloom's own students, whom he considers were once able to experience the aesthetic until they chose to 'abandon' it to pursue the political and historical aspects of literary analysis. Their political criticism is, for Bloom, a manifestation of Freudian repression of an unconscious and purposeful forgetting in order to alleviate guilty feelings on the behalf of the 'resenterers.' Since cognition relies on memory, their repressed drive to forget their guilt ruins their aesthetic capability (Bloom, 1994, p. 18).

Bloom traces the leading figure of 'the resenterers' to Antonio Gramsci, whose *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* argues that there cannot be a disinterested intellectual because his intellectuality has been formed as a part of a certain social groups that will always color his intellectual judgement. Bloom anticipates this attack when he claims that he sees "no inner connection between any social group" and his ways of reading, remembering, judging and interpreting literature. They are independent of his social status despite the very possible leftist claim that "all of his passionate proclamations of the isolate selfhood's aesthetic value are necessarily qualified by the reminder that the leisure for meditation must be purchased from the community" (Bloom, 1994, pp., p. 23).

Although Bloom believes that Shakespeare invented human, in the sense that a lot of psychological traits theorized by Freud had been identified by Shakespeare beforehand, Bloom differentiates himself from other humanists who believe in the pragmatic use of literature, such as making one a better person. He does not believe that literature is mainly intended for such a project. Aesthetic quality seems the only preoccupation a literary critic should always have. In other words, literary criticism is art for art's sake.

Consequently, Bloom wants to place himself outside the debate between two extremes, the right wing – who advance the pragmatic moral use of literature - and the so-called 'resenterers' – whom he accuses of advocating a pragmatic political manipulation of literature - by saying that he is:

not concerned with the current debate between the right-wing defenders of the Canon, who wish to preserve it for its supposed (an nonexistent) moral values, and the academic-journalistic network I have dubbed the School of Resentment, who wish to overthrow the Canon in order to advance their supposed and (nonexistent) programs for social change. (Bloom, 1994, p. 4)

Not only does Bloom embrace aesthetic values as the governing principles beyond any pragmatic dimensions in literary analysis, but also the purity of the aesthetic values independent of any ideological strain.

Political Reading of Literature

Amongst the 'Bloomian School of Resenterers' are critical theorists influenced by Marx and Foucault. Theorists developing their framework from the latter include Raymond Williams, Stephen Greenblatt, and Edward Said whose ideas I would like to juxtapose with those of Bloom. The case of

Said is interesting because, as he himself admits, his training was as a humanist, accustomed to analyzing works belonging to the Canon. Although Bloom does not mention Said as one of those who flee from the aesthetic quest in a more political direction, Said fits nicely into the 'School of Resenters.' Departing from liberal humanism, Said constructed a seminal theoretical framework modifying the contradictory theories of humanism and Foucauldian power analysis in his book *Orientalism*.

Said interprets the non-political nature of humanist writing is not that the writer is not influenced by politico-ideological constraints, but that his or her writing does not have "a direct political effect upon reality in the everyday sense" in the way a politician, economist or ideologue does. Said formulates this view thus:

The distinction between "humanists" and persons whose work has policy implications, or political significance, can be broadened further by saying that the former's ideological color is a matter of incidental importance to politics ..., whereas the ideology of the latter is woven directly into his material. (Said, 1978, p. 9)

Said does not deny the ideological color of a humanist writing, despite recognizing its aesthetic quality. It is very likely that Said himself would agree with Pierre Bourdieu that, contrary to Kantian aesthetic, value judgment is not universal but influenced by social and educational category (Bourdieu, 1984). But Said pursues the consequence of this oblivion of the value judgment politically, so that within an imperialist discourse such a universalist view might be seen as working in the service of imperialism.

