

# Democratising the Literary Experience: Metafiction in the Novels of Agusta Wibisono

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## **AGUSTA WIBISONO AND METAFICTION**

This paper is a study of the intersection of text, context and presentation in Agusta Wibisono's two novels based on the wayang shadow puppet theatre of Central Java, *Balada Narasoma* (The Ballad of Narasoma) (1990) and *Balada Cinta Abimanyu dan Lady Sundari* (The Ballad of the Love of Abimanyu and Lady Sundari) (1990). It should be observed from the outset that in the field of modern Indonesian literary studies Agusta Wibisono is a virtually unknown figure, and in Indonesia his two novels are long out of print and now extremely hard to find. The publishing house responsible for the novels' initial print run, Pustakakarya Grafikatama, is now defunct. Adding to the enigma surrounding this man, Agusta Wibisono is in fact a pseudonym for a writer and a pilot in the Indonesian airforce, Mohammad Agus Suhadi.

Agus Suhadi was born on 16 February 1966 in Kediri, East Java, and in the 1980s he majored in journalism at Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung. In 1989 Agus Suhadi published *Humor itu Serious* (Humour is Serious), a study on the role of humour in Indonesian society, highlighted by a chapter on humour in wayang mbeling (parodic literary interpretations of the wayang shadow puppet theatre). Although this study, like others of its kind, is predominantly based on a semi-New Criticist content analysis of wayang parodies, it is distinguished by a survey of readers of the genre. Despite the small survey sample, Suhadi was able to argue that on the whole the reception of wayang mbeling narratives has been extremely positive, mainly due to the combination of the wayang with humour and sociopolitical satire. These aspects of the wayang mbeling genre are key elements in the two novel-length wayang parodies by Agus Suhadi's 'alter-ego', Agusta Wibisono.

One of the most humorous aspects of the novels of Agusta Wibisono is the presence of self-reflexivity, an international literary phenomenon better known as metafiction. What is metafiction? "Metafiction", observes Patricia Waugh, 'is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality' (Waugh, 1984:2). By taking fiction-writing, or fictionality, as its subject matter, metafiction reveals and critiques its own methods of construction, as a means of highlighting the flexibility, instability and lack of fixed identity of not only fiction, but also of reality itself. Metafiction, or, to borrow Will Derks' phrase, 'narrative inversion', is a relatively common phenomenon in the oral literary tradition of Indonesia and Malaysia (Derks, 1994: 713). However, according to G.L. Koster and Henri Chambert-Loir, who have discussed self-consciousness in a corpus of narrative texts - including humorous wayang parodies - that appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century in colonial Batavia, self-conscious narration is a recent phenomenon (Koster, 1986: 73-99; Chambert-Loir, 1991: 87-114). In terms of the history of the

wayang shadow puppet theatre, metafictional moments are also regarded as a recent development (Clark, 2001: 130-168).

In Agusta Wibisono's *Balada Cinta Abimanyu dan Lady Sundari* and *Balada Narasoma*, a variety of literary techniques self-consciously reveal the 'fictionality' of the texts, emphasising their constructed and parodic nature. When examined in terms of the social, literary and political context of the texts in question, these humorous metafictional moments - like self-reflexivity throughout the world - embody a certain subversive intent. The 'subversive' nature of metafiction is supported by the observation that an increasing number of commentators have sought to forge links between radical literary practices (such as metafiction) and radical politics (Ommundsen, 1993: 85). Inspired by post-structuralists such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, not to mention earlier theorists and writers such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Bertholt Brecht, these commentators have argued that by calling attention to its own processes of construction, metafictional texts point to the cultural and ideological codes informing the construction termed as 'reality'. It therefore works, as Linda Hutcheon argues, to 'dedoxify' our cultural representations and their undeniable political import' (Hutcheon, 1984: 3). Wenche Ommundsen adds to this argument by saying that by 'denaturalising cultural conventions, reflexivity then becomes the tool of a radical cultural critique, a critique aimed at unmasking our modes of representation and their ideologically constructed centres [...] the reflexive text, by highlighting the 'constructedness' of texts and their contexts, liberates the reader to intervene, politically, in these processes' (Ommundsen, 1993: 86). In accordance with this view, Waugh argues that

metafictional deconstruction has not only provided novelists and their readers with a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative; it has also offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems (Waugh, 1984: 9).

