

REPRESENTATION OF BALINESE CULTURE IN GUN GUN'S MAHABHARATA EPIC PUPPET COMIC

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ABSTRACT

The Mahabharata epic is better known to people in Bali, especially in shadow puppet plays. However, since 1955, the Mahabharata epic has been presented in the form of comics. This way of storytelling continued until 2014 with the printing of the Mahabharata epic puppet comic by Gun Gun, which presents Balinese cultural icons. This research aims to describe the representation of Balinese culture in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic. The research method employed a critical qualitative design. Data collection was conducted through observation, interview, and literature study. The theories utilised are comic theory, hegemony theory, representation theory, and articulation theory. The findings indicate that Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic employs three forms of Balinese cultural representation. The three forms are as follows: (1) visual representation, whereby characters and backgrounds are depicted in comics in a manner that evokes Balinese architecture, including *wantilan*, *pura*, and *togog*; (2) verbal representation, which is evidenced by the presence of Balinese vocabulary in the dialogue of the characters, such as *om swastiastu*, *kerahayuan*, *yadnya*, *Hyang Widhi*, and *darma*; and (3) narrative representation, which is evident in the explicit portrayal of Hindu teachings, including *karma phala*. The dialogue of the characters, such as *om swastiastu*, *kerahayuan*, *yadnya*, *Hyang Widhi*, and *darma*, and the narrative representation that shows explicitly the teachings of Hinduism, such as *karma phala*, are also forms of cultural representation. The study of Balinese cultural representation in the Mahabharata epic comic contributes to the understanding that comics also serve as a medium for the adaptation of external cultural influences, thereby reinforcing Balinese identity.

Keywords: *Balinese culture, Mahabharata epic, comics, representation, Balinese identity.*

INTRODUCTION

Along with the Ramayana, the Mahabharata is an Indian epic that has significantly influenced Indonesian arts, including literature and the performance of *wayang kulit* and *wayang orang*. Furthermore, the influence of the Mahabharata epic has also been

observed in the popular art of Indonesian comics, with the first examples dating back to 1955. The inaugural composer was the Indonesian comic artist R.A. Kosasih. One of the reasons the Mahabharata epic is present in comics is to facilitate its acceptance as an integral part of Indonesian culture (Bonnet, 2008, p. 27). A number of comic artists have elevated the Mahabharata epic into comics, including Oerip, Ardisoma, and Teguh Santosa.

In Bali, the Mahabharata story is also presented in the form of a comic created by comic artist Gun Gun in 2013 and published in print in 2014. In contrast to his predecessors in the field of comic art, Gun Gun presents the epic of the Mahabharata in a different format. Firstly, the Mahabharata story that Gun Gun transformed into comic visual language displays a background of events that specifically illustrates the presence of Balinese cultural icons. The depiction of the background represents cultural icons in a specific visual display. The second method of narrating the Mahabharata epic by Gun Gun commences with the introduction of Bhagawan Wyasa, the author of the Mahabharata, who subsequently recounts the events that transpired in the past. This approach to the narrative differs from that of previous comic artists, who typically commence the Mahabharata story with the character Sentanu. This is the protagonist narrative of the Mahabharata (Nuriarta, 2024, pp. 31-39).

Publication of Gun Gun's Mahabharata puppet comic has received the endorsement of the Parisadha Hindu Dharma Indonesia (PHDI). In a statement to the press, Suwisma, Chairman of the PHDI Daily Executive Board, highlighted the success of Gun Gun's Mahabharata comic in creating new icons through distinctive images. He noted that the illustrations displayed in the comic convey meanings related to Hinduism through Hindu cultural icons in Bali (Gun Gun, 2014, p. x).

Iconography of the puppet world in Gun Gun's Mahabharata puppet comics draws upon the iconography of *wayang orang* or stage puppetry, which is a popular spectacle as a more communicative option compared to Sulardi's puppet comics, which refer to the iconography of two-dimensional shadow puppets. Although the images are three-dimensional realism (read: *wacana "rasional" Barat*) that draws on the iconography of *wayang orang*, it is precisely because it can never be free from regional ties that its uniqueness is emphasised in comparison to any other comic in the world.

It can be observed that Gun Gun's comics are consistently faithful to Indian sources, as they are endorsed by the official authorities of Balinese Hinduism. Nevertheless, when compared to Indian comics translated into Indonesian, there are still

discernible differences. In general, this type of information, such as the *dharma wacana* presented in the comic form, occupies a novel position within the context of puppet comics. Moreover, Gun Gun does not alter the portrayal of certain characters, as is the case with Kosasih's Mahabharata comics. Concurrently, the iconographic signs serve to represent Balinese Hindu culture in a dominant manner. Moreover, Gun Gun incorporates Balinese language into the dialogue of his comic characters.

The Mahabharata is a narrative set in India. However, in Gun Gun's Mahabharata puppet comic, the story is situated in Bali. The issue of identity in comics appears to be one of multiple identities, with visual representations, verbal representations, and narrative representations.

