SOCIO-CULTURAL SETTING IN THE NOVEL *A BREATH OF FRESH AIR* BY AMULYA MALLADI

Kintania Kartiwi[1*]

[1]University of Muhammadiyah Sukabumi, Sukabumi, Indonesia

[*]Correspondence Email: kintaniak@ummi.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The novel A Breath of Fresh Air by Amulya Malladi depicts the social and cultural aspects of Indian society at that time. This study aims to describe the social and cultural background in the novel, as well as to examine the ethics contained within Amulya Malladi's work. It was conducted using a qualitative descriptive method, with observation as the data collection technique. The study's results reveal that the novel contains cultural elements based on Koentjaraningrat's theory, including: language (six data points), knowledge systems (two data points), social organisation systems (eight data points), tools and technology systems (nine data points), livelihood systems (three data points), religious systems (five data points), and arts (two data points). The most prominent cultural element in Amulya Malladi's novel is the technological system.

Keywords: *civilization; culture; ethics; Koentjaraningrat; social background*

INTRODUCTION

Human life is inseparable from culture. Culture is an essential element of human existence. Besides culture, another inherent aspect of the human self and life is ethics. When discussing culture and ethics, many literary works are inspired by these two elements, including novels. A novel is a form of literary work in prose that has both intrinsic and extrinsic forms (Purwanto, 2022).

Literary works, including novels, are often used to reflect the culture and identity of society, as stated by Harahap & Karo Sekali (2025). They mention that literature not only serves as a means of entertainment or education but also plays a strategic role in shaping, reflecting, and enriching the cultural identity of society. One novel that raises aspects of community life through its culture is *A Breath of Fresh Air* by Amulya Malladi, set against the backdrop of life in India, where culture and ethics are very prominent. Amulya Malladi, being of Indian origin, naturally incorporates Indian culture as a social setting into her novel.

Social setting refers to aspects related to people's social behaviour in a place, as described in a work of fiction Bidang (Khairatunnisa & Manaf, 2018). In a social setting, culture is one of the inherent elements within every group of people, exhibiting different characteristics based on ethnicity or particular groups. According to Koentjaraningrat, culture can be interpreted as related to mind and reason; it is divided into seven elements including language systems, knowledge systems, social organisation systems, living equipment systems and technology, livelihood systems, religious systems, and art (Sumarto, 2019).

Speaking of culture, ethics are often associated with society's norms. Ethics are habits that develop into rules or standards that emerge naturally within a community. The word "ethics" originates from the Greek "ethos". Aristotle, in Muchtar et al. (2024), defines ethics in two ways: Terminius Technicus, which is a science studying individual behaviour or actions, and Manner and Custom, which pertains to the procedures and customs inherent

in individuals, as well as notions of good and bad behaviour. From these two definitions, this research focuses on *Manner and Custom*.

Based on the explanation above, the problems that will be discussed in this study can be identified, namely, how the socio-cultural setting is in the novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* by Amulya Malladi, and (2) how the ethics are contained in the novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* by Amulya Malladi. From these problems, this study aims to (1) describe the socio-cultural setting in the novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* by Amulya Malladi and (2) describe the ethics contained in the novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* by Amulya Malladi.

Research on cultural elements has been conducted previously, including by Bidang Irawan et al. (2018) in their study titled Cultural Elements in the Text of Nggahi Dana in Dompu Society: An Archetypal-Pragmatic Approach. Irawan et al. (2018) explore cultural elements in the Nggahi Dana text of the Dompu community using an archetypal-pragmatic approach. In his research, Koentjaraningrat's theory suggests seven cultural elements, but his study identifies only four types: human life equipment, livelihoods, knowledge systems, and religious systems. Another study, conducted by Rushanthan & Rushanthan (2023), examines how literary writers from Sri Lanka depict cultural identity in their works. This research highlights the differences in perspectives between the two main ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, namely Sinhalese and Tamil, and how their historical experiences, traditions, and social backgrounds influence their writing.

RESEARCH METHOD

In research, it is necessary to identify the object of study, which in this case is the novel titled A Breath of Fresh Air by Amulya Malladi. When analysing this object, a research method must be employed. The technique used in this research is a descriptive qualitative approach. According to Kirk and Milner in Alaslan (2021), qualitative research is defined as research that utilises natural settings to interpret various phenomena that primarily involve humans, incorporating multiple existing methods.

Another opinion reveals that descriptive qualitative methods aim to describe phenomena systematically, factually, and accurately about the facts, properties and relationships between the phenomena investigated (Sugiyono, 2017). Based on this explanation, the purpose of using descriptive methods is to describe the elements of culture and ethics contained in the object of study. In this regard, the data collection technique used is the observation technique.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In a novel, there is usually something that makes the story engaging. For example, in the novel A Breath of Fresh Air by Amulya Malladi, certain aspects are particularly interesting to discuss, especially the cultural and ethical elements. The inclusion of information about cultural and ethical issues significantly supports the events and storyline of this novel. Here, the author will focus on this discussion.

