

SYMBOLISM ANALYSIS USING SEMIOTIC APPROACH IN MALAYSIAN ANIMATED FILM

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the symbolism in first anthropomorphic Malaysian animated film, *Seefood*. It aims to analyse the symbolism of animal characters as a visual metaphor in the Malaysian animated film. This paper is based on research using the Semiotic Saussure Theory in analysing the data. This paper records that cultural factors and knowledge of myths, beliefs and social differences as key aspects of symbolism application can be applied into new media, especially in the field of animation. This makes the character easier to attract the attention of the audience due to the existence of understanding and coherence of social cultural representations that are synonymous in the audience.

Keywords: *Seefood*, symbolism, Malaysian animated films, character.

INTRODUCTION

Animation began as early as the production of a series of sketches of animal symbols in rock caves known as anthropomorphs. Anthropomorphics is derived from the Greek words 'anthropos' and 'morphe' which refer to the application of human characteristics and traits whether to animals, nature or objects (Sfetcu, 2014: 1).

The results of evolution can be seen by the development of anthropomorphic use in various fields, especially in the animation production industry. However, the technological boom does not guarantee high quality film products. Instead, it depends on the storytelling and the ability to use diversity in the formation of animated characters. Hassan Muthalib in the *Harian Metro* newspaper clipping (August 16, 2017) stated that even with the use of advanced digital technology, animated filmmakers need to strengthen the use of visual language in producing animated films equivalent to international publications. One of them is

through the formation of anthropomorphic character that is able to vary the storytelling and then describe a sociocultural symbol of society in just one character (Wells, 1998: 108).

Anthropomorphic characters are not only created for entertainment purposes, but also as a platform to convey messages. Each of the characters in anthropomorphic films carries the symbolism of animal characters as visual metaphors (Thomas & Johnson, 1995: 119). Mohd. Taib Osman (1988: 135) also explains stories that use animal characters to reflect high thinking ability. Animals are not only used as a tool to process stories but they are also able to convey allusions implicitly. Every character formation and characterization are associated with belief in the original animal either through mythology, theology or literature such as folklore and proverbs. For example, the first short-length animated film in Malaysia, *Hikayat Sang Kancil* (1981) using the Kancil character that is synonymous with the perception of the community as an intelligent animal. In fact, it is used by society as a symbol to convey the implicit meaning.

Thus, this study examines the use of symbolism in animated films with anthropomorphic characters in Malaysia. The findings from the analysis of selected animated films are expected to be a guide to the next production company to further improve the use of anthropomorphic characters in their animated films. It is hoped that the understanding of the use of symbolism in the production of anthropomorphic animation can also increase the interest of the audience to watch Malaysian animated films while ensuring that the Malaysian animation field can compete in the international market.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study aims to analyze the symbolism of animal characters as a visual metaphor in the animated film *Seefood*.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is analyzed using a qualitative approach. Sources such as books, journals, magazines and theses are sources of support to obtain the data of this paper. In analyzing the animated film *Seefood*, researchers use Semiotic theory (Saussure, 1916) to analyze the symbolism of animal characters in Malaysian anthropomorphic animated films in more detail. In the context of Semiotics Saussure (1916), this study identifies the elements of signifier and signified symbolism in interpreting meaning in the social and cultural context of Malaysia to answer the research question.

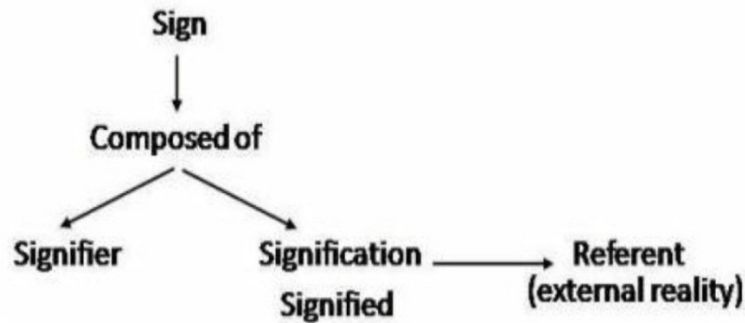


Figure 1 Semiotic Saussure Theory (1916)

The semiotic study is divided into two components namely signifier and signified. Signifier is something that contains meaning that can be clearly understood and conveyed literally. In this context, it refers more to the basic meanings conveyed through markers (Berger, 2005: 11). Therefore, in this study the researcher will study the denotation through the characters used in the selected animated films.

