

Situating The Notion of Nationalism in Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Dian Windriani

STKIP PGRI Bandar Lampung

dianwindri234@gmail.com

Abstract: The idea of nationalism cannot be universalized, proven by Hans Kohn's framework on Civic and Ethnic nationalism. Applying Hans Kohn's framework on nationalism, this study examines the act of nationalism reflected in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). This study uses qualitative research method by employing three steps in interpreting the data; describing, analysing, and deriving a conclusion. This study finds out that first, Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855) glorifies individual journey and struggle in uniting the whole members of the nation. Second, Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) highlights the collective cultural identity as a form of rejection to colonial supremacy. Due to the controversy of Hans Kohn's framework on nationalism, the contextualization of the writer's background and social history of the works is needed.

Keywords: *Nationalism, Civic and Ethnic, Comparative studies*

Abstrak: Gagasan nasionalisme tidak dapat diuniversalkan, dibuktikan dengan kerangka Hans Kohn tentang nasionalisme Kewarganegaraan dan Etnis. Dengan menerapkan kerangka nasionalisme Hans Kohn, penelitian ini mengkaji tindakan nasionalisme yang tercermin dalam "Song of Myself" karya Walt Whitman (1855) dan *The God of Small Things* (1997) karya Arundhati Roy. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif dengan menggunakan tiga langkah dalam menginterpretasikan data; mendeskripsikan, menganalisis, dan menarik kesimpulan. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa pertama, "Song of Myself" karya Whitman (1855) mengagungkan perjalanan dan perjuangan individu dalam menyatukan seluruh anggota bangsa. Kedua, *The God of Small Things* (1997) karya Roy menyoroti identitas budaya kolektif sebagai bentuk penolakan terhadap supremasi kolonial. Karena kontroversi kerangka Hans Kohn tentang nasionalisme, diperlukan kontekstualisasi latar belakang penulis dan sejarah sosial karya tersebut.

Kata kunci: nasionalisme, kewarganegaraan dan etnis, studi banding

INTRODUCTION

Hans Kohn, a Jewish American historian, succinctly explained, "Nationalism is a state of mind, in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due the nation-state" (Kohn, 1965: 9). However, the universality of 'nationalism' is difficult to be defined since each person, group, or state has their own ideology and history (Wicaksono et al, 2021). In one side, nationalism can be related to self-determination, liberalism, and democracy, in other side, nationalism is associated with chauvinism, war, even genocide. Craig Calhoun cited by Jaffrelot explained that the diversity of nationalism never allows a single narrative to generalize it all, in contrary, nationalism should be determined by "the difference of cultural traditions, the actions of leaders, and contingent situations within the international world order" (Jaffrelot, 2014: 3). In different circumstance, Hans Kohn differentiates between civic and ethnic nationalism based on a comparative analysis of Great Britain, France, and the United States as the West and Germany, Italy, and Slavic nations as the non-West. Based on Kohn, the distinction between Western and non-Western nationalism was caused by a long-complex history and politics. Kohn as cited by Shulman argued that civic or Western nationalism which emerges in the West is to describe "a political identity built around shared citizenship in a liberal-democratic state" (Shulman, 2002: 555). In other side, ethnic nationalism which is happening in the East, is based on collective ethnic and cultural identity, such as language, religion, customs, and traditions (Shulman, 2002: 559; Wicaksono et al., 2020). If civic nationalism focuses on the individual liberty and equality, ethnic nationalism prefers to derive the nation from communal ties of ethnic kinship. The dichotomy between civic and ethnic nationalism creates a controversy in status quo since it glorifies orientalist views by believing that civic nationalism is dominant in Western Europe and America, while ethnic nationalism is dominant in Central or Eastern Europe and Asia.

Responding to the debate on nationalism, this study examines the spirit of nationalism reflected in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855) is the first poem in *Leaves of Grass*, consists of 1336 lines divided into 52 stanzas which celebrates the individual freedom, democracy, equality, and unity as Americans, regardless their race, identity, gender, and religion. Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a story about a resistance against colonial hegemony that tends to highly value colonizer's culture, language, and ideas, told by children point of view. This study is aware that there is orientalist view on Kohn's civic and ethnic nationalism; therefore, this study will contextualize it to the writer's background and social history of the works.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hans Kohn is the influential figure in developing Civic/Western and Ethnic/non-Western nationalism. Civic/Western nationalism focuses on individual liberty and rationality without looking back to the past in order to establish nationhood. In other hand, Ethnic/non-Western nationalism prefers to derive the nationalism from culture, communal ties of ethnic kinship. According to Kohn, the distinction between Western and non-Western nationalism was caused by a long-complex history and politics. He argued, "The difference in the concepts of nation and nationalism was a historical consequence of the difference in effect produced by Renaissance and Reformation between Germany and Western Europe" (Kohn 1944: 331). Hans Kohn further explained that modern nationalism emerged in Great Britain, France, and the United States (as the West) in the eighteen centuries as the same as the development of political dimension. In different circumstance, nationalism in Germany, Italy, and Slavic nations (as the non-West), then emerged at the beginning of nineteenth century, founded in the cultural aspect (Kohn, 1946: 4). However, Kohn's dichotomy on nationalism is seemingly to justify some critics on Western hegemony (the way the West defines itself by othering the Rest), such as Edward Said in *Orientalism* or Stuart Hall in *The West and the Rest*. This is one of the reasons why his framework on nationalism is defined in binary and creates a controversy in status quo. Indeed, nationalism in non-Western world focuses on non-political dimension because it spread by scholars, poets, or writers. Even further, the political condition was not developed yet, thus the bearers of non-Western nationalism could not play their role like the bearers of nationalism in the West who are the middle-class society.