This research paper examines the construction of Balinese cultural representation in Gun Gun's epic Mahabharata puppet comics. In order to achieve this objective, the paper is divided into two interrelated sections. In the initial section, the paper examines and identifies the form of Balinese cultural representation in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comics. This form is examined in order to explain the process of transforming the verbal text of the Mahabharata story into the visual language of comics that characterise Balinese cultural identity. The visual elements of the comic are interpreted as a form of cultural representation presented by Gun Gun. In the latter section, the paper elucidates the form of Balinese cultural representation present in the comics. This entails three forms of representation: visual representation, verbal representation, and comic narrative representation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of comics in Indonesia is a relatively new field, as is the study of comics in the context of Balinese cultural studies. In Indonesia, comic studies have been conducted by Ajidarma, who produced a dissertation that was subsequently published as a book in 2011. The book is entitled *Panji Tengkorak: Culture in Conversation*. The analysis reveals that in *Panji Tengkorak* comics, there are simulations of identity of origin, desired identity, and non-identity in the personal identity cluster; or factual identity and non-factual identity in the geographical cultural identity cluster. This allows the tracing of the existence of identity politics and the ongoing struggle between discourses. In the recapitulation, it is revealed that objectivity and subjectivity are ideological representations for the construction of reality. The assignment of meaning to ideological reality becomes a struggle between discourses that enact culture. This is presented as metaculture, that

is to say culture about culture, because culture is only presented in the process of a conversation. It can be concluded that three of the *Panji Tengkorak* are traces of culture that, in their dismantling, demonstrate the unfolding of culture.

In addition to Ajidarma, Mataram (2015) also authored an article on comics entitled "*Bahasa Rupa Komik Wayang Karya R.A Kosasih*", which was published in the journal *Gelar: Jurnal Seni Budaya*. The article analyses comics from a visual perspective. Mataram conducted a study of the form of comic visual language and the idiolect character of puppet comics by Kosasih, employing the theory of visual language. Mataram employed a linguistic analogy approach to textual and contextual analysis of Kosasih's puppet comics, examining the visual language and idiolect characters that appear as their characteristics. The findings of the research indicate that the visual language of comics is analogous to the language in which it is expressed, comprising a language system and idiolect. The language system of Kosasih's comics is constituted by the fundamental elements of comics, namely panels and juxtaposition structure. Secondly, R.A. Kosasih's puppet comics utilise narratives derived from the Indian versions of the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics, as well as Indonesian puppetry stories.

The studies above serve as references in discussions pertaining to the representation of Balinese culture in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comics. However, the aforementioned literature is evidently distinct from the author's focus, which is on the form of cultural representation in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comics. A number of studies have been conducted on Gun Gun's comics, yet none have specifically examined the context of cultural representation using comic theory, hegemony theory, representation theory, and articulation theory.

METHOD

This research employs a critical descriptive qualitative design to investigate the representation of Balinese culture in comic cultural practices. The objective of this research is to gather qualitative data that describes the form of Mahabharata puppet comics and the representation of Balinese culture contained in the comics. This research is a textual analysis of the Mahabharata comic by Gun Gun, published by ESBE in 2014. Comics are regarded as cultural works, as a document that collects data through observation, interview, and literature study. The analysis employs the theoretical frameworks of comic theory, hegemony theory, representation theory, and articulation theory.

Comics can be defined as a visual language, where the arrangement of picture plane, lines, and imagery follows a specific language structure, forming a visual narrative. This form of communication is distinct from other genres of visual communication. McCloud posits that comics are a combination of images and other symbols that are arranged in a specific sequence to convey information and/or elicit an aesthetic response from the reader. There are five fundamental choices employed by comics in the context of communication. These are the five choices available to comic artists: moment choice, frame choice, image choice, word choice and plot choice (McCloud, 2007, p.15).

Comics represent a significant aspect of popular culture. Hegemony theory allows for the consideration that popular culture is a negotiated mixture of will and resistance from above and below, commercial or authentic. It is a transitional balance of power between resistance and incorporation. From this perspective, popular culture is a contradictory mix of competing interests and values. However, it will always seek a transitional equilibrium, which Gramsci referred to as a compromise equilibrium (Ajidarma, 2011, pp. 69-71).

The capacity to describe or imagine is what is meant by the term 'representation'. The significance of representation is evident in the manner in which culture is perpetually shaped through the medium of meaning and language. In this context, language can be regarded as one of the principal symbols or forms of representation. The meaning of culture is always mediated by language, which is used to share that meaning with members of the culture. Hall posits that representation is a fundamental aspect of communication and social interaction, emphasising its role as a basic need in communication (Hall, 2005, pp. 18-20).

