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Reading Disability in Indonesian Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine the representation of disability and to identify the discourse resulted from the pattern of its portrayal in four selected Indonesian children's shorts stories, namely "Kacamata UFO", "Gadis Penari", "Bapak Si Dono", and "Cerita Rion dengan Sebelah Mata" published in Bobo magazine. Applying the lens of Said's Orientalism, this content analysis study shows that children with disabilities are presented as weak, dependent, not productive, an object of curiosity and violence, and a vehicle for the growth of other characters in the story. This study concludes that literacy on disability for Indonesian people is significant. Such writing is to provide a positive image and reduce the negative stereotype which is currently shared among society.

Keywords: *children's literature, disability, representation, short stories*

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, there are about ten million people with various disabilities resulted either by a congenital condition or by some other factors such as accident, natural disaster, tribal war, or any other incidents that cause a temporary or permanent impairment to a body (Amannullah, 2016; Cameron & Suarez, 2017). The degree of impairment is different from one person to another. They usually start from a little up to severe difficulties that could be about the problem in hearing, seeing, speaking, or walking, which affects one's ability to participate actively in society. Almost everyone with impairment experiences discomfort in their social interaction.

This situation occurs because society consists of people with various backgrounds who tend to view the world from the perspective of binary opposition. The discourse creates a dichotomy between abled and disabled. As a result, this ideology segregates and leads the two communities to have a prejudice against one another. People without disabilities gaze the people with disabilities negatively. They are considered as a burden, both for family and the state, a source of embarrassment, a sin of a family, and a case that is destined by God (Byrne, 2007). They are also considered as the *other*, a marginalized group of communities that is alien to the majority group (Bold, 2019).

This article explores the issue of disability in four selected children's stories published online and printed in *Bobo* magazine. This magazine is an adaptation of a magazine with the same name from the Netherlands that has been published since 1973. It has been very popular among young readers in Indonesia for many different generations. From the list of short stories published in the magazine, this article seeks "Kacamata UFO" by Tria Ayu K from the collection of short stories series 40, and "Gadis Penari" by Kemala P, from the collection series 28. Besides, it includes "Bapak Si Dono" by Sylvana Toemon, and "Cerita Rion dengan

Sebelah Mata" by Putri Puspita which are downloaded online from *Bobo* magazine website. The investigation focuses on explaining the representation of disability and the discourse constructed from the representation of the people with disabilities in the selected stories.

The genre of children's literature is chosen because it is an essential medium to facilitate the growth of children's and young adult's awareness of various social problems, including the topic of disability. There are many studies on children's literature examining environmental problem (Dewi, 2017; Jeanne & Harms, 2019; Nikolajeva, 2014; Segal, 2014; Sugiarto & Purbani, 2019), multiculturalism (Iwai, 2013), identity (Coleman-king & Groenke, 2015; Sajid, 2015), but a study on the representation of disabilities in children's literature, especially Indonesia's children literature, is very limited. The existing studies on children's literature and disability stop on inspecting the importance of inclusive children literature in Indonesia (Kristanti, 2016; Wardany, 2018). While the studies found that inclusive reading materials are vital for children and some inclusive works depicting children with disabilities become available, an investigation on how such topic is presented in a literary work for children is worth doing. Applying the lens of Said's *Orientalism*, this study is hoped to shed a light on the discourse of disability and its presence in children's literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Children's literature has been used for educational purposes for children, young adults, and even adults to understand the world. This genre is used as an effective tool to transmit values, understanding, tolerance, and a positive mindset for its targeted group of readers since a long time ago (Boudreaux, 2006; Mcllhagga, 2016; Sedgwick, 2010). It gives pleasure by presenting lively characters, setting, and also provides a gap for its readers to complete. It facilitates discussion and negation that help children and young adults to be more critical.

The selection of short stories published in *Bobo* magazine illustrates some different types of disabilities that are permanent and exist from birth. The characters in all of the stories experience negative preconception by peers who have no disabilities. The detail of the representation is observable in the following table.

