

The Hermeneutic of the Malay Comic: Unveiling the Symbolism of Love in *Selendang Siti Rugayah*

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ABSTRACT

A comic is a form of sequential art that incorporates the integrated textual and visual aspects to reveal the desired meaning. It involves storytelling techniques with narrative elements as found in conventional literary works. Nowadays, comic art is flourishing in Malaysia with the advent of abundant comics from various old and new local authors. The uniqueness of Rejabhad, who was widely known as the King of Malaysian Cartoon, allows the researcher to analyse his comic works in the aspects of textual and visual designs. Prior studies have only discussed the outer layer of Malay comics. In fact, Malay comics especially Rejabhad's works need to be examined more deeply to unravel their outer and inner layers of meaning. It is essential to fully understand the overall meaning of the work as well as to appreciate the author's identity. This study focuses on one of Rejabhad's particular comic work entitled "Selendang Siti Rugayah" (1997). The study uses a spiritual hermeneutic reading or exegesis (takwil) method is applied to obtain the inner or spiritual meaning of "Selendang Siti Rugayah" comic work. The results of this study allow the public to understand the inner meaning of the comic work and to appreciate the identity or personality of the author in his or her comic works. This study which based on the spiritual hermeneutic reading is very significant. It is a new exploration that may change the views on the creativity and wisdom of a Malay comic artist, Rejabhad, who had been appreciated and understood only based on the outer layer of reading.

Keywords: Malay comic, spiritual hermeneutic, takwil, comic artist

INTRODUCTION

In modern times, comics have become an important medium with their artistic strength. In general, comic art is beneficial for the lives of people in a country, especially in the context of entertainment, socio-culture, education, and politics. This is because comics are not merely artworks but a source that provides colourful, cheerful, and good moments for people's everyday life. Great comics can provide cultural influence to society in some countries, including in the political field. Hence, even though comic art is often associated with humorous, light, and leisure things, it is a highly potential branch of art that warrants further exploration. This paper aims to examine comics as a form of literary art with its characteristics and privileges. The main focus of this study will be on the comic compilation of *Selendang Siti Rugayah* (2001) by Rejabhad. The literature on this compilation will be studied to understand its implicit and explicit meanings. For this purpose, the Islamic spiritual hermeneutic approach or the *takwil*, which is a famous method amongst Muslim scholars of Sufi teachings, will be utilised.

MALAY COMICS IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, the development of comic art began with cartoon art in the 1930s when editorial cartoons were published in the Malay newspapers in Malaya such as *Warta Jenaka*, *Utusan Zaman*, and *Majlis*. At that point in

time, cartoons played a very important and influential role to the readers. The emergence of the first cartoon of *Wak Ketok* by Mohd Ali Haji Sanat through *Utusan Zaman* managed to open up the space for cartoon art in the country. During the same time, he also produced the *Wak Keleddek* cartoon. Both of these cartoons were adapted into comic series and they represented the pioneer that stimulated the growth of comic arts in Malaysia. Most of their editorial cartoons are used as a form of social criticism and political issues. At the end of the 1940s, Malay comic arts had witnessed new movement with the emergence of more comic writers and painters such as Saidin Yahya, Jamil Sulong, Abdullah Salehi, A. Ghani, K. Bali, O.S. Arshad, Mohd. Hussin, Yusoff Idris, and Nas Achnas. They successfully introduced a more convincing form of comic design. The emergence of *Hiboran* magazine in 1946 opened up various opportunities for comic artists to produce serial comics in every issue of the magazine. In the 1950s, comic art continued to grow with the publication of comic books by Saidin Yahya. His comics emphasised on traditional themes related to myths, legends, and stories from the *Sejarah Melayu*.

The 1960s was the epicentre of comic art activities. Several publishing companies such as Pustaka Antara, Sinaran Bros, The Sentosa Store Kuala Pilah, Geliga Limited, Melayu Raya Press, and others showed high interest in publishing and marketing comic books. This era also witnessed the emergence of many new and talented comic artists with their unique potentials. Among them were Alias Kulub, Osman Baru, Meor Shahrman Hassan, Sulaiman Awang, Hussein Saad, Shukor Lin, Rahman Bakree, Solihin Haji Othman and several others. The development of comic art in the country became more widespread with the increasing number of new comic artists and comic magazines from the late 1970s to the present time. Famous comic painters such as the late Rejabhad, the late Raja Hamzah, Jaafar Taib, Azman Yusof, Zainal Buang Hussein, Ujang, Rossem, Fatah, Nan, Don, and Cabai have produced massive comic compilations in the Malay language. Furthermore, they applied many Malay traditional elements within their comics design.

