Clash of Cultures: Natural Environment, Local Wisdom, and Modernization in Butet Manurung’s *Sokola Rimba*

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper aims at portraying the dilemmatic positions of *Orang Rimba*, a nomadic ethnic community who has inhabited the tropical rain forests of Jambi, in coping with the changes of their natural environment and traditions as the impact of modernization. The objective is to discover the position of *Orang Rimba* as a tribe who has lived side by side with nature for generations in keeping their commitments to prevent the destruction of their natural environment and local wisdom. Further, it is to examine whether their commitments to preserve nature and local wisdom have withered or not as they have confronted modernization and education. The main data source was Butet Manurung’s book entitled *Sokola Rimba*. Using critical reading, ecocriticism and postcolonial perspectives, the finding can be presented as there are cultural clashes among natural environment, local wisdom, and modernization in the life of *Orang Rimba* that can be identified as follows. (1) In one hand, modernization and education for *Orang Rimba* are the symbols of oppression toward the conservation of their natural environment and local wisdom. (2) In the other hand, modernization and education have become their hopes to resist the power of oppression. (3) In the attempts to compromise with modernization, *Orang Rimba* is often compelled to sacrifice nature and their interests for the reason of survival.

**KEYWORDS:** postcolonial ecocriticism, natural environment, local wisdom, modernization, indigenous people, *Sokola Rimba*

The fate of indigenous people is frequently determined by the fate of the land and natural environment in which they have settled in. For generations, they have inhabited the land and built their local custom there. In other words, they have been living in harmony with nature for a long time. Since their life depends on nature, they are accustomed to treating nature with respect and even making sacred of nature.
However, the history has proved that human’s desire to dominate nature has destroyed a harmonious and balance relationship among human, non-human, and nature. In the past, the imperials’ desires to expand their territory and land had triggered a serious problem for natural environment and the indigenous people who had inhabited it. Long generations of the indigenous people had been marginalized and oppressed by the outsiders who had suddenly occupied their land and exploited their natural resources.

The outsiders had brought with them the fundamental changes in the ways of life of the indigenous people in the name of development. They had conquered the land as their own and frequently insisted the indigenous people to leave the land. Long after the conquered land has become the territory of a country, the practices of dominating, oppressing, and looking down at the indigenous people still persist, even more; nowadays, the practices have been operated by the parties who potentially have greater power of oppression like the states, the stake holders, and the global scale private corporates. Those practices are the legacies of imperialism and colonialism. Despite the concerted attempts to abolish the practices, the colonial ways of thinking still stand in the consciousness. Nowadays, the new type of imperialism and colonialism threatening the environment and the life of the indigenous people has emerged in the form of capitalism.

Every party with interest cannot avoid the waves of capitalism. Even the state that supposes to protect its people cannot avoid the practices of capitalism. In the name of ecological and forest conservation, the state often abandons the entitlements of the indigenous people toward their land. The instances of this case have happened in many nations and countries. This research focuses on the case which has happened in Jambi; in which the indigenous people called Orang Rimba have inhabited its forests, as depicted in Butet Manurung’s book Sakola Rimba. Orang Rimba, also commonly
known as ‘Suku Anak Dalam’ or ‘Kubu’, is the Indonesian ethnic community who has inhabited the tropical rain forest areas of National Park Bukit Duabelas, Jambi province, Sumatra Island. *Orang Rimba* has lived depending on nature. They have been supporting their everyday life by hunting, gathering food, and also cultivating the dry lands. Anindita (2008) explains that for *Orang Rimba*, “the forest is not only a source of living, but also where their norms, values, and philosophy of life related to their myths, taboos, and beliefs are actualized within existence of the forest”.

The forest has turned into the most important aspect in the life of *Orang Rimba*. Therefore, the environmental problems related to the forest and its inhabitants are crucial matters for them. Further, Anindita (2008) figures out that nowadays, “their ecology and social environment gradually could not support their life”.

The environmental and societal problems such as the illegal logging, the land cultivation, the forest products pillaging, the big scale plantations, the land conversion (for transmigration programs), the increasing population around the forest areas, the market with its poisonous charms, the various kind of NGOs’ programs, the missionary programs, and the government with its own projects like the ‘Resettlement of the Indigenous Community Program’ have become the visible threats for *Orang Rimba* and their indigenous culture (Manurung, 2013, xv).

The transmigration program in Jambi for instance; the program started in 1979 and has succeeded to resettle approximately 30,000 families (Anindita, 2008). This kind of program has brought a significant change in the life of *Orang Rimba*. The remnant of colonial tradition like clearing the lands for big scale of palm oil plantations has also challenged the life of *Orang Rimba*. In fact, all of the environmental problems that
have occurred in the forest areas are hand in hand with the marginalization of *Orang Rimba* which has been brought by modernization.

