LIFE OF PI: EMERGING MAGICAL REALISM, ERASING WORLDS
(Life of Pi: Pemunculan Realisme Magis dan Penghapusan Dunia-Dunia)

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Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas kemunculan realisme magis dan penghapusan dunia-dunia sebagai strategi narasi dalam memunculkan aspek posmodernisme dalam novel *Life of Pi.* Artikel ini menyuguhkan tiga pertanyaan yang sekaligus menjadi tujuan dilakukannya penelitian ini. Pertama, artikel ini memperlihatkan bagaimana realisme magis dimunculkan dalam novel *Life of* Pi karya Yann Martel. Kedua, artikel ini menunjukkan bagaimana dunia-dunia mengalami penghapusan di dalam novel tersebut. Terakhir, artikel ini menjelaskan gambaran kultur posmodernisme yang muncul melalui penggunaan realisme magis dan penghapusan dunia-dunia sebagai strategi narasi dalam novel *Life of Pi.* Penelitian ini menggunakan perspektif posmodernis dalam menguji pembangunan dunia-dunia dan kemunculan realisme magis berdasarkan teori McHale. Penelitian ini dikelompokkan ke dalam penelitian kualitatif. Metode dokumenter digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data, sementara metode induktif digunakan untuk menganalisis novel tersebut. Setelah menganalisis novel tersebut, kami menemukan bahwa dengan memunculkan realisme magis dan penghapusan dunia-dunia, *Life of Pi* telah menghadirkan permasalahan ontologis yang merupakan ciri dari karya posmodernis. Selain itu, kami juga menemukan bahwa melalui kemunculan realisme magis dan penghapusan dunia sebagai strategi narasi dalam novel *Life of Pi,* Yann Martel menggambarkan kultur posmodernis yang disebut "anything goes".

Kata Kunci: Posmodernisme, Realisme Magis, Penghapusan, Dunia.

Abstract

This article discusses the emergence of magical realism and the erasure of the world as a narrative strategy in presenting postmodernim in Life of Pi. This article has three major questions as the main problems as well as the purposes of this article. First, this article shows how magical realism is presented in Yann Martel's novel Life of Pi. Second, this article demonstrate how the worlds are placed under erasure in the novel. At last, this article describes the representation of postmodern culture beyond the narrative strategy of magical realism and the erasure of the world that is employed in Life of Pi. This research uses postmodernist perspective in examining the construction of worlds and the emergence of magical realism based on McHale's theory. This research is a qualitative research. A documentary method is used to collect the data, while the inductive method which is used to analyze the subject matters. After doing the research, we found that by presenting magical realism and the erasure of the worlds, Life of Pi raised the ontological problems that mostly appear in postmodernist fictions. We also found that through the employment magical realism and the erasure of the worlds as the literary strategy in Life of Pi, Yann Martel reflects the postmodern culture of the "anything goes".

Keywords: Postmodernism, Magical Realism, Erasure, World.

Introduction

Postmodernism is "philosophical ideas, derived from poststructuralist theory and cultural formations, and associated with global popular culture" (McGuigan, 2006:3). The term postmodernism started to be applied to literature and art after World War II, where in its relation to literature, it has limited application to poetry and drama, but is used widely in reference to fiction

(Abrams, 1999:168; Baldick, 2001:201). In its developments, postmodernist fictions become engaged to other genres, one of them is magical realism. Magical realism has developed as a narrative mode that produces fiction, and become popular in the last century. The history of the term magical realism started from 1798 to this day; from Germany to Latin America, and then continues spreading up to the rest of the world, internationally (Bowers, 2005:7). Christopher Warnes defines magical realism as "a mode of narration ... in which a real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence" (Warnes, 2009:3). Magical realist fiction treats the supernatural as something that cannot be, even simply is not, explained but still accepted and understood as an everyday life aspect.

The object of the study, *Life of Pi,* is a novel written by a Canadian writer named Yann Martel about Piscine (Pi) Molitor Patel who survived after the Japanese cargo ship carrying him and his family along with a collection of zoo animals, from India to Canada, had sunk in the Pacific Ocean. There are two versions of Pi's survival story. In the first version, Pi survived with wild animals, while in the other version Pi survived with Mother, Taiwanese Sailor ad The Frenchman Cook. In the process of creating and telling the second version of his survival story, not only does Pi place the narrated events in the first version of the story under erasure, but also abolishe the details and explanations; erase the existence of characters, objects and settings, and then leave the story with no ending.