The Socio-Cultural Background of Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh* Air Novel

In a literary work, there is often a socio-cultural setting that underpins and influences the narrative and characters. This is clearly visible in novels, where the author not only tells stories but also creates a world that mirrors the social and cultural realities of a particular society. An interesting novel to analyse for this purpose is Amulya Malladi's A Breath of Fresh Air. In this study, the socio-cultural setting depicted in the novel includes several key aspects, such as the language used by the characters, the knowledge possessed by the community, the existing social organisation system, the economic conditions and livelihoods, as well as the tools and technology employed in daily life. Furthermore, aspects of religion and art are also integral parts of the socio-cultural setting presented in this novel.

Based on the research conducted on the novel *A Breath of Fresh Air*, 35 data points were collected and analysed according to seven predetermined cultural categories. These categories encompass various elements that interact and influence one another, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural context underpinning the story. Therefore, this research aims not only to understand the content of the novel but also to explore how the socio-cultural environment helps shape the characters, conflicts, and themes presented by Amulya Malladi in his work.

Table 1. Cultural Categories

No	Cultural Category	Number of Data
1	Language	6
2	Knowledge System	2
3	Social Organization System	8
4	Living Equipment System and Technology	9
5	Economy and Livelihood System	3
6	Religious System	5
7	Arts	2
	TOTAL	**35**

1. Language

Included in the language category of Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air* are the following.

> *""Namaste, **Mummyji.**" I shouldn't have called her that."* (Malladi, 2002, p. 124)

The quote above shows the moment when Prakash, Anjali's ex-husband, meets Anjali's mother. During the interaction, Prakash inappropriately calls Anjali's mother "Mummyji". This term, in the Indian cultural context, is a nickname for a mother-in-law of her daughter-in-law, reflecting a relationship bound by family norms.

This proves that a very important cultural element, language, is exhibited in Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air*. The evidence shows that language not only functions as a means of communication but also as a reflection of values, norms, and social relationships in society. Through this event, Malladi succeeds in showing how language can be both a bridge and a barrier in relationships between individuals, as well as how mistakes in language use can illustrate differences in cultural and social backgrounds.

2. Knowledge System

The knowledge system is something that provides a deep understanding of a society's intellectual level, covering various aspects such as education, traditions, and values adopted by a community. The knowledge system contained in Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air* is as follows.

> *"I also read to **Amar** who at twelve knew Shakespeare and had read his work".* (Malladi, 2002, p. 35)

The quote above highlights Amar's limitations that prevent him from engaging in activities like other children, such as reading books, which leads Anjali to read a book to Amar. This demonstrates that reading books is not only an enjoyable activity but also one that can greatly enhance a person's intellect. Therefore, book reading can be considered part of the knowledge system, which aims to transfer information and knowledge.

3. Social Organization System

Social organization is a group of people who have the same goal so that they can form social institutions or organizations that do not violate the rules of the State.

> *"Our Anjali is very beautiful, and she should marry a nice boy and the **Mehra family has a very good reputation**."*

In the excerpt above, the author carefully describes the scene where Anjali is making tea for her mother and aunt Divya. In this close setting, Anjali intentionally listens in on the conversation between Divya's aunt and her mother, who reveals a plan to arrange her marriage with an army officer from the Mehra family. This moment highlights the social norms that influence marriage in Indian society.

In this context, it is evident that a system of social organisation plays a significant role in the lives of the characters in Malladi's A Breath of Fresh Air. The army officer, as Anjali's matchmaker, is not merely a choice of partner but also symbolises the social status often considered in the matchmaking process. This demonstrates how educational background, occupation, and social standing can influence decisions in relationships and marriage.

4. Economy and Livelihood

The livelihood system in a community can be in the form of traditional livelihoods, raising livestock, farming in the fields, fishing, and so on.

> *"I had blown that away and now had to settle down with a **professor**..."*

The above quote shows one of the sources of livelihood for the male protagonist, Sandeep, who works as a professor. This profession not only reflects the level of education and expertise that Sandeep possesses but also shows the important role that higher education plays in society. Thus, Sandeep's profession can be categorised into the economic and livelihood aspects, which are important elements in understanding the socio-cultural setting of Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air*. A job as a professor provides Sandeep with financial stability and a higher social status, which is often expected in the context of society.

5. Equipment and Technology

The equipment and technology system of life encompasses various aspects, including means of transportation, communication equipment, weapons, household items, clothing, shelter, knowledge, and art.