The modernization has challenged the life of *Orang Rimba* and pushed them to position themselves between the two entirely different cultures, the natural culture and the modern culture. As the result, there are cultural clashes in the life of *Orang Rimba* that influence their identity as an ethnic community in Indonesia. They are in a complex dilemma; living among natural environment, local wisdom, and modernization. From this point, the writer proposes three problem formulations as follows: (1) How are the positions of natural environment, local wisdom, and modernization in the life of *Orang Rimba* as the indigenous people? (2) How are the cultural clashes among natural environment, local wisdom, and modernization depicted in the book? (3) How does *Orang Rimba* address the cultural clashes in their life? The problem formulations have assisted the writer to unravel the dilemma of *Orang Rimba* living in modern era. Further, the problem formulations have also assisted to show the position of *Orang Rimba* in keeping their commitments to preserve their natural environment and local wisdom.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

Butet Manurung’s book *Sakola Rimba* has been selected as the primary data of this study. In addition, the writer has also collected the secondary data taken from reference books, journals, and articles. The data was added in order to complement the primary data and to validate the results of the interpretation. The secondary data was selected from the previous studies that had discussed all topics related to the life of *Orang Rimba* and the indigenous people, postcolonialism, and also the representations of nature and environment in literature. Content analysis and descriptive qualitative were applied as the techniques to analyze the data.
The data analysis was started by reading Butet Manurung’s book *Sakola Rimba*. The book was read with the writer employing a critical reading; combining the reading on ecocriticism and postcolonialism (postcolonial ecocentric reading). In this study, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s notions on postcolonial ecocriticism have been functioned as the main foundation to elaborate the dilemma of this study. As cited in Huggan & Tiffin (2010), the Indian historian Ramachandra Guha argues that it is necessary “to bring postcolonial and ecological issues together as a means of challenging continuing imperialist modes of social and environmental dominance” (2). Moreover, Huggan & Tiffin have highlighted that “one of the central tasks of postcolonial ecocriticism as an emergent field has been to contest-also to provide viable alternative to-western ideologies of development” (27).

After the process of reading, the interpretation was written by collecting and classifying the data based on the topic of the study about the clash of cultures among natural environment, local wisdom, and modernization in the life of *Orang Rimba*. The process of collecting and classifying the data pursued Glotfelty and Fromm’s (1996, qtd. in Maimunah, 2014, 329) three stages of ecocentric reading which were: (a) The nature representation in literature (the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, forests, the body, and so forth), (b) The important function of “raising public consciousness of interlinked social and environmental issues that require immediate action and change” (Buell, 1995, 97-98; qtd. in Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, 23); as the consciousness rediscovers, reissues, and reconsiders the nature, and (c) The symbolic construction of species. The results of the reading interpretation, then, were validated by showing the excerpts from the book and the secondary data that could have supported the interpretation.
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Positions of Natural Environment, Local Wisdom, and Modernization in the Life of Orang Rimba

The ethnic community of Orang Rimba has inhabited the tropical rain forest areas in Jambi province for a long period of time. This community has scattered in more than 60,000 hectares of the forest areas in Bukit Duabelas (Manurung, 2013, 9). Since August 2000 and by the decree of the Minister of Forestry, 60,500 hectares of the forest areas have been legalized as Bukit Duabelas National Park. Before the decree, the 32,000 hectares of the forest areas had been known as the areas of Biosphere Reservation. Nevertheless, the transformation of status has failed in making a significant contribution to the improvement of the forest’s quality (Manurung, 2013, 9).

Natural environment, specifically forest with all of its natural resources and inhabitants, has become a part of Orang Rimba’s life. The forest’s position is very fundamental for Orang Rimba since it supports their existence and shapes their identity as an ethnic community. Forest has not only provided them with settlement and supplied them with food, but it has also protected them from the dangers coming from the outside world. Orang Rimba always lives in harmony with nature. They always attempt to be in a good side of nature and live peacefully without the desire to dominate nature. For Orang Rimba, forest is a partner; it is their mother and also their friend. Nature looks after of Orang Rimba and as a return, Orang Rimba look after nature like a mother looks after her children. This relationship, according to Maimunah (2014) demonstrates the need of femininity in the ecological wisdom to care for nature, “feminine ecology points out the harmony and the integrity of nature with the femininity of women, not with the exploitation of nature” (337). All aspects of nature
are sacred for *Orang Rimba*. Nature is a life source, and everything in nature has its own soul and life force. The animals have souls, and so also the trees. For that particular reason, *Orang Rimba* comes to respect and preserve nature.

