

REREADING BARTHES' READING METHOD: COMPARING FRENCH AND INDONESIAN/BRITISH CASES

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ABSTRAK

Tulisan ini membahas metode pembacaan Roland Barthes yang dikenal dengan nama semiotika. Metode ini diterapkan pada fenomena budaya yang terdapat di Prancis dan dimuat dalam buku Barthes yang berjudul *Mythologies*. Cara pembacaan Barthes dapat dipertanyakan karena cara itu akan menghasilkan suatu titik pandang dari dalam. Pengamat dari luar budaya Prancis akan berpandangan berbeda karena pemahaman kontekstual budaya Prancis tidak akan dipertimbangkan dalam pembacaan gambar negro yang menghormati bendera Prancis. Kasus pemakaian jilbab di London untuk para polisi wanita dapat dibandingkan dengan kasus negro itu. Selain itu, kasus kenaikan harga di Prancis juga dibandingkan dengan kasus Indonesia pada saat perayaan Idul Fitri. Dari perbandingan itu, tampak bahwa metode pembacaan Barthes mempunyai keterbatasan sehingga menghasilkan suatu fleksibilitas.

Kata Kunci: semiotika, simbol, titik pandang dari dalam, paradigma

INTRODUCTION

It is probably true that the significant study on language contributed to the understanding of human life. This is shown by the study on the system of the language, on the one hand, and other signs on the other. There are two different forms of language study, namely the synchronic and diachronic (Coward and Ellis, 1977:1).

Under the synchronic form, studies were and are made with language as the object of study. Language here is understood as the language of human beings. A science was founded to examine the role of language in human life. The science develops in such a way that even attempts at formulating universal language was encouraged. On the other hand, there is also the study under the diachronic perspective. Languages are studied under different time. The studies conduct comparisons of languages as developed through time.

This study of language becomes the basis for the study of signs in cultural studies. Languages are developed and viewed from cultural perspectives so that they mean differently. Under the cultural turn, the study of language becomes something which is not 'free-valued'. Besides, the development of study language as signs have also paved the way to the study of other signs in cultural studies. One of the scholars who dealt with this type of study was Roland Barthes with his work, *Mythologies* (Barthes, 2000).

This paper will present the summary of the methods of reading proposed by Barthes in his work, especially those propounded in the second part of the work, namely "Myth Today" (Barthes, 2000:109-159). This part will be provided with examples. Afterwards, critical examinations will be made on the methods and other examples will be presented to expose the problematic aspects of the method and offer other possible method of reading.

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MYTH TODAY

Mythologies can be divided into two different parts. The first part refers to the analysis of 'myths' from daily events in France from 1954 to 1956. It contains discussions of 28 myths that Barthes analysed. This part includes examinations on daily events, such as wrestling, novels, toys. Generally, it covered more applied activities. The second part is more theoretical. It is about a method of reading myths. This part showed how Barthes developed his method of reading myths based on the idea of sign coined by Saussure. The arguments presented in the second parts can be summarised in the following.

Barthes discussed mythical systems and he started elaborating a method of reading myths from Saussurean triadic elements, namely sign, signifier and signified. In relation to myths, the three aspects were considered only as a sign. Under the second-order semiological system, the sign in Saussure's system becomes a signifier for mythical system. In this case, language is understood not only to cover daily language, but also to include 'the materials of mythical speech', such as, 'photography, painting, poster, rituals, objects, etc' (Barthes, 2000: 114).

He further stated that the elements relation in Saussurean network was governed by what he termed 'language-object' relation. It was different from the connection of parts in mythical system. As to the triadic aspects under the mythical system, he preferred to denote it 'metalanguage' implying that the system was still related to language aspects, but it was developed out of them. According to Barthes, semiologists needed not bother about discussing the linguistic system because their concern was on signs as myths.

Signs in the language system were called meaning and functioned as the form in the mythical system. The comparable term for Saussurean signified in the mythical system was concept. Then, the relation between form and concept produced the third term, namely

signification. Barthes suggested that signifier of myth might function as both meaning and form. One of the examples that he presented was a picture saluting French flag. On the level of meaning, the picture could be described in a sentence 'A negro is saluting French flag'. However, according to Barthes, this picture was not mere a picture. It had other hidden meaning which can be understood through 'signification'. The picture could be taken as the symbol of French imperialism. According to him, the picture was detached and isolated to serve an ideological purpose. It was disconnected from the French history, its colonial rulings on other countries, etc.

