

# The Representation of National and Urban Conditions in Indonesian and Singaporean Science Fiction Short Stories

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Abstract: In the 20th century, science fiction was considered cheap literature and not included in the high literary canon. However, this genre is highly acclaimed in the 21st century for its capacity to discuss the 21st century society and its specific issues. Not only in Western countries, but science fiction is also currently on the rise in Asia, especially after Liu Cixin won the prestigious Hugo Award in 2016. To investigate further about this current literary phenomenon in Asia, this research discusses science fiction short stories from two countries in South East Asia, namely Indonesia and Singapore. The data of this research are taken from four short stories (two from Indonesia and two from Singapore). The short stories are qualitatively analyzed using representation theory from Stuart Hall and other theories related to elements of science fiction. The result of the analysis shows how with its specific characteristics, science fiction is a powerful and effective genre to portray the dynamics of the two countries, Indonesia and Singapore.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the 20th century, science fiction was not considered a part of high-brow literature because they were printed in niche-marketed magazines, accompanied by striking illustrations. They were labeled as cheap fictions and not included in the literary canon. On the other hand, the 21st century witnesses the rise of science fiction. Ref (Pflueger-Peters, N., 2017) in his article “Why Science Fiction is The Genre of The 21st Century” explains why science fiction suddenly regains recognition and high popularity. The 21st century is an era signified by a rapid progress and heavy use of technology and the internet. The internet has been around for decades; however, the invention of smartphones that enable people to access internet anytime and anywhere has tremendously changed the way people live. This cultural and technological phenomenon seems to be in line with the spirit of science fiction as a technology fiction and a literature of change. Thus, science fiction can represent the digital era better than any genre.

Not only in Western countries, but science fiction is also a rising genre in Asia, especially in China after Liu Cixin won the prestigious Hugo Award in 2016 with her science fiction trilogy

entitled *The Three Body Problem*. Ref (Feng, E., 2017) has an explanation regarding the relation between science fiction and reality in China. Science fiction stories could function as an escapism for the readers since the setting in science fiction can be totally different from the real world. It is because as a genre science fiction has a special characteristic called cognitive estrangement. Cognitive estrangement is “the sense that something in the fictive world is dissonant with the reader’s experienced world.”

Furthermore, (Hall, S., 2013) also explained why China has become the sci-fi powerhouse in Asia. It is mainly because of the help of the internet. She also noted how science fiction has “roots extending far back in Chinese literary history” when science fiction stories from Jules Verne were translated to Chinese. Chinese readers have always been interested in science fiction genre as it contains themes of science and technology, which are aspects of modernity that China as a nation has always been pursuing.

Meanwhile, science fiction literature in Indonesia has not received enough appreciation. A number of Jules Verne’s books (such as *Around The World in 80 Days*) have been translated to Indonesian, but science fiction is still not a best-selling genre in Indonesia. Not many authors explore the themes of

science fiction in their works. One notable example is only Dewi Lestari with her *Supernova* series (first published in 2001). In order to increase the popularity of science fiction in Indonesia, a community of science-fiction fans decided to create an online magazine called *Serana 42*, dedicated especially to science fiction stories. The short stories published in *Serana 42* try to capture the development of science and technology, but what is notable is, the stories are characterized by Indonesian local colors and contexts.

Besides in Indonesia, science fiction also starts to receive more attention in Singapore, especially after the publishing of *Lontar*, a magazine that specializes in speculative fiction (including science fiction). Thus, this research will not only discuss science fiction in Indonesia but also in Singapore. The short stories chosen as the primary data of this research are *Suara Mesin*, *Suara Rakyat* by Muhammad Rivai, *Buyan* by Utiuts, *Blind Date* by Melissa de Silva, and *Big Enough for The Entire Universe* by Victor Fernando R. Ocampo. The four short stories are chosen because they manage to capture the urban and national issues from the two countries through the elements of science fiction. It is expected that the result of this research can help to identify national and urban issues and concerns as portrayed in the short stories and contribute new perspectives and understanding in dealing with them.

To analyze the data in this research, representation theory of Stuart Hall (Roberts, A., 2006) will be used. Hall stated that there are three approaches that can be used to explain how representation of meaning through language works. The first approach is reflective approach, which means “language functions like a mirror” (Roberts, A., 2006). It has a function to reflect the existing world. Next is the intentional approach that believes that meaning is imposed by the speakers. The last approach is constructionist approach that basically proposes that human beings construct meaning, using representational systems namely concepts and signs. According to this approach, there should be a separation between the material world and “the symbolic practices and processed through which representation, meaning and language operate.” (Roberts, A., 2006) It is not the material world that conveys meaning, but the language system.

