IS SHAHNON AHMAD’S *RANJAU SEPanJANG JALAN* A TRAGEDY?

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Abstract

Malaysia’s Shahnon Ahmad is a versatile writer. He has been a prominent literary figure in the arena of Malay literature. He is the voice of the masses. Through his fiction he is not afraid to portray the truth of the everyday Malaysian life. This is evident through many of his works. He talks about poverty, politics, religion and much more vis-à-vis his fiction. For the purpose of this paper one novel has been selected, *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (RSJ) (1966) or its translation, which will be used in this paper, *No harvest but a thorn* (1972) translated by Adibah Amin. This novel is very popular and it has also been turned into a movie, produced and acted by Malaysia’s famous and talented actress Sarimah in the 1980s. This paper will determines that the novel can be labeled as a tragedy. It uses the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle’s work the *Poetics* in the reading of this novel. The discussion juxtaposes Aristotle’s views of tragedy with the plot/events and characters that are portrayed in RSJ. It investigates whether the formula of the Greek tragedy is present in Shahnon Ahmad’s selected work.

Keywords: Aristotle, Poetics, Shahnon Ahmad, tragedy, Lahuma, Jeha

1. Introduction

Malaysia’s Shahnon Ahmad is a versatile writer. He has been a prominent literary figure in the arena of Malay literature. Over forty years ago in 1956 his first short story appeared in *Majalah Guru*, titled “Bingung”, nine years later his first novel *Rentong* was published in 1965. He is the voice of the masses. Through his fiction he is not afraid to portray the truth of the everyday Malaysian life. This is evident through many of his works. He talks about poverty, politics, religion and much more vis-à-vis his fiction. For the purpose of this paper one novel has been chosen, *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (RSJ) (1966) or its translation, which will be used in this paper, *No harvest but a thorn* (1972) translated by Adibah Amin. This novel is very popular and it has also been turned into a movie, produced and acted by Malaysia’s famous and talented actress Sarimah in the 1980s.

The question posed is that is RSJ is a tragic novel? At first reading it exudes the idea that it is because it does not give us a happy ending. It is about a pair of farmers, husband and wife, Lahuma and Jeha who have seven daughters. The novel begins as the padi planting season starts. Lahuma and Jeha go to the edge of the jungle to sow padi seeds before they are transferred to the rice fields. There, Jeha comes across a snake that nearly bites her. If not for Lahuma’s bravery and quick action his wife would have died. He manages to kill the snake, however his wife is traumatized by the incident. When Lahuma goes to the fields to clear them and make them ready for planting padi she stays at home, sickly and scared.
In the paddy field Lahuma steps on a thorn, and it is lodged in his foot. He is nursed by his wife, but the thorn cannot be taken out since it is embedded deep in his foot. Lahuma’s condition becomes worse, his body bloats because of the poison of the thorn and in the end he dies. Jeha and her seven daughters are left to fend for themselves. Although without male help Jeha works the fields with her two elder daughters. She manages to plant the paddy but at the same time she misses her husband and pines for him, thinking of him day and night and dreaming of him while she sleeps. Her sorrow and the burden of responsibility of taking care of her children and the paddy field take its toll, and Jeha becomes insane. The penghulu helps her, but then Jeha’s craziness becomes serious and she is sent to the hospital for treatment. Her two elder daughters take over her responsibilities and take care of their younger sisters as well as the paddy fields. When Jeha returns from the hospital she comes back to a cage that was made for her and in which she was locked before taken away to the hospital. In that cage also lies a big can that is filled with paddy. That is the only harvest that the family gets for that particular season.

This paper will try to determine whether the novel is a tragedy or not. It will take into account the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle’s work the Poetics in the reading of this novel. The discussion will juxtapose Aristotle’s views of tragedy with the plot/events and characters that are portrayed in RSJ. We will view how RSJ is similar in many ways to the elements of Greek tragedy that is discussed by Aristotle. Though Shahnon’s work is a novel and Aristotle discusses poetry and drama it is not impossible to trace the characteristics of a tragedy in RSJ that have been mentioned by Aristotle. We have to take into consideration that the art of the novel did not exist during Aristotle’s ancient Greek period. However, the ingredient of a tragedy that has been outlined by Aristotle has influenced modern day writers and this does not leave Shahnon Ahmad out. We will see whether the formula of the Greek tragedy is present in Shahnon Ahmad’s work even though it is not a drama or a piece of poetry.

