Lat’s *Budak Kampung*: Nostalgia as Semiotics

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One World, Many Stories: Celebrating Diversities in Children's Literature and Literary Activities
Lat’s *Budak Kampung*: Nostalgia as Semiotics

Abstract

Personally, we rate Lat’s childhood memory *Budak Kampung* (*The Kampung Boy*, 1979) as the best comics Malaysian authors ever produced. Furthermore, the simple story of *Budak Kampung*’s layout and modest cartoons makes it also an exemplar publication in any genre – from young adult to arthouse material. For our paper, we will elaborate on the semiotics of Lat’s drawings and argue that what makes *Budak Kampung* so remarkable is the soothing appeal for a long-gone-era of living in Malay rural. The character Lat is always depicted as a minor figure in the vastness of his surroundings, emphasizing further the loneliness of being a child in the immensity of rackets (family, friends and nature) which seeks to – always – engulf him. For Lat, it is not only about how it is to feel being a child and growing up but – the beauty of being a child and growing up! Lat’s design strategy (juxtaposition of small and immense) will be the key in our semiotic reading of Lat’s imaginative yearning for his lost environment.

Keywords: Lat, *Budak Kampung*, semiotics, drawing, Malay culture

Introduction

- It is tough to read Lat’s *Budak Kampung* (*The Kampung Boy*, 1979) without being engulfed in the strong memory Lat had while growing up in rural Malay. Being Malaysians ourselves, brought up from small with the concept of ‘kampung’ as a place to go back to every time ‘Hari Raya,’ reading Lat’s story means our personal memory of childhood is both transformed and imposed by our idea of what Malay rural is and can be.
Introduction

Lat was born in 1951 in Kota Baru, a kampung (village) in northern Malaysia. His professional career began at the age of 13 when his cartoons were published in Majallah Filem and Movie News. While still in his teens, his first comic books, Tiga Sekawan, and "Keluarga Si Mamat," has appeared weekly in the newspaper Berita Minggu since he was 16 in 1967.

Upon graduating from high school, he sought a position in the art department of the largest English-language daily, New Straits Times, but instead was made a crime reporter. By 1974, his artistic talent was recognized and he became editorial cartoonist of the Times.

(Lat, interviewed by Eddie Campbell)
Introduction

**LAT:** “Kampung Boy is about the early childhood in a Malaysian village. I drew the pages in 1977, 78...and it got published in 1979. We had become city rats and I wanted to tell people about our origins. I didn’t have a dateline for it....I just drew when I had free time at home.”

(Lat, interviewed by Eddie Campbell)

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**Introduction**

**Budak Kampung (Kampung Boy)** is Lat’s personal nostalgia in a form of black and white comics. As such, we get to see the how he grows up with his laid back father and stern mother, his fear of tin factory, watching his father dancing, his first time drinking government-subsidized milk at school, following around his father to *kedai kopi*, chased all over the village by his mother and so on. What is interesting is that the images drawn by him are not seen merely from his point of perspective, but that he also includes a younger and smaller version of himself within the images. While *Budak Kampung* is full of Lat’s memories of his childhood, Lat’s visual depiction of himself sometimes took back stage rather than center stage.

- **Our paper argues that the juxtaposition of small (Lat’s body) and big (his surrounding) play an important part in the representation of Lat’s nostalgia.** The semiotics of Lat’s small figure emphasizes several aspects of his memory; that he was very small when things happen the way they are, and he is innocence to the will of his elders. For our paper, we will offer several examples from *Budak Kampung* that can strengthen our argument, and to make it easier - for scaling purpose - we will highlight Lat’s figure using a zooming-like circle, converged from each corner of the frames. This will create and heighten the sense of small-to-big comparison.
Semiotics

- Semiotics is a research into sign and the meaningful. Everything that is perceived by our consciousness, as long as it emits meaningful ideas and languages, is a sign.
- A sign can be the colour of your shirt, the text you are reading, the hand gesture, metaphor and so on. As such, semiotics is a universal and dominating discipline, since it can covers a vast spectrum of things.
- Semiotics refers to sign in the combinative meaningful of signifier + signified (Saussure).

