

**“THE DESTINY OF A GOOD LISTENER?” A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING OF A
SHORT STORY NASIB SEORANG PENDENGAR SETIA BY JUJUR PRANANTO**

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Abstract

A literary text is open to signification process by any readers and it is just possible that the text has contesting forces that are at the same time contradictory each other even within the same text. This study attempts to deconstructively read a short story *Nasib Seorang Pendengar Setia* by Jujur Prananto to reveal the contradiction, inconsistency and unreliability of the text that evidently constitute the warring forces inside the story. This is a library research by applying deconstructive reading method as proposed by Jacques Derrida to show the verbal, textual and linguistic ambiguity and unreliability of the text. The result of the study shows that the short story in the light of deconstructive reading is undoubtedly containing quite many contradictions and inconsistencies that climax in the fact that the content of the story betrays its intended main idea and the title.

Keywords

Deconstructive Reading, Contradiction, Inconsistency, Ambiguity, Undecidability

Introduction

Deconstructive reading attempts to prove that a text –which is seemingly well- structured and organized based on coherence and consistency – is in fact built around contradiction, incoherence, and inconsistency that consists abundant of dilemmas and problems. Deconstructionists try to raise contradictory and problematic textual elements existing in any texts (but not to suggest or claim any way of finding solution to the problems) by subverting and destabilizing the stability of the text. They work by questioning or teasing the steadiness and constancy of the text hierarchy – which normally puts forward text coherence and well-structured ness – emphasizing the fact that we will never arrive at the real truth, *the signified*; that we can only attain the truth through its traces (*the signifier*); that

“There is no transcendental signified... Deconstruction and post-structuralist theory repudiate the notion that there are enduring truths that can be invoked with certainty in the process of signification, textual creation, and cultural critique...post-structuralism suggests that all truths are fully contextual and the result of relationships among signs...post-structuralists would suggest that their own interpretations are never definitive–although they are certainly defensible (because of their ample supporting detail)– and emphasize that their own articulations are certainly fair game for further critique” (Hall, 2001:164).

Method

Deconstruction according to Adam Sharman can be done by firstly *“identifying the centre of a system, or the privileged term in a violent conceptual hierarchy, and represents an intervention to make that system or hierarchy tremble” (Simons, 2004:87)*

Further, we can never reach the real truths because as suggested by Michel Foucault we can only play with the effect of the truth, *“that any exercise of power, or any other form of signification, is never fully self-contained–it is polyvalent...for its complex meanings are always deferred and complicated through a complex chain of signs and actions” (Hall, 2001:163-4).* It is strengthened by Jacques Derrida’s *complex notion of difference–that meaning is made differences among signs but never made certain and secure through those differences” (Hall, 2001:162),* that the truths are always *deferred* or delayed without any final understanding of the meaning and we only keep playing with the traces (the signifier) of the truths.

How does the deconstruction process work? Despite the fact that there is no final court of meaning can ever be attained, deconstruction does not proceed through careless, haphazard and disorganized ways with skeptical doubts or distrust. It works through a cautious teasing of the signification process in the text. If there is something shattered in the deconstructive reading process, it is not the meaning but the assertion or claim that one signification process is better than the others. It means that no signifying process can be claimed to be the only one or the better one, let alone the best one. It is due to the polyvalence nature of meaning as stressed by Foucault. One signification process may not dominate the others. This is also related to notion of deconstruction itself:

“the word ‘de-construction’ is closely related...to the word ‘analysis’, which etymologically means ‘to undo’– a virtual synonym for ‘to de-construct’. The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or generalized skepticism, but the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself. If

anything destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not meaning but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signification over another". (Marshall, 1992:47; Barry, 1995:71).

Therefore, the focus of deconstructive reading is showing, teasing and subverting the "warring forces", the contradictions, incoherence, inconsistencies, paradoxes and other conflicting, incongruous and ambiguous forces inside the text.