> *"Harjot's **train** arrived at six and he had to go to the railway station."* (Malladi, 2002, p. 176)

The above quote depicts the moment when Harjot's train arrives at 6 o'clock, which shows one of the most widely used modes of transportation in India at that time, the train. This depiction not only highlights the importance of trains as an efficient means of transportation but also reflects the development of infrastructure and technology that have become part of the daily lives of Indians. In *A Breath of Fresh Air, the* use of trains as a means of transportation reflects cultural elements related to equipment and technological systems. It shows how technological advancements can affect people's lifestyles and social interactions. Thus, the train not only serves as the background of the story but also as an element that enriches the narrative.

6. Religious System

Religion can be defined as something related to one's spirituality, a belief in the supernatural or things beyond human control. The following is included in the religious system in Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air*.

> *"A respectable man didn't marry a divorcée."*

In Hinduism, the marriage bond is considered sacred and should last for a lifetime, even beyond the confines of earthly life into the afterlife. This concept emphasizes the importance of commitment and fidelity between spouses, so divorce is considered as something that is not good and difficult to accept in society. In this context, divorce is not only seen as a failure in the relationship, but also as a violation of long-established social and religious norms.

As a result, someone who has experienced divorce is often looked down upon by society, and marrying them becomes taboo or avoided. This shows how strong the influence of cultural and religious norms is in shaping people's attitudes and behaviors towards issues related to marriage and divorce. With this explanation, the quote above is included in the cultural elements related to the religious system. This system includes not only religious teachings, but also social norms that regulate individual behavior.

7. Arts

Art is a means for humans to express their freedom and creativity. Art refers to the elements of beauty and aesthetic elements created by humans. The following is an excerpt of the art category in the novel *A Breath of Fresh Air*.

> *"They would be talking at the Saturday evening **Tambola** party,..."* (Malladi, 2002, p. 104)

The above quote is a fragment of the event when Anjali talks about Prakash at a party, which provides an interesting picture of social interaction in the context of Indian culture. This is included in the culture of the arts because the party includes an element of art through the game of tambola. Tambola, which is a popular game at parties in India, has similarities to a casino game played by several players. The game involves strategy, luck and social interaction, thus creating an atmosphere of excitement and enthusiasm.

In addition, tambola also reflects aspects of creativity, both in the way players participate and in the way the game is organized. Players are not only focused on the end result, but also enjoy the process and experience that the game brings. As such, the tambola can be classified as an art form in culture, as it contains elements of creativity and expression that are important to the players. Through this depiction, the author succeeds in showing how art, in the form of games, plays an important role in enriching cultural experiences.

Ethical Values in the Novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* by Amulya Malladi

The discussion of ethics is an in-depth study of the manners and customs inherent in human nature, which in turn is closely related to the understanding of the meaning of good and bad in human behavior, conduct, or actions. In this context, the term "*manner* and *custom*" according to Aristotle can be understood as a representation of good and bad values held by society. Therefore, ethics not only functions as a moral guideline, but also as a reflection of the prevailing social norms.

In the novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* by Amulya Malladi, the ethics raised are more inclined to good values, which are reflected in the interactions between characters and the depiction of the situation at hand. Based on the research conducted, there are 10 data describing good ethics in this novel. Thus, this novel is not just a story, but also a deep reflection on ethics and human values that are relevant in everyday life. As below, it shows

a behavior, conduct or human action based on the definition of ethics according to Aristotle with the following explanation.

1. Pray

Praying is included in the classification of good ethics because it is an action that reflects hope and sincerity. A human being who believes in the existence of God will usually pray as a means to express their wishes and hopes, as well as to ask for guidance and guidance in living life. Through prayer, individuals not only seek to have their wishes granted, but also demonstrate an attitude of humility and dependence on God. Based on this, prayer not only functions as a request, but also as a form of good ethics that teaches values such as patience, sincerity, and gratitude in every aspect of life, as in the quote below.

> *"Major Mukesh Mohan, the resident pulmonologist, ... **I was relieved and prayed** that he would be the miracle we were waiting for". (Malladi, 2002, p. 160)*

In the quote above, it is explained that Sandeep prayed with hope that Major Mukesh Mohan could cure Amar, who was in a very poor condition at that time. Sandeep describes Major Mukesh Mohan as a figure who is expected to bring about positive change, as if he is the miracle they have been waiting for. This hope reflected Sandeep's belief that Major Mukesh Mohan's presence was not just a coincidence, but an answer to their prayers and longing to see Amar recover.

Sandeep's statement, *"I was relieved and prayed that he would be the miracle we were waiting for"* further reinforces this image. This sentence shows the relief he felt when Major Mukesh Mohan arrived, as well as emphasizing how much hope he held. In this context, Sandeep's prayer is not just a plea for healing, but also an expression of deep submission to God for Major Mukesh Mohan's ability to do things that are considered extraordinary.

