# Constructivism on Literary Teaching: Assimilating Prior – knowledge, Social Environment, and Experiences in D. Zawawi Imron's poems and Black American's Poems

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## Abstract

Learning English literature including American literature for second language learners needs to reconstruct some elements in teaching process. The reconstruction is necessary, because the students at least will be up against any factors, culture, language and figurative language. Such factors must be comprehended firstly before the students learn the next phase of literature. The aim of this study is assimilating all of students' potency like experiences, prior knowledge or schemata engaging with the students' environment. The subject analysis is Black American poems from Black Art Movement era compared to Indonesian contemporary poems from D. Zawawi Imron. This american black arts movement is interesting because it tries to reidentify and to gain the identity as the African – American people. All arts should be the product of a creative need and desire in terms of Black people. Thus, this Black arts movement inspires the reinforcement of Africa – American literature such as the creation of poems, drama, and novel. Consequently, it is not simple matter for L2 students in Indonesia, thus D. Zawawi Imron's poems use as the comparative data because these poems also figure out the

similar problem such identity, race, and moral values. The constructivism is chosen as the basic theory in approaching the learning literature process because by using this theory it will enable to assimilate and unify all learning factors like prior knowledge or schemata, experiences, and environment as the underlying factor to reach the learning literature objectives.

**Keywords:** Schemata, experience, environment, Black American poems, contemporary poems, constructivism.

# Introduction

Teaching Literature in non-English country or as a second language is the complex problems. Moreover, it has quite different in its culture. Such problem will make the learning process more complicated, due to its different cultural view. The problem will increase while it is found that the students do not have excellent English competences, because mostly they learn English intensively while they come and choose English department in the university. Perhaps some students have good ability in English, but mostly they do not have it. Thus, the students will struggle to master their basic skills in English in their beginning of learning process in the university. Usually like in Indonesia curriculum it needs till 2 or 3 semesters to sharpen their English basic skills. Then, starting in 4th semester, they will begin to learn or to introduce the reading related with literature, such as: short story and poem.

Unlike teaching literature for the L1 students, teaching literature for L2 has many constrains, because it has different context. Surely, the students need to have a deeper understanding to engage with the literary works. To start with that vocabulary, grammatical structures, and syntax in literary texts make it difficult for L2 students to understand the content of literary texts (Chen, 2006; Lazar, 1994). The students have more challenge when they attempt to figure out such as metaphorical sentences, figurative language, theme, message, background of the writer, diction, and the context of culture as the point of view that cannot be separated from the literary notion. Like the diction, it really needs cross culture understanding to comprehend some of the dictions in the contemporary poems because some of the words used are quite unfamiliar especially for the "eastern person" (Harits, 2012). Therefore, one of an effective way to learn literature for L2 students is to bring and to engage "western context" to the local context and try to assimilate and adapt according to similar experiences of the learners. Further, one of the possible uses of literature in L2 learning is the use of literature as a way to introduce the students to the social practices and norms of the L2 culture (Allington & Swann, 2009; Hall, 2005; Kim 2004).

In teaching literature, such as Contemporary American poems for L2 students, it must be compared with the contemporary poems from Indonesia. The aim is to contextualize and to assimilate students experience thus they can engage with these poems. For Madura students, D. Zawawi Imron is the most popular poet and writer. Zawawi Imron poems have different characteristics, such as using free form like other contemporary poems, telling the natural phenomena, describing social condition, and depicting the local culture as the special features in his poems. Mostly his poems explore the situation and the condition of the village as the reflection of his life. Zawawi Imron lives in the village in *Songenep*, Madura. The village in Madura has an exotic situation, refer to its mountain, its beach, its sea, its life, its people, and its natural view. Such situation inspires many people including Zawawi Imron to write the poems according to several features above. Besides the social aspects, Zawawi Imron poems are also much influenced by the religious values in Madura and he is a part of it. Madura is much influenced by Hinduism and Islam (Harits, 2014).

