

The Social and Discursive Context of Sutardji Calzoum Bachri's Mantra/Sufi Poetry

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Abstract

Sutardji Calzoum Bachri's poetry, considered groundbreaking in 1970s Indonesia, emerged from a complex interplay of social repression and discursive dynamics. This study explores how Sutardji's unique mantra-Sufi poetics functioned as a strategic response to the authoritarian control of language during the New Order era. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in Terry Eagleton's materialist criticism, this research analyzes the segregation and desegregation of mantra and Sufi discourses within Indonesian poetry. The findings reveal a dual strategy: first, Sutardji's mantra form, with its emphasis on phonetic sensation over semantic meaning, allowed him to subvert the state-imposed monopoly on language and evade censorship. Second, by aligning his work with the popular and politically safe Sufi literary trend, he skillfully navigated the constraints of the literary production system. This study concludes that Sutardji's linguistic innovation was not merely an aesthetic choice but a sophisticated act of discursive resistance, reclaiming the essence of language from institutional control.

Keywords: Sutardji Calzoum Bachri, literary, poetry, mantra

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Introduction

The proclamation of Indonesian independence in 1945 marked the end of the control and repression by several colonial powers that had once conquered the Indonesian nation. This situation automatically fostered hope among the entire populace to become self-reliant and build their own country. The nation's foundation, with principles aimed at liberation from colonialism on Indonesian soil, was regulated by the 1945 Constitution. At the same time, the state system formulated the ideology of Pancasila, a foundation that guides the people to respect differences, encapsulated in the motto “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” (Unity in Diversity).

However, in 1965, the first governmental system, the Old Order under President Soekarno, collapsed and was subsequently replaced by the next, the New Order, under President Soeharto. The Old Order was deemed a failure in bringing prosperity to Indonesia, leading to high inflation and a situation the public could no longer tolerate. President Soekarno resigned following the massacre of seven generals and all those associated with the Indonesian Communist Party.

The New Order emerged offering a vision to develop the nation and improve the people's welfare. However, this system ran its government with authority and repression. The freedom experienced by the people could not be enjoyed as it should have been—a freedom that liberates public expression. The spaces for public expression, such as the press, books, and literary works, did not escape the control of the New Order regime (Yusuf, 2010). Many press outlets were forbidden from operating. A number of literary works were banned. Moreover, writers who were indicated to be critical of the government were detained.

Under such control, writers who refused to be silent and compliant chose other avenues for expression. One of the most radical expressions was that of Sutardji Calzoum Bachri (SCB) through his Sufi/mantra poetry. Through his poetic credo, he claimed that the poetry he wrote was unbound by the definition of word meanings. Furthermore, in his essay titled “Puisi Besar” (Bachri, 2000), he argued that poetry has its own world, and in an extreme view, poetry is an imagination disconnected from reality. However, it is the readers themselves who sometimes connect poetry to reality. With this perspective, SCB produced three poetry collections published under the title *O Amuk Kapak* (Bachri, 1981). This collection presented a novel form to the Indonesian literary world at that time. The linguistic structure and typography seemed to deconstruct long-established poetic forms with their disciplined rules. Additionally, the use of words in SCB's poems appeared inverted, fragmented, or reversed in mood.

Indeed, before the existence of modern literary works, Indonesian society had a long-standing oral tradition, one form of which is the mantra. In Indonesian society, the mantra was already an integral part of life. Indonesian society is an oral-tradition society. Therefore, the mantra was familiar and had become second nature to the people. With a poetic credo that frees words from meaning, the mantra poetry form emerged with an emphasis on the experience of sound. The mantra itself does not adhere to linguistic structure; for this reason, its language is formulaic and resistant to changes in form and meaning. Therefore, with this method, Sutardji seemingly attempted to restore the purpose of literature as expression while simultaneously trying to destabilize the stability of the existing power, which controlled all aspects of the Indonesian state.

