

The cultural fluidity and conflict: multicultural dynamics in Pulang

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the manifestations of multiculturalism in the Indonesian novel *Pulang* (2015) by Tere Liye. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the research analyzes the narrative through the theoretical lens of Mingsui Cai, focusing on the protagonist Bujang's shifting status as both an insider and outsider within diverse cultural contexts. The novel chronicles Bujang's journey as he confronts criminality and navigates interactions with individuals from a multitude of cultures and nationalities. The analysis reveals how Tere Liye portrays cultural phenomena such as adaptation to foreign customs and the fluid, complex nature of identity formation. Furthermore, the novel delineates the dynamics between dominant and marginalized groups, illustrating how these power relations engender discrimination. Despite these tensions, the narrative also foregrounds themes of loyalty and duty, which persist across cultural divides. Ultimately, this study argues that *Pulang* uses its multicultural landscape to explore how cultural backgrounds fundamentally shape individual personality, worldview, and interpersonal relationships.



INTRODUCTION

Literary works are the art of imagining and reflecting the times in which they are written (Fawaid, et al., 2022), which are widely used for various purposes as well. Apart from providing entertainment and pleasure to readers, literary works also have other more complex purposes. One of the purposes is the didactic purpose or literary works that are intended to be able to direct or educate from the values contained in the story (Ramadhani, 2022). In the process, literary works also involve a creative process which requires contemplation, searching for ideas, and has different steps depending on the writer (Lestari, 2017). Writers usually apply different steps in creating a literary work depending on what form of literary work is being created.

Literary works can be divided into several types based on their form. In the world of literature, this form of literary work can be in the form of prose poetry, rhymes, or drama (Muhsyanur & Lering, 2022). Of these examples, one of the most popular types is the novel, which has a longer story and three main elements: main character, conflict and theme (Ristiani, 2012). Novels are also often thought-provoking and emotionally engaging, making them an effective medium for conveying social and cultural messages (Surayya Hanum et al., 2023). Therefore, novels have an important role to increase knowledge and broaden readers' horizons, especially on the cultural aspects of each country with the main elements of the novel (Anindya Putri Lesmana et al., 2024).

Indonesia is an example of a country with diverse cultures (Ismawati et al., 2019). This makes Indonesian novels unique, one of which is their themes. Based on this fact, Indonesian novels are closely related to the theme of multiculturalism (Farida & Dienaputra, 2021). Novels with a multicultural theme

often explore the identity, traditions, and values of a society (Fatmawati et al., 2019), and how these factors interact with changing times and globalization (Imron Al-Ma'ruf, 2012). Multiculturalism means emphasizing and accepting diversity, plurality, and plurality as the main facts of life in society (Dahri et al., 2023). Multiculturalism means emphasizing and accepting diversity, plurality, and plurality as the main facts of life in society (Khaeriyah et al., 2022). This also relates to how the author depicts local and foreign cultures in multiculturalism on literary work. Multiculturalism emphasizes acceptance of diversity, meaning that the author of a multicultural literary work should depict a story that maintains local cultural nuances while still not excluding the possibility of depicting foreign cultures within it. These local and foreign cultures must also be created with a more objective perspective from the author so that the depiction can be more acceptable. Thus, cultural genre novels are important in a literary context, because they depict differences of opinion, differences in worldview, differences in ethnicity, and misunderstandings in communication due to differences in language and religion, which are only a small part of the problems faced (Alamsyah et al., 2023). One of the most famous novels that carries the theme of multiculturalism is Tere Liye's *Pulang*. The cultural complexity and interconnectedness of several cultures presented by each character in this novel is interesting to study. Through this novel, Tere Liye describes how a person is related to a group that comes from a different cultural background. However, these differences become commonplace in the story, so the novel also highlights how each character can interact with each other.

In *Tere Liye's Pulang*, although the story is told by the main character Bujang—who is an insider in the international mafia world—the narrative often contains an outsider's perspective that is critical of the value system and culture of power that he lives in. Bujang not only plays a role as part of the group, but also questions and assesses the meaning of power, loyalty, and the concept of family used by the dominant group. According to Cai (2002), multiculturalism in literature aims to foster understanding, respect, and appreciation for cultural diversity by presenting characters who can engage in critical reflection toward their own cultural background while empathizing with others. Cai emphasizes that a mature multicultural character is one who not only acknowledges cultural differences but also practices empathy, equality, and justice in interpreting and responding to those differences. In this light, Bujang's narrative reflects such maturity. He was able to understand and criticize his own culture through the lens of empathy and justice, and open up space for fair and equal cross-cultural dialogue.