This research has three major questions as the main problems as well as the purposes of this article. First, this article shows how magical realism is presented in Yann Martel's novel Life of Pi. Second, this article demonstrate how the worlds are placed under erasure in the novel. At last, this article describes the representation of postmodern culture beyond the narrative strategy of magical realism and the erasure of the world that is employed in Life of Pi.

Methodology

This research belongs to qualitative research. Silverman (2008:17) defines qualitative research as a research that draws the findings not by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification, and the data are chosen based on the uniqueness of analyzed reality. This research discusses the literary strategies used in Life of Pi in presenting ontological dominant. Therefore, the data we use are non-numerical data.

This article has two kinds of data, primary and secondary data, which are taken from two sources, primary and secondary sources. The primary data of this research are any kind of information and facts about the construction of worlds and the representation of postmodern culture in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. On the other hand, the secondary data are any kind of facts and information about magical realism and postmodern culture that support the analysis of the primary data. The secondary data collected from Faris's *Ordinary Enchantment: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* and Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. These books are considered beneficial to understand the development of Magical Realism and postmodern culture in literary works.

Result and Discussion

The result of this research shows that in *Life of Pi*, not only does magical realism become the cause of the erasure of the worlds, by the way of making the character resist the magical events and objects, but also the effect of the erasure itself. This research has also found that by presenting magical realism and the erasure of the worlds, Life of Pi raised the ontological problems that mostly appear in postmodernist fictions. We also found that through the employment magical realism and the erasure of the worlds as the literary strategy in Life of Pi, Yann Martel reflects the postmodern culture of the "anything goes".

a. Emerging Magical Realism

There are three kinds of world constructed in *Life of Pi*: fictional world, fictional "real" world and "other" world. The construction of those worlds is using the strategy of interpolation and superimposition. The interpolation strategy is the strategy that of introducing an alien space *within* a familiar space, while the superimposition is the strategy that of placing one familiar world on top of another world (McHale, 2004: 46).

The strategy of interpolation is employed in constructing the fictional "real" world and the "other" world when the first version of Pi's survival story is being recounted. In this version, the Pacific is the fictional "real" world where Pi spent his time day by day floating in a lifeboat, living his life as normal as every castaway does, gathering food and water by fishing and distilling salt water. On the other hand, the Pacific becomes the "other" world through the presence of the talking tiger. In addition, the "other" world that is also constructed in the first version of Pi's survival story is the carnivorous algae island where Pi and Richard Parker stranded on. The employment of the

interpolation strategy in constructing fictional "real" world and the "other" world in the first version of the survival story leads to the confrontation between those worlds. The confrontation between the Pacific as the "real" world and the "other" world creates the magical event of Pi having conversation with the talking tiger. The confrontation between the Pacific as the "real" world and the carnivorous algae island as the "other" world creates the magical event of meerkats sleeping in trees, the event of the fresh-water ponds eating fish and the event of Pi finding a set of human teeth in a tree.

The effect of the confrontation between the "real" world and the "other" world in the first version of Pi's survival story is the emergence of the rhetoric of contrastive banality, in which the characters fail to be amazed by supernatural events and objects as well as accept those supernatural happenings and beings with casual matter-of-factness (McHale, 2004: 76). Compared to the explanation of magical realism that is proposed by Christopher Warnes (2003: 3), who explained magical realism "as a mode of narration … in which a real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence"; this rhetoric of contrastive banality is seen as the emergence of magical realism in *Life of Pi*.

One example of the emergence of magical realism in *Life of Pi* through the confrontation between the fictional "real" world and the "other" world is when Pi talked to Richard Parker.

> "The voice came back again, "Let's talk about food …" … Understanding suddenly dawned on me. … I laughed. I knew it. I wasn't hearing voices. I hadn't gone mad. **It was Richard Parker who was speaking to me!** The carnivorous rascal. All this time together and he had chosen an hour before we were to die to pipe up. I was elated to be on speaking terms with a tiger. Immediately I was filled with a vulgar curiosity, the sort that movie stars suffer from at the hand of their fans." (Martel, 2003: 242-246)

A talking tiger is a magical object, while having conversation with a talking tiger is a magical event. However, Pi does not mind the idea of having conversation with a tiger. He even keeps talking and asking Richard Parker about foods. Pi's *curiosity* and attempts to talk about food seem more magical than the fact that he was having conversation with a tiger and the presence of the talking tiger itself. The natural—the conversation about food—becomes magical and the magical—the talking tiger and the conversation *with* the talking tiger— becomes banal or flat.