Given SCB's position, a paradox emerged within the New Order situation. Freedom of expression was restricted, yet Sutardji's work, which seemingly undermined the established tradition of modern Indonesian literature and the institutionalization of language, was allowed to circulate. In fact, due to his phenomenal work, SCB was dubbed the “president of Indonesian poetry.”

To understand how SCB's phenomenal work could be born and circulate amidst this paradox, this research requires a theoretical tool for analysis. Therefore, the materialist criticism framework proposed by Terry Eagleton (1976, 1978) is used to analyze the socio-historical situation when SCB wrote his poetry. Eagleton states that literary works do not emerge from a vacuum but are influenced by external factors, which Eagleton calls external constituents.

These constituents consist of the General Mode of Production (GMP), Literary Mode of Production (LMP), General Ideology (GI), Authorial Ideology (AI), and Aesthetic Ideology (AuI). The relationship among all these constituents ultimately determines the kind of work that is born. For Eagleton, to understand a literary work, one must analyze the socio-historical context in which it was produced and consumed. Eagleton (1976) writes:

To understand how culture is produced, we need to look at it through the idea of historical materialism. This means that the way a society produces its material needs (its economy, or ‘base’) fundamentally shapes its social, political, and cultural institutions (the ‘superstructure’), including literature. From this process, the characteristics of cultural products are formed. (p. 5)

Therefore, it is crucial to examine the specific social conditions that shaped SCB's phenomenal poetry. Furthermore, at the same time, Indonesian literary discourse was dominated by Sufistic poetry. This trend is also visible in several of SCB's poems. The hypothesis of this research is that, with his novel poetic aesthetic, SCB sought to challenge the dominant poetic discourse in Indonesia and the institutionalization of language through the segregation and desegregation of word meaning.

Thawing the Discursive Freeze: How Mantra Poetry Subverted Indonesian Poetic Discourse

During the New Order era, language was not merely a tool for communication, but a vital instrument of power. The regime systematically used language to instill ideologies deemed favorable by the state. Through the slogan of “National Development” (Pembangunan Nasional), the government asserted a dominant narrative that had to be adhered to, where words were chosen to support values such as patriotism and loyalty to the national ideology. This practice, within Eagleton's theoretical framework, was a method for the dominant power (General Mode of Production) to maintain its authority. They established a system where the meaning of words was controlled and sourced from a single authority, such as a dictionary or official state language institution. Consequently, what can be termed as “discursive freezing” or a monopoly on meaning occurred, wherein language lost its free and fluid nature.

Confronting this hegemony of meaning, Sutardji Calzoum Bachri (SCB) emerged with a radical poetic resistance movement. He declared through his poetic credo that “words are not tools for delivering understanding... the word is understanding itself, it is free” (Bachri, 1981; Bahasa, 2006). The complete poetic credo written by SCB is presented below:

Kredo Puisi

Kata-kata bukanlah alat mengantarkan pengertian. Dia bukan seperti pipa yang menyalurkan air. Kata adalah pengertian itu sendiri. Dia bebas.

Kalau diumpamakan dengan kursi, kata adalah kursi itu sendiri dan bukan alat untuk duduk. Kalau diumpamakan dengan pisau, dia adalah pisau itu sendiri dan bukan alat untuk memotong atau menikam.

Dalam keseharian kata cenderung dipergunakan sebagai alat untuk menyampaikan pengertian. Dianggap sebagai pesuruh untuk menyampaikan pengertian. Dan dilupakan kedudukannya yang merdeka sebagai pengertian.

Kata-kata harus bebas dari penjajahan pengertian, dari beban idea. Kata-kata harus bebas menentukan dirinya sendiri.

Dalam puisi saya, saya bebaskan kata-kata dan tradisi lapuk yang membelenggunya seperti kamus dan penjajahan-penjajahan lain seperti moral kata yang dibebankan masyarakat pada kata tertentu dengan dianggap kotor (obscene) serta penjajahan gramatika.

