

EXPLORING CULINARY IDENTITY: A GASTRO-CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF AHMAD TOHARI'S *RONGGENG DUKUH PARUK* AND *SURABANGLUS*

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Abstract: The novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* and the short story *Surabanglus* are two works by Ahmad Tohari (AT) that talk about food and how food becomes the identity of a society. RDP tells the story of how Srintil, the *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, loses her parents due to a massive poisoning in her village caused by tempeh bongrek made by her parents. With very little knowledge of toxicology, the people of Dukuh Paruk "treat" the tempeh poisoning with empirical experience passed down from their ancestors. While *Surabanglus* tells the story of the friendship between Kimin and Suing which is so touching because Suing had to experience the bad luck of eating poisonous cassava due to unbearable hunger. This research is descriptive and qualitative and uses textual analysis to reveal and interpret the hidden construction in a text. The data collected is analyzed from a gastro-critical lens. Gastro-criticism is part of a critical approach to welcome the phenomenon of culinary literature in literary works. Culinary is chosen as one of the symbols, myths, and signs in the development of literary works. From the data contained in the novel RDP and short story *Surabanglus* in the form of narrative quotations, and dialog between characters in AT's two works, there are four findings, namely; food and its characteristics, food and socioeconomic status, food and food processing tools, food and medicine. Through these two works, AT not only presents a story with food as the plot, but at the same time, Tohari documents what and how food in a society becomes a symbol and social identity of the community.

Keywords: *gastro-critic, Ahmad Tohari, culinary, poison.*

INTRODUCTION

Ahmad Tohari (AT) is a prominent figure in Indonesian literature, particularly known for his depiction of Banyumas culture. His works often explore the lives of villagers living in poverty and simplicity, using food as a significant symbol of cultural identity. This study focuses on two of Tohari's works, "*Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*" (RDP) and "*Surabanglus*," which illustrate how food can become a powerful cultural and social identity marker. In RDP, the *Tempeh Bongkreng* poisoning event profoundly affects the community, highlighting the lack of toxicological knowledge and the reliance on empirical, ancestral practices. Similarly, in "*Surabanglus*," the story of Kimin and Suing underscores the dire consequences of consuming improperly processed cassava. This

study employs a gastro-critical approach to analyze these works, aiming to reveal the deeper cultural, social, and symbolic meanings of food in Tohari's literature.

Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk (RDP) is a monumental work of AT that talks about the memoirs of a *Ronggeng* dancer named Srintil. Even though it is only fiction, Srintil's history represented in the novel cannot be separated from the society and the cultural community where she lives. Focusing on the history of Srintil's parents and her friends, Rasus, AT, describes how the process of food, the food characteristics, and poison treatment as the social identities of Banyumasan culture. In the RDP novel, the *Tempeh Bongkreng* (tempeh made from coconut dregs) is highlighted for causing people in Dukuh

Paruk (the name of Srintil village) to die of poisoning, including the tempeh maker, Santayib, and his wife, Srintil's parents. The presence of food as a means of controlling the novel plot is what then creates chaos against the poisonous tempeh causing the death of the Paruk Dukuh citizens. Similar things are also seen in AT short story entitled *Surabanglus*, with the two main characters Kimin and Suing. A short-sighted story capable of bringing humanity through the friendship of both through the poison cassava tree known as Surabanglus, a special name given by the Banyumasan to a certain type of cassava that if not processed properly will become poisonous. Just a simple story, but therein lies AT's expertise in presenting and even being able to stir the deepest side of humanity.

Through these two works, AT seems to be making to talk about the history of Banyumas culture along with the local wisdom of type of food consumed by the local community, which becomes the background of the story. In addition to the type of food, AT describes in detail how it is processed, the tools used in the processing of food, and how to treat the poisoning caused by the food. Nevertheless, very few researchers have highlighted the topic. This is possible because many researchers have assumed that the study of culinary (gastronomy) and literature are two different disciplines. When we read literature, we are surfing in a social space of a society with social structures, religions, cultures (food included), and quite complicated power disputes. Researchers can delve deeply into the symbolic and social significance of food through gastro-criticism in literature and how food and foodways are serious matters (Budiyanto & E. Latifah, 2018; Klitzing, 2019)

So as a cultural product, food is not only a basic necessity for sustaining life but can also lead to the conclusion that literature and food are intertwined. Literature is a human reflection of himself and his environment. This research will discuss the connection between food and literary works or better-known literary gastronomy. By putting together, the gastro-critical concepts, this study will reveal how the Banyumasan people recognize food, the use of equipment to process food, toxins in food, and therapies in the handling of poisons in food.