In Malaysia, the art of comic literature is widespread with diverse forms from various generations of comic authors. The high number of local comic artists has encouraged the emergence of various genres of local comics. Most of these authors demonstrated different comprehension, appreciation, and knowledge in their comic work. Every local comic work has its unique value. This provides the opportunity for researchers to observe and analyse comics in terms of the style of drawing arts (visual) and narrative (text). Previously, researches have mainly discussed the comics based on their explicit aspects. Most of the comic readers also absorb the idea of the comics and acknowledge the value of the comics in an external and superficial manner. However, the exact features and ideas of Malay comics need to be understood clearly. There needs to be an interesting learning process for the Malay comic to be understood holistically. If these comics are only examined and viewed internally, the understanding of these comics will only revolve around their literal meaning. The implicit meanings of the comics are often only understood by the author himself or those who really understood them. The implicit comprehension of a particular comic could only be achieved through deep appreciation and a thorough discussion of the comic.

In view of this, more enlightenment is required on the issue of understanding a Malay comic. To date, no study has described the implicit understanding of Malay comics in detail. Since it has never been specifically explored, this issue has become a limitation towards understanding Malay comics arts and the relevant knowledge. The implicit definition of the comic needs to be interpreted so that it can be comprehended based on its designs. The text and comic visuals of local Malay comics in Malaysia often consist of implied and mystical aspects. The implied meaning of the text or visual illustration expressed by a comic artist needs a clearer explanation. This kind of comprehension enables the readers to figure out the hidden meaning inserted by the comic artist in producing the comic design. Comics can be a reflection of the authors or comic artists in which their creative ideas are often inspired by their souls and minds. Comics may also stem from their spiritual and soul-stirring experiences, as well as instincts that they develop from their historical adventures or life encounters.

Based on the observations and explicit definitions of the texts and images, there are some differences and similarities between the texts and visuals in Malay comics. This observation also highlights the challenging prospect of sorting out the implicit definition of text, visual, and spiritual elements of each comic. This study also points out the lack of discussion or specific understandings of the comic themes, especially about the inner meanings of the text and visual illustrations of Malaysian comics. The majority of famous comic authors in the country have their own comic compilations. Most of the storylines of these compilation works are often interpreted by readers merely based on the visual and textual designs of the outer layers. The deeper understanding of these comics has not yet been explored or interpreted in layers by readers, researchers, or academics.

Most of the comic writers and artists produce their works based on their thoughts, beliefs, experiences, culture, and lives around them. Every artwork is like a manifestation of the soul and feeling of the artist in the

context of the culture and of the times when the comic was created. The production and development of a comic are hugely influenced by the personality traits of the author or artist. The artists themselves are often indirectly related to the comic theme. In other words, one of the problems in understanding the comic which has not been discussed in detail in this country is the lack of implicit reference to the identity of the writer. If this problem can be addressed internally, there will be a clearer and more interesting comprehension related to the theme and self-identity of the artist.

ISLAMIC SPIRITUAL HERMENEUTIC

Takwil is a form of Islamic hermeneutic that is often associated with the general interpretation of the text, especially texts from the holy book of Qur'an. It is used to explain the literal meaning of the text, but the method used and the application of the method are different from ordinary interpretation, namely the formal interpretation. The word *takwil* was derived from the root word *awwal*, which means first or the first. The term is also used to address the Creator. God is the first (*al-awwal*) place to return to for all creations. Based on that, the word *takwil* means "return or causing us to return (to the first or the original) and find something that cannot be reduced, which means the final reality." Sachiko Murata (1992: 226–7) connected the meaning of "cannot be reduced" to "reaching the core meaning of the text, the implied and hidden meaning." Regarding the signals, examples can be given on how some Muslims members interpreted the meaning of the *mutasyabihat* verses of Qur'an (Surah Al-Baqarah: 115), *Ayna-matruwallu fa tsamma wajhullahi*, which means "Wherever you (might) turn, there is the Face of Allah." The focus is not on the word "turn," but rather the meaning of the phrase "The Face of Allah." Obviously, it does not refer to the outward appearance that could be seen with eyes. In fact, it refers to the inward existence, which could be felt with eyes of the heart and indicating the deep level of faith (Abdul Hadi 1995: 24–6).

Abdul Razaq al-Kasyani, a Sufi in 13th century, linked the *takwil* tradition with the well-known Prophet's words which means, "There is no Qur'anic verse that has no external meaning as well as internal meaning, the limitation (*hadd*) and at the same time where we go about climbing" (Murata 1992: 301). With regard to the effectiveness of its application, al-Kasyani stated that in one's *takwil*, it is not enough to merely use logic and mind. A *pentakwil* (the person who does the process of *takwil*) also needs to use his intuition and creative imagination, besides engaging in the entire movement of text, merging the text and imagining himself as the one who receives the inspiration to deliver the textual content that he has been reading. As hermeneutics in general, *takwil* members believe that language, as the meaning of human communication and expression, is also the "meaning tool" (the locus of the meaning), as well as the marking system (*dilal*) and symbolism or symbolisation (*mitsal*). Based on his emphasis on symbols or symbolic elements from the sense of 'il or discourse, *takwil* is often interpreted as interpretation or symbolic understanding. If viewed based on its specific meaning, *takwil* can be interpreted as a journey of the soul in understanding the text (literary masterpiece) through ways such as modifying or transforming certain expressions in the text into *kias*, *tamsil*, or *mitsal*. In this way, the meanings in the text become wider and richer.

