Reification in John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl*

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Abstrak:

Penelitian ini merupakan sebuah penelitian kepustakaan terhadap karya sastra John Steinbeck yang berjudul *The Pearl*. Penelitian ini menganalisa aspek-aspek reifikasi yang terdapat dalam cerita tersebut. Reifikasi adalah sebuah istilah marxis yang dicetuskan oleh George Lukacs untuk mendeskripsikan relasi material kebendaan antar manusia. Penelitian ini membuktikan bahwa dalam karya sastra tersebut terdapat relasi reifikasi dalam tokoh-tokoh yang berhubungan dalam sistem kelas.

Kata Kunci : Reification

A. Introduction

One of the famous thinkers in the last three centuries is Karl Marx. Karl Marx influences many fields of social sciences and humaniora. Therefore he can be called as a philosopher. The interesting thing is that Karl Marx influences not only intellectuals, but also revolutionary people. The idea of Karl Marx on class struggle and his critique on the savage of capitalism makes him not only a kind of scientist but even a prophet with his infability.

Karl Marx influences revolutionary people around the world to fight against capitalists by creating a new world order based on the principle of communism. The principle of communism lays on the idea of Marx’s scientific socialism. This kind of socialism states that the class struggle is based on the class struggle and dialectics of materialism which is against the traditional value of socialism that is utopia socialism.

The class of struggle that is experienced by the proletariats, those are the poor people is also found in the literary work. One of them is John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl*. It is a short novel portraying a poor family that experiences a poor condition leading to the family ruin because of the family’s poverty and the brutality of the capitalists.
B. Research Problem

This research examines how reification is practiced by characters in the story of *The Pearl* which is written by John Steinbeck.

C. Theoretical Background: George Lukacs on Reification

Discussing the class struggle that leads to reification in a literary work requires a profound understanding of the meaning of criticism and its branches of criticism. Criticism is the branch of study concerning with defining, classifying, expounding, and evaluating works of literature (Abrams: 1971:36). Among some criticism proposed by M. H. Abrams, this paper applies pragmatic approach. According to M.H. Abrams pragmatic criticism views the work as something which is constructed in order to achieve certain effects on the audience, and it tends to judge the value of the work according to its success in achieving that aim (Abrams, 1971: 37). From the explanation, it can be learnt that pragmatic criticism aims to give a value concerning the way that the readers enjoy the literary work.

Pragmatic criticism is used in this paper to see how a literary work is related to an idea out of the literary work itself by this work paper researcher. John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl* is studied through a Marxian philosophy that is reification. This work is studied from a philosophical approach because there is a relationship between a literary work and philosophy. According to Wellek and Warren (1963: 121) stated that literature and philosophy cannot be separated, because readers of philosophical books can find the ideas in the forms of literary works. In this paper, the idea of reification as a part of Marxism is applied.

To understand reification, a scholar must trace back to the idea of Marx’s philosophy of class struggle. Class struggle is social class antagonism. It is seen from the perspective of the poor. The concept of class struggle is closely related to alienation. Alienation in Marxism is rooted in Marx’s idea that individuals become separated and not harmony with their own self (Sargent, 1985:112). *Entfremdung* (estrangement) is Karl Marx’s theory of alienation, which describes the separation of things that naturally belong together; and the placement of antagonism between things that are properly in harmony. Theoretically, *Entfremdung* describes the social alienation (estrangement) of people from aspects of their human nature (*Gattungswesen*, “species-essence”) as a consequence of living
in a society stratified into social classes; the theory is expressed in his early writings, especially the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1927). Lyman T. Sargent states that it is part of young Marx’s writing which shows the early writings of him. On his early writing, Marx is not really deterministic on his law like his following works. By definition of alienation, it can be learnt alienation makes human beings cannot live fully within his best human capability because of his forced condition living miserably in a capitalistic system. When someone works in a coal mine as a laborer, and faces a hard condition he will get troubles of bearing his life as a human being. He works as a machine rather than as a human being.

Alienation is closely related to reification. Reification is an objectification, means regarding something as separate business matter, the social relationship between human is expressed by the relationship between traded object. Reification in thought occurs when an abstract concept describing a relationship or context is treated as a concrete "thing", or if something is treated as if it were a separate object when this is inappropriate because it is not an object or because it does not truly exist in separation.

