BUILDING PLACE FROM WORDS: AN ANALYSIS OF PLACE IN ACEP ZAMZAM NOOR’S MEMBACA LAMBANG

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DOI: 10.24815/.v1i1.14424

Abstract

The paper discusses Acep Zamzam Noor’s choice of place words in his book “Membaca Lambang”. Using a theoretical framework from Knickerbocker which is rooted in Ecocriticism tradition, a selection of poems is analyzed and discussed to examine the ways poetic devices are used to enact the immediate, embodied experience of nonhuman nature, which in this case is place or place words. There are fifty nine out of sixty six poems in the book which are entitled with names of place. The selected poems will be analyzed by looking into the ways the place words are used as a framing device and a presence in human history. The analysis shall delve into the contextualization of place in Noor’s ecopoetics so that readers are drawn into the words and the ecosystem they are a part of.

Keywords: Place, ecocriticism, ecopoetics, desire, spirituality, memory.

1. Introduction

Place has been a straightforward support of identity. People are often times defined by where they are from. Place in literature has, therefore, been getting renewed interests as it is now seen as a site where meaning potential resides. With this perspective, the paper looks into place as part of the author’s ecopoetic device to deliver the different meaning potentials from experiences, concerns, ideas, tangible or otherwise, to his audience.

2. Literature Review

Place, according to Carter, et al. (1993), is space after space embodies the symbolic and imaginary investments of a population and is overshadowed by the power and negotiation of social relations. This means that the symbolic and imaginary are constitutive to the idea of place. Place is more than just mere space because it is space where meaning making is made. When space is consumed, it becomes place because then it is ascribed with meaning.

Place in literature has been studied from different perspectives. It is, for example, the focus of ecocriticism. Place from an ecocritic perspective is part of nature because, as stated
by Wallace and Armbruster (2001) nature, “… also includes cultivated and built landscapes, the natural elements and aspects of those landscapes, and cultural interactions with those natural elements” (p. 4). In his study of several American poets, Knickerbocker (2006) comes up with a proposition that the poets used what he called as sensuous poesis which refers to the use of formal poetic device to enact the immediate, embodied experience of nonhuman nature. Knickerbocker believes that “modern eco-poetics draws attention to both the words on the page and the greater world of which they are part of” (p. 6). This is basically the base for the analysis of Membaca Lambang.

However, place has been analyzed in many ways. Ecocriticism is one of them. Marland (2012) explains that ecocriticism is a term which might cover a wide range of literary studies examining and exploring the relationship between the human and the non-human. This started in around the 1960s when people’s environmental consciousness started to arise. The awareness of environmental importance led to, what is now termed, the First Wave which, according to Marland (2012) placed its concern on finding best forms of literary expression to deliver. Critics have argued that, especially in the US, the First Wave tend to be celebratory, lacking a critical rigor in its writing. The Second Wave which followed has a more complex view towards environmental messages in literary expressions. Critical approaches with roots in for instance feminism and post-colonialism have contributed to a more complicated view of nature as constructed and deployed to reinforce dominant ideologies (Marland, 2012). This was phrased by Coupe (as cited in Marland, 2012) as “green studies debates ‘Nature’ in order to defend nature”. The contributions of the different critical theories have brought into fore the complexities of nature representation in literary work. It carries the potential to show or conceal the possibilities of marginalization or oppression in the contexts of the texts.

Further development of the theory witnessed the coming of a new paradigm which is eco-cosmopolitics which becomes the major feature of the Third Wave. As implied by the term, eco-cosmopolitics, the Third Wave breaks national barriers and attends to the locality of the global world. Adamson and Slovic (2009, pp. 6-7) state that ecocriticism “recognises ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries,” and explores “all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint”. Ecological and environmental violence has contributed to a realization that boundaries in its many forms including human-non/human, nature/culture are affected indiscriminately by the violence. The Third Wave then brings a more versatile approach as it provides the possibility of examining texts as the realizations of how bodies and matters get entangled and diffused. With the Third Wave, literary texts become one of the manifestations of eco-cosmopolitics.

