ALIENATION AND OPPOSITION TO AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE NOVELS OF ASHADI SIREGAR

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Introduction

The 1970s have been boom years for certain sectors of the Indonesian publishing industry. The expansion is especially evident in the field of 'popular' literature. After the turbulence of the sixties young gifted authors have taken to writing with a passion and ability welcomed by both publishers and readers. In a country where even outstanding best sellers were previously only selling a total of 10,000 copies,\(^2\) the new breed authors are now frequently tripling that figure.\(^3\) Although dismissed by many critics as producing works of questionable 'literary' merit these authors nonetheless wield a distinctive influence upon this decade's Indonesian literature.

\(^1\) This article is largely based upon material gathered for my B.A. Honours Sub-thesis, "Romance and Coincidence - A Formula For Success: The Popular Novelists Marga T. and Ashadi Siregar". (Department of Indonesian Languages and Literatures, A.N.U., Canberra, 1977).

I would like to thank George Quinn of the Department of Indonesian and Malayan Studies, University of Sydney, and Patricia Woodcroff-Lee of the Department of Indonesian Languages and Literatures, A.N.U. for critical comments on earlier versions of this article. The many failings which remain are, of course, my responsibility.

\(^2\) Ajip Rosidi, Pembinaan Minat-Batja Apresiasi dan Penelitian Sastra: Mas'alah-mas'alah di Indonesia, Tjupumanik, 1972, p. 48.

\(^3\) The following table lists the annual sales figures for a range of novels written by young authors. The information was provided by Mr Y. Adisubrata, Manager, Bagian Penerbitan Buku, P.T. Gramedia. Gramedia published all novels listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Novel</th>
<th>1974</th>
<th>1975</th>
<th>1976</th>
<th>1977*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+ Cintaku di Kampus Biru</td>
<td>9,200</td>
<td>14,120</td>
<td>16,730</td>
<td>6,640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Kugapai Cintamu</td>
<td>10,850</td>
<td>11,520</td>
<td>13,310</td>
<td>4,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Terminal Cinta Terakhir</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>21,730</td>
<td>4,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>= Karmila</td>
<td>22,080</td>
<td>13,050</td>
<td>17,290</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>= Badai Pasti Berlalu</td>
<td>16,840</td>
<td>11,140</td>
<td>11,580</td>
<td>3,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>= Gema Sebuah Hati</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>21,980</td>
<td>2,930</td>
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<tr>
<td>± Karina</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8,640</td>
<td>7,510</td>
<td>2,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>± Incognito</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8,480</td>
<td>1,790</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(|*\) until April 1977

\(+\) by Ashadi Siregar

\(=\) by Marga T.

\(±\) by Naniheroe
In this article I will focus on one of these authors and discuss the dominant themes of his novels. Despite the paucity of analytical and statistical information on this topic I shall then attempt to suggest why such qualities appeal to the expanding reading public.

Biographical background

Ashadi Siregar was born in Pematang Siantar in North Sumatra on 3 July 1945 into the family of a pegawai tinggi (senior public servant). In 1964 he completed his schooling in Sumatra and moved to Yogyakarta to study at Gajah Mada University. Although quietly spoken he was politically active on campus. Graduating as a 'Doktorandus' in 1970 he begun lecturing in the Department of Publicity and Communications in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Politics at Gajah Mada University, a position he still holds.  

Ashadi's experience of life has not been restricted to educational institutions. During the years 1968-72 he worked as a journalist, generally with smaller 'alternative' papers. In 1972, while editor-in-chief of the weekly newspaper Sendi (Base), he was charged with defamation of the Indonesian Government because of an article contained in the paper. After a nationally publicized court case he was eventually released with a three month suspended sentence. In effect the defamation charge terminated his career in journalism, a field of employment strictly controlled by government regulations in Indonesia.

With the avenue of journalism closed to him Ashadi turned to novel writing for self-expression and to communicate his ideas and political beliefs. Since 1972 he has had six novels published, four of which were also serialized in the national daily press.

