

Travelling through Text: Representation of Toba Batak Cultures in Suhunan's *Sordam* in Promoting Toba Tourist Destinations in North Sumatra, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Literature and tourism are intertwined in a reciprocal relationship, where many literary works draw inspiration from the world of tourism, and many tourist attractions are promoted in literary works. This article investigates the representation of Toba Batak cultures depicted in *Sordam* (2010), a novel by Suhunan Situmorang, and its relationship with promoting Toba tourist destinations. By employing qualitative approach, this study collects data from the novel and analyses them using the literary tourism approach and intertextuality theory. The results show that *Sordam frames its narration through three main Toba Batak cultures: saur matua death ceremony, mangongkal holi tradition, and spirit summoning ritual. It is done so by inserting some intermingled stories to support its narrations, such as the story of Lake Toba occurrence from two perspectives, cultural materials, historical notes, myths, and magical realism. By creatively providing natural and cultural attractions of Toba Batak, Sordam persuades readers to travel through text and intertextuality. In this viewpoint, Sordam presents itself directly or indirectly as a medium for promoting Toba tourist destinations. Hence, by exploring readers' experiences traveling through text, this article strengthens the reciprocal relationship between literary works and the tourism world.*

Keywords: literary tourism; tourism promotion; representation; Toba Batak cultures; traveling through text and intertextuality.

INTRODUCTION

The fact shows that literary works and tourism are closely connected. Literary works portray the tourism phenomena along with the story, and on the other hand, tourism inspires writers to produce literary

works. The connection between literary places, as one of the literary tourism areas, proposed by Butler (1986 cited in Busby & Klug, 2001), has been investigated by scholars from around the world, such as Herbert (2001), Hoppen et al. (2014), Gentile and Brown (2015), Yu and Xu (2016), Baleiro and Quinteiro (2018), Putra (2019), and Bîca and Schuster (2021). Its rapid development has met Smith's expectations (2003).

Literary tourism is flourishing, especially in places with cultural backgrounds and long precedence (Archatay & AK, 2017). Quinteiro et al. (2020) studied several literary texts portraying Coimbra, Portugal. They concluded that Coimbra is a destination for cultural tourism par excellence, both because of its material heritage, given the exceptional nature of its architectural heritage, and for its intangible legacy. In line with them, Guntar (2021) stated that the traditional dance of Malaka, called *Likurai*, depicted in Robertus Fahik's *Likurai untuk Sang Mempelai* (2013), had a potential effect of attracting tourists to Malaka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia.

The Toba Batak people mostly live around Lake Toba, one of the most popular tourist destinations in North Sumatra, Indonesia. This sub-ethnic group has several unique cultures, which are adequate to attract tourist's attention. Inspired by the Toba Batak cultures, some Indonesia novelists have published literary works in Indonesian and local languages, such as Bokor Hutasoit's *Penakluk Ujung Dunia* (1960), Situmorang's *Sordam* (2010), TB Silalahi's *ToBa Dreams* (2015), Idris Pasaribu's *Mangalua* (2015), and Remy Sylado's *Perempuan Bernama Arjuna* (2016). Although all novelists of these novels portray some Batak Toba cultures, only Situmorang's *Sordam* is assumed intensely to narrate them from the beginning until the end. He beautifully describes three Toba Batak cultures on Samosir Island, at the center of Lake Toba, from where he comes.

It is also predicted that Situmorang uses some other stories to represent the three local cultural forms in his narration because those cultures mentioned above are connected to the Toba Batak people's ancient beliefs. This study employs the intertextuality theory, proposed by Kristeva (1980), to understand the cultures represented in *Sordam*. According to her, intertextuality is the transposition of one or more systems of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position. She adds that it is a permutation of texts; in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.