Derrida also emphasizes that deconstructive reading process is a method of reading which reveals a text failure to convey something because of the text weaknesses as a whole. Definitions or conceptual limitations expressed by the text are used by the deconstructionists to attack and shatter the original concepts or definitions consciously emphasized by the text (writer). This can be done because of, once again, the inconsistency, contradiction and incoherence within the text itself. Derrida puts it as follows:

"This method of reading a text so closely that the author's conceptual distinctions on which the text relies are shown to fail on account of the inconsistent and paradoxical use made of these very concepts within the text as a whole. In other words, the text is seen to fail by its own criteria; the standards or definitions which the text sets up are used reflexively to unsettle and shatter the original distinctions" (Sarup, 1988:37).

It is clear that the job of a deconstructionist is to "crash" the text against itself because the deconstruction theory believes that it is the nature of a text (remember: everything is textual to deconstructionist point of view) to be self-contradictory. It is the ultimate goal of deconstructive reading to show that *"texts betray traces of their own instability"* (Hall, 2001:166). J.A. Cuddon, in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms* clarifies this text betrayal against itself, saying that deconstruction means:

"A text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying...it may be read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be seen by criticism as a single 'stable' meaning. Thus a text may 'betray' itself" (Barry, 1995:71-2)

It is also important to note that a deconstructionist must look for paradoxical or contradictory forces within a text that are not realized by the writer of the text himself, forces that he does not intend to express or convey through his writing. Therefore, deconstructive reading must have the same purpose like Derrida discusses in *Of Grammatology* as quoted by Barry i.e. it *"must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that he uses...[It] attempts to make the not-seen accessible to sight"* (Barry, 1995:71).

This writing then, for that reason, attempts to "tease" a short story *Nasib Seorang Pendengar Setia (The Destiny of A Good Listener)* written by Jujur Prananto, showing to all of us that essentially this text (short story) consists of warring forces that weaken the story's own very concept, that many things are openly worth questioning. The short story won *Kompas 1999 Short Story Selection* and Jujur Prananto is a famous Indonesian story and script writer.

Practically, the discussion will be divided into three stages as suggested by Barry (1995:74-9): verbal, textual and linguistic stages. The verbal stage involves searching for paradoxes and contradictions within the text at the solely verbal level. The textual stage will deal with shifts,

breaks or inconsistencies in the story at its more overall view. While the linguistic stage will question the adequacy of language itself as a medium of communication, that language used by the writer is somehow unreliable; *“Such moments occur when, for example, there is implicit or explicit reference to the unreliability or untrustworthiness of language. It may involve, for instance, saying that something is unsay able; or saying that it is impossible to utter or describe something and then doing so; or saying that language inflates, or deflates, or misrepresents its object, and then continuing to use it anyway”* (Barry, 1995:76).

Analysis

The first discussion will be related to the *verbal stage* concerning the doctor’s final conclusion based on his diagnosis at the beginning of the story. He strongly comes to a conclusion that he has given up, that he has no idea about the patient’s (Mr. Darsono’s) illness, let alone how to cure him medically. *“Terus terang saya angkat tangan, Pak, ...Setelah menimbang segala aspek medis dan nonmedis yang saya catat selama Bapak menjadi pasien saya, saya sampai pada dugaan kuat bahwa yang bisa menyembuhkan Bapak hanyalah Bapak sendiri”* (*“Frankly speaking, I have given up Sir, ...After considering all medical and non medical aspects that I’ve recorded as long as you’re my patient, I’ve come to a strong conclusion that the only person who can cure you is you yourself”*) (Nurhan, 1999:33). Here we can see that the statement *I have given up* is in direct contradiction to the statement *I’ve come to a strong diagnosis that the only person who can cure you is you yourself*, because as a doctor he knows that the word diagnosis means saying exactly what an illness or the cause of a problem is. Therefore, he cannot say that he has given up to his attempt to cure Mr. Darsono. Moreover, the doctor has said that he has considered both medical and non medical aspects. When he refers to the non medical aspect, he is in fact referring to his final diagnosis that Mr. Darsono is suffering psychological problem, so he indeed knows something crucial medically based on his non medical finding and therefore may not give up!

