

SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN EKA KURNIAWAN'S NOVEL *CANTIK ITU LUKA*

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Abstract

The research is related to social problems. People's lives are actually changing with the times. In the process of the changing, sometimes unexpected conditions arise or should not occur. This unexpected condition gradually becomes a polemic and has a negative impact on people's lives. This condition is called a social problem. Social problems cannot be ignored because they can disrupt global economic and political stability. The discussion of this research focuses on two social problems: poverty and prostitution. Poverty is the condition of a person who has no wealth, lacks, or has very low income and of course cannot fulfill his daily needs; while poverty is also closely related to prostitution. One can become a prostitute because of poverty or circumstances. Prostitution is a sexual activity outside the institution of marriage and is generally carried out by women. These two social problems can be found not only in the novel but also in the real world; so the sociology of literature is used as an approach in this research. The whole research is conducted using a qualitative descriptive method because the focus of the research is related to social problems. The results of the analysis show that this novel provides two descriptions of social problems: poverty and prostitution and these two social problems are clearly illustrated through the data obtained from the novel.

Keywords: *social problem; poverty; prostitution*

1. Introduction

Cantik Itu Luka is Eka Kurniawan's first novel which was published for the first time in 2002. This first work won a World Readers award in 2016. The novel *Cantik Itu Luka* became a best-seller which was translated into more than 34 languages, including English, Japanese, French, Danish, Greek, Korean and Chinese. This makes Eka Kurniawan's name known in the international arena. The popularity of Novel *Cantik Itu Luka* abroad brought Eka Kurniawan to win an international literary award in the Netherlands, namely the Prince Clause Awards in 2018. Not only that, the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* was also included in the list of 100 leading books according to The New York Time version. The Novel *Cantik Itu Luka* has the genres of romance, history, and magical realism, as this book describes the history of colonialism in Indonesia. Eka presents the story of a woman named Dewi Ayu. Dewi Ayu is a very beautiful woman,

but her beauty is not something that is profitable, but brings disaster for herself and her children.

Eka Kurniawan wrote this novel with a back and forth plot, with various complexities of different conflicts, and presented several characters who had big roles. So, there is no one central character in the story of *Cantik Itu Luka*. Eka Kurniawan tells a story from the colonial period to post-independence of Indonesia. So, the story in this novel goes through four periods, the Dutch colonial period, the Japanese colonial period, the independence period, and the post-independence period.

The novel *Cantik Itu Luka* tells the story of Dewi Ayu, a beautiful prostitute in colonial times. Dewi Ayu's line of life and lineage are very unique, starting from the father-mother lineage to her children who later have a lot of influence in Halimunda, Eka Kurniawan's fiction area. Since childhood, Dewi Ayu grows up without the care of her father and mother who are expelled due to inbreeding (half-sibling marriage). Dewi Ayu is raised by her grandparents. She grows up to be a strong and brave girl. One proof of her courage is her tenacity to live in prison when the Japanese attack the Dutch East Indies. It is at this place of detention that Dewi Ayu gives up her chastity in order to help her colleagues in the shelter barracks. Two years later, Dewi Ayu is one of 19 detainees who are transferred to the luxurious house run by Mama Kalong. In that place, Dewi Ayu starts her life as a prostitute to serve the lust of the Japanese soldiers. During her time as a prostitute, Dewi Ayu gives birth to four daughters. Everything is not clear of the identity of their fathers. Like her mother, three of Dewi Ayu's daughters are very beautiful. Dewi Ayu feels that raising very beautiful children is very inconvenient. That is why, when she is pregnant with her fourth child, she hopes that her child would become an ugly child and so it happens. However, Dewi Ayu does not get to see her youngest daughter. Ironically, before she dies, Dewi Ayu gives the name of this ugly daughter *Si Cantik*. Such is the life of *Si Cantik*, full of wounds. The name that she bears is very burdensome for her life because in fact she is ugly, not beautiful at all.

Although this novel is fictional, Eka Kurniawan inserts real historical values behind the fictional story. Readers can use this novel as a medium for studying history, in the form of a literary work; In addition, the author also provides an overview of social problems. This social problem is then discussed in this paper with a sociological literary theory approach because the problem is not only found in the novel but can also be found in the world of reality. Sociology of literature is an approach in literary studies that understands and evaluates literary works by considering social aspects (Damono, 1979). As the name suggests, sociology of literature is an attempt to understand literary works through the combination of literature with sociology. In this discourse, literature stands as a societal phenomenon which is studied in the eyes of literature in relation to sociology.

