Articulation of Indonesian Identity in *Mahabharata* Epic Puppet Comics by Sundanese, Javanese, and Balinese Comic Artists

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Abstract: This research examines *Mahabharata* epic puppet (*wayang*) comics, created by three renowned comic artists: R. A. Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun, who respectively have Sundanese, Javanese, and Balinese cultural backgrounds, through the lens of Indonesian identity articulation. The comics of *wayang* which translates 'puppet', are a distinctive genre that employs panels to depict puppetry tales. While being influenced by foreign cultures such as American comic art and the Indian *Mahabharata* epic, these artists intentionally incorporate Indonesian elements into their works. This is evident from 1955 to the present. This research used a critical qualitative descriptive approach to investigate the articulation of the identity discourse within the cultural realm of comics. The comic works of the artists are analysed through articulation and hegemony theory. The research concludes that the artists' works establish a cultural connection and relate cultural comic art to Indonesian readers. This not only constructs Indonesian identity but also promotes cultural diversity.

Keywords: articulation; Indonesian identities; puppet comic; *Mahabharata* epic

1. Introduction

Mahabharata epic puppet comics are a fusion of two seemingly paradoxical elements: comics as a popular, commercial, and mass-oriented art form known as a Western cultural product, while the *Mahabharata* epic is known as a story originating from India. Puppet comics are a distinctive genre that employs panels to depict *puppetry* tales. However, these three well-known Indonesian comic artists–R. A. Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun–each with different cultural backgrounds (Sundanese, Javanese, and Balinese) were able to create

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a new embodiment of both aspects in their respective articulations, presenting comic art with an Indonesian identity. Their comic, *Mahabharata* epic puppet, is a distinctive representation of Indonesian identity.

In national politics, identity is often used to differentiate one nation from another. Indonesian discourse is consistently emphasised to define national identity. In the 1950s, Soekarno attempted to break free from Western values (Bonneff, 2008, p. 28). He emphasised national identity in the Nusantara cultural identity by expressing an anti-Western cultural stance. Foreign cultural influences, including comics, also drew attention because they were seen as a Western cultural identity. In the 1950s, comics were raided and burned due to this perception. As a result, comic production in Indonesia ceased from 1954 to 1955 (Bonnef, 2008, p. 28).

Comics were prohibited from production and distribution for approximately a year due to their misperceived misalignment with Indonesian culture. Educators criticised comics not only for their perceived lack of educational value, but also for their potentially harmful ideas, as they contained stories about Western figures such as the portrayals of *Alexander the Great, Marco Polo, and Andersen's fairy tales* (Bonneff, 2008, p. 27). These aforementioned stories have influenced comic creators in their choice of themes. The *Mahabharata* story, which has been passed down for centuries in Indonesia, truly reflects the idea of a national mentality capable of meeting these demands.

From 1955 onwards, a new type of comic called puppet comics emerged (Bonneff, 2008, p. 29), such as the works of R. A. Kosasih (1955) and puppet comics by Ardisoma (1960s). The *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic has been well-received by the public and has gained popularity since its release. The comic has continued to be produced by publishers from Melodi in 1955 to ESBE in 2014.

As a cultural product known to the public, the *Mahabharata* epic puppet is a fascinating cultural product to explore. It has emerged as a saviour of comic industry in Indonesia. Several comic artists, including Ardisoma and Oerip, have produced comics based on the *Mahabharata* epic. Although their style is similar to Kosasih's, their printed productions are less extensive than Kosasih's puppet comics of the *Mahabharata* epic. Three comic artists stand out in terms of publication and geographic distribution when it comes to the *Mahabharata* epic: Raden Ahmad (R. A.) Kosasih, representing Sundanese culture (West Java); Teguh Santosa, representing Javanese culture (East Java); and Gun Gun, representing Balinese culture. They interpret visual depictions imaginatively from written texts, each with their own unique aesthetic approach. Articulation in the comics also demonstrates a negotiation of narratives that adapt to the social practices of the comic artists. Additionally, these three artists have

their own distinct visual styles when presenting puppetry stories. This article examines how Western hegemony is negotiated to Indonesian identity and localism in Kosasih, Santosa and Gun Gun's comics?

The emergence of puppet comics was a statement in the Old Order era of Indonesia (1955) to show the cultural identity for the Nusantara, distinct from the Western identity that focused on technological advancement, such as the comic *The Secret Submarine Nautilus* or characters with detective stories like *Kit Carson* (Bonneff, 2008, p. 27). The three artists who created the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic have their own unique storytelling styles. Although they all depict the same plot, the *Mahabharata* has a unique way of showcasing Indonesian identity in the comic.

Kosasih (1919-2012) was the first comic artist to create puppet comics based on the *Mahabharata* epic. In 1955, he achieved great success and significantly enriched the puppetry discourse by incorporating Sundanese local cultural values. These comics continue to be well-received by the community, as evidenced by numerous publishers still printing them today, and they were allowed to be distributed after the comic burning in 1954. The reference used is from India, the birthplace of *Mahabharata*. The book, *Mahabharata*, written by M. Saleh, was published by Balai Pustaka in 1949. The comic has well-organised panels and its character illustrations closely resemble the forms of the shadow puppet theatre (*wayang orang*) and wooden puppets (*wayang golek*), which are characteristic of West Javanese identity. Kosasih achieved great success with the public's acceptance of the puppetry comics depicting the *Mahabharata* epic. This comic was regularly printed by Melodi and Erlina as publishers with standard covers from 1955 until 2010, when hardcover editions were introduced.

Indonesian identity is reflected in three aspects of the comics. Firstly, the character forms in the comic are based on shadow puppet theatre and wooden puppets, which are cultural identities of Indonesia, particularly West Java. Secondly, in addition to Indonesian, the comic also includes Sundanese, the language of West Java. Thirdly, the comic includes a narrative negotiation, such as the story of the character Drupadi, who was originally depicted as having polyandrous marriage. However, in Kosasih's *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic, she is portrayed as only being married to Yudistira. The character Drupadi is not depicted as polyandrous, but rather as a representation of Indonesian cultural identity.

