

Cultural Intersection in the Novel "Kuli" by M.H. Szekely Luloofs

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Abstract

This article discusses the representation of cultural intersection in M.H. Szekely-Luloofs' novel *Kuli*, a colonial text that records the lives of indentured labourers on Deli plantations. Starting from the multi-ethnic historical context of North Sumatra, this research highlights how cross-ethnic encounters—Javanese, Sundanese, Madurese, Betawi, Malay, and even Chinese—are constructed through stereotypes, conflict, and power relations. Luloofs, a Dutch-descended female writer, uses her personal experiences in Deli as both the setting and the medium to depict a fragmented social reality. Utilising the perspective of literary sociology, the analysis is directed towards two main aspects: first, ethnic diversity as the foundation of Deli society, shaped by migration and colonisation; and second, intersectional conflicts arising as a consequence of differences in ethnic identities and representations within the narrative. The novel *Kuli* presents ethnic stereotypes in layers: Betawi people depicted as arrogant, Madurese as tough, Sundanese as polite, and even Chinese who are socially and economically marginalised. This stereotype is not only an identity marker, but also a source of conflict that culminates in intergroup violence. Inter-ethnic intersection is depicted ambiguously—on one hand, it gives rise to "ship brother" solidarity, while on the other, it triggers exclusion and criminalisation. Novel *Kuli*, therefore, presents plurality as an arena of tension, where ethnic representations operate within a colonial framework that reinforces social hierarchies.

Keywords: *culture, intersection, Luloofs, Kuli*

Introduction

An important part of the discussion about the multiculturalism of North Sumatra society is the story of indentured labourers. Various history books describe this event as a social fact that contributed to the transformation of multi-ethnic community life in North Sumatra (Reid, 2014; Stoler, 1995). Contract *Kulis* were also recorded in fictional writings. Among them were written by Jan Breman, Emil W. Aulia, and M.H. Szekely Luloofs (Breman, 1990; Aulia, 2007). This paper discusses how the situation of society during the contract *Kuli* era is represented by the novel *Kuli* by M.H. Szekely Luloofs, published in 1985. More specifically, this paper discusses the social issues that arose from the

interethnic encounters and differences among the Kulis, as well as the underlying factors (Houben & Lindblad, 2002). The discussion is divided into two categories to trace the events that can be elaborated upon with those constructed by the novel. First, the diversity of society in North Sumatra is presented (Furnivall, 1948). Second, an analysis of several intersectional conflicts constructed by the novel in those spaces is provided (Stoler, 2002).

The novel *Kuli* was written by Madelon H. Szekely Lulofs, who was the daughter of a civil servant working in the Ministry of Home Affairs. This led her to travel extensively throughout Java and Sumatra (Vickers, 2005). Madelon married Doffegnies, a junior assistant at a rubber plantation in Deli, but it ended in divorce. Madelon's presence in Deli continued with her marriage to Laszlo Szekely, who also worked as a junior assistant at a rubber plantation in Deli. Lulofs' experiences in Deli were later written into the novel *Kuli* (Teeuw, 1988).

Although written by a woman of Dutch descent and with a high likelihood of being used for colonial purposes, the existence of the novel "*Kuli*" with its humanitarian issues during the time of contract Kulis in Deli is an important part of the sociological and historical journey of the North Sumatra region. Especially in providing an overview of the plural society situation in the past, which is likely to be affiliated with building the current construction of a plural society in North Sumatra (Locher-Scholten, 2000). Therefore, looking at "what" someone outside of the existing tribes views and says about the tribe's existence is one way to gain a picture of the situation from another perspective (Said, 1978). In this context, this is what is recorded in the novel *Kuli*. Thus, we can see how the plurality of society is viewed zoomed out through the lens of Lulofs (White, 1987).

The representation of society in the novel *Kuli* shows how different ethnic groups are placed in varying social positions according to the needs of the colonial system. For example, Javanese Kulis are described as the main workforce that is easiest to recruit and discipline, something also expressed in historical analyses of the mobilisation of Javanese labour to East Sumatra (Bremant, 2010). Meanwhile, Chinese Kulis were often placed as foremen or intermediaries, serving as a link between the workers and the plantation managers. This ethnic division of labour confirms how colonial power managed plurality for its own interests.

