

## REVEALING THE "SWAN" SYMBOL AND SOCIAL CRITICISM IN RENDRA'S POETRY "NYANYIAN ANGSA"

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research aimed to reveal symbols that are often present by applying semiotic critical analysis to poetry. *Nyanyian Angsa* (The Swan Song) is the source of data in this analytical practice. Rendra is a writer who is familiar to the Indonesian people through his sharp lines and directly affects the social phenomenon critics. In this article, the researcher implemented Riffaterre's semiotic reading theory to examine the Swan symbol in poetry. Riffaterre introduces 4 things in semiotic of poetry, they are (1) poetry is an indirect expression, stating something with another meaning, (2) heuristic and hermeneutic reading (retroactive), (3) matrix, model, and variant, and (4) hypogram. By using qualitative research methods, this research focused on critical analysis of the text in poetry. The results of this analysis indicated that there are many ungrammatical expressions in poetry that could not be read heuristically reading so that the reading is done by hermeneutic reading (retroactive). Through the semiotic stages, there are two major criticisms behind the ungrammatical meaning found, namely the representation of social criticism on individuals in medical and religious institutions. The Swan symbol also refers to the Maria Zaitun character who has done forgiveness of sins.

Keyword: Symbol, Semiotic, Poetry, Riffaterre

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is a part of the picture of social life that is presented through its reflection. To create a literary works, a writer reflected them from the truly image of reality developments that occurred in society. In literary works, it often encounter various stories that describe the social life of society such as politics, social economy, culture, and religion. Therefore, even though it is

said to be a work of fiction, a literary work is not necessarily a pure fantasy and imagination. However, a literary work is born through the forging of the author's experience. Endaswara (2013) explained that this fact is not a crude copy, but a fact that has been reflected in a subtle and aesthetic way. The structural equation requires the existence of literary works by requiring

the existence of literary works with society as two symptoms that have autonomous qualities with their respective characteristics.

Poetry is a part of literary works. Unlike other forms of literature, poetry presents an unique aesthetic variety related to figurative language, rhythm, rhyme, stanzas, lines and deep meaning. With deep meaning language, poetry is often used by writers as a medium to convey sharp social and political criticism and can directly hit deeply. As stated by John Kennedy in Bachri (2007), "If politics is bent, poetry will set the record straight". This means that when politics is used by a small group in which there are various unhealthy intrigues, poetry is here to fight it.

One of Indonesia's phenomenal literary works that is sharp enough to criticize social phenomena is found in the poem "Nyanyian Angsa (The Swan Song)" by Rendra. The poet, nicknamed the peacock, presents various sharp lines and often appears on stage with his poetry reading as flamboyant as a peacock (Verelladevanka. 2022). The hallmark of his poetry presents long lines and straightforward language. His sharp criticism of social and even political phenomena made him imprisoned during the *Orde baru* era. His work has also received many national and international awards. Even though he has passed away, but his literary work is continuously live in filling literary spaces to be enlightened until now.

This "Nyanyian Angsa" poem in this article is analyzed using Riffaterre's semiotic theory with focus on searching for the "Swan" sign that often appears on every line in the poem. Swan

certainly cannot be analyzed with ordinary conventional reading because with sharp lyrics, swan's social criticism has a deep meaning. With that, semiotic reading plays an important role in helping to reveal meaning in poetry that cannot be translated into conventional language.

The definition of semiotics can be understood through the notion of semiotics which comes from the word *semeion*, a language of Greek origin which means sign. Signs as objects of study can be in the form of several artefacts that have been interpreted holistically as a form, style, or genre, which in terms of cultural studies is called text. In semiotics, text represents a coherent series of signifiers (Thomas in Sobur 2003). Michael Riffaterre in his book entitled *Semiotics of Poetry*, suggested that there are four things that must be considered in understanding and interpreting a poem. These four things are: (1) poetry is an Ungrammatical expression, stating something with another meaning, (2) heuristic and hermeneutic reading (retroactive), (3) matrix, model, and variant, and (4) hypogram (Riffaterre in Salam 2009)

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### a. Semiotics of Riffaterre

Michael Riffaterre in his book entitled *Semiotics of Poetry*, suggested that there are four things that must be considered in understanding and interpreting a poem. These four things are: (1) poetry is an Ungrammatical expression, stating something with another meaning, (2) heuristic and hermeneutic reading (retroactive), (3) matrix, model, and variant, and (4) hypogram (Riffaterre in Salam 2009)

#### 1) Ungrammatical Expression

An important feature of poetry according to Riffaterre is that poetry expresses concepts and things indirectly. Simply put, poetry says one thing with the intention of another. This is what distinguishes poetry from language in general. Poetry has a special way of conveying its meaning. The language of poetry is semiotic while everyday language is mimetic. Indirect expression of poetry occurs because of a shift in meaning (displacing), destruction of meaning (distorting), and the creation of meaning (creating).