The author chose Tere Liye's novel *Pulang* as the object of study because it contains a rich and diverse cultural representations. Each character in this novel comes from a different cultural background, thus presenting a variety of unique perspectives and values. These cultural differences are not only seen in social aspects and customs, but also in the characters' perspectives and attitudes to life, which are reflected in the storyline.

In addition, the cultural diversity in *Pulang* (2015) provides a complex picture of how intercultural interactions can work, from unity to conflicts that arise due to these differences. By studying these various cultural representations, the author believes that it shall provide a deeper understanding of the multicultural dynamics that occur in society, especially how different cultural values can be interconnected and contribute to forming a shared identity.

METHOD

The method in this research is a descriptive qualitative method. According to (Creswell, 2009), qualitative approach is a term that is generally utilized or used to refer to theoretical perspective designs such as narrative research, phenomena studies, action research, case studies, historical research, ethnographic studies, and content analysis. Furthermore, this research applies qualitative research methods by applying qualitative descriptive research. Qualitative descriptive research is research that produces analytical procedures that do not use statistical procedures and only describes results based on facts about a variable, symptom, or situation. The author wants to analyze Tere Liye's novel *Pulang* by using Mingshui Cai's theory of multiculturalism literary work (2002). Purposive sampling was implemented to choose the right narratives and dialogues which represents the dynamics of multiculturalism in the setting. These data were then classified to infer some emerging themes which

accord to or are comparable to Cai's ideas on multiculturalism (Cai, 2002).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The multicultural practices in the novel *Pulang* (2015) is a description of the variations in religion, culture, and ethnicities of the characters who interact in various dynamics of circumstances or situations. The cultural diversity there provides valuable perspectives on other local and foreign cultural practices. There are three aspects identified, based on Cai's perspective: interaction, loyalty, and domination.

Interaction of diverse cultures

Cai (2002) argues that multiculturalism should include as many cultures as possible in literary works without distinguishing between dominant and dominated (Cai, 2002). In the novel "*Pulang*," the seemingly diverse cultures are demonstrated through the interactions of the characters who introduce what those cultures are like and how they are practiced. This novel demonstrates that, in accordance with Mingsui's theory, not just one culture is introduced, but rather a variety of cultures are present in the novel. In accordance with this novel, the main character is a man named Bujang, who comes from Sumatra, deep in the forest where there is a village called Kampung Talang. He experiences various interactions with various outside cultures that differ from his own.

In Tere Liye's novel "*Pulang*," it is found that the Big Boss's subordinates come from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Some of these findings will be explained in the data below.

Datum 1

"*Karena Basyir memang adalah jagal keturunan Arab*" ("Because Basyir is indeed a butcher of Arab descent.") (Liye, 2015:54)

Datum 2

"*Kalian naiklah ke atas, istriku sudah menyiapkan kopi dan juadah.*" ("You guys go upstairs, my wife has prepared coffee and a meal.") (Liye, 2015:5)

Datum 3

"*...Frans adalah orang Amerika, pernah mendengar nama negaranya?*" ("...Frans is American, have you ever heard of his country?") (Liye, 2015:61)

Datum 4

"*Tidak ada lagi rumah panggung reot Bapakmu itu. Tidak ada lagi ranjang kayu, tikar anyam. Kau adalah bagian dari Keluarga Tong. Kau dengar aku?*" ("No more of your father's rickety stilt house. No more wooden beds or woven mats. You are part of the Tong family. Do you hear me?")

From these four data points, several narratives identify that several characters come from different ethnicities or backgrounds. In point 1, the main character "Bujang" explicitly states that Basyir is of Arab descent. Similarly, in point 2, the term "juadah" appears in a sentence. Juadah here refers to a collection of traditional foods arranged in a special way on a tray according to Minangkabau (Malay) customs. This narrative is mentioned by the character "Bujang" himself, who is of Malay descent in Sumatra. Furthermore, there is another character from an American background, Frans. There is also a character named Tauke Muda, who comes from a Tong family (of Chinese ethnicity). These data indicate complex backgrounds for the characters, yet they still interact well, as shown in the narrative below.

