

## THE EVOLUTION AND THE FUNCTION OF HANTU IN THE AGE OF PANDEMIC COVID-19 AND THE MEDIA

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### ABSTRACT

This paper offers a new perspective in the usage and shift of the function as well as the identity of *Hantu(s)* in assisting the nation to overcome the spread of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). An eclectic framework as a result of the combination between the Gothic trope and the concept of appropriation was utilised for the purpose of data analysis in this study whereby the first concept provides this study with a theme or device known as Gothic tropes that are associated with supernatural figures. The second concept, appropriation is used to understand the existence of subject's appearance and they are utilised out of their primordial context. From the analysis conducted, the findings suggest that the function of *Hantu(s)* has to some extent managed to assist the Indonesian government in decreasing the amount of Covid-19 spread due to its' function in reminding the society pertaining to lethal effect of the pandemic. This is resulting from the figures of *Hantu(s)* and *Hantu Pochong* being perceived as the manifestation of the global pandemic itself. Last but not least, it was also found that the *Supernatural figures* or *beings* still gravitate fear among people in the Asian countries including today's generation even though both *Hantu(s)* and Covid-19 disease are equally virulent towards the society.

**Keywords:** Appropriation; Covid-19; Gothic; hantu, Hantu Pochong; Movement Control Order (MCO); society

## EVOLUSI DAN FUNGSI HANTU DI ZAMAN PANDEMIK *COVID-19* DAN MEDIA

### ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menawarkan perspektif baru didalam penggunaan, anjakkan fungsi dan identity Hantu terutamanya didalam membantu membendung penularan wabak COVID-19. Sebuah kerangka kajian gabungan dari konsep Gothik *tropes* (element) dan *Appropriation* untuk menganalisa kajian ini. Konsep pertama iaitu Gothik *tropes* digunakan untuk mengupas identity dan fungsi Hantu. Manakala, konsep yang kedua digunakan untuk memahami dan mengkaji bagaimana sesuatu subjek digunapakai diluar konteks asalnya. Hasil dapatan analisa menunjukkan bahawa Kerajaan Indonesia telah menggunakan Hantu untuk mengurangkan kadar penularan wabak Covid-19. Ini adalah kerana pnggunaan Hantu telah menjadi symbol peringatan kepada penduduk setempat tentang bahayanya wabak ini. Disamping itu, Hantu atau Hantu Pochong telah menjadi representasi atau kiasan kepada kemunculan wabak ini. Akhir sekali, kajian ini juga menunjukkan corak pemikiran di negara Asia dimana mereka lebih menggeruni watak-watak Hantu berbanding wabak ini.

**Kata kunci:** Appropriasi; Covid-19; Gothik; hantu; Hantu Pochong; Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan (PKP); masyarakat

### INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to analyse the evolution on the image of *Hantu* and its function focusing on how it has been appropriated in the age of pandemic Covid-19 and in the media. Upon understanding the relationship between the subject of *Hantu(s)* and Covid-19, we must first delve into the notion behind this sporadic pandemic. According to Paul Kilgore (2020:11), originally the virus was found and carried by a certain species bats in China and soon later the virus was transferred to palm civets and pangolins. Kilgore (2020: 11) further dictates, the nature of the virus has evolved and mutated due to these animals were kept alive in proximity waiting to be sell as exotic food in China. Later upon consumption and close contact with human, initiates the spreading of the pandemic throughout the globe. Reported in *Berita Harian Online* (2020) up to 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, the United States have recorded a total of 5,703,617 cases, meanwhile Italy records 255,278 active cases and finally China recorded 84,895 active cases. Malaysia only recorded a total of 9,235 cases, and the number of active cases accordance to the Ministry of Health (MOH / KKM) Malaysia declared a total of 195 active cases only. Reported in *The Star Online* dated on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 2020, Malaysia is ranked the second-best country in the world in curbing this pandemic. The effort in obtaining this success through the execution of the Movement Controlled Order (MCO) by the current Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 where most premises except the necessities are forced to close and interstate travelling were not allowed. During the movement order, the police, the military and medical doctors became the frontline in controlling this pandemic. Furthermore, the police and the military were stationed at each state and province to execute the interstate traveling and if anyone were caught during the MCO, they will be fine and jailed according to the *Akta Penyakit Berjangkit Malaysia*.

