

Social Problems in Shahnnon Ahmad's Novels *Sutan Baginda (1989) and TIVI (1995)*

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Abstract: Shahnnon Ahmad has long been synonymous to the literature world that he no longer requires any introduction to the people of such literature circle. His pieces of thoughts are always awaited by many. His words are captivating and may touch many souls. The issues raised are not illusions but real ones. Everything is implicit and embedded in the writing containing worrisome life tragedies. Shahnnon's works invite readers to reflect deeply into the selves and think of their life paths. Among works which attract readers to delve into deep thinking are the novels *Sutan Baginda* and *TIVI*. Even though these novels have been discussed quite frequently, this paper aims at elaborating them focusing on the issue of social problems. The issue is believed to be still relevant in today's world—needless to say within the era of borderless world. Incest, promiscuity, scandal and politics are issues popular in the public. These prove that Shahnnon Ahmad plays not only with life imagination but also with that reality. This paper uses the content analysis method. This analysis shows that Shahnnon Ahmad writes by referring to events occurring in society.

1 INTRODUCTION

Shahnnon Ahmad is an active writer who keeps producing works even though his health is challenged. Reaching the age of 70s, his creative ability still portrays sharpness in thinking and his spirit to write has never faded. Even though he may no longer fulfil certain invitations related to the literature field, he has never failed to closely follow the development of literature. It is proud to learn from Shahnnon Ahmad who has always welcomed guests despite his deteriorating health condition.

Shahnnon Ahmad has started writing since 1950's and his keen interest has been into highlighting various societal issues. At the early stage of writing, especially within the 1960's, Shahnnon Ahmad wrote a lot on poverty. According to Yusuf Hasan (Yusuf Hasan, 1995), the works of novel Shahnnon Ahmad beginning 1965 until 1985 revolved around the themes of leadership and poverty. His novels portray that leadership quality is important in dealing with poverty related issues. Mana Sikana (Mana Sikana, 2004, p. 695) also shares the same opinion. To him, "Shahnnon Ahmad is famous with the subject pertaining to the Malays' poverty and his sensitivity towards the country's politics. These two subjects

have been individual subject matters to Shahnnon Ahmad and he is deemed to have developed his own identity and individualism as a writer". Besides poverty and politics, Shahnnon Ahmad also portrays other pertinent issues in his writings. It is meaningfully impactful that he owns the ability to explore the souls of the characters in illustrating sadness, happiness, anxiety and even eagerness.

Nevertheless, his works mostly focus on the societal issues. They are either to solely document the issue, to remind and to give opinion, or to criticise. Whether the highlight is on oppression, politics, social or any other issues, Shahnnon Ahmad always raises it from the occurrences happening within the society. Of this matter, Mana Sikana (Mana Sikana, 2004) believes that Shahnnon Ahmad "holds onto and sustains the idea of realism". Realism refers to one's expressions and tendency towards evident and physical problems, which are both representational and contextual; therefore, leading the texts to be constructed in a way that is prone towards words of reminder in promoting awareness towards constructive aspects and formal qualities of such physical and surrounding issues". This belief goes in line with the societal issues emphasised in his works. It is undeniable that some parts of the narratives may not reflect the real stories. However, they may be

proven to contain such elements when the mass media reports and statistics are referred to. The issues of poverty, oppression, distortion, social problem, vices, politics and polygamy are among issues which always take place in the society. Nonetheless, not all are revealed. Only selected cases are exposed to the public.

Besides the aforementioned issues, Shahnnon also gives focus on matters pertaining to death; either the after-death life or the life heading towards death. Those works of Shahnnon resemble life stages which include the final stage of life, the reminder of death, the imagination of death and the wait for the onset of death. To illustrate, such matters are contained in several short stories in anthology *Jeritan Pulau* (2011). Even before that, Shahnnon produces few short stories with the theme of death - "*Lagu Kit-Kit*" and "*Mayat*". However, these two short stories tell the reactions of the family members when facing the death of a family member. This is different from the short stories in *Jeritan Pulau*, which attempts at exploring the souls of those waiting for their family member's death onset. The short story "*Kematian*" tells how the family is in high hope that the mother's life is ended, for they cannot bear seeing the suffering. This is similar to the short story "*Ipin*" in which the family is waiting for the eternal farewell. This clearly shows that Shahnnon Ahmad does not limit his writings to certain issues only. He even successfully explores the emotions of every character. The sketch of anxiety in his works touches readers' hearts and it is able to make readers develop certain feelings of happiness and sadness. Indeed, not all authors have the ability to present the soul struggle in a character the way Shahnnon does. This ability is such a *forte* for Shahnnon Ahmad that it makes the storyline alive and fresh. The same applies to some of his works portraying the intimate issues between men and women as contained in the novels *Sutan Baginda* and *Tivi*. In relation with this, some literature activists regard these two novels as polluted with pornography elements.