For *Orang Rimba*, honey tree is like an heirloom for jungle outsiders. The tree is commonly bequeathed to the youngest daughter in the family. If one family has more than one daughter even several daughters, all the daughters must also be counted. Thus, it is forbidden to carelessly cut the honey tree. If the law has been violated, the one violating the law has to pay very expensive fines of customary law. One life of a honey tree is equal with one life of a person, or equal with 500 sheets of fabrics (Manurung, 2013, 16).

*Orang Rimba* has created their indigenous wisdom and teaching. Their custom and tradition have been constructed by considering the position of nature. Their local custom and life philosophy have been only created in order to preserve nature so that they can continue living side by side with nature. Anindita (2008) states that “the structure of leadership in *Orang Rimba* is related with the power under the Kingdom of Jambi in the past and it was originally created as a system to deal with natural resources from the forest”. *Orang Rimba* also believes that the souls of their ancestors, the spirits, as well as God and Evil, reside in nature; and for this reason, they are afraid of the wrath of nature if they disrespect it.

A wood or a honey tree has to be ‘seduced’ so that the ghoul can leave, and *Orang Rimba* is permitted to ‘taste’ the honey given to them by God. If the ghoul does not leave, they believe that they will fall while climbing the tree, and die. The myth says that there was someone who climbed the tree and never went back to the ground, lost and disappeared. If something like that happens, nature will give a sign to the people around, or to the family who lives long
away from the location of the honey, for instances with the sound of particular
bird or certain dream (Manurung, 2013, 18).

*Orang Rimba* only hunts animals to taste and they let the rest of the animals live freely in the forest. They do not consume livestock animals. For them, breeding animals is forbidden and it violates the natural law. If they take something from nature, they will perform some kind of rituals or chant prayers as the reciprocate actions.

Although the relationship between *Orang Rimba* and nature is not quite an equal relationship, it is not essentially a hierarchical relationship either. Hunting animals and food gathering are survival necessity for *Orang Rimba*. The kind of relationship showed by *Orang Rimba* with natural environment and local wisdom is different from the kind of relationship showed by the agents of capitalism with natural environment and local wisdom. Comparing this situation with the situation of the Indians and the colonists, Anderson (2004) explains the different kinds of human and nature-relationships showed by the Indians and the colonists as follows.

Aware of the power of animal spirits, native hunters treated their prey with respect and performed rituals defined by reciprocity. Although not quite a relationship of equals, the connection between Indians and prey was not essentially hierarchical. But notions of domination and subordination were central to the English, who believed that the act of hunting epitomized the divinely sanctioned ascendancy of humankind over animals (58).

Translating the situation of the Indians and the colonist into the situation of *Orang Rimba* and the agents of capitalism, there is a similarity between both of the situations. In *Orang Rimba*’s case, this situation could be understood as; originally, there is no arrogance and tendency to dominate nature in Orang Rimba’s life philosophy.
However, there is an intentional need to dominate and to demand profit from nature showed by the agents of capitalism.

Initially, modernization and education for *Orang Rimba* are the embodiment of evil. Modernization brought the outsiders to their land and after that; the outsiders have gradually taken their lands. Modernization has also devoured their habitats, forests, and natural resources. It has ruined their life, brought curse, and carried the plagues to their families. In their mindset, particularly the mindset of the elders, modernization does not have much impact on their daily life. They can live without modernization and they are proud with their ways of life.

**Cultural Clashes: Natural Environment, Local Wisdom, and Modernization in the Life of *Orang Rimba***

The serious repercussion of modernization toward natural environment and the life of the indigenous people is that modernization has stirred a problematic situation that could threaten the existence of both nature and the indigenous people. From the vantage point of the indigenous people, modernization does not only take along a new influence into their life but it also takes along a lot of problems, especially when it is related to capitalism as neocolonialism. Davary (2012) states that “the most longstanding legacy of colonialism, however, is not its material but its discursive effects; it is not its overt violence, but its covert cultural, intellectual, and religious assumptions that still remain in force today” (13). According to the ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2001, as summed up by Huggan & Tiffin, 2010), there are three typical types of ecological imperialism which commonly embedded in the colonial mindset namely biocolonization, reason-centered culture, and environmental racism (4). The indigenous people like *Orang Rimba* have been marginalized and oppressed by this ecological imperialism. According to the colonial mindset, natural environment and
the indigenous people with their local wisdom are always in the inferior position. The existence of nature and all of its inhabitants is to be exploited for the prosperity of human, and the indigenous people simply do not have the capacity to cultivate and then exploit them. As highlighted by Davary (2012), “the colonial mentality which sees the colonized as inferior people with inferior cultures has resulted, among other things, in the use of the knowledge of the colonized to serve the interests of the colonizers. It is this discursive effect that has heavily amplified the suffering of nature, women, and the poor” (13).

