

Ultimatum to Neo Imperialism; Ecocriticism in Khairani Barokka Poem 'Ultimatum Orangutan'

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Abstract: The article discusses issues of ecology injustices in a single poem *Ultimatum Orangutan* written by Khairani Barokka in 2021. The poetry is taken from her second poetry collection entitled the same *Ultimatum Orangutan* which is shortlisted for Barbellion Prize. The study employs ecocriticism frameworks in literary works and uses a qualitative-interpretative method. The words, phrases, and lines are observed, connected, inferred, and concluded based on the subthemes of the discussion. The study results in two parts. Firstly, the forms of neo-imperialism exploitation of lands are conveyed through foreign imperialists such as big industrial companies based in Indonesia, and the movie and play game industry. The form also shows the authority in Indonesia that always supports capitalism. Secondly, the neo-imperialisms addressed in the poem include the extinction of orangutans, the death of people, and the loss of land in Indonesia. This study reflects that the literature could function to challenge the issues of climate justice in very provocative ways.

Keywords: ecocriticism, neo-imperialist, climate justice, extinction.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of climate injustice has been discussed widely today, not because it is a new issue but because it is a prolonged issue that is very complex and still could not be resolved (Hubbell & Ryan, 2020). It is a global and complex issue (Dewi, 2022). In literature, the relationship between nature and literary works could be seen in almost all cultures in the world. In modern contemporary literature, there are a number of literary works that discussed the issues of environment, climate injustice, and exploitation, and also advocacy for the environment through poetry (Liliani, 2022; Ryan, 2020). In the Indonesian context, Khairani Barokka is one of the poets that writes critically

regarding ecojustice. Ryan mentions that in Khairani Barokka's book *Indigenous Species*, she writes about deforestation, loss of ecosystem, and ecojustice toward the indigenous people (Ryan, 2020).

Khairani Barokka (Okka) was born in Jakarta in 1985. She is a poet, performer, producer, interdisciplinary artist, and disability activist who recently completed her doctoral study at the Goldsmiths University of London. Khairani Barokka is a Minang-Javanese writer and artist from Jakarta whose work centers on disability justice as anticolonial praxis. Her first book as sole author, a poetry-art production entitled *Indigenous Species*, was published in December 2016 by Tilted Axis Press (UK), with a Vietnamese translation out in 2018 with AJAR Press, and was nominated for a Goldsmiths Public Engagement Award. Her first full-length poetry collection, *Rope*, was published by Nine Arches Press (UK) in 2017. *HEAT*, an anthology of Southeast Asian urban writing co-edited with Ng Yi-Sheng for Buku Fixi Publishing (Malaysia), was launched in London in April 2016. She is co-editor, with Sandra Alland and Daniel Sluman, of Nine Arches Press' UK anthology of D/deaf and disabled poets, entitled *Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back* (Nine Arches Press, 2017), shortlisted for a Saboteur Award for Best Anthology and a Poetry School Book of the Year.

Politically engaged and bold in its prophetic visions, *Ultimatum Orangutan* is an outcry against environmental hazards, social injustices, and racial and ableist stereotypes. Through the use of experimental language and forms and surreal imagery, Barokka's poetry exposes the underlying relationship between colonialism and environmental and systemic injustices, confronting the reader with crucial, thought-provoking questions about climate change and the treatment of indigenous societies, and forces us to contemplate the consequences of inaction (Wong, 2021). However, there is no academic paper discussing the poem *Ultimatum Orangutan* from the perspective of ecocriticism. This paper aims to discuss the issues of environmental injustices with the subthemes of the forms of neo-imperialisms and the reasons why the ultimatum is addressed to neo-imperialisms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary criticism. It has come to mean not only the application of ecology and ecological principles to the study of literature but also the theoretical approach to the inter-relational webs of natural cultural and supernatural phenomena (Fenn, 2015). Ecocriticism not only gives emphasis on the 'harmony' of humanity and nature

but also talks about the destruction caused to nature by the changes which take place in the modern world for most of which man is directly responsible.

