Reading Abbas: A Postcolonial Study of One of the Main Characters of *Kelas Internasional*

Anggun Putri Fatahillah English Language and Literature Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Kelas Internasional, an Indonesian TV series depicting the dynamics of a class consisting of students of different nationalities, has a Nigerian character named Abbas, who is the only African student in the story. It is quite uncommon in Indonesian films to have an African playing as the main character; this study thus aims to analyze how the African character Abbas is represented in the TV series Kelas International. Adopting a qualitative descriptive method, the study draws on Hall's (1997) theory of representation, Said's (1979) Orientalism, and Doh's (2009) stereotyping Africa to delve into the representations of Abbas. The study also employs Heintz and Stracey's (2008) film theory, focusing primarily on the elements of mise en scène and the soundtracks, to understand how the representation of Abbas is constructed through film elements. The data analysis reveals that the character Abbas is primarily represented in a negative light: being educationally backward, economically poor, and attitude-wise impolite. This study indicates that *Kelas Internasional* tends to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Africans, rather than counter them. This study is expected to not only contribute to the field of postcolonial studies, but more importantly to raise Indonesian people's critical awareness of implicit messages embedded in literary works.

Keywords: postcolonial study, representation, African stereotypes, Indonesian TV series

INTRODUCTION

Sahara, zebra, poverty, stupidity, exoticism, and infection are among some of the most common words used—explicitly or implicitly—by the media to present the 'Dark Continent' called Africa. In March 2017, the first news and buzz displayed in CNN African Edition website is "Orphanage 'recruited kids to get donation'" and followed by "Somalia: 'people are dying of hunger". In the BBC website of African Edition, the first headline shown is "UN: World faces 'largest humanitarian crisis' since 1945" with an African malnutrition child shown as the main picture. In **National** Geographic Expedition website, readers can find the pictures of gorillas, elephants, zebras, lions, and other kinds of wild animals in East Africa. In North Africa, the readers only find pictures of the Morocco's deserts. In Southern Africa, there is a picture of lions with headline "Southern Africa Highlights". These are some of the most common portrayals of Africa that can be found in the media. Doh (2009) states in his book entitled Stereotyping Africa that "the portrait of Africa to the world has

been painted with broad strokesprejudiced on a canvas of natural and man-made disasters characterized by frustration, despair, blood, and pain" (p.3).

How the media represent Africa leads their audience to believe in what they say. People then construct the images that are presented by the media when they hear the word 'Africa'. The vast majority of people across the world know very little about Africa, and what they know is what they see on television, read in the newspapers, and hear on the radio that finally amounts to their knowledge and understanding of Africa (Doh, 2009). Through the examples given above, the images that then appear are Africa that is related to wild animals, diseases, poverty, etc., which are different from the images generated when people think about Europe. This kind of thinking depicts what is meant by Said (1979) in his theory of Orientalism. Said believes that in the perspective of the West, the world is divided into two parts: the West (or the Occident) and Non-West (or Orient) as the opposite of

Occident. Africa, in this context, is part of the Orient.

The term Occident, as Said (1979) states in his book, refers to the people from three great empires: British, French, and American. On the other hand, the Orient refers to the people from other than those countries in the world, and this includes Africa (Said, 1979). Orientalism itself is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and, most of the time, 'the Occident' (Said, 1979). Orientalism thus can be seen as the negative representations of Orient from the Occident's perspectives.

The representations of the Orient, in this case Africa, emerge in kinds of texts such as newspapers, novels, poems, and even in TV Series in Indonesia. In 2015, NET TV, one of Indonesian TV Stations, broadcasted an Indonesian comedy series entitled Kelas Internasional. Kelas Internasional tells about an Indonesian teacher who teaches Bahasa Indonesia to his foreign students. One of these foreign students is Abbas. He is from Nigeria,

and is the only African student in the class. The representations of an African in this comedy series are depicted through the characterization of Abbas. The character Abbas is played by Abbas Aminu who is indeed originally from Nigeria. *Kelas Internasional* was aired every day until its third season in 2017.