Corbin (1980: 29), in his analysis of the philosophy of Ibn 'Arabi, reported that apart from altering certain expressions in the text to be *kias*, *tamsil*, or *mitsal*, an interpreter of *takwil* method will also use intuitive perceptions in an attempt to discover the world of meaning from the texts that he examines. Intuitions are significant because it is only with intuitive perceptions that the expression in the text can appear as a vivid picture in our thoughts and imaginations. The use of intuition in the reading text is shown by Kasyani and Iqbal. To understand and interpret the Qur'anic verse in depth, they imagine themselves as God who sent down the revelation directly into their hearts. When one reads the text of a literary work, a similar method can be used in the process of interpretation. In the process of understanding the inner message of the text, a critic must be able to position himself as if he is receiving the inspiration from the literary works that he is reading.

Takwil will only able to work out if we can distinguish between *tamsil* and allegorical or metaphorical statements, besides apprehending about how a symbol occurs. Logical usage alone is insufficient for a *pentakwil*. This method is more effective in criticising or reviewing the text. Therefore, a *pentakwil* must be able to use the inner vision and to make full use of his sense of contemplation and creative imagination. When a *pentakwil* has used all three of his spiritual spaces, he will no longer view the work he studied as a discourse based on logical ideas, but rather as a figurative or symbolic form (Corbin 1981: 13–4, 78, 88, 90). However, several things need to be taken into account. Firstly, the literary work is a symbolisation, which means it is not merely mimesis (to imitate) of the sensory statement, but the *mitsal* (metaphor) or copies of the *kias* or symbols to the ideas inspired by the author's inner experience. Therefore, it is a replica of something in the spiritual realm. Secondly, the

sense of contemplation and creative imagination is required to provide a space that can understand the ideas contained in the spiritual realm and transform the ideas into symbolic aesthetic expression.

In the book entitled *al-Insan al-Kamil*, Abdul Karim al-Jili spoke about the role of creative imagination. He stated that imagination is the foundation and source for the existence of things related to human creativity. It is the essence of inner experience, which includes the presence of the sophisticated speech and spiritual nature that enables the existence of creative imagination (Corbin 1977: 151). To be able to apply texts as a language event and model of thought and reflection, clear images are necessary. Firstly, the position of words and certain key phrases in the text plays a very unique role. The texts are not merely used as logical utterance, but rather as colourful symbolic representation. A creative imagination of the world would be able to put the inner meaning of the text as a higher nature than the emotional world and regular mind.

In the process of understanding the literary work, the initial stage usually involves indicating things to be marked or specified in *dilal* (symbol) which is significant, including sharing a symbolic or metaphorical text. In the view of *pentakwil*, the role of the symbol in the literary work represents a ladder towards higher consciousness. This view corresponds with the purpose of literary work, which is to bring readers to a higher level of consciousness. According to Sahl al-Tustari, the first *pentakwil* from the 10th century AD, the symbolic expressions in religious discourse, particularly The Holy Book of Qur'an, have two important aspects, namely the *hadd* or boundaries and *matla'*, a place to climb to a higher and boundless celestial ground. The *hadd* refers to the external forms while the *matla'* means the internal forms. Therefore, if we only pay attention to the external meaning, the comprehension we obtain would be rather limited or narrow when in fact the inner meaning of the text is celestial and boundless.

Initially, *takwil* arose because of the need to interpret the *mutasyabihat* (symbolic) verses of Qur'an, certain Hadith, and the sayings of the *shatiyyat* sayings (theophany) of Sufi members. In fact, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2007: 18) defined *takwil* as a perennial (eternal) philosophy, in other words, the knowledge of how to understand the spiritual meaning of holy or religious texts. The knowledge must revolve around the issues of eternal philosophical themes. Although the texts from the Islamic intellectual tradition is not entirely a spiritual masterpiece of Sufism, they still contain the spiritual and moral definitions associated with the theme of eternal philosophy. For example, literary works on manners, history, epics, and romance. Such works, if examined in depth, contain implied or Sufi-inspired spiritual messages, especially with regard to metaphysical, ethical, sociological, aesthetic, and religious psychology issues. These elements can be exposed, especially when one uses the *takwil* method, as this method basically relates to metaphysics (cosmology and ontology), aesthetics, ethics, and religious psychology in Islam.