METHOD

This study employs qualitative research method. The primary sources are Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855) is the first poem in *Leaves of Grass*, consists of 1336 lines divided into 52 stanzas. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is Roy's debut novel narrated using children point of view. The secondary sources are taken from academic journals, theories, and book. Since this study tries to examine the spirit of nationalism in the works studied, this study employs three steps in interpreting the data; describing, analysing, and deriving a conclusion. First, this study describes the spirit of nationalism depicted in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Second, this study analyses the works studied using Hans Kohn's framework on nationalism. Third, this study tries to derive a conclusion about spirit of nationalism by comparing two

different stories, from different writers and nationality, using Hans Kohn's framework on nationalism.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Civic Nationalism in Whitman's "Song of Myself"

Walter Whitman is an American poet, journalist, and essayist, was born on May 31, 1819, in Long Island, New York. According to Allen and Jeffares, Whitman's family originally lives in North America in the first half of seventeenth century, and moves to Brooklyn a few years after Whitman was born (Allen and Jeffares, 2018). His family moves to Brooklyn to search for better future, in reality they have to struggle financially due to his father's failure on the investment. Whitman journalist's journey starts at the age of twelve; he apprentices in the *Long Island Patriot* newspaper and some years later he works in several newspaper companies where he learns how to transfer thought and event into language, and communicate it to the readers. Between 1841 and 1859, Whitman becomes the editor in seven different newspapers, such as in *Long Island*, *New York City*, and *New Orleans*. All this time, he becomes an outspoken journalist of social and political reform in both local and national issues. It can be seen through his participation in the antislavery *Free-Soil faction* or a political party that opposes slavery in America and in the *Crescent* for three month which becomes his first time having a contact with African American.

For his literary life, Whitman was strongly influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson with his idea on transcendentalism which is focusing on self-reliance, individual journey, institution, and unity. After intensively reading books at home and library, he decided to ignore traditional meter and rhyme, and started to use *free verse* in his poem in order to achieve what he called as "Democratic Poetic". Whitman's attitude in rejecting traditional rules of writing a poem shows his attempts in glorifying freedom, equality, and democracy. Redding argued,

The absence of "rhyme and [metrical] uniformity" indicates a poet's commitment to the free expression of (human) nature. The democratic citizen was entitled to "free growth" in his private imagination just as in the public world of politics. (Redding, p. 672).

Whitman wisely uses free verse in his collection of poems entitled *Leaves of Grass*, firstly published in 1855 and becomes the masterpiece of world literature. *Leaves of Grass* celebrates the idea of democracy, nature, love, and friendship. According to Nathanael O'Reilly, *Whitman in his Leaves of Grass tries to build utopian imagination of America by embracing all people and providing equality and freedom for them since America fails in providing equality for some people, such as immigrants, Native Americans, African-*

Americans. Indeed, the way Whitman celebrates democracy, equality, and individual right of Americans can be perfectly seen in his famous poem entitled "Song of Myself".

"Song of Myself" is one of famous poems in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* that undergoes long revision on its title. Marketa Ferstova said that this poem gets its final title as "Song of Myself" in the 1881, the seventh edition of *Leaves of Grass*, she says,

In the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* the poem was untitled, in the following edition this poem took on the title "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" and in the 1860 – 1871 editions it was shortened simply to "Walt Whitman." The final widely known title "Song of Myself" appeared firstly in the 1881 edition. "Song of Myself," is a long poem in fifty-two sections which is considered by many to be his masterpiece (Ferstova, 2011: 22).

"Song of Myself" narrates speaker's attempt in healing, mediating and uniting Americans, regardless their race, identity, gender, and religion after severe disunity and tension caused by the civil war and slavery. Whitman prefers to write a long and un-rhythmical verse that can develop conversation and bring the intimacy to the readers. By inviting the readers to his poem, Whitman tries to lead them to have similar position as the speaker. He asked, "What do you think has become of the young and old men? / And what do you think has become of the women and children?" (*Poetry Foundation*, part 5).