Having an African as a main character in an Indonesian TV series can be seen as something new. In relation to this, the present study aims to analyze how the character Abbas is represented in the film. Drawing on selected episodes of Kelas Internasional, the African character Abbas is 'read' by using several frameworks: Hall's (1997) theory of representation, Said's (1979)Orientalism. and Doh's (2009)stereotyping Africa. As the data source is in the form of film, Heintz and Stracey's (2008) film theory will also be used as an analytical device.

The selected episodes are taken from the first, second, and third seasons to show the development of the character more clearly. The selected episodes are: (1) the 47th episode from season 1 entitled "Abbas

Homesick" whose theme is around Abbas' educational condition, (2) the 255th episode from season 2 entitled "Abbas Move On" whose theme is around Abbas love life, and (3) the 375th episode from season 3 entitled "Cangcimen Abbas Hilang, Abbas Harus Cari Uang Lagi" whose theme is around Abbas' economic condition. The chosen episodes are selected based on their different themes to see the varieties of Abbas' traits. The episodes that are used in this study are also selected based on the story lines that have Abbas as the main character of the stories.

There are a number of studies that have been conducted regarding the issue of Orientalism in films. One film that relates to such studies is Walt Disney's animation Aladdin. Addison (1993) analyzed the film using Orientalism her theoretical as framework in her research. Her study reveals that Arabian people are represented being immoral. In 2008, Punyanunt-Carter conducted research regarding the portrayals of African-Americans on television. She explored the specific perceptions (i.e., occupational roles. negative

personality characteristics, low achieving status, and positive stereotypes) of African-American portrayals on television. Her findings reveal that television can affect the way viewers think about African-Americans in general.

To contribute to the existing literature on postcolonial studies, the present study thus attempts to analyze the representations of 'the Other' in an Indonesian TV series; specifically, the study aims to analyze how an African—through the character Abbas—is represented in the series *Kelas Internasional*. The problems of the present study are formulated in the following research questions:

- 1. How is the character Abbas represented in Kelas Internasional?
- 2. What do the representations mean?

3.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Cultural theorist Hall (1997) believes that representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It involves the use of language, signs and images

which stand for or represent things. Hall (1997) also states that meaning does not actually lie in the object, person, or thing, nor is it in the word itself. It is the society who firmly fixes the meaning that, by time, it seems to have become natural and inevitable. The process of representation itself is multidimensional since it involves five aspects in how cultural form works (the circuit of culture): (1) representation, (2) identity, (3) regulation, (4) consumption, and (5) production. It is the interplay of these five aspects that make people in a culture able to represent ideas/things and to construct meanings.

However, the meanings of things which are stored in our mind could be the real representations of the things, or it could also be the false representations or stereotype. The practice of cultural stereotype is very common in every societies. Hall (1997) believes that "stereotyped' means 'reduced to a few essentials, fixed in nature by a few, simplified characteristics'" (p.249). Furthermore, Kumaravadivelu (2008), a cultural theorist, argues that "a stereotype is a fixed, frozen, and often false image we

retain about an individual or a group of individuals." (p.50). Since the practice of cultural stereotype is very common in every society, there is no individual or groups of individuals that can escape from being stereotyped. Africa as well as Africans are regarded as the Inferior in the theory of Orientalism by Said (1979). They are also the objects of stereotype.

An African Literature and Critic professor Doh (2009) answers the Westerners' shocking questions about Africa through his book entitled Stereotyping Africa. He was shocked to find out that some Westerners have been and still are—intentionally or otherwise-misled and uninformed about Africa, Africans, their plight, and their culture. In Stereotyping Africa, Doh (2009) believes that Africa and/or Africans are being stereotyped in many ways. categorizes the stereotypes of Africa into thirty aspects. From thirty aspects, there are three chosen aspects that are used in the present study: (1) attitude, (2) economy, and (3) education.

In terms of attitude, Doh (2009) believes that Africans are often stereotyped as naturally violent and

criminals. In other words, Africans are stereotyped as being impolite or manner less. However, according to Doh (2009), it is a prejudice towards African since just like every human being on Earth, there are those who are violent and eventually become criminals in every race or group, just like there are good people in it. In terms of economy, Doh (2009) also believes that Africans are often stereotyped as being poor. However, just like anywhere else, there are the poor and the wealthy, and the have and the have-nots in Africa. In relation to education, Doh (2009) states that Africans are actually being stereotyped as backward. There are actually good schools in most of Africa and every child must have a primary school education, which spans seven years, five years of secondary school, and two years of high school. The students also have to take several examinations to go to every next education level (Doh, 2009).

