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Positioning the Chinese Princess of Peace in World Literature

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Abstract. The novel *Putri Cina* or *The Chinese Princess* by Sindhunata builds on the intertextuality of various texts such as myths, chronicles, history, and pop culture. In the light of René Girard's theory of desire, revenge, and scapegoating, this study aims (1) to show the inter-relationship among the texts in question; and (2) placing this novel in the work of World Literature. Through qualitative research methods and close reading techniques, this study finds out that *Putri Cina* recounts the history of conflicts to promote peace rather than revenge. The novel narrates such conflicts as the war between the descendants of the Javanese kings; the feud between the Chinese and Javanese people in colonial time; and the May 1998 ethnic riots in Indonesia. It concludes that it is necessary to circulate the narrative of the Chinese Princess as a peace ambassador in World Literature through the process of adaptation and translation. In a world prone to conflict, literary works can be effective agents of transformation.

Keywords: intertextuality; desire; revenge; scapegoating; World Literature

I. INTRODUCTION

In the beginning, it was a painting of a girl dressed in Chinese outfit with a head shaped like a withered black rose; her beautiful but sad face was on the girl's lap. In 2006, the painting artist Hari Budiono drew "Mawar Hitam" [the Black Rose] on top of a canvas measuring 150 x 190 cm partly in response to the ethnic Chinese persecution in Indonesia. Together with nine other paintings, "Mawar Hitam" had inspired Sindhunata to tell the story of the Chinese Princess in a book called *Babad Putri Cina* or the chronicle of the princess from China, published in the same year and later became the origin of Sindhunata's novel known as *Putri Cina* in 2007.

The character of Putri Cina transformed into three different personalities: Princess Campa the concubine of King Brawijaya, Roro Hoyi in the days of Sunan Amangkurat I, and Giok Tien the ketoprak star Sekar Kastubo towards the collapse of the New Order government. Narratives about love, power, revenge, and death give color to the journey of these Chinese women who have passed from one time to another in Indonesian history.

Written by a Catholic cleric as well as an observer of the Javanese local culture and practices, the novel alludes to a variety of culture in and outside Java, even the one known in other hemispheres. In *Putri Cina*, we find references and allusions of World Literature, especially Chinese Literature. This novel combines the poems written by T'ao Ch'ien and Han San with varied cultural and religious texts, especially those of non-Abrahamic religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Through the story of

the Chinese Princess, Sindhunata gives a voice to individuals who cannot speak by presenting the daily lives of the common people that commonly characterize great literatures of the world. The English translation of this novel, *The Chinese Princess*, was published eight years later.

Although *Putri Cina*'s background includes the stories that occur in Indonesia, especially Java, it is important to examine whether this novel can find its place in the constellation of World Literature (Dewi, 2019). The classic definition of World Literature in Goethe's term is any national literature that circulates internationally (outside Europe), including literary works that are not rooted in Western culture. This ostensibly Eurocentric definition has undergone improvements from time to time, among others by Damrosch who thinks that World Literature does not embrace all literary works in the world, but only works circulating throughout the world through translation (2011). Damrosch has earlier asserted that World Literature was not born but created; and can only become global if it gets readers outside of their home countries. Voltaire's work *Candide*, for example, became World Literature after being translated into English, *Candid*, and became famous outside of France even throughout Europe (Damrosch, 2008: 308).

On the contrary, Berman argues that World Literature must also reach works from unknown countries or far from the reach of world-renowned publishers (Berman, 2009). In fact, language is an important issue that plays a role in the circulation of World Literature, which itself is laden with power relations, ideology, institutions, and economic manipulation or politics (Tachtiris, 2012). World Literature circulates through English for literary works from developing

countries, even though the number of works translated is not comparable to the number of works in English translated into various languages in the world. Even literary works from minor cultures are mutually translated through English, for example: Vietnamese poetry is translated into Indonesian through its English version.

