

UNDER CHILDREN'S EYES

Becoming Pious in Tayeb Salih and Pramoedya Ananta Toer Short Stories

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Abstract

This research seeks to discuss how child characters navigate their interactions with the adults in two short stories set in the predominantly Islamic society of Sudan and Indonesia. It examines Tayeb Salih's "A Handful of Dates" (1964) and Pramoedya Ananta Toer's "Circumcision" (1950) by locating both texts in World Literature which is largely Western or Eurocentric. Both short stories belong to the genre of initiation fiction often included in world literature anthologies. This paper argues that both authors help contribute to not only the rethinking of World Literature concept and circulation thereof, but also balanced view of heterogonous, multicultural Muslim society. Using post-Genette focalization theory as conceptual framework, this study finds out that the child narrators play distinct roles as (1) the perceptual focalizer to reveal injustice and frivolity of the adults' world; (2) the ideological focalizer to make meaning of children's faith through their relationship with the grown-ups. [Penelitian ini bertujuan membahas bagaimana tokoh anak berinteraksi dengan orang-orang dewasa dalam dua cerita pendek dari negara berpenduduk mayoritas Islam, Sudan dan Indonesia. Karya Tayeb Shalih, "A Handful of Dates" [Segenggam Kurma] (1964) dan karya Pramoedya Ananta Toer "Sunat" (1950) dikaji dengan menempatkan kedua teks dalam Sastra Dunia yang cenderung berkiblat ke dunia Barat dan Eropa. Kedua cerita pendek bergenre fiksi inisiasi ini sering diikutkan dalam antologi sastra dunia. Makalah ini menunjukkan bahwa kedua penulis memberikan

kontribusi dalam penafsiran ulang konsep dan peredaran Sastra Dunia, serta pandangan yang lebih seimbang terhadap masyarakat Muslim yang heterogen dan multikultural. Menggunakan Teori Fokalisasi Pasca-Genette sebagai kerangka konseptual, studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa tokoh anak dalam kedua cerpen memainkan peran yang berbeda sebagai (1) focalizer (penyuar) perseptif yang mengungkapkan ketidakadilan dan kedegilan dunia orang dewasa; (2) penyuar ideologis yang memaknai keimanan anak lewat relasi dengan orang-orang dewasa.]

Keywords: hypocrisy, perceptual focalization, ideological focalization, injustice piety

A. Introduction

When the talk turns to children in fiction, most people turn to characters in Western literature from the classic American *Adventure of Tom Sawyer* to contemporary British *Harry Potter* series. Very rarely do people mention fictional child represented in “minor literature”.¹ Character portrayal of non-Western, let alone Muslim, children in literature is until recently under studied and has become a priority area for research. Although African children have made their way to literature since the publication of Camara Laye’s *The African Child* (1954), for example, scholarships on child character in fiction are scarce. Only near the close of the century that Maxwell Okolie examines the works of some renowned African writers like Seydou Badian, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, and Mongo Beti, to conclude that evocation of the past like that of childhood is at the heart of African literature.² Evocation of childhood experiences also symbolizes the moral and psychological pride of the African people especially in pre-colonial times. Narration about childhood has made up perceptible parts of the

¹ At the risk of participating in the logic of neocolonialism, the term “minor literature” is used here as a convenience and mean by it mostly World Literature from the non-Western countries available in English translation. As claimed by Damrosch, most literature circulates in translation around the world. See David Damrosch, *Wiley: How to Read World Literature* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 65–85.

² Maxwell Okolie, “Childhood in African literature: a literary perspective”, *African Literature Today*, no. 21 (1998), pp. 29–35. <http://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=204469139>, accessed 12 Feb 2017.

culture, history and destiny of Africa.