The simple explanation of representation is the important part of the process “by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of culture.” (Roberts, A., 2006) This process involves the use of languages, signs, and images that are used to represent things. According to constructionists,

“meaning is produced within language, in and through various representational systems.” and it is “constructed through signifying – i.e. meaning producing - practices.”

In order to gain a better understanding about characteristics of science fiction, a number of sources will also be used, including books and academic journals. According to Suvin (in (Anderson, J., 2016)), science fiction is a literary genre “whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.” In this definition, Suvin highlighted the differences between the world in science fiction and the author’s real environment. In addition, Mendehlson (in Feng, E., 2017) stated that a special characteristic of science fiction is cognitive estrangement. It means that the fictive world in science fiction is something unfamiliar for the readers. Thus, there is a sense of wonder when readers encounter the world in science fiction. Furthermore, (Morse, D., E., 2006) explained that the setting in science fiction, by nature, is often very different from contemporary life, and that difference helps readers to temporarily escape.

However, Anderson also argued that science fiction still has a connection to the real world experienced by the readers. Many science fiction stories are “inspired by, and often mirror, contemporary events and troubles” (Morse, D., E., 2006). The distance (and at the same time connection) between science fiction stories and everyday life is one special appeal of science fiction. Morse added that although the setting of science fiction is somehow strange, science fiction is a genre that “reflects in varying degrees the times during which it is written.” (Rivai, M., 2017) For example, in the 1950s, Americans were still shocked by the aftermath of the first nuclear bomb against civilians. In his writing “Sterile Men and Nuclear-Powered Vacuum Cleaners: The Atomic Bomb and Atomic Energy in 1950s American Science Fiction”, Morse discussed that this concern was reflected in science fiction stories published during that era. In conclusion, with its unique intrinsic elements, science fiction has the ability to portray the conditions and problems of the contemporary society.

## 2 RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method in analysing the data. The primary data will be taken from four short stories from Indonesia and Singapore. The

short stories are *Suara Mesin, Suara Rakyat* (2017) by Muhammad Rivai (Utiuts, 2018), *Buyan* (2018) by Utiuts (DeSilva, M., 2017), *Blind Date* (2017) by Melissa de Silva (Ocampo, V., F., R., 2017), and *Big Enough for The Entire Universe* (2017) by Victor Fernando R. Ocampo (Ocampo, V., F., R., 2017). The two Indonesian short stories (*Suara Mesin, Suara Rakyat* and *Buyan*) are written in Indonesian, while the Singaporean short stories (*Blind Date* and *Big Enough for The Entire Universe*) are in English. In the analysis later, the English translation of the Indonesian short stories are provided. Since the data of this research are short stories from two countries, a comparative textual analysis will be conducted. The intrinsic elements highlighted in the research are characters, setting and theme. Furthermore, in order to conduct a deeper analysis and answer the research questions, the data are analysed with support from representation theory from Stuart Hall. Other theories related to science fiction are applied too since science fiction is a genre with specific characteristics.

### 3 ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 The Analysis of Two Indonesian Science Fiction Short Stories

The first short story which is going to be analysed is *Suara Mesin, Suara Rakyat* (*The Voice of Machine, The Voice of People*) written by Muhamad Rivai. This short story is the first winner of the second short story writing competition held by Serana42. *Suara Mesin, Suara Rakyat* cleverly discusses political issues of Indonesia with two major characters, 'I' as the narrator and Aini, the girl whom he secretly loves. Although the story is set in the future, it is relevant to the current condition of Indonesia, in which politics becomes the topic mainly discussed in public, particularly because Indonesia is scheduled to have a national general election in 2019.

*Suara Mesin, Suara Rakyat* starts with a quotation from a book entitled *Demokrasi Mesin: Sebuah Pengantar* (An Introduction to Machine Democracy) that is being read by 'I'. The quotation basically explains why in the future machine replaces people in the system of democracy. It is because based on the previous events in the past, power tends to corrupt:

“ ... Oleh sebab itu, untuk mewujudkan suatu demokrasi langsung yang adil, bersih, dan efisien,

kita membutuhkan suatu alat yang mampu mengelola, mengkalkulasi, dan mengeksekusi aspirasi tiap-tiap warga negara dengan rasional, cerdas, tegas, ringkas, tanpa bias, dan tanpa faktor-faktor emosional yang membatasi seorang manusia.” (“Therefore, to create a direct democracy that is fair, clean, and efficient, we need a tool to manage, calculate, and execute the aspirations of every citizen rationally, intelligently, strictly, briefly, and without bias and emotional factors.”) (Utiuts, 2018)

Different from human beings who have emotions and subjectivity, machine is considered to be more rational, unbiased, and effective. Therefore, it is believed that a just and prosperous society can be achieved through the system of machine democracy. However, the two main characters, 'I' and Aini, have different perspectives about the system.