International and national researchers have employed intertextuality in analyzing some novels, including Abdullayeva (2018), Dewi (2013), and Purwantini (2017). Abdullayeva (2018) found some reminiscences, allusions, quotations, and aphorisms used in Ackroyd's three novels, i.e., *The House of Doctor Dee*, *The Lambs of London*, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, which functioned as the skeleton of the works and as the means to show heroes' characteristic features. Dewi

(2013) and Purwantini (2017) employed intertextuality theory in analyzing the interconnection between Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Arok Dedes* (1999) and *Pararaton* (1966), an old Javanese folklore translated by Ki Padmapuspita. Dewi (2013) found that the myth in folklore has been transformed creatively by the writer in the globalization context. Purwantini (2017) stated that through the deconstruction of narrative structures or storytelling, Toer wanted to criticize the New Order regime in Indonesia.

Sordam has attracted literary critics' attention, including Nasution et al. (2015) and Malau et al. (2020). Nasution et al. (2015) applied a psychological approach to studying the moral values of the characters depicted in *Sordam*. On the other hand, Malau et al. (2020) employed linguistic theory to obtain the meaning of figurative language use in the narration. Their studies, however, have yet to investigate how the Toba Batak cultures are represented and how *Sordam* promotes Toba tourist destinations. It is quite similar to Hariyono (2020) in his absence to connect the cultural attractions depicted in *Puya ke Puya* (2015), *Tiba Sebelum Berangkat* (2018), and *Sawerigading Datang dari Laut* (2019), written by Faisal Oddang to promote Tana Toraja tourist destinations.

Accordingly, it is vital to explore the role of *Sordam* in promoting Toba tourist destinations, primarily through the representation of Toba Batak cultures. Frost & Laing (2014) and Jenkin & Lund (2019:183) stated that novels have a powerful effect on readers, and at a particular time, the effect will turn their imaginative journey into an actual trip. To understand its role, two fundamental questions of this study are formulated: 1) How does *Sordam* represent Toba Batak cultures, and 2) Do the representations help promote Lake Toba as a tourist destination?

METHOD

This study employs qualitative research. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) stated that qualitative research has the natural setting as the direct data source, and the researcher is the critical instrument to analyze the data inductively. In addition, qualitative research is concerned with obtaining the meaning of the data collected in words.

The data correlating with Toba Batak cultures are selected from Suhunan's *Sordam* (2010), such as cultural materials and events, local wisdom, myths, legends, magical realism, and tourism areas. The data obtained are analyzed using a literary tourism approach to see how *Sordam* represents and promotes Toba Batak cultures along with Toba tourist destinations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sordam tells a story about the life journey of a young Batak man from Samosir Island, at the center of Lake Toba. Amidst his busy life as a lawyer in Jakarta, Paltibonar Nadeak always flies to Tanjung Bunga, his hometown,

to visit his old mother, Ompu Sahala Boru, who lives alone there. The story is set when political paralysis and economic chaos occurred in Jakarta and other regions in Indonesia from 1996 until 1998. Through his travels, this novel records three primary Toba Batak cultures, i.e., *saur matua* death ceremony, *mangongkal holi* tradition, and spirit summoning ritual performed by the people in Samosir Regency.

By applying a flashback plot story, *Sordam* is able to convey the whole story by talking about the death of a mother, which raises a conflict at the very beginning of his first chapter. It is narrated that Ompu Sahala Boru misses her youngest son, Paltibonar, so much. Finally, she dies in sadness after two years of waiting. The conflict occurs in response to Ompu Sahala Boru's last request for Paltibonar's attendance at her death ceremony. The ceremony is delayed many times with the hope that Paltibonar is found immediately. Toba Batak people believe the last request should be fulfilled, or a bad thing will happen to children. Creatively, *Sordam* chooses to delay the conflict's resolution on purpose by portraying Samosir Island, at the center of Lake Toba, as its setting place, along with intermingled stories about Toba Batak people's beliefs and cultures.

