
SUFI POEM “JOHNNY CASH GOES TO HELL”: THE UNIVERSAL OF MORALS

Taufiqurrohman

ufiq1289@gmail.com

Islamic University of Nahdlatul Ulama` (UNISNU) Jepara

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ABSTRACT

This research is aimed at finding the theme of a unique Sufi poem expressed by Tiel Aisha Ansari entitled “Johnny Cash Goes to Hell”. The analysis used is Riffaterre’s Semiotic theory. The theory uses two stages of signification. The first finds lexical meaning that is called Heuristic reading. It functions as the footstep for the next signification. The next one explores second meaning that is called Hermeneutic reading. This signification consists of four steps: Hypogram Actual, Hypogram Potential, Model and Matrix. The result of research says that this poem uses character Johnny Cash and St. Peter as the signified. The dialogue was used by Tiel to share Johnny’s thought. Johnny, the icon for Sufis, was considerate with what people had suffered from. The Hypogram Potential says that a Sufi sacrifices his comfort just for making people who are trapped by wrongness can go back to expedience. The model makes the distribution of meanings to be two, namely morals and universalism. The morals, especially considerate, can be universal. It can go across religions. This can be proved from the using of inter-religion symbols in the poem. That’s why “the universal of morals” is the theme can be got here.

Keywords: unique poem, Riffaterre’s semiotics, universal, morals.

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INTRODUCTION

One of poem genres in the timeline of literature is Sufi poem. Sufi poem is one of poems written by a Sufi². This definition is indirectly stated by Schimmel as has been quoted by Hadi (1985:vii) that the harmony between one poet’s experience and his works must be the standard for the existence

of a poem. Wachid (2002:179) also gave an understanding that if a poet never does what he has written in his poem, this kind of Sufi poem has to be asked its truth. Based on those two definitions, it can be concluded that the main point of Sufi poems is in “experience”. Thus, what is called Sufi poem is a poem that is written by a real Sufi who has experience in Sufism.

There are many Sufi poets worldwide who are recorded in the timeline of history. For instance in classic era, Schimmel (2011: 274 and 325) gave the examples of two most popular Sufi poets, they are Ibn al-Farid (1181-1235 A.D) as the mystical poet and

²In book “The Elements of Sufism” (1993:3), Shaykh Fadhalla Haeri said that a Sufi is a Moslem who always purifies his heart, protects it from anything can makes it dirty until achieving one point of harmony between a servant and his Creator.

Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273 A.D) as the musical poet. Meanwhile, in this contemporary era, if Indonesia has Musthofa Bisri (born in 1944) and Emha Ainun Najib (born in 1953)³, so America has Danielle Abdal Hayy Moore (born in 1940) and Tiel Aisha Ansari (born in 1964). In a scientific speech on June 6th 2006 reported in internet (<http://www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=47288>), Kevin Matthews, a senior American writer, said that Moore is the contemporary American Sufi who is most productive in writing Sufi poems.

On Tiel Aisha Ansari, Moore appraised her as a woman Sufi talented poet with China-Afro-Indian descendant⁴. This appraisal is proved from her book in 2008 “Knocking from Inside” and in 2012 “High-Voltage Lines” and her four poem e-books year 2011, namely “Ideas in Abundance; The Madness of Richard Madoc”, “Killing Time”, “47 Haiku” and “Illuminations from Inside”.

There is a uniqueness in her book “Knocking from Inside”. There is one title, “Johnny Cash Goes to Hell”, that looked strange in its readers’ assumption. The title uses one Blues musician Johnny Cash and combined with “Hell” which seems unique due to its term of “Hereafter”. Additionally, this is a Sufi poem that of course is written by a Moslem. Yet, Tiel used St. Peter, as one popular profile in Catholic, as one of his main characters in her poem.

³This information can be seen in Abdul Wachid B.S’ book *Religiositas Alam (dari Surealisme ke Spiritualisme D. Zawawi Imron)* year 2002 page 181.

⁴http://www.famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/tiel_aisha_ansari/poems/22914

Then the case above emerges to be one thing needs to be answered as the root cause. The root cause can be found by determining the substantial idea that constructs the poem. In “A Hand Book to Literature”, Holman and Harmon (1986:502) said that the substantial idea of a literary work is called a theme. That’s why this research is aimed at finding the theme of Tiel Aisha Ansari’s poem “Johnny Cash Goes to Hell”.