Plot synopses

His first short novel Cintaku di Kampus Biru (My Love on the Blue Campus) deals with the struggles of a student at Gajah Mada University in Yogyakarta against unfair academic assessment by one of the staff members. The hero, Anton, struggling to complete his final year's studies before his finances are exhausted, is hampered by an antagonistic female academic who continually fails him in her subject's tests. Anton confront the university bureaucracy in an attempt to gain an unbiased marking of his exam paper. When challenged by Anton over the biased marking, the dean tries to justify his position, stating calmly:

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4 Details of Ashadi’s life were provided by him in personal correspondence
5 In 1968 he was journalist and editor of a small paper, Mingguan Publika (The Public Weekly). Subsequently he worked as a free-lance journalist for a Jakarta magazine. In 1971 he became editor-in-chief responsible for the weekly newspaper Sendi (Base).
6 Cintaku di Kampus Biru (My Love on the Blue Campus), Kugapai Cintamu (I Reach Out For Your Love), Terminal Cinta Terakhir (Last Love's Terminal), and Sirkuit Kemelut (Circuit of Crisis) were all serialized in the newspaper Kompas.
7 Ashadi Siregar, Cintaku di Kampus Biru, P.T. Gramedia, Jakarta, (Cetakan pertama, September 1974). Though serialized in Kompas in 1972 Cintaku di Kampus Biru did not appear in book form till September 1974 when Ashadi’s popularity as an author was becoming more evident Kugapai Cintamu, the second novel in Ashadi’s trilogy, was published in book form five months before Cintaku di Kampus Biru.
Apapun yang terjadi Anton, percayalah bahwa bukan prinsip-prinsip kebenaran itu yang lenyap, tetapi keadaanlah meminta kita harus bertindak lain.⁸

Hypocrisy pervades all authoritarian structures.

He eventually overcomes the problem (incongruously falling fleeingingly in love with the female lecturer!) but not before the author cynically criticises power structures within the microcosm of the university administration.

The subsequent novel, *Kugapai Cintamu* (I Reach Out For Your Love)⁹ deals with the frustrations of another student in both managing his love life and attempting to contribute to agricultural development programmes in the countryside, as required in his final year studies. In the village to which he is assigned he meets the silent opposition of conservatives who estrange the young idealist. Romantically the male protagonist is forced to choose between two women who symbolise the future for him and, I suggest, his society. One, urban and ‘liberated’ (in an Indonesian context) lives a life of decadent ganja (marijuana) parties, sensual rock music and erotic dance. The other, a conservative Javanese village girl adheres to the restrained graces of a traditional upbringing.

Tody, the hero, compromises himself by surrendering to the powers of materialism and corruption. Opportunism corrupts him and ultimately leads him, frustrated, to his death. His fate symbolises the perils of moral compromise with the social and financial elites.

Perhaps Ashadi’s most forceful novel completes this trilogy of related stories. *Terminal Cinta Terakhir* (Last Love’s Terminal)¹⁰ is partially autobiographical clearly reflecting Ashadi’s philosophy of opposing unjust and arbitrary power. Joki, the male protagonist, is dismissed from his position as a journalist with a Jakarta paper because his news reports were sympathetic to students’ demands during a recent political crisis. His uncle, a corrupt, wealthy general, refuses to allow Joki to continue living with him. Joki falls in love with Widuri, the quiet Javanese village girl who appeared in the previous story and who is now a divorcee raising a child she bore as a result of having been raped.

The rape of Widuri highlights an important point that Ashadi is trying to make in his novels: individuals are exploited and oppressed by those who hold power. Ashadi uses the rape incident not only to indicate the vulnerability of women in his society, but the potential vulnerability of all individuals confronted by corrupt power-holders. Despite being called ‘pendekar pembela hak-hak kaum hawa melalui novel-novelnya’¹¹ Ashadi is not a strident anti-sexist crusader. He is, in that regard, non-committal. Nevertheless, in contrast with many Indonesian male writers, Ashadi creates female characters who are imbued with a notable individuality and an independent, healthy sexuality. They do not merely function as pawns in a male’s sexual fantasy. In this novel particularly he challenges middle-class attitudes to women working, the remarriage of widows and the treatment of unmarried

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⁸ ‘Whatever happens Anton, you must believe me that it is not that our principles of truth have vanished, but rather that circumstances require us to act differently’. *Cintaku di Kampus Biru*, p. 10.


mothers. It is common in his novels for Ashadi to fire rebellious volleys at bourgeois values in his society although this rebellion is not an entirely coherent one.

Joki, as the author's mouthpiece, condemns parental interference in the lives of children and highlights government manipulation of employees in the media who refuse to submit to press restrictions and censorship. The novel is Ashadi's expression of disgust with the treatment of free-thinking Indonesian journalists: an indication of his own alienation from the established media industry which, politically shackled, presents a government bias.