These negative representations of Africans depict Said's (1979) theory of orientalism. Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological

distinction made between the Orient or "the East" and (most of the time) the Occident or "the West" (Said, 1979). In simpler words, Orientalism is the (mostly negative) representations of the Orient in the Occident's mind. Those who are regarded as the Occident, according to Said (1979) are Britain, France, and America. The countries other than the Occident are the Orient.

Africa, as one of the object of Orientalism, is also seen as inferior in the eyes of the West. In the late nineteenth century, precisely in 1880, almost all of Africa was seized and occupied by the European imperial powers of Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, and Italy (Boahen, 1987). Africans' inferiority in the Westerns' mind can be seen through the West's literary works. In American films before the nineteenth century, Africa was and always has been the scene of savagery, cannibalism, devil worship, immoral (Hall, 1997). In the early nineteenth century, British discussions of Africa necessarily departed from the image of Africa in the eighteenthcentury. They began with the accepted "fact" that Negro Africans were, at best, barbarians who had never known civilization (Curtin, 1964). These images of Africa in the West's eyes seem to undergo little changes since then. In the 21st century, many Americans still see Africans as half-clad savages roaming the jungles in pursuit of wildlife (Doh, 2009).

Said (1979) believes that that literature has become a vehicle for the Occident to strengthen the imperialism and gain more power through the writings of Orientalism. One of the most popular literary works today is film. As one of literary works, it means that film can also be the vehicle for the Occident to strengthen the imperialism. Different from novel, film uses different ways to deliver the story. The way film uses to deliver the story is called film technique (Heintz Stracey, 2008). From seven elements of film by Heintz and Stracey (2008), there are two most relevant elements associated with the research which are mise en scène (set designs, properties, and costumes) and the soundtrack (dialogue, music, songs, and sound effects).

METHODOLOGY

The study uses descriptive qualitative method in analyzing the representations of the character Abbas in three selected episodes of Kelas Internasional. This method considered appropriate since the study deals with rich descriptions in the analysis. A descriptive method is particularly suitable for exploring the notion of 'being African', as meanings need to be constructed from the given representations in a descriptive manner (see Mack, et al., 2005).

Data collection

The data for the research are collected from the selected scenes from three episodes of *Kelas Internasional*: (1) episode 47 from season 1 entitled "Abbas Homesick" (Meutia, 2015), (2) episode 225 from season 2 entitled "Abbas Move On" (Wirachman, 2016), (3) episode 375 from season 3 entitled "Cangcimen Abbas Hilang, Abbas Harus Cari Uang Lagi" (Wangi & Meutia, 2016).

Data analysis

There are six steps of the procedure in gathering the data: (1) selecting the

episodes that have Abbas as the main character in the story from three seasons, (2) watching each episode several times, taking the screenshots and regarding Abbas' notes in the appearance screen, (3)categorizing the data into two sections: negative representation and positive representation, (4) describing the data using Heintz and Stracey's (2008) framework of film theory (Mise en scène and soundtrack) and analyzing the data by using the framework of representation bv Hall (1997).stereotyping Africa by Doh (2009), and orientalism by Said (1979), (5) using the descriptions to reveal how the film represents the character Abbas, and (6) relating the representations to the literature that has been reviewed in theoretical frameworks section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis in this chapter reveals that the African character Abbas is dominantly and negatively represented as someone who is educationally backward, financially poor, and attitude-wise impolite. Even though Abbas' traits are dominated by

negative representations, the analysis also reveals some positive representations of Abbas, such as: punctual, clean and neat, friendly, hard-working, and confident.

