

SOCIAL INJUSTICE AND RACIAL PREJUDICE IN MAXWELL ANDERSON'S *WINTERSSET*

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Abstract

Wintersset is one of the great works of Maxwell Anderson that reveals universal values such as love, hatred, revenge, and also fear. Wintersset also describes social events depicted through the lives of the actors who are oppressed.

The main problem in this research is related to social injustice and race prejudice. The writer uses sociological approach and historical biographical approach in analyzing the problem. Mio as the main character represents figure from oppressed community and lives in poverty. While Trock Estrella, Judge Gamet reflects a ruler who acts arbitrarily against the poor and oppressed. This study reveals the causes of mistreatment in the field of law and prejudice against race or class. In court, Mio's father, Romagna was arrested by police for no apparent reason at the time of the robbery, and eventually he was sentenced to death. Although there were witnesses who saw that Romagna did not commit robbery, but nevertheless the judges did not believe Mio and the death sentence was done. In everyday life Mio was not allowed to live in New York but he had to come together with people of other minorities. Mio also did not get the same treatment as the rich people in the field of education for minorities would not be able to pay for school.

Key words: *social injustice, racial prejudice, oppressed community, minorities*

A. Background of the Study

Most people agree with Jefferson's idea that a man was born free and created equal (Henkin, 1991: 18). In association with the importance of equality and of freedom, Henkin (1991: 18) shows the right movements that have been spreading out the world since the seventeenth century. Some countries enact the law or the constitution proposed to guarantee and protect people from the human violation and distortion.

People can love with peace, justice, freedom, and equality. However, their hope is not more than a dream. The words peace, justice, freedom, indeed sound idealistic. In the real life people always confront with the facts that contrast with what they really have in mind. They can hardly achieve life what they want to get. Evil, good and personal drives often come in one's life. These all are mixed deep down in human soul. As man driven to the complexities of life he has many choices of something good or bad and he must choose one of them. The focus in the way that one wants to meet his own personal quest is really factors which often destruct human values. Shortly, one prefers to say that, in fact, in human life the choices that usually produce the conflict of even dilemma are always present. Cobuild notes dilemma is a situation in which one has to choose between two things (1987: 392), both are bad.

Wintersset is one of Anderson's dramas which is very interesting because, first, this drama exposes the universal values such as love, avenge, hatred, and fear. Anderson's view of life has been stated in the very beginning of the research, that man lives inevitably is in the world of 'good' and 'evil'. He seems to believe that man lives with his constrains, psychologically, culturally, socially, politically and economically against which he has to fight for his survival and prosperity. Second, *Wintersset* expresses the social issues by exploring the life of the oppressed people. The protagonist in the play (Mio) is a young minority person who represents the life in which the minority people are the subordinated. At the same time the majority people as well as the power presented by the characters of Trock Estrella, Judge Gamet who show the domination of the majority toward the minority.

Winterset actually does not only offer the issues as shown in the above paragraphs of this research but also shows how evil affects the human life soul and man's inhumanity to man. These are portrayed through the characters' experiences in the play.

Thus the writer formulates the statement of the problem as follows: "how do different values between the majority and the minority ethnic groups cause the social issues?"

This study concentrates on Anderson's play *Winterset*. This drama provides a picture of the social issues. To understand problem, the study covers the social issues that the main character, Mio sees in the world around him. The study reveals the historical background of the American prejudice and anti-alien problems in the early nineteenth century. The attitude and experience are depicted in the playwright's vision for the existence of social issues. By this reason the main observation of the study of the research is Anderson's vision for the existence of social problem in America.

The study covers several objectives. The primary objective is to reveal the social issues as they are seen in *Winterset*. The discussion therefore will be directed to find out the social issues in fictional setting of New York in 1920's – 1930's. Aside from this, the study is meant to point out the sociological study; the knowledge about the relation between the play and the sociological background in America during 1920's – 1930's is needed to identify the values either social or cultural that are integrated in the play. It is assumed that Anderson's *Winterset* provides the readers an image of the social life at the American minorities in the north, of the rigid category of the ethic, overwhelming anti-immigrants, and racism in the year around the 20th century. By this reason, the image of the social situation as pictured in the drama is also described.

The other objective is to discuss man's inhumanity to man regarding the race and the social status. These are all the portrait of the individual and ethic relation that make one aware of and he may be to learn toward human being and human right, ignoring the nationality, the race, the place and the social status.

In addition, it is hoped that the study may be used as a consideration and comparison to have further study and the social matters, mainly social injustice and race prejudice of the same literary writing. The social matters discussed here will be of much benefit to see which is the best to take since Indonesia has already been confronted with the social injustice and prejudice now days.