Furthermore, this research employs the theoretical framework of articulation. The concept of articulation occupies a pivotal position in the understanding of meaning, as it is through the act of articulation that meaning is constituted. The process is referred to as "articulation" because meaning must be expressed, but always within the context of specific historical moments and discourses. An expression is invariably contingent upon and shaped by the context in which it is expressed. This formulation is derived from Stuart Hall's theory of language, which posits that meaning is always determined by the context of articulation (Barker, 2021, p.18).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis in this discussion employs comic theory concerning visual text

(illustrations), verbal text (typography/letters), word balloons, and comic panel transitions. It also draws upon hegemony theory to examine the position of Mahabharata puppet comics; whose stories originate from India. This enables an understanding of how they present as Indian cultural hegemony. Representation theory is also employed, with the workings of depicting culture through picture language. Finally, articulation theory is applied at the level of epistemology, politics, and strategy. The discussion is divided into four subchapters, namely (1) a profile of comic artist Gun Gun as a comic artist from Bali, (2) a visual representation of Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic and his work, (3) a verbal representation of Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic, and (4) a narrative representation in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic.

Profile of Gun Gun and His work

Gun Gun is a comic artist whose real name is I Wayan Gunasta. The comic artist, who is also a cartoonist, was born in Ubud, Bali on 27 November 1964 (Figure 1). He has been passionate about fine arts since childhood. By the time he was in the fourth grade of elementary school, Gun Gun had already participated in a sculpture exhibition at the Jakarta Cultural Centre with his father Wayan Pendet. In 1990, Gun Gun was awarded a scholarship to pursue studies in cartooning and animation at the Ever Green Film Company in Tokyo, Japan.

Gun Gun is arguably the first Balinese cartoonist to study animation in Japan and the only Balinese cartoonist to adapt the Mahabharata story into a full comic book (18 parts). By studying animation, Gun Gun acquired knowledge pertaining to the angle of shooting in each comic he created. In comparison to the depiction of Mahabharata comics by his predecessors, Gun Gun's approach to characterisation and visualisation is more dynamic.



Figure 1. Comic Artist Gun Gun
Source: Mia's documentation, 2023

Gun Gun is particularly interested in the visual arts, with a particular focus on cartoons, caricatures, comics, and graphic design. Since the 1980s, his cartoons have been published in various periodicals, including Bali Post, Karya Bhakti, Kompas newspaper, Sinar Harapan, Suara Karya and Tabloid Olah Raga Bola. Gun Gun's cartoons, which critique Balinese culture, were frequently published in the Bali Post print media from the 1980s to the 2000s. A variety of ironies pertaining to societal issues and the conduct of politicians in the lead-up to the general election constituted a recurring theme in his work. The artist's critique of Balinese culture is an expression of his reverence for Balinese tradition. Furthermore, his affinity for Bali is evident in his comic works that engage with the Mahabharata epic. Gun Gun presents the Mahabharata story in conjunction with Balinese cultural icons and incorporates Hindu religious teachings, including those derived from the Vedas.

Gun Gun has expressed an interest in adapting the Mahabharata epic into a full comic book, presented in a binder. In contrast to his previous approach, which involved publishing the comics separately or in scattered formats, Gun Gun has opted for a unified approach, presenting the comics in 18 volumes. This approach was first implemented in 2014, with each *parwa* (section) presented in a separate volume. The 18 comics are presented in chronological order, from Adi Parwa to Swargarohana Parwa. The narrative of the Mahabharata is conveyed from the perspective of Bhagawan Wyasa, who is responsible for authoring and narrating the story to the Five Pandavas and Drupadi, who subsequently embark on their journey to *surga loka* (heaven).

This comic book was published in 2014 by ESBE Books. Although the comic book is presented in black and white, the cover design is rendered in full colour. The cover design is characterised by the use of bright colours. The layout of the cover design has been formalised into a template. The upper portion of the cover displays the word 'Mahabharta', accompanied by a style of writing that evokes the aesthetic of Indian writing. The word 'Mahabharata' is accompanied by the title of the *parwa* presented, such as 'Adi Parwa', 'Sabha Parwa', and 'Swargarohana Parwa'. On the right-hand side, a description of the publication of the comic volume is provided. The publisher's logo is positioned in the lower right-hand corner of the page (Figure 2).