The gastro-critical approach is a new paradigm in literary criticism and philosophy. Gastro-critic refers to the critical analysis of food and culinary practices, examining their cultural, social, and symbolic significance (Kapitány, & Kapitány,

2022). It highlights or discusses the significance and/or implications of the presence of food or drink in a text (Nugraha, 2021). It helps comprehend the roles that food and foodways play in literature and other imaginative texts because it approaches them through a culinary lens that is influenced by gastronomy and food studies (Klitzing, 2023). In gastro criticism, the close reading method or sometimes the term extensive close reading is commonly used (Klitzing 2019). It serves as the foundation for an understanding of the definition, classification, and interpretation of food writing and literature. It also helps in appreciating the diverse culinary traditions and their impact on cultural identity (Geetha & van Dam, 2020; Mulcahy, 2019). Gastronomy is simply the science of the relationship between food and culture. Gastronomy is an art and a science, even cross ethnic, nation, race, group, religion, gender and culture appreciation by learning how to eat, food and beverage in detail to use in various conditions and situations (Soeroso & Turgarini, 2020). Understanding food memory helps in preserving cultural heritage and fostering a sense of community through shared culinary traditions (Paredes, 2022) by introducing new flavors, techniques, and ingredients (Kuhn et al., 2024). Etymologically, gastronomy comes from the ancient Greek *gastro*, meaning stomach, and *nomos*, meaning habit (Wulansari, 2018). "Habits" in this context are understood as what can and should not be eaten and measured based on the habits of the turn of meetings that they then accept as reality. The use of fresh perspectives, findings, and information from a variety of fields, including linguistics, semiotics, literary studies, anthropology, social science, history, and cultural studies, makes gastro criticism an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach (Ambarwati et al., 2020). Thus, we may conclude that gastro criticism examines the connections between cuisine, literary criticism, and literary and cultural studies using a multidisciplinary approach as a foundation for understanding how food and beverages are conceived by society to provide an overview of their behavior and habits to a wider audience. It fosters critical thinking and cultural imagination in culinary arts and gastronomy education, promoting sustainable and equitable food systems (Flowers, 2022). The markers also then become identities about the existence of a society, tribe, and country.

The link between gastronomy and the literature studied in gastro-criticism is not just the food question that appears in literary texts alone but also things related to the cultural background, religion,

and social structure, including everything that can be eaten, how to get it, with what equipment the food is cooked, who can cook it, and even the form of its presentation. These are all important things to pay attention to.

Some literary works that discuss gastronomy include classical Java works such as *Serat Centhini*, the novel of Umar Kayam entitled *Para Priyayi*, and *Jalan Menikung*, which tells a lot about the food in the novel. From the West, there's Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*, and *Dee's Filosofi Kopi*, which was later incarnated into a movie that captured a lot of audiences. The newest is the novel by Laksmi Pamuntjak entitled *Aruna dan Lidahnya* (2018). The last two works have made food and beverages a story stream (Saryono, 2020), calling on academics to conduct research from a gastro-critical perspective. One of them is Ambarwati (Ambarwati et al., 2020) who discuss the representation how coffee, tea, biscuits, and traditional snacks typical of Lebaran in *Joko Pinurbo's Khong Guan Banquette* concerning the family relationship. The picture in Khong Guan tin can packaging itself, represents how direct engagement in the family in the past was strong through direct face-to-face contact. They argue the unease felt by human beings when they negotiate, shape, and rearrange family relationships. This includes adjusting to the change from traditional to virtual communication methods and patterns as well as the decline in the amount of in-person, direct engagement.