Said's view, nothing including the aesthetic – is immune to the ideology of imperialism because, as Eagleton puts it, ideology is not "simply the deeply entrenched, often unconscious beliefs which people hold," but "more particularly those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power" (Eagleton, 2003, p. 13). Supporting Foucault's idea of power and running parallel to Eagleton's concept of ideology, Said sees imperialist ideology and power as operating in similar ways, that is, by consent (interpellation), with productive constraints, and that it reproduces itself the way labor power is reproduced in a capitalist system. The need for a new *terra incognita*, both geographic and cultural, is never satisfied so that even the production and the profit that it entails from Said's supposedly anti-imperialist books is coopted by publishers of the neo-imperialist countries like the U.S.A. and the U.K.

Another example of how the ideology of imperialism is durable and productive can be seen in writing of renowned Western humanist, Ernest Renan. From his observation on the essential nature of the Chinese, the African and the European, Renan concluded:

Nature has made a race of workers, the Chinese race, who have wonderful manual dexterity and almost no sense of honour; govern them with justice, levying from them, in return for the blessing of such a government, an ample allowance for the conquering race and they will be satisfied; a race of tillers of the soil, the Negro; treat him with kindness and humanity, and all will be as it should; a race of masters and soldiers, the European race. Reduce this noble race to working in the like Negroes and Chinese, and the rebel. (qtd. in Césaire, 2000, p. 38)

Under the same ideology, it has also been theorized that the colonizer and the colonized were bound by certain psychological dispositions inherent in the race of the colonizer as well as the colonized. The colonizer suffered from "domination complex/prospero complex" and the colonized from "dependency complex/caliban complex." Colonization occurred because of the complicity of the colonized. Independence did not fit the psychological dispositions of the colonized peoples and they needed European tutelage for their betterment.

Observing the damaging consequence of the claim of disinterested aesthetic judgement, Said criticizes such liberal humanist belief that real knowledge is never political, by arguing that it is prone to or suspect of complicity with the dominant ideology and, in his observation, this kind of conviction

made colonial discourse durable and even productive in fields such as sociology, anthropology, literature and Orientalism more generally. What Edward Said intends to show through his book is:

how the general liberal consensus that “true” knowledge is fundamentally non political (and conversely, that overtly political knowledge is not “true” knowledge) obscures the highly, if obscurely, organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced. (Said, 1978, p. 10)

1 As Said himself admits, this argument is derived from the Foucauldian concept of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discipline and punish* especially on how power circulates and gets stronger because it induces pleasures as the effects of power. In Said’s words:

My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, Militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. (Said, 1978, p. 3)

As Said also agrees, for Foucault, power does not operate only by means of repression. What he means by repression is the negative aspect of power that prohibits and says ‘no’ along with punishment for those who transgress its boundaries. If power circulates only by means of oppression through state apparatus, it will not be able to stay for long and will soon become obsolete. There is a productive aspect of power Foucault believes has been overlooked. As he rhetorically asks: “If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?” (Foucault, 1980, p. 119). Foucault adds that what makes power durable and well accepted is:

simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault, 1980, p. 119)

6 In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault wants to show is how from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onwards power has been constructed and sustained not only by military might but also by what Foucault calls a new ‘economy’ of power,” that he defines as

procedures which allowed the effects of power to circulate in a manner at once continuous, uninterrupted, adapted and ‘individualised’ throughout the entire social body. These new techniques are both much more efficient and much less wasteful. (Foucault, 1980, p. 119).