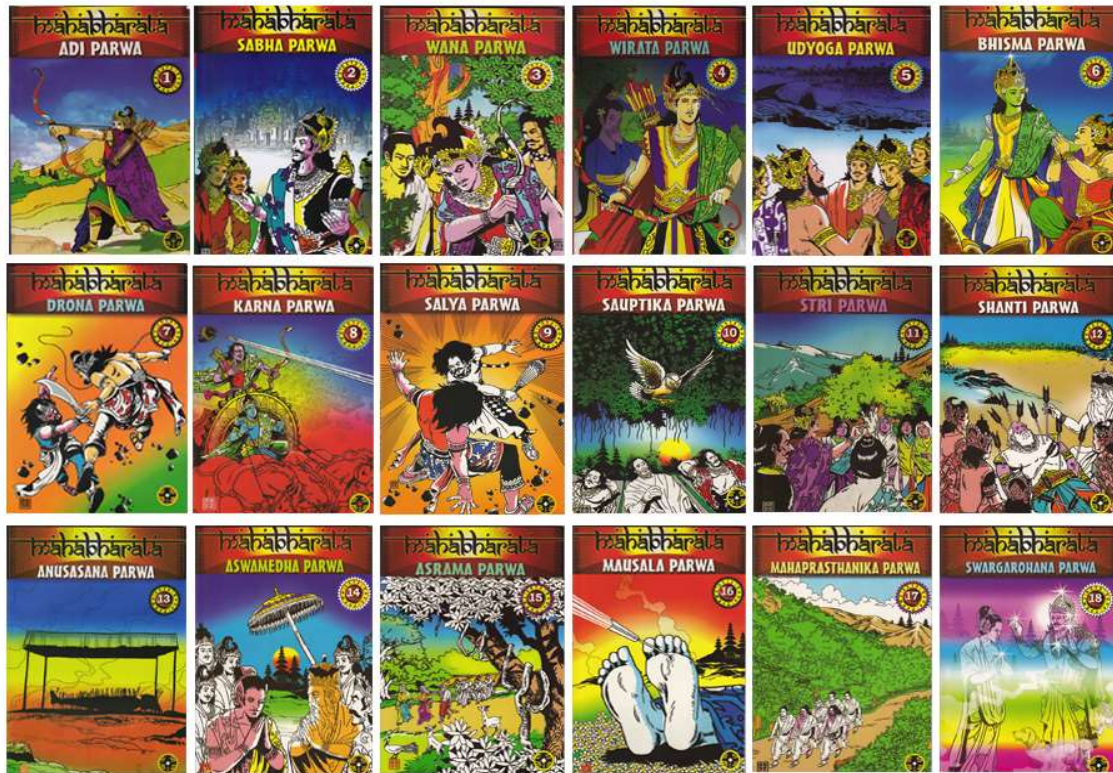


Figure 2. The cover of Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic book published by ESBE buku, Denpasar
Source: Gun Gun, 2014

In his Mahabharata epic puppet comic, Gun Gun presents a representation of Balinese culture. The characteristics of Balinese cultural representation in the comic manifest in three forms. Firstly, visually, the characters in the Mahabharata puppet comic referred to by Gun Gun are parwa dance dramas, namely puppet shows that are usually present in Bali. The depiction of the background of the events in Gun Gun's Mahabharata puppet comic specifically shows the iconographic representation of Balinese culture by presenting the temple, *togog*, *apit surang* (gateway), and *wantilan* (meeting place). Additionally, the comic depicts the character of Ganesha, who assists Maharsi Wyasa in composing the Mahabharata. The depiction of Maharsi Wyasa's character is characterised by the wearing of Brahmin clothing in Bali.

Secondly, the language used in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic is Indonesian. At the time when puppetry discourse was only known in Old Javanese through *wayang kulit* and *wayang orang* performances, the use of Indonesian in Gun Gun's puppet comics represents an important factor, as it enables the story to be understood more widely by the comic-reading public. As a form of popular culture, comics can be read at any time, without the need to attend a puppetry performance until dawn to witness

Bharatayudha. In addition to employing the Indonesian language, Gun Gun's Mahabharata puppet comic also makes use of the Balinese language, which serves to represent Balinese culture.

Thirdly, the Mahabharata narrative is regarded as a heroic epic from India. In Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comics, the Mahabharata story is set in Bali. Gun Gun's Mahabharata recounts the tale of Maharsi Wyasa, who is responsible for narrating the Mahabharata. The narrative of the Mahabharata, as recounted by Maharsi Waisampayana (Wyasa's disciple), is conveyed to Janamejaya. Prabu Janamejaya was the king of Hastina, son of Parikesit, grandson of Abhimanyu, and great-grandson of Arjuna. Gun Gun employs identity politics in comics with metanarratives. In this comic, Gun Gun discusses the Hindu teachings of *Reg Weda*, *Yayur Weda*, *Sama weda*, and *Arharwa Weda*. In particular, Adi Parwa also mentions the Mahabharata as the fifth veda.

Visual Representation

The capacity to describe or imagine is the essence of representation. In his 2005 publication, Hall (pp. 18-20) underscores the significance of representation as a conduit for communication and social interaction, emphasising representation as a fundamental aspect of communication. Gun Gun created the Mahabharata epic puppet comic with a realist approach to illustration, with the intention of clearly representing Balinese cultural elements as a visual representation. The lines that appear are similar to those typically employed by Gun Gun, a cartoonist and painter. Gun Gun himself refers to his Mahabharata comic style as a classic style comic. In other words, a style that combines puppet characters with realist nuances. His drawing design technique is digital, utilising a computer and the assistance of various software.