So: ‘Signifier’ as the vehicle of the meaning, while ‘signified’ is the meaning.
**Semiotics**

- The signifier/signified relation brings forward the problems of structure in semiology.
- This in turn influenced the development of Structuralism, which started from France.
- Structuralism: “that all surface phenomena belong to some structural system” (Tyson, 1999: 200). It is a mode of analysis of cultural artifacts which originates in the methods of contemporary linguistics (Barthes, 1967: 897)
- The economics of semiotics, “is to isolate and analyze the symbolic function of sign systems, although the objects or behaviors under investigation will often have other functions as well” (Tyson, 1999: 207)

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**Semiotics**

- What this all means is that in the nature of communication, which can include media and graphic images, therein lies a deep structure, the ‘how’ and ‘what’ that contribute the network of possible meanings. For example: A house is not mere an image; it is consisted of several other parts that contribute to the essence of house-ness, such as pillars, walls, window, roof, door, etc. The shape of the house is the unifying shapes of several other semiotics.
Nostalgia

- A sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations.
What type of image is being manipulated in *Lat’s Budak Kampung*? How is it deployed? What are the consequences of its employment in reader’s mind?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Nostalgic Graphics in Lat’s</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Simple attire</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <em>Joget</em> dance</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Tin factory</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Jungle landscape</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <em>Kampung</em> house</td>
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<td>• Old bike</td>
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<tr>
<td>• River</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <em>Berkembang</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>• <em>Pokok pisang! Pokok kelapa!</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Marker</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Black &amp; white drawings</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Caricature</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Simplified drawings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dialectic of small and big</td>
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The idea of the contrasting scaling in Lat’s drawings accentuate further the sense of longing, and we believe, is the key to what makes Kampung Boy as powerful medium in absorbing readers attention into Lat’s nostalgia.

By using small figure, Lat can also make himself ‘invisible’ to his surroundings – a helpful abilities especially when hiding from his mother. In fact, Lat’s figure can sometimes give a further visual playfulness to the readers, as we search the landscape for his reduced body.
If “to read a poem is not to take in its meaning, in however sophisticated a fashion, but to enter into its effects, to show what it does” (Melville & Readings, 1995: 23), then to read comics is to enter into its visual effects and grapple with the structure of what it is exhibiting.
The resemblance appears so much more than the original that it forces it out of sight.  

“...painting seeks to present the mute objects of the world in a framework that will make them speak” (Melville & Readings, 1995: 8)
Inilah dia rumah teman kalian dipandang dari sebelah ulu.
Rumah ini dibuat dariipada kayu cengai. Kayu cengai ini memang keras dan tahan lama.
Thus, confronted with an **immensity**, the person who is being interrogated seems to be naturally **sincere**.

Emak ga ngel cook rupana!
Dia koy teman macam Singa...
Meniscuss-sits teman hui sampai
ke sini. Mjor ada Pak Alang.
Dia yang menyelamakan teman...

Tapi apa-apa hal pun... petang tu teman hia bedel juga...
Art bears the responsibility of what it gives to see and, even further, the responsibility of its power to make us look.

Lepas makan — main!
Semiotics, Nostalgia, Lat

Inner grasp of Lat’s psychological condition?
• lonesome
• naiveté
• lost
• timidity
• wanting to fit in
• loyal
Conclusion

The tension and harmony of the size of the Lat’s self-caricature and its scaling with the society and the environment where he finds himself is the main structure of the way Lat’s nostalgic drawings represent itself to his consciousness, and what is projected back to the audience.

Not only that, the placement of his figure is almost always done in periphery, hard-to-notice in contrast to the landscape which almost always seen to devour his figure.

Conclusion

• The dialectic of small and big constitutes as an important element in Lat’s nostalgic drawings.
• Lat’s character: Timid, adventurous, innocent, loyal.
• The strategic placing of Lat’s imaginary childhood narrative: between big and small, new and old, alienation and friendship.
• Simplified drawings create a better, universal identification among readers’ imagination
“The world is large but in us it is as deep as the sea.”

R. M. Rilke
(cited from Bachelard, 1964: 183)

Selected references

The end
&
thank you!

hi
thank teman!