The novels *Sutan Baginda* and *TIVI* are among those which have gained popularity among the public as they describe pretty hot scenes alongside with the social issues that are challenging to the Malays. The novel *Sutan Baginda* tells a political journey of its first character, Sutan Baginda. He is an ambitious politician who aims at holding the highest political position. Therefore, he is willing to do anything for the sake of getting what he wants. Even though he has already had two wives, he still possesses a mistress. His relationship with Fidah is well known and approved by Fidah's parents. However, this lady is

quite cunning and she is not ready to be Sutan Baginda's mistress forever. Instead, she works hand in hand with Sutan Baginda's enemy, Nirwan. Fidah's action is worrisome to Sutan Baginda. He is confident that Fidah will reveal all his evil plans to let down Nirwan. This anxiety and disappointment make him experience an emotional disturbance. The novel ends in a state in which Sutan Baginda becomes insane.

The novel *TIVI*, on the other hand, describes the character Chah who works in a factory, and starts living freely. Her dressings begin to change and so does her social lifestyle. She brings home a television and a video player for her family entertainment. The family, who was once very obedient towards the command of Allah has lost focus when they indulge in the various rapturous television programmes. Chah has also unashamedly brought home her boyfriend and sleep over together in her room. The climax of the novel is when Chah brings home a video player and a pornographic compact disc. The existence of these entertainment tools has invited negative consequences when incest and rape happen. The television brought back by Chah has totally changed the lifestyle of the family till Mat Isa and Chah have no longer felt guilty of committing sins. This novel ends with the death of Chah's family member being struck by lightning. Even so, Chah who is the main culprit is safe. Maybe the author wants to develop a sense of repentance in Chah's soul and make her return to God.

Even though the novels *Sutan Baginda* and *TIVI* both portray social issue, there are other issues, too, shown in *Sutan Baginda*. *Sutan Baginda* reflects Shahnnon Ahmad's observations and anxiety towards the social phenomenon hitting the country. The moral decay and vices illustrated by Shahnnon is not a mere empty talk. It is an alarming societal issue. As highlighted by Shahnnon Ahmad in both the novels, the phenomenon implicates the Malays who are synonymous to the Muslim. Indeed, Shahnnon Ahmad is neither imagining nor fantasising. What has been sketched by Shahnnon Ahmad is a tragedy impacting young girls, parents and many others. In fact, today it is getting more serious. Baby dumping cases are increasing and inverse relationships are getting their place in the society. This proves how Shahnnon Ahmad writes with his caring thinking towards the society. Hence, he may be regarded as a writer who contributes towards the society's development. If the works are meticulously analysed, they are full with sarcasm, satire and total exposure towards the phenomenon hitting the country. This is because

Shahnon Ahmad has his own stand towards literary works as he says:

“At its principle, literature is an effective and fine medium to deliver human stories, conflicts and values through its various genres. The efforts to develop human characters through literature are admitted to be effective as its fine teaching elements match human’s perceptions. However, if not beware, this literature medium may lead to character decay if the literary works portray values which are against the Islamic values” (Shahnon Ahmad, 1991, p. 13).

Holding on to such principle that we may see teaching elements in Shahnon’s works, his intention is to let readers learn the lessons in coping with the social problem.

This article will highlight Shahnon Ahmad’s anxiety towards the social problem among the youngsters. Shahnon Ahmad has indirectly blamed the parents. To him, parents are the closest to the youngsters; therefore, their activities should always be monitored. The attitude of letting it be is only similar to encouraging the adolescent to practise vices.

2 PROMISCUITY

Promiscuity in this context refers to the free social intercourse between male and female which is beyond the ethical or moral limit. In the novel *Sutan Baginda*, this promiscuity is reflected through the character of Fidah who is a widow with a child. She is a ‘rock’ singer who at times appears very seducing. Her seducing performances expose herself to a dark life. She becomes a mistress to Sutan Baginda, the first character of the novel, *Sutan Baginda*. Being a rockstar and a mistress is sadly within her parents’ knowledge. Fidah has never kept any secret from her parents. To illustrate:

When Utan comes, there must be a problem. And F begins her treatment with massage and stroke and further follows what Utan wants. And Utan’s desire does not differ from other men’s desires. F is all aware of that. *Daddy* and *mummy* have never objected. F has always been open with them. They encourage; in fact, mummy herself suggests that F become Sutan’s third wife. *Daddy* discourages F to remarry yet until the previous impacts have faded...But let F take daddy’s advice first (Shahnon Ahmad, 1989, p. 43-44).