'I' essentially believes that machine democracy is the best system for Indonesia. He even compares it with the election system in the past when people still used a ballot paper and a nail to choose their president, vice president, and the members of House of Representatives. According to him, the previous system is corrupted, and it is a right decision to replace people with the machine. On the other hand, Aini questions the validity of machine democracy. This can be inferred from her conversation with 'I' after they voiced their aspirations via the machine. Ref (Morse, D., E., 2006) argues that even though in nature most of science fiction stories take place in a world different from our contemporary life, they still have connections to the world experienced by the readers. For example, in *Suara Mesin, Suara Rakyat*, there are elements that evoke the sense of familiarity, which are the physical setting (Indonesia) and the social setting (democratic system).

The story ends with Aini being captured by Anti-terror Detachment and then sentenced to death because the machine declares her as a threat to the country. This incident comes as a big shock for 'I', and while trying to control his emotion, he remembers his own words to Aini, “Adil itu tidak berarti mengabdikan keinginan semua orang” (Being fair does not mean granting everyone's wishes). *Suara Mesin, Suara Rakyat* is a perfect example of how science fiction is used not only to portray a society but also to warn them what could possibly happen if technology takes control over politics.

The next short story which is going to be discussed is *Buyan* by Utiuts. 'Buyan' in Palembangnese means 'stupid' and the word is usually used to mock at other people. Through the title, it can be seen how Utiuts made an effort to

bring a local colour to her story. Specifically, the conflict of the story happens when a woman from Palembang (a city in Sumatra) called Tante Nana goes to Jakarta and has to encounter a complicated situation in Jakarta. From her perspective, the readers are taken to witness the condition of Jakarta in the future with its technology development and also environmental problems.

Buyan is set in the future Jakarta. Different from Jakarta in 2018, the capital city in the story is having a problem with big flood. The government even has to block accesses to half of the city because of the flood. Sophisticated machine is the science fiction element that can be witnessed here, which is a driverless car. Tante Nana just arrived in Jakarta, and from the airport, she is taking an online-based taxi (called Kejar or 'chase'). On the way to her nephew's house, the driverless car takes the wrong route, going to a part of Jakarta that is affected by the flood. Panicking, Tante Nana tries to contact Kejar's customer service, and this is when the external conflict happens: between technology and human beings.

Kejar's central system tries to stop the driverless car, but it keeps having a problem because of the interrupted connection: "Ibu Nana, kami mohon maaf sekali. Kami belum berhasil mengambil alih pengendalian mobil Ibu karena interrupted connection." ("Madame Nana, we apologize once again. We haven't successfully taken control of the car due to interrupted connection.") The car then keeps moving to the affected area, making Tante Nana panic even more. The scene could be discussed as an analogy of what would happen if technology is out of control, leading to incidents and accidents for human beings. In the end, what saves her is when the car suddenly stops because the battery is running out. This seems to indicate that after all machine is just a machine. No matter how sophisticated it is, it can be broken and destroyed.

### 3.2 The Analysis of Two Singaporean Science Fiction Short Stories

The existence of independent bookstores and publishers has a considerable contribution in the rising of Singaporean literature in the 21st century. Founded in 2005 as an imprint of an independent bookstore Books Actually, Math Paper Press has published works from Singaporean authors (or foreign authors living in Singapore), such as Cyril Wong, Melissa de Silva, and Victor Fernando R. Ocampo. Even though Math Paper Press is a small press publisher, it offers various choices of literary

work, including novels, poetry anthology, and photography collections. Two short stories published by Math Paper Press will be studied in this essay, which are *Blind Date* by Melissa de Silva and *Big Enough for The Entire Universe* by Victor Fernando R. Ocampo.

In *Blind Date*, de Silva critically discusses Singaporean government's policy towards a certain race in Singapore, Eurasian (the term used to refer to individuals of mixed European and Asian descent). This theme dominates the stories in her collection *Others* is not a Race, but what makes *Blind Date* different is that it employs science fiction genre to explore the topic. Martin Desker, the main protagonist, is a Eurasian living in Singapore, and all his life, he has been trying to find other Eurasians in his country. *Blind date* in the title refers to his meeting with another Eurasian, Gerald Pereira.