However, the presence of magical realism in *Life of Pi* is not merely seen from how Piscine Molitor Patel considers the magical objects and events he experienced as banal or normal. It is also strengthened by the appearance of the characteristics of magical realism. Since our discussion is the emergence of magical realism in *Life of Pi*, it becomes essential to address the characteristics

of magical realism, as a mode of narration, proposed by Wendy B. Faris. Faris suggests five primary characteristics of magical realism in identifying whether a literary work is magical realist or not. The five characteristics Faris suggests are; *first*, the "irreducible element" of magic; *second*, the presence of the phenomenal world; *third*, the unsettling doubts experienced by the reader in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; *fourth*, the merging of different realms; and *fifth*, the disturbance over the received ideas about time, space, and identity (Faris, 2004:7).

b. The Erasure of The Worlds

In *Life of Pi* there is a construction of worlds that is called Chinese-box world; the construction of the fictional-world-within-fictional world. Yann Martel in his *Life of Pi* mostly constructs this kind of world construction. The strategy used in constructing this fictional-world-within-fictional world is *superimposition.* It means that one world is put on top of another world; one fictional world is put on top of another fictional world. This superimposition strategy is used when Pi recounted the two versions of his survival story to the Japanese officers.

McHale (2004) explained that there is a kind of ambiguity and indeterminacy happened in postmodernist fiction when one condition is projected, then that condition is *recalled* or un-projected. In general, the process of Pi creating and telling the second version of his survival story automatically erases the first version of the story. Erasing the first version of the story means erasing the worlds that are projected in there.

McHale also said that in postmodernist fiction one narrated event—with some details and explanations—that occurs to one narrative agent or more can be replaced with another event along with other details and explanations (McHale, 2004:103). If we compare the two versions of Pi's survival story, we can find that the very first event that is erased by the creation of the second version of the story is every single event Pi experienced with Richard Parker. Moreover, in the second version of the story the event of Pi talking to Richard Parker is erased, as well as the event of Pi meeting up with the blind Frenchman.

The erasure of events here is the form of resistance felt by Mr. Okamoto. It happens because those events are magical events that contradict the laws of nature and are hard to believe. McHale (2004: 77) said that the resistance is "the means postmodernist fiction uses to emphasize the ontological confrontation" and to dramatize the confrontation itself. In the previous discussion, we have seen that those erased events emerge from the confrontation between worlds in the first

version of Pi's survival story. Mr. Okamoto's resistance, which is shown by his attempts to make Pi erase some events in the first version of the story, emphasizes and dramatizes the confrontation between the fictional "real" world and the "other" world.

Moreover, some details and explanations are also erased along with the erasure of events. These details and explanation are the existent in the literary work, like objects, settings, characters, and so on (McHale, 2004: 103). In *Life of Pi*, through the creation of the second version of the survival story, the erasure occurs to the characters, the objects and the settings.

The erasure of the characters can be seen when Pi substituted the animal characters in the first version of the story with human characters. The erasure of the characters creates an ambiguous situation happened in a literary work. The ambiguous situation as the effect of the erasure of the character is felt by some of the characters in the novel—the two Japanese officers—as we can see in the following dialog:

> "Mr. Okamoto: "Both the zebra and the Taiwanese sailor broke a leg, did you notice that?"
> [Mr. Chiba:] "No, I didn't."
> "And the hyena bit off the zebra's leg just as the cook cut off the Sailor's."
> … "The blind Frenchman they met in the other lifeboat—didn't he admit to killing a man and a woman?"
> …
> "The cook killed the sailor and his mother."
> …
> "So the Taiwanese Sailor is the zebra, his mother is the orang-utan, the cook … the hyena—which means he's the tiger!"
> "Yes. The tiger killed the hyena—and the blind Frenchman—just as he killed the cook." (Martel, 2003: 311)

The conversation between Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba above indicates the ambiguous situation which is the blurring identities of the characters in both versions of the survival story. The disruption of identity is one of magical realism characteristics, in which the identities are merged and changed (Faris, 2004: 26). Thus, magical realism here is not merely the cause of the erasure of the worlds; it also appears to be the effect of the erasure itself.