2. What is a tragedy?

This section will discuss the meaning of tragedy. It will also explicate the Greek tragedy and the modern tragedy. A tragedy is drama or works of literature in which the main character suffers and is not able to cope with the situation that he or she is put in. A tragedy ends in grieve, where the character dies or does not have a happy life, unlike a fairy tale that has a happily ever after ending. According to Jennifer Wallace, “Tragedy is the art form created to confront the most difficult experiences we face: death, loss, injustice, thwarted passion, despair” (2007: 1).


1. a. A drama or literary work in which the main character is brought to ruin or suffers extreme sorrow, especially as a consequence of a tragic flaw, moral weakness, or inability to cope with unfavorable circumstances.
   b. The genre made up of such works.
   c. The art or theory of writing or producing these works.
2. A play, film, television program, or other narrative work that portrays or depicts calamitous events and has an unhappy but meaningful ending.
3. A disastrous event, especially one involving distressing loss or injury to life: *an expedition that ended in tragedy, with all hands lost at sea.*
4. A tragic aspect or element.
(http://www.thefreedictionary.com/tragedy online 1/11/2012)

While the Oxford dictionary defines tragedy as,

1. an event causing great suffering, destruction, and distress, such as a serious accident, crime, or natural catastrophe: *a tragedy that killed 95 people [mass noun]: his life had been plagued by tragedy*
2. a play dealing with tragic events and having an unhappy ending, especially one concerning the downfall of the main character: *Shakespeare’s tragedies [mass noun] the dramatic genre represented by tragedies: Greek tragedy*
(http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/tragedy online 1/11/2012).

Thus, the second definition given by the American Heritage dictionary of the English language can be applied to RSJ.

The original context of tragedy can be traced to ancient Greece. Greek tragedy has been read and discussed extensively. However, in these modern times we have distanced ourselves from Greek tragedy. According to Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, “The larger than life characters, the elevated language, and the mythic plots make Athenian tragedy distant to today’s students” (2008: 7).

Greek tragedy lead writers to imitate it because it was so fine and gave great impact on the minds and lives of people. It delved deep into audiences minds and emotions. Thus, we can find great modern works from Shakespeare’s times till current day imitating the processes of a Greek tragedy be they in the form of drama, poetry or novels.

In accordance with the thesis of this paper which is to analyze and confirm if Shahnon Ahmad’s novel RSJ is a tragedy let us delve into the modern novel. According to Jeniffer Wallace,

> Traditional definitions of tragedy seem antithetical to the novel. According to Aristotle, tragedy should have a simple unitary plot and it should deal with general truths, rather with specific facts, places or people. But neither of these desired criteria (unitary plot and general truths) are usually to be found in novels since multiple narratives and referentiality are two of the most characteristic aspects of the novel (2007: 168).

Nevertheless, Wallace argues that writers like Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Stendhal and Tolstoy have successfully produced tragedy. According to her, “These novelists self-consciously posit the traditional models of tragedy only to modify them...” (2007: 168). Thus, it can be argued that tragedies in the modern form do exist and sometimes they do imitate great tragedies like the Greek tragedies but not wholly.
3. **Aristotle’s Theory of Tragedy and *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan***

This section will read RSJ vis-à-vis Aristotle’s theory of tragedy. It will also discuss how Aristotle portrays tragedy. It will elucidate Aristotle’s views on tragedy. According to the *Poetics* a tragedy imitates men in action well. Then Aristotle states that a tragedy is “a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possess magnitude” (Aristotle 1970: 25).

The goal of a tragedy Aristotle states is the plot. He argues that a tragedy cannot exist without a plot but it can without characters. This theory can be proven in RSJ. There are no evil characters – the couple suffer due to the turn of events. Can we say that the snake that Jeha encounters is a villain in the story? Can it be turned into a character or is it merely a means used to move the plot? The character comes second, and plot hold primacy in a poem or drama. This paper will discuss that the same theory that is applied to a drama or a poem can be used to read a novel, in this case RSJ. The plot of the novel moves and the text postulates a tragedy without having wicked characters in it.

A tragic plot has general principles. Aristotle establishes that “tragedy (29) is an imitation of an action which is complete and whole and has some magnitude...” (29-30). By whole he means that it has to have a beginning, middle and end. In a tragic plot a shift takes place that is from good to bad fortune (30-31). In RSJ the plot is aligned with the season – the paddy planting season. It begins with Lahuma and Jeha planning and then going out to sow paddy seeds near the jungle, Lahuma falling sick with a thorn lodged in his foot. While his wife and children clear the paddy fields in his absence, his death takes place in the middle of the novel and Jeha has to fend for herself and her children while working in the paddy fields. However, she cannot handle the pressure of Lahuma’s death and the toll that paddy planting takes on her, thus she becomes insane. In the end the children harvest without their mother to help them as she is in an asylum. She comes back to only a can of rice. That is the only harvest that the children get from the season’s produce. Thus, we can say that the plot is tragic, because it shifts from good to bad fortune. All of Lahuma and Jeha’s planning to wield a good harvest is brought to nought by the tragedy of death and insanity that befalls the husband and wife consecutively.