Meanwhile, signified refers to the implicit meaning conveyed (Berger, 2005: 12). In this study, the researcher will study the meaning behind the denotation shown in the introduction of a character. For example, the character of *Sang Kancil* in the short-animated film *Hikayat Sang Kancil* (1083). The signifier is the Deer and the signified is a smart animal. Referent reference to triangulation or recommendation and justification of giving meaning to the character Sang Kancil which is an animal deemed to be clever with the linking of social culture of the Malay community who believed that deer symbolized as animals are smart and full of finesse.

Seefood Animated Film Biodata

The animated film *Seefood* (2012) is Malaysia's first animated film that uses anthropomorphic characters. The animated film *Seefood* successfully penetrated 90 countries including North America, Europe, Latin America and Asia. The animated film *Seefood* (2012) won awards in 2010 including Best Animation Director, Best Production, Best Editor, Best Audio Production and Best Commissioned Work at the Kre8tif! SEA Awards festival. This RM2.36 million animated film has been one of the Malaysian animated films that has adapted anthropomorphic characters as the main movers of the story (*MyMetro*, 2010).

Seefood Animated Film Synopsis

The animated film *Seefood* tells the story of the adventures of two sharks, Pup and Julius. Pup has a mission to find illegal hunters who have stolen some of the eggs from the waters. Pup wants to save the stolen eggs from their area. At first, Pup, unaware of the advantages he had, began to give up trying to save the eggs from the poachers. However, Spin has shown the place as well as his ability to cause Pup to be determined to go ashore to save the eggs.

Throughout Pup's adventures, various obstacles arose with funny action not only in the water but also on land. Pup's determination to save the fish eggs has brought Pup to the land world.

Concerned about Pup's safety, Julius a white horned shark with Moe, Curly and Larry appears in an attempt to save his best friend. Throughout the adventure, other anthropomorphic characters such as Octo, Lee, Herc, Spoch and Heather appear to assist Pup and Julius in their quest. When Pup has managed to save the fish egg, Mertle and Octo tell Pup that Julius has gone ashore to save her. The shocked Pup climbs back to land and has found Julius and his other friends. Efforts continued as Fatman, Lanky and Pudgy began to chase after them. Various anxious scenes occur during the chase scene between Fatman's character and anthropomorphic character. At the end of the story, Fatman, Pudgy and Larry are arrested by the authorities for illegally hunting marine life.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Anthropomorphic character is created as a conceptual idea shared in parallel terms that has evolved to define both the human and animal worlds (Thomas & Johnson, 1995: 119). Humans often associate animals with personalities due to their belief in the foundations of legends and fairy tales. In animation, such beliefs allow the audience to easily understand the personality that involves the motives, emotions of the character or personality of a character. It is a technique that is often used but taken lightly by animated film directors (Jardim, 2013: 51). In fact, anthropomorphic character is also applied to the original nature of the animal.

Through the semiotic theory (Saussure, 1916), anthropomorphic character is a signifier while the signified is the symbolism behind the use of characters in the *Seefood* animated film. It is shown through Figure 2 where there are characters or signifiers created as the main catalyst in the animated film *Seefood*. These developed characters at the same time make this animated story more alive and interesting to follow. Anthropomorphic characters apply the use of symbolism to animals as visual metaphors in *Seefood* animated films. Overall, the findings of anthropomorphic character symbolism in *Seefood* animated film are shown in Figure 3.