Besides ethnic hierarchy, the novel also subtly depicts friction between groups caused by stereotypes and prejudice. Interactions between people of different ethnicities are not always harmonious, especially when they have to compete for jobs, space, or the attention of plantation authorities. Some minor conflicts that arise in the novel reveal patterns of internal discrimination stemming from the consequences of colonial structures, which is segregative, something also studied by Stoler (2002) in the context of racial relations in other colonial territories.

On the other hand, the novel "Kuli" also portrays the human dimension that is often overlooked in official historical records. For example, the image of Kuli solidarity that emerges in certain situations, such as when facing foreman violence or extreme working conditions. This cross-ethnic solidarity shows that behind the structures that separate, there is a shared experience as an oppressed subject. This is relevant to Scott's (1985) idea of forms of hidden resistance in colonised societies.

Lulofs' narrative, although from a colonial perspective, also notes the important role of women on plantations, both as Kuli wives, informal workers, and as objects of social control. The presence of women is often positioned in more vulnerable conditions, whether due to economic violence or sexual power dynamics. This issue aligns with the study by Locher-Scholten (2000) on how colonialism shaped women's bodies and social lives in the Dutch East Indies.

Method

This research uses a literary sociology approach to examine the representation of cultural intersectionality in M.H. Szekely Lulofs' novel Kuli. This approach was chosen because it allows for analysis of the reciprocal relationship between literary texts and the social structures that underpin their emergence. Referring to the thinking of Wellek and Warren (2014), literature cannot be separated from the socio-historical context that shapes it, so the analysis is directed towards how the novel portrays the social conditions of Deli society during the colonial period. Thus, this method is relevant for critically uncovering how texts represent multiethnicity, power relations, and the social dynamics that accompanied the lives of indentured labourers.

Data collection was carried out using the close reading technique, which involves intensive and repeated reading to identify patterns of ethnic representation and indications of social conflict. This technique aligns with Damono's (2013) concept, which emphasises the importance of close textual analysis to understand the relationship between social structure and narrative structure. Next, the data analysis was conducted qualitatively-descriptively, interpreting the narrative findings through the framework of literary sociology theory. The analysis phase involves categorising data based on themes such as ethnic stereotypes, colonial power relations, intergroup solidarity, and inter-identity conflict. The categorised data was then interpreted using social intersectionality and colonialism theories, including Said's (1994) ideas on colonial representation and the concept of interethnic relations in plural societies. This analysis aims to identify how text produces, reinforces, or even disrupts ethnic-based social hierarchies.

Result and Discussion

One consequence of societal diversity is the potential for cultural intersection. This condition is supported by differences in interethnic characteristics and identities. According to Soerjono Soekanto (2009), in the sociology dictionary, a section is an

ethnic group within a pluralistic society, such as the Sundanese, Javanese, Bugis, Minang, and others. So, simply put, it can be said that intersectionality is the crossing or meeting of membership in a social group from various sections, whether ethnic, religious, gender, social class, etc., within a pluralistic society.

Diversity of North Sumatra Society In this section

The researchers discuss the conditions of society in North Sumatra, focussing on its diverse ethnic groups. This discussion serves to establish the understanding that as a city inhabited by various ethnic groups, such as Malay, Batak, Javanese, Chinese, Bugis, Indian, and various other ethnicities, North Sumatra has a fairly good construction of interreligious tolerance. It is proven that, to date, there has been very little conflict based on ethnicity. This condition certainly didn't arise as an instant culture. As Clifford Geertz (1989) stated, a plural society is one divided into systems that are more or less self-contained, with each subsystem bound together by primordial ties. That characteristic shows that diversity is very vulnerable to various issues of difference that arise from interethnic friction.

