A SATIRICAL PORTRAIT OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT’S PERFORMANCE REFLECTED IN YOU CAN’T TAKE IT WITH YOU

Sebuah Potret Satiris terhadap Kinerja Pemerintah Amerika yang Terefleksi dalam You Can’t Take It with You

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INTISARI

Kata Kunci: Satir - Internal Revenue Department - the Great Depression

INTRODUCTION

As a satire You Can’t Take With You (1936) written by Moss Hart and George Simon Kaufman combined criticism and humor. The humor is used to arouse laughter or smile that becomes a weapon to ridicule the object of satire (Abrams, 1993: 153). American government with its policy and action through the Internal Revenue Department (IRD) becomes one of the objects of satire in the play. The aspect being satirized in the play

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relates to the American situation in the Great Depression of 1930s, for example government’s policy in the taxation as the main source of the government’s programs in New Deal.

In the midst of the depression of 1933, Roosevelt launched New Deal with its programs to combat the hard situation in the depression. Most of financial support of New Deal programs was taken from the taxation (Poole, 1957: 571). Until 1936 general election American people still experienced the depression. New Deal brought about controversy to the Americans. On one hand, some people thought that New Deal helped them to recover the great depression. On the other hand, other people disagreed with such an opinion. They thought that some of the programs in the New Deal wasted money and caused the rise of the country’s debt (Todd and Curti, 1972: 242).

Such a controversy becomes the background of You Can’t Take It With You. This paper attempts at describing the portrayal of the government performance through the satire reflected in the problem of taxation involving the government and society.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

The method in this study is library research that is used to collect the data, written sources as well as electronic sources. Written sources include books relevant to the study of the satire in the play, such as writings about the playwrights and history particularly the social, politic, and economic condition in the 1920s and 1930s. The electronic sources are obtained from the American Studies Library of Gadjah Mada University, KIVA Library University of Indonesia, personal collection of some lecturers, and from the internet.

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In analyzing the play the writer uses mimetic approach and American Studies approach. In relation to mimetic approach the work of art is considered as the reflection of the world outside (Abrams, 1959: 41). With this approach, the play is regarded as the imitation of the event during the Great Depression in America.

In relation to the American Studies perspective, this research uses ‘interdisciplinary’ approach by Henry Nash Smith (Kwiatk & Turpic, ed. 1980: 14). Thus, a student of literature will not consider literature as a subject that separates from other fields. Culture embraces aspects of human life some of which are language, government, and artistic expressions as the results of human culture. It means that if we study literature as a culture we can relate it with other fields of science.

ANALYSIS

The satire in the play lies in the follies, particularly in the spheres of politics that becomes one of the concerns of the playwrights in the era (MacNicholas, et al., 1981: 25). Considering the background of time of the play that is in the era of Great Depression in 1930s, the satire reflects some of prominent social phenomena of the era, for example the social doubt towards the government’s capability. The issue is seen through the Vanderhof’s conflict with the Internal Revenue Department. The conflict is due to his objection to pay the income tax because he does not believe in the usage of tax. Mr. Vanderhof’s conflict with the government starts when Mr. Vanderhof gets two letters from the IRD. Those letters inform that he has to come to the IRD office because he has to fulfill his duty to pay the income tax.

As previously stated the government made programs in New Deal that was aimed relief, recovery, and reform (Todd & Curti, 1972: 410). In order to achieve those purposes the government needed significant fund to support the programs. Government revenues, largely derived from taxation, paid for roughly three-fifth of the government expenditures in New Deal programs (Poole, 1957: 751). The New Deal had various programs and involved a lot of people. Consequently, it expended money and costly bureaucracy (Riegel & Long, 1955: 212). The government’s expenditures between 1934 and 1939 were $27 billion greater than between 1924 and 1929 and such a big amount was used almost entirely to the cost of the New Deal programs (Bogart and Kemmeren, 1974). However, the government’s spending of money was not followed with better condition. People still suffered from the effects of the Great Depression, such as the unemployment. The fact is that the depression was far from conquered (Todd & Curti, 1972: 424).