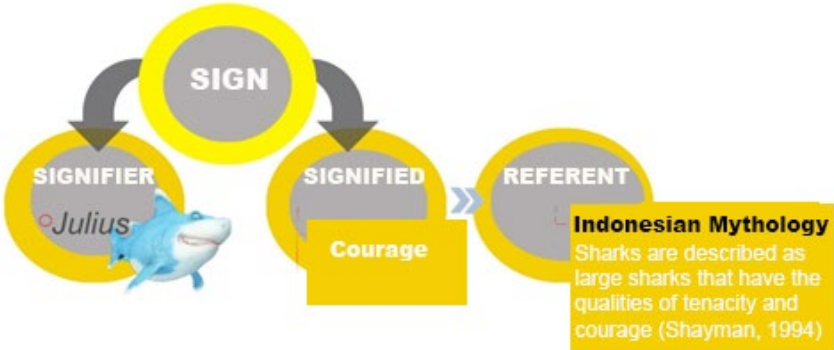


Figure 2 Application of Semiotic Saussure Theory (1916) in the analysis of the animated film, *Seefood*.

No.	Signifier	Signified	Referent
Main Characters			
1.	<i>Pup</i>	Bravery, Determination	<p>In Japanese folklore, sharks are described as characters who are easily deceived but have a determination towards things they want to have.</p> <p>The people of Kalimantan, Indonesia uses the character of sharks in fairy tales. Sharks are described as large animals that have tenacity and courage (Shayzaman, 1994: 21).</p>
2.	<i>Julius</i>	Bravery, Determination	
Side Characters			
3.	<i>Mertle</i>	Kindness	In Japanese mythology, turtles or known as <i>minogame</i> symbolize longevity because turtles are able to live up to the age of hundreds of years. Due to their long lifespan, turtles are often associated with good and wise nature (Ashkenazi, 2003).
4.	<i>Octo</i>	Cleverness	The god Na Kika is the protective god of Gillbert Island (Kiribati). Na Kika has the strength and wisdom to be able to form an island using his eight hands (Ashkenazi, 2003: 121).
5.	<i>Moe, Curly and Larry</i>	Loyalty	In Egyptian mythology, pilot fish will guide the victim towards sharks to be used as food and the leftover will be eaten by pilot fish (Remler, 2006: 64).
6.	Lee, Herc, Sepoch, Heather	Bravery	Heroic symbol (MacDonald, 2008).
7.	<i>Spin</i>	Cautious	Stingrays are associated with a sensitive spirit. This spirit has a high level of awareness. These features are taken through the true nature of stingrays that are commonly found in shallow waters. It is intended as a disguise especially to other predators (Chwalkowski, 2016: 465).
8.	<i>Murray</i>	Power, Agressiveness	The eel is an incarnation of the devil in Greek mythology due to its shape

			resembling the shape of a snake (Chwalkowski, 2016: 468).
9.	<i>Cray</i>	Helpfulness	In Greek belief, coconut crab is a helpful animal (Matsumura, 2014).

Figure 3 Symbolism in the animated film *Seefood*

The results of anthropomorphic character analysis found that all the characters used are related to community beliefs in addition to the original nature of the animal. It is applied casually so that the audience is able to relate the character of anthropomorphic character to the original beliefs and traits. For example, the main characters in the animated film *Seefood* are Pup and Julius. A summary of Pup and Julius' character formation and characterization based on beliefs and literature is shown in Figure 4.