Further, another contradiction in connection with the verbal stage still connected to the first one is clearly seen when the doctor says,

“Kalau Pak Dar tidak menyadari atau tidak bersedia mengakui adanya persoalan yang begitu dalam menghantui pikiran Bapak, dan Bapak tidak kunjung bisa mengatasi persoalan tersebut, saya khawatir kondisi kesehatan Bapak akan terus menurun tanpa pernah jelas penyakitnya apa” (*If you [Mr. Dar] do not realize or are not willing to admit that there is a very serious problem haunting your mind, and you really cannot cope with the problem, I am afraid your health condition will get worse and worse without exactly knowing what your illness is*) (Nurhan, 1999:34).

So, on the one hand the doctor says that Mr. Darsono’s illness is not clear, but on the other hand, he knows exactly based on his strong diagnosis that the only person who can cure the illness is Mr. Darsono himself. The doctor also concludes that Mr. Darsono’s health condition will get worse and worse. These all indicate that in fact Mr. Darsono’s illness is clear enough. If not, how come a doctor comes to such a conclusion? Is it common that a doctor merely guesses at his patient’s condition? I don’t think it is a common habit in a doctor’s profession. Thus, it is a big contradiction when on one hand the doctor has given up and has no idea what to do about Mr. Darsono’s illness, but on the other hand he knows for sure that Mr. Darsono himself is the only person who can heal his illness.

The third contradiction, still connected to the above discussion, can be found in the following statement: *“Demikianlah, setelah menjalani perawatan selama sebulan lebih di kelas VIP sebuah rumah sakit swasta paling terkemuka tanpa satu dokter bisa memberikan diagnosa secara tepat dan akurat, akhirnya Darsono pulang dengan langkah mantap penuh keyakinan”* (So it happened that after going through a treatment for more than a month in a VIP class of the most famous private hospital without even a single doctor could give an exact and accurate diagnosis, finally Darsono went home with steady and confident steps” (Nurhan, 1999: 39). Here, again, the contradiction is clear. It is described that no doctors could give an accurate diagnosis of Darsono’s illness, but the fact is different: the diagnosis given by the doctor in the above first point is so accurate. It is proven by the fact that Darsono is really recovered (p. 39) after following the doctor’s suggestion (to resign, p. 38). Therefore, even this one diagnosis is enough and already accurate, so the statement saying that *without even a doctor could give an exact and accurate diagnosis* is destroyed by the fact that this one doctor’s diagnosis is accurate.

The fourth clear contradiction can be observed when Darsono says that has no achievement at all in his career: *Lagi pula apa sih yang dilakukannya selama ini dengan jabatan-jabatannya? Secara jujur Darsono mengaku pada dirinya sendiri bahwa ia tak pernah berprestasi apa-apa”* (Moreover, what has he done so far with his job positions? Honestly Darsono admits to himself that he has never achieved anything’ (Nurhan, 1999:39). This statement directly contradicts Darsono’s words by the end of the next paragraph: *“...jangan-jangan hanya itulah satu-satunya prestasi yang pernah diraihinya”* (I’m afraid that’s the only achievement he has got, p. 39). Moreover, if noticed further, Darsono is professional in carrying his duty as an important person in the company. It is proven by the fact that he becomes a director and commissioner of the company, indicating that he is good at his job. This is supported by his routines described on page 36: He leaves home at 7.30 and arrives at the office by 8 o’clock; then he has to sign the company’s letters, handling phones, setting meetings and others. They seem professional and achievements for Darsono. Even by the end of the story, Mr Imaluddin gives Darsono a medal of service for, of course, his achievement.

