

## THE SKETCHES OF MINANGKABAU SOCIETY IN NUR ST. ISKANDAR'S AND HAMKA'S NOVELS

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### ABSTRAK

*Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan sketsa masyarakat Minangkabau sebelum merdeka yang terefleksi dalam novel-novel karya Nur St. Iskandar dan Hamka. Ada dua bentuk sketsa masyarakat Minangkabau yang terefleksi dalam novel karya Nur St. Iskandar dan Hamka. Pertama, di dalam novel karya Iskandar ditemukan bahwa masyarakat yang berkarakter baik adalah masyarakat berpendidikan Barat dan berprofesi sebagai pegawai pemerintah (Belanda). Kedua, di dalam novel karya Hamka masyarakat yang berkarakter baik adalah masyarakat yang berpendidikan surau (agama Islam) dan bekerja sendiri (swasta). Kelompok masyarakat ini dalam berperilaku sehari-hari cenderung menonjolkan rasional dan akhlak serta menentang praktik tradisi adat yang bertentangan dengan agama (Islam). Sketsa kehidupan yang tercermin dalam novel-novel Nur St. Iskandar dan Hamka itu, juga berdampak terhadap pola pikir masyarakat Minangkabau sekarang.*

**Kata Kunci:** masyarakat, Minangkabau, refleksi, sketsa

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the sketches of Minangkabau society before independence as reflected in Nur St. Iskandar's and Hamka's novels. In Iskandar's novel, a good character in society is a Western educated person who is an employer at the Dutch office. In Hamka's novel, a good character of society is one holding religious (Islam) education and working as an entrepreneur. Both characters reflect a social group who tends to demonstrate rationality and good attitude, but opposes any tradition that contradicts religion (Islam). The life sketches reflected in Nur St. Iskandar's and Hamka's novels also have impacts on the Minangkabau societies' way of thinking.

**Keywords:** Minangkabau, reflection, sketches, society

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## INTRODUCTION

There are some theories that backgrounds this study on why it is important to study Minangkabau society that is reflected in Nur St. Iskandar and Hamka's novels before Independence Day. *First*, these writers grew up in Minangkabau society and life, but have education and careers in other cities. Nur St. Iskandar received a Western education, lived in Jakarta, and had a job as an employer in a Dutch office; meanwhile Hamka received a religious education (Islam), lived in Medan, and had a job as a businessman. Based on these conditions, these writers have different points of view about Minangkabau society. The study of Minangkabau society can be caused by several things: (1) the uniqueness of Minangkabau society which has a matrilineal system and is different with the other ethnic groups that have a patrilineal system, (2) the existence of strong religion (Islam) in the matrilineal system, (3) talking about the matrilineal system, Syafri Sairin (2002) states that Minangkabau society is "ambiguous". Azwar (2001) also states that the society always competes with each other. Bachman (2000) mentions a society that does not have clear rules.

*Second*, Iskandar and Hamka are the Minangkabau writers that published their works before World War II. Nur Sutan Iskandar and Hamka also come from noble families, but they had different education and jobs. These writers lived in other cities. The profile of society that became their object of the story related to the social problems in Minangkabau. The problems of socio-culture of Minangkabau society and the system had many critics in the 1920s, especially before World War II. The critics were stated in the novels by the writers. Teeuw (1967: 54-57) stated that the novels at the time were usually known and considered to be against tradition.

*Third*, the novels are a reflection of society. As a reflection, they will always be filled by culture and take an important role in human life, because there are some alternatives for humans to act upon the life problems stated in the novels. These include acts to face and solve problems in

an artistic and imaginative way. The problems are those related to humans and their cultural aspects such as marriage, education, wealth, loyalty, betrayal, heroism, sadness, happiness, cheating, corruption, etc.

The life sketches that are drawn in the novels will give new experience to the readers because it draws from the same conditions that happen in society. Experience also will have social impacts on the readers. The readers will read about things that they will not see in their life. According to Hauser (Ratna, 2003) literature is more likely affected by society and not vice versa. Literature as social life reflection has a tight relationship with the writer as a member of society. The writer's imagination, directly or not, is influenced by his/her experience.

Based on the explanation above, it can be stated that literature uses facts of cultural ideology. Hoggart (1975) explains that literature always reflects cultural values. Therefore, writers usually tell the problems that are related to individual life in society.

It should be remembered that writers are the product of eras and environments. Their way of thinking is influenced by the environment and era. Their ideas are transformed through their characters in the novels. So, literature means it is an expression of culture. The problem is how the sketches of society can be reflected in the writers' novels (Iskandar and Hamka).

