AMERICAN PROTEST SONGS IN THE 1960s

LAGU PROTES AMERIKA 1960-AN

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ABSTRACT

The writer of this thesis attempts to explore songs that express the dissatisfaction of the American society toward what was happening in their country in the 1960s. It was very difficult to realize an ideal peaceful society due to the involvement of America in the Vietnam War and the problem of discrimination in America that aroused protests. These protests caused the 1960s to become the era of protest songs. The songs analyzed in this study represent the events happening in America, so the songs portray the opposition toward the Vietnam War and the discrimination against Blacks.

The interdisciplinary approach, which involves the history, culture, sociology, and politics is applied in this study. With this approach, the writer of this thesis discovers that the protest songs were not incidentally related to the situation that existed in America in the 1960s. The protest songs emerged as a result of the composer’s understanding and their attitudes toward the situation in those years.

The result of the study shows that the protest songs acted as the catalyst for the process of Americans’ awareness toward the incidents that occurred around them. Those songs also reflected the attitude of some Americans who dreamed of peace, which was also the desire of the composers. The protest songs were topical, since the topic of the songs was related to the situation of America in the 1960s.

Keywords: American protest songs – Vietnam War – Civil Rights Movement.

INTRODUCTION

The songs of the 1960s reflected the situation that was faced by the people. Many songs reflect the condition of a society as they describe to the listeners about what is actually going on. The 1960s was an era with the civil rights movements and the Vietnam War. Thus, the songs of the 1960s protested and reflected the conditions of the society.

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Many people opposed the Vietnam War, and they opposed more when they had to go to war. Jerry Friedman's song "I Don't Stand Alone" reflected the objection of those who were sent to war. The government argued that it was necessary to prevent Communist to take over of Vietnam because of the domino theory. If Vietnam fell into the Soviet or Chinese Communist orbit, so would the neighboring countries. In addition, communism would spread (Kimball, 1990:6). Still, people did not agree. Bob Dylan questioned the importance of war in his song "With God on Our Side".

The problem of discrimination and segregation came to its climax in this decade. It started among blacks, mainly in the South, and emerged from the frustration felt by many blacks at the slow pace of their acquisition of civil rights, especially in education and voting rights (Johnson, 1999:891). White men's treatment toward blacks made terror to the black society. The Ku Klux Klan who proclaimed as its goals 100 percent Americanism and protection of the racial purity of "Anglo-Saxon" Protestant America was anti-Catholic, anti-Negro, anti-Jewish, and anti-immigrant. It defended segregation as part of the Southern way of life and sometimes used violence (Gordon, 1984:20). The bombing of a church by a white man that killed four black girls in Birmingham Alabama (Hampson and Fayer, 1990: par 3) was one of the violence. The murder of Medgar Evers - a Mississippi field secretary of the National Association for the advancement of colored people - in Mississippi ("Northen Folks Helped Out At Negro festival In Mississippi", 1963, par: 4), the murder of Emmett Till, were the others and still many were done by the members of the Ku Klux Klan. These made Bob Dylan, Richard Farina, Phil Ochs and some other composers wrote songs which described about the incidents. "Only A Pawn In Their Game" was one of Dylan's songs that described the effort of the government who support the Ku Klux Klan and the ethnic-cleansing actions. The whites' discrimination resulted in the hostility toward blacks. The white's anti-Negro attitude led to the murder and torture of the blacks. Racism triggered the civil rights movements. As Dylan expressed in his "Blowin' In the Wind," the blacks did not get equal treatment. They were even unnoticed. Dylan put his question about the problem in the following lyric, "How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man" ("Blowin' In The Wind", 1-2).

The songs of the 1960s were very close to the condition of American life. This era was the era of the most issue-oriented songs in America. Many protest songs of the 1960s described the attitude of many people who opposed the Vietnam War. Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs were two of those who expressed their opposition toward war in their songs. Dylan's
"Masters of War", and Ochs' "I Ain't Marching Anymore" and "Draft Dodger Rag" were the expression of the opposition to the war.

METHOD OF STUDY

This thesis is a qualitative research. The data are taken from books. Information on the songs and the historical background of the composition of the songs is acquired through internet exploration. Some of the song-lyrics are found in the websites.