The objects that are erased through the creation of the second version of the survival story are the tiger, the carnivorous algae island and the meerkats. A tiger itself is only a natural animal until the story revealed how Pi survived with it in a small lifeboat, floating on the Pacific for 227 days. It is miraculous, even magical. What makes it more magical is that the tiger is talking to Pi. Furthermore, the carnivorous algae island—an object Pi found in the middle of the Pacific—is erased, also because the island is magical. The algae island are considered contradict the laws of nature; that such botany would not be accepted by scientists since no one else has come upon it

but Pi (Martel, 2003: 294). The story also erases the meerkats. Actually, there were "bones of some small animals found in the lifeboat" when Pi reached Mexico, but Pi failed to assure Mr. Okamoto that those are meerkat's bones (Martel, 2003: 299).

The erased setting in the first version of the story, through the creation of the second of the survival story, is the carnivorous algae island. I have mentioned before that the island is the erased object. The carnivorous algae island is indeed a magical object Pi found in the middle of the Pacific on the one hand and the setting where Pi lived and continued taming Richard Parker for a little while on the other. Among the erasure of the existents—the characters, the objects and the setting—in *Life of Pi,* the erasure of the characters has the greatest effect. Since through the erasure of the characters, magical realism not only becomes the cause of the erasure of the projected worlds in the literary work, it also becomes the effect of the erasure itself.

In the end of the interview, Pi asked the two Japanese officers which story is the better one, as in the dialog below:

> "[Pi:] Before you go, I'd like to ask you something. … I told you two stories that account for 227 days in between. … Neither makes a factual difference to you. … You can't prove which story is true and which is not. … So tell me, since it makes no difference to you and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the best story, the story with animals or the story without animals?"
> …
> "Mr. Chiba: "The story with animals."
> "Mr. Okamoto: "*Yes.* The story with animals is the better story." (Martel, 2003: 316-317)

In postmodernist fiction, in some cases, the event is erased permanently. But in some other, after the erasure, the erased *event* is not automatically gone; it waits to be projected again. By choosing the first version of the survival story, "the story with animals", as the better story, the whole projected worlds in the first version of the story, not just the events, are projected again. Therefore, in *Life of Pi*, the projected worlds in both versions of the survival story superimpose and erase one another.

The superimposition strategy that is used in projecting the two versions of Pi's survival story makes the stories are both true and false. McHale said (2004: 46) that the superimposition strategy creates what is called a zone. Zone is a space which violates the laws of excluded middle. It is said violate the laws of excluded middle since a zone is a space that is both true and false; an impossible world (McHale, 2004: 33). This kind of construction affects the ending of a literary work. We are quite familiar with two kinds of ending: open and closed. However, in postmodernist fiction, we are introduced to *both* open and closed ending, or *between* the two, because the ending

is either multiple or circular (McHale, 2004: 109). McHale said that the "multiple ending texts … are obviously related to the forking-path narratives" (McHale, 2004: 109). Forking-path is one of construction in postmodernist fiction where the text erases itself by presenting the same event at two different points (McHale, 2004: 108). In *Life of Pi,* this forking-path construction emerges when the younger Pi recounted the same event—of him surviving the shipwreck by floating in a small lifeboat at the Pacific for 227 days—but in two different ways. Thus, this forking-path construction is related to the erasure of the worlds in *Life of Pi* not only by the way of presenting Pi's survival story in two different versions, but also by the way of making the two versions of Pi's survival story true and false. Because both versions of the survival story are true *and* false at the same time, the endings of both version of Pi's survival story are also true *and* false. This is how multiple ending is constructed in *Life of Pi.*

Besides affecting the ending, by presenting the construction of fictional worlds that are both true and false like that, *Life of Pi* projects another characteristic of magical realism which is the unsettling doubts that are experienced by the reader in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events. Faris (2004: 20) said that the unsettling doubts emerge because of the presence of magical events and objects—the irreducible elements—also of narrator's acceptance over those magical events and objects. In the first place, when the first version of Pi's survival story is recounted, the readers may hesitate whether the events Pi experienced are dreams or hallucination. However, this kind of hesitation changes when the second version of the survival story is being recounted. The construction of the second version of the survival story does not only make readers wonder which one of those two fictional worlds that is truly happened, but readers also wonder "whether the events the novel narrates are possible and therefore could be true" (Faris, 2004: 19). Thus, once again it proves that magical realism, in *Life of Pi,* is raised not merely as the cause of the erasure of the projected worlds, it also becomes the effect of the erasure itself.

