

The Symbols and Interpretants of Beetle and Flower in The Malay Pantun

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Abstract

This paper discusses the symbols and interpretants of young man (*teruna*) and young woman (*dara*) that are indirectly expressed in the traditional Malay pantun. Beetle (*kumbang*) and flower (*bunga*) as the symbols and interpretants are selected for the discussion because these two symbols are often presented simultaneously in the meaning part of the pantun. Both symbols and interpretants, like other symbols, imply a conventional meaning. The implicit meaning is shared by the poet who creates the pantun and the listener. Therefore, when a symbol is mentioned in a pantun, the listener knows its meaning. The conventional meaning of symbols and interpretants in the pantun is compatible with the pantun itself as a poetic communication tool in life. Thus, the pantun is different from the modern poetry that uses symbols and interpretants which are more personal and requires the readers to imply the meaning. In the pantun, the symbols with their conventional meanings help the listeners to understand something related to the symbols and interpretants. Hence, beetle and flower with the meaning of a young man and a young woman that are expressed in the quatrain (four lines) pantun which is the most popular traditional pantun among the traditional Malay community will be discussed.

Keywords: Symbol, Interpretant, Meaning

Introduction

In life, whether it is still-life or real life, human thinks and acts based on signs. Attaining needs such as food, clothing, work, self-defense and ambition are among human thoughts and actions. Signs that are no less important as the basis of human thought and action in life are symbols and interpretants. These two types of signs which are often related, become the basis of the semiotic theory presented by Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher

who was living in the same era as Ferdinand de Saussure, a linguist who introduced the theory of semiology at the beginning of the 20th Century.

Symbol and Interpretant

Peirce in his semiotic theory introduced a system with three categories. Thirdness becomes a legisign and eventually a symbol. For Peirce, thirdness is the most problematic part because it is a law or rule that applies in general. Thirdness in Peirce's semiotic theory acts as an intermediary between firstness and secondness. In firstness, the feeling must be clear, even if the feeling is only possible and general. In secondness, there is a sign of individuality and action. When a person realises that he is sad because of some reasons, then the feeling is thirdness. Therefore, the relationship between feelings is actually determined by the rules that apply in general (Cobley and Jansz, 1997/2002). Therefore, legisign is a law or rule that applies in general. It is a convention and a code as it implies sinsign, second that associates it with third (Van Zoest, 1993). Language can be considered as an example of legisign. Every nation has its own language. The language of a nation has its laws and rules that apply in general. Communication that takes place in nations that share the same language is often smoother because the people who speak understand each sign of the language that is in their minds (Tengku Intan and Mohamad, 2009).

Symbol is like the legisign and it is known as third. Therefore, symbol is an arbitrary and a conventional sign (Dani and Tedi, 2006) because of its arbitrary appearance in a society. Thus, there is no source based on thought and consideration to name something as a symbol. In Malay, house as a residence appears as a symbol because its name is arbitrary and conventional. Symbol in linguistic meaning is a direct communication tool that refers to a real object found in reality. Symbol represents the object. In literary works, a symbol does not represent an object, rather, it suggests other meaning. The bird symbol found in the pantun is no longer referred to a two-legged, warm-blooded animal that has two wings which enable it to fly. The bird symbol in the pantun usually suggests a woman who already has a husband or has a relationship with a man and is no longer single like a girl or a widow.

Mohamad (2021) in his study stated that interpretant is a concept of value on a sign, in which the sign has been in someone's mind. When someone sees a sign and recognises it, the value of the sign expands. The definition in each discipline is an interpretant because someone might develop it further. Therefore, there are many definitions in a certain field of science such as the definition of sociology. Hence, the interpretant is an endless sign. Choosing one of the definitions presented as a basis in conducting a research means that the interpretant must also be a definitive sign.

Research Objectives

- To identify the symbols of beetle and flower in the traditional Malay pantun
- To analyse the implicit meaning of beetle and flower symbols in the traditional Malay pantun

Research Methodology

This study used the literature review method. The research material was obtained from the collection of *Kurik Kundi Merah Saga* (KKMS) pantun, published by (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2015). This pantun collection contains a total of 5154 stanzas that were recorded and collected by researchers from Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in the Malay Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak. From 5154 stanzas in the pantun collection, ten stanzas have been selected for

this research to show the relationship between the symbol and the reader's interpretation of the beetle and flower symbols with the suggested meaning of young man and young woman. To make the description more systematic, each stanza of the pantun was marked with a number from one to ten followed by the position of the pantun found in the KKMS pantun collection. This process was done manually. Each pantun which uses the symbols that represent young man and young woman were collected, sorted and arranged in page order. Sorting process was done on the selection and evaluation of pantun based on the symbols used.