Ashadi believes the sins of the child may be directly attributable to the neglect shown by the parents. He depicts the attempts of a young person to publicly embarrass or revolt against his/her parents as an endeavour to attract the attention of the parents to the problems of disorientation the young person is experiencing. This motif of generational conflict occurs frequently within Ashadi's novels and is fundamental to his personal world view.

Generational conflict is a major theme in Ashadi's next novel *Sirkuit Kemelut* (Circuit of Crisis). Alex, a young delinquent, is alienated from his parents. His mother had run away with a lover while Alex was still a child and his father reacted by retaliating against Alex. After raping a school girl, Joice, to prove his 'manhood' to a gang of delinquent companions Alex is cast out of his home. He begins sleeping in the streets with the gelandangan (homeless poor) and after spending some time in prison, he gets a job as a motor mechanic. Eventually he becomes a champion motor bike racer.

Ashadi stresses his belief that Alex's delinquency is caused by the unstable environment in which he grew up. His mother's abandonment and his father's rejection of him forged Alex's cynical, devil-may-care attitude to life.

Sexual problems figure noticeably in the novel. Not only was Alex temporarily sexually impotent, but Liana's husband Burhan, had become permanently impotent as a result of a car accident. Alex, Burhan and Liana form an unusual 'romantic triangle' as Burhan encourages Alex's friendship with Liana. Burhan regards the youth as a substitute for the child his wife never bore. Initially Liana takes a purely maternal interest in Alex, but gradually they become sexually involved. Once the youth and the mother-figure establish a sexual relationship the allusion to incest by the author is clear. More definite is the

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13 On 15 January 1974 mass demonstrations took place in Indonesia sparked off by the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka. Initially focussing on examples of Japanese investment in Indonesia, the riots became an outlet for general dissatisfaction with the Indonesian government. The event was termed the "Malari" affair.
incestuous liaison between Alex and Wanda, his step-sister (adik tiri) as they spend a night together seeking succour and emotional support.

As neither of these sexual encounters is with 'blood kin' they are not strictly incestuous, but Ashadi's challenge to the incest taboo is unmistakable. He supports his opposition by illustrating how certain psychological and physical needs can be fulfilled within a quasi-incestuous relationship. The challenge to social mores is evident yet the author handles the delicate subject in a sensitive manner without crass-ness or crudity.

Although they published Sirkuit Kemelut with its overtly sexual themes, it appears P.T. Gramedia, the publishers of Ashadi's first four novels, declined to print an unexpurgated version of Warisan Sang Jagoan (The Legacy of a Champion)\textsuperscript{14} undoubtedly one of his most controversial works. The book was awarded a consolation prize in the International Book Year Novel Writing Competition held in Indonesia in 1972, but did not reach the market until 1977. The reason appears simple. The author would not compromise with the publishing company by eliminating passages describing sexual liaisons which he regarded as central to the characterisation of the hero.\textsuperscript{15} Since, unlike his other novels, this work was not written for the general reading public, but rather specifically for the competition jury, it exhibits stylistic and thematic differences with the previous works.

As suggested, the book, in two volumes, is extremely frank sexually, delving into the emotional and sexual problems of an adolescent boy as he grows into manhood during the Second World War and subsequent national revolution in Indonesia. The youth, Mardan, is vehemently opposed to Dutch colonial domination but ironically falls deeply in love with a young Dutch girl. He joins the Independence struggle as an officer in the resistance but rebels against his superiors. He believes the upper echelon of regional commanders - career officers often trained by the Dutch - are more pre-occupied with petty internal power struggles than with confronting the colonial enemy. Mardan’s struggles with the Republic's military leaders are symbolic. Ashadi feels such resolve is still required by young people in Indonesia to counter those who dominate the social and political fields.\textsuperscript{16} I shall return to this point later.

Mardan is torn between two women: one an Indonesian fighting in the resistance and the other the Dutch girl who has borne his child. Despite surviving internment during the Japanese occupation the Dutch girl was demoralised and disoriented, and needed Mardan's support and protection. In protecting her he risked being compromised in the eyes of the freedom fighters.