Negative representations

1. The representations of Abbas as a backward student

Represented as a backward student, Abbas as the only African student who comes from Nigeria, is represented as a student who has bad habits in class. He often falls asleep in class and makes mistakes in his homework. Since he has bad habits in class, his scores on achievement tests dropping. These poor educational conditions of Abbas make his teacher, Budi. and Bu Rika. Pak headmaster, disappointed and angry. Abbas' educational backwardness is also shown in his poor concentration ability and poor self-image. Another indication of his backwardness is he does not have long-term goals. Additionally, Abbas' backwardness does not seem to show any significant changes from season one to season The evidence of Abbas'

backwardness can be seen in Table 1. below.

Screenshots	Descriptions
NIT.	Abbas' poor
	concentration
	ability: sleeping
Scene 1 – Eps. 47,	and making
Season 1	mistakes in
	homework.
1	Abbas' low
-	score on
and the second s	achievement
Scene 8 – Eps. 47,	test: the seventh
Season 1	rank from the
	total of eight
	students.
	Abbas' poor
	self-image: he
	confesses that he
Scene 9 – Eps. 47,	is lazy.
Season 1	
	Abbas' poor
	concentration
W. K. KO. K	ability: he utters
Scene 8 – Eps. 225,	wrong and silly
Season 2	pick-up line to
	his crush.
	Abbas' lack of
7- 1	skill: he
	becomes a
Scene 2 – Eps. 375,	cangcimen
Season 3	seller. He also
	does other low-
	level jobs in this
	episode such as
	becoming a

laundry man,
hair washer,
bodyguard, and
a barber.

Table 1.

This negative representation of Abbas might create an image that Africans are backward since the character represents the African race in the film. Doh (2009) states in his book that Africans have often been stereotyped as backward. Not many people know that there are actually good schools in most of Africa and every child must have a primary school education, which spans seven years, five years of secondary school, and two years of high school. The students also have to take several examinations to go to every next education level (Doh, 2009).

History has recorded that Africa was the 'dark continent' where bitter histories laid. One of the bitter histories of Africa is slavery. A slave is a person who works in harsh conditions for low payment or not get paid at all. Getting low payment by working hard means this person is not educated enough to get proper job or high income. Therefore, being a slave is a sign that the person is uneducated.

The stereotype of African as being backward may first come from the large number of slaves from Africa. Unfortunately, even though this bitter history of slavery in Africa has been greatly reduced, the negative stereotypes remain.

However, Black people do not remain silent. They have fought prejudices and discrimination until their voices are heard. African have started to be acknowledged by the world through their hardship and great works. Maya Angelou is an example of one of prominent African figures in the contemporary world. Being born as an African-American, Maya Angelou becomes the first African-American woman who published a best-seller non-fiction book entitled I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969). Another successful educated African is Nelson Mandela, the first Black president of South Africa from 1994 to 1999. He was also a devoted champion for peace and social justice in his own nation and around the world until his death in 2013.

By creating an African character who is backward, *Kelas Internasional* strengthens some of the

negative stereotypes about Africans. Compounded by funny atmosphere created by the laughing sound effects in the film, the film can be regarded as discriminating Africans.

2. The representations of Abbas as a poor man

Apart from being backward, character Abbas in Kelas Internasional is also portrayed as an economically poor man. Abbas' poor economic condition is shown through his debts, low-level job and low income, and he does not have future goals. Abbas' economic condition tends to worsen from season to season. In seasons one and two Abbas still comes to school to study, but in season three Abbas stops studying in school and starts to be an illegal cangcimen seller on the road. This shows that Abbas can no longer afford education. evidence of Abbas' economic condition can be seen in Table 2.1.

Screenshots	Descriptions
	Abbas being
	penniless: he
	confesses that
	he has no
	money.

Scene 6 – Eps. 225,	
Season 2	
	Abbas' debts:
	since he cannot
	afford food,
Scene 6 – Eps. 225,	Abbas is in debt
Season 2	to Bu Kantini.
	Abbas' low-
	income:
Million and the second	becoming a
Scene 2 – Eps. 375,	cangcimen
Season 3	seller does not
	give him enough
	income to afford
	education, food,
	and shelter.
	Abbas' debts in
	season 3: he
	does not have
Scene 3 – Eps. 375,	enough income
Season 3	to afford shelter,
	so he is in debts
	to Bu Ice and
	Eneng.
omo Sa Sa	Abbas is so
	penniless to the
3 * V	point that he is
Scano 6 Eng. 275	willing to do
Scene 6 – Eps. 375, Season 3	anything to get
Scason 3	money:
	becoming a
	laundry man,
	hair washer,
	bodyguard, and
	a barber.