METHODOLOGY

Do to the aim of the research in finding the theme of a literary work, so this research is categorized into Qualitative research. According to Thohir (*ed.*) (2011:34), the method that is used for looking into Qualitative research object is such theory or approach. Therefore, the researcher has to choose the suitable approach to reveal the theme of a literary work.

Then the researcher has to choose semiotic approach for it is important for this research to come into some technical stages for revealing the theme of the poem. In this case, the researcher chooses Riffaterre’s semiotic model.

The researcher has two reasons why he chooses this model of semiotics. Those are:

- a. Due to the importance of finding the theme, so the needed theory is that which has some stages of analysis, even the stage of finding the core meaning of the poem. There is one theory that can answer that urgency, namely Riffaterre’s theory.
- b. For revealing the theme, it is urgent to use two stages of signification, either on poem’s paraphrase or the socio-cultural meaning behind the paraphrase. Then Riffaterre’s semiotic theory has both of them.

Semiotics, as the knowledge on sign, has two principles, namely signifier and signified. According to Pierce as has been quoted by Pradopo (1995:121), based on the relation between the signifier and the signified, there are three kinds of basic sign, they are *icon*, *index* and *symbol*. *Icon* has a similar relationship between the signifier and the signified such as photograph with the man photographed. *Index* is the relation shows cause and effect like smoke beckons fire. Meanwhile, *symbol* shows arbitrary relations based on the convention of people generally. It is like language.

In case of semiotics of poetry, Pradopo in Jabrohim (*ed.*) (2003:86), when he translated "Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics" (1974:980-982), said that poem can be defined as semiotic system level two. This conclusion indicates that the language expression written in a poem have been decorated with effects and meanings variety that are quite different from language expression level one. While language expression level one just uses lexical meaning, language expression level two undergoes displacing of meaning, distorting of meaning and creating of meaning. That's why Pradopo (1990:123) concluded that interpreting one poem is identical to understanding the significance.

To find the substantial meaning of a poem, according to Riffaterre (1978:4-6), there are two stages of signification, namely Heuristic reading and Hermeneutic reading. If Heuristic reading is based on the language convention, so Hermeneutic reading is divided into four stages, they are Hipogram Actual, Hipogram Potential, Model and Matrix.

Riffaterre (1978:5) said that Heuristic reading needs a skill of language

competence to reveal the first meaning or the denotative meaning of a poem's lyrics. That's why the readers are demanded to know the level change of the first meaning that would be into the second meaning.

After a reader does Heuristic reading, he has to do Hermeneutic reading with the explanations as follows. Riffaterre (1978:13-18) explained that poem is like doughnut. Something presents textually is the doughnut's meat. While something is not present is described as one round space at the middle of the doughnut that makes it called doughnut. Therefore, something which is not present textually defines one poem to be a poem. The space often be called Hypogram. Then Hypogram is divided into two, namely Hypogram Actual and Hypogram Potential. Hypogram Actual is present based on the other passages outside the poem can be related to the poem while Hypogram Potential is present based on the signification of symbols reflect many socio-cultural phenomena. Determining the Hypogram Potential can be helped via the concepts *icon*, *index* and *symbol*.

Besides, the unstated statement or the round space can be found also functions as the core meaning of a poem. This core meaning is called as Matrix. Then the actualization of Matrix is Model. So Riffaterre (1978:19) said that Model can be words, phrases or lyrics/lines that are so poetic. The model also functions as the miniature of a poem because the readers can see an extension of lyrics by only seeing this miniature. Next, Riffaterre also said that Matrix functions as the substantial idea because it lies in the core of finding the meaning of a poem. Thus, finding Matrix also means finding the theme.

ANALYSIS

Below is the poem that would be analyzed.