B. Underlying Theories

Reaske interprets, to a certain extent; there is a close relationship between a play and playwright. By this means there is the autobiographical elements involvement in the play (1966: 87). By then, it is supposed that Anderson's plays more or less are influenced by his experiences and life. Downer (1965: 147 – 148) states that Anderson as the playwright is so concerned with the social problems like racism, crime, discrimination and the like. He is also said as alien voices. Anderson praises individualism, independence, frontier spirit and social justice. And vice versa, he condemns fascism, tyranny, dictatorship that end by destroying the personal freedom.

According to Reaske's concept of drama (1966), it is thought that drama is a work of literature and composition which delineates life and human activity by means of presenting the various actions and of characters and it is usually for the theatrical performance. This idea emphasizes drama written to be staged. However, as literature, drama can be studied.

The creation of literary work cannot be separated from the place and the time where the author lives. It shows that the relationship between the author, the work and the social and political constitution backs up the writer is very close. These elements influence one to another (Harjono, 1983: 71). Therefore, according to Harjono (1983) the work of literature often gives information about the social condition on the history.

George shares the same view that shows the theatre as well as a literature represents a social situation, a social gathering. It constitutes a certain social framework in its own right, within which the actors are integral parts (Burns & Burns, 1973: 73).

In accordance with the idea shown above, it is assumed Anderson's *Winterset* has something to do with American society and culture which serve as its background. *Winterset* presents almost vividly American social condition in the North during the isolation to the depression era.

It is in *Winterset*, Anderson exposes many times the issues of social life that he is interested in. He shows the characters who are confronted with social fact contrasting to the meaning of liberty as the view of American life. Considering to the thoughts described above it seems more certain that *Winterset* relates to the American social condition as a common ground. Thereby, it is assumed the sociology of literature is applicable in analyzing *Winterset*. Swingwood, in his book *the Sociology of Literature* writes "sociology is the scientific, objective study of man in society, the study of institution and of social process. It seeks to answer how society is possible, how it works and why it persists (1972: 26). Damono (1978: 18) argues that sociological approach is an approach regarding the relationship between the literature and society as the important fact.

This research will be carried out by applying the structural approach in which the characters and plot are observed in terms of their roles to create the dramatic situation. Since one of theories which are applied in the study is sociological approach, the writer of this research needs also the backgrounds of social and cultural description in addition to the biographical notes of the playwright. This will hopefully open the path to a better understating of the social injustice as one of the most outstanding aspects in the play.

The possibility of an interdisciplinary approach as part of American studies enables the writer to carry out a social approach. Hence, in understanding Anderson's vision for the existence of the social issues in America, a social approach is applied to approach the play. As depicted in the play, the main reason of existence of the social issues is because two ethnic groups (the majority and the minority) with their own differences within each group are assumed to evoke the social issues like the social injustice and race prejudice.

Still it is believed that a literary work is a reflection of some external factors, such as the author and the reality outside the play. This research also tries to interpret Anderson's vision for the social problems in America through the problem of social injustice and race prejudice.

Expressive criticism, according to Abrams (1981: 37) "judge is the work by its sincerity or genuiness, or adequacy to the poet's individual vision or state of mind; and it after looks in the work for evidence of particular temperament and experiences of the author who consciously or unconsciously has revealed himself in it.

C. Discussion

The members of minority group; Mio, Romagna, Garth and his family have been treated in the society. They have been prejudiced. They have faced the grave obstacles to cordell and social equality. Mio faces facet of pattern of prejudice and discrimination. His personal rights have been limited by the power. Romagna is the fixed crime by the process of biased law. Garth's right to express what he must say has been deprived by the court and those who are superior. The problem is how could the power as well as the majorities maintain to impose any violence on the minorities.

The different attitude or characteristic of two groups brings the consequence. Scenes division in Act one sets very important. These depict people of two classes in any differences. The minorities are not like the majorities. Through episodes of different Acts (Act II and Act III) the interpretation on the world of minorities becomes clear. Minorities feel and see themselves inferior to the whites. The feeling of self-inferiority keeps them from being brave. They lack of comrade to fight to obtain the essence as human being; standing on equal feet with the whites. The result is the whites or member of majority group easily discourage and impose the threats on them. In the society they play an important role, Garth and his family look very frightened of Trock Estrella. They are obedient to him. They are always willing to do what Trock is told to do.

They are not brave to say 'no' though they know the orders are only good for him (WIN, 1935: 43).

In the social economic system, Garth's condition is not as good as Trock's. It is another reason why the gangster has dominated him. He has earned his life on condition that he must keep the past scene secret. The condition makes Garth and his family much more dependent on him (WIN, 1935: 43-49). It is really the fact which brings them to the worse condition.