Table 2.

Abbas as the character in the film brings his cultural identity as an African. Being represented as poor, the creation of the character Abbas in the film might create an image that Africans are poor to the audience, while in fact, not all of Africans are struggling against poverty. Doh (2009) believes that "one can state almost categorically that there is no community on Earth in which everyone is poor, as that would have to be a particularly unfortunate group of people; poverty is a relative concept" (p.74). He also believes that the same things applied in Africa. Africa, just like any other places on Earth, has the poor and the wealthy, the haves and the have-nots. However, there is a negative stereotype about Africa that is acknowledges by the majority of people in the world: poverty.

Doh (2009) states that not everybody is poor in Africa. African societies are structured economically like elsewhere, with the poor, the middle class, and the rich. In some of African societies, however, the middle class is almost disappearing. Therefore, by considering these explanations regarding poverty in

Africa, it is clear that by creating an African character that is economically poor, *Kelas Internasional* perpetuates the stereotypes of Africans.

It is worth noting that the filmmakers almost always put laughing sound effects whenever the scenes deal with Abbas' economic condition. The filmmakers seem to reinforce this idea that seeing an African character who is poor is hilarious and to be laughed at. This kind of portrayal can lead to prejudice and discrimination towards Africans.

3. The representations of Abbas as an impolite man

Not only as backward and poor, the data analysis also reveals that the character Abbas is represented as having bad manners or impolite. Abbas' impoliteness is shown in the negative evaluations or reactions of his surroundings. Abbas often annoys and mocks people, tells lies, and does thoughtless actions. Having bad manners is associated greatly with being uneducated and uncivilized. According to Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2008), the word 'uncivilized' means below the usual

standards of Western society. To put it another way, being uncivilized means not socially, culturally, or morally advanced. Abbas' impolite actions can be seen in Table 3 below.

or seen in Tuoie 3 delow.	
Screenshots	Descriptions
	Throwing up on
	Sueb's face and
	does not
Scene 4 – Eps. 47,	apologize.
Season 1	
*	Changing the
	music as he
	pleased when
Scene 9 – Eps. 225,	others are
Season 2	enjoying their
	song.
	Borrowing
	other people's
	things without
Scene 9 – Eps. 225,	their prior
Season 2	permissions.
上	Lying and
	mocking other
	people.
Scene 9 – Eps. 375,	
Season 3	
	Insulting other
Scene 20 – Eps. 375,	people's job for
	Abbas' own
	benefit.
Season 3	
Table 3.	

Table 3.

According to Power (in Doh, 2009, p.34), "Africans are usually the most courteous, hospitable, forgiving and cheerful of all people I have met on God's Earth." Stereotyping African as having bad-manners is actually a discriminatory practice since not all Africans are bad-mannered. Even though some might have mannered, this phenomenon does not only happen in Africa, but in all of the continents in the world. There are always bad-mannered people even in the so-called most advanced continent in the world (Doh, 2009).

By creating an African character that has bad manners or impolite, *Kelas Internasional* perpetuates another stereotype of African in the film. There are numerous laughing sound effects that can be heard when Abbas does impolite actions. This means that it is funny and amusing to see an African being impolite and bad-mannered.

Positive representations

Even though the character Abbas tends to be dominated by negative representations and stereotypes, the data analysis also reveals a number of positive images. In the film, Abbas is portrayed as a friendly man who often greets strangers cheerfully. Doh (2009) states that Africans are often associated with barbarians who are savage and abusive. However, Abbas does not seem to show savagery and abusive traits in the film, but he is shown as a very cheerful and gentle man.

The film also shows that Abbas is neat and clean. According to Doh (2009), Africans are often being stereotyped as dirty and unhealthy since most of them are believed to have failure to afford health care. However, the character Abbas is not shown as a dirty nor unhealthy man. He dresses neatly and cleanly even from the first to the third season of the film. There is also no single scene in the film that indicates Abbas as dirty and unhealthy. This indicates another evidence that counters the negative stereotypes of Africans.