The coming of the Fourth Wave is more of a compliment to the Third Wave. To put it simple which is actually almost impossible, the Fourth Wave co-exists with the Third because it adds the element of trans-corporeality to contemporary ecocriticism (Marland, 2012). Trans-corporeality, a term coined by Stacey Alaimo, refers to the exchanges of materials across human bodies, animal bodies, and the wider material world. This implies, in Marland words, a shared materiality between human and the non-humans. Marland further explains that it implies the importance of understanding that distinctions between human and environment become more unclear. Marland states that the opaque distinctions necessitate a move beyond the construct of ‘nature’. This means that the intermingling of corporals of human and non-humans with the environment suggest the presence of agencies. Environment and ecology wise, the fourth wave has highlighted the presence of agency in the process of bodily movements across humans and non-humans. Marland illustrates this by showing evidence in a picture of a dead chick with plastic materials in their stomach. The picture shows the intricacy and difficulty in differentiating human and non-human agency.
The complexity of analyzing things environmental and ecological necessitates a methodology of close, slow and reflective readings of texts which should result in the non-normative meaning making of nature.

For a start, examining literary texts as they embody for example eco-cosmopolitics or trans-corporeality should reveal the ideas of nature as it is used in the texts. Taking the aforementioned background of the theory into considerations, the framework proposed by Knickerbocker lays foundation of how at the very basic the workings of poems might construct the textual use of nature, in this case place words, to serve the authorial or textual intention.

3. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of the text is critical and qualitative in nature as it is basically a textual analysis. Place words were identified and classified. They were then analyzed and interpreted with reference to Knickerbocker’s framework. Meaning making was made by taking various contexts into considerations.

*Membaca Lambang* is divided into two parts *Mencari Perigi* and *Membaca Lambang*. I shall refer to the book as *Membaca Lambang*, to the parts as *MP* and *ML*. The poems in both parts show that the poems are notes written by a traveler. The notes record the places, the experiences, the contemplations encountered or undertaken by the traveler during his journey. To the extent that the poems serve as an outlet of the traveler’s experience and views of his journey (Basumatary, 2018), *Membaca Lambang* share the features of travel writing. However, the poems go beyond records of a journey. They become rife with meanings as they were ascribed with symbols and imagery which indicate human presence and history.

For example in *Mendaki Bukit Doa* (p. 73):

*Cinta adalah palang kayu*  
*Yang kupanggul dari lembah*  
*Ke puncak bukit. Ada tetesan darah*  
*Jejak pengusiran yang terukir*  
*Sepanjang retakan tanah*  
*Dan pecahan gamping.*  

Love is a wood crucifix  
I carried from the valley  
To the hill top. Blood drops.  
Traces of rejection carved  
Along cracks on the ground  
And the lime stones

Bukit Doa is a tourist destination in North Sulawesi. It is popular for its beautiful scenery, and it is also visited as a spiritual retreat for many Christians. The symbols *palang kayu, kupanggul, tetesan darah* which are used in the poem indicate meaning which ties the place to an aspect of Christianity history. Reference to history also implies the dynamics of social and power relations that might have set in as evidenced from the above verse. The suffering of Jesus as a human being carrying a crux up a hill is evidenced of inequitable human relations, and these relations pale before the love for God—*Cinta adalah palang kayu yang kupanggul dari lembah ke puncak bukit*. *Mendaki Bukit Doa* embodies a specific point in human history which transcends geographical boundaries because it is contemplated from a place in a modern or postmodern time. However, the sense of universality of suffering is then redrawn to the single poetic subject in the last verse:

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1. Searching for A Well
2. Climbing Bukit Doa (Hill for Praying)
3. Wood crucifix, I carried, blooddrops
4. Love is a wood crucifix I carried from the valley To the hill top
To arrive at the last verse which indicates a sense of surrendering to things outside of him, the poetic subject is portrayed as going through various sufferings, the ups and downs of life. The experience which definitely has affected human history is framed within the boundary of a place Bukit Doa in North Sulawesi, and has emphasized the power of word in generating meanings for the author’s choice of place. Bukit Doa in North Sulawesi is now a place made up as a social construction. From an ecocritical perspective, put forth by Wallace and Armbruster (2001), the place -Bukit Doa- in Membaca Lambang then has become less obvious as nature because it has embodied perspectives of diverse peoples about nature and human relationships. The notion of place as a social construction permeates Membaca Lambang. The constructions are realized through a language of memory, of desire, and of spirituality.

In Membaca Lambang, the journeys to various places in Indonesia are used as a poetic devise not only to record the traveler-poet experience but also to voice a range of sentiments which manifest in the exploitation of language. Language and nature is so intertwined in the poems that nature becomes an active producer of words that voice social relations in a variety of symbols and imageries. The word-producing nature delivers perspectives, experiences, stories which I categorize into three kinds of language: language of memory, desire and spirituality.