On the other hand, although rarely anthologized in the past, African American poets like Mari Evans, Langston Hughes, Lucille Clifton, Countee Cullen, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, Marilyn Nelson, and others are regularly featured in collections of poetry in the U.S. for young people today. Poets also share powerful visions of African American history in Roots and Blues, A Celebration by Arnold Adoff, Never Forgotten by Patricia McKissack, We are America: A Tribute from the Heart by Walter Dean Myers, and Remember the Bridge: Poems of a People by Carole Boston Weatherford. More and more African American poets are gaining widespread recognition and praise. Eloise Greenfield won the National Council of Teachers of English Poetry Award for her lifetime contribution to poetry for children, including the popular collection Honey, I Love. Nikki Grimes, another NCTE Poetry Award recipient, creates an unforgettable modern heroine in the Danitra Brown poetry books. Charles R. Smith, Jr. showcases athletes and heroes from the African American community in his rap-like poem picture books and Hope Anita Smith tells raw family stories in her poetry. These poets speak of their lives, of their color, of their humanity, of their humor. Some write in dialect, some use rhyme, some focus on racial pride, some share emotional universals. Children of all cultural backgrounds deserve to know their names and hear their words.

# Constructivism: bridging and understanding of the comparison

In the Literature class, especially poetry, it is not easy to internalize and recite some messages, such as identity, race, and the moral values in the poems due to the different background of knowledge and social milieu. Even for Madurese who was born in Madura island, they find an obstruction to understand their own culture, even more to know D. Zawawi Imron as the native poet from their island. Then, how is to understand an American poems? Thus it should be down to the earth. It needs some contextual situations to learn the poems. The constructivism, which uses the learner's

environment which influences him/her is one way to solve such problem in poetry class. In constructivist point of view, learners' environment will be the focus in the learning process together with their experiences, and knowledge. "...an activivity and development of a learner gets into the center of attention (Juvova, Chudy, Neumeister, Plischke, Kvintova, p. 2). Constructivism itself can be defined as learner conceptions of knowledge are derived from a meaning-making search in which learners engage in a process of constructing individual interpretations of their experiences (Applefield, Huber, Moallem, p. 6). Then, Desforges looks the constructivism from the different point of view, he observes the constructivism from the process of mental in human's mind. He suggests that constructivist should identifying learner's existing schemata and then arranging experiences that challenge those schemata and that provoke the construction of more advanced intellectual structures (p. 71). Its intellectual structure relates with the students schemata or their prior knowledge for one topic of discussion and develop the new knowledge on it. Thus, the use of prior knowledge (schemata) will support the students while they attempt to solve the problem in learning process. The teacher can help his/her students to recall their prior knowledge to comprehend one topic in the classroom. Byrness (1996) "Schemata serve several functions in learning: categorizing, remembering, comprehending and problem solving." First, schemata or prior knowledge links categorize our experiences more efficiently for processing. This categorization of information facilitates the processes of remembrance (recall), and comprehension (understanding), all of which make problem solving more productive"

According to the definition of constructivism above, there are two main stream of constructivism principles, (1) knowledge is not passively received but actively built up by the cognizing subject; (2) the function of cognition is adaptive and serves the organization of the experiential world, not the discovery of ontological reality (Husen, Postlethweite, P. 114). For the first principle, it needs the mutual interrelation between the learner and the teacher. Both of them must be active in the learning process, and the teacher is as the facilitator to trigger and explore to optimize learners' competence. Here, the learners do not only react to experience, but they reflect on it, and theorize it, developing mental structures or schemata for understanding it (Desforges, p. 69). While, the second principle, in learning process it requires the contextual experience and social environment that support the learning process to get the aim of learning.

Both D. Zawawi Imron poems and Black American Poems are the contemporary poems. Thus, the social construction, prior knowledge, and experience take an important role, both in their creative process and also in learning process in the classroom. Being the learners in Indonesia do not have experiences of slavery like African – American people and its movement to upright the human right and justice like Black American Movement, so that the comparison with the similar problems are required. To comprehend the Madura culture and Africa – American history absolutely is compulsory before learn both of poems. The social environment and also the experiences mainly

in gaining the identity, problem of race, and moral values should be explored and assimilated in the process of learning.