The writer of this thesis selected the data that was found and then arranged as needed. The songs of civil rights movement and Vietnam War protest songs are distinguished according to the theme. Then the writer starts analyzing them by applying the socio-historical method, which means in analyzing the data, she uses the historical perspective to understand the phenomenon of people's attitude reflected in the protest songs as the product of culture of the period under study. This thesis uses the interdisciplinary approach, which comprises between sociology, history, literature, and politics.

The result of the analysis is presented in a descriptive way. The writer presents the result by describing what she has found in the analysis of the data.

RESULT OF STUDY

Civil Rights Movements Songs

Racial problems in the United States brought about many riots, murders, and the whites' ill treatment toward the blacks. In the rebellion toward the injustices in the U.S., the 1960s witnessed the peak of the protests among the society. The criticism, the demonstrations, and the protest movements through protest songs were appealing that the government should stop the war in Vietnam and the discrimination in the U.S.

A story-telling style of song, "Only A Pawn In Their Game" by Bob Dylan that was written in 1963 (Trent, 1998: par.1) described to the audience about the murder of Medgar Wiley Evers. This song was Dylan's reaction to what the whites did to this black individual. The murder was only a game, he said, as the murderer did not realize what he had done. Someone who ran this game was he who believed that the blacks must be wiped out. While the man who committed the murder did not know
what he had done and, according to Dylan, should be forgiven. Below are some lyrics from “Only A Pawn In Their Game”,

_The poor white man's used in the hands of them all like a tool_

...  
_But it ain't him to blame_  
_He's only a pawn in their game_  
_(“Only A Pawn In Their Game,” 22, 30-31)_  

The murderer was only a pawn, someone that was used to carry out the purpose of others. The “poor white man” was used to kill the black individual. There was a man who stirred the murderer and he was the man who had the “game.” The involvement of someone behind the violence was also described in Dylan’s “Talkin’ Devil.” In this song, Dylan suggested that we could not see devil because he hid behind the “snow white hood”. He killed people without his face seen, and then acted as if he never did anything wrong. This is described in some lines of “Talkin’ Devil.”

_Well, sometimes you can’t see him so good,_  
_When he hides his hood, reach a snow white hood,_  
_And rides to kill with his face well hid,_  
_And then goes some to his wife and kids (“Talkin’ Devil”, 1-4)_  

The members of the Ku Klux Klan always wore robes and hoods in their actions. The lines above described that the actor was a member of the KKK organization. The “snow white hood” was an illustration for the hood that was worn by the members of the KKK. Indirectly, these lines would describe the man that was behind the action. He was not the man who killed, but he was the man who steered the action. He was the provocateur who wanted other people to hate blacks, to be scared of something that should not be feared, for some reason that did not exist.

Richard Weissman was also inspired by the incident. The murder of Medgar Wiley Evers inspired him to write “Medgar Evers Lullaby”. This song was a story-telling song that pretended to be a lullaby for Medgar Evers’ son, about why his father was killed (Claire, 1997: par 1).  

Phil Ochs in his “Too Many Martyrs” wrote a song about the murder of Medgar Wiley Evers as a protest toward the acts of violence that was done to the blacks in his country. To the killers that murder Evers, the color was a crime. “... his color was his crime ...” (“Too many Martyrs”, 3). So, white men would attack the blacks because of the skin color.

Another victim of the whites’ hatred was Emmett Till. He was murdered by several white men. Emmett Till was a black boy. The incident was described in Dylan’s song “The Death of Emmett Till”. The murders
confessed that they had reason, but the storyteller in this song said that he forgot the reason. The fact was that the hatred still dominated and the led to the killing. So much was their hatred, which they would kill with fun as described below.

Some men they dragged him to a barn and there they beat him up,

They said they had a reason, but I disremember what,

... The reason that they killed him there, and I'm sure it was no lie,

Was just for the fun of killing him and to watch him slowly die

(“The Death of Emmett Till” 5-6, 11-12).

Emmett Till was beaten and dumped into the river. Because of the system, the trial was just a joke. The killers were set free. The juries were the men who agreed to the discrimination and segregation toward the blacks as seen in the following lyrics.