Other countries around the globe are also seen to have executed the MCO and especially prohibiting the interstate travelling. In Indonesia, they have introduced an alternative in increasing the success rate in banning the public from interstate traveling and simultaneously putting the public in morbid fear. Narrated by the Cable News Network (CNN) dated on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2020 and The Star dated on the 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020 reports that on the province of *Kota Pekalongan* and *Kepuh* village, Indonesia, the authorities and the villager's committee have disguised themselves as *Hantu Pochong*. The *Hantu Pochong* or *Hantu Bungkus* (wrapped ghost) is a type of Asian ancestral ghost that has an appearance of a dead human wrapped in layers of *kain kapan* (white cloth) (Danny Lim, 2008:91). Here arises a notion where, the function of the *Hantu* has somehow shifted from the role to scare people to the role of helping the authorities in executing the MCO. To further delve into this shift of function and image, this paper would like to deploy an eclectic framework. This eclectic framework is an integration between the concept of appropriation and Gothic. Upon obtaining the finding would able to contribute to the expansion of knowledge in further understanding the relationship between *Hantu* and the society.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Generally, Malaysia is not the only country termed these malevolent creatures as *Hantu(s)*. Other Asian countries such as Indonesia also shares the same term in referring to these supernatural beings. The depiction of *Hantu* and especially in the Asian region is vast and complex. Additionally, each *Hantu(s)* have their own specific roles in causing harm to humans and their appearance may vary from different town or region (Theresa Bane, 2014: 158). As some of these *Hantu(s)* may appear in real life situations and some appears in the media. Yet the *Hantu's* appearances and functions may differ from real life situations, in the media and by scholarly research. In some cases, the existence of *Hantu(s)* in any society, especially in the Asian context its image functions as a reminder, sign or warning to the people. Taking example of the *Hantu Moyang Lang Kuit*, it has appearance of an eagle with a tail of a snake, its appearance and shrieks signs that someone in the village will pass away soon or a village will be abandoned soon (Danny Lim, 2008: 65).

Upon delving into the concept and functions of *Hantu(s)* that are accordance to the real-life situation. According to Theresa Bane (2014: 158) *Hantu* in the Malaysian region is termed as "demonic ancestral spirit. There are three classifications of *Hantu*: minor, medium, and greater." Bane (2014:158) further dictates that *Hantu(s)* are commonly nocturnal in nature and able to inflict pain, insanity, illness and even disease through numerous channels especially possession. Commented by Mohd Faizal Bin Omar (2014 :13) *Hantu* is a cultural terminology while in Islam it is termed as *Jinn* (Djinn), *Syaitan* (Demon or the Devil) or *Iblis* (Lucifer) and similarly they are able to inflict all types illness towards humans and most of its existence is to make sure humans divert their faith from Allah S.W.T. Mohd Faizal Bin Omar (2014:13) further elucidate that the common *Hantu(s)* that appears in the Malay community are *Pontianak*, *Langsuir*, *Toyol*, *Pelesit*, *Hantu Air*, *Hantu Raya*, *hantu bungkus*, *Polong*, *Bajang*, *Bunian*, *Hantu Bukit*, *hantu Kubur*, *Jerangkung*, *Jin Tanah*, *Hantu Keramat*, *Hantu Kum-Kum*, *Orang Minyak*, *Puaka*, *Penanggal*, *Hantu Bidai*, *Hantu Kopek*, *Harimau Jadian* and *Jembalang Tanah*.