# 1 American and Madura Identity and Race Perspective

Mostly literary works in Madura try to show their religious values or at least it will use the religious values as their basic themes. It is because religion is used as the breath of life. Likewise in Zawawi Imron poems, he tries to penetrate Madura deeply and look for the identity of Madura. Telling about the identity, it must be discussed according to the social construction rather than biological construction. Waters in Chaves and di Brito argues that Ethnic identity is often considered a social construct as well (1999, P.40). Here, the identity is connected with culture, values, social system, language, literature, and other local wisdom that are developed in one society. Thus, according to the definition previously, the identity refers to characteristics of the social life and all of its elements. The social construction will give the different attribute to a group of people and the society that make them differ from others. Their cultural attribute like the local wisdom becomes the pride of the people that live in their community. Further Chandra defines it as the ethnic identity, he tells the ethnic identity as a subset of identity categories in which eligibility for membership is determined by attributes associated with, or believed to be associated with, descent (p.3). They will show it as their identity, sometimes it will be reflected in their social system, such as family system, heritage, marriage, and somehow it will be shown in their tradition system like traditional clothes, dance, ceremony, language, and literature.

Madura society is the unique community that hold the social and tradition system tightly. If talking about Madura, it does not only refer to Madurese who live in Madura island, but also Madura people who live all over of Indonesia. Madurese who live in Madura island is only 30 % from the whole of Madurese in Indonesia. Although, they do not live in Madura, but they live with their own old tradition as the heritage from their predecessor. Usually they live with their communal and they bring their identity as Madurese in their new places. In special day, for an instances, Maulid (the birth of Prophet Muhammad SAW), Isra' Mi'raj, Ied Adha they will return to Madura island to visit their family and relatives in there. They use the term "toron" (down), this term refers to the tradition of Madura people while they back to their homeland.

Tradition, social life, and environment, all of them are the inspiration for Zawawi Imron, the poet of cluritemas (gold sickle), the title refers to his golden and shinning works, and also refers to his origin. He tries to express his identity, his love, his sympathy, his happiness, his sadness, and all of his emotion about Madura through his works. His contemporary poems are not only depicting the beauty of Madura but also showing the identity through the symbol, allegory, simile, metaphor and other figurative languages.

Mostly, his works use imagery about Madura, it can be its people, its nature, its society, its tradition, bits occupation to represent Madura identity. One of his anthology of poems, *Madura Akulah Darahmu*, it is very clear to describe his love about Madura, *darah* is blood, it is used to show his feeling about Madura, because blood is the most important part in human life, blood flows in the human body and blood is human identity, because the different human has the different blood type. The analogy that Madura likes the blood in human life, it will raise the pride to have an identity as Madurese.

In United States, the notion of the identity, race, and moral values flourishes as a response of racialism and racial segregation that happened in the past time. The history of African American from the slavery era contributes to the color of American diaspora today. It has been formed the multicultural view of literary works, such as poems, novels, and dramas. The novel, *Erasure* as an example, it depicts the african american diaspora who struggle to find his new identity as American. Percival Everett, the writer tries to show the psychological conflict, Thelonious Ellison or Monk as the main character while he must get the dilemma as the black writer. He must have the hard effort to ensure the publisher to publish his works. Another example is the poems from black poet such as Nikki Giovani, most of giovani's poems tell the searching of identity, race, and moral values. She tries to reveal the black identity of African American including the conflicts they have been carried out. Mostly such poems tells about the diasporic problem as African American like the racism and discrimination.

The awareness to look for the identity as African American that is pioneered by the writers called The Black Art Movements. This movement is much inspired by the black power movement and other movements in other countries, mainly the movement in third world nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Patrice Lumumba, Nelson Mandela, Mao Tse Tung, and Che Guevara can not separate from the black arts movement in America. Most of political leaders above fight to free themselves from colonialism and the exploitation politically and economically. The wave of anticolonialist in other countries come to U. S and Malcolm X, the black leader struggle to voice the equality of civil rights in U. S. and also call for the racism abolishment. Such political and social movement finally becomes the catalystic on the poetry and other literary works of African Americans during the latter half of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. The racism issues and the struggle to end *de jure* of racial segregation use as the central theme in The Black Arts Movements. The writers use such issues to show their identity as the black American, African American.