On a separate note, Ibn al-'Arabi equates *takwil* as a method of interpreting the text by continuously creating a similar new meaning (*tajdid al-mutsul*) or creating something new through the interpretation process (*tajdid al-khalq*). The purpose of *takwil* is to build meaningful spiritual awareness, knowledge, and valuable ideas about life, as well as self-awareness that will activate the understanding of the text in a spiritual, rational, aesthetical and intellectual manner (Corbin 1981: 242). In addition, Ibn al-'Arabi added ways to examine poems or symbolic allegories more accurately. He proposed the readers to view them from the perspective of their completeness to facilitate the necessity for comprehensive understanding. For example, poetry is a literary utterance that is rich with visual images and should be interpreted by using *majas* or figurative language. This visual image must be transformed into a broad symbolic image that encompasses the meaning to the extent that it could be transformed into something meaningful, rather than merely text or formal utterance.

Takwil differs from formal interpretation, as formal interpretation only seeks to understand the textual content that is bound to external matters that are supported solely by empirical and rational arguments. In contrast, apart from viewing the text from formal and rational aspects, *takwil* also includes the interpretation from the intuitive or implicit aspects. This intuitive aspect relates to the picture of the world and the soul or situation surrounds the author or artist at that time he produced his work. The psychological situation of the author or artist the moment he produced his artwork was not only influenced by the state of the author's soul, but also by the social and political factors during his days. This shows that cultural development encompasses the development of religious thoughts and literature. In other words, the creation of a literary work is basically through a complex mental and psychological processes aside from the inner experiences. Observation with the method of *takwil* involves *tamsil*, *kias*, or symbolic nuances apart from just focusing on the utterance or nuances of the text (*surah*). This is necessary to achieve the final underlying meaning of the researched works, which can be spiritual or invisible and hidden behind the explicit utterance; or symbolised thru *kias* or implied meaning. The final meaning is also indicated as the inner meaning and known as *isyarah* or "suggested meaning." Most of the *pentakwil* are convinced that this inner meaning could naturally animate the text at the time of reading and ensure that the readers can understand it.

In general, this spiritual hermeneutic requires three important components in the interpretation of the text and comic visuals, namely text horizon, and context horizon in understanding the context. Firstly, the understanding of the text requires looking at the aspect of text language. Readers need to understand the comic texts and visuals so that interpreters can understand the meaning behind the text and the comic. Therefore, the first concern in hermeneutics is to cultivate the text in the aspect of language. Secondly, the context needs to be weighed in. Prior comprehension of the text is very crucial in hermeneutics because it depends on the existence of its surrounding contexts. Hence, the quest for meaning and history behind the texts will lead to partial understanding and inaccurate interpretation. Lastly, the ability to reduce meaning or context is also important in understanding the context.

Background of the Author: Rejabhad

Rejabhad (real name: Rejab bin Had) was born in Kampung Titi Timbul, Permatang Pauh, Pulau Pinang on 23 August 1939. His father, the late Pak Had, was a shaman famous for catching crocodiles. Rejabhad aspired to be a writer when he was a child. However, after graduating from school, his ambition changed into becoming a cartoonist, artist, and comic writer. Rejabhad also worked on other literary fields such as *pantun* and poems. He was recognised as one of Penang's famous writer talents. His talent and interest in cartoons and comics had been obvious since childhood. He was also very close to another famous cartoonist at that time, Rashid Din or Pabai. Rejabhad regarded him as an idol. Rejabhad also received a great amount of guidance from Pabai.

After graduating from school, he joined the military. During his time in the military, his talent was noticed by some of the top officers and they encouraged him to further develop his talent in the field of literature. Thus, it is not surprising that most of his cartoons and comics revolved around his experience in the military. According to some sources, Rejabhad was said to have worked with the Malaysian government at that time to drive out the communists from the rural areas after independence. He had painted a simple cartoon in Chinese which narrated the situation of Malaya and the condition of communists at that time. The cartoon was printed in large numbers and airdropped on the rural areas dominated by communists. Rejabhad firmly believed that cartoons and comics were suitable for all walks of life. After retiring from military service, he became a full-time comic cartoonist and comic artist for *Gila-Gila* published by Creative Enterprise magazine. He was also the editor of humour magazine. His income as a cartoonist was better than when he was a soldier. However, he continued to live a modest life because he viewed the creation of cartoons and comics as a commitment. The youngest brother of Rejabhad, Siraj Had, said that his brother loved travelling around to gather different experiences in new places. Most of his inspirations and artworks also reflected his life experience. Throughout his life, he learned a lot about religious knowledge. Therefore, it was not surprising that he inserted various religious elements in most of his works. The subjects can also be found in the writing of his cartoon and comic book. Through this, he was able to share his personal experience with readers so that his experience can be appreciated and learned by readers who can grasp it either internally or externally.

Principles, Spirit, and Struggles

The late Rejabhad used a basic principle in his comic, which is a comic serves the function to criticise certain issues. He was very careful in using the basic principle because he understood the risks if he did not handle it properly. Rejabhad drew his ideas wisely and at the same time adhered to his philosophy of never criticising sensitive issues. He was particularly well known with a cartoon that illustrated the current situation in a traditional style that was full of Malay elements. Very often, he also incorporated his philosophy in dialogue to make his cartoon and comic book more interesting.