Marx argues that reification is an inherent and necessary characteristic of economic value such as it manifests itself in market trade, i.e. the inversion in thought between object and subject, or between means and ends, reflects a real practice where attributes (properties, characteristics, features, powers) which exist only by virtue of a social relationship between people are treated as if they are the inherent, natural characteristics of things, or vice versa, attributes of inanimate things are treated as if they are attributes of human subjects. Alienation is the general condition of human estrangement. Reification is a specific form of alienation.

After Marx, the concept was developed by a Hungarian Marxist, Georg Lukács in "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat", part of his book *History and Class Consciousnes*. Lukacs (1923) states that Reification is an objectification, means regarding something as separate business matter, the social relationship between human is expressed by the relationship between traded object. Human as subject shifting into object and thing as object shifting into subject which
mean the way of human sees other human because of their money or valuable things they have. It becomes the fundamental reason for reified offender to having relationship with others in their social life.

His fate is typical of society as a whole in that this self-objectification, this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanised and dehumanising function of the commodity relation. (George Lukacs, 1923:7).

From the above quotation, it can be learnt that human beings function just as commodity. Human beings experience the process of dehumanization in a capitalistic system. The relationship between human beings is based on commodity. Human beings fall into the function of machine (Lukacs,1923:5). Lukacs further states that:

The objectification of their labour-power into something opposed to their total personality (a process already accomplished with the sale of that labour-power as a commodity) is now made into the permanent ineluctable reality of their daily life. Here, too, the personality can do no more than look on helplessly while its own existence is reduced to an isolated particle and fed into an alien system. On the other hand, the mechanical disintegration of the process of production into its components also destroys those bonds that had bound individuals to a community in the days when production was still ‘organic’ (Lukacs,1923:5).

From the above quotation, it can learnt that reification makes human being who lives in a capitalistic system suffers a problem from his external power controlling him so that he becomes to lose his “humanly” relation with his community.

D. Research Method

This research is a descriptive qualitative research. Qualitative research is created to find out a target audience’s range of behavior in which in this research means the characters that are studied and the perceptions. In his outstanding summary of the nature of qualitative study, Erickson (1986) claims that the primary characteristic of qualitative research is the centrality of interpretation (education.illinois.edu). The results of qualitative research are descriptive. This research is conducted both by using intrinsic and extrinsic approaches to analyze the topic. Intrinsic approach is applied in order to reveal the elements of literature that exist in the story The Pearl, such as study on character, theme, plot, etcetera. However, the researcher also uses extrinsic approach that is Marxism. The data sources of this
research is taken from a novella entitled “The Pearl” written by John Steinbeck. This research does the analysis by interpreting the data through description and explanation. The researcher uses deductive and inductive techniques. Deductive technique is a technique used to explain something from general principles to specific principle, while inductive one is a technique used to explain something in particular to general only. In order to support explanation, Little (1996:201) states:

Deductive is the process of reasoning from general principles to particular conclusion. Inductive is the opposite process one in which many examples are considered, leading to information for a general principle in summary of all the evidences.

E. Analysis

The story is centered on the life of a poor Indian family, Kino, his wife Juana, and his only child Coyotito. As a traditional family, this family lives with no great expectation. The environment where the family lives is under the antagonism of class and even it is sharpened with racial prejudice. There is no doubt that Kino family is from Indian race that is subordinated for hundred years under the rule of the whites. The unbalance relation between the groups make the relation is full of reification, the process of commodification. This can be seen from the following quotation:

Kino hesitated a moment. This doctor was not of his people. This doctor was of a race which for nearly four hundred years had beaten and starved and robbed and despised Kino's race, and frightened it too, so that the indigene came humbly to the door. And as always when he came near to one of this race, Kino felt weak and afraid and angry at the same time. Rage and terror went together. He could kill the doctor more easily than he could talk to him, for all of the doctor's race spoke to all of Kino's race as though they were simple animals (Steinbeck, 1945: 9).

From the above quotation, it is studied that reification takes place. The doctor who comes from a ruling class race calls the Indian race as simple animals. It is a kind of reification because human beings that come from the same species in this universe should treat other people equally, as the same level of human beings. If it does not work, this will lead to a dehumanization process, and this comes to reification. The doctor treats the Indian people, like Kino as just a kind of animals. Animals are part of
commodity that should work hard like other machine, or to be precisely production machine. The Indians are merely seen as things not human beings so that they can be squeezed, colonized and “forced” to serve the human beings, the capitalists. Because of this reification point of view, it is right morally for the doctor race or group to make the Indian race marginalized.