2. Apologizing

Apologizing is one of the most important ethics in human life, as this act not only reflects an individual's awareness of the wrong that has been done, but also demonstrates emotional and moral maturity. It creates space for personal growth and character development, and strengthens social bonds between individuals. Here is one example depicted in the novel *A Breath of Fresh Air.*

> *"Because **I am sorry** that he did what he did and . . . I don't really know why I am talking to you," she admitted with a faint smile."* (Malladi, 2002, p. 144)

The above quote shows that Indira sincerely apologized to Anjali on behalf of her husband, Prakash, who had made a mistake and caused inconvenience. Indira's action to apologize reflects a deep sense of responsibility and empathy, even though in this context Indira did nothing wrong. This is evidenced by the phrase "I am sorry," which is a simple yet powerful expression. This apology is not just a formality, but also shows Indira's awareness of the impact of her husband's actions on Anjali. The phrase "I am sorry" symbolizes her good intentions to show that she respects Anjali's feelings.

3. Offering Help and Helping

As social beings, offering help and doing favors are basic ethics that every individual should have, because interactions and relationships between people rely heavily on mutual support and care. In everyday life, the act of helping others not only reflects human values, but also strengthens social ties. Helping each other can create a more positive environment, where everyone feels cared for and supported.

"I . . . can arrange for . . . I can try at least to move your son to the military hospital. They have better doctors and they have better services." (Malladi, 2002, p. 157)

The quote above shows an important moment when Prakash offers help to Anjali in the hope that Amar can be transferred to a military hospital that has better doctors and facilities. Prakash's action reflects his deep concern and empathy for Amar, who is facing a critical health situation. By offering to help, Prakash is showing empathy, as well as trying to come up with a better solution for Amar's health care.

4. Courtesy

Politeness is an ethic that must be applied by every human being in social interactions, whether to peers, younger people, or elders. It shows respect for others, regardless of their age or social status. Manners are a social norm and an important foundation in building healthy and respectful relationships among individuals in society.

"'Thank you so much, Anjali,' Mrs. Dhaliwal said when I brought her a cup of tea." (Malladi, 2002, p. 111)

The above quote depicts a meaningful moment where Mrs. Dhaliwal shows courtesy by thanking Anjali for bringing her a cup of tea. This simple act signifies appreciation for Anjali's thoughtfulness and kindness. By saying thank you, Mrs. Dhaliwal not only shows good manners, but also creates a warm atmosphere.

5. Tolerance and Empathy

Tolerance and empathy should be cultivated, maintained and applied in every aspect of our lives. Tolerance, which means respecting differences and accepting diversity, is essential in a multicultural and diverse society. When individuals are able to respect the views, beliefs and backgrounds of others, they create a harmonious environment. In an environment of tolerance, individuals feel freer to express themselves without fear of judgment or discrimination. This not only improves the quality of relationships between individuals, but also strengthens the sense of togetherness and solidarity within the community. Here is one example from Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air*.

*"In the army **all religions were accepted**. All holy days from Christmas to Diwali to Id to Guru Nanak Jayanti were celebrated."* (Malladi, 2002, p. 106)

The nature of tolerance found in this novel can be seen from the quote above, which describes how soldiers in India at that time had a high sense of tolerance. In that context, the soldiers showed mutual respect for each individual's religion and beliefs, creating a harmonious atmosphere in the midst of diversity. They do not discriminate against someone just because of their religion, but rather try to understand and respect the differences between them.

These actions reflect humanitarian values, where every individual is considered equal and entitled to live out their beliefs without fear or negative judgment. In a challenging situation like the one depicted in the novel, this attitude of tolerance becomes very important, as it can help build solidarity and cooperation among the soldiers, regardless of their religious or cultural background.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that in the novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* by Amulya Malladi there is a rich social setting with various cultural elements and deep ethics. This novel not only presents an interesting story, but also provides insight into the social and cultural life that exists in it. From the results of the analysis, 35 data were found

covering cultural elements, including language, knowledge system, social organization system, livelihood system, living equipment system and technology, religious system, and art.

Of the seven cultural elements, the system of living equipment and technology dominates with a total of 9 data, showing that this aspect has an important role in the lives of the characters in the novel. This reflects how technology and living tools affect the way of life, social interactions in the story. Meanwhile, in the discussion of ethics, a total of 10 data were found covering various important categories. Two data in each category shows that ethics in this novel are very diverse and cover various aspects of life.

Among these categories are praying, apologizing, offering help and helping, courtesy, and tolerance and empathy. Each of these categories illustrates the moral values held by the characters in the novel, as well as how they interact with each other. Thus, the novel not only functions as a literary work, but also as a social and cultural reflection of the society. Through the depiction of cultural and ethical elements, Amulya Malladi manages to convey important messages about human relationships, human values, and the importance of mutual respect in everyday life.

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