Johnny Cash Goes to Hell

<i>Well, Johnny he said to St. Peter</i>	1
<i>“You know that I just can’t stay</i>	2
<i>I’m grateful for all that you’ve done for me</i>	3
<i>But I just can’t be living this way</i>	4
<i>while there’s people suffering in Hell.”</i>	5
<i>“Well, when I came up here to Heaven</i>	6
<i>You gave me a suit of white</i>	7
<i>And I put it on just to please you</i>	8
<i>But you know that it just ain’t right</i>	9
<i>‘cause there’s people suffering in Hell.”</i>	10
<i>St. Peter he says to Johnny</i>	11
<i>“I’m sorry, but those are the rules</i>	12
<i>I can’t let you move out of here, Johnny</i>	13
<i>Son, what you want me to do</i>	14
<i>for the people suffering in Hell?”</i>	15
<i>“Let me play for the damned souls in Hell</i>	16
<i>Let me play them ‘Folsom Prison Blues.’</i>	17
<i>Let me play for the lost and the struggling</i>	18
<i>Do the job like I used to do</i>	19
<i>for the people suffering in Hell</i>	20
<i>St. Peter he says to the devil</i>	21
<i>“Turn the damned souls out of their cells</i>	22
<i>The Man in Black, he’s comin’</i>	23
<i>to give a free concert in Hell</i>	24
<i>for the people suffering in Hell.”</i>	25
<i>St. Peter he says to Johnny</i>	26
<i>“I’ll send you an angel bodyguard.”</i>	27
<i>Johnny he laughed and said: “Thank you</i>	28
<i>I ain’t scared of no prison yard.</i>	29
<i>Ain’t no-one gonna hurt me in Hell.”</i>	30
<i>The stadium’s big as the whole wide Earth</i>	31
<i>The damned souls were packed ear to ear</i>	32

<i>When they heard him say:</i>	33
<i>Hi!</i>	34
<i>I'm Johnny Cash!</i>	35
<i>Well, you should have heard them cheer!</i>	36
<i>Cheers from the damned souls in Hell!</i>	37
<i>And a million souls let go their chains</i>	38
<i>And the souls flew up to the sky.</i>	39
<i>And when Peter asked: "How do you come here?"</i>	40
<i>They said: "Johnny Cash made me cry</i>	41
<i>and I'm done with suffering in Hell."</i>	42
<i>So Johnny he's wearing the black</i>	43
<i>And he plays for the damned down in Hell.</i>	44
<i>And he won't let them send him back to Heaven</i>	45
<i>Till he empties out every last cell</i>	46
<i>and there's no-one suffering in Hell</i>	47
<i> ...In Hell, in Hell</i>	48
<i>Johnny's playing the damned out of Hell.</i>	49

(Tiel Aisha Ansari. *Knocking from Inside*, 2008: 37-39)

Heuristic Reading

It is impossible for such Sufi poem above to use denotative meaning as the precise meaning. There must be any explanations of symbolism there. Perhaps there are meanings for Johnny Cash, Man in Black, damned souls, Heaven and Hell, etc. Those are automatically the signified in the poem. Two analysis below will reveal the meaning of the signified by using the combination of Hypogram Potential and Hypogram Actual.

Hypogram Actual

This poem uses abundant references. This is seen from the mixes of religion terms with popular things in this world, especially in music. Below is the exploration of the references respectively.

Johnny Cash (1932-2003) is a Scotland descendant who was born in Arkansas,

USA. He is a Country-Blues musician (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_blues_musician). Meanwhile, St. Peter is a name for one apostle of twelve apostles of Jesus⁵.

Hell is contrast to Heaven. If Hell is the reckoning for those who don't get God's mercy, Heaven is for those who get His mercy.

The damned souls refer to the general paradigm that those who did bad deeds in the world would get reckonings in Hell. Their soul is considered damned because they are in friend with Iblis, human bad temper. They tempt men in order to distort them to the insult way of life. These Satans

⁵ In *A Dictionary of Islam* (Hughes, 2001:153) and in *Kitab Perjanjian Baru* part Peter (1) chapter 1 verse 1 (www.catholic.org/bible/book.php?id=67).

cannot be seen in this world but clearly seen in Hell.

Folsom Prison Blues is one name for a song composed and sung by Johnny Cash. This 1955 and re-released in 1968 song is concluded into Blues music, Rock music and Country music (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folsom_Prison_Blues). The song tells about wills to get out from criminality, jail and poverty.

Then the little information above can be used to reveal the meaning of symbols written in the poem. Below is the signification.

Hypogram Potential

This poem uses the interaction of talks between Johnny Cash with St. Peter and the Hell inhabitants. Based on the information from part Hypogram Actual above and symbols on Sufism, below is the extensive analysis.