The above illustration clearly shows that Fidah’s or F’s actions are deemed acceptable by her parents. Both of them are aware of immoral behaviour of their child yet they only let it be. No objection simply means allowing the vices to happen and this makes no space for guilt to take place. ‘*Daddy* discourages F to remarry’ reflects how he allows Fidah to become a mistress rather than a wife. He may mean that Fidah does not necessarily have to be tied to someone and may live under whosoever’s influence. This scenario shows that parents also encourage vices to be exercised by their children. In this case, it is apparent that Shahnon Ahmad also blames the parents in contributing to the practice of vices. To Shahnon, limited religious education among parents is the factor of adolescents’ promiscuity. This leads to vices and other social problems which are challenging to be coped by parents and the authorities. Social problems would only get worse if parents follow Fidah’s parents’ stand. Hence, Shahnon Ahmad recommends that parents should become more concerned towards children’s social lifestyle and monitor their activities if they do not want their children to get involved in social problems which would only affect their future.

The issue of promiscuity is also narrated by Shahnon Ahmad through his novel *TIVI*. Promiscuity in this novel also involves a woman; Chah. What differentiates Chah from Fidah is that Chah is a village lady who experiences a culture shock when she moves to work in an urban area, Sungai Petani. She begins to have a boyfriend and spends most of her time with him;

But that guy does not stay long because he said he has an important task in Kuala Lumpur. Jeha is not surprised as everything has been told by Chah. During weekends, that guy will take Chah anywhere to enjoy sightseeing, at times they don’t come home at night. On weekends, normally Chah is taken far. (Shahnon Ahmad, 1995, p. 17)

This excerpt describes how Chah is always with his boyfriend. What is surprising is that this activity is known by her mother but she does not take any necessary action. “Jeha is not surprised” means that she is aware of Chah’s activity yet she only lets it be which simply equals to encouraging vices to happen. This excerpt illustrates the low morality of a mother since she is willing to witness her child to be taken anywhere by a non-*muhrim* man up to the extent which they do not return home at night. In line with the mother’s acceptance, it is nothing shameful for

Chah to expose her promiscuity with the man in front of her mother.

The hands-off attitude has made Chah disrespectful towards her parents. Not only does she bring home a porn CD to be watched together with her family but also without feeling shameful, guilty and sinful, she sleeps over with her boyfriend in her own room. The acceptance of the porn CD by Mat Isa and his wife, Jeha clearly shows that they allow all the vices exercised by Chah. The acceptance also leads Mat Isa and Chah to practically apply what they have watched. This episode explains that if Chah does not involve herself in such promiscuity, she could hardly get implicated by such immoral activities. She would not wear those indecent clothes, go out with a man and get introduced to porn CD. Strictly said, everything begins from too much of promiscuity.

Regardless of whether Chah or Fidah, both represent the life of a morally declined woman. The behaviour of these two ladies is no longer a taboo in our society today, in fact it is getting worse. If the characters, Chah and Fidah are illustrated to be in sins due to adultery, today's adolescent involvement in decadent activities is even worrisome. The ladies implicated in this social problem do not only commit adultery, but also murder. They murder or dump their babies born from their immoral activities without any sense of love. They are determined to do it because they do not want to get ashamed by the society. This is apparent when referred to the current scenario which the reports of such cases appear very frequently. The statistics from the Bukit Aman Police headquarters show that throughout 2010 there were approximately 65 baby dumping cases reported in the country. Within a five-year duration, it is estimated that 472 baby dumping cases are reported (Syahmi Syahiran, 2010, p. 34). This statistic illustrates the decline in morality among our adolescents. This reflects how they are careless in leading life. They carelessly have fun until they commit adultery and later murder their own children born out of wedlock due to the shame towards the society. This statistic does not include the number of aborted pregnancies. If such cases are counted, the number that appears may reach four digits.

The statistic clearly tells that Shahnun Ahmad's works - *Sutan Baginda* and *TIVI* – are based on real facts. He is proven to be a concerned author towards his surrounding and society. Through these novels, the author indirectly reprimands parents' attitude which gives too much freedom to their daughters until they are courageous enough to behave beyond the permissible values. If meticulously referred to, Shahnun Ahmad only touches a bit of what actually

happens today. The novels *Sutan Baginda* and *TIVI* only revolve around adultery and incest while our adolescents today have gone beyond those. Not only do they commit adultery, they even dump and kill their children. Today's youngsters have doubled the sins in comparison with those expressed by Shahnun 10 years ago. Shahnun Ahmad's worries have now taken their places. Shahnun Ahmad's message has met its period; uncontrolled promiscuity would only lead to guilt and sin.