METHOD

The method used in this study is a qualitative interpretative that employs the principles of ecocriticism. The process of interpretation involves essentially four things; observing, connecting, inferring, and concluding. The researcher observes details of description and action, of language and form. The study looks for connections among these details and begins to establish a sense of the poem's coherence (the way its details fit together in meaningful relationships). On the basis of these connections, the researcher makes inferences or interpretative guesses about its significance. Lastly, make a provisional conclusion about the poem's meaning based on our observations, connections, and inferences. (DiYanni & Kelemen, 2008)

FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

Ultimatum Orangutan is one of the poems in Khairani Barokka second anthology entitled *Ultimatum Orangutan* (2021). It contains the restlessness of the author and brings an alarm to awaken the readers on how the Indonesian environment has been critically exploited by neo-imperialism. The poem is constructed in free verse and written in English. Yet the last part (80-90) of the poetry is written in Bahasa Indonesia functioning as the translation of particular English phrases. These bilingual lines are to address Indonesians whose land has been exploited by imperialism. The analysis of the *Ultimatum Orangutan* poem discusses two aspects. The first aspect discusses the forms of neo-imperialism and injustices towards the environment, human beings, and animals. The second aspect discusses the reasons for sending the ultimatum to neo-imperialism.

Forms of Neo-Imperialism and Injustices

This part argues that neo-imperialism in Indonesia comes from two sides; from outside Indonesia and from Indonesia itself. It can be inferred that neo-imperialism comes from a country with enormous power that the author might refer to United States of America. This poetry is opened with the story of *King Kong* movie that is originally from Sumatra (Nias Island). Yet, now Indonesian people feel strange about the King-Kong character which is actually a gorilla or one of the species of orangutan that lives only in Borneo and Sumatera Island in Indonesia or in some areas of Malaysia. Why do Indonesian

people now feel strange with an orangutan? "The original King Kong story was set on an island off Sumatra/perhaps Nias/So this is a twisted phobia, of what-is-now-Indonesian man and fear/of his usurping, of his big, hairy hands on a blonde ingénue/ on the needle of white capitalism, the Empire State Building" (1-5). The author refers neo-imperialism to as white capitalism and the Empire State Building. As we may know that Empire State Building is the symbol of the technological prowess and economic strength of the United States. In the movie, King Kong or orangutan was characterized as a big pre-historic monster rather than as an intelligent solitary primate. This is because the famous *King Kong* movie was written, produced, directed, and starred by Americans. The neo-imperialism through American most influencing movie production brings *King Kong* or orangutan closer to the concept of the whites about orangutans rather than to the understanding of Indonesians regarding orangutans.

Then, the author of this poem refers to the neo-imperialist in the country of Uncle Sam. Ultimately, nobody's -real-uncle-by-the-name of Sam sanctioned-slash-planned all of this,/ to open up lands with forklift-hands, letting millions of bodies fall to the ground/ as it was all lifted into another country entirely --- people's homes and cosmologies/ in the rainforest lifted and dropped into the laps of people who cannot pronounce us/ and only the most powerful of those who can, who claim to be of us"(26-30). In this part, the poem strongly argues that the imperialist has exploited Indonesian land and brought all of the resources to the US. Indonesia has lost not only natural resources and rainforest systems but also lost homes for millions of people. The author emphasizes that neo-imperialist is the country with capital that can bring all things from Indonesia to theirs including the orangutan or people who live in the jungle and orangutan, the extinct primate from our jungle. They have taken all Indonesian resources but what is more, they also take the character of our orangutan/ gorilla as in *King Kong* movie to bring more capital to their country.

The character of the orangutan is not merely sold through the King Kong movie but also through a very popular Japanese play game Nintendo, entitled Donkey Kong. This Super Smash Bros character portrays the character of an orangutan for children or younger people. "and am thinking about Donkey Kong as a Super Smash Bros character and what colour the thread is between the child/ and the pixelated animal who pounds the earth in a piece/ of electronics made with metals forged from this earth, and/ all through the making of these things, the monkey on screen" (55-59). In this game, the character of the orangutan through Donkey Kong (DK) is portrayed as exotic, tenacious, and loyal. As the character is meant for children, the character of the gorilla in this game is of course entertaining. This could not bring awareness to children or a younger generation that the orangutan is an extinct animal in its original devastating habitat, Sumatran and Borneo forests in Indonesia. In fact, the foreign play game industry can't stop receiving from its character. Here, we could see neo-imperialism of the riches of our rainforest through the play game industry.