The comic's illustrations of the characters are created with black outlines. The utilisation of black lines enables the depiction of characters that can be identified as belonging to children, adults and the elderly, both male and female. In the context of the comic illustrations, Gun Gun assumes the role of the line. The use of thick and thin lines allows for the adaptation of the linework to the context of the narrative being constructed. In order to illustrate scenes from stories told by other characters, thin lines devoid of any black blocks are employed. In the case of regular display, the characters are depicted with ordinary black and white lines or with no thick lines, and there are black blocks in some parts. The use of black blocks in certain instances serves to indicate the volume of the character. The characters in the comic are depicted from a variety of vantage points,

including a bird's eye, frog's eye, and human eye-level perspective.

One of the character illustrations in Gun Gun's Mahabharata comic features the character Maharsi Wyasa. The character is depicted wearing clothes similar to those worn by Brahmin priests in Bali, with the distinctive head covering known as a *ketu*, which represents one of the visual forms of Balinese cultural elements. In Balinese culture, Brahmins or *Sulinggih* are individuals who adhere to the concept of social stratification. A Brahmana is a person who has achieved liberation of the soul, whose actions no longer adhere to the constraints of worldly concerns, as they are no longer bound by the cycle of rebirth. In Hinduism, Brahmins are individuals who have achieved *niskama karma*, a state of being that is believed to be attained through the practice of karma-phala, a concept that is highly revered in Bali. The Mahabharata epic, as narrated by the character Wyasa, illustrates the role of a Brahmin in Bali, who is responsible for conveying religious teachings. The visual representation of Bagawan Wyasa as a Brahmin in Gun Gun's comic is indicative of Balinese culture, as well as Gun Gun's political strategy to integrate Balinese culture into the comic (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Representation of Brahmin illustrations in Gun Gun's Mahabharata Epic puppet comic
Source: Gun Gun, 2014

Gun Gun's depictions of the Mahabharata epic are consistent with those of Indian sources. However, Gun Gun explicitly excludes the *punakawan* from his comics, despite the fact that the Mahabharata story, as commonly known by the Balinese through *wayang kulit* stories, always presents the *punakawan* as a form of cultural recreation. Gun Gun's

comics can be considered a medium of *dharma* discourse (akin to *da'wah* in Islam), in that they occupy a new position within the context of puppetry comics. Gun Gun presents iconographic signs of Balinese culture in a manner that is highly dominant. Through images that are sufficiently absorbed by one sense, comics represent all the senses, and through the character of the lines, Gun Gun's epic Mahabharata puppet comics represent a world of touching emotions. In terms of narrative technique, featuring *punakawan* in comics is undoubtedly problematic. Furthermore, the role of the *punakawan* is typically to elucidate the discourse of their superiors. While this is effective in spoken language, it becomes a repetitive process in written language, which can result in a slow and tedious narrative.

Publication of Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic has elevated the status of comics to a position of considerable artistic merit. The comic's characters exhibit a strikingly different form than those of traditional puppets. Nevertheless, the visual representation of Balinese culture persists. The background of the story is depicted with great attention to Balinese culture. The visual representation of the background of the story is indicative of Balinese culture, with the depiction of the *wantilan*, which is a typical Balinese building and also a temple as a place of worship for Hindus. Additionally, the illustrations of giant statues, or *togog*, which are typical in Bali, are also evident (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Representation of Balinese culture (*wantilan*, temple, statue) in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic
Source: Nuriarta documentation, <https://shorturl.asia/kcOtd>, and Gun Gun, 2014

At the level of epistemology, Gun Gun created illustrations of *wantilan*, temples, and *togog* (giant statues) that are identical to Balinese cultural identity in the Mahabharata epic puppet comic. This was done to demonstrate that the Mahabharata story seems to take place in Bali. The visual display implies that the Balinese story is presented in a particularly strong manner. The Mahabharata epic presents Balinese cultural representations, thereby affording readers, primarily Balinese Hindus, the opportunity to engage with the narrative on an emotional level. The emotional element thus constructed enables readers to become more deeply immersed in the various scenes of the story, which convey a strong philosophical message about dharma or the teachings of truth.

The background visualisation in this comic presents a number of Balinese cultural icons, including the *wantilan*, temple, and *togog* buildings, which are commonly decorated with Balinese craftwork. The cultural icons serve to facilitate a closer engagement with the Mahabharata narrative, which is regarded as an epic work of considerable influence and historical importance, originating from India. The utilisation of cultural representations in the visual display facilitates the attachment of a religious message to the target audience.

Utilisation of this visual display facilitates the effective conveyance of messages to readers. The message is conveyed in a more effective manner. Gun Gun posits that his comics are attentive to context. The comics created by Gun Gun are not merely textual; they are also contextual. By referencing puppetry culture, the realistic visual identity that originated in the West gives rise to novel visuals.

It is evident that the identity of the Balinese cultural representations, as depicted in the comic panels that tell the story of the Mahabharata, cannot be denied. Furthermore, while Gun Gun desires to return to the ancient or original Mahabharata, his creation is, in fact, an alternative to the dominant one in the local context. This serves to enrich the puppetry culture, thus enabling readers to have access to two versions of the Mahabharata: the Indian version and the Balinese version. In this context, identity is understood to be a dual identity. The visual representation of Balinese culture in comics represents a cultural negotiation of the Mahabharata story as a medium for introducing Hinduism in Bali.