Still using the same novel, Rosyadi reveals culinary varieties of hot food and rijsttafel food, as well as describing how food becomes a representation of social identity: nobility food, common community food, global community food, food to celebrate meeting close friends, and food to establish familiarity with the surrounding communities (Rosyadi, 2020). Another research was conducted by Nurzaimah who analyzed five short stories at once: *Koh Su* by Puthut EA, *Smokol* by Nukila Amal, *Tradisi Telur Merah* by Sanie B. Kuncoro, *Tart di Bulan Hujan* karya Bakdi Soemanto, and *Lelaki Ragi dan Perempuan Santan* by Damhuri Muhammad. The study reveals that food in literary works serves as a focal point for separation, metaphors, conflict, character, personality, ideology, and knowledge about regulated and related cultures. It also serves as a marker of character identity through the categories of food consumed. Overall, food in literary works plays a significant role in character development (Nurzaimah, 2021).

In the meantime, the study of food as a representation of cultural experiences is also recorded in the travel records of a Muslim traveler, Ibnu Batutah (Yilmaz et al., 2018). They highlight food culture not only as a product but also as a process—including the tools used in its manufacture. Ibnu Batutah, in his travelogue, recorded the culture of food in the various places he visited. They classified food into 13 types based on the Stonehenge record: cereals, flour and bread, meat, seafood, milk and livestock ingredients, aromatic herbs, spices and sweeteners, oils and mustard fruits, fruits and vegetables, desserts, drinks, kitchen appliances, and others. Special studies related to food were also carried out by Nadirova (Nadirova et al., 2018) who used a linguistic ethnographic approach with phrase-phrase data in dictionaries related to the topic of "nutrition." Besides, he also connects "food" with the tradition of eating in the tradition related to the human life cycle: birth, marriage, and death. These studies will be both comparative and accompanying in this forced research proposal.

From the various gastro-critical studies above, AT's novel appears to be out of the perspective of literary critics, at least from the search results that have been carried out. As a standard writer who describes nature, social problems, and poverty, AT indirectly writes how the way a community lives is influenced by the nature that surrounds it, including the kind of food they eat daily.

METHOD

This qualitative study uses semiotic methods and content analysis to explore the hidden constructions in AT's *"Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk"* and *"Surabanglus."* Data were collected from narrative quotations and dialogues related to food in these works. The analysis focuses on identifying the characteristics of food, its socio-economic implications, processing methods, and medicinal uses in the context of Banyumasan culture. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how food functions as a cultural and social identity marker in Tohari's literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A gastro-critical reading of Ahmad Tohari stories
Ahmad Tohari is a name that is mentioned a lot when it comes to literature, locations, and, of course, Banyumas, there are countless literary critics, academics, and historians, to the point that culturalists use their work to explore how to make a living and to learn about the wisdom of localities as identities to mark themselves in an ever-fading

globalization in the euphoria of the times. His work often talks about the lives of the villagers living in poverty and simplicity reflected in his works. In addition, AT's work is also focused on the culture and identity of the Indonesian people who live in the countryside. Such cultures and identities are not only represented through traditions and cultures such as cavities but are also largely described through food, including the type and processing of foods to be consumed. The empirical behavior of the matter is depicted in two works of AT, *RDP* (Tohari, 2011) and *Surabanglus* (Tohari, 2014).

In *RDP*, *Tempeh Bongkretek* is the cause of the chaos (massive poisoning) experienced by the Dukuh Paruk community. *Tempeh Bongkretek*, the cuisine, that originates in Banyumas, Central Java, is prepared by fermenting a blend of soybeans and coconut pulp (Haryati, 2021). According to them, the *Tempeh Bongkretek*, which is soaked in copper, is the culprit of the disaster they experienced. The lack of knowledge about toxins has made them blame the use of copper basins during the process of soaking soybeans. Even though this is not the case. It is the fermentation process that grows the bacteria that causes the toxins. As stated by Raghav & Verma (2023) the importance and role of bacteria in food were finally recognized after a series of decades-long events. Thus, this makes sense as many people do not understand that certain bacteria can be very dangerous as with the *Tempeh Bongkretek* making is related to the bacterial content that causes *Tempeh Bongkretek* to be toxic. Both Raghav and Verma (2023) mentioned that although salt as one of the ingredients in making *Tempeh Bongkretek* can reduce toxin levels, any level of toxins in *Tempeh Bongkretek* is unacceptable. This is how improperly processed food can contain toxins. Meanwhile, in *Surabanglus*, AT focuses on the need for resourceful knowledge of how to process and identify certain foods are becoming edible.