Moreover, Abbas is also represented as a hard-working and confident man. This shows that being backward and poor does not make him desperate and give up on life. He always tries to survive in any kind of

conditions and he does not blame his family for not being able to send him to school. These positive representations of Abbas are a plus point to the film since it brings good moral values to the audiences. The evidence of Abbas' positive representations can be found in Table 4 below.

Screenshots	Descriptions
NAT. 1	Even though
	Abbas is caught
	sleeping in class.
Scene 2 – Eps. 47,	The scene also
Season 1	shows that
	Abbas is actually
	punctual by
	coming earlier
	than Pak Budi.
	Abbas is also
	depicted as a
	neat and clean
Scene 1 – Eps. 47,	person through
Season 1	his costumes.
	Abbas is also
	friendly since he
	often greets
Scene 5 – Eps. 47,	people
Season 1	cheerfully.
	He is also
	hardworking and
	never gives up
Scene 2 – Eps. 375,	on life no matter
Season 3	

how hard his life
is.

Table 4.

Through Abbas' positive and negative representations in *Kelas Internasional*, this study confirms the complexity of representation. Representation is complex since it does not deal with a single frozen meaning behind it; on the contrary, the construction of representation itself is multidimensional since it involves several dimensions or aspects ('the circuit of culture' by Hall, 1997).

The overall set of findings in this study merits the writer's interpretation that since Kelas Internasional is a comedy series, it is possible that the way a comedy series to (intentionally or not) perpetuate stereotype is by creating all the stereotypes of African laughable. *Internasional* Kelas has indeed represented Abbas based on existing negative stereotypes about Africans. However, this might happen for the sake of gaining profits for the television company. Furthermore, the filmmakers might purposefully create the stereotypes of African through the character Abbas since these kinds of stereotypes are believed to stimulate the comedy elements in the film.

However, since literature can be seen as a mirror of life, Kelas Internasional can thus also be seen as reflecting some of the Indonesians' beliefs about what it means to be African, which unfortunately seems to be a reinforcement of negative stereotypes, and perceives these negative stereotypes as funny and to be laughed at. The fact that these negative stereotypes laughable are Indonesian indirectly confirmed that Indonesian have the power over Abbas as an African. In other words, Africans are more power-less than Indonesian.

In the theory of orientalism by Said (1979), African and Indonesian are both considered as the East or the inferior, the power-less, and the uncivilized by the West. However, the issue of power that is presented in the present research shows that Indonesians tend to see themselves as being more powerful than the Africans (as represented through the character Abbas). Unfortunately, the representations of Abbas as an African in the film are mostly dominated by misleading negative representations.

CONCLUSIONS

The issue of power is the main concern in postcolonial study. Orientalism, as theory in the study one of postcolonialism, derived from power relation between the powerful and the powerless (Said, 1979). By being powerful, one has the ability to describe and speak about the powerless. How Kelas Internasional series describe and speak about Africans through the character Abbas is also an Indonesians indication that themselves as powerful.

By having the thought that Africans are more powerless, Indonesians may see themselves in contrast to Africans: more civilized and advanced. Ironically, according to Said (1979), Indonesian in the point of view of the West is regarded as powerless. Based on the history, both Indonesia and most of Africa have experienced colonialization by countries. Africa Western was colonized by the European imperial power (i.e., Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, and Italy), and Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch. Even though both Indonesia and Africa have gained their independence, the fact that they used to be colonized by Western countries can never change.

So, what leads Indonesians to think that they are more superior? Since the ways Indonesians perceive Africans are similar to the images of Africans in most of the Westerner's minds, it can be concluded that many of Indonesians' point of views towards Africans have been constructed by the West. Behind all of this issue, the most influential tool that can help the West to perpetuate the negative images about Africans is, most likely, their media and literary works. Thus, it can be inferred that Indonesians have been very much influenced by the Western media and fail to be more critical in filtering the information. It is therefore important to carry out studies of this nature, as postcolonial theories can help people to be more aware of the hidden power play exercised around them.

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