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**An analysis of Suffering Bodies in Shahnnon Ahmad's *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (1968)**

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**ABSTRACT**

Portrayal of human bodies is a concept which is frowned upon by Malaysians. Nonetheless, Shahnnon Ahmad's illustrations of suffering bodies, as a result of fierce struggles among farmers to combat poverty, verges on the fence without being insensitive. In the same space of time, it discloses one aspect of the novel that is often dismissed. This paper aims to discuss suffering bodies in Shahnnon Ahmad's *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (1968) in Foucault's post-structural conceptual framework to explore the characters' social macrocosm. The violent relationship between the physical environment that governs and the characters that inhabit its space reveals an imbalanced scale between the nature's reward and the energies expended from the characters' bodies. The exploration of this ruthless relationship highlights the aspects of suffering henceforth its role in outlining the identity of the characters and their society in the novel. This paper explains how conforming to social expectations may generate internal conflicts within bodies hence creating destructive physical effects on characters' bodies. It is shown that bodies as an allegory of the struggle in the discourse of identity is evident in Shahnnon Ahmad's powerful depiction of farmers' predicaments particularly in 1960s rural villages of Northern Malaysia.

*Keyword:* body politics, Malay identity, Malaysian literature, Post-colonial, Shahnnon Ahmad, suffering body

**Introduction**

Shahnnon Ahmad's illustration of the plight of the impoverished farmers to combat poverty in his novel *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (here in after *Ranjau*), discloses one aspect of the book that is often treated as less central, and that is the discourse on body. Shahnnon (1991/1994) himself advocates that this novel is curated purposefully as 'an example of a work, which viewed from one aspect, is a seismograph, recording poverty-stricken life, representing the analysis of peasant folk suffering.' (p. 4).

It is therefore appropriate to place this novel under the lights of Foucault's post structural conceptual framework to understand how the narrator linguistically 'manipulates' his characters to reflect the imbalanced relationship between their bodies and the society they (the characters) represent.

The genealogical nature of the novel, in which the novel historically criticise its society's present time, resonates Michel Foucault's (1988) model (as cited in Armstrong, "Background") on 'critical ontology of the present' as the novel involves 'a diagnosis of "the present time, and of what we are, in this very moment" in order "to question ... what is postulated as self-evident ... to dissipate what is familiar and accepted".' (para. 1).

The process of unveiling the politics of body in this paper owes to its palpable narrative manifestations as suggested by Ungku Maimunah (1998), that the novel's basis is an in-depth exploration 'of human experience ... in order to extend and deepen the

perspective with which the peasants and peasantry are to be understood.' (pp. 115-116). The background setting of *Ranjau* is set in the late 1960s, a historic period in Malaysia when the young country began to experience an accumulation of racial tension which have then led to many protests among the impoverished peasants, majority of whom were the Malays (Ong, 1995, p. 163). Therefore, it is difficult to discuss this historic moment anywhere, without looking closely at the bodies that had become the physical force behind this movement. Shanon (1991/1994) suggests that this novel strongly connects the reader to the peasants through bodily elements. The fruits of the peasants' hard labour are the fundamentals that contributes to the continuity of life. He (1991/1994) states that:

Even though we are not the children of peasants in the sense that our parents are not peasants, our connection with the peasants are naturally close and difficult to separate except by death. Do we not every day enjoy the fruits of the peasants' labour? Twice or thrice a day we eat rice, product of the labour and sweat and toil of peasants. (p. 5).

### Suffering Bodies

To peasants such as Lahuma and Jeha, life is sustained through working the body and according to Shanon (1991/1994), peasants attitude towards life is 'solely one of suffering.' (p. 6). Suffering bodies in this novel refer to the overworked and distressed bodies of the two major characters, Lahuma and Jeha, and their relation to the reality of their world. Bodies in this novel suffer tremendously from the ruthless relationship with the physical environment and the society that govern its inhabitants. It is a 'one-sided battle' (Ungku Maimunah, 1998, p. 117) against the brutal nature that results to an imbalance scale between nature's reward and the energies expended from the characters' bodies. Referring nature as 'enemies', this novel 'presents a picture of a world in which clashes between man and the impersonal forces of nature are inevitable.' (Ungku Maimunah, 1998, p. 120).