“Anything is possible with money” was the life philosophy of *Periwira Mat Gila*, one of the most important characters created by Rejabhad in the self-titled comic. In addition to *Periwira Mat Gila*, Rejabhad also produced *Tan, Tin, Tun* (1992) and *Selendang Siti Rugayah* (1997). In *Gila-Gila*, Rejabhad was addressed as Tok Penghulu and he played the role of a mentor to many young cartoonists. The most significant input narrated by Rejabhad in *Gila-Gila* involved apparent Malay tradition in terms of drawings, storyline, humours, and language. In addition to the subtle images and sketches, the strength of his cartoon lay within the texts used, which were highly associated with traditional Malay literature such as folklore, *pantun*, proverbs, idioms, and poems. Other than beautiful and effective imagery and texts, the strength of Rejabhad's artwork also lay in the moral values and education that he channelled. Rejabhad adhered to what he called the 3M Concept in artwork, namely “entertaining, educating, and creating awareness.” These became the foundation elements of *Gila-Gila*.

SELENDANG SITI RUGAYAH

In the past, Malay comic artwork was known to be humorous or entertaining. Analysis of Malay comic books was done based on the construction of theoretical hermeneutics, assisted by traditional Malay norms and Islamic perspectives. This consideration then became the basis of comprehension and interpretation of the elements and phenomena contained in the text as a symbolic expression of the Sufi religious-mystical tradition. From the perspective of artistic and literary expression, *Selendang Siti Rugayah* by Rejabhad presents a narration of romance between two human characters. At a higher level, the esoteric consideration of love in this work had been examined in detail by using spiritual hermeneutics exposure or *takwil*. This perspective questioned the symbolic human love story, parables, analogies, and ontologies. At the same time, this visual and textual meaning were related to the soul relationship between humans and God, and its mystical relation.

The analysis of *Selendang Siti Rugayah* artwork is an attempt to discover the inner meaning or symbolism in visual and textual comics based on the three main themes that symbolise the recurring cycle in the form of spiritual sighting (quest).

This sighting refers to the changing process of the lover, who, rather than being a human who merely engaged in worldly love, was actually someone who had a divine nature with the spiritual element and encountered many trials and challenges. In this context, the stage or love theme began with consolidation but later ended with separation. The next stage was the love in separation which involved suffering and pain, but also not short of delights. The last stage was the romance of the reunion which symbolised an end to an adventure, which is a destination for a love story.

According to Lalitha Sinha (2008), a person's mystical experience, which was the direct experience of the existence of God at that moment and at present time, can be a condition beyond human understanding and explanation. However, having said that, many people have tried to deliver this experience through various traditional and sacred arts throughout the ages. Therefore, arts could be considered as a medium in expressing mystical experiences. In addition, Lalitha Sinha also referred on the statement by Schuon (2003) who claimed that all traditional arts belong to the same spiritual domain and that art is a projection of truth and beauty in the world of creation; it is an *ipso facto* or projection of perfection. It also means gathering and returning to God. The perfect example is the sacred art of the celestial inspiration: all other arts will take inspiration from the spiritual personality of the author or the creator. Most of the artistic expression, poetry, in particular, play a more significant role. In the same way that music is intermediary to musicians, paint is an intermediary tool for a painter, as is a language for an author. Through this intermediary tool, many creators of mystical and metaphysical artworks have produced a lot of artworks that described their mystical experiences.

In most religious traditions, the mystical experience is considered as an incredible experience, making it unthinkable and unimaginable to some. Under this situation, the issue arises as to how an ordinary human can describe and convey such an extraordinary experience? The answer to this question, as agreed by most major religions, is through symbolism. Humans use symbolism as a way of expressing an abstract, spiritual, and sacred experience. In this case, Lalitha Sinha (2008) explained Schuon (Coomaraswamy 1981: 252):

In order for humans to understand the world of spirituality and divinity, will be lost direct connection to God and direct depiction of spiritual. A direct depiction of spiritual form is required as there is no direct connection to God. It will then involve trying to shape or produce something that is in a recognisable form to represent something that cannot be described in words. Humans will create symbols and be able to see through the sacred form of these symbols, unlike anything else, and also to see through something invisible.

At the highest level of consciousness, the mystical experience is considered as a clash between the two intangible entities of the human soul and the divine nature. To illustrate this clash, something concrete should be used. In this context, the paradigm of a love story between a man and woman and all its accompanying aspects had been widely used by mystical experts in conveying this experience. In describing this worldly love, the love, the emphasis was not on the character but the symbolic aspects of the character. Symbolic expressions are generally related to the process that will lead to reunification and not merely the unification of God.

