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A stylistic analysis of a selected short story in Agnes Newton Keith’s *Land below the Wind*: Narratorial shift, ambivalence and mimicry in colonial writing

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate how the story short *A Man of the River Goes Home* (henceforth MRGH) by Agnes Keith in her *Land Below the Wind* (1939) differs from the rest of the stories in this compilation. As an autobiographical work, *Land Below the Wind* deals mostly with the author’s account of her own life and experience in Sabah during the British colonial era. This may include things she needs to endure, how she feels about the country and her inner thoughts as a white woman who just starting to adapt to a new life in Sabah. This paper is based on this particular short story (MRGH) since it demonstrates how the author changes her style of writing from an autobiographical to a creative mode (i.e transforming fact to fiction). In other words, this is among few instances where Agnes seems to offer a different stroke of her penmanship and that the language and element of fiction used in her narrative is particularized in such a way that it enables her to explore the life of the main character, Abu Nawas while at the same time reflects her own situation being away from home in North America. *A Man of the River Goes Home* as a short story also testifies Agnes’s ability to critically empathise with the native during the era where colonial rules were taking its roots and that her narration of ‘Abanawas versus the White Man’s Law’ definitely offers a perspective of a white woman spreading the message of humanity to her western readers amidst her ambivalent position as a wife to a colonial administrator.

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1. Introduction

Agnes Newton Keith was an American writer and wife of Henry G. Keith a British Conservator of Forests and Director of Agriculture for the government of North Borneo during the British colonization in North Borneo. During her stay in North Borneo which is now known as Sabah or Land Below the Wind, she managed to write a book about her life and adventures in North Borneo and she also wrote about the peoples she met where most of them are natives. We chose Agnes (1939) because unlike Said (1978), we will look into the western female style of travel writing. Moreover, the fact that she is married to a coloniser makes her as a part of the imperialist who represents the natives in her writing.

2. Methodology

In this paper, we have conducted a close reading on a chapter in Agnes Keith’s well-known autobiographical book, The Land Below the Wind. The book itself serves a memoir of the writer’s real life experiences but it also contains some fictional events/stories which lend itself to the writer’s imagination. The selected chapter entitled The Man of the River Goes Home is one of those stories. It is a story about Abanawas, a native of Borneo whose story told to Agnes by another person and Agnes decides to put the story together in her autobiographical work. She narrates the story of the ill-treatment of Abanawas by the white ruler of North Borneo through the invisible narrator. By so doing, Agnes does not incriminate herself as the narrator of the story who passes judgement on the white man’s rules in Borneo as the narratorial shift in her narrative help to fictionalise the story.

It is necessary to choose fictional text rather than an autobiographical writing in order to conduct a stylistic analysis because through this genre, we can see how a narrator represents his/her character in the story. In our case, we are lucky to discover that Agnes in a few occasions in her book represents the natives in fictional mode which enable us to conduct such a study. According to Shakila (2013), it is important to use fiction as a source to determine the representation of the “other” by western writers where she agrees with Said (1978) that the way natives were depicted by western travel writers through representation of bias description against the natives has the power to reinforce cultural stereotypes. Moreover, readers who have less or no knowledge about the natives could eventually use this bias description as a “guide” (Manan, 2013). The question is whether Agnes Keith in her writing about the natives follows the same flow as proposed by Said (1978) above? This is what we are trying to answer in this paper. Apart from conducting a close-reading of the selected short story, we are also using Fowler’s analysis of point of view to unearth some postcolonial issues in her writing such as ambivalence and mimicry. This study is not a pure stylistics analysis but it also a combination of stylistics and postcolonial analysis because we agree upon the notion that no text is value free and neutral (Simpson, 1993).

3. Theories

The dichotomy of the two worlds between the Orient and Occident is the main issue in Edward Said’s book, Orientalism (1978). In his introduction to Orientalism, the author argues that the whites needed the East (and its inhabitants) to help them establish the notion of superiority of the West. Either it is through political colonisation or in the field of education and writings, Said observed that the way the whites represented the Orients is always unfair. In other words, the whites are very Eurocentric in their views of the East. They regarded the non-westerners as the “other”. This leads to the “Rhetoric of Othering” which is based on “us” as whites and “not us” as the non-westerners. For instance, in many travel writings by the whites, Said realised that all of those travel writings create a pattern that is unfair towards the “other”. He then provides a blueprint in his theory of Orientalism where he condemns all of such writings. The whites often represented as the powerful and everything nice however, the non-westerners (or the natives of any colonised land) are often represented as powerless as well as “demonic” and “uncivilized” other. This, according to Said, has produced the concept of binary opposition that divides the Oriental and the Occident. Therefore, Said classified and generalized that all western writers treat natives as their subjects in their writings. In short, Said in his theory of Orientalism claims that all western writings have represented the West and East in such binaristic terms. As a result, this generalisation produces a racial stereotyping in which it is against
the western writers. However, in our view, as Said only chose to analyse works that were written by male western writers such as Disraeli, Burton and Nerval and did not include female western writers, his view may be misconstrued. In this paper, we aim to analyse *A Man of the River Goes Home* a story from *Land Below the Wind* which is part of the travel writing by a female western writer and prove that not all western writers promote racial stereotyping in their works as opposed to what Said had earlier claimed.

