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Building Humanity Values Through Maya Angelou's Poems

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Abstract

One of the areas of attitude established by Indonesia's Kemenristekdikti is appreciating the diversity of cultures, views, religions, and beliefs of others and has a social sensitivity and concern for society and the environment. Poetry is one means of establishing attitudes according to the purpose because of its refined nature through language. Seven of Maya Angelou's poems were selected based on humanity issues in her works especially on discrimination and racism. The analysis was done by semiotic theory and sociology of literature. The analysis of the poems is also related to the attitude competencies set by Kemenristekdikti. The results show that Maya Angelou poetry contains moral values that can build an equal value of human being and solidarity between people.

Keyword: Poems, Maya Angelou, Humanity Values, Discrimination, Racism

Abstrak

Salah satu sikap yang ditetapkan Kemenristekdikti Indonesia adalah menghargai keanekaragaman budaya, pandangan, agama, kepercayaan orang lain, dan memiliki kepekaan sosial, kepedulian terhadap masyarakat dan lingkungan. Puisi adalah salah satu cara untuk membangun sikap sesuai dengan tujuan karena sifatnya yang halus melalui bahasa. Tujuh puisi Maya Angelou dipilih berdasarkan masalah kemanusiaan dalam karyanya terutama tentang diskriminasi dan rasisme. Analisis dilakukan oleh teori semiotik dan sosiologi sastra. Analisis puisi juga terkait dengan kompetensi sikap yang ditetapkan oleh Kemenristekdikti. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa puisi Maya Angelou berisi nilai-nilai moral yang dapat membangun nilai yang sama antara manusia dan solidaritas antarmanusia.

Kata Kunci: Puisi, Maya Angelou, Nilai-Nilai Kemanusiaan, Diskriminasi, Rasisme

INTRODUCTION

Educating millennials has its own challenges as they are attached to gadgets and are considered as an anti-social generation. Millennials are attached to popular culture which might alienates them, especially students, from critical and humanist cultures. It happens as the culture lacks of intellectual challenge and stimulation and providing the undemanding ease of fantasy and escapism (Strinati, 2004: 12). On other hand, university students have very important roles as agents of change, controllers and iron stocks, which demand them to give more attention to their

social environment. Millennials then need to learn human values as they play a vital role in the society, for they are said to be the basis of human beings for leading a better life (Sharma, 2015: 27).

To address this, *Kemenristekdikti* set an attitude competence that must be fulfilled by students in learning process in the university. In *Kepmendiknas* No. 49 of 2014, it is stated that all graduates of academic education, vocational education, and professions must have humanity values which can be briefly mentioned as (a) religious attitudes, (b) humanism based on religion, moral, and ethical, (c) contributive, (d) nationalist, (e) tolerant toward culture, views, religion, faith, opinion and original findings of others, (f) collaborative and sensitive to the society and environment, (g) law-abiding and disciplined, (h) integrity, (i) responsibility, independence and have fighting spirit. These set of values should be possessed by the university students through learning process so that they will have good qualities as a human being and a social creature. Through these values, the students are expected not only to be somebody who is only competence at knowledge, but also has good attitude, which is very important and needed in social life.

To meet those attitude competences, the learning material must be adjusted so that it can build the values of student attitudes. One of the teaching materials that can be used to build attitudes is literature. Richard (in Migliavacca, 2011: 302) states that "the arts are our storehouse of recorded values" which then can be taken to shape the mindset and attitude of the readers. Alemi (2011) describes the role of literature in learning in EFL class as a language and cultural enrichment and also as authentic material that needs the teacher's role as personal involvement in exploring the meaning and values in it.

One of literature genres that can be used in instilling values is poetry. Unlike other literary genres, poetry voices the values of life with its socio-cultural background through solid diction. Moral value in poetry is contained in the author's experience as outlined in diction, not only in its contents, but also in emotional and sensorial tones (Migliavacca, 2011, p. 303). In his research, Strömner (2013) proved that poetry as teaching material can be used to instill fundamental values to students such as life, moral, civic, value and citizen education. It means that the teacher can explore the meaning in poetry to instill value, not merely the structure.