#### 2) Displacing of Meaning

A displacing of meaning occurs when a sign changes from one meaning to another, when a word represents another word. Generally, the cause of the shift in meaning is the use of figurative language, such as metaphor and metonymy.

#### 3) Distorting of Meaning

Distorting of meaning occurs because of ambiguity, contradiction, and non-sense. Ambiguity can occur in words, phrases, sentences, or discourses caused by the emergence of different interpretations according to the context. Contradiction arises because of the use of irony, paradox, and antithesis. Non-sense are words that have no meaning (according to the dictionary) but have an "occult" meaning according to the context

#### 4) Creating of Meaning

The creating of meaning in the form of meaning to everything is considered meaningless in common language, for example "symmetry, rhyme, or semantic equivalence between homologs in a stanza". The creation of meaning occurs because of

the organization of the text space, including: enjambment, typography, and homologue.

Among the three organization of the text space above, there is one factor that is always present, namely that all of them cannot simply be considered as representations of reality. The representation of reality can only be changed clearly and unequivocally in a way that is contrary to the possibilities or context the reader expects or can be distorted by a distorted grammar or lexicon, which is called ungrammaticality.

#### 5) Heuristic and hermeneutic reading

Heuristic reading is reading poetry according to normative grammar, morphology, syntax, and semantics. This heuristic reading produces the overall meaning according to normative grammar with a first-level semiotic system. After going through the first stage of reading, the reader arrives at the second stage of reading, which is called retroactive reading or hermeneutic reading. At this stage, the second stage of the interpretation process occurs, the actual interpretation. The reader tries to look back and make comparisons related to what has been read in the first stage of the reading process. The reader is in a decoding effect. This means that the reader begins to be able to understand that everything that at first, in the first stage of reading, looks ungrammatical turns out to be related facts. At the level of heuristic reading, the reader only gets the "meaning" of a text, while the "meaning" is obtained when the reader has gone beyond retroactive or hermeneutic reading.

#### b. Previous Research

There are several articles that contributed to the development of the ideas in this article. The research conducted is quite diverse regarding the similarities in the use of semiotic theory which are categorized as a structuralism approach or application to poetry as a literary work. However, of course the researchers placed a different analysis from previous research. Isnaini, et al (2020) researched the concept of *manunggaling kawula Gusti* in Sapardi Djoko Damono's poetry. There is a metaphor of loneliness, the emptiness of the relationship between man and God in Islamic teachings in the poem. Kuhon, F. (2020) conducted a research on Edgar A Poe's poem which highlighted the representation of women. In his research, Kuhon traces the representation of 17th century women in England which is full of fairness, careless, and loving the family. Ahmad, Q. (2020) analyses Watson's speech with a semiotic social approach. The results of the study showed that Emma Watson gave a very natural speech, especially regarding the problem of inequality in social society. Sulastri, et al (2019) analysed the application of poetry learning in children to increase the creativity of students in the classroom. By studying poetry, students get learning about dealing with vocabulary barriers and developing wider ideas. Tambunan (2019) analyses the lexical cohesion and grammar of Afrizal Mana's poetry. He analyzed the poem "Document Destroying Museum" with a linguistic approach and found 313 points in it.

### 3. METHOD OF THE RESEARCH

The source data for this study comes from scenes in *Nyanyian Angsa* by W.S. Rendra. Researcher utilizes semiotic theory to interpret the message to see the hermeneutic meaning in this critical poet especially to analyse the symbol of Swan. Researcher use the semiotics analysis method to completely comprehend the message that will be given in the poet. Semiotic analysis seeks to find the meaning of signs, including things hidden behind a sign (text, advertisements, and news). It caused the sign system is very contextual and depends on the user of the sign.