In this diverse mystical culture, ontology experience has emphasised that reunification with God can only be achieved after encountering many challenging trials. The journey is illustrated through the human love story of two lovers who had been separated from one another. This separation is illustrated through the quest, challenges, and the return journeys which interspersed with pain, agony, and extreme longing. This situation symbolically shows the consciousness of a separated human soul from God and the willingness to return to Him.

Negligence and Losing Love (The Wonders of God Love)

The author began the story by describing the love of lovers who crafted both his and his partner's name on a tree as a symbol of love. It is a visual narration that portrays the happiness on the face of a person who is in love. However, for a reader who grasps the idea from the spiritual point of view, this visual interpretation of the tree from inner understanding may connote different meanings. It may even create suspicions for those viewing the comic visuals and reading the texts of these comics in a spiritual manner. Every visual or text created and composed by an author has a specific purpose. Every comic design and artwork has the meaning definition of the author or the artist himself.

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا كَلِمَةً طَيِّبَةً كَشَجَرَةٍ طَيِّبَةٍ
أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ ﴿٢٤﴾

Have you not considered how Allah presents an example, (making) a good word like a good tree, whose root is firmly fixed and its branches (high) in the sky? (Surah Ibrahim: 24)

تُؤْتِي أَكْلَهَا كُلَّ حِينٍ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهَا وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

It produces its fruits all the time, by permission of its Lord. And Allah presents examples for the people that perhaps they will be reminded. (Surah Ibrahim: 25)

وَمَثَلُ كَلِمَةٍ خَبِيثَةٍ كَشَجَرَةٍ خَبِيثَةٍ اجْتُثَّتْ مِنْ فَوْقِ الْأَرْضِ
مَا لَهَا مِنْ قَرَارٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

And the example of a bad word is like a bad tree, uprooted from the surface of the earth, not having any stability. (Surah Ibrahim: 26)

مُثَبِّتُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا بِالْقَوْلِ الثَّابِتِ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا
وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ وَيُضِلُّ اللَّهُ الظَّالِمِينَ وَيَفْعَلُ اللَّهُ مَا
يَشَاءُ ﴿٢٧﴾

Allah keeps firm those who believe, with the firm word, in worldly life and in the Hereafter. And Allah sends astray the wrongdoers. And Allah does what He wills. (Surah Ibrahim: 27)

As described in Surah Ibrahim verses 24–27 shown above, Allah swt has given His servants a reminder of the power of faith in human life in the world. Faith means believing. Faith comes from the word *aamana-yukminu-iimaan*. According to the term, faith is the act of confirming with the heart, uttering verbally, and carrying out the actions. Thus, the author began the story with the scenario whereby Leman, the young man, put up the tree as a symbol of human faith towards the Creator. The beginning of this story, if understood internally, actually describes the obligation of humans to uphold and believe in the compulsory faith pillars firmly.

Furthermore, the author also described the negligence and bigotry of the couple who were in love. The author described the level of human faith towards the Creator during the trials and challenges in enhancing faith in every human being. This was determined by how they encounter the challenges and be persistent in life. The main character, Leman was deeply in love with Rugayah. He crafted both their names on the tree trunk to show the sign of their love. This shows the human lust, as in how they become engrossed in human love to the extent that they disregard their love for God.

A heart occupied with lust and illnesses opens the door to demons and closes the door to the angels of God. This kind of heart will affect the mind and perception. A person's mind at this point will only help the heart to fulfil his lust. Thus, the devils will become more powerful as they are welcomed into the person's mind. The person's level of faith will also be slowly weakened because of the darkness of the heart. If interpreted from an internal angle, the reader might hold the opinion that Leman is in the infirmity of his faith. This is because his speech reflects the nature of the servant who forgets his God as he is obsessed with his love towards another human until he upholds his love based on the love sign he crafted on a tree. Faith in Allah SWT is to acknowledge the existence of Allah SWT as the Creator of all creatures. Basically, the man's faith in God has already been instilled from the moment a man was born. From birth, the human requires constant assistance or protection. This trend of seeking protection is called "religious instinct."

If the religious belief is held strong, then the faith of the person will be resilient. The knowledge and value of faith must be practised by every Muslim. The parable of seeking or pursuing knowledge on faith is like a light that illuminates the human hearts and minds. Without the presence of knowledge, human hearts and minds will be in darkness and go astray. Therefore, Islam strongly emphasises the need for people to attain knowledge because it can be applied to benefit religion, world, and hereafter. The knowledge pursued must also be beneficial and useful to the human in general. From Anas bin Malik ra, the Prophet (PBUH) once said: "A person's faith will never be complete until he loves God and His Messenger more than others" (Riwayat Al-Bukhari: 13).

The Prophet's Hadith above explains that a servant should be perfecting his faith to Allah SWT and His Messenger before loving other humans. It is described as how a servant should put his heart to God and prioritises Him from the rest. In Leman and Rugayah, the author described the worldly love affair of humans resulted in them neglecting the Creator. The characters were so immersed in human love and lust to the extent that they forgot God.

