

# Bringing A Sense of Optimism to the World of Despair in the Postmodernist Portrayal of Humanity: A Study of Sexually Obsessed Characters in *Cakra Waruga* (2006) by Arena Wati

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**Abstract.** This study is to question the rejection of the postmodernists of traditionalism and modernist Enlightenment as meta-narrative in their search for human highest potential. *Cakra Waruga* a Malay novel (2006) written by Arena Wati is selected here to contest the postmodernist premise that rejects traditionalism, and in the context of this study the premise denies God His place and diverts humanity from such a divinity as strong source of reliance. This study is aimed at proving that the denial of such a meta-narrative in human parameter is a false sense of freedom because it dismisses the main part of humanity, that is to say a human need of a strong source of reliance upon human strength subsiding or diminishing because of being put up to internal and external challenges or suppressions. This study is also intended to propose that a strong source of reliance is an identified and believed conception mainly of divinity and spirituality as shown by the novel, which can be taken as a meta-narrative that gives a sense of completion and accomplishment meanings for characters being portrayed and assurance for the represented humanity. Having said so, this study is to be based on two different poles of an identified and believed meta-narrative, and a postmodernist idealism of liberty for humanity. The main emphasis of this study is on exposing important aspects of the caged sexual obsessed characters in the Malay novel. This study argues that humanity as represented by the obsessed characters is subject to despair and insensibility vis-à-vis the identified and believed meta-narrative of Islam. In a broad sense, this study disproves the postmodernist idealism because in practice or literary manifestation the envisioned liberty is frustrated when postmodernist characters are put in periphery and seclusion. Conversely, this study argues that such an identified and believed meta-narrative as Islam of the novel outlasts a challenging element of denial of spirituality associated with the obsessed characters Rubiah, Kintan, Mustafa and Salam who are portrayed as merely relying on fragile and unsustainable individual strength.

**Keywords:** meta-narrative, postmodernist, world of despair and sexual obsessed

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Synopsis of *Cakra Waruga*

*Cakra Waruga* literally *Cycle of Death* is centred around obsessed characters, Rubiah, Kintan, Mustafa and Salam who are portrayed as being caged in a world of despair, suffering from sexual obsession either in the forms of an unfulfilled sexual desire or sexual concern for others. As for Rubiah – the main emphasis in this study – her despair and suffering are due to the cold sexual response and shunning of her husband Salam on one hand, and also due to the jealousy of the husband and wife intimacy between Mustafa and Kintan on the other. As portrayed in the novel, Mustafa used to have an affair with Rubiah during overseas study years but because of Malay marriage custom, she had to agree that her older sister, Kintan, was preferred to marry the first man, Mustafa coming to be part of her big family. As of Kintan, she is too portrayed in a world of despair because of sexual concern she shows to her sister who is bereft or denied sexual intimacy by her sister's husband Salam. During the course of time, Kintan is aware that her husband is becoming distracted from her because of his obsessive concern for his sister-in-law Rubiah. In a nutshell, all of the four characters, Rubiah, Kintan, Mustafa and Salam are portrayed as sexually obsessed, but with different angles,

and being in a world of despair. In a sense, they are viewed as representing an unreasonably depressed and pessimist humanity against the background of meta-narrative dominated social life where turbulence and hardship are viewed as a viable way to realize optimism.

## 1.2 Postmodernist portrayal of humanity

Postmodernist portrayal of humanity departs from its basic emphases of rejection of meta-narrative and fragmentation of picture. However, in this discussion it would be clear to dismantle the term postmodernism into three parts of *fundamentality*, *manifestation* and *humanity*. The *fundamental* of postmodernism is rejection of meta-narrative as idealised by Lyotard. As suggested by Harvey (1990:45), postmodernism attacks “*any notion that might be a meta-language, meta-narrative, or meta-theory through which all things can be connected and represented*”. Across cultural and religious boundaries, postmodernism is viewed by David Harvey (1990) and Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (2001) as representative of a world of despair for humanity, and viewed by Sayyid Sayyid `Abd al-Raziq (2002), and Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir (2010:159-287) as dismissive of spirituality, morality and knowledge for the development of human potential.