The fifth contradiction is related to the statement from the doctor who treats Mr. Imaluddin almost at the end of the story: *“‘Kami belum berhasil menemukan kepastian atas penyebab penyakit beliau,’ kata dokter yang merawat Pak Imaluddin kepada Darsono. “Tapi kami berharap kehadiran Pak Dar memperbaiki kondisinya”* (We haven’t been able to figure out certainly the cause of his illness’ said the doctor who treated Mr. Imaluddin to Mr. Darsono. *‘But we hope your coming, Pak Dar, will help to better the condition,* p. 40). This is contradictory because it is mentioned that they cannot find out the cause of Mr. Imaluddin’s sickness but hope that Mr. Darsono can help him recover from the health problem. How do they know that Mr. Darsono can help him recover?

The next part will discuss the textual stage of the study which deals with inconsistencies found in the story. The first inconsistency lies in Darsono’s self identity. It is stated by Darsono himself that, *“Ia bertekad menghadap Pak Imaluddin untuk menyatakan pengunduran diri. ‘Selamat tinggal Pak Imaluddin! Saya Darsono, pendengar setia lelucon-leluconmu, hendak berpamitan pergi meninggalkan segala rupa tawa basa-basi, sebab hanya dengan begitu saya bisa memiliki arti dan menemukan jati diri”* (He is determined to see Mr Imaluddin to resign from his job. *‘Good bye Mr. Imaluddin! I am Darsono, your loyal listener of your jokes, wish to leave all hypocrite laughter, because only though this way I can gain meaning and find my self identity”* (pp. 39-40). This expression states how Darsono has found out his self identity dan he knows the

way. However, in the other part of the story it is said that it is Darsono himself who dreams about soldiers forcing him to laugh, and in the real world (not dream) Darsono himself too who considers the visitors as soldiers during Mr. Imaluddin's sickness that makes him finally decide to laugh for the last time in front of Mr. Imaluddin. So, where is Darsono's self identity that he has mentioned previously? He is being inconsistent. If he has really got his self identity, he will never have problems with Mr. Imaluddin.

The second inconsistency is related to Darsono's being honest to himself that he has no achievement at all (p. 39, see the fourth contradiction above) and, on the other hand, his worry on the same page that his routine activity of listening to and laughing at Mr. Imaluddin's joke is the only achievement he has achieved. Here he is not consistent because if he still says "*jangan-jangan*" (*I'm afraid*) followed by his worry, how come he says that he is honest to himself. What is clear from this is the fact that on one side Darsono is honest to himself, but on the other side, he himself is doubtful, meaning that he is NOT honest to himself. Furthermore, it is unreliable to say "having no achievement at all" while the story tells us that Darsono is the director and commissioner of the biggest oil company (p. 39) as discussed before.

The next question deals with a doctor's profession in dealing with the patient's recovery, and this becomes the third inconsistency. It seems clear that the doctors' role in coping with Darsono and Imaluddin's sickness is so limited, that the doctors seem to have given up (it is repeated three times: pp. 33, 39, 40) but on the other hand, the doctors know exactly Darsono and Imaluddin's psychological problem (pp. 33, 34, 38, 40). Therefore, there is an inconsistent characterization of the doctors. They are described as helpless but also the solution to both patients: Darsono is advised to admit his internal conflicts and resign from his job, and then he recovers, and for Imaluddin, the doctor knows that Darsono's presence will fix the condition (help Imaluddin recover, p. 40) and this is also proven that finally Imaluddin recovers too.

The last stage of the analysis, the linguistic stage, deals with the fundamental question of how the language used by the narrator betrays itself because what is being conveyed or intended to convey contradicts within itself. The first untrustworthiness of language can be traced in the concept of "being funny" and "laughing" which is paradoxical. Darsono says that sometimes he does not know which part of Mr. Imaluddin's jokes that is funny. He says,

"Kadang leluconnya sulit ditangkap, lalu dia tertawa duluan, baru kemudian saya menyusul tertawa meskipun tidak tahu lucunya di mana. Atau belum selesai melucu dia sudah keburu tertawa sendiri. Saya pun ikut-ikutan tertawa, sampai dia merasa tidak perlu menyelesaikan dongengnya, mungkin karena mengira saya sudah menangkap kelucuannya."