4. Analysis

*A Man of The River Goes Home* raises some issues and conflict between the natives and the white man during the imperial era in North Borneo. Abanawas as the main character in this story represented the natives who live according to their traditional law and the officers in this story represented the natives who are “natives in nature but British at heart” echoing Bhaba’s (1994) theory of mimicry. In her attempt to probe into the mind of Abanawas, a native man who ran ‘amok’ from the white man’s prison, we believe that Agnes consciously uses what Fowler has described as the transformation of psychological point of view from internal perspectives type A to internal perspectives type B in her description of Abanawas’s action. Abanawas seems to live a hard life after the imperialist colonised North Borneo where he is forced to follow the law of the white man, a law which is very different from the law that he knows. After so many years spent in prison and suffers insult from Corporal Dullah, Abanawas determines to run amok.

At the very beginning of the short story, Agnes uses psychological point of view type A in the excerpt below, it is clear that Agnes plays the role of a narrator as well as participant for this story and thought from a first-person point of view (Verdonk, 2002). Her description of the trip to Semporna is from her point of view and is based on her participating character’s consciousness. Agnes describes as follows:

> Our return trip from the island usually leaves us at Semporna for a night. After the green and blue of the jungle and sea, the glowing white strand of Semporna seems to strike out at me like a violent hand across the cheek, painful almost in its heat. But there is one time thereafter the sun has first gone, when the scene becomes unbelievably beautiful. And perhaps because that darkening coast holds the memory of amok of 1935, that sunset beauty is also sad. The story of the amok of Abanawas was my first experience with the fury of the Far East. All the weekend, in which Semporna was besieged by one crazed native, the news was tapped out for us in Sandakan over the grapevine telegraph system. The timber company launch brought word of it, the police captain wired reports from Lahad Datu, and the Semporna Bajaus spread news by native boats, and the coast steamer Kinabalu brought back report that she dared not touch at the Semporna wharf, where he decks would be under fire. While we waited in safety in Sandakan, with the hungry gossip on our lips, the amok took its course. The mosquito house which is still rusty and dark with the blood of Abanawas. (Land Below the Wind, p. 139)

The excerpt above also includes verba sentiendi which highlights the “preoccupation of the narrator with herself and her image” (Simpson, 1993, p. 40), for instance, ‘strike out at me’, ‘was my first experience’ and ‘hungry gossip on our lips’. Since she is on the same boat of ‘exegesis’ as the story, it makes her as the homodiegetic narrator at the first glance.

However, as the story progresses, there seems to be a clear change of point of view from type A to type B when Agnes starts to describe Abanawas and she herself changes her roles to be the heterodiegetic narrator. The narrator is telling the story from an omniscient point of view who tells the story using a third person omniscient and possesses the ability to see the inner thought of her characters. Here she focuses on the character’s point of view, feelings and inner thoughts. She is trying to avoid bias in her narrative by making herself as the omniscient narrator:

> In the noisy darkness of the jungle night he sat by the river and thought. In only one way could the shame be lifted from himself and his wife. He, Abanawas, a man of the river had no choice in the dead which he must do. He must do what his ancestors had done, what his conscience told him to do […] when the shame had been lifted by blood Abanawas looked down on the twisted, once lovely body of his adulterous wife transfixed to the ground by his spear. The bleeding torso and severe head of her lover lay near her. As Abanawas looked sadly
down on them he knew that his action was just. A report of the killing was made by Abanawas to the headman, whose word in the tribe was law. The headman recognised the justice of the deed, but he remembered also that any death of violence must be reported to the White men who held authority of the district. (Land Below the Wind, p. 143)

Here Agnes discusses the reason why Abanawas kills his wife and her partner. She describes Abanawas as an obedient person who tries to live as a dignified man in accordance to the law of the native. Starting from this point, she uses zero focalization where the narrator does not play any role in the story but seems to know and says more than any of the other characters. This comes together with the free indirect discourse. When Agnes mentions about native law, it is evidenced that natives in North Borneo are not uncivilised. They are a civilized nation only that their laws are different laws than that of the white man’s. This revelation by Agnes is different from Said’s ‘Orientalism blueprint’ as Agnes does not perceive the natives as the “uncivilised” other; rather she describes them as civilized human beings. Agnes in her description of Abanawas also provides an avenue for the reader to probe into Abanawas’ inner thoughts and feelings. This is a very important element of Agnes use of stylistics because the transition from internal narration type A to interval type B enables writer to foster empathy between character and reader since she goes deeper into Abanawas dilemma of whether to kill or not to kill his wife and her partner—it is something that unobservable and only Abanawas himself is aware of. She let the reader understand the motives of her character so that the reader would not jump into conclusion that the native is a ‘crazy native’ as, the choice of mode used to represent the character and his or her speech determines a reader’s attitude towards a particular character (Lanser, 1981).