Adapting Foucault’s concept of power and how it circulates and is sustained, Said emphasized that exactly the same mechanism takes place in the production of Orientalist texts. So prevalent is the power of colonialism that the desire to describe the Orient does not stop at description but has been “tinged” by colonial desire (Said, 1978). Said continues that:

to believe that politics in the form of imperialism bears upon the production of literature, scholarship, social theory, and history writing is by no means equivalent to saying that culture is therefore a demeaned or denigrated thing. Quite the contrary: my whole point is to say that we can better understand the persistence and the durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were productive, nor unilaterally inhibiting. It is this idea that Gramsci, certainly, and Foucault and Raymond Williams in their very different ways have been trying to illustrate. (Said, 1978, p. 14)

Said has been critiqued by Aijaz Ahmad in his *Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures*. The way Said traces imperialist discourse back to the time of Homer is very “un-Foucauldian” (Ahmad, 2008, p. 166) and therefore problematical because Foucault himself mentions that this new kind of power circulation arose from the seventeenth century onwards (Foucault, 1980, p. 119). In addition, Said

himself disagrees with Foucault on one key aspect: Said believes in the role of an agent within the discourse of power:

Unlike Michel Foucault, to whose work I am greatly indebted, I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like *Orientalism*.” (Said, 1978, p. 23)

For Foucault, on the other hand, power is a matter of discourse beyond the subject’s constraints or authorial authority: “the quibbling and confrontations that a writer generates between himself and his text cancel out the signs of his particular individuality” (Foucault, 1977, p. 117). Said’s position also seems to negate Foucault’s pessimistic view of the possibility of a successful counter-discourse, in that *Orientalism* has made it possible to posit a counter-discourse strategy to colonialism and imperialism, quite powerfully and significantly.

Implications, Conclusion and Recommendation

One of the implications of political reading of texts on the development of English Studies is the opening up of English canon. Despite the religious origin of the word, canon in literature does not refer to an immutable body of works that threatens with blasphemy anybody trying to modify its content. In fact, canon inclusion or exclusion has been politically charged and therefore there is no such thing as pure aesthetic criteria of canon formation. Female, Colored and non European writers are notoriously underrepresented in English literature. At the moment we are witnessing writers excluded from the canon due to their nationality, gender and race gain currency in literature classes.

Vernacular literature is worth studying and comparing with the already established English texts. In the past not only vernacular literature but also literatures in English from Africa and elsewhere were not seen a literature proper. A prominent African poet was once invited to talk about his works in a university in the U.K. but in the department of Anthropology, showing how literatures in English have been viewed by the established English literary scholars. If now we compare vernacular literature with English literature, the aim is not to prove that it is not less literary than English literature but that we have our own narrative portraying different lived experience closer to us in comparison to lived experience of other peoples. This way the study of English will be multicultural and dialogical as well.

This does not mean, however, that Shakespeare shall not be studied in isolation or without comparing him with vernacular writers. Shakespearean scholarship has now moved toward revisionist criticism, revisiting Shakespeare’s works with postcolonial and cultural materialist or new historicist perspectives. This revisionist approach rectifies what liberal humanists have missed in their criticism: the political dimension of the works and the critics. This new approach revitalizes Shakespearean texts and relates them contextually with the experience of peoples (without assuming a universalist posture) even when they are far apart geographically and periodically.

Geographical distance also often relates to translation issue when translated literary text is seen as secondary and hence unfit for a primary text in a research. This view has also greatly changed and now translated literary works are seen as objects having their own validity. The assumption underlying the research using a translated text is of course not the faithfulness with the original text but that translated text is rewriting. A text always suppresses a meaning that stimulates rewriting, a concept that has been developed using various terms such as political unconscious (Fredric Jameson), surrogation (Diamond, 1996) and intertextuality (Julia Kristeva). Literary translation has to be seen as a response to the literary taste of an era, for what is accepted by the target audience determines, consciously or unconsciously, the decisions translators make” (Rose, 1996, p. 31).

The latest development of English Studies is its movement toward Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies has become an interdisciplinary subject promising more tangible political commitment for

social justice and the reading beyond limited notion of a text. Informed by lived experience and resistance, Cultural Studies broadens literary reading to the textuality of non textual phenomena such as pop culture, film, and advertisement. Literary scholars find themselves at home in this new discipline because, like literary criticism, Cultural Studies has also been influenced by grand theories such as Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Postmodernism, Feminism, Cultural Materialism, etc.

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