"Wah, itu baru lucu."

...

Sedemikian lama dan membosankannya hingga bagi saya tertawa bukan lagi reaksi atas kelucuan, melainkan semata-mata bagian dari tugas yang harus saya jalankan penuh kepatuhan. Bila orang lain menea ditandai dengan kerutan pada kening, saya berkerut pada bagian pipi sebelah kanan-kiri bibir disebabkan terlalu seringnya tertawa secara mekanis."

(Sometimes his jokes are difficult to understand, then he laughs first, and after that I follow him to laugh although I don't know what is funny. Or before finishing his jokes he can't stand laughing by himself. I then join him to laugh, till he thinks that he

doesn't need to continue his jokes, maybe because he thinks that I've grabbed its funniness."

"Wah, that's really funny."

...

It's so long and boring that for me laughing is not a reaction toward funniness anymore, but merely a part of my job that I must do with complete loyalty. If other people get older signed by wrinkles on their forehead, I get wrinkles on my cheek, on the right-left sides of my lips caused by too much laughing mechanically"

(pp. 36-37).

If we look the words up in the dictionary, the meaning of the word "funny" is "*humorous, causing laughter*" (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2008:583) while "laugh" means "*to smile while making sounds with your voice that show you think something is funny or you are happy*" (p.809). None of the two definitions is true for Darsono in the above context because what he has is false funniness and false laughter. However, this being not funny is really funny for the doctor as described above. So, what is funny for Imaluddin may not be funny for Darsono and what is not funny for Darsono can be so funny for the doctor. Therefore, who is (are) funny or not funny among the three? What is important, when Darsono says that he does not know the funny side of Imaluddin's jokes and he thinks they are not funny because he does not understand them, he is being funny at the very moment. The fact that Darsono keeps laughing at Imaluddin's dry, not funny jokes is actually so funny. Moreover, when Darsono says that he keeps laughing mechanically, he is actually not laughing because he fails to fulfill the characteristic is laughter since he does it under pressure of his loyalty to the boss, and he is absolutely not happy for it. So, what Darsono wants to convey betrays its own essence: what he means not to be funny actually turns to be so funny and what he means by to laugh does not result in real laughter at all.

The second untrustworthiness of language is depicted in Darsono's expression that it is difficult for him to tell about the serious problem that he has kept for himself:

"Darsono menghembuskan napasnya perlahan-lahan. Setelah beberapa saat terdiam, ia pun berucap dengan suara pelan. 'Ya. Saya memang memndam persoalan yang sangat serius'."

'Pernah Bapak menceritakannya kepada orang lain?'

"Darsono menggeleng-gelengkan kepalanya. 'Sulit saya menceritakannya'."

(Darsono exhaled slowly. After a moment of silence, he then said in a soft voice. 'Yes. Actually I keep a very serious problem to myself.'

'Have you ever told someone else about it?'

'Darsono shoke his head, 'it's difficult for me to tell about it'.'") (p. 34)

We know that the rest of the story (even the whole story) is about what happens to Darsono and he can recount everything smoothly without any difficulties. Again, here what he says through his language of expression betray what really happens and what he has done in telling the doctor and all of us as readers.

The third untrustworthiness happens in connection with the cure or recovery of Darsono's sickness and this will also be related to the last point later. It is described that Darsono finally has to be hospitalized due to his worsening health condition, and then all of the first class doctors cannot identify his sickness let alone cure him. However, we ca also notice that during his sickness, Darsono can still recount and narrate his problem very well. There is no indication that

he has health problems, physically and mentally. And what is surprising and unreliable, Darsono can handle everything after a terrible psychological terror by his own mind and simply recover afterward by a simple suggestion from the doctor to resign from his job.

