



Empathy, Diversity, and Poetry: The Position of Multicultural Literature in Digitalized Network Society

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Abstract- Poetry is more than just a literary expression. It may produce empathy and cultural competence vitally needed to navigate today's digitalized network society when cultivated in the right way. This paper elaborates empathy on diversity through poetry. This is a qualitative research conducted in two layers of analysis: textual analysis of the poems and analysis of students' responses on the empathy and diversity issues. The two poems on diversity are an Indonesian poem *I See Indonesia* by Soekarno and a Taiwanese poem *Song of the Island* by Chen Li. 75 respondents from English Department of Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta Indonesia and Aletheia University, New Taipei-Taiwan were involved. The results show that the two poems have reflected and produced empathy both in the authors and the readers. It is also concluded that poetry is utilized beyond its literary function in navigating diversity through cultivating empathy in studying poetry and multicultural literature as the research has proven that almost all (96.66%) of Indonesian students agree that multicultural literature helps them develop their CQ (Cultural Quotient/Competence) and 86.66% of Taiwanese students also agree and believe the same. Most of them finally believe that CQ positively contributes to their preparation of their future profession.

Keywords: Cultural quotient, diversity, empathy, multicultural literature, network society, poetry

I. INTRODUCTION

Generally, it is believed that literature may foster interpersonal skills and pro-social behavior such as acquiring empathy. Literary reading may be "positively correlated with increased empathy and/or affective theory of mind" (Kuzmičová, 2017: 137). Empathy and affection have a special connection to poetry as poetry may reach a deeper part of human emotions and feelings. The fundamental theory of this can be assumed to have rooted from Wordsworth, the distinguished poet, that seems to still be relevant today: "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply...I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind" (William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802). Wordsworth actually talks more than just a creative process of producing a poem. He highlights the role of tranquility, sensibility, spontaneity, and originality of feelings and emotions in the creation of a purposeful and valuable poem on a long, deeply-thought and inspirational idea. It is not an instant idea, but one that has been contemplated and crystalized into the communicated awareness through the poetic lines.

In today's digitalized world, many aspects of human life have been taken over by robotic, non-human androids and artificial intelligences for life practicality. Systems and programs are creatively produced to originally facilitate human needs, but consequently and unavoidably have taken over human positions, especially in job fields. In education world, human traditional face-to-face interaction has been replaced by virtual interaction, especially in this pandemic circumstance. The existence of social sciences has been disruptively challenged by this technology application to at the same time question human social needs as well. One element that challenges technology and human beings is empathy. Do humans today still have and need empathy? Can androids and AI have empathy? Can people live successfully and happily without empathy? More specifically, do education practices need empathy to be successful? We know that

humanoid robots such as Sophia by Hanson Robotics have AI, copying human intelligence. The robot has also been programmed to be able to respond to empathy by behaving and responding empathically towards human needs. Paiva, Leite, Boukricha, and Wachsmuth (2017) have studied in the area of computational empathy by elaborating “different ways by which artificial agents can simulate and trigger empathy in their interactions with humans. Empathic agents can be seen as agents that have the capacity to place themselves into the position of a user’s or another agent’s emotional situation and respond appropriately” (p. 1). They have also examined that the artificial agents through their design and behavior are able to direct the users to emotionally respond with empathy as if the users experienced the smart agents’ situations.

Interestingly, Veprinska (2020) shared an experience where she had a computer text conversation with an AI called Athina the Chatbot from Carnegie Mellon University in October 2014. She questioned the chatbot Athina differently by asking, “Can you feel empathy?” She got the programmed answers, such as: Oh, you humans, always wanting to know about that stuff. Well, I just don’t understand”, I don’t understand your question. Can you ask me that in a different way?”, “I’m sorry. That question might make sense to humans with your squishy, illogical brains, but to a robot it’s just weird”. Veprinska (2020) concluded, “Athina defines herself against the ‘squishy’ human, against emotion and empathy. This non-human robot’s indifferent attitude toward empathy suggests the possible indifferent stance toward empathy of other non-human entities” (p. 2). Beyond our knowledge that robot can never have empathy or emotion, this fun and teasing conversation with Athina signifies the fact that no matter how sophisticated the technology to copy human beings, it is impossible to fool human awareness that robot is only a thing without real empathy. Humans and their empathy are still unreplacable.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The research is qualitatively conducted in two layers. First, the textual content-based analysis is done to expose the empathy mechanism in the two poems. Second, based on the questionnaire distributed to English Department of Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta-Indonesia (60 respondents) and Aletheia University, New Taipei-Taiwan (15 respondents), the idea of empathy is also elaborated based on the respondents’ responses toward the two poems. Conclusions are drawn based on the two analyses as to prove the role of poetry to contain and generate empathy in positively facing diversity and enhancing CQ (Cultural Quotient/ Competence) needed in today’s interconnected digitalized world.