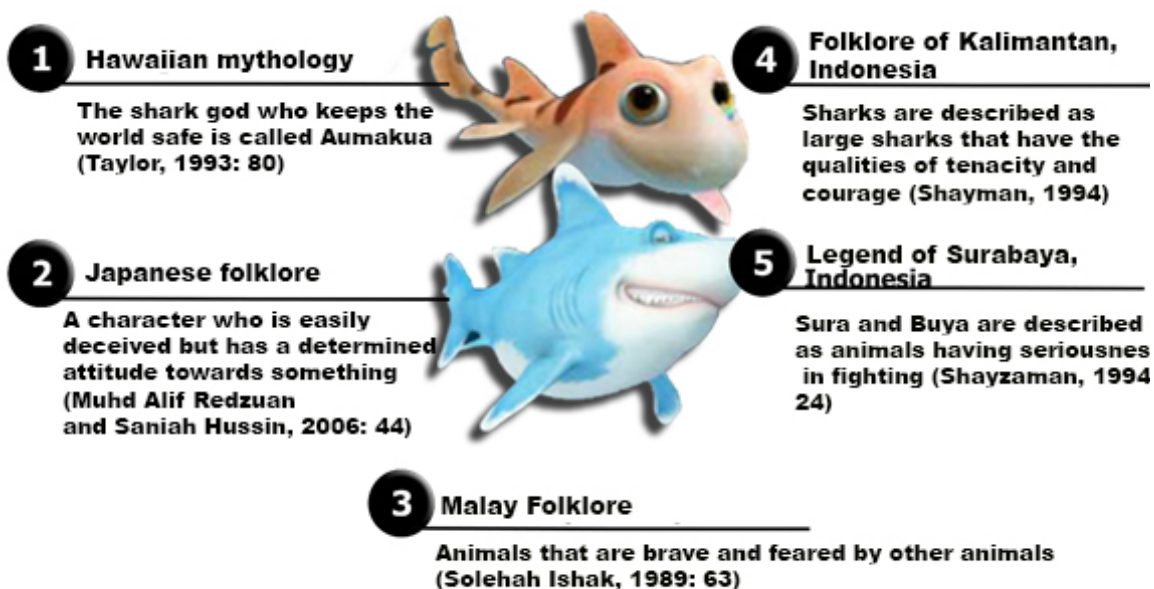


Figure 4 Formation of characters and characteristics of main characters Pup dan Julius based on mythology and folklore

Pup is a bamboo shark or also known by its specific name *chiloscyllium punctatum*. Bamboo sharks can be found in the Indo-West Pacific, Indonesia, Malaysia to northern Australia. It has advantages such as being able to walk and breathe on land (Scott, 2005: 67). The selection of bamboo sharks as the main character in the movement of *Seefood* storytelling is due to the ability of the original animal to breathe and move on land. It fits in with the storytelling of the animated film *Seefood* which requires the main character to have a desire to go ashore to save the fish eggs. In addition, bamboo sharks are among the marine life that can be found in Malaysian waters. Julius is a whitetip shark. Male whitetip sharks can reach a size of seven feet to 13 feet and weigh up to 168 kilograms. Through these natural traits, Julius's character is also applied to his awesome nature.

In general, there are several beliefs about sharks in the field of mythology. For example, sharks are synonymous with Hawaiian mythology. Hawaiian people believe that there are shark gods called Aumakua who keep the world safe. The deity warned of safety while on the coast. Sharks are raised as great animals for Hawaiian society (Taylor, 1993: 80).

Sharks are also a symbol of higher people who misuse the power of money for corruption. It is proved by a fairy tale that uses sharks as big but greedy animals in the *Hikayat Sang Kancil* series. Through Malay folk tales, shark described as an animal brave and feared other animals (Solehah Isaac, 1989: 63). Therefore, through these fairy tales, sharks are often given negative traits. It is done based on its nature which is being the best hunter in the ocean. Its large size makes it among the most feared animals among other animals and humans. It is depicted in the first scene in the animated film *Seefood* when Julius is portrayed as wanting to eat Pup.

Japanese people also use sharks in folklore (Muhd Alif Redzuan & Sanimah Hussin, 2006: 44). Sharks in Japanese folklore are described as characters who are easily deceived but have a determination towards things they want to have. The folk tale tells about sharks and white rabbits. Sharks are feared by terrestrial animals but when they are deceived by white rabbits, sharks do not let that happen. Sharks try their best to punish the white rabbits that have used and deceived them to cross the ocean.

The people of Kalimantan, Indonesia also use the character of sharks in fairy tales. In the fairy tale, sharks are described as big sharks that have tenacity and courage. In the fairy tale, the squirrel character who tries to get the shark's heart has to work hard to defeat the shark (Shayzaman, 1994: 21). It is shown throughout the storytelling of the animated film *Seefood*, when the characters Julius and Pup are given a character who is resilient and brave in facing obstacles. This attitude makes the characters Julius and Pup able to achieve success in the end of the story.