By describing Mardan's sexual liaisons Ashadi reveals to the reader the psychological stresses placed upon the character because of his sexual drives and the turbulence of his

\textsuperscript{14} Ashadi Siregar, Warisan Sang Jagoan (Books 1 and 2), Pancar Kumaln, Jakarta, n.d. (1977?). The English word 'champion' does not adequately communicate the meaning of the Indonesian 'jagoan'. The term literally refers to a fighting cock, but is commonly used of a haughty or skilled fighter, or one who exhibits powerful qualities of leadership. In his study Indonesian National Revolution 1945-50 (Longman, 1974) Dr Anthony Reid describes the 'jagoan' or 'jago' in the revolution as follows: "Skilled in pencak and silat (forms of Indonesian martial arts), the jago often had a reputation for invulnerability and other magic powers, related to his birth-date, nickname, and other distinguishing features." (p. 56).

\textsuperscript{15} “Ashadi Siregar: "Cintanya di Kampus Biru", (no author cited), Femina No. 105, 29 March 1977, p. 22.

\textsuperscript{16} Ashadi indicated this attitude to me in personal correspondence. He kindly completed two questionnaires which are appended to my sub-thesis.
environment. Personal insecurity and lack of confidence are revealed sporadically as he struggles to give his life some meaning, to escape his loneliness and emotional isolation.

In his most recent novel, *Frustrasi Puncak Gunung* (Frustration on a Mountain Peak), Ashadi returns to more familiar subject matter and settings. The novel deals with the politicisation of a quiet post-graduate student, and, as is often the case with his earlier novels, the story is set largely on the campus of Gajah Mada University. Herman, the hero, does not participate in the hectic social and political life of the campus. Instead he prefers to spend his leisure time climbing in the mountains. He finds a unique freedom and tranquility when surrounded by nature. When confronted with problems or pressured by people he retires to the hills. A loner, he is cynical about the benefits of campus activism and apathetic about his society's problems. He avoids forming close friendships and does not seek female companionship. His attitudes begin to change however when he is pursued romantically by a self-assertive female campus activist, Ambar, to whose entreaties he partially succumbs.

After graduating he commences working on the grossly underdeveloped island of Timor and it is as a result of this experience that Herman realises the plight of the "little people" of Indonesia. The Timorese are gradually losing their cattle and suffering a constantly declining standard of living because of the lack of government support schemes and the inefficiency and disinterest of local government officials. The author also highlights a common complaint levelled by the people from the Outer Islands of Indonesia against the central government: that officials of the central government working in the Outer Islands do not belong to the ethnic group(s) of the region in which they are serving. The officials are often Javanese; foreigners from outside the region. Their cultural background may be different to that of the local people. Often the local inhabitants appear to be antagonistic towards these officials whom they regard as interlopers.

Returning to Jakarta on leave after his term of service in Timor, Herman becomes caught up in the student protests against governmental corruption and specifically the "Pertamina Affair" (when the government oil company was discredited after incurring massive international debts). The experience he has gained serving in Timor steels his resolve. He is conscious now of the gross inequalities within his society and is prepared to do something to redress the balance. His political commitment is tested to the full when he is arrested along with large numbers of other demonstrators.

Ashadi comments that the arrested demonstrators had been instrumental in ousting the dictatorial left-leaning Sukarno government in 1966. Now, imprisoned by the Suharto government they had helped bring to power, they share the same roof with the remnants of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Ashadi implies that both the PKI and the students are exploited by power-holders when it is expedient and then ruthlessly suppressed when they become too critical of them.

At the conclusion of the novel Herman is left facing his most difficult decision. Ambar, his former campus girlfriend, is now separated from her husband. Herman is the father of her unborn child. As a Catholic she claims she cannot get a divorce, but

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(paradoxically perhaps) she wants Herman to take her away and acknowledge his child. As Herman is left grappling with this decision, the author asks:

beranakah dia mengambil kepastian untuk mendaki ke puncak gunung yang tak boleh dipijak?  

Herman has developed a political conscience and the strength of his conviction. Will this recently achieved assurance help him to breach the social and religious conventions that stand in the way of him beginning life anew with Ambar?

The ‘popular’-‘serious’ debate

Since 1972 Ashadi has maintained a steady flow of popular novels. The obvious popularity of the works of authors like Ashadi led to a heated debate concerning the literary standard of the popular works. Literary critics were quick to condemn Ashadi and similar authors as being of no consequence because such writers preferred to direct their works to the general public rather than to the highly educated upper-class, or the small core of artists, writers and critics who compromise the literary ‘set’. Writers like Ashadi prefer to contribute to newspapers, variety magazines or write romantic novels rather than restricting themselves to the small-circulation 'literary' journals or the publishing houses which, often with government support, restrict themselves to publishing works by eminent ‘literary’ writers.