III. DIVERSITY, EMPATHY AND POETRY

Diversity is to be celebrated, not lamented. It is an undeniable fact that we are destined to be different human beings beyond its complicatedness as individual humans. Indonesia is one country destined to exist with diversity from the beginning, thus we have *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) as the country’s philosophy, ingrained and engraved in the Garuda Pancasila ideological symbol of Indonesia. Taiwan is also destined the same, “Taiwan has become a genuinely multi-cultural society in terms of its history, ethnicity, culture and politics” (Wu, 2017: 250). Conflicts always exist along the diversity in both countries for hundreds of years from colonialism era until today’s democracy as further stated by Wu (2017): “In its 400-year history, Taiwan has witnessed various cultural and political conflicts among and between different ethnic groups, suffered through monarchy, colonial government, dictatorship and eventually is experiencing democracy” (p. 250). Indonesia, for example, has long experienced intolerance and conflicts based on diversity of religion. Laksana and Wood (2019) have stated that, “a more recent 2017 survey by the Centre for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) and Convey Indonesia of 1,522 students from 34 provinces throughout Indonesia, found that 51.1% of respondents had deeply intolerant views toward minority Islamic sects such as the Ahmadiyya and Shia communities” (p.808). Previously, a study of 611,678 high school students in the Greater Jakarta alone by the Institute of Peace and Islamic Studies (LAKIP) revealed that “48.9% of students were willing to be involved in acts of religious violence, while 41.1% of students were willing to be involved in vandalizing houses of worship of other religions... 25.8% of students deemed Indonesia’s philosophical foundation the Pancasila...to be no longer relevant” (Laksana and Wood, 2019: 808). This is just to show that diversity is still a serious problem to be well navigated in both countries. Thus, this study aims to contribute to that positive diversity navigation through the study of poetry and empathy among university students.

Although Kuzmičová et al. (2017) through their research failed to “confirm the widespread hypothesis that a literary style elicits more empathy than a more popular one, suggesting instead that it elicits a more aesthetically distanced reading” showing that the non-literary version (the rewritten version of Katherine

Mansfield's short story *The Fly* by omitting the literary style) substantially more explicitly empathic responses than the original version. (p. 149), poetry may elicit empathy in a different way, such as the one used in poetry therapy. Moreover, the manipulated short story in the research in a sense is still a fictitious work, naturally a "literary" representation of reality through a practical and less literary expression in stylistic perspective. Poetry has long been used as a medium for mental therapy because "the openness of the poetry is more evocative of more varied responses, and less egocentric too" as confirmed by Arleen Hynes, the poetry therapy pioneer (Rossiter, 2006: 216). Compared to narrative fiction, poetry opens more space for personal and affective responses.

Furman (2014) has reviewed the growing uses of poetry beyond its literary uses. Poetry has been utilized as a tool of change, growth, and transformation in health-care settings, international development, and business. These less traditional uses of poetry "represent an expansion of the domain of poetry therapy (poetry as change) that complements more common uses such as psychotherapy, personal expression, and community change" (p. 205). Ingram and Nakazawa (2010) for example did a research in developing empathy among community college counselors through sociocultural poetry.

Quoting Seligman (2011), Croom (2014) highlighted that psychological well-being consisted of "PERMA: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment" (p. 2). Croom (2012) has previously applied the concept of PERMA in his research entitled "Music, Neuroscience, and the Psychology of Well-Being," and concluded that 'regularly engaging in musical practice could actually increase one's level of positive emotions, strong interpersonal relationships and rapport with others, commitment in engaging activities, level of accomplishment, and experience of meaning or purpose in life', where he emphasized as a consequence the existence of 'compelling evidence that musical engagement can positively contribute to one's living a flourishing life' (p. 2). Similar to music, Croom's further study of poetry and psychology in the light of PERMA has come to a conclusion supporting his claim that practicing poetry can positively contribute to an individual flourishing with greater psychological well-being by positively influencing their emotions, engagement or 'flow' experiences, social relationships, sense of meaning or purpose in life, and personal accomplishments (Croom, 2014: 1, 16-17). There are quite many significant advantages that one may cultivate from practicing poetry which contributes to his or her better psychological well-being, with meaningful and purposeful life accomplishments.