Bila kata telah dibebaskan, kreativitas pun dimungkinkan. Karena kata-kata bisa menciptakan dirinya sendiri, bermain dengan dirinya sendiri, dan menentukan kemauannya sendiri. Penderitaan yang kreatif bisa timbul, karena kata yang biasanya dianggap berfungsi sebagai penyalur pengertian, tiba-tiba, karena kebebasannya bisa menyungsang terhadap fungsinya. Maka timbullah hal-hal yang tak terduga sebelumnya, yang kreatif.

Dalam (penciptaan) puisi saya, kata-kata saya biarkan bebas. Dalam gairahnya karena telah menemukan kebebasan, kata-kata meloncat-loncat dan menari di atas kertas, mabuk dan menelanjangi dirinya sendiri, mundur-mandir dan berkali-kali menunjukkan muka dan belakangnya yang mungkin sama atau tidak sama, membelah dirinya dengan bebas, menyatukan dirinya sendiri dengan yang lain untuk memperkuat dirinya, membalik atau menyungsangkan sendiri dirinya dengan bebas, saling bertentangan sendiri satu sama lainnya karena mereka bebas berbuat semuanya atau bila perlu membunuh dirinya sendiri untuk menunjukkan dirinya bisa menolak dan berontak terhadap pengertian yang ingin dibebankan kepadanya.

Sebagai penyair saya hanya menjaga sepanjang tidak mengganggu kebebasannya agar kehadirannya yang bebas sebagai pembentuk pengertiannya sendiri, bisa mendapatkan aksentuasi yang maksimal.

Menulis puisi bagi saya adalah membebaskan kata-kata, yang berarti mengembalikan kata pada awal mulanya. Pada mulanya adalah Kata.

Dan kata pertama adalah mantera. Maka penulis puisi bagi saya adalah mengembalikan kata kepada mantera. (Bandung, 30 Maret 1973)

This statement posed a direct challenge to the state's project of language institutionalization. While the state sought to patent meaning in dictionaries and grammar, SCB, in contrast,

sought to free words from the decaying traditions that shackled them, such as the dictionary. His goal was to return the word to its true essence: the mantra.

SCB's radical strategy to liquefy this frozen meaning was to return poetry to the essence of the mantra. In Indonesian oral tradition, the mantra did not operate through semantic understanding; rather, it aimed to generate an effect through sound and sensory experience. The mantra became a link between humans and the world of mystery and ancestral beliefs, not between humans and the dictionary. By adopting this form, SCB's poetry cleverly operated outside the jurisdiction of state-controlled meaning. When the government censored based on content and meaning deemed subversive, SCB's mantra poetry offered a form that emphasized the phonetic dimension, making it difficult to interpret singularly and thus allowing it to escape the grip of censorship.

Therefore, SCB's actions produced works that were ambiguous and opened up a vast space for interpretation for the reader. The poems collected in *O Amuk Kapak* could not be interpreted merely by referring to dictionary definitions. Readers were enabled to experience the vibration of sound, the rhythm, and the visuality of the typography. In this way, SCB succeeded in decentralizing interpretive authority. He transferred the power of meaning-making from state institutions back to the personal experience of each reader. This act of liquefying the monopoly on meaning was the most fundamental step of discursive resistance, which became the foundation for his entire poetic strategy amidst the New Order regime.

A Phonetic Strategy: Evading New Order Censorship

The New Order regime's tight control over expression forced writers to be extremely cautious in their choice of diction. In this situation, where any word could be interpreted as a threat, literature often remained within the government's ideological circle. Many writers chose to use symbolic or neutral language to avoid direct confrontation. However, SCB took a more fundamental and radical path. Instead of disguising meaning, he sought to empty his poetry of the semantic meaning that could be ensnared by censorship, and instead fill it with the power of sound.