Whitman's spirit of nationalism in "Song of Myself" is clearly seen even in the opening sentences of his poem; he tries to embrace the unity among the Americans, he said, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (*Poetry Foundation*, part 1). Whitman highly values the unity, freedom, and equality since American has suffered from "fratricidal war" or a civil war that destroys the ties between South and North America. He knows how horrible the war is since he directly involves in witnessing the victims of war as a nursing assistance. He then laments the horror of the war in his poem by saying,

I take part- I see and hear the whole;
The cries, curses, roar- the plaudits for well-aim'd shot;
The ambulance slowly passing, trailing its red drip;
Workmen searching after damages, making indispensable repairs;
The fall of grenades through the rent roof- the fan-shaped explosion;
The whizz of limbs, heads, stone, wood, iron, high in the air.
(*Poetry Foundation*, part 33).

Facing the suffering and injustice, Whitman's spirit of nationalism arises; he uses his imagination and intuition to spread freedom, unity, and self-reliance to build a new face of America that is totally different with the previous era. He declared, "One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same, / A southerner soon as a Northerner, a planter nonchalant and hospitable down by the Oconee I live." (Poetry Foundation, part 16). He points out 'the important of self' as a part of big community regardless their race and ideology, as long as they are Americans, they are equal and have their own freedom because "all the men born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers." (Poetry Foundation, part 5). Whitman's attitude in celebrating the individual right and liberty in "Song of Myself" represents what Hans Kohn called as "civic nationalism". For this case, Whitman build his nationalism based on complex struggle of self in achieving individual right and uniting the whole members of nation.

Ethnic Nationalism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy or Suzanna Arundhati Roy was born on November 24, 1961 in Shillong, India. She is an Indian author, actress, and political activist who won the Booker Prize in 1997 for her novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). She also won Sydney Peace Prize in 2004 for her involvement in environmental and human rights cause. *The God of Small Things* which won the Booker Prize is Roy's first book and only novel, until in 2017 Roy publishes her second novel entitled *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

The God of Small Things, written in 1992 and published in 1997, is a debut novel of Arundhati Roy. It sets in Ayemenem, India, told by Rahel and Estha using children's point of view. Under postcolonial perspective, this novel is used as a resistance against colonial mentality that tends to highly value colonizer's culture, language, and ideas. Roy's protagonists, Rahel and Estha, grow up in a village in Kerala influenced by foreign stuffs, ideology, and religion, such as Elvis Presley, Broadway musicals, peppermint candies, Love-in-Tokyo hair bands, Rhodes scholarships, Chinese Marxism, and Syrian Christianity. However, hybrid identity that is experienced by Rahel and Estha creates confusion in their life, like who they are; they are neither Indian nor British. Chacko, where he says "We're prisoners of war," ... "Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore" (Roy, 1998: 53). Therefore, they feel inferior when they meet Sophie Mole, thinking that they are the fake one. Their mother is Ammu, in the past Ammu tries to escape from her ill-tempered father, known as Pappachi, and persuades her parents to let her spend a summer with a distant aunt in Calcutta. To avoid in returning to Ayemenem, she marries a man and gives birth to fraternal twins named Rahel and Eshta, however, she finds

out that his husband is an alcoholic and tends to abuse her. She decides to return to Ayemenem to live with her parents and brother, Chacko, who has just returned to India from England after his divorce from an English woman, Margaret. In Ayemenem, she has an affair with a Dalit man, Velutha.

Sadly, when her forbidden relationship with Velutha is discovered, Ammu is locked in her room and Velutha is banished. Disappointed, Rahel and Estha run away followed by Sophie, their Indian-British cousin. Unfortunately, Sophie drowns in the river and dies. Baby Kochamma then goes to police and accuses Velutha of being responsible for Sophie's death. In fact, she is wrong. Afraid of being exposed, she convinces Chacko that the twins are responsible for his daughter's death. Chacko then chases Ammu away and she dies miserably at age 31 years old, he then sends Estha to his father, and forces Rahel marries an American man. When Rahel and Estha are 31 years old, they are reunited