Table 1. Representation of disabilities in some selected short stories for children

No	Title	Types of disability	Representation
1.	*Kacamata UFO* by Tria Ayu K	Children with low vision disability	An object of curiosity and violence, weak, a vehicle for the growth of other characters
2.	*Gadis Penari* by Kemala P	Children with a speech disability	Not productive/Incompetent, vehicle for the growth of other characters
3.	*Bapak Si Dono* by Sylvana Toemon	Children with mental/intellectual disability	Dependent, a vehicle for the growth of other characters
4.	*Cerita Rion dengan Sebelah Mata* by Putri Puspita	Children with low vision disability	An object of curiosity and violence, incompetent, a vehicle for the growth of other characters

From Table 1, it is seen that children with disabilities are addressed with negative prejudices. In *Bobo* selected short stories, the portrayal focuses on the absence that these children have and neglecting the potential skills that may be nurtured to make them contribute equally with children and people without disability.

DISCUSSION

A Person with a Disability is an Object of Curiosity and Violence

People usually define normalcy as having no impairment. It has a complete function of physic and mental to work and contribute to others (Couser, 2009). Some children with impairment are excluded from this criterion and are easily identified. Their looks are different and contrast to the standard of 'normal' kids constructed by society. They may lose one or two functions in their body. With incomplete parts of the body that leads to limited ability to behave and perform based on an ideal image in society, children with disabilities are potential subjects of bullying.

In K's "Kacamata UFO", the story narrates Diah who wears thick cylinder eyeglasses. These glasses have a unique look and design compare to the glasses worn by her classmates. Among her friends who also have a low vision problem, Diah's problem is complex. She has astigmatism that makes her unable to see objects at any distance without glasses. However, the glasses turn her appearance peculiar and lead her to become an object of bullying. Four classmates bully Diah verbally and physically because of her unusual look.

> *"Awas, ada mahluk UFO lewat!" teriak Didik, si bandel di kelas 4. Teman-teman lainnya cekikikan" (24)*
> "Watch out, there is an alien passing by!" shouted Didik, the naughty student in the 4th grade. The other classmates' giggle" (24)

From the above quotation, it is illustrated that Didik, one of Diah's classmates, name-calls her as a UFO creature, as an alien. This name-calling results from the effect of cylinder glasses on the Diah's face. Wearing the glasses has made her eyes look bigger and wider. She resembles an alien with big and wide eyes. Seemingly, her classmates also support Didik because they giggle when hearing him ridicules her. None defend her or stop Didik for his ill-treatment. All of them might agree to discriminate Diah for her look, or afraid to be connected with Diah, and thus possible to be a victim of a bully.

Then, this verbal bullying continues to physical bullying. Didik, Tom, Ari, and Wawan bully Diah physically by taking her glasses at the end of their school hour.

> *"Tangan Wawan lalu melayang cepat di wajah Diah, ia mengambil kacamata Diah" (27)*
> "Wawan's hand moves quickly on Diah's face, he grabs her glasses" (27)

Wawan takes Diah's glasses and plays with them until they accidentally fall and break. Didik and his bystanders do this because Diah does not respond to the name-calling they have made to mock her in the class. She stays calm and acts like their verbal bullying means nothing. She pretends that it does not hurt her at all (24). Her patience and feeling of gratitude help her to see things clearly. She realizes that the glasses are helpful for her and her parents spend a lot of money to buy them for her.

In Puspita's "Cerita Rion dengan Sebelah Mata", a boy with only one abled eye is also objectified by some children around him. Due to his left eye impairment, some children make fun of him. However, Rio does a similar response to Diah's in "Kacamata UFO". He channels his anger and discomfort to the name-calling addressed to him into something positive. He creates a state of mind that he must thank to have one healthy and functioning right eye. This positive sentiment motivates him to work harder, disregard the bully, and never give up on his limitation to chase his goal of life.

> *"Awalnya aku malu karena berbeda. Beberapa teman juga*

mengejek," kata Rion mengawali ceritanya di depan anak-anak" (1)
"I am different; it embarrassed me at the beginning. Some friends also mocked me" said Rion when he started his story in front of some children" (1)

The above quotation explains that unfair treatment has a significant effect on the psychology of a person with a disability. In the beginning, being different from the majority has made Rion unconfident. This gets difficult because some friends also tease him for his impairment. Nevertheless, this motivates him the fight and leap higher to prove his valuable existence. The insult could not turn him into a traumatic state or isolate him from the outside world.

A Person with a Disability is Weak

In response to some unequal treatments given by their surroundings, children with disabilities mostly remain silent. Diah in "Kacamata UFO" does not share the true story about her broken glasses with her classmates. She hides the fact that Didik and his friends have broken her glasses. Diah is presented as a wise girl who does not want to seek problems with the bullies. She is also portrayed as a weak girl who does not dare to fight or defend herself.