In relation to the tax as the most significant financial support to run the programs of New Deal, the Internal Revenue Department plays very important role. This department was the backbone of the funding of government’s programs. Internal Revenue Department is a division of United States department of the treasury and responsible for the assessment and collects most of its revenues through the individual and corporate income tax (Concise Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 1994). The department is very important because it makes a direct contact with those
who are obliged to pay the tax.

Tax itself is defined as an amount of money that has to be paid to the government so that it can pay for public services (Collins Cobuild Dictionary, 1987: 1498). From the definition, there are two important points to consider that tax is the obligation of the citizen and that the government has to provide the citizen with the service because it is the citizen’s right. Thus, the role of the government to determine the tax and to provide services as the consequence of managing the tax is very important.

Among many kinds of taxes, the income tax is one of them. It is defined as a certain percentage of one’s income and should be paid regularly to the government (Collins Cobuild Dictionary, 1987: 736). From the concept of the tax, citizens who get income are obliged to pay the tax. In turn, they will have facilities and service from the government.

As part of the government, the IRD not only provides the data of those who have to pay the tax and calculate the amount of money people have to pay but also collects the money of the taxpayers. In fact, the department has to take care of all problems relating to the tax.

Henderson as an employee of the department represents the government. He makes a contact with Mr. Vanderhof who is stated not paying the income tax for years. Henderson comes to see him because Mr. Vanderhof does not give any response to the IRD’s letters. Through Henderson who tries to handle the tax problem the performance of government is reflected.

Vanderhof used to work in the Wall Street but he quitted from his jobs thirty-five years ago because he feels that he cannot enjoy his job. He does not worry about his living. He owns property and he gets 5,000 - 4,000 per year income from it. It means that Vanderhof’s income is above the subsistence level of $2000 (Norton et al., 1986: 715). So, it can be inferred that without job he can have proper living.

In accordance to his income, the Internal Revenue Department records that he should have paid the tax since 1914. However, he never pays the tax. His reason for doing such a thing is that he does not believe in the tax. After years passing by, he suddenly receives two letters from the department. From the letters, the problem begins.

The government’s action to send Vanderhof the letters is too late. If Vanderhof has to pay the tax since 1914 and the letters are sent to him in 1936, it means the letter is twenty-two years late since the determined time. This very late letter indicates the weakness of the department. Tax has to be paid annually, so if a taxpayer does not fulfill his duty, the department has to warn him soon. Yet, in Vanderhof’s case, the department has let him not pay the tax for more than twenty years. It is very ridiculous that the department’s action is taken after such a long time. It can be implied that the performance of the department is not organized.

Representing the government Henderson explains the reason he comes to Vanderhof’s home. First, he mentions about the letters the department has sent to Vanderhof who gives no response to those letters. Second, he explains the case of Vanderhof’s tax. According to his explanation, Vanderhof has never paid the tax since 1914. It means Vanderhof owes the government for twenty-two years so the government asks him to pay the tax.

Vanderhof tells Henderson frankly that he has never paid the tax. His reason for doing that is he does not believe with the usage of the tax. Vanderhof’s statement implies his doubt towards the government’s management of tax. As an American citizen he knows his obligation to pay the tax, but the fact is he does not. He enquires the usage of the tax because he sees the situation in his country is still in the depression. The government has used a big amount of tax to support the programs of New Deal. However, he sees the fact that the depression still exists. He wants to ask what the tax for, if the country is still in a complicated situation. Vanderhof’s idea about the government is similar with Donald’s. Donald thinks that “...Government ought to be run better than that...” (Hart & Kaufman, 1973: 253). Such an idea reflects the social doubt towards American government in the Great Depression.

Vanderhof’s doubt towards the government is getting stronger with the arrival of Henderson. As a government agent Henderson gives ridiculous answer to Vanderhof’s questions. He states that if Vanderhof does not pay the tax, the foreigners will invade the country. There is no relation and no logical explanation that if the citizens do not pay the tax, foreigners will attack the country. As a government’s employee he is very rash in giving such an answer.