On another view, whites' prejudgment that the minorities are lower in rank, ability, social status manages the condition that causes them to suffer from the unfavorable opinion. The whites view that culture of minorities is different from theirs. They are also preoccupied with the thought that the minorities are stupid, poor and uneducated. A great number of minorities live in the slum area. They cannot go to school because they don't have money to pay the taxes. They earn their livings by selling vegetables; padding magazines' collecting old newspaper. Some others live like tramps. They speak in their own dialects instead of standard English. On account of the inferiority, the whites hold the minority in low esteem (WIN, 1935: 37).

A related consequence is the sense of superiority profits the whites but on the contrary, the lack quality of the minorities causes them to suffer from the societal system; the societal rewards such as the way how the job opportunities, school, the state property are distributed; the way how laws are carried out, the way the health care is delivered in the society (Eitzen, D. Stanlay, 1986: 14). Such a disadvantageous condition furthermore makes them powerless. The people like Lucia, Rinny: Garth: Hubo: tramps, all face social failures and therefore they are unable to succeed in the competitive struggles. Being the poor and the lower class they are considered inferior and defective. From beginning they are victimized and prejudiced. It is not surprising, then they often fail to win in all problems as what Mio says about it (Win, 1935: 103). It is not only the defeat, but the power most often oppresses them ignoring the rights of human being. The execution of innocent man, the pressure on the eyewitness and the limitation to the minorities to go to school, all these note that the inferior status reinforces negative stereotypes that in turn justify the prejudice toward them. From that point of view, the flaw of the minority groups comes from the attitude of the prejudice majority ones.

It is also assumed the prejudices and the racial conflicts come about on the base of the individual competition to preserve one's own advantage. This personal motivation undoubtedly harms one to another and possibly brings the conflicts within the personality. It is told in the play Trock and Shadow are very close friends. Both of them are fellow gangsters. However, their relationship is not free from the prejudice. They distrust and suspect each other. Trock has an idea that Shadow, the one who knows everything he has done may tell to people that he is the criminal who often commits the crimes, including the murder of the pay-master in New England. In reverse, Shadow tells uncertainly that Trock is able to save his life. He has been haunted with the opinion that Trock is the first who tells the public that he is also a gangster. The suspicion and the prejudice within each individual increase more and more when each person wants to preserve for his own survival, being alive. At the same time, the increasing prejudice results in the competition for struggle to torture one another. Trock kills Shadow before he gets the opportunity to inflict statement of an intention to punish or hurt him (WIN, 1935: 67). Trock also murders Mio and Miriamne in order that they stop denouncing the facts that he is the real criminal (WIN, 1935: 113). The authority of New York prejudices that Mio's position is dangerous to the court. He is suspected telling the bias of law. Hence, the authority forces him to live in another place soon (WIN, 1935: 49).

Turning our attention to the sources of prejudice and social injustice as examined above, likely the blame is only seen from the mistake of minorities. However, the inferiority is not the only reason why minorities have endured prejudice and injustice. The economic system operated within the social milieu must be suspected and questioned because the social milieu which include laws, customs, distribution of power may dominate and oppress the minorities. In this view, institutions of the society have great power to reward and penalize their people. It is in the hand of institutions that the greatest authority drives from (Social approach).

The portrayal of court which penalizes Romagna to be a murder ignoring his arguments implies that the institutions foreclose the reward for him. The norm, the system of law reinforced by institution disadvantages him. In relation to this issue, the exercise of system is much affected by Romagna's personal identification, being alien, and anarchist. People are commonly in the unfavorable opinion that he is the criminal, trouble-maker or law-breaker. The judge says "and if the jury were led astray, remember it's the jury, by our Anglo-Saxon custom. The police orders the minorities not to go to the theatre, clubs and to dance in street like the whites (WIN, 1935: 54 – 55). Here, the personal liberty and man's dignity cannot be assured. Second, one becomes sure that Anderson delineates the authority which is less responsible for the protection of the citizen. Mio is unable to find a place in the society and he wanders from one place to another (WIN, 1935: 48).

D. Conclusion

Winterset is one of the plays which tell about the social problem in U.S. written by American playwright. This play explores the problem of minority people who are treated in unjust ways and prejudiced. As seen in the study these people become the victim of social injustice and racial prejudice.

Social injustice and race prejudice in the play are characterized by some aspects of life. Firstly, in the court Mio knows that his father, Romagna is treated in unjust way. He is arrested by the police without any clear reason when the robbery takes place. Then, he is passed with the death sentence though he is not guilty. The eyewitness, Garth is called to give his testimony. The real murder is not changed and punished. He is free from the accusation of being a murder. Secondly, in housing problem Mio is not allowed to live in New York. The government asks him to live in some other places. Like Mio, the minority people live in poor condition like those who live in slum area. Thirdly, in education Mio and other minority (Carr) are not permitted to go to school. They are kicked out from school only because the authority thinks they cannot pay their fee.

The depiction of man's inhumanity to man has got the place in this play. Anderson describes the power or majority people who are intolerant toward minority people and bad treatments that has caused them to suffer.

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