For Sufis, a man who is sad seeing others get suffering is called as person who has brilliant heart. He is not only ideal in worshipping God but also in interacting with others. Those are what attached to the Sufis. This is what Tiel Aisha Ansari has symbolized in her poem. He uses Johnny Cash as the icon for a Sufi. It is legal for a poet to use a musician profile, perhaps, either based on universal importance and the poet's favor. So attaching Johnny as the icon for a Sufi comes from subjective reason but is aimed at using universal reason so that Sufism can be accepted for everyone.

A Sufi, represented by Johnny Cash, should be considerate in seeing the sufferings of others. Even this poem uses care to others as the icon made by Tiel for any kinds of positive morals to others who undergo sufferings. Even it is in Hell that

the play has been written by Tiel so it is just a fiction thing. So it is true that drama in the Hell is made icon for happenings in this world.

An-Naisabury (2006:347) says that people who are considered as the true Sufi are those who are matched with what Junaid al-Baghdady, a Sufi master, has ever said about:

“The Sufis are like earth; all dirt is thrown for it. Yet it never makes something grow but nice plants. The Sufis are like earth; stepped either by the pious or the sinners. A Sufi is also like cloud; shading everything below, like rain water; flow anything.”

Based on the aphorism above, it can be known that a real Sufi is not only those who concentrate focusing on worshipping God, but also those who are social, care to others. “Stepped by everyone” means owning empathy and mercy in others' sufferings. It also means that everyone should be able to accommodate others' problems without seeing the religion or the backgrounds. In this poem, the profile explained is symbolized with black suits worn by Johnny. It is due to common symbol or convention that black is symbol for neutrality and absorbing everything.

The morals described above are clearly shown by the highest Sufi profile, namely Muhammad. After being born he said, “O people... o people... (*ummatī..ummatī..*)”. Then before passed away, he also said the same, “O people... o people... (*ummatī..ummatī..*)”. Even, An-Naisabury (2006:268) said that Muhammad will also keep saying “O people... o people... (*ummatī..ummatī..*)” on the Resurrection Day at the time everyone says, “myself..myself”. The case above shows that human should be considerate to others,

especially in having empathy and sympathy to others. Human should have noble morals to have attention to others.

Considerate to others' suffering in this poem functions as the icon for Johnny's considerate character to feel pity for those who are suffering in Hell. In turn, Hell is the icon too for everything unworthy done in this world. So Johnny, as representative for Sufi, feels pity for those who do everything not in line with God. This kind of noble character is clearly written in the Qur'an surah At-Taubah verse 128, "*Now hath come unto you a Messenger from amongst yourselves: it grieves him that ye should suffer,*" This verse is clearly in line with what has been the morals showed by Johnny in the poem. This is what Sufis should be. Tiel, as a Sufi, indirectly also gave one message to other Sufis to remember about the noble character taught in the verse above.

Next, the considerate character doesn't mean influenced by the people of unworthy deeds, but wanting them to be able to go back to the worthy path. In this poem, being not influenced is symbolized with no guard for Johnny to have concert in Hell.

Then concert in Hell can be the symbol for leaving and forgetting all worldly things. This is reflected by the vanishing sufferings of Hell inhabitants when they watch Johnny's concert. Johnny just has concert for entertaining them, not staying with them. It is briefly seen when St. Peter at first refused Johnny's request to move to Hell, yet finally accepted because of single motivation to have concert only.

The largeness of the stadium told in the poem symbolizes the large hope to call on people to go back to God's straight path. While the cheers of Hell inhabitants when

Johnny came to Hell symbolize delicate Sufi method in which Sufis could make bad people can smile or laugh at.

The main song sung in the concert in the poem is "Folsom Prison Blues". This song contains a wish to get out from badness has been done, from jail life and from fettering poverty. That's why Tiel is good at symbolizing the delicate persuasion with the daily familiar song. It is also about hope to live better for criminals. It is down to earth for touching the readers. Universal of the message can also be felt.

Finally Tiel emphasizes the importance of feeling considerate to those who act unworthy and their success in persuading them delicately. Those two things are symbolized with Johnny's success in making Hell inhabitants feel out of Hell.

In case of St. Peter, it is used by Tiel to symbolize wisdom master who perhaps could control one group of people in Heaven. That's why, as a common man, Johnny needed to have permission to St. Peter as the leader in Heaven. Symbolically, Johnny, as a Sufi, needs a spiritual permission from one great religious magnate to call on criminals to get repentance.