Pierre L. Van Berghe, in Nasikun's (1985) analysis, then revealed several fundamental characteristics of plural societies that have the potential to cause a number of social problems. Namely, the formation of segmentation into groups that often have different cultures, or more precisely, subcultures. Furthermore, it has a social structure divided into non-complementary institutions, and there is less consensus among community members on basic social values. Additionally, in pluralistic societies, conflict often arises reactively between groups because social integration is built on coercion and economic interdependence, or on the political dominance of one group over another. Thus, the multiculturalism possessed by North Sumatra can be said to be the result of a deep journey and understanding of diversity in social life.

According to Sinar (1994), the majority of the population in the Deli region is Malay. However, it gradually became crowded with migrant residents from various regions since the Deli plantations were opened and managed by the Dutch. Perret, in *La Formation d'un Paysage Ethnique: Batak & Malais de Sumatra Nord-Est*, translated by Wardhany (2010), mentions that initially, planters obtained Chinese labourers from intermediaries in the Malacca Strait region, who were paid per Kuli, in Singapore, Penang, or even Deli itself. It was only since 1888 that Deli planters directly imported around 7000 labourers per year from China, mainly from the Guangzhou region" (J. Ch'en and N. Tarling in Perret's analysis, 2010).

Besides being sought after, according to A. Reid via Perret (2010), "there were also labourers who came of their own accord." For example, the Chinese, who numbered almost half a million. However, because in 1930, the central government required planters

to pay an immigration tax of 100 guilders for each labourer brought from China, plantation companies switched to labourers from Java (Plezer via Perret, 2010).

According to P.J. Veth, as analysed by Perret (2010), in 1870 there were already around 150 Javanese Kulis who came of their own accord from Semarang to work on the Deli plantations. They still numbered several hundred until 1890, when the plantations began to change their direction. However, in 1890, rubber, tea, and oil palm plantations were rapidly developing, so after 1900, they only employed Javanese labourers. In 1911, more than 50,000 contract Kulis were brought from Central Java to work on rubber plantations.

Furthermore, according to Perret (2010), among the immigrant communities, it is necessary to add the Banjar people from Kalimantan, who initially worked as construction labourers for tobacco drying sheds and forest clearers before forming rice farmer colonies along the coast. The Deli plantations did indeed attract many newcomers from various regions. In fact, most of these workers ultimately chose not to return to their home regions and opted to settle in North Sumatra. This background is quite significant in my opinion to be used as one of the indicators of the formation of population diversity in the North Sumatra region.

Furthermore, the interethnic relationships that have been established become a crucial issue to discuss. *"Orang Betawi itu menolehkan badannya ke samping, sedikit dan meludah, Tanda penghinaan terhadap kehidupan miskin yang sampai sekarang dijalani oleh temantemannya."* (Kuli, 13)

Betawi people are depicted as having an arrogant demeanour. In the novel, the character is paired with a Sundanese character who is portrayed as more polite and whose life is described as simpler. The interaction that ensued then reinforced the differences between the two ethnic groups.

Next, regarding the Madurese people.

"Seorang kelasi Madura mendesak menembus orang banyak itu. Ia separuh kepala lebih kecil ketimbang orang-orang Jawa dan Sunda, tetapi pundaknya lurus dan seluruh tubuhnya yang kekar membayangkan kekuatan. Mukanya yang hitam kelihatan angker." (Kuli, 22)

Unlike the Betawi and Sundanese, Madurese ethnic figures are depicted as having a fearsome demeanour and being feared due to their position. Kelasi (according to KBBI 5th Edition) is the lowest-ranking crew member on a ship. However, in the novel, the sailor's rank is certainly higher than that of other indigenous characters.

b. Ethnic Conflict

Not only does the novel Kuli bring together ethnicities from the island of Java, but it also presents differences on a broader scale, namely between Europeans and Chinese.

However, because Europeans acted as colonisers, there wasn't much interaction. Nevertheless, another interesting phenomenon is the relationship between local ethnic groups (Javanese, Malay) and the Chinese.