Interestingly, poetry practice may also enhance someone's emotional intelligence as Morris, Urbanski, and Fuller (2005) have proven that practicing poetry and visual arts can develop students' emotional intelligence by developing their two key components of emotional intelligence: awareness and emotional recognition (p. 888). It is obvious here that poetry, combined with visual arts, may help individuals cope with life challenges with emotionally intelligent takes of it.

More personally, Sharma (2020) has shared his experience in dealing with poetry writing, hovering with the question whether it is a wastage of time or a savior of life. Through an autoethnographic exploration he has drawn a conclusion that although poetry has been banished and declared dead several times in history, he and presumably many others who have treated poetry as therapy and agreed that poetry is a tool to connect oneself to others. He has also convinced that poetry, beyond its function as therapy, has its role to be a life experience recorder that, quoting Mazza (2016, 2018) can be mindful, useful and inspiring sharing to the future generations (pp. 11-12). This personal and autoethnographic experience with poetry practicing has proven that it is not a waste of time as individuals can benefit in their own way from the practice and poetry may create empathy and psychological strength that can save life in its own way as well. In today's digitalized and connected complex world of diversity, the positive role of poetry can still presumably be traced in cultivating cultural intelligence among young generation.

In this research, we attempt to see the role of poetry in representing empathy and eliciting it among the readers, particularly relating to issues in coping with and navigating diversity in today digitalized world, with humanoid robots and AI-based system assisting our life.

Through this writing we argue that poetry may consist of empathy in the process and content, and can produce empathy just as well in the readers. We thus research the three dynamics through two poems: *I See Indonesia* by Soekarno from Indonesia and *Song of the Island* by Chen Li from Taiwan. Both poems talk about the beauty of diversity in ethnicity and language. We assume that the two poems are the result of crystalized ideas on empathy in the authors that may ignite empathy among the caring readers with similar perspective in how to cope with diversity. Diversity ignites empathy in this context because in many cases diversity sparks conflicts and disunity.

It is also argued that the study of literature, especially Multicultural Literature (ML), may contribute to the acquisition of Cultural Quotient/Competence (CQ) because ML can ignite empathy toward the underrepresented in the world of diversity. Lawson (2013), quoting Sanders (2009), has specifically defined multicultural literature as "a body of literature that spans all literary genres but generally focuses on primary characters who are members of underrepresented groups whose racial, ethnic, religious, sexual

orientation, or culture historically has been marginalized or misrepresented by the dominant culture” (p. 3). Further, the definition of CQ is well elaborated in the following definition: “Cultural competence refers to the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration status, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each...Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system or agency or amongst professionals and enable the system, agency, or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. Operationally defined, cultural competence is the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of services, thereby producing better outcomes (Gallegos, Tindall & Gallegos, 2008: 54).

IV. ANALYSIS

The first level of analysis is conducted by elaborating empathy within the two poems as to see how empathy resides in both the author and the work. In *I See Indonesia* we can see that Soekarno has used the poetry as his medium to express his personal attitude—his so called ‘tone’ in literary study—toward diversity in the newly independent Indonesia. The poem was written by the Indonesian first president as a part of his speech entitled *Be A Complete Patriot* in Surabaya, East Java, 28 October 1959, on the date of Indonesian Youth Pledge Day. His empathy toward celebrating diversity is seen when he views Indonesia from diverse beautiful entities that color Indonesia, such as natural beauties (beaches, mountains, rice farming, domestic birds, fresh air), cultures and ethnicities (traditional songs from Batakese, Javanese, Ambonese songs), freed people and country children. Empathy is a journey we travel (coincidentally, as Veprinska explained by quoting Solnit, the word empathy is built from a homonym for the Old English path): “Empathy is a journey you travel, if you pay attention, if you care, if you desire to do so...This imaginative entry or journey of the self into other parallels the work of literature, much of which...predicated on the reader’s ability to imaginatively and affectively enter and inhabit fictional worlds, ideas, and/or characters” (Veprinska, 2020: 3). Soekarno has shown that he has travelled from his ‘self’ (a young educated idealist and visionary, a mixture of Javanese and Balinese, who has travelled a lot) into thinking, caring, and desiring for diverse Indonesian people as a whole, with so many differences, living on the archipelago composed of some 17,500 islands laying from Sabang to Merauke, from Miangas to Rote, with more than 300 major ethnic groups or more than 1300 sub ethnic groups, and more than 700 local languages, but with one united language: Bahasa Indonesia. Soekarno has seen all diverse components of the nation as united into “Indonesia”. He perceives one Indonesia in the seas, beaches, songs, poems, rice fields, mountains, birds, air, and children, to represent some entities.