But on the jury there were men who helped the brothers commit this awful crime.

And so this trial was a mockery, but nobody seemed to mind

(“The Death of Emmett Till”, 15-16).

In “Here’s to the State of Mississippi,” institutions like schools, law, courts, and even Churches considered blacks as enemies. In schools, children were taught to hate blacks, and were blinded from the words fair and justice. From the lyrics below, it was seen that the schools were the institution to teach that white were better and “higher” than blacks.

And here’s to the schools of Mississippi.

Where they’re teaching all the children that they don’t have to care

All the rudiments of hatred are present everywhere.

And every single classroom is a factory of despair.

And here’s to the State of Mississippi.

(“Here’s to the State of Mississippi”, 13-18).

The Church of Mississippi was also an institution without equality and justice. So bad was the condition, that Ochs wrote:

Where the cross, once made of silver, now is caked with rust,

and the Sunday Morning sermons pander to their lust;

Oh, the fallen face of Jesus is choking in the dust,

And Heaven only knows in which God they can trust

(“Here’s to the State of Mississippi”, 51-54).

The discrimination brought misery to the blacks. So cruel was the discrimination that there seems to be a god for the whites, and a god for the blacks. The discrimination caused the blacks to think that the whites’ God was not the same as their God, because there was no equality for
them. If they all had the same God, there should be equality for all. The blacks was pushed by the condition that they thought they had their own God, in which "they could trust" (line 55).

The attitude of the segregationist was shown in Phil Ochs' "Outside of A Small Circle of Friends." In this song, Ochs expressed his sympathy toward the blacks. The song was about a murder of a black woman, which was caused by the whites' hatred. No one was concerned about the killings except the blacks themselves. Ochs provided these lyrics to describe that.

Look outside the window, there's a woman being grabbed. They're dragged her to the bushes and now she's being stabbed.

May be we should call the cops and try to stop the pain.

But monopoly is so much fun, I'd hate to blow the game.

And I'm sure it wouldn't interest anybody.

Outside a small circle of friends.

("Outside of A Small Circle Of Friends", 1-6)

Phil Ochs was also aroused by the march from the Sixteenth Baptist Church in May 1963 (Bleilweiss, 1968: par.1) which led him to write the song "Talking Birmingham Jam." He told a story about a person's opinion about the city in when he walked down to Birmingham. There was a kind of hospitality, but it was for the whites, as shown below.

Welcome in, welcome if you're white, my friend.
Come along, and watch the fights
("Talking Birmingham Jam", 10-11).

In "Talking Birmingham Jam," Ochs described a conversation between the narrator in this song with a dog. This man, the narrator, could not find anybody—police or any one in charge—in this incident except was a dog, as Ochs wrote:

Well, a pack of dogs was stamin', by,
I walked up to them and I said "Hi."
Well, I asked one dog what they were doin'.
He walked up to me and started chewin'.
It was a black dog.
Seems everybody down there is prejudiced.

These dogs were described as the tools of the segregationists to fight against the blacks. They stood up for the segregationists' interest. They argued that the commissioner and the governor were right. The commissioner and the governor were not fools and were protecting the children from mugging with the black children. The dogs were indoctrinated, and
taught to hate.

The illustration of the dogs that protected the discrimination and segregation policy was the description of the Southerners who supported the segregationists. If they were policemen, they were the policemen who protected the Klan’s violent actions. If they were the politicians or the lawmakers, they would stand for the whites only.

The incident of a bombing to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church which took four girls in a Sunday morning when there was a Sunday service (Hampton and Fayer eds., 1990: par. 1) inspired Richard Farina to write a song entitled “Birmingham Sunday”. Farina described the incidents that happened in the church, express his empathy for the victims. “On Birmingham Sunday the blood ran like a wine, and the choir kept singing of Freedom” (“Birmingham Sunday”, 3-4). The names of the four girls who died in the incident were mentioned:

That cold autumn morning no one saw the sun,
And Addie Mae Collins, her number was one,

The clouds they were grey and the autumn winds blew,
And Denise McNair brought the number to two,

The church it was crowded, but no one could see,
That Cynthia Wesley’s dark number was three,

Young Carol Robertson entered the door
And the number her killers had sworn was four
(“Birmingham Sunday”, 5-6-9-10-13-14-17-18).