3.1 Memory-Evoking Places

The poem, Mendaki Bukit Doa, has illustrated the way place on behalf of nature has constructed a certain part of human history. Bukit Doa, a hill in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, is used as the site to evoke a collective memory of Jesus crucifixion. Bukit Doa is written as a place where collective memory is shared and transcends physical boundaries. At the event of the traveler-poet climbed Bukit Doa in North Sulawesi, his sentiments took him to another hill where a historical climb had occurred. Place is a textual resource where the collective memory then is used to reflect on might then have happened to the poetic subject.

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The journey to the different parts seems to have incite the need to evoke collective memory of the places that he visits. In the poem Makam Aulia Raja Ilato Jupanggalo—a ritualistic site in South Sulawesi-, Noor uses a repetition of the phrase delapan puluh anak tangga (eighty steps to reach a sacred tomb) to reflect on the efforts made to achieve something or to be in a certain state of being. Each phrase that follows the words delapan puluh anak tangga are linked to another element of nature such as

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5 Tomb of Aulia Raja Ilato Jupanggalo
Aulia means a leader; raja means king
. . . Delapan puluh anak tangga
Adalah mantra yang dirapalkan pada segunduk tanah
Delapan puluh anak tangga adalah jejak pengembara
Yang menulis di atas air.
. . . Delapan puluh anak tangga
Adalah tahun yang meninggalkan bulan dan matahari.
. . . Delapan puluh anak tangga
Adalah kelahiran dan kematian yang telah berganti tempat.

The collective memory about the ritual at Makam Aulia Raja Ilato Jupanggola is preserved in the relation between human and nature, in about what human needs to do (climbing the eighty steep and slippery steps) despite the fact that none in the area really know about the collective memory they have on Aulia Raja Ilato. Through his journeys, Noor has made the places as a textual resource to construct a collective memory which leaves space for meaning making and reflection about the place and the memories tied to it.

3.2 Inciting Desires through Place
One of the tenets in ecocriticism in an awareness that there is” the deeply ingrained tendency (of human) to project his own human desires onto nature” (Bergthaller, 2006). The tendency has long been a central debate because many times the projection of desires onto nature is seen as a kind of human domination or conquer of nature. An ecofeminist perspective of this tendency, for example, might discuss it as a form a patriarchal dominance. In Membaca Lambang, different kinds of desires are indicated to have been casted on nature. Ideas about nature as a bodily entity is evident in, for example, Sungai Walemmae. Instead of giving a sense of conquering nature, this particular poem gives voice to nature:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sepi meneteskan tinta</th>
<th>Silence is dripping ink</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pada permukaan sungai</td>
<td>On the river surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dari balik gemuruh air</td>
<td>From below the roaring water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mengalir kata-kata</td>
<td>Words flow.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nature is a textual resource. Here silence produces ink, and words flow from water. The poetic aspects of water ends in desire, a longing which transcends time and space.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sebuah puisi</th>
<th>A poem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bermula dari lubuk hati</td>
<td>Starts from the heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kata-kata menyala</td>
<td>Words aflame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di ujung jemari</td>
<td>On fingertips</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AZN emphasizes the power of words in this poem by pairing the words kata-kata (words) with menyala (blazing), and rindu (longing) with bergolak (boiling). So, nature is here more empowered rather than dominated, and it resulted in a text with the sense of desire because the paired words indicate heat, movements and dynamics.

The tendency to use nature as a means of word empowerment is also evidenced in the poem Gua Pettae. Gua Pettae is located in South Sulawesi. It is a prehistoric karst cave with drawings on its wall.

The poem while describing the cave, equates the wall cave with words whereas we are aware that there are paintings on the cave walls which are assumed to carry stories. Giving the role of an author subject to the wall and omitting human presence has elevated nature over human. However, the next verses, again like the poem Sungai Wallanae, insert a human presence—to be precise a poet-as the ruler of words. So, even though nature is empowered through the construction of words, in the end it is the poet who rules.

In addition to desires of longing and ruling, there is a libidinal desire which implies a complexity of power relations such as that found in the poem Makale. In Makale, nature is given female sexual significance so that while the nature seems to be empowered it is so because it is made prepared for an intercourse. The poem again justify the assumption there is indeed a domination of culture because by effeminating nature, nature is then (and again) conquered.