### 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

*Nyanyian Angsa* (The Swan Song), one of the phenomenal Poetry by Rendra. Although it seems explicitly visible but has a deep meaning. Rendra through his poems is also famous for his criticism and satire on social phenomena that exist in everyday life. From the title, Rendra has presented a deep parable with the word "*Nyanyian Angsa*". The swan is a symbol of purity, beauty, and even used as a vehicle for the goddess Saraswati as a symbol of true truth. The song of the swan may be the voice of holiness, but to whom does the song of the swan refer? If we look into the stanzas of the poem, a self-affirmation of the subject appears which is repeatedly mentioned: my name *Maria Zaitun namaku* (line 14, 65, 138, 166, 194, 298, 312).

When tracing each line in this *Nyanyian Angsa*, there are many statements that describe ungrammatical reality. Like the two phrases of the swan's song, referring to the subject Maria Zaitun instead told of

a prostitute who is old and thrown out of life (line 16, 66, 139, 196, 213). The ungrammaticality of another reality also occurs in the following lines:

*Malaekat penjaga Firdaus,  
Wajahnya tegas dan dengki,  
dengan pedang yang menyala*  
“Guardian angel of Paradise, His face resolute and spiteful, with a flaming sword” (line 9,10, 11)

*Malaekat penjaga Firdaus,  
wajahnya sombong dan dengki*  
“Guardian angel of Paradise, his face is arrogant and spiteful” (line 132,133)

*Malaekat penjaga Firdaus,  
Wajahnya tampan dan dengki*  
“Guardian angel of Paradise, His face is handsome and envious” (line 186,187)

*Malaekat penjaga Firdaus, dengan tegas mengusirku* “Guardian angel of Paradise, resolutely cast me out” (line 213,214)

*Malaekat Penjaga Firdaus,  
wajahnya dingin dan dengki*  
“Guardian Angel of Paradise, his face is cold and spiteful” (line 238,239)

*Malaekat Firdaus, Wajahnya Jahat dan dengki* “Paradise Angel, His Face is Evil and Envy” (line 302,303)

The subject of these lines referred to the Angel of Paradise who is said to be the guardian of Paradise several times in the poem. What makes it contradictory is the Angel of Paradise which is identical to the guardian angel of heaven which is filled with beauty and splendour. On the other hand, this lyric referred to a contrast expression. It referred to a firmly, arrogantly,

jealously and evilly character. Riffatere in Faruk (2012: 153) mentioned that all lines of poetry that are ungrammatical encourage the reading process to move away from heuristic reading that is plucking and linguistic to a circular hermeneutic (rectro-reading) stage and that is based on literary conventions or extra linguistics. The rectro-reading reading leads the reader to a deep meaning of the text while still following the rules of the structural elements contained in the poetry text.

The Changing expression of the Paradise angel in the form of personification expressions, it is disclose to human expressions (firm, arrogant, envious and evil), simultaneously with the affirmation of the subject Maria Zaitun. This could be seen from the following lines: Maria Zaitun, my name is a miserable prostitute. Not pretty and a bit old. (line 14,15,16), The fearful and wretched whore (line 65,66), the hungry and happy whore (line 138,139), the defeated prostitute. The despicable whore (line 195,196). The subject of the opposition in the lines of the poem, provides answers to the various ungrammatical facts found in the previous reading. The figurative expression of Paradise which is contrary to the convention of the reality of the nature of Paradise itself has a correlation with the self-affirmation of Maria's subject as a prostitute. In another words, Paradise in this case is a metonymy of the fears Maria Zaitun faced on her journey to death. It is clearly seen by words that my blood continues to freeze (line 13), I tremble with fear (line 63), I freeze helpless (line 136), weak prostitute, tremble with fear (line 167). These

words are also inserted between two subjects who contrasting "Paradise" and "Maria Zaitun", with the negation of "I" which proves that Paradise is a figment of the imagination of herself. The fears presented in the lines are also interpreted as an acknowledgment of the guilt that Maria realizes about the reality that she has been through. Then, is it true that a confession like this is a sacred trait of the "Swan" that Rendra wanted to portrait in his poetry?