From the data findings in *Surabanglus* and *RDP*, there are four findings, namely: food and its characteristics, food, and socio-economic status, nutrition and planting of toxins, foods, and processing equipment.

Food and its characteristics

In "*Surabanglus*," Kimin's empirical knowledge helps him recognize the danger of the pungent-smelling cassava, reflecting the community's reliance on ancestral wisdom for identifying safe food. Similarly, in *RDP*, Srintil's mother recognizes the good quality of *Tempeh Bongkretek* through its dryness and freshness. These examples

highlight the community's empirical methods for determining food safety.

"Wait! How dare you eat that cassava? I already smelled it. Now I'm sure we can't eat it. No Wing, no! You'll get hurt later." (*Surabanglus*, p.18)

Smelling the aroma became Kimin's control not to eat the cassava. He also warned his friend, Suing, not to eat the cassava even though both of them were stricken with extreme hunger. Kimin is just a poor village youth who has never learned about many things, he only practices the empirical experience of his ancestors about various things including the types and characteristics of food that are good for consumption and which are not. One of the characteristics of food that Kimin understands is that he should avoid foods that have a strong odor.

Apart from the pungent smell, there are several other criteria namely texture and color that mark the food as fit for consumption. Carneiro, et.al. (2022) color and appearance are frequently the first factors that customers consider when evaluating the quality of fruits and vegetables, and they have the power to affect both food consumption and purchases. However, in the case of fermented soy bean it can be seen that the tempeh is dry (liquidly ideal), non-damp, and fresh (Djoko & Irawan, n.d.-a) These criteria are also conveyed by AT in the novel *RDP*. Of course, the criteria conveyed by Santayib's wife are not due to the knowledge she gained academically about how to characterize food worthy of consumption but knowledge gained based on hereditary experience which later became a source of knowledge for the people in the village.

"No. Yesterday Kang Santayib got a good meal. Dry and fresh. Try it, my bongkretek is very sweet today." (*RDP*, p.23)

As a member of a culture and society, AT describes in detail the cultural practices including how a society recognizes food worthy of survival in his work. Of course, this is AT's intention to blend food or culinary into his work. It is a complete documentation of how a society lives its entire life. Including how to identify the signs caused by food that is not fit for consumption/poisonous.

A child runs from a rice field clutching his stomach. At the doorstep of his house, he vomits, staggers, and falls unconscious. His mother, who had begun to feel the pain stinging her head, screamed and called the neighbors. Before the neighbors arrived, the boy was dead. Even his

mother fell unconscious with a blue hue on her face. Mother and child drooped on the ground. The scream from the first house started a panic in Dukuh Paruk. (RDP: 24)

"Listen, Suing, did you eat the cassava too?"
Suing was silent, even collapsing to the ground.
(*Surabanglus*, p.21)

In the quote above, there are several signs or indications to recognize when people experience poisoning caused by food, namely vomiting, dizziness, staggering, fainting, blue hue, and death. Since the poisoning is caused by food, the symptoms caused are also closely related to the digestive organs, namely vomiting. The substance contained in poisonous cassava is called hydrogen cyanide which, if not processed properly, will cause nausea, vomiting, headaches, and narrowing of the esophagus, and in severe cases can lead to death (Alitubeera, et.al., 2019).

In addition to these signs, AT associates the face of the poisoned person with the color of the food itself, namely coconut cake which is bluish. In fermented foods such as *Tempeh Bongkrek*, the bacterial compound *Pseudomonas Cocovenenans* can contaminate the raw material of bongkrek, namely coconut cake if the processing process pays less attention to hygiene. Not only is *Tempeh Bongkrek*, but cassava that contains toxins also has a bluish color, while cassava that can be consumed generally has a clean white color when the skin is peeled. Besides, the aroma, food that is dry or not mushy, is another characteristic that can be used to identify whether the food is worthy of consumption by recognizing the color of the food that has changed. Usually, it is identified by a blue color. Some of the above characteristics written by AT are the result of AT's observations as part of the community where he lives.