# Madura Identity in Imron's Poems Di Pintu Bandar: Natural and Social Based

Discussing about Zawawi Imron's works, it cannot separate with his life background in Madura. It has been mentioned before that he lives in *Songenep* (today, Sumenep), the most fertilized part in Madura. This place is the combination between farming and fishing, mountain and sea, hot and cold. There is very difficult to find coconut trees,

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palm trees, sugar palm trees, and rice fields in other parts of Madura, because of its geographic condition, but such trees and rice fields will be easier to find in Sumenep, the place where Zawawi Imron lives. The depiction of the social life and its relationship with the nature can be found in his poem, Di Pintu Bandar. Such depiction will be easier to be understood by the learners due to its closest metaphor with their daily life. The students try to identify this poem using their experiences and their similar environmental condition.

In this poem, it shows clearly Zawawi Imron brings his social and natural icons in his works. From the title till the end of this poem, he uses the analogy which are closest with his social and natural background. Bandar (port), pasir pantai (beach sand), sampan (boat), gelegak gelombang (wave), nelayan (fisherman), jelaga (carbon black), sauh (anchor) are very familiar and famous terms for the people who live in Madura. They involve with all of those items every day. Zawawi Imron uses all of such terms in this poem to give the characteristics and the natural effect in his works. His pride and admiration to his environment has inspired him to express it in his poems.

The poem *di pintu Bandar* reflects his admiration to the motivation, toughness, and firmness of the fisherman in his lovely land, Madura. Like in the second line, *senyummu di sampan mengaduk gelegak gelombang*, it symbolizes the great motivation of the fisherman, this line is opened with the word *"senyummu"* (your smile). Certainly, your smile here is the smile of the fisherman while they go to the sea, there is depicted no fear, no sadness, and the only one is hard work although they must attack the big wave (*gelegak gelombang*) in the sea and even in the ocean. Then, in line 5, it is also shown the happy and glad situation as the reflection of their motivation even though they must work very hard. While, the word *nyanyian* (song) is used to describe the internal situation in the fisherman's mind. They are happy, very happy to carry out their profession as the fisherman. The bathing of carbon black (*mandi jelaga*) uses to express the challenges as the fisherman in the sea. But, it cannot reduce their motivation go to the sea and ocean to fulfill their holy duty as the fisherman.

Zawawi Imron is also shown that the journey of the fisherman is the borderless journey. It is very long trip and they do not know what kind of the dangerous threat will come to them. Such as in the 7th line, diam – diam berangkat ke langit, kesela bintang gemintang. The sky (langit) is the place without border, the very large place, no ending place. The sky is also symbolized never ending effort, although they face the hard life, but they (Madura people) must try harder to gain their aim. Thus, this poem really shows the toughness and the firmness of Madura people to get their aim. The sky is the place where it can be found a lot of danger, and the danger cannot be predicted. But, Madura people are ready to face it and get their aim, they will fly in the sky like the kite (menjadi layang – layang qaib yang mengagumkan).

This poem, *di Pintu Bandar* is full of social life experience, it is truly the mirror of Madura society. It has been happened in their daily life since in the past till today. When

we go around Madura island, this land is surrounded by the sea, therefore it is quite normal, if the majority of profession for Madura is fisherman. This poem expresses the life of fisherman, their toughness when they face the danger and their habit. Zawawi Imron wants to send the message that Madura people that are reflected by the fisherman are the brave people who are ready to face the danger and challenge. The title *di Pintu Bandar*, symbolizes the gate, the way from the land to the sea, the symbol from something with border to the borderless things.

# 2 The Pilgrim and soul journey

In Indonesia, Madura is very famous to have a lot of Islamic boarding school. In every village, it can be found 2–4 Islamic boarding school. The people prefer to send their son to Islamic school than to send in the public school. In Madura Islamic boarding school hold an important role in the society. The kyais (the moslem spiritual leader) have a great appreciation from the society. They are the role model for his santris (students in the Islamic boarding school). This boarding school is also the place to learn everything, such as reciting Holy Qur'an, learning Islamic and general subjects, farming, and writing including literature. Zawawi Imron is the poet who was born from the process in the Islamic boarding school. Thus, many of his poems are telling about religious experience, the pilgrim and the soul journey to get the real happiness in human life. One example of his religious poem is *Dari Andulang ke Batang – Batang*.