For the beginning, *Orang Rimba* has begun to understand the purpose of money and then, the politic related to the environment policies. Nonetheless, the environmental policies suggested by the government, NGOs, and other parties about the managements of the forest and its natural resources often ignore the voices of *Orang Rimba* as the people who have directly involved with forests conservation. Based on Plumwood’s classification of ecological imperialism (2001), this type of situation can be categorized into biocolonization. Biocolonization has raided the natural resources such as lands, wildlife, forests, and minerals to self-serving the needs of the corporate.

This biocolonization is aggravated by a cultural clashing happening in *Orang Rimba*’s life. Nowadays, their life has been constructed by the intermingled of the natural culture, represented by natural environment and local wisdom; and the modern culture, represented by education, modernization, and capitalism. The capitalist world-system has absorbed *Orang Rimba* and transformed their culture; creating a ‘reason-centered’ culture as the type of ecological imperialism. The modern people often take advantage of them, trick them, and also steal their natural resources.
From the perspective of Orang Rimba, modernization is the symbol of their oppression. Their ways of life are considered ‘exotic, wild, and uncivilized’ compared to the modern ways of life. The modern people even think that Orang Rimba has to be taught about ‘the civilized way of life’. The arrogance of the modern people offers only one single interpretation of life’s standards and appropriateness. Anindita (2008) in her report, states that “according to the perspective of the outside world, the Orang Rimba is uncivilized”. Further, she explains that

the outside world often addresses them as ‘Kubu’, which has now become an international name for the Orang Rimba. Kubu is an external marginalization of the Orang Rimba that carries the connotation of ‘a person who is dirty, untidy, smelly, infidel, stupid and has no religion’. In other words, they are not ‘normal’ human beings (Anindita, 2008).

Orang Rimba is also marginalized because of their beliefs. They believe in animism and dynamism. Their beliefs have not been included in one of the six religions acknowledged by Indonesian government. For Orang Rimba, Anindita (2008) again states, “marginalization occurs not only ecologically when the forest; their habitat, is degraded, but also when they are challenged by external arrogance about their standard and way of life”. Marginalization, stereotype, and discrimination are the common phenomena when interacting with the indigenous people. Insulting their dignity and cheating in trading transactions have also become the typical treatments. These marginalization and discrimination, in fact, are the remnants mindset of imperialism and colonialism and defined by Plumwood (2001) as environmental racism.

In this book, Butet shows the dilemma of Orang Rimba as well as her struggles as the agent of change living with Orang Rimba. Her presence in the middle of the community is the manifestation of the dilemma experienced by Orang Rimba toward
modernization. Butet, as an outsider and a woman herself, strives for *Orang Rimba*’s acknowledgement. For *Orang Rimba*, she is the representation of modernization; their fears and also their opportunities to resist their oppressors. In one hand, modernization and education taught by Butet, for *Orang Rimba*, are the symbols of oppression toward the preservation of their natural environment and local wisdom. The outsiders have coerced education and modernization to them. They have degraded *Orang Rimba*’s life philosophy and put it into the inferior position. They have simply thought that their modern ways of life are better that *Orang Rimba*’s ways of life. In the other hand, modernization and education have become their hopes to resist the power of oppression. Education and modernization like the use internet and video are their opportunity to put their position in the same ground with the outsiders. Only through this opportunity, they can have an equal fight with the outsiders to ensure the protection of their forest and entitlements.

Further, Butet gives a new perspective in depicting the life of *Orang Rimba*. She describes the positive images of *Orang Rimba*’s life. In this case, she breaks the tradition on describing the life of the indigenous tribe from the mindset of colonialism which describes them as negative, passive, and helpless. Instead, she describes the power of *Orang Rimba* by showing that they are not a dependable tribe who can only rely on the assistance of government, NGOs, and other people outside the forests. They are fully capable of governing their own life and making their own choices.