“...Lalu saya tidak ingat apa-apa lagi dan malamnya terjaga di ruang ICU rumah sakit ini...”

‘Jadi apa yang mesti saya lakukan sekarang, doctor?’

Setelah sekali menghembuskan napas panjang, doctor berucap singkat.

‘Gampang. Segera saja ajukan surat pengunduran diri.’

‘Darsono tersentak. Ya. Kenapa tidak?’

“...Then I didn’t remember anything anymore and that night I was awoken in the ICU room of this hospital...”

‘So what should I do now, doctor?’

After taking a deep breath once, the doctor said shortly.

‘It’s easy. Write your letter of resignation immediately.’

‘Darsono is surprised. Yes. Why not?’

(p.38)

It is actually a very simple self cure! So the idea of complicated sickness (the doctors have given up!) is destroyed by this fact that Darsono by a little insight from the surrendered doctor can easily recover.

The last untrustworthiness of the story lies in the fact that becomes the main idea of the whole story i.e. the concept of not becoming a good listener. Darsono seriously says,

‘Jangan! Jangan pernah terjebak menjadi seorang pendengar setia!’

‘Dokter terperanjat. ‘Kenapa?’

‘Persoalan serius yang sekarang saya hadapi justru berawal dari kebiasaan saya menjadi pendengar setia.’

‘Lho, kok bisa?’

‘(Never! Never be trapped of becoming a good listener!’

The doctor was stunned. ‘Why?’

‘The serious problem that I have now indeed started from my habit of becoming a good listener.’

‘Lho, how come?’

(p. 34)

From the title of the short story we know that Darsono is someone who suffers very much because of becoming a good listener and actually this is what the story is all about. But, when we look into the story more thoroughly, Darsono’s suffering is not that much when we compare him to Mr. Imaluddin’s suffering. Why? Because Darsono is still able to “cure” himself by deciding to quit the job, while Mr. Imaluddin can’t do it (evidently, it turns to the bitter fact that after being left by Darsono, Mr. Imaluddin suffers a similar sickness with similar symptom i.e. unclear sickness). Mr. Imaluddin can recover only after Darsono visits him and, of course, laughs at his jokes as usual. It shows us how dependent Mr. Imaluddin is on Darsono. Therefore, this undoubtedly shows that the suffering of people who has a life role (read ‘destiny’, Darsono) is not as bad as those who asked others to listen to them (such Imaluddin). Further, who is actually the subject and who is the object of the story if we view it hierarchically? Is it centered on Darsono or Imaluddin? Looking back to the title of the short story, it must have been Darsono

because he is the victim of becoming a good listener. But, again, analyzed through the degree of seriousness or severity, there is no doubt that Imaluddin is the subject. So, it is clear here that unreliability goes along with the progress of the story, that the content of this story betrays its very title. Weighting what really happens in the story, the title must sound like '*Nasib seorang yang minta didengarkan dengan setia!*' (*The Destiny of someone who asks to be listened to!*). That is why the title of this paper is given a question mark: asking for reliability!

Conclusion

Meaning is slippery and uncertain. The above analysis has shown us that a piece of seemingly harmonious work intended with a certain main idea by an author can have many warring forces inside. In verbal stage, for example, there are five evident contradictions related to the doctors' diagnosis, accuracy of diagnosis, hopelessness on way out or cure, achievements and who can help in coping with the sickness. While in textual stage, some inconsistencies can also be revealed such as inconsistent self identity, honesty, and professionalism. Finally, in the linguistic stage, it is proven that the language used by the author is not reliable enough and self-contradictory. This is evident in for instance the concept of funniness and laughter, complicatedness and simplicity, all related to the characters' sickness and solution to it, and the biggest question on whether it is the poor destiny of a good listener or the worse destiny of a good man asking to be listened to. All in all, again, show how a piece of work and its language is ambiguous, and full of un-decidability of meaning.

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