Just as it is difficult to document research on children in African Literature, it is all the more difficult to find similar studies in Indonesian Literature for at least two reasons. First, when children, like women, appear in Indonesian fiction, they usually play a minor role. With the exception of the classic *Si Doel Anak Betawi* [Si Doel the Betawi Kid] written by Aman Datuk Madjoindo in 1956 that is much more popular when made into film and television series, there is hardly any other Indonesian novels with child character that can surpass Si Doel so as to invite scholarly debates to date.³ Secondly, children mostly appear in Children's Literature, that is, literature for children/ young adults being the target audience as shown by the wealth of research in this field,⁴ hence doing no service to the study at hand. Thus being said, this study attempts to examine how Tayeb Salih and Pramoedya Ananta Toer depict the child narrator in, respectively, "A Handful of Dates" (1966) and "Circumcision" (1950). Both works belong to World Literature, i.e. works that circulate outside the country of origin via translation. This study departs from the conviction that portrayal of children may convey powerful messages about the ways in which grown-ups can be either perpetrators or protectors of the young ones; and how children deal with the adults and the world around them. It will firstly discuss the position of both short stories studied among the World Literature constellation. The child narrator's perception found in each story will be discussed in turn, focusing as it does on its distinctive role as (1) perceptual focalizer and (2) ideological focalizer.

³ See for example recent studies on, mostly, the film or television series *Si Doel Anak Betawi* by Zane Goebel, "Representations of doing 'Unity in diversity' on Indonesian television", *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, vol. 47, no. 1 (2013), p. 89; Intan Paramaditha, "City and desire in Indonesian cinema", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2011), pp. 500–12; David Hanan, "Innovation and Tradition in Indonesian Cinema", *Third Text*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2010), pp. 107–21.

⁴ Among important research conducted in Children's Literature are those of Riris K. Toha Sarumpaet, *Pedoman Penelitian Sastra Anak* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2010); Burhan Nurgiantoro, *Sastra Anak: Pengantar Pemahaman Dunia Anak* (Yogyakarta: UGM PRESS, 2012); Elisabeth Oseanita Pukan and Harris Hermansyah Setiajid (eds.), *Proceeding of the Fourth Literary Studies Conference: Children's Literature in Southeast Asia* (Yogyakarta: English Letters Department Universitas Sanata Dharma, 2016).

B. Locating Pramoedya and Salih in World Literature

Sharing Damrosch's first facet of his definition of World Literature being "elliptical refraction of the national culture",⁵ Andre Lefevere claims that World Literature is the refraction rather than reflection of the original, because translated literature is often diffused and distorted, hence gaining recognition mainly through misunderstandings and misconceptions.⁶ Incorporation of literature from non-Western countries into World Literature is often biased because preference and taste of the global literary market is determined by the English speaking audience.

The translation of Asian classic literature by the early Western scholars/translators is a case in point. In Waley's translation, *The Tale of Genji*, for instance, shows omission of 800 poems and several chapters out of this first novel by Murasaki Shikibu with which the position of the work to date in World Literature remains debatable.⁷ Another example is the translations of *The Thousand and One Nights* by Western writers like Antoine Galland, Edward Lane, and Sir Richard Francis Burton that show not only penchant for the exotic and erotic Orient, but also their colonizing attitude as to edit the original works at will.⁸ The stories of

⁵ According to David Damrosch, the definition of World Literature is built on threefold foundation, i.e. the world ("an elliptical refraction of national literature"), the text ("writing that gains in translation") and the reader ("a form of detached engagement with world beyond [reader's] own place and time"). See his David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 281.

⁶ André Lefevere, "Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in A Theory of Literature", in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Venuti (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 234–5.

⁷ See for example, some authoritative works by Michael Emmerich, "Translating Japanese into Japanese: Bibliographic Translation from Woodblock to Moveable Type", in *Wiley: A Companion to Translation Studies*, ed. by Catherine Porter and Sandra Bermann (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 599–611; Michael Emmerich, *The Tale of Genji: Translation, Canonization, and World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Michael Emmerich, "Making Genji Ours: Translation, World Literature, and Masamune Hakuchō's Discovery of The Tale of Genji", *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, vol. 20 (2008), pp. 226–45. 2014 See also Valerie Henitiuk, "Going to Bed with Waley: How Murasaki Shikibu Does and Does Not Become World Literature", *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2008), pp. 40–61.