This phonetic strategy was manifested vividly in his poem titled "O," which is presented below:

O

dukaku dukakau dukarisau dukakalian dukangiau
 resahku resahkau resahrisau resahbalau resahkalian
 raguku ragukau raguguru ragutabau ragukalian
 mauku maukau mautahu mausampai maukalian maukenai mauapai
 siasiaku siasiaku siasia siabalu siarisau siakalian siasia
 waswasku waswaskau waswasrisau waswaswaswaswaswaswas
 duhaiku duhaikau duhairindu duhaingilu duhaikalian duhaisangsai
 oku okau okosong orindu okalian oblong orisau Okau O....

On the surface, the poem "O" appeared like a random play on words and did not seem to pose a direct threat to the authorities. Herein lay the cleverness of SCB's strategy. Unlike the poems of W.S. Rendra, such as *Kenalan Lamamu* (Your Old Acquaintance) written in 1977, which was banned because its symbolic criticism could still be translated into political language, SCB's poetry was intentionally designed to resist such a translation process. A line

such as “...resahku resahkau resahrisau...” emphasizes alliteration and assonance over lexical meaning. This poem does not speak about restlessness; it becomes the very sound of restlessness itself. The logic of censorship, which operates by searching for forbidden meanings, was paralyzed when faced with a work that made sound its main feature.

A similar pattern dominated his poetry collection, *O Amuk Kapak*, in works such as “Pot,” “Tragedi Winka & Sihkha,” “Q,” “Amuk,” and “Shang Hai.” By consistently emphasizing this phonetic aspect, SCB’s works successfully passed censorship and were permitted for publication, as they were not considered a significant threat. This artistic choice, however, created a new complexity. By sacrificing semantic clarity, he opened up a much richer and more personal space for interpretation. Readers were no longer spoon-fed meaning but were instead invited to feel and interpret the poetic sensation arising from the vibration of the words’ sounds. Ultimately, the phonetic strategy employed by SCB was more than just a tactic to deceive the censors. It was a conscious effort to soften the rigidity of institutionalized language. By prioritizing the phonetic dimension, SCB not only succeeded in publishing his work but also managed to build an autonomous space for interpretation—a poetic space immune to the intervention and control of the regime’s censorship apparatus.

The Sufi Trend: A Strategy for the New Order’s Publishing Market

If the phonetic strategy was Sutardji’s way to evade censorship, he also applied an equally clever thematic adaptation strategy: blending his work into the mainstream of Sufistic literature that was popular at the time. This was a pragmatic step to ensure his work could penetrate the gates of the publishing industry, which was tightly controlled by the New Order regime. This choice was not merely about “playing it safe,” but rather a tactic to obtain an “entry permit” into the public sphere.

To understand why this strategy was necessary, we need to look at how the publishing industry operated under the power of the New Order, which can be analyzed through the framework of the LMP (Literary Mode of Production) from Terry Eagleton’s materialist literary criticism. During that era, the government (GMP) used state apparatuses like the Department of Information to control the LMP, namely publishers such as Balai Pustaka, Pustaka Jaya, and Sinar Harapan. These publishers functioned as ideological filters, screening manuscripts to ensure their content was aligned with the GI (General Ideology) adhered to by the regime and with market tastes that were considered non-subversive. Consequently, works that were critical or challenging were difficult to publish, while those aligned with the government’s narrative or considered apolitical could circulate more easily.

It is in this context that Sufi literature became an ideal “safe space.” Sufistic themes—such as the annihilation of the self before God (*fana*), spiritual quests, and introspection—were considered non-resistant to the state’s ideology. During this period, many writers suddenly began to write works with a religious nuance (Sobary, 2016). Its focus on the vertical relationship (human-to-God) made it appear apolitical in the eyes of a regime that was more focused on monitoring criticism of the horizontal relationship (society-to-government). Moreover, because the majority of Indonesia’s population is Muslim, these themes resonated deeply and were well-received.