"Lalu kuli-kuli berjalan lewat, kebanyakan orang Jawa dan Snda. Satu di antara pondok pemukiman kuli letaknya tidak jauh dari kantor. Mereka dipisahkan dari orang Cina dengan keras. Di antara pondok dan kongsi terbentang pertentangan yang tak dapat dipertemukan, seperti jurang yang dalam antara dua agama yang berbeda." (Kuli, 32)

The movement of stereotypes in the content dimension has provoked the division of space so that different ethnicities are not in the same location. In the above quote, starting with settlement alone, the colonial authorities separated China from other ethnic groups. Is this influenced by different regions of origin? Chinese from abroad and other ethnicities from Indonesia. Is that background what sparked ethnocentrism? In my opinion, it's possible. Furthermore, they were also separated in their work.

"Kuli Cina mencangkul bumi dan membalikkannya dalam-dalam dengan alat kejam itu. Berulang kali, tiada habisnya, sepanjang hari yang terik mereka mengangkat tangannya dan membungkukkan punggungnya yang mengucurkan keringat seperti kali kecil." (Kuli, 40) Sementara kuli Jawa, "Di sepanjang tepi hutan dibuat terusan air. Di situ kuli-kuli dari Jawa berdiri terendam sampai ke paha dalam air rawa yang kelabu dan berbau busuk." (Kuli, 40)

Lulofs' actions in stereotyping his characters and ethnicities, in my opinion, serve as a strategy to highlight the major issues within the story of indentured labourers. This hypothesis was then strengthened by the intersectional conflicts that arose due to the movement of stereotypes in terms of direction and intensity. As stated by Katz and Braly via Warnaen (2002), the direction dimension indicates whether an ethnic group subject to stereotypes is liked or disliked. Meanwhile, the intensity dimension indicates the degree to which an ethnic group subject to stereotypes is liked or disliked.

"Saimah...Saimah...! 'Seorang wanita Sunda yang masih muda sekali terhenti. Ia baru saja mandi. Kainnya menutupi tubuhnya dari ketiak sampai lututnya." (Kuli, 44) "Saimah, perempuan cantik dan muda, memang. Tapi ia melacurkan diri dengan setiap orang yang mau membayar. Bulan terakhir ini ia juga pergi kepada orang Cina. Mereka membayar lebih tinggi." (Kuli, 46) "Ya, aku makan daging babi! Mau apalagi?... dan aku tidur dengan orang yang makan daging babi!... dan perempuan kontrak yang lain?... mereka tidur dengan orang putih, dengan tuantuan. Mereka bagaimana?... saudara kapalmu, Karminah... jadi nyai di Bagan Satu. Apa itu adat Jawa? ... apa dia tidak ikut kafir?" (Kuli, 61)

Saimah, a Javanese woman who worked on the Deli plantation, as quoted above, shows that in her thinking, Javanese, Sundanese, Dutch, and other ethnic customs have developed. As a result, his anger was directed towards justifying his behaviour. Indirectly, it also shows that the other ethnic groups he stereotypes are not liked.

Besides Saimah, who represented the Sundanese, there was Mandor Amat, who was described as a Kuli from Surabaya.

"Saya kira... saya kira.... Kamu juga goblok seperti yang lain saja. Kamu orang Surabaya...bukannya tani dari desa... dan kamu sudah begitu tua, kumismu melintang di kanan kiri mulutmu, tapi toh tidak lebih pintar keitmbang seorang kuli baru." (Kuli, 72)

The disappointment expressed by Mr. Assistant Plantation Manager towards Foreman Amat shows that in Mr. Assistant's imagination, people from Surabaya are equated with attitudes that are the opposite of what Foreman Amat does. Besides Foreman Amat, the construction of a Kuli from Surabaya is also focused through the presence of Nur. In the plantation, not many were willing to be Nur's good friends.