The poems that will be analyzed in this article are Maya Angelou's. Maya Angelou is a black poet who figured out the situation of racism, slavery and discrimination that happened in America in the 17-18th century through her poems. In 17-18 century, African Americans were badly discriminated. They were treated as commodity, as a slave, not as human being. Their right as social living was discarded and their social facilities were separated from the White. Angelou's life struggle in fighting racism and discrimination are portrayed in her various poems. Despite the critiques that says that Angelou's poems are "thin stuff" and "easy reading" (Stepito and Gargan in Janoušková, 2005: 7), her poems contain humanity issue that can be analyzed to find the humanity values inside. Hopefully the result of the analysis below can help the lecturer to build good attitude of the students through poems as one of the best mean to instill values.

RESEARCH METHOD

One of the criteria for choosing literary texts as teaching material is easy, adjusted to the right level of students (Lima, 2010: 110). The poems analyzed here then are those which are suitable with the targeted students in CEFR level B2. In this level, the students can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics. They also can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue. Angelou's poems contain metaphorical dictions that describe discrimination issue. The students are expected to understand the topic.

This article discusses seven poems of Maya Angelou entitled *Harlem Hopscotch*, *Caged Bird*, *The Thirteens (Black)*, *The Thirteens (White)*, *When I Think About Myself*, *My Guilt* and *Still I Rise*. To be able to fully understand Maya Angelou's works, the approach taken are structural and also socio-cultural to see the relation of structure in poetry with its socio-cultural background. The results of this approach will then be analyzed with values that can be explored in accordance with the attitude competency expected in higher education students as stated in the attachment of Kepmendiknas No. 49 of 2014.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the 17-18 century African-American blacks experienced racism and discrimination to slavery in America. Through her poems, Maya Angelou described the cruelty of racism and discrimination experienced by the Black at that time. Racial discrimination has been formally banned in the middle of the 20th century, but in reality, cultural racial discrimination still occurs in America. A survey conducted by National Public Radio, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in 2017 showed that African Americans report extensive experiences of discrimination, across a range of situations. In the context of institutional forms of discrimination, half or more of African Americans say they have personally been discriminated against because they are Black when interacting with police (50%), when applying to jobs (56%), and when it comes to being paid equally or considered for promotion (57%).

Harlem Hopscotch is one of the Angelou's poems regarding to discrimination and racism issue. With cynical and ironic tones Angelou describes discrimination against the Black as follows.

*In the air, now both feet down.
Since you black, don't stick around.
Food is gone, the rent is due,
Curse and cry and then jump two.*

Harlem is one of the urban states in America, which is known as the most Black civilians live there. African-Americans could not approach white people just because they are black. On that basis they also found it difficult to get food and work. Through the Hopscotch game metaphor, Angelou builds the mood of sadness for her readers. Hopscotch game, which should have been described cheerfully, is used as a means to convey deep sadness because of the injustice caused by racial discrimination. In the 17th century Black people were only

regarded as commodity objects, not as humans. The anguish of discrimination is also described by Angelou as a poem entitled *Caged Bird*.

*But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream his
wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.*

Maya Angelou creates *caged bird* as a symbol of discrimination that occurred at that time. '*His wings are clipped*' and '*his feet are tied*' are metaphoric clauses that show that their freedom is really taken away. Discrimination buries the ideals of black people and becomes a nightmare for them. However, *the bird* still has the mouth to sing (voicing the suffering to others), and that is what Angelou does through her works.

In *The Thirteens (Black)* and *The Thirteens (White)* poems, Angelou compares activities with very striking differences between the Black and the White. Through ironical tone, Angelou describes how black people wrestle with the separation of rights that discredit them and causes them to live in violence, fear and poverty. On the other hand, white people can enjoy their lives with pleasure, calm and comfort. This has been going on for decades. Through contrasting ideas, Angelou describes injustice and creates a mood of anger for the readers.

Discrimination experienced by the Black is also a form of bondage that is shackled. In the poem entitled *My Guilt*, with the ironic and cynical tones, Angelou describes the cruelty of slavery as follows.