"kembalikan kacamataku!" pinta Diah dengan suara tertahan". (28)
"Give me back my glasses!" begged Diah in a muffled voice." (28)
"Tolong, kembalikan kacamataku!" pinta Diah mengiba sambil menghampiri Didik" (29)
"Please, give me back my glasses!" begged Diah while approaching Didik" (29)

The above quotations justify that Diah is a powerless girl. She does not confront Didik and take back her glasses. She only begs them to return her glasses in a less powerful and firm statement. Consequently, this has not stopped the perpetrators from taunting her. In the discourse of bullying, Diah matches the archetype of bullying victim that is generally weak, poor, and perform a passive response to the aggression done by Didik and his friends (Danielson & LaBonty, 2009). She will always become a victim of bullying from her peers unless she learns to be stronger and defensive for herself.

A Person with a Disability is not Productive

This representation is explicitly found in "Gadis Penari" written by Kemalam P. The story portrays a talented dancing girl with speech impairment who has been misjudged by one of her peers. Ika, a major character of the story, does not know that Nuri is a dancer who has a speech disability. She thoughts that she is a great talented girl with a complete physical ability like her.

"Ika sangat kaget. Ternyata gadis itu bisu" (108)
"Ika was very surprised. It turns out that she is a mute girl" (108)

The above statement implies that Ika has a negative image of a person with a disability. Her surprise implies that she is apt to the commonly false stigma on people with disabilities; that they are weak, a burden, and unable to contribute socially and financially to family or society (Rohwerder, 2018). When he finds Nuri does not parallel to the myth, she was amazed and confused. Nuri does not burden his community. She contributes to her surroundings instead. She trains dancing for some girls in her neighborhood, and this situation negates the preconception of low expectations toward people with disabilities.

Besides, in "Gadis Penari" Ika also disputes Nuri's confidence in responding to her speech impairment. She always focuses on her impairment, and assume that this would always hamper her to grow and gain recognition and achievement

> *"Dia cuma heran bagaimana gadis itu begitu percaya diri, seolah cacatnya itu bukan masalah buatnya" (108)*
> "She just wonders how the girl is so confident, as if her disability is not a problem for her" (108)

The quotation shows that Ika is curious about Nuri's outstanding achievement. Her physical limitation should have had limited her. Yet, it does not stop her from achieving big. Nuri has failed Ika's and many conceptions on people with disabilities. The myth that sees disability as a disease that should be cured or fixed to make the person gain a complete capacity and contribute to the people has been disapproved through the story from Nuri

Rion in Puspita's "Cerita Rion dengan Sebelah Mata" also expresses how society underestimates a person with a visual impairment. Rion is considered to be weak, low, and unable to demonstrate good work on the textile business.

> *Aku juga pernah diragukan ketika ingin masuk ke bidang tekstil, seperti yang aku tekuni sekarang. Lalu, aku tunjukkan bahwa aku bisa dan mau belajar," kata Rion dengan tegas" (2)*
> "I have also been doubted when I want to enter the textile field, the focus area that I am working on now. Then, I show them that am capable and eager to learn "said Rion firmly" (2)

The data explains that Rion answers the prejudice from the people in his community with commitment and persistence. He finally reaches his dream and gains recognition from other people. He achieves his life's goals as a great and successful man in the textile business.

A Person with a Disability is Dependent

Another portrait of a person with a disability is the inability to be independent. A disabled person is described as a dependent person who could only live with assistance from other people (Rapley, 2004). In "Bapak si Dono", Dono's father works as a driver for a rich family and is responsible for nurturing a boy who suffers from a mental disability named Bambang. When he is not assigned to drive a car for the family, he accompanies him playing and provides him everything he needs.

From the perspective of Dono, Bambang is viewed as a dependent person.

> *"Ada seorang anak laki-laki bertubuh besar. Pantasnya ia sudah SMP atau SMA. Namun, anak itu duduk main mobil-mobilan di lantai. Bapak sedang jongkok sambil memegang semangkuk bubur kacang hijau dan menyuapi anak itu. Darah Dono mendidih saat melihat anak itu menaruh mobil-mobilan di atas kepala Bapak dan tertawa terkekeh-kekeh. Sementara Bapak membiarkannya. Dan ketika Bapak menyuapkan bubur, anak itu malah meludahkannya ke lantai. Dengan sabar Bapak mengambil lap, membersihkan lantai" (2)*
> "There is a big boy. He might be in middle or high school. However, he sits on his car toy on the floor. Dono's father is squatting while holding a bowl of green bean porridge and feeding him. Dono's blood boils when he sees the child puts the car on his father's head and then laughs. Yet, his father allows him to do it. And when his father feeds him the porridge, he spits it on the floor instead. Patiently, his father takes a rag and cleans the floor" (2)

The quotation explains that Bambang could not even spoon his food. He depends on someone else to spoon-feed him. When Dono's father leaves him because Dono has

come to pick him, Dono's father lets another maid in the house to continue providing the boy his food.