By way of explanation, modern Indonesian literature has been regarded as bipartite, consisting of ‘popular’ and ‘serious’ literature. ‘Popular’ novels are widely read but tend to be of poor ‘literary’ quality. The ‘serious’ novels have recognisable literary merit, but a limited circulation. Despite attempts to develop a comprehensive criterion for evaluating into which category a particular novel falls, no satisfactory result has been achieved. The evaluation is ultimately a highly subjective one. Rather than two distinct

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18 "Is he brave enough to climb, with assurance, to the top of that mountain which may not be trod upon?", *Frustrasi Puncak Gunung*, p. 257.


20 Ashadi has implied deprecatingly that eminent authors write only for a "small circle of authors and their relatives (acquaintances, critics etc.)" - "lingkaran kecil pengarang dan kerabat (kenalan, kritikus dan sebagainya)" See Ashadi Siregar, "Untuk Siapa Saya Menulis (Melihat Novel sebagai Medium Komunikasi Sosial)", *Budaya Jaya*, 117, Th. Ke-11, February 1978, p. 100.

21 Literary magazines like *Budaya Jaya*, *Horison* and *Basis* only have a circulation of approximately 4,000, compared to one popular women's magazine's sales of 200,000 (despite being three times as expensive as the 'literary' magazines). See Wildan Yatim, "Pendidikan Sastra Sejak Remaja", *Kompas*, 11 January 1977, p. V.

22 In this article when using the term 'popular' to represent that category of literature opposed to 'serious' literature I will use quotation marks. When the term appears without quotation marks it indicates that the work was well received by the public; it does not necessarily imply an evaluation of the literary merit on the work.

23 The critic Jakob Sumardjo has written widely on 'popular' literature. His attempt to analyse the criterion for 'popular' and 'serious' novels is valuable, despite it incompleteness. See Jakob Sumardjo, "Peta Novel Indonesia Kini", *Sinar Harapan*, 13 November 1976, p.X
categories it is more realistic to see novels as falling along a 'popular'→serious1 continuum, since the categories are not totally exclusive.

While Ashadi’s novels are most frequently categorised as ‘popular’ works there is no consensus on this point. His skill as a storyteller and writer is impressive. He displays a stylistic vibrancy in his novels that is unquestionably an attribute of works of literature. Though I shall elaborate further on this point I wish merely to note here that it is inappropriate to dismiss Ashadi as a ‘pop’ writer, though his stories do share many of the characteristics common in 'popular' novels. Rather he occupies an intermediate position on the ‘popular’→‘serious’ continuum.

Ashadi is unconcerned that many critics denigratingly regard his novels as 'popular'. He sees his own stories, with their stylistic emphasis upon colloquial language, as essentially 'oral' stories, written down. He claims that the people for whom he writes can relate more naturally to oral literature, rather than to formal literary novels, of the type critics regard as 'serious' literature.24

**The readership**

Unfortunately no comprehensive statistical information has been gathered on the composition of Ashadi’s readership. The author acknowledges that he directs his novels to young people with a high school education25 and it is my impression that they constitute the majority of his readers. Even from the rudimentary plot outlines I have given it should be clear that the protagonists in Ashadi's novels are inevitably young people usually involved in the urban sub-culture.26 This focussing on young characters would prove an attraction to young readers.

Bearing in mind the lack of concrete information if we desire to get an idea of the socio-economic status of Ashadi's readership we could look at the marketing of his novels. Firstly all four novels subsequently published by P.T. Gramedia were originally serialized in Kompas, read mainly by middle-class people.27 However, a contemporary study of the reading habits of poor areas of the Jakarta city area indicated that Kompas was also the second most widely read paper in the survey region. Furthermore the most frequently read section of the daily newspapers was that containing short or serialized stories.28 Perhaps from this information we can assume that Ashadi’s serialized novels were read by both the middle-class and a reasonable selection of the lower urban socio-economic class (although not a majority of the latter). Of course the middle and upper classes were able presumably to purchase the stories in their bound form, despite the higher initial cost when compared with the daily serialisations.

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25 Ibid., p. 103 and the questionnaire appended to my sub-thesis, p. 171.
26 For an interesting discussion on sub-kebudayaan remaja (the youth sub-culture) and its link with big business see Jakob Sumardjo’s "Wajah Kebudayaan Masa Kita", Kompas, 22 October 1974, pp. IV-V.
To my knowledge no information is available to indicate whether rural readers are attracted to Ashadi's works. To suggest that, on the basis of the novels' style and the previous popularity of similar types of reading matter, readers in regional areas might be attracted to Ashadi's stories, must remain a supposition.