Vietnam War Protest Songs

Many of the protest songs described about the attitude of the Americans toward the war. “Dear Uncle Sam” by Loretta Lynn was a voice of an American who lost her beloved boyfriend who died in war and how she regretted his death. She tried to talk to the U.S. national leader how she felt toward the war. In this song, “Uncle Sam” was meant to be the country, the United States.

You said you really need him, but you don’t need him like I do.
Don’t misunderstand, I know he’s fighting for our land,
I really love my country, but I also love my man
(“Dear Uncle Sam”, 3-5).

A song that was written by Ian Boyden and Ralph Dale, “Prayer for Peace,” saw the war in an American soldier’s view. He, who was sent to
the war and do the bombings, prayed to God that he and his helicopters were safe, he asked for blessing for each bomb he dropped. It seemed to contradict that he asked for blessing for all the bombs, because it looked like he intended to kill people in the place where he dropped the bomb. The prayer is presented below.

Gentle Jesus, bless each bomb.
We drop them in Vietnam,
And keep our helicopter safe,
From natives they fly low to strafe,
Amen.
("Prayer for Peace", 1-4).

All he asked in his prayer were actually the reflections of his fears. He did not want to die. He did not want to repeat the bombing, so he wanted the bomb to fall on the right place. He just prayed for his safety. This is cruel because what he did could destroy villages with all the villagers. It was true that nobody wanted the war and to kill people. The composer just tried to present the anxiety of an on-duty soldier. He wanted to survive and return home safely.

Three songs, “I Don’t Stand Alone” by Perry Friedman, “I Ain’t Marching Anymore” and “Draft Dodger Rag” by Phil Ochs described about the attitude of the Americans toward the war. In Friedman’s “I Don’t Stand Alone,” it was shown that a twenty-two-year-old man refused to fight in Vietnam. Although that meant breaking the law, this young man was sure that he did not stand alone. He was told that refusing to be sent to war was a crime, but he argued that killing was just as bad a sin, as shown in the following lines:

I refuse to fight in Vietnam,
And that’s a crime I’m told,

The U.S. judge in Nuremberg who judged the Nazi crimes said killing’s just as bad as a sin (“I Don’t Stand Alone”, 3-4. 9-11).

The same refusal was described in “I Ain’t Marching Anymore.” In this song, Ochs presented America in the word “I”. America had passed through many wars, the war with the Indians, the Civil War, and the World Wars. In all those wars, too many people killed.

For I’ve killed my share of Indians,
in a thousand different fights.

For I stole California from the Mexican land.
Fought in the bloody Civil War.
Yet I even killed my brother.
dicceptors seemed to it looked the bomb.  

"I Ain't Marching Anymore", 6-7, 16-19.

And so many others.

After so much bloodshed, the country did not want to get involved in the Vietnam War. Ochs described the country's refusal to go to the other war in the following lyrics.

"I know that I was learning
that I ain't marching anymore."

Another song by Ochs, "Draft Dodger Rag" described about an American boy who had to serve the country as a soldier. He refused and gave many arguments for his refusal. He was mentally and physically weak. He was too scared when he had to face the enemy, suffered from several diseases, and wanted to continue studying and get a good job.

The lyrics below showed the boy's reasons.

Serge, I'm only eighteen. I got a ruptured spleen
And I always carry a vise,
I got eyes like a bat, my feet are flat, and my asthma's getting worse.

I've got a disclocated disc and a lashed up back
I'm allergic to flowers and bugs
And when the bombshell hits I get epileptic fits
And I'm addicted to a thousand drugs
I got the weakness vices, and I can't touch my toes
I can hardly reach my knees
And if the enemy came close to me

"Is This Land Your Land?" was a protest against the American involvement in the Vietnam War. In the lyrics below, it was shown that the land was the Vietnam's.

