



## The Character of Bagong as a Symbol of the Lower-Class Society in Seno Nugroho's Wayang Kulit (Shadow Puppet) Performance

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to determine the clarification regarding the figure of Bagong as a symbol of the lower-class society in Seno Nugroho's wayang kulit performance. The results showed that the understanding of symbolic values in wayang kulit performance can be observed through the lakon (the plays) and their supporting elements framed in each scene within the performance. Through his creative inner space (freedom of expression), Seno Nugroho made the Bagong character a medium of social criticism that symbolizes the lower-class society. This study used qualitative method and interpretative data analysis technique to describe, narrate, and systematically describe the data regarding Bagong character as a symbol of the lower-class society in Seno Nugroho's wayang kulit performance. The data were collected using observation, interviews, and documentation studies.

**Keywords:** *Bagong; Seno Nugroho; Symbol; Wayang Kulit*

### **Introduction**

Art is an expression of cultural processes, so it is closely related to the "worldview" of the people of that culture. It is a world view in which people define life, take values and look for the basis for continuing to live, including assumptions about what is beautiful, what is good, what is right, and these deposits are values. According to Mudji Sutrisno and Chriest Verhaak in their book *Eстетика Filsafat Keindahan* (1993:6), there are two dimensions in art. First, the cultural dimension (independence). Art is an expression of the human cultural process, and culture on the one hand is a process of self-liberation. Second, the functional dimension. Culture is also functional for survival, so the size or value of a culture is not only useful, useful, functional, and efficient, but also freedom, which makes people more human.

Art is a symbolic part of culture that is never separated from the tension between conventions, namely the written and unwritten rules of creation (Dimiyati, 2004:81). As symbolic beings, humans can express what they feel, desire, and understand through symbols for the fabric of social interaction. Cassirer (1956), in Anggit Surya Jatnika (2017:94), stated that symbols are formed by cultured humans in the form of religion, philosophy, art, science, history, and language. Through this meaning, humans then take on their role in an ever-developing culture. The development of this culture is in line with the development of the mindset of the people in it. Changes and developments in every sector of people's

lives are of course a consequence of these cultural developments. Thus, in each culture, development and even understanding have become a framework of views regarding cultural products. This can be seen through the results of the culture itself, especially through the *wayang kulit* performance.

Various sources define *wayang kulit* performance as an art form that has a specific purpose with beauty and aesthetic values in it. While functionally, *wayang kulit* performance reflects the social conditions of a society in an era. This function is then used by the society in the next era. Based on its history, the function of *wayang kulit* performance has transformed from time to time. At first, it only function as a *tontonan* (show), *tatanan* (order), and *tuntunan* (guidance) (these are teachings or life guidelines for the Javanese people). Along with various developments, and the people's saturation with the arbitrariness of the rulers, *wayang kulit* performance has transformed. *Wayang kulit* then becomes a medium of social criticism. The *dalang* (puppet masters) which mostly come from the lower-class society now use *wayang kulit* as a medium to criticize the government for their injustice to the lower-class society.

*Wayang kulit* performance is widely used as a medium for social criticism because of its ability to disguise or or to stylize the true intentions and meanings, so that those who are criticized do not feel that they are being criticized directly. The social criticism generally flows and is conveyed through the characters presented in the *wayang* performance. One of the most famous puppeteers today is Seno Nugroho with his *Bagong* character. *Bagong* is an iconic figure which Seno Nugroho used to deliver his social criticism. Seno Nugroho's version of *Bagong* is different in terms of its character and sound. Seno Nugroho portrays *Bagong* as a symbol of the lower-class society who demands justice from the ruler. Even the various spontaneous humors displayed through *Bagong*'s character sometimes become controversial or viral. This is one of the uniqueness or creativity of Seno Nugroho in delivering a performance to communicate with the audience, so his audience can easily accept and understand what Seno wants to deliver. Seno Nugroho is one of the puppeteers who has succeeded in renewing the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) audience. Thus, this study aimed to find out the the clarity about the *Bagong* character as a symbol of the lower-class society in Seno Nugroho's *wayang kulit* performance.

## **Research Method**

This is a qualitative study which used an interpretative data analysis technique. This study focused on examining the *Bagong* character which became a symbol of the lower-class society in Seno Nugroho's *wayang kulit* performance. This study intended to describe, narrate, and explain data systematically on the phenomena studied based on data derived from audio-visual recordings, scientific journals, and interviews with informants or sources.