This adaptation strategy by Sutardji was reflected strongly in his poem titled “Q” and several other poems:

Figure 1
Sutardji's Poetry Titled "O"

[illegible]

In the poem “Q” presented above, it can be seen that its content consists of scrambled exclamation marks (!) and separated letters which, when arranged, form the words “alif lam mim,” a phrase sourced from the Qur'an. Another example, in the poem *Orang Yang Tuhan* (The Person Who is God) written in 1981, also uses the words “tuhan” (God) and “assalamualaikum” (peace be upon you). Furthermore, in other poems, Sutardji frequently uses the suffix “-Mu” (Thy/Your), which indicates its reference to God.

From these examples, in terms of form, Sutardji's poetry carried an Islamic nuance, or what was known as Sufistic poetry in his era. By writing poems like these, Sutardji placed himself in the midst of a wave of other poets such as Emha Ainun Najib, Mustofa Bisri, and Kuntowijoyo who were also exploring similar themes. For publishers and the government, this kind of poetry was not only acceptable but also supported the image of a religious and obedient society. Sufistic poetry was freely published because it was considered non-resistant to the prevailing ideology. Sufism was seen as a life motivation to be more accepting of one's circumstances, a stream that was especially suitable given that the majority of Indonesian society is Muslim. Seeing this condition, Sufi-themed poetry circulated freely, including Sutardji's collected works. As a writer, Sutardji took a safe path. He utilized the space opened up by the authorities to continue producing work. This situation is what is referred to as the LMP, where the aesthetics of a literary work are determined by the consensus of cultural apparatuses, which are themselves an extension of the GMP.

Thus, Sutardji's brilliant dual strategy is revealed. If the mantra poetry was the radical "engine" of his resistance, then the Sufi theme was the "passport" that allowed him to cross the borders of censorship. He used the widely accepted theme as a Trojan horse to bring his experimental and subversive poetic forms to the public. This shows that Sutardji was not merely a poet who "played it safe," but rather a cunning cultural strategist, one who was able to dance between the constraints of power without losing the essence of his artistic resistance.

Sutardji's Aesthetic Ideology: Textual Resistance and Contextual Empowerment

A literary work is the product of an author's specific position within their society, or what Eagleton calls Authorial Ideology (AI). Sutardji, who lived in and internalized the social reality of the New Order, was certainly not sterile from the General Ideology (GI) of his time. However, as an artist, he possessed the creative power to respond to these conditions. This response was then represented through his artistic choices, referred to as Aesthetic Ideology (Aul). Sutardji's conscious choice to adopt the oral tradition form of the mantra was the ultimate manifestation of his aesthetic ideology, a brilliant strategy that operated on two levels: textual and contextual.

On the textual level, this aesthetic ideology functioned as a clever defense mechanism. The "text" here refers to the work on paper that would be faced by the state's censorship apparatus. As has been discussed, mantra poetry, with its experimental linguistic structure and emphasis on sound, created a work that was difficult to interpret singularly. To the censors tasked with finding subversive literal meaning, SCB's work would have appeared as harmless nonsense. In this textual dimension, the mantra became a "shield" that protected the poetry from the threat of censorship and banning.

On the contextual level, however, the mantra's function shifted dramatically from defensive to generative. The "context" here was when the poem met its reader or was heard by an audience. For Indonesian society, familiar with oral traditions, the mantra was not judged by its denotative meaning but by the magical power and effect it generated when chanted. By using this form, Sutardji indirectly invited readers to interpret his poetry through the experience of reading, creating a special effect that transcended mere intellectual understanding. This approach actively rejected the hegemony of meaning imposed by institutionalized language structure.

This view was affirmed by Sutardji himself in his essay titled "Puisi, Bunyi, dan Nurani" (Poetry, Sound, and Conscience)(in Bahasa, 2006). He argued that if poetry often appears absurd or nonsensical, it is because it is presenting the hidden parts of daily life. That which is raw and naked. For him, such poetry, despite seeming disconnected from reality, "always presents the meaning of life, as the other side of the coin of life."