This study attempts to answer, first, why does the main theme surrounding desire, love, and revenge continue in the story of the Chinese Princess? Secondly, does Sindhunata's novel *Putri Cina* deserve a place in World Literature?

II. THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

Below is a brief overview of (1) René Girard's theory of mimetic desire and scapegoating, and (2) Intertextuality or theory of influence. Both concepts make up theoretical framework of this study.

A. Reading Girardian Conflict and Condemnation

René Girard's theory begins with the concept of desire, which is the basis of human nature and behavior. In simple terms, the explanation of this theory is as follows. If someone's stomach sends a hungry signal to the brain, she or he will want to eat. However, there is a possibility that such desire is, in fact, mediated by an advertisement for food that invites her/his hunger. Thus, human desire is not always internal and natural. People imitate other people's desire. They desire what other desire, hence Girard calling it "mimetic desire" or artificial desire.

A number of literary figures from major world authors namely Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Proust, Stendhal, and Cervantes were subject to Girard's research that becomes the basis of his book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. The main characters in the great novels studied by Girard fight for the same object of desire (e.g. woman, power, wealth, etc.) so fiercely that they fall into jealousy and rivalry with each other. Abshire (2010) claims that Girard's further interests in examining personas in myths and the Bible contribute to his elaborated theory of religion, sacred, and violence which remains influential in contemporary Christian philosophy, theology, literature, anthropology, and other human sciences.

Reading characters in those stories, Girard finds out that desire and rivalry (both are mimetic) yield social tension or violence. Inevitably, such violence requires scapegoating as he explains at length with examples drawn from mythology, literary, and Biblical figures in *The Scapegoat* (1986). According to Girard, scapegoating is effective if relations between humans break down along with the spread of natural disasters such as droughts, earthquakes, epidemics and so on. Whether in mythology or modern time, sacrifice is thereby required to curb conflicts and further chaos. Girard's theory of scapegoat mechanism reinvents the discourse of sacrificial lamb in major religions. Sindhunata claims that Girard's intellectual journey results in his own religious conversion with which he spiritually transforms himself with joy (Sindhunata, 2006a: xiii). In the light of Girard's scapegoat theory, this study looks at how the narrative of *Putri Cina* is constructed.

B. Layers of Texts

Simply explained, intertextuality is an intersection or relationship between texts where an author rewrites, cites, borrows or transforms the other (Kristeva in Abrams & Harpham, 2011; Mcquillan, 2002). No text is essentially original because it comprises of tissues of citation from other texts. In the view of Clayton and Rothstein (1991), intertextuality is theory of influence. They argue that narrative theory recognizes the incorporation of the author's story and that of the fictional character as "intertextuality". This present study is to trace what other texts Sindhunata steals, alludes to, alters, and reinvents in his *Putri Cina*. It seeks to examine what had given the author influence(s) in his writing of the novel.

III. METHOD

The nature of this research is qualitative by using library study that is commonly applicable in researching literary texts. It makes use of nine steps of library research from Mary George (2008) in reading *Putri Cina* with the intention of changing imagination into insight. According to George (2008: 6), the steps in library research are firstly, choosing a topic. Second, the topic is then changed to imagination. Step 3 is to clarify the research questions; followed by developing a research strategy as the fourth step. Step 5 is looking for references from various databases, and six, identifying the data sources. The next step is to assess/ match data sources based on the research questions. The last two steps are to explore insights based on reflection, and to compile a thesis statement based on these insights.

Sindhunata's novel *Putri Cina* appeared in 2007 became the primary data in this study. Occasionally, the translated version of the novel entitled *The Chinese Princess* published by Gramedia in 2015 was consulted to compare and contrast. The secondary data includes journal articles, reference books, scientific papers, and reviews in the media surrounding the author, works and their relevant worlds. All data were collected by note taking. The findings were then interpreted using close reading technique to see how intertextuality operates in *Putri Cina* whilst examining the application of René Girard's theory that underlies the novel.