Proposed by Abdurrahman As-Syafie (2015:2), *Hantu(s)* or *Jinns* inflict pain through a medium called *Sihir* (Black Magic) and each of these creatures have their own black magic ability or roles in doing so. Abdurrahman As-Syafie (2015:3) black magic practitioners or anyone with bad intentions usually these creatures to either aid or command them to produce and execute black magic towards their victim. One of the famous examples in seeking aid from these supernatural being is the *Hantu Raya*. Bane (2014: 162) describes it as an aerial ghost that has a gargantuan body while some claims it has the characteristics of red fiery eyes and

body (Danny Lim, 2004:100). Bane (2014: 162) further explicates that, the Hantu raya mostly appears in the form of animals or their previous masters but it swiftly disappears upon making contact with other humans. The process of possessing, making a pact or seeking aid from this *Hantu Raya* is termed as *Saka* where the master needs to provide the *Hantu Raya* with offerings known as *Acak* (Bane, 2004:162). Bane (2014:162) advocates that *Acak* is a “cake made of eggs, rice cakes, roasted chicken, yellow glutinous rice, and a doll.” this cake is meant to prevent the *Hantu raya* from going amok.

Another use of *Hantu(s)* in the field of culture, in Indonesia uses the concept of *Hantu(s)* as a cursing ritual termed as *Sumpah Pochong* (The Pochong’s Curse). Administered by Nazarudin Zainun (2015:NP), this curse is practiced when someone is being framed of a crime that he or she did not commit. The practitioner of this ritual must undergo the process of burial in Islam and after they are wrapped in *Kain Kafan* (white shroud) they must declare the curse (Nazarudin Zainun, 2015:NP). The primary reason the people of Indonesia are morbidly afraid of this curse is because if they practitioner lied a terrible curse will befall to the practitioner and his or her family (Nazarudin Zainun, 2015:NP).

On the contrary, the image and function of *Hantu(s)* as depicted by the media suggest a different connotation of its images and functions although the original appearance and function is preserved. As the media attempt to showcase underlying and potential messages to the public regarding and through the relationship between *Hantu(s)* and the society. Commented by Ahmad Muhyiddin B Yusof, Mohd Naquiddin B Zulqarnain, Nazirul Mubin B Mohd Noor and Airil haimi B Mohd Adnan (2020:158) supernatural or monstrous figures such as the Frankenstein’s monster becomes a reflection and metaphor of the society’s mindset in their level of acceptance in regard to taboo. Through the framework of entextualization in which have placed the Frankenstein’s monster in different media episode, each episode this supernatural character have been refined and given sophisticated traits, roles and wider social circle compared to its original appearance that is being marginalized thus reflects the mindset of the society (Ahmad Muhyiddin B Yusof, 2019: 158). Some horror films usually portray the relationship of male patriarch, women as victim and power through the image of Hantu or the supernatural. This has been described by Azlina Asaari, and Sabariah Mohamad Salleh (2017:73), the female is usually depicted as the victim, the other and being submissive towards the male patriarch. Azlina Asaari et.al., (2017:80) extensively clarifies that the transformation of a female figure to a *Hantu* or the Monstrous Femanine using *Susuk* has liberated them from being abused by the male patriarch. The transformation of liberation is seen in the film *Susuk* (2008) when Soraya is seen wearing the *Susuk Keramat*, the scene becomes the symbol of liberation and her transformation to the Monstrous Feminine (Azlina Asaari et.al., 2017: 81). Another research conducted by Azlina Asaari and Jamaluddin Aziz (2013: 119), on the discussion of women and power through the use and aid from *Saka*. Azlina Asaari and Jamaluddin Aziz (2013: 120) illuminates that the female character in the film *Waris Jari Hantu* (2007) portrays a female character named Tina and Tok Wan who were feared and respected by the villagers of Pekan Mendakar because Tina’s and Tok Wan’s *Saka* makes their family strong and able to protect the village from harm.