Toba Batak sub-ethnic group has a few legends that inspired Situmorang to write *Sordam*, one of which is the Legend of Lake Toba. This legend is retold along with scientific research to give readers two viewpoints. His narration about the legend is quite similar to the former one that used to be spoken elsewhere. However, he deconstructs a part of it by narrating that the couple has many children (Situmorang, 2010: 79), not only one son. After that, he encounters the legend by inserting a history of Lake Toba based on scientific research. "There also comes another story. Lake Toba, Samosir, Mount Pusuk Buhit and the hills that surround it are the children of an old volcano that exploded." (Situmorang, 2010: 80). He transforms the story into a new one. He makes the readers curious without stating which is right or wrong. Each cannot be proclaimed true or false because history can only be valid until another story supports it (Kriseva, 1980).

The stories of the lake above provide information and description about the landscape of Lake Toba, Samosir Island, and Mount Pusuk Buhit. This mountain is sacral for Toba Batak people because it is believed that Deak Parujar, the daughter of *Mulajadi Na Bolon* (God), descended her son, *Si Raja Batak* (The King of Batak), on the top of the mountain (Situmorang, 2010: 78) and lived in Sianjurmula-mula Village at the foot of the mountain a long time ago. He is regarded as the ancestor of the Batak ethnic group by *parmalim* (the ancient Batak belief). Until now, all legends, myths, and supernatural powers spoken in Toba Batak society are always connected to the myth of *Si Raja Batak*.

The myth of *Si Raja Batak* has also influenced the social systems and the norms of Batak society, although most Batak people have

left *parmalim*. In response to the death of Ompu Sahala Boru, Toba Batak people agree that she deserves the highest death status, called *saur matua*. *Saur matua* status can only be given to someone dead if all her children have got married and have grandchildren before they die. It is different from two other levels, *sari matua* and *mate mangkar*. According to Simanjuntak (2002), *sari matua* is given to someone who dies before their children get married. *Mate mangkar* status, on the other hand, is given to someone who dies at a young age or no one of their children gets married. Because of its prestige, Toba Batak people always dream the status, as stated by Ompu Sahala Boru to Paltibonar:

“If you have got married and have children, Palti, I am ready to die. Oh, how beautiful my death ceremony will be. My spirit will be delighted to see my children and grandchildren dancing and circling my dead body.” (Situmorang, 2010: 263)

By narrating the conversation between Ompu Sahala Boru and her son above, *Sordam* tries to support the influence of the myth of *Si Raja Batak* in Toba Batak's norms. This myth makes Ompu Sahala Boru ready to die anytime God decides. She believes her spirit will be happy to see her descendants. *Sordam* also shows that her family has the same feeling. All people look happy during the ceremony because they believe Ompu Sahala Boru has reached two of Batak Toba's philosophy of success, i.e., *hagabeon* (having children) and *hasangapon* (dignity) in her life, excepted *hamoraon* (richness).

The death status above is unique and out of logic for other ethnic groups. To clarify the reason why the spirit and the people are happy, *Sordam* portrays a *mangongkal holi* tradition and a *batu na pir* or *tambak na pir* (a high monument) in the middle of his novel through the journey of Paltibonar and his family to Ronggur Nihuta on the top of Samosir Island. This tradition is one of the most significant events performed by the Toba Batak people, among other ceremonies. It is held for three days and nights, involving hundreds to thousands of people, and costs millions to billions of rupiahs (Situmorang, 2010: 172). *Sordam* creates a few critical questions, often asked by non-Toba Batak, in Paltibonar's mind. He wonders what inspired the ancient Toba Batak to perform the tradition and why the Toba Batak people still keep doing it now. Quoted from *Sordam*, this tradition aims to gather all his father's family lines in one monument, which spread in different regions in Indonesia and Western countries (Situmorang, 2010: 179). After being excavated, all skeletons are put into a *batu na pir*, which has many levels constructed in it. Every level is provided for each generation, depending on their positions in their family. The skeletons of the first ancestor must be placed on the first level, followed by the second, on the lower level, and so forth. Toba Batak people believe that the higher it is placed, the closer the spirit of their ancestor is to heaven. That is why every Toba Batak family hopes they have sons and grandsons in their life, as conveyed by Ompu

Sahala Boru to Paltibonar in the quotation above.