There is also a legendary story related to the clash of sharks named Sura and crocodile, namely Buya in Surabaya, Indonesia. Sura and Buya are described as animals having seriousness in fighting. Sura ruled the oceans while Buya ruled the land. When Sura invaded the Buya area there was a clash between the two characters in the Surabaya area. From the name of the shark and crocodile was formed the name of the city of Surabaya and there is a monument in the middle of the city to commemorate the legend (Shayzaman, 1994: 24).

Through the mythologies related to sharks, sharks are indirectly associated with a positive attitude, especially in folk tales such as having high courage and perseverance in performing a task. Thus, indirectly it influences the formation of Pup and Julius' characters given the application of bold and resilient nature in *Seefood* animated films.

Not only that, but the formation of the character of the antagonistic character in the animated film *Seefood* is also influenced by the mythology related to the original animal, the Moray eel. It is shown in Figure 5.

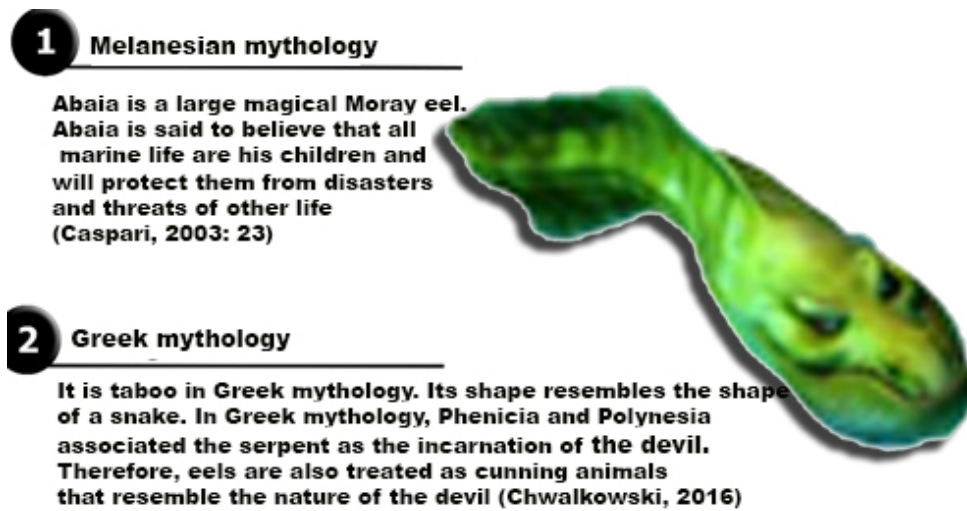


Figure 5 Formation of characters and characteristics of antagonist character, Murray based on mythology

In Melanesian mythology, the Moray eel is known as Abaia which is a large mystic Moray eel. Abaia is said to believe that all marine life is his offspring and will protect them from catastrophes and other life threats. Fishermen trying to catch fish in the Fiji ocean will be opposed by Abaia by creating huge waves. One version of Abaia is that Abaia will create a thunderstorm if it feels that there is a threat to other marine life (Caspari, 2003: 23). Due to the power of the eel, Murray is featured as the leader of the submarine life group in the animated film *Seefood*. Murray was given the power to lead the herd in controlling the waters.

Chwalkowski (2016: 468) also added that eels are taboo in Greek mythology. This is due to its shape which resembles the shape of a snake. In Greek mythology, Phoenicia and Polynesia associated snakes as incarnations of the devil. Therefore, eels are also associated as cunning animals that resemble the nature of the devil. Based on the mythology, Murray's character is known as a cunning antagonist character. The character Murray uses the character Spin in achieving his desire to seize and rule the seabed.

In fact, other side characters are also used as symbolism through mythology from all over the world. One of the characters in the animated film *Seefood* is Mertle. Mertle character formation and characterization are shown in Figure 6.