In the emergency the cost of war is taken from the tax (Poole, 1937: 571). Vanderhof thinks that such usage of tax is not appropriate because the war did not give significant benefit for Americans. He gives an example that in Spanish-American War in 1898 America did not get anything. America “helps” Cuba to release from Spain. He thinks that it is illogical that American people have to pay the tax used to finance such kind of war. In other words, Vanderhof disagrees with government’s policy in the usage of tax for war.

Henderson’s answer that the tax is also used to pay the Interstate
Commercio is also ridiculous. The Interstate commerce established in 1887 is a regulation of economics and services of specified 
carriers engaged in transportation between states, and becomes a permanent part of national 
policy (Henretta, 1993: 542). The constitution and the Interstate 
Commercio are regulations and have already existed. Thus, it is not appropria 
te if tax is used for financing those regulations.

Since Henderson cannot give logical reason to Vanderhof he loses 
control and gets angry with Vanderhof and says that his concern is 
Vanderhof has to pay the tax. "...All I know is that you haven't paid the 
income tax and you've got to pay it" (Hart & Kaufman, 1973: 242). His 
answer shows the weakness of Henderson's argument and his inability 
to perform his job. As a government employee who represents the gov 
ernment he has to realize that his performance and statement will give 
implication to people he meets. Consequently, he has to be able to adjust 
to the people he has to see and to explain everything relating to his job.

Vanderhof's idea about the improper usage of tax implies the per 
ception and dissatisfaction of American people. In the Great Depression 
people found very difficult to survive for their living. The tax was felt as 
a hard burden (Schlesingers, et al., eds. 1948: 92). Moreover, the 
government's policy to increase the tax shows that they ignore the citi 
zens' difficult situation (Wecte, 1960: 92). At times when finding a job is 
very difficult and the tax is felt as a burden, it is something unappreci 
tive if the government increases the tax.

Vanderhof's objection to pay tax is because he sees government's 
weakness in managing the tax. During the depression the government 
spent a lot of money for the projects of New Deal. However, the projects 
that were attempted to solve the Depression were more like economic 
experimentation (Hofstadler, et al., 1959: 500). If one project was not 
successful, it was replaced with other projects. Such kind of action indi 
cates the weakness of the program.

Besides, as a government's employee, Henderson, does not show his 
capability in doing his tasks. It is clearly seen that Henderson does not 
really know how to do his job. His answers to Vanderhof's questions 
show that he does not really understand to perform his duties. His con 
fusion in answering Vanderhof's questions is worsened with his anger. 
Henderson who represents the government has failed to perform his job 
owing to his own folly.

Besides, the scene implies that the "craziness" of Vanderhof can beat 
the "seriousness" of the government's employee. As he works for the 
government Henderson has to be qualified because government is an in 
stitution representing a country. Yet, the fact that Vanderhof's craziness 
can ridicule the serious government's employee gives the impression that the 
employee is not qualified.

Seeing the fact of how careless the government, particularly the IRD's 
employees in doing the duty leads to the impression that Vanderhof's idea to refuse paying the tax can be accepted. The reasons for this are 
first, the government has not proved the best performance to the society 
to solve the problems in society; second, the government's employee does 
not perform the job well; third, the government is careless about gather 
ing and investigating data of those who are obliged to give income tax. 
Government's weaknesses and foolishness through Henderson is exposed. 
In the conflict Vanderhof's idea reflects society's perception about the 
government.

Government's foolishness is more clearly reflected in the end of the 
problem. Involving in the problem of tax, Vanderhof tries to convince the IRD 
that Mr. Vanderhof has died. He himself is Mr. Martin Vanderhof, 
Jr. It is very odd that the IRD accepts Vanderhof's statement. They be 
lieve that Mr. Vanderhof is dead and he is his son, Mr. Vanderhof Jr. The 
government sends Vanderhof a letter to apologize for the mistake. 
Vanderhof is free from his duty to pay the income tax.