Gun Gun created the Mahabharata epic puppet comic, which employs a realistic style of representation to depict Balinese cultural icons. The realism approach is based on the premise that reality can be accurately represented by depicting it in a manner that is consistent with how it is perceived in everyday life. In other words, the term 'realist depiction' refers to the resemblance to reality, not only in images, but also with all the

consequences of the approach, such as the reasonableness of the behaviour and responses exhibited by the human figures in question. Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic represents a synthesis of tradition, modern culture and popular culture in a visual work. The convergence of these three elements represents a novel domain within the realm of postmodern culture. This implies that modernity does not supersede tradition, and that tradition does not become impermeable to modernity

Verbal Identity Representation

The act of representation is accomplished through the construction of linguistic elements. This phenomenon can be observed at the level of sentences or propositions, words or phrases, or at the level of larger language structures such as paragraphs or discourse. Technically, representation is at least displayed at the vocabulary level. The verbal text in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic employs the San Serif typeface with a black colour. Verbal text is employed as a representation to convey dialogue between characters and captions to construct the narrative of the story. In order to provide an explanation of the Mahabharata story, Gun Gun, the comic artist, provides a note on the first page about the Mahabharata story. Gun Gun composed this note as the inaugural introduction to the comic. The verbal text, which serves as the initial introduction to the Mahabharata story, was written by Gun Gun in the form of word balloons with a shouted word balloon character. This character expressed the following affirmation (Gun Gun, 2014, p.1).

Mahabharata adalah kisah besar keluarga Bharata yakni bangsa yang menurunkan ksatria utama turunan Kuru: Pandawa dan Korawa jaman Bharata Warsa.

Mahabharata disusun oleh Maharsi Wyasa bersama Dewa Ganesha.

Itihasa ini diceritakan oleh Rsi Waisampayana pada Janamejaya raja Astina pura putra Parikesit cucu Abimanyu, cicit Arjuna saat pelaksanaan aswamedha Yadnya. Maharsi Wyasa diiringi pula oleh para rsi penyusun wahyu pustaka Catur Weda yaitu: Rsi Waisampayana, Rsi Paila, Rsi Jaimini, Rsi Samantu, Rsi Suka, dan rsi lainnya.

English translation:

'The Mahabharata is a seminal text within the Hindu tradition, chronicling the exploits of the Bharata family and the nation that descended from the Kuru warriors. The Pandavas and Koravas of the Bharata Era. The Mahabharata was composed by Maharsi Wyasa and Lord Ganesha. The Mahabharata was narrated by Rsi Waisampayana to Janamejaya, the king of the Astina temple, son of Parikesit, grandson of Abhimanyu, great-grandson of Arjuna, during the aswamedha Yadnya. Maharsi Wyasa was also accompanied by the Rsi compilers of the Catur Veda library revelations, namely: The following Rsi scholars were also

present: Waisampayana, Paila, Jaimini, Samantu, Suka, and others.’

The Gun Gun’s Mahabharata epic puppet comic employs three distinct types of word balloons. Firstly, there is the conventional word balloon, which represents the dialogue or conversation between characters. Secondly, there is a type of word balloon with a shape that resembles a collection of bubbles and circles, which gradually become smaller as they approach the character speaking. The third type of word balloon indicates that the character is engaged in self-talk. Thirdly, the type of word balloon with a pointed edge is employed to convey affirmation or important information as a comic book note or a sentence conveyed by the character in the comic (Figure 5).

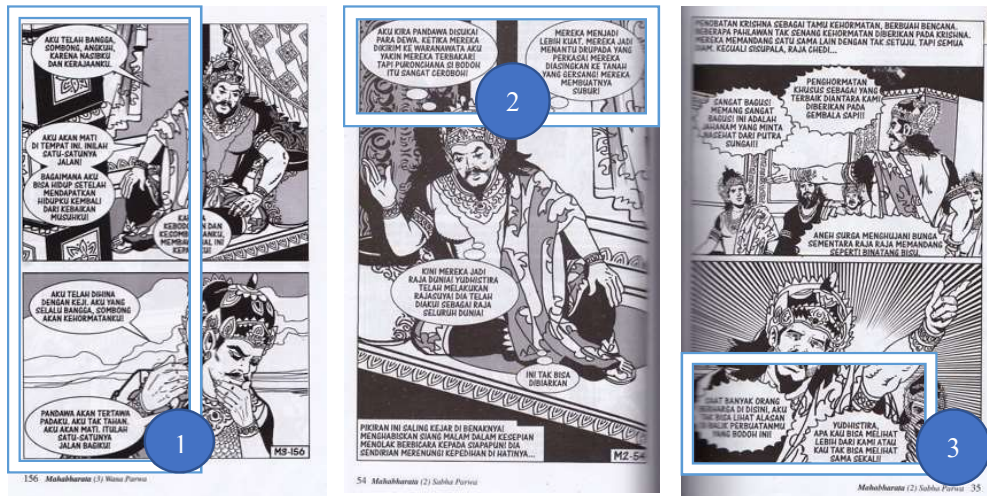


Figure 5. The shape of the word balloon in Gun Gun’s Mahabharata epic puppet comic published by ESBE Buku, Denpasar
Source: Gun Gun, 2014