Through a method of reading or deciphering the picture, he offered three positions in making interpretations as a result of reading the picture. The first position was that of journalist. Under this position, it was shown that the Negro who salutes is an 'example' of French imperialism. He was considered the symbol for it. The second position is the mythologist position. This position would, according to him, produce an interpretation of the picture, being that the negro was an 'alibi' of the imperialism. The last stance was that of myth reader. From this position, the produced interpretation would refer to the function of the negro as the very 'presence' of the imperialism (Barthes, 2000:128).

In short, of all interpretations, there is an implication that there were a superior position, being the French imperialism and the lower one, which was the negro. Through these interpretations, the two elements were united into one. This negro was put in a position where he was abused representatively in the picture. From what Barthes did, it seemed that the negro in the picture was 'powerless.'

QUESTIONING THE METHOD OF READING

In relation to the interpretations produced by Barthes, there are questions to be considered. Is it true that the negro in the

picture was powerlessly represented? Or is it the method of deciphering the picture that made him powerless? In other words, was he powerlessly interpreted?

There are two things that should be noted about Barthes' reading the picture. The first is that it was Barthes who deciphered the mythical picture, and not any other people. The second thing is that it was intended by Barthes to 'track down...the ideological abuse which is...hidden there' (Barthes, 2000:11).

Barthes made interpretations on the myths that occurred between 1954 and 1956 in France. During the period, he was surely influenced by his social and political context. To understand his position, for instance, relations among social classes in France should be considered. *Mythologies* were originally magazine articles in *Lettres nouvelles* which were written between 1954 and 1956 (Coward and Ellis, 1977: 26). During the period, the difference between bourgeois and proletarian in France was existent. When the discrepancy was becoming wider, there emerged the third group called *petite bourgeois*. The latter group did not belong to the bourgeois class, yet they follow the bourgeois's cultural experiences. These natural experiences were so widespread that they became 'mass-culture' and filled the daily public sphere of French community. The experiences took the form of daily events analysed by Barthes, such as 'The Great Family of Man,' in which the bourgeois ideas were implanted through universal family norms (Barthes, 2000: 100-1002), the Blue Blood cruise that posed the royal tradition (ibid. 32-33), steak and chips which emphasises the value of Frenchness (ibid. 62-64). As Barthes was living in a particular period of time, the time also affected him in interpreting the picture. In other words, he stood in a very particular position in analysing the myths. There is also another aspect that should be noted, for instance, how some historical knowledge about the relation between France and the negro (probably Algerian man) was implied in the act

of interpretations. This is important since, without having recourse to the knowledge, it was impossible to set up a relation between them.

Barthes's project in relation to myths was to reveal the mechanism of the myths. Thus, when he read the picture of negro saluting three colour flag, he argued that there were two important levels involved here. Firstly, there was an aspect of denotative. Looked through this aspect, the picture was described in daily language, that is 'a negro is saluting the French flag'. Then, according to him, there was another level of reading called connotative. It had to do with the relations between the picture and other external references, such as French imperialism, its colonial history, its military system. The idea that the negro in the picture was considered part of French imperial campaign could not be separated from the context when the picture was analysed, that is during Algerian war of independence. The picture was meant to show that French colonialism was right (Coward and Ellis, 1977: 28).

His interpretation of the picture should be understood that way in that he was brought up in a particular culture, viz. French culture where bourgeois class was still predominant. The problem will occur when the person who read the myths is not him. It is possible for other people in the later period to read the myths, yet the interpretations on the myths will not be the same. They may discuss the myths of France as presented by Barthes in his *Mythologies*. However, it is hardly possible that they may reach similar interpretations. Barthes' reading of the myths implied also a particular stance.