**Orang Rimba in the Middle of Cultural Clashes**

Paul Spencer Sochaczewski, the former head of International Campaigns of WWF and the author of *Redhead and Soul of the Tiger*, in Butet Manurung’s *Sakola Rimba* (2013) comments that “objectively, *Orang Rimba* is not in the positions to resist against pillaging and the destruction of their habitat since they have been crippled by
illiteracy, the lack of legal entitlements, land belonging, and the connections to the influential corporates” (vi). In addition to their unfortunate conditions and in the attempts to compromise with modernization, Orang Rimba is compelled to sacrifice nature and their interests for the reason of survival. Truthfully, this condition is not entirely the fault of Orang Rimba. Marfuah (2013) says that “globalization has changed the mindset of Orang Rimba and their life” (83). Further, Butet argues that “the impact of modernism has exceeded the power of local wisdom and Orang Rimba has been compelled to abandon nature” (xiii). As a human being, Orang Rimba also has the right to abandon their former way of life and decides to embrace modernization. Since by preferring not to confront modernization, they also still do not have enough power to prevent the spread of forests destruction (Manurung, 2013, 228-233).

In this case, the position of Orang Rimba in the middle of cultural clashes can be divided into the conservative and the liberal. The conservatives have emerged from the elder generations of Orang Rimba and some younger generations opting to maintain the traditional ways of life. They have resisted giving opportunity to education, development, and modernism. Meanwhile, the liberals have emerged from mostly the young generations of Orang Rimba and the open-minded elders which have been willing to give opportunity to education, development, and modernism. They are consciously aware that they have to change in order to protect their forest, local culture and wisdom. Nevertheless, a few of them have opted to entirely abandon their identity as Orang Rimba, forsake the jungle, and live as modern people in the village, city and even big town.

Fairly, the book has depicted that the young generations of Orang Rimba have been more adaptable to the change. Although being suspicious in the beginning, the young generations are willing to empower themselves with education, knowledge and
new skills to protect their natural environment and local wisdom. Initially, they have denied education. However, as time passes by, they have gradually acknowledged the importance of education since as an indigenous ethnic community; the changes are necessary to protect their natural environment and local wisdom.

...but with the increasing social interaction with the outside community and demands for change, then Orang Rimba should be empowered through… empowering psychologically, sought from those who are shy, insecure, fear can turn into a self-confident, daring either with the group or with the outside community of Orang Rimba (Marfuah, 2013, 85).

Butet depicts their eagerness and willingness to accept education by showing the growing number of the cadre of educator emerging from the inside community of *Orang Rimba*.

From a denied person; has been harshly rejected by *Orang Rimba*, I finally have been accepted as a calling teacher for the nomadic *Orang Rimba*. My idea to create the cadre of educator who comes from *Orang Rimba* finally could have been actualized. There are fourteen of Rimba’s children who have become teacher cadres; seven people have already been married, so now, there are only seven people who have moved together and still believed in my dream (Manurung, 2013, 221).

**CONCLUSION**

The environmental damage and the ecological crisis that have befallen this planet are the result of human’s never ending ambition to dominate and control nature. The desire to dominate and control nature and its inhabitants is the main legacy of imperialism and colonialism. In the era of postcolonialism, this legacy survives and it has been transformed into capitalism; the desire to control all the capitals which are
considered worthwhile and profitable. The story of Butet Manurung about the life of *Orang Rimba* cannot be separated from the story about the practices of capitalism. Further, the ways people outside the *Rimba* have stereotyped and labeled the life of *Orang Rimba* as ‘exotic, wild, and uncivilized’ represent how the colonial ways of thinking still stand until today.

Butet Manurung critically depicts how modernism, capitalism, and the war of interests have become the primary factors that engender the damage of natural environment and local wisdom. In the case of *Orang Rimba*, the survival of *Orang Rimba* is connected with the survival of their inhabited environment. For the indigenous people like *Orang Rimba*, all of their cultural roots rely on the forests in which they have been living for generations. For them, the environmental crisis is a crucial problem that should be prioritized; otherwise, it will be a problem that threatens their existence and identity. *Orang Rimba*, somehow, cannot abandon nature for the sake of modernization or for the sake of their survival. Abandoning nature means automatically losing most aspects that shape their identity as an ethnic community who has lived side by side with nature. Thus, for the sake of their future identity, although they have done a lot of compromise with modernization and had a full right to live differently, they still need to partake in preserving nature.

Even though their life has been torn apart between natural culture and modern culture; in ways they have to maintain their natural environment and local wisdom while at the same time they also have to deal with modernization, and even though some of them have sacrificed nature and their interests for the sake of survival, most of them still prefer to maintain their identity as the guardian of nature. They do not abandon their cultural root and identity that have come from nature. Thus, most of them are still struggling to maintain their natural environment and their ways of life in
the modern era. At the same time, they have taken advantage of education and modernization to support their resistances, since no matter how, *Orang Rimba* still cannot imagine living without their forests and natural environment.

REFERENCES