Sutardji's statement becomes the key to understanding the dual function of his poetry. The mantra form was a perfect aesthetic ideology for its era. Textually, it deceived the authorities with an "emptiness" of meaning. Contextually, however, that "emptiness" became fertile ground for the birth of diverse personal interpretations, empowering the reader and reclaiming the right of interpretation from the state's monopoly. This was Sutardji's success: he maintained a balance between radical artistic innovation and its relevance to the social reality of his community, proving that even the most experimental work can be a profound form of political resistance.

Sutardji's Poetry and Resisting the Authority of the State's Language Apparatus

Language possesses a component that is intrinsically tied to the state; its meaning is produced and constructed in a specific manner by state power. As Halim (1976, p. 15) notes, the issue of language is a national problem requiring planned, directed, and meticulous management, primarily due to the multitude of regional languages in Indonesia. To manage this, a state-regulated system is necessary to instill ideologies and control social dynamics. In the literary

sphere during the New Order, this control was institutionalized through publishers like Balai Pustaka, which functioned as a machine to regulate public reading material. According to Damono (in Faruk, 2007), Balai Pustaka enforced strict criteria, ensuring that published works would not “damage the government's authority and domestic tranquility.” This was achieved through two strategies identified by Faruk (2007, p. 41): ideological filtering of content and the symbolic enforcement of a standardized “high Malay,” which effectively censored any work that did not conform (Pradopo, 2013, p. 97; Teeuw, 1955, p. 60).

In direct opposition to this rigid institutional control, Sutardji Calzoum Bachri launched his poetic manifesto, the *Kredo Puisi* (Poetic Credo) on March 30, 1973. In it, he declared: “words are not tools for delivering understanding, they are not like pipes that channel water, the word is understanding itself, it is free.” He saw definition as a form of colonization over words and ideas as a burden. Through his poetry, Sutardji stated that he had liberated words from the decaying traditions that shackled them, “such as the dictionary, grammar, and morality that had been instilled by the state from childhood to adulthood.” This liberation, he argued, is what makes creativity possible, allowing words to create and define themselves.

This philosophy was not merely theoretical; it manifested as a clear poetic method. Sutardji's resistance against the “discursive freezing” of language was executed by creatively and innovatively manipulating linguistic structure and spelling. His work is characterized by three main features. First, he often used unconventional words, drawing from regional languages, foreign languages, or even his own coinages. Second, he frequently manipulated structure and spelling, for instance, by using all capital letters, merging words together, or employing extensive repetition. Third, and most importantly, the meaning of his poems is often ambiguous and open to interpretation. This ambiguity is not a flaw but a central feature of his resistance, as it dismantles the possibility of a single, state-sanctioned interpretation and instead creates a challenge for the reader to think creatively. It transfers the authority of meaning-making from the state to the subjective experience of the individual reader, whose interpretation is shaped by their own unique background and knowledge.

As a poet, Sutardji allowed words to form their own meaning and achieve maximum accentuation. He powerfully summarized his entire artistic and philosophical project in his *Kredo*: “For me, to write poetry is to free words, which means returning the word to its beginning. In the beginning was the Word. And the first word is a mantra. Thus, for me, to write is to return the word to the mantra.”

Conclusion

Sutardji Calzoum Bachri's poetry offers a new dimension to Indonesian literature, representing a sophisticated strategy of artistic navigation and discursive resistance within the restrictive climate of the New Order. This study concludes that his mantra-Sufi form was a dual-pronged approach. The emphasis on phonetics, characteristic of mantras, served as a clever tactic to evade state censorship by obscuring semantic meaning. Simultaneously, the poem's Sufistic content allowed his work to align with a popular and politically palatable literary current, ensuring its publication and circulation.

Furthermore, Sutardji waged a direct resistance against the “discursive freezing” of language institutionalized by the state. By deconstructing and rearranging words, as exemplified in his poem “Pot,” he liberated language from its fixed definitions, opening it up to a multiplicity of interpretations dependent on the reader. Ultimately, Sutardji's poetry demonstrates that

literary innovation can be a powerful tool not for escaping reality, but for profoundly engaging with it, thereby reclaiming linguistic and intellectual freedom from an authoritarian regime.

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