The other imperialism towards the environment comes from the power holders or authority in our own country, Indonesia. The author reflects on how the injustices and the land's exploitation are not only caused by foreign imperialism but also by the authority in Indonesia. The author started reflecting on the traumatic situation that happened in 1965-1966 when there were generals and people suspected of communism were killed. "under a red and white sigil were lullabied; women's rights and labor organizers / killed the generals like animals—instead of being told; generals/organized a genocide of people suspected of communism / likely millions of people ended, who were simply feared of usurping (remember, the film), rounded up for no master other than bloodthirst" (18-24). The killings at that time were massive and were merely based on suspicion. The victims could not have the right to speak and give self-defense. The political and military leaders were trying to fight for power and authority in Indonesia. The ambition to get power was so strong that they didn't think even think about others' human rights. This situation remains very traumatic feelings to many people, victims' family, and their younger generations.

The poet then also mentions the prolonged yet unresolved case of Marsinah who was a young labor activist in the Era of the New Regime. "And so many wrestled this machinery with lives paid for so long / --Marsinah at twenty four, our many-of-stealth --" (31-32). Marsinah who becomes the symbol of laborers' struggle led a labor demonstration that was fighting for a 20% increase in their payment based on the East Java Governor policy. In fact, Marsinah was kidnapped and found killed after three days and until now the kidnap remains a mystery as Marsinah's struggle was against power, authority, and capitalism. The case that happened in 1993 reflects how Indonesian experience injustices when they fight for rights and justice.

Similarly, for climate justice, the activists and indigenous people who fight for the justice of their land were many accused of a betrayal of our own country. The author points out the cases of many indigenous people like Papuans, Dayak, Padang, et al (39). Yet she gives more elaboration in the case of Papua. "who could be Papuan men writing white letters on themselves/ in jail, to display for their trial at which at which they accused of/ treason against Indonesia" (73-75).

The poet draws our attention that the devastating land exploitation in Indonesia is a twofold complex situation. Both come from the power, authority, and capital that become the new forms of imperialism toward the environment.

The Emergency of Ultimatum.

Why Khairani Barokka used the word ultimatum for the poem? The poem contains her restlessness and anger towards the injustices that the Indonesian experience. Okka also gives an alarm to all Indonesians that the situation is very critical. "And I think about a child so small, so sad, fearful to breathe/ from all the blood in the air, adult nightmares seeping into her sky/

and her books, and her friends, and just now I remember being her, am being her," (51-54). The devastating situation gives no future to the young generation. Even the poet describes that the air children take is not only polluted but the air also contains blood. She might refer to the blood in the air as the blood of many victims that fight for climate justice (39). Besides, it does not only give no future to the next generation but also brings many traumatic experiences for adults.

In her restlessness, she gives a strong criticism of the campaigns against palm oil plantations. She highlights that orangutan does not only refer to the extinct primate but also to the people that live in the jungle. The rainforest exploitation does not only make the orangutan extinct but also the death of millions of people who lost their homes, and lands. "When I speak to people about palm oil plantations/ as the devastation of Papuans, Dayak, Padang, et al,/ invariably, the words 'palm oil' makes them think of orangutans. *We need to save them*. I've found myself thinking 'Orangutans, and so many peoples/as well'/but this phrase does not fit well on campaigns/ against palm oil; (37-43). The poet brings the ironic situation that in many campaigns about palm oil plantations, very often people use the phrase '*We need to save orangutan*' with the picture of an orangutan on the billboard, yet they forget about the human beings that have suffered and died because of the exploitation.

The ultimatum orangutan conveys a meaning that the ultimatum does not only come from the orangutan as a primate but also from the people living in the jungle. '(and also ultimatum-ultimata from all they/burn, burned, will burn) –juga dari orangutan (also from orangutans)" (89-90). In the last part of the poetry, the narrator wants to reveal that human beings are also already very upset and sick with the situation.

CONCLUSIONS

The *Ultimatum orangutan* shows a challenge to the reader by showing the readers that environmental injustices, land exploitation, the extinction of orangutans, and the death of people in the jungle were caused by two key factors; the foreign neo-imperialist and the authority or power holders in our country. The poet sends us a strong and loud alarm that our environment is in a very devastating and critical situation. It shows the extinction of animals including the famous orangutans, land loss, and the death of many people.

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