Literature Review

Based on the research conducted on Malay poetry such as the pantun, various studies have been conducted related to the use of natural elements such as flora and fauna as symbols in expressing meanings. Mohammad and Noriah (2020) conducted a survey on the use of flower symbol in the pantun. This study aimed to identify and analyse flower symbol and examine the most dominant type of flower. The flower symbol used in this study was taken from the pantun under advice category in the KKMS book. The study found that the flower symbol used in pantun carries an implicit meaning that usually serves as an advice and admonition to the community. The flower symbol does not only have various meanings of its own, but it is able to show the creativity of the Malay community in applying the concept of flower with behaviour, objects, things and events that happen in human life.

In contrast, Zabedah and Shaiful (2020) conducted a study on the portrayal of female character depicted through flower symbol in Malay proverbs. This study used 13 proverbs that contain flower symbol to represent woman which were taken from *Kamus Istimewa Peribahasa Melayu*. The study found that the use of flower as a symbol of woman is appropriate as flower and woman have similar characteristics. There are some similarities between flower and woman in terms of life cycle in which blossom is symbolised as virgin while withered flower is symbolised as not virgin or woman with bad luck. The use of flower as a symbol can convey the hidden meaning of the proverb that can be conveyed more accurately even though it brings different interpretations.

Maulana and Hashimah (2018) conducted a study related to the use of bird element as symbols in the pantun. The study focused on three types of dominant birds which are pigeon, sparrow and mynah. The selection of these types of birds is based on the frequency of their usage in the KKMS pantun collection. Important aspects in human life can be translated through the use of animal element as symbols in which 'birds' symbolises 'humans', for instance, pigeon symbolises love between humans, sparrow symbolises the power between humans and mynah symbolises sadness, grief and disappointment experienced by humans. This study found that birds are symbols for humans. For example, the pigeon refers to love, romance and loyalty. The sparrow is a symbol of a person's position, rank and status while the mynah symbolises sadness, disappointment and grief.

Besides, Hussain et al (2017) through her study, *Simbol Tumbuhan dalam Pantun Melayu Bingkisan Permata* found that the Malay community uses plant as symbols to convey implicit and explicit meanings. The plant symbol was chosen in pantun based on the experiences and observations of the Malay community who involved in agricultural activities. Agricultural activities are very closely related to the lives of the Malay community as their sources of

income are mostly through agriculture such as farming and gardening. The agricultural products are for the family use only. The study conducted by Hussain et al (2017) has divided agricultural plant into two types, vegetables and fruits. The analysis of this study used the principle known as '*Prinsip Dunia Luas yang Dipadatkan*', which is one of the principles of Malay Poetry (*Puitika Sastera Melayu*) introduced by Muhammad Haji Salleh. This study found that vegetables and fruits are agricultural products that are used as symbols to express advice, admonition, dream, hope and consensus in society.

Furthermore, Muhamad (2017) conducted a study on the Semantic Mapping Analysis of Flora and Fauna Elements in the Malay Poetry: A Preliminary Review (*Analisis Pemetaan Semantik Unsur Flora dan Fauna dalam Pantun Melayu: Satu Tinjauan Awal*). The elements of nature are very close to the life of the Malay community. Therefore, this study aimed to see the semantic universality of natural elements and the Malay wisdom in conveying ideas and thoughts (*akal budi*) in the creation of the pantun. The research focused on three aspects which are identifying flora and fauna symbols, identifying Malay wisdom in conveying ideas and thoughts for the selection of flora and fauna symbols and analysing flora and fauna symbols in the Malay pantuns based on semantic mapping. The study found that the use of flora and fauna symbols in the Malay pantuns gives an impression of love. In addition, this study has proven the greatness of the Malay wisdom in conveying the ideas and thoughts through the pantuns. This study revealed to the community about the greatness of the Malay wisdom in conveying ideas and thoughts and also accustomed the community to use wisdom when communicating.

Findings and Discussion

According to Mohamad (2009), although the Malay society nowadays makes modernity as an important feature in life, it is difficult to find the Malays who do not know about the pantun. The pantun is a traditional poetry that is considered as the identity of the Malay community. Apart from mantra, the pantun is the earliest type of traditional poetry that existed in the Malay community. The quatrain pantun (*Pantun Empat Kerat*) appears as the most popular pantun among other types of pantuns. Every age group reveals it. Children sing the pantuns while playing and express their happiness. Some of the young people express their feelings of love, disappointment and wanting to travel through the pantuns. Advice and religious teaching are expressed by the elders through the pantuns.

Some of the pantun expression by the young and old people have direct meaning. There are also the pantuns that express the meaning indirectly by using symbols. "Beetle" (*kumbang*) and "flower" (*bunga*) are the symbols that are often used to convey the meaning in the pantuns. The linguistic meaning of beetle is a winged and hard-skinned insect while flower is the reproductive part of the plant, usually bright and fragrant. In the pantun, these two symbols do not represent the objects but they provide images and suggest other meanings. 'Flower' in the pantuns suggests the meaning of a young woman while 'beetle' suggests the meaning of a young man.