This study used textual approach and hermeneutic theory. The approach and theory were used to operationalize understanding and its relation to the interpretation of the text. Theoretically, a study needs to have three of the six branches of Schleimacher's hermeneutic classification: (1) *philosophical hermeneutics*, in which a study must be able to interpret broadly and deeply about the object and its interrelation with open, advanced, and forward-looking entities; (2) *dream analysis*, where the object consists of the construction of cultural symbols of society which at certain times are represented in everyday life; and (3) *social hermeneutics*, in which a study can carry out a basic understanding of the reciprocal relationship between the human person and social action, as well as the direction of the intended mentality development (Pitana, 2014:22).

Information about Seno Nugroho's artistic background and the development process of Seno Nugroho's *wayang kulit* performance was traced through interviews. The interview results in the form of informants' responses were then transcribed in writing so that they can be accessed and presented in the study as supporting data.

## Discussion

### The Character of *Bagong*

*Bagong* is one of *punakawan* (a group of puppet in Javanese *wayang kulit* story) members. *Punakawan* is derived from the word „*pana*’ which means understand, and *kawan* which means friend. The *Punakawan* are very identical to the *wayang kulit* story. They consist of four characters: *Semar*, *Gareng*, *Petruk*, and *Bagong*. In *wayang kulit* performance, *Punakawan* is an effective media to deliver message to the audience, and one of the most liked *Punakawan* members is *Bagong*. In *wayang kulit* performance, *Bagong* is the youngest child of *Semar* who was created from *Semar*'s own shadow. *Bagong* is depicted with rounded body, wide eyes, and thick lips. *Bagong*'s speech style is quite arbitrary, innocent, and ruthless, compared to the other members of *Punakawan*.

In *wayang kulit* performances, *Bagong* has a rebellious nature. For example, when he disagrees with the circumstances around him, *Bagong* will show his dislikeness by making a fuss. In addition, *Bagong* also has an indifferent character, he underestimates all problems and does not think deeply about a problem (Sunarto, 2004: 477).

### Symbols in *Wayang Kulit* Performance

Indonesian people, especially Javanese people, know and understand even to the point of experiencing *wayang kulit*. The plays in *wayang kulit* performances are shown as if they are a true representation of human life. Not infrequently, the audience also equate themselves with certain *wayang kulit* characters and imitate their figures in the audience's everyday lives. Soetarno (2005:149-150) argued that *wayang kulit* performances are often seen as a symbolic language of a life that is more spiritual than outward. Therefore, *wayang kulit* performances can become a source of values. The values contained in the *wayang kulit* performances are expected to be absorbed and practiced in daily life.

*Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI) defines “symbol” as a temporary epitome, or an epitome that has the meaning of a sign that states a certain intention. Based on the KBBI explanation, it can be inferred that a symbol is something that represents or describes an object. The symbol itself can also be a marker of an object. In a *wayang kulit* performance, there are various symbols interrelated to each other. In addition, symbols in a *wayang kulit* performance have a very broad meaning. *Wayang kulit* is a physical representation and character of humans. *Wayang kulit* is an illustration of humans in the world they live in, their different characteristics, and their own roles.

*Wayang kulit* performance is a depiction of human life in relation to other humans, nature, and God. In addition, *wayang* also acts as a communication medium for symbols that have meaning and significance for the journey of human life. As stated by Hazim Amir in Cahya (2016: 22), *wayang kulit* performance is a kind of theater where every play or story it presents is revealed in the form of symbols. Therefore, good and bad things in it are always displayed in the form of symbols of *wayang* figures with their distinctive characters. I Gusti Nugrah Seramsara (2019:82) also mentioned that *wayang kulit* performance has become a medium of symbolic communication since a long time ago, where it was used for a spirit worship ceremony using *wayang* puppets led by a shaman or tribal chief.

### *Bagong* as a Symbol of the Lower-Class Society in Seno Nugroho's *Wayang Kulit* Performance

*Wayang kulit* is a cultural product that is embodied in the form of performing arts that contain philosophical and ethical values. The Javanese people consider *wayang kulit* performance as a perfect work of art in Javanese culture. *Bagong* is one of the *Punakawan* characters in Seno Nugroho's *wayang kulit* performance. *Bagong* has an intriguing character and is attached to various values and culture of the Javanese people.

In his *wayang kulit* performance, Seno Nugroho narrated that *Bagong* has a rebellious personal character, yet he is also sensitive to the circumstances and problems around him. *Bagong* becomes a symbol of the lower-class people who always demands justice to the rulers. Apart from being identical with the lowe-class society's rebellion, *Bagong*, in Seno Nugroho's *wayang kulit* performance is also funny, reckless, and mannerless. This can be seen in every performance or *wayang kulit* play presented by Seno Nugroho.