Indonesian identity extends beyond Kosasih's *Mahabharata* epic puppet. Still, it continues in the hands of comic artist Teguh Santosa, who created the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic in 1984, and Gun Gun in 2014. The works of these three comic artists in the puppet comics of the *Mahabharata* epic have their articulations according to each artist's comic-making style. These three artists

established the genre of Indonesian identity comics, which is apparent in the visual text, verbal text, and narrative elements within the comics.

Mahabharata epic puppet comics, created by these three comic artists, are discussed in terms of their contribution to the articulation of Indonesian identity. The process of articulation is significant because it allows for the expression of meaning. Articulation is crucial because meaning is always the result of expression within specific contexts, historical moments, and discourses. An expression is always connected and conditioned by context (Ajidarma, 2017, p. 3). Negotiation is part of articulation, so in this study, the discourse used by comic artists to formulate self-identity and distinguish oneself from *Liyan* (the other), which refers to that which is different from the self-outside of oneself, is explored.

The *Mahabharata* epic puppet comics by these three comic artists are not judged based on their actual publication dates in this study. Instead, the focus is on the content that reflects relevant discussions to interpret the articulation of Indonesian identity, which serves as a distinctive marker (otherness) from the West and India. The effort to articulate Indonesian identity through the comics of the *Mahabharata* epic is intriguing to study because the *Mahabharata* originates from India. The internalization or recreation of Indian identity into Indonesian identity provides an attractive dimension to discuss the articulation of identity in the context of popular comic culture. In other words, this study is expected to contribute to understanding Indonesian identity through the art of comics.

2. Literature Review

The history of comics in Indonesia spans over 90 years and has played a significant role in popular culture. However, there have been few studies conducted on comics during this period. While a great number of research has been conducted on identity, none of them have used comics as a unit of analysis, with the exception of Ajidarma's work (2017). This research aims to bridge these gaps by building on previous research.

Bonneff's dissertation (1976), entitled '*Les Bandes Dessinees Indonesiennes*', which was translated and published in book form only in 1998 under the title *Komik Indonesia*, reveals the evolution of comics in Indonesia. Diachronically, the history of comics presents genres such as puppet comics, *silat* comics, and humour comics and teenage romance comics. As a genre, puppet comics hold a significant position in the history of Indonesian comics. Bonneff notes a significant shift in the world of Indonesian comics since independence, marked by the emergence of puppet comics. These comics are recognised for their 'national personality' and their resistance to the hegemony of Western comics.

Comics can serve as authentic documents of a nation's culture. Lubis (2014) conducted a study on comics, which he compiled in a book titled *Komik Medan: Sejarah Perkembangan Cerita Bergambar di Indonesia*. According to Lubis, Indonesian comics in the 1950s were referred to as '*tjergam*' (*cergam*), the short form for *cerita bergambar*, which means 'illustrated story'. Generally, illustrated stories publishers in both Medan and West Java made an effort to utilise popular genres from around the world. However, following President Soekarno's call for a return to Indonesian culture, comics began to improve by adapting 'universal' illustrated story genres and replacing characters and settings with Indonesian ones, incorporating local nuances. However, some still considered this step insufficient in showcasing Indonesian identity. Lubis' notes align with Bonneff's (2008) review in *Komik Indonesia*, which asserts that comics should promote locality by exploring the culture of the archipelago. Medan publishers produced illustrated stories that not only adapted folklore but also introduced new stories of romance, adventure, and action, all set in locales and featuring characters that conveyed a folklore-like impression. Medan's illustrated story creators became more creative by embracing the spirit of nationalism that was sweeping Indonesia at the time. They declared the term '*tjergam*' as a way to identify Indonesian comics and defend them from foreign cultures.

Ajidarma's study, originally a dissertation, was later published as a book titled *Panji Tengkorak*: *Kebudayaan dalam Perbincangan* (2011). The research presented in the comic *Panji Tengkorak* underwent three changes in visual style when depicting the character Panji Tengkorak. These changes were influenced by the development of comics from realist to *manga* or Japanese style. Ajidarma discusses comics as an entry point to read a culture, using three types of theories: comic theory, discourse theory, and hegemony theory.

Bonneff, Lubis, and Ajidarma's research is closely related to this study, particularly in terms of the articulation of Indonesian identity in puppet comics. Their method of analysing comics on identity discourse and projects serves as a reference for this research. Although used as a research reference, Bonneff, Lubis, and Ajidarma's work differs from the present study. Their research does not address the articulation of Indonesian identity in *Mahabharata* puppet comics. The current study focuses on the works of three prominent Indonesian comic artists, namely R. A. Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun. Furthermore, Bonneff, Lubis, and Ajidarma discuss comics and identity using historical theory, discourse theory, and Gramsci's concept of hegemony. In contrast, the present study employs articulation theory and hegemony theory.

This study offers three novelties by reviewing previous studies. Firstly, it specifically constructs a new object of study: comics as an arena for the articulation of Indonesian identity in the comic works on *Mahabharata* epic

puppets by three leading Indonesian comic artists, namely R. A. Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun and the comics are examined critically based on a cultural studies approach. Secondly, this research provides evidence that Indonesian identity is articulated in comics over time (1955-2014). This is demonstrated by the position of three leading Indonesian comic artists and their comics based on the *Mahabharata* epic.

Thirdly, culture is an area where the struggle over meaning takes place, and where the subordinated group resists the imposition of meanings that carry the interests of the dominant group, whose discourse dominates the cultural area. Therefore, culture becomes ideological. Building on these facts, the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comics, created by the three artists, serve as a representation of the ideological struggle within Indonesian culture to articulate its identity in this study. The negotiation between Indonesian culture (*puppet*), Western culture (comic culture), and Indian culture (*Mahabharata* story) in shaping Indonesian identity has been a previously unexplored or neglected topic.