In the context of New Order Indonesia the use of metafiction as a mode of deconstructing 'reality' has wide-ranging social and political ramifications. The recognition and rejection of the ideologically constructed hegemony of the New Order regime could arguably be considered as an important emotional and intellectual step in preparing the ground for the regime's eventual demise. For this reason, I would argue that metafiction in the novels of Agusta Wibisono can be considered as key elements of a carefully crafted discursive attempt to undermine and blur the distinction between the 'fiction' of a parodic 'wayang world' and the 'reality' of New Order Indonesia, ultimately as a means of challenging and subverting the authoritarian foundations and hierarchical cultural ideologies of the New Order regime.

## **BLURRING BOUNDARIES**

In both *Balada Narasoma* and *Balada Cinta Abimanyu dan Lady Sundari* the intertextual references to the wayang world are dominant. However, the precise contours of the reader-writer relationship, not to mention the character-writer relationship, are blurred, and the multi-genre nature of the novels themselves, defying definition, have a hybridising effect. Because the novels are variously depicted as novels, wayang performances, lectures, movies, tours and radio-plays, then principal actors within the metafictional

drama become writers, dalang (wayang shadow puppeteers), puppets, movie actors, movie directors, critics, tourists and sound engineers. Similarly, readers are also included, being addressed as readers, viewers, listeners and note-taking students. Therefore, whilst the author may from time to time attempt to exert his authority over the narrative in which he figures, the provisional roles of narrator, character and reader ensure that no-one – including, it appears, the author – has absolute authority over the narrative in which they participate. Furthermore, mirroring democratic political systems throughout the world, the balance of power is both egalitarian and precarious: no-one has the ultimate and sole power to narrate or to interpret, and the roles of writer, character and reader are sufficiently flexible as to allow each the right to accept, decline or comment upon the roles offered by their counterparts within the text itself.

This is not to say that the playful postmodern author-figure of Agusta Wibisono's novels does not attempt to assert his authorial power. Agusta Wibisono decides to emphasise the narrator's 'authority' by destroying the fictional illusion in the first stages of its construction. For example, the first page of *Balada Cinta Abimanyu dan Lady Sundari* is spent revealing the 'mystery' behind the Vice-Chancellor of Universitas Terbuka (Open University) granting permission for the establishment of a bus terminal at Blok M. Why begin a novel supposedly based on the romance between wayang heroes Abimanyu and Siti Sundari in such bizarre fashion? In a direct address to the reader, the narrator explains:

Right, you, o readers, giving me the honour of your attention (read: who I am honouring), you don't need to worry about whether or not it was the Rector of Universitas Terbuka who made the ruling about the bus terminal at Blok M. You know that was just my trick to start this story! Honest! You see, the hardest part is beginning the story. It's true! If you don't believe me, just go ask some authors. (p. 6)

Here we find an attempt to overlap the authorial voice with the narrating one, a common technique in metafictional writing whereby the narrator becomes an ambiguous and ambivalent literary figure. However, the narrator of Wibisono's novels is no all-powerful deity, controlling what Marie Maclean terms as the texts's 'strategic battleground' between narrator and narratee, or between author and reader (Maclean, 1988: 15). In Wibisono's two novels the author, who in fiction and literary theory is generally portrayed as an authoritarian figure limiting the text's potential for meaning, is challenged and forced to give ground both by the multiple and shifting genres of the texts themselves and by the readers and characters.

The ambiguous conflation of Wibisono's author's voice with the narrator's voice is confounded by ambiguity regarding the interchangeable status of the narrator himself. One moment he is a narrator and a writer (as above), the next a lecturer or a dalang. In the following passage the narrator (as dalang) explains how it could be that an unknown boxer from the wayang's Kingdom of Mathura could defeat boxing champion Mike Tyson:

Dear readers, I apologise, once again I apologise. You have to know that in matters such as this, THE PUPPETEER is everything...And, [Mike Tyson] really could be beaten! Mike Tyson really could be beaten!!! You, perhaps, are asking: how could this be? It can be, you know. THE PUPPETEER ensured that Tyson would be defeated so that the world would know that Mike Tyson actually can be beaten! Who beat him? THE PUPPETEER. Me, ha.. ha.. ha.. haaa... (p. 81)