Viewing reading habits from a broader perspective observers have complained of the lack of an established tradition of reading as a form of entertainment and enlightenment in Indonesia. Harsja W. Bachtiar fell that:

Kebiasaan membaca karya-karya sastra Indonesia merupakan tradisi baru yang masih harus ditanam, dipupuk dan dikembangkan di kalangan masyarakat luas kita.29

Ajip Rosidi notes that even students in the literature departments of the universities do not seem attracted to reading as a pursuit,30 while Hazil Tanzil implies that according to traditional attitudes, reading was anti-social, impolite and too individualistic.31

If such is the case, why then have Ashadi's novels become acknowledged best-sellers, swept along on a wave of popularity? Without pretending to offer a comprehensive answer, let me suggest a number of possible reasons.

Literary skill

Firstly, Ashadi's works have undeniable literary qualities which set them apart from more elementary 'popular' novels. He writes in a style that is colloquial, fast moving and unaffected. He claims in fact, to have no literary pretensions, although his skillful use of language belies this claim.32 He is fond of allegory and metaphor, often breaking new ground with the comparisons he evokes. He uses the Indonesian language with a freshness and fluidity that comes across clearly, especially in the dialogues between his young characters. This contemporary style injects a sense of realism into the novels. The conversations and language used, for example, parallel the common speech of his young readership.33

I am not suggesting Ashadi's novels are flawless. Certain characterisations lack depth. He has great difficulty in satisfactorily concluding his stories, a weakness he concedes.34 Throughout his stories, Ashadi often resorts to inserting unrealistic coincidences and

29 "The habit of reading works of Indonesian literature is a new tradition which has to be planted, fostered and developed in our broader community", Harsja W. Bachtiar, "Kesusasteraan Indonesia dan Perkembangan Masyarakat", Horison, No. 8, August 1975, p. 228.
32 For an examination of Ashadi's creative use of Indonesian see Nym Tusthi Eddy's article, "Kreasi bahasa novel-novel Ashadi Siregar", in Suara Karya, 6, No. 1779, 28 January 1977, p. 4. Th. Sri Rahayu Prihatmi has also looked at aspects of Ashadi's literary skill in "Terminal Cinta Bagian dari trilogi Ashadi", Kompas, 10, No. 275, 27 May 1975, p. 4
33 See the opening scene in Frustrasi Puncak Gunung or pp. 9-12 of Sirkuit Kemelut as examples selected at random.
34 Th. Sri Rahayu Prihatmi, "Ashadi Siregar: Saya bercerita agar tidak sumpek", Kompas, 11, No. 43, 1 July 1975, p. 4.
contrived twists in the plot. Chance meetings by characters in the huge city of Jakarta, car accidents, emergency hospitalisations and unexpected pregnancies revealed at the conclusion of the story are examples of forced coincidence. However, these weaknesses do not appear to detract from the enjoyment readers gain from his stories.

A perceptive writer, Ashadi appreciates that his readership is attracted to romantic stories. At first glance most of his books deal ostensibly with a lover's quest for a life partner; a quest often frustrated by unrequited love. The peppering of his stories with sexual incidents and veiled eroticism would especially whet the appetite of his male readers. However, since he handles such scenes with sensitivity and refinement he avoids outrightly offending the sensibilities of his female readers. This risqué element in his style has drawn fire from some quarters of Indonesian society who feel the novels do offend against the community's values, but I suggest this moralistic outcry does not reflect the general attitude of the community to his works. Ashadi challenges the community's values without degenerating into pornography. His novels may occasionally become sultry but they are not obscene.

**Personal philosophy of alienation**

While the majority of readers may initially be attracted to Ashadi's novels because of the romantic pre-occupations of the stories, embellished by his literary skill, the novels are also enriched by the author's personal philosophy of life. In fact, Ashadi's primary motivation in writing is to communicate his own philosophy to as wide an audience as possible.\(^{35}\)

Looking more carefully at the works one can see the underlying emphasis the author places upon the need for the individual to stand up against authoritarianism. Usually Ashadi's major characters are isolated from the community around them. They feel alienated from figures of authority. Such figures exist on many levels, from high government officials, right down to parents within the family. So not only do the characters feel isolated from an elite group of national power-holders, but they also feel alienated from those in positions of power within the traditional community. Ashadi implies that individuals must earn the respect of others: respect is not due solely by virtue of one's age, occupation or traditional station in life.