There are two discussions related to social problems in this study, namely, poverty and prostitution, presented in general based on the data obtained from the novel. These two social problems have always been discussed both academically and in general. Poverty and prostitution are always intertwined because the main factor in the occurrence of prostitution in society is poverty. The poor are also human and they have to fulfill their necessities of life; while employment opportunities are not wide open for them, they especially women are always trapped in this prostitution business.

The quality of all of Eka Kurniawan's works cannot be doubted, given the abundance of evidence in the forms of a number of national and international awards

that he has received. However, there are also some controversies related to Eka's work, because Eka uses an outspoken, bold, and vulgar language style in some of his works.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sociology of Literature

Sociology of literature is a branch of research that is reflective. This research is widely observed by researchers who want to see literature as a mirror of people's lives. The social life of reality has various dynamics and is also a trigger for the birth of literary works because a writer in producing his literary works must see the reality around him. Literature often expresses the struggle of mankind in determining its future, based on imagination, feelings, and intuition. From this opinion it appears that the long struggle of human life will always color literary texts.

There are three perspectives related to sociology of literature, namely: (1) a research that views literary works as a social document in which it is a reflection of the situation at the time the text is created, (2) a research that reveals literature as a reflection of the writer's social situation, and (3) a research which captures literature as a manifestation of historical events and socio-cultural conditions (Wiyatmi, 2013; Ratna, 2015). Although sociology and literature have certain differences, they can actually provide an explanation of the meaning of literary texts. This can be understood, because the object of study of sociology and literature is related to humans. Literature is an expression of human life that is separated from society. Thus, although sociology and literature are two different things, they can complement each other. In this regard, literature is a reflection of the socio-cultural environment which is a dialectic test between the author and the social situation that forms or is an explanation of a dialectical history developed in literary works (Saraswati, 2003).

Sociology of literature can examine literature through at least three perspectives. First, the perspective of literary texts, meaning that a researcher analyzes as a reflection of people's lives and vice versa. The text is usually cut into pieces, classified and explained its sociological meaning; second, the biographical perspective, where the researcher analyzes the author. This perspective will relate to the life history of an author and his social background; third, the receptive perspective, where the researcher analyzes public acceptance of literary texts.

Based on the description above, the researchers use the sociology of literature as an approach in this study with discussions related to social problems because the social problems contained in the novel *Cantik itu Luka* are a reflection of social problems that exist in the real world.

2.2 Social Problem

Social problems are processes of incompatibility between elements of society's culture that endanger the lives of social groups. It can be said that social problems cause obstacles in meeting community needs. Social problems are problems that arise as a result of social interaction between individuals, between individuals and groups, between groups and groups. Social interaction revolves around the size of values, customs, ideologies and traditions which are characterized by a dissociative social process. Even social problems arise from the process of community development, especially if the development process takes place quickly, causing shock in society, so that people experience cultural shock and cultural gaps.

Social problems arise because of a mismatch between the elements of culture or society, which can endanger the life of a social group or hinder the fulfillment of the basic desires of the members of the social group which causes a lame of social ties. A normal condition is that there is integration and appropriate conditions in the relationships between elements of society or elements of culture. If there are clashes or discrepancies between these elements, then social relations are disrupted which results in shakiness in group life (Soerjono 2003).

Social problems are undesirable conditions but occur in society because they can disrupt the peace of society so that action is needed as a result of a mutual agreement to overcome or fix the problem. Social problems are considered as problems because they involve behavior that is immoral or contrary to the law which can damage certain individuals or groups. The resolution of social problems cannot be studied without consideration of the dimensions of society regarding what is considered bad or good.

2.2.1 Factors Causing Social Problems

Soetomo (2013) claim that there are some factors causing social problems, such as economic, cultural, biological, and psychological factors. Economic factors are factors of the inability of individuals or groups to meet their needs properly, especially materially. Cultural factors are caused by inconsistencies in the implementation of norms, values, and social interests in heterogeneous or multicultural patterns of society. Biological factors are problems that arise due to inappropriate environmental conditions that have the potential to cause instability in the biological conditions of society. Psychological factors are problems with the mindset of a particular community or individual that intersects with the order of social life. Examples of these psychological factors are usually the understanding of deviations from religious teachings which if observed in detail do not make sense, as well as the emergence of false kings and anti-government separatist movements (Soetomo, 2013).

Various forms of social problems can be found in society, including: poverty, ignorance, war, crime, family disharmony, social inequality, population, and deviations from pre-existing cultural values and norms. Prostitution is a violation of values and norms and culture and can also be categorized as a form of crime because in practice many people are trapped into the world of prostitution and the practice of human trafficking (Rubington and Weinberg, 1981). With regard to the types of social problems, this research only focuses on two forms of social problems, namely poverty and prostitution.