The empathy is further seen in the way Soekarno positions his own culture. He does not name his Javanese traditional song *Pangkur Palaran* (line 19) on the first place. He names Batak song (line 16) first before his own traditional ethnic song although he knows that Javanese people compose more than a half of Indonesian people. Soekarno also highlights not his own or city children’s but the dominant countryside children (line 32-36) and their eyes to metaphorically demonstrate how Indonesia is purely and peacefully perceived as a beautiful and harmonious country beyond its diversity. Only his perceptive empathy toward the beauty of diversity that allows him to embrace all different and unique people into one Indonesia.

The same empathy can be observed in Chen Li’s *Song of the Island*. Li’s journey from self to other is seen in the way he uses the point of view in the poem when he metaphorizes Taiwan as a beautiful painting of different languages, ethnic groups, and cultures. The metaphor “colorful Formosa” (Taiwan was formerly known as Formosa, meaning “beautiful” in Portuguese) reflects the beautiful diversity of Taiwanese languages and ethnic groups speaking the local languages with diverse dialects. The beauty of this linguistic diversity is metaphorized as “the full, harmonious chorus is like a waterfall and a rainbow—hanivalval—hanging in the sky”. The empathy on diversity of Taiwan is presented through the use of point of view, beginning with impersonal “it” (line 2) to represent universal Taiwan as a palette, then moving to the use of second singular and plural “you” (line 6, 13) to embrace others and only then Li uses first person singular “I” (line 17) to show his own contribution in painting the beauty of diversity. Then he moves to involve everyone by intensively using “we” and “us” (line 21, 22, 23, 25, 27). This also emphasizes the importance of the plural Taiwanese in contributing to the love of diversity. After that Li provides other’s specific perspective by using an example of third person singular “he” (line 30) in his contribution to metaphorically paint the beauty of Taiwan diversity. He then goes back to presumably plural “you” (line 39) hearing others singing and praying in harmony like the waterfall creating “rainbow hanging in the sky” (line 42-43). Rainbow is a precise metaphor to depict diversity in its beauty and harmony side, not the ugly

and conflicting side. Li's journey of using the point of view is ended by using the plural "us" to ask everyone to do the same: "Let us loosen our knotted tongues and let any syllables become an easel, a bowl's colorful paints" (line 45-47). In this process, we may see how egotistical "I" is not emphasized, but the altruist "Us". The expression "Your 'tear' is our *lusa*" (line 25) which means "Your tear is our tears" really shows how the empathic journey into others happen by crying and perhaps laughing together.

The second level of analysis is conducted based on the responses from students toward the poems and the emphatic responses and impacts on them related to diversity, the role of multicultural literature and cultural quotient or competence in facing today's and future profession.

When generally asked how the respondents feel when their ethnic groups are mentioned and not mentioned in the Indonesian poem, interestingly most of them feel neutral in both cases. In the first case, when mentioned, 36.66% of Indonesian students feel just OK and neutral while when not mentioned in the poem 25% of them still say just OK and neutral. 20% even say that they still feel included, safe, and peaceful even though their ethnic groups are not mentioned. This result makes 81.66% in total showing that they still feel OK and included whether their ethnic groups are mentioned or not, signifying that they don't only think of their own ethnic groups. Empathy toward others is obviously seen in this case when they have awareness on diversity. When the next question, clearly specified, asks: "If your ethnic group is NOT mentioned in the poem, how do you feel?", again 76.66% of Indonesian students say that they feel neutral and 8.30% feel included, safe and peaceful and the other 8.30% feel excluded, marginalized and insecure. Positively read, this neutral and included feelings make 85.96% where empathy is dominantly seen. As for Taiwanese students, the result is quite similar. When generally asked, when mentioned in the poem 33.33% feel neutral and when not mentioned, 13.33% feel neutral, but none of them feel included, safe and peaceful, when not mentioned. This is understood since the Taiwanese students encounter the new Indonesian poem. When specifically asked that their ethnic groups are NOT mentioned, 46.66% still feel neutral with 20% feel excluded and 26.66% feel "don't know".

When the Taiwanese poem *Song of the Island* generally asked to Indonesian students related to the local languages, 25% feel neutral when their language is mentioned, 38.33% feel neutral although their language is not mentioned in the poem and 18.33% even feel included although their language is not mentioned. When specifically asked if their language is NOT mentioned, 70% still feel neutral, 10% feel included and 8.33% feel excluded. As for Taiwanese students, when their language is mentioned 40% feel neutral and another 40% also feel neutral when their language is not mentioned. 20% feel included when the language is mentioned. When further specifically asked if their language is NOT mentioned, 60% students feel neutral, 6.66% feel included, and 13.33% feel excluded. The whole result still shows that neutrality is dominant, totalizing 63.33% (general) and 70% (specific) for Indonesian and 80% (general) and 60% (specific) for Taiwanese students. This signifies the existence of empathy among them toward linguistic diversity whether their language is mentioned or not.