Alienated from dominating figures on all levels Ashadi's characters struggle alone, ostracised from the wider community. The theme of alienation of the individual from power-holders on these various levels runs through all of Ashadi's stories and is an intrinsic part of the author's own philosophy of life. Ashadi attempts to awaken his readers to the dangers of authoritarianism and the abuse of power in their society. He illustrates this struggle against authority in various forms. The recurrence of the incidence of generational conflict in his novels has been touched upon. Furthermore Ashadi's protagonists frequently become embroiled in civil disturbances stemming from an anti-government political groundswell.\(^{36}\)

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\(^{35}\) Ashadi summarised his philosophy of life in answer to a questionnaire appended to my sub-thesis, p. 171.

\(^{36}\) For example the Malaria riots in Sirkuit Kemelut and the demonstrations over the Pertamina Affair in *Frustrasi Puncak Gunung*. 
In his earlier stories Ashadi was guarded in his criticism of the government because overt criticism would have been severely censored. However, as he gained popularity and recognition as an author he seems to have become more immune to such political censorship. Undoubtedly though he would not be permitted to outspokenly attack the government. Though his political comments are unmistakable they are still restrained and never over-stated. Neither do the political aspects of the novels detract from their fluidity or quality. Ashadi is not a political propagandist, rigidly propounding a party line, but rather an individual committed to using writing as a medium for social awakening.

It is difficult to evaluate just how successful Ashadi has been in making his readers aware of the need to oppose authoritarianism. Critics are certainly conscious of this aim in his novels. Drs Tamrin Amal lauded Ashadi as *pelopor perubahan sosial* because of the effect he thought Ashadi’s novels were having. He suggested that by depicting unusual or deviant behaviour in his novels Ashadi encouraged the acknowledgement and acceptance of such behaviour by the society (or at least certain receptive segments of it). For example, by challenging such values as respect for age and the importance of pre-marital virginity, Amal feels Ashadi makes his readers question these values. Needless to say it is extremely difficult to prove, or even to substantiate, such suppositions without extensive investigation. Again, to my knowledge such an investigation has not yet been carried out.

### The pitfalls of identification

Given that the majority of Ashadi’s readers are drawn to his stories because they offer light entertainment, what effects do the stories have? I have put forward the case for Ashadi politicising his readership by making it more aware of the abuse of authority within the society. There is the possibility too, however, that readers from lower socio-economic groups, on reading about the lives of essentially middle-class characters will desire a style of life they can never hope to emulate.

Sociologically there is undoubtedly a schism between the idealised ‘unrealistic’ developments in the stories and the more mundane aspects of the readers’ day to day lives. It has long been recognised as a characteristic of ‘popular’ novels that they present a world largely built on fantasy. The milieu of the characters is often closer to the dreams young

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37 It is not unusual for writers in Indonesia to be less subject to political censorship as they become more well known. As their fame spreads the government may tend to become more lenient. Rendra may be considered an example of this.

38 See for example Perdana Ginting’s "Orang-orang muda dalam 'Terminal Cinta Terakhir'-nya Ashadi Siregar", Sinar Baru Indonesia (Medan), 7, No. 1842, 1 July 1976, p. 3; also Deddy Roamer Ps, "Timbangan Buku: Ahir Trilogi Cinta Ashadi Siregar: Plus S Minus", Sinar Harapan, 16, No. 5024, 10 February 1977, p. 8.


40 This problem was suggested to me by George Quinn (19/6/79). Pamusuk Eneste, "Marga T. Pengarang Sekali Baca?", Suara Karya Minggu, 4, No. 174, 24 November 1974, makes this point about another popular author Marga T.

41 See for example R. Roolvink, "'Roman Pitjisan' Bahasa Indonesia", in Pokok dan Tokoh (Part II) by A. Teeuw, P.T. Pembangunan, Jakarta 1959.
people conjure up than to the reality of their lives. Ajip Rosidi expressed his concern about
the effects 'popular' literature was having on people, stating that that type of literature lured
people into a world of illusion, making them less able to cope with the realities of life.\footnote{Ajip Rosidi, Pembinaan Minat Batja, op. cit, p. 7.}