IV. DISCUSSION

The first part of the discussion is intertextual analysis of *Putri Cina* that Sindhunata recreates from various texts. The second part is to locate the novel within World Literature in terms of its theme and reproduction. If otherwise indicated, all quotations are from the translated version of the novel into English, *The Chinese Princess* (2015) by Katherine Rae and Simon Rae.

A. Rich Intertextuality

The novel *Putri Cina* is the result of the development of Sindhunata's previous work *Babad Putri Cina* [The Chronicle of the Chinese Princess]. As Sindhunata says himself in the foreword of the book, the paintings that adorn the 175-page book are not illustrations but as art works to enjoy on their

own because the value they have is inseparable from the story that becomes the basis of the book (Sindhunata, 2006: 5). The novelist and chief-editor of the socio-cultural magazine *Basis* has also said that his intention is to make the ten paintings of the Chinese Princess open the imagination and inspiration of the reader.

The book's intertextuality becomes richer because Sindhunata also consulted the work of the American historian Nancy K. Florida on the chronicle of Jaka Tingkir. Sindhunata's reference is Florida's translated version of *Writing the Past, Inscribing the Future: History as Prophecy in Colonial Java*.

The next intertextuality is Sindhunata's use of the script of Ketoprak Ringkes Tjap Tjonhong, Djogjakarta. Sindhunata thanked Indra Tranggono for the *ketoprak* script "Putri Cina" he wrote which was part of the *Babad Putri Cina*. From the book *Babad Putri Cina*, which may also function as a catalog of Budiono's paintings, the novel *Putri Cina* was born and published a year later.

Putri Cina, the Black Rose, is the mother of Raden Patah, the concubine of King Brawijaya who accepts her destiny as a rootless human being. Because the the king's wife was jealous, Putri Cina was sent back to her native country, China. In the novel, the author says that this princess from China is "like dust scattered on the road tossed about by wind according to the poet T'ao Ch'ien" (Sindhunata, 2007: 302). In her wandering back to Java in search for the identity she had never found, the Chinese Princess became Giok Tien, the female lead of ketoprak Sekar Kastubo. Like her predecessor, this wife of Senapati Gurdo Paksi found that Java was only a temporary stopover for a drink. In Java, she and her people became exotic creatures, chased and sacrificed during riots.

It should be borne in mind that Sindhunata worked on the novel in conjunction with his scientific textbook published in the same year *Kambing Hitam: Teori René Girard [Scapegoat: Theory of René Girard]*. Explaining that in a riot and violence there is always a scapegoat, Sindhunata makes systematic reflections on some tormenting events for ethnic Chinese Indonesians by using the May 1998 Tragedy to illustrate his arguments. Here, following Clayton and Rothstein (1991), this incorporation of Sindhunata's own story and that of Putri Cina can be seen as an example of intertextuality. The novel is thus the result of the author's creative process and personal struggle owing to his Chinese ancestry.

Putri Cina is replete with stories of war, revenge, and scapegoating. A number of hostilities that led to violence described in the novel includes the Great Baratayuda War; the struggle for power among the descendants of the Javanese king dynasty; the conflicts between the Chinese and Javanese in the colonial era; and the May 1998 riots in Jakarta that afflicted the ethnic Chinese minority, especially women. In Sindhunata's imagination, the violence took place in the land of Medang Kemulan Baru. All stories in the novel are told to remind the reader of the horrors and futility of the war between brothers. In fact, the Indonesian Chinese minority in all ages become the scapegoats. To quote Girard, "ethnic and

religious minorities tend to polarize the majorities against themselves." (1986: 17).