Common knowledge is that meta-narrative is disregarded by the postmodernists because traditionalism and modernist Enlightenment used to be meta-narrative are regarded as failing to accentuate justice and harmony for humanity, and failing to emphasize the need for the development of human potential. In contrast to this common knowledge, traditionalism, as shown in *Chakra Waruga* are portrayed to contribute to human potential because Muslim traditionalism is both fundamental and substantive, not of subjectivity that is prone to manipulation or uncontrolled interpretation. Thus, it cannot be manipulated and its rejection means aggression and encroachment on one hand and dejection and despair on the other. In this light, Muslim humanity as represented by the main characters of the Malay novel, with their sexual obsession points to the denial of spiritual strength as the source of despair in contrast to optimism associated with the meta-narrative as the background of the novel. Through the religion of Islam as the background of the story, the novel shows that transcending and sustaining divinity and spirituality constitute a foundational meta-narrative.

Speaking of postmodernist manifestation, David Harvey (1990: 44) proposes that postmodernism is “*total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic that formed the one half of Baudelaire’s conception of modernity. But postmodernism responds to the fact of that in a very particular way. It does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even to define the eternal and immutable elements that might lie within it.*” Also, as suggested by Harvey (1990:113-114) postmodernism is representative of “*the multiple forms of otherness as they emerge from differences in subjectivity, gender and sexuality, race and class, temporal and spatial geographic locations and dislocation....as mimetic of social, economic and political practices in society. But since it is mimetic of different facets of those practices it appears in very different guises. The superimposition of different worlds in many a postmodern novel, worlds between which an uncommunicative is ‘otherness’ prevails in a space of coexistence, bears an uncanny relationship the increasing ghettoization, disempowerment, and isolation of poverty and minority populations in the inner cities of both Britain and the United States*”. Such postmodernist manifestations of *ephemerality*, *fragmentation*, *discontinuity* and the like are typical of marginalization for humanity and they contradict the idealised human liberty envisioned by the postmodernists.

Implicitly, humanity as represented by postmodernist characters is freed from the restrictions that are said to related with traditionalism and modernist Enlightenment but it is subject to another type of restriction which is more serious because humanity through the postmodernist manifestations of discontinuation or fragmentation also means the fragmentation of an entirety that can be related to the character and the space being occupied, in both senses of physicality and mentality. To put in another way, the fragmentation *snatches parts of consciousness and conscience that makes sense of human action, interaction and reaction in the world of reality, and makes sensibility of the interaction of the character with meta-narrative, from the entirety of humanity*. It puts humanity in a senseless condition, and more conspicuously in dejection and despair.

In this study, the concept of postmodernist freedom of humanity mentioned above is to be contested by analyzing the portrayal of the main Malay characters associated with sexual obsession, i.e. in contrast to the

humanity envisioned by the postmodernists. In doing so, the obsessed Malay characters are to be dismantled and examined to prove that postmodernist fragmentation, discontinuation and the like, of which is sexual obsession, is inconsistent with the envisioned postmodernist liberty for humanity.

## 2. Marginalization of the Envisioned Postmodernist Humanity

### 2.1. Denial of Self-Entirety

The postmodernist fragmentation and discontinuation as mentioned above also result in postmodernist portrayal of humanity being fragmented, discontinued and dislocated in a formless space. When this fragmented picture of humanity is set in the background of the dissolved boundary, as suggested by Harvey (1990: 41), “*between fiction and science fiction*” humanity as represented by postmodernist characters are portrayed as “*confused as to which world they are in, and how they should act with respect to it*”. This implies that the represented humanity is marginalized because of the fragmentation of postmodernist characters and the dissolving of the boundary, which also means the rejection of meta-narrative, which in the end makes humanity *less represented*. Thus, the represented humanity is made to appear *nonsensical* and *lost* in space. In the context of this study, it can be said that part of the entirety of the represented humanity or portrayed postmodernist character is shed, which is to be elaborated later.