While it is common for 'popular' novels to focus upon the social elite and the
middle-class\footnote{See for example, the novels of Marga T., such as Karmila, or Bukan Impian Semusim} Ashadi includes characters from a wider social gamut. He does attempt to
depict characters with certain financial constrictions, even if they have a university
education. They often have the financial limitations of a poorly paid job; in some instances
they are unemployed. Ashadi's characters often live in humble dwellings rather than in the
bungalows of the wealthy. However, educated and employed in a university, the son of a
senior public servant, it would be unusual for him not to reflect some middle-class values.\footnote{In their study, The Sociology of Literature (Paladin, London, 1972), Diana Laurenson and Alan
Swingewood note that a writer "is unlikely to be part of the working class, since most writers originate and
remain within a middle-class environment and rarely identify with a social class they hardly know" (p. 71,
their emphasis}

Yet even Ashadi's middle-class characters tend to be alienated from that class and
rather down on their luck. By consciously broadening the experiences of his characters
Ashadi includes material within the novels which indicates that he does seek to identify
with lower class readers also. The stories may owe their popularity to the fact that the
readers gain some sort of self-gratification through an indefinable identification with the
characters in the story.\footnote{This idea was suggested to me by Harry Aveling, Head of the School of Human Communication, Murdoch
University, Perth, 13/5/77.}

As for whether Ashadi's novels encourage people to aspire to a bourgeois life style, to
be fair, even when depicting such life styles in his novels, the author is not likely to
introduce the public to which of them are not already aware, surrounded as they are
by the examples of an ostentatious life style. It leaps at them from films-both foreign
and local\footnote{There are, of course, many similarities between 'popular' novels and 'popular' films, and a number of
Ashadi's stories have been filmed with great success. Two reports which note the elitist life styles
depicted in 'popular' films in Indonesia are; Goenawan Mohamad, "Sebuah Pengantar Untuk Film
Indonesia Mutakhir - Catatan Tahun 1974", Prisma, No. 3, Th. 3, June 1974, pp. 49-60, and D.A. Peransi,
"Sebuah Snapshot Profil Film Indonesia 1976-77", Kompas, 10 March 1977, p. 4.}
- and television shows, while the wealthy flaunt it in the streets. Even the
newspapers link the individual with a grandiose world outside his/her own experience.
Certainly readers in cities like Jakarta do not have to open one of Ashadi's novels to be
stimulated to desire an elitist life style. In the hands of a writer like Ashadi the depiction of
bourgeois life styles may serve as an indictment of the prevailing social and political status
quo and instil awareness in the minds of the readers rather than lulling them into a sense of
wide-eyed adulation for the characters depicted in the stories.

Ashadi is conscious of the possibility of 'popular' novels becoming tools for
propagating bourgeois values; he criticised another popular novelist, Marga T., on these
very grounds.\footnote{See Ashadi Siregar, "Apresiasi seni: Marga T. - Penulis Feuilleton yang berdamai dengan realita",
Kompas, 23 August 1972, p. 4., and the questionnaire appended to my sub-thesis, p. 175.} He feels that, unless his readers realise the 'message' (he uses the
English term) embodied in his stories, his personal philosophy, then, as he says:
saya tak lebih dari tukang hibur, sebagai antek bisnis kapitalis
dunia kebudayaan massa.48

Though there is a danger that he will compromise the 'message' to increase his
commercial success, so far he has achieved popularity without resorting to undue
compromise.

Authors of ‘serious’ novels have been accused of writing stories that are too difficult
for an ordinary reader to follow or identify with, creating a sort of literary credibility gap.49
To Ashadi's credit he has been able to bridge the gap between reader and writer. Unlike
many of his colleagues in the sphere of 'serious' literature who are unable (or unwilling) to
write in a style which will attract a broad readership Ashadi is particularly adept at writing
for the general public. He selects and presents the subject matter in such a way as to be
immediately recognisable and attractive to his prospective audience. By blending elements
of ‘popular’ style and his personal political belief he has written a collection of novels that
elevate the standard of ‘popular’ reading material and are both entertaining and
thought-provoking. The ultimate test will be whether Ashadi can sustain such a standard
into the 1980s and beyond.

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48 "I am nothing more than an entertainer, a stooge of capitalist business in the world of mass culture",
49 Sides Sudyarto D.S., "Mencari Jasa Sosiologi untuk Menutup Jurang antara Sastra dengan
Masyarakatnya", Kompas, 20 January 1976, p. IX, and Ajip Rosidi, "Politik Bahasa Nasional dan
Pengembangan Kesusasteraan", Budaja Djaja, No. 82, Th. ke-8, March 1975, pp. 129-134.