Although nature sustains and nourishes life in Kampong Banggul Derdap, nature is also characteristically destructive. Nature forces their bodies to constantly display an enormous amount of stamina in order to pit against its threats. Lahuma suggests that he is trapped in this tyrannical relationship as he is forced to offer nature his own blood in exchange for its mercy. To allow for the rice seedlings to grow into maturity, '... at least one *chupak* of his blood would go into the leeches' bellies.' (Shanon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 7). Lahuma's determination to fight this injustice prove to be futile. 'He remembered how in the beginning they had collected those crabs and stepped on them with their heels. But after some time their heels were bruised ...' (Shanon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 7). The conflicting relations between the world and the peasants' bodies brings out nature's forceful role in moulding and shaping the characters' understanding of their body in relation to its meaning and identity.

Ernest Cole's recollection of the civil war in Sierra Leone is helpful in further explaining Michel Foucault's theory on body in relation to textual discourse. Cole (2014) reflects on a memory of watching a documentary about the brutality of the war and claims that, 'My interest of the body as witness or evidence of crime was ignited. I was struck by how the body could literally be read as a text and marker of identity or perhaps mis-identity.' (p. xiv).

The physical world represented by both nature and society, in which characters in *Ranjau* inhabit, effectively construct their behaviours in the conceptualisation of identity. As Pincikowski (2002) explicates, 'body studies have opened new doors of understanding on how human beings interact, and how social influences control, restrict, and even define

the physical body and vice versa.' (p. xvii). Therefore, the portrayal of body in Shahnnon Ahmad's *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* is imperative in understanding the symbolic relationship between body and the elements that construct it.

### Bodily Senses

The first seven chapters of the novel focus on Lahuma with multiple references to his body and its connection to senses. Understanding Lahuma's world means understanding his sensitivity to the universe that regulates the spiritual, emotional, and physical environment inhabited by Lahuma and his family. In an article titled "Sharpening Sensitivity and Perception", Shahnnon (1991/1994) emphasises the importance of dispensing 'sensitivity' in any literary work in order to allow readers to effectively appreciate characters' mortal experiences. He defines sensitivity as such:

Sensitivity is derived from the root word sense. It means sense which can be mentioned as the powers inherent in man and through these powers a person becomes conscious or realises something. Perception comes from the word perceive which means to accept. Here perception I take to mean the power of acceptance which is effective through the senses. (p. 299)

Set against the background of Kampong Banggul Derdap, *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* begins with numerous references to the five senses in human's nervous system; sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. The reference to the concept of sixth sense is absent in this paper as it aims mainly to reflect on the life of peasants in its bodily context. The discussion on these senses is crucial in establishing body as a topic of discourse. In chapter one of the novel, these senses function to describe the characters' anticipation towards the beginning of the annual rice-cycle. It simultaneously introduces the major characters, relationships, and the fictional world in which the novel establishes its story.

#### Sight

*Ranjau* establishes a world of sight by introducing Kampong Banggul Derdap through the eyes of the characters, establishing a vivid and instant images of their world. Through Lahuma's sharp eyes, the reader is introduced to his wife Jeha, and their seven daughters; Senah, Milah, Jenah, Semek, Liah, Lebar and Kiah and what they do for a living. Lahuma brings the reader's attention to his scrutinising eyes as he inspects his daughters' physical changes. 'Sanah, the eldest, her pigeon breast filling out. Followed by Milah with her too luxuriant head of hair.' (Shahnnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 1). He then concludes that, 'Sanah had indeed grown up. If necessary, Sanah and Milah too could wield the hoe and *tajak*.' (Shahnnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 16). This style of narration 'structurally [does] away with a narrator who mediates between characters and the reader.' (Ungku Maimunah, 1998, p.123). As Lahuma 'gazes', the reader immediately see:

... the greenness of jungle at the foot of the distant hills... the tops of the malacca teak and *meranti* trees in the distance, as if there were something there, in those tree-tops which were straining to touch the *sky*. His children went on wallowing in the dust under a *chenerai* tree... dust-covered children. The game they were playing, ... the only one they knew, ... cooking, with sand for rice. (Shahnnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 2)

Lahuma's gaze is the spectrum into which the reader is able to visualise the village in its truest form.