> *"Bapak keluar ruangan sambil membawa mangkuk bubur. Ia menyerahkan pada Satpam dan Satpam berkata, "Biar Mbak Ning yang menyuapi!" (2)*
> "Dono's father comes out of the room carrying a porridge bowl. He hands it to the security guard and the security guard says, "Let Mbak Ning feeds Bowo with his porridge!" (2)

Mbak Ning continues to assist Bambang. She spoon-feeds the boy his porridge after Dono's father left the house. This situation gives another inference that Bambang is given low expectations from his parents to be an independent disabled boy. He is not trained and expected to fulfill his basic needs alone. He is not trained with some essential skills needed to survive in life. Furthermore, giving the responsibility to nurture Bambang to untrained people like Dono's father and Mbak Ning implies the situation that the family has neglected him

Furthermore, Dono represents a member of a society who does not open to differences. The narrative illustrating him to witness his father's interaction with Bambang results in no awareness or empathy. He keeps busy thinking about himself and his plan to get a present from his uncle. Bambang's condition does not give him a particular sensitivity to disability

Then, Dono's father begins to provide a considerable perspective that may improve Dono's sense of tolerance and empathy toward Bambang.

> *"Tapi, kalau sedang tak ada tugas, Bapak menemani Bambang. Kasihan, ia cacat mental. Walaupun orang tuanya kaya raya, apalah artinya" (2)*
> "But, if there is no duty, I accompany Bambang. Poor him, he is mentally handicapped. Even though his parents are rich, it could mean nothing" (2)

From the quotation above, Dono's father expresses his pity for Bambang and his family. He extends his belief that being rich is useless when it has a child with a disability. This proves the stereotype that disability is "the other", something different which is not expected by anyone (David, 2000). A family could hardly accept and make peace with the situation. This is due to the socially constructed myth that having a child with a mental problem is associated with bad luck and a curse. In Indonesia for instance, a family will usually neglect its disabled member or hold him or her, for example, in stocks to "protect" the family, the person himself, and also the community.

A Person with a Disability is a Vehicle for the Growth of Other Characters

Because the short stories under the study are narrated in the third point of view, they could provide various perspectives of characters that are not only from the major but also the minor characters. From the four selected stories, it is generally found that the unpleasant experience of characters with disabilities has always provided a positive effect for some characters without disabilities.

In "Kacamata UFO", the incident that has made Diah lost her glasses help Didik and his friends become conscious of their misdeed. It gives them a positive moral understanding. The guilt feeling has urged them to repent their mistake.

> *"kenapa orangtuanya tidak membelikan kacamata baru" selidik Didik lagi*
> *"Ayahnya kan Cuma tukang becak, Dik!" Sahut Yeti ketus. Kalimat terakhir Yeti ini menari-nari di kepala Didik. (31)*
> "Why do her parents not buy new glasses for her?" Didik exclaimed

> "Her father is only a pedicab driver, Dik!" Yeti replied firmly.
> Yeti's last sentence makes Didik thinks very hard" (31)

Diah does not attend school after she has her glasses broken. Knowing that Diah's parents could not afford to buy her new glasses, Didik's sense of humanity and empathy improves. He feels sorry for his misdeed and then gathers his saving to be given to Diah. Besides, he navigates his classmates to also give donations to Diah. Without anyone knowing his bad behavior, Didik and his bystander can clear their mistake and stop bullying Diah. They will stop it because Diah finally dares to offend Didik, Tommy, Ari, and Wawan. It is when they deliver the money for her to buy new glasses. In front of them, she stresses that "indeed she needs new glasses to replace the one which is broken because it falls from a desk" (33). This playful satirical statement implies a message that has made Didik and his friends feel uneasy.

Furthermore, in "Gadis Penari", Nuri's achievements as a talented dancer with speech impairment have made Ika promises herself to study hard and be a successful dancer as Nuri.