In conjunction to the figure of *Hantu(s)* and the society, some horror film displayed the theme of power and greed. This can be seen in early Malay films such as *Pusaka Pontianak* dated on 1965, directed by Ramon Estella deploys the *Pontianak* figure. In the film, the figure of the *Pontianak* is just a disguised by one of the inhabitants to scare away the rest of the inhabitants from collecting the riches in the mansion (Ahmad Muhyiddin B Yusof, Ruzy Suliza hashim, Noraini Bte Mohd Yusof and Anita Harris Satkunananthan, 2019:60).

In summary, the image, identity, roles and function of *Hantu(s)* is no longer bound to divert one’s faith or scaring humans as in fact a *Hantu’s* identity has evolved and stretched into a more critical and sophisticated spotlight. Where its existence allows the media delve deeper

into the condition and mindset of the society. Furthermore, the application of *Hantu(s)* in the media also helps to critically magnify societal issues that has been long embedded within one's society.

In recent development, reported by the Cable News Network (CNN) dated on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2020 and The Star dated on the 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020 the police with the help from the village's committee have joined forces to enforce the MCO in *Kota Pekalongan* and *Kepuh* village, Indonesia. The committee have decided to dress themselves as a *Hantu Pochong* to scare the people from recklessly travelling or loitering around during the MCO. It is reported that the plan is very successful as the community are morbidly afraid of the *Hantu* itself in comparison to the police. Here marks a new chapter on the evolution of the *Hantu's* identity and function. Thus, this paper attempts to delve deeper into this subject.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.

Upon discerning to this matter, this paper has decided to deploy an eclectic framework derived from the Gothic tropes and the concept of appropriation. The Gothic tropes provides this paper with tropes that are related to the supernatural figures meanwhile the concept of appropriation provides this paper in understanding the process on the appearance of a subject that exist and placed outside from its original context.

### HANTU(S) AND GHOST(S) IN GOTHIC TROPES

According to Nick Groom (2012: 1) the concept of Gothic has undergone numerous evolutions beginning from referring to the ancient Goth tribesman that toppled Rome, to describing gargantuan cathedrals to finally on the refinement of genre complete with its convention and tropes. Upon experiencing the evolution of concepts by the Gothic, the nature of Gothic tropes expands exponentially. Argued by Maisha L. Wasiter (2012: 2) the common collective Gothic tropes are "dark villains who never tire chasing hapless maidens through a seeming maze of forest, halls or shadows; supernatural monsters made all the horrible by stray marks of (disfigured humanity), heroes who are sometimes weak, sometimes wicked, but rarely successful saviours; twisted yet uncannily familiar, landscapes; victims spied upon, raped, tortured, mutilated, and occasionally cannibalized, the list goes on." In conjunction to the Gothic trope, the aspect of the supernatural element is usually eminent in most Gothic and horror works. According to Collin Dickey (2017:169) typically the Gothic or in any horror scenarios showcased the image of the supernatural as being restless in nature, in seek of justice and typically came across by the Gothic heroines during her(s) exploration within the castle in the form of supernatural sounds and occurrences (William Hughes, David Punter and Andrew Smith, 2016: 2320). Andrew Lee Cooper (2010: 166) suggests that, in some Gothic works deploy ghosts that are more malicious or evil in nature. Cooper (2010:144) further explicates that, the existence of the supernatural or ghosts are divided into two (2) categories which are fictional and actual. In the case of fictional ghosts, it impacts the reader through a verisimilar account meanwhile actual ghosts impacts the people through actual instances or experience (Cooper, 2010:144).

Although the appearances, manifestations and its vocations of ghosts in Gothic works, may vary, these appearances usually lead to one outcome which is representation or metaphor. Other than their horrific appearances, as suggested by Gary Backhaus and John Murunga (2009: 20) meanings or metaphors can also be obtained through a ghost's gestures, and behaviours. These gestures and behaviours presented by ghosts usually defines messages, intentions and situations Backhaus and Murunga (2009: 20). Cooper (2010:155) describes that ghost's behaviours towards humans are by possessing the inhabitants, the manipulation of object and

disruption of the five sense. In recent development, Ahmad Muhyiddin B Yusof et.al (2019:65) suggests that the roles of ghost can also be seen as a form spatial invasion where it disrupts the inhabitant's family ties, safety and psychological state through a series of malicious hauntings, manifestations and possession hoping the inhabitants to leave the house.