Datum 5

"Tauke mewarisi rumah ini dari orang tuanya, tapi orang tuanya bukan keturunan langsung Tong. Itu bukan masalah besar, di rumah ini, siapapun orangnya, dari mana asalnya, adalah keluarga." (Tauke inherited this house from his parents, but his parents are not direct descendants of Tong. That's not a big deal; in this house, whoever they are, wherever they come from, they are family)." (Liye, 2015:58)

Datum 6

"Tapi ini berubah menyenangkan, dengan bisa berlatih bersama Kopong, aku tidak keberatan menghabiskan waktu membacanya. Juga tidak keberatan mendengarkan Basyir dan pemuda lain engolok-olokku, memanggilku "Profesor". Aku berjanji akan mendapatkan nilai-nilai terbaik. Frans si Amerika juga guru yang mengasyikkan, dia mengajarku dengan cara menyenangkan. ("But this turned out to be fun. Being able to practice with Kopong made me happy. I didn't mind spending time reading. I also didn't mind listening to Basyir and the other boys make fun of me, calling me "Professor." I promised I'd get the best grades. Frans, the American, was also a fun teacher; he taught me in a fun way.)" (Liye, 2015:121)

Furthermore, Cai's view on multiculturalism focuses on issues of race and ethnicity in multicultural literature. (Cai, 2002). In *Pulang*, racial and ethnic issues are widely displayed. The main character, Bujang, is a village boy who lives in a rural village on the island of Sumatra. Bujang is a man who lives with and works for a big Tauke as a butcher. Bujang met many people coming from different cultures and ethnicities.

Datum 7:

"Niat ku sudah kokoh. Aku tidak datang sejauh ini ke kota besar hanya untuk sekolah. Aku tidak membunuh babi raksasa itu hanya untuk sekolah. Aku tidak membunuh babi raksasa itu hanya untuk kemudian disuruh belajar." ("My intentions are firm. I didn't come all this way to the big city just to go to school. I didn't kill that giant boar just to go to school. I didn't kill that giant boar just to be told to study.") (Liye, 2015:69)

In the narration, Bujang did not want to go to school; he had a strong idea to be butcher, a traditional legacy of his family. His statement proved that he used his effort in his school as a step stone to achieve his big dream, a big butcher. To prove this, he had shown to people that he could easily kill the gigantic pig—a skill which not every butcher had. Here, it functions not only to describe Bujang's personality, but also to exemplify his cultural background, that allowed him and his community to consume pork – a diet which is not common and even prohibited in other communities.

Datum 1:

"Karena Basyir memang adalah jagal keturunan Arab." ("Because Bashir is indeed a butcher of Arab descent.") (Liye, 2015:54)

Based on some of the characters in *Pulang*, the backgrounds they bring are different and one of them is Basyir. this proves that this novel explores many cultural identities that are increasingly complex and examines further the interaction of these cultural differences.

Loyalty to diverse cultural families

Bujang's loyalty to his adoptive father, Tauke Muda, as well as his teachers such as Samadikun, Salonga, and the Tua shows strong loyalty even though they come from different cultural backgrounds-Chinese, Filipino, and Latin American. Bujang is not only obedient as a student, but also open to

absorbing life values from each culture without losing his identity as a Malay child. In the context of Mingshui Cai theory, Bujang's attitude reflects an appreciation of cultural diversity and his ability to maintain personal identity, which is at the core of multicultural character education. The loyalty of the Tong family can be seen in the way their father, who comes from a different ethnic background, became a trusted figure in the Tong family. The same holds true in the era when Bujang also became the right-hand man of the young Tauke.

Datum 8:

When The big Tauke accepted Syahdan as his right-hand man. And the same thing happened when Bujang was appointed by young Tauke as well as others. There is no narrative where Tauke's employee defected.

The Dominant's control

The dominant group in *Pulang* can be seen in the elite "Tong Family" who controlled the international shadow economy. This group was led by characters such as Tauke Muda and powerful figures from the Chinese cultural background, as well as other mafia groups from Western and East Asian cultures. This cultural dominance is not only seen in the form of economic power, but also the cultivation of values and ways of life. Bujang, who comes from a simple and religious Malay culture, has to conform to the value system of an international elite group that is full of power, violence and manipulation. Bujang almost lost his control over his own identity as he had to follow the rules of the dominant group, even if they went against the original values of his hometown. There is a pressure for Bujang to "be like them"-intelligent, without excessive empathy, efficient, and obedient to the power hierarchy. This shows how the dominant culture constructs values that individuals from subordinate groups must accept and follow in order to "survive".