3. Methods and Theories

This study employs a critical qualitative descriptive design to investigate the construction of identity articulation in comics. It focuses on text or verbal/visual discourse and does not require a specific location. The study involves interview activities that were conducted in Denpasar, although they could have been conducted anywhere. Research materials were collected from various locations, including Denpasar, Semarang, and West Java. The data analysis conducted in this research includes analysing the data based on the theory that has been formulated. It includes an analysis of the text at the level of the visual form of comics and the construction of the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic articulation in relation to Indonesian identity.

Data were analysed using articulation theory and hegemony theory. Cultural texts and practices are multi-textual. In other words, they can be articulated in different accents, by different people, in different contexts, for different politics. Therefore, meaning is a social construct. A text, practice, or event is not a source that disseminates meaning, but rather a site where meanings are articulated or a variable in which meanings take place. While different meanings can arise from the same text, practice, or event, they can also be potential sites for conflict. In 1980, Stuart Hall introduced *Cultural Studies* in his famous essay titled 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms'. Hall is the central figure of this principle of articulation. He modified Gramsci's theory of hegemony by stating that within the framework of hegemony, the process of ideological struggle takes place not only in expression but also in articulation.

The term 'articulation' is a theory in itself. In cultural practices and texts, meaning is never fixed as intended by the producer, but is always the result of the act of articulation as an active process of production and use (Ajidarma, 2011, pp. 66-67). Articulation emerges in experience, which is key in Cultural Studies, and so is articulation.

The way articulation works is divided into three levels: epistemology, politics, and strategy (Slack, 2006). The epistemological level describes the fragments of a whole, i.e. every smallest part (subordinate) of a social order is important and recognised in a larger order (ordinate). The political level is a way of putting forward the order of power (in the social sphere) that is responsible for the emergence of relations between the small part (subordinate/ commoners/proletariat/lower class) and the main part (subordinate/ruler/ upper class). At the strategic level, articulation is a mechanism for sharpening participation in a particular social formation, set of events, or context. That is, what strategic efforts are then taken by subordinate groups so that they remain part of a dominant, main social formation order (Hall, 2005, p. 113).

Hegemony can be defined as the influence, power or dominance of a particular social group over another, usually weaker social group. According to Gramsci's Hegemony Theory, the values of the upper class are voluntarily accepted by the lower class as part of their value system, even if they are not always compatible. The notion of hegemony is used by Gramsci to refer to a condition in the process, when the dominant class in alliance with other classes or factions within classes, not only organises a society, but leads it through a practice of moral and intellectual leadership (Siswati, 2017, pp. 19-20).

Hegemony theory allows for the consideration that popular culture is a negotiated mixture of will and resistance from above and below, commercial or authentic, a shifting balance of power between resistance and incorporation. From this perspective, popular culture is a contradictory mix of competing interests and values, but one that will always seek a transitional balance in what Gramsci called a compromise equilibrium (Ajidarma, 2011, pp. 69-71). Articulation theory and hegemony theory are used in the articulation of Indonesian identity in the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comics, by R. A. Kosasih, Teguh Sentosa, and Gun Gun.

4. Results and Discussions

The discussion is divided into three parts: articulation of visual identity, articulation of verbal identity that represents Javanese and Balinese culture as a part of Indonesia, and articulation of narrative that follows Indonesian norms in the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comics by three comic artists: R. A. Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun (Figure 1).
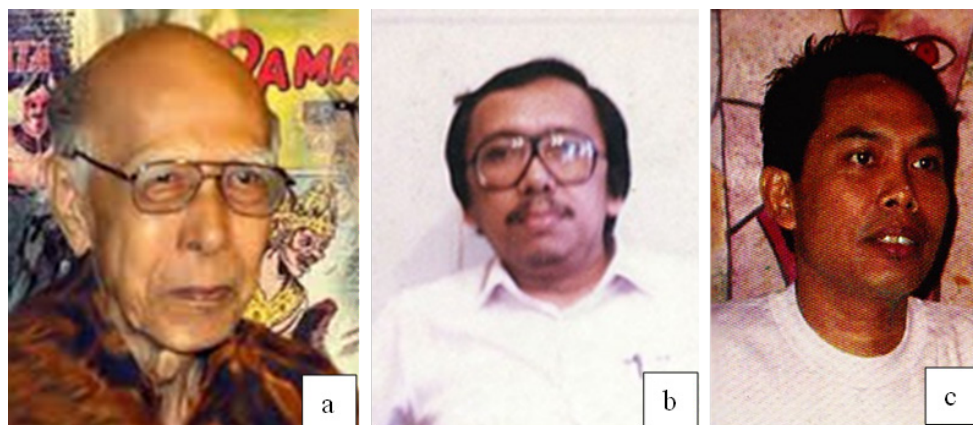
Figure 1. Comics R. A. Kosasih (left), Teguh Santosa (centre), and Gun Gun (right) (Source: https://bit.ly/3JNAfPw, https://bit.ly/40iQfA5, Gun Gun 2023; accessed date-month-year)

R. A. Kosasih (Figure 1a) created the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic, which is considered a milestone in the birth of puppetry comics in 1955. His work was continuously printed from 1955 to 2010 by various publishers, including Melodi, Elex Media Komputindo, and Erlina using both regular and hard covers. Kosasih is widely regarded as the Father of Indonesian Comics. The author's works primarily focus on Hindu literature, specifically the *Mahabharata*, as well as traditional Indonesian literature, particularly from the Javanese tradition.

Teguh Santosa (Figure 1b) is a comic artist who adapted the epic *Mahabharata* into comics. Teguh Santosa's work presents a complete aesthetic form of inking with meticulous story research. The aesthetic strategy employed in Teguh Santosa's comics can be understood as a transformational approach that he underwent during his social, cultural, and literary research journey (Ajidarma, 2021, p. 153).