It is interesting to make notes on his position and methods of reading the myths. To understand them would impel readers to refer to the term 'paradigm'. Paradigm, which was made popular by Kuhn (Kuhn, 1996), denoted a 'constellation of values, beliefs and methodological assumptions, whether tacit or explicit, inscribed in a larger worldview' This term is

most commonly used in scientific discussions. However, scholars in cultural studies argued that there were possibilities for paradigms to exist in other fields of studies, such as cultural studies (Best and Kellner, 1997:xi). Since Barthes took a particular position in French culture at the time and formulated his method of reading myths in relation to cultural aspects during the moment he was living in France, it could not be denied that he follow a particular paradigm. The problem then is that if somebody else makes attempts to read the French myths as presented in his books in later periods, is there a possibility for the paradigm to shift?. This is related to the notion in scientific 'normal sciences' that paradigm can shift where there is a crisis in the past paradigms and new discoveries are made. Scientists lose faith on the paradigms and begin to consider new alternatives for the existing paradigms (Kuhn, 1996: 77).

Take, for example, in his reading the black negro saluting three colour flag. It is very probable that one who does not have knowledge about the social position of negro in France between 1954 and 1956 may not come to the conclusion that the negro in the picture is abused to represent French imperialism. On the other hand, the likely knowledge gained from such a picture may be that 'There was a negro accommodated in the military system in French government'. This opinion may be valid since it was known that the position of negro in French emporium was not highly appreciated. The older notion based on history was that it was hard, even impossible, for negro to attain respected positions, let alone become a member of military system considering that negro used to be slaves in most kingdoms in Western countries.

This is probably comparable to a picture of a Muslim Pakistani policewoman in London. The picture was posed in one of Foreign and Commonwealth Office's publications distributed through British Embassy in Jakarta Indonesia. Interestingly, the woman put on both headscarf and police helmet as well as police uniform. If

the picture was deciphered using Barthes' method, the likely interpretations would be that 'The Muslim Pakistani policewoman was the symbol, alibi, and/or representations of British monarchy'. That may work out. However, for Indonesian audience, this kind of picture reveals something surprisingly pleasant considering that, even in Indonesia of which the majority of population is Muslim, wearing headscarf for a policewoman is very rare, if not impossible. In fact, only in one remote city in Aceh areas can a policewoman wear it and it is not in the capital of Indonesia. Looking at the Pakistani policewoman, the Indonesian audience will have positive impressions that the British Government has a big understanding on how Muslim should wear clothes according to Islamic teachings. This can mean also that people from other countries, the immigrants who are especially from Commonwealth countries are granted recognition in the UK.

Thus, with reference to that of negro under the French military system, a say can be made. The picture in which negro saluting French national flag may produce similar positive response from people. This may produce an impression that negro (probably Algerian man) was accommodated in the French military system. This will make an implication that the older notion that only white men can become military personnel was negated.

This point should be considered one of the alternatives in the interpretation of the picture. As Barthes presented in his *Mythologies*, there were only three interpretations as a result of his deciphering the negro-saluting-French-flag picture, namely the symbol, alibi and presence of French imperialism. He ignored the fact that the existence of negro in the picture meant something. The negro in the picture may be taken to stand separately from the imperialism and to represent something other than the imperial authority. The question is that why Barthes did not consider the negro in his discussion as the Other representative than the imperialism.

BARTHES'S POSITION

As mentioned above, Barthes's position implied a particular paradigm that he employed in reading the myths. The fact that Barthes may disregard the existence of negro in the picture had to do with his stance in deciphering the picture. He placed himself as the white-male interpreter who provided results of interpretations probably to white audience. Thus, the fact that there was an older hidden notion about the superiority of the white over other nations was concealed due this position. In other words, he read the picture under the French cultural and social system in which he made critiques on bourgeois values and he did not feel that he belonged to the class. Yet, he was still *inside* the cultural system, being brought up under the French academic, social and political systems. Had he deciphered the picture from outside the system, he might have taken a different perspective.

This kind of position will also lead to a different consequence when a reading was made on other example he discussed in his *Mythologies*, namely the case of vegetable price that dropped. He presented a situation when he read a big headline in *France-soir* stating, 'THE FALL IN PRICES: FIRST INDICATIONS. VEGETABLES:PRICE DROP BEGINS.' He then noted some keywords from the title. Afterward, he offered a signified or concept which was behind the drop, viz. Governmentality. He concluded that the drop of price was due to the government's wish (Barthes, 2000: 130).

His position in this kind of situation was again very unique. It is hard to understand why he referred to the government as political force behind this change. To come to such a conclusion as he did is not an easy thing for other myth readers. One has to understand the social and political situation in France at the time. Besides, one also has to place oneself in the position he took, for a different point of view will yield different references.