Ruki tidak menjawab. Sambil mengasa cangkul ia melirik ke arah Nur. Ia tidak begitu berani melawan Nur, orang Surabaya yang pernah menjadi kuli pelabuhan. Nur seorang buaya tulen: pembual, licik, kurang ajar; ia dibesarkan di tengah penjahat-penjahat yang di pelabuhan Surabaya membantu dalam pemuatan dan penurunan barang. Ia juga pernah kena suatu perkara lalu melarikan diri ke Deli menghindari polisi. Ada darah Madura dalam dirinya. Itu juga membuatnya rewel, kaku, dan suka melawan..." (Kuli, 73) *"Jahat!" kata mandor-mandor dan mereka mengawasinya dengan lebih tajam. Ia banyak cakap dan nenek moyangnya yang dari Madura tidak pernah berpikir panjang sebelum menghunus belati. Sifat itu sedikit diwariskan kepada Nur."* (Kuli, 74-75)

It was at this point that the peak of interethnic intersection occurred. In the quote, it is very clear how Ruki, who is from a different origin and tribe than Nur, is very cold and does not want to get close because of Nur's personality. This assessment is also influenced by Nur's past and her tribal roots. Not just Ruki, but the other Kulis as well. For example, Sentono, Saimah, and Kromorejo. These differences are more pronounced in the internal space. This means that in the interactions between the Kulis, the likelihood of intersection is very high. In external spaces, for example, represented by China, these differences and stereotypes often dissolve. One example can be seen in how the novel portrays the phenomenon of "ship siblings" for characters from the island of Java, even though they are from different ethnic backgrounds.

The spirit of brotherhood animates them. They call each other 'ship brothers'. All they know about each other is their origins. There are Sundanese people from the highlands and mountains in Priangan, Bantenese people from West Java, and Javanese people from East and Central Java." (Kuli, 28) This situation can be observed, for example, in the emergence of a sense of shared fate and suffering simply because they are on the same ship and will face foreigners. Another form of unity is, for example, in facing the Chinese ethnic group. In the novel "Kuli," it is narrated that many Kulis became increasingly estranged from Chinese Kulis because Chinese Kulis were known for stealing women on the plantations. This is what fuelled the deep hatred of the indigenous Kulis.

"Ayo! Keroyok! Cincang... ! Biar kapok mengajak perempuan kita!" kegilaan yang liar melanda mereka. Mereka merasakan kegembiraan yang tidak waras waktu melihat Nur menghantam gagang pacul kepada orang Cina itu." (Kuli, 77)

One night when one of the Chinese Kulis was about to have relations with Saimah, the native Kuli attacked the Chinese Kuli en masse until he died. However, once the joint mission was achieved, divisions between the indigenous colleges occurred again.

He remembered all the humiliations he had suffered from Nur. Now God was repaying him. ... He had also testified about Nur. That was the final proof of Nur's wrongdoing. Nur was sentenced to hard labour in the coal mines of Sawah Lunto for fifteen years... that was not only punishment for the murder of the Chinese, but also redemption for the transgressions he had committed in Java in the past. Thus, God's decree had also come to pass upon him. (Kuli, 96) The manifestation of "dislike" between characters due to perceived bad ethnic backgrounds ultimately leads to criminal acts. First, Ruki, Nur, and Sentoso, who disliked the Chinese, angrily killed the Chinese Kuli simply because they felt their right to Saimah's body had been taken away. Not only that, the directional dimension of stereotypes led Ruki, Saimah, and Sentoso to fabricate testimony against the Chinese Kuli's killer. They accused Nur—a Kuli of Madurese and Surabaya ethnicity—of being the killer, resulting in Nur's punishment. The testimony was given because they disliked Nur's behaviour, which they considered rude, even though the real killer of the Chinese Kuli was Sentono. These intersectional images show that stereotypes attributed to an ethnic group, in terms of both content, direction, and intensity, are very dangerous. Especially if that stereotype is then used as a basis for interactions between individuals.

Conclusion

The novel "Kuli" constructs the phenomenon of intersectionality by strengthening the worship of ethnicity—borrowing Isaacs' (1993) term to clarify the dichotomous situation between Kulis from different ethnic backgrounds. Although written by someone outside the dominant ethnic groups and organisations in Indonesia, what Lulofs describes can at least serve as a reference for observing how the social situation during the Deli plantation era was viewed and experienced by others. Although it cannot be said to be an event that fully represents its time, at least through this novel, we can see one person's thoughts and perspective on the issue of interethnic intersection in North Sumatra, as well as the prevailing ideological situation, from the midst of the indentured labour events. Considering that the Deli Plantation is an important part of the growth of a diverse society in the North Sumatra region.

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