Elsewhere, the narrator takes on the persona of a lecturer, teaching a course on the history of the wayang mythology, which is based on Indian epics such as the Mahabharata:

In last week's lecture I explained the way in which in international geopolitics Lord Salyapati had a tendency to side with the Pandawa as opposed to the Kurawa. Even though, at the same time, the Kurawa ruler was his own son-in-law. Today's lecture will be taken up with more on the Kurawa. Get your notes ready! (p. 94)

Earlier, the narrator is not so much a narrator of a novel, or even a lecturer or a puppeteer, but rather a 'behind-the-scenes' movie critic:

'Dad?!'

'Soma?!'

'Daaad?!'

'Somaaa?!'

'Daaaaaaaaadd....!'

'Somaaaaaaaaaaaa.....!'

Father and son left their respective positions, rushed over to... embrace each other! The background music to this dramatic scene was Song Theme of The Six Million Dollar Man. The reason being that although the distance between the two of them was just 10 metres, when they were running (to embrace each other) it was like Lee Majors in slow-motion on TV. So it was sloooooowed down. (p. 87)

The critic's role is embraced on a number of occasions, most noticeably when the impact of the background music, as part of a radio performance, is analysed within the text itself:

Listening to his sister's whimpering which consisted of some molecules of sadness, Narasoma felt crushed. He cried as well. Touched. He held his sister lovingly (Background music: Chariots of Fire by Jon & Vangelish [sic]. This choice of music truly brought a touching sense of sadness to the scene of Narasoma hugging his sister Madrim. 99% of the radio audience got carried away by this atmosphere, which was brilliantly choreographed by a joint effort between the director and music director. They all wept uncontrollably). (p. 72-73)

It goes without saying that such a variety of dramatic roles embodied by a single narrator undermines not only the authority of the narrator but also the notion that Wibisono's novels are novels at all, in the strict sense of the word. As noted earlier, Balada Narasoma and Balada Cinta Abimanyu dan Lady Sundari are far more than novels. In fact, they are a fictional gado-gado [mixed salad] of wayang, literary criticism, television commentaries, radio plays, lectures and journalism. This modal gado-gado converges contemporary and earlier discursive paradigms, in the process defeating the reader's expectations about all of them.

## **THE 'FREEDOM-INDUCING TEXT'**

The frustration of conventional expectations, which thereby calls attention to the reader's role in the construction of the fictional universe, is often cited as a model for the 'freedom-inducing text', which acts as a metaphor for the postmodern dispersal of meaning, which ultimately favours indeterminacy and fluidity over adherence to form and structure. In her study of metafiction, Linda Hutcheon describes the process in the following way:

The unsettled reader is forced to scrutinize his concepts of art as well as his life values. Often he must revise his understanding of what he reads so frequently that he comes to question the very possibility of understanding. In doing so he might be freed from enslavement not only to the empirical, but also to his own set patterns of thought and imagination (Hutcheon, 1984: 150).

The freedom Hutcheon has in mind, however, is a 'forced' liberation. The reader has no real choice: 'He is assaulted, frustrated in his normal novelistic expectations. The author seems to want to change the nature of literature by altering the nature of the reader's participation in it' (Hutcheon, 1984: 150). Nevertheless, without coaxing the reader on-side, the metafictional author's political intentions cannot be fully realised. For this reason, in terms of realising the latent democratic potential of Wibisono's texts, the problematisation of the 'traditional' role of the reader as a passive bystander is crucial.