This question needs a deeper exploration of study based on the relevant theories, in this case, based on sociology literature. The reason of choosing this basic foundation is the view of literature as a reflection of socio-culture society. Sociology always relates literature with society, goals, and writers. Literature is the reflection of society's life that takes a role as its background (Atmazaki, 2007). As a reflection, literature does not imitate reality fully but it gives lessons and problem solving for the problems. The focus of sociology of literature is not on the things happen but on how it happens and the possibilities. According to Damono (1978) literature shows life

and life is social fact. Life covers the relationships among society, and the events that happen in individual's lives (Damono, 1978:1). All human aspects of life-including the life sketches and its socio-cultural system-can be found in literature. Literature shows the attitudes about all aspects of human life including, about themselves.

## METHOD

This study is a qualitative study using a descriptive-analytic method. The object of this study is the life sketches of Minangkabau society before Independence Day. The sources of the data are the novels of Iskandar and Hamka. The data were collected by using R-N-A (Read, take Notes, and conduct Analysis) technique. The technique of data analysis was done using a technique of literature text (in this case, Iskandar and Hamka's novels). This phenomenon became the major analysis and social phenomena became the minor analysis (Junus, 1986).

## MINANGKABAU SOCIETY'S SKETCHES IN ISKANDAR AND HAMKA'S NOVELS

Before discussing the sketches of Minangkabau society in Iskandar and Hamka's novels, it is better to explain the socio-culture background of these writers. The data are explained in the following table:

**Table 1**  
**Socio-cultural data of Nur Sutan Iskandar and Hamka**

Writers	Nur Sutan Iskandar	Hamka
Origin	Minangkabau	Minangkabau
Economic background	Noble	Noble
Education	Western	Religious
Domicile	Jakarta	Medan/Jakarta
Job	Employer	Entrepreneur

Based on the table above, Iskandar and Hamka have different socio-cultural backgrounds

although they were from Minangkabau and lived in noble families. Iskandar had a Western education, lived in Jakarta, and got a job as an employer. Meanwhile, Hamka had a religious education, lived in Medan and Jakarta, and got a job as a businessman.

The two facts of socio-culture are reflected in the facts of their stories, from the side of characters, plots, and also backgrounds. The following table explains the facts:

**Table 2**  
**The facts of Iskandar and Hamka's novels**

No	Iskandar	Hamka
1.	A good character of a Minangkabau people in the novel is someone who has a Western education and has a job as the employer in the Dutch office	A good character of a Minangkabau people in the novel is someone who has a religious education and has a job as an entrepreneur
2.	Bad people are those who have a job as a businessman and are uneducated.	Bad people are those who have a job as the Dutch employer and have a Western education
3.	Against Minangkabau tradition	Against Minangkabau tradition
4.	Iskandar's novel shows the resistance of a Minangkabau people who has a Western culture toward tradition	Hamka's novel focuses on how Minangkabau people become the victims of Tradition and Western education
5.	Plot: conventional	Plot: conventional
6.	Background of the story: Minangkabau-Jakarta	Background of the story: Minangkabau, Medan, and Java

Based on the table above, the basic differences of good and bad characters that are reflected in Iskandar and Hamka's novels can be seen. Iskandar stated that the good Minangkabau people are those who work as the Dutch employers, meanwhile Hamka stated that a good character of Minangkabau people are those

who have a religious education and work as an entrepreneur. The existence of these differences is caused by their different backgrounds. Hamka's education and his job showed that he did not like Western education. It can be seen from his novel titled *Dijemput Mamaknya* and *Merantau ke Deli* where the characters work alone and became victims of tradition. Moreover, the novel entitled *Tenggelamnya Kapal van der Wijk* has the character of a religious person.

Most of the figures who have good characters in Hamka's novels come from a poor family, but eventually they become rich and work as a merchant because they dared to fight for their survival. Presumably, Hamka wants to show people a good sketch is not located as a rich-poor one, high-low education, or worked as a government employee, but it is the people who behave as religious people. Hamka in his novels also criticized practices in Minangkabau society at the expense of his own people as experienced in the novel *Tenggelamnya Kapal van der Wijk*. Zainuddin's arrival event to his hometown eventually caused conflicts for himself and his entire family. In the end, he relented and left the village that has been regarded as home itself. He believes that behind his boredom and the boredom of his family, one day he find happiness. From here it can be seen that Hamka criticized socio-cultural systems that are always sacrificing Minangkabau people (especially men).