⁸ Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen (eds.), *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (California: ABC-CLIO Inc, 2004), pp. 506–8; Jennifer Schacker-Mill, "Otherness and Otherworldliness: Edward W. Lane's Ethnographic Treatment of The

“Aladdin’s Lamp”, “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” and other lesser known tales are but enchanting supplementary tales never found in the 14th century Arabic transcript compiled by Muhsin Mahdi in 1984 and later translated into English by Husain Haddawy in 1990.⁹

Indeed, the translation of contemporary fiction is not immune either to some alteration and decontextualization to fit in with the consumption and approval of the Western audience. One clear example is the translation of Nawal El Saadawi’s novels that is inundated with Orientalist stereotypes of the Arab Islamic world as being barbaric and oppressive towards women.¹⁰

Therefore, mindful of the possible distortion of World Literature in translation as shown by the works above, the present discussion will firstly map out the two short stories discussed in their respective position and perception in global literary scene. To begin with the Tayeb Salih’s short story, written originally in Arabic in 1957 and subsequently translated into English, “A Handful of Dates” is found in Salih’s early collection of short stories *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories* published by the Arabic literary journal *Al Hiwar* in 1964. Beside his masterpiece novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), “A Handful of Dates” is one of the most notable writing by Salih often listed in school and university curricula around the world and was made into a film in 1976 by Kuwaiti Director Khalid Al Siddiq.

Consequently, the short story that recalls Salih’s own idyllic childhood in the Northern Sudanese village has enjoyed academic discussion since its publication. Several authorities in Arabic literature like Young, Berkley, Davidson, Elad-Bouskila,¹¹ to mention but four, claim

Arabian Nights”, *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 113, no. 448 (2000), pp. 164–84.

⁹ Haddawy’s translation is recommendable because of its readability and authentic taste characteristic to the genre. See Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (New York: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2004), pp. 1–9.

¹⁰ Amal Amireh, “Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2000), pp. 215–49.

¹¹ M.J.L. Young, “Modern Arabic fiction in english translation a review article”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1980), pp. 1–18; John E. Davidson, “In Search of a Middle Point: The Origins of Oppression in Tayeb Salih’s ‘Season of Migration to the North’”, *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1989), pp. 385–400; Ami Elad-Bouskila, “Voices of Exile and the Fictional Works of Tayeb Salih”, in *The Arab*

that this “coming of age” story is partly autobiographical and scornful of the pretense of the adult world. The short story has also drawn the attention of postcolonial critics from Edward Said to Benita Parry in their corresponding claim that oppression in the story evokes the Empire’s desire to colonize Africa.¹² At the more practical and constructive level, “A Handful of Dates” is also a favored choice of text for community building, cross-cultural understanding, and even linkage of faith and social justice. Still, Salih’s famous short story gains entrance into studies in linguistics and applied linguistics.

Meanwhile, Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s needs little introduction in terms of his place in World Literature. The works of this prominent writer of Indonesia are regularly selected as reading materials in schools, colleges and universities across the globe to teach not only modern Indonesian literature but also introductory passage to the history, anthropology, and politics of Indonesia as well as Southeast Asian societies.¹³ Like Salih’s short story, “Circumcision” is a story of childhood. The short story is translated by Willem Samuels and found in *All That is Gone*, a collection of short stories written from the perspective of the young Pramoedya. The book consists of eleven stories originally published in *Cerita dari Bloro* [Stories from Bloro] and one from *Subuh* [Dawn].¹⁴ Most stories in this collection are reminiscences of the narrator’s childhood in witnessing the

Diaspora: Voices of an Anguished Scream, ed. by Zahia Smail Salhi and Ian Richard Netton (Routledge, 2006), pp. 41–52.

¹² Said’s comment is referred in particular to Salih’s famous novel, but he also concurs that Salih, like the Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, use stories to write back to the Empire through their typical heroes, i.e. Black men’s journey to the West vis-à-vis White man’s quest to conquer the colored people like Joseph Conrads’s Kurtz. See Edward W. Said, “Two Visions in Heart of Darkness”, in *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage Books, 1993), p. 31; Benita Parry, “Reflections on the Excess of Empire in Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North”, *Paragraph*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2005), pp. 72–90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43152689>, accessed 28 Jan 2017.

¹³ See, for example, Ward Keeler, “Teaching Southeast Asia through Fiction and Memoirs”, *Anthropology Today*, vol. 24, no. 6 (2008), pp. 16–9; Thomas Williamson, “Teaching Modern Southeast Asia”, *ASLANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2009), pp. 72–85.