Aristotle also describes simple and complex plots in his *Poetics*. According to him,

> Some plots are simple, others are complex; indeed the actions of which the plots are imitations already fall into these two categories. By “simple” action I mean one the development of which being continuous and unified in the manner stated above, the reversal comes without peripety or recognition, and by “complex” action one in which the reversal is continuous but with recognition or peripety or both. And these developments must grow out of the very structure of the plot itself, in such a way that on the basis of what has happened previously this particular outcome follows either by necessity or in accordance with probability; for there is a great difference in whether these events happen because of those or merely after them (Aristotle 1970: 35).
By reading Aristotle’s definition of simple and complex plot we have to align RSJ to it. Is RSJ a novel with a simple plot or is it complex? This will be answered later in this section.

Let us now look at a further definition of a plot by Aristotle. According to Aristotle there are three elements of a plot. They are peripety, recognition and pathos. He states,

Naturally, there are also other kinds of recognition: it is possible for one to take place in the prescribed manner in relation to inanimate objects and chance occurrences, and it is possible to recognize whether a person has acted or not acted. But the form that is most integrally a part of the plot, the action, is the aforesaid; for that kind of recognition combined with peripety will excite either pity or fear (and these are the kinds of action of which tragedy is an imitation according to our definition), (36) because both good and bad fortune will also be most likely to follow that kind of event.

He further explains that, “These then are two elements of plot: peripety and recognition; third is the pathos. Of these, peripety and recognition have been discussed; a pathos is a destructive or painful act, such as deaths on stage, paroxysms of pain, woundings, and all that sort of thing” (37).

With Aristotle’s definition of plot in mind let us now discuss RSJ. The novel has a complex plot because the reversal comes with peripety, but not a reversal. Peripety means a sudden change in the course of events, especially in dramatic works. Lahuma in RSJ has planned for the season. It is stated,

Tomorrow the belukar would be cleared. And tomorrow will begin his days of rice-growing. After the belukar had been cleared, the earth would be loosened and leveled. The rice would be sown. And while waiting for the seedlings to reach a certain age, Lahuma and his family would work in the rice-field (Shahnon, 1972: 7).

It is evident that Lahuma has planned ahead for the season, however he meets with an accident. He steps on a nibong thorn which lodges itself in his foot (Shahnon, 1972: 49-50). He falls sick, and his foot becomes swollen later it becomes sceptic and his whole body is swollen. This causes his death (Shahnon, 1972: 61-80).

Before Lahuma steps on the thorn there is another complexity in the plot. His wife Jeha who has planned to help him clear the belukar to sow the paddy seeds encounters a snake which nearly bites her if not for Lahuma’s quick action. His wife becomes paranoid and sickly after this and is unable to help him in the paddy fields. Everything that she sees seem to look like a snake (Shahnon, 1972: 21-30).

Other than peripety, pathos also exists in the text. There is the pain that Lahuma goes through with the wounding of his foot. His foot is swollen and has puss in it. He is impatient and wants to get well soon. In order to get rid of the puss and the thorn that is lodged in his foot Lahuma cuts his foot open with a razor blade though it causes him extreme pain,

Again he took the blade. He thrust it deep into the flesh until the edge touched one end of the thorn. Lahuma felt terrible pain. But he bore the pain and persevered, for he knew that unless the thorn came out, his rice-field would not be finished. His rice-plants would not be safe. And his children could not be sure of their rice. (Shahnon 1972: 61).
Lahuma is a tragic hero. He suffers paroxysms of pain in order to save his children from hunger, thus this turns him into a noble hero. A man who is willing to sacrifice because of others’ happiness should be classified as a noble hero.

4. Conclusion

The discussion above has proven that RSJ is indeed a tragic novel. This can be read via the complex plot, peripety and pathos that are depicted in the novel. Shahnon a learned man, may or may not have known about Aristotle’s theory of tragedy when he wrote the novel, yet his text can be aligned and read using Aristotle’s theory of tragedy successfully. It does not follow the exact pattern of a Greek tragedy since it is a modern day novel, nevertheless it can be classified as a tragedy. Both Jeha and Lahuma their lives and the pain that they suffer contribute to the novel being a tragedy.

References