Besides, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* shows about the complicated relationship in a family, this novel also criticizes the inferiority of native India toward British cultures and its people. Tracing back to the history, the internalization of inferior mentality by native India is manipulated by British colonizers since they colonized India, spread through many aspects, such as culture, language, idea, ideology, and so on. Therefore, many natives India who admire and try to behave and speak as similar as possible to British colonizers or it is called as Anglophile. Even if India has already got their independence, the influence of British colony has already been internalized in their daily life. It can be seen through the characters in Roys' *The God of Small Things* who degrade their own culture and completely fond of Western values, language and ideas, perceiving them as superior. In the end there is a desire to adopt and internalize Western values, language, and ideas in their everyday practice. For example, Roy's protagonists, Rahel and Estha, grow up with foreign stuff, such as Elvis Presley, Broadway musicals, peppermint candies, Love-in-Tokyo hair bands, and so on. Baby Kochamma continuously forces the twins to use English in their daily conversation; even she tends to correct their pronunciation and grammar. Another character who has already internalized western hegemony is Pappachi. He adores England and tries to resemble British manner and appearance as similar as possible, even worst he does not want to wear traditional Indian cloth. Roy also presents the binary between Sophie Mol as western representation and the twin as the East in order to criticize society's internalization of western hegemony. Sophie Mol, an English girl, is associated with an angelic portrayal, like she is described as a "little angel" while Estha and Rahel are described as "little demons" (Roy, 1998: 179).

There is a reason behind presenting anglophile characters in Roy's *The God of Small Things*, in this novel Roy wants to raise the nationalist spirit of

Indian people by resisting anglophile which is a symbol of British superiority. It can be seen through the death of Sophie Mole that symbolizes the power of the East in subjugating the West. Sophie dies because she is drowned in the river; this river in the forest shows the stereotype of Eastern as primitive but they forget the fact that in this river, she dies. It shows how powerful the East is even the West cannot tame and resist against the wilderness of the East. Besides Sophie Mol drowning, Rahel and Estha also participate in resisting British superiority. They find amusement in English word 'Nictitating' and unconsciously play it by pulling it apart (Roy, 1998: 189).

Actually, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* represents the spirit of nationalism which is glorified by post-independence Indian writers. In this case, they try to challenge Western negative stereotype on them by producing literature that is used to articulate and rewrite their own identity and experience in order to reclaim their freedom as Indian society. Roy's love toward Indian culture and language until she does a resistance against anglophile can be categorized as "ethnic nationalism" or nationalism done by certain group in a certain geographical territory as opposed to Western views of a nation.

CONCLUSION

Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* reflect the spirit of nationalism, by showing their loyalty and devotion toward their nation. However, their nationalism is expressed in different way. In Whitman's "Song of Myself", his nationalism can be seen through his promotion of national unity and defense toward individual rights and freedom of American people. His nationalism arises after seeing the condition of war and slavery that create disunity among Americans, or according to Kohn, it is called as civic nationalism. Therefore, he works hard to unite all American to be part of America, regardless their race, religion and ideology. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the nationalism of Estha and Rahel can be seen through their activity in preserving their Indian language and culture even if they live in hybrid identity. Estha and Rahel's struggle can represent how the nationalism in the East works, such as by embracing their identity and collective experience or history as a colonized to fight against colonizer. In fact, it is different with nationalism in the West, like Afro-American or Chinese-American, who ask for individual right and freedom since most of them are immigrant from all over the world whose right and freedom are denied in America.

REFERENCES

- Ferstova, Marketa. (2011). "Walt Whitman "Song og Myself"." *University of Pardubice*. (URL: https://dk.upce.cz/bitstream/handle/10195/42461/FerstovaM_Walt_Whitman_Song%20of%20Myself_BM_2011.pdf?sequence=3). Accessed on March 20, 2022.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. (2014). "For a Theory of Nationalism". *Centre d'études et de recherches internationales Sciences Po*. (URL: <https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01065058>) . Accessed on March 20, 2022.
- Kohn, Hans. (1944). *The Idea of Nationalism. A Study in Its Origin and Background*. New York: Macmillan Company.
- Kohn, Hans. (1946). *Prophets and People Studies in 19th Century Nationalism*. New York: Macmillan.
- Kohn, Hans. (1965). *Nationalism: Its Meaning and History*. Princeton, N.J: Van Nostrand.
- Poetry Foundation, "Song of Myself". (URL: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version>). Accessed on March 15, 2022.
- Redding, Patrick. "Whitman Unbound: Democracy and Poetic Form, 1912-1931". *New Literary History*. (URL: https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Redding_Whitman.pdf). Accessed on March 20, 2022.
- Roy, Arundhati. (1998). "The God of Small Things". New York: HarperCollinsPublishers.
- Shulman, Stephen. (2002). "Challenging the Civic/Ethnic and West/East Dichotomies in the Study of Nationalism". *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 5.
- Wicaksono, A.; Emzir; and Rafli, Z. (2020). History of Indonesia's War Independence in Novel Larasati by Pramoedya Ananta Toer: New Historicism Approach. DOI: 10.5220/0008993400320040. *In Proceedings of the International Conference on Education, Language and Society (ICELS 2019)*, pages 32-40
- Wicaksono, Andri; Emzir; Rafli, Zainal. (2021). Colonizers and Fighters: Discursive Relations of The National Revolution Period in Indonesian Novels. *PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION* (2021) 58(4), ISSN 1553 – 6939