¹⁴ Pramoedya Ananta Toer, “Preface”, in *All That Is Gone*, trans. by Willem Samuels (New York: Hyperion, 2004), p. viii. All subsequent quotations in this article are from this edition shown in pagination only.

hardship and struggle of the nation in times of revolution.¹⁵ Pramoedya often used ordinary people in his stories, because the *rakyat* [people], says Herriman, is the key to the nations' aspirations.¹⁶ Herriman further claims that the people's revolutionary struggle to expel the colonizers in order to create a new nation is also a struggle of ideas. Using this stand, "Circumcision" can also be seen as a struggle of ideas by the young narrator to become a true Muslim.

Having described the recognition of Tayeb Salih's and Pramoedya Ananta's Toer short stories studied in World Literature, the discussion will now turn to the ways in which both stories depict the characters' growth and/or rites of passages into becoming members of Islamic societies. The purpose is to break down the stereotypes of Asian people in general and Islam in particular often seen in literary works translated into English.

C. Faith and Piety in the Eyes of Children

In order to analyze the two stories, the discussion is to use theoretical concept of focalization formerly postulated by Gérard Genette in substitution to the traditional literary element called "point of view". According to Genette, a story may unfold through the mediation of different perspectives, i.e. zero focalization (omniscient point of view), internal focalization (character), and external focalization (objective narrator).¹⁷ Since its inception in 1972, Genette theory has been developed and modified. For example, according to Edmiston, in homodiegetic narratives (the narrator being also the main character), the narrator simulates the role of an autobiographer. This is to say that Genette's three types (zero, internal, external,) while useful is lacking because the zero type may be considered as a case of infraction.¹⁸ The two stories

¹⁵ For Jonathan Stalling, "Review of All That Is Gone", *World Literature Today*, vol. 80, no. 5 (2006), pp. 60–2.

¹⁶ Nicholas Herriman, "Objects of manipulation: the people and the rural village in Indonesia's culture wars", *South East Asia Research*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2010), pp. 451–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23750993>, accessed 15 January 2017.

¹⁷ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, (trans.) J. Lewin, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

¹⁸ See William F. Edmiston, "Focalization and the First-Person Narrator: A Revision of the Theory", *Poetics Today*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1989), pp. 729–44. www.jstor.org/stable/1772808, accessed 2 May 2017.

discussed here are of zero type. Thus, mindful of its limitation, more theories after Gennete's is needed. It will be used herein the elaboration of Gennete's focalization concept, namely facets of focalization as shown in Rimmon-Kenan's distinction of internal focalization (narrator with restricted knowledge) and external focalization (narrator-focalizer with no restriction to knowledge).¹⁹ Both internal and external focalizers give the narrative to the reader perceptually, psychologically, and ideologically. It would seem that the child narrators in the short stories under study fall into two out of three facets of focalization, i.e. perceptual and ideological as the discussion will soon follow.

1. *Revelation of Adult World's Deception in "A Handful of Dates"*

Set in an agrarian Muslim society of Sudan, Salih's short story is an awakening story of a young boy who used to love and admire his grandfather only to find that the older man is in fact a fearful "master" figure who shows no pity to his "slave" neighbor. Told in a flashback technique, the progression of the story exemplifies the perceptual and ideological facets of focalization.

In recounting the story, the child narrator travels backward and forward telling about the past and the present, hence an effective use of perceptual focalization that is determined by two dimensions, i.e. time and space.²⁰ He begins with this: "I must have been very young at that time. While I don't remember exactly how old I was, I do remember that when people saw me with my grandfather they would pat me on the head and give my cheek a pinch – things they didn't do to my grandfather."²¹ Here, such perception as sight (people seeing), touch (physical contact on the head and cheek), sound, smell, etc. is taken by the narrator to show his perplexity mixed with joy as a child. He says: "The mosque, the river and the fields – these were the landmarks in our life." (HD, 59)

Again at the perceptual level, the reader is told about his childhood

¹⁹ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 71–85.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²¹ Tayeb Salih, "A Handful of Dates", in *Encounters from Africa: An Anthology of Short Stories*, ed. by P.A. Williams (Nairobi: Macmillan Education Kenya, 2000), p. 59. All subsequent quotations to this work, abbreviated HD, will be used in this article with pagination only.