The negligence of Leman and Rugayah towards God is clearly illustrated by the author when they were at the culmination of their love affair, where they bound their love pact on Rugayah's shawl. It symbolises the unifying tool between them. This situation also shows the loss of human love towards the Creator when they are more inclined to desire human love rather than obey the command of Allah SWT. Every human being is obligated to devote themselves to Allah SWT and to be grateful to Him. God said,

قُلْ هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْشَأَكُمْ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ

It is He who has created you and made your hearing, sight, and heart. But little is it that you give thanks. (Surah Al-Mulk: 23)

The Anxiety of Love (Test on Human)

The love between Leman and Rugayah was tested when she was forced to marry Tok Bek, a famous martial arts instructor in the village, as instructed by her parents. In life, every human being will be tested by God. The author of the comic created a conflicted story plot between Rugayah and her parents when she was forced to accept a marriage proposal from a man who she never loved. Her faith was tested when her parents agreed with Tok Bek's marriage proposal. Visuals and texts were used by the author to illustrate how Rugayah had to choose between the heirlooms *keris* (double-edged dagger) and suitcases. At this stage, the test given by Allah SWT was actually about the feeling of anxiety on the love towards the Creator. The wisdom and effects of each test given will draw people to be closer to Him in life. The spiritual nature of this comic work seems more rational and it is the psychological advice that mankind needs regardless of the boundaries of religion. In the human spirit, love

is a great strength that could never be defeated. God's love for human and human love to God both stem from the relationship and love between the human and God. Love never fails in tests, no matter how big the test is because love will defeat loneliness and solitude regardless of the pressure. The culmination of love is selfishness and thus, it enters the stage of *baqa'* (eternal). At this point, a person is no longer burdened by the desire of lust in performing his duties and responsibilities. When a man reaches this kind of situation, he would be indulged in the sweet love blessed by God.

Gayah: If you love me, just keep in your heart. That's the best way for you.

Leman: Why?

Gayah: If love is in the heart, only God knows its glory. If it is uttered out, it is known and destroyed.

Leman: Well, how about our agreement?

Gayah: Even the covenant with God could be withdrawn, what more with human beings.

This sentence provides an overview of Rugayah's love with the current trial she encounters. The anxiety of love happens whenever one is tested by Allah SWT. It is actually creating anxiety of love towards the Creator so that he or she will remember to be closer to Allah SWT.

Allah SWT said:

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِ نَفْسُهُ. وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ
 جَبَلِ الْوَرِيدِ ١٦

And We have already created man and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than (his) jugular vein. (Surah Qaaf: 16)

When Allah SWT has already said that, then there must be something wrong with ourselves if we fail to take delight from the soul that is filled with love for Allah SWT. When Allah SWT declares that He is near, but we feel distanced, it is possible that we are the ones who are getting away from Him.

The author has described that upon returning home, Leman told Malim the sad news about the meeting between him, Gayah, and her parents. Malim persuaded Leman who was crying in front of him that, "Do not cry, Leman. Men should never cry; men only cry while performing *tahajjud* and in front of the Kaabah."

The text and visual situation illustrated by the author shows that Leman was in despair and disappointed with what had happened. This anxiety and restlessness are the signs that would draw Leman to remember and to be closer to Allah SWT and to approach Him so that his heart will be at peace and be stronger to face the trials and challenges. It is also a human journey to know Him better and to be closer to Allah SWT. The *tahajjud* prayers is a sign of gratitude towards the blessings from Allah SWT. It is also a way to strengthen the soul and devotion of a servant to Allah SWT. This prayer also seeks to gain peace in facing the challenges and trials in human life.

The Longing of Love (Sincere Acceptance of His Destiny)

The author created a feeling of longing for the Creator in Leman's heart when the character Malim said "Crying is a nature of women, they love to cry, in despair they cry, on the first night they cry, when people left for pilgrimage they also cry. When people died, women also cry, when it is forbidden to cry in front of the deceased." When humans are tested by trials, we often cry. However, this symbolises a feeling of longing and human love towards Allah SWT so much so that we pray to be closer to Him. The human heart at this point has been touched by the feeling of longing for love and also to pray and seek help with the remembrance of Allah SWT. Every test faced by man should not be mourned, but instead, we need to ask Allah SWT for the perseverance and strength to encounter every test and trial in our life.

The conflicting situation peaked when Leman succumbed and accepted the fact about Rugayah's marriage. He decided to leave the house with a heart full of pain and despair as reflected in this dialogue, "I'm sad Gayah! I'm disappointed!! My life is now ruined Gayah!!" At that moment, a shaman named Pak Sukun approached Leman and started the conversation below after listening to Leman's screams.

Leman: Leave me alone here.

Pak Sukun: Actually, you have an associate.

Leman: Who is my associate?

Pak Sukun: Satan. Satan really likes people who are alone in despair, except those who are contemplating about themselves.