What becomes obvious here is that Agnes begins to show her ambivalent position about the imperialist practice of law in North Borneo. She displays her disagreement by declaring that the natives in North Borneo are civilized in their own way. This difficult position may not be shared among other writers of this time let alone male writers. Agnes position here also challenged the notion that the colonialist is supposed to “[save] the native from their uncivilized world” but what the imperialist has done here is actually making the life of the natives even harder than before by implementing their white law. In addition, the headman in this excerpt displays Homi Bhabha’s idea on the ambivalence of the coloniser. He understands that Abanawas is only following the law of the natives but he also bowed down to the white man’s law as he thinks their law is more superior. Agnes described the characters in this fiction both internally and externally. In this story, Agnes changes her role to an omniscient narrator who possesses the knowledge of the thought of her character, motivation as well as feeling.

To add to the gravity of colonialist discourse in the story, Agnes introduces another character, Corporal Dullah, who serves as an agent of the white man’s law in North Borneo. The excerpt below demonstrates Corporal Dullah’s treatment of his fellow native:

The Corporal came closer. Still Abanawas did not move. The Corporal was indignant. Here was insolence and he resented it! He could afford to resent it, for he was Police Corporal Dullah! He was supreme in this fort, in Semporna! He was the white man’s law! The Corporal became more indignant. “Animal,” he shouted, “Do not look at my woman with dirty eyes! Empty the water and go!” Abanawas stood stupid before him. “Pig! Insulting swine! Empty your water and go!” The mind of Abanawas struggled dreamily back to a swaggering Corporal. “I do not insult the Corporal’s wife,” he said gently. “But I see I see inside Corporal’s house all that a man desires. And my heart is sick for it.” “So your heart is sick! Then here’s the medicine for it!” The Corporal struck the prisoner on the cheek with his open hand, and entered his kitchen to Jijah. Abanawas stood motionless. The blow becomes part of his misery. Then submissively the shoulders of Abanawas bowed with the yoke, the hands picked up the tins of water and emptied them in the Corporal’s water jars and returned the empty tins to the water cart. Submissively, the body of Abanawas went to the barracks, entered the sleeping quarters, and sat on a cot. Here at last the mind of Abanawas took note of what had happened. He sat on his cot in the hot close shadows with the Corporal’s blow stinging his face. He thought back on his life, and in the sweet sick dusk he saw the years move clearly. (Land Below the Wind, p. 142)

In this excerpt, from the perspective of stylistics, Corporal Dullah represents a character of power whose actions directly affect the entities including Abanawas. He becomes the agent because the act of slapping affected
Abanawas who is victimised in the story. Another element of stylistic that we would like to highlight here is the use of words that can persuade the reader to feel empathy towards Abanawas but instill anger towards Corporal Dullah. Agnes uses the words that create sympathy such as ‘struggled’, ‘gently’, ‘sick’, as well as ‘submissive’ to describe Abanawas. However, she uses words such as ‘indignant’ and ‘supreme’ to establish gaps between reader and Corporal Dullah’s character. The excerpt above shows the relationship between Corporal Dullah and Abanawas where although both are natives of North Borneo, Corporal Dullah seems to be more superior than Abanawas because he is ‘a white man’s law’. Thus, the relationship between them is almost similar to ‘master-slave’ relationship. This is another point to prove that Said has overgeneralised the western writings because there are natives who are more superior to the other natives. This is also a reflection of the ‘other’ relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Thus, Corporal Dullah is an example of mimicry where he may looks native but he is actually trying to be more like the coloniser.

From the excerpt above, it shows that Agnes uses the narrative report of speech acts. Agnes tries to alienate the reader from the imperialist by raising the issue of how the white man’s law has discriminated the law of the native. Agnes also tries to build a closer relationship between the reader and the main character Abanawas using internal perspectives type B. The excerpt above also demonstrates some aspects of transitivity items by displaying unequal power relationship between the agency and the victim—the clausal structure of an agent-affected agent-hurled-affected.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, A Man of the River Goes Home is an example of fictional work published during the colonial era of North Borneo which was supposed to propagate imperialist agenda. However, based on the analysis of Agnes’ writing using stylists approach and juxtapose it with Said’s (1978) Orientalism, it is found that the way Agnes represented the natives in her fictional writings does not adhere to Said’s Orientalism. She is more ambivalent in her writings. There is a sense of empathy in her writings about the natives and the style that she chose when writing about the native demonstrates her effort to build a closer relationship between the reader and her character, in this case, Abanawas. Thus, this discussion provides an evidence to prove that Said has overgeneralized the western writing and it also serves as an evidence to debunk some aspects of Said’s Orientalism.

References