Significantly, Wibisono's novels stage the literary act as a collaborative project. On numerous occasions the narrator transgresses conventional text-reader relationships and involves the implied reader by directly addressing him or her. The following quote is just one of many examples of this thematised relationship:

Perhaps you're asking: What happened to the fate of Abimanyu, who was the head of the journalism students' association, after he fled from Dwarawati? OK, let's have a look together. (p. 88)

At other times, the implied reader is not so much invited to participate in activating the text but rather threatened and cajoled:

[...] You still have the right to continue reading this story. I swear! Moreover, the story is actually just going to begin here. However, beforehand, I request and hope of you that while you read this story, don't even once try to interrupt it such as by farting, whatever your reason. In the meantime, just hold it in. If you ignore this warning, then something will happen to you, five years in the future. (p. 6)

Such playful banter between the narrator and the implied reader is certainly unusual in the field of modern Indonesian literature. Of course, it may well be merely a contemporary textual manifestation of the extremely intimate relationship between the *dalang* and the audience of a wayang performance, or alternatively between traditional story-tellers and their audience, or even writers of manuscripts and their audience (see, for example, Derks, 1994, and Maier, 1998). Indeed, Derks would argue that this sense of togetherness between performer and audience is merely a manifestation of Indonesia's 'orally oriented literary system' (Derks, 1996: 341-352). As observed by Derks, whilst poems and short stories appear in magazines and newspapers in abundance, they are also often performed publicly, and extra-textual comments - say comments on what inspired the poem or story, criticism of the sound system, or witty responses to hecklers - are a common trait of these performances. Gatherings at which poetry and short stories are read

and performed are a widespread phenomenon, and according to Derks the popularity of these gatherings, 'undeniably oral in nature [...] strongly suggests that literature in Indonesia really is something one listens to, in the company of others, rather than reads silently and in seclusion' (Derks, 1996: 345).

Extrapolating from these observations, Wibisono's attempt to break the novel-reader's 'solitary confinement' within the textual boundaries of the novel itself should not be treated as a naive aberration. By transforming the reading act to become an open and collaborative process between reader and writer, Wibisono is drawing upon the strong sense of togetherness dominant in Indonesia's orally-oriented literary system. In so doing he simultaneously reinvigorates the novel form by transforming and adapting it to Indonesia's orally oriented context.

One only needs to make a small mental leap to suppose that in an orally oriented literary system the relationship between author and literary critic need not be a cold and distant affair. Indeed, not content with deconstructing the boundaries between reader and writer, Agusta also conflates the role of writer with that of a literary critic. In the following passage, which also happens to be inscribed with Wibisono's trademark concern for the reader, the narrator provides his own criticism:

One day, Prince Narasoma was summoned to meet the King for a special function: the official opening of a government-funded primary school, with the wife of the Governor to cut the ribbon. Hey! That's a bit dodgy, what's going on? I'm sorry, when I was typing up this manuscript - on a computer you know! - I was pretty sleepy. Just imagine, it was 4:20am, and I hadn't even given my eyes a break! I didn't care though, for the sake of the royalties, ha..ha..ha... (p. 22)

Clearly the above quote - with its self-analytic overtone - can be perceived as pre-empting the critic's role as commentator. A passage such as this highlights Patricia Waugh's point that

the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinctions between 'creation' and 'criticism' and merges them into the concepts of 'interpretation' and 'deconstruction'(Waugh, 1984: 6).

Thus having been informed that Agusta Wibisono's fiction is cheap, badly written, and furthermore written only for the expected royalties, the critic's role is subsumed by the narrator's pre-emptive strike, and the writer's role is synthesised 'in a formal tension' with that of the critic. Most importantly, such metafictional antics embody the 'democratic' symbolic ruptures needed to spark off the 'democratisation' of the hierarchical wayang world, and by extension, the hierarchical political system of New Order Indonesia.

In other words, through the metafictional mode Wibisono simultaneously draws upon literary strategies that capture the irreverent and subversive momentum of postmodernism and the participatory nature of traditional cultural elements, ultimately as a means of rhetorically undermining the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of the New Order regime. It is not surprising, therefore, that Wibisono uses metafictional techniques to allow the puppets themselves to be given a high degree of autonomy, whereby they too, paradoxically, can self-reflexively participate in their own performance. A key literary strategy that Wibisono uses in order to reveal the fictive, literary



elements of his fiction is the bestowal of self-consciousness upon his characters. In *Balada Narasoma* the characters often reflect on their status as fictional entities, especially when they find themselves acting as mere mouth-pieces for the author. For example, when Setyawati is asked by her husband Narasoma about how deep her love is towards her husband and her father, she finds herself giving such a long-winded answer that she admits to being confused herself. The reason for this, she explains, is as follows:

'Whatever we want to talk about is entirely up to whoever is writing the story, you know. Well, the problem is that the one writing just wants to be funny all the time. So even if we have a bit of a momentum going to talk about something romantic and a little political, oh, I mean a little sad, yeah well the writer persists in giving our discussion a humorous edge. And just supposing the writer of this story wants to talk about philosophy, well we'll end up talking about something philosophical. Anyway, don't worry about it, we're just wayang puppets, whereas the guy writing this is the dalang. So 'we just give in to whatever the dalang wants!' (p. 46-7)

Here we find that the relationship between Setyawati and the author is conflated with the relationship between a puppet and a puppeteer. As a result, Setyawati's self-consciousness is tinged with a degree of resignation: as a puppet, she is unable to assert her autonomous identity, and she has no option other than to acquiesce to the tyrannical puppeteer's wishes. Again, the danger arises whereby the 'benevolent democracy' of metafictional novels can mask a return bid for authorial power. By allowing characters such as Setyawati just enough autonomous agency to admit that they are but mere puppets in the hands of the narrator, in the words of Ommundsen, 'the rhetoric of freedom becomes the means by which the playful author-figure of postmodern fiction enlists readerly cooperation in a new and not necessarily less dictatorial regime'(Ommundsen, 1993: 85).

However, in Wibisono's novels the metafictional 'rhetoric of freedom' cuts both ways. By situating the author's 'real' identity as creator of the text within the text, paradoxically he is at the same moment creating himself as a 'mere' character. Following this logic, one could argue that he is also annulling his 'power' as author over the world he is supposed to be creating. In *Balada Cinta Abimanyu dan Lady Sundari*, the extraordinary consequence of such a movement is that the narrator finds himself in an even worse position than his characters. This situation gives the impression that Agusta's fictional world, created by words on a page, exists autonomously, independently, and currently with the 'real' world. For example, at one point the narrator pauses to consider how much Maid Sud, the maid-servant of Lady Sundari, is paid:

Hey, by the way, how much is Maid Sud getting paid? 300 thousand a month! Bullshit, I'm getting way less! From book royalties, on average all a writer gets is just 100 thousand a month, and that's only if the books sell. You'd be better off being a servant than an author. But the difference is that a servant is from the lower sudro class, whereas an author is from the higher brahmono class. But, regardless of this, long live Maid Suuuud!!! (p. 31)

In an elaborate conceit, where the narrator is pushing to extremes the pretence of powerlessness, we see here how the autonomy of the textual world appears to undermine the narrator's authority. His conceit invites us to consider: is he a puppeteer or a puppet? Clearly the puppets themselves are not powerless because of the fact that they are 'mere' puppets. Indeed, the more the puppets assert their powerlessness, the more noticeable their identity and autonomy. Likewise, the true democratic 'power' of Agusta's self-

reflexive narrator lies in the fact that he is just another character, and a poorly paid character at that.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the passage quoted above, one could argue that in the metafictional novels of Agusta Wibisono the narrator is an accessible participant in the interaction between text and reader. The effect of this, which impacts directly on the texts' ultimate sociopolitical meaning, is that the reading process, in contrast to the wayang proper, becomes an interactive enterprise, where the role of the narrator is no more important than the role of reader, and, as we have seen, the metafictional character. However, it is worth bearing in mind that this 'puppet democracy' is not democratic per se. At most, it merely foreshadows the possibility of democracy. To be precise, the 'puppet democracy' of *Balada Narasoma* and *Balada Cinta Abimanyu dan Lady Sundari* is a carefully-measured pretence on the part of Agusta Wibisono. As I explained earlier, the puppets' power increases the more they allude to their powerlessness. Likewise, the more Wibisono's narrators participate in their own texts – even if they are bemoaning the fact that their literary characters are receiving more wages than themselves – the greater their presence, thus, paradoxically, the greater their authority. As if to confirm Ommundsen's words, what we may have here is 'a new and not necessarily less dictatorial regime'. Ultimately, if Agusta Wibisono's 'puppet democracy' could be considered as a symptom of the times and the changing society in which it appears, in New Order Indonesia democracy was very much still a distant, and problematic, proposition.

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