Take the case of Indonesia during Suharto's era from 1980s to 2002. Whether goods prices

increased or decreased, this could not be directly related to the political forces, such as government or political parties. There was, for instance, a common case when Eid day was celebrated in Indonesia. It was very common that prices of goods would increase, sometimes very steeply, around a week before the Eid day. People who worked in the capital of Indonesia would go back to their home towns to gather with their families and relatives. They preferred to celebrate Eid in their home towns. Under this kind of situation, mobility was very high since the flow of people from the capital to other towns were very high. Besides, prices of goods and general transportation tickets soared. If the situation had to be reported in a newspaper, the headline would have come up, 'PRICES GO UP DUE TO EID.' A kind of reading conducted by Barthes for this situation might not work in a similar way. The Indonesian government normally set up limits for tickets' prices and other significant goods. However, there was another party in this game of price, namely the sellers and travel agents. Thus, while the government tried to impose lower prices on tickets and goods, those people would break the limits and exceeded them. The reasons for them to do it was due to the fact that people would sacrifice their money to the maximum for everything they needed because those days were special days. Eid is celebrated once a year. This phenomena was comparable to people in the UK spending much more money during Christmas times, especially between 26th December and 2nd January. Prices drop very significantly during these days. The difference is that people in the UK buy goods for the reason of lower prices while people in Indonesia spend their money on goods and tickets for the sake of religious celebration regardless of the high prices. Thus, government did not play significant roles in the case of Indonesia when prices increased or decreased. Religious and economic reasons lay behind those phenomena.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NEGRO

Another point to arise in relation to Barthes' reading negro-saluting-flag picture is the hidden meaning of the negro's existence in the

picture. Barthes' intention in analysing the picture was to reveal what ideology was hidden behind the picture. So, he focussed his analysis on the imperial aspects as represented by the negro. In other words, even the negro was tamed to be part of the imperality. However, his method of reading the picture brought a suspicious attitude. His acts of reading myths might undeliberately be hiding something due to his desire to put emphasis on the imperial elements in the picture. These ended up not giving the negro an 'independent' status. The significance of the negro in the picture was secondary because all that occupied his analysis was the imperial elements.

Let us discuss the case of the Muslim Pakistani policewoman in London before considering the meaning of the negro in the picture.

When looking at the picture of Muslim Pakistani policewoman in London, the outsider audience will note that immigrants to UK are accommodated under the British system and granted freedom. This freedom includes things both in general and specific matters, even those related to personal matters, such as what to wear. However, this recognition of private things does not come all of sudden. When one has sufficient knowledge about the struggle for permission to allow to wear headscarves in the UK, one will realise that that to be recognised as Muslim women to wear headscarf takes a long-term struggle, let alone for those women who work for the government. It takes years for Muslim immigrants in the UK to be granted freedom to wear scarves. There have been many attempts involved in impelling the British government to finally permit Muslim women to put on those scarves, even for those who work as policewomen. This process of gaining freedom for headscarf is not exposed or manifested in the picture of Muslim Pakistani policewoman in London. However, the picture does imply the results of the struggle. In other words, the existence of Muslim Pakistani policewoman in the picture indicated a 'victory' or 'independence' of immigrants in pushing the

national government to acknowledge their needs.

This kind of logic may apply to the negro in the picture presented by Barthes. There was a possibility that the existence of negro in the picture implied a long struggle waged probably by negro groups in France to gain places in the military services, positions probably considered privileged even by French natives. What happened to Barthes' reading the picture was that he emphasised the importance of the imperial aspects in such a way that he paralleled everything in the picture with the imperality. This mystified the possible fact that there might have been resistance to the imperial rule. As a result, the negro in the picture was 'powerlessly interpreted' by him.

Thus, there is another possible stance in reading the picture of negro saluting the French flag. It is an outsider point of view. This kind of position will entail by particular ways of deciphering the myths. In reading a picture where two elements are united, such as negro and French imperality, Muslim Pakistani policewoman and British government, a stark opposition should be drawn first of all. This is to show the opposition clearly. Then, under this contradiction, an attempt should be made to reveal the implicit superior-vs-inferior positions. Afterwards, the inferior elements should be 'empowered' to stand independent from the superior. To empower the inferior means to see the possible resistant aspects that may imply the bargaining positions or even winning points of the less privileged.