Datum 9:

"*Itu pesan terakhir Mamakku. Maka aku tidak kan minum tuak atau sake yang dihidangkan*" (That is the last things that my mom said. So I will never drink any alcohol or sake when it was served") (Liye, 2015:68)

Here, Bujang tried to negotiate his master, who did not share his cultural value. By quoting the community principle from his mother, Bujang presented a respect to mother, shared by all eastern cultures. This way his disobedience to his master was then appreciated. As a result, they would never force him to do it in the future.

In another example, uniformity of cultural values as a unifier. *AMOKKK* comes from Malay language, but Tauke and other groups called out the term when the butchers competed each other.

Flexibility and Complexity in Identity Construction

In Tere Liye's *Pulang*, Bujang's identity construction is presented in a flexible and complex way, where he grows from a religious Malay cultural background into the powerful and violent world of the international mafia. Despite being exposed to new values from various cultures such as Chinese, Filipino and Latin American, Bujang is able to adjust without losing his cultural roots. This process shows the flexibility of his identity that continues to develop through cross-cultural interactions and moral conflicts that he experiences. In the perspective of Mingsui Cai theory, Bujang reflects a person who forms a multicultural character through openness, critical reflection, and the ability to maintain self-integrity amidst the pressure of the dominant culture, thus showing that true identity is built from an inner journey that respects diversity.

Datum 10:

His ability to adapt to different countries and cultural environments, such as in China, the Philippines and Latin America. (Bujang's ability to learn the languages, life philosophies and values of different cultures, without showing rigid resistance.) (Liye, 2015:78)

Bujang is not stuck in a single identity, but rather continues to evolve through complex intercultural interactions. This is in line with Mingsui Cai's idea, which states that multicultural character is formed through openness, empathy, and an individual's ability to positively navigate cultural differences.

Stories of insiders' narrative

In Tere Liye's *Pulang*, although the story is told by the main character Bujang who is an insider in the world of the international mafia, the narrative often contains an outsider's perspective that is critical of the value system and culture of power that he lives in. Bujang not only plays a role as part of the group, but also questions and reflectively assesses the meaning of power, loyalty, and the concept of family used by the dominant group. In the perspective of Mingsui Cai's theory, this reflects a mature multicultural character, where one is able to understand and criticize one's own culture through the lens of empathy and justice, and open up space for fair and equal cross-cultural dialogue.

Datum 11 :

Bujang as insider :

"Aku tidak masuk dalam struktur organisasi karena posisiku adalah jagal nomor satu. Aku kaki tangan langsung Tauke Besar. Tugasku spesial, yakni penyelesaian konflik tingkat tinggi." ("I'm not part of the organizational structure because my position is the number one butcher. I'm a direct underling of the Big Boss. My job is special, which is to resolve high-level conflicts.") Liye, 2015:71

Bujang is the main character who comes from a Malay village and is directly involved in the shadow economy. As an insider, he experiences life as a member of the shadow economy "family", learns directly from important figures, and becomes part of the power system. Although Bujang is part of the system, his narrative often contains an outsider's voice - he questions, criticizes and assesses the prevailing values in the world of power from a moral and spiritual perspective that comes from outside the system.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the novel represents complex and profound multicultural practices through the main character Bujang and his interactions with various local and foreign cultural settings. The novel presents cultural diversity in a balanced manner without placing one culture as superior to another, in accordance with Mingshui Cai's multicultural principles that reject cultural domination. Through rich intercultural interactions, the main character's adaptation process, and the construction of a flexible yet critical identity, *Pulang* illustrates the importance of empathy, moral reflection, and respect for cultural differences as the foundation of character building. The narration by an insider but containing an outsider's point of view reinforces the values of multiculturalism in this work.

This article has several strengths. It analyzes a local novel that encompasses a wide range of cultural representations, offering a broad perspective on multicultural literature that combines preserved local cultural nuances with foreign influences that enrich readers' understanding. Moreover, the article provides an in-depth discussion of the narrative techniques used in portraying multicultural themes within the novel, making it insightful for readers interested in the dynamics of culture and identity in literary works. However, the findings are primarily based on the examination of the content. A more comprehensive review of the author's biography is needed to fully determine the originality of the

multicultural elements in the work. Thus, *Pulang* is not only a fictional imaginary piece but can also be an educational item to foster multicultural awareness in its readers' mind.

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