The meaning of flower which is young woman and the beetle which is young man do not change in any traditional pantuns. Thus, the meaning of the two symbols is arbitrary, conventional and code in the Malay culture. The meaning of the symbol is unchanged because the pantun is a poetic communication tool. If the meaning of the same symbol changes like in

the modern poetry because the poet tends to express their conventional meaning by inserting a new meaning, the communication will be interrupted or unable to run smoothly.

A symbol is not only an image and implies a meaning, but also relates to the interpretant of the receiver of the symbol. The value of a woman who is symbolised as a flower might develop further. This is further proven when the study was done on a number of pantuns that use the flower symbol to convey the meaning. Thus, a total of 10 traditional pantuns have been selected in this research to show the relationship between the symbols and the reader's interpretant of the flower symbol.

Youths experience lots of feelings and emotions. A young man begins to have feelings for a young woman from the same village who has captured his heart. He wants to love and to be loved. That feeling encourages him to get married as he has someone special in his mind, and therefore inspires his family to take important steps of 'merisik' (surveying customs) and 'meminang' (marriage proposal). These steps must be made as they are traditional Malay wedding customs which are still being practised in the modern era. The desire of the young man can be seen in this Malay pantun;

*Bunga raya di atas peti,
Bunga melur di atas bahu;
Memang ada niat di hati,
Hendak menyunting bunga yang satu.
(Saga, 2015:76)*

The hibiscus is on the fridge,
The jasmine is on the shoulder;
There is indeed an intention in my heart,
I want to propose the only flower in my heart.
(Saga, 2015:76)

A young man being attracted to a young woman or a young woman has feelings for a young man is normal as the Supreme Being has created humans in pairs or dualism. However, a young man who has his heart set on a young woman should not try to seduce her. He should investigate first whether the young woman already has a boyfriend, a fiancée or still single. If he knew that the woman already has a boyfriend or a fiancée, he should not seduce her. Something bad will probably happen if he continues to seduce her because her boyfriend or fiancée would probably act unexpectedly like starting a fight. However, it does not mean that the young man is a coward as he does not dare to face the challenges to get the woman who has captured his heart. For a peaceful society, he prioritises the society over personal interest. The interpretant of the flower symbol can be seen in the Malay pantun that uses questioning tone:

*Hisap sigup tembakau Cina,
Keluar asap berbunga-bunga;
Jangan marah abang bertanya,
Bunga di taman siapa punya?
(Saga, 2015:124)*

I smoke Chinese tobacco,

It produces flowery smoke;
Don't be angry, I want to ask,
Who's the owner of the flower in the garden?
(Saga 2015:124)

If in the previous Malay pantun, the poet asks whether the young woman already has her choice or not, the Malay Pantun below is the poet's confession that he has investigated the woman. The woman does not seem to have a special relationship with another man. Thus, he still has a chance to win the woman's heart. The statement about the woman that has "feelings for the man" (*sudah berkenan di hati*) is emphasised by the poet by using the wordopname style (The repetition of the word at the end of the line is used to start the next line), for instance, the word "flower" at the end of the third line is repeated at the beginning of the fourth line;

*Kalau sudah beralih nama,
Mari bawa ke dalam puri;
Saya sudah siasatnya bunga,
Bunga sudah berkenan di hati.*
(Saga, 2015:156)

If you have changed your name,
Let's bring it into the puree;
I have investigated the flower,
The flower has feelings for me.
(Saga, 2015:156)

"*Kumbang*" or beetle is a symbol that suggests the meaning of a young man in the Malay Pantun below. The man takes care of the woman he loves. He could only look at that woman as he realises that he could not possibly have her. Therefore, it is likely that the man who is taking care of the woman is not her father or brother. The man might be her fiancé. Disappointment balanced by his rational mind is expressed as follows

Kapal terbang masuk Perlis,
Kalah berperang negeri Jerman;
Bunga kembang ambil tak boleh,
Ada kumbang di dalam taman.
(Saga, 2015:167)

The airplane flies to Perlis,
Germany lost the war;
I couldn't pick the flower,
There is a beetle in the garden.
(Saga, 2015:167)

A woman will not be attracted to a man just like that. There must be something special about the man that makes her captivated. The pantun below does not specifically make the man special as he can "pick the flower" or literally means that he can make the woman as his lover. The poet only suggested to the man that he could find the best way to seduce the woman

first. If he managed to find a way, then it would be easier for him to have her. The poet's suggestion is expressed through clothes which is "*kain pelikat*" as a prefatory statement (pembayang) of the pantun:

Kalau nak pakai kain pelekat,
Ikatlah molek dipandang cantik;
Carilah cara untuk memikat,
Agar dapat bunga dipetik.
(Kurik Kundi Merah Saga 2015:155)

If you want to wear *kain pelikat*,
You have to tie it neatly to look beautiful;
Let's find a way to be charming,
And be able to pick the flower.
(Kurik Kundi Merah Saga 2015:155)

A young man also realises that to get the woman of his dream is not easy. Obstacles await him if he pursues his wish. The "thorn" in the pantun below is a symbol that implies the meaning of the obstacles he must face. The obstacles may come from the woman's parents and relatives. Despite realising the fact that it would be difficult to get the woman of his dream, the young man keeps trying. Finally, it turns out that he fails to have her. More than that, he is also affected by the obstacles. This is expressed through his frustrated feelings:

Jika betul anak menteri,
Hang Jebat raja Melaka;
Bunga diambil dalam duri,
Bunga tak dapat tangan luka.
(Kurik Kundi Merah Saga 2015:137)

If you are the minister's son,
Hang Jebat is the King of Malacca;
The flower is picked among the thorns,
I can't have the flower and my hand is injured.
(Kurik Kundi Merah Saga 2015:137)

The deep feeling of a man for a woman is expressed in various ways in the pantun. The man in the pantun below intended that it is better to die if he could not have the woman he loves which is expressed through the line "*Biarlah kumbang mati beragan*" which means "Let the beetle die". This line also means that the poet is not ready to accept another woman if the woman he loves falls into the hands of another man. Therefore, this pantun emphasises feeling above rationality. This is true as when people are drunk in love, they will lose their rationality. The poet expresses his feeling through the pantun:

Ke darat mengembang payung,
Payung dikembang hari pun hujan;
Kalau tak dapat bunga sekuntum,
Biarlah kumbang mati beragan.
(Kurik Kundi Merah Saga 2015:169)

The umbrella is opened on land,
The umbrella is opened when it rains;
If the flower couldn't be owned,
Let the beetle die.

(Kurik Kundi Merah Saga 2015:169)

Rationale or reasonable thought as the basis of certain beliefs and actions is reflected in the pantun below and can be considered as a reaction from the expression of the pantun above. In the pantun above, the expression comes from a person who has deep feelings towards the woman he loves while the expression in the pantun below comes from a person who does not experience that feeling. Therefore, the poet is more rational in his expression, "Should I grab one flower/ As if there are no other flowers" "*Hendak direbut bunga setangkai/ Bukan tak ada bunga lain.*" The entire pantun that brings the meaning "In life, there are many other options available if one option cannot be realised" is expressed as follows:

Ke darat mari mengendong rambai,
Rambai dikendong dalam kain;
Hendak direbut bunga setangkai,
Bukan tak ada bunga lain.

(Kurik Kundi Merah Saga 2015: 169)

Let's carry the *rambai* to the land,
The *rambai* is carried in a piece of cloth;
Should I grab one flower,
As if there are no other flowers.

(Kurik Kundi Merah Saga 2015:169)

The statement of advice in the pantun above with rational thought can be considered as an answer from the young man for his action in the pantun below

Mudik ke hulu mengait rambai,
Rambai menarik lengan baju;
Saya tak rebut bunga setangkai,
Bunga lain sedap bau.

(Kurik Kundi Merah Saga, 2015:204)

I'm going to the upstream to collect the rambai,
The rambai tears the sleeves;
I don't fight for a flower,
There are other flowers which smell good.

(Kurik Kundi Merah Saga 2015:204)

The pantun below is more related to the surveying custom or '*merisik*' in the Malay community. The one who expresses the pantun is not the young man or the advice from someone who is in a relationship, but it is from someone on behalf of the young man to the representative of the young woman. The purpose of the man's representatives coming to the woman's house is clear, "To pick the flower in the garden" ("*Hendak menyunting bunga di*

taman"). This verse from the pantun below is more subtle, polite and pleasing to the woman who hears it:

Kejat-kejat dari Patani,
Kemunting dari Kemaman;
Besar hati datang ke mari,
Hendak menyunting bunga di taman.
(Kurik Kundi Merah Saga 2015:163)

Conclusion

The symbols and reader's interpretations on the ten stanzas of the pantuns focus more on the thoughts and actions of a young man who has deep feelings towards the woman he loves. There is not much advice for the young man regarding the feelings and surveying custom (*merisik*). As the thoughts and actions come from man, the "flower" as a symbol of young woman in the pantun is more static. If the value of the flower symbol develops further in the reader's mind, it can be associated with the position of women in the traditional Malay society. Usually, women in the Malay society are very limited in their actions as they must comply with the society's norms. Their marriage will also be arranged by the family. Therefore, the Malay pantun is a reflection of the traditional Malay community lifestyle.

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