Food and socioeconomic status

Food is not only about fulfilling basic human needs, at the same time what is eaten and how it is served is closely related to the social relations of a society, geographical location, and social strata, food further becomes a construction of the identity of a society. Both RDP and "*Surabanglus*" depict the severe economic conditions of rural communities during the colonial period. The reliance on *Tempeh Bongkrek* and cassava, often considered "trash food," underscores the community's struggle for survival and reflects their socio-economic status.

Coconut pulp or bungkil is the basic ingredient for making *Tempeh Bongkrek*. Instead of being thrown away, the food is fermented and made into a favorite menu of the people at that time. Apart from *Tempeh Bongkrek*, which comes from coconut cake, cassava is an endemic plant that is easily found in rural areas. However, not all types of cassava can be consumed, several types of cassava contain poison, one of which is the *Surabanglus* type, which is the theme of the short story.

Now they felt safe hiding in a thicket of Puyengan. The thicket not only sheltered them but also some hope. A cassava plant grew hidden there. Three thimbles of sweet potatoes were now on the hearth. Suing was scraping them (*Surabanglus*, p.17).

Through the plot of the story that revolves around food, AT indirectly describes how the conditions of rural communities during the colonization period survived on food that might be considered as trash food today. The selection of food types that are far from meeting the food nutrition standards as mandated by BPOM (Indonesian terms for Food Regulatory Authority) shows how the social status of the people at that time experienced a food crisis during the colonial period. Cassava and *Tempeh Bongkrek* are the indexes of the rural poor who are the setting of AT's second story.

Food and food processing equipment

In one of the principles of food processing, (Djoko & Irawan, n.d.-b) says that the equipment used in food processing should not be of a type that is capable of releasing substances to food such as cadmium, plumbum, zinkum, cuprum, stibium, or arsenicum because these metals are toxic which can accumulate as urinary tract diseases and cancer. Furthermore, in Permenkes RI No.712/Menkes/Per/X/1986 and Permenkes RI No. 1096/Menkes/Per/VI/2011 on Sanitary Hygiene of Catering Services, Appendix Chapter III, states that food utensils must be made of food grade materials, meaning that the surface layer of the utensils does not dissolve in acids/bases or salts commonly found in food.

The use of improper equipment, such as the copper basin in RDP, highlights the community's lack of knowledge about the dangers of certain materials in food processing. This lack of knowledge leads to fatal consequences, illustrating the importance of proper food processing practices. So, when Santayib was found to be using a copper

pot when processing his *Tempeh Bongkrek*, he was accused of being careless and causing mass poisoning and even death in Paruk.

"Perhaps you are mining for a meal with a copper basin," said another man. After asking this question, the man ran to the well. He was right. There he found a copper basin. It had a blue coating, the color of copper acid. He brought it to the front of the crowd. He shouted like a madman. (RDP: 26)

"Santayib. You dog! You bastard. Look, this basin is blue with poison. Asu buntung. You have killed everyone. You... you aaasssu" (RDP: 26)

The understanding or knowledge of villagers that certain types of utensils can release acids that then dissolve in food and make food toxic, is obtained from past experiences that are passed down between generations and become a source of knowledge (ethnoscience). This has been preserved until now so that the equipment used for making tempeh mostly uses plastic materials.

Food and medication

Beyond cases of poisoning, AT has well documented how villagers treated tempe bongkrek poisoning including how to identify and treat the various problems caused by the food. During the Dutch East Indies, access to health facilities was like "the moon longing for the moon", something that was very difficult to realize so they used traditional ways of treatment that had been done by previous generations.

The people of Dukuh Paruk had a simple way of helping people consumed by poison. Coconut water mixed with salt became a fairly effective laxative. Also, water mixed with kitchen ash. If the poisoned person could vomit after drinking this laxative, there was hope for his life. As proposed by Martinez, et.al. (2020) that one of the ways to gastrointestinal function in critical illness is by fasting condition. It means by removing the entire contents of the stomach or laxative is one way to treat due to food poisoning.