Actually, the man who died eight years ago was not Vanderhof but 
the milkman who was very close to the family. When he died, the 
Vanderhof gave Vanderhof's name to him because they do not know his 
real name. Since that time Vanderhof was stated dead.

It is a silly failure that the government cannot find out that the man 
died eight years ago was not the real Vanderhof. The government should have 
known if the real Vanderhof is still alive and it was the milkman who 
died eight years ago because the government possesses and provides the 
data about the citizens in the country. The data embraces all aspects of 
the citizens.

The Vanderhof's case shows that the IRD is very careless in per 
forming the jobs. The fact that the department can accept Vanderhof's 
statement shows the department's weakness The department has to 
cooperate with other departments. In this case, the IRD has to contact 
other department in order to have the real data about Vanderhof. Yet, it 
is clearly seen that there is no coordination among the departments so 
that the IRD believes with Vanderhof's lie.

Besides, the government is an organized institution. The success of 
Vanderhof's lie implies that the administration is not organized. It also 
reflects that the performance of the government is in disorder and shows
The employees’ foolishness because Vanderhof can make a fool on then.

Vanderhof’s conflicts with the IRD show the satire on the government’s performance. The government is not only exposed through the failure in collecting the tax, inability to convince the society, and weakness in providing data but also through the carelessness in managing the administration. Such kind of case shows the disorder condition in the government. Besides, from the satire it can be inferred that there is a doubt on the part of the society towards the government in trying to solve the problems in the depression.

The tax problem pictures the complicated situation. The performance of the government is not well organized. There is no appropriate record, no coordination among departments. Seeing such a condition, the playwrights show that Vanderhof’s attitude to the government makes sense because from his case it is clearly seen that the government is not capable.

CONCLUSION

You Can’t Take It With You is a play that satirizes the weaknesses of the government’s performance in relation to the taxation, which became significant problem in the depression.

The government is exposed through the performance of the Internal Revenue Department. The satire reflected from Vanderhof’s problems with the department shows the weakness of government’s performance, particularly in handling the taxation.

To support the emergency, like war and problems of the depression, the government needs money mostly taken from the tax. However, people as the taxpayers cannot take the direct benefit from the tax. Financing war as in Spanish-American War is expensive but it does not give any benefit for the American people. Financing the programs to solve the depression is also expensive. Yet, the programs are like experiments and cannot give satisfying results for the people.

Such a situation makes people distrust the government and enquire the government’s efforts in solving the problems in the country. Vanderhof is an example of person who does not trust the government. He thinks that the government should prove to the society in order to get citizens’ trust.

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DEMORALIZATION IN THE SLUMS AS SEEN IN STEPHEN CRANE’S MAGGIE: A GIRL OF THE STREETS

Demoralisasi di Perkampungan Kumuh seperti Tampak dalam Karya Steven Crane: Maggie= A Girl of the Street

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INTISARI

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menunjukkan demoralisasi pada kaum miskin yang hidup di daerah daerah kumuh di New York pada saat Amerika memasuki era industrialisasi di akhir abad 19, seperti yang terrefleksi di dalam karya Stephen Crane, Maggie= A Girl of the Streets.

Penelitian ini adalah penelitian kependekan yang dilaksanakan dengan menggabungkan pendekatan interdisipliner, yang merupakan suatu ciri khas American Studies, yang dalam hal ini melibatkan ilmu sejarah, sosiologi, psikologi, dan sebagainya.

Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa pada era industrialisasi di akhir abad 19 di Amerika, yang dilihat oleh prinsip Darwinisme, yang kuat yang menang, kaum miskin dianggap sebagai kaum yang lemah yang tidak mampu bersaing dengan mereka yang kuat atau kaya. Kebanyakan kaum miskin ini adalah buruh rendah, yang menerima upah yang sangat minim, yang tidak cukup untuk memenuhi kebutuhan mereka setiap hari. Mereka seringkali tidak bisa keluar dari keadaan mereka miskin dan tidak lagi mempunyai pengharapan untuk kehidupan yang lebih baik di masa depan.


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ELECTRONIC SOURCES


http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/paul/chapp/kaufman.html

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