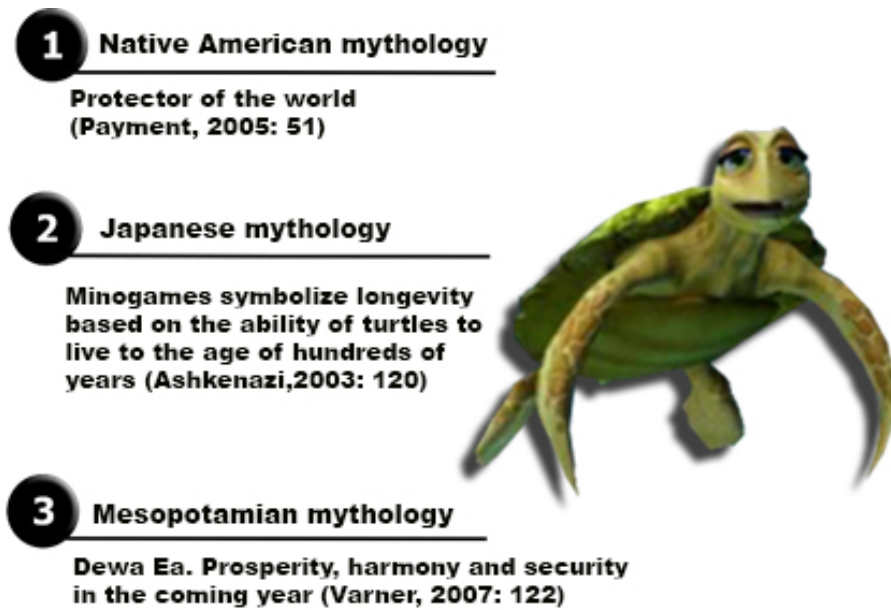


Figure 6 Formation of character and characteristics of Mertle based on mythology

In addition, Mertle is a side character in the animated film *Seefood*. Mertle's character name was adapted from the turtle's English name Turtle and was changed to Mertle. It aims to make it easier for the audience to identify that Mertle is a female turtle by name. Turtles are one of the most popular animals in the field of mythology due to their appearance and longevity. The protective shell and its calm appearance become symbol of the serenity and protective aspect in the field of mythology. In the mythology of Native American society, turtles are depicted as protectors of the world and they carry the world and heaven behind them. Spirits like Cheyenne and Maheo knead the mud until the old turtle is able to carry the world on its shell. The Mohawk community believes that when a disaster occurs like an earthquake, it is caused by an old turtle stretching its body resulting in an earthquake on the earth (Payment, 2005: 51). Thus, Mertle's character is indirectly given a motherly character. Mertle always gave advice to anthropomorphic characters who were deemed to be protective of those characters.

Mertle's motherly character is also featured in the ancient history of Mesopotamia. Mesopotamian people believed that turtles were associated with one of the gods, Ea. Not only that, turtle-shaped cakes are also produced in villages in Taiwan. This turtle-shaped cake symbolizes prosperity, harmony and security in the coming year (Varner, 2007: 122).

Ashkenazi (2003: 120) also explains that in Japanese mythology, turtles or known as *minogame* symbolize longevity based on the ability of turtles to be able to live up to the age of hundreds of years. Due to their long lifespan, turtles are often associated with good and mature nature. Through the turtle-related mythology, Mertle's character in the animated film *Seefood* is shaped as an anthropomorphic character who is always calm and kind. The long

life span of sea turtles is an idea in the application of nature to Mertle's character. As the Malay proverb 'be like the rice stalk, it bends lower as it is laden with ripening grains.' The saying is clearly applied to the nature of Mertle. This attitude is shown through the attitude of Mertle who does not exalt himself despite having a lot of knowledge and experience. Instead, always be humble and always give advice to other characters.

CONCLUSION

Overall, cultural factors and knowledge of myths, beliefs and social differences as key aspects of anthropomorphic application can be applied into new media, especially in the field of animation. This is because culture and beliefs greatly influence society's assessment of a character used. Therefore, it is easy to apply especially in the context of popular culture such as animation. The characters are described as anthropomorphic with a personality that tends to be human rather than animal. This makes the character and anthropomorphic character easier to attract the attention of the audience due to the existence of understanding and coherence of social cultural representations that are synonymous in the audience.

With the study of symbolism in anthropomorphic characters, it is hoped to give implications especially in the formation of characters and meaningful narration that attracts the attention of the audience. It is hoped that the findings in this study can have a positive impact on the Malaysian animation industry as well as help improve the quality of Malaysian animated films and further ensure that the local industry can compete with the foreign film industry.

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