Reification also takes place when the capitalistic doctor asks money to cure Kino’s only son, Coyotito. This statement is supported by the quotation below:

"Have I nothing better to do than cure insect bites for ‘little Indians'? I am a doctor, not a veterinary."
"Yes, Patron," said the servant.
"Has he any money?" the doctor demanded. "No, they never have any money. I, I alone in the world am supposed to work for nothing- and I am tired of it. See if he has any money!" (Steinbeck, 1945: 10).

From the above quotation, it can be learnt that the doctor judges and values his patient from his richness. He is eager to cure someone if the one has money. His justification for this behavior is that he feels that he has helped others so far not for money, and it is the turn for him to make money. Finally the doctor’s servant asks whether Kino has money or not. This is een from the following quotation:

“Have you money to pay for the treatment?” (Steinbeck, idem)

The above quotation shows that the doctor’s point of view regards others is influenced by the theory of George Lukacs’ reification. Men undergo the process of dehumanization. Men are seen merely as commodity, who are valued from the capacity of resulting material benefit for the capitalists. Men are not seen as human beings but as things. The relationship between men is changed into production tool or process.

This humiliation makes Kino family, in this case Juana is influenced by reification. It happens when Kino and she want to find something valuable, something material that functions as a wealth thing. The following quotation supports the idea:

She had not prayed directly for the recovery of the baby – she had prayed that they might find a pearl with which to hire the doctor to cure the baby, for the minds of people are as insubstantial as the mirage of the Gulf (Steinbeck, 1945: 11).

From the above quotation it can be learnt that Juana experiences reification because she has put the level of the
importance of having money rather than her son, because everything is materialized. Something material is much more important than spiritual, that is to have a baby. Now she thinks that money is number one. By having money, someone can buy everything, in this case to hire a doctor.

Now Kino family has already found the greatest pearl ever. This news is spread over the village. Now even the beggars who usually underestimate Kino family pays attention to them. The following quotation shows how the beggars now do not underestimate Kino family any more:

The news came early to the beggars in front of the church, and it made them giggle a little with pleasure, for they knew that there is no almsgiver in the world like a poor man who is suddenly lucky (Steinbeck, 1945: 8).

The above quotation takes place when the beggars are now thinking and expecting money and see that how lucky Kino family is. This is a part of reification because the beggars since the beginning of the story have already underestimated Kino family.

And the newcomers, particularly the beggars from the front of the church who were great experts in financial analysis, looked quickly at Juana's old blue skirt, saw the tears in her shawl, appraised the green ribbon on her braids, read the age of Kino's blanket and the thousand washings of his clothes, and set them down as poverty people and went along to see what kind of drama might develop (Steinbeck, 1945: 10).

The quotation above shows that the beggars are watching them passing through their poor house. They usually criticize the family as the poor who never give much money. The beggars are described as financial analysis because they can judge people from their belongings. The beggars judge Kino family from their appearance. It shows a reification because the beggars just value people from the things that people have.

Kino family feel happy that they can have the biggest pearl ever. This situation does not make the family aware of danger. They do not know that people may feel envy to their pearl. The following quotation supports the statement:

But Kino and Juana did not know these things. Because they were happy and excited they thought everyone shared their joy. Juan Tomas and Apolonia did, and they were the world too (Steinbeck, 1945: 11).

From the above quotation it can be concluded that Kino family has different world view with the people surroundings who live under the influence of reification. They just value the family from the things Kino has. Gradually, however, the pearl makes the family influenced by reification.
The statement is proved by the following quotation:

In the pearl he saw Juana and Coyotito and himself standing and kneeling at the high altar, and they were being married now that they could pay.

He spoke softly, "We will be married-in the church." (Steinbeck, 1945: 11).

The quotation above tells about Kino’s dream if the family will have already changed the pearl into money. Kino dreams that he will be blessed by the priest’s town. He dreams that he can get married officially in church with a God’s blessing. This event shows how reification works. Even in the non material world (marriage and God’s blessing) is materialized. The God’s blessing is traded in His holy place for the sake of things, materials. If someone has money he will be blessed in a church.