Here, Putri Cina broke through the horizon of place and time to see her descendants continually become victims of the ruthlessness of the rulers when the country flared up in chaos. The following is the depiction of the disgusts of the May 1998 Tragedy through the eyes of Putri Cina:

Then [Putri Cina] saw the man take off his trousers and jacket, leaving only his underpants which clung firmly to his body. Although he was no longer young, his body appeared sturdy and strong. In his right hand the man carried a cage which he clutched close to his underpants. At the same time his left hand held a Chinese hand puppet, a puppet of a woman. (Sindhunata translated by Rae & Rae, 2015: 102)

Her bafflement continues as follows:

What could this all mean? Why are the soldiers clothed in green? Why is there a song *Heppypye-heppypye-heppypye* that became *iki piye-iki piye-iki piye*? Why does the man dressed only in his underpants carry the Chinese puppet of a woman? (Sindhunata translated by Rae & Rae, 2015: 102)

The Chinese Princess is described above as an innocent, trusting girl. Hardly did she realize that on a daily basis of her life, she had been surrounded by violence threatening at every moment. Such is violence that looks like the woman Chinese puppet in the hands of the seemingly chivalrous soldier. To compare, in the older book *Babad Putri Cina* that accompanies Hari Budiono's painting of the same event, the author depicts such violence thus:

In fact, people are not singing a happy song, *Iki piye-iki piye-iki piye*, but a violent song that was often sung by *Kumpeni* the Dutch soldiers: *Heppypye-heppypye-heppypye*. Then the violence becomes pleasant to hear. The violence is not felt. The feeling is just delightful and enjoyable: *Buntute sing akeh wulune, yen digoyang, ser-ser aduh penake*. (Sindhunata, 2006: 120)

Putri Cina was so familiar with violence that she was no longer aware of the threat. She might have thought that the violence was "only" limited to the song "Cucak Rowo" which was sung cheerfully by children in almost all corners of Java. Clearly, Cucak Rowo the bird's long tail with large amount of hair alludes to the soldier's "bird" – when shaken, the children cried out, "*ser-ser*, oh my, how satisfyingly sensual". In fact, behind the supposedly harmless (children) song, there was a masculine violence as potent and forceful as the soldiers. The author says the following:

It was inconceivable by Putri Cina that on one certain day violence would eventually break out in her life. And it is inconceivable, too, that in the jolly song Cucak Rowo, there is a tremendous lust of violence hidden. And hardly did she think that the woman *potehi* puppet was herself, who would become a victim of violence, if it should explode later (Sindhunata, 2006: 121).

Just as Putri Cina was naïve, so were the mob that gang raped the Chinese women in May 1998 riots of Indonesia. Quoting Girard (1986: 8) that "[N]aïve persecutors are unaware of what they are doing", the native crowd who turned jealous

thinking that the Chinese were their rivals committed such violence nonchalantly.

In the novel, the Black Rose, this headless Chinese Princess, however, sincerely forgave enemies who had slandered and ravaged her family. What Putri Cina offered was peace: “We come to this world as brothers; But why should we be bound by flesh and blood?” (Sindhunata, 2006: 9). The answer to that query is within reach; Near the end of the novel Sindhunata borrows another text: the jewels of Sunli, the gist of Dewi Kwam Im Po Sat words of wisdom. The Chinese believe that Guan Yin the Divine being will give her message to whoever pray fervently and show compassion to others. The pious praying people will find strewn jewels or tears of the Goddess of Compassion on the altar table as they say their prayers. These are her pearls of wisdom to remember if people want to be the ambassador of peace as epitomized by Putri Cina:

If other people cause as sadness

We will consider this as abundant good fortune. We will study every day, beginning from now that we do not cause another person sadness.

Every day we must feel satisfied at heart with what we possess at that time.

Whenever we are given one we will give ten times more.

If we are slandered without fault we should consider that as merit. If we do wrong but are praised as true we will feel this as judgement. (Sindhunata translated by Rae & Rae, 2015: 356)

At this point, a novel like *Putri Cina* recommends another way of reading history of desire, revenge, and scapegoating to which discussion the next section now turns.

B. Towards Transformative Literature

Like most countries in Asia that have the same historical experience of Western colonization, Indonesia has the potential to unravel problems through postcolonial literary works that question unequal East-West power relations. Issues such as orientalism, exoticism, identity, discrimination and the like are profoundly calling for global awareness. The narrative of Putri Cina is pregnant with these issues characteristic of postcolonial societies.