experience on how he idealizes and wishes to be like his grandfather. It is the grandfather not his father who takes him wherever he goes except when the boy goes to the mosque. The affectionate bond of the two characters is clear: the boy, unlike others of his age, enjoys learning Qur'an, and his grandfather, likewise, is proud of him for his intelligence. The Sheik often asks the boy to recite the *Chapter of the Merciful* when visitors come and he gets a pat on the head and cheek the way people do when he is seen with his grandfather. The boy enjoys touching his grandfather beards saying "it was soft and luxuriant and as white as cotton-wool – never in my life have I seen anything of a purer whiteness or greater beauty" (HD, 60).

Change of perception is seen in the second part of this three-part short story when the narrator asks why his grandfather dislikes their neighbor Masood whom the older man thinks as being indolent and imprudent. A much-married man, Masood used to own two-thirds of the land with palm trees and crop of dates presently owned by the grandfather. The boy is told that his grandfather has nothing when first setting foot in the village and now wishes to buy the remaining third plot of the land from Masood who used to have those riches. Before the child narrator is then told that Masood sells his land part by part whenever he takes a woman to be his next wife, the boy experiences the change of heart and mind:

I do not know why it was I felt fear at my grandfather's words – and pity for our neighbor Masood. How I wished my grandfather wouldn't do what he'd said! I remembered Masood's singing, his beautiful voice and powerful laugh that resembled the gurgling of water. My grandfather never used to laugh. (HD, 61)

Here, by juxtaposing the laughter (and the lack thereof) of the two men, the child narrator perceptively focalizes his feelings to them – pity to Masood for his plight and fear to his grandfather who enslaves Masood. The narrator's grandfather divides up a total of 10 sacks of dates sold to Hussein the merchant, gives two stranger helpers 5 sacks each, shares 5 sacks to Mousa the owner of the field, and takes 5 sacks for his own. Masood is left with nothing with his eyes "darting about to left and right like two mice that have lost their way home" (HD, 63). The narrative reaches its climax when the grandfather said this to Masood:

“You’re still fifty pounds in debt to me. We’ll talk about it later” (HD, 63). Theme of “indebtedness is slavery” is obvious here.

Exploitation and oppression in the story is focalized through the imagery of noises made by the different animals present. The two strangers’ camels grunt carrying the heavy sacks. One of Hussein’s donkeys brays irritating the camels. Drawing closer to Masood, the boy hears the older man making “a noise in his throat like the rasping of a lamb being slaughtered” to which he feels “a sharp sensation of pain” in his heart (HD, 63).

As for the ideological facet, this dominant narrative is also known as “the norms of the text”²² which allows readers to see the character’s ideological position. In “A Handful of Dates”, this aspect of ideology is presented most clearly in the first part of the story before the date harvesting and the last part after the harvest. The recounting is made effective in English translation by such phrases as “I must have been” and “I used to”. As the grandfather’s favorite, the boy who “used to know when [his] grandfather wanted [him] to laugh, when to be silent” knows how the old man was proud and deeply moved when listening to him reciting “the Koran in a lilting voice” (p. 60). When saying, “Yes, I used to love the mosque, and I loved the river too” (p. 60), for example, the narrator focalizes his disappointment to his grandfather’s superficial religiosity. Here his grandfather’s duplicity is revealed more after the harvest to carry the notion that greed makes people indifferent and heartless.

At the close of the story the narrator runs off avoiding his grandfather who calls after him. At first he hesitates but then continues his way, saying:

I felt at that moment that I hated him. Quickening my pace, it was as though I carried with me a secret I wanted to rid myself of. I reached the river bank near the bend it made behind the wood and acacia trees. Then, without knowing why, I put my finger into my throat and spewed up the dates I’d eaten. (HD, 64)

Resistance to his grandfather’s behaviour is focalized by spitting out the dates from the mouth that used to recite the Koran beautifully. The river he used to plunge into and the thick wood of acacia tree he

²² Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 81.

used to hide behind are presented again as final sight to strengthen the focalization. They symbolize the ideal person with whom the child narrator used to identify himself. He secretly dislikes the frivolity of his grandfather having found for himself the virtue of justice, care for others, and compassion. The subtext read herein is that the seemingly religious grandfather is anything that the child narrator is not, because the younger one lives up to his faith through his honest association with the adults including Masood whose singing and laughter the boy loves.