2.2.2 Poverty

The big problem faced by developing countries is poverty. The unequal distribution of income triggers income inequality which is the beginning of the emergence of the problem of poverty. Allowing the problem to drag on will further exacerbate the situation, and often can have negative consequences for social and political conditions. Economic disparities or inequality between high-income groups and low-income groups as well as the poverty level or the number of people below the poverty line are two big problems in many developing countries (Sukardi, 2004).

Poverty is a condition where there is an inability to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and health. Poverty can be caused by the scarcity of tools to fulfill basic needs, or the difficulty of access to education and employment (Mowafi and Khawaja, 2005). Poverty is a global problem. Some people understand this

term subjectively and comparatively, while others see it from a moral and evaluative point of view, and still others understand it from an established scientific point of view. Poverty is understood in different ways. The understandings include:

- a. A description of material shortages, which usually include daily needs for food, clothing, housing, and health services. Poverty in this sense is understood as a situation of scarcity of basic goods and services.
- b. A description of social needs, including social exclusion, dependency, and inability to participate in society. This includes education and information. Social exclusion is usually distinguished from poverty, as it includes political and moral issues, and is not confined to the economic sphere.
- c. A description of a lack of adequate income and wealth. The meaning of “adequate” here varies widely across political and economic sections around the world (Setiadi, 2011; Hal, Hill, 2021).

2.2.3 Prostitution

Prostitution today is a very common phenomenon, where in every country in the world there are prostitution practices that are spread and mushroomed to remote areas. It is undeniable that prostitution is difficult to avoid or eradicate easily because prostitution is a practice of selling sexual services that has existed since ancient times and is an activity in order to support the economic needs concerned (Adriaenssens & Hendrickx, 2012). Prostitution (prostitution) in general is the practice of temporary sexual intercourse, which is more or less carried out with anyone, for monetary rewards. The three main elements in the practice of prostitution are: payment, promiscuity and emotional indifference.

Based on the description above, it can be concluded that there are at least four main elements in the definition of prostitution that can be enforced, namely, (1) payment, (2) infidelity, (3) emotional indifference, and (4) livelihood. Of the four main elements, payment of money as a source of income is considered the most common factor in the world of prostitution.

Prostitution is the oldest profession in the world because prostitution has existed since the existence of human civilization. This is based on the assumption that instinctively humans, both as individual beings and as social beings, through various means and efforts in the form of culture, have the will which includes: defending themselves from existing disturbances and challenges; maintaining life and developing life; maintaining the lives of their generations through marriage; having sexual relations between the sexes to fulfill biological needs; and others (Kartini, 1981).

From the description above, it can be seen that in the practice of prostitution there are elements or characteristics as follows: a. The perpetrators or subjects of prostitution are men and women outside the marriage relationship. b. The incident is a sexual relationship or intercourse, which is carried out by mutual agreement between the two parties, or not because of coercion. c. The goal is to fulfill biological needs (for men) and money needs (for women) or vice versa.

3. Research Method

The research is a literature study so it does not require a special location for the research and conducted by using descriptive qualitative method. The data source of this research is the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* by Eka Kurniawan, published by Gramedia Pustaka Umum, in 2016.

The method used in this research is descriptive method . This method is a method that is carried out by collecting data, describing the data, and then analyzing the data. The type of data taken from this research is qualitative. (Moleong, Lexy J. 2011) Therefore, the data described in this study are the social problems that occur in the novel *Cantik Itu Luka* by Eka Kurniawan.

In this study, the researchers analyzed the data with qualitative research methods and used several techniques. According to Sugiyono (2015:29) the techniques of implementing qualitative research are: (1) at the orientation or description stage, the researchers describe what is seen, and what is being asked. (2) at the reduction or focus stage, the researchers reduce all the information regarding social problems obtained to focus on a particular problem. (3) At the selection stage, the researchers describes the focus that has been set in more detail; in this case the data related to social problems that focus on the problem of poverty and prostitution.

4. Result and Discussion

In the novel, *Cantik Is Luka*, Eka Kurniawan describes social problems that are diverse, ranging from economic problems, poverty, war, family, love and prostitution in the community, which are written in a very real and clear way. This novel tells the story of a woman and a mother during the colonial period. It is told in the course of her life that she has to face so many problems, from separation from her family to her destiny of having to work as a paid woman. The focus of this research is related to two social problems: poverty and prostitution which are depicted in the novel.