Meanwhile, in Iskandar's novels, a good character is described as an educated person or those who get higher education. The character normally works as a civil servant (the Dutch). Iskandar also expressed disapproval of the custom against the character through the novel *Marah Adil*. Although he is uneducated and works as merchant, he decides to leave his wife and his hometown. Only with a strong desire and belief for a better life in the new areas he dares to face any challenge in life. It is different from Ramli, a good character in the novel *Karena Mertua* who is educated and works for the government. Likewise, the typical character in the novel titled *Salah Pilih*

is named Asri. He is a figure of a forward-thinking young man and has been affected by the social habits of the Western world. His way of thinking and his behavior was more advanced compared to the youth in the village. Sometimes his behavior was shocking to Asnah and his mother:

*"Asri sudah mendapat pendidikan Barat dan sudah biasa bercampur gaul dan beramah-ramahan dengan bangsa Eropa. Baik dengan laki-laki, baikpun dengan perempuan. Rupanya adat mereka itu sudah banyak yang diketahuinya bahkan banyak pula yang sudah ditiru dan dipakainya. Oleh karena itu ia pun hampir lupa dengan adat-istiadat nenek moyangnya sendiri".*

(“Asri already has a Western education and ordinarily mixes slang and is friendly with European nations, both with men and women. It seems that he already knows their customs, and even he imitates and uses them.. Therefore he almost forgot the customs of his own ancestors”)

On the contrary, figures of bad characters in Iskandar's novels are those who are uneducated and do not work for the government. Ani's parents in the novel *Apa Dayaku Karena Aku Perempuan* are bad characters because they are just ordinary farmers and are uneducated. Ani's husband is also a bad character because he is uneducated and works as merchant. Likewise, the *mamak* (uncle) in Samsiar's novel *Korban Percintaan* is a leader who is a bad character and he is a wealthy merchant. Samsiar and Dahlan are good leaders and are victims of *mamak* Samsiar's decision.

Farmers may easily be swapped into merchants or vice versa, but they will not become government employees because they do not have a good education for this position. This condition makes public employees have a higher social status than ordinary people. This phenomenon is represented by the character of Ramli who works for the government and he is able to escape from the power of tradition carried on by his mother. This data also shows us that educated people can break away from the shackles of Minangkabau tradition, and act as an agent of renewal.

## CIVIL SERVANT AS THE HIGHEST SOCIAL STATUS

The Dutch introduced employees as a new profession for Minangkabau society before independence era, and this profession occupied the higher social status in Minang society rather than merchants and farmers. Merchants were considered as having the more fortunate profession economically. In addition, it was assumed that merchants usually knew more about the world outside since they usually go overseas.

Culturally, the three professions represent two sketches of Minangkabau society at the time. Society, who works as the employee, is Western educated, has a Western mind concept, and mostly come from noble families. This Western mind concept causes these groups to oppose tradition and assume that the societies that are not getting Western education are old-fashioned and left behind. This group was also unsympathetic to the community groups who work as merchants.

A good character in Iskandar's novels is one who is educated and works as clerk and influences the behavior of people's lives-including the Minangkabau intellectual people. Employees are also considered as having a prestigious profession and it is still a top choice for the young generation in Minangkabau nowadays. They go to college and study everywhere in the country in order to get a job as a civil servant and ABRI.

The above fictional reality is reflected in objective reality. This is evident from the job options of 138 students (70 men and 68 lectures in IAIN and STAI) West Sumatra. There were three things that were asked in the questionnaire: the choice of a job after graduation, the reason for choosing the job, and their chosen country if they wanted to continue their study. By completing the questionnaire, it was obtained that out of 138 students, upon graduation, those who would like to work as a civil servant/military/police are as many as 78 people (56.5%), those who try to be entrepreneurs and merchants are 40 people (29%), and 15 people (11%) want to work in the company of others/foreigners, and 5 (3.5%) want

to choose to be politicians. None of them chose to be farmers.

The reason why they chose that profession is due to the fact that working as civil/military/police is it provides secure retirement. Those who chose the profession as a businessman or merchant want to change to have a better life (or said "to be rich"). Some respondents chose to work in a company or a foreign country because they want a large salary, and respondents who chose the profession as a politician were motivated because they want to be a public official.

Meanwhile the country that became their option to continue their education is America with 32 people (23.3%), the UK and Germany with 21 people (15.3%), Australia with 19 (13.5%), Saudi Arabia with 33 people (23.9 %), Malaysia with 6 (4.3%), and 27 people said they want to study in Indonesia (19.7%). If we sum up the students who selected the U.S., UK, Germany and Australia (Western), it totals 71 people (51.4%), Arab totals 33 people (24%), and Malaysia and Indonesia totals 34 people (24.6%).