### THE CONCEPT OF APPROPRIATION IN LITERATURE

The concept of appropriation was coined by Julia Senders (2006: 26) as she defines it as "appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain." In applying appropriation and the transporting of a character or any literary element from its original context to another one must regard on this fundamental rule as any literary elements are totally dependent from its original literary canon (Senders, 2006: 45) furthermore, Senders (2016: 10) explicates that upon transporting the subject from its original context to another context, it is crucial to ensure the subject's originality, historical culture, and its pleasure are not lost or underestimated. If its degree of temperament, alteration or only a partial of its to be used into another context it is termed as entextualization. The premise of entextualization relies only a detachment of a (small) portion from the original subject export out into another context (Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, 1996: 21) at some degree, some might suggest that the process of appropriation is similar to the act of plagiarism. Yet as argued by Senders (2006: 33) appropriation is a standard feature that are practiced and found in any artistic process and production. Senders (2006: 33) extends that at some degree, appropriation involves the process of adaption and the creation of creative texts and its elements around the around world may overlap and have intertextuality between texts from a different country. Therefore, the concept of appropriation needs to be taken into a more positive vantage point as it cultivates, inspiring and enriching new and endless cultural and aesthetic possibilities.

### ANALYSIS

In integrating these two literary concepts, this paper now initiates the analysis by first deploying the concept of Gothic onto the figure of *Hantu Pochong*, specifically analyzing on its role, identity and function. Meanwhile the concept of appropriation is used to discern the position of *Hantu Pochong* during the MCO movement.

Previously mentioned in the introductory section, the definition of *Hantu Pochong* has been established as one of the ancestral *Hantu(s)* appears in the form of a human wrapped in *Kain Kafan* (White Shroud) it resembles a decease individual during a Muslim funeral. Additionally, this *Hantu* is well known in the Asian region especially Malaysia and Indonesia. Up to this point, the subject that revolves around the *Hantu Pochong* only describes about its appearance and rarely claims of its symbols and functions in comparison to the *Pontianak*. For example, the Indonesian usually describes this *Hantu* that jumps around while revealing its face to scare people that lives near or passing by a graveyard (Urbanlejen, 2013: 168). In Malaysia, commented by Danny Lim (2008: 91) the *Hantu Pochong* is a Malay *Hantu* that arises from the grave because its head knot is forgotten to be untied during the burial, thus it jumps around to disturb people by asking them to untie it. Danny Lim (2008: 92) further suggests that the rise of *Hantu Pochong* from its burial ground becomes a reminder to the society to take proper care, respect and being forgetful during a burial. In conjunction to this matter, Nazarudin Zainun (2015:NP) suggests that the concept of this *Hantu* is being used in a cursing ritual termed as the *Sumpah Pochong* (Pochong's Cursed). Upon the definitions, roles

and functions it can be summarized through the lens of Gothic that this particular *Hantu* represents the image of fear, respect and curse.

Upon taking these representations of this *Hantu* and appropriate it into the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic, its representation might offer another meaning to this *Hantu*. As stated by one of the village committee in *Kepuh* village, Indonesia comments about this effort during the MCO,

“Since the *Pochong* have started appearing, children and adults have not left their home. People will not gather or stay on streets after evening prayers.” (Karno Supadmo, The Star, 2020)