The priest’s intention on reification is also reflected when he comes to the village to meet Kino and his family. He comes there after hearing that Kino finds the pearl. The following quotation shows the statement:

"Kino," he said softly, "thou art named after a great man- and a great Father of the church." He made it sound like a benediction. "Thy name sake tamed the desert and sweetened the minds of the people, didst thou know that? It is in the books." Steinbeck, 1945: 12).

The above quotation shows that the priest intends to know Kino just after knowing that he has the pearl. This event reflects the idea of reification. It is an example of reification because as a priest who loves a spiritual being like God, the priest should serve people regardless their belongings, but in this case he just serves people who have money. This is a process of thing-ification because he just turns the relationship among men based on “human” value into materialism, that is reification. The following quotation shows how reification is done further by the priest:

Kino opened his hand and held it out, and the priest gasped a little at the size and beauty of the pearl. And then he said, "I hope thou wilt remember to give thanks, my son, to Him who has given thee this treasure, and to pray for guidance in the future."

Kino nodded dumbly, and it was Juana who spoke softly. "We will, Father. And we will be married now. Kino has said so." She looked at the neighbors for confirmation, and they nodded their heads solemnly. The priest said, "It is pleasant to see that your first thoughts are good thoughts. God bless you, my children (Steinbeck, 1945: 11).

From the above quotation, it can be learnt that the priest turns the spiritual value
of religious thing, the sacred marriage into
the material one. He asks Kino to pay for
God. It is a kind of reification because as if
the priest knows what God wants. He has
reified the spiritual God into material thing.

Reification is well practiced by the
doctor. It happens when the doctor hears that
Kino now has the precious pearl. He comes
as if he is the savior for the family by curing
Coyotito. However this deed is based on the
money. He wants to make sure that Kino can
pay him well because of the scorpion’s
poison. This statement is supported by the
following quotation:

"The doctor was closing his bag now. He said, "When do you think you can pay this bill?" He said it even kindly. "When I have sold my pearl I will pay you," Kino said. "You have a pearl? A good pearl?" the doctor asked with interest. And then the chorus of the neighbors broke in. "He has found the Pearl of the World," they cried, and they joined forefinger with thumb to show how great the pearl was (Steinbeck, 1945:15)."

From the above quotation, it can be
learnt that the doctor has performed a
reification in his life. As a doctor, he should
work regardless the patient has money or not. In fact, the doctor just works for the sake of money, that is for materialism, a reification. The reification that is done by the doctor is getting worse when he wants to cheat Kino
by offering him to save the precious pearl to
himself. The following quotation shows the
statement:

"The doctor looked surprised. "I had not heard of it. Do you keep this pearl in a safe place? Perhaps you would like me to put it in my safe?" Kino's eyes were hooded now, his cheeks were drawn taut. "I have it secure," he said. "Tomorrow I will sell it and then I will pay you." (Steinbeck, 1945:15).

From the quotation above, it can be
learnt how reification works. A rich man, like
the doctor should help the poor, but in fact he
abuses the poor and an uneducated people
like Kino by cheating him. The doctor has
treated Kino as commodity to enlarge his
own richness rather than to help him as a
human being. This is a kind of thing-ification,
a reification.

The reification, the dehumanization
process that reduces human being
relationship that surrounds the life of Kino
has made him have conflicts with others. Robbers try to get close to him actually not
for his personality but for stealing and taking
over the pearl. Kino becomes afraid of seeing
everyone. The following quotation shows
how the pearl makes Kino afraid of everyone
And Juana, sitting by the fire hole, watched
him with questioning eyes, and when he had
buried his pearl she asked, "Who do you fear?"

Kino searched for a true answer, and at last he said, "Everyone." And he could feel a shell of hardness drawing over him (Steinbeck, 1945: 16).

From the above quotation it can be learnt that Kino is also influenced with reification. Now there is a change on his personality. He starts thinking that human beings are the potential robbers who will make contacts with him just for the sake of the pearl, the thing, a material. Therefore, in this case he reduces the relationship among human beings is just based on money.

**F. Conclusion**

From the analysis that is presented, it can be learnt that Kino family experiences a reification problem dealing with people surround him. He is forced to struggle against who want to make relationship with him, not as a human, but as a commodity, as a thing.

This process of the thing-reification of human being is named reification. Reification has created dehumanization, and widely practiced by all people in the story, ranging from the priest, the doctor, the robbers, the thieves, and even the beggars. Finally, Kino, himself practices reification when he wants to secure the pearl.

**Bibliography**