Based on the implications of the above data, it is clear that the sketch of Minangkabau society being delivered by Nur St. Iskandar through his works highly influences the younger generations of Minang nowadays. This is evident from the choice of students who want to work in public civil service (56%). Meanwhile, the sketches that were delivered by Hamka through his work were becoming self-employed merchant and it got second place (43.5%). The profession as a farmer got the lowest social strata. It is evident that none of the respondents chose that profession. Their reason of not choosing this profession is that farmers do not need higher education to work. Similarly, it is reflected in the country of choice in continuing education; they choose Western countries (51.4%), Arab countries (24%) and Eastern countries (26.6%). The emergence of this phenomenon is essentially a logical consequence of the influence of people who colonized for 350 years and the impact of Minangkabau culture itself that tends to "*maambiak contoh ka nan sudah*;



*maambiak tua ka nan manang*” (take the example from the previous; take good luck to the winner ).

The sketch of Minangkabau society in Hamka’s novels mostly included work as a merchant. This group usually was *surau* (Muslim) educated and had *Muslim* mind concepts. They generally come from an ordinary family and even from a poor family. This group is different from Western-educated groups in three ways, namely: (a) they never connect themselves with government officials (the Netherlands), (b) some of them eventually became freedom fighters against the Dutch so they are not sympathetic to the Dutch government who are among the Minang people themselves who worked with him, and (c) they prefer to work alone (as an entrepreneur) and thus they are more accommodative than farmers.

Education that was received at the mosque is grouped into three types as follows: (a) religious education, which was held from sunset until after the evening prayers. The material taught concerned all aspects of worship and morals, as well as the deepening of religious teachings reading the Al-Quran at a child’s level, such as the level of *Juzz Amma* for children as young as elementary school and Quran for children and adolescents; (b) Indigenous education and customs, which was held after the evening prayers. The material is taught in the form of customary speeches, teaching the ins and outs of customs, social systems, and rights and obligations of a person according to custom, and (c) education skills, such as analyzing daily work, and includes importance is arts education in the mosque courtyard. That is the provision of education for them to go overseas.

Minangkabau matrilineal system is a benefit to women. Home and family possessions such as land are inherited by women (Junus, 1963). The reason why Iskandar and Hamka criticized customs and ways of practice are also due to the matrilineal system which is advantageous for women. In a matrilineal system, men do not inherit anything because the family land is earmarked for the families of women, although he has a duty to

determine that the land will be profitable for the female members of his family. Perhaps this also causes Iskandar and Hamka to reside and settle overseas.

Living overseas, Iskandar and Hamka are more accommodative with other cultural systems. They see that there is no system for the entire Minangkabau. The system only applies to one group of Nagari or sheer. One particular community in Nagari is sometimes also considered as a foreigner. Therefore, the world is usually limited to a small geographic boundary. This view was changed by the view of Islam and Western education as reflected in the works of Iskandar and Hamka. Although Western education does not propose a specific kind of brotherhood, like what Islam is based on, but they introduce that man is the same everywhere. This differs from the Minangkabau system. Islam is more beneficial to men because power is in the hands of the father.

The entrance of modern education and the number of young people who live outside Minangkabau make youth integrate their studies with foreigners (not in the village or not *senagari*). They are aware that there is another world alongside the world that they know. Education also has a wider impact. Educated people are not likely to stay longer in their hometown because of work. They go far from home to get along with the new environment. They no longer live with the matrilineal system which is beneficial to the women, but integrate with the patrilineal system that benefits men. The reality of this new life could be demonstrated with life in the shoreline in which home ownership, vehicles, and other ownership certificates no longer are vested in women (wives), but based on men (husbands).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and explanation above, it can be concluded that there are two sketches of Minangkabau society that are reflected in the novels by Nur St. Iskandar and Hamka. First, the character in Iskandar’s novels are the Western-educated, professional government employees (the

Netherlands) and are against indigenous traditions. Meanwhile, the bad characters are those who are not Western-educated, and work as merchants and farmers. Second, Hamka viewed that good characters of Minangkabau people are those who had *Surau* education (Muslim religion), were self-employed, well-behaved, and were against the customs and traditions that are not relevant to Islam. Bad society is a society that typically is Western educated and works as an employee.

The sketch of Minangkabau society, as reflected in the novels of Iskandar and Hamka, still affect the life of the Minangkabau people (including the young generation). This phenomenon gives a negative impact of the colonized society and local culture that tends to “*maambiah contoh ka nan sudah; maambiak tua ka nan manang*” (take the example of the past; take good luck to a winner). This phenomenon is reflected in the employment and education options in Minang society now. Although there are two sketches of Minang people as reflected in the work of the two writers, we need to instill that in this life, we should grow a love for all people, all professions, and establish friendship regardless of SARA and social status. In addition, we also need to build a sense of equality between communities with a sincere heart, and raise awareness to be good and wise people. Hopefully with such attitudes, we will avoid disintegration and the degradation of humanity.

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