Unfortunately, the uncontrolled use of laxatives often leads to death. The people of Dukuh Paruk themselves did not know that many of their friends did not die from *bongkrek* poison, but from lack of fluids in their bodies, due to too much vomiting (RDP: 29).

No one taught that coconut water, salt, and kitchen ash are a magic combination to treat poisoning. In the past, that magic combination was well-performed to cure poisoning. Yet, the coconut

water is still widely used in first aid to treat poisoning. Green coconut water according to Thadathil (2023) has the medicinal benefits and health-promoting qualities by both its physical and chemical characteristics, including its mineral content and phytohormones. Its function in hydrating the body, lowering inflammation, and supplying antioxidant advantages, establishing it as a potentially beneficial functional food. In addition to macro elements, namely carbon (glucose, sucrose, fructose, sorbitol, inositol, etc.) and nitrogen elements in the form of protein, composed of amino acids, such as alanine, arginine, alanine, cystine, and serine, coconut water also contains microelements in the form of minerals needed by the body such as Kahum (K), natirum (Na), calcium (Ca), magnesium (Mg), ferum (Fe), cuprum (Cu), phosphorus (P), and sulfur (S).

Some of the facts above are of course not widely known by the people of Dukuh Paruk, what they understand is the reality that when someone drinks green coconut water their body feels fit again. This condition is then told from generation to generation and becomes local wisdom in the world of medicine. So, without anyone commanding them, they used this knowledge when they were poisoned by *tempeh bongkrek*. Apart from coconut water, another method used was to "plant" the body in the ground to cure *Jengkol* (*archidendron pauciflorum*, a species of flowering tree in the pea family, Fabaceae, that is native to Southeast Asia) bean poisoning.

Without any prompting, Grandmother dug into the sandy soil beside the house. She planted me in a standing position, with only my head above the ground. This is how the people of Dukuh Paruk treat people poisoned by *Jengkol*. Strangely, this was also how I survived the *Tempeh Bongkrek*. (RDP, p. 33)

Sandy soils contain coarse particles (0.05-2.00 mm) with a large proportion of macro pores (Awan, et.al., 2023). The pores allow for good water drainage and sandy soils are capable of high heat absorption. The logic that sand is unable to retain water and will absorb water faster than other soil types is probably what my grandmother used to treat Rasmus, her grandson who was poisoned by *tempeh bongkrek*.

As an adult, I tried to think about this once. Perhaps by planting it that way my sweat, which must have contained poison, was quickly absorbed by the soil from all the pores on my skin. Thus, the strength of the poison would be

quickly reduced. Ah, but such a theory is highly improper and would only invite laughter from clever people. So, it is better for me to follow Grandmother's belief that I am safe because Ki Secamenggala's spirit has not yet willed my death (RDP, p.34).

From the data contained in the two AT works, *RDP* and *Surabanglus*, traditional remedies, such as using green coconut water and planting the body in sandy soil, reflect the community's reliance on empirical knowledge for treating food poisoning. These methods, though not scientifically understood by the community, demonstrate their resourcefulness in dealing with health crises.

As a quasi-ethnographical and historical source on Banyumasan food and foodways in the '80s, Tohari's vivid, painstaking rendering of food-related scenes, from identifying the characteristics of the food, locating food as social status, using the equipment and curing from the poisoning may be of interest to scholars from the touching tales and heartbreaking pictures of the starving, Kimin and Suwing to a dark of historical story of *Tempeh Bongkreng* in Banyumas region. Tohari descriptive talent deepens our comprehension of the meaning and context of food and the foodways of the indigenous. The setting of the story determines the type of food eaten by the people who become the setting of the story, how to process the food, what is allowed and what is prohibited, holistically referring to the identity of a society and even a country.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Ahmad Tohari's works, "*Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*" and "*Surabanglus*," intricately weave food into the narrative to reflect cultural identity, socio-economic conditions, and traditional knowledge. By employing a gastro-critical approach, this research highlights how food serves as a powerful symbol in literature, representing the community's struggles, wisdom, and resilience. The findings underscore the importance of considering food as an integral part of cultural and social studies in literature. Future research could further explore the relationship between food and identity in other literary works and cultural contexts.

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