Another noteworthy comic artist is Gun Gun (Figure 1c), a Balinese creator of the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic. He produced an 18-book *Mahabharata* comic series, covering the story from *Adi Parwa* to *Swargarohana Parwa*. Gun Gun was awarded a scholarship to study cartooning and animation at the Ever Green Film Company in Tokyo, Japan in 1990, making him the first Balinese cartoonist to study animation in Japan. Through studying animation, Gun Gun gained knowledge related to the shooting angles in each comic or cartoon he created.

4.1 Visual Identity Articulation

In the comic scene of *Mahabharata* epic puppets, the marker is not only a source of conflict between the dominant and the dominated, but it is also mutually negotiated as one of the process markers in the visual display. The term 'negotiation' implies the mutual entanglement of opposing camps in an ongoing process of give and take. As an instance of the production of meaning, negotiation involves cultural exchange as a crossover of production and reception processes. Realism-dominated visualisation has been the prevailing style among comic artists in Indonesia. However, the existence of dance drama references with diverse cultural backgrounds has challenged this hegemony and added visual interest to puppet comics. The negotiation between visual styles is on going, as Western comics' realist style continues to hold sway. Although still categorised as realism, the depiction of the body appears to reference the philosophical background of *wayang kulit* (leather puppet) symbolism, where the body is not physical but ideological.

The epistemological level shows the appearance of the comic characters of *Mahabharata* epic puppets, by R. A. Kosasih, which refers to *wayang orang* and *wayang golek*. The Pandawa and other characters refer to *wayang orang* in West Java (Figure 2). The Kurawa characters appear in a realistic form that refers to *wayang golek*, which is a type of puppet typical of West Java where R. A. Kosasih, the comic artist resides. Politically, it shows that there is a realistic form that refers to *wayang golek* that represents the habitus where the comic artist grew up. The local cultural value of West Java is strong in the visual articulation of the *puppet*. This display aims to showcase the value of regional culture and bring readers closer to *puppet* comics. The factor of strengthening regional cultural identity is a consideration in presenting the *Mahabharata* puppet comic.

The visualisation of characters in Kosasih's *Mahabharata* epic puppet comics presents a local identity through puppetry and a global identity through realistic visuals. This can be seen as an example of the influence of Western hegemony on comics. As Kosasih is a pioneer of puppet comics, he created a new visual language by combining realism with traditional symbolism from dance. The enhancement of realistic visual displays cannot be dissociated from the impact of 'Western' comics that had previously hegemonised Indonesia.
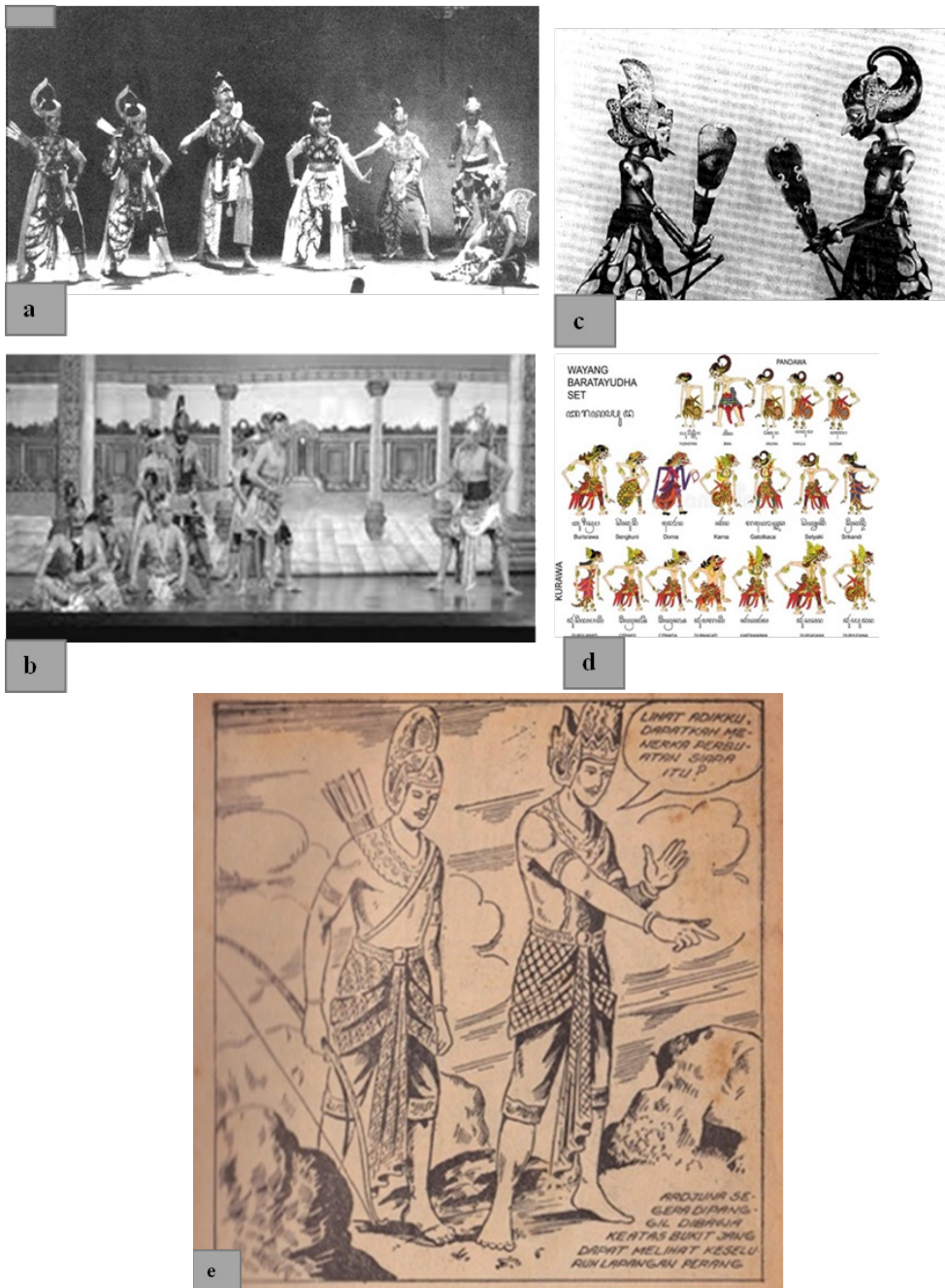
Figure 2. a. Wayang orang Priangan in the play Jaya Perbangsa, from left: Sadewa, Nakula, Batara Krishna, Semiaji, Arjuna, Bima and Gatutkaca are seated; b. Wayang orang of Surakarta; c. Sundanese wayang golek with Duryudana and Bima characters; d. *Mahabharata* wayang kulit; e. Illustration of Kosasih's Comic of *Mahabharata* Wayang (Source: Mataram, 2015, https://bit.ly/3LcaJEj and Kosasih's Comic of 1966).