The underlined words, although empower nature by giving them active words, are words which eventually can be related to the effeminization of nature as part of a libidinal desire.

When it comes to libidinal desires, place is treated in a rather complicated manner. Place is given voice and empowered with words but in the end it is still about the empowerment of human over the effeminization of nature by way of woman embodiment.

3.3 Place as Part of a Spiritual Journey

Another distinct use of place is as a site for a spiritual visit where contemplation and reflection are conducted, and philosophical questions are thrown. In the poem, _Sebuah Desa bernama Sidemen_6, as an example, a language of spirituality is observed from the word choice.

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6 A Village called Sindemen
Among words of nature, a word which indicate a specific prayer movement *bersujud* is assigned to *bukit-bukit* (hills), and the bowing movements of the trees (*pohon merunduk*).

Another specific praying activity, preparing the prayer mat is done on paddy fields. So praying is conducted by nature, hills, trees, birds, insects, and winds. The relation with nature has essentially led the poetic subject find his way to the infinity

...Kubiarkan hari-hari sunyiku mencari ujungnya sendiri
Di antara keterbatasan kata dan ketakterhinggaan makna

Adalah gerimis yang dihamburkan langit ke bumi
Ketika kudirikan surau baru untuk meletakkan hati
Bukit-bukit di sana telah menyimpan segenap keresahanku

Sedang padi-padi menguning di atas sajadaku yang basah
Bersama pohon-pohon yang merunduk aku sembahyang
Serangga-serangga di hutan menuntunku berzikir padamu

Kepasrahan telah meringkas semua perjalanan di bumi
Telah mengurai hasrat dan keinginan tersembunyi
Menjadi zarah-zarah kecil yang terbang entah ke mana
Kuikuti detik-detik yang bergulir, menit-menit yang mengalir
Jam-jam takdir yang akan mengaburku di dasar muara

...Sincerity has summed up all journeys on earth
Has parsed desire and concealed wishes
And turned them into tiny particles
Flying wherever
I keep the ticking seconds, flowing minutes
Fate hours who shall bury me at the bottom of the estuary

The underlined rituals indicating aspects of spirituality which is derived from a relation with nature eventually leads the poetic subject to a total submission to destiny. In this spiritual journey, nature is used in a dense manner as the tool to reach submission in spirit as expressed in the last line.

Kuikuti detik-detik yang bergulir, menit-menit yang mengalir
Jam-jam takdir yang akan mengaburku di dasar muara

I keep the ticking seconds, flowing minutes
Fate hours who shall bury me at the bottom of the estuary.
4. Conclusion

Place in *Membaca Lambang* is the trace left by the traveler-poet as he goes from one place to another. Each place is a textual resource. Place is agentive as it (and therefore nature) gives birth to words and then poems. There is an emphasis placed on place as the birthing mother of words in the poems as the emphasis in word choice with active and generative implications. Thus, a sense of an empowered place and nature is observed. Place as a textual resource is intertwined in the social relations between humans and non-humans. It implies place as a shared materiality which moves in an unequal play of power between humans or between humans and nonhumans. Place is the source, agent, and witness of the result of these relations. In the process, place is utilized as the site to address, maintain, recall or exploit memories (collective or individual), desires, and spirituality.

References


Appendix

Bahasa Indonesia-English Translations of selected poems

**Mendaki Bukit Doa**

*Cinta adalah palang kayu*  
*Yang kupanggul dari lembah*  
*Ke puncak bukit. Ada tetesan darah*  
*Jejak pengusiran yang terukir*  
*Sepanjang retakan tanah*  
*Dan pecahan gamping.*

*Tapi kenangan lewat dari pikiran penat*  
*Dan perasaan lelah. Waktu seakan mengendap*

**Climbing Hill Prayer**

*Love is a wood crucifix*  
*I carried from the valley*  
*To the hill top. Blood drops.*  
*Traces of rejection carved*  
*Along cracks on the ground*  
*And the lime stones*

*But memories passing from tired mind*  
*And exhausted heart. Time settles*
Ingatan tak ada lagi dan doa yang kuseret
Tersangkut pada baris-baris nubuat
Lalu aku membayangkan surga
Yang penuh parodi
Cinta adalah sejumlah luka
Yang nyerinya masih kutumpang
Di dada dan lambung. Tak ada yang berubah