*My guilt is "slavery's chains,"
too long the clang of iron falls down the years.
This brother's sold, this sister's gone, is bitter wax, lining my ears.
My guilt made music with the tears.*

Angelou applies 'my guilt' as a paradox for making fun of the situation that she is a guilty entity for the long chain of slavery. She puts the '*clang of iron*' as a symbol of slavery snares experienced by black people. Human trafficking separates family members and the phrase 'music with tears' shows the deep sadness experienced by blacks at that time.

In the history of slavery in America, slaves were sold as property. Pinkey (in Ilham, 2015) mentions that slaves could be traded or given as gifts, as a means of payment, and as a bet in gambling. Slavery was a very important commodity to increase profits for slave owners and become a big business in the 17-18th century in America (Franklin & Moss in Ilham, 2015). White people's moral crime at that time was laughed at by Angelou in a satire tone in *When I Think About Myself*, which described injustice to the Black by stating that *they grow the fruit / but eat the rind*. However, in *Still I Rise*, Angelou reveals that she and her people would continue to rise against the racism and discrimination they received. In this poem, Angelou uses the word '*dirt*' and '*dust*' in this poem to symbolize something that is dirty, trivial, and even can be trampled down as their pride has been debased by the White. However, Angelou stressed that even though they were humiliated, they

would continue to rise up to fight. Maya Angelou's poems above portray how human rights are violated by dominant group (the White), how the Black are treated as commodity instead of as human being, how they are badly suffered from racism and discrimination, and how they tried to go out from the condition. The satirical and ironical tones delivered in metaphorical dictions depict the deep agony of being Black. The discussion of these poems will raise the awareness of humanity values.

Angelou's poems can be used as a means of learning to instill the value of tolerance, especially in respecting the identity of other nations and not degrading anyone for any reason as every human being has the same rights to live and be independent. The value of religiosity can also be built by instilling the value that humans are equal in the eyes of God. In addition, this poem can also be used to teach social sensitivity, so that students can become agents of change to voice justice for their fellow human beings, as an implementation of the second principle of Pancasila which emphasizes social justice.

In a table, the humanity values that can be drawn from Angelou's poems discussed are presented below.

No	Poems	a	b	c	d	e	F	g	h	i	j
1.	<i>Harlem Hopscotch</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓				
2.	<i>Caged Bird</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓				✓
3.	<i>The Thirteens (Black)</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓				
4.	<i>The Thirteens (White)</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓				
5.	<i>When I Think About Myself</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓				
6.	<i>My Guilt</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓				✓
7.	<i>Still I Rise</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓				✓

Table 1. Attitudes that can be build through Angelou's poems

(a)religious attitudes, (b) humanism based on religion, moral, and ethical, (c) contributive, (d) nationalist, (e) tolerant toward culture, views, religion, faith, opinion and original findings of others, (f) collaborative and sensitive to the society and environment, (g) law-abiding and disciplined, (h) integrity, (i) responsibility, independence and have fighting spirit.

The dominant attitudes that can be instilled to the students through the poems are religious attitude, humanism, tolerant, and sensitive to the society and environment. What must be also emphasized in the poems discussion is that discrimination, racism and slavery are contrary to human rights which have been stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued by the United Nations (2015) in article two and four which show that discrimination and slavery for any reason cannot be justified as humans have equal rights to other human beings. It means that there is no party, personal or as dominant group, can do discrimination and racism toward others for any reasons such as skin color, religion, tribe, position, etc. Discrimination and racism are violation toward human rights.

Today, in Indonesia and also in some other countries, discrimination has become an important issue to be dealt with. In the discussion section of those poems in the class, the student's awareness of the issue must be built. They can also be asked to search the discrimination and racism issues both in their environment and around the world. This way might open their eyes and heart about what happens with the humanity problems and the frightening impact of the issues.

CONCLUSION

Maya Angelou's poems with the theme of racism, discrimination and slavery describe the cruelty of the white treatment of black African-Americans in the 17-18th century in America. Critical, cynical, satiric, and ironic tones are used by Angelou in writing his diction, which evokes the mood of sadness and anger for the readers of his poems. Through symbols, Angelou also describes the pain experienced by the Black with the injustices they have received for decades. Racism, discrimination and slavery conflict with humanity values that are related to the similarity of human rights in the world. These poems can be used to instill the value of humanity to the students so that they would have a moral attitude, tolerant, religious, and sensitive to their social environment.

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