### Smell & Taste

The sense of smell is first established when the children complain that the 'sand' rice, they pretend to cook at play time, has a 'burnt smell because the "fire" was too strong.' (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 3). When Lahuma speaks about rice, especially the *serindit* rice, his sense of smell is stimulated. This emphasises the importance of smell in his reality even though the process of formulating this smell might cost his beloved to suffer 'cuts all over [her] palms.' (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 6). Through Lahuma's confession, he establishes two important notes: his determination to feed his family, and the predicaments he is willing to suffer in order to obtain this reward. The taste of rice in his mouth is a taste of success, a taste of a battle won, and a taste of hope for the continuity of life. For Lahuma, 'That's all [he cares] about in this world. This must taste good. That must smell nice.' (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 6).

### Hearing

It is crucial in Lahuma's world that bodies are able to perceive sound. In Kampong Banggul Derdap, the ability to recognise sounds coming from the nature and humans alike is an invaluable skill that helps farmers like Lahuma, Jeha, and their children, to guard themselves against nature's unpredictable threats. The first thing Lahuma does when he starts to prepare the ground for sowing is to yell out 'Oi!' to the other farmers to inform them of his whereabouts. Lahuma's ability to recognise Jeha's voice and her cry for help during the cobra attack contributes greatly to her aid.

The story teases the reader's sense of hearing throughout the novel and reaches its deafening note during the children's fight with *tiaks* (a type of bird that feeds on rice grains):

"Waah! Waah! Weeh! Weeh!" The shouts were heard all along the ridge. The *tiaks* scattered and fled at the sound. At the rice-field Sanah and her sisters went in different directions. They shouted as they went. And as they shouted they waved the *mengkudu* branches. (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 154).

It is in complete contrast with the next chapter, which is also the final chapter, when it begins with 'silence and desolation.' (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 161). With silence, sound is toned down, and the reader is prepared for the ending. It also provides a sense of completion as sounds tune out.

However, many times, hearing becomes impossible when sound is heard only by the speaker henceforth hearing becomes one-sided. The arrogant nature, for one, is impenetrable. Leeches, crabs, *tiaks* and other natural agents of disaster are mute to hearing. When Lahuma threatens to kill the leeches and poison the crabs, '... none of them heard these words.' (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 13). Nonetheless, sounds captured through the sense of hearing assists the reader 'to absorb' and 'to witness' first-hand, the reality of Kampong Banggul Derdap.

### Touch

In his preparation to clear the fourteen *relongs*, Lahuma physically assesses the quality of his *parang* by slightly cutting up the back of his finger-nail. This wounded touch increases his determination, almost as if he is granted with an invisible energy from the *parang* into his body. Lahuma's submission to this brutality bears resemblance to rituals performed in an animistic society to please the angry nature. His satisfaction in seeing the torn finger-nail intensifies his body's vulnerability and its total submission to nature's calamity and incarceration.

Sense of touch is crucial in driving the story towards Lahuma's tragic end. While working in his paddy field, Lahuma accidentally steps on a *nibung* thorn. His body begins

to swell and bloat as Lahuma, Jeha and the villagers fail to force out the thorn from his feet and cure him out of the disease. Eventually, it is through the sense of touch that Lahuma meets his untimely death.

Death disrupts Lahuma's senses breaking its connection with his body. The disconnection between the five senses and his body leads to the disconnection between Lahuma and the world, ultimately the disconnection between the reader and Lahuma.

### Body and Identity

Lahuma's body reflects nature's construction of identity while Jeha's body reflects the social influences that builds one character. As the beginning of this paper ventures into the natural causes that play structural importance in shaping the peasants' work ethic, the next paragraph will excavate discussions on social causes that influence the way the characters in *Ranjau* bring themselves. Drawing on Aveling's (2000) idea on 'gendered discourse' (p. 105) in the novel, the following discussion will focus on Jeha's character to give an insight into the full extent of this statement.