Tracing backwards, marginalization of the represented humanity or denial of postmodernist characters of self-entirety takes place as a result of postmodernist disillusionment in *modernist unequal unjust representations* of all segments of western society on one hand, and from *politicised or propagandist institution, mass media and national agenda on the other*, as proposed by Harvey (1990: 36-38). This puts the represented humanity in total and continuous despair as opposed to the represented humanity in a non-manipulated or non-politicised meta-narrative as can be related with the Malay novel. Based on the storyline that lends credence to Malay religious belief, this Muslim meta-narrative surpasses the manipulation and politicisation typical of modernism subject to postmodernist attack as has been suggested by Harvey because the background of the novel is based on divinity and spirituality that transcends cultural boundary and human over-interpretation.

The Malay characters are portrayed as sexually obsessed against the background of a strong traditionalism, which is Islam. The functionality or workability of the Muslim meta-narrative completes a sense of entirety for the portrayed characters and brings a sense of optimism to the represented humanity. In contrast to the postmodernist dismissal of traditionalism as meta-narrative, the functionality of the Muslim meta-narrative is realized when in the public domain the characters are ironically portrayed as a balanced human while in private domain they are portrayed as a human part of whose entirety is shed, leaving the characters nonsensical. This is because sexual obsession restrains the obsessed characters from crossing over to the territory of freedom as enshrined in postmodernism and it blocks the minds of the characters by imprisoning the characters in the imaginary walls of sexual obsession. The refrain of the characters can be viewed from three angles, which are firstly *denial of self-entirety* as mentioned briefly above; secondly, *denial of self-composure*; and thirdly, *denial of self-sensibility*.

What is meant by denial of self-entirety is *an unprepared and forced conversion or diversion of the main characters*, which negates, misrepresent or distort their identity projected in public domain. The unprepared and forced conversion happens when the characters are not prepared with some sort introductory situation before they are directly converted or transformed into the intended state of tormenting situation. In this study, the prepared state of situation is confusion, frustration and so on that may usher in the intended sexual obsession scene or space. The unprepared and forced diversion happens when the main characters are abruptly transferred from typical sexual obsession scene to general story scene, making the storyline nonsensical. Otherwise, the conversion and diversion are possibly closely related but what is significant is they bring about misrepresentation or partial presentation of the main characters, hence denial of self-entirety.

Rubiah, Mustafa and Kinta are good examples representative of denial of self-entirety, and in a wider context it is possibly said that they represent a denial of complete humanity because they are awkwardly or forcedly put into sexual obsession picture, shedding their holistic self-entirety. Thus, the marginal sexual obsession misrepresents the identity of the obsessed characters in public space, apart from undermining the reality of the background of postmodernist society. To put it another way, it contradicts the supporting characters and the crowd that the writer puts forward as the background of the story, apart from denying the obsessed characters representation of sensible intellectuals with Ph. D title. The unreasonable sexual obsession subjects the characters to periphery, and makes absurdity of the characters' imagination and intellectual abilities, thus the obsession denies the characters self-entirety, which means shedding part of the identity of the obsessed characters, as can be related to Kintan and Mustafa. Kintan is made to shed part of her being as an organized professor, who holds head of department post when she is described as overwhelmed with naive sexual fantasy "*Like dirt and tree root. Each depends on one another...Tree root needs dirt for trunk, leaf, flower and fruit. Who is the root, who is the dirt? Dirt is unlike the trunk. Unlike the leaf, unlike the flower and unlike the fruit, obviously, man is the dirt and woman is the root, for woman is the one is to be pregnant.* In other places she is portrayed as trying to fulfil the mission of the so-called dirt and root, being obsessed with her sister Rubiah to the extent of allowing her husband to sort of have an affectionate intimacy with his sister (Arena Wati, 2006: 30-31 & 128-132).

Like Kintan, Mustafa is a rational professor yet he is portrayed as absurdly fantasizing sexuality, becoming irrational. Mustafa is also portrayed as excessively showing his sexually concern for Salam and absurdly asks about Salam's sexual behaviour, who in turn hesitantly responds "*Almost every night, I let (Rubiah) sleep on my lap, Brother Mus*".... Salam bit his lips... "*Quite seldom, after we passed a duration of new marriage. I don't have the heart to look at her suffering from long period of pregnancy*"(Arena Wati, 2006: 35).