This land is your land,
But it's not my land,
From the Mekong Delta
To the Peupu Highland
When we get stict at the AVN flee.
This land was meant for the V.C. (!) "Is This Land Your Land?", 21:27.

The U.S. did not have any right on the Vietnam land. As some people argued, the war in Vietnam was a Civil War where the U.S. government should not meddle. The land did not belong to the U.S.

Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" was a famous song of protest against the war in Vietnam and the discrimination in the United States. Questioning about many things, Dylan described that many things had
gone wrong in the country. He questioned the existence of men, the use of any violence, and the presence of the heart to hear people's cry. He questioned the war, when would it cease, or would it wait until all human beings were vanished and destroyed by the war. These verses showed that:

How many times must the cannon balls fly
before they're forever banned?

And how many ears must one man tear
Before he can hear people's cry?

And how many deeds will it take till he knows
That too many people have died? ("Blowin' In the Wind" 5-6, 19-22)

Joan Baez wrote "Where Are You Now, My Son" in her opposition to the war. She took the role of someone who saw misery as the result of the war, and she was now also expecting her son to go home soon. Although people said that the war was over, she could not find her son.

I've heard that the war is done
Then where are you now, my son?

("Where Are You Now, My Son?" 59-60)

"Masters of War" was another song by Dylan (Robinson, 1963-47), which expressed his hatred to the war. This song was an address to those who had a role in the decision to take America into the war, the "masters of the war." Those people did not have to go to war, but they supported it by providing guns and bombs, building planes, which were all used in the offense. War destroyed many things, killing many people, and the narrator of this song cursed all the "masters of war." He hated the "masters of war" so much that he said that even God could not forgive them, as shown below:

But there's one thing I know,
Though I'm younger than you,
That even Jesus
would never forgive what you do ("Masters of War", 45-48)

In "With God On Our Side", Dylan was questioning the things that happened in his country. He was questioning the policy of God in shaping the country's destiny (Scheuer, 1991: par. 5). Dylan ended the song by stating that if God was on their side, "He'll stop the next war." ("With God on our side", 79).

If I had a Hammer" had the message, which according to Seeger was that "we have got tools and we are going to succeed ... We will overcome" (Dunaway, 1981: 157). The tool was the hammer, a tool that
would be used in warning people about danger in the country.

If I had a hammer
I'd hammer in the morning,
I'd hammer in the evening,
All over this land,
I'd hammer out a danger,
I'd hammer out a warning (“If I had a Hammer”, 1-6).

War and discrimination were serious problems that were going on at that time. Unequal treatment to the blacks must be put to an end. People must realize that there were still many things that went wrong. The song that had the optimistic atmosphere was ended by a will to give justice and peace to the land. As written below.

Now I have a hammer,
And I have a bell,
And I have a song to sing.
All over this land,
'Tis the hammer of justice,
'Tis the bell of freedom,
And a song about love between
All of my brother,
All over this land (“If I had a Hammer”, 12-20).

DISCUSSION

Protest Songs as Topical Songs

The tradition of songs commenting on current problem of injustice, or inspiring people fighting a common cause is said as topical songs (Shaw, 1982:39). Topical songs presented the condition in the society, and could also be said as occasional songs. The theme or the story was something that actually happened in the society. The composers were inspired to write the songs as they comprehended what had happened in society. Their thoughts, disagreements, or opinions about the incidents that happened were expressed in the songs. Thus, the songs of protest are topical songs.

Some of the protest songs were obviously topical since they referred to certain incidents that just happened. The murder of Medgar Evers inspired several composers to write songs which were “Only Pawns In Their Game,” “Talking Devil,” (both by Bob Dylan), “Medgar Evers Lullaby” by Richard Weissman, and “Too Many Martyrs” by Phil Ochs. The bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church inspired Richard Farina to write “Birmingham Sunday”. Dylan referred to the murder of
Emmett Till in his "The Death of Emmett Till". The first verse of "Outside A Small Circle of Friends" was inspired by the murder of Kitty Genovese (Trent, 1998: par. 1), which was written by Phil Ochs. Each song referred to one incident that became a tragedy in the American society.