> *"Ika semakin kagum pada kak Nuri yang ternyata pernah mendapatkan perhargaan atas tarian ciptaannya. Di dalam hati Dian ingin tekun belajar menari agar bisa seperti Kak Nuri" (111)*
> "Ika is even more amazed at Nuri, who had received an award for her dance creation. Inside her heart, she wants to be diligent in learning to dance, so she can be as successful as Nuri" (111)

Ika is suspicious about Nuri at their first meeting and wonders why Nuri is very confident to dance regardless of her impairment. Finally, she understands that impairment has nothing to do with skill and work quality that a person could produce. Nuri wins many awards for her choreography because of her hardworking. She has been invited to dance in many different countries quite often. These outstanding achievements burn Ika's spirit to also aim and dream high.

The same situation is also found in "Cerita Rion dengan Sebelah Mata". Among the short stories from Bobo magazine that are selected for this study, only "Cerita Rion dengan Sebelah Mata" whose characters are all the persons with disabilities. The story projects the struggles that Rion has to undergo to achieve his current status as a textile expert. He fights negative stigmas and fright of being isolated by other people. His story motivates other disabled people who attend his talk. They commit themselves not to be afraid and continue to work hard to achieve their dream.

> *"Seorang anak berkursi roda datang memeluk Rion. "Terima kasih ya Kak. Kakak membuat aku lebih semangat," katanya. Beberapa anak pun akhirnya melakukanya, dari yang tangannya hanya ada setengah, kakinya tak sempurna, hingga matanya tak bisa melihat. (2)*
> "A child in a wheelchair comes hugging Rion. "Thank you. You make me more enthusiastic" he said. Some children finally do the same thing. Some of them are children with hands, feet, and eye impairments" (2)

This is seen that Rion's story gives a positive impact on the group of the disabled person in the sharing and discussion moment with him. Learning from Rion, the people from the session are more spiritful and confident to cope with a diverse set of societal perspectives that may value disability differently. They will focus on their life's goal, rather than their impairment.

A Discourse of Disability in the Selected Inclusive Children's Literature

The discourse of disability in the selected children's stories is mostly colored with prejudice. In the selected short stories, the appearance of children with impairment is stigmatized as weak, dependent, incompetent, and target of a bully by their peers. This portrayal is strongly influenced by the traditional perspectives maintained in daily interaction of people in the community and supported by books, social media, and mass media in Indonesia that create an imbalanced picture of people with disabilities. The spread of news and stories through various media could guide and strengthen the negative image of people with disabilities. When these media reinforce negative stigmas that people with disabled-bodies are weak, inferior, and incapable, the people with disabilities will always be trapped as fated to fail people. As most of the Indonesian mass media, especially newspapers, often depict the negative stereotype of people with disabilities (Priyanti, 2018; Tsaputra, 2016), the course of any literary work to portray a character with disabilities positively meets challenges.

Indeed, some people or children with disabilities are illustrated as having a patient, persistent, hardworking, and friendly person. These values are observable in the characterization of Diah, Rion, and Nuri in their reaction to the mistreatment of their peers. Nevertheless, these traits are depicted to benefit the people without disability, the perpetrators who ridicule, or create prejudice upon them. People with disabilities must not always become the sidekick to create a better world for others. Their experience must not be presented simplistically in a literary work and benefit the majority, so readers can understand their hardship real and then take awareness to respond to the society's behavior toward people with disabilities.

Thus far, people with disabilities are depicted in an unfortunate position. Although the Indonesian government has taken serious attention to the issue of disability, the people's comprehension of the government's concern toward people with disabilities is different. In Indonesian's inclusive children's stories or picture books is not popular and could not be easily found, but when they appear, the depiction falls far from realistic portrayals of human complexity, and thus negative perceptions of their existence are prevalent in the selected children's short stories.

CONCLUSION

It is always hard for people with different posture and looks to be accepted in society. The prejudice and negative mindset toward people with impairment have rooted traditionally since the past. The discourse of poststructuralists has located society's way of thinking into binary oppositions such as normal and abnormal, and ability and disability. This dichotomy entails stereotype that has put the minority group as something different and "other', and thus make it allowed to be treated unequally. From the selected stories, none of the stories explore the process of negotiation of anger and sadness experienced by the characters with disabilities when they are bullied or discriminated by their peers. The character with a disability is simply projected as a community who would accept anything done to them with an open arm. These images are intriguing because they imply the negative recognition for people with disabilities by the majority group.

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