4.1 Poverty

In general, poverty is a condition where a person or group of people is unable to fulfill their basic rights to maintain and develop a dignified life or a condition of economic inability to meet basic food and non-food needs (measured from the expenditure side).

The causes of poverty can occur due to natural and economic conditions, structural and social conditions, and cultural conditions. Natural and economic poverty arise due to limited natural, human and other resources so that production opportunities are relatively small and cannot play a role in development. Structural and social poverty is caused by uneven development results, institutional arrangements and policies in development. Meanwhile, cultural poverty is caused by attitudes or life habits that feel sufficient so that they trap someone in poverty. The causes of poverty come from within and from outside the poor. The causes from within include the low quality of human resources and the attitude of the individual. Meanwhile, external causes are limited natural resources, social and institutional arrangements in society, development policies, limited job opportunities and competition that marginalizes the poor.

The descriptions of poverty in the novel are presented through the following data.

The hut is very dark, inhabited by more frogs and lizards than humans. There are only two rooms that could be seen dimly by the moonlight from the open door: a bedroom with an old man sitting in confusion on the end of the cot and a kitchen in which a stove with ashes barely exceed its cavity. Cobwebs are here and there, leaving the little room for the old man's route to the stove and bed and the exit. The

champion who is then made to cough by the smell of urine that is more than any other smell in the horse stable and the pigs... (Kurniawan, 2016: 27).

The description of poverty in the novel can be seen from the character of Ma Gedik. Her house is very small, dark and also dirty and unfit for human habitation. But circumstances render Ma Gedik completely helpless; she is unable to get out of economic trouble. The hut has only two rooms and is also dark; at night there is no lighting at all except from the moonlight that penetrates the roof full of holes. If there is no moon, then the hut will be pitch black. In addition, the entire room in the hut is very smelly. In short, the hut is uninhabitable by anyone, neither healthy nor comfortable. This is a very real picture of poverty from the novel.

The next picture of poverty can be seen from the following data.

One day Dewi Ayu saw a crocodile at the end of the delta, she knew that the only thing she needed to avoid from a crocodile on land was its tail, so with a large rock she hit the crocodile's head. The eyes were cracked but not enough to kill it. The poor beast flinched and started wagging its tail here and there, moving toward the river. With a pointed bamboo stuck to the boat's rope, Dewi Ayu with a desperation that she herself never imagined killed the crocodile cub by stabbing it in one eye, and then in the stomach. It died a miserable death. Before other crocodiles arrived, Dewi Ayu dragged the crocodile cub into the camp by its tail. Now they could party, crocodile meat soup. Many people praised her courage and thanked her for sharing the food (Kurniawan, 2016: 69).

Dewi Ayu is the central character in the novel because the novel's storyline is centered on her. She has experienced various difficulties in her life including poverty. The quote above shows that someone who is poor or has nothing, or does not have food to survive can turn into a brave person. Dewi Ayu is a woman and in general a woman does not want to have anything to do with scary things, like dealing with a crocodile. For Ayu, the sight of a crocodile in the delta is not something scary but a joy because the crocodile is food. With her efforts that can be considered a brave and even desperate effort, Ayu manages to kill the crocodile and makes the crocodile as food for herself and her friends.

Furthermore, a picture of poverty is also presented by a character in the novel.

"Adinda, my daughter, you have to know that my condition does not allows me to convey the state of the swamp behind this hut; people will not listen to me;, poor people always get ridiculed. O, why won't they understand that everyone has their own destiny...

(Kurniawan, 2016: 36)

The data above were presented by Aunt Amanda who tells Adinda about herself and her environment. Aunt Amanda lives in a shack with a dirty environment and is surrounded by swampy swamps. Her living quarters are always full of mosquitoes and she could not do anything about it. She will not be able to solve the mosquito problem alone due to economic limitations and she cannot report to the relevant parties because according to Amanda, she is a very poor woman and no one wants to hear the

complaints of the poor. This is a picture of reality, not only in the novel, but also in the real world. The poor are always marginalized and neglected.

4.2 Prostitution

Prostitution is having sexual relations with multiple partners who are not their wives or husbands, carried out in certain places and in general they get rewards, usually in the form of money after having sex. Prostitution can also be defined as a business transaction that is agreed upon by the parties involved as something of a short-term contract nature allowing one or more people to get sexual satisfaction with various methods. The descriptions of prostitution in the novel can be seen from the following data.

"As you ask a prostitute to take off her clothes," said Dewi Ayu with a mocking look, "you have to pay," (Kurniawan, 2016: 8).