A few days before the *mangongkal holi* begins, *dongan sabutuha* (the clan from the father's brother) prepares everything for the ceremony with the help of *boru* (the clan from the father's sister line). The *boru* is fully responsible for providing food, drinks, party tents, and other stuff. According to the social relation system of Batak ethnic groups, called *dalihan na tolu* (three pillars of Toba Batak society; *hula-hula, dongan sabutuha, boru*), everybody has different rights and responsibilities due to their positions in a family (Situmorang, 2010: 331). *The dongan sabutuha* and the *boru* must respect *Hula-hula* (the clan from the mother's brother line) because the *hula-hula* is regarded as a representative of God to bless them.

The excavation process starts early in the morning, witnessed by all families standing at the side of the graveyard. The vivid description of a traditional activity lets readers have a sort of 'cultural travel' through their reading. The narrator describes it as follows:

"The bones and skulls of great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers and all dead descendants, including Paltibonar's father, have begun to be excavated. After being cleaned, each will be gathered in a white cloth and placed on a large Chinese ceramic plate covered with *ulos*. *Paniarans* (daughters-in-law) seem busy cleaning the skull and bones from the soil. The body remains will be placed into a *batu napir* or *tambak napir*. *Gondang sabangunan* (percussion instrument) is played slowly during the process. The tone and the rhythm spread mystical nuance. The *sarune* (flute) tone is like crying each time *ogung* (gong) is beaten. The sounds make the graveyard is like full of dead spirits." (Situmorang, 2010: 183)

The quote above provides four detailed steps of *mangongkal holi*. First is the excavation process; all grandparents' skeletons are excavated one by one to avoid mixing the bones. Second is the washing process; this step removes dirt and soil attached to the bones. After being washed with clean water, the bones are smeared with lime and turmeric and dried under the sun to preserve the condition of the bones. Third is the transferring process; the skeletons of each grandparent are placed in a white cloth on a ceramic plate covered with an *ulos* (a traditional woven Batak cloth) before transferring into a small coffin (Situmorang, 2010: 172). Finally, the placing process; each coffin is put into a *batu na pir* started from the first ancestor on the highest level, continued by the second and the rest. To make readers feel the situation, *Sordam* adds two phrases, 'mystical nuance' and 'dead spirits,' to take the readers to the last traditional event. All process is shown in Picture 1 below.

Picture 1: Four Process of *Mangongkal Holi*



(A) The Excavation Process



(B) The Cleaning Process



(C) The Transferring Process



(D) The Placing Process

Source: (A) indonesianall.com; (B) tobatabo.com; (C) imagine.blogspot.com; (D) akurat.co

Travelling through Text: Representation of ...
Bertova Simanihuruk, Asmyta Surbakti, I Nyoman Darma Putra, Eddy Setia

Before being inserted into the monument, all coffins are placed in front of a *ruma bolon* (a traditional Batak wooden house) during the ceremony. All people are dancing while circling the coffins under the tents accompanied by *gondang sabangunan* played by *pargonci* (the music players), positioned on the upper terrace of *ruma bolon* (Situmorang, 2010: 178). The terrace is over the entrance door especially built and functioned as a place of the *pargonci* in every ceremony. Siregar et al. (2018) confirmed that *gondang sabangunan* has a significant role in the Toba Batak community as a primary tool for communicating with *Mulajadi na Bolon*. *Ruma bolon* also has several unique architectures. It is a large house with no room like houses in general. The *ruma bolon* looks artistic in its decoration. It is full of various *gorga* (ornaments) painted in three dominant colors; white, black, and red. Each *gorga* contains Batak local wisdom, as seen in Picture 2 below.