The tradition of realist character visualisation was carried on in puppet comics. During the 1980s, when the market was dominated by translated Japanese manga comics, there was an 'interruption' and nostalgia for puppet comics. This was the case when Teguh Santosa's comic of *Mahabharata* puppets were published as a series in Ananda magazine in 1984 and reissued in 2009 as a comic book volume. Teguh Santosa bases his comic characters on the East Javanese *wayang kulit* and *wayang wong*, but always adds his own interpretations. He presents them by referring to realistic human characters and the Indonesian puppets approach. In his notes on the comic, he depicts characters wearing Indonesian puppetry clothing and adds his own imaginative touches (Santosa, 2009, p. 76).

> Now we turn to the Indian version (the original *Mahabharata*) which is the main line of the *Mahabharata* story that I have been telling you since the beginning! But with the consideration of being more 'communicative', I present the costumes with the mecca of puppetry clothing in our country, combined with my own imagination to make it more flexible for presentation in the form of comics (*cergam*).

Figure 3 illustrates the correlation between East Javanese shadow puppets and the characters of Bima and Arjuna in the *Mahabharata* puppet comics. The *supit urang*, which is a headdress covering part of the hair, is a common feature of these two *pandawa* characters in *wayang orang* or in comic characters by Kosasih and Gun Gun. However, Teguh Santosa's depiction of the Bima and Arjuna characters shows the *supit urang* directly arching the hair. Teguh Santosa's drawings are visually distinct due to their similarity to East Javanese shadow puppets. This presentation of East Javanese cultural identity serves to preserve the value of local culture in the face of Western hegemony in the global comic industry. Additionally, this creative approach serves as a visual marker of Santosa's personal identity.

Depiction of the puppetry comics is not limited to East Java nor is it exclusive to comic artist Teguh Santosa. In Bali, comic artist and cartoonist Gun Gun created a Mahabharata story consisting of 18 *parwa* (parts), which are contained in 18 comic books. The visual depiction of the comic uses a realist style that refers to three-dimensional images.

Amidst the growing popularity of online games and digital cartoon films, comic artist Gun Gun published the epic puppet comic *Mahabharata*. This work of his was a bold move in a time when comics were becoming less popular. However, with the support of the Hindu Council (Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia or PHDI) of Bali Province, Gun Gun's *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic

has managed to showcase the universal teachings of Hinduism across time. Gun Gun and Kosasih's *Mahabharata* puppet comics are distributed not only in Bali but also in Surabaya, Lombok, and throughout Indonesia. Teguh Santosa's comics are also distributed abroad with their English prints.
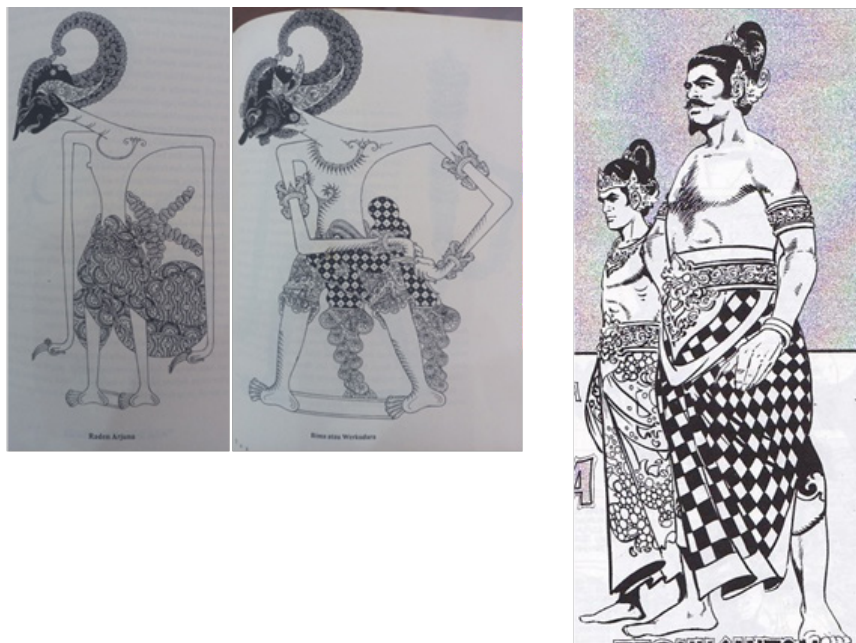

Figure 3. Javanese shadow puppet forms of Arjuna and Bima and Teguh Santosa's depiction of the comic characters (Source: Budiharjo, 1997 and Santosa, 2009)

Comics represent all senses through images that can be absorbed with one sense. Through the character of those lines, Gun Gun's epic *Mahabharata* puppet comics represent a world of touching emotions. With the presence of Gun Gun's epic *Mahabharata* puppet comics, the position of comics can be seen as a 'high-class' work today. The identity that we can read from Gun Gun's *Mahabharata* comic is the presence of characters that depict realistic forms that are very different from the puppet characters we have seen so far. However, the depiction still shows a visual representation of Balinese puppets (Figure 4).