The author once again described the situation in which Leman was tested with his own feeling, to be lonely and in despair. This lonely situation created a feeling of longing for love towards Allah SWT, besides from presenting an opportunity for one to consider calmly about the wisdom behind every test and incident that happens. At this point in time, the human will be wishing for help from God and at the same time, this situation will strengthen a person's remembrance towards Allah SWT. When we neglect the love for God, then we will lose His love for our souls. Here, the longing for the love from the Creator exists when we obey and comply with each of His commands.

The Reality of Love (Acceptance and Return to God)

The author ended the conflict in the story by uniting Malim and Gayah as legitimate husband and wife while Leman accepted to his fate destined by Allah SWT.

I will travel to Makkah. I will devote myself to Allah in front of Kaabah because I know and I realise that our love for Allah is the only true love. It is pure and it will promise us eternal happiness in the world and hereafter.

The phrases illustrate the feelings and self-contemplation of human beings on the test and the trials that he faced. When the pleasure of love is felt in the soul of a human being towards the Creator, then the truth of love from Allah SWT will exist in his heart. The hearts and souls of people who take delight in this kind of love will be more sensitive to the prohibitions and limitations of Allah SWT. If one is always remembering and worshipping Allah SWT in his heart and soul, then he will obtain a peaceful mind and soul in his life in the world and hereafter. Leman said to Gayah (Rejabhad 2001):

Gayah! We could not stitch the *Selendang Siti Rugayah* on the first night as we have planned in this world...

It's okay Gayah...we'll stitch it later in the hereafter.

The author also illustrated the situation in which Leman's soul and faith discovered true love the moment he succumbed on the test given to him. It was an illustration of Leman's belief in God's fate. When the human soul is in negligence and it had lost the sweetness of God's love, the human needs to fill the longing and emptiness of the heart and soul by drawing himself closer to Him. Leman was pleased and surrendered to God's fate and he left through the river, and then said (Rejabhad 2001):

Oh foot, bring me to Makkah.

Oh river, please can you vanish this *Selendang Siti Rugayah* so that it's no longer in my memory.

The reality of the love from Allah SWT will present whenever one is always striving to fill the emptiness of his soul and faith by turning to Allah SWT. Happiness in a human's life could be empowered by strong soul and deep faith. Moreover, it is the eternal love that will sustain and provide happiness in the love towards Allah SWT.

CONCLUSION

The story of *Selendang Siti Rugayah* is not merely about the love between humans but it is also about the belief, strong faith, and true love towards the Creator. In addition, it is a story about the journey of human life in facing trials and worldly challenges which is capable to awaken the soul, touch the innermost of people's heart, and test the human faith. The story touches on the colourful life journey of Malay people in the Islamic village apart from embracing the meaning behind the nature of Malay culture holistically, in complete reflection of the visual and textual forms. Spiritual hermeneutic is a form of interpretation that is capable of narrating love, triggering nervousness, recording dilemmas, connecting stories, painting the meaning, and savouring the soul confession. It is also the recording of a life that tries to echo the Creator's magnificent tone through meaningful bonds.

For every event that occurred before our eyes, including falling leaves, blown dust, can all be interpreted as trouble or pleasure, in constraint or spaciousness. Allah SWT wants us to ponder on and confront the situation. Only those whose hearts are awakened are able to take wisdom from things that happened to them. Therefore, we must learn to grasp the meaning of every occurrence because only from the comprehension would we be able to know and discover the bounties and blessings of Allah SWT. Spiritual hermeneutics applied in the Malay comics were able to secure the inner meaning through the text and visual in the comics eventually.

Selendang Siti Rugayah is not simply a humorous comic story, it is a narration on the current situation of the local community and their experience during that time. It also portrays manners and the basis of human civilisation in life. The story also depicts the value of human love, which is said to be blinded by ignorance and lust which leads to the abandonment of the religion and commands from Allah SWT. This implicit interpretation resulted in a new analysis of the comprehension of human true love story through a spiritual destination in seeking the Creator, which is the interpretation of the text and comic visual through religious thought, intellect, spirit, and soul. Therefore, *Selendang Siti Rugayah* is likely to be a journey and unification between humans and the Creator in worldly life. This comic is also an artwork in the form of creative imagination and personal expression of its narrator, based on his experience, thoughts, emotions, ideas, and confidence in producing beautiful literary artwork.

Rejabhad, the author of this comic artwork, also produced this story as a representation of the ultimate love in this life, which is the love towards Allah SWT. His personal traits and self-identity were portrayed in the literary artwork which emphasises on spiritual understanding in seeking the divine love of God. To understand it, observation, reading, and inner comprehension through spiritual hermeneutics in comic artwork need to be coupled with the creative imagination of the worldly life. In short, his work encapsulates that life is always full of tests, trials, and experiences that educate humans on the purpose of worldly life, as well as the life journey in accomplishing true love, which is the love to the Creator.

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