This poem expresses the journey, the spiritual trip. This is started with the journey from *Andulang*, it is the name of small village in Sumenep. This place is agriculture place with the fertile land. This is a peaceful village where the society lives and unifies with its nature. While, Batang – Batang is another small village, it is the place where Zawawi Imron lives. It is the religious place, Zawawi Imron lives in the Islamic community. Most of his works are inspired from his religious milieu, *Batang – Batang*. This place is a part of his life, thus till today he lives in this small village and with several of moslem scholars, he makes and develops an art community. In this poem, it is clearly stated the journey of life, the spiritual trip, and soul experience.

This poem show the religious values, the spiritual experience. For example the phrase *di atas duri* (above the thorny) describes the problems of human. It can threaten their life, it can disturb their life, but if the human trust and surrender to God, they can get the problem solving for every problems that they will face in their daily life. The human aim is to get God blessing and mercy through their praying. The calamity, the kindness, and the trust are only got by the human through his believe in God. The trust and the kindness are sourced from the human heart, if their heart is good, it can determine their attitude including their relationship among the human, and their relationship with God. This poem also reflects the homage and high appreciation to

mother. Mother is the most appreciated women. Her mercies are to their God, Allah SWT mercies, and her praying will give much energy to her son to undergo the life. Every steps of our life must be got the mother's blessing and approval.

# 3 Socio – constructivism as medium to assimilate knowledge, environment and experiences

Research in cognitive science (Newman et al., 1989; Rogoff and Lave, 1984) has shown that everyday experience of the learners is the foundation upon which they construct an 'intuitive understanding' (Vosniadou, 1992, p. 349) of their cultural environment. Experiences of the students, its prior knowledge, then engage with its supporting environment will trigger and foster students' understanding of one subject. Such elements play an important role in teaching literature especially while the students learn literary works as their second language. Because of without the assimilating of such three elements, they will find a lot of difficulties due to the language competencies and the cultural background.

It is very important for the learners to know the concept of identity in their own culture before the try to analyze the identity in Black American poems. What is the identity, how is the identity playing role in their life, how to show and maintain their identity? All of these questions are not easy to understand moreover, Black American poems are the contemporary poems. It is the poems with no rule like the classical poems, it is free versa, free form, they do not always use the beautiful words, because their principle is not beautiful but interesting. Thus, It is important to choose an appropriate poem for the students. D. Zawawi Imron poems is not only contemporary poems, but it is also the poems that reveal Madura identity, the closest cultural, environment, experience, and knowledge with all of the students.

# Giovanni and Black American Movement

Black American movement refers to the revolution of writing by African American. In this movement the writers voice the national opression, racism, and white supremacy. Further, Samuels (2007) states Black Arts Movement artists called for African-American self-determination, selfrespect, and self-defense (p.48). Black American poems that write around 1960's has a tight relationship with the black American Movement at that time. Mostly the theme of Black American Poems will use the political and social issues. The discrimination between black and white will raise the awareness of black people to struggle and get their identity as African American. Also Giovanni as one of the outstanding black American poet takes the themes such as freedom, violence, black love, and black pride. Another central issue in Giovanni poems is gender, especially telling

about the black woman. Through her poems, Giovanni wants to make a change in American society. She wants get African American get their new status in American society. Fowler suggests Giovanni's poetry is indeed to read "the story" of the last thirty years of American life, as that life has been lived, observed, and reflected about by a racially conscious Black woman (p.xix). Thus, her poems as the clarion to voice the anti discrimination and anti racism in America, especially against the racism of the black woman.