Something unique can be withdrawn is that the poem uses symbols out from Islam. Extrinsicly, it is out of the limitations from Sufi religion, namely Islam. But intrinsicly this symbolization is universal for it can be taken advantages for men of any religions.

Furthermore, Tiel actually takes perennial wisdom as the mindset of his poem "Johnny Cash Goes to Hell". It means it is wise to relate one religion to others because in turn they will meet in one point, God as He is, without names. It is in line with what has been stated by Qamar-UI Huda (2003:278-305) that the central focus

of religion followers is God and human struggles to always be conscious before one deity.

Besides, Tiel tended to use spirituality in transferring his mind into the poem. It is based on what has been said by Hill *et all* (2000:51-77) that religiousness and spirituality are in different constructs. Religiousness is in formal line while spirituality is in inner transcendental line. That's why, Tiel uses other religion's profile to make the poem more universal and more spiritual. Focusing on theme of human struggle to be advantageous to others is done by Tiel to achieve the high spirituality before one God for all religions. This is what Tiel has concentrated in.

That's why the focus plane of poem *Johnny Cash Goes to Hell* is actually the morals itself. The morals on how a man could be considerate to anyone others and be open in heart and mind for opening their consciousness. In turn, a man will be able to help releasing them from their sufferings and to provide an advantageous spot for everyone to be used for betterments. This inference is reflected as the summary of the poem. It is about Johnny Cash who wanted to have concert in Hell for releasing the inhabitants from their sufferings.

The signification has been got above is in line with the fact that morals do not depend on religions. Morals are always universal. It goes beyond the borders of religions. Every single person of a religion could do anything worthy. It can be seen as good for every one of other religions. Even people often evaluate someone's religiousness through his / her morals. This is also what "morals is universal" means.

In case of the thing above for a Moslem scholar, Zaroug (1999:53-54), introduced

morals in Islam with Islamic ethics (*akhlāq*). He said that Islamic ethics are those universal standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do as taught in the Qur'an and demonstrated by the prophet in the exemplary either in words or in actions. This is what happened to Tiel Aisha Ansari too as a Moslem poet. She intends to introduce universal morals that spread beyond religions. She showed it through her poem "Johnny Cash Goes to Hell".

Model

Based on the conclusion has been got in Hypogram Potential, so the model must be one lyric that can reflect the conclusion. It is "... suffering in Hell." This lyric actually is repeated seven times, they are in line 5, line 10, line 15, line 20, line 25, line 47 and line 52. This repeating has an effect in emphasizing the theme that has been given by the poet. Although the wordings of the model in each stanza are different each other, they have the similarity in expression "suffering in Hell". Among nine stanzas of the poem, there are seven stanzas which use lyric "suffering in Hell". The meaning of each seven stanzas is ended up by that lyric.

The expression "suffering in Hell" refers to the meaning of the poem itself; "suffering" refers to morals of someone to be considerate to anyone suffers from anything bad; "in Hell" refers to the universal of the poem. It means Tiel used cross-religious expression in which "Hell" as the meeting point.

Besides, the model has been got makes this poem shape its own plot. It is repeated in using it so that the impression of the lyric's spirit can be felt many times. The poet's message on having good morals to

others, especially considerate, indeed can be underlined in readers' mind.

Matrix

Based on the results of analysis both from Hypogram Potential and Model, it can be concluded that Matrix of poem "Johnny Cash Goes to Hell" is the universal of morals. This is the substantial idea that constructs the poem. This substantial idea divides the poem into two distributions of theme maker, namely good morals in which considerate as the description and universal across religion symbols.

"The universal of morals" can be a simple phrase that explains the meaning and the content of the poem. The phrase also

functions as the constructor of the poem's content.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research is to find the theme of a unique Sufi poem entitled "Johnny Cash Goes to Hell". The theme, at the same time, is the substantial idea that constructs the poem. It is found in Matrix. So, the theme of the poem is "The Universal of Morals" as described in Matrix part. Based on this finding, it can also be concluded that Tiel Aisha Ansari has developed her Sufi poem entitled "Johnny Cash Goes to Hell" with some features that can decorate its content (stanzas and lines) so that it can be a unique Sufi poem.

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