We also ask whether the participants feel the same way as the authors to trace their empathy. For Indonesian poem, 65% Indonesian students claim they have the same way of seeing plural Indonesia as the author. 16.66% say no and the rest say they do not know. For Taiwanese students, only 26.66% say yes, 40% say no, and 33.33% say don't know. We assume that they are not familiar with the Indonesian context. While for the Taiwanese poem, 28.33% Indonesian students say they have the same way of seeing Taiwanese diversity and 61.66% say that they don't know and only 6.66% say no. Again, the issue of familiarity presumably contributes to this result. However, the same case as the Indonesian poem, when the Taiwanese students are asked about the Taiwanese poem, 60% say that they have the same way of seeing Taiwanese diversity as the author. Only 20% say no and another 20% say that they do not know.

The next discussion relates to the role of multicultural literature in navigating diversity for preparing the future profession in this network society. Interestingly most students feel eager to enjoy and study multicultural literature. More specifically, 28.33% of Indonesian students say that they are 100% eager, 40% go for 75% eager, and 25% go for 50% eager. As for Taiwanese students, 60% go for 50% eager, 13.33% go for 75% eager and 6.66% go for 100% eager. Further, 91.66% of Indonesian students believe that multicultural literature helps them understand other fellow human beings in their diversity anywhere and 66.66% Taiwanese students believe the same. This is also in line with the degree of diversity acceptance as reflected in the fact that most of them accept diversity (for Indonesian, 51.66% accept diversity 100%, 31.66% for 75% acceptance and 10% for 50% acceptance; while for Taiwanese, 6.66% accept diversity 100%, 33.33% for 75% acceptance, and 46.66% for 50% acceptance). Overall, Indonesia has a higher degree of diversity acceptance.

Lastly, most students agree that Multicultural Literature (ML) helps them develop the CQ (Cultural Quotient/ Competence) needed for navigating diversity in today's network and digitalized society. Almost

all (96.66%) of Indonesian students agree that ML helps them develop their CQ, while 86.66% of Taiwanese students agree and believe the same. Most students also realize that the future jobs need CQ. 61.66% of Indonesian students say the future job need CQ for 100%, 23.33% need for 75% degree, and 13.33% need for 50% degree. While Taiwanese students believe that 46.66% need CQ for 50%, 20% need CQ for 100% and 13.33% need CQ for 75%. Overall, Indonesian students are much more convinced than Taiwanese that the future professions significantly need CQ.

The biggest question remains: How to navigate diversity according to the students' perspective? When asked "In your personal opinion, how can we positively navigate (manage) diversity in our life?", some key words come up and interestingly, most respondents agree to a certain degree as can be traced through their use of the key words. The most dominant key word is "accepting". According to the respondents, accepting diversity is a must, strongly and openly stating that they have to accept the fact that they are inherently different. Quoting one response gives the picture of how diversity is perceived today: "Diversity is something that we cannot un-see. We can see people from various kinds of races and religions in the internet and media. Because of this we need to be more open-minded to these diversities to create a better management/navigation". The second dominant key word is "respecting", just as the consequence and reason of the first. Respecting diversity and respecting one own and others' cultural differences is also obligatory and it is possible when individuals have been able to accept diversity or the other way around. There are other less dominant key words, such as: be open-minded, tolerant, positive, understanding, embracing, not judgmental, not discriminating, and others, all implying that everyone knows theoretically how to positively navigate diversity, at least to his or her knowledge and perspective. Whether everyone has put this into practice and what challenges he or she encounters needs further study.

V. CONCLUSION

The two levels of discussion have proven that poetry may reflect and produce empathy both on the authors and the readers. The textual analysis of the poems has shown that both Soekarno and Chen Li have expressed their empathy toward the country diversity. The journey of both authors from their "self" into caring for the country and its people as a whole can be traced from the way they put others as more important on the first place than themselves.

Based on the questionnaire analysis on students' responses to the poems regarding diversity, empathy, multicultural literature and CQ, it can be concluded that most students agree to accept diversity as a part of digitalized network society today. This diversity can be well navigated when empathy is alternatively cultivated through studying poetry and multicultural literature as research has proven and most respondents agree that multicultural literature can help them develop CQ to prepare their future profession. It is true that poetry has been utilized more than its literary function as a tool of change, growth, and transformation in cultivating empathy to navigate the nation diversity and to cope with the needs and problems of future profession in digitalized network society.

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