Gun Gun’s Mahabharata epic puppet comic is predominantly written in Indonesian. However, it is also evident that many conversations also utilise Balinese (verbal identity). The choice of words used to represent Balinese culture can be observed in greetings such as *om swastiastu*, congratulations such as *kerahayuan*, and holy sacrifices such as *yadnya*. Furthermore, the term *Hyang Widhi* (God Almighty) is employed when Drupadi is subjected to harassment by the Kurawa. Upon losing a game of chance, Pandawa’s wife Drupadi demands to be publicly shamed. One of the characters, Dursasana, forced Drupadi’s clothes to be removed. Upon the occurrence of the incident, Drupadi petitioned for protection from *Hyang Widhi* (Figure 6).



Figure 6. The terms *Hyang Widhi*, *Sama Weda*, and *Dharma* in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic
Source: Gun Gun, 2014

In addition to displaying the word *Hyang Widhi*, Figure 6 in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic also references the words *Sama Weda* (one of the holy books of Hinduism) and *Dharma* (truth). These words are verbal representations that are commonly spoken by Balinese people to refer to the teachings of their religion, including teachings about truth. These words can be found in the comic during the conversation between Widura and King Dristarastra on pages 150-151. King Dristarastra experiences a profound sense of fear and distress upon witnessing the departure of the Pandavas from his palace, having been subjected to a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Kuravas. The king engages in discourse with his younger brother, named Widura. In this discourse, the virtuous teachings or Dharma of Yudistira (the eldest Pandavas character) are deliberated upon.

In Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic, the term *puput* is employed at the conclusion of each volume as a means of representing Balinese culture orally. *Puput* is a verbal sign that is commonly used in Bali to indicate the conclusion of a narrative. The term '*puput*' is used to indicate the conclusion of a narrative. Each of the 18 volumes comprising the Mahabharata story is filled with the word '*puput*', as created by Gun Gun. This term signifies that a section of the volume has been completed (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The word *puput* in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic
Source: Gun Gun, 2014

The use of familiar Balinese words in the narrative allows the reader to engage with the characters and their interactions in a more personal and relatable manner. The use of Balinese words in comics as verbal markers of conversation facilitates the acceptance of religious teachings. Although the comics in question adopt a more exclusive 'original' orientation, taking stories sourced from India, which is outside the traditional culture limited to primordial society and which is an inferior puppetry comic in a local atmosphere, the comics are nevertheless able to be present and widely accepted by the community because comics are mass media and use the national language, Indonesian, as the language of instruction. The medium of Gun Gun's Mahabharata story is now perceived as being of a superior quality to local classics. One of the factors contributing to the success of Mahabharata puppet comics in Indonesia is their ability to reinforce Balinese cultural identity. This identity-strengthening factor is present as a form of strategy in articulation.

Narrative Representation

The field of cultural studies is concerned with the manner in which the world is

socially constructed and represented to and by people in meaningful ways. Representations are embedded in a multiplicity of forms, including voices, inscriptions, objects, images, and books. They are created, demonstrated, utilised, and comprehended within particular social settings. The panels created by Gun Gun in the Mahabharata epic puppet comics are rectangular in shape, which serves to build a narrative and to represent the characters and events depicted. The illustrations within the panels may either adhere to the boundaries of the panels themselves or extend beyond them. The essence of a comic is found between the panels, where the reader's imagination imbues the static images with life. In relying on visual sequences, the comics substitute time for space. However, despite this substitution, nothing seems to be confused, and time flows through comics in various ways.

The panel transition employed by Gun Gun is a transition that occurs in real time. This is similar to the approach taken by other comic artists in general. This transition enables the narrative to be effectively conveyed, despite the images created being comparatively less detailed than those produced by a transition from action to action. The use of verbal text in the form of dialogue and captions can assist readers in comprehending the narrative conveyed by comic artists. The panels in comics represent their own space and time. The interval between panel transitions allows readers to reflect on the relationship between the preceding and subsequent panels. The utilisation of these panels enables Gun Gun to narrate the Mahabharata epic.

Mahabharata narrative presented in Gun Gun's puppet comics is a retelling of the story by Rsi Waisampayana at the behest of Janamejaya during the Aswamedha Yajna. The Mahabharata was composed by Maharsi Wyasa and Ganesha. The compilation of the *Catur Weda* library was overseen by Maharsi Wyasa, who was assisted by a number of *rsi*, including Rsi Waisampayana, Rsi Paila, Rsi Jaimini, Rsi Samantu, Rsi Suka, and others. In the comic, the first character to appear is Bhagawan Wyasa, also known as Krisna Dwipayana Wyasa. Due to the efficacy of his penance, Bhagawan Wyasa received *Hyang Widhi's* revelation and compiled it into the Hindu holy book, *Catur Weda*. In contrast to other comic artists in Indonesia and the Mahabharata on Indian television, Gun Gun does not present the character Sentanu at the very beginning of the story (Figure 8).