The typical denial of self-entirety could also lead to misidentification of the identity of the characters intended to be accentuated in public space when only part of sexual obsession is picked up and considered. As can be related with the Malay work, sexual obsession makes Rubiah who is portrayed in public domain as a professor, seem to be an irrational woman in private domain, or not a professor at all. The portrayal of Rubiah in private domain, where she is described as sexual obsessed, makes nonsense of freedom humanity, as envisioned by the postmodernists, through fragmentation of picture technique as mentioned earlier. Since Rubiah is the most important character, she misrepresents the postmodernist intended freedom for humanity through the fragmentation. In contrast to her realistic identity in public domain, she is contrastively portrayed in private domain as sexual fantasized, preoccupied with sexual uncontrolled desire, and with disorganized mind as she is portrayed as obsessively imagining. In one place, she is made imagining that Mustafa and his wife are having sex in the next room, followed by her recollection of her late husband Salam in her wake and then her dream while in another place, she is made appear childish along with Mustafa chasing butterflies (Arena Wati, 2006: 91-92 & 130-132)

Generally, the scenes related to sexual obsession are awkwardly put into the otherwise structured public domain, to put it another way, the story background is not prepared for the scenes of sexual obsession. In this light too, there is an awkward presence of the underworld element of prostitution it fails to undermine the establishment of the Muslim meta-narrative. The underworld element is quite scarce compared to the big picture of the story background. This is done through the recollection of Mustafa of a minimised picture of the misdeeds of "smugglers of *kretek* cigarette, syndicate for illegal migrant labours and prostitutes". This is followed by another similar but peripheral portrayal experienced by a supporting character, Sawiriti is illustrated as nearly falling prey to prostitution syndicate (Arena Wati, 2006: 23& 208-210).

## **2.2. Denial of Self-Composure**

The following discussion is about denial of self-composure that can still be regarded as part of denial of self-entirety discussed above, but here it is intended to be looked at different angle or as a subsequence. While the discussion above is focused on the contradiction of the identities of the main characters in public domain on one hand and in private domain on the other, here, it is focused on aspect of emotional stability. It is intended to the postmodernist intended liberty for humanity and intended human potential, in other words,

these postmodernist intentions are far-fetched because human liberty and potential lie with human consciousness or self-composure. By being fragmented, the portrayed characters are denied self-composure and the intended humanity is framed in fear and anxiety undermining the intended freedom and potential.

Sexual obsession, as discernable in the Malay novel, leads to denial of self-composure, or plainly speaking it brings about emotional depression for the main characters, Rubiah, Kintan and Mustafa and Salam because the obsession is intensified, thus it degenerates into emotional depression by *confronting* it with the established barrier of marriage custom that disapproves non-marital sexual intimacy. Rubiah who is portrayed as sexually obsessed is confronted with Mustafa is married to her sister Kintan, whereas the obsession and ensuing emotional depression could be lessened by way of *acceptance of circumstances* as can be related to other supporting characters, Sawitri, Supinah and Baiduri . Likewise, Rubiah's sexual obsession is also confronted with Salam's confession of betrayal of marriage bond, whereas her emotional depression could be dissolved also by the same of way of acceptance. To conclude, the two elements of acceptance of circumstances and non-acceptance of circumstances are equally present in the Malay work, suggesting the main characters are forcedly denied self-composure, and imprisoned in emotional depression.

In light of the forced conversion above, this emotional depression is made restricted to private domain, but in public domain, the depression is out of the picture, because the whole picture is about intellectual and religious society. In other words, the depression is an awkward creativity and the storyline shows the main characters are forcedly converted into emotional depression, not naturally adopted in the text. There is no strong departing point to support the interrupting scenes of sexual obsession and ensuing emotional depression. The storyline is generally historical, about Indonesian migrants, and replete with the recording of personal routines and religious rituals that obviously is not intended to herald the interruption of emotional depression.