The idea of "topical" or "occasional" of the Vietnam War protest songs is slightly different from that of the songs of Civil Rights Movement. Most of the Civil Rights Movement songs are topical in the sense that they were composed as a result of the writer's inspiration of a specific incident, while the Anti-Vietnam War songs are said to be topical since they refer to the incidents in those days, that was the war in Vietnam. Some songs obviously refer to the Vietnam War by mentioning it, whereas songs like "Masters of War" by Bob Dylan and "Dear Uncle Sam" by Loretta Lynn did not. The two songs describe people's disagreement of the war and those behind the war: the military leaders and the government officials. However, those two songs can be considered as expressions of disagreement toward the war in Vietnam, considering the era those songs were composed, that was in the 1960s. Thus, they can still be considered as songs of protest toward the war in Vietnam.

Protest Songs as the Reflection of the Composers' Attitude

Several artists expressed their attitude in songs. The songs were the reflections of their feelings toward the situation. The songs become a means to voice disagreements or protests.

Protests did not have to be so obvious. They did not have to mention "protest", "disagree", "reject", or other explicit expressions of dislike. Protest songs can be in the form of questioning something or merely narrating to the listeners, although there are songs like "I Don't Stand Alone" which use the word "refuse" to show the protest against the war.

Bob Dylan's "Only A Pawn In Their Game" describes about the murder of a man named Medgar Wiley Evers. This song tells how he was killed and who killed him. It is also a description of the condition of the government and its institutions. The effort of the white Southern segregationists who told the other whites to implement the principle of segregation toward blacks is also described. These "other whites" were not the kind of people with a strong principle. They were easily provoked by the statements that the blacks were low and the whites should hate them. Schools taught its students to hate and also taught that laws were on the white's side. In this song, there was not any word that suggested the concept of protest used by the composer. The composer told a story and it reflected his hatred and dislike toward the incident that happened.
"Dear Uncle Sam" was an address to the government that sent a girl's boyfriend to war which brought about his death. A young girl spoke to the government, to the Uncle Sam. She told Uncle Sam about her feelings toward the war.

You said you really need him, but you don't need him like I do...
I really love my country, but I also love my man...
And I can't believe that it's shakin' me like I am.
For it said, "I'm sorry to inform you..." ("Dear Uncle Sam," 4:6,10-11)

She could understand why there was war, but she also wanted the national leader to understand her. She did not want to lose her boyfriend. This description is an illustration of the misery caused by the war. The composer intended to emphasize this through the song, which reflected her attitude toward the war. Loretta Lynn's "Dear Uncle Sam" represented her opposition to the war. Her illustration of the woman who lost her beloved one in the war was her effort to present her attitude toward the war, her disagreement to the existence of war.

Protest Songs As A Means to Arouse People's Consciousness

The sentences chosen for the protest songs are easy to understand, because they were like people having casual conversation. The lamentation of the girl was the daily words that people often said. Although the songs used daily words that people used a lot, the meaning was still deep. "Dear Uncle Sam" illustrates the misery caused by war. Many people lost their beloved ones. This suggested that the war must be ended.

Songs with simple sentences enable the listeners to understand the message of the songs. If they understand the songs, they would also understand the condition in the society described in the songs.

The songs of Civil Rights Movement, which were mostly inspired by the incident that happened in America in the 1960s, were intended to make those who were not sensitive to the problems of racism and discrimination realize the toxicity caused by them. The murders of the blacks were described in the songs to enable people to perceive the existing problem of racism in America. Similar to songs of Civil Rights Movement, songs of anti-Vietnam War were also intended to show the Americans the results of the involvement of American in the Vietnam War.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it could be said that protest songs played a role in the American society. They were the reflection of the condition
in the society. The songs also showed the attitude of the composers, which was the attitude of a part of the people. Then, they played role as the tool that led to the people's understanding about what actually happened around them.

The historical perspective in understanding the protest songs of the 1960s helped the audience to understand the songs, which is a product of culture, and the situation as related things. This perspective helped in understanding that the political upheaval that happened at that time triggered the emergence of the protest songs as the work of art in the society, which reflected the composer's attitudes. So, the relationship between the songs with situation was not incidental. It happened by the composers' comprehension about the situation and the intention to express their attitude.

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