This kind of stance should be understood as a kind of shift in paradigm. One of the assumptions that underlie this paradigm is, for instance, the change relation among nations and/or ethnics in a country due to international migrations. In the case of Britain, since more people came to the UK from other countries, such as those from Pakistan, Malaysia, China, the number of immigrants living in the country increased. Initially, these immigrants lived in few cities in the UK. Then, they might live in almost in any city in the country. More

immigrants also held positions which used to be assigned to native people. Besides, the government also realised the need for recruiting those people. New rules were issued to manage such recruitments. Even, traditional foods of the people from different countries were also acknowledged. It is not difficult, for instance, for people from China to find rice which is the popular food in China. The same is true of students from India and Pakistan. They can order *kebab* in *kebab* restaurants which are found easily in most cities in the UK

However, not all aspects related to immigrants are automatically granted permission to exist in the UK. One of the aspects is *hijab* (headscarf).

This problem related to the *hijab*-wearing came up, for instance, in 1999 where 2 Muslim girls were placed in isolation for refusing to remove their *hijabs*. This took place in a school in Luton Bedfordshire (Versi1, 1999). Other happened in the same year in the City of Portsmouth Girls School. The school had a general ruling that prohibited girls wearing headscarf inside school (ibid.). This problem was also noted in the police recruitment. Still in the same year, there was an article reporting the recruitment of police candidates in The Islamic Cultural Centre of London. However, the candidates with *hijab* were not given the chances of being policewoman for the 'safety' reasons and because *hijab* was 'not part of the uniform'. These events led to the question about Race Relation Act 1976 in which turbans were allowed for Sikhs, but *hijabs* were not for Muslims (Versi2, 1999).

It was on January 2000 that the amendment to Act 1976 was then initiated. The amendments included 'plans to eradicate indirect discrimination and bringing the 'full force' of the Act to bear on issues of racial equality across the public sector, including police, health services and schools' (Zakiuddin, 2000). It was followed by the appointment of Mohammed Dhalech, a Muslim Policy Advisor, from Gloucester who stated that 'the police force is taking positive action to recruit Muslims.

They use a whole range of recruiting methods even if they do not use the Muslim media directly and are looking at sensitivities such as meeting the needs of Muslim women, including dress codes' (Choudhury, 2000). It was in April 2001 that Metropolitan Police introduced 'the *hijab* (head scarf) in its service as a uniform option for Muslim women. It was stated that '[the] move is part of the drive by the Met to attract Muslim women into the service. There are only about a dozen Women PCs (WPCs) out of about 100 Muslim police officers in the Met'. The *hijab* showed the Service's commitment to giving greater recognition to the cultural and religious needs of its staff'. (Adil, 2001).

CONCLUSION

Barthes has managed to set up a method of reading myths through his 'Myth Today.' This method was based on particular assumptions, networks of cultural, social, and political elements of France during his lifetime. His attempts to dismantle the myths in French daily events should be given credit. However, notes should be made on his position. As a semiological method of reading myths, his position represents an insider point of view. This kind of stance will result in producing particular interpretations which are different from those interpretations made by other possible position, namely outsider point of view. The drawback of the former position may be an ignorance of knowledge that can be compensated when complimentary outsider views are presented. In this case, Barthes' position is ironic in the sense that he was determined to demystify the myths of French imperium, on the one hand, yet he suppressed the idea of possible resistance to it, on the other.

Since myths are very unique for each nation, the reading of Barthes' *Mythologies* should be complimented by historical, political, and cultural knowledge related to France during the periods denoted by Barthes in the work. It is not easy for readers from different culture to

comprehend why particular events were considered myths if the readers have no sufficient knowledge. Besides, there is also the need for readers to understand the stance Barthes took in reading the myths so that the readers can have some ideas as to how he viewed all myths. From the study, it should be understood that he did not feel he belonged to the class of which culture he was criticising. He put himself in a position vis-à-vis the bourgeois class.

Notes should be made on the advantages of reading *Mythologies*. One of the advantages of reading the work is that the topics covered by Barthes can become thematic references for demystifications of myth which probably exist in other cultures throughout the world. The other advantage is that the students of cultural studies who come from nations and cultures different from French culture at the time Barthes was living will become aware of the myths that are constituted in their countries. Thus, they will become more critical towards such natural phenomena of culture. Besides,

the students will also realise the limits as well as flexibility of Barthes' methods in reading myths.

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