Adapted from various media (in this case paintings) which are also inspired by real events surrounding human rights violations, *Putri Cina* indeed becomes a richer work. Sindhunata presents a potpourri of puppet stories, Taoist truths, and incantations by *kaki* and *nyai danyang*, i.e., the highest subtle Javanese spirits that live in trees, mountains, water sources – they are, in reality, the spirits of the predecessors or ancestors of the village. Sindhunata juxtaposes these chants in praise of the spirits with the invocations to *makco* and *kongco* – both are terms of endearments for the great grandparents of the Chinese family in Indonesia. In so doing, the novel is to spread pleasant bouquets to offer at the *puja* altar called Javanese-Chinese intercultural understanding (Dewi, 2008). This work is worthy of circulation as an important part of the repertoire of World Literature.

Thus far, World Literature from the Asian (non-West) hemisphere (non-West) has included classical works such as *The Tale of Genji*, *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, and *The Arabian Nights*. These three great works of pride of the Asian nations revolve around love, war, revenge, power, and death. Similarly, *Putri Cina* is the story of love with sad ending between two people from different ethnic backgrounds Gurdo Paksi-Giok Tien. Such emplotment is likely to attract the attention of readers of World Literature. Sindhunata covers one story with another story with the theme of love and death from various cultures and backgrounds: Pangeran Tejaningrat-Roro Hoyi, Ken Arok-Ken Dedes, Batara Guru-Dewi Luhwati; and, at the top layer, the Chinese legend of the Tang Dynasty, *The Butterfly Lovers*, between a young man named Sam Pek (Liang Shanbo) and his lover Eng Tay (Zhu Yingtai).

Giok Tien or Putri Cina’ metamorphosis successfully performed the ballad of love and death on the ketoprak stage before the prima donna resigned to accompany her partner Setyoko who later held the title “Gurdo Paksi”. As with Sam Pek and Eng Tay, the love of Gurdo Paksi and Giok Tien ended in death when the arrows of Medang Kemulan warriors penetrated their bodies. Still like the story of the love of Sam Pek-Eng Tay, Gurdo Paksi and Giok Tien reunited later at the cemetery being the last and silent witness of their love. Finally, as in the old legend, the two lovers’ dead bodies were nowhere to find except a pair of yellow butterflies flying above the cemetery.

The (un)happy ending of *Putri Cina* symbolically shown by the flying butterflies also qualifies the novel into a transformative literature that pursues reconciliation instead of revenge. In Chinese culture, two butterflies that fly together symbolize eternal love. Some cultural traditions see butterflies as a symbol of rebirth to a new life after being free of cocoons for a certain period. It is not hard to predict that allusion to the Butterfly Lovers plot is to discontinue the revenge stories. As discussed earlier by Dewi (2008), when Sindhunata gives an example of the prosecution to the Chinese Indonesian women in May 1998 Tragedy in his *Kambing Hitam*, the tone is of apprehension and little annoyance. In the novel discussed however, Putri Cina comes across as sincere in accepting the fate as a descendant of the people who are usually made scapegoats. The quotation below may better tell:

Putri Cina thought in her heart, that the fate of the Chinese –as set forth in the admonition of Sabdapalon-Nayagenggong– should challenge the Chinese people not to pursue property, or to become wealthy, stingy and obsessed with trade. Once again, not because property, wealth, stinginess, and obsession with trade are bad in themselves. But because property, wealth, stinginess, may sometimes become a justification for scapegoating Chinese people as the party at fault, if and when conflict occurs. (Sindhunata translated by Rae & Rae, 2015: 95).

Further, the message of peace is also clear through the reflection of the Chinese Princess who actually gained valuable life lessons and path to happiness because of the misfortunes she experienced, saying:

“Our destiny has outlined that we can become victims when conflict breaks out. But it seems that this destiny can also

become the way to help us to live according to the teaching of our ancestors which make us happy. This is the secret of destiny. Not everything in our destiny is bad. In the badness actually is hidden a way and a means which help us and our fellows to be happy.” (Sindhunata translated by Rae & Rae, 2015: 90)

Here, Putri Cina appeared to realize that the Chinese people in Java ought not to be obsessed with trade and property seeking only but produce wisdom and art as advised by K'ung Tzu (Confucius).