Regarding puppetry culture, the strategic level in comics demonstrates that a realistic visual identity, derived from Western culture, produces new visuals. The visual display of three prominent comic artists (R. A. Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun) articulates identity through three interrelated aspects. Firstly, the search for an emerging identity cannot deny the existence of the dominant local identity, as seen in the comic panels that tell the story of the *Mahabharata*. Secondly, while Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun aim to

return to the ancient or original *Mahabharata*, their creation actually presents an alternative to the dominant local identity. The text discusses the enrichment of puppetry culture through the availability of two versions of *Mahabharata* – the Indian and Indonesian (Javanese and Balinese) versions. This creates a dual identity for the readers.

Figure 4. Balinese wayang kulit and the depiction of Yudistira and Bima in the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic created by Gun Gun (Source: Budiharjo, 1997 and Gun Gun, 2014)

Thirdly, with a more exclusive focus on originality, beyond the traditional culture limited to primordial society, comics that employ puppetry may be inferior in creating a local atmosphere. However, with comic books as a mass media and the national language Bahasa Indonesia as the language of instruction, comics are able to be widely accepted by the public. The works of R. A. Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun's *Mahabharata* stories are now superior to local classics. The strengthening of regional culture is a common motivation for the three comic artists who created the *Mahabharata* puppet comics with an Indonesian twist.

4.2 Verbal Identity Articulation

Verbal identity demonstrates regionalism as a component of comic identity in the creation of puppetry comics. Identity politics focuses on the establishment and preservation of cultural rights to support identity claims in society and culture, through coalition formation where shared values are present. Although the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic by R. A. Kosasih is generally in Indonesian, the first print still includes words with regional nuances. The epistemological level demonstrates the presence of certain words, such as '*Jaji*' read '*Yayi*' which means 'brother', '*biyung*' which means 'mother', and '*kandjeng eyang*' which means 'grandfather'. In his comics, R. A. Kosasih employs Sundanese language, such as the word '*sampurasun*', as a means of expressing verbal identity. The use of Sundanese words in the comic serves to *familiarise* the story from India

and make it more relatable to national and local readers. The text includes regional values as part of the dialogue between characters in the comic, without presenting any political bias.

Figure 5. Verbal articulation of West Javanese (Sundanese) regional language use in the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic, by R. A. Kosasih (Source: Kosasih, 1966)

In *Mahabharata* epic puppet comics, Kosasih uses local language (Figure 5) as a creative strategy to enhance readers' connection to the story. The use of local languages helps readers feel closer to the *Mahabharata* story, which originates from India. The articulation strategy that portrays the local language as a representation of Indonesia highlights the efforts of the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic to reclaim the concept of Indonesianness from the dominance of Indian narratives.

Teguh Santosa's comic on *Mahabharata* puppets also includes Javanese language (Figure 6). The verbal text in the dialogues between characters is presented in a San Serief font style. In addition to Indonesian, there are also many regional languages or Javanese. Verbal texts in the form of character utterances include '*kanjeng ibu*', which means respect for the mother, '*kangmas*', a term for brothers, and '*gemah ripah loh jinawi*', which means the community's life prospers due to the abundance of blessings. In his comic, Santosa also mentions the term '*Sang Hyang Widhi*'. The term appears when Drestaketu meets Salwa's character, and Drestaketu states that 'Supala's death was predestined by *Sang Hyang Widhi*'.

Figure 6. Verbal articulation of Javanese language use in the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic by Teguh Santosa (Source: Santosa, 2009)

The verbal text in the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic, by Gun Gun, uses Indonesian and Balinese languages. Words with Balinese identity characteristics are read in comic word balloons or as explanations of certain events. Phrases such as '*Kerahayuan Jagat*' in the sentence '*Upacara untuk Kerahayuan Jagat, ini pernah dilakukan Ramawijaya dan Sang Bharata*' ('The ceremony for '*Kerahayuan Jagat*', that was performed by Ramawijaya and Sang Bharata'), means to bring about the salvation of the world. On the same page there is also the phrase '*arta brana*'. This phrase is used in the sentence '*Jangan Khawatir! Datanglah kalian ke Gunung Himawan, di sana ada sisa arta brana para pandita yang dulu melakukan Yadnya!*' ('Do not worry! Come to Mount Himawan, there are the remains of the '*arta brana*' of the priests who used to perform Yadnya!') (Figure 7). The use of Balinese language '*arta brana*' (wealth) and '*yadnya*' (ritual) serves to convey advice, teachings, religious guidance, and traditions to readers.

Figure 7. The Use of Balinese language in the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic, by
Gun Gun (Source: Gun Gun, 2014)

Mahabharata epic puppet comics, created by three prominent Indonesian comic artists, not only use Indonesian but also incorporates their respective regional languages. R. A. Kosasih uses Sundanese in his comic, Teguh Santosa uses Javanese, and Gun Gun uses Balinese. This highlights the richness of Indonesian culture and promotes the use of regional languages as part of

the Indonesian identity through the medium of comics. Although the story of *Mahabharata* originates from India and the comic storytelling style is predominantly Western, the puppetry comics created by these three leading artists successfully blend both cultures. The comics continue to promote the significance of Indonesian culture.

4.3 Narrative Articulation

The term 'narration' in this context refers to a story. After reading the works of the three comic artists, it is evident that each artist has a unique way of presenting the narrative of the *Mahabharata* epic in their puppetry comics. In Indonesian culture, puppets are considered a way of life and serve as role models. They are not merely a form of entertainment without any purpose or meaning, as they also have educational and cultural significance. Puppets provide various examples that are believed by the Indonesian (Javanese) people.