Picture 2. *Ruma Bolon* Construction and the Pargonci with Gondang Sabangunan on the Upper Terrace of Ruma Bolon



Source: (A) detik.com and (B) ninna.id

To end the conflict in the first chapter, *Sordam* introduces a traditional ritual called spirit summoning as the resolution. It is narrated that Amani Tongam, one of Paltibonar's relatives, decides to see *Datu Pasordam* (a shaman) in Harianboho Village in the middle of the night. He believes the shaman can help them find Paltibonar. The wife of *Amanta Datu* sets ritual equipment (Situmorang, 2010: 387), which is similar to other traditional rituals, except for a large bamboo flute called *sordam*. As described by Pinem (2020), *sordam* is a Toba Batak musical instrument made of bamboo, which is played by blowing from the end (up-blown flute) by placing the lip on the end of the bamboo diagonally. It has five tone holes at the top and one at the bottom, while the blow hole is the tip of the bamboo, as seen in Picture 3 below.

Picture 3: *Sordam* and the Way to Play It



(A)

(B)

Source: (A) Facebook_Marno Siagian; (B) GoSumut.com

Before *Amanta Datu* begins the ritual, he reminds Amani Tongam to be calm while he is blowing the sordam. He also tells him a sign of the spirit's presence (Situmorang, 2010: 388). Then, after saying a spell, he blows the sordam.

“The pitiful sound breaks out through the silence of the night, rousing the feathers. It is wailing and rousing the hairs of the neck. It is like gripping, screaming, wailing. Unexpectedly wind like a tornado comes. The lantern suddenly goes out.” (Situmorang, 2010: 387)

The excerpt indicates that Amanta Datu uses a supernatural power to call Paltibonar's spirit through the medium of sordam. Its tone sounds screaming and wailing, like a human being's voice. Suddenly, the spirit of Paltibonar enters Datu Pasordam's body and talks:

“Who calls me?” asks the voice out from Amanta Datu's mouth.

Amani Tongam is familiar with the voice. He is shocked and afraid. He suddenly gets goosebumps.

“Why do you call me?”

It is like Paltibonar's voice.

“Who are you?” asks Amanta Datu's wife. “Please, identify yourself”

“I am Paltibonar...” (Situmorang, 2010: 389)

In the quotation above, *Sordam* narrates a mysterious moment when the spirit can talk and question like a human being. Its voice described similar to Paltibonar's is out of logic. This narration is quite similar described in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1984), investigated by Barrett (2001). Barret questioned how the dead speak to the living, which is also questioned in this study. It can be accepted that if this exchange between the past and the present is “how the dead speak to the living,” then postmodern sublimity may be expressible not in any single text but in the spaces between texts.

From the analysis above, it is clear that *Sordam* is wrapped with various source texts, such as historical notes, a legend, myths, a supernatural power, and tourism phenomena to promote three Toba Batak cultures, i.e., *saur matua* death ceremony, *mangongkal holi* tradition, and spirit summoning ritual in Samosir Island through the life journey of Paltibonar. By reading *Sordam*, the readers get unique pre-knowledge and pre-experiences, which raise a motivation to see Toba Batak cultures. Stebbins (1996) stated that tourists often travel to find a unique culture different from theirs. The diversity of cultures in the world increases people's curiosity and moves people from one place to another, no matter

how far it is from their home and how much money they spend.

CONCLUSION

Lake Toba has already got its name because of its tremendous nature for so long. *Sordam* creatively adds another potential attraction by narrating the uniqueness of three local cultures from the Toba Batak people in detail, i.e., the *saur matua* death ceremony, the *mangongkal holi* tradition, and the spirit summoning ritual. Whoever reads *Sordam* will get the portrayals of the beauty of Lake Toba's nature and culture. The story in this novel can be read as a promotion for Toba tourist destinations which provide a form of cultural travel through text and intertextuality.

This study focuses on Toba Batak cultural attractions performed by Toba Batak society. However, further research on the other attractions of *Sordam* remains unexplored, including the reader's response which might be interesting to investigate using literary tourism or other relevant approaches.

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