Even though it is not clearly stated that adultery would lead to murder, he has indirectly warned about the punishments towards those who commit sins. Chah does not die in the novel *TIVI*, however she is given the lesson and awareness; her father has raped Hasanah and she has received her punishments. She dies even before she manages to repent. Her mother, Jeha, also succumbs to lightning struck; and Chah is given a space to repent and to return to God. Apparently, Shahnun Ahmad attempts to provide lessons to readers not to involve in vice activities. Promiscuity, according to Shahnun Ahmad is the main reason of other social illnesses.

3 SCANDAL

Kamus Dewan (Kamus Dewan, 2004, p. 1509) defines scandal as "despicable matter or behaviour (shameful, disgusting, despised, etc.) which normally invites people's anger". Based on this definition, the novel *Sutan Baginda* may be concluded to narrate this issue especially when referring to the relationship between Fidah and Sutan Baginda. Their relationship is deemed scandalous as they are not legally married. It is also categorised as a scandal because Sutan Baginda, the second man of the country, is having a forbidden relationship with a lady, while he is not supposed to. Sutan Baginda has ashamed himself, the organisation and the country by making Fidah his mistress. Adding to that, he always uses the translation of the Quran verses and the hadeeth in his political talks. Sutan Baginda is called as 'ustaz' by his fans for his articulative ability. He is very confident with his self image, "Tasawwur Sutan is now clear and firm. And the people have started to be amazed with that tasawwur. Life and death are all for Allah, for from Him we come and to Him we end our life" (Shahnun Ahmad, 1989, p. 69). His character shown to public is totally different from what he actually does with Fidah. It is merely a drama acted for self interest and satisfaction.

The behaviour of Sutan Baginda portrayed by Shahnun Ahmad is not an issue intentionally created

by the author. The scandal of political leaders is an issue which always happens yet is not reported except for certain cases. It is not publicised in order to protect the dignity of such leaders and their family. Regardless of the situations, this paper stresses how Shahnnon Ahmad is so intelligent that he combines the social issues with creativity that everything appears so real.

In this novel, Shahnnon Ahmad also penalises Sutan Baginda who makes fun of the Quran and the hadeeth for his own sake, and who is not responsible over his behaviour in treating women. He becomes insane after all his plans fail and when Fidah turns to Nirwan. Sutan Baginda becomes insane as he thinks much about the possibilities when all his secrets are in Nirwan's and Fidah's hands. The punishment onto Sutan Baginda is appropriate in line with Shahnnon's principles which are against people who are hypocrite, selfish, into adultery and making fun of Allah's name. What Sutan Baginda receives is a reminder to those who possess his characteristics in achieving political success or places in the society. Again, the promiscuity is seen to be the reason for what has happened to Sutan Baginda. If he knows how to limit himself and builds up his faith, such difficulty would not hit him. Hence, it could be concluded that free promiscuity could highly lead to scandals among the politicians and the policy makers.

4 INCEST

Incest is a tragedy that is disgusting and embarrassing. Those who commit it are like animals which are not able to distinguish between a family member and other people. They are people with mental illnesses who follow their lust as they desire, making them similar to animals which do not have any mind. It reflects humans' attitude that centres their attention only on their desires that they no longer recognise sins and rewards. To Shahnnon Ahmad, this matter is of utmost importance to be delivered to the society, for it is really taking place in our country. Even though some may regard it to be a peripheral case, Shahnnon Ahmad deems it as an important issue to highlight. According to Shahnnon Ahmad, incest phenomenon is due to several reasons. The first reason is free promiscuity. For example, in the novel *TIVI*, the promiscuity has led Chah to obtain porn CD that is widely available in the black market. Promiscuity allows Chah to experience unlimited pleasure. Besides, it is the parents' roles that is essential. Shahnnon Ahmad believes that the parents' uncaring attitude towards their children's behaviour

is deteriorating their morality. This is proven through Chah's despised behaviour when he is with his boyfriend:

Wherever they both are, when Chah feels like offering her lips, she just does it. It is extremely easy. Her boyfriend simply devours the lips. In the bus, near the well behind the house, and even while watching TV with Mat Isa and the family, Chah just offers her lips when she feels like to, and the boyfriend devours them as if there's nothing. ' (Shahnnon Ahmad, 1995, p. 81)

This excerpt demonstrates how Chah's parents act indifferently toward Chah's and her boyfriend's behaviour. It also shows how freely Chah may act and how she is impolite and disrespectful wherever she is. This behaviour explains the promiscuity and this does not even affect the family. This too much freedom has led to even worse problems. This is also the reason behind Mat Isa's disgusting behaviour that he makes sex with Chah when he watches the porn CD.