Suffice it to say for now that the story of Putri Cina usefully contributes to World Literature. Promoting peace through literature is at the center of contemporary literary works as evident in the growing body of literature that won the Noble Prizes in the recent years, to say the least. Following Adolf (2010: 10), that peace literature is to maintain unity and diversity regardless of the national source culture, it is important to endorse the global literature status of Sindhunata's *Putri Cina* through its pertinent peace themes. Yulianto (2019: 78) claims that the portrayal of the May 1998 riots in the novel was a “memento mori” with which every person in the land of Java realizes the mistakes made in the past so as not to repeat it in the present. He argues further that literally, the depiction of the figure of Putri Cina and ambivalence about her identity whether as native Javanese or ethnic Chinese show the vision of the author about the importance of unity values among ethnic group differences particularly in Java and Indonesia in general (Yulianto, 2019). In addition to this, the fact that the novel had drawn the attention of Katherine Rae and Simon Rae as to have it translated by themselves shows that the novel has universal appeals concerning peace making.

Besides the issue of the theme and translation of World Literature, another important aspect is adaptation. Before examining the position of *Putri Cina* or *The Chinese Princess* by Sindhunata in World Literature through adaptation, a very brief review of some theoretical concept is necessary. According to Hutcheon (2006), adaptation is an internal or inter-cultural representation of one work in the same or different medium through a dual process: receptive and creative. Adaptation occurs because in essence a story always revolves. It evolves and mutates to suit the place and time. In Japan, the classic work of Murasaki Sikibu's *The Tale of Genji* has been adapted into dozens of versions of manga (Japanese comics) and films. Adaptation helped accelerate the pace of circulation of World Literature. Adaptation can break geographical, cultural, and national boundaries. In the digital age, the most popular and circulating adaptations occur rapidly through filmization and other performative adaptations. Like translation, the adaptation of World Literature is also not immune to economic and ideological biases.

In order to promote Sindhunata's novel in between 2006 to 2008, several cities in Indonesia held drama performances of the Chinese Princess. The performance was part-and-parcel of the book launch program. To mention but one, Dramacanda with the famous Jogjaneser performer and television star Den Baguse Ngarso with his ketoprak group put “Putri Cina” on stage at the Auditorium of Campus 2, Atma Jaya Yogyakarta

University a decade ago. An adaptation of the novel for motion pictures in the future will likely secure the work's position as World Literature. Here, seen in its possible adaptability, the novel *Putri Cina* deserves inclusion in World Literature. Such a work, in Damrosch's view (2009), is the result of a “glocal” process, namely the author brings local events (in this case, the May 1998 Tragedy) into a story that interests global audiences where locality is seen as a microcosm of global exchange. This is to say that efforts to disseminate *The Chinese Princess* by Sindhunata are crucial if Indonesian Literature is to expand its influence in the realm of World Literature while proclaiming the message of peace.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that desire and revenge is at the heart of *Putri Cina* the novel. Mostly through the female protagonist who appears in several different personas, the novel recounts stories of desire, revenge, and violence from one historical epoch to another in Indonesia.

This study has also shown that *Putri Cina* comprises of a number of texts that are cleverly pieced together by Sindhunata to juxtapose with his scientific book *Kambing Hitam* where he explores the theory of René Girard. Scapegoating mechanism is common when calamity occurs. In *Putri Cina*, the scapegoat reflects on and discontinues the violence by her compassion and understanding.

This study concludes that the universal theme of peace makes the novel worthy of proper position as a piece of World Literature. Here, the withered Black Rose aka the Chinese Princess, with her unclear identity, is sent to be the messenger of peace to break the continuing atrocity in the country she has loved to call “home” but, unfortunately, never will be.

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