Given that the focus of this study is the child character, Masood's characterization is mentioned a little here as a closure, approving as it does previous claims like Berkley's that people's spiritual belief determines their conscious and unconscious action as seen in Masood.²³ Despite the grandfather's disrespect of him, Masood is a compassionate person from whom the boy learns to treat other living beings kindly. The narrator recollects Masood saying thus: "Palm trees, my boy, like humans, experience joy and suffering" (HD, 63). It is from Masood that the boy comes to think of "the palm tree as something with feeling, something possessed of a heart that throbbed" (HD, 63), hence the boy's religion-in-action. Berkley opines that "A Handful of Dates", like most works of Salih, exemplifies how the Sufi religious beliefs dominate Sudanese Muslim society.²⁴

2. *Disclosure of True Virtue in "Circumcision"*

Written in simple style yet elegant and meaningful, "Circumcision" (1950) is said to be based upon Pramoedya's own childhood experience as the son of a schoolmaster in a small town in East Java at the dying days of the Dutch colonial government.²⁵ This semi-autobiographical story receives some mentions in the fields of history and anthropology

²³ Constance E. Berkley, "Artistry in El Tayeb Salih's Short Stories", *Northeast African Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1983), p. 3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43660122>, accessed 7 Feb 2017.

²⁴ Constance E.G. Berkley, "El Tayeb Salih, the Wedding of Zein", *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1980), p. 106; 108. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4183036>, accessed 6 Feb 2017.

²⁵ Chauncey Mabe, "Plain, But Not Simple", *Sun.Sentinel* (24 Feb 2004), http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2004-02-22/entertainment/0402180861_1_pramoedya-ananta-toer-circumcision-muslim, accessed 25 May 2016. accessed 25 May 2016.

by such renowned scholars as Benedict Anderson and Niels Mulder.²⁶ Often cited as an example of “coming of age” and masculinity story in Asian context,²⁷ “Circumcision” tells of the narrator’s fear mixed with eagerness as he waits for the operation that will make him a full-grown Muslim male. This story has a powerful, ironic ending whereby the boy’s feeling dramatically changes; He no longer has interest to become Muslim for he realizes that his family is not rich enough to send him to Haj pilgrimage.

One might ask how trustworthy the narrator is in giving the readers the tales. Post-Genettian scholar like Nieragden suggests the term “homodiegetic narratorial focalization” to identify a narrator who has the status of a character in the story.²⁸ Commonly found in autodiegetic texts such as autobiography, this type of focalization is present in “Circumcision”. In the story, the boy called Muk is the narrating character who authoritatively tells everything.

Like Salih’s story, this present story comprises of three uneven parts. The first part is brief accounts of the boy’s desire to be good Muslim through circumcision soon granted to him by his parents. The second part details the narrator’s excitement prior to the circumcision with the thought of becoming a bona fide circumcised Muslim; friends’

²⁶ See Benedict Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution: Occupation and Resistance, 1944-1946* (Equinox Publishing, 2006), p. 86; Niels Mulder, “Individual and Society in Contemporary Thailand and Java: An Anthropologist’s Comparison of Modern Serious Fiction”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1983), pp. 312–27.

²⁷ Among others are the works of Pamela Allen, “Literature and the Media Contemporary Literature from the Chinese ‘Diaspora’ in Indonesia”, *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2003), pp. 383–99; Marshall Clark, “Indonesian masculinities: images of men in Indonesian TV advertising”, *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2004), p. 9. The use of religion herein is mentioned in passing in William E. Smith, “The Use Value of Fight Club in Teaching Theories of Religion”, *Teaching Theology & Religion*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2008), pp. 87–91.