Hanya malam yang bersekutu dengan sepi
Lalu kau dan aku tercipta kembali
Dilepas mengembara ke bumi

Tapi sejarah hanya mencatat adegan
Yang terjadi di luar kita. Dawat telah kering
Pena sudah patah dan doa yang kugelindingkan
Tersandung bongkahan-bongkahan batu
Yang tengah ditatah seorang rahib
Menyerupai anatomiku

Makam Aulia Raja Ilato Jopanggola

Delapan puluh anak tangga adalah suara keheningan
Yang mengitari bukit dan laut. Delapan puluh anak tangga
Adalah gema dari kediaman yang tak terdengar oleh telinga
Delapan puluh anak tangga adalah petualangan tanpa rute

Delapan puluh anak tangga adalah langkah peziarah
Menapaki lorong di hatinya. Delapan puluh anak tangga
Adalah mantra yang dirapalkan pada segunduk tanah
Delapan puluh anak tangga adalah celah gelap di bumi

Delapan puluh anak tangga adalah jejak pengembara
Yang menulis di atas air. Delapan puluh anak tangga
Adalah anak panah yang kembali ke jantung pemiliknya
Delapan puluh anak tangga adalah takwil tanpa aksara

Tomb of Aulia Raja Ilato Jopanggola

Eighty steps are voices of silence
Circling the hills and sea. Eighty steps
Are echoes of silence unheard by the ears.
Eighty steps are adventures without route.

Eighty steps are the pilgrim’s strides
Stepping along the corridor of his heart.
Eighty steps
Mantra chanted over a mound of earth
Eighty steps are a dark crack on earth.

Eighty steps are traces of a wanderer
Writing on water. Eighty steps
Arrows returning to the owner’s heart.
Eighty steps are interpretations without words.
Delapan puluh anak tangga adalah tahap penempuhan
Mendaki puncak tertinggi diri. Delapan puluh anak tangga
Adalah tahun yang meninggalkan bulan dan matahari
Delapan puluh anak tangga adalah kilatan pedang waktu

Delapan puluh anak tangga adalah arah menuju peleburan
Yang jalannya licin dan curam. Delapan puluh anak tangga
Adalah kelahiran dan kematian yang telah berganti tempat
Delapan puluh anak tangga adalah nisan tanpa alamat

Sungai Walennae

Seri meneteskan tinta
Pada permukaan sungai
Dari balik gemuruh air
Mengalir kata-kata
Sebuah puisi
Bermula dari lubuk hati
Kata-kata menyala
Di ujung jemari
Pada puncak kata-kata
Bergolak rindu
Seri menembus bukit
Menerobos waktu.
Di gerbang segara
Kata-kata lindap
Dan seri mengendap
Menjadi puisi

Walennae River

Silence is dripping ink
On the river surface
From below the roaring water
Words flow.
A poem
Starts from the heart
Words aflame
On fingertips
On the words’ peak
Longing boils
Silence pierces through the hill
Transcending time.
At the sea gate
Words are orshadowed
And silence settles
To become poems.

Gua Pettae

Dinding batu
Adalah kata-kata
Yang diukir waktu

Pettae Cave

Rock walls
Are words
Carved by time
Berabad penyair
Menggembala
Sunyi

Sebuah istana
Tercipta dari kata-kata

Berabad penyair
Meninggalkan
Takhta

Tetes air mata
Adalah kata-kata
Yang menjadi sabda

Berabad penyair
Menggali kuburan
Ganda

Bagi takhta dan sabda

For ages the poet
Herds
Silence.

A palace
Is created from words.

For ages the poet
Leaves
The throne.

Tears drops
Are words
Becoming the word.

For ages the poet
Dig a grave
Two

For throne and word

Makale

Kulihat matahari mendaratkan cahayanya
Dengan bongkahan-bongkahan gemawan jingga
Ke pelukan senja. Kulihat langit merendahkan dirinya
Dan gunung membusungkan payudaranya ke angkasa
Sedang sungai yang berliku membelah belantara
Pelan-pelan merengang ke dua pahanya
Seerti ingin mengundang seekor naga
Memasuki terowongan rahasia
Di selangkangan bumi.

I saw the sun lands its rays
With chunks of orange clouds
Onto the dusk’s embrace. I saw the sky lowers itself
Dan mountains protruding their breast to the sky
While winding rivers split the forest
Which slowly opens up its thigh
As if inviting a dragon
To enter a secret tunnel
In the earth’s groin