The introduction of *Mahabharata* to Indonesia is based on an Indian text. Within this text, there is a story about a woman named Drupadi who has five husbands, known as *Panca Pandawa*, namely Yudistira, Bima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva. The story of Drupadi's polyandrous marriage originates from India. However, the story in this text differs from the story in the *Mahabharata* puppet comic by R. A. Kosasih and Teguh Santosa (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Drupadi's wedding story in two different Mahabharata puppetry comics: one by R. A. Kosasih (left) and the other by Teguh Santosa (right) (Source: Kosasih, 1966 dan Santosa, 2009)

The *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic, by R. A. Kosasih and Teguh Santosa, recounts the story of the appearance of the character Drupadi in the puppetry version of the *Mahabharata* epic. It begins with the Panchala Kingdom holding a competition to find a husband for Princess Drupadi. The winner would be the contestant who could stretch a heavy bow and hit the predetermined target. Arjuna, upon hearing of the competition, decided to participate. Warriors from various other countries also flocked to Panchala to take part in the competition.

Arjuna won the competition, but his victory made other knights jealous. This was because he had disguised himself as a '*brahmana*', which was deemed inappropriate for competing to win the king's daughter. Arjuna then quietly withdrew from the field and returned home with Drupadi to meet his mother.

Upon hearing from Drestadyumna (sometimes written Drestadjumena) that Arjuna had won the competition, King Drupada finally invited the Pandawa and Dewi Kunti to Panchala. Upon hearing from Drestadyumna that Arjuna had won the competition, King Drupada finally invited the Pandawa and Dewi Kunti to Panchala. Upon their arrival, the Pandawa revealed their true identities and proposed that they each marry Drupadi. This revelation left Drupada both shocked and disappointed.

Yudistira explained that the Pandawa would always live together and swore to share everything fairly. This vow was given on the advice of Dewi Kunti and could not be broken. In the Indian version of the story, King Drupada eventually accepted the Pandawa and arranged a wedding ceremony for them and Draupadi. It is evident that in the Indian version, Draupadi was married to five husbands, indicating that she practiced polyandry.

The version of the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comics, by R. A. Kosasih and Teguh Santosa, differs from the Indian one. In Kosasih's and Sentosa's version, it is stated that Drupadi is monogamous, meaning she is married only to Yudistira, and not described as polyandrous. After the competition, the Pandawa held a meeting to decide who would marry Drupadi. Although Arjuna won the competition, he did not want to marry before his eldest brother Yudistira, so he gave Drupadi to him. This is in addition to the advice given by Krisna, which Yudistira accepted.

It is evident that Drupadi is only married to Yudistira, not to the five male Pandavas. The puppetry *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic, by R. A. Kosasih and Teguh Santosa, presents a different story from the original Indian version. The adaptation of the narrative that portrays Drupadi as not being polyandrous reflects Indonesian culture, which does not justify polyandrous marriages. This is in line with the Indonesian Act No. 1 of 1974 on Marriage. Negotiation regarding this in Drupadi's story reflects Indonesian culture and identity.

Polyandry is prohibited by Indonesian religions for normative, juridical, psychological, and sociological reasons.

Polyandrous marriages are prohibited in Indonesia for several reasons. Firstly, from a normative perspective, polyandry is legally haram based on the Qur'anic verse al-Nisa [4]: 24, and al-Sunnah hadith narrated by Ahmad. Secondly, from a juridical perspective, polyandry contradicts article 3 paragraph 1 of the Marriage Act 1974, which states that a wife can only be married to one husband (the principle of monogamy). Thirdly, from a psychological perspective, polyandry is contrary to human nature and can disturb one's peace of mind. Fourthly, from a sociological perspective, polyandry can cause problems in both the family and society, and is even contrary to socio-cultural values (Hayati, 2018, p. 181).

Physically, Drupadi is depicted as a beautiful dark-skinned girl in Javanese puppets. She is known for her noble, wise, patient, conscientious, and loyal character traits. In the storyline, Drupadi's loyalty is symbolised by her having only Yudistira as her husband, which differs from the original Indian story. The *Mahabharata* puppetry comic by R. A. Kosasih and Teguh Santosa portrays Drupadi as the sole wife of Yudistira, the eldest Pandawa. This aligns with the cultural expectations of the comic's Indonesian-speaking readers.

The concept of paternalism is evident in the division of roles between men and women and the cultural expectation of distinct gender roles. In Javanese society, there are certain paternalistic beliefs that position the wife as '*konco wingking*', which translates to 'friend, colleague, partner behind the scenes', often referring to the kitchen located at the back of the house. Semiotically, this term implies that women are relegated to the role of friends who share their difficulties, and are confined to the kitchen with a 'second class' position.

The origin of the term '*konco wingking*' to refer to women is stated in the holy book. According to the text, the first human being created by God was a man, followed by a woman who was taken from the man's left rib. The text implies that women are inferior to men, comparing them to the left hand.

It appears that these norms and regulations are only present in the Javanese public sphere. The concept of women is viewed as 'inferior' or of lower status than men, whether based on the perceptions of Javanese men or women themselves. The Javanese culture also upholds the principle of respect in social interactions, including in marital relationships, with regards to the positions of men and women. In Javanese families, the mother often holds the real authority, while the father is typically the one who receives respect.

The starting point for the change in the storyline in this comic is the omission of the part where Arjuna has to share Drupadi as a prize for the competition due to Kunti's (the mother) command. The Javanese puppetry

creation version of the story tells of Drupadi, the daughter of Prabu Drupada, who was made into a contest. In contrast, the Hindu-Indian version of the *Mahabharata* records that Arjuna was the winner of the contest and had to share his wife with his brothers.

In some cultures, women are not allowed to practice polyandry and are often relegated to a secondary position. The absence of polyandry in Indonesian culture (Martinus, 2022, p. 87) explains why it was not highlighted in the real marriage story of Drupadi by Indonesian comic artists in their comics, who instead portrayed it as a typical marriage.