Ungrammatical of the reality about "*Nyanyian Angsa*" poem which is in opposition to Maria Zaitun character, represent its answer after going through the second reading stage. The song that referred to the sound that came out of the swan was interpreted as a call for social criticism that the poet wanted to describe. This could be seen how the signs in the poem connected the meaning of the word "singing" as a criticism and satire of reality. The statement that reeks of social criticism was obtained from the journey that Maria went through after she was expelled by the pimp where she worked. There are two institutions implicitly criticized in this poem; an individual in medical and religious institution.

Social criticism of medical institution could be seen in verse 3. Maria was in a pathetic condition at that time: suffering from syphilis (line 26), full of ulcers on her groin, neck, armpits and breast (line 28), red eyes, dry lips, bleeding gums (line 29), his heart disease relapsed (line 30) to see a doctor for treatment. The first word that came out of the doctor's mouth was not asking Maria's condition at that time, but Maria Zaitun, you owe me a

lot.. (line 40), "How much money do you have now?" (line 42). This attitude of doctors clearly contradicted the oath made by every doctor before taking up the profession, namely "to dedicate my whole life to the benefit of humanity... not to be influenced by considerations of religion, nationality, social position..." (wikipedia.2014). The opposite attitude is actually shown by the doctor in the poem by leaving the sufferer because of financial purposes. It could be seen from the quotation "give him a Vitamin C injection,"(line 50) a doctor, at least he needs Salvarzan (line 53) "what for?", she can't pay (line 55). Seen, this line is criticizes toward the a medical person which is out of their humanitarian function and prioritize materialism.

The second social criticism of individuals in religious institutions is contained in the 5th stanza. From the line of church doors that have been locked, for fear of thieves (line 73,74) an irony that sticks out here is how it is possible for the Church as a place of worship to be locked, let alone afraid of thieves. The conjunction "because" in this line refers to a cause-and-effect relationship that shows a shift in the function of the church which turns out to be storing valuables that can attract thieves so that they must be secured. The diction about the priest which is described through the line "the smell of wine from his mouth (line 91), sandals made of crocodile skin (line92) shows luxury in stark contrast to the figure of an agent of God who is simple and cares about the misery of their fellow believers.

The next dialogue, from the attitude taken by the Pastor in judging someone further justifies it; seen from

the line, "are you-mm-night butterfly?" "I am a whore. Yes." "Saint Peter".... "You have been tempted by sin." "Not tempted. But only sinful." "You have been seduced by the devil." (line 108-103) The Pastor's statement against Maria immediately discredited Mary as a sinner, while Maria also could not do anything because she was pressed by poverty and failed to find work. The simile phrase "You are fierce like a tigress. Maybe you're going crazy. But will die. You don't need a priest. You need a psychiatrist" (line 127-131). This statement came out of the Pastor's mouth when Mary asked for directions to confession and forgiveness from God. Ironically, the Pastor acted as if it was beyond God's nature to justify someone as a sinner without mercy.

The end of the storyline of Maria Zaitun is her encounter with a man with curly hair who has wide eyes and beautiful looks, when Maria Zaitun lives in silence: time, moon, trees, kali, syphilis, and herself that are beyond words (line 10). This last plot is a reversal of the fate of Maria Zaitun, who initially fell in humiliation and humiliation, in the arms of a handsome man who has a scar on his right side, two palms of his hands, and two soles of his feet. This description of the Man clearly refers to the Saviour; Jesus. It is from line 10 that the answer to the "Swan" symbol in Rendra's poem is revealed. The figure who received the forgiveness of sins and was loved by God turned out to be Maria Zaitun, in other words, the symbol of holiness in the "Swan" refers to the Maria Zaitun character who has forgiven sins.

## CONCLUSION

Poetry is the most effective method used by writers as a medium of criticism which contains a solid content of social and political life in society. Writers can freely express their heart's worries in short but sharp words. Lace with her poem *Nyanyian Angsa* is inseparable from a scathing criticism of individuals who do not carry out their functions honourably for the mandate they carry. Maria Zaitun as a woman who has sinned during her lifetime begs for forgiveness for the mistakes she has made. Humans are like judges more than God, presuming themselves as the holiest human beings, not even giving Olive the opportunity to do the best at the end of his life. This disclosure is found from the semiotic critique by the researcher by applying Rifaterre's theory.

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