²⁸ Narrative theory recognizes two types of focalization being heterodiegetic where the narrator is not the character in the story; and homodiegetic where the character is also the narrator of the story. Built on that of Genette, some later scholars like Mieke Bal, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, and many more develop this theory. See, for example, Goran Nieragden, “Focalization and Narration: Theoretical and Terminological Refinements”, *Poetics Today*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2002), pp. 685–97. <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/37640>, accessed 28 Nov 2016.

and teachers' respect; everyone's extra attention and gifts, not to mention grand preparation made by his father for the event. Muk's father has planned to stage a school drama and made the occasion also a mass circumcision to help poor family to take part in the new tradition.²⁹ The last part narrates the modulation of the narrator's feeling from firstly fretful, next comforted, and finally embittered. While perceptual focalization is evident in the first two parts, the last part demonstrates the story's ideological focalization.

The story opens with his perceptual perception of what it means when children in his village including himself learn to recite Qur'an from 5.30 to 9 PM. Despite the weekly fee of two and a half cent parents have to pay for oil lamps, children find this learning session as an excuse not to do their homework. He then says this:

What I'm calling recitation lessons was actually nothing more than telling jokes, talking in fevered whispers about sex, and annoying other devotees who came to say their sunset or evening prayers while we waited for our own turn to be called. This was my world at the age of nine.³⁰

At the perceptual level, his focalization is clear; and the focalization facet is that of time and space. "After I'm circumcised, I'll be a true Muslim", says Muk, "I'll have the right to go to heaven!" (C, 76) So determined is the narrator to earn his passport to paradise that he tells the *kiai* his option of having the accompaniment of *hourri*, the heavenly angels, who look like his classmate Sriati, instead of the six-or-eight-breasted ones like a dog. His everyday depiction of village life is made more convincing by saying, for example, "In my small town of Bora, boys were usually circumcised" (C, 74); "In my hometown, there was very little public entertainment" (C, 79); "In my hometown, the day of a boy's circumcision was a day of great significance" (79), etc.

²⁹ Hatley's early investigation on the source of Pramoedya's creativity for his short stories collection *Stories of Bora* where "Circumcision" is included shows that Pram peopled his book with characters modeled on his family members. Pram's parents were respected figures in the society with his school principal father looked after schoolboy borders. See Barbara Hatley, "Bora Revisited", *Indonesia*, vol. 30 (1980), pp. 1-16. <http://cip.cornell.edu/seap.indo/1107014419>, accessed 20 Oct 2011.

³⁰ Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Circumcision", in *All That Is Gone*, trans. by Willem Samuels (New York: Hyperion, 2004), p. 73. All subsequent quotations to this work, abbreviated C, will be used in this article with pagination only.

The difficult path to become a good believer and the worthy of it is the hidden, ideological focalization identifiable near the end of the story. “I was incredibly scared,” the narrator says, “I wanted to be a good Muslim, but that wasn’t enough to still my terror” (C, 81). Muk, like other boys soon to be circumcised, appears frightened upon seeing the *calak*, circumcision specialist “with a ferocious gleam in his eye” (C, 82). The portrayal of the operation is quite terrifying:

I felt a hand grope my penis, and then my foreskin being twisted tightly until it began to sting and feel very hot. Just at that moment, a razor severed that knot of my skin. It was over; I was circumcised. The old man who had been holding my temples back released his hands. It looked down to see blood dripping from the end of my penis. (C, 82)

Upon finishing the operation, the grown-ups who help with the circumcision, again, cause frustration on Muk’s part for he is not allowed to move until the first flow of blood has stopped. Muk’s father, too, approaches him and his younger brother Tato to congratulate the just-circumcised sons saying “Well done, well done” officiously. Unlike other adults who come across as insensible of the narrator’s fear, his mother is the comforting one. “Mother came to me and kissed my cheeks; her display of affection caused tears to well in my eyes” (C, 82). As said elsewhere, Pramoedya’s portrayal of mother figure is of the favorable kind resembling his own.³¹

When later his mother asks if he feels like a true Muslim after the circumcisions, Muk confesses thus: “I still don’t feel like a true Muslim” (C, 83). Defending himself from his mother’s speculation that he does not perform the five-time-a-day prayers, Muk continues to pursue what will make him a true believer, only to recognize that a Haj pilgrimage his father will never afford would turn him into a good Muslim. The narrator closes with this: “Although I suddenly wanted to be rich, I also knew that this would never be the case. And after I healed, the thought of becoming a true Muslim never again entered my mind” (C, 84).