The comic *Sri Asih* (1954) by R. A. Kosasih is cited as evidence of the lack of acceptance of women as 'powerful beings' in Indonesia. Sri Asih's dominance over male characters is a recurring theme in the comic. Sri Asih has become a prominent figure in Indonesian female hero narratives. The eponymous character possesses superhuman strength, the ability to fly, and magical powers that enable her to defeat male criminals. Despite Sri Asih being dressed in traditional Javanese clothing, the comic was rejected by teachers and readers in Indonesia due to the perception that the character was a Western imitation of Wonder Woman, a super-powered female comic character from the West. It is considered a comic that does not align with Indonesian culture. Therefore, R. A. Kosasih incorporated Indonesian culture into comics by transforming the *Mahabharata* into a comic while considering Drupadi's position in the story. Drupadi is a significant character in the *Mahabharata* story. She is married to five men, known as Pandawa. However, in R. A. Kosasih's adaptation, the storyline was altered to show Drupadi marrying only Yudistira. This change was made to convey the message of Indonesian identity.

Teguh Santosa, the next generation, also used the same plot as R. A. Kosasih by portraying Drupadi as only married to Yudistira. However, this differs from the approach taken by comic artist Gun Gun, who presents the *Mahabharata* story according to the original Indian version. Gun Gun aims to restore the Indian story to the puppetry comic. In his version, Drupadi is depicted as polyandrous, married to five men (see Figure 9).

In an interview, Gun Gun stated that the focus of his comic is not on Draupadi's position as a polyandrist, which was not of her own preference (Interview, March 15, 2023). The comic aims to present not only a great epic story but also to convey the values of the teachings of '*karma phala*'. The emphasis is on the value of '*karma phala*', or the law of cause and effect, which is the central theme of this story. The *Mahabharata* story aims to provide readers, especially Balinese, with a more contextualised understanding of events dominated by Balinese cultural icons.

Gun Gun's comics focus on the religious teachings of the *Mahabharata* epic. The character of Drupadi, who marries five men, is a result of her past '*karma*' and her request to the gods for a perfect man. However, perfection cannot be found in one individual, but rather in the group of men known as the Pandawa in the *Mahabharata* story. Therefore, in Gun Gun's epic puppet comic of the *Mahabharata*, Drupadi is married to five men.

Figure 9. Drupadi's marriage story in the epic puppet comic of Mahabharata, by Gun Gun (Source: Gun Gun, 2014)

Comics are often viewed as cultural representations that serve as ideological battlegrounds. The *Mahabharata* puppetry comics by R. A. Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun demonstrate loyalty to literary sources that refer

to India. They also negotiate with actual contemporary puppetry mythology as played by the puppeteers. This reflects a separate inter-discourse struggle. On the one hand, it creates a monument of creativity. On the other hand, it shows the potential of comic media to be examined as a form of continuity of cultural conversation. The article examines the position of the *Mahabharata* epic puppets comics by three comic artists (R. A. Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun) using Hall's articulation theory and Gramsci's hegemony theory. It argues that these comics, which reflect an Indonesian identity, are a product of the negotiation between Western, Indian and Indonesian cultures. The article suggests that the presence of puppetry comics can be attributed to the cultural hegemony of the dominant class.

5. Conclusion

Mahabharata puppet comics by three prominent Indonesian comic artists, R. A. Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun, demonstrate that the exclusive puppetry culture can merge with the popular culture of comics, which is widely consumed. The presence of *Mahabharata* epic puppet comics in Indonesia since the 1950s has at least two meanings. Firstly, the *Mahabharata* epic puppet comic represents a new milestone for the development of comics in Indonesia after the ban during the Old Order era in 1954. The *Mahabharata* epic puppetry comic is a unique form of identity articulation, particularly when viewed through the works of three prominent Indonesian comic artists with diverse cultural backgrounds. Drawing on their backgrounds in Sundanese, Javanese, and Balinese culture, Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun, respectively, incorporate their cultural characteristics to form the unique and diverse cultural identity of Indonesia, represented by the phrase 'Bhinneka Tunggal Ika', unity in diversity.

Since 1955, there has been a contestation of signs for puppetry comics in the name of identity politics, with the aim of achieving an ideological representation of puppetry culture. However, it is important to note that theory has defined that it is impossible to isolate one unique identity. When identity matters, identity politics becomes the driver of identity projects. The visual display of puppets in narrating the *Mahabharata* epic refers to puppets as a part of Indonesian culture, as depicted in comics. The puppet visualisation has become an integral part of Indonesian culture, widely accepted as a symbol of the country, despite its origins in comics.

The *Mahabharata* puppet comic, created by three prominent Indonesian comic artists, is written in Indonesian. This is a significant achievement as the *Mahabharata* has become an integral part of the regional culture, at least, of Java and Bali, as evidenced by *wayang kulit*, *sendratari*, and *wayang wong*, all of which are performed exclusively in regional languages. The comic, created by the

three prominent Indonesian comic artists, has expanded the boundaries and forms of the *Mahabharata* puppetry comic's presence on the Indonesian national stage. This has made the *Mahabharata* accessible to a wider audience, regardless of social status, through the use of the Indonesian language.

Puppet comics by R. A. Kosasih, Teguh Santosa, and Gun Gun are considered guardians of cultural values. They convey fair messages and good teachings. However, despite their cultural significance, the comics also contain economic ideology. Historically, comics were banned in Indonesia before the birth of puppet comics due to their perceived negative influence on children, as they contained Western cultural values.

Moreover, the emergence of puppet comics revitalised comic production, as they have become recognised as a form of Indonesian cultural comics. Puppet, traditionally performed by a puppeteer throughout the night, can also be enjoyed in the form of comic books, which convey the teachings and moral values of puppetry stories. Puppet comics have an economic dimension through their production, distribution, and consumption, all of which involve business calculations. Additionally, these comics promote noble values.

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