This suggests that the application of this *Hantu* especially during the MCO have brought a positive deterrent effect in curbing and controlling the people’s movement during the curfew. From a glance, it reflects the people’s mindset that most of the community in *Kota Pekalongan* and *Kepuh* village are still clinging to supernatural powers and believed that these beings are more of a threat in comparison to the police, law and the gravity of this pandemic. Suggested by A. Halim Ali, Norazimah Zakariah and Ariff Mohamad (2017:235) in understanding a culture, one must observe and delve into its mindset, religion, society, politic and economy. Here in this case, it also showcased that some culture is still unaware, ignorant and does not care on the ferocity of this pandemic. In order to control and have a better result in executing the MCO, the resort of hiring this *Hantu* into action is one of the best solutions in restricting the people’s movement and the spread of this pandemic. Thus, from this point, this *Hantu* promotes a new connotation and embodies the idea of ‘Reminder’. To further explain this embodiment, although from one perspective this *Hantu* only use as a deterrent effect to scare the people during the MCO. Yet, from another perspective the appearance of this *Hantu* especially during this pandemic on the streets at night reminds the people that death is eminent if someone is diagnosed with the Covid-19 virus. The diagram below suggests the present image and functions of *Hantu(s)*, especially the *Hantu Pochong* according to these three (3) categories in which are cultural or religion, media and the pandemic Covid-19.

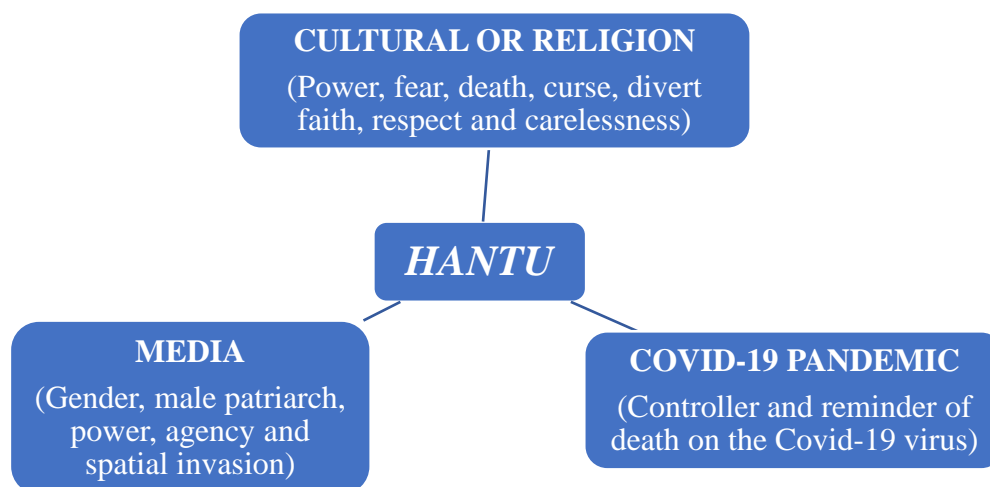


FIGURE 1. The expansion of function on the image of *Hantu(s)*

## CONCLUSION

The image and function of Hantu(s) especially in the Malaysian context have experience a massive shift from frightening children, gender representation and metaphors. Although, the Gothic have originally deployed and portrayed the image of ghost as hidden meanings or metaphors yet it is proposed that different background have different functions in regards to these supernatural entities. Generally, the *Hantu(s)* or these supernatural beings are commonly associated with death, negativity, bad omen or unfinished business. Here in today's context, the image of *Hantu(s)* is used to symbolize this novel pandemic, the Covid-19 in which is a far cry in comparison to any traditional context. The question remains, whether this pandemic shifts the image and functionality of Hantu(s) or vice versa.

In a nutshell, the concept of *Hantu(s)* or the *Hantu Pochong* has been placed under a positive spotlight and indeed offers new connotations and functions especially during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Although the manifestation of *Hantu* is indeed terrifying yet its deterrent effect is quite positive as it able to increase the success rate during the MCO and simultaneously reminds the people on the hazards of this pandemic. Perhaps at some degree, it can be understood that the figure of *Hantu(s)* or the *Hantu Pochong* is the manifestation of the pandemic itself. Another finding that is obtained from this research, in Asian countries the gravity of fear towards the supernatural beings are still strongly embedded even in today's generation although it is well known that both *Hantu(s)* and this pandemic carries equal danger to human beings.

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