Figure 1. Padusunan Pringapus Scene

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ED0cQx6uF7o&list=PLjo\\_9TsFeWJUPgP\\_4oJgA66TycFkdZFH8&index=2&t=4680s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ED0cQx6uF7o&list=PLjo_9TsFeWJUPgP_4oJgA66TycFkdZFH8&index=2&t=4680s))

In the play "*Bagong Mbangun Desa*" in the Pringapus village scene, *Bagong* complained to his father, *Semar*. *Bagong* wanted to improve his village by giving two sacrifices, *pelem pertanggajiwa* and *jambu dipanirmala*, which only grew in *Khayangan Suralaya*. As *Bagong*'s father, *Semar* used his power to summon *Batara Guru* to come. After his coming, *Bagong* immediately conveyed his desire to *Batara Guru* that he wanted to build his village to be more advanced and prosperous by giving two sacrifices, *pelem pertanggajiwa* and *jambu dipanirmala*. However, *Batara Guru* disagreed because the two sacrifices could only be used by a god, and lowly people do not deserve to use it.

The figure of *Bagong* is a connecting bridge between the people and the ruler. This symbol of small people and rulers in real life illustrates that everyone always longs for a decent life. Such a desire can only be obtained if one has power and superiority. Therefore, the stronger one's power in social life, the higher his social status in society will be. Here, *Bagong* reflected his role as a symbol of the lower-class people who demand justice and prosperity from the rulers.



Figure 2. Negara Amarta Scene

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIGn1N6QOCw&list=PLjo\\_9TsFeWJUPgP\\_4oJgA66TycFkdZFH8&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIGn1N6QOCw&list=PLjo_9TsFeWJUPgP_4oJgA66TycFkdZFH8&index=3))

In the play “*Semar Mbangun Khayangan*”, in the scene of *Amarta* country. The scene told of *Krisna* and *Baladewa* who came to *Amarta* country to borrow *Puntadewa*'s heirloom, *Jamuskalimasada*, to be used as a sacrifice. But in the middle of discussion, *Bagong* interrupted and reminded *Puntadewa* not to easily trust others, because *Jamuskalimasada* is a very important royal heirloom. *Bagong* advised *Puntadewa* to think carefully about his actions, because if the country of *Amarta* lost the *Jamuskalimasada*, there would be destruction. *Baladewa* could not take *Bagong*'s words which indirectly humiliated his younger brother, *Krisna*. *Baladewa* got really angry to *Bagong*. Seeing *Baladewa*'s anger, *Bagong* bravely reminded *Baladewa* that he got the title of king only because he was chosen by the people and he should not demean the people because both rulers and people have the same position.

From the scene above, it can be seen that *Bagong* has become a symbol of the lower-class people. *Bagong*, as a lower-class society, tried to remind *Puntadewa* (ruler) to be careful with rulers from other countries. In addition, *Bagong* also reminded that a ruler is a representative of the people who is given the mandate by the people to take care of the country. A ruler should not act arbitrarily to his people because the ruler and the people are actually on the same level.

Essentially, *wayang kulit* performance can depict human life. When observed from the scene of the performance that has been described above, the characters displayed in *wayang kulit* performance can be used as a symbol of life teachings for human. As stated by Cahya (2016:122), the understanding of symbolic values in *wayang kulit* performance can be observed through the plays and their supporting elements framed in each scene of the performance. I Gusti Nugrah Seramasara (2019:85) also mentioned that the conflict between the good characters in *wayang kulit* performance can be used as a guide for the people in general to imitate the characters who are considered good and righteous, and to introspect bad and evil behavior.

## Conclusion

With his creativity, Seno Nugroho made the *Bagong* character as a medium of social criticism that symbolizes the lower-class society. In his creative inner space (independence of expression), Seno Nugroho tried to express his artistic creativity towards people's lives through the *Bagong* character in a *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) performance. The results of these expressions can serve as symbolism, entertainment, responses to social situations, portraits of cultural conditions, and teachings of life.

Javanese society considers *wayang kulit* performances as a source of life values and norms. Watching a *wayang kulit* performance is a process of interpreting the symbols of the reality of life. *Wayang kulit* performance depicts the human life and can be used as a comparison of ways of thinking by understanding, interpreting, and translating the meanings and symbols delivered in *wayang kulit* performance.

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