The next nine chapters focus on Jeha. After her husband's death, the story shifts to revolve around Jeha, who is left alone to raise their seven children and work on the paddy field. Now a single mother and the sole bread-winner of her family, Jeha is terribly overwhelmed in her struggle to adapt to her new social role. This is reflected in her troubled attitude as she observes the appearance of her late-husband's stiff, motionless body on the day of his death. Her late-husband's grotesque body becomes the talk of the people and this bothers her deeply. She refers to his dead body as 'carcass' (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 81) and compares it, which dies 'amidst pus and foul-smelling discharge', to 'a boar killed by a tiger-a portion of the carcass left un-eaten, rotting and crawling maggots.' (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 81). The revolting manner in which Lahuma's body is described indicates Jeha's anxiety:

A yellow liquid oozed out of every opening on his body: his anus, his penis, his ears, his nostrils, his mouth, and the tiny pores in his skin... the vapour from the yellowish liquid was wafted from the house right into the compound... From time to time Ali Ketopi pressed the belly, which was as big as a drum. And gradually the belly too shrank. (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 81)

She is distressed from her fellow villagers' talk thus emphasising the role of her society in modelling her thoughts. In her small village, appearance becomes one of the most important observable measurement of a person's health. The manner of which one dies may reflect one's piety. In their simplistic view of life, how the body was expended during one's lifetime, be it good or bad, may affect one's way of death. Therefore, when Lahuma suffers a filthy death, it is natural for everyone in the village to judge him as sinful for they believe that 'God deliberately tortured such people with filthy diseases.' (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 81).

As Thumboo (1979) reveals, 'part of Jeha's suffering after the death of Lahuma, notably the gossip about her, arises from certain views of a woman's place in society.' (p. 92). Through Jeha's character, the novel uncovers a patriarchal society. Different from her husband, Jeha's source of suffering does not only come from the impersonal force of nature, but also from the patronising society that outlines the identity of the people of Kampong Banggul Derdap. As Ong (1995) delivers, 'Just as self-control, and control of his wife's sexuality defined a man's adult status, regulating the activities of unmarried women-virgins and *janda*- defined the collective identity of kampong men. (p. 166)

### Engendered Attitude towards Body

When Lahuma's vision constantly visits Jeha in her dreams to advise her of her duties, it discloses a society which is far from equality. Jeha's nightmares exaggerate her incompetency to adapt to her new role as a provider of her household thus advocating her powerlessness and her failure to fulfill what her society labels as men's responsibilities. Contrary to Bailey's (1983) opinion (as cited in Aveling, 2000), Aveling (2000) stresses that, the pressure of male-control in Jeha's world is strong (p. 105). Many times Jeha is confronted with her own doubts especially when 'she remembered that she was only a woman.' (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 70). The very idea of this opinion originates in Lahuma's condescending statement that:

Jeha would not be able to cope with all the work as he had done. Jeha was only a woman. She could not possibly do all the work. His children were all girls. A woman's arm-bone is fragile. A woman's leg-bone is easily twisted. A woman's ribs are easily cracked. This Lahuma knew: a woman is weak. Right from the time of Hawa and Adam, woman has always been very much the weaker sex. (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 68).

On the other hand, Jeha margins herself from this discrimination. This contradicting opinion between Jeha and Lahuma suggests a gendered perspective on life among men and women in Kampong Banggul Derdap society. Jeha's determination to be independent announces her refusal to be subordinated to inequality. Jeha's initial refusal to rely on the village chief's help advocates her rejection towards gendered occupation. To bring her momentum back on track, she states:

Sex was no obstacle. She would clear that rice-field with her *tajak* from bank to bank. If her husband's life was taken away, she would feed the children. She would toil hard on her own. She gritted her teeth hard as if to crush them between the *menerong* and the "porcupine-hair" weeds. (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 70).

Jeha's negation to this gendered discourse emphasises her effort to empower herself in accordance to her own ability. This self-empowerment resonates Foucault's proposal that the body can become its own 'agent of normalisation' (Armstrong, "Background", para. 2). In Foucault's (1980) words (as cited in Armstrong, "Background"):

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. The individual, that is, is not the *vis-à-vis* of power; it is ... one of its prime effects. (para. 2).

In other words, 'power is something you acquire through your own potential and not through physical domination. As subjects, we can... discipline our body to the point that we become our own masters... Through this disciplinary power, we can overthrow patriarchal domination of our bodies and mind.' (Smaranda, 2012, p. 109).