Here it is illustrated that Dewi Ayu states that she is a prostitute and she is ready to undress, if she is paid. A prostitute will engage in sexual activity if she gets a proper reward, with the understanding that the reward she gets is in accordance with her request.

Furthermore, the descriptions of prostitution can be seen from the data below.

Mama Kalong's brothel has existed since the massive opening of the colonial army barracks. Before that she was actually a girl helping out at her evil aunt's tavern (Kurniawan, 2016: 81).

The data above show that at that time prostitution has already existed and become a lucrative business. Mama Kalong is a pimp who provides brothels, especially for civilian men or colonial soldiers. From this business, Mama Kalong earns very good profits; but she must also provide women who are always ready to serve the lusts of men. Mama Kalong certainly does not choose women for her prostitution business randomly; she always chooses women who are beautiful and sexy because this is the type of woman who will make a lot of money.

In addition to the brothel provided by Mama Kalong, the Japanese soldiers then arrest the indigenous women, especially the beautiful ones, for prostitution.

"I've checked everything," said Dewi Ayu. "There is no hole to escape." "We're going to be prostitutes!" Ola shouted as she sat down and wept. "Worse than that," said Dewi Ayu again. "It seems we will not be paid" (Kurniawan, 2016: 84).

Dewi Ayu and her friends have been captured by the Japanese army and they realize that they will be turned into prostitutes. They try to run away but there is no way at all for them to do so. Here it is illustrated that the women become prostitutes not because of their will; circumstances make them helpless and finally they have to surrender to become prostitutes. If they refuse, they would be tortured and possibly killed. Being a prostitute for them is their attempt to defend themselves; though for a certain extent, they are also paid.

"It is really a pity," said the prostitute. "You're the thirty-second guy trying to have me." That does not surprise the man, for she had heard it very well. This gives her some courage to speak. "If I can't marry you," he said, "at least I pay you every day as a whore." (Kurniawan, 2016: 126).

The data above is a conversation between Dewi Ayu and Maman Gendeng, a thug in the city. Maman Gendeng wants to have Dewi Ayu, with the understanding that Maman wants to marry Dewi Ayu, but Ayu does not budge with Maman's words, because according to Ayu, all men are the same, they just want to vent their sexual desires when dealing with women. This is of course based on her experience as a prostitute and can be directly felt by Ayu. For Ayu there is no love in the relationship between a man and a woman. She feels very pessimistic about the relationship between men and women.

She said that with a romance full of nostalgia for the years gone by, because she had been a prostitute since the Japanese occupation. She has experienced many sad things, but she has also had good times, although not many. "All women are prostitutes, because even a good wife sells her genitals for a dowry and money, or love if there is one," she said. (Kurniawan, 2016: 127).

Ayu has been a prostitute since the Japanese occupation and she knows very well how to be a woman, a mother and a prostitute. For her all women are prostitutes; even a good wife is also a prostitute because she is willing to give her genitals to a man after the man has paid her in the form of a dowry; meaning that all relationships, including husband and wife relationships, are still based on selfishness and Ayu finally concludes that sex, both inside and outside of marriage, is still considered a prostitution.

5. Conclusion

The novel *Cantik itu Luka* is written by Eka Kurniawan in a neat and painstaking manner. Even though Eka uses a forward and backward flow, readers will not be confused when reading it, because the transitions between scenes are very neat and smooth. Although the story in this novel is complex, with a mix of family history stories, historical stories of colonialism in Indonesia, communism, the struggle for independence, horror, poverty and prostitution as well as love stories, again Eka Kurniawan writes it so beautifully.

Eka Kurniawan succeeds in creating interesting, unique, and strong characters. Each character in this story has the same important role, so the novel is not simply focused on one central character. Many things can be learned from this novel. Eka Kurniawan seems to be writing fantasy products that are not merely works of fiction, but contain real Indonesian history lessons. This novel also contains some traditional values that exist in Indonesia, especially those related to moral values.

The results of the analysis show that there are two social problems in this novel: poverty and prostitution. Poverty is a common social phenomenon at that time because of the Japanese occupation. The people are pressured and used by the colonialists so that they do not have the power to fight back, especially economic power. Almost all members of society are unable to meet their daily needs; they live below the poverty line. As they are poor and because of the arbitrary and brutal treatment of indigenous women, they are made into prostitutes to fulfill the sex needs of Japanese soldiers. The Japanese soldiers torture indigenous women who are not willing to become prostitutes and they even kill them. The problems of poverty and prostitution in this novel are interrelated. They are poor because of the situation and prostitution arises because of poverty and also because of their powerlessness against the political situation at that time.

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