Not only does Mat Isa exercise incest with Chah but also rapes his own daughter, Hasanah. It is apparent that the CD he watches has controlled all his thoughts that he no longer thinks of his daughter's future. Hasanah, a virgin lady, is raped without guilt and empathy. To this prolific author, incest is alarming as there are a lot of porn CDs available in the market. Indirectly, Shahnnon Ahmad urges that the selling of porn CDs should be cut off and those who are involved in copyright and distributing the CDs should be punished strongly. CDs or any forms of media that leave negative consequences will only increase the cases of incest and rape.

As an author who is concerned about his society, Shahnnon does not let this person with an animal heart live long. In line with his bad lust and wicked actions, Mat Isa's life in *TIVI* has been ended tragically. Mat Isa died at the place where he is struck by lightning, and Hasanah died too. She died after being struck by a fallen tree due to a lightning strike. What happens to Mat Isa functions as a reminder to readers that committing forbidden behaviour in Islam has surely suitable punishments in exchange. The illustration given by Shahnnon throughout the novel *TIVI* is actually not much different from what is currently happening in our country. Incest is no longer a peripheral case even though it is not related to porn CDs. The newspaper *Berita Harian* on 20 June 2011 reports that a father was put to jail and was fined RM2,500 while his daughter was fined RM 2,000 by Syariah High Court, Kota Bharu, after admitting to live together till granted three children (*Berita Harian*, 2011). This news is extremely embarrassing. It

demonstrates the low morality level among the society. Indeed, the works of Shahnnon Ahmad in the novel *TIVI* is a resemblance of parts of the society livings which are not rational. Therefore, Shahnnon Ahmad cannot be regarded as extreme when he thoroughly describes the incest activity in his novel. The news above is just a little part of the reported cases. There are many more reports of incests and the people who commit it have received their punishments. What differs Shahnnon Ahmad's work from the news is that the person who commits incest gets his punishment right away when he is struck by lightning. Meanwhile, the newspaper report tells that it is after he has three children that he receives his punishment. Regardless of the forms of punishment, it is a reminder to everybody that God's rewards and punishments in both the world and the hereafter await you always.

Rape cases towards own family members as what has happened to Hasanah in the novel *TIVI* is also no longer regarded small and peripheral; it is instead is reported frequently in mass media. *Utusan Malaysia* on 24 July 2012 reports an elderly man is prisoned for 20 years after raping his own disabled daughter in law (Norliza Mohamad Zakaria, 2012). *Utusan Malaysia* 21 November 2003 also reports a business man admitting to have raped two of his children and is to be prisoned for 36 years (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2003). Having discussed this, Shahnnon Ahmad has again demonstrated realities in his works; raping cases happen even in one's own family. This behaviour portrays the father's immoral and irresponsible attitudes. A father, who is supposed to protect his children, suddenly chooses to victimise them for his own sake. This is such a depressing case and it is appropriate that the person who commits this be prisoned for 20 years. These examples warn people not to practise such disgusting behaviour towards whoever; either family members or other people.

5 CONCLUSIONS

All in all, Shahnnon Ahmad's main agenda is to warn and reprimand the readers of his works. Children who are not closely monitored by parents would have high tendency to get involved in social problems. The hands-off attitude may worsen things. Letting the vices to occur in front of your eyes is such an encourager to the children to do even more. Having discussed this, Shahnnon Ahmad apparently criticises parents who fail to provide religious education to their children. He also recommends that parents be responsible towards their children's development so

that they are not implicated in the social problem. Issues like adultery, incest and rape portrayed in both the novels are a reminder to parents not to neglect their responsibilities in growing children. Both these novels evidently put the blame on parents who only choose to let their children do what they wish to do. These irresponsibilities only lead to the increment of social illnesses in the country.

Shahnnon Ahmad, in his own unique way, has attempted his efforts to contribute to the society, especially in coping with the social issues. The events illustrated in his novels are only a small portion of what actually happens. However, if it is neglected, the new generation would decline in many life aspects. Both these novels manage to highlight the current reality of the society and it is returned to the readers to learn any lessons.

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