According to the poem above, Giovanni tries to tell black women condition, woman emancipation, and woman struggle. The words "sitting and waiting" show the social condition of black woman. They have an inferior position in the society. "it's a sex object if you're pretty/and no love/or love and no sex if you're fat/get back fat black woman be a mother/grandmother strong thing but not woman." (Samuels, p. xix). As the woman, especially black woman, they will be as an object, thus they only sit and wait and there is no right to find. Giovanni wants to show the reality of the black woman based on her view. She criticizes the social life which is unbalanced to place the man and woman position. Through her poem, she voices the unfairness of gender, mainly for the woman, the black woman. The slogan in 1960's "The Black is Beautiful" is the slogan for the Black man, but it is not for the black woman. Such slogan precisely give the arrogance to the black man. Therefore, Giovanni writes such poem above to against the racism as well as the discrimination of gender as the legacy of resistence and struggle in the past time. The poem above (All I gotta Do) reflects the black woman feeling that is prisoned by the masculinity and racism. The depiction of the prisoned feeling and their powerlessness to face the condition are represented by the word "sitting and waiting"." These two words are repeated for several times to strengten the weakness of the woman when they face the reality. Another line "but you didn't have it" is repeated for three times". The repetition is to give the stressing to the weak position of the black women to face ot only the racism that emerges around them but also it is to depict the powerless of the black women to against the domination of the black men as well.

# Mari Evans and the Black Claim for Justice and Freedom

Evans poems are mostly written for children. Her works are aimed to give an awareness to black children and help them to look for their identity in the recism wave. She tries to give the pride for the black children and invite them to free themselves from the racism. She writes a lot about the social problem in the black community as well as the political problem that must be faced by the African American people. Her works are inspired by Langston Hughes, the poet and the writer from Harlem Renaissance era. Her poems really portray the social and political reality and she also tries to voice the injustice for the black people. Peppers (1985) tells that Evans is noted as a "powerful poet" whose poetry has "a strong social commitment and a marked clarity of poetic vision" (p. 117). Such statement proofs the cridibility and the struggle for her community,

black community through her works, especially her poems. One of her poem that tells the social condition as a result of the relationship between the black and the white is "Status Symbol". This poem depicts the lives of poor, surely the poor of the black women who work as domestics in white homes.

Evans as the black writer shows the racism that emerges in 1960's till 1970's. She utters the all of the injustice for the black people. She starts her story in her poem from Abraham Lincoln era. It is the era of slavery abolishment. Lincoln is the U.S. president who pioneered to free the slaves. Although the black has been freed from the slavery, but they do not get the similar right like the white people. The black people still wait for many years to get the same civil rights like the white people. They do not have the same social and political porition as the white. They are "second rate citizens". The awareness of their status and the struggle to have the same the civil rights starts at the beginning of 1960's. The writer like Evans using her poems, such as status symbol give an awareness to the black women to struggle her social and political rights. The line "they hired me" is interpreted as the inferiority of the social position of the black women. They are weak, powerless, and poor, thus they let themselves to be hired as the domestics in the white people homes. Their poverty make them do not have the proper house. Most of them must sleep in the street, it is described in the next line "Along with my papers". The word "papers" refer to the paper from the used newspaper that used by the people as the base for sleeping. While the unbalanced relationship between white and black as the superior and inferior reflects in the next line "they gave me my status symbol". The pnonoun "they" represents the white, while "me" is the black people with all of their poverty. They are powerless caused by their poverty, therefore they only receive whatever the status symbol that given by the white people. The white superiority is also described by the line "the key to the white" and the black is locked.

# Conclusion

Teaching literature for L2 students is a complicated problem, because it has a lot of elements that should be understood like the different of cultural background and figurative language (metaphor, imagery, allusion etc.) while in other side, they have to struggle to foster their ability and competency in mastering their English skills. Constructivism offers the solution to solve such problems. Using the schemata or prior knowledge engages with experience, and social environment of the students, it supports and helps the students understanding and comprehending of literary works in L2 such as American poems. An exploration of student schemata through their comprehending of the closest cultural poems with them, contemporary poems written by Madurese poet, D. Zawawi Imron enable the students to figure out the identity, race, and moral values. Then, using their knowledge, the students try to analyze the Ameri-

can contemporary poems in Black American Movement era with the similar elements (identity, race, and moral values).

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### Contact

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