If Hatley’s comment of the spiritual life of people in Blora is true, the depiction of Islam as a given, professed religion in “Circumcision” is thus quite clear. Contrasting the Jogjanese with the people of Blora,

³¹ See Novita Dewi, “Women of Will for Nation building in Pramoedya’s Three Early Novels”, *Kritika Kultura*, vol. 0, no. 20 (2013), pp. 6–27.

Hatley argues that the latter shows little interests in subscribing to the mystical power of the Javanese nobility.³² Instead, they are inclined to hold esteem the influence of Mbah Suro the populist leader of the Saminist movement not far from Blora. As such, it is hard to tell if Islam is truly the practiced religion of most people. Presumably, it is the Blora depicted in Pram's story that may shed light on the spiritual life of the people. For example, as an alleged Muslim, Muk's father is quick to grant his son's wish to be circumcised with which he might as well help other boys from poor family in the village to partake. Next, through the eyes of Muk, to say the least, circumcision and Qur'an recitation are represented as more of social rather than religious affairs. Next still, the *kiai* gives an offhand, tongue-in-cheek explanation to Muk about the meaning of circumcision. The last example is Muk's mother who is seen to downplay her son's feeling about the unlikelihood to fulfill the fifth pillars of Islam.

Therefore, at the heart of the story is poverty. It is the suffering of the underprivileged family that lends itself to spiritual emptiness. Through the eyes of a child, Pramoedya represents the collective awareness of the repressed society.

D. Concluding Remarks

Quoting Franz Rosenthal's article "Child Psychology in Islam", Khan agrees that observation of childhood behaviour as done by later Freudian psychoanalysts is quite useful as it reflects insights on fundamental problems of human relationships in any given civilization.³³ This study has attempted to examine the relationship between (young) individual and (adult) society in contemporary Sudan and Indonesia (particularly Java) by investigating how this relationship is seen in the works of two important authors of modern Sudan and Indonesian serious fiction. The conclusion to "A Handful of Dates" and "Circumcision" gives much food for thought. The child narrators who are innocent at

³² Hatley visited Blora in 1978 during the prolonged and heavy rains. For the people in Yogyakarta, by comparison, such unusual and unwelcoming weather was often taken to be an extraordinary connection with the mourning of the Sultan palace where the uncle and the son of the Sultan passed away a few months apart in that year. See Hatley, "Blora Revisited", pp. 3–4.

³³ Ruqayya Y. Khan, "Childhood and modern Arabic literature: the initiation story", *Arabic & Middle Eastern Literature*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2001), p. 167.

the beginning of the story not only gain their sight but also gain insight with regard to the world around them. They all aspire to become good Muslims. Even in the face of being disappointed by their own pre-understanding of piety, they take a stand: The unnamed boy from Sudan witnesses injustice and he commiserates with the victim; Muk comes to see that poverty and piety cannot unexpectedly go together. When the story ends, the children are the ones able to see the true meaning of spirituality. One single unsolicited experience with the adult world and the reality thereof is all it takes for them to believe what it means to be or not to be Muslim.

“When authors felt a moral responsibility to educate and uplift, why might we encounter such ambiguous, unreliable narrators?” goes the exasperated lament. This study has answered the question by proving that literary analysis aims at unveiling the special way in which ideological discourses are produced and persisting in the text. By giving the authorial voice to the child narrator, the authors display their perceptual and ideological positions.

This study has also shown that both Tayeb Salih and Pramoedya Ananta Toer fictionalize the characters as well as settings of their stories by making use of people and places most known and dear to them. To follow Roland Barthes’ claim that narrative is a point of communication,³⁴ both authors have established points of communication for readers of different religious, ideology, and social backgrounds. Writing as “insiders”, they utilize local culture to communicate how Islam is differently experienced in, respectively, Sudan and Indonesia. In so doing the authors show a variety of ways in which diverse Muslim society across the world make meaning of their spirituality. Each author put his message through the mouth of a small boy in order to pass on his remarks on the superficiality of the adults and this, flawed, world wrecked by injustice and poverty. In conclusion, it is this universal message that has won each author a rightful place in World Literature to date.

34 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 109.

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