### Body and Disability

Jeha's exertion for self-empowerment prove unsuccessful for she is forced to succumb to social pressure. Villagers labels her with names such as 'widow-with-many-children', 'bold-widow-with-many-children', as well as 'bold-widow-of-swollen-Lahuma-with-many-children' (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, pp.113-114) indicating a patronising society that is gender biased. As she realises (and made to realize) her limits at working

the paddy field, Jeha denounces her motivation and draws back to normality (Aveling, 2000, p. 108). Aveling (2000) stresses that, 'the gender factor of female dependency is dominant.' (p. 107). In the end, Jeha's failure to adapt to her new condition is professed through her insanity. Her mental disability decapitates her physical ability to neither tend the paddy field nor to raise her daughters. In the beginning, Jeha's madness is undetectable to the eyes of her children and the village. There is, however, a hint to this when she claims that her late husband comes to visit them from the grave. 'I saw your father last night. He was angry because we gave up too quickly. He told us to keep on killing crabs till our rice-field is free from them.' (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 110).

However, her physical appearance finally confirms her madness as exposed in the story:

Jeha brought nothing with her. She only brought her three children. In her big bun which kept coming undone she had stuck a faded flower. She wore a round-necked *baju* Kedah, and the colour of its floral pattern had also faded. On her face which had been neglected these past two or three months she dabbed a little powder made by Sanah and Milah. The powder stood out clearly in the cracks on her dark dirt-coated face. (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. 113).

Flashing her breast at the village chief exposes her sexual frustration (Aveling, 2000, p. 109). This act of flashing her breasts is contradictory to how a Malay married woman supposed to act in accordance with Malay '*adat*' (customary) knowledge. Aihwa Ong (1990) explains *adat* in further details, that:

*Adat* defined adult womanhood in other ways, but always within the Islamic construction of women's relation to men. ... Women's *adat* knowledge included the art of preserving their sexual attractiveness to retain their husband's interest ... previously married women, whether widows or divorcees (called by the same term, *janda*), were considered both vulnerable and dangerous. *Janda* were frequently suspected of trying to steal husbands. (p. 166).

She (1990) adds that, controlling women's sexuality is seen as a noble duty that defines kampung (village) men's collective identity. When Jeha flashes her intimate part at the chief, she clearly violates Malay *adat* but on the other hand liberates herself from the patriarchal domination that suffocated her. Aveling (2000) further claims that, 'Jeha has become driven by her overwhelming biological nature to express herself in an outrageously anti-social manner.' (p. 109) Eventually, Jeha's madness redefines her mental liberation. Through her madness, her body rejects cultural oppression. Endowed with 'freedom', 'The naked body is a superior body, freed from stereotypes and constraints'. (Smaranda, 2012, p. 114).

Even though Jeha does this out of her disability to make a sound judgment, her body manages to symbolically contest patriarchal domination that has been imprisoning her physical. Her insanity is a channel to release the angst from her society's patriarchal pressure.

### Conclusion

The mortal experiences of the poor farmers portrayed in the novel reveal such defenceless characters with vulnerable bodies. For peasants such as Lahuma and his family, nature provides their source of life at the cost of the energy expended from their bodies. The relationship these bodies have with nature is one of suffering. As Shahnon (1991/1994) himself declares, 'such untold sufferings of the peasants until an attitude of life crops up that this life is solely one of suffering. There is nothing else.' (pp. 5-6). It is important that bodily experiences in this novel are highlighted as they reveal not only a

tense relationship between the fragile humans and the forceful nature, but most importantly, the bodies' roles as significant instruments in the discourse of identity. It is therefore imperative to locate the story of *Ranjau* particularly in post-structuralist discourse of body in an effort to fully utilise the novel's powerful depiction of farmers' predicaments in 1960s Malaysia. Adibah Amin's introduction to her translation of the novel is noteworthy as it gives the reader a spectacular overview of the story in order to conclude this paper,

More than anything else, *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* is the story of man's eternal fight for survival against the impersonal forces of nature. In a desperately unequal battle for a meagre subsistence Lahuma's only assets are a piece of land, his four limbs, a wife, and seven children—all girls. The struggle is unending, the rewards skimpy... But even in losing, he is sustained by the thought that though he may be defeated physically, his spirit will never be quenched. (Shahnon Ahmad, 1968/1972, p. viii).

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