Figure 8. The story of the Mahabharata told to Janamejaya in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic.

Source: Gun Gun, 2014

In his epic puppet comic Mahabharata, Gun Gun not only mentions the names of the Pandavas, namely Yudistira, Bima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva, but also introduces the names of the Kuravas in full. In recounting the Mahabharata, Gun Gun incorporates Hindu teachings. In addition to the *Catur Weda*, Gun Gun also incorporates the teachings of *Catur Purusa Artha*, which include *Dharma*, *Arta*, *Kama* and *Moksa*. The narratives in Gun Gun's comics are meticulously crafted, as evidenced by the graphic depiction of the burning of Pandu and Dewi Madri's bodies. This meticulously crafted narrative is not replicated in other Mahabharata comics.

The Mahabharata epic is frequently presented in shadow puppet shows. In these performances, the narrative is constructed in a manner that allows for the story to be told in fragments, with each fragment representing a particular aspect of the character Drupadi's story. In the original narrative, Drupadi is said to be married to five men, a

practice that is common according to the Mahabharata story from India. It is important to highlight the marriage to the five Pandavas, as it is a distinctive aspect of Gun Gun's narrative, particularly in comparison to the puppetry comics of Sundanese comic artist Kosasih and Javanese comic artist Teguh Santosa, who omit the element of polyandry. In contrast to the Sundanese comic artist Kosasih and the Javanese artist Teguh Santosa, who construct the narrative of Drupadi's marriage to only one man, Yudistira (Nuriarta, 2024, pp. 35-38), Gun Gun presents a different version of the story. Similarly, Gun Gun's approach to the Mahabharata story in *wayang kulit* performances aligns with the originality of the narrative and the values it represents, rather than promoting polyandry (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Drupadi married to five men in Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic
Source: Gun Gun, 2014

Drupadi's marriage to five men is an example of Gun Gun's teaching of *karma phala* (the law of cause and effect). Drupadi married the five Pandava men as a result of her constant supplications to the gods. Drupadi aspired to a husband who would exemplify the ideal of perfection. While no human being is perfect, Drupadi was made to marry five men who were, in fact, the five sons of King Pandu, who were collectively known as the Panca Pandawa. The nature of *karma phala* teaches that there are three types of karma: karma that has direct consequences, karma that has indirect consequences where the reward is only enjoyed after death and karma that is enjoyed later as a result of actions in

previous lifetimes. It is important for Hindus to understand the law of *karma phala*, as this will encourage them to consider the consequences of their actions. This understanding will help them to make informed decisions, particularly in Bali, where the consequences of actions are often long-lasting.

Gun Gun's narrative technique in comic form continues to utilise Western methods, evident in the use of word balloon arrangements and panel transitions. The Mahabharata, a heroic narrative from India, is also presented in the comic as an example of an Indian story. The representation of Balinese culture in Mahabharata comics is a consequence of the dominance of Western and Indian identities, as well as the adaptation of comic artists to Indonesian culture. The representation of Balinese culture is manifested through the use of language, artefacts (statues), building forms, and storylines that adhere to Balinese cultural norms.

The position of Gun Gun's Mahabharata epic puppet comic can be understood through the lens of Hall's articulation theory and Gramsci's hegemony theory. Featuring Balinese cultural representations, the comics are an example of the negotiation of Western, Indian and Indonesian cultures. The prevalence of puppetry comics can be attributed to the cultural dominance of the dominant class.

CONCLUSION

In his Mahabharata epic puppet comic, Gun Gun engages with identity politics. As a Balinese comic artist, Gun Gun represents Balinese culture in the Mahabharata epic puppet comics. These cultural representations feature prominent Balinese cultural icons, such as the construction of *wantilan*, temples, and *togog* statues, which serve as the backdrop for the Mahabharata narrative. This construction is employed to facilitate a closer engagement with the Mahabharata narrative. Verbal text construction is also evident, with evidence of the use of Indonesian language, as well as the presence of Balinese language, such as *Hyang Widhi* (God), *Dharma* (truth), and the word *Weda*, which is one of the holy books of Hinduism.

The narrative construction of Balinese culture is also evidenced by the character of Maharsi Waisampayana, who is responsible for narrating stories to Prabu Janamejaya. The Gun Gun comic employs a metanarrative. This narrative recounts the tale of Maharsi Wyasa, who returns to recount the Mahabharata with the assistance of Ganesha. The Hindu teachings incorporated into Gun Gun's Mahabharata comics do not appear to be a radical construction, given that the Mahabharata epic originated in India.

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