Besides hesitating in deciding which fictional world that is truly happened, readers' hesitation is also raised through the *Author's Note.* As explained before, readers hesitates whether the Martel-like character in the note *is* Yann Martel himself, or whether the Author's Note is fact or fiction, or whether *Life of Pi* itself is a true story or not.

c. *Life of Pi* and Postmodern Culture

According to Lyotard, postmodernism also constructs a condition that he called *anything goes* in which things are done without following the rules that have been constructed and considered as "right" or "good" by modern society. An artist or a writer, in postmodern society, produces their works "not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work of art" (Lyotard, 1984: 81). The artist and the writer make their own rules. Some thinkers even argued that the work of art or the text itself *is* the rule.

In general, Yann Martel, through his writing *Life of Pi,* reflects the condition of postmodern society by projecting supernatural events and objects. Supernatural events and objects are things that would not be accepted by modern society since they cannot be explained, or challenged by another explanation.

The event of Pi taming Richard Parker in the lifeboat in the middle of the ocean can be considered as the representation of the "anything goes". It is a common for us seeing animals such as lions, bears, monkeys or elephants are being trained in circus or zoo, Yann Martel does not follow that common "rule". On the contrary, he presents an animal—a tiger—being tamed and trained in a lifeboat on the ocean. It is like Yann Martel emphasizes on how his work creates its own rule. Training an animal in a normal place such as circus and zoo is no easy task to do, let alone in such a small space as a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean. By presenting this event of Pi taming the tiger, Yann Martel shows that everything is possible in postmodern condition.

Furthermore, the representation of the "anything goes" also can be seen from Pi's strange religious practice—Hindu, Christianity and Islam (Martel, 2003: 45-46). Pi started practicing these three religions when he was still in Pondicherry. His parents who consider themselves as "a modern family" who "live in a modern way" said:

> "You can't be both. You must either be one, or the other. … if you're going to be religious, you must be either a Hindu, a Christian or a Muslim. … Or none." (Martel, 2003: 72-73)

Modern society accepts only one religion, if only modern society accept the idea of *God* and *religion.* Yann Martel, on the other hand, rejects that rule by projecting *three* religions in *one* person. Thus, Yann Martel through *Life of Pi* represents the postmodern condition of the "anything goes", that people can choose whether they want to be a believer or not; they can choose whether they want to believe in one religion or more.

Furthermore, I have explained in the previous discussion that the construction of worlds that are both true and false has affected the ending of the novel; that of the creation of the multification

of endings. Yann Martel did not create an ending for *Life of Pi* by not giving more information to the readers which of the stories that was really happened to his character; the first or the second version of the survival story. By not deciding any ending, Yann Martel gives an open choice for the readers, to decide the ending. The readers could create any ending for the story. One might consider the first version of the story is the *real* story happened to Pi, that the creation of the second version of the story is only to mock the two Japanese officer as the representation of modern society. The other might think that the first version of the survival story is the form of Pi's hallucination; that Pi might suffer from a mental disorder, thus they decide the second version of the survival story as the real one. By making this open choice and giving the readers chances to create any possible endings, *Life of Pi* once again represents the postmodern condition of the "anything goes".

Conclusion

Life of Pi, a postmodernist fiction written by Yann Martel, is a novel about the story of Pi Patel surviving in the Pacific Ocean as castaway for 227 days. This novel constructs plural worlds—fictional worlds, fictional "real worlds and "other" worlds—using the strategy of interpolation and superimposition. We have analyzed that the employment of the interpolation and superimposition strategy leads to the presence of magical realism and the erasure of the worlds in the novel. Moreover, by analyzing this literary work, we have found that in *Life of Pi*, magical not only does realism become the cause of the erasure of the worlds by the way of making the character resists the magical events and objects, but also the effect of the erasure itself. Therefore, by presenting magical realism and the erasure of the worlds*, Life of Pi* raised the problems of modes of being or the ontological questions that mostly appear in postmodernist fictions. Furthermore, this research concludes that Yann Martel, through his writing *Life of Pi,* reflects the condition of postmodern society of the "anything goes" by presenting the event of Pi taming the tiger, projecting *three* religions in *one* person and not creating an ending for *Life of Pi*. However, one aspect that I have not analyzed in this research is magical realism as a postcolonial strategy. This could be an opportunity for a further research on Yann Martel's writing.

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