In a broad sense, the message underlying the world of despair that framed the represented Malay humanity and the portrayal of the characters being denied self-composure or consciousness is that an identified meta-narrative is a necessity to make sense of the fragmented humanity and characters. Without the identified meta-narrative, humanity is dislocated, and in this context the postmodernist intentions are denied because the term intention does not only operate internally but it also needs being extended into external dimension in order to be realized. Hence the postmodernist intentions need an identified meta-narrative. Obviously, the intended Malay humanity and the portrayed Rubiah and Mustafa who are portrayed as living in otherwise optimistic society represented by supporting characters, are made nonsensical because their being separated from an identified and socially accepted meta-narrative. Against this public domain of optimism, the pessimist main characters, Rubiah and Mustafa are conversely portrayed, i.e. in control of emotion, but in private domain the same characters are forced in the world of despair through *restrained, sad* and *annoying* imagination and recollection.

### **2.3. Denial of Self-Sensibility**

Like denial of self-composure, denial of self-sensibility is part of denial of entirety discussed above but both denial of self-sensibility and denial of self-composure are intended to be looked at from different dimensions. While denial of self-composure is intended to stand for denial of emotional stability, denial of self-sensibility is intended to represent denial of conscience. It needs to be reiterated that taking into account of postmodernist intended human potential and anti-modernist movement of the 1960s in the West as suggested by Harvey (1990: 38), conscience of the intended humanity or self-sensibility of the portrayed characters is far-flung intention of the postmodernist dream. However, because of postmodernist conventionalism of rejection of meta-narrative and adoption of manifested fragmentation, the conscience is considered to be an illusion. In literary practice or manifestation, postmodernist humanity is denied conscience or denied self-sensibility, resulting in the main characters being perceived as absurd, nonsensical or lowly intellectual minded,

As has been argued, Rubiah and Mustafa are two main characters in the Malay work that are portrayed as sexual obsessed followed with their hollowness of ideas after the characters are portrayed as dumfounded in the face of the obsession. The characters are made to appear lame and languid, at the same their minds are portrayed shallow, being incapable of finding the solution to the obsession yet the solution is at hand as

opposed to the supporting characters. The solution is both in spirituality and conscience but these two aspects of solution are made appear to be far-fetched for the characters. At the same time, the storyline does not show any contradiction between traditionalism and postmodernism that help portray that the characters are against tradition, and then the characters seek other techniques of healing within their experience and knowledge of the obsession and healing.

Apart from that, the worldviews of the obsessed characters, including Kintan, Rubiah, Mustafa and Salam are of typical postmodernist dismissal of traditionalism or religion and they are vague, not well articulated, proving that a strong source of reliance is needed as meta-narrative to lend conscience to the worldviews. Without resorting to a reliable source of conscience, their intellectuality is restricted to their professionalism and as experienced by Rubiah and Salam, the characters are portrayed as unable to form a conclusive idea on social ills of human trafficking and disintegration of familial institution. To put it another way, in public domain the portrayal of the intellectualism of Rubiah, Kintan and Mustafa as university professors is peripheral, and their professorship of lecturing, preparing paper for presentation and holding academic post is portrayed as boring routine. They are not ready for being put up with the challenges of intellectually insisting social phenomena because their conscience or sensibility is denied by their sexual obsession from interacting social or religious norm that forms meta-narrative for the novel. Thus, this painted picture of the characters being denied their conscience or sensibility needs reliable source of reliance to interpret fractured picture of social phenomena into intellectual consciousness. It is clear the only source of reliance is something divine and spiritual surpassing over-politicising and manipulation as shown in the Malay novel.

### **3. Conclusion**

To sum up, postmodernist rejection of meta-narrative and reliance on unbounded exploration of literary creativity and human potentiality surpasses the relevancy for humanity and it denies human sense of needed reliance, i.e. humanity is undeniably part of the whole unseen and physical beings. Thus, humanity is in relativity that makes interaction, action and reaction a necessity for survival. As argued above, divinity and spirituality constitutes an indispensable meta-narrative. Concerning postmodernist conventionalism of manifested fragmentation in addition the dissolving of the difference, for instance of disciplines, it binds humanity with sense of loss. Humanity becomes marginalized in dejection and despair because of its entirety being shed.

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