The element of science fiction which is obvious in this short story is the development of technology, as seen in this quotation: Reaching into his shirt pocket, he drew out a thin silicone rod and tapped one end of it with his index finger. It ejected a transparent, pliable sheet, as thin as paper used to be (Ocampo, V., F., R., 2017). The quotation depicts how Martin uses a sophisticated gadget, a significant indicator of technology development. However, a cynical attitude toward this development can also be seen here: Smooth globes of tree emerged like sculptures under the effortless industry of the automated sheards. It was all very impressive, but he often felt humanity had become obscured by these wonderful technological doodahs (Ocampo, V., F., R., 2017). Through Martin's perspective, de Silva points out an important debate about human beings' attitude toward technology, a typical topic of science fiction stories, for example in *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley.

De Silva also uses Martin to voice her concern about the existence of Eurasians in Singapore: Try as he might, he hadn't been able to shake off the suspicion that 'heritage Eurasians' were on the brink of extinction (Ocampo, V., F., R., 2017). In 2017, Eurasians are considered minorities as they took only 0.4% of Singapore population, and this makes them often categorized as the others (thus, the 'others' in the title *Others* is not a Race). Martin and Pereira have this deep conversation about their ethnicity during their meeting. While Martin seems to have the intention to gather the remaining Eurasians, Pereira intends to cover the fact that he is Eurasian. He even does not want his children to be labeled Eurasians:



“It was just more practical. Why would I want them to be upset all the time? I spent so much of my life being angry. Angry at feeling invisible, angry that other bloody Singaporeans seemed to think we didn’t exist. Yes, there were so few of us, but we still counted, goddammit.” (Ocampo, V., F., R., 2017)

Having listened to his grandmother’s story about Singaporeans’ discrimination toward Eurasians, Pereira expresses his disappointment and does not want his children to experience the same bitter treatment. He prefers his children to be free from discrimination from Singaporeans.

If *Blind Date* focuses on how Eurasians are categorized as the other in Singapore’s social structure, in a short story written by Victor Fernando R. Ocampo the multicultural condition of the nation can be seen, as represented by the characters. Ocampo is actually a Filipino author but he often wrote about Singapore. The major plot of *Big Enough for the Entire Universe* revolves around the issue of technology versus humanity. The story starts in a military installation in Bukit Gombak. In this place, four characters are investigated by an officer about a recent case which happened in a flat. ‘A giant blob of grey goo in the shape of a human heart’ appears in the flat and everyday it expands, as if it is going to cover the entire Singapore. Bewildered about this strange appearance, Singaporean government tries to investigate about what is actually happening by asking questions to the flat residents.

An important science fiction element which appears in the story is the incredible invention. Dr. Xin, a scientist, lost her family in a car accident. Unable to handle the grief, she conducts an experiment to bring her family back. Similar to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in which tragic consequences happen when human beings try to play God, in *Big Enough for the Entire Universe* Dr Xin’s creation becomes out of control. The story ends heartbreakingly when the officer commits suicide since he feels depressed and other characters decide to leave Singapore.

Singapore’s multicultural society is represented by the characters and their cultural background. The first character investigated is Madame Semangat. She is a middle-aged Moslem woman, and from the vocabulary she uses, she is also from Malay background. The second character is Miss Shen, who represents Chinese ethnicity. She speaks in Hokkien, and Singlish can also be detected from her

answers to the officer. Another characters is Ms. Ai, who depicts a Singaporean from high social class.

When being investigated by the officer, she is worried more about her Louis Vuitton bag instead of the growing creature. The last character is a Filipino student, Ghabby Marquez. He helps Dr. Xin’s experiment, and his main concern is whether he will get deported after the incident. His appearance highlights the immigrant issue in Singapore. The interesting element in *Big Enough for the Entire Universe* is that he portrays how a family problem can affect national security. Technology in this story is used by Dr. Xin to help her get her family back, and when her creation grows beyond her control, it causes a national disaster.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

The discussion of *Suara Mesin*, *Suara Rakyat* and *Buyan* shows that the two short stories not only portray the condition of Indonesia but also serve as a warning if technology takes control over all aspects in life. *Suara Mesin*, *Suara Rakyat* grimly depicts the situation when machine replaces human beings in a political system. Meanwhile, through the point of a view of its main protagonist, *Buyan* cleverly describes Jakarta in the future with its enviromental complications and the development of transportation technology. On the other hand, the two Singaporean science fiction short stories discussed in this paper highlight the multicultural condition in Singapore. *Blind Date* depicts the painful situation faced by the Eurasians who have always been ‘othered’ by Singapore government. The major conflict in *Big Enough for The Entire Universe* is actually about mother’s love to his son, but interestingly, in the short story the characters represent the various races and social classes in Singapore. It also represents how Singapore’s national security is affected by uncontrolled technology. All short stories analysed in this paper employ science fiction elements to unveil concerns about the national and urban conditions either in Indonesia or in Singapore. Even though science fiction settings are in the future or in